

# POWER AS PERSUASION IN YEMENI TRIBAL SOCIETY

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## Introduction

Who among the contributors to this volume and its readers, who came to Yemen forty or more years ago, could have imagined the country come to the tragic state it is in today? What I write about is a Yemen I knew in the past, and I ask the question, “Is that past still possible in Yemen today?” I hope it is, and I will explain why in this essay’s conclusion.

I came to Yemen for the first time in 1978, on a vacation trip from Saudi Arabia, where I was working in the Department of Antiquities and Museums as an assistant to its then director, Dr. ‘Abdullah al-Maṣrī. The reason for the trip was, one might say, exploratory. I was advised by Professor McGuire (Mac) Gibson from the University of Chicago who was doing research in the kingdom at the time, that if I wanted to study oral tribal poetry in the Arabian Peninsula for my PhD dissertation in anthropology and linguistics, perhaps I was better off not doing so in Saudi Arabia, as had been my original intent, but in Yemen, where modernization had not yet swept away the country’s cultural legacies, and where the tribes still flourished. When I got off the plane and saw the Old City of Ṣan‘ā’ looming darkly against the pale dawn, my heart literally raced, and I decided on the spot that I would heed Mac’s advice.

The site of my fieldwork was around 60 km northeast of the capital, in a tribal region known as Khawlān al-Ṭiyāl, where I was told over and over again the “best poets” lived who still composed in the ancient poetic tradition. I was also told, however, that I would never be able to carry out my research. I assumed this meant I would never obtain official permission from the Yemeni government, but my interlocutors had a more sinister meaning in mind, and ran the side of their two fingers across their throat to signal what the tribes would do to me if I lived among them. To the incredulous question of why the tribes would do such a thing, I was told they were a “violent” people, “lawless” and “irrational.” To be sure, this admonition gave me pause, but when I spoke to men who identified themselves as “tribal,” they derided this as calumny coming from urban people who were hostile to their ways. They insisted I would be welcome. I eventually did go to Khawlān, though I ended up living in a *hijrah* village or sanctuary inhabited by *sādah* (sg. *sayyid*, descendants of the Prophet Muḥammad) and had to venture out from there to attend tribal ceremonial events in which poetry was produced and to meet well-regarded tribal poets whose oeuvre I recorded.

People’s lives in the *hijrah* and its surroundings were suddenly shattered by the abduction of two young tribal women, allegedly by a young *sayyid* man from the sanctuary, which precipitated a conflict that engulfed the entire region. The father of one of the missing girls, who was also a shaykh of a local tribe, came into the *hijrah* and raised his *jambiyah* (dagger) in the air, while intoning the ritual words “I challenge you!” (meaning that he held them responsible for this heinous crime). He handed the dagger to a third party standing by who was to serve as the initial arbiter of the dispute. Then the shaykh made another pronouncement: if the girls and the boy were not found by sundown, there would be war between the shaykh’s tribe and the *hijrah*. From the start what I call “symbolic violence” was performed

by the ritual challenge and by the shaykh and his military supporters taking positions on the mountain tops surrounding the sanctuary to signal both the seriousness of the offense to his and his tribe's honor as well as their preparedness to fight to restore that honor if the parties to the abduction were not apprehended. As the deadline for meeting his demand elapsed, despite the efforts of search parties combing the region to find the young man and the two young tribal women, an armed confrontation was "staged" with the sanctuary and its armed supporters that ended after twenty-four hours with a truce. I say staged because it was clear that, although the sanctuary was fired upon and the sanctuary fired back, care was taken not to take the violence too far. After this staged armed confrontation, the mediation process got started in earnest, though it would not have a successful conclusion (if one can even speak of a conclusion to these kinds of conflicts) until six months later, and after several rounds of interlocking violence and mediation that escalated in their scale with each successive round.

It had not been my original intent, of course, to study this event (Caton 1999), which happened unexpectedly while I was conducting fieldwork on tribal poetry, but as I was living in the midst of the controversy that imperiled my neighbors, not to speak of threatening to bring my fieldwork to an end, I could not help but be aware of it, and when I realized that the genres of poetry I was analyzing were constantly referring to the event and its uncertain outcome, I determined to focus my attention on it. My book *Yemen Chronicle* (Caton 2005) is an account of that event.

In this essay I want to revisit that event and examine it through the lens of a model of power as persuasion that I developed in a couple of publications (discussed below), though I also hope to sharpen that model here by a deeper engagement with various theories of discourse and power (specifically those of Habermas), before going on to ask what salience that model might have both for contemporary Yemeni scholarship as well as for the political future of tribes in Yemen.

#### Two Idea Types: Power as Persuasion, Power as Coercion

I published this model for the first time in 1987 in an article entitled "Power, Persuasion, and Language: a critique of the segmentary model in the Middle East" in which I critically examined the anthropological model of tribe going as far back as the classic statements by Evans-Pritchard (1940) and Ernest Gellner (1969). My aim was to reveal in that model what I called a contradiction or tension between a dominant scholarly notion of power as coercive force on the one hand (corresponding to the cultural stereotype that the only thing tribes understand is the use of force) and the far less prevalent notion of power as consensus based on moral suasion, accomplished in large part through communication, especially poetry. After arguing that both these understandings of power have to be kept in view if politics is to be understood in the tribal context, I did a cultural interpretation (following Clifford Geertz 1973) of persuasion; that is, interpreting what the communicative act of persuasion might mean in the subjective view of the actors involved in the dispute mediation.

I realize now, however, that what I was proposing in that 1987 paper might be better served by framing it as a Weberian *ideal type* of persuasion. This is not the place to go over Weber's fragmentary discussion of what he meant by the ideal type (Weber 1949, 1968); suffice it to say that I mean by it a constellation of traits, derived from empirical investigation, that have some sort of affinity with each other, usually based on logical coherence. Thus, for persuasion, I would argue, the ideal type consists of at least three traits. (1) There are agents who think of themselves as *autonomous social actors*, however defined in local cultural terms, because, as I wrote at the time, "an actor would only try to persuade someone he could not or should not compel. In other words, actors must believe that they are

in some sense free to accept or reject political policies and that their decisions matter in the decision-making process” (Caton 1987, 96); (2) While there are men of power to be sure, they are ideologically constituted as “first among equals,” and they are enjoined to *govern by consultation* and *consensus* rather than by coercive will or the use of force. (3) Communication between agents consists of what I called *cultural “forms of speaking,”* especially poetry, though including also genres such as sworn oaths, proverbs, challenges and counter-challenges, and legal discourse such as sworn testimony, legal judgments and so forth. In hindsight, I realize that I left out “forms of writing” that are part and parcel of persuasive processes which Dresch (1989), Weir (2007) and especially Messick (1993) have examined in works that came out after my article was published, and I left out image-media such as videos and social media, which have increasingly become part of the tribal communicative sphere since I did my original fieldwork in 1979–81.

To continue with my argument, this ideal type of power is the dialectical opposite of the one the literature on tribes has tended to elucidate. The latter ideal type is instrumental rather than moral/suasive and focuses on (1) the monopoly of the instruments of violence in the hands of powerful shaykhs and their supporters; (2) the consequent military as well as political-economic means at the disposal of such shaykhs to coerce others, including buying their allegiance; and (3) the use of kinship and marriage relations to create alliances and curry favors. In this type, forms of speaking like poetry are little more than epiphenomena or idle pastimes, and certainly of little or no consequence in the weighty task of governance. They are treated either as minor entertainment or of purely ceremonial significance or, if connected to the art of rule at all, as praise poems to the rulers.

What, then, according to my argument, is the epistemological status of these two ideal types? It would be a mistake, it seems to me, to assume that the moral/suasive type is somehow closer to the subjective view of the actors (*Verstehen*) and the instrumental/coercive type closer to the investigator’s explanation of what is “actually” going on (*Erklären*). I argue that the instrumental/coercive type is also a subjective/interpretive one, in the sense that tribal actors understand other people’s actions in those terms and their understanding of it (*Verstehen*) is communicated in genres such as poetry.

For example, in the protracted dispute I introduced above, the negotiations dragged on for months because the plaintiff in the case refused to agree to a settlement despite the best-faith efforts of the negotiators working within the legal-moral system to bring the conflict to an end. Thus, suspicions were aroused over his recalcitrance, and an interpretation based on an instrumental and coercive understanding of power as force began to circulate; namely, that the shaykh and the tribe supporting him wanted to derail the negotiations in order to tip the conflict into open warfare, an armed conflict the tribe was confident it could win because of its superior military strength, and with the aim of plundering the sanctuary and gaining political ascendancy in the region. This interpretation spurred a mobilization of a yet larger contingent of regional tribes coming to the defense of the sanctuary in order to stop the opposing tribe from imposing its will by force. In the end, the latter was beaten back, but – and this is important for my argument – the latter went back to negotiations with the *hijrah* as demanded by their opponents, and the dispute was eventually settled in accordance with tribal law (settled, yes, though not entirely ended as it turned out). Also important to note is that the tribes that mobilized in defense of the sanctuary did so not to coerce their opponent into submission to their desired instrumental aims but to continue with the mediation process, trusting that the outcome would be amenable to all parties concerned. Force, if anything, was used to reconstitute the moral order of persuasion, not to supplant it.

### A Dialectic Between and Within

In a very real sense, then, force and persuasion are in dialectical tension with each other in the dispute mediation, but to grasp this point more subtly we need to complicate what we mean by force, as being dialectically both a symbolic gesture of violence like a threat and an enactment of armed violence against the other. Consider, for example, one of the prototypical acts of challenge and response in everyday life in Yemen: a man feels that his honor has been impugned by an alleged crime against him (say, the failure to repay a debt). Going up to the man with whom he has this dispute, he withdraws his *jambiyyah* from its sheath and raises it aloft while uttering the words “I challenge you! (*anā dā ī l-ak*)” Taking out his dagger in turn, the man indexed by this formulaic challenge is honor-bound to respond, “And I am respectful! (*w-anā muhtarim*)” The two men then hand over their daggers to a third party, usually a male bystander, who is honor-bound to accept them as guarantors of the peace and to act as mediator of the dispute. This exchange of challenge and response and the handing over of weapons to a third party who must act as mediator is a profound ritual, the equivalent of a Durkheimian social fact if there ever was one. The third party, for instance, cannot refuse to act as mediator on the grounds that he is too busy or unqualified (for instance, that he does not know tribal law, because someone else more knowledgeable may be consulted to help adjudicate the dispute). At this point in the proceedings a crowd usually gathers around the plaintiff, the defendant and the mediator to hear the discussion and to offer their own views on who is at fault and who is innocent. Some among them might even provide circumstantial testimony or shed light on the character of the two parties. Eventually, the mediator must pronounce judgment. He will have learned enough from the crowd around him to know what the consensus view is of the guilt and innocence of the litigants (which is usually a matter of degree rather than a simple dichotomy of guilty/not guilty), and he should know enough about tribal law to set the terms of reparations, including fines. Usually that settles the matter and the daggers are returned to their scabbards; but if either of the litigants (and usually it is the plaintiff) feels that his grievances have not been adequately heard or redressed, he has the option of taking the case to the next level in the adjudicative process, a hearing, as it were, in front of a *qāḍī* or judge. The larger point is that the moral imperative to resolve differences peacefully runs deep in everyday life; the use of actual force (as opposed to threatened force) being a last resort rather than the option of first choice. When the shaykh came into the *hijrah* to throw out his challenge, the *sādah* were honor-bound to submit to negotiation and make amends in accordance with tribal law.

But this was not to be a quick or easy process, for a whole host of reasons I discuss elsewhere (Caton 2005). The initial round of mediation failed, and the shaykh led his tribesmen in an attack against the *hijrah* that left two dead and several wounded among his men. After that, a second round of mediation began, with ever-more powerful regional shaykhs participating in the negotiations, but after several weeks it too failed to lead to a mutually satisfactory conclusion, at which point a very large contingent of armed men on the side of the *hijrah* attacked the shaykh and his village for not agreeing to a settlement even though this was what tribal law demanded. The shaykh agreed to submit to a third round of mediation, this one presided over by the paramount shaykhs of the Ḥāshid and Bakīl tribal confederations, who threw all their moral authority as well as their military might behind the successful conclusion of the conflict. What this example makes clear are the successive gradations (specifically, the scaling up) in the dialectics between the symbolic show of force versus its actual performance with the intent to coerce.

To provide a more nuanced understanding of this dialectic, we have to consider forms of speaking as possible forms of force (otherwise we are in an untenable position of claiming that force only entails

weapons or the threatened use of weapons). Recall in Evans-Pritchard's ethnography of the Nuer (Evans-Pritchard 1940) the leopard-skin chief, the religious figure who helps adjudicate disputes. He does not have armed supporters to back his verdicts, he is without power in a brute material sense. However, he is not powerless, for if the disputants refuse to accept his verdict, he can curse them. The curse is the religious equivalent of the physical use of arms. The curse is believed to have severe repercussions for those who have been cursed, including grievous physical and mental harm that fall upon those who have been cursed, and thus is not performed lightly. So too an opponent may be cursed in Yemeni tribal poetry, though never gratuitously so, for there has to be a justified provocation for resorting to such a violent form of language. One can shame the opponent by saying that his dignity has been sullied because of the wrong he has committed; to call him a "horse's ass" is to ridicule him and provoke a physical assault, and is therefore considered beyond the pale. Of course, it is possible that that may be the intention behind the humiliation, for it is hard to imagine those who resort to such an extreme form of speaking being naïve about its consequences, but not necessarily so. One does not utter the curse or the vilification out of the blue; one arrives at it, gradually. Here we come to the idea of gradation, enunciated above in the discussion of force, and of scaling up. Exerting moral pressure upon the other entails ratcheting up the criticism, and with each successive round of challenge-and-retort this pressure and counterpressure becomes more heated and nears the tipping point, where shaming spills over into cursing. When the curse is finally performed, it vilifies the other, who now has no choice but to respond in kind, terminating the round of verbal challenges and retorts and initiating the exchange of physical force. Just as there is sometimes a fine line between a symbolic show of material force and the exercise of physical force to do real harm to others, so there is a fine distinction between criticizing someone by calling them to account for their heinous actions in order to get them to mediate and cursing them, thereby casting them out of the moral community and ending any further discussion. But, as I said, one arrives at that point, if one arrives at it at all, gradually, not precipitously.

Now that we have grasped the analytical distinctions between and gradations in a show of force and the exercise of it, between an invocation to mediation and a curse to end it, we can see the dialectic between these ideal types of power unfolding more complexly and subtly in dispute mediations. A show of force (the threat) initiates a round of mediation in which linked poetic performances exhort the litigants to come to terms and ultimately to accept them; but if that fails, a new show of scaled-up force (more armed opponents facing off) is performed, precipitating another round of mediation, this one involving more powerful mediators and often more skillful and compelling poets shaming the parties who have done wrong and who continue to refuse to accept a peaceful settlement of their differences. If the parties remain recalcitrant to a peaceful resolution in that mediation process, they might find themselves cursed by the mediators and the show of violence may now tip into the "real thing," or armed confrontation with the aim to maim or kill. One has now reached an extreme in both physical violence and language, and the dialectic seems to have ground to a halt. The moral and political community is in crisis. What will save it, if anything can, are the highest-level shaykhs in the region and the country who throw all their moral authority, and sometimes also their physical power, behind the resolution of the conflict. Some conflicts in the past may have reached that point, but I think not many of them. The conflict between the sanctuary and the tribes did reach that point, though catastrophe was averted in the end.



### Theoretical Interlude on Discourse and Power: Foucault and Habermas

The ideas I put forward in the late 1980s and early 1990s of power being exercised in tribal society through a rhetoric of persuasion and not just the exercise of coercive force provoked little reaction, except perhaps one of mild skepticism (expressed in personal communication rather than in print). Any number of reasons might have been behind this skepticism, not the least being an incredulity that poetry could serve as a vehicle for power (as opposed to, say, legal instruments) which is deep-seated and widely held in our Western political tradition. I was making the argument that poetry could do just that, if one expands one's definition of poetry to include not just a finished text but also a multi-media, oral composition performed in key institutional contexts such as weddings and religious ceremonies. Another problem, as I see it, was that theories of language that incorporated power in their purview and that I relied upon in my analysis were relatively uncommon at the time. There was work on pronominal switching of tu/vous to signal differences of power and status (Brown and Gilman 1960) and the lectures of Austin (1962) on performative utterances, but key theoretical texts on which my thinking depended such as Vološinov (1986) and Bakhtin (1981) were only just being translated and more widely read.

However, a deeper reason for the skepticism toward a notion of power as persuasion may have had to do with Foucault's theory of discourse and power which was widely influential from the 1970s until today. It was incompatible with the concept of power I was developing by deflecting attention away from concrete acts of inter-subjective communication and from intentional, sovereign acts of power to something else entirely, something that it is fair to say we hadn't clearly seen or appreciated before. The following discussion may come across as a bit of a tangent, but I hope it will clarify how I was thinking about discourse and power by comparing it with a very different theory of these same notions that was dominant in anthropology and political theory at the time that I was writing up my research on Yemen.

First, Foucault shifted the meanings of what we generally understand by discourse, and though there is not enough space to go into the details of his arguments, I want to give a cursory summary to illustrate my point. In *Archaeology of Knowledge* Foucault distinguished between what he called énoncé (enunciation), or concrete acts of communication, which he consigned to the field of linguistics, and what he called discourse; that is, statements derived from a corpus of texts that are much more ill-defined or fluid than concrete speech utterances but that nevertheless form an ensemble or set of connections and are historically crucial in constituting certain objects of knowledge, methods, procedures, and subjects. Less interesting to Foucault were those utterances that could be attributed to specific individuals to whom one might (or might not) attribute specific intentions, or to persons addressed by those individuals and how they might interpret or take up the utterances (Austin 1962), or a situation of utterance (Malinowski 1923) which the utterances index in some fashion or other (Silverstein 1976), and so forth. As Foucault's thinking on discourse developed, it expanded beyond the ensemble of statements to be extracted from written texts to include practices or techniques that these texts talked about and which over time became techniques of power for various institutions in society such as the clinic (Foucault 1975) and the prison (Foucault 1979).

As Foucault's thinking on discourse evolved, so did his thinking on power. It should be apparent from what I said above about his bracketing of the énoncé that the kind of power he had in mind was not exercised intentionally by actors through concrete signifying practices or what he called in one of his lectures (7 January 1976) power's "internal point of view."

Let us not, therefore, ask why certain people want to dominate, what they seek, what is their overall strategy. Let us ask, instead, how things work at the level of ongoing subjugation, at the level of those continuous and uninterrupted processes which subject our bodies, govern our gestures, dictate our behaviors, etc. . . . we should try to grasp subjugation in its material instance as a constitution of subjects. . . . I believe that we must attempt to study the myriad of bodies which are constituted as peripheral subjects as a result of the effects of power (Foucault 1980, 97–98; emphasis in the original).

Power in this sense as material practices that subjugate (later usage would be discipline) our bodies, is understood to be diffuse or capillary, constantly circulating, and fragmentary rather than unitary (Foucault 1980), and though its political effects are not necessarily imagined or intended, they are nonetheless palpable and substantial.

The question remains as to the relationship of these two sorts of power to each other: sovereign power on the one hand and disciplinary power (or what eventually came to be called bio-power) on the other. Was sovereign power simply to be replaced by bio-power? It seems not, for Foucault was not claiming that sovereign power was merely an ideology and that somehow “real” power was bio-power; rather, he was arguing that disciplinary power operated under the radar of sovereign power and therefore was more difficult to detect if one used sovereign power as one’s primary analytical lens. Moreover, according to Foucault, disciplinary/bio-power seems to have gained in importance since the rise of modern society, and therefore has epistemological privilege for students of the latter.

This new type of power, which can no longer be formulated in terms of sovereignty, is, I believe, one of the great inventions of bourgeois society. It has been a fundamental instrument in the constitution of industrial capitalism and of the type of society that is its accompaniment. This non-sovereign power, which lies outside the form of sovereignty, is disciplinary power (Foucault 1980, 105).

Put this way, one could view Weber’s analysis of the rise of capitalism in the West as a result of a Protestant ethic that disciplined the mind and body (Weber 2009), an ethical disciplining that then migrated into the economic sphere where it affected the rise of capitalism by creating certain kinds of disciplined economic subjects.

If Foucault’s periodization is correct and disciplinary power really is an invention of bourgeois society, then does it make sense to use this notion of power to grasp tribal society? Insofar as the tribes of Yemen have been impacted by modernity (and they certainly have), would it not be reasonable to suppose that techniques of bio-power have found their way into their society, requiring us to go beyond the sovereignty model that so far has dominated their study? And what would such a bio-power study of the tribes look like? Or, if Foucault is incorrect in his periodization and origins of disciplinary power, how might we recognize it in places like Yemen? Brinkley Messick (1993) has arguably provided a Foucaultian analysis of scriptural or textual culture among the literary elite in Yemen, but I am not sure that anyone else has done the same for Yemeni tribal groups, or if it even makes sense to apply a disciplinary lens to our understanding of power in the Yemeni tribal context.

Counterposed to Foucault’s model in the 1970s and 1980s was that of Jürgen Habermas, especially as articulated in his work *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962; first published into English in 1989). It is fascinating to see how diametrically opposed the two are in their thinking about discourse and power. If Foucault argued that disciplinary/bio-power was the invention of the

bourgeoisie, Habermas argued that the bourgeoisie invented its opposite, so to speak, a democratic public sphere, that is, a society of property-owning, educated individuals that arose in tension with the state (which they saw as hampering their interests) and who engaged in “rational” critical discourse about how the economic and political orders should be run, about the rights and responsibilities of individuals in those orders, and so forth. It was assumed that those individuals who took part in those debates and discussions were more or less “equal,” and that they would attempt to persuade each other as to the correctness of their views by a reasoned appeal to fact and truth. These debates and expressions of opinion took place in a “free” and “independent” press, in debating societies, public lectures, salons and so forth, comprising a forum or sphere that was “public” for all to read and, in theory, to participate in (so long as they were property-owning males, of course). Habermas traces the rise of this bourgeois public sphere in the early to mid-nineteenth century and its rapid decline only a couple of decades later, attempting to understand the conditions of possibility for its emergence and its eventual demise. In today’s world of “fake news” and “fake facts,” with democratically elected leaders spreading disinformation in their wars against their opponents, Habermas’ focus on the public sphere and communicative discourse seems more salient than ever before.

What Habermas’ training in the Frankfurt School did not prepare him for was a theoretical understanding of communicative action, which was needed in order to grasp how debate operates in the democratic public sphere. For this, he turned (Habermas 1994, 1987), rightly, to *pragmatic* theories of language; that is, of speaking that is inter-subjective and grounded in concrete contexts of social interaction. His coverage was wide-ranging and deep, including not only Austin but also the pragmatists like Peirce and Dewey. But communicative action in the public sphere, as Habermas saw it, also required a theory of language that was self-referential – that could take speaking itself as an object of description and ultimately of criticism – for that is what debate is all about, speaking to the communicative expression of divergent points of view. George Herbert Mead was helpful here, but so too – and perhaps especially so – would have been Bakhtin (1981) and his idea of dialogicality (and his comments on authoritarian discourse), which, as far as I know, Habermas did not consult. Dialogicality refers to the fact that in every utterance is already embedded a “reply” to a previous said of discourse, not to mention an anticipation of an “answer” to one’s own utterance, thus rendering speaking debate-like at its very core.

Habermas’ ideas about the public sphere based on critical communicative action, if also necessarily untethered from the particular history of its emergence in the rise of the European bourgeoisie, would have been extremely useful to my analysis of Yemeni tribal poetry that is audio-taped, sold in audio-cassette stores throughout the country and then circulated in the national public sphere (Caton 1990). Regrettably, I did not start thinking about Habermas’ theory of communicative action and the public sphere in relation to my own research until after I had published my book. How were his ideas relevant? After the 1962 Yemeni revolution, tribes were eager to participate in an emergent national public sphere, one that was not reliant on print and the newspaper but on the cassette tape and cassette tape player which became a widely accessible technology in the 1970s. Through this media they could express their views on national events and policies and try to shape them. Of the three poetic genres that constitute what I call a system of tribal genres, it is the *qaṣīdah* that was audio-taped and then circulated, and no doubt for the reason not only of its cultural symbolic value or artistic prestige in the Arabic literary tradition but also because its composition is not crucially tied to a performative situation, as is the case for the *bālah* and the *zāmil*. It is the text (*naṣṣ*), the product of an individual compositional process, that is esthetically prized in the *qaṣīdah*, and it is this text that can be most easily extracted from a context of creation, written down or taped and then passed around or listened to on audio-cassette players by



audiences everywhere, tribal and non-tribal. For example, a well-regarded poet representing the views of his tribe would compose a *qaṣīdah* poem weighing the pros and cons on a particular issue and then make an argument as to why his group came down on one side or another of the debate. This poem would then be set to music by a professional tribal singer (*mulaḥḥin*) who would perform it in front of a tape recorder, and the tape would then be sold in local markets all around the country. The tape might then be heard by another poet, representing a different tribe, who might feel inspired to respond with a poem of his own, the two poems linked as a “challenge” and a “response.” The second poem might then be sung by the same singer and the two appear on the same cassette tape, again to be sold in various outlets. And so it might continue, with a “chain” of such poems responding to each other and constituting a lively debate between presumably equal actors trying to persuade each other about the rightness of their positions. In this fashion, tribes from across Yemen could hear what each was saying about particularly urgent topics (the policy of rapprochement between the two Yemens in the 1980s, the prohibitive rise in “bride price,” the scourge of revenge killing or *tha’r*, and so on). Not just tribesmen but also non-tribesmen listened to these debates in order to get a sense of what the tribal public sphere was debating. Miller (2007) expanded this analysis of poetry’s production for and in the Yemeni oral/aural public sphere by showing how diasporic poets participated in and widened the borders of the public sphere beyond Yemen in the 1990s and later.

#### Power as Persuasion: Its Past and Future on the Arabian Peninsula

Two questions about the notion of power I put forward for Arabian tribes interested me, and both might be said to be temporal: the first was how far back the existence of this power extended into Arabia’s past; the second was whether it still existed in the contemporary period .

I found the answer to the first question in research by the linguist Samuel Liebhaber on Mahrī, one of six modern South Arabian languages still spoken in the Arabian Peninsula today. His focus is on the *qaṣīdah* as it is composed by Mahra (or Mehri) speakers in the Mahra Province of southeastern Yemen and in the Dhofar Province of southwestern Oman.

In his article “Rhetoric, Rite of Passage and the Multilingual Poetics of Arabia: A thematic reading of the Mahrī Tribal Ode” (2013) Liebhaber argues for a “common core” to be found in Mahrī poetry, other contemporary vernacular poetry such as Nabaṭī written in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf, and the ancient pre-Islamic *qaṣīdah*. By “common core” he means “a common conception of human society that is structured around the conflicting obligations of feuding and feud-mediation” (2013, 118). He grounds part of his analysis of this common core in Susan Stetkevych’s application of the Van Gannep paradigm of rites of passage to pre-Islamic Arabia (Stetkevych 1993), with feud beginning as a breach of the moral order that requires “mature males” to repair (i.e., males who have been properly initiated into the moral order). Indeed, my analysis of the *bālah* performance at the wedding *samrah* bears this out, for although it is subjectively understood as a “game” to divert or entertain the groom, I argued that it is also a profound allegory about the dangers of heedless youths pushing symbolic violence too far and plunging it into feud and how they require mature males to reign them in (Caton 1990). Explained in this way, one can see how this performance genre is a kind of rite of passage for youths who must learn to submit to the tribal order.

The other underpinning of Liebhaber’s analysis is more directly connected to my own work, for he cites both my 1987 article and my 1990 ethnography of poetry as the basis for understanding the language of Arabian poetics as mediation:

I will draw from Steven Caton's ethnographic analysis of Yemeni tribal poetry from Khawlān al-Ṭiyāl. Arguing against a strictly coercive definition of power in tribal societies, Caton has demonstrated that the "rhetoric of persuasion" embodied in the poetic practices of northern Yemeni tribesman is more relevant to the management of social welfare than coercion (Liebhaber 2013, 119).

What Liebhaber then goes on to show, through an extended analysis of two Mahrī poems and a comparison with some pre-Islamic odes, is that a notion of social maturity tied to honor on the one hand and collaboration to resolve differences peacefully on the other, based on persuasion and consensus rather than force, are at the heart of the "common core." In sum, he suggests that power as persuasion is deeply embedded in the tribal moral order of Arabia, going back centuries, even cutting across different languages within the Arabian Peninsula. There is, then, a historical depth to the kind of power as persuasion I had encountered in contemporary tribal Yemen about which I had no inkling before Liebhaber's analysis.

But there is every reason to question whether such a concept of power has any salience in contemporary tribal Yemen, given the changes the country has undergone since the 1980s. For one thing, both the position and structure of the shaykh's power seem to have undergone a profound shift since that time, away from a status of "first among equals" to one of greater power based on ties to the central state on which the tribes depend for essential goods and services crucial to their economic development. As has been argued above, persuasion, if it is to be real, presupposes actors who are more or less equal and not in a relationship of domination and subordination to one another. And did the strategy of the Ṣāliḥ regime of sewing discord among the tribes as a way of weakening them and thereby of mitigating their opposition to its rule exert such stresses on the mediation system that it could no longer handle the disputes (both in volume and intractability) coming its way? And what of the concomitant rise in sales of armaments to Yemen, much of which ended up in the hands of the tribes: did the moral imperative to resolve disputes by mediation and consensus give way to the instrumental use of force to coerce one or more parties to do the bidding of the other? In such circumstances the odds do not look good for a power based on persuasion rather than coercion or force.

It was heartening, therefore, to encounter it in the revolutionary rhetoric of the 2013 Yemen "Change Revolution." One of the most iconic moments of that revolution was when thousands of tribesmen joined the protesters in Change Square by laying down their weapons at the entrance to Ṣan'ā' University. It was a symbolic gesture of their commitment to non-violent protest. They later composed *zāmil* and other poetry while marching in the streets of Ṣan'ā', as described in an article, "Poetry of Protest: Tribes in Yemen's 'Change Revolution'" (Caton, El-Eryani and Aryani, 2014). Many Yemenis were amazed to see tribesmen laying down their arms, and yet it is in keeping with the rhetoric of persuasion that I have outlined.

It is Ross Porter in his yet unpublished book manuscript, *'Being Change' in Change Square: An ethnography of revolutionary life in Yemen* (2019, forthcoming), who picks up the model of power as persuasion and develops it subtly and insightfully for the Yemeni Arab Spring.

I have found Caton's work on tribal poetry to be particularly useful for developing an explanation for the most celebrated of revolutionary moments in 2011: when several large tribal delegations came into the Square announcing a rejection of their former way of life. Where dialectics and a mutual respect for autonomy lies at the heart of successful conflict

mediation, the emergence of a political system (especially post-unification) committed to increasingly coercive tactics resulted in a perpetual state of war . . . The ideals of tribalism became increasingly difficult to uphold in the face of what was seen as oppression (*thulm*) (Porter 2018, 37).

In other words, the Ṣāliḥ regime's tendency of increasing authoritarianism, in which coercion rather than persuasion was the tactic of rule, became intolerable, and the tribes in the Change Revolution reverted to their understanding of power as persuasion to assert another, more peaceful way to imagine the political order.

Tragically, the aftermath of the Change Revolution has plunged Yemen into a bitter, protracted and bloody civil war between the Ḥūthīs and their Iranian supporters on one side and the Saudi/UAE coalition backing President-elect Hādī on the other. There is no need here to go into the details of this conflict which have been fully analyzed elsewhere (Brandt 2017). What this conflict has led us back to is a notion of power in which force predominates over persuasion, even begging the question of whether persuasion still exists. I want to remind us that there was another, even bloodier and more protracted civil war in Yemen from 1962–1970, and yet the model of power as persuasion survived. One might hope the same will be true now. It is clear after several years of inconclusive fighting that neither side can win by use of force alone, and at the time of writing this essay there seem to be fitful efforts at a truce in order to begin the long, difficult process of mediation and negotiation. Without such a process one cannot see how a lasting peace can be achieved.

## Epilogue

Let me conclude, then, with a hopeful anecdote. Speaking recently to a political scientist who works for the International Crisis Group, one Yemeni shaykh from Khawlān said to her that the shaykhs had decided that the fighting in the civil war would not spread to their region. Disputes would have to be resolved without arms or the coercive use of force. Perhaps the political model I have sketched in this paper is not defunct after all.

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