

Observations on the Baboons in the Garden of the "Bostan Restaurant"

It was a bright and breezy Friday afternoon in Ṣan'ā'. Having only recently arrived to the Sheba Hotel, I decided to forego experiencing the *haute cuisine* available in my room or at poolside for a Lebanese repast at the "Bostan Restaurant". This Levantine oasis in Yemen is located only a stone's throw away from the great wall of the Chinese Embassy on the road that parallels Zubeiri Street. On the sign outside you are welcomed to the "Bostan Tourism Restaurant", although the astute diner will note that on the menu cover this metamorphoses into "Boustan". (Perhaps the menu cover was printed in Paris? The French seem to love adding the letter "u" to words that can be perfectly well pronounced without: when I see "Bilquis" my tongue utterly fails).

The Bostan or Boustan is in fact a rendering of the Arabic term for garden (Did you ever wonder why Arabs smile at mention of the Celtics playing in the "Boston Garden"?), which is quite appropriate in this case. There is a lovely arbor-embellished garden dining area, which is definitely the place to head for. If you enter in the main dining room, which is usually empty except for unknowing tourists with a lack of curiosity to explore inside, keep on going out the door in the back left. You have a choice of enter-

ing another dining area or bearing left of this to the garden dining area. (The rest rooms, by the way, are off the garden area past the falcon cage...).

The tables are set with clean white tablecloths. Bright red napkins folded accordion style are placed in glasses at each setting. The waiters, clad in matching red jackets, are most courteous, although difficult to find when there are more than a few customers. The cuisine is more-or-less Lebanese with a variety of *mezza hors d'oeuvres*, including tabouleh, hummus, babaghanuj and *lahm bi-'ajin*. The standard meat fare is there, accompanied with chips or rice. For a drink you have the range, but I suggest the fresh lime juice (sweetened to your taste) to avoid tasting something out of a can.

It was June 1991, but the last time I visited the Bostan was in February 1990. At that point the master chef was Monsieur Sherbil, who has since moved to Rabat where he has opened up a seaside Lebanese restaurant. Sherbil had been associated with several restaurant ventures in Ṣan'ā' since the early 1980s. I first met him at "Candles" (Shumū'), which lasted only a short while around 1984; this restaurant was located near the junction of the Ministry of Agriculture Road (now Kuwait Street) and the Wadi Dhahr Road

(also known as the Ministry of Justice Road). After this he moved on to more meager quarters in the "Ghadir Tourism Restaurant" on a street behind the tea garden diagonally across from the Sheba Hotel. It was a bit cramped (to say the least), but the food was quite good in those days. And there was, unfortunately, little competition in the genre. Later came "Le Baron" which transmuted into "Abū Nuwās" (not to be confused with the night club at the Mövenpick Hotel in Aden or the banquet room in the Sheba Hotel and whatever other locality Abū Nuwās might have slept in); my only memory of "Le Baron" is that of ill-trained waiters serving "Ma Ling" canned peas from a far too dainty-looking serving plate.

On this particular Friday I was relatively early and so I had the pick of the place. I chose a table underneath an arbor of green *rāziqī* grapes. My table was on a raised terrace next to a long row of trees and flowers. It appeared to me that this area had not been watered in recent memory as several of the flowers looked a bit parched. I almost ordered water just to give them a bit of a drink. What amazed me was that someone had planted three lightbulbs in the soil. I stared at these for several minutes wondering what would eventually sprout up. The

wattage was not clear, nor the place of manufacture. It is altogether possible, at least in my mind, that some of the bulbs imported to Yemen from eastern Europe may in fact contain seeds and be capable of producing flowers. Perhaps the same thought occurred to one of the waiters. Having just arrived, I did not yet have the courage to ask.

A Yemeni family was dining further inside. An added attraction for families is that there are several cages of animals on the side of the garden. In one is a peacock, although I doubt there is room in the small space for it to fully display its feathers. Since I had been here before the management had added a falcon and a mongoose. But the main attraction, verified by the giggling children, was the pair of baboons. The chatter and play of the baboons focused my attention for the entire meal. It was obvious that a proper (i.e., male and female) pair had been chosen for family fare. The male was no more than two-and-one-half feet high, and the female slightly smaller. It appears that the Arabian variant of *Papio hamadryas* is of smaller stature than his East African cousins. Although, in this case I think the Bostan's apes are on the juvenile side.

One of my first acts, even before ordering, was to walk over and greet this pair who were destined to be, through no fault of their own, a major part of my dining experience. The cage was a virtual prison cell: six feet high,

barely six feet long and not quite three feet wide. A couple of sticks propped at an angle between the sides and a couple of chain swings provided the fixed entertainment potential for the baboons. A rusty can of festering water (I could readily discern the algae) was placed inside the cage. No doubt my two friends would eventually feed on the remnants of my meal and countless others. (In some ways, it was probably a better set-up for them than a zoo.)

Despite the bleak reality of their cage, my simian friends were making the best of it. But it seemed unsporting of a higher evolved form not to relate to his cousins by name. I asked each of them, half suspecting a reply, but only a quizzical look could be returned. So it seemed best to give them each a name, at least so I could talk about them on a more personal basis. After all, we were dining together in the broader sense. Somehow "Flo" and "Eddy" popped out of my mind, and so I dubbed them for this Friday afternoon. Both Flo and Eddy were playful little devils and rather well accomplished acrobats for the limited space available (it reminded me of trying to dance on a very crowded dance floor). We exchanged views on the weather (quite hot and dry this year), restaurant life and the like. At least I felt as if we had broken the ice.

As I sat coursing through my meal the garden area began to fill up with families. The enterprising owner had set up a swing for

children near the cages; it was as close to MacDonalds as one might get in Şan'a'. This play area was quite a melting pot: Yemeni, German, Chinese children all oblivious to the linguistic Babel that separated them. One boy in particular had engineered a clever game with Eddy. He placed his foot near the cage and encouraged Eddy to untie the lace. Within ten minutes the deed had been done by a resourceful Eddy. (To be honest, I was more amazed at seeing a seven-year old stand still for ten minutes than at the dexterity of Eddy.) It occurs to me that this may be the first recorded observation of an Arabian baboon untying a boy's shoelace; perhaps this is a first in the whole field of primate studies. As luck would have it, Flo immediately grabbed the lace and bounced off (not very far, as you might well imagine). She had been ignoring Eddy most of the time, but clearly lace had been on her mind. Well, not exactly lace in the feminine sense. Flo spent the next twenty minutes trying to slurp up the lace like a strand of spaghetti. I doubt if anything that day was more frustrating for Flo than this useless spaghetti look-alike that could not be chewed or swallowed (try as she might). The young boy stood by in admiration at his deed and was totally oblivious to the fact that his shoes now flapped clown-like as he walked back to his table. I wonder when the parents would realized that the lace was missing.

What started out as a leisurely

lunch observing baboons was evolving more into a play in which the main characters were my fellow patrons. The behavior of Flo and Eddy, restricted as it was forced to be, made sense in the ultimate scheme of things. They were on the inside trying half-heartedly to get out. We, on the other hand, were already on the outside and presumably able to know better (at least according to relative brain size).

Let me introduce you to the other guests besides myself, Flo and Eddy. At the table in front of me sat two Egyptian men who were soon joined by two Frenchmen. There was a rather abrupt shift from Cairene Arabic to French (or at least a form of French). What struck me was not the Egyptian or the French dia-

“Black Sambo” image of Blacks in America during the “Amos ‘n Andy” era. One of these caricatures was boxing, another surfing, and so on. I suppose it was supposed to communicate nothing significant and for the most part it did here in Yemen. But I was somewhat appalled and was tempted to ask the fellow, whose back was a billboard for my face, to take off his shirt and wear it backwards (assuming only the over-ripe banana exuded on the front).

A Yemeni child, perhaps about three or four years old, walked by in a far more palatable t-shirt. It simply said “Gator Beach” and showed a Florida style beach with palm trees and a sailboat. This I could take with a smile, even though I remember reading in one

a wealth of t-shirt types in Şan‘ā’. The one that really struck me this time was made in Indonesia. It shows a shark named “Mr. Mako” and peddles a fictitious (I hope) “Shark Bite Beer”. Of course this beer has a “smooth predatory taste”. (The designer label, by the way, shows an American Indian head in full headdress.) One of the t-shirts making the rounds in Şan‘ā’ shows Saddām and reads “*Allāhu akbar*,” surely a collector’s item for the wayward tourist if ever there was one.

The way people dress always amazes me. Most foreigners in Yemen try to respect local custom, especially those who are resident for a period of time. But it seems that a trip on Friday afternoon to the Bostan allows for a bit of relaxation. The skirts on the European women are shorter and the men sport t-shirts. What intrigues me is how it is virtually impossible to identify the nationality of children from the clothing. There may be a Yemeni family with the women in *sharshāf*, but the children dress like children anywhere, mostly t-shirts and shorts. Yet there will probably come a point when the clothes will mean something and be chosen for a more blatantly social purpose. But if the children can mix and play as one, will they not want to do so when they grow up?

The Bostan highlights a number of anomalies in modern Yemen, the mixing of traditions, the merging of the old with the new. I saw a family with a Yemeni

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lects, but the visual message on the back of a t-shirt worn by one of the French diners. This might have been purchased anywhere, of course, since all these designs are mumbo-jumbled internationally. First of all the color of the t-shirt was that of over-ripe banana pulp (it really was). Emblazoned on the back were four figures, each of them a replica of the racist

of the super-market tabloids that killer gators were escaping the Everglades and would soon be the death of us all.

The t-shirt billboard is a social custom that to my knowledge has not been given serious attention. Do people really want to advertize the products named on the shirt or communicate the gross messages flashed on front or back? There is

man married to a European wife. There are the lonely Lebanese and Syrian workers, the foreign consultants escaping from claustrophobic hotels, a few struggling students. The melting pot which this Lebanese restaurant hosts goes beyond the children's swings, t-shirts, and caged baboons. One of the most poignant metaphors of change is the presence of rows of Mousy non-alcoholic beer in a cooler near the garden area. It looks like a regular beer can, but of course the liquid inside does not taste like it. Now, to my mind the taste of non-alcoholic can beer is a Madison Avenue nightmare. I have never actually met anyone who admits

to drinking it, unless by mistake or just for an initial trial. It's presence here is ultimately a joke, because a Muslim would hardly be tempted to try it (even if it is non-alcoholic) and any true beer drinker would rather go without. Could these be the same cans I saw a year ago, or even seven years ago at the "Candles" restaurant? What is the half-life of non-alcoholic beer, anyway?

Back to Flo and Eddy. As I finished the last of my coffee (Do you ask for Arabic or Turkish coffee in Yemen?), I turned the cup over as though my fortune could be read from it. It no doubt annoys the waiters, but I like looking for the ridges and guessing if

I have a long journey ahead of me. Of course, it never works to tell your own future. I left the Bostan more concerned about the future of Flo and Eddy. No doubt there will be two baboons in the cage when I return to Sanaa the next time, but will I recognize Flo (still wondering about that odd unedible spaghetti) and Eddy or whatever else other travelers might name them? If you happen to get to Šan'a' before I do, please do me a favor. Drop by the Bostan for lunch and say hello to Flo and Eddy. Also, please let me know if any of the lightbulbs have sprouted yet.

-- D. Varisco

Graz Symposium on Southern Arabia

During 15-17 November, 1990 a Symposium on Southern Arabia was held at Karl-Franzens University in Graz in coordination with the Grazer Morgenländischen Gesellschaft. This symposium was held in honor of the 90th birthday of Prof. Maria Höfner, retired dean of the faculty and a world-renowned specialist in South Arabian studies. The symposium was attended by the following scholars: Prof. Yusuf Abdullah (Šan'a'), Prof. Bafaqi (Aden), Prof. A. F. L. Beeston (Oxford), Prof. Walter Dostal (Vienna), Prof. Alan Kaye (Univ. of California), Prof. Müller (Marburg), Prof.

Muawiyah ('Ammān, Jordan), Prof. Preissler (Leipzig), Prof. Christian Robin (France), Prof. Ryckmans (Belgium), and Prof. Stein (Leipzig).

Between November 1990 and March 1991 the university also sponsored a series of presentations and lectures at the Landesmuseum Joanneum Schloss Stainz in Graz. This included lectures by Prof. Eisenstein (Vienna), Mr. Andre Gingrich (Vienna), and Prof. Roswitha Stiegner. For more information contact Dr. Roswitha G. Stiegner, Institut für Sprachwissenschaft, Karl-Franzens-Universität, Mozartgasse 14, A-8010 Graz, Austria.

Arthur Hayden Hughes, a career foreign service officer and currently deputy assistant secretary of defense for Near East and South Asian affairs, has been named to succeed Charles F. Dunbar, Jr. as ambassador of the United States to Yemen. Hughes is a former deputy chief of mission at U.S. embassies in Tel Aviv, the Hague and Copenhagen.

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