

QABYALAH OR WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE TRIBAL IN YEMEN?¹

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What's in a Name?²

“*Qabyalah*³ is *sharaf*” (honor); *qabyalah* is “*aşl*” (tribal origins/ genealogy). “*Qabyalah* is ‘*urf* (tribal law) or “*şar‘ wa man‘*,” both of which refer to customary law. One person said *qabyalah* refers to “*al-tanāzul ‘alā ḥad*,” i.e., stepping down rather than perpetuating conflict. Others said simply, “*al-qabyalah al-ḍayfah*” (*qabyalah* is hospitality). Some associated *qabyalah* with tribal heritage, saying the term referred to *aslāf al-qabā’il* (lit., tribal customs or heritage). Others said that “*ayyām al-qabyalah*” (lit. “*qabyalah* days”) refers to the time before effective central government, when tribes did not pay taxes and followed only customary law. At a focus group discussion with *shaykhs* in Ṣan‘ā’, I was told that *qabyalah* refers to “self-respect” (*iḥtirām al-nafs*) and “respect for women” (*iḥtirām al-nisā’*). These were all responses given to me over the years when I asked Yemenis from a diversity of regions, “What is *qabyalah*?”⁴ I have also heard appropriate clothing and demeanor praised as *qabyalah*. My most poetic response was composed by the late Sayyid ‘Abd al-Karīm Muḥammad Sharaf al-Dīn from Kawkabān:

‘*Allim ibnak li-l-shirā‘ah wa l-barā‘ah*
Wa l-‘amal bayn al-zirā‘ah
Wa dakhlat al-sūq kulli sā‘ah

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² This chapter transcribes dialectical terms as they are pronounced in Yemen. Hence, *ḍayfah* instead of *ḍiyāfah*, *mara* instead of *imra‘ah*.

³ *Qabyalah*, pronounced *qabwalah* in parts of southern and eastern Yemen, is a purely Yemeni term, distinct from the more commonly used *qabaliyyah* (tribalism).

⁴ Author’s field notes 1979, 1983, 1987, 2005 and CDF focus group, Ṣan‘ā’, September 2004.

Teach your son conflict mediation (with an implied pun on poetry), generosity (a pun on *bar 'ah* dance), agriculture (implying hard work), and frequent visits to the market (in order to remain aware of news and negotiate tribal affairs).

I asked about *qabyalah* (*qabwalah* in Yemen's South and East) because it was the most frequently used term I heard in my years of field research among Yemenis who self-identify as tribal, usually with pride, sometimes sardonically when describing questionable or laughable behavior. But what ties these various meanings together? In this chapter, I suggest that *qabyalah* synthesizes the multiple local understandings of tribalism as a political and legal system, a set of social and behavioral norms, and aesthetic principles. Tribal descent, while important to some extent, is eclipsed by territoriality and behavior as more important components of identity. I also propose that *qabyalah* is not the only guide to behavior in tribal Yemen but forms one component of a duality that appears to be widespread throughout the Middle East. This duality is not discussed at length in the literature, with the exception of Joseph and Joseph's 1987 study of a similar duality in the Moroccan Rif and my own work (Adra 1982, 1998, 2016). Changes in understandings of *qabyalah* and potential implications of tribal identity for the development of national identity will be discussed.

I have not always been comfortable with the terms "tribe," "tribal," and "tribalism" as used in anthropology and the media. Too often these terms appear to lump most of the world into a single, "pre-modern" category. In scholarly work and popular understandings, "tribes" are both exoticized and disdained as repositories of "tradition," emotive survivals of a tenderhearted past, or kin-based, irrational advocates of convention, stolidly opposed to "modern" nation states (Adra 2015; for an example of serious misunderstanding from an American leader whom I respect, see Goldberg, 2016). Consequently, many anthropologists argue against using these terms (e.g., Fleuhr-Lobban and Lobban, 2002). Yet no better English term has been proposed to translate the Arabic *qabīlah* (pl. *qabā'il*) or *'ashīrah*.⁵

Because a large majority of Yemen's 27 million people self-identify as tribal, this is not a category that can be ignored. Over the years, I have come to understand the term, *qabīlah* (tribe) and its variants as referring to indigenous territorial groups that have long co-existed with cities and states. Tribal names have remained consistent over centuries. Some tribal units self-define in genealogical terms but, as is the case elsewhere, genealogies are used flexibly and manipulated to justify new relationships or break off old ones. The vast majority of Yemen's tribes are sedentary agriculturalists with some livestock or engage in fishing along the coasts. Herding is important in the more arid locales. Whereas in the past urban Yemenis did not usually identify as tribal, extensive urbanization in the past 40 years has enlarged the urban population that self-identifies as tribal.

Qabyalah (tribalism) is an all-encompassing Yemeni term that refers to tribal origins, organization, customary law, norms, an egalitarian ethic and aesthetic tribal icons (Adra 1982).⁶ In the words of Muḥammad 'Abdallah al-Jawhī, a poet from the Jawhī tribe of Ḥaḍramawt:

⁵ Terms such as "clan" and "lineage" highlight genealogy as a primary organizing principle, while genealogy tends to be secondary among Yemen's tribes.

⁶ In previous work I had framed my discussion of tribalism in terms of values. I thank Andre Gingrich for pointing to "norms" as the more appropriate term.

*He lied who said that al-qabwalah can be met in every valley
It is higher than valleys and black mountains.⁷*

This chapter will describe the various facets of tribalism and its antithesis as understood and lived in Yemen in order to explain the implications of tribal identification for daily life and economic and political participation in Yemen. The following sections explore the various components of the Yemeni concept of *qabyalah*.

Qabyalah as Tribal Origin

Tribes in Yemen consider themselves Southern Arabs, descended from Qaḥṭān, a son of Noah and brother to ʿAdnān, ancestor of the Northern Arabs. This, and membership in a known lineage are sufficient to establish tribal origin (*aṣl*) and pedigree. Yemeni tribes in the North were historically distinguished from the *sādah*, descendants of the Prophet Muḥammad through his daughter Fāṭimah and son-in-law ʿAlī,⁸ although there are tribes composed largely of *sādah* in al-Jawf and the Ḥaḍramawt. Also distinguished from tribes were low-status service providers, such as barbers, musicians, butchers, and others who engaged in work historically considered demeaning. Status endogamy remained important in Yemen into the late 20th century. The significance of these ascribed status distinctions has decreased steadily over time due to their legal abolishment after the revolutions in the North (1962) and South (1967) and changing economic conditions that have drawn members of all status groups into similar occupations.⁹ By the turn of this century, cross-status marriage, although not yet common, was accepted by most in the Central Highland Plateau, where I conducted my most intensive field research. As I hope to show below, however, status distinctions, important in urban contexts, were understated in rural tribal villages even in the 1970s. Members of all groups dressed alike, worked and socialized together.

Qabyalah as Tribal Organization¹⁰

Throughout MENA, tribes are organized into units of increasing size and scope (“segments” in the anthropology literature), with the household (*bayt*) as the central foundation (Hammoudi 2017; Ibn Khaldun 2015). Because of the widespread use of genealogical idioms, tribes are often described as kin groups. Yet in Yemen and elsewhere, most tribal units are territorial, with kinship terminology providing a metaphor to indicate closeness or distance (e.g., Peters 1967, 262, 279; Varisco 2017, 240). All parcels of land, including tribal territories, grazing land, villages, personal landholdings and sometimes specific trees, are named and their boundaries specified in written deeds. That said, some Yemeni tribes and tribal units, notably in the northern and eastern parts of the country, identify with a putative ancestor as well as territorial boundaries (Dresch 1993b; Weir 2007; Brandt 2014 and 2016; Gingrich 1989).

⁷ Al-Ṣaʿb al-Jawhī 2006, 320–321, quoted in Rodionov 2011, 334.

⁸ It appears that in Yemen’s North, this particular status distinction may have originated with the migration and subsequent rule of *sādah* in the 10th Century.

⁹ See Lackner’s chapter in this volume.

¹⁰ See Adra 1982, 116–133 for details on tribal units and the mutual responsibilities of the members of each unit in al-Ahjur and the Central Highland Plateau.

Terms given to tribal units differ regionally within Yemen and from those used in other Arabic-speaking countries. In Yemen's far north, for example, units may be distinguished as fractions, e.g., *thulth* (third), *khums* (fifth), *thumn* (eighth), or parts of the body (Brandt 2014; Dresch 1993b; Meissner 1986; Varisco 2017; Weir 2007). Even where units are defined genealogically, however, their boundaries are territorial. The following describes the most commonly used units in Yemen's Central Highland Plateau, specifically al-Ahjur basin. Unit terminology here is relatively straightforward, genealogical at the levels of household and lineage but otherwise territorial.

The household (*bayt*) usually consists of three generations of kin but may also contain more distant kin or unrelated single or widowed individuals without a household of their own. In al-Ahjur, the household is also known as *daymah*, the local term for a small room or a woman's cooking area or kitchen. Those who share a kitchen and usually eat together are defined as a household, with the oldest male member considered its leader. Multiple *daymahs* may share a large house with several kitchens.

The next unit, called a lineage in this chapter but locally known as *lahm* (with connotations of cleaving or holding together) or *ḥabl* (lit. rope or tie), includes several households that share a common ancestral name. This group may also include members who migrated to the area a few generations ago. They do not claim to share the same ancestry but were "adopted" into the lineage. If a lineage grows too large to manage easily, it splits into two or more lineages.¹¹ Each lineage selects a leader (*ʿāqil* in al-Ahjur) who resolves disputes within the group and represents its interests in discussion and debate with other lineages.

Larger and more important than the lineage is the village (*maḥall*),¹² a bounded territory that includes pasture, access to water and rocky outcroppings considered suitable for housebuilding.¹³ These resources are available to all village residents. However, villagers do not own agricultural land in common, and individuals may own property outside village boundaries. Although a village is defined purely in terms of residence, people often say of their village, "We are all one family," reflecting the reality that families in a village tend to be related due to a preference for village endogamy. Villagers elect a leader who mediates disputes within the village and represents the village in its dealings with other villages, and sometimes the national government and external parties. In al-Ahjur, a village leader is known as *shaykh*, although elsewhere he (almost always a man) may be known as *ʿāqil* or by another term. *Shaykhs* and *ʿāqils* lead as *primi inter pares* without coercive powers. Wisdom, mediation skills and modesty are among the most desired traits in a leader. Village rules and policies are decided by the heads of lineages together with the village *shaykh*. A cluster of neighboring villages may form a single political unit, sharing a *shaykh* and responsibilities for protection and cooperation activity (Adra 1982).

The tribe (*qabīlah*) is the next larger unit in the Central Highland Plateau, where this term refers to a bounded territorial unit comprised of a number of villages, water sources and grazing land.¹⁴ Al-Ahjur, the site of my most intensive field research, is locally classified as a tribe, loosely connected

¹¹ Descent groups, often called lineages, have continuity over time and may maintain ties and identify with descent groups of the same name who live elsewhere and thus belong to different tribes.

¹² *Maḥall* is used in this part of Yemen, but elsewhere *qariyah* may refer to village.

¹³ When agriculture was the primary source of subsistence, rural Yemenis did not build houses on arable land, which was considered too valuable to waste on houses. Since the decline of agriculture in the 1980s, however, an increasing number of houses have been built on previously farmed land.

¹⁴ Among transhumant herders, tribe may refer to a large area to which they have grazing rights.

with Banī Maṭar, its closest neighbor. However, it is officially classified as a subdistrict (*uzlah*), of the administrative district (*mudīriyyah*) of Kawkabān.¹⁵ Together, the villages of al-Ahjur elect a paramount leader, known as *shaykh al-mashāyikh*.¹⁶ Paramount *shaykhs* may be chosen from among candidates with good urban and government connections in the expectation that they will help direct resources to their constituency. The largest tribal unit, the confederation, rarely acts in concert. Al-Ahjur technically belongs to the loose confederation of Bakīl. Wider in scope than the confederation is the North-South distinction noted above.

Qabyalah as Cooperation: The Mutual Responsibilities of Tribes and Tribal Units

Members of tribal units at all levels owe each other specific responsibilities. As the only unit that shares property in common, the household expects its adult members to contribute to feeding and housing the unit and otherwise helping when needed. These responsibilities are assumed but cannot be enforced by anyone outside the household because behavior among close kin falls outside the jurisdiction of tribal customary law. The members of a lineage do not own property in common, but they owe each other help with meeting the requirements of hospitality and other tasks too difficult for a single household to manage (Gingrich 1989). I witnessed a telling example at a wedding in 1979. Soon after I arrived, I left the dance space with another guest to greet the women of the family who were preparing food for the guests. We stopped at the kitchen door where six or seven women were busy baking bread. They welcomed us, but when the groom's mother noticed my companion, she declared, "Greetings my mother's sister's son's wife, come in and knead dough with us." The young girl, who was dressed for dancing, reluctantly admitted, "True, I am the wife of your mother's sister's son" and went into the kitchen to help with the baking (Adra 1982, 133). The failure to honor required obligations (*lawāzim*) is considered serious.

Responsibilities at the village and higher levels include protection of their territory and of vulnerable persons within this territory.¹⁷ They also involve participation in conflict resolution and in community projects. In the past, when raids from neighboring regions threatened grain harvests, all of the village households would harvest crops in unison. In case of conflict within a village or between two villages, the entire village participates in the ensuing discussion and mediation to resolve the conflict. The cost of reparations due from the culprits (usually the slaughter of an animal and a monetary fine) are shared by all households in the village(s), while the victims' village(s) shares in the meat provided as reparation. In practice, however, the village is primarily the locus of cooperative activity and the preferred source of marriage partners.¹⁸ Typically villagers are called to help with building and repairing infrastructure, schools,

¹⁵ Nevertheless, village *shaykhs* of al-Ahjur receive small stipends from the Directorate of Tribal Affairs, as do other *shaykhs* and tribal leaders in Yemen.

¹⁶ When, in the 1970s, the villages were not all able agree on a single paramount *shaykh*, two were elected, each representing part of the territory.

¹⁷ I use the term "vulnerable" rather than "weak," the usual translation of *da'if* (pl. *du'afā'*), the term most frequently used to refer to people owed protection. Protection is owed not only to the unarmed population but also to strangers and guests, including visiting tribal leaders, who are far from weak in their own territories, and members of specific minorities under tribal protection (see also Gingrich 1989, 132).

¹⁸ Village endogamy is usually explained by the reluctance of young women to move far away from their mothers.

mosques, health centers, cisterns and wells. Major projects are organized by the village shaykh and require the labor of a member of each household or a laborer's daily wage if a household cannot contribute labor.

Despite the current warfare, violent conflict is usually rare in Yemen, and tribal units are mobilized primarily for community development and the resolution of conflict between individuals.¹⁹ Although the constituents of each unit are usually established, the number of people called to help with any given task varies with the situation and need. Smaller groups are called to work on projects that require the aid of fewer people. Activities requiring the cooperation of several villages or of the entire tribe are organized by consensus among village leaders. Built into the system is a flexibility that allows individual and group behavior to adapt to the context and to changing circumstances. Tribal organization, then, is based on sophisticated and flexible organizational principles that enable groups of varying size to mobilize quickly and effectively to protect their territory and accomplish particular tasks. Tribal units are best defined as cooperative units, made up of ever-expanding units, each with its own elected or selected leaders (Adra 1982, 2015, 2016).

In Yemeni terms, to be tribal and possess *qabyalah*, is to be ready to help whenever help is needed, to understand which circumstances require one's help and to expect similar aid from others. Also expected from tribesmen is active participation in community and tribal affairs. It is often assumed that "group feeling" or "sentiment" (*aṣabiyyah*), based on real or fictive kinship is the basis of "tribal cohesion" (Ibn Khaldun 2015; Black-Michaud 1975; Robertson-Smith 1990, 1, 30). Considering the pre-eminence of cooperative activity in Yemeni tribal life as described above, I suggest that tribes and tribal units are held together not by chauvinist sentiment or allegiance to a leader but by the contractual obligations implied in the system of ever-expanding tribal units or segments. Individuals who leave the community permanently and cut their ties are no longer expected to contribute. Competition between tribal units is also typical. Tribal icons serve to distinguish tribes from each other by headdress, forms of dancing and poetry, and dialects. Villages often distinguish themselves from their neighbors with their own dances and dialectical variations. More recently, some villages have established rules of women's seclusion that differ from tribal traditions or the practices of their neighbors.

Qabyalah as Customary Law²⁰

As noted at the beginning of this chapter, tribal customary law (*ʿurf, sharʿ wa manʿ, aslāf al-qabāʿil*) is often perceived locally as synonymous with tribalism. The focus of tribal customary law is conflict resolution through mediation and consensus. Conflict often involves access to scarce resources – water, agricultural property, prime grazing territories. Other frequent sources of conflict include failure to fulfill responsibilities of protection or hospitality, damage to someone's person or property, physical violence, threats of violence and breach of contract. Due process is a paramount concern, with the facile use of force highly sanctioned.²¹ It is significant that one of the responses above to "What is *qabyalah*?"

¹⁹ This and other information I have collected from the field and written sources refute the prioritization of violence attributed to tribal segmentation in Salzman (1978), Meeker (1979) and Black-Michaud (1975).

²⁰ See Adra (2011) for detailed case studies of conflict resolution in Yemen.

²¹ This norm is enforced from early childhood. Whenever children come to blows, any adult present will physically separate them. Whenever a quarrel between two adults (especially men) becomes heated, they will both shout loudly at each other with the expectation that others within hearing distance will rush in to keep them separate (see also Weir 2007, 42).

noted “stepping down” (*al-tanāzul*) rather than perpetuating a quarrel. Customary laws are based on restitution rather than punishment.

Conflict at all levels is mediated by a third party with the goal of establishing consensus and restoring the self-esteem of the aggrieved person. These range from informal mediation within a household and conflicts between married couples to conflict within tribal units and between tribes.²² With personal quarrels between two people, this may involve a small gift to atone for an insult. With more serious conflict involving violence or the threat of violence, the entire unit (often one or several villages) participates in debating the alleged behavior of each disputant, a process that may take several days. Generally men meet together, while women meet at a nearby venue to discuss the case (see Adra 1982, 2011).²³ In the evenings, the discussion continues at home. When men return to the formal deliberations the next day, they bring with them the input of their mothers, wives and sisters (Adra 2011, 3). After consensus is reached, parties deemed guilty are fined reparations that involve cash and/or the sacrifice of an animal. The entire unit to which the culprits belong shares in the expense of the reparations, while the victims’ units share in the spoils. Mediators and others impacted by the conflict also receive shares.

The proceedings of each case, however small, are written and stored with the tribal leader, thus providing legal precedent for future cases. All tribes in Yemen possess written documents detailing previous cases, some of which date to previous centuries (Dresch 2006; Weir 2007). Successful mediators, including women, are highly respected, although women mediators often work behind the scenes by convincing parties in conflict to submit to arbitration (Al-Dawsari 2008).²⁴ Disputants unhappy with a verdict may pursue the case at a higher tribal level or in government courts. Some intractable cases have been mediated by the former president (but see Brandt in this volume for other cases perpetrated by the government). The highest respect in tribal society is accorded to *marāghah*, specialist mediators intimately familiar with customary law who consider cases of last resort.

In theory, the village and tribe are perceived as unified wholes in disputes with other villages and tribes,²⁵ and a dispute between a resident of al-Ahjur and a member of another tribe involves the entire two tribes. In practice, however, only the families or lineages directly involved join in the conflict and its resolution. Members of the community who have personal alliances or affinal relationships with members of the opposing group serve as liaisons and participate in the mediation process (Adra 1982, 175–177). Feuding is rare among agricultural tribes in the Central Highlands Plateau, especially those watered by permanent springs, but it appears to be more common among tribes on arid land (see Brandt in this volume).

Based on mediation, customary law is restorative, transparent, and locally accessible (Adra 2016, 327). It prioritizes due process and non-confrontational means of expressing anger, often through carefully crafted verse that synthesizes grievances, as Steven Caton (1987, 1990) has shown. Customary law is adaptive. Because it has not been formalized, despite efforts to do so over the years, customary

²² In contrast to village and tribal disputes, household and marital disputes do not involve the entire community (Adra 2011).

²³ In some cases, older women join men in these discussions (Gingrich 1997). For similar practices among Omani pastoralists, see Chatty 1996, 147, 148.

²⁴ Although much of women’s political participation and mediation is informal, it is highly valued and respected locally.

²⁵ In the past, when security was a more serious threat, villages were fortified, and houses were elevated. Living areas were all placed on higher floors. Their windowless lower floors contained regularly spaced small port holes.

law remains sufficiently flexible to consider extenuating circumstances in any given conflict, and specific rules are amenable to change. In al-Ahjur in the early years of this century, for example, rules specifying reparations for *qāt* thieves were amended to take into consideration changing economic conditions (Adra 2011, 5).

Customary law has maintained security in the rural areas of Yemen for centuries, always in coexistence with urban and religious legal systems, and it continues to maintain security in most parts of Yemen, including conflict zones. State courts in rural areas are understaffed and expensive, and thus do not provide viable alternatives to mediation. When a dispute is taken to a state court, there is a high risk that both parties will be imprisoned, with the burden of feeding them falling on their families, and cases often take months before they are heard.

People being human, there have always been violations of customary law procedures and rules, often leading to long term feuds in areas susceptible to feuding. But severe violations appear to have increased, or they may be reported in the media more frequently than in the past, leading to public censure of tribalism as an institution rather than of the individual criminals responsible for these breaches. Thus, customary law in Yemen articulates principles of tribal identity and honor as discussed in the next section. When a tribesman or woman characterizes *qabyalah* as law, they mean that legal prescriptions to control their temper, follow due process in resolving disputes and accept reparations rather than pursuing vengeance are all part of what it means to be tribal.

Qabyalah as Honor

Behavior locally considered honorable (*sharaf*) includes courage, adherence to one's word (*wijh*), generosity, integrity, perceptiveness, industriousness, self-restraint during conflict (highlighting the prioritization of due process) and modesty (especially on the part of leaders). Obligations of hospitality are crucial to tribal honor in Yemen, and hospitality is an icon of generosity and protection. This focus on responsibilities towards others reveals significant differences between Yemeni conceptions of honor from those described in the Mediterranean (e.g., Peristiany 1965) and resembles most closely descriptions in Farès (1932) and Lancaster and Lancaster (2011).²⁶ In contrast to tribal honor elsewhere in MENA, women are not conceived of as devoid of honor. Women play important roles in ensuring hospitality which reflect on their own honor and that of the men in their households.²⁷ The strict constraints to mobility found in the Levant in the name of honor were not traditionally found in rural Yemen.²⁸ “A woman with honor (*sharaf*) can be with a thousand men [without losing her honor]” is a frequently heard aphorism. Honor killing, presumably in response to women's sexual transgressions, was unknown or extremely rare among Yemeni tribes. Honor killing contradicts both the requirement that men protect women under all circumstances and the legal prohibitions against impulsive violent behavior. Although poetry and legend conflate tribal honor with heroism, honor is not glorified locally. In daily life honor simply refers to proper comportment.

²⁶ See also Dresch's chapter in this volume.

²⁷ See Gingrich (1989) for an extensive discussion of the rules of hospitality in tribal Yemen.

²⁸ Urban women historically faced more constraints to their mobility than rural women.

Qabyalah as Tribal Character and Integrity²⁹

I have been surprised over the years by the consistency with which *qabyalah* is described by tribal leaders from diverse regions in Yemen as denoting tribal integrity. The following, by Aḥmad Muḥammad Jibrān from Rāziḥ, whom I met in London in 1984, is typical:³⁰

Al-qabīlī yitarajjal fī l-ḥarb.

Al-qabīlī mitfarris; yitfarris bi-l-nās.

Al-qabīlī ya ‘mil ṭayyib dā’iman.

Al-qabīlī lā yuḍrub mara mahmā ta ‘mil aw qālatlah.

In time of war, a *qabīlī* goes to the forefront of the fighting. The *qabīlī* is discerning and perceptive, i.e., he scrutinizes people with a clear awareness of personalities and the situation.³¹ A *qabīlī* always does good. A *qabīlī* never strikes a woman, no matter what she does or says to him.

Variations include: “A *qabīlī* does not cheat or deceive (*mā yikhtansh*), nor does he seek evildoing, such as lying, cheating, violent behavior” (*lā ysīr fī mahrat al-baṭālah*).³² “Someone with honor who possesses character and integrity” (Muḥammad ‘Alī al-Ḥammāmī of Hijrat al-Aḥjur, 1983). In the early 20th century, Le Comte de Landberg wrote that to say someone has *qabyalah* is to imply that “they honor the stranger and do not attack his belongings” (*indahum qabyalah y’izzūn al-gharīb mā yit’addūn fī al-māl ḥaqqah*) (1901 (1), 682, cited in Adra 1982, 140).

Similar presumed characteristics of tribesmen in Yemen, although not the term *qabyalah*, are found in the Arabic historic literature. The 10th-century Yemeni historian al-Hamdānī praised the nobility of the tribes of Hamdān, a category that would include present-day al-Aḥjur, eulogizing their roles as protectors of the vulnerable:

Wa ahluhu anjad Hamdān wa ḥamāt al-‘awrah wa man‘at al-jār
(1884, 194, also quoted in Rossi 1948, 9).

And his people, the most intrepid of [the] Hamdān [tribes] protect the deficient and defend the fugitive. (As is common in Arabic poetry, this line is replete with puns. “Anjad” implies “supportive” and “helpful” as well as “intrepid”. The term “man‘,” translated here as “defend,” is also a term denoting customary law.

The 9th–10th-century historian and geographer al-Mas‘ūdī (1965, 236) also praised the tribes of Hamdān using terminology of honor that would be familiar to contemporary Yemenis:

²⁹ See Adra (1982, 144–146) for more detail on this topic.

³⁰ My thanks to Shelagh Weir whose hospitality during this visit encouraged a fruitful 3-way discussion on tribalism in Yemen.

³¹ Words derived from the root, *f-r-s* may have connotations other than acute perception, including horsemanship and chivalry. The translation used here is that of the tribesman who quoted these qualities to me. Another way to talk about the perceptiveness of *qabā’il* is to say, “A *qabīlī* has red eyes” (Amat Alsoswa, personal communication).

³² Adra field notes.

Abnā' al-layl wa ahl al-nayl
Wa yuwwafūn bi-l-dhimār

yumna 'ūn al-jār
wa yuṭlibūn al-tha'r

Sons of the night and people of action [They] protect the fugitive
 And hand over their cherished possessions And demand justice and restitution

Yemeni friends explained this verse as follows:

“Sons of the night” refers to the courage of tribesmen who are not afraid of traveling at night. Tribes are “people of action” in that they do not hesitate to do what is right. The protection of the fugitive, implying all who are vulnerable, is a fundamental obligation of tribes. Generosity, like hospitality, is a tribal norm (this line has also been translated as “meet their debts.”). Tribesmen demand justice and restitution for serious infractions of customary law.

Landberg (1901 (1), 682) concurs: “To say that someone has *qabyalah* (*fulān ṣāhib al-qabyalah*) is to say that he is courageous and possesses tribal pride.”

Character and integrity are considered even more revealing of tribal identity than origins, as expressed in the following proverb: *Idhā yghurrak al-aṣl mā yghurrak al-fi'l* (If you are duped by someone’s [pretended] origins, their behavior will establish the truth.) Someone who consistently fails to fulfill tribal expectations may be referred to as lacking in *qabyalah* (*qalīlat al-qabyalah*). A person who consistently flouts tribal laws or ignores the mutual responsibilities that define tribal ties will be said to have left tribalism (*qad kharaj min al-qabyalah*).

Qabyalah’s Work Ethic

Historically, most *qabā'il* worked in highland agriculture, herding or artisanal fishing. This work was and remains physically taxing, and hard work was highly valued and associated with piety (Adra 1982, 151). When I asked people at work what they were doing, a frequent response was, “*bi nuṣud Allāh*” (We are pleasing God). Women would often say, “We complain about fatigue, but it is the road to heaven” (Adra 1982, 151). Even wealthy *qabā'il* who could afford to hire labor to cultivate their fields tilled the land along with hired laborers. Until the late 1980s, *qabā'il* also played hard, with weddings and other celebrations lasting for days of continuous dancing late into the night. As the economy has become monetized, and food imports have undercut agriculture, this work ethic is no longer so visible in daily life nor so easily detectable among young Yemenis. Nonetheless, industriousness remains an ideal.

Qabyalah and “Moral Equality”

Underpinning *qabyalah* is an assumption of “moral equality” (Dresch 1993b, 50). The model for governance is participatory and egalitarian rather than a centralized hierarchy. Despite the existence of established hierarchies among some tribes in which leaders are selected from specific families, tribal leaders in Yemen have long been considered *primus inter pares*, and modesty is admired in leaders.

Historical status distinctions described in the literature include an urban elite, the tribal majority and a variety of low-status service providers who were not historically recognized as tribal.³³ Yet these status distinctions are understated and often challenged in daily life (Adra 1982, 65–82). In Yemen’s North, especially in rural villages, people of all status groups work together, share meals around a common dish, attend celebrations together and dress alike. In rural and urban Yemen, it is common to find high-status hosts serving lower-status guests, and paid household help (technically of lower status) seated among guests and hosts.³⁴ Some tribal families, although by no means all, openly disdained low-status service providers, but whenever I heard a woman deride a *mzayyinah* (low-status musician), someone else would inevitably reprimand the speaker, stating “*Al-mzayyinah tirḥim*” (*mzayyinahs* deserve our compassion).

In the 1970s and 1980s, rules of status endogamy were strict, reflecting the relevance of tribal descent. By 2005, cross-status marriage was accepted by many, and I was informed of marriages between tribes and urban elite on the one hand, and tribes and former service providers on the other. In another indication of assumed equality among traditional status groups, I was told that one of the new village *shaykhs* elected at the turn of the 21st century was a member of a historically low-status service category. When I asked how a member of this status group could become a *shaykh* (a near impossibility according to the previous literature on tribes in Yemen) my *‘āqil* companion replied, “Najwa, *mā hī-l-qabyalah?*” (“Najwa, what is *qabyalah* after all?” – Did I not know that all are equal in a tribal system?)

Tribal Icons: The Aesthetics of Qabyalah

A number of expressive forms serve as tribal icons. These include *bar‘ah*, the signature tribal dance performed by men in much of Yemen. Each tribe performs its own variation of *bar‘ah*, and until the late 1990s *bar‘ah* performance enacted the intense cooperation that holds tribal units together (Adra 1982, 238–288 and 1998). The basic step is relatively easy to perform, but a successful performance requires perfect coordination among numerous dancers following a very fast beat (Adra 1982, 1998). *Bar‘ah* was strenuous, and *bar‘ah* events typically lasted several hours. Along with *bar‘ah*, *zāmil* is a poetic genre closely associated with tribes (Caton 1990). Both *bar‘ah* and *zāmil* are performed on occasions when a tribe or tribal unit wishes to present itself to the outside world (Adra 1982, 1998). Reinforcing tribal egalitarianism, any man, whether from the community or visiting, is, in principle, welcome to participate in iconically tribal behavior, such as conflict mediation, tribal dances and poetic composition. Whenever I have asked why men not recognized as tribal participate in the *bar‘ah* dance that is defined by all as “tribal,” I have been told, “status distinctions are erased in *bar‘ah*.” Other tribal icons are also male prerogatives. They include the dagger sheath and rifle worn by tribesmen and increasingly by men who did not self-identify as tribal in the past. Dagger sheaths and headdress, like tribal dances and poetry, distinguish tribes and regions from each other. Other traditional icons of tribalism include land ownership and robust but simple rural foods, not necessarily limited to men (Adra 1982, 1998).

³³ Until the 1980s, pariah groups known as *akhdām* were absent and largely unknown in the rural North.

³⁴ This behavior differs starkly from elite attitudes in some other countries in MENA in which the elite would not consider eating at the same table as the household help.

The Male Representation of Qabyalah

Although neither women nor men monopolize honor as understood in Yemen, a male public persona characterizes *qabyalah*, as is clear from the discussion above of tribal leadership, legal process and tribal icons. Men represent the tribe or tribal unit in all formal proceedings. Men preside during formal conflict resolution, although women play important roles in the process as well as in informal mediation. All legal systems in Yemen – tribal customary, Islamic, and State – assume a woman’s dependence on her male kin. Thus, women’s male kin represent them in all dispute resolutions. The active participation of a woman’s kin potentially provides an important source of support. However, women’s (and unmarried men’s) recourse to justice is limited if they do not have the support of their male kin (Adra 2016, 316).

Formal Ideology and Its Antithesis

Qabyalah, with its focus on cooperation and self-restraint and heavy load of responsibilities, is a formal ideology that idealizes tribalism and provides a standard for comportment in public, but it does not cover all that is important to Yemen’s tribes. *Qabyalah* coexists with a wide range of behavior and norms that fall not only beyond customary law but beyond *qabyalah* itself. These contexts, also characteristic of life in rural, tribal Yemen, are locally classified as personal or intimate, foreground autonomous and competitive behavior, and are usually ignored in discussions of tribalism.³⁵ Joseph and Joseph (1987), in one of the few published studies of a similar duality in the Moroccan Rif, dub such antithetical behaviors “agonistic.” In Yemen, these include money and business transactions, most artistic expression (e.g., music, most genres of dancing and song as opposed to chanted poetry) and personal and intimate relationships (Adra 1982, 1998).

Thus, while hospitality falls under the domain of customary law, as does trespassing on another’s land rights or water turns, how any person uses his or her water rations or property is not considered anyone else’s business, and irresponsibility in these contexts neither reflects personal or community honor nor can it be legislated by customary law. Although piety is expected of everyone, both lapses in religious observance and extreme conservatism were historically tolerated as personal choices, although there are indications that religious intolerance has increased throughout Yemen with the intrusion of politicized Islam in the past 30 years and especially during the current conflict which warring factions have justified in sectarian terms.

Antithetical contexts reduce the customary restraints on all forms of self-expression, including most dancing and music, love songs, affection between spouses and friends, humor and varieties of play, the behavior of closely related kin (parents and offspring, siblings) to each other, and individual religious observance. Competition in financial and personal affairs allows daily life to proceed and entrepreneurialism to flourish (Varisco and Adra 1984). Poetic, musical and dance events counteract the relentless responsibilities and constraints of *qabyalah*. Women’s dance events are often called *nafs*, a term that in Yemen is usually glossed as “breath” as in “a breath of fresh air,” but which also implies “spirit”, “individuality,” “competition” and “personal discretion,” among other connotations (Wehr

³⁵ I explore this duality at greater length in Adra 1982 and 1998. Explication of this particular duality helps explain the contradictory perceptions of tribes in MENA by external observers, some of whom characterize tribes as essentially cooperative, while others focus on competition between individuals and tribes. Both are correct: tribes in MENA are simultaneously cooperative and competitive.

1960, 984–985). Women’s social gatherings are typically known as *tafriṭah*, connoting escape from daily chores. Arguably, these contexts provide release from the stringent requirements of *qabyalah*.

Within these diverse but clearly bounded areas, the range of acceptable behavior is determined by individual discretion and the dynamics of the particular household. Social disapproval enters the picture primarily when individuals cross the acceptable boundaries between contexts in which self-expression is permitted and accepted and those in which behavior deemed *qabyalah* is required. Both sets of norms intermingle in daily life, with one or the other prevailing depending on the context. A certain restraint is expected in the presence of people one would like to impress, and issues defined as intimate are not often discussed in contexts defined as public, since etiquette requires they be ignored. However, private property, poetry, dancing, romance within marriage and play are highly valued. They are all considered normal parts of life, but some behaviors are not for overt exhibition. Questionable behavior within and outside of *qabyalah*, however, is regularly discussed through gossip.

The term *qabyalah* integrates ideals of tribalism, yet no analogous term represents the domains defined as personal, which extend far beyond Herzfeld’s “cultural intimacy” (2015). The diversity of activities locally defined as intimate or personal often involves behavior perceived to be inconsistent with or antithetical to *qabyalah*, such as folklore that exalts the individual and love songs that glorify handsome heroes and beautiful women. It is perhaps for this reason that such activities do not enjoy the social legitimation or open recognition of *qabyalah*. Aspects of the culture defined as personal or intimate may or may not be formally acknowledged in local descriptions of their society, and only some of these are considered tribal markers. High-status individuals and older people tend to regard antithetical behavior with ambivalence and avoid overtly competitive behavior or open self-expression in public venues. Marital relations straddle these contextual boundaries: while romance and intimacy are considered deeply personal, the mutual responsibilities of husbands and wives are regulated by custom and the marriage contract. It is significant that the household, the structural foundation of tribal organization, is also the ideal venue for antithetical behavior. Considering the household the most, rather than least, important tribal unit, exposes the potential irony of the household’s centrality to both *qabyalah*’s antithesis and *qabyalah*’s norms. From this perspective the household is foundational to the entire cultural duality; not only to *qabyalah* in tribal praxis.³⁶

The Implications of Qabyalah and its Antithesis to Gender Roles in Yemen

As discussed earlier, women are protected by customary law, but their interests must be represented by men in formal contracts and dispute resolution. Legal constraints often serve to disempower women, but a number of safety nets counteract their negative impacts. These include requirements that men financially support the women in their households and support their female kin in disputes with their husbands or in-laws. The component of tribal honor that prohibits tribesmen from assaulting women contrasts with some societies in MENA in which women may be punished for transgressing a family’s “honor.” Such “honor” killings are rare in Yemen, and it appears that the majority of Yemeni men take the injunction to protect their daughters and sisters seriously (Würth 2005, 304 n. 4). Married women

³⁶ My insight on this point developed through reading Hammoudi’s 2017 discussion of *bayt* as the foundation of both tribal organization and poetry. Hammoudi does not discuss tribal duality or antithetical contexts in tribal life, but I have often wondered at the significance of the term *bayt* in poetry and its possible connections with the household.

who feel insulted, or are assaulted, by their husbands or the in-laws with whom they live, have a right to return to their parents' or other kin's home. This move initiates a mediation process between the husband and the woman's kin that may end with reconciliation in return for gifts or in divorce (Adra 2011). (In Yemen's North, divorce is not stigmatized as it is in parts of the South.)

Furthermore, women's participation in the rural economy assures them greater mobility than that enjoyed by their urban sisters. Gender mixing is the rule in villages, and in many villages until the early years of this century women and men danced together all night at weddings and other celebrations. Women inherit and control their own property, and in the Zaydī North, men do not control their wives' property. Although brothers routinely pressure their sisters to cede the management of their inherited land to them, they must ensure their sisters' life-long support in exchange. The majority of women accept this option, but some women refuse it, choosing to manage their own land instead (Adra 2013). From a top-down perspective, women are not legitimized as public personae. Yet women control the household, the foundation of tribal structure; hospitality, one of the most important components of tribal honor; and children, who are very highly valued in this society. The power of women at the grassroots cannot be denied.

Ironically, the duality of norms described above provides women with greater freedom of expression than men. In contrast to Euro-American societies, the primary responsibility for community cooperation and coexistence is assumed by men who serve as tribal icons. This leaves women more room for negotiation within their households regarding the management of their land, economic pursuits, education and mobility. Tribal women are less constrained in their political and social critique and tend to be more outspoken than men, who are restrained by stricter rules of propriety (see Gingrich 1997 for an example.) Women's songs, which are heard by all, can reflect deep personal feelings that would not be considered appropriate in other (public) contexts (cf. Abu Lughod 2016, Joseph 1980). I have begun to explore the possibility that women may symbolically represent *qabyalah*'s diverse antithesis as men represent *qabyalah* (Adra 1998).

The picture is marred, however, by lack of access to adequate health care and quality education, statistics that place Yemeni women near the bottom of international organizations' gender equality indices. Despite high poverty rates and the negative health consequences of early marriage, rural women in Yemen do not behave like victims. They are unusually assertive, stand tall, walk with long strides and express themselves loudly and with confidence. As Sheila Carapico writes, "Yemeni women may be the most liberated, though not necessarily the most privileged, Arab women" (1991, 15).

The Resilience of Qabyalah

To sum up this discussion, tribes in Yemen are primarily territorial groups, divided into ever-expanding units held together by specific mutual responsibilities. Tribal organization is based on sophisticated and adaptive principles that enable groups of varying size to mobilize quickly and effectively to protect their territory and accomplish tasks that benefit their community. *Qabyalah* is an all-encompassing Yemeni term that integrates the various components of tribalism: origins, organization, customary law, norms, an egalitarian ethic, patriarchy, and aesthetic tribal icons. *Qabyalah* coexists with an unnamed set of antithetical norms that encourage competition and self-expression in specific bounded contexts. Women in this patriarchal society find themselves at a legal disadvantage, but they benefit from safety nets, mobility and considerable room for negotiating and bending the rules to accomplish their wishes.

How have tribal ideology and norms survived the immense social and economic changes of the past 50 years? Will they survive the current conflict? First, it is important to note that norms underpinning *qabyalah*, such as the importance of social responsibility, flexibility and “situational ethics,” reliance on due process and mediation as well as positive valuation of entrepreneurialism and the variety of expressive forms, are pervasive throughout Yemeni society and feed local understandings of fairness and the expected behavior of others. To most Yemenis, this complex of expectation and behavior appears “natural” and understandable.

Economic and social change over the past 50 years has had multiple impacts. New opportunities for tribes to engage in trade and other new professions have propelled cross-status endogamy and the acceptance as equals of formerly disdained status groups. Educational opportunities have expanded for women and men. Many more women now benefit from formal education, and female enrollment in Yemen’s universities surpasses that of men. On the other hand, Islamist teachers and curricula have negatively impacted women’s agency and voice. Many young tribal women who have completed secondary school now idealize women’s seclusion and unquestioning obedience to their husbands as “modern” in contrast to tribal women’s mobility and voice. Women’s song, poetry and dancing have been curtailed in many villages (Adra 2016).

Massive food imports have undercut local dry farming in highly nutritious grains and seeds, accelerating the erosion of terraces and traditional water conservation methods. These, along with increased cash cropping, which has enriched some communities, have reduced rural women’s economic contributions and consequent mobility, because cash cropping is defined as men’s work. The traditional work ethic appears to be weaker among the youth, who no longer value agricultural work. Intense *bar‘ah* continues among some tribes, e.g., the Yāfi’, but it has been replaced in other regions with languid performances resembling tribal dances in the Gulf. Older Yemenis are likely to complain that *qabā’il* are no longer as physically strong as they were a generation ago. They use the term *ta‘ayyabna* (we are dishonored) because they are no longer as hearty and wholesome as they were in the past.

Tribal models of organization that enable groups of varying size to mobilize quickly and effectively to accomplish given tasks, combined with an egalitarian ideology and elected leaders, provide an ideal format for civil society. These institutions provided the model for Local Development Associations initiated by President Al-Hamdī in the 1970s to spur local development efforts.³⁷ Customary law continues to maintain security in all areas not ravaged by violent conflict. During the current conflict, tribal leaders have mediated the withdrawal of terrorist groups from cities they had controlled and continue to mediate tribal and intra-tribal conflicts. As Hūthī forces marched toward Aden in 2015, several southern tribes organized impressive evacuations from the city. Tribal men and women vote in elections and actively participate in discussions of national and international politics. Most perceive themselves both as Yemeni nationals and as members of tribes. In Dresch’s words, “Contexts have changed, not least in that the tribes, and for the first time tribalism, now form part of an explicitly national whole” (1993b, 236). Mohammed al-Zahiri argues that tribes in Yemen continue to perform positive political and social roles that present a check against the misuse of power by so-called modern politicians (2006, 29–30). In 2005, as my friends in al-Ahjur proudly showed me their voting cards and actively debated national politics, they also framed their discussion of recent local changes, including

³⁷ See Carapico 1984 and Swagman 1988 for more information on LDAs.

the election of younger *shaykhs* and the revision of laws no longer deemed appropriate, as examples of the dynamic sustainability of *qabyalah*. They do not perceive tribalism and nationalism as contradictory. Tribe and nation have become two loci of identity, each entailing its own set of responsibilities.

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