

We were invited to a celebration luncheon at a tiny village in Northern Yemen near the Saudi Arabian border. It was 1976, and some civil engineer Peace Corps Volunteers had just completed building a concrete rain water catch basin to improve this village's clean water supply.

There were 30 people lounging on pillows in a circle on the floor of the village sheikh's sumptuous living room in this expansive mud and stone home. He wanted to show us his gratitude, and a feast of roasted lamb, spiced rice, and vegetables was laid before us on big straw mats.

On one end of the room were all the village elders wearing skirts and kaffieh head scarves, with belts of bullets forming a big "X" across their chests. Each man's AK-47 rifle hung on pegs on the walls behind them.

At the other end were about 10 Peace Corps guests, one of whom was visiting from the State Department in Washington. After we finished that delicious meal, we all engaged in the popular Yemeni custom of chewing Qat leaves. Most Yemeni men chew these leaves and tell stories, and recite poetry each afternoon after lunch.

The sheikh began asking polite questions about each of his American guests. I told him that one guest from Washington was on a trip all the way around the world to review construction projects. I noticed that the sheikh sort of snickered when I said that. And the thought occurred to me..... is it possible?.....well I better ask to confirm.

I timidly posed the question, "you do know that the Earth is round, don't you sheikh?"

My question provoked a hearty round of laughter.

I decided to rise to the challenge, and politely asked if the sheikh would mind if I explained further. He urged me on, so I asked his sons to bring me their soccer ball and a flashlight. I enlisted the boys' help in the center of the room to hold my props, and I proceeded to explain how the sun was in the center of the universe and did not move, and the soccer ball represented the earth which rotated around it and that's why half of the ball was in darkness and the other half was in daylight every 24 hours.

All the elders at the end of the room watched in utter fascination as this seemingly crazed American attempted to describe, in halting Arabic, a theory that Galileo had postulated in the 16th century at the University of Pisa. Our hosts all seemed wide-eyed and intrigued by my explanations. I did not know the word in Arabic for gravity, and this particular concept proved my most challenging notion to explain.

After a very earnest 15 minute-long description, in which I literally broke a heavy sweat, the room fell silent as I sat down again. The Yemenis seemed to be reflecting on this radical explanation of how the world works.

After a few minutes, the sheikh stood up dramatically and slowly walked towards the center of the room where his sons had held up my mock Earth and sun to demonstrate. He took the soccer

ball in his hands and began to repeat the things that I had tried to explain. He repeated that Yemen was on this side of the ball where the sun made it daytime now, and then pointed to the other side, where the United States was, and said it was nighttime there because the sun was out of sight. I delightedly said yes that's exactly right sheikh.

Then he paused and smiled to the village elders. He bent down and picked up a tiny Qat leaf near his feet and said, "Let me make sure I understand this completely. Let's say this tiny leaf represents you George", and then he placed the leaf on top of the ball and said that I was standing here in Yemen right now. Then he slowly and very dramatically began to rotate the ball and said, "and here you are George as the day slowly turns into night."

Naturally, the tiny leaf fell off the ball and it happened to land right inside a Pepsi bottle on the floor. The entire room burst into uncontrollable, raucous laughter, even from my Peace Corps friends. I realized that I had been utterly defeated by the sheikh's logic, and so I gave up my efforts at attempting to reorganize their world order.

We left that afternoon having had a marvelous experience because of their gracious Arab hospitality filled with lots of loving laughter. But as we drove away, we knew that village was still certain that the world was definitely flat.