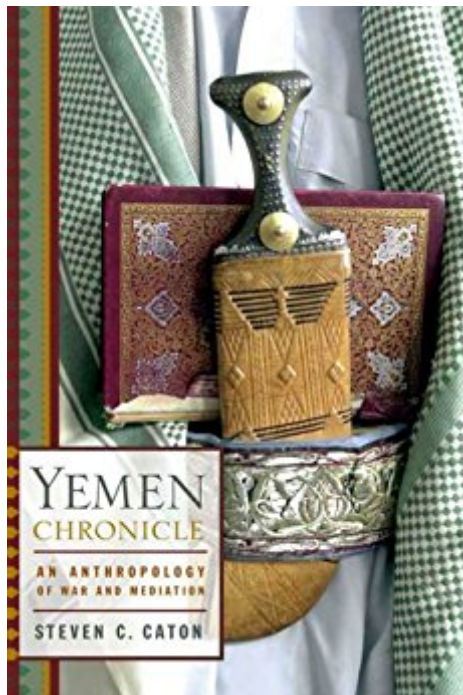


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# Yemen Chronicle: An Anthropology Of War And Mediation



## Synopsis

A report like no other from the heart of the Arab Middle East. In 1979, Steven C. Caton went to a remote area of Yemen to do fieldwork on the famous oral poetry of its tribes. The recent hostage crisis in Iran made life perilous for a young American in the Middle East; worse, he was soon embroiled in a dangerous local conflict. *Yemen Chronicle* is Caton's touchingly candid account of the extraordinary events that ensued. One day a neighboring sheikh came angrily to the sanctuary village where Caton lived, claiming that a man there had abducted his daughter and another girl. This was cause for war, and even though the culprit was captured and mediation efforts launched, tribal hostilities simmered for months. A man who was helping to resolve the dispute befriended Caton, showing him how the poems recited by the belligerents were connected to larger Arab conflicts and giving him refuge when the sanctuary was attacked. Then, unexpectedly, Caton himself was arrested and jailed for being an American spy. It was 2001 before Caton could return to Yemen to untangle the story of why he had been imprisoned and what had happened to the missing girls. Placing his contradictory experiences in their full context, *Yemen Chronicle* is not only an invaluable assessment of classical ethnographic procedures but also a profound meditation on the political, cultural, and sexual components of modern Arab culture.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Caton's work has become more personal over the years. Here he revisits his fieldwork in Yemen via a memoir that reads like a novel with engaging characters (not the least of which is Caton himself), plot, and dramatic action. By briefly dwelling on the anthropology of events, Caton uses his fieldwork experiences to illustrate the importance of this perspective and what can be forgotten in more traditional ethnographies (like his own *Peaks of Yemen I Summon*). Caton's sophisticated prose is deployed in sensitive descriptions of his friends' lives and how their dialectical interaction with each other and with their cultural milieu drive the dramatic events of his fieldwork. The descriptions of how poetry is composed *de novo* and performed spontaneously in response to events and other poets is absolutely fascinating and brings a vibrancy to this text too often absent in others. Students of anthropology have a lot to learn from this book not only from this sensitivity, but also from seeing the detailed methods and authentic tribulations of an anthropologist in the field. A refreshing contribution to the genre-- unburdened by theorizing or academicism, this would be a fine text for introductory anthropology courses as well as folks just looking for an enjoyable and engaging read, particularly if they do not know much about cultural anthropology but want to know more.

Professor Caton combines a wonderful memoir of his time in Yemen with a specialist's explanation of Yemen's tribal poetry, its importance in easing social and political tensions, and how its best practitioners are so good at improvising verse on the spot. This is a wonderful "landscape" painting of what was once a very rich and powerful country that is now struggling through resource shortages and undeclared civil wars.

I liked the book as a model for what unexpected issues can come up during field work. I especially liked how reflexive the author was in his observations.

A few years ago I read Steven Caton's *"Peaks of Yemen, I Summon"* and thought that it was a fabulously intelligent and well-done study which depicted the role of poetry in conflict resolution in Yemeni society. I remarked in my review that it would behoove our politicians, who are making decisions that affect both Yemen and America, to read the book and ponder its significance for their decisions. I had little hope that this would actually happen. When you read such books as Caton's

and Paul Dresch's history and then read the newspaper accounts of events, or of US government policies, you can only despair. The present volume doesn't present such a wide picture of Yemen's society or politics, but rather places the anthropologist in his chosen research site and gives a wonderful picture of day-to-day Yemen. It is a study, if you wish, of "how it was done" and as an anthropologist who has done several bouts of field work, I may say that Caton's work was done with a great deal of difficulty. Yemen was never going to be easy given America's behavior in the Middle East and the complex conflicts in that once-remote nation. You may read "Peaks" first or this one, but they are each enriched by the other. Not many anthropologists write the story of their research lives, but a few have. I am thinking of David Maybury-Lewis and "The Savage and the Innocent", of Hortense Powdermaker's "Stranger and Friend", and perhaps Paul Rabinow's "Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco". Then you might look at Margaret Mead's works and Malinowski's diaries, but they are more just thoughts put down while doing the work (latter) or carefully crafted later on (former). In recent decades it has become the fashion (if not obligatory) for the anthropologist to put herself/himself into the picture. Some engage in this pursuit more than others. What struck me most about YEMEN CHRONICLE was the utter, stunning honesty of the book. Revealing one's most grimy thoughts or petulant moments of jealousy (to chose just a couple things) is not easy. But, yes, that was you. Most people would cover such things up forever while Caton writes them down. He says, "In writing this ethno-memoir I have wanted to bring [the narratives of my diary entries and field notes] in closer proximity to each other, hoping they will interact and produce something other and greater than either or both of them alone."(p.135) While telling the story of a complex quarrel between tribal society and a village inhabited by descendants of the Prophet, a quarrel that begins with a possible kidnapping of two girls and escalates into several gun battles and a standoff that attracts participation from the highest levels in the capital, Caton describes his efforts to collect poetry, to get to know the poets, and understand the process by which justice is or isn't done in Yemen, a process of arbitration that involves poetry. Everything is murky, nothing is what it seems, he gets involved over his head, winds up in jail for a short time, and can't really continue his work. His informants are friendly---or are they? He doesn't know whom to trust in many cases. The Yemenis come out as very human, very engaging. To emerge at last with not only one good book, but two, well, I have to hand it to Steven C. Caton. If you want to know more about Yemen, read "Peaks of Yemen, I Summon". If you want to know more about the process of how such books are created, the atmosphere of daily life for an anthropologist, especially when research must be done in a chaotic environment, read YEMEN CHRONICLE. If you are an anthropology teacher at some level, you could do much worse than to assign it to students.

This is an interesting and moving account from a young American student who in 1979 went to an isolated part of northern Yemen to study the country and its oral poetry. Based on field notes, diaries, letters, and memories he records not only the poetry but feuds, tribal warfare, conflicts, kidnappings, abductions and distrust that eventually lead to his arrest as a spy but was released after 3 days. The author returned in 2001 to see what had happened to his 1979 friends in particular the kidnapped girls and consider how the country had changed. He would now be really upset to see how the country has been destroyed by civil war.

Tim Mackintosh-Smith, Eric Hansen, and Kevin Rushby have all written excellent books vividly describing Yemen. They give us exciting travelogues and detailed descriptions of qat. And yet this book is the finest I've ever seen to describe what it's like to actually live there, and what modern Yemeni culture is. I felt like I was actually there, in a remote village to the East of Sana'a. I wanted to go to Yemen and experience more of the life Caton describes. He shows us the mentality and life of the tribe in ethnography; he makes us part of his life through memoir. This allows us to simultaneously experience the emic and etic and gain the best of all worlds, understanding life through the eyes of ourselves and the observed. I feel for Caton as he frankly confesses his failings or perceived failings. He writes honestly, and at times more honestly than he realizes. Because Caton has such a thirst for poetry this book is an artistic work as well, and the poetry interspersed throughout the war and reconciliation attempts addresses both sides of the mind. It was fascinating to see how the possibility of war rested in large extent on what poems were produced, and how well-crafted the poetry was. I am inspired to learn and hear more Arabic poetry through this book.

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