

SOCIAL RESTRATIFICATION IN ḤADRAMAḤT DURING THE LAST 25 YEARS: AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL OUTLOOK

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Being a local version of the extensive phenomenon, the Ḥadramawt social stratification may be defined as a hierarchy of fixed social strata based on inherited status loyalty. Its essential core is the stratum of fully-fledged tribesmen with spiritual arbitrators above and the underprivileged non-tribal groups below. Strata hierarchy relies on 1) the principle of marital conformity with a tendency towards hypergamy, 2) a system of declared genealogies, and 3) the specific distribution of social and economic functions. Today the most active members of the low-status strata in Ḥadramawt either seek their origin within the tribal context (of great value are freshly forged genealogical ties with the noble tribes) or prefer to join the Islamist radical groupings with acquired status.

My first visit to Vienna thirty-two years ago with a preliminary report on the field research in Ḥadramawt as a sociocultural anthropologist had been arranged by the Austrian anthropologist Walter Dostal. His perfect hospitality and encouraging help facilitated my entry into the everyday life of Ḥadramawt in particular, and the interdisciplinary fields of South Arabian studies in general. To his memory as my ethnographic field-father I dedicate this chapter.

For many tribesmen and women of North Yemen in 1994, it was an overwhelming discovery that tribal organization and tribal honor, *qabwalah* (pronounced in the North as *qabyalah*), also existed in the South. Even in 2006, some Northerners took as breaking news my PowerPoint presentation about the influential Saybānī tribal federation (*ziyy*) of western Ḥadramawt, their rites and customs including social presentations with tribal dances, songs and poetical improvisation.¹

Tribes constitute an important echelon in the social hierarchy of South Arabia, the core stratum of the local system of fixed social strata with spiritual arbitrators above (*sādah*, the Prophet's offspring, and *mashāyikh*,² hereditary Islamic scholars) and the underprivileged below (*ḥaḍar* townsfolk, socially destitute *masākin*, socially weak *du'afā'*, socially underage *ṣubyān*, slaves, etc.). The stability of this flexible hierarchy is based on the inherited status loyalty and on the following principles: First, marital conformity with a tendency towards *hypergamy* (the brides are given within the same strata or above, whereas the grooms marry social equals or below); second, the system of declared/manipulated genealogies; and third, the specific distribution of social and economic functions (Rodionov 2006, 181–90).

In Ḥadramawt, this phenomenon was studied by Robert Serjeant (1957), 'Abdallāh Bujra (1967 and 1971), 'Abd al-Qādir al-Ṣabbān (1984), Walter Dostal (1984 and 1985), Silvain Camelin (1997), Ulrike Freitag (2003), Engseng Ho (2006), etc. My ethnographic field research took place in 1983–

¹ Rodionov 1996, 118–32; 1997a, 107–13; 1997b, 15–21; 2001, 263–75; 2009, 5–92; 2014, 49–88.

² In the Ḥadramī context, *shaykh* (pl. *mashāyikh*) is a religious, not a tribal honorary title.

2008 (Rodionov 2007; Rodionov and Schönig 2011). In the present-day Yemen, the process of social re-stratification has been gaining momentum since the unification of the country in 1990, the 1994 civil war, and the current conflict tearing Yemen apart.

The plateau-and-valley complex of Ḥaḍramawt (Rodionov 1993, 173–84) occupies the southeastern part of Yemen between Shabwah Province in the west and al-Mahrah Province in the east; it borders on Saudi Arabia in the north and the Arabian Sea in the south. Inhabitants of Ḥaḍramawt, the Ḥaḍramīs, traditionally regard their country as a landscape of death and burial and a gateway to eternal life. Denied by modern linguists, folk etymology still explains the name of Ḥaḍramawt as “presence of death.” Moreover, in vernacular poetry the region is regularly rhymed with the Imperfect forms of the verb “to die.” This semantic play reflects a local discourse which implicitly presents the region as a sacred landscape of death and burial (Rodionov 2010a, 342–45; 2014, 8–20, 89–129).

The most picturesque local features are shrines with their whitewashed domes or flat roofs. The main route in this symbolic space can be defined in one long sentence: a pilgrimage (*ziyārah*) to a sacred enclave (*ḥawṭah*) to the shrine (*qubbah*) with the tomb (*qabr*) of a holy man (*walī*) being the patron (*mawlā*) of the area due to his, or sometimes her, vital force (*barakah*). Tombs of Islamic holy men stand by the cenotaphs of pre-Islamic prophets and ruins left by ancient tribes wiped out by God (Rodionov 2001, 263–76).

In the hub of the Wādī Ḥaḍramawt (see the map accompanying this chapter), one can find the tomb of the first *sayyid* who immigrated to the region in the 10th century CE, Aḥmad b. ‘Īsā al-Muhājir, the forefather of the great Bā ‘Alawī clan, which consists of numerous families living all over the world (Freitag 2003; Ho 2006; Brehony 2017; Lackner 2017a).

Another sacred enclave, Mashhad ‘Alī b. Ḥasan al-‘Aṭṭās, 18th century CE, is situated in Wādī Daw‘ān, a southwestern tributary of the main Wādī Ḥaḍramawt (Rodionov 2004, 307–12; 2017, 95–108). During the pilgrimage to the *sayyid* ‘Alī al-‘Aṭṭās, water collected in reservoirs is blessed by the elder (*manṣab*) of the local al-‘Aṭṭās clan. The act of giving water either by rain and flood or by subsoil sources is called *al-raḥmah*, the [God’s] mercy, so al-Raḥmān is regarded first of all as He who endows people with potable water (Rodionov 1999, 119–21).

Practically all venerated tombs in Ḥaḍramawt are related to water and some affiliated folklore motives that retain chthonic features. Thus, the tomb of the pre-Islamic prophet Hūd bordered by the constant flood of Wādī Maṣīlah stands not far away from the legendary well Barhūt, believed to be a path to the afterlife at the utmost eastern extremity of the wādī. This ritual complex, the most significant in the area, is served by the mashāyikh hereditary groups.

Kawr Saybān plateau, the abode of Saybān tribes to the southwest of Wādī Ḥaḍramawt, is famous for its sacred memorial of Mawlā Maṭar, or the Patron of Rain. It retains pre-Islamic features and an explicit tribal air, free of the *sādah* and/or *mashāyikh* influence. The sketch and plan of the Mawlā Maṭar memorial was drawn in 1993 by the Russian architect Yuri Kozhin during our three-day visit to Kawr Saybān (Rodionov 2014, 114–129, Illus. 1–20).

The traditional arbitrary and religious functions of the *sādah* as the Prophet’s descendants have been harshly contended at least from the 19th century onward. The well-known Irshādī-‘Alawī conflict between the Ḥaḍramī reformers can be seen in part as a struggle against the marital conformity rules which destined the *sādah* women to be married within their stratum only. Following the Saudi Arabian Wahhabi standards, the Irshādīs of Ḥaḍramawt and diasporas used to condemn regular visitations of the tombs of the pious *awliyā*, labeling the *sādah* and *mashāyikh* involved in this practice as *quburiyīn*, or tomb worshippers (Rodionov 2007, 61–75; Rodionov and Schönig 2011, 13–21).

Archaic rituals of the ibex hunt aim at demonstrating the viability of social stratification through which representatives of each stratum know their social place and functions. Nowadays, traditions of the ritual ibex hunt in Wādī Ḥaḍramawt, in spite of all opposition from the Islamic radicals, are still alive, in particular in such centers as Dammūn, Tāribah, al-Qa'ūḍah, Madūdah (the ritual is headed by the *muqaddam al-qanīs*, “leader of the hunt”, Mubārak Bakhḍar), and al-Ghurfah (with the most impressive sham play performance after successful hunting). The scenery, however, has changed slightly since the late 1980s because oil industry activity has driven the ibexes away from parts of their habitat on the southern belt of plateaux to the northern plateau (Rodionov 1994, 124–28; Rodionov and Schönig 2011, 43–47).

Madūdah, an important agricultural settlement, renowned for its basketry and date palms, represents a successful attempt to alter the strata system in a traditional way. The local oral tradition repeatedly narrates stories about weaklings who dared to become tribesmen, about plowmen who pretended to proclaim themselves shaykhs, etc. Madūdah's folk poet, Rabī'ah 'Awadh Bin 'Ubaydallāh, told me a story of his native self-proclaimed tribe Bin 'Ubaydallāh, “wrongly called Bin 'Ubaydillāh,” whose eponym “was a ploughman.” At the time of our conversations (autumn 2003), Rabī'ah Bin 'Ubaydallāh headed the tribal committee. In his house, which served as the meeting place of the committee, he kept the tribal archives, a brand-new genealogical tree in a golden frame, and various documents related to the history of the tribe. His community was officially registered as a fully-fledged tribe only after the unification of Yemen in 1991, when the authorities in Ṣan'ā' started to promote the tribalization and Islamization of the South, quite contrary to the politics of the ex-PDRY (Rodionov 2005, 215–21; Rodionov and Schönig 2011, 46–7).

The Marxist regime in South Yemen, with its notion of social classes, tried not to alter but to undermine the strata system entirely through abolishing most of its social and economic functions and even the names of the strata. Instead, in their attempt to create regular social classes, they have replaced the labels *'abīd* (slaves) and *ḍu'afā'* (weaklings) by “workers.” Consequently, a popular socialist slogan “Workers of the world, unite” was widely misunderstood by common Yemenis who wondered: “Why should the slaves of the world unite?” Tribes had been repeatedly disarmed, tribal chiefs (*maqāddimah*) and tribal judges (*ḥakam/ḥukkām*) expelled.

In spite of all efforts, however, the rules of marital conformity have managed to survive, and, therefore, the system of social strata, even deprived of some of its social and economic functions, has reproduced itself over and over again. De-stratification turned out to be re-stratification due to the alteration of the social roles and structures of certain strata.

Recent events show us some traditional forms of social mobility in action; they demonstrate in particular how declared genealogies can be manipulated. Today the most active members of the underprivileged strata in Ḥaḍramawt seek their origin within the tribal context. Of great value are freshly forged genealogical ties with the noble tribes of Kindah, tracing their origins back to Qaḥṭān, the legendary ancestor of the South Arabian tribes. Thus, the reputed Ḥaḍramī carpenters of the Bā Ṭarfī clan maintain that they are descendants “of the kings of Kindah.”

The ex-underprivileged non-tribal strata members have established the “Kindah Society” under the patronage of the Kindah tribes, including the al-Ṣay'ar, who always declare that they have no friends. For certain remuneration, the genealogies of the ex-weaklings, *masākin* (the poor), are “reinstated, strengthened and completed.” There is a permanent demand for genealogical experts able to complete this task according to old manuscripts and handwritten documents. Another way of getting rid of hereditary low status is to join a radical Islamists' organization or political movement. In that way

we can explain the relative success of the AQAP (al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula), jihadists and other extremists.

When, in 2016, the AQAP forces entered al-Mukallā, they blew up some minor *qubbās* of the *sādah* and requested from the city museum, housed in the Sultan's Palace of the al-Qu'ayṭī dynasty, a list of all pre-Islamic artifacts as fruits of pagan *jāhiliyyah*. Fortunately, the museum staff, headed by 'Abd al-'Azīz Bin 'Aqīl, a member of the Russian-Yemeni Scientific Expedition (the RYSE), hid those items until the AQAP's retreat. The same menace for the cultural memory of Ḥaḍramawt may endanger the Museum of Archaeology, History and Anthropology in Say'ūn, previously the al-Kathīrī Sultan's Palace, headed by 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Saqqāf, also a collaborator of the RYSE. The potential target of the extremists in Tarīm is "unorthodox manuscripts" from Maktabat al-Aḥqāf, the Manuscript Library, directed by Ḥusayn al-Hādī, who obtained his high school diploma in the former USSR (Rodionov 2018a and 2018b). Small wonder that two museums of St. Petersburg, the State Hermitage and the Peter-the-Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (Kunstkamera) as well as the Museum of Oriental Cultures in Moscow ardently supported the international campaign launched by UNESCO for the safeguarding of Yemen's cultural heritage. Up to now, however, Ḥaḍramawt, if compared with some other districts of South Arabia, has seen little fighting and most of the key decisions are reached there through negotiations.

The current social and political struggle in South Arabia can be interpreted as the interplay of cultural and political symbols and slogans seen on street walls and on the internet, mostly on Facebook. My recent data is derived from an online exchange with my Ḥaḍramī friends in the field, as practiced by Marieke Brandt and other colleagues, who dub it a "digital anthropological approach" (Brandt 2017, 4–6). Thus, Fayṣal Khamīs Bā Tays proudly posts online a photo of a defensive tower (*dār* or *ḥuṣn*) from the plateau of his tribe, Sawt Bā Tays. Along with honeycomb and a *jambiyyah* curved dagger, it forms the symbolic triad of Ḥaḍramī cultural identification (tower – dagger – honey), to which one can add the fourth element, the curved horns of the ibex, the most important emblem of the local ritual hunting.

A recent trend in present-day Ḥaḍramawt is numerous historical accounts attributed to a certain tribe written by a native author from the inside. Some of these publications do not go much further than traditional genealogical revisions, which tend to heighten the social status of a group. However, other works aim to carry out a more ambitious task. Those authors lay emphasis not only on the noble origin of their tribe but also stress its extreme importance in social, economic, political, and cultural areas. To prove this point, they bring into play ancient chronicles, classical and folk poetry, handwritten documents, various samples of the oral tradition, and ethnographic data. It is worth mentioning that the apologist of the al-Jawhiyyin, which is an important part of the Saybān tribal federation, ascribes all Saybānī merits to his tribal group. These local publications can also be regarded as the fruit of social re-stratification (Rodionov 2011). In these publications, tribe is treated like an eternal social division created by God and certified by an oft-cited Quranic passage (49: 13): "O mankind, indeed We have created you from a male and a female and made you peoples (*shu'ūban*) and tribes (*wa-qabā'il*) that you may know one another."

Social identification comprises at least three basic levels: 1) familial/tribal, 2) local (= a Ḥaḍramī) and 3) regional (= a Southerner), to which we can add two comprehensive cultural traits: belonging to the world of Arabic speakers and to the community of Islam.

The problems of social and cultural identification have been repeatedly discussed both on tribal and all-Ḥaḍramī levels. On the internet, these attempts are sometimes illustrated with two posters. The first

one announces the meeting held on 31 December 2015, by the Tribal Union of Ḥaḍramawt, the Branch of Seashore and Plateau, at the Bā-l-‘Ubayd tribal area, commemorating the 2nd anniversary since the *muqaddam* of al-Ḥumūm tribe, Sa‘d b. Ḥamad Bin Ḥabraysh, was killed because of his active anti-AQAP stance.

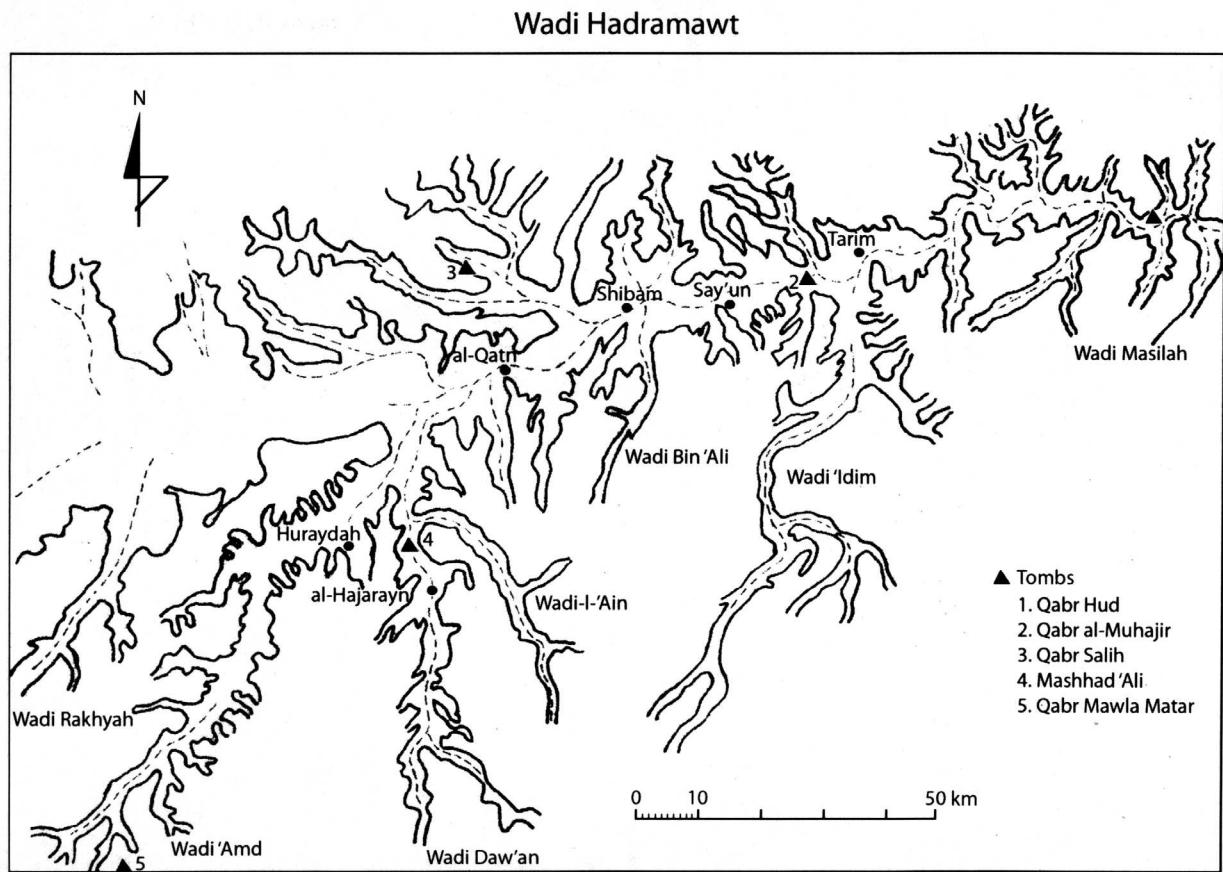
The second poster informs about the “Inclusive Hadhramout Conference” held on 22 April 2017 with 3001 participants from all over the province. According to this conference and other meetings, Ḥaḍramawt seems to be a rather cohesive entity which seeks its political perspective either in autonomy within the Southern state, or even in complete independence.

The evolution of local political attitudes may be highlighted by a brief history of the al-Ḥirāk association. Established in 2007 by the Yemeni Social Party (the YSP) functionaries as the Peaceful Movement to liberate the South, it had been transformed into an organization of Southern resistance, eager to fight under the state symbols of the former PDRY against, in their wording, northern colonialists plotting to lay their hands on the Ḥaḍramī oil. In 2009, al-Ḥirāk got a new top leader, ‘Alī Sālim al-Bīḍ, former General Secretary of the YSP, a party whose fervent Marxist-Leninist ideology he later renounced in favor of milder social democratic phraseology. The al-Ḥirāk movement declares that the current conflict in Yemen is nothing but a struggle for control of land and resources between northern kleptocrats and the South with its seventy-five per cent of Yemen’s resources. Any agreement that does not give the southern people control of their resources will only provoke a third war between the North and the South, warns al-Ḥirāk.

To associate oneself with the South means to see in a Northerner an evil alien. A popular joke treats it as follows: “In the South, a school teacher asks: ‘Children, who were the People of the Elephant totally destroyed on their way to Mecca and mentioned in the Holy Quran?’ – A boy replies: ‘Daḥbāshī occupants!’” The point is that the boy has confused the Abyssinian intruders of the pre-Islamic time with a pejorative nickname for modern Northerners (“a backward bumpkin”): *daḥbāshī* instead of *aḥbāsh*.

Among the most common political slogans used today we find: “Restore the status quo (*fakk al-irtibāt*)” and “The South is our Motherland, Aden is our capital.” Recent social disasters and tribulations make Southerners re-imagine and re-estimate their history. Now they regard the colonial period and the British Protectorate with a sort of nostalgia reflected in numerous jokes, e.g. about an old woman at the fish market in Aden. She asks: “What is the price for that fish?” A seller replies: “900 riyals.” – “Under the British it was two shillings only!” – “Bring back the British and take your fish for nothing!” A joke recorded and published by Helen Lackner (2017b, 167) embraces all three political periods at once: “Northerner asks: Why do you hate us? Southerner replies: when the British ruled, we hate them, once they left, we loved them. When the socialists ruled, we also hated them, and when they left we loved them; now you are here, we hate you, but we’ll love you when you leave.”

Local cultural memory is amazingly flexible. Nowadays it appeals to the golden age of the PDRY as if there were no purges, collectivization (known in Ḥaḍramawt as *intifāḍah*), permanent shortages of food and goods, etc. In 1994, tribal chiefs did not support ‘Alī Sālim al-Bīḍ in his futile efforts to defend al-Mukallā against the northerners. Now, 25 years later, the near future of Ḥaḍramawt depends on numerous forces and institutions including local tribal councils and other traditional and modern institutes of re-stratified society, using various combinations of inherited and acquired statuses.



Map: Wādī Ḥaḍramawt. Five most important tombs (qabr – qubūr). Drawn by Mikhail Rodionov.

- 1) Qabr Hūd, a pre-Islamic prophet;
- 2) Qabr of Aḥmad b. ʿIsā al-Muhājir, the first *sayyid* who immigrated to the region in the 10th century CE;
- 3) Qabr Šālīh, a pre-Islamic prophet;
- 4) Mashhad of *sayyid* ʿAlī b. Ḥasan al-ʿAtṭās, 18th century CE;
- 5) Qabr Mawlā Maṭar, “the Patron of Rain”, a tribal memorial.

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