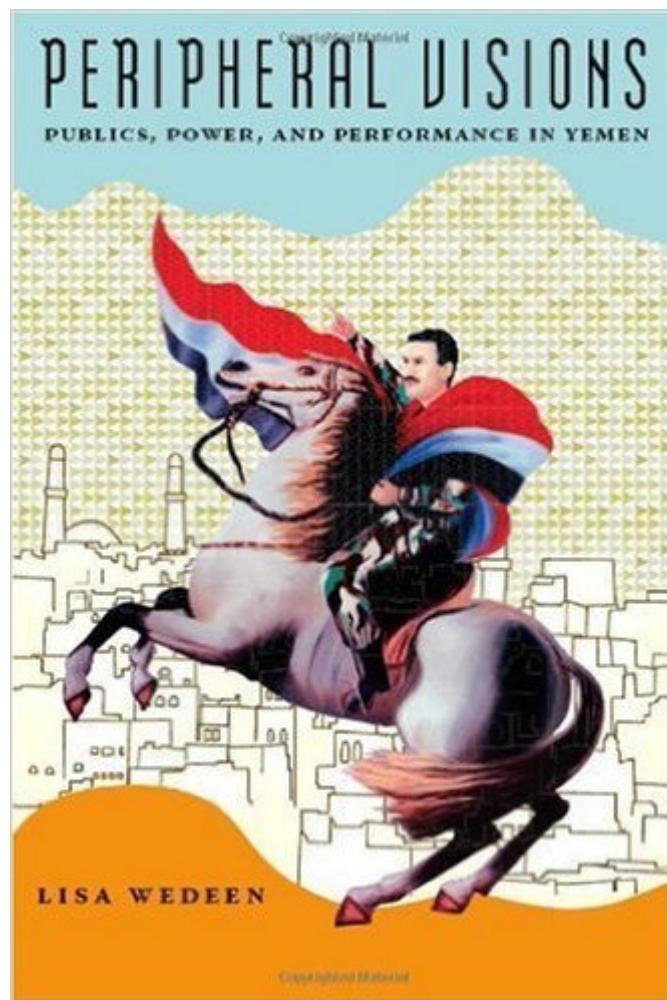


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# Peripheral Visions: Publics, Power, And Performance In Yemen (Chicago Studies In Practices Of Meaning)



## **Synopsis**

The government of Yemen, unified since 1990, remains largely incapable of controlling violence or providing goods and services to its population, but the regime continues to endure despite its fragility and peripheral location in the global political and economic order. Revealing what holds Yemen together in such tenuous circumstances, *Peripheral Visions* shows how citizens form national attachments even in the absence of strong state institutions. Lisa Wedeen, who spent a year and a half in Yemen observing and interviewing its residents, argues that national solidarity in such weak states tends to arise not from attachments to institutions but through both extraordinary events and the ordinary activities of everyday life. Yemenis, for example, regularly gather to chew qat, a leafy drug similar to caffeine, as they engage in wide-ranging and sometimes influential public discussions of even the most divisive political and social issues. These lively debates exemplify Wedeen's contention that democratic, national, and pious solidarities work as ongoing, performative practices that enact and reproduce a citizenry's shared points of reference. Ultimately, her skillful evocations of such practices shift attention away from a narrow focus on government institutions and electoral competition and toward the substantive experience of participatory politics.

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## Customer Reviews

When we do democracy, we do it with a ballot. The United States has been shipping ballot boxes all over the known world for, conservatively, sixty years. The official line holds that, barring strategic exceptions, everybody across this wide globe benefits from the dignity proffered by suffrage, and furthermore, after ballots are counted, the food, water, electricity, education and piety will follow in a timely way. In *Peripheral Visions*, Lisa Wedeen complicates this vision of democracy by showing how voting only emerges as an appropriate and relevant aspect of human dignity given a constellation of other institutional, cultural, and discursive preconditions. *Peripheral Visions*' contribution to the long conversation of political science flows from a careful study of Yemeni democratic practices. Yemen's academic import stems from its situation as a weak state, a vague nation summoned into being, as a nation, on the strength of a series of ethnic poems and intermittent profusions of oil money. To be sure, a fledgling nation could do worse than being held together by a song and a well, but the situation remains that the duties commonly ascribed to government--'enforcing contracts, keeping the peace, and deliberating public affairs--'are taken up and executed with mixed success not by the duly elected officials, but by a well-armed *populus*, such that performing dry procedurals like casting a ballot seems only tangentially tied, late and perfunctory, to the quality of practices of the Yemeni citizen's day-to-day life.

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