

INTRODUCTION: THE CONCEPT OF TRIBE IN THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF YEMEN

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In Yemen, “tribe” (*qabīlah*) is a historically rooted, emic concept of social representation, even though the polymorphism and ambiguity of the term tribe render the formulation of a universally applicable definition almost impossible. Rooted in remotest antiquity, over the last centuries the concept of tribe in Yemen has undergone transformations, but also featured aspects of longevity and continuity. Today, with the emergence of massive political change, the eruption of popular uprisings, internal conflict, external military intervention and the associated weakness of the state, tribalism seems to be gaining in importance once again, filling in part the void created by the retreating state. It is these present-day expressions of tribalism in Yemen which the chapters of this volume set out to explore.

A Disputed Concept

There are a number of reasons why it is difficult to work with the concept of “tribe.” For historical reasons, anthropology has a special interest in the exploration, but also a specific responsibility for the critical discussion of the concept of tribe. During the period of the Euro-American colonial expansions, the term “tribe” served as a term for societies that were considered “primitive,” “uncivilized,” or “underdeveloped.”¹ At the time dominated by grand theories of social evolution and historical progress, anthropology became a tool to legitimize the rule of the “progressive” societies of the Euro-American area. During the post-colonial era, the concept of “tribe” and the evolutionist world view behind it were critically discussed. As a consequence, the term tribe was widely discredited and abandoned as an analytical term.²

A further difficulty consists in the incoherence of the concept of tribe as a sociological term and the associated difficulties of devising a viable definition. In the past, fundamentally different groups from South America to East Asia were freely labelled “tribal,” and “tribe” became a kind of umbrella term with little precise meaning. The impossibility of a precise definition, but also the historical (political and ideological) burdens of the term have meant that “tribe” has long been avoided as a social category within Western social and cultural anthropology.

For these reasons, the concept of tribe is no longer considered an analytical term or general comparative category. Much of the scientific discussion focuses on devising a definition of the term tribe that takes into account the differences and varieties in structure and function of such groups in

¹ See, for example, Yapp 1983, 154.

² For further details of this ongoing discussion, see the quite different definitions given by Southall 1996; Gingrich 2015; Sneath 2016. Sneath is one of those who are particularly critical of the concept of tribe. He has repeatedly attacked Yemeni scholarship on tribalism and prefers to speak of “principalities” instead.

different social and political settings, in specific times and regions. Instead of abandoning the term altogether and replacing it with more shallow terms like “community”³ or “ethnic group,” Gingrich suggests that “an active reformulation where empirically appropriate might be the more productive alternative.”⁴ While agreeing that a precise general definition is almost impossible, he advocates for the use of the term as an “equivalent to certain vernacular or national legal terms referring to local conceptions of collective sociopolitical identity.”⁵ The results are loose working definitions evolving around locally specific notions of belonging, genealogy and descent, territory, collective agency and interaction with the wider world.

Tribes in Yemen

In many respects, Yemen is a particularly fine example for the emic origin of the concept of tribe. The existence of the principal constituents of the Hamdān⁶ tribal confederation that dominate large parts of highland Yemen – to give but one example – has been proven for pre-Islamic times, and substantial traces of Yemen’s pre-Islamic tribal order continued to exist well into the Islamic period.⁷ A comparison with the writings of the 10th-century geographer and scholar al-Ḥasan al-Hamdānī reveals that most (though not all) Yemeni tribes have been sedentary for millennia, and the overwhelming impression is one of minimal change of tribal territories, even if tribal structures have altered or developed from time to time.⁸ In the 20th century, these tribal territories became the basis of the administrative divisions of northern Yemen; the borders of most of today’s districts (sg. *mudīriyyah*) and municipalities (sg. *‘uzlah*) are congruent with the boundaries of the tribes and tribal sections that inhabit them.⁹ Not only tribal names and structures, genealogies, territories and borders can be traced back over many centuries, but also central principles of tribal customary law (*‘urf*).¹⁰

The tribes of highland Yemen stand out from many other tribal societies of the Middle East also in regard to their recent political history. For centuries, the tribe constituted the organizational unit around which both urban and rural communities converged in Yemen, particularly in the absence of stable centralized states. Before the revolution of 1962, the support of the tribes was the very basis for the rule of the *sādah* or *ahl al-bayt*, that is the descendants of the Prophet and pre-republican elite from whose ranks the imams emerged.¹¹ Combining the long-existent idea that Yemenis are the “original Arabs” (*al-‘arab al-‘āribah*) with the genealogical construct that the “true Yemenis” were descendants from Qaḥṭān, the eponym and symbol of unity of the South Arabian tribes, in post-1962 republican Yemen “the tribe” became invoked as the very basis of North Yemeni society.

³ In relation to Yemen, the replacement of the term “tribe” by “community” is propagated by Blumi (2010).

⁴ Gingrich 2015, 647.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ The grand confederation of Hamdān b. Zayd subdivides into the confederations Ḥāshid and Bakīl.

⁷ Robin 1978, 46–52.

⁸ Wilson 1981, 95–96. In some cases, the continuity of tribal names and their related territories spans almost three millennia, see Aston 2014.

⁹ Matsumoto 1994.

¹⁰ On the long-term development of tribal customary law, see Paul Dresch’s chapter in this volume.

¹¹ The *sādah* (sg. *sayyid*) are the putative descendants of the Prophet Muḥammad through ‘Alī and Fāṭimah.

Throughout the 20th century, in many states of the Middle East and North Africa (Iran, Iraq, Libya, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia, to name just a few examples), the relationship between states and tribes was ambiguous and often conflicting, as state authorities manipulated, de- and reconstructed tribal societies in order to turn them into docile tools in the service of the respective government.¹² This also applies to many areas of southern and eastern Yemen, whose tribes, though historically rooted, have been the target of opposing manipulative policies, first in the course of the British policy of protectorate formation, and later in the PDRY.¹³

In contrast, and compared to the often ruthless interventions of other Middle Eastern governments in their domestic tribal systems, statecraft in northern Yemen left tribalism largely intact. After the September Revolution in 1962, it was due to the physical and ideological weakness of the northern Yemeni republics (YAR and RoY) that – albeit state interference in one form or another was frequent – extreme political and ideological manipulations of tribal systems and tribal structures did not take place. After 1962, a system developed in which the republican state (in itself a complicated set of constantly shifting alliances often animated by local and tribal factors) established long-term patronage relationships with tribal elites, without managing to establish consistent control over them. The leitmotif of northern Yemeni state policy towards the tribes was – to give Evans-Pritchard’s famous phrase a quite different meaning – that of a “balanced opposition,” a kind of equilibrium, a complex bargain between governments and tribes, as competing tribal, religious and political interests agreed to hold themselves in check by a tacit, at times precarious, acceptance of balance.¹⁴ Today, with the ascent to power of the Ḥūthīs facilitated by the 2011 “Change Revolution,” the war-related tribal mass mobilizations and the disintegration of the state, the relationship of tribes and rulers is again undergoing a process of transformation that in many respects resembles a retrograde step back to the era before 1962.

The long history of tribes and tribalism in northern Yemen shows that Yemeni tribalism is neither a political or ideological artificially invented concept that has been forced upon the country by foreign powers in order to subjugate and govern local populations, nor a relic of the past whose evolution proceeds vector-like from “archaic” tribes to “modern” societies. The simultaneous presence of various systems and paradigms, and the absence of a teleological sense of history, rather correspond to Khoury and Kostiner’s observation that tribes do “not necessarily cease to exist because states were formed.”¹⁵ Rather, in highland Yemen, society remains characterized by the permanent but not unchanging coexistence of various paradigms.

¹² The studies on state-tribe relations are numerous. See, for example, the chapters in the volumes edited by Khoury and Kostiner 1990a, Abdul-Jabar and Dawod 2003, and Rabi 2016.

¹³ Bujra 1971; Lackner 1985; Brehony 2011, 69–70.

¹⁴ Evans-Pritchard 1949, 59. The term “balanced opposition” is borrowed from segmentary theory, which is regarded as defunct, see Marieke Brandt’s chapter in this volume.

¹⁵ Khoury and Kostiner 1990b, 2.

The Chapters

The collective volume at hand is the result of the workshop titled “Yemen’s Living Heritage: Tribes and Tribalism into the 21st Century,” which took place in February 2018 at the Institute for Social Anthropology (ISA) of the Austrian Academy of Sciences in Vienna. Its chapters aim at exploring the longevity, liveliness and diversity of tribalism in contemporary Yemen by addressing a broad range of topics, such as the concept of tribe and its historical and present-day dimensions, the changing relationship between tribe and state, the importance of Yemeni customary law and its relation to Islamic and state law, tribal conflict management and conflict resolution, tribal traditions and roles related to territories and borders, agriculture and resource management, cultural practices, and the manifold aspects of social and political change. This volume aims at rethinking and updating research on tribes and tribalism in Yemen, re-connecting the scholarly discourse with the present situation, and providing new input for the discussion of tribalism in the contemporary Middle East.

The first chapter introduces the reader to the concept of tribalness (*qabyalah*) in Yemen. *Qabyalah* is a purely Yemeni term and not synonymous with *qabaliyyah*, which is frequently used to refer to tribalism in the Middle East region. In her article “Qabyalah or What Does It Mean to Be Tribal in Yemen?,” Najwa Adra explores the diverse expressions of *qabyalah* in Yemen and how they play out in everyday life. By reviewing the notions and use of the term *qabyalah* in various fields – origin, organization, cooperation, customary law, honor, tribal character, work ethics, moral equality, aesthetics, gender roles, etc. – Adra argues that the concept of *qabyalah* synthesizes the multiple local understandings of tribalism as a moral, social, political, legal, and aesthetic system. Tribal genealogy and descent, while important to some extent, are eclipsed by territoriality and behavior as more important components of identity. Under the onslaught of the turbulent transformation processes of our time, *qabyalah* proves to be a resilient, but not rigid, concept that is capable of coping with social, economic and political change.

Qabyalah has special notions in the field of tribal leadership whose specific features Steven Caton sets out to explore. In “Power as Persuasion in Yemeni Tribal Society,” Caton revisits Khawlān al-Ṭiyāl, the site of his initial fieldwork in Yemen in the late 1970s. In the light of what has happened since then, he reflects on the validity of his notion of (tribal) power as consensus finding based on moral suasion, accomplished in large part through communication, especially poetry – an observation that contrasts with more common and dominant scholarly notions of power as a coercive and instrumental force. Caton examines and further sharpens this model through a critical discussion of various theories of discourse and power (specifically those of Foucault and Habermas), before going on to ask what salience this model might have for contemporary Yemeni scholarship, as well as for the future of tribes and tribal leadership in war-stricken Yemen.

In “Some Principles and Continuities of Tribal Law,” Paul Dresch explores the features that are at the heart of tribal customary law in Yemen, both in its current and historical forms. By analyzing historical texts and treatises dealing with tribal law in Yemen and comparing them with the present-day contents of customary law, Dresch shows that certain underlying legal principles remain constant for centuries, such as the logic of hospitality, the importance of reciprocal protection and protected space, and the specific “transactional” character that is distinctive for Yemeni customary law. Dresch concludes that tribal law in Yemen is far from changeless but exhibits specific principles that remain consistent for at least seven centuries, down to our own time.

In the following chapter “Some Remarks on Blood Vengeance (*tha’r*) in Contemporary Yemen,” Marieke Brandt explores the phenomenon of blood vengeance in the tribal societies of highland Yemen. In Yemen’s tribal system, the process of taking revenge is governed in great detail by the rules of

tribal customary law. In recent decades, however, Yemeni statistics observed both an increase in blood revenge cases and their growing non-compliance with the rules of customary law. This chapter argues that the observed increase in revenge cases and their growing non-compliance with tribal customs is caused by societal transformations and, above all, the government's deliberate manipulations of tribal violence that led to a gradual weakening of tribal norms and customs but failed to fulfil the state's obligations to provide an effective apparatus of law and law enforcement able to control violence.

In "*Qabīlah, Jirbah and Tanmiyah: Tribes and Agriculture in the Northern Highlands of Yemen*," Daniel Varisco discusses the historic role of agriculture in relation to tribal identity and tribal customary law against the backdrop of the changes brought about through agricultural development and the current insecurity and open warfare. Throughout history, agricultural activities in highland Yemen were primarily governed by customary law, usually in harmony with Islamic legal principles. For some years, and especially since the beginning of the political, societal and economic transformations brought about by Yemen's "Change Revolution" in 2011, this system has been subjected to a tremendous stress test. In the wake of the current crisis and turmoil, the rural tribal societies of highland Yemen are being forced to cope with dramatic political and economic transformations, in which the set of values embedded in Yemen's *qabyalah* can help to sustain Yemen's agricultural system and social peace.

The following two chapters deal with tribe-state relations in the area of border management. In "Munebbih's Northwestern Borders Through the 20th Century," Andre Gingrich explores manifestations of state agency and state interventions in Munebbih, a tribe and homonymous area in Yemen's extreme northwest. The importance of this area stems from the fact that some stretches of Munebbih's tribal borders are congruent with the controversial international border between Yemen and Saudi Arabia. Gingrich traces the evolving cooperation process between the Munebbih tribe and the Yemeni state(s) through several stages during the 20th century: first a period of loose contact between the tribe and the state before the mid-1920s, then a phase of beginning but not very close cooperation in the 1930s, and finally, during the Cold War era, a phase of increasing integration of the tribe into the state's efforts to achieve the implementation and protection of its international border. The advancement of state influence from the 1920s until the 1980s mirrors a certain gradually increasing presence in the region by various states, albeit the development was never linear and consistent, but continued to feature fractures and breaks. By reviewing this process, this chapter demonstrates how a focus on tribal borders can reveal other and new dimensions of tribalism and tribe-state relations at large.

In "From Bordering to Ordering: The Tribal Factor in Managing the Yemeni-Saudi Border," Lisa Lenz-Ayoub continues the topic of tribes and border management by paying particular attention to recent developments since the beginning of the 21st century. Lenz-Ayoub shows that the current crisis has led to major changes in the roles and tasks of the border tribes, who have been involved in the guarding and administering of the border from its initial establishment in 1934. Increasing Saudi security concerns, as well as the war raging in northern Yemen, have contributed to the successive formalization, institutionalization and militarization of the Yemeni-Saudi border management at the expense of the long-standing role of the local tribes. Today, with the conflict-induced expulsion of many tribal leaders from the borderlands and the involvement of their tribes in the war, the traditional system of tribal border protection is on the brink of collapse.

Alexander Weissenburger's chapter "*Al-Mawaddah al-Khālīdah? The Ḥūthī Movement and the Idea of the Rule of the *Ahl al-Bayt* in Yemen's Tribal Society*" considers another aspect of the current crisis in Yemen, that is the (re)negotiation of the relationship between the tribes and the social stratum of the *sādah* or *ahl al-bayt*, the descendants of the Prophet and former elite of the pre-1962 imamate,

many of whom recently regained power and influence in the Ḥūthī leadership. Weissenburger analyzes the ideological high-wire act of the Ḥūthī leaders, who, in addressing their tribal supporters, try to legitimize the re-establishment of the active political leadership and religio-political authority of the *ahl al-bayt* with recourse to their distinct (foreign) descent, while simultaneously striving to portray Zaydism and Ḥūthism as indigenous movements, deeply rooted in Yemen. The outcome of this (re) negotiation of the relationship between the tribes and the *ahl al-bayt* is of great political importance, as it will decide whether the tribes will be willing to support the Ḥūthī leaders on a permanent basis, beyond the current war.

Throughout the tribal societies of the Middle East, the politics of belonging and processes of identity formation take varying shapes and forms. Mikhail Rodionov's chapter "Social Re-Stratification in Ḥaḍramawt during the last 25 years: An Anthropological Outlook" introduces the reader to the society of the Wādī Ḥaḍramawt in eastern Yemen and, by doing so, also illuminates a specific way Ḥaḍramīs seek to cope with the prevailing rapid social transformation: a return to – and in many ways the reinvention of – tribal genealogy. As such, Rodionov's chapter reveals a seemingly marginal but vital and lively aspect of the Ḥaḍrami society, as the most active members of the non-tribal, low-status strata either seek their origin within the tribal context by forging genealogical ties with the "noble" tribes or evade the universe of the social strata by joining radical Islamists. This chapter elucidates the enduring relevance of tribal descent and genealogy and the reasons that compel low-status people to invent their "authentic" descent from Ḥaḍramawt's prestigious tribes.

The last chapter is devoted entirely to the subject of social change. In "Tribes in the Neo-Liberal Era," Helen Lackner presents some of the issues concerning Yemeni social structure and the place of tribes within different approaches to political economy analysis by examining three main trends in Yemen's social transformation in the past half century: First the rise of a new capitalist neo-liberal class, including people of all ascribed social statuses under the Ṣāliḥ regime. Second, the partial reversal of this trend resulting from the rise of the Ḥūthīs, who are empowering the *sādah* or *ahl al-bayt* as their political leaders, using status ascribed by descent as a rationale for privilege and promotion. Thirdly, it assesses the likely long-term impact of Yemen's transitional period that began in 2011 but has been stalled and overridden by the empowerment of the Ḥūthīs and the war that began in 2015. Yemen's political transition set in motion a process that addressed issues of representation and led to the political and social recognition of social strata that were increasingly defined by social identity rather than economic interests, such as women, the youth and low-birth-status individuals, but also "civil-society" groups and, to a certain degree, tribes. Against this backdrop, Lackner concludes with an examination of the enduring relevance of the concept of "tribe" in Yemen.

Without in any way claiming to be exhaustive, the chapters of this volume deal with specific case studies of the role and agency of tribes and tribalism in contemporary Yemen. Despite the diversity of these case studies, we can draw two main conclusions. First, rather than being anachronisms or expressions of nostalgia for the past, tribes and tribalism are phenomena that are able to cope with and respond to changing circumstances in their social, political, economic and ecological environments. We see evidence of this in the creative ways Yemeni tribes are dealing with governments and states, in the

evolution of tribal customary law and its relation to other law systems, the developments in tribal conflict management and conflict resolution, agriculture and resource management, in the dynamic character of tribal genealogies over time and their utilization for establishing and expressing alliance and status, and the liveliness of cultural practices, material culture, popular cultural expressions, aesthetics, etc. These observations correlate to a “dynamic” context of tribalism more than to a purely static context. It is therefore crucial that we do not consider tribe and tribalism as rigid, narrowly defined concepts but rather continue to study the ways in which tribes have evolved and how they manage to adapt to new circumstances and challenges.

Second, despite its ability to change and the impossibility of a concluding definition, tribalness or *qabyalah* remains an organizing principle, mostly in the sense of giving priority to kinship loyalties and common action with those who are considered fellow tribesmen. Despite – or perhaps because of – rapidly changing environments, the Yemen example shows that tribalism remains available as a principle for organization and mobilization, similar to what Salzman called a “social structure in reserve.”¹⁶ Tapper recently suggested that, instead of continuing to look for a concluding definition, it would be more productive to treat “tribe” and “tribalism” as “ideas” or “ideological elements” determining political and social behavior, usually in relation to other ideas to which they stand in relation or opposition, notably the political and economic expediency of the “state” and “rule of law,” and the persuasive charismatic inspiration of religious leaders.¹⁷ And there are signs that in Yemen the tribal matrix – Gellner’s “hardy plant of tribalism” – in its manifold forms and expressions was and is able to outlast the political and religious orders evolving around it. This assumption lies at the heart of this volume.

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¹⁶ Salzman 1978, 69.

¹⁷ Tapper 2018.

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