YEMEN COSTUMES AND ARTS AND CRAFTS
YEMEN RESEARCH

• I lived in the Yemen Arab Republic from 1981-1986 where I carried out research on the regional costumes and arts and crafts of Yemen.

• At the time of my stay in Yemen it was a divided country with South Yemen – the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen being off limits to tourism. Therefore, my travels and documentation does not include costumes and arts and crafts of what used to be called the Democratic Republic of Yemen and is limited to the then Yemen Arab Republic. The Republic of Yemen was formed in 1990 when the two Yemen's were united.

• It became a passion to research, survey and write an overview on the varied regional costumes. I also photographed women wearing their costumes as they carried out daily activities - giving the viewer an insight into what it is like to be a Yemeni woman. My work included researching costumes made and worn before the sewing machine was introduced which changed traditional dress design forever.

• Before the arrival of the sewing machine, styles were almost universally “ghamis” styled garments made from local indigo dyed cotton cloth - or made from the famous Yemeni striped cloth which is no longer made. After the introduction of the sewing machine – about 60 years ago - regional variations appeared, a wider range of cloth became available and the hand guided embroidery machine facilitated new regional patterns and designs to be developed. There are some exceptions to this but in general women’s clothing became more fitted and very colorful. For the Yemeni woman this included her distinctive and flamboyant use of color as exemplified through her clothing, head gear and accessories.

• Additionally, I conducted research on the arts and crafts which includes photographs and written information informing the reader about the main crafts of Yemen.
Jebal Sabir women are known for their independence and flamboyant way of dressing. The area is known as one of the best qat growing regions in the country. Qat is an amphetamine-like stimulant and can cause excitement and euphoria. It is legal in Yemen. The women of this mountain are often seen in nearby towns selling the family’s harvest. When seen on their home mountain they are usually not veiled, however, when they travel into towns it is not uncommon for some of these women to veil.
AFTERNOON QAT PARTY IN TAIZ
JEBEL SABIR WOMEN WALKING IN TAIZ
EID SPECIAL DRESS ATTIRE WORN BY GIRLS IN SA’ADA
EID IN SA’ADA
JEBEL HABASHI IS A MOUNTAIN SOUTH OF TAIZ. FROM THE TOP YOU CAN SEE ACROSS
THE RED SEA TO ETHIOPIA. THE WOMEN’S DRESSES ARE VERY DECORATIVE AND ON THE
LEFT YOU CAN SEE THE OLDER VERSION OF THEIR TRADITIONAL ATTIRE AND ON THE
RIGHT IS THE NEWER VERSION - USING METALLIC THREADS INSTEAD OF METAL SEQUINS.
COVER-UPS IN YEMEN

• Some form of cover-up is worn in most urban areas to a great degree than in the countryside where the women often go with faces uncovered.

As you wind through Yemen's mountains large stone villages perched on top of precipitous cliffs and crags can be seen everywhere. The magical tall adobe and stone houses of Sana'a and Sa'ada are as different from the thatched huts and palm frond dwellings of the Tihama as anything seen when visiting two entirely different countries. Women’s cover-ups also vary regionally with styles totally unique to one area, yet a few “universal” styles exist and can be seen throughout the country.

• That women should be expected to wear the veil is considered by some as an injustice and fault with the interpretation of Islam. Yet students of the Holy Koran widely believe that Mohammed was neither a supporter, in theory or in practice, of the seclusion and veiling of women. This form of cover-up has been found in ancient Rome, Athens and other areas outside of the Middle East. When therefore, the argument goes, Mohammed asked his wives to cover themselves for protection he was drawing on a custom which originated long before his time. In the time of the Prophet the veil was a sign of a respectable woman and a custom that helped her walk about without fear of being accosted.

The veil told the ruffians that this woman was not a slave but rather a person of virtue who was to be treated respectfully. Gradually the form of dress which ensured privacy and respect began to be considered as a status symbol. Those women who did not have to venture outside their homes into potentially hostile city environments were thought to be of better means than those who had to leave the safety of their homes to perform daily tasks. City women began staying inside their homes and letting male members of the family tend to the outside chores. When they did venture beyond the compound walls they wore complete cover-ups.

As disorderly conduct was more prevalent in the urban areas than in the countryside the rural women were not subject to the same pressures to wear cover-ups as their city sisters. The veil today is considered more as a customary form of clothing than a necessity deemed useful for protection.
A FORM OF COVER-UP IS USUALLY WORN IN URBAN AREAS. BELOW ARE SAMPLES OF THE TYPES OF COVERS SEEN IN MANY CITIES OF YEMEN.
TAIZ IS AN OLD PROVINCIAL CAPITAL OF YEMEN. It LIES AT THE FOOTHILLS BELOW JEBEL SABIR AND JEBEL HADNON. The women in Taiz are often less conservative in their dress than women are in northern areas of the country.
WEDDING IN TAIZ
WADI DHABAB IS A SUQ 45 MINUTES FROM TAIZ WHERE PEOPLE FROM THE SURROUNDING MOUNTAIN VILLAGES COME TO SHOP. THE WOMEN ARE NOT VEILED AND A WIDE VARIETY OF COLORFUL ATTIRE ARE IN VIEW. TAKING PHOTOGRAPHS OF WOMEN IS NOT EASY AND THE PHOTOS I HAVE OF THESE WOMEN WERE TAKEN OVER A PERIOD OF FIVE YEARS DURING NUMEROUS VISITS.
TIHAMA COASTAL PLAIN

• As Taiz, Jebel Sabir and Jebel Habashi are left behind and a descent is made through the foothills of Hagda onto the Tihama, many changes are experienced not only in the surrounding physical environment but also in the character of the dwellings, the features of the people and in the styles of women’s dresses. Much of the plain is devoid of any agriculture and the dwellings are in small clusters of round African style huts with thatched roofs and mud and dead acacia thorn enclosed compounds. The rural people of the Tihamah are noticeably poorer and live in much harsher conditions than the people of the central and southern uplands. Agriculture is dominated by a deficient and irregular rainfall which limits production possibilities to only the shallow wadi beds and those areas which are irrigated by pumped water.

• The villages here are not as isolated from each other as those located in the mountains and high mountain plains. A tremendous variety of garment styles exists. Zabid and Bayt al-Faqih are some thirty miles apart with no settlements of any size located between them. Their dresses, despite their close proximity, are totally different. Some of the dresses of the Tihamah are styled expressly for warm weather wear, but others ignore the prevailing heat and tropical climate altogether.

• The Tihamah coastal plain is home to some of Yemen’s oldest cities including Zabid. Founded in the ninth century it became Yemen's seat of learning. At one time it housed many mosques and schools where students could study the Holy Koran as well as participate in research. Learned scholars came from far afield to teach and learn in what is now considered one of Yemen's most picturesque and architecturally interesting cities.
On the TIHAMA one can see old style dresses with hand made tatting worn along side the new tighter more revealing dress of the area. These women intermingle with others wearing the complete cover-up called the “sharshaf” – which is one of Yemen’s “universal” covers seen throughout the country.
TIHAMA DRESSES
UNIVERSAL DRESS

- The Yemeni universal dress or zina is the garment most often seen in Sana'a as well as in other parts of the country. It is found in all areas of Yemen and has popular appeal with women for many years and was also favored by the Imam's wives from early this century.

- It is in some ways reminiscent of the dresses worn by many western women in the 1940's and 50's. Some say it is the Turkish influence and others that the British brought the style to Aden and it was deemed modern and became popular throughout Yemen. It is worn with baggy leggings.
YEMEN ARTS AND CRAFTS

• The majority of crafts in Yemen are utilitarian items – woven floor coverings, blankets, woven reed objects, decorative metal doors, jewelry, hand guided machine embroidery on clothing, as well as elaborate rock and gypsum geometric designs which embellish houses in many regions of the country.

• Geographical and social isolation within Yemen gave rise to the numerous regional traditional dress styles currently seen through the country. Similar, if not the same, factors contributed to each region creating their own production centers for unique utilitarian household objects usually not sold outside of these geographic centers. Since movement between towns was limited each region created embellished utilitarian items unique to their vicinity.

• A number of hand-produced everyday items made in villages are rarely, if ever, available for purchase at the suq even in the village where they are produced. It is customary for would-be purchasers to place advance orders for the item they want and when it has been produced to purchase it directly from the craftsman without the product appearing for sale to the general population.

• Since Yemen remained under tightly controlled autocratic rule and sealed off from the outside world until recently - it was sometimes called "the Silent Kingdom" - it is still possible to see remnants of the former utilitarian craftwork which produced objects for everyday use.
In “Textiles in Yemen”, (Baldry 1982) mentions that from 1000AD there appears to be a decline in Yemeni textiles outside of Yemen. One reason was increased trade with imported fabrics from Europe, China, India and Madagascar. As early as 1000AD Yemenis started favoring these foreign goods rather than home produced cloth. Also, during this time the Egyptian Mamluk Sultans started sanctions against merchants trading with Yemen in a bid to control imported items. Taxes were doubled on ships arriving in Jiddah or Yemen and these ships sailed to India without stopping at the previously frequented Aden port.

By the fifteenth century the political climate had changed enough to allow trade to gradually increase. During the 1600 and 1700’s trade in textiles fluctuated. The Portuguese, Italians, British and Dutch were vying for trade with Yemen.

By the 1800’s steam navigation, the building of the Suez Canal, the increased European production brought about by the industrial revolution and the occupation of Yemen by the Turks collectively reduced general trade and particularly badly affected trade in cloth.

In 1914 the Turks handed over control of Yemen to Imam Yahya who, succeed by his son and later his grandson ruled Yemen until 1962. The Imam’s reign was strict and autocratic and isolationist in the extreme. During their time in office the internal unrest, tribal dislocations and insecurity of trade routes caused a devastating blow to what was left of the cloth and weaving production. There remained only small and insignificant production centers. These small pockets continued the traditional industry with Imam Yahya supporting his private factory which was hand weaving the famous old striped cloth for use by the royal family. This production was still producing a limited supply of the traditional textile into the early 1980’s.

Until recently weaving of camel gear and associated items integral to the bedu life was performed in the Wadi al-Jauf, in the Marib area as well as in the vicinity of al-Baida. This craft is now largely irrelevant and obsolete as the pick-up truck has replaced the camel. Weaving still goes on in these areas but it is minimal. Similarly Sana’a and north of the capital was once a busy weaving center for goat hair rugs, blankets and wool wraps. These are still being produced mostly in natural black with narrow strips of white but not in the same quantities as previously.

The northern tribes also used to wear woven pieces of goat hair cloth for futahs and for vests, abah, which is still produced today although not in the former quantities. The vests were thought to possess healing powers especially for joints and swollen areas of the body also to relieve muscle ache and fatigue resulting from hard physical labor. The vests were worn day and night and thought by the wearer’s to “be part of them”.

There are small pockets in other areas of the country which continue with weaving – the Tihama being one – but the craft is dying out as Yemen continues down the modernization road where old traditions are not followed.
WOVEN CRAFTS OF YEMEN
Veiling has been a custom in Arabia for hundreds of years and one unique style is worn in Sana’a and its immediate surroundings called the maghmukh. This red and black tie-dyed face veil is thought to have originated in Sana’a or has been here for so long that no one can remember from where its pattern originated.

The craftsmen still perform tie-dyeing as they have done through the ages although the dyes used now are imported while those employed in the past were of natural origin. The cloth comes from Wusab where it is woven on small hand looms and later brought to Sana’a for coloring. Men who perform tie-dyeing work and live mainly inside the old walled city are from families with a long standing involvement in this specialized skilled craft.

In years past there was a very active indigo dyeing tradition. This activity is now totally extinct in Sana’a and in the entire country there are only three or four dyeing workshops in operation. Until 70 years ago men and women all over Yemen wore clothes and head gear made from indigo dyed cloth. It was considered as a healing agent which could cure all manner of ills, keep the body warm and eliminate pains in the joints. Indigo dye is not colorfast and will give a bluish tinge to the skin of the person wearing the dyed cloth. This was considered to work as a sun screen and softening agent which kept the skin supple but as indigo dyed cloth lost favor women choose imported fabrics from which the color did not run and was considered modern by the populace.

The process of dyeing the fabric with indigo is time consuming because an alkaline solution needs to sit for three days before the cloth is dipped into it and subsequently dipped into the dye solution. To obtain the strongest take of dye so that the cloth obtains a dark blue color it has to be dipped and removed from the dye three or four times in rapid succession. After the cloth has dried it is pounded with heavy wooden mallets or it can be repeatedly scrapped on a smooth slab with a straight edge to produce the much desired metallic sheen characteristic of indigo dyed cloth.
INDIGO AND TIE DYEING
BASKETS

- Like most Yemeni crafts, basket weaving is regionally distinctive with different villages creating varying and individual designs. These baskets generally remain in the vicinity of their place of production with the exception of the Tihamah work which is used and sold in many areas of the country.

- Until recently baskets served as the primary article in which consumable goods were transported and in the villages this still remains true. Jebel Sabir women have a plainly woven basket carried on their heads when shopping. Tihamah women are consistently seen with the small conical shaped hat which completes their outfit and men make good use of large soft baskets to gather sorghum grain.

- Donkeys and camels can be seen carrying baskets made in Bayt al-Fakih and wearing reed woven saddles. Northern villages prefer solidly structured baskets with stylistic variations including flat bread carrying trays to coiled round baskets used for transporting vegetables. Women shape flat bread over a padded basket handle making their task of baking bread easier. Baskets are used therefore in many different ways, made in many different styles and employ many regional designs.

- The people of the Tihamah make a very wide use of baskets and other woven articles. These are woven from braided palm fronds, grasses and other indigenous plants which grow locally. These woven articles are made in many of the small villages situated along the length of the coast and into the foothills to the east. They are brought to various suqs for sale. Among the rush and palm frond items for sale are: flat eating mats, graduated sizes of carrying baskets, brooms, camel or donkey muzzles and saddles, conical shaped hats, ropes, portable chicken coops, fans and many other items. Most of these utilitarian articles from the Tihamah are devoid of color or patterns relying on symmetry of the plaiting or weaving technique to enhance the appearance.

- In contrast to these are the colorful coiled baskets of the areas far from the Tihamah, near Sa’ada and including the villages situated northward and eastward towards the borders with Saudi Arabia. These baskets are produced by women in outlying villages using grasses and reeds for their raw materials. the dyes are imported, bought locally and used for dyeing by the women in their homes. Designs are all geometric consisting of zigzags and triangles forming pleasant and uniform designs on the finished baskets.

- The women sit on a small knoll under the shade of a large buckthorn (elb) tree where locals from all over the area come to purchase the baskets directly from the women producers. These beautiful baskets are sold mostly in the production area and only rarely can they be found elsewhere.
BASKET PRODUCTION
SHORT HISTORY OF EMBROIDERY IN YEMEN

- Sirwal leggings, gargoosh (the small head covering worn by the majority of girl children and by some women in the northern parts of the country), ras maghmukh, and waist belts worn with the jambia, called a hizam, are the main hand embroidered articles in general use and still being hand embroidered today. The hand guided sewing machine has made its mark on fashion and both urban and rural women wear clothing heavily embellished with this type of adornment.

- In days gone by, evidence suggests that leggings were hand embroidered high up the calf incorporating colored threads and sometimes making use of beads. It is known that the Jewish women in Sana'a and in other areas did intricate work which was later sold to the general Muslim population. These pieces often made use of small couching stitches employing silver and metallic gold colored threads and could be used for leggings, head pieces or be sewn into a dress. These items are not now produced.

- Machine embroidery has replaced hand work that was once done on the women's dresses. The same is true of the painstaking work which went into creating the numerous kinds of head gear worn by girls and some adult women. Ibb and the surrounding mountains which rise above it, especially Jebel Badan, is one of the best places to see remnants of these colorful hats worn by the local small girls. Many styles existed and some are still in evidence showing appliqué, patch work, embroidery and combinations of all three. Black was often the background color with additions in almost any color.

- These head pieces most commonly take the shape of a pointed cap but the ones in the Badan area have a round crown. It is common for young boys to wear this hat, although it is generally reserved for little girls, as it is thought that if the boys are disguised this will protect them from the evil eye and also lessen the chances of them being kidnapped.
MACHINE EMBROIDERY ON NEW DRESSES
GYPSUM WINDOWS AND HOUSE TRIMS
Sitting on the floor is not the custom on the coast. People from the Tihamah prefer to be high above the ground and frame bed-like couches are built so one almost needs to jump up to reach the sitting position. The wooden frames are stretched with cord lattice work creating the support on which the person sits or reclines. These are sometimes covered with carpets but since hot weather prevails they are usually left open to allow air to circulate.

Older Tihamah mufraj’s were often made with elaborate wood carvings serving as the back rest. These have been replaced with simpler versions but ones which are creative and fun to live with. The backrest section is often now painted in colorful patterns of flowers and abstract shapes and designs. Color seems to be the important thing and many primary colors and bright mixes are used.
A Yemeni household would not be complete without the ever present mada'ah. The mada'ah is one part of the hubbly-bubbly pipe smoked at all social gatherings whether they be of men or women. It is essential for the qat chewing sessions.

The art of making the brass mada'ah is almost extinct in Yemen as most are imported from India and Syria. However, there is one craftsman still involved in making traditional mada'ah as his prime livelihood and is working in the same manner as his predecessors had done for hundreds of years before him.

He works in a small workshop in the courtyard of his home situated near the silver suq within the walls of the old city of Sana'a. He recycles brass from old objects, separates the brass from other metals and pours the melted brass into sand moulds which he has cut himself. He also uses hand crafted brass moulds which have been used by previous generations of his family as they were also makers of the mada’ah.
METAL WORK

• The Yemeni carpenter was adept at creating massive doors sometimes incorporating hand carved locks and ingenious mechanisms for opening these heavy doors without ever leaving the top of the sometimes seven storey high houses. By the use of pulleys which could slide the heavy cross bars away doors could be opened to family and friends without the time consuming walk down the endless stairs for each visitor.

• The wooden doors were sometimes painted but more often they were heavily studded with massive nails and decorative wood cutouts created patterns which were artistically appealing. These doors are not now being made but are rather replaced by metal doors handcrafted by Yemeni craftsmen.

• These doors are made from steel and preserve the feeling of safety which the old doors provided. Steel doors and gates are sometimes elaborate in the color and design making use of stylized mosques, rocket ships, houses and more prevalently geometric shapes.
In Yemen money is given to the bride and the bride's family before a wedding agreement can be concluded. Much of the bridal agreement includes jewelry which belongs to the woman and which she can dispose of as she wishes. This dowry helps provide a more secure future and acts as her savings account, also raising her worth in other's eyes and signifying a married status.

Freya Stark found on her travels through south Arabia in the 1930's that women's chests were often covered with jewels and they often were seen covered with as many as twenty or thirty pieces. Although this is not seen as much today, women still favor an abundance of jewels and add to their collection at every possible occasion.

- Most of the jewelry being produced today is made from gold. Gold bars are imported into the country and are later melted down and alloyed with small proportions of brass to increase the gold's hardness and increase its durability: pure 24 carat gold is too soft to make jewelry.

- The silver jewelry of Yemen represents many centuries of tradition and a piece cannot always be valued for the amount of silver contained. The value also depends greatly on the consistency and intricacy of the work as well as individual preferences. Remember that up until now almost all of what is Yemeni made has been produced for the indigenous population.
SUMMARY

• The material described in the clothing section of the summary manuscript covers the principal contemporary dresses, both urban and rural, to be seen worn by Yemeni women. Variations do exist which have not been mentioned and the possibility that styles current in some areas are not mentioned is present. The material does amply illustrate the unique and impressive array of dresses which in actuality represent a form of functional traditional art made by, and for, the indigenous population in a world context where this is increasingly becoming rare.

• As examples of Yemeni applied art and craft the dresses are a significant part of the whole. Yemenis are largely farmers, builders and many work abroad. They, as a nation are not renowned for their arts and crafts yet, in common with all people, as this collection of material shows, they possess an innate felt need and desire to express themselves through the use of form, design and color. It is only through neglect and isolation that the impression has been created of artistic capabilities being limited to architectural expression for which Yemen is justifiably famous. Despite their involvement, as a national group, in a maelstrom of change and development, with all its attendant effects on traditional values, perspective and outlook, they are attempting to maintain elements of their heritage and age old physical culture. They have up to a point succeeded in doing this in the creation of and adherence to the currently worn dresses.

• External influences and the felt need to cater to a growing tourist trade have not yet affected the styles and production techniques used in the manufacture of the traditional dresses. The garments are fashioned for Yemenis by Yemenis and mass production and modern systems of promoting fashion consciousness are largely unknown. The simplicity of styles, designs and construction of the dress proceeds in the age old manner without, as yet, much cognizance of the fledgling tourist industry. Changes have obviously occurred in the styles of dress worn in Yemen over the centuries. The most recent influence has been the introduction and almost universal adoption of the sewing machine some fifty years ago, as well as the adoption by the men of western-style suit coats which were worn by the English in the former Aden Protectorate. The sewing machine permitted the use of new sewing techniques which facilitated the introduction of new and borrowed dress styles as well as major changes in the creation and employment of embroidery designs. The machine permitted innovations in dress construction and the use of heavily and densely embroidered designs and patterns which would have been very difficult and time consuming to do by hand. These innovations originated from within the art consciousness of the local people themselves and there developing sense of form and design rather than being imported from alien cultures.
SUMMARY

• This makes Yemen unique on the entire Arabian peninsula and as the current opening of the country is underway is it possible for these clothes to retain their traditional forms? Probably not. What does the future hold for the unique and special regional dresses of Yemen? There are numerous documented cases of irreplaceable loss of traditional costumes along with a modernization of outlooks and turning away from old customs.

• Arts and crafts have suffered a similar fate in many instances as the rationale for their continuation and relevance to lifestyles vanishes. Yemen is surrounded by Arab countries which have lost much, and in many cases all, their tradition and age old culture to have these replaced in a half-hearted manner with western modernity which has no connection with traditional lives and standards. Yemen, through its receipt of international development assistance and its desire to modernize may be similarly progressing down the road of alienation and cultural impoverishment.

• However, Yemen differs significantly from its neighbors in that it is steeped in a sedentary agricultural tradition based on generations of rootedness to the soil and the family village rather than being based on migratory pastoralism and nomadism. As Yemen builds an infrastructure of a more modern kind it is likely that farming will continue to form a viable nucleus for traditional Yemeni perspectives and outlooks. At least styles may not die as quickly as they have in neighboring countries and we may still have an opportunity to view them in their original context for years to come.
HAJARA
QUEEN ARWA’S TOMB JIBLA
JEBEL SABIR
YUFURUS MOSQUE OUTSIDE OF TAIZ
YEMEN MOUNTAIN SCENE
THE END