

TRIBES IN THE NEO-LIBERAL ERA: THE TRANSFORMATION OF YEMEN'S SOCIAL STRUCTURE

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In recent decades, throughout the world, the dominant neo-liberal ideology has successfully suppressed analysis based on political and economic power relations, despite its considerable relevance to understanding the causes of inequality nationally and internationally. Instead it has encouraged “identity” politics in political action as well as in academic analysis, focusing on issues such as sexuality and gender which obscure the relevance of socioeconomic circumstances in understanding social and political differentiation. In the case of Yemen, for example, this approach has transferred social stratification categories which applied in the precapitalist and precolonial eras to the 21st century while ignoring the impact on these categories brought about by the important underlying political and economic changes of the past century. This has facilitated simplistic explanations which often also imply ethnicist interpretations, suggesting the inferiority of these social categories by comparison with those prevailing in the states of the North, as is frequently seen in the popular and even occasionally the more analytic media.

The term “tribe” is a prime example of the widespread simplistic misuse of an important category as a substitute for serious examination of the country’s political economy, as a *fourre-tout* to define society, rather than attempt to understand the complex social and economic structure of the country at different historical moments, let alone their development over time. Yemeni tribes are labelled pre-modern by those who want to disparage the country and its people on the one hand, or as a model of perfect social harmony and hive of “democratic” practices where everyone had equal say by those who idealize it.¹ Significantly, the term “tribal society” has been so widely used that even former president Ṣāliḥ described Yemen that way. This has encouraged neglect of other social categories either in the past or the present, allowing such misrepresentations as the use of the word “tribal” to describe the Ḥūthī movement. It has also facilitated an anti-historical approach, ignoring the fundamental changes in modes of production and mechanisms of wealth and poverty creation which have taken place in the past half century.

This chapter outlines some ideas concerning the transformation of Yemeni society in recent decades, focusing on the changing relationship to economic and political power of older and newly emerging social groups and the relevance of the concept of tribe in these relationships. My assumption is that changes in social structure result from fundamental transformations in the underlying relations of control over economic resources, and are therefore the outcome of the synergy between the economy and political

¹ A brilliant caricature of these prejudices was presented by Daniel Corstange in his lecture “Tribes and the rule of law in Yemen” at the *Annual Conference of the Middle East Studies Association (MESA)* in 2008.

power. After a brief outline of the country's long-lasting earlier social structure, I focus on two aspects, beginning with those indigenous to the Yemeni policy, including the three periods of recent decades: the Ṣāliḥ regime, the brief interim transitional period of the post-2011 uprisings and the situation prevailing at the end of the second decade of the 21st century with, on the one hand, the Ḥūthī-dominated situation in the northern highlands and the emergence of increasing fragmentation elsewhere. The second focus is the involvement of external interventions, particularly those of the internationally funded development community. In conclusion, I raise a few conceptual questions worthy of further discussion.

Throughout any discussion of Yemen, it is important to remember that about 75% of the country's population are members of tribes,² so when discussing other allegiances/identities, clearly the individuals concerned are also members of ascribed status groups, in most cases, tribes. But they can also be members of professions, political organizations, interest groups, etc. Equally, but not overlapping totally, about 70% of Yemen's population are still rural,³ living in small settlements and villages around the country. Finally it is also essential to recall that there are significant regional differences in both economic circumstances and social structures and therefore most generalizations can be challenged with respect to one area or another: for example, *sādah* in Ḥaḍramawt have cultural characteristics which differ markedly from those of *sādah* in Ṣa'dah.

Mechanisms for rising in the social structure in societies with "ascribed" status structures have been analyzed in different contexts, particularly that of South Asia, where the caste system is commonly described as permanently unalterable.⁴ In reality, it is possible for individuals and their households to become upwardly mobile: this usually involves gaining some wealth away from their area of origin and then returning to the homeland to a different location where they and their background are not known and they can therefore assert a new status. It is worth pointing out that increased wealth is an almost *sine qua non* condition to rise in the social structure. Similarly, impoverishment can lead to a lowering of status over a period of time, usually at least one generation.

The situation varied in different parts of the country, and while most of the discussion focuses on the highlands since the middle of the 20th century and on the whole country during the period of Yemeni unity, comparable processes were seen in southern Yemen from the 19th century onwards as migration, particularly from Ḥaḍramawt, was one of the mechanisms which enabled some low-status persons to rise in social rank, mostly by migration to southeast Asia and, in the early 20th century, to Saudi Arabia. Among the most prominent examples are leading business families such as the bin Laden and bin Mahfoudh. During the PDRY period, the process was rather different and, in any case, the regime did not last long enough to be responsible for long-term transformations of social status, which generally take at least a generation, though a few changes were initiated.⁵

² All figures and statistics about Yemen are subject to considerable challenge. In this particular case, as the constitution states that all citizens are equal, no statistics are ever collected on the issue of the comparative representation of the different ascribed social status groups.

³ The 2012 *Statistical Yearbook* of the Republic of Yemen (p. 68) gives 71.15% rural and 28.85% urban.

⁴ See Dumont 1974 for lengthy discussion of these issues and probably other more recent papers on both sides of the argument.

⁵ For an example of social structure changes in Ḥaḍramawt, see Lackner 2017a.

Social Structure in the Prerevolutionary Period

Although not static, Yemeni society had certain features which remained stable for many decades, well into the 20th century in the southern protectorates and until the overthrow of the imam's regime in 1962 in the "north." They included in particular a social structure commonly described as being based on ascribed status, i.e. one in which people's social status was inherited, and shifting between one group and the next was formally impossible, though practice was different. The hierarchy was topped by the *sādah* (sg. *sayyid*), sometimes and in some places known as Hashemites or *ashrāf*. They claim descent from the Prophet and their roles are primarily religious and judicial. Until the 1962 Revolution, the northern part of the country was ruled by Zaydi *sādah* imams, and the main ideological characteristic of the Ḥūthī movement today is its belief that *sādah* have an innate right to rule. *Sādah* also played a major political role in Ḥaḍramawt. Throughout the country, in addition to their religious and judicial roles *sādah* are also landowners. *Sādah* often, but not always, live in villages where they form the totality or the majority of the population, rather than being dispersed in tribal villages. One notable regional difference is that while *sādah* in Ḥaḍramawt for example did not bear weapons, those in many other parts of the country did so in the past and still do today. Just below *sādah* in status are the *quḍā'* (sg. *qāḍī*), a group of people whose status was originally achieved through learning and who in the past acted as judges and bureaucrats. They have tribal origins and only became a distinct ascribed social group over centuries of practice.

The vast majority of the population are tribespeople. Unlike other countries where tribespeople in the past were mainly pastoralists, in Yemen the overwhelming majority of tribespeople were settled agriculturalists, primarily owner-cultivators, though some worked as sharecroppers. To deal with another myth, according to which the southern highlands are not tribal, tribes are found throughout the country. The difference resides in the level of political consolidation of tribal units, which ranges from small tribes of a few hundred people covering a village or a district and who are loosely associated with each other through common ancestry, to the well-known major confederations, the Ḥāshid and Bakīl in the northern highlands and the 'Awlaqī in the southern area. Tribes are the main arms-bearing group and were dominant in society as they were the formal and effective protectors of the rest of the population, both those ranking above and those below them.

Below them are groups considered weak (*ḍa'īf*).⁶ They are headed by traders, whose status has changed considerably in recent decades, as discussed below. Those who remain comparatively low status include the *banī khums*, a group which covers artisans of all kinds as well as the less despised among the service providers such as restaurant operators and heralds, who rank above barbers and bloodletters and "henna decorators" among women. Descendants of former slaves, still commonly known as 'abīd were not at the bottom of the hierarchy given that in their former roles they had included both administration and military cadres for the local political leaders, whether tribal or *sādah*. The lowest status group is that of the *akhdām*, who now prefer to be described as *muhamashīn* (marginalized), whose status was worsened by a range of prejudices which still prevail today.⁷ Even today, their main occupations are cleaning and begging, though they also occasionally work as casual cash laborers.

⁶ Distribution of activities and status hierarchies vary considerably for this group. For a useful table with the ranking given by different authors, see Chelhod 1985; Stevenson 1985, 94; Dresch 1989; Weir 2007.

⁷ Dolores Walters devoted her PhD thesis to analyzing the comparative levels of low-status groups and attempting to identify the origins of these phenomena, see Walters 1987.

Formally, all these statuses were abolished in the constitutions following the revolution in 1962 in Ṣan‘ā’ and independence in the People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen in 1967, both of which proclaim equality of all citizens. This explains why no statistics are collected on the distribution of the different social groups today. Economic developments in the past half century have fundamentally changed the country’s social structure, in addition to changes within each group, with new families becoming dominant while others have lost their influence.

Domestic Transformation

The Ṣāliḥ Period (1978–1990 in the YAR and 1990–2012 in the Republic of Yemen)

This period, spanning a whole generation, saw the emergence of a capitalist polity on the neo-liberal model prevailing in other Third World states, with the characteristics of this aspect of the globalized world. With limited natural resources, Yemen was an insignificant supplier of raw materials at the world level, but there were enough resources for primary capital accumulation by Yemeni individuals through extraction of the resources: oil and gas from the state, international investments (mainly in the form of development aid from bilateral and multilateral agencies) and trade (of everything from basic food commodities as Yemen imported 90% of its wheat and 100% rice, tea and sugar, to household appliances and vehicles), services (particularly telecoms and physical infrastructure), and finally, from the citizens’ agriculture and fisheries. In the YAR, remittances from its migrants to the Gulf states in the 1970s and 1980s mainly helped thousands of households to escape poverty, it also both helped shifts in social status for some and contributed to the significant enrichment of a few who benefited directly and indirectly,⁸ by profits on sales of imported goods or even local produce as well as the marketing of produce locally (*qāt*) and internationally (oil, coffee and fish). In all these sectors, a small group of individuals successfully extracted percentages and became the wealthy. Migration, corruption and Ṣāliḥ’s political strategies facilitated this process.

The Ṣāliḥ regime ensured that profits and income were concentrated under the control of a small rapacious group of kleptocrats whose rise to the top of society was not primarily determined by their ascribed social status, but rather by being Ṣāliḥ “cronies,” which gave them access to the resources. Thus there was a combination of factors which helped individuals to join the 1% (or actually less). One of Ṣāliḥ’s strategies to remain in power was to build up support beyond those who might have some “traditional” reason to support him, such as a close relationship within the tribal structure or military loyalty. He supported others to rise from their original status by ensuring their access to resources. Individuals and families who gained power and/or wealth during this period could only do so if allied to Ṣāliḥ and cooperating with him and his close associates whether from former leading social groups (*sādah* and tribes) or from the low-status groups.

Ṣāliḥ started implementing this strategy very early on with the establishment of the General People’s Congress (GPC) in which he integrated all types of influential people from everywhere in the country, regardless of their ascribed status, thus both giving them social and political recognition in their communities and, at the same time, providing them with opportunities for financial enrichment. He thus established a “modern” entity, a formal political institution which became a party after unification, when

⁸ For the detailed impact on households and mechanisms for shifting from one “ascribed” social group to another, see Carapico and Tutwiler 1981 and Tutwiler 1987.

such organizations became legal, and created it as a base for his power, which transcended ascribed status categories and also permitted members to rise socially, politically and economically through a new institution.

Involvement in the military and security sectors was a particularly important mechanism in this process, and here the tribal element was important as the units he trusted most were composed of men from his own and neighboring tribes, primarily Sanhān and Ānis. One of the mechanisms used was the Military Economic Corporation (later renamed the Yemen Economic Corporation when the IMF and World Bank demanded privatization, although only the name was changed, not the ownership structure).

After unification, in 1990, some of the leaders of the PDRY were absorbed into this group and quickly learned to enrich themselves; prominent examples were Faḍl Muḥsin 'Abdullah, ex-minister of trade who profited from major wheat import contracts and Muḥammad 'Alī Aḥmad, the former governor of the Abyan governorate.

Among the tribal groups or leaders who benefited from their association with Ṣāliḥ, a few are particularly prominent, such as the al-Aḥmar family of the Ḥāshid tribal confederation, some of whose members joined the wealthiest in the country and Muḥammad Nājī al-Shāyif of the Bakīl confederation, who was a member of the permanent committee of the GPC, thus covering the two major effective tribal confederations. Elsewhere, where no large confederations operated, a more dispersed approach had to be taken, giving positions to members of smaller leading tribal families, for example the Bayt al-Sūfī and Bayt Duwayd from Khawlān and Bayt al-Bāshā from Ibb. After unification, local leaders from the southern parts of the country were added: al-Faḍlī, al-Qufaysh and Āl 'Ashāl from Abyan, al-'Awlaqī from Shabwah, and al-'Amūdī and Āl Jābir from Ḥaḍramawt.

Most importantly, Ṣāliḥ also supported the rise of members of other social groups to broaden his political base: civilians from different original ascribed groups rose to both political prominence and wealth through membership of the GPC. Political positions were also a fundamental means of access to wealth, thanks to the widespread and complex corruption structures. Members of famous *sādah* families achieving senior military and security positions included the al-Wazīr, al-Shāmī, al-Kibīsī, al-Ahdal, and al-'Azzānī. From the *qāḍī* social stratum, some prominent names include al-'Arashī and al-'Ansī from Ṣan'ā', al-Suswah from Dhamār, and al-Iryānī from Ibb.

Members of the pre-existing trading families, who had in earlier decades been considered among the lower-status groups, transformed their situation as a direct result of the socioeconomic developments of the country in the 1970s and 1980s. During this period, migration to Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States changed the country into one where thousands of ordinary tribespeople entered the cash economy and become traders themselves. As a result of the involvement of the higher social status groups (*sādah* and tribesmen), trade ceased to be associated with low status. Members of the older established trading families, who had in earlier generations moved to British-ruled Aden, now returned to the north and were in a position to provide credit to *sādah* and tribesmen, and also expanded into industrial activities and manufacture. But they were only successfully able to retain or improve their positions and status if they were willing to cooperate with Ṣāliḥ and include his nominees among the management or shareholders of their companies; this was the case, for example, in the enterprises of the best-known families: Hā'il Sa'īd, Fāhim, al-Ḥabbārī, Thābit, and Bazārah.

While all the above-mentioned groups had previously had either social status or wealth or both, Ṣāliḥ also promoted and gave opportunities to people from the low-social-status ascribed groups, giving members of these groups opportunities they had not previously had, and thus ensured a far firmer loyalty to himself as the individuals concerned had no other mechanisms on which to rely should they

fall out of favor. Individuals reaching a high position from these groups include Rashād al-‘Alīmī, Ḥusayn al-Maṣwarī and Aḥmad al-Qana‘ (in 2019 a minister with the Ḥūthīs). For these individuals and their families, cooperation with Ṣāliḥ was a mechanism to rise in social status, in addition to the immediate political and economic power they gained.

Overall this process can be described as the emergence of a capitalist class, as was seen in the West in the industrial revolution. Most wealth was obtained through trade, i.e. mercantilism, and transferred to industry, though in the late 20th century, industrialization only played a minor role due to the worldwide economic changes. Corruption, supported by political power, was also a major means towards enrichment for many. By comparison, the US ancestors who gained their wealth and influence in an equally disreputable manner are now known mainly as founders of major philanthropic foundations (Carnegie, Rockefeller, Ford etc.), and in the UK the hereditary landowning aristocratic families have a similar origin, including as warriors rewarded by the king (Marlborough and Bedford are prime examples, but most aristocratic families and “old” wealth in the UK have similar origins).

By the time the revolution of 2011 took place in Yemen, while many of these changes had not yet become fully entrenched, they were well on the way. Younger people did not necessarily remember the social origins of those who had become “big” names in politics and the economy, or the fact that their prominence was less than a generation old. But there was widespread distaste for the corruption associated with Ṣāliḥ’s associates and “cronies” and with the blatant gap between the public display of wealth of the small minority and the poverty of the majority.

The Transition and the “Rise” of New Social Groups

By the beginning of this century, rural agricultural households had experienced a significant deterioration of their living standards. Most were tribespeople and had become unable to support their families from their crops and livestock and largely came to depend on the casual labor of their younger (and older) men in the towns and cities, thus suffering a serious loss of social status and self-confidence. Similarly, the members of the new educated professionals, again from most ascribed social groups, such as teachers, medical staff and administrators, could not maintain an acceptable living standard on their salaries, given inflation and routine daily corruption. In addition to calls for real political empowerment, the worsening poverty of the majority was a major cause of the upheavals of 2011.

The 2011 revolutionary movement explicitly called for increased political power for previously marginalized social categories. The uprisings⁹ expressed the demands of the non-privileged bulk of society for empowerment: it was a revolt against the kleptocratic minority which had become extremely wealthy while the majority were finding it increasingly difficult to make ends meet, let alone improve their living conditions, regardless of either their ascribed social status or their more recent economic status. The events of 2011 can, in the current terminology, be summarized as the struggle of the 99% against the 1%, or the rise of the citizenry challenging the elite. Their demands, if achieved, would bring the political regime in line with the country’s constitution, which asserts the equality of all citizens. Their demands included “dignity,” a society where citizens would be treated equally, and an end to corruption and nepotism, a society where *wa’sṭah* (intermediation, often interpreted to mean

⁹ For a discussion of the Arab Spring events throughout the region and including Yemen, see Achcar 2013.

nepotism) would no longer be the main mechanism to get employment, nor demands for bribes essential to enable people to live reasonably. All these demands were shared widely, regardless of ascribed or "identity" status.

Social media played a very important role in the 2011 movement, but this was mostly differently from the way they are usually described: they allowed rural and urban people to connect within the same movement. They ensured that rural families were fully aware of developments in the towns and cities, not only to be kept informed of the safety of their younger participant members but also enabling them to share and indirectly join in the aims and objectives of the movement. This was a clear reminder to all that most urban residents are simultaneously part-time urban and rural.

The concept of a "national economy" does not necessarily challenge the hegemonic dominant neo-liberal discourse. Its vagueness reflects an absence of alternative economic strategies. Given the importance of the economic crisis, it is surprising that so little effort was invested in identifying a different economic model more able to respond to the needs of the majority of the population, enabling people to earn reasonable incomes; this was one of the main weaknesses of the movement throughout the region and contributed to its later failure.

The youth, women, and civil society were the new "identity-based" social categories which were promoted by the movement and its international supporters. Participants in the movement included thousands of men from tribal and other origins and fewer, but significant numbers of women. Although speakers on the platforms were dominated by "intellectuals" and political leaders, this was a genuine mass movement in which people of all social strata participated on an equal basis expressing social, economic and political concerns unrelated to their status of birth.¹⁰ It was also an opportunity for the emergence of new social relations as people from the different strata who had previously only had very ritualized relationships based on their respective positions in the status hierarchy learnt to share ideas and discussions. Most importantly, it allowed people from different geographical regions, tribes and status groups to discover common concerns, particularly in the Şan'ā' Square where there was more regional mixing than in other places, where participants were mainly from the same area. But the involvement of different social strata was a phenomenon throughout the country.

Once the uprisings reduced in scope and the country was involved in the UN- and GCC-sponsored transition process (2012–14), the locus for social transformation moved to the institutions of the transition. Here, recognition by the international community (primarily in the shape of the UN) of the importance of these identity-defined forces came in the partially successful efforts to give these groups representation both in the "government of national unity" of the transitional period and, more successfully, at the National Dialogue Conference (NDC). The youth, women and "civil society" were "identity-based" forces which achieved political and social recognition. The NDC was the most successful of these attempts insofar as it was a forum where all the different groups, whether defined by ascribed status or identity, met and discussed: people had to listen and respect each other as individuals addressing whatever issue was under discussion, and could not be ignored because of their "traditional" ascribed status. Whereas international efforts failed to have more than a symbolic impact on the government and most other institutions, in the NDC it succeeded in ensuring 28% of members were women (instead of the intended 30%) and 20% were young people.

¹⁰ See Lackner 2016.

Of particular relevance here is the way in which the transition addressed issues of representation. Rather than ensuring statistical representation on a regional basis or on that of the different ascribed social strata recognized by all Yemenis, it ensured representation of the “new emerging forces,” but these were defined by social identity rather than fundamental economic interests. The groups included in this definition were the previously politically marginalized, namely the youth and women and the *muhamashīn*. A further category of “civil society” was intended to strengthen these and also, given the nature of significant civil society organizations in Yemen, to strengthen representation of highly educated and in many cases, foreign-trained, middle-class individuals who were outspoken and experienced in dealing with the representatives of the international community.

Ultimately, the transitional regime failed to fulfil the hopes expressed by these groups for many of the same reasons it failed in everything else, points I discuss elsewhere.¹¹ Symbolic political representation of these groups was insufficient to overcome the vested interests and the power struggle between the main forces during this period, namely Ṣālīḥ’s GPC and Iṣlāḥ, which represented the political and economic elites. Two main points need to be noted here. First, the primary sector which would have enabled a fundamental social transformation, the economy, needed a sophisticated program maximizing the development of the country’s resource assets for the benefit of the majority. This required investments and job creation based on qualifications and competence, a focus on sectors with good economic potential, and other features which could lay the basis for an equitable national economy in a democratic system in the context of scarce natural resources. Real recognition of the political and social importance of the non-privileged social strata, and giving their members the economic means to develop would have had a fundamental impact on the country’s political and economic structure, weakening the grip of autocracy and the kleptocrats.

Second, the amalgamation of the youth, women and civil society into a single group attempts to bring together individuals with diverse and sometimes conflicting interests; this was bound to fail due to the absence of shared strategies and objectives. Each of these identity groups was composed of individuals who were also members of other social entities, tribes, *sādah*, low-status ascribed groups or new professional groups as laborers or professionals. Hence they did not form a cohesive entity and their influence and role depended largely on other aspects of their identity, be they tribal, political or professional. But, had this succeeded, the outcome could have been an increased political role for what is broadly described as the “middle classes,” mostly professionals and educated people.

Ḥūthī Rule and the Return of the Sādah

Since 2015, the situation in the areas under Ḥūthī control has marked another turning point. Although capital accumulation has become one of the main *raisons d’être* of profiteers of the war economy, and these include members from all the above categories, as well as new ones based on military strength and closeness to the new centers of power, other aspects are of greater social significance, in particular the return to referring to ascribed social status as the main mechanism for empowerment.

The rise of the Ḥūthīs during the transitional period and since has been marked militarily and politically by a number of characteristics, including authoritarianism and many features of retrograde Islamism,

¹¹ See Lackner 2017b, 39–53.

particularly with respect to women. Politically, its main manifestation has been the re-emergence of the *sādah* as the leading social group, reflecting the Ḥūthī belief in the innate right to rule of descendants of the Prophet. Among senior Ḥūthī appointees, the following are outstanding in military affairs: ‘Abdullah al-Ḥākīm, a *sayyid* from Ṣa‘dah, appointed head of the fourth military region, head of military security, and most recently head of the Republican Guards; ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Shāmī, a *sayyid* from Ibb appointed Director of Political Security in January 2018; his brother Yaḥyā al-Shāmī, appointed advisor to the head of military forces in 2016; *Yūsif al-Madānī*, from Ṣa‘dah, the husband of Ḥusayn al-Ḥūthī’s daughter, military leader in Tihāmah, appointed early in 2015. Among the many civilians in very senior positions, in addition to members of the Ḥūthī family, the following stand out: Qāḍī Aḥmad ‘Abdullah ‘Aqabāt, minister of justice; Qāḍī Aḥmad Yaḥyā al-Mutawakkil, head of the higher Judicial Council; and ‘Abd al-‘Azīz Nāṣir al-Kumaym, minister of planning and economic cooperation.

The coalition has facilitated implementation of this policy by some of its air strikes: the Saudi bombing of the Ruwayshān funeral commemoration in October 2016 was a particularly prominent moment when the Ḥūthīs were given the opportunity to replace Ṣāliḥ senior military appointees by *sādah*: among the military leaders killed were the head of the Republican Guards (‘Alī al-Jāyfi) and many other senior military commanders. Disagreement between Ṣāliḥ and the Ḥūthīs on the appointment of his replacement remained one of the main issues between the two former allies until Ṣāliḥ’s killing, while many other lower-ranking cadres were replaced by *sādah Ḥūthī supporters, some of whom had few military qualifications*.

Other than returning *sādah* to a situation where they are given privileged positions and political dominance in the regime, while also ensuring that they benefit economically, the only other feature which marks their governance is a very retrograde attitude to women, whose movements they want to control in the same way as other religious fundamentalist movements do. Other than these two features, the Ḥūthīs have not produced any policies for governing the country differing from those prevailing earlier. The war economy operates as much in the areas they control as elsewhere and their rule is autocratic and certainly more repressive than that of the Ṣāliḥ regime.

State-Tribe Interaction

Academic¹² and political debate about the role of tribes and their relationship to the state ranges widely between two extremes: Some see tribes as entities which, by definition, oppose and compete with the state, while others see tribalism as a mechanism for supporting or complementing the state, as an intermediary institution between the state and village-level communities. Confirming yet again the importance of Ibn Khaldun, most contemporary discussions on the subject return to his analysis, either to support or challenge it. While there have often been tensions between centralized state authorities and the tribes within their territories, in practice, in the past century, the hierarchy seems clear, and tribes operate within the various states around them.¹³ Recently, social anthropologists have adopted very similar interpretations; most prominent among them is Godelier.¹⁴ In recent centuries, Yemeni

¹² See the many important contributions in Khoury and Kostiner (eds.) 1990; Luciani 1990; Jabar and Dawod 2003; Weir 2007.

¹³ Interpretation confirmed by Weir 2007, 105.

¹⁴ Godelier 2004, 296.

tribes have largely operated in coordination with the state under the imamate and, indeed, during the British colonial period. The two have complementary roles, with tribes providing the armed forces for the state which controls them through hostage keeping (imamate) or the supply of finance and weapons (British protectorates), a system currently revived by the Hūthīs, though not by the internationally recognized government, which has failed to establish its authority in the “liberated” areas.

In recent decades, the complementarity of tribal community level management and central government rule has been manifested in many aspects. The demand by tribal groups and communities for the government to provide the services expected of a modern state, mainly physical infrastructure (roads, telecoms) and social services (medical and education). To obtain these, different types of pressure were exerted, ranging from traditional requests and petitions to more aggressive demand mechanisms such as the kidnapping of tourists and other activities which publicly embarrassed state representatives. Under the Ṣāliḥ regime, weapons and violence were used by both tribes and the state, challenging the fundamental belief that the state should have a monopoly on the means of coercion. This was one of the reasons why many condemned the regime for not being a “modern” state.¹⁵

When convenient, or according to political expediency, state authorities can either take up modern state responsibilities or decline them and tell people to use “tribal” justice; people familiar with Yemen know of innumerable examples and have had experience of being told by modern state officials to use “tribal” mechanisms to solve a problem. These procedures have, however, been endorsed by the official legal system, through law number 32 of 1997 which allows the use of “tribal” compensatory agreements with the agreement of the victims and perpetrator, decisions which are then confirmed in writing by the modern court system. In the early 2000s, Phillips described the situation neatly:

to most tribes, the Yemeni state is an instrument through which a small band of elites exploits and harasses the people. This will not change unless the state delivers benefits and builds trust between itself and grassroots communities. The Yemeni regime has weakened many aspects of the tribal system by co-opting shaykhs with access to wealth and power from the center, thus severing many from their traditional support bases. Shaykhs now often derive their wealth and status from the political center, rather than their traditional constituency in their local area.¹⁶

Throughout the Ṣāliḥ period and currently, both state authorities and tribal leaders have manipulated mechanisms to achieve their aims, either claiming the primacy of the state or that of the tribe in a completely opportunistic manner to serve the interests of the moment. For example, in the 2000s, a soldier from Ānis escaped after murdering a tribesman; when the latter’s tribe demanded compensation, the Ānis tribal leaders refused to take responsibility by responding that “he is the son of the state, nothing to do with us.” But when one of their own was killed, they demanded action: Ṣan‘ā’ University professor al-Ṣabrī from Ibb killed a soldier from Ānis in Dhamār. When the tribal leaders came to Ṣan‘ā’ intending to take revenge by killing al-Ṣabrī (who had surrendered to the prison authorities), the state was involved and dealt with the situation by giving the dead soldier a military position so that his family would be compensated by receiving a pension, and ordered the tribal leaders to close the issue.

¹⁵ Ben Nefissa et al., 217.

¹⁶ Phillips 2010, 7.

Another example took place in Laḥj in March 2017: When an agent of the security forces from the Yāfi' al-Ḥad tribe hit a member of Parliament from Ṣubayḥah, Ṣāliḥ 'Alī Farīd al-Barhamī, in the building of the governorate, the latter sought redress in the Parliament. The deputy speaker, Muḥammad 'Alī Shaddādī, appointed a three-man team (Sālim Maṣṣūr Ḥaydarah, Fu'ād Muḥammad 'Abd al-Karīm, and Khālīd Ṣāliḥ al-Radfānī) to address the issue. They then arranged for the problem to be solved "tribally" with the sacrifice of three bulls and other livestock and apologies for the insult. In this case an appeal by the victim to the formal "modern" structure was transformed into a "traditional" tribal issue in the justice system.

External Influences: The Role of "Development" Financiers in Transforming the Social Structure

Although of infinitely less significance than domestic factors, external ones should not be neglected. Both direct external political involvement since 2011 and earlier development investments or "aid" projects have been instruments used by the North to attempt to direct the nature of change of Yemeni society in recent decades, contributing to bringing to prominence two marginalized groups: women and the *akhdām* or *muhamashīn*. This has had the side-effect of undermining tribal political mechanisms.

Since the 1970s, a series of internationally funded development programs and projects sought to bring about social change. Most of these had detailed strategies aimed at changing the structure and priorities of Yemen's polity. They were implemented by national staff "supported" or, to be more accurate, "directed" by international development experts pushing and promoting the international policies of their funders, whether northern states or multilateral institutions. A few decades ago these would have been described as "social engineering," a term now completely abandoned for "politically correct" reasons, but the actual reality of what was being done continued largely unchanged and involves attempts to influence social and economic change to fit them into a standardized model, currently of neo-liberalism.

The two main transformative policies targeting the country's social structure were first the empowerment of women, promoted particularly in Netherlands-financed projects but also by prominent international financial institutions, particularly the World Bank. Officially claiming to support gender equality, it was also one which was intended to push social transformation in a Western-oriented direction and undermine tribal authority structures. An underlying objective was to slow the rate of population growth which was about 3% per annum, resulting in a doubling of the population every 20 years.

The second strategy was to insist that projects include all social groups within a community and, in particular, to raise the status of people in the lower social strata by giving them leadership positions. This was correctly perceived as a threat by the existing leaders, usually tribal shaykhs, many of whom benefited from direct support from the state and particularly from elements close to the country's leadership (provided they supported the GPC), whether in line ministries or at governorate level. Despite this opposition, these projects sometimes contributed in a small but significant way, to the spread of the belief that "all are equal"¹⁷ and to empowering these groups. A third policy which was resisted was these agencies' intended focus on professionalism and qualifications in recruitment, when they

¹⁷ See various IFAD-funded projects, the UNDP Community Based Regional Development Programme, Ali and Baas 2004.

attempted [in many cases unsuccessfully] to undermine the nepotistic approach to employment. All three of these policies were only very partially implemented due to resistance from the more powerful elements centrally and locally.

With the exceptions just noted, foreign-financed development projects strengthened the tendencies and policies of the state. Both the regime and the financing institutions shared the same prime objectives, namely the implementation of neo-liberal policies, even if the regime did not perceive them in that way. In practice, regardless of rhetoric to the contrary, all implemented policies effectively enriched a small group and worsened the impoverishment of the majority. An important example in agriculture was the development of spate irrigation schemes, the only relatively large schemes possible in Yemen. It is worth noting that the physical and engineering characteristics of spate irrigation infrastructures predetermine outcomes. Even assessments sympathetic to the World Bank confirm the intensification of social differentiation as a result of the Tihāmah spate irrigation projects.¹⁸ Bonzanigo and Borgia¹⁹ discuss the projects in Wādī Sihām from the imamate period onwards. Their analysis illustrates the way in which the projects accelerated social differentiation by assisting the more powerful and thus weakening the smallholders, whose access to irrigation water was severely restricted or even completely stopped as a result of the technical “improvements” brought about by the project. Beneficiaries were mainly the original landowners, mostly tribal leaders, but in later decades members of the rising “elites” bought land in anticipation of the works, having had access to the plans and knowing that their value would increase fundamentally.

In summary, the intervention of international development actors did not fundamentally challenge Ṣāliḥ’s autocratic regime as they shared a philosophy which privileged a small group of wealthy and influential people that included tribal leaders supporting the regime, as well as many security/military elements who were also mostly from tribal backgrounds. But on less fundamental aspects, development agencies promoted social change through the support of two groups, women and poorer people of lower status. They were encouraged to become active participants and beneficiaries of projects as well as community leaders. During the transition, with the open intervention of the UN agencies in procedures, the new “identity-based” approach to social change promoted women and young people. Once the Yemeni politicians took back control of processes, the situation reverted: there is no significant quota of women in the current Yemeni governments, whether internationally recognized or Ḥūthī, and women have had at best symbolic representation in the formal negotiations between the warring sides since the war started in 2015.

Concluding Remarks

Tribes and social class overlap and should not be seen as conflicting or mutually exclusive categories. There are many aspects of the changes during recent decades in the role of tribes and in tribal structures which need further study and investigation, placing tribes in their overall historical and social context, nationally and locally. This chapter has presented some of the issues concerning the Yemeni social structure and the place of tribes within different approaches to political economy analysis. The concept of tribe is neither a substitute for, nor in opposition to, analysis based on socioeconomic conditions,;

¹⁸ See Ward 2015.

¹⁹ Bonzanigo and Borgia 2009.

rather, it is complementary. Addressing the issue of tribes as social entities is similar to the method used to examine the youth or women, i.e., it focuses on identity rather than on political economy. Tribes had in the past, and continue to have, a potentially important and meaningful social and political role. Tribal solidarity remains a fundamental mobilizing mechanism in Yemeni society. The idea that recent changes “undermine” tribal structures and norms implies that these are static and unable to adapt to new contexts. This is simply not true. As anyone who has been involved in observing any society over a few decades can confirm, so-called “eternal” traditions change fairly rapidly as a result of underlying economic and political transformations. Much anthropological research, regardless of explicit statement by its authors, is interpreted as representing a long-term situation, rather than the actual “moment” of fieldwork as intended by the researchers.

While tribes remain important, given the demographic balance in Yemen, the interaction between tribal leaders and their members has also changed considerably in recent decades as many researchers have demonstrated. In particular, the balance of power within tribes has been affected first by the enrichment of ordinary tribal households through migration in earlier decades and, more recently, by the reassertion of power by tribal leaders who were the direct interlocutors of the state and therefore the mediators for obtaining social goods (physical and social infrastructure) and also household benefits (through employment). This was one of the features of the Ṣāliḥ regime, which was known as the “city shaykhs” as tribal leaders moved to Ṣan‘ā’ to ensure access to material benefits from the regime, thus shifting their role from one of community leadership to being sources of benefits which had to be visited in the same way as state institutions like ministries.

In the Ḥūthī-controlled areas after 2015, the return to privileging the *sādah* merely because of their ascribed social status is one reason why the majority of the population oppose them, insofar as the republican ideology of fundamental equality of all citizens has been adopted in principle, while in practice, tribal and other leaders who had gained power under the republican regime reject being relegated to an inferior status. This is the case regardless of the distortions to this ideal implemented by Ṣāliḥ’s autocracy.

There has been a tendency to regard the tribal system as a closed cohesive entity experiencing interference from other social groups, rather than as one element among others of the social landscape which interact with each other over time. Gradually these interactions transform the internal structures of each of the component groups. Just as tribes changed and the relationships of tribal members with each other also changed, complementary changes took place in the roles and positions of other social groups, thus transforming their interrelationships. The current uneasy relationship between the tribes supporting the Ḥūthī movement and the *sādah* leadership of the movement is one of many examples of such changes.

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