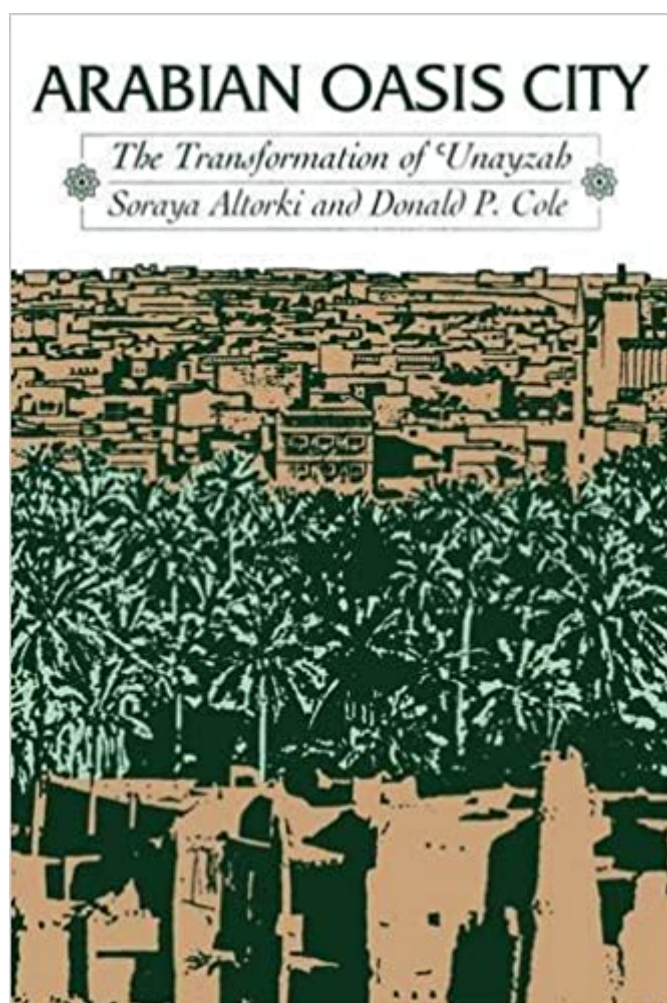


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# Arabian Oasis City: The Transformation Of 'Unayzah (Modern Middle East (Paperback))



## Synopsis

Vast social change has occurred in the Middle East since the oil boom of the mid-1970s. As the first anthropological study of an urban community in Saudi Arabia since that oil boom, *Arabian Oasis City* is also the first to document those changes. Based on extensive interviews and participant observation with both men and women, the authors record and analyze the transformation that has occurred in this ancient oasis city throughout the twentieth century: the creation of the present Saudi Arabian state and of a new national economy based on the export of oil and the economic boom brought about by the dramatic increases in the price of oil following the October 1973 Arab-Israeli War. In addition, the authors reveal the changes brought about by the fall in the price of oil beginning in 1982 and analyze the problems confronting Unayzah in its aftermath. By demonstrating that the area was not exclusively dominated by tribalism and Bedouin nomads, this empirical case study destroys stereotypical views about Saudi Arabia. Indeed, it proves the existence of surplus agricultural and craft production and the full development of local, regional, and long-distance trade networks. It shows that women, although veiled, played active roles in work outside the household. The social impact of change over the years is, however, profound—especially the gradual replacement of the extended family by the nuclear family, changing patterns of husband-wife relationships, the impact of self-earned income on the status of women, and the emergence of a new middle class of employees and entrepreneurs. Because of the high degree of gender segregation in this area of research, Altorki and Cole give us a fortunate collaboration between a Saudi Arabian female scholar and an American male scholar experienced in research in the Middle East.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This book reports on a study the 2 authors did in Unayzah, a mid-size city in central Saudi Arabia. The study was particularly well planned in that the authors, an American man and a Saudi woman, were able to combine the views of both outsiders and insiders, men and women into a single seamless whole. Through interviews with local people, the authors present a history of the development of Unayzah from an agricultural and market center before oil wealth to the city it is today. They describe the early transport industry and the work women did in agriculture and the market as well as the longstanding importance of education in this city. They also describe the tremendous changes that have taken place since oil wealth, particularly with the importation of foreign labor and the construction of modern housing in new areas. Early in the book, the authors suggest that they will make a distinction between "transformation" of economy/society and "development". As the book unfolds, they do not focus on arguing for this distinction explicitly, although many facts gradually build to support their case. Descriptions of changes in family life in Unayzah present some interesting comparisons of the pros and cons of abandoning or adapting tradition in favor of "modern" customs. This book is a must for anyone who would like to learn more about modern Saudi society.

...was an accolade given to Unayzah in 1924 by a Lebanese writer and advisor to Ibn Saud, Amin Rihani. I heard it in a more expansive sense, no doubt due to inflation, many years later, as the Paris of Arabia. And no less a (Western) authority on Arabia from his travels there in the 19th Century, the curmudgeonly Charles Doughty, said that he spent the "one good day" of his travels in Arabia in Unayzah. This is a very remarkable book, along several different dimensions. First of all, that it was written at all. It is the result of a partnership between a Saudi woman, and an American man, both of whom are sociologists. They had studied and taught at the same universities. Soraya Altorki's family was originally from Unayzah, which was key for obtaining authorization to conduct the study. Still, in a society in particular in which there is much skepticism towards the motives of the inquiring stranger, that permission itself is a remarkable achievement. I had to gulp hard on the first page as the authors began to differentiate between "transformation" and "development" and knew that "modes of productions" and associated jargon could not be far behind. After all, this IS

sociology, and the tone of the book is excessively flat and scholarly. But if the reader is willing to adjust to this mode, s/he should be richly rewarded. Because the authors tell a remarkable story, yes, a "transformation" in one city in central Arabia, debunking many common myths like the Arabs always eschewed manual labor. Their reasons for this study is explained in the introduction, and resonated well with me: "...for letting the people tell much of the story in their own words, derives from our reaction to much of the literature that has been published on Saudi Arabia in recent years. Quite a lot has been written about society in Saudi Arabia by foreigners who happened to live there but who were not social scientists. Much of this has been anecdotal at best and often inflammatory and misleading. More serious are the writing of social scientists who have either never been to the country or have only briefly visited some of the main cities." In terms of "telling their own story," I found the stories told by Abu Talib, an 88 year old, on pages 76-80, who traveled throughout much of the Middle East during and after WW I, and Abu Ziyad, on page 175, who had lived in Europe for seven years, and returned to Unayzah for his health particularly well done. Ms. Altorki enabled the stories of the women to also be well told, from their days working in agriculture to their current work as school teachers and their experiences in socializing, via "coffee klatches" and more. The central aspect of the book, a description of the "transformation" of this city from an agricultural base, supported by long-distant traders, where education is admired, to the current (1989) state where the old lines of work and trading disappeared, and government employment was providing, along with new housing, compliments of the "tufrah," the "oil boom," was accomplished admirably. I agree with their assessment on page 120: "changes of such vast proportions in such a short time have probably never occurred in any country during times of peace." There are a few points I wish I could query the authors on: there was no mention of anyone refusing to participate in their study; there was also no skepticism that what they were told was not true, for example, on page 128 they seemed to accept the assertion that the maids "do not play an important part in childrearing." As is now known here in the American Southwest, sometimes the Indians, tired of being "specimen studies," would embroider tales for sociologist's consumption. No doubt the authors would claim that it was "beyond the scope of this study," but a contrast of the outwardly looking and "liberal" Unayzah with insular, and extremely conservative Buraydah, only 20 km away, on the north side of Wadi Al Rimmah, was never done, nor even alluded to. Truly a fascinating subject for a follow-up study. And perhaps understandably, a description of the part that religion played in the lives of the Unayzah's citizens was minimized; thereby avoiding controversy, yet the reader is poorer in his/her understanding. And I felt the authors was overly pessimistic concerning the future, as though they actually had internalized the constant predictions of many of the West that the day of collapse is

always 2-3 years away. On a personal note, during the days of the electrification of Qassim province, almost 30 years ago, my wife and I were once shown around Unayzah, its old homes, its date production, et al., by one of the community leaders who beamed pride in Unayzah's history and accomplishments. That evening we ate chicken, and drank "Bebsi" in a "sidewalk cafÃ©" watching the traffic pass, and pondered the differences between Unayzah's openness and insular Buryadah. And we thought it was better to be in Unayzah than the real Paris. Cole and Altorki have done much to explain what we did not understand at the time. Sadly, this illuminating, solid factual account of those in the very heartland of Islam is currently selling with a rank in the millions at , whereby the books that promote a fantasy view of this country and religion are always much better sellers. You don't have to be a sociologist to ponder what does this say about ourselves?

The media images of Saudi Arabia concentrate on camels, dunes, huge crowds of pilgrims at Mecca and Madinah, and large installations dedicated to the oil industry. Outsiders see almost nothing of Saudi life (though we hear a lot about women not being able to drive, chopping of heads etc.) Without much tourism, without films that tell about life there, without any Saudi neighbors (I've met one Saudi in my entire life and that was 45 years ago), a book like ARABIAN OASIS CITY can provide a major change in the way you view the country. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the area that would become Saudi Arabia still moved in traditional ways. It had never been much part of the larger empires that rose and fell in the Middle East. The appearance of the kingdom that became known as "Saudi Arabia" (in the 1920s) meant a gradual changing of the society and economy. Up to the 1930s and the beginning of oil production, change proceeded slowly. The two anthropologist-authors here interviewed many people (in the 1980s) who could remember those times very well. Through their memories, plus the straightforward writing of the authors, who do not embellish their text with jargon or footnotes, a picture emerges of a very stable society devoted to agriculture, animal husbandry, and trade. Farmers raised wheat and 30 kinds of dates on land that they owned or leased (some leases ran even to 500 years, surely one for the Guinness Book of Records !) Many craftsmen practised their trades and men drove herds of animals up to Syria or Palestine for sale. Both women and men sold produce and various craft items in the bazaar. Women also worked on farms as laborers. A network of trading/merchant families lived in many parts of the Arab world and even in India, expediting business for the people back home in `Unayzah, the central Saudi city that is the focus of this study. We look at family patterns, levels of indebtedness, and the market as a center of social and political interaction. "For a very long time and until not too long ago, `Unayzah had a complex economic structure and its population had a

high degree of occupational specialization. It was a center tied into various networks that operated locally, regionally, and at an international level." (p.81) Having established what once existed, the authors spend the rest of the book telling what happened as Saudi Arabia transformed itself thanks to the flow of oil money that became a flood after the oil price rise of the 1970s. We may say that five major changes occurred. They investigate each thoroughly---secular education, new technology and new infrastructure, salaried employment especially in the government, the arrival of a vast, cheap workforce of expatriate laborers, and a cash economy. These affected family life, friendship patterns, male-female relations, daily behavior, expectations of the future, and attitudes towards nearly everything, especially work. The sub-title given to the book, "the transformation of `Unayzah" is thus very accurate. The research was done by a man and a woman working in tandem but separately in accordance with Saudi mores. The result is satisfying if you are looking for a descriptive work on how Saudi society has changed over the years. There is little or no theoretical content, little relating to the vast body of anthropological research that has gone on over the years. Some books err in having too much theory and not enough content. Not this one. The authors make a vague nod in the direction of theory with a discussion of a "rentier" model gleaned from several works, but only in the last ten pages. Frankly, it seems to be tacked on to what otherwise is a solid descriptive work. They want to make the point that the present avoidance of manual labor by large parts of the Saudi work force is a function of the economic conditions prevailing since the `boom' of the 1970s and not something that is traditional in any way. I would say in conclusion that this book must be read by anyone who is concerned with Saudi Arabia or the changing societies of the Middle East. And, I think, that should include nearly everyone !

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