Remembering camels in Aden

by Adel A. M. Aulaqi

Introduction:

A centuries-old story of survival and an enduring love affair between the Arab and his camel inspired much-treasured real or imagined tales of love, death and war. Much of the wealth of poetic culture by the best known classical Arab writers and poets from al-Mutanabbi to al-Asma‘ee and Ibn U’qba remains in evidence today in addition to lasting folklore of heroic acts of war and conquests.

Arabs bred camels for crossing deserts, living on their milk and meat and utilising their skins and hair. Camel and man’s footprints are etched in tracks criss-crossing the Arabian Peninsula. Traders, poets, physicians and astronomers, pilgrims, warriors, ordinary travellers and adventurers followed these footprints, tracks and routes to far away destinations from Africa, the eastern and southern borders of Europe to the ends of China. Camels crossed endless desert sand dunes, river beds, and ragged mountains or ambled along lush terrain carrying adventurers and explorers in search of knowledge. Ibn Batuta, ibn Jubair and more recently Thessiger and Philby amongst many others left their experiences in journals, books or reports.

One may justifiably wonder had the camel not been the vehicle that transported people and merchandise across continents how different Arab history would have been. Trade with and through Yemen (Arabia Felix), especially in spices and frankincense, originating in Southern Arabia was the source of wealth and power in the region. In step with the camel’s steady gait, camel caravans journeyed in carefully timed annual cycles that interconnected the entire Arabian Peninsula and dictated the rhythms of trade, so well-described not least in the Quran. Life in Arabia would surely have been different without the magnificently designed patient dromedary. Remains of ancient tracks can still be seen unchanged, but many have been replaced by modern roads. Alongside ancient camel routes and at caravan sites shrines and villages were named to celebrate the good life of Muslim holy men (auliyā) and sheikhs. Today such fairs are still held at some of these graves and shrines. Those for the Prophet Hud in Hadhramaut and al-Hashimi and al-Aidarous in Aden continue to be visited by seekers of good fortune and blessings, long after camel caravans ceased to park at their sites.

A South Arabian connection

Some forty years after Britain acquired Aden in 1839, Hunter (1877) published his survey of the area. His sketched map highlighted the main camel caravan routes to and from Sheikh Othman, the desert bordering frontier township of Aden Colony. In 1930 Freya Stark proposed the frankincense routes that camel caravans in South Arabia would have taken. The two sources amalgamated into one map illustrated the immense significance of Sheikh Othman. At its periphery was al-Sailah, where camels conglomerated in their hundreds at the last major terminus for camel caravans in South West Arabia.
Sketch map of camel caravan “Kafilah” routes in South West Arabia. Sketch by A. Aulaqi.

Map of Aden Colony Caravan Routes. Sketch by A. Aulaqi
Aden sits on the southern shores of Arabia irresistibly attracting maritime powers. From ancient to modern times, it had been the major trading centre and gateway that connected Southern Arabia with international sea traffic and to its north the Arabian Peninsula. At its height as a significant British Colony (1839-1967) it boasted a multi-racial, multi-ethnic and multi-cultural society of some 250,000 people. Today it is the commercial capital of unified Yemen. Despite its enviable strategic position, trading and maritime significance, and until mechanised transportation replaced the camel, Aden owed its survival and prosperity almost entirely to the camel. Its water, food and firewood came on camel backs. Its four townships of Crater 5 the main administrative and commercial centre, Ma’alla, accommodated the local and domestic marine service while Tawahi (Steamer Point) served as a major international harbour and Sheikh Othman hosted the vital camel caravan site and connections.

Al-sailah site was an essential hub of a wider inter-connection and economic inter-dependence of the colony and its immediate neighbouring states in all directions north of the Arabian Sea and east of the Red Sea. Far beyond British-controlled South Arabia camel caravans connected all other parts of the Arabian Peninsula. Within the confines of the colony and its nearby surrounds a great number of the camels were short-distance beasts of burden.

The some four to six square mile area of al-Sailah held a special place in the collective memory of the many whose lives were touched by its powerful camel presence. This is a brief journey through 1946-1961, that captures some of these vivid recollections by many 6 of camels, caravans and people seemingly always on the move and yet gradually on the wane.

The site occupied an ancient remnant of dried up river bed mostly flat with the odd diminutive sand dune interspersed by green clumps of acacia and tall palm trees (Hyphaen thebaica) locally called “bahash”7 Their narrow pencil-like shade was hardly useful, but their tops housed the large nests of the magnificent Black Kite. True shade in the open spaces was at a premium hardly offered by neem (Azadirachta indica) trees and the few one storey buildings as well the odd rented straw-strung wooden beds. The small mosque offered refuge from the relentless overhead mid-day sun. The site, by its name, was where a stream would flow. Extremely rarely it received a frightening overflow of waters from a branch of Wadi Tuban on its natural southerly rush towards the sea. The relentless sun did not spare burning man or beast and dessicated any puddles of water almost as soon as they formed. Perhaps, had it not been for the sun, worse disease misery and epidemics would have occurred. The rhythm of daily life of camel and cameleer here began well before sunrise and carried on to well beyond sunset.

**Sunrise to Sunset**

As the night darkness peeled itself off, caravans of numerous dromedary camels emerged slowly from all distant horizons to converge onto al-Saila site. In the darkness of the pre-dawn hours one such caravan emerged daily out of the eastern horizon. It was in the shape of a long train of rhythmically creaking black bushes. Thin and weary hard-toiling, dark-skinned, short-skirted cameleers episodically yelped short sharp unintelligible instructions. The camels understood the instructions well and the caravan relentlessly aimed to unload its precious cargo of dry black firewood branches.
Camel caravan carrying firewood approaching the eastern border of al-Saila site, c.1930. Photograph kindly supplied by Mr. Ash Girgirah and re-edited by the author in March 2011. The distant eastern horizon borders the Western Aden Protectorate. To the right of the visible tarmac road would be Sheikh al-Daweel village, said to be the site of original human habitation in the area. This caravan image was witnessed daily by the author and inhabitants of the area from 1946 to 1961.
Here all camels jostled for parking space and with much loud characteristic camel groaning mingled with unintelligible human shouts, unloaded perhaps rested a little to eat and drink, reloaded and departed once more in all directions. Unloading and reloading was carried out with such apparent chaos and noise, but with infinite meticulous balancing of loads and with deep consideration for the animal’s well-being.

Incoming loads were diverse, mainly animal fodder and food for humans, all manner of vegetable produce, grain, nuts, pulses, sorghum, millet, sesame, dates, a variety of nut, the precious frankincense and coffee beans, honey, and the much sought after spices and locally woven colourful traditional cotton or woollen garments and carpets.

Camels leaving Aden carried imported natural or manufactured materials and goods from all parts of the world, agricultural machinery, paraffin, cloth, garments or Aden produced salt as well as milled four, rice, sesame oil and ready-made shirts and clothes. However, humans must have been the most precious of all that travelled with camel caravans. People from the Yemen and Aden Protectorates would travel to and from Aden using the safety of the caravan to cross inhospitable desert and hostile lands. Many travelled for days or even weeks to reach Aden in search of better treatment for their ailments. Others sought knowledge and education, work in the metropolis or simply visited relatives. They endured much hardship to reach Aden and on returning home. It must have been painfully hard for parents to dispatch their children such distances in search of education and a better life. Perhaps thanks to the camel, education and employment in Aden, the lives of those who came from the protectorates were indelibly changed; many became highly educated professionals.
Late 19th and early 20th centuries brought Western modernity in the shape of new infrastructures, institutions, brick and mortar buildings. With the advent of mechanical transportation, piped water, electricity and gas, for commercial and domestic use, the camel’s vital role was gravely threatened. But, in urban areas, human ingenuity and camel resilience led to newer adaptations; the new rubber wheel mounted on discarded car chassis, the wooden flat platform replaced camel back to pull carts on wheels, the wooden water tankards were replaced by shiny metal ones and the camel entered ever deeper into the paved narrow streets closer to perpetually overstocked shops and to homes. The camel was an integral part of the fabric of Aden society as a means of transportation, as much as the car is today.

The arrival of Christian missionaries in Sheikh Othman added a new dimension to the caravan site. Residents within the confines of the Keith Falconer Scottish Mission Hospital (KFMH), the self-contained medical facility and those closely associated with it remember well its immediate vicinity to al-Saila. The hospital was built in 1886 almost certainly on land where previously camels walked and parked way back into history.

Sheikh Othman represented a frontier town where modernity crept into the lives of a thoroughly rural population. The camel terminus and hospital sat literally at the confluence of desert and coastal plain. Large numbers of camels imposed their traditional presence and contrasted with a relentless creeping modernity in the form of asphalt roads, new colonial town structures and infrastructures. The ever present majestic black kite (huddiah) nested in the tops of the palm trees. Flying high in search of food it would sometimes appear only as a tiny black speck that glided effortlessly working thermal currents and saw the clash between tradition and modernity below. Over the fifteen years modernity relentlessly subdivided and displaced the camel resting places into ever diminishing enclaves. By 1961 the classic camel caravan shrank markedly.

At the heart of the site camels and other animals lived openly, under relentless sun or desert night, close to water and al-Othmani mosque. Some shade offered by the odd tall leafy neem tree or thick acacias, the latter often housing human-shy scorpions and snakes (including the poisonous vipers). Cameleers from all parts of southern Arabia reflected their own tribal affiliations by dress, mannerisms and speech. A branch of the Aulaqi tribes, the Mahajer, specialised in driving camel caravans, were recognizable by the short belted skirt, naked torso, indigo-smeared dark skin, the long hair held together by a tight string across the forehead and their distinctive accent or perhaps language. Their journey to reach Aden would have started at Sa’eed or Mehfid in Shabwah some eight or ten days previously.10

Soon after early morning prayers, and well before the day was drenched in the bright warm sunrays, the site was a hive of purposeful activity. Food was cooked on portable utensils or bought in noisy cafes and communally eaten. Camels, singly or in numbers began to arrive and depart. Al-Othmani mosque was central to the site. Its water supply was essential for drinking and ablutions and its quiet space for peaceful silent prayers or perhaps a little snooze. Five times a day the call to prayer went out. Initially the call was by unaided human voice issued by the caller walking around the circular platform high up the minaret. With time the loudspeaker appeared and saved the caller his voice and the climb to become the new tradition. A respectful distance away sat the vital water trough for the camel, mules and donkeys as well as goats and sheep. The watering area was a noisy place surrounded by perpetual movement and communication between man and
man and man and beast. Colour came brilliantly from the unhindered sunlight reflected by the constantly blue sky, dusty earth, white buildings, sparse green of vegetation and human attire. Smells of all varieties arising from camels, other animals, aromatic merchandise, cooking and humans filled the air. Rarely, when it rained a brief distinctive delightful aroma of wet parched earth assaulted the senses.

At Sheikh Othman’s al-Sailah silence fell in two distinctive periods; in the heat of the mid-day sun when shade was at a premium and during the still, a little chilly, desert night. The resting period for camels and cameleers was almost invariably soon after post mid-day. In mid-afternoon the camels would present a rather strange image by placing themselves in groups next to each other, as if in contemplative prayer, crouched dozing and chewing the cud, facing the sun now drifting towards setting.

Within the major Aden townships, camels moved as smaller caravans to stop at sub or end-termini; the one in Crater for the same reason was also called al-Sailah. From these parking lots and in much smaller numbers or even singly, camels, other animals or human-powered carts or cars delivered their burdens to the eventual destinations at trading stores, shops, workshops, cafés, restaurants, bakeries or homes. Like the ubiquitous car of today camels then effectively extended their majestic presence beyond the confines of al-Sailah to every part of Aden. Today Crater’s al-Sailah still carries the name but taxi cabs have for long replaced camels.

Fresh camel meat was available in the local meat market. Young camels were slaughtered away from al-Sailah; it was said to avoid distressing the other animals. A rather expensive Somali delicacy of sun-dried then cooked, finely chopped pieces camel meat called “q’warimah” came preserved in its own fat. It was pan fried and consumed by those who could obtain or afford it.

Unpasteurised fresh camel milk was available for human consumption on request, but not on sale in the market place as a regular item. Although brucellosis was not particularly prevalent, those aware avoided camel milk in its unpasteurised state for fear of contracting this chronic illness.

Whenever children saw camel caravans arriving into Aden and its immediate surrounds they would spontaneously break into song of two famous lines, a question and answer. Although it is about the exotic fruit of quince the song illustrated the intimate connection between camel, the entire region, human food supplies and the special role of certain cameleers.

Oh you single quince, what brought you from [all that far away] Yemen? I was brought [here] by mašārīqa who loaded me onto a camel.

Soon after lunch time and before sunset prayers a special form of socialising took place in most Aden homes, clubs and social gatherings. It was based on the leaf of the shrub called Qat (Catha edulis); it was and (more so today) remains a highly significant internal economic commodity that reached Aden daily. It largely replaced coffee growing in what was the northern imamate of Yemen. The non-edible fresh succulent green leaves contained several active chemical entities released by chewing into saliva. When ingested they induced various conflicting pharmacological, effects. These ranged from initial heightened volubility and mental hyperactivity to broodiness and insomnia for hours after ingestion. Britain attempted banning it but for her troubles ended up involved in a serious fracas locally and with Imamate Yemen. To deliver daily fresh
consignments, these camels mostly bypassed the Sheikh Othman al-Sailah site. When the automobile replaced camel in bringing in Qat, such vehicles were often announced with much fanfare of car horns and were received with unmistakable human joy. Interestingly though, cameleers from the Aden Protectorates seemed not to partake in the habit of Qat chewing.

To reach destinations within the colony, camels followed set routines and travelled along well-trodden paths. An English lady could time three o’clock in the afternoon by the regular passage of a small caravan not too far from her house window in the district of Khormaksar.

Whilst the northern and eastern the Sheikh Othman site loose boundaries were only roughly marked by footprints its southern and western borders were sharply demarcated by asphalt roads. On the latter camels journeyed to and from the main townships of the colony and followed tracks that often ran parallel to or actually shared tarmac with the car. It seems certain those modern roads sensibly mostly followed the historical tracks engraved on the ground by centuries of use by the camel caravans.

To enter the significant urbanised commercial centres of the colony all animal or motorised traffic laden with produce or manufactured goods had to pass through the customs station, the disarmament gate (bab-a-salab). Here imported commodities were taxed and all weapons, guns and daggers, were handed in to be reclaimed on the outward journey. By seven in the morning this check point was a beehive of activity. The daily noisy frenetic affair was at odds with its obvious good humour; trade and business, destination and delivery of goods were the orders of the day. Children on school buses to and from Crater passed through un-hindered and witnessed these daily events.

Once through bab-a-salab the inward journey’s end was now in sight. Camels spread out to reach the local camel caravan sites of the main townships of Crater, Ma’alla and Tawahi (Steamer Point). Local camels, camel carts or, increasingly, cars would take over the distribution of goods. The animals would return laden with merchandise for the rural hinterlands in the Protectorates of Aden or to Yemen to complete the long cycle.
The business centre in Crater was a honeycomb of well paved streets, wide enough to accommodate two camel carts side by side. It had the air and characteristics of a grand confusing emporium of imported goods and social interactions. Loud music and songs in many languages, including various Arabic dialects, competed happily with people trying to barter over the price of a desired item. On each side granite stone buildings of no more than three storeys, had ground floor shops above which the floors housed people of all nationalities and origins. The streets interconnected by narrow noisy alleyways also lined by shops so overflowing with merchandise from the smallest nail or screwdriver to the latest electrical gadget imported from Japan, India, the United Kingdom and just about the rest of the world. Virtually in every street there were mechanic repair shops not too far from boutiques selling the most exotic of perfumes, myrtle, eucalyptus gum and frankincense and clothes. One could not help but inhale the dizzying aromatic perfumes and spices that permeated the whole area but needed to ignore the human noise of shoppers, passers-by and those in the plethora of tea shops restaurants and cafes. It was impossible to ignore the persistent hammering of metal on metal in the narrow alleyways where various cheap household utensils mostly to do with cooking food or burning of tobacco or incense, were hand-manufactured virtually on demand. Camels strapped to wooden-platforms on ex-car axle and two wheels dutifully stop to deliver and patiently stand chewing the cud whilst the urban cameleer negotiated and delivered his load. The urban plenty here contrasted with the rather harsh, frugal and light way of life of the cameleer.
Wood for burning continues to be delivered by camel to restaurants. Photo: A. Aulaqi, November 2010

Having an abundant supply of sea water and unlimited free solar energy, salt production, initiated by an Italian family, became a significant source of income for Aden. Camels were an essential ingredient in its success. They were worked in the Salt manufacturing industry shifting salt on train tracks. A separate kind of camel came to be laden with heavy sacks of salt for transport to the interior and, more significantly, for international markets such as Japan via the sea ports in Ma’alla and Tawahi. At designated camel caravan sites, the desert-crossing camel and cameleer encountered seafaring trading and transportation life. Here they delivered for export salt, hides, coffee beans, sacks of compacted Hadhrami dates, perhaps sun-dried fish and the famous Dawa’ni honey. In exchange they picked up all manner of merchandise from Britain and building material such as wood from all parts of the massive British Empire and from India and Africa. Most was for Aden but a good deal was also destined for those living a rural life.

Iconic windmill and camels of Aden salt pans, postcard c.1960. By kind permission of Aden Archives’ Director, Mr. Murshed Shamsan.
The camel as a militarily groomed and decorated beast for show came in the shape of the Camel Corpse. In Tawahi, opposite the opulent Crescent Hotel, the ground held annual military parades. The magnificent white Camel Corpse did their bit to impress the crowds with their immaculately turned out decorations, absolute masculine sturdiness and military discipline. They often inspired a great deal of awe, and people lined up respectfully to observe them anywhere they appeared. Their real job was to go confidently where no car could across the borders and into desert. More as a deterrent, moving in small numbers, they were probably not in large enough numbers materially to affect military affairs along the very long borders.

**Crossing the space**

For an urban youngster, far more so a child, to cross into the domain of the dusty rather mysterious caravan site would be an adventure. Not because of fear of humans, more so to avoid the overpowering smells, insect bites, especially by ticks, and the ever present real or imagined potential risk of camel bites, crossing the site was avoided. The nearby Christian Mission hospital treated cameleers with camel-related injuries, mostly camel and insect bites, some of which were indeed serious. A genuine fear was that of coming in contact with the horrific mange that was deadly to camels, cats and dogs. Camels were treated with a tarry paint, but the numerous feral dogs and cats perished untreated.

On occasion one would observe the act of breeding, when animated and loud cameleers would collaborate in guiding the highly excited male camel onto a reluctant pinned down she-camel. One wondered as to why this required human intervention. It was a noisy, rather ungainly approach to reproducing camels when presumably the animals, left to their own devices, must have known of a far more natural but perhaps less selective way. Some of the old camel breeding
sites persist to today, but the reason for breeding has changed, it is now for camel meat and milk and less so for the beast of burden.

The Saisaban (Acacia) area formed much of the northern border of al-Sailah; a dense mini forest of juicy evergreen acacia acted as a magnet for foraging camels. The vegetation was interspersed by airy shacks, huts and increasingly the more modern stiflingly hot breezeblock low single-storey housing. Many recalled how the entire area of al-Sailah and its surrounds was under cover of a dense forest that is no longer in existence; it had been denuded by decades of cutting for firewood. Some two miles north east of al-Sailah the villages of Masa’bain and ‘Imād were important caravan stops; then as today white camels are bred there. In local folklore ‘Imād is sometimes claimed to be the probable remnant of the region that received mention in the Quran.

Camel breeding in Mas’bain, Yemen. Photo: A. Aulaqi, November 2010

Close to the village of Dar-Sa’d on the site’s northern perimeter where desert, colony and protectorate met, Aden College opened its doors in 1950. It offered an elite secondary education and produced the students who, through merit and scholarships, sought higher education, mainly in Western institutions. On the journey to and from school camels in all their guises were encountered in the main north-south highway. Caravans composed of larger or fewer camels carried people or heavy merchandise, pulled tankards of water or carts loaded with building material; all purposefully went by in the unending service of humans and trade.

On the north-south highway, the site’s western border, camels met and lived with their future metal nemesis. Whilst the car still struggled with the desert sands its emergence led to the local modification of the camel-drawn wheel-based cart. It thus contributed to the emergence of a different kind of camel culture, based on
the settled urban setup, a far cry from that of its cousin in the old caravan culture. This cameleer lived in a house, sat on a contraption that the camel pulled and was part of and served an urban society. He travelled solo. He identified his camel by decorative markings on neck and torso, guarded it from theft and did not allow it to wander off to forage. He hand fed it and, in the heat of day, sometimes rested or slept in the shade of its cart. In the fifteen years, 1946-1961, the wheel of the cart had changed from the cumbersome noisy large wooden spoke metal-rimmed contraption to the faster and quieter modified car remains of axel and rubber wheel. All along the side of the modern road many a new enterprise of wheel and puncture repairs “the mechanics garage” offered their services. It was a rather odd image, of accommodation and compromise, to see modern cars and camel carts awaiting repair side by side. Tarmac, rubber wheel and new mechanics seemed to be sending an ominous message foretelling of an uncertain future for the camel.

However, it was the long southern borders of the site that brought back most of the memories; for this was where transition from caravan culture to the relentlessly creeping modern future was sharpest. The Keith Falconer Mission Hospital was built primarily to treat tribal people. It also served those at the periphery of Aden colony and spread the words of the Gospel. Indeed this western medical service was on offer to all who asked for it. Doctors and nurses here regularly treated camel-related injuries including some horrific bites by camels as well as skin and other diseases in cameleers especially those resulting from eye infections, leg ulcers, insect and tick bites.16

![Water Filling Station (Pump) Sheikh Othman Camel Water Cart in early twentieth century. It existed till the late 1950s and early 1960s when more homes were connected to piped water. The wall behind the station was the northern perimeter wall of the KFMH compound over which one can glimpse the mud-brick homes of KFMH employees. The tall palm trees were in the space between the hospital and Sheikh al-Daweel village. The camels face al-Othmani mosque and the al-Saila camel caravan park site. Drawn by A. Aulaqi.](image)

Close to the hospital was the iconic vital water pump. For many years it filled camel carts with water to supply the needs of the township. It ceased working sometime in the mid-sixties when piped water reached humbler homes. The
water camel cart modernized by changing to car axel and rubber wheels and from wooden kegs to shiny metal tankers. Nearby Sheikh al-Daweel, believed to be the historic original founding village in the area occupied a sand-dune hillock. Its houses were a jumble of narrow alleyways and closely compacted buildings. The ancient traditional mud bricks for walls and tree branches for fences comfortably touched the most modern homes built using mason hand-carved granite stones. In parts of the village man and animal, particularly the camel, lived side by side, the latter usually in enclosures attached to the property. Here history was always alive not least through its holy men. The good lives of the (auliya’) and Sheikhs, buried in nearby graves for monuments, were celebrated annually by holding fairs at these sites. The wally received gifts of cloth, the kiswa, money and food offered to the guardian of the well-preserved monument. The kiswa a highly colourful hand-made cloth to cover the wally’s tomb was brought on camel back accompanied by a procession. Drums, flutes, song and dance, mixed with the joy and laughter of participants especially by youngsters filled the air. Highly spiced food, ice-cream, sweets and drinks complemented the various games, swings, card tricks and Punch and Judy type of entertainments.

Photograph of Sheikh al-Daweel from the roof of KFMH taken by the author in 1953. The central space shows camels, and cart repairs. Large neem trees in the midst of housing offered shade. Part of a large acacia tree is seen at the right hand corner of the photograph. From the distant horizon emerge the camel caravans to enter al-Saila on the left hand side of the photograph. Tracks made by camels and man are seen criss-crossing the picture. Photodigitally processed by Orbitpress of Chesham, May 2011.

Camel and horse races were very special attractions held in the more prestigious fairs at the nearby al-Othmani and the further away al-Hashimi shrines. With the brief advent of communist rule in the 1970s these cultural events ceased almost completely. More recently, they seem to have returned but are described as but pale imitation of their vibrant past.
Al-Saila during al-Othmani Fair. Camel races at the centre. Sheikh Othman’s mosque far right. Photo by the author 1953. Acacia trees mark sites of camel grazing. Photo by the author 1953, a little degraded, digitally processed by Orbitpress of Chesham in May 2011.

Al-Othmani Fair. Mosque in background and associated grave of Sheikh Othman were at the heart of al-Saila camel caravan site. Charmers, with local snake round neck and small drum in hand, in the foreground sing and dance and ritually hit their foreheads with an axe at moments of ecstasy. The kiswa for the Sheikh is seen behind onlookers centrally and to the right of the picture. Photo by the author 1953, digitally processed by Orbitpress of Chesham in May 2011.
The cooler afternoon hours brought out youngsters to socialise or play football in public spaces close to al-sailah and camels. Camels had a natural right of way and people would spontaneously stop even in the middle of a hotly contested football issue, to let camels pass by. At the edge of one such football ground the sesame seed cold press owned by the Da’ar family presented another iconic landmark. A small healthy camel went endlessly round, crushed and squeezed the tiny seeds and extracted their distinctive oil. The rich oily husk remains were turned into cakes for camel feed. The well-fed camels had these cakes enriched with date molasses or honey. The apt sarcastic proverb “a camel rotates and presses and another eats the rich remains” reflected the inequity of unrewarded labour and undeserved gain. Today an electrically-powered mechanism drives the same old wooden press.

*Author’s Sketch: Camel-driven sesame seed cold press.*
As the afternoon neared its end the tempo at the site changed; newly arrived camels were unloaded in preparation for overnight parking. At dusk, the cloak of darkness descended upon al-Sailah like a rapidly drawn curtain and successive calls to prayer from the minaret for the evening (Maghrib) and night (‘išā’) prayers ushered in end of day. A gentle hush fell upon the site; soft noises and vague images caught by faint amber light from hurricane lamps emerged. Primus paraffin cookers hissed their heat, the aroma of fresh cooking wafted. Who could not cook bought meals in cafes and ate it communally with others. Under the cover of open sky, moonlit or in a sea of darkness, the ghostly shadows of man and animal in the process of settling down for the night affirmed a nomadic life soon to be on the move a few hours later. Before sleep cameleers also softened their voices, sat cross-legged in their hibyas (a colourful thick circular band of cloth often described as an Arab chair) and talked in gentle whispers, perhaps told stories, recited poetry, sang softly or simply gently smoked the pipe. Camels watered and fed with ready twisted bundles of leaves, cameleers prepared to sleep on wooden beds or by simply scooping sand into a concavity of a bed in which to curl up under sparse cover of cloth. In the stillness of the hours of slumber sporadic grunts and snorts of resting animals chewing the cud permeated the entire site as man and animal awaited a new dawn for the journeying to resume.

A new kind of sunrise to sunset

The sunset of the romantic long train of desert-crossing camel caravan slowly settled over al-Saila in those fifteen or so years. Cars became more prevalent as camels became increasingly fewer. By 1961 the traditional camel caravan culture declined and by the 1970s, perhaps with the advent of post-independence and
new economic realities, had almost completely disappeared. However, its cousin, the urban camel retained a presence and a different role and culture.

A visit to Aden in December 2010 by the author found al-Sailah site occupied by a plethora of new homes, cafes, mosques and shops criss-crossed by tarmac. Its old boundaries and camel caravan culture had also completely irrevocably altered; it is now an inseparable extension of Sheikh Othman whilst Sheikh al-Daweel is no longer separate from Masa‘bain or ’Imad; even the previously separate old Aden College in Dar-Sa‘ad is no longer at the periphery of desert, but at the heart of the vast development of tall multi-storey buildings that tower over a totally urbanised space.

In the 21st century al-Saila is urbanised, but continues to breed camels as do the other old villages. Photo: A. Aulaqi, November 2010

Deprived of space of their own clusters of a few camels are now even more intimately connected to human spaces wherever possible or necessary. The camel and its culture are alive and well, still as a mode of urban transportation and, in Aden and its surrounds, the camel today is also bred for use in rural areas but more so for its meat and milk than for the traditional Arab camel caravan of old.

NOTES

1 Physician and Researcher in Middle Eastern History.


5 The mouth and base of an extinct volcano.

6 With gratitude to the many who remembered and helped especially M. Hadi Awad, Abdulla A.O. Uqba, Ashraf Girgirah Watheq Aulaqi, Faeq Aulaqi and Khaled Awad.

7 Its round fruit was much loved by children. Using teeth to easily peel off and discard the dark brown skin and take bites of its thick soft stringy wet fibrous husk. When chewed the child is rewarded with a delicious sweet aromatic juice. The kernel is not chewed or eaten.

8 Aden was a directly ruled 75 square mile colony surrounded by the rural buffer zone of tribal territories designated as the Aden Protectorates, ruled over by sultans, sheikhs and emirs. These were divided into the Eastern and Western Aden Protectorates major blocks. They separated and acted as buffer between Aden and Imamate Yemen.

9 One such student came from Upper Aulaqi, at the time in the Western Aden Protectorate, presently in Shabwah region of today’s Yemen. He used to travel in the safety of caravans between his village in Wadi Yeshbum and his school in Aden. The journey normally took a week to ten days to complete. On one occasion he hoped to spend a large part of his two months vacation at his village some 300 odd miles away. He never enjoyed seeing his family properly as he spent the first four or so weeks on the trail. He had to return as soon as he arrived.


Madinat al-Meẖfid al-tari-khi̱ah..atar li-ma’alem islamiah sha-hidah ala hadharah q’adema zakhirah bil-i’lm wa-athaqa’afah.

>>http://www.al-ayyam.info/IssuesFiles/56a81ebf-0ba5-4f02-b96a-7b4ba2207870/Mahafad.jpg>

11 Thanks to my colleague and Somali friend Dr. Abdi Ali for sending me this description: "‘Qawarma’ AKA ‘Oodka’ in South Somalia and ‘Muqmad’ is North Somalia is a predominantly camel meat, sometimes goat meat. It is cut longitudinally to about half a meter and 1 centimetre wide and then sun dried. Its then cut in to 0.5 centimetre all around and cooked with purposely prepared oil. After that it is put in a container to be consumed over weeks and months. It is tradition arise from the traditional nomadic Somali lifestyle were men use to travel for weeks in order to provide income and the women used to look after the assets of the family and prior to leaving men used to receive this long-lasting dish to last them through their lengthy journey”.

12 The term literally means those from the east. These are assumed to be cameleers from the eastern districts of Yemen, such as al-Baidha and Mukairas where such fruit would have been cultivated. But some believe the mašāriqa originate in the Ta’ez region. Quince (Safarjal) was a much appreciated delicacy, but the song could also have equally applied to the pomegranate and fresh fig brought on camel back.
In Aden Colony civilians were unarmed; but tribal visitors to the colony were normally armed with guns of varying vintage as well as the “Jambiah”, the curved miniature sword-like knife carried about the waist.


According to Ibn Katheer its children of A’ad who inhabited I’mad suffered destruction and God’s wrath for the sins of arrogance, abuse of power and not worshipping Him.

Ibid