

AL-MAWADDAH AL-KHĀLIDAH?
THE ḤŪTHĪ MOVEMENT AND THE IDEA OF THE RULE OF THE
AHL AL-BAYT IN YEMEN’S TRIBAL SOCIETY

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Introduction

The term “*mawaddah*,” literally meaning “love” or “affection,” has been used in Upper Yemen for centuries, optimistically describing specifically the feelings of love and loyalty the tribal population supposedly harbored for the religious ruling elite (Serjeant 1982, 23–25). This religious elite was mainly comprised of the *sādah* (sg. *sayyid*) or *ahl al-bayt*,¹ the descendants of Muḥammad through his daughter Fāṭimah and his nephew and son-in-law, ‘Alī. Upper Yemen is the home of Zaydism, a denomination of Shi‘ite Islam, which is characterized by the role of political leadership it assigns to the *ahl al-bayt*. For the better part of a millennium, between the end of the 10th and the middle of the 20th century, Upper Yemen has thus, at least nominally, been ruled by an imam from among the *ahl al-bayt*, while the religious and administrative elite was to a large degree constituted by the *ahl al-bayt*. While the existence of a specific term to denote the tie between this elite and the general population points to the immense importance of this relationship for Yemeni society, in reality the attitude of the tribal population towards its religious rulers was never as harmonious as the phrase makes it out to be. With the end of the imamate and the consequent decline of Zaydī scholarship, however, the issue lost its significance. Only with the revival of Zaydism in the 1990s and especially with the appearance of the Ḥūthī movement a decade later, did the question of religious leadership gain relevancy again, albeit in an entirely different conceptual setting.

Especially in the context of the emergence of the Ḥūthīs, a Zaydī religio-political movement founded in the early 2000s, the issue of the imamate gained relevancy again. While much of the Ḥūthī movement’s rhetoric revolves around typical “third-worldist” or anti-imperialist interpretations of Yemen’s political situation, there is an increasing amount of effort spent on the question of religious rule in the context of Yemen’s tribal society. The earliest ideological statements of the group, the speeches of its founder, Ḥusayn al-Ḥūthī, himself a member of the *ahl al-bayt*, address the issue only briefly. While legitimizing the *ahl al-bayt*’s claim to the right to leadership in religious terms, he does not really attempt to connect these claims to the societal realities of Upper Yemen, which were, and still are, characterized by tribalism. With the political success of the movement in the wake of the Arab Spring, the movement now engages with the problem in a more concrete manner, trying to reinterpret the relationship between the tribes and the *ahl al-bayt* in a way conducive to their political aspirations.

¹ In the remainder of the chapter, these two terms will be used interchangeably.

This chapter will first show how the role of the *ahl al-bayt* in Yemen's society was fundamentally altered by the foundation of the Yemeni Republic in 1962. With the abolition of religious rule and the introduction of new markers of Yemeni identity, the *ahl al-bayt* lost not only their religious and political position in society, they, and by extension also Zaydism, in a sense also ceased to be Yemeni. While it has to be acknowledged that reality is never as clear cut as presented in a theoretical discussion, and Zaydism and the *ahl al-bayt* in reality remained an integral part of Yemeni society, the implications of the *ahl al-bayt*'s conceptually altered status are diametrically opposed to the claims to legitimate religio-political leadership advanced by the Zaydī actors such as the Ḥūthī movement. This chapter will thus use these conceptual considerations in order to analyze the Ḥūthī movement's calls for the reintroduction of religious rule.

Religious Rule in Yemen's Tribal Society

The use of the concept of tribes has been strongly criticized by scholars pointing to its misuse by colonial powers from the 17th century onwards. The term is therefore seen by many as negatively charged and frequently replaced in academic discourse by terms like "ethnic group" or "indigenous people" (Gingrich 2015, 645). Upper Yemen, as well as most parts of the Arabian Peninsula, however, were never colonized by Western powers. Tribes in Yemen and large parts of the Arabian Peninsula in general are not a self-serving colonial construction, but have been part of social reality for at least one and a half millennia.² The majority of Yemenis self-identify as tribal³ and the term "*qabīlah*" is found repeatedly in Yemeni historiography of the last centuries, reflecting the indigenous nature of the concept. The same holds true for the segments (such as *sha'b*, *qabīlah*, *imārah*, *baṭn*) of Yemen's tribal society (Varisco 2017).

Tribes and their subdivisions are each mainly bound together by mutual ties of solidarity based on shared notions of common ancestry.⁴ Each of these segments, down to the household, is an independent unit (Serjeant 1982, 12), which allows them to "mobilize quickly and effectively to accomplish certain tasks" (Adra 2016, 1185). Tribes and their segments are therefore cooperative entities tasked with the accomplishment of mutually shared goals. Whether society in northern Yemen persists in a perpetual state of anarchy in which tribes and their segments only come into existence in order to protect their honor (*sharaf*) from infringements from other conceptually equal units as Dresch (1984, 35) writes in one of his earlier articles may, however, be contested. The performative qualities of tribal dance (Adra 1982, 60), the collective recitation of tribal poetry (Caton 1990), as well as guest meals (Gingrich 1989, 143) also serve to evoke communal cohesion, as do the completion of shared tasks such as the building and maintaining of wells (Hovden 2014, 61). Nonetheless, inter-tribal relations and the conflicts arising from them are of major concern in Yemen's tribal society, since these conflicts, due to the internal logic of the tribal organization of society, can easily spin out of control (Dresch 1993, 84–85 and Jamous 1992, 172–173).

² Tribes are already attested in pre-Islamic inscriptions (Robin 1982) and Islamic historiographers report that tribes such as Banū 'Aws and Banū Khazraj come from South Arabia and settled in Medina in pre-Islamic times (Watt 1953, 141).

³ On tribal self-identification, see Najwa Adra's chapter in this volume.

⁴ In reality, tribal membership above the level of the extended family and below the level of tribal confederations tends to be defined in terms of co-territoriality (Adra 1982, 116–133; Weir 2007, 97). "What is important is not a verifiable chain of ancestors, in a positivistic sense, but social recognition and acknowledgement" (Meissner 1987, 177).

[E]ach tribe divides and subdivides again and so forth until family units are reached ... From the viewpoint of any one individual or family, this means that he or it are at the centre of a number of concentric circles – the intra-village clan, the village, the group of villages forming a local clan, the larger clan, the tribe, and so forth (Gellner 1985, 117).

An individual is thus part of different nested segments at once; a conflict between two individuals can therefore quickly involve wider sections of society, not directly involved in the conflict. “This is embodied in the oft-cited Arabic saying ‘I against my brother; my brother and I against my cousin; my cousins, my brother and I against the world’” (Combs Schilling 1985, 660).

This conceptualization of tribal societies is most commonly referred to as segmentary theory. As Dresch (1986, 309) says, this theory does not, however, deal “with sequences of events at the level of observation (and in particular with the appearance of groups) ... [but] deals with formal relations that characterize the types of events possible.” Or, as Mundy (1989, 118) puts the same idea: “The tribal idiom was by its nature more an appeal to local men for common action than a description of obligatory association.” Segmentary theory therefore does not sufficiently describe the actual workings of inter-tribal relations (Weir 2007, 2–3; Adra 1982, 114; Caton 1987; Peters 1990). The actual course events take is defined by sophisticated modes of tribal mediation,⁵ which help to contain the centrifugal forces inherent in the system. This is illustrated by a conversation Weir (2007, 192–193) mentions: Asked about how conflict would spread in a certain village, a shaykh answered: “If they have an internal dispute in al-Farq, everyone supports his own *bayt*. Then elders intervene and crush it by slaughtering, and force them to make it up and return to the right path (*yiruddūhim*). There must be no ganging up! It should only be one on one.” While, in this example, the conflict in the village is contained by the elders, the function of mediator is often carried out by outsiders.

The conceptual equality of tribesmen and tribes, which Gellner alludes to in the quote above, is a function of their shared ancestry and predestines outsiders to mediate in tribal conflicts. It is therefore no wonder that many shaykhly families are said to have joined the tribe they represent relatively late, often only a few hundred years ago (Dresch 1984, 36–37). Another such group of outsiders are the aforementioned *sādah* (sg. *sayyid*) or *ahl al-bayt*, who for centuries have played an important role as mediators in Yemen’s tribal society. As descendants of Muḥammad, they are members of the North Arabian tribes, tracing their lineage back to their mythical ancestor ‘Adnān. Traditional Arab genealogy states that he was a descendant of Ismā‘īl, the son of Abraham, and therefore arrived only late to the Arabian Peninsula. Yemen’s tribes, on the other hand, trace their roots back to Qaḥṭān, who is said to have come to the peninsula shortly after the Great Flood. The Qaḥṭānī tribes are therefore also known as *al-‘arab al-‘arībāh* (roughly: original Arabs), while the ‘Adnānī tribes are referred to as *al-‘arab al-musta‘ribāh* (Arabized Arabs) (Orthmann 2002, 210–211).

The ancestors of most of Yemen’s *ahl al-bayt* came in 897 together with Yaḥyā b. al-Ḥusayn b. al-Qāsim al-Rassī, who later became known as Imam Hādī ilā al-Ḥaqq (Heiss and Hovden 2016a, 375 n. 26). Yaḥyā b. al-Ḥusayn was invited to Yemen in order to settle a local dispute in the city of Ṣa‘dah. With him, he brought Zaydī Islam, and became Yemen’s first imam. According to the most common forms of Zaydī Islam, every *sayyid* who fulfills certain criteria (such as being male, free, sane, pious,

⁵ For detailed descriptions of these modes of mediation, see Weir 2007, 143–225 and Dresch 1993, 75–197.

just, brave and learned) and rebels against the unjust incumbent to the office of the imamate, can theoretically become imam.⁶

So while, according to Zaydī beliefs, society should be ruled by the *sādah*, in accordance with Zaydism's understanding of Islam, in reality the power of the imamic state was nowhere near absolute. The *sādah*, usually had a higher level of education than the rest of the population and traditionally filled high positions in the bureaucracy and the legal system. While they thus formed the upper stratum of Yemeni society, they did so in a society that remained tribal and to a large extent guided by principles and laws independent of Islam, in fact preceding it. So in other words: the *sādah* held their exalted societal position more due to their ability as outsiders to mediate in a society governed by secular principles, than due to the position Zaydī Islam ascribed to them. From imamic literature it becomes evident that the *sādah* were well aware of the problem and tacitly adapted to this contradiction between the "source of political leadership and the pretense of legitimacy" (Mundy 1995, 28).

This adaptation to the tribal environment is also seen in a passage from the biography of the first Yemeni imam, al-Hādī ilā al-Ḥaqq, written by his cousin al-ʿAbbāsī al-ʿAlawī. In this account, the imam returns from his daily visit to the market and brings with him a coat embellished with silk.⁷ When he encounters the father of the author, he says:

"By God, if I was amongst believers I would not wear such a thing; this is not of my normal clothes. I would like to just dress in coarse clothes. But if I would not wear it [i.e. the coat] the people would judge my position lowly. I looked into their ways and saw that they only follow somebody who wears clothes like these. On my skin, however, it feels like it was made of thorns." (al-ʿAbbāsī al-ʿAlawī 1972, 56).

The reason for the imam's apology to his uncle is that in many interpretations of Islam, obviously including the interpretation of the imam, the wearing of silk is forbidden for men. The imam is clearly aware that he has to make amends in terms of religious purity in order to satisfy the expectations of his subjects; on the other hand, he apparently also feels that this behavior distracts from the respect those that judge him by religious standards have for him.

Due to the fact that the *sādah*'s legitimacy rested on their claim to religious leadership, however, the issue was normally not addressed openly, as Gellner (1984, 21) writes:

A person who made it plain that his confidence in his own supposedly unnegotiable basic position is less than total, and that he is keeping an alternative ready and available, would thereby undermine the credibility of his own stance... Thus the alternatives are decently hidden away.

This tendency is clearly seen in the imamate's dealing with tribal customary law (*ʿurf*). Due to its secular nature, tribal law, strictly speaking, fell outside the purview of the imamic state. Since openly engaging with it would constitute an acknowledgment of its validity, doing so would undermine the

⁶ For general information on Zaydism, see Strothmann 1912 and Madelung 1965. For a biographical account of Imam Yahyā's life, see Van Arendonk 1960.

⁷ The term used here (*qabā' mulḥam*) is explained by Mundy (1983, 531 n.12), who also cites the same passage: "A *qabā'* is an open-front coat, probably like a *ṣāyah*. *Mulḥam* is stuff with a warp of silk and a woof of some other material."

imamate's claim to being the sole source of legitimate authority. Imamic literature therefore frequently reviled tribal customary law and practices publicly, often referring to it as *ṭāghūt* (roughly: idolatrous practice). In reality, however, the imam had to adapt to these practices. He therefore, for example, sent emissaries to negotiate in tribal affairs or tolerated some principles of *ʿurf* that did not openly contradict the *sharīʿah* (Dresch 1989, Rathjens 1951, and Rossi 1948).

All of this does not mean that personal piety amongst the tribesmen was of no importance, nor that consequently the *sādah*'s religious status did not benefit their societal standing and their authority in mediations, quite the opposite (Caton 1990, 94, 108, 116; Dresch and Haykel 1995, 418; Serjeant 1982, 12). The problem, however, remains the same: from their own point of view, the *sādah* were at the top for the wrong reasons.

What is more, both of the sources of their authority, be it in the secular or the religious sense, are based on them being outsiders to tribal society. Their ability to mediate in tribal conflicts is based on their standing outside the tribal order, while their standing as a religious elite was legitimated and based on Zaydī principles, privileging North Arabian tribal ancestry. As long as the state claimed for itself to be religiously legitimized, however, they were still part of that state. With the abolition of the imamate in 1962 and the reinvention of Yemen as the home of a particular Yemeni nation, things changed dramatically for the *sādah*.

After 1962 the *ancien régime* was officially derided as tyrannical, racist and accused of dividing the country,⁸ and the newly established republican state tried to create a shared national identity based on a non-sectarian state Islam (vom Bruck 1998; King 2012) as well as Yemen's historic (Stookey 1978, 24) and tribal heritage (Adra 1993; Varisco 2017, 241). Thus neither Zaydism nor the *sādah* lost much of their societal standing in practical terms, but theoretically also stood outside the conceptual realm of the new nation-state.⁹ Under the imamate, the *sādah*'s claims to authority on account of them being from the family of Muḥammad and therefore of ʿAdnānī descent were not only in line with the precepts this state purported; they were the essence of the imamic state itself. If a Zaydī state is defined by its application of Zaydī Islam and Zaydī Islam demands the leadership of the *ahl al-bayt*,¹⁰ such a state can only be upheld if the *ahl al-bayt* claim authority. Yet, with the connection of notions of a Yemeni nation with the country's tribal and pre-Islamic cultural heritage, claims to the leadership of the *ahl al-bayt* were inherently at odds with the republican state on a political level, while every highlighting of descent from outside Yemen at the same time re-enforced the *sādah*'s position outside the envisioned national community. Their exclusion went to the heart of what it now meant to be Yemeni. By introducing South Arabian descent as a marker of "true Yemeniness," the *sādah* conceptually became foreigners. The idea of *sādah* supremacy, however, persisted and made a comeback in the early 2000s.

⁸ A good example for this is the republication of al-Zubayrī's *Al-imāmah wa-khataruhā ʿalā waḥdat al-Yaman* in 2004 by the ministry of Culture and Tourism. Tellingly the book opens with a foreword by then-president ʿAlī ʿAbd Allāh Ṣālīḥ in which he states that this book should be read by every Yemeni as a warning of the dangers of the imamate to the unity and safety of Yemen.

⁹ On this point, see also Bonnefoy 2011, 226–228.

¹⁰ In traditional interpretations of Zaydism there is, should there for some reason be no imam, the possibility of a so-called *muḥtasib*, a sort of steward of the vacant imamate who does not have to be from the *ahl al-bayt*, see Strothmann 1912, 86–87. For the Muṭarrifiyyah, a form of Zaydism not conforming to standard Zaydī conceptions of legitimate rule, see Heiss and Hovden 2016a.

The Ḥūthīs and the Attempt to Make Zaydism Yemeni Again

As a result of the profound social transformations setting in in the 1970s with the influx of oil money, new irrigation technologies and aggressive forms of Sunni Islam from Saudi Arabia and Egypt, as well as the opening of new political possibilities, especially for tribal elites, the tribal system began to show cracks (Brandt 2017, 35–74). In this context of a weakening and coopted tribal system and the onslaught of an alien and state-sponsored form of Islam in combination with the more liberal political climate after the Yemeni unification in 1990, Zaydī scholarship slowly began to make a comeback (Dorlian 2013). First, Zaydī scholars such as Aḥmad al-Shāmī or Zayd al-Wazīr tried to reintegrate Zaydī doctrine into the republican system by abandoning the idea of an imam from amongst the *ahl al-bayt* (vom Bruck 1998); later, more intransigent voices like Zayd ‘Alī Muṣliḥ and Ḥusayn al-Ḥūthī appeared.

Ḥusayn al-Ḥūthī was the scion of an old but historically not overly important *sayyid* family, which had made a name for itself through its charitable works and tribal mediation in northern Yemen (Brandt 2017, 139–144). Between 2000 and 2003, al-Ḥūthī gave around a hundred speeches in Yemen’s Ṣa‘dah province. Collectively they became known as the *Malāzīm Ḥusayn al-Ḥūthī*. After Ḥusayn’s death in the first round of the Ḥūthī conflict in 2004, he became a martyr figure, as is evident in the honorific *al-shahīd al-qā’id* (the martyr leader), which is now commonly bestowed upon him. At the same time, his speeches developed into the ideological foundation of the movement.¹¹

Al-Ḥūthī is surprisingly clear on the role he envisions for the *ahl al-bayt*. Contrary to al-Shāmī and al-Wazīr he clearly envisions a leading role for the descendants of Muḥammad.

We say: We are the Zaydiyyah, the Zaydiyyah is the correct faction (*al-ṭā’ifah al-muḥiqqah*), the Zaydiyyah is the best of factions (*ṣafwat al-tawā’if*), we are the people of correct beliefs ... And those of us who are from among the *ahl al-bayt*, we say: We are from the *ahl al-bayt*, we are those of whom Allāh took away the uncleanness and purified them thoroughly (*adhaba Allāh ‘anhum al-rijs wa-ṭahharahum taḥīran*). We are those whose love has to be for the *ummah*, those who have to cling to it. We are those who have to cling to them to protect them from going astray. And so on and so on ... But is it of the logic of the Quran (*manṭiq al-Qur’ān*) that you can attribute those things to yourselves without accepting the responsibility that comes with them? There is a responsibility, a large responsibility! (Ḥusayn al-Ḥūthī, 2002c)

Also:

Don’t expect those that are angry at the *ahl al-bayt* or don’t believe in the culture of the *ahl al-bayt* to be victorious against the Jews ... The prophet – *ṣalawāt Allāh ‘alayhi wa-ālihi* – said: “I am leaving among you [two weighty things, (*thaqalayn*)],¹² if you cling to them, you will not go astray after I am gone: The book of Allāh and my descendants, the *ahl al-bayt*.” (Ḥusayn al-Ḥūthī 2002e)

¹¹ His speeches continue to be referenced in abridged form in magazines (Ḥusayn al-Ḥūthī 2016, 4–6), poems are composed in his honor (al-Dakkāk 2017, 61) and his picture is frequently used in posters and graphic designs.

¹² Al-Ḥūthī leaves out the word “*thaqalayn*” here, yet mentions it in the context of the quoted passage.

In the first quote, al-Ḥūthī clearly refers to the Hadith of the Cloak,¹³ while in the second he refers to the Hadith of the Two Weighty Things.¹⁴ Besides Muḥammad's sermon at Khumm, which culminates in the sentence: "He of whom I am the *mawlā* (roughly: guardian), of him 'Alī is also the *mawlā*," which Ḥusayn al-Ḥūthī also quotes (2002a), these passages are two of the main traditions commonly used to legitimize the *ahl al-bayt*'s claim to political authority.

Ḥusayn al-Ḥūthī calls upon the *ahl al-bayt* to become aware of what he sees as their responsibility towards the *ummah* and lead it in the fight against what he saw as Western imperialist intrusion into the Middle East in the wake of the so-called War on Terror. Only led by the *ahl al-bayt* could the *ummah* survive in the face of Western and Zionist imperialism; after all, he argues, it was only 'Alī who could breach the walls of the fortress of Khaybar, not Abū Bakr, nor 'Umar (Ḥusayn al-Ḥūthī 2002c, 2002a, 2002d).

Guided by the *ahl al-bayt*, Yemenis should unite in a culture defined by Islam, which he calls the "Quranic Culture" (*thaqāfah qur'āniyyah*).

We, if we don't believe in the Quranic Culture will lose everything, we will return to an illiteracy worse than the first [i.e. before Islam]. God described this illiteracy as "they had been before in manifest error" (Al 'Imrān: 164) ... Because we fail to follow our religion, to hold on to its values, we lost also the values of our human nature (*qiyamnā al-insāniyyah al-tabi'iyyah*) that humans like every other living being (*ka-ayy ḥaywān ākhar*) possess. Do humans not have feelings of anger (*ghaḍab*), sometimes he is angry? This is a matter of nature and instinct (*shay' fiṭrī wa-gharīzī*), love of revenge (*intiqām*), love of sacrifice (*tadhiyyah*) for something that is dear to him? We will be more illiterate than the illiterate Arabs were then [before Islam]. There is no religion amongst us, there is no mutual help (*najdah*), no honor (*karāmah*), no courage (*shajā'ah*), no proud refusal (*ibā'*), no chivalry (*furūsiyyah*), and nothing else (Ḥusayn al-Ḥūthī, 2002e).

These categories, mutual help, honor, courage, chivalry and proud refusal are clearly categories familiar to people brought up in Yemeni tribal society. These values are, however, mentioned in a universal, Arab context, which becomes clear as he continues to argue that before the advent of Islam, the Arabs holding on to these values were stronger than "the Jews" (Ḥusayn al-Ḥūthī, 2002e). While alluding to these indigenous values and ideals, not necessarily connected to Islam, he hardly mentions the tribes¹⁵ or the tribal system. Unlike the imams, he does not denounce the mechanisms of the tribal system. Different

¹³ "The prophet went out one morning wearing a striped cloak of the black camel's hair. Then came Ḥasan b. 'Alī and he took him under it, then came Ḥusayn and he took him under it, then came Ḥasan and he entered with him. Then came Fāṭimah and he took her under it, and then came 'Alī and he took him under it. Then he said: "God only wants to remove from you all that might be loathsome, O you members of the [Prophet's] household, and to purify you to utmost purity. (*Innamā yurīd Allāh l-yudhhaba 'ankum al-rijs ahl al-bayt wa-yuṭahhirakum taḥīran*)" [Quran 33:33]" (Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim: 2424).

¹⁴ On his way back from the last pilgrimage to Mecca, Muḥammad and his followers rested at a watering place called Khumm. Feeling his death coming, he said: "I am leaving amongst you two weighty things. If you hold on to them, you will not go astray after me. One is bigger than the other: the Book of Allāh, it is a rope that reaches from heaven to the earth. The other are my descendants, my *ahl al-bayt*. They will never be separated from each other until they return to me at the Pond [i.e. the Pond of Abundance (Hawḍ al-Kawthar) in paradise]." (Jāmi' al-Tirmidhī: 3788)

¹⁵ For an exception, see Ḥusayn al-Ḥūthī (2002b): here he uses the ideal of tribal unity to warn of the dangers of pluralism in religious matters. He uses an example with which people are familiar, yet he does not acknowledge the value of the tribal systems as such.

from the *sādah* during the imamate, al-Ḥūthī's problem was not so much the existence of tribes or the tribal system *per se* but, as described above, the theoretical implications of the elevated importance of Qaḥṭānī descent and, tightly connected to that, the focus on Yemen's pre-Islamic heritage. Ḥusayn al-Ḥūthī seems to have been aware of these problems and addressed them. He strongly criticized the government's attempts to build a Yemeni nationalism on the basis of pre-Islamic history. "The Jews", as he said, worked through the Yemeni government to evoke an interest in the population in the history of the pre-Islamic Yemeni kingdoms of Saba', Ḥimyar, and Ma'īn. Just as in other countries like Egypt, Iraq, and Syria, the population would be diverted from Islamic history and thus made complacent in the face of Jewish supremacy over them. Islam would be cast aside and be perceived as an idolatrous deviation from the freshly imposed quasi-religious devotion to pre-Islamic heritage.

They lay out their principles in one way or another. They make the honoring of the spiritual authorities (*awliyā' Allāh*), the preservation of attention to certain characteristics of the authority (*ḥifāz 'alā ma'ālim mu'ayyanah 'alā walī*), of the Imam, of the birthday of the prophet – *ṣalawāt Allāh 'alayhi wa-ālihi* –, of every Islamic influence ... the attention to that, the honoring of that, an expression of a heterodox innovation (*bid'ah*) and idolatry (*shirk*) (Ḥusayn al-Ḥūthī 2001).

In reality, however, the Yemenis and 'Alī and consequently the *ahl al-bayt*, he argues, share a common bond. Only by reviving that bond could, as mentioned above, Yemen and the Islamic world return to strength. That bond, he argued, becomes apparent in the steadfast loyalty of the Yemeni people towards the *ahl al-bayt*.

In their history, the people of Yemen (*ahl al-Yaman*) always fought (*yujāhidūn*) under the banner of the *ahl al-bayt*. They left the indigenous rulers (*sulṭānāt ukhrā qā'ima 'alā turāb hādhā al-waṭan*) ... They did not say: "These are the sons of our homeland and those are intruders, they stood with the *ahl al-bayt*" (Ḥusayn al-Ḥūthī 2002e).

These attempts to reintroduce the *sādah* as an integral aspect of Yemeni society became more pronounced after the movement spread in the aftermath of the Arab spring. After Ḥusayn al-Ḥūthī's death in August 2004, the leadership of the movement passed briefly to his father, Badr al-Dīn al-Ḥūthī, and then to his younger half-brother, 'Abd al-Malik. Between 2004 and 2010, the movement fought six wars against the Yemeni government and participated in the revolution of 2011 (Brandt 2017; Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells 2011). In March 2005, Badr al-Dīn al-Ḥūthī gave an interview in which he clearly states the imamate was preferable to democracy and that the imamate could only be held by male descendants of Ḥasan and Ḥusayn. He, however, denies that Ḥusayn aspired to the office of the imamate himself (al-Amir 2005). In how far Badr al-Dīn al-Ḥūthī's views are representative for the movement at this point must remain open to speculation. Also, the ideology of the group during the period between Ḥusayn al-Ḥūthī's death and the Arab Spring, for which only relatively few original sources remain available, has not been analyzed in detail yet. In general, however, the movement during this phase seems to have concentrated mainly on political issues. It appears that only after taking over control over Ṣan'ā' in 2014, and especially after 'Alī 'Abd Allāh Ṣāliḥ's assassination in December 2017 did the movement seem to become more specific in its religious claims.

Marching down south from Ṣa'dah province in 2014, the Ḥūthīs brought large parts of the country under their control, swimming on the one side on a wave of popular support due to their active stance

against the corrupt and ineffective government¹⁶ of ‘Abd Rabbihi Maṣṣūr Hādī and brutally crushing tribal resistance (Lackner 2018, 160–162; International Crisis Group 2014, 11; Brandt 2018, 174–178). In control of wide parts of the country, for many Yemenis the movement became the only defense against the attacks of the Saudi-led-coalition, which plunged the country into chaos. With the country crumbling under the weight of the bombardment, the humanitarian crisis and internal displacement, for many Yemenis the Ḥūthīs seem to be the lesser evil compared to foreign occupation and complete societal breakdown. Profiting from an emerging war economy (Salisbury 2018, 7), the movement is currently without any real rival from within. Thus empowered, the *sādah* made a comeback to leading positions in many sectors of public life¹⁷ (Lackner 2018, 165), a new head mufti was installed (Yemen Press 2017), school books seem to have been changed in accordance with the movement’s religious ideas (al-Yaman Today 2017) and books on social issues such as on the role of women in Islamic society (‘Abd al-Malik al-Ḥūthī 2018) were published.

Also, with regards to the imamate, the movement is getting bolder. The following is from a recent publication by the movement via the Majlis al-Zaydī al-Islāmī (Zaydī Islamic Council)¹⁸:

Lately, Yemen went through a phase of darkness, distortion and plagiarism not seen before in her history nor in her defining and cultural heritage (*turāthuha al-rā’id wa-l-khaḍārī*). Imam Hādī ilā al-Ḥaqq was a great Imam and it is mandatory that we praise him, his ideas, heritage and cultural and intellectual influence, but unfortunately he and the majority of distinguished men of Islamic thinking in Yemen, were exposed to neglect and forgetting. And if research was conducted on them, they [the researchers] were treated in a derogatory, biased and distorted manner, resulting from self-serving interests of corrupt politics, the excretions of the odious *takfīrī madhhab* and the epidemic from the Kingdom of the Horn of Satan (*Mamlakat Qarn al-Shayṭān*¹⁹) [i.e. the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia] – the tip of the spear of the Zionist American project in the region – of which the ongoing aggression [i.e. the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen] is but one visible aspect. It is unthinkable and unnatural that the Yemeni people be prohibited from their Islamic, Arabic heritage and their centuries old historic identity, just because of the sudden urge to modernize, which is not an expression of the Yemeni identity, but of the opposite, that is the identity of the Najdī Satan that harmonizes with the American/Zionist project (Anonymous 2018, 6–7).

The book hails Imam al-Hādī ilā al-Ḥaqq as a fair and just ruler and brave fighter, courteous to his enemies. The fact that he was invited to settle a dispute and came only with very few men – the book

¹⁶ For a speech by ‘Abd al-Malik al-Ḥūthī addressing this issue, see ‘Abd al-Malik al-Ḥūthī 2014.

¹⁷ For a list claiming to detail high official positions that went to *sādah* under the Ḥūthīs, see Yemen Press 2016.

¹⁸ The Majlis al-Zaydī al-Islāmī seems to be formally independent of the Ḥūthī movement, yet clearly serves as an ideological mouthpiece. It for example publishes favorable books on issues relevant to the movement, including speeches and books by ‘Abd al-Malik al-Ḥūthī; it distributes a journal (*al-Shamārah*) lauding the movement; and it holds conferences on relevant issues such as the imamate. Many activities of the organization are covered by al-Masirah, the Ḥūthī movement’s television station. This includes the conference out of which the publication cited here developed (al-Masirah 2017). Writers of the Majlis are also active for the Dā’irat al-Tarbawīyah li-Anṣār Allāh (Educational Department of Anṣār Allāh), a Ḥūthī-affiliated think tank.

¹⁹ The appellation “*Qarn al-Shayṭān*” was already used in the 13th century in Zaydī writing in order to decry the people from the Najd (Rossi 1948, 11). The Saudi Arabian kingdom has its roots in the Najd.

speaks of fifty – is interpreted as a sign of his benevolent intentions and serves as proof that he had no way to coerce the local population into following him. According to the book, he was generous to the poor, especially the orphans of the martyrs, and used the *zakāh* only for the benefit of the state. With the *zakāh*, he set up an “Economy of Resistance” (*iqtiṣād al-muqāwamah*), which relied on self-sufficiency. Here it becomes clear that the imam is seen as an example for the present age:

[His] reliance on the *zakāh* as primary source of income in order to administrate the young country may today appear miraculous and phantastic, but history tells us it is possible. But only by improving the collection and distribution. The method of Imam al-Hādī ... ensures us today to improve the societal sources of revenue and ... expand our administrative efforts. This is certainly a big undertaking, that will help us with God’s help to get through this trial (*miḥnah*), through which the enemy wants to vanquish us, but this will never happen. (al-Ahnūmī 2018, 32)

Together with such calls to take the past as an example,²⁰ a trend to portray the movement as an indigenous actor becomes notable. While to a smaller degree this can, as mentioned above, already be observed in the speeches of Ḥusayn al-Ḥūthī, now in power over large parts of Yemen, the movement seems to see an increasing need to present itself as a decidedly Yemeni actor. ‘Abd al-Malik al-Ḥūthī now commonly begins his speeches with the phrase: “Oh brothers and sisters, our mighty Yemeni Muslim people (*sha ‘bnā*), peace be upon you and the mercy and blessing and Allah.”²¹ What is particularly noteworthy with this phrase is the use of the word “*sha ‘b*”, which means “people” but has a national and/or racial connotation. Imam Yaḥyā (d. 1948), for example, commonly used the more innocuous term “*ahl*” instead (Wedeen 2008, 34–35). In power over large parts of Western and Upper Yemen, the movement is now also forced to engage with tribalism as a means of societal organization. In 2014, for example, al-Masirah proudly announced that ‘Abd al-Malik al-Ḥūthī had settled a conflict between the tribes of al-‘Atīn and Banū Suwayd in Dhamār, allegedly ending a feud lasting for thirty years (Youtube 2014). In highlighting such efforts, the movement is faced by the problems outlined above, namely that by mediating in tribal disputes, they implicitly acknowledge the existence of secular forms of authority independent of their own religiously legitimized claims to leadership. So while reality is never as clear-cut as theory and arguably every political actor has to make concessions in terms of doctrinal purity, the Ḥūthīs now seem to try to connect Yemen’s tribes with religion in order to make Zaydism, and with it the *ahl al-bayt*, “truly Yemeni” again. In 2018 the Majlis al-Zaydī al-Islāmī published the book *al-Yaman wa-ahl al-bayt fī ṣadr al-Islām* (Yemen und the *Ahl al-Bayt* in the Beginning of Islam) as the first installment of a series called *Silsilat al-Yaman wa-ahl al-bayt* (Series of Yemen and the *Ahl al-Bayt*):

²⁰ In similar vein, for example, ‘Abd al-Malik al-Ḥūthī likens Imam Zayd b. ‘Alī’s resistance against the Umayyads to the Yemenis’ fight against the Saudi-led coalition (‘Abd al-Malik al-Ḥūthī 2018).

²¹ “*Ayyuhā al-ikhwah wa-l-akhawāt, sha ‘bnā al-Yamanī al-muslim al-‘azīz, al-salām ‘alaykum wa-rahmat Allāh wa-barakātuhu.*”

[The book's purpose is to] show in all clarity that Yemen has preserved its respectful and loving relationship with the Hashemite²² house from which Allah has chosen the noble prophet – *ṣallā Allāh ‘alayhi wa-‘ālihi wa-salam* – even before the advent of Islam. This relationship remained good and fine and as Islam arrived, it changed into a religion that encompassed all the hearts of the Yemenis and brought them near to Allāh – *‘azz wa-jall* ... This special relationship formed the gentle power (*al-quwwah al-nā‘imah*), which enabled the emergence of the imams of the *ahl al-bayt* and the founding of the just state of Islam (*dawlat al-Islām al-‘ādilah*) that lasted more than a thousand years, beginning with the state of Imam al-Hādī ilā al-Ḥaqq Yaḥyā b. Ḥusayn ... Despite the attempts of the others to sever the historic emotional and contractual bond (*irtibāt al-wajdānī wa-l-‘aqd al-tārīkhīyān*) between the two, Yemen has not even for one day abandoned the idea of the *ahl al-bayt*. This is what those trying to repeat these attempts should understand (al-Ahnūmī 2017, 66–67).

In 2018 al-Masirah, the movement's Beirut-based TV-station, broadcast a documentary movie called *al-Mawaddah al-Khālīdah* (*The Everlasting Affection*) which outlines the envisioned connection between the *ahl al-bayt* and the tribes explicitly (al-Masirah 2018). The documentary starts with the story of the Banū Jurhum, a Qaḥṭānī tribe from Yemen, which is said to have settled in Mecca in pre-Islamic times. There it established marital connections with Ismā‘īl, a forefather of ‘Adnān and thus also of the *ahl al-bayt*. Later the Banū ‘Aws and Banū Khazraj settled in Medina and women of the Banū Khazraj, including Muḥammad's grandmother and great-grandmother, married into the Quraysh. Muḥammad thus had close familial ties to Yemen. Later members of the two tribes were amongst the first Muslims of Medina (*al-anṣār*), helping Muḥammad to escape from Mecca. The film goes on to tell the story of how Hamdān, one of the two big tribal confederations in Yemen, converted to Islam in “a single day” and how it continued to play a major role by supporting ‘Alī in the war against Mu‘āwiyah b. Abī Sufyān. Even today, the film alleges, this “everlasting affection” has not changed.

By selectively drawing on well-known passages of Islamic historiography, the Ḥūthīs are able to give examples underpinning the presumption of the existence of an almost primordial bond between the Qaḥṭānī and ‘Adnānī tribes and thus between the *ahl al-bayt* and the Yemenis of Qaḥṭānī descent. These arguments are often given additional gravity through the use of poetry, which serves as a sort of direct quote of the actors involved in the mentioned historic events.²³ A case in point is the recitation of an oft-cited poem in which ‘Alī is said to have honored Hamdān at the battle of Ṣiffīn:

As I saw horses impaled by spears
 – their riders' throats reddened with blood
 I turned to those of Hamdān
 – should it ever come to it, they are my shield and my arrows
 they do not ride into battle unarmed

²² The term “Hashemite” is, like here, often used synonymously with *sayyid* in order to denote a member of the *ahl al-bayt*. Strictly speaking this is not necessarily correct. While the *ahl al-bayt* or *sādah* are, as previously mentioned, descendants of Muḥammad through his daughter and son-in-law, “Hashemite” refers to descendants of Muḥammad's great-grandfather Hāshim b. ‘Abd Manāf. Every *sayyid* is thus a Hashemite, but not every Hashemite is a *sayyid*.

²³ On the (un-)reliability of early Islamic sources, see Donner 2011.

– tomorrow is war and from Shākīr²⁴ and Shibām
 and of Arḥab are the noblest of my comrades in arms
 – Ruhm and the factions of Sabī‘ and Yām
 and of al-Wādi‘ah are exceedingly brave, feared are their traps
 – attacking with sharpened swords in their hands
 Hamdān is elevated by their character and belief
 – as well as by their strength and, if need be, vigor in battle
 they are elevated by their solemn and honest speech, their support
 – and their knowledge should they utter noble words
 if I was the guard at the gates of paradise
 – I would say to Hamdān: Enter in peace!
 (al-Masirah 2018, min. 52:09–53:42)

What becomes evident in the depiction of the tribes in the book and the documentary movie is that they are primarily portrayed solely as kinship entities. Customary law and tribal methods of conflict mediation are only given a role in so far as they support the immediate political interest of the movement. Like under the imamate (Dresch 1993, 186), tribalism is generally not conceptualized or even alluded to. Tribes are mentioned, yet not portrayed as parts of a society, which is, to a certain extent, still organized around tribal forms of rule. Reduced to the kinship aspects of tribalism, a tribe becomes simply a group of people drawn together by varying degrees of inter-relatedness, and is in that regard not different from the *ahl al-bayt* themselves. Such groups can then be inscribed with new meaning in accordance with the movement’s goals.

Conclusion

Looking at the movement’s two most productive periods in terms of its ideological output, this chapter aimed to shed light on the Ḥūthī movement’s strategies to legitimize its claim to religious rule. In both of these periods, the phase of the inception of the movement under Ḥusayn al-Ḥūthī in the early 2000s and the phase of active political leadership after 2014, the movement claims the right for the *ahl al-bayt* to rule. This call is more pronounced in the case of the speeches of Ḥusayn al-Ḥūthī. In these he makes frequent reference to the necessity he sees for reestablishing the active political leadership of the descendants of Muḥammad. How this should be achieved and what this role should actively look like, however, he leaves largely unaddressed. The contemporary movement, on the other hand, is, as of the time of writing, already in control of wide parts of Yemen. In this context, the movement’s narratives concerning the imamate seem to be primarily oriented towards legitimizing this kind of religio-political authority with recourse to the early imamic times.

At the same time, the Ḥūthī movement expends a considerable amount of effort to portray itself as a quasi-indigenous movement, deeply rooted in Yemen. In so far as what is considered to be indigenous is determined by Qaḥṭānī heritage, such claims are, however, contradicted by the Zaydī legitimization of religio-political rule employed by the Ḥūthīs, which demands that leadership should lie in the hands of a member of the *ahl al-bayt*. As became evident from the discussion of the status of the *ahl al-bayt* under

²⁴ Shākīr, Shibām, Arḥab, Sabī‘, Yām, Ruhm and al-Wādi‘ah are segments of Hamdān.

the imamate and under the republican system, the Ḥūthīs, in the absence of a decidedly religious state, now face considerable obstacles to argue convincingly for the “Yemeni nature” of their movement. While, as mentioned in the beginning, societal realities are never even nearly as clean and tidy as they may appear conceptually, and the amount of legitimacy the Ḥūthīs enjoy is, of course, not solely dependent on their ethno-religious credentials, the perception of the *ahl al-bayt* as foreigners leaves them open for criticism and attacks.²⁵ Ḥusayn al-Ḥūthī acknowledged the issue but did not give it much room. The issue has only gained relevance and urgency with the Ḥūthīs’ rise to power. Consequently, Yemen’s tribes now play a relatively significant role in the movement’s ideological output. They do so, however, mainly only as tribes, not as elements of a tribally organized society. With this reduction of the tribes to kinship groups, the movement is able to incorporate them into Zaydī conceptions of the ideal Islamic society, while at the same time portraying the Qaḥṭānite population as closely tied to the *ahl al-bayt*.

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²⁵ For an example published by the Hādī government, see al-Aḥmadī 2018.

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