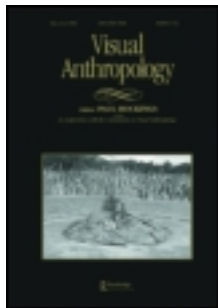


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### Dance and glance: Visualizing tribal identity in Highland Yemen

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# Dance and Gance: Visualizing Tribal Identity in Highland Yemen

Najwa Adra

This paper is a study in the ways that esthetic markers—dancing, poetry, clothing, food—underlie, define, and construct conceptions of the tribe in the northern highlands of Yemen. As the rural Yemeni economy has changed from economic and political self-sufficiency to dependence on the world market and a strong central government, so has the significance of tribalism. Ironically, nationalism is presented by the Yemeni media in tribal terms. While rural expressions of tribal identity have declined, use of tribal markers has intensified in towns and cities even by those who were not formerly defined as tribal. The significance of esthetic phenomena in the formation of identity and the construction of culture is addressed.<sup>1</sup>

## IMAGES

I have a keychain with eight laminated photographs showing Yemen's President Ali Abdallah Salih in various costumes [Figure 1, 2]. Among these are President Salih in military uniform, in a light grey businessman's suit and tie, in a leisure suit with sunglasses. This collection of photographs is sandwiched between a picture of the Yemeni eagle and flag, insignia of the modern Republic of Yemen (established in 1962 and united with the South in 1990) and a photograph of a group of men in tribal<sup>2</sup> dress at a *bara'* dance event. In the latter, men are standing in an arc around several drummers who are accompanying two dancers: President Salih and the Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat. I also have two posters of a jovial President Salih wearing a tribal headdress and a tribal *jambiyya* (dagger), white shirt and dark suit coat. One of these is stereotypically tribal: the shirt is rumpled, with the top button left open [Figure 3]. The second is tidier, with shirt completely buttoned, and a *shāl* (shawl) draped elegantly across the President's chest [Figure 4]. It is the look of tribal leaders in Yemen. Still other photographs, notably in Yemen's English language newspaper, *Yemen Times*, consistently depict a very serious President dressed in dark suit and tie. These images could be

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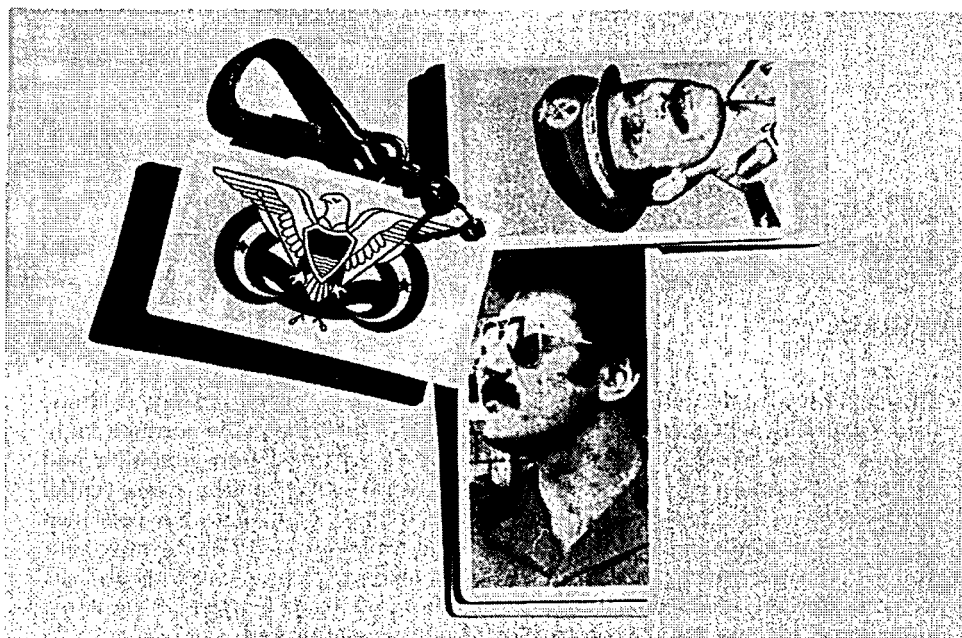


Figure 1 Key chain—President Salih in military uniform and leisure suit, and the emblem of the Republic of Yemen.



Figure 2 Key chain—President Salih in military uniform, suit and tie, and performing bara' with Yasir Arafat.



Figure 3 Poster—President Salih in tribal clothes.

dismissed as stereotyped, which they are. However, as Richard Dyer [1993] has poignantly demonstrated, stereotypes are representations which replicate perceived realities while simultaneously constructing such realities. This paper will explore the realities represented through various media in traditional and contemporary Yemen as well as the roles of representations in the construction of Yemeni identities.

## INTRODUCTION

Throughout Yemen's history, esthetically charged visual, aural, and tactile phenomena have distinguished recognized social groups from each other and highlighted perceived similarities within groups. Before the 1962 revolution, there were three major recognized status groups in northern Yemen, and an important rural/urban distinction. The tribal population (*Qabā'il*) was predominantly rural and comprised over 90 percent of the population. Tribal Yemenis were distinguished from those Yemenis not defined as tribal by clothing, dancing, poetry, music, and cuisine. These markers also replicated tribal values and furthered the construction of tribal identities. In the past twenty years, identification with a



Figure 4 Poster—President Salih in elegant tribal clothes, looking like a tribal leader.

Yemeni nation and with a cosmopolitan global environment has transformed traditional distinctions. Dress, performance, and cuisine have also changed. I will argue in this paper that these markers, like the stereotyped images described above, continue to represent and construct traditional and changing concepts of what it means to be Yemeni, and that the ways in which Yemenis are incorporating new images and identities into a tribal perspective point to a particularly Yemeni style of postmodernity.

President Salih, for example, can direct the gaze of others to Yemen as a modern, developing nation-state or to a tribal nation that honors its traditions. In his role as leader, he can, through his dress, identify with the military, urban youth, rustic tribesmen, mature traditional tribal leaders, or Westernized leaders seen on television. That he chooses all of these images, sometimes in juxtaposition, is significant. President Salih's government has sought hard to foster and develop a new Yemeni nationalism since he first took office in a military coup. This nationalism presents Yemen's tribal tradition with considerable ambivalence, though, often denouncing tribalism as divisive and retrograde. Yet the President is himself from a central highland tribe and often conducts his affairs in ways defined as tribal. Tribal leaders continue to play important roles in government. Thus the importance given in the media to tribal, as well as cosmopolitan, images is significant. It encompasses the complexity with which the government perceives the young nation and its relationship to its traditions and development and to other nations.

This paper will probe these markers and their meanings, historically and as they have continued to change through to the present. The bulk of my argument

is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the valley of al-Ahjur in Yemen's northern highlands in 1978–1979 and again in 1983.<sup>3</sup> Supplemental data were gathered in brief periods of research conducted elsewhere in north Yemen, 1983–1986. On the initial trip and several times in the 1980s, I was accompanied by my husband, Daniel Varisco, also an anthropologist. I also draw on earlier literature and recent ethnographic studies on highland Yemen [Bédoucha 1987, Caton 1990, Dresch 1989, Gingrich 1989a,b, Miller 1996a,b, Mundy 1983, Swagman 1988]. In my discussion here, I will attempt to include as wide a variety of “voices” [Friedrich 1988] as were accessible to me: the perspectives of members of different social strata, of urban vs. rural, returned migrants, and perspectives from different time frames. Another “voice” included here comes from apprehending this society through visual lenses.

In order to provide the reader with some necessary background information on Yemen, I will include a few more introductory remarks. The first is a description of my first impressions of this fascinating country. These were powerful visual images. I then describe apparent paradoxes in Yemeni ethnography that I was faced with in the early stages of fieldwork. Their resolution will be dealt with in the body of the paper. Following this is a discussion of the theoretical framework of my argument. A short summary of Yemen's history, included here for the benefit of those unfamiliar with the country, concludes my introductory sequence.

The main part of this paper begins with a description of esthetic markers in the northern highlands. Tribal markers are considered in the context of others that mark the non-tribal population. Recent changes in these markers are noted. An appreciation for the significance of these markers depends upon an understanding of the role of the tribe in the northern highlands of Yemen and of what it meant to identify oneself as tribal. These issues are addressed next. I argue that the markers in question did not serve simply to identify members of various status groups, but that identification was lived and constructed through an acceptance and utilization of these markers.

Culture is not static; markers and loci of identity have changed with the rapid political and economic changes of Yemeni society. Changes in markers and contexts of use are described. Many traditional markers continue to represent and construct tribal identity. Some have gone into disuse, while others have been revived in new contexts. This paper will conclude with a discussion of some of the ways that tribal markers have been modified and appropriated by the Yemeni government in its efforts to forge a nationalistic identification for all Yemenis. As the significance of the tribe in modern Yemen is being contested, its markers are being manipulated by all sides.

## FIRST IMPRESSIONS

March, 1978, was a time of rapid change in Yemen. My very first sight, as the airplane landed in Sanaa airport, was of a large, round fortress-type structure standing in the middle of dry fields, eerily reminiscent of science fiction novels. Agricultural fields lined the road to Sanaa, and the city itself was a small dusty sprawl of low buildings bordering on a walled old city with majestic stone

skyscrapers. The small channel that flowed through the city and watered its gardens before the Revolution had dried up as a result of the city's rapidly increasing population. Sanaa bustled with traffic, and its shops were crammed with all manner of imported goods. Besides the usual cigarettes, pampers, baby formula, canned Kraft cheese, popcorn and beautifully colored synthetic fabrics, one could buy German rye bread, Scotch marmalade, Sharp televisions, Panasonic tape recorders, Seiko watches, Lark luggage, Guerlain makeup and the latest Paris perfumes. Armed as I was with the usual stereotypes on veiling on the Peninsula, I was surprised to see veiled women walking hand in hand with men (husbands or brothers) and riding on the backs of small motorcycles.

My first impressions on our exploratory trips to rural Yemen in search for a field site were of the spectacular terraces, green and brown mosaics that covered entire mountains well into the remotest spots. The fresh air of villages and the hospitality of rural Yemenis were warming. There was also an unexpected candor. We were discouraged from settling down for research in any area that was politically unstable, and where the inhabitants did not feel that they could guarantee us protection.

We were first taken to al-Ahjur by the late Muhammad Muhammad al-Shāmī, whom we met in Kawkaban and who then invited us to spend a few days with his family in al-Ahjur. The beauty of this lush valley, watered by a legendary 360 springs, was striking. Its villages, like others in the rural highlands, were situated on mountain tops or rocky outcroppings, with the houses on the perimeter sharing an outside wall, looking very much like medieval fortresses. Unlike urban houses, which were taller and built of smoothly hewn blocks, most village houses were built of rough hewn stone and were not higher than three stories. Only the houses of two wealthy urban-based families were built on agricultural land. Every other bit of land was formed into terraces cultivated with sorghum or maize, or with cash crops of coffee, *qāt* (a mild stimulant) or tomatoes. Here and there an old house was left to crumble, while a newer house had been built nearby. An occasional abandoned field with broken terrace walls could be seen, but these were far from the rule at the time.

The first car roads into the valley were built just four years before our arrival, making Toyota trucks the favored means of transportation.<sup>4</sup> Flour mills were available in a number of villages, and electric generators were just being installed. Frozen chickens, imported mainly from France, were sold wherever generators were available to power freezers. In sum, my first impressions of Yemen were primarily visual, due perhaps to both Yemen's spectacular visuals and my Western training.<sup>5</sup>

## PARADOXES

Early in the fieldwork experience I was confronted by a number of apparent paradoxes. I originally went into the field to investigate just how much cultural information can be gleaned from an analysis of a group's dancing and dance events. I planned to conduct an ethnographic study while I observed and studied the dances performed. When I told Yemenis, scholars and others, that I was

interested in studying Yemeni dancing, they all referred me to *bara'* as the most important dance to study. But then I was surprised to discover that *bara'* was not technically described by the term generally translated as dancing (*raqs*). A *bara'* performer was not called a *raqqās* (dancer), and one did not use the Arabic verb, *raqasa* to describe *bara'* performance.

The second paradox to be dealt with here was the degree of stratification as experienced "on the ground". There were historically in Yemen's northern highlands three largely endogamous social status groups. They included a religious elite composed of two subgroups: descendants of the Prophet Muhammad (*Sādah*, sing. *Sayyid*) and scholars of tribal origin (*Fuqahā'*); tribesmen or *Qabā'il*, (sing. *qabīlī*); and *Banī Khums*,<sup>6</sup> a client grouping responsible to the tribes for providing ritual and menial services. The last was a loose, internally stratified category which included a number of subgroups, each specializing in a particular occupation. A large number of *Banī Khums* lived in towns. Others, who were spread out through the countryside, maintained relationships of clientage with particular tribes or villages. *Banī Khums* residing in al-Ahjur include the barber/musician (*Muzayyin*, pl. *Mazāyina*), the herald (*Dawshān*), the butcher (*Jazzār*) and the vegetable seller (*Qushshām*). Barber/musicians were, and continue to be, ritual experts. They direct the proceedings during weddings and circumcisions. Traditionally, the various status groups were marked by descent, occupation and dress. The Republic of Yemen has officially condemned traditional status distinctions, but they continue to influence patterns of identification, endogamy and occupation.

Having read about this system of stratification in travelers' accounts and ethnographic works,<sup>7</sup> I expected to find appropriate deference behaviors reinforcing these distinctions. For example, I expected seating arrangements to reflect a hierarchic scheme, and that lower status groups would defer to higher status groups in conversation and in greeting behavior. I was surprised to find members of all groups eating and socializing together as equals. In al-Ahjur members of all social classes eat together from the same plate and sit together. Where there is marked deference behavior, it is towards older age or occasionally by someone who wants a favor. It was virtually impossible to distinguish members of the lower service groups except when they were performing their ritual roles. With one exception of the *Muzayyin* who reinforced his low status by playing the clown, nothing in the daily dress or behavior of *Banī Khums* set them apart from others. In fact, individuals in this status group exercised considerable social control through their roles as ritual experts. They could criticize or praise *Qabā'il* as well as members of the religious elite through their choice of song lyrics. Respected *Muzayyins* were sometimes asked to help mediate family quarrels of *Qabā'il*.

Neither did *Qabā'il* routinely defer to *Sādah*. *Qabā'il*, when referring to individual members of the *Sādah*, occasionally used the traditional honorific, *Sayyid* (m) or *Sayyidah* (f) (lit., master, mistress), but rarely did they do so in the second person. When asked about this, they would respond, "*Sidak Allāh*" (God is your master). By this they meant that the honorific properly referred to God alone and not to ordinary mortals. I found this to be the case even in Sanaa. Endogamy within status categories was enforced, while hypergamy was rare, but the



understating of recognized status differences reflected an ambivalence that I did not expect to find.<sup>8</sup>

Behavior contradicting the indigenous model of social structure spilled over into the expressive forms. By definition, *Qabā'il* (tribesmen) performed *bara'*, while members of the religious elite performed *lu'b*, another genre of dancing that is defined as *raqs*. In practice, I saw members of all social strata performing *bara'* and *lu'b*. Likewise, members of all social strata dressed alike in al-Ahjur, with perhaps one or two exceptions. While the ability to compose poetry is regarded as a characteristic of *Qabā'il*, in practice all members of the society are expected to compose poetry on various occasions. It took some time before I could appreciate the apparent paradox of a hierarchical society that denied hierarchy in expectations and valued equality in behavior. The resolution of these paradoxes will be discussed along with the significance of *bara'* and the role of tribalism in the northern highlands.

### THEORETICAL FRAMES

My thesis is that esthetic parameters underlie, replicate, and construct conceptions of the tribe in Yemen's northern highlands. By conceptions of the tribe, I mean tribal definitions of themselves as well as perceptions of the tribal population by other Yemenis. I define esthetic processes as those in which form (stylistic information) is primary and in which people indulge mainly for pleasure. In this study, I include a number of visual, aural and tactile forms that are recognized in Yemen as tribal markers.

I am particularly interested in the cultural embeddedness of artistic form. I argue first that the principles of organization that give a culture its sense of coherence and distinguish it from others are replicated in the principles that motivate and define its art and performance styles. This view necessitates that culture is defined in terms of particular *ways* of ordering the elements of social life rather than collections of traits or symbols.

A number of anthropologists have discussed art styles as replicating relations fundamental to the producing culture. Gregory Bateson explores this property in his seminal article, "Style, Grace, and Information in Primitive Art" [1972]. He looks for information about the artist and his culture in the "style, materials, composition, rhythm, skill...rather than the story or mythology" of a Balinese painting: "The crux of the picture is the interwoven contrast between the serene and the turbulent...In final analysis, the picture can be seen as an affirmation that to choose either turbulence or serenity as a human purpose would be a vulgar error" [1972: 130]. Bateson's analysis indicates that both the images portrayed in this painting—funeral pyre, women carrying offerings on their heads, procession—and its style—the relationship between the parts within the painting—are icons of Balinese cultural concerns.

James Fernandez [1966, 1977] found principles of spatial organization in Fang architecture, village layout, and statues, iconically replicated in principles of Fang social organization. My research on dancing in al-Ahjur suggested that tribal dancing is a metaphor or icon of what it meant to be tribal in Yemen [Adra 1982]; while Steven Caton's [1990] work has shown that Yemeni tribalism is

also replicated in tribal poetry. Among other anthropologists and ethnomusicologists who have described similar metaphoric relationships between esthetic pattern and cultural principles are Adams [1973], Gell [1975], Ness [1992], Schieffelin [1976], Sugarman [1989], Turino [1989], Urban [1997], and Wade [1976].

Metaphor and iconicity are important concepts here. As Peirce [1940: 105–06] has argued, an icon (metaphors being one example of iconicity) condenses information, so that “by the direct observation of it other truths concerning its subject can be discovered than those which suffice to determine its construction.”<sup>9</sup> Cultural signifiers are not entirely arbitrary in the Saussurien sense. Metaphors frequently involve relationships that have natural referents. For example, the American eagle as a sign of the United States means different things to different people at different times, and these meanings are tied closely to American social history. To this extent, the sign is arbitrary. What is not arbitrary is that the choice of an eagle points fundamentally to strength, cunning or power. A wolf or lion could conceivably replace the eagle in representing the United States without significantly altering the intended meaning, but a kitten or puppy dog as symbol would create an entirely different image.<sup>10</sup>

In the same vein, ideas of what constitutes a “natural” balance vary with culture. In some cultures, it means a resolution of opposing forces; in others, symmetry in opposites; in still others, coordination of equal parts. These concepts are arbitrary on a cultural level, but their representations in art forms are frequently iconic. European and American novels, symphonies, and dances of a certain time period strive towards resolution, while Balinese paintings and dances juxtapose opposites in ways that may be discomfiting to those unfamiliar with the culture. Cultural concepts of hierarchy and egalitarianism may also be iconically represented in the arts.

When artistic process replicates relations considered important to a culture, its products are appreciated for expressing truth as well as beauty. As a corollary to this, one finds in situations of culture change that a portion of the population appreciates and holds onto traditional forms while others participate in and are attracted to newer configurations. This has been the case with Yemeni tribal dancing [Adra 1993] and tribal poetry [Caton 1990, Miller 1996a] and will be discussed below.<sup>11</sup>

The close fit between culture change and artistic change is interesting and implies a connection between art process and the formation of identity. The second part of my thesis is that artistic process not only recreates fundamental cultural relations but that it helps form cultural identities as well. In this, I follow Caton’s [1990] lead. He contends that tribal poetry not only reinforces values held dear, but that traditional and changing tribal identities are constructed in its performance:

More obviously than in the West, poetry in tribal Yemen is both the creation of art and the production of social and political reality in the same act of composition. To compose a poem is to construct oneself as a peacemaker, as a warrior, as a Muslim...the two kinds of practices—artistic and social—are indissociable [Caton 1990: 21–22].

The poems studied by Caton are not only constrained by economic and social practices, they “are active agents...in history” [Caton 1990: 250]. That is, tribal poetry is constitutive as well as representative.

This position echoes the conclusions derived from ethnographic research elsewhere. James Peacock [1968: 245] has argued that the form of *ludruk* theater in Indonesia was active in the formation of new identities. More recently, Adrienne Kaeppler [1993: 478] has written of Tongan laments and eulogies. She writes, "Rather than 'reflecting' or 'mirroring' social activities...the oratorical voice *constructs* fundamental cultural values." Janet Wolff [1992: 707] sums up this position as follows:

Cultural forms, like dance, do not just directly represent the social in some unmediated way. Rather, they *re-present* it in the codes and processes of signification—the language of dance. Moreover, far from reflecting the already given social world, dance and other cultural forms participate in the production of that world.

My aim in this paper is to show that tribal dancing and other tribal markers are *similarly representative and constitutive*. They not only recreate tribal ideals, but tribal identities are created, at least partly, through performance and participation in these artistic processes. Furthermore, seeing artistic process in this light helps explain the roles of changing art forms in the construction of new or modified cultural identities. Esthetic phenomena, far from being marginal to issues of identity and meaning, foreground underlying social currents.

I do not wish to imply that expressive forms are not to be appreciated in themselves. A Yemeni dance, poem or house (or a Graham performance) are, on one level, bounded entities which can be admired or dismissed in their own right, but they are also products and producers of culture. The issue is not simply the embeddedness of art in culture. It is the extent to which art constructs culture as it reflects it. It may be that we learn, perpetuate, and change our culture through manipulation of such metaphors. Perhaps the overriding issue is the relationship of esthetics to culture. I would like to suggest that what we intuit as cultural pattern is an issue of style, that cultural similarities and differences are, at base, esthetic rather than technological or psychological.

Traditional esthetic markers in Yemen identified social groups and distinguished them from each other. These markers, like Dyer's stereotypes, and all metaphors, were "simple, striking, easily grasped...but none the less capable of condensing a great deal of complex information and a host of connotations" [1993: 12]. The role played by tribal dancing in representing tribalism and constructing an ever-changing tribal identity will comprise the bulk of the argument. Rather than being considered alone, however, dancing will be situated among other important, esthetic markers. These include poetry, dress, domestic and landscape architecture, cuisine and music, all of which provide important images of tribalness.

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The geographically remote highlands of North Yemen have never been colonized by a Western power. Neither the Crusades, nor the Mongol invasion which destroyed the Abbasid Caliphate based in Baghdad, directly affected Yemen. Although various parts of Yemen were indeed occupied by Ottoman Turks in the

Sixteenth and Nineteenth Centuries, making it a nominal part of the Ottoman Empire, the Sublime Porte did not control the country as a whole. By the turn of the Twentieth Century Yemen was ruled by an absolute religious monarch, Imam Yahya, who succeeded in the difficult task of unifying the area that came to be known as North Yemen, and in expelling the last remnants of Turkish troops in the area. Fearing European colonization, Imam Yahya and his son Ahmad, who ruled from 1948 to 1962, severely restricted the travel of foreigners into the country and of Yemenis abroad, although they could not control emigration through the port of Aden in the south. In 1962 a Revolution toppled the imamate and established a Republican Yemeni government (YAR) in the north.

Thus, for at least half of the Twentieth Century, North Yemen was relatively isolated from what are assumed to be global hegemonic influences. The two world wars, the Arab-Israeli conflict and oil economics, were quite removed from the praxis of Yemeni life. Although Yemenis of the northern highlands lacked the conveniences associated with industrial society, they maintained a pride in their own heritage and civilization that contrasted radically with the attitudes of colonized peoples. Not well informed about modern industrial and technological capabilities, rural Yemenis had very little reason to question the validity of their own civilization that once controlled the coffee trade, commerce in silk and spices from Asia, and the fabled incense route.

The Revolution was followed by a seven-year long civil war in which Egyptian forces, using Soviet tanks and weapons, propped up a nascent republic against the old guard, supported by Saudi Arabia and Anglo-American policy. When the civil war ended in 1969, and Zaydi rule was replaced by a republican government, goods and ideas from industrial nations began to flood the country. The number of imports increased dramatically. By 1978–79, almost any manufactured product could be obtained in the capital, Sanaa.<sup>12</sup>

Large numbers of Yemeni men emigrated to work in service occupations in the nearby oil-rich countries. Entrepreneurs used remittance wealth to set up flour mills, electric generators and schools to serve their own and neighboring villages. With cash available through remittances Yemenis, rural and urban, were now able to purchase the plethora of available imports. It became cheaper to buy imported foods than to grow these locally. Subsistence agriculture began to give way to cash cropping.

Farmers began to migrate to Yemen's towns and cities, rapidly increasing the urban population. The small picturesque city of Sanaa, once known for its grape arbors and rose gardens, grew exponentially into a dusty metropolis complete with traffic congestion. Roads were built to connect the various parts of Yemen, facilitating travel and the exchange of information. Toyota trucks quickly replaced camels as the preferred means of rural transport. Within the next decade, television transmission reached most of Yemen's rural population, and Yemenis quickly became acutely aware of the rest of the world [Adra 1996]. Although the Revolution had officially banned traditional social status distinctions, members of the traditional elite continued to hold positions of power by virtue of their education and wealth.

South Yemen, in contrast, was under British control from 1839 until its 1969 Revolution which established the socialist People's Democratic Republic of

Yemen (PDRY). Although many Yemenis travelled regularly between North and South Yemen, there was a certain degree of ideological discord, with Yemenis from the northern highlands tending to be critical of socialism while those of the southern highlands of North Yemen tended to have more sympathy with PDRY. In 1990, the former YAR united with the former PDRY to form the Republic of Yemen.

Yemenis are currently struggling with the implications of change on their own value systems and lifestyles, specifically with how to construct cultural axioms in a rapidly changing world. Gone is the chronic poverty and frequent hunger that characterized the lives of the rural population during the imamate. On the other hand, the same people often deplore their current (perceived) lack of energy, strength and endurance as compared to the past. The term they use is *ta'ayabnah*, which literally means, "we have become flawed," and implies that honor has been compromised. There is also a marked decline in dancing and other local expressive forms that many decry. My concern as an anthropologist, over how accurately to describe relations of a society in flux, parallels the concerns of many Yemenis of how to make meaningful and palatable adaptations to changes in their own society. In the next section I describe traditional and contemporary esthetic markers in the northern highlands.

#### ESTHETIC MARKERS

Tribal markers include dancing, poetry, music, clothing, housing, and cuisine. These are esthetically charged, internally patterned phenomena with associations of pleasure and beauty. Each is valued highly by *Qabā'il*, both as a tribal symbol and for its own esthetic qualities. Tribal representations signal to the Yemeni population not only what is "ours" but also that which is "best" and most "beautiful." This section will describe some of the visual, culinary, tactile and aural markers<sup>13</sup> that traditionally identified members of the three social strata<sup>14</sup> and distinguished between urban and rural folk.

#### Traditional Men's Clothing and Arms

Men and women in Yemen wear several layers of clothing and headdress.<sup>15</sup> Today, as in the past, costume varies with status, region and fashion.<sup>16</sup> Except during religious holidays, when everyone pays particular attention to dress, a nonchalance or carelessness is considered typical of *tribal* men's attitude to clothes.

In al-Ahjur, tribal dress for men in the late 1970s consisted of a gathered skirt (*fūṭah*)<sup>17</sup> in white or light colors worn over white shorts, a collared, Western-style shirt, and imported Western suit coat. An embroidered headdress, imported from Pakistan, was wrapped around a cotton cap. The manner of wrapping the head-dress distinguished and continues to distinguish tribes or tribal groups from each other. Long shoulder cloths (*shāl*) were either made locally of handwoven cotton, with black, red and yellow stripes, or were larger variations of the imported embroidered headdress. These were worn for warmth or used as carry-alls,

according to need. The *shāl* could also be folded and draped over the mandatory dagger, which is described below<sup>18</sup> [Figure 5].

A few traditional men wore black hand-woven woolen vests (*'abahs*) with white geometric designs and black headdresses with long fringes. Vests were sometimes lined with sheepskin. Previously, *fūṭahs* may have been made from undyed cloth or indigo, as was the case in Sanaa [Mundy 1983].

Some returned migrants from Saudi Arabia wore an ankle-length robe (*thawb*) in subdued colors instead of *fūṭah* and shirt. They wore a t-shirt under the *thawb* and a Western jacket over it. Those who wanted to appear particularly urbane wore a white *thawb*, following the fashion in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries. This has increasingly come to represent the new cosmopolitan Yemeni.

Not more than a handful of men wore Western pants and shirt or t-shirt. Those who did so were the only men who did not regularly cover their heads. In al-Ahjur, as elsewhere in Yemen, pants as male dress were considered too tight to allow one to sit comfortably on the mattresses that furnish all the living areas.<sup>19</sup> Consequently, men who wore pants outside the house would don a *fūṭah* or *thawb* indoors.

While clothes were considered social markers, the dagger (*jambiyyah* or *janbiyyah*) and the rifle were, and continue to be, the ultimate material signifiers of tribal affiliation. The tribal dagger (*'aṣīb*) has a handle made of wood or horn, sometimes studded with silver coins. It is carried in a J-shaped sheath (*jihāz*) that may be covered with a silver plate or, more frequently, wrapped with leather cord. Dagger and sheath are mounted upright on a leather belt. The belt may be covered with a cloth embroidered with silver and gold thread. Traditionally, only *Qabā'il* wore this particular shape of *jambiyyah*, and particular styles of sheath could distinguish tribal affiliation. Another item associated exclusively with *Qabā'il* is the rifle, and more recently, the kalashnikov. These weapons are carried as an important item of dress even in the absence of warfare. Arms carried by tribesmen reinforce the continued tribal association with warfare, although the only rifle shots I heard in the field were those shot in the air in bridal processions and to herald important guests.<sup>20</sup>

In contrast to the tribes, and in keeping with their wealth and education, the men of the religious elite wore large robes with wide sleeves that reached nearly to the ground<sup>21</sup> over a tighter fitting long-sleeved robe. The robe was called *qamīṣ*, and the unwieldy sleeves were often tied back behind the neck. On their heads *Sādah* and *Fuqahā'* wore an *'imāmah*, a sign of the religious scholar. This consisted of a white turban wrapped around an embroidered flat-topped cap covered in white tulle.<sup>22</sup> Around their waists was a leather belt, wider than that of *Qabā'il*, covered with cloth woven or embroidered with gold and silver thread. The elite's dagger (*thūmah*) had an ornate silver handle. Its sheath, made of embossed silver, was curved gracefully and mounted sideways towards the right.<sup>23</sup> Members of the elite also carried a shoulder cloth. This was the traditional signature look of the religious elite, worn usually in the cities, and it distinguished them from others in the society. It also underscored the scholarly or mercantile work of this group, as opposed to agriculture or herding. It should be noted, however, that those of the elite who lived in rural Yemen and farmed wore these clothes only on special occasions, and wore tribal dress normally.



*Figure 5 Tribesmen from al-Ahjur wearing tribal clothes and tribal jambiyyah. The gentleman third from left is the oldest in the group, and he is wearing the traditional black headdress (Photo, Daniel Varisco).*

During the time of my fieldwork, members of the *Banī Khums* dressed like *Qabā'il*, and no one in al-Ahjur seemed to remember if they ever wore distinctive clothing, although they appear to have done so in some parts of Yemen.<sup>24</sup> Whether or not men carried a dagger is open to question. Some say that they did carry a dagger and wore it facing to the left mounted on a narrow belt; others that they did not traditionally carry a dagger. For shoes, nearly everyone in rural Yemen (women and men) wears heavy leather loafers and/or rubber Chinese thong sandals.

Currently, the elite costume is worn by only a few older scholars. In the late 1970s, younger members of the traditional elite wore the long white Saudi *thawb* with elite belt and dagger around the waist. Since then, many have substituted a (tribal) leather belt and upright dagger sheath for their traditional silver sheath. This correlates with a new popularity assumed by the tribal *jambiyyah* in Yemen. It is currently worn by almost all men who wear a *jambiyyah*, not only *Qabā'il*. Some men who did not wear a dagger in their youth are now purchasing and wearing tribal *jambiyyahs*.

Nowadays men of all social strata in large urban centers can be seen wearing a white Saudi *thawb* with tribal *jambiyyah*. Professionals of all status groups wear Western clothing. It would appear that traditional status markers are disappearing quickly. Subtle markers remain, however, as Mundy observes, "those who come from the old elite remain meticulous in their public dress. If it is now a European business suit that he has adopted, the man of the government will be quite as deliberate about wearing it to work as his father was in donning his outfit...before appearing to the public eye" [1983: 538]. Meanwhile, a certain nonchalance about dress continues to stereotypically characterize *Qabā'il*.

### Women's Clothing

Women's dress is less status specific than men's and varies more with region and economic standing. Wealthier women of all social status groups wear clothes made from more costly fabrics and have more expensive jewelry than poorer women. Fashion changes tend to originate in the capital and progress into the surrounding villages.

Currently in al-Ahjur, as in the past, women wear a dress and underdress over leggings. The style of dress and leggings varies with fashion. In the 1970s older women in al-Ahjur wore a black dress that was mid-calf in length and had a slit from the neck to mid-chest. Pleats were sewn into the front of the dress above the waist and on the cuffs of sleeves. The areas around the collar and wristbands were sometimes embroidered. The neck opening (necessary for breastfeeding purposes) would be covered with necklaces. Regional differences were reflected in embroidery as well as in the location of pleats that were sewn into the dress. Before pleats became fashionable, women's dresses were straight, wide or narrow shifts with narrow sleeves. Before the Revolution, rural women who could afford it wore dresses from indigo dyed cloth; those who could not wore white (undyed) dresses. After the Revolution, when inexpensive imported synthetics became widely available, many women began to wear dresses made of colorful



polyester, although black was still said to be the most beautiful color for clothes. Under all of these dresses, baggy pants with tight leggings were worn. Leggings were embroidered or made of plain black velour.

Younger women in al-Ahjur, following urban fashions,<sup>25</sup> wore slightly shorter dresses that were gathered at the waist and made from Japanese polyester. These were cut like American shirt-waist dresses with scooped necks, and worn over similar dresses with shirt collars. Initially, they were worn over the traditional baggy pants. In time, bell bottom pants became fashionable (late 1970s), and these were replaced with tight legged pants in the 1980s. By the 1980s many urban women had replaced pants with dark tights, but these have not yet been adopted in the countryside.

Before the Revolution, women covered their heads with bonnets (sing., *qarqūsh*) that hung down their backs. Married women wore bands made from braided goat hair around their foreheads. Since the 1970s, smaller bonnets were worn by young girls but not by married women. Whereas in some villages of the region women cover their heads only with a small square scarf, folded into a triangle and tied under the chin, married women of al-Ahjur wear several scarves. The square scarf is covered with a long sheer veil (*lithmah*)<sup>26</sup> wrapped attractively around the head, framing the face, but not covering it. Part of the *lithmah* can be lifted up to cover the lower part of the face when men who are defined as strangers are present (or sometimes, to be coy at a gathering of women). A strand of hair, draped along the left side of the face, is left exposed. Small bouquets of basil or rue are inserted into the *lithmah* above the ear, for decoration and to ward off the evil eye.

Among married women, a crown (*maşar*), made of a piece of brocade wrapped around a band made of folded newspaper, was tied around the forehead, and held the *lithmah* in place. In 1979, these were increasingly of fine silk brocade. More recent *maşars* are made of black velvet with brass studs. Silver jewelry<sup>27</sup> in the form of necklaces, bracelets, rings and pieces attached to the headdress were traditionally important in all women's clothing. Currently, gold jewelry has replaced silver, and large watches have become a necessary part of rural married women's costume.

As in other rural areas, women of al-Ahjur traditionally draped large woolen handwoven shawls (the size of an American throw) loosely over their heads and shoulders when travelling between villages. This shawl, called *maşwan*, was often layered and folded on top of the head in attractive ways. Considered to be beautiful and seductive, it was also worn indoors on dress occasions such as weddings. By the 1980s the handwoven *maşwan* had been largely replaced with an imported cotton print version.

Urban women, in contrast, traditionally covered their clothes with a cotton print cloth (*sitārah*) and veiled their faces. The Turkish black *sharshaf* was adopted by some elite women during the reign of Imam Ahmad; it became an urban "uniform" after 1962 [Mundy 1983: 539]. The *sharshaf* is composed of a pleated wrap skirt and a triangular hood that covers the body down to the waist. The face is covered with a black gauze veil that can be lifted at the wearer's will. The *sharshaf* worn before the Revolution reached just below the knees. It has been getting progressively longer as the attitudes towards women have become more

conservative and fashions have changed accordingly. In the 1990s new styles of *sharshaf* head covering and veil have proliferated in Sanaa.

It is the outer covering (worn outdoors, between villages or out of one's neighborhood in towns) that has traditionally distinguished tribal women from urban women. By definition, urban women "veil" while rural women do not, and any community in which women habitually wear *sharshaf* is described as a town. Only the women of two urban based families wore the city *sharshaf* in al-Ahjur in 1978–79. Its length and bulk made walking on the rocky mountainous terrain difficult.

Wearing the *sharshaf* is regarded with some ambivalence in this society, where the seclusion of women is a cultural ideal. On the one hand, it threatens rural women's cherished freedom of movement.<sup>28</sup> A number of *Sayyid* women who live in al-Ahjur wear the *maṣwan* for the comfort and mobility it allows. On the other hand, the *sharshaf* is considered a sign of urban sophistication; a woman accentuates her status by veiling, implying that she is not necessarily available for all to see. Following this reasoning, an increasing number of young rural women were asking for and wearing the *sharshaf* as an item of dress clothing by the mid-1980s, reflecting a greater identification with urbanism.

#### Agricultural Terraces and Domestic Architecture

From a distance, Yemen's terraces look like patchwork quilts. Villages are surrounded by small plots of individually owned and managed cultivated terraces. The separateness of each plot of land is highlighted by the fact that each is named and has its own deed. Farmers are free to cultivate their plots as they wish as long as they do not infringe on the water rights of others. These lands have long been irrigated through a complex system of water turns that reveals a concern for the equitable distribution of water, and requires the intense coordination of all those involved [Varisco 1983]. In contrast to the discreteness and private ownership of cultivated land, pasture land is shared by residents of a village, and water for domestic use is accessible to all.

Until relatively recently, agricultural terracing covered every cultivable space. Even tiny out-of-the-way spots on mountain tops would be cultivated. Crops grown in al-Ahjur included sorghum, maize, wheat, barley, alfalfa, coffee, *qāt* (a mild stimulant), and various legumes. With increased out-migration, and the simultaneous availability of cheap food imports, many terraces have been converted to cash crops, primarily *qāt* and tomatoes. Some terraces were simply left uncultivated, leading to serious erosion where terrace walls were not kept up.

Housing styles vary according to whether they are urban or rural. Traditional urban houses for the most part are impressive tall buildings made of carefully carved stone blocks (or, in the far north and south, of mud brick.) The first floor of these buildings is reserved for animals and storage, and the upper parts serve for sleeping, eating and entertaining. Many urban houses traditionally had indoor toilets. Small alabaster panes covered the windows of the affluent. By the 1970s most of these had been replaced by large windows topped with colorful stained glass [Figure 6]. Alleys often separated urban houses from each other.

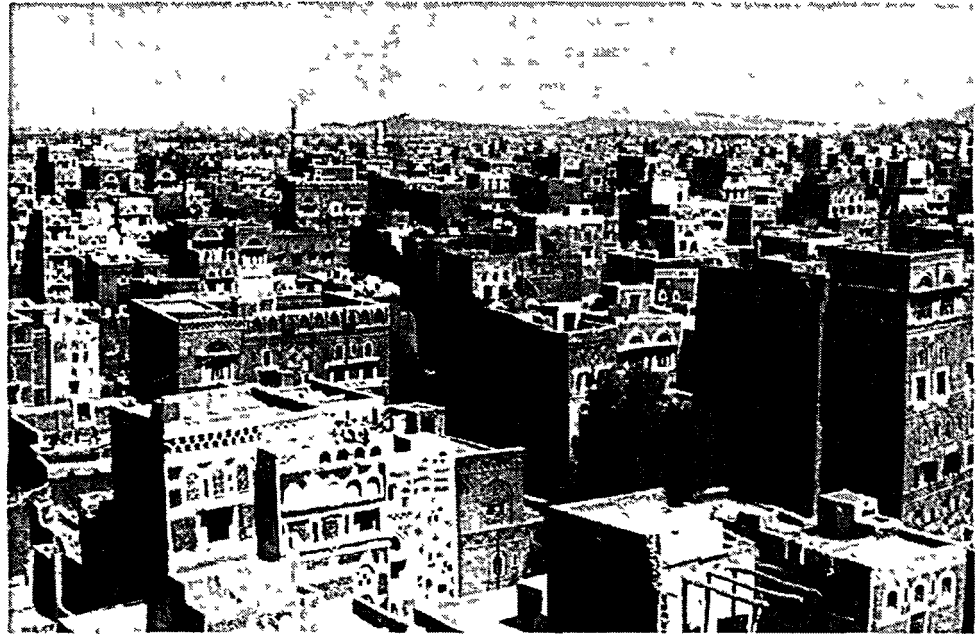


Figure 6 Traditional architecture in Sanaa. Newer additions on the upper floors of these houses sometimes feature large windows (Photo, Daniel Varisco).

Modern urban houses tend to be wider than the older houses, with spacious rooms and large hallways. Since Yemenis expand their houses upward as their extended families grow, new houses are much lower in height than old ones [Figure 7].

Older rural houses, in contrast, are huddled close to each other. Those on the perimeter of a village usually share a wall. Rural houses, seeming to grow out of rock outcroppings or attached precariously to mountainsides, are quite impressive. However, they appear less sophisticated in that the stone used was cut more roughly; they tend to be not as tall; and most of them do not have indoor toilets. Typically, rooms in older rural houses are smaller than their urban counterparts, as are their windows. Windows are sometimes simple holes in the wall, without alabaster or glass. Houses of the poorest families may have had one room only, with an attached kitchen and a shed to house animals.

Rooms of urban houses and houses of wealthier rural families are lined with thick mattresses and cushions covered with colorful velvets. Carpets cover the floor. A bed is sometimes placed against one wall of a room. In poorer rural houses, in contrast, people sit on handwoven wool runners, or thin foam mattresses, and cover the floor with straw mats or imported plastic mats. In the past, rural houses were built only on uncultivable terrain because of the high value placed on agricultural land. Other structures typical of the rural landscape through the 1970s were small stone guard towers spaced at regular intervals on agricultural land.

Beginning in the late 1970s *Qabā'il* in al-Ahjur began to build their houses in low areas among agricultural terraces. With increased male migration and the



Figure 7 Modern urban architecture (Photo, Daniel Varisco).

availability of inexpensive food imports, agricultural land was no longer held at a premium. Moreover, remittance wealth allowed young men to leave their parents' houses and build houses for their wives and children in nuclear family arrangements. This was preferred by many young women because it gave them more control over their lives, although it considerably increased each woman's work load.<sup>29</sup> Typically, newer houses are modeled after modern urban architecture. More care is taken in carving the stone façades, and rooms are more spacious and may feature large windows [Figure 8]. Guard towers are no longer necessary on fields planted with grain; and are currently used only in lucrative *qāt* fields. The new rural landscape is studded with low houses dispersed throughout agricultural fields. This is a consequence of the monetization of the economy and changes in attitudes.

### Cuisine

Cuisine is another cultural marker that distinguishes urban from rural Yemen. Throughout Yemen, oven-baked breads are the staples in the diet, with Chinese chive, green chili peppers, ground thyme, other greens, soured skim milk, fruit in season, and meat eaten to accompany bread. But the favorite foods of rural Yemen are strongly associated with tribes. These are porridges (*'aṣīṭ* and *maṭīṭ*) and breads made from the flour of locally grown grains and lentils. *Maṭīṭ*, a gruel made from flour mixed with water, skimmed soured milk and thyme, is eaten



Figure 8 A village in al-Ahjur. Initially the village was built entirely on top of the boulder. As its population grew, the houses on the right were built. The two houses center front are very new and were built to resemble urban houses (Photo, Daniel Varisco).

regularly as a mid-morning breakfast in al-Ahjur. This is the food most often taken to workers in the fields. 'Aṣīṭ is a thicker porridge shaped into a mound. Meat gravy, clarified butter or honey is poured as a sauce into a basin-shaped depression at the top of the mound and/or in a moat surrounding this mound. To eat 'aṣīṭ one takes a small amount with the fingers of the right hand and dips it into the sauce. Historically 'aṣīṭ was made of sorghum flour and eaten on market days when meat was available. It is a heavy robust food, the favored food given to breastfeeding women because it is thought that it will increase their milk supply.<sup>30</sup>

Rural foods are contrasted with foods classified as urban, notably whipped fenugreek (*ḥulba*), vegetable stews (*ṭabīkh*), rice dishes, and commercially baked loaf bread. Although tribal people eat urban foods, they consider local porridges to be more nourishing. A reliance on urban foods is thought to weaken the body. *Qabā'il* may deride townspeople as weaklings by saying, "*Ahl al-madīnah ghayr haqq al-ḥulba*," (Townspeople are nothing but *ḥulba* eaters.) Urban Yemenis, on the other hand, consider *ḥulba* to be a healthy aid to digestion. Urban foods are considered, by rural and urban Yemenis, to be more delicate, thus more fitting for the perceived finesse of townsfolk. On several occasions I heard young rural women with urban pretensions argue that they were too delicate to consume the vast quantities of 'aṣīṭ eaten by more robust *Qabā'il*. Town dwellers also eat 'aṣīṭ,

but it is considered simple food, not fancy enough to offer to guests. Yemenis traditionally drank locally grown coffee and a brew made from coffee husks (*qishr*).

With the decline in subsistence agriculture and the easy availability of food imports, diets had changed considerably by the 1980s. It had become cheaper to buy imported foods—flour, rice, tea, sugar, frozen chickens, canned fish and meat—than to grow or raise food locally. The traditional urban/rural markers blurred. Bread is still baked daily in rural households, in contrast to towns where bread is frequently bought; local meat is still purchased weekly by many rural families; but in terms of imported foods, most are as available to the rural population as they are in towns and cities. The consumption of rice with vegetable stew is now popular in rural Yemen. Tea has nearly replaced the traditional brew made from coffee husks.

Meanwhile traditional local foods have gained in economic value. The price of local meat, grain (especially sorghum), fruit, nuts, honey, and coffee is grossly inflated. In the 1980s, local meat and nuts sold at four times the price of imports. Today, a pint of Yemeni honey can cost up to US \$100.00. Although most Yemenis still value traditional foods, they can no longer afford to consume these regularly. Whereas the consumption of *'aṣīṭ* in rural areas has declined markedly since the 1970s, its consumption in towns has increased because the dish has now acquired a nostalgic value.<sup>31</sup> Imported pumpernickel and rye breads are savored because they remind Yemenis of a variety of grain (*'alas*) that is no longer grown.

### Poetry

Nearly everyone composed poetry in traditional Yemen. Scholars composed long poems to express their feelings about social issues. Tribesmen composed poems to present their cases in dispute mediation. Women composed poems which they sang while grinding grain in order to influence decisions that concerned them.<sup>32</sup> And although it is said that *Banī Khums* do not compose poetry, the *Muzayyinah* (female professional musician) of the community I lived in frequently sang her own compositions. I was also told that in communities close to Sanaa, women dancers (*Qabā'il* and elite) would engage in poetic repartee with professional musicians.

As Caton writes, in Yemen, "The ability to compose verse is not something acquired or overlaid as some sort of cultivated veneer; it is thought to be inalienable from the person" [Caton 1990: 26]. All Yemeni poetry is sung or chanted, and particular genres of poetry are associated with particular styles of singing. Some poetry is accompanied by drum, some by other musical instruments, and some is sung without instrumental accompaniment.

Caton analyzes three genres of poetry performed in Khawlān at-Ṭiyāl, south-east of Sanaa: *bālah*, *zāmil*, and *qaṣīdah*.<sup>33</sup> *Bālah* [Caton 1990: 79–126] is a poetic competition performed at men's wedding parties (*samrah*). As part of their responsibility toward their host, guests compose two-line poems in praise of God, the Prophet Muhammad and his son-in-law, Ali; then in praise of the host, the groom and other guests. The sequence closes with a religious invocation. Poets perform singly, and each tries to outshine the one before him. Humor and teasing are significant components of this exchange. Insults may be traded. Yet, if

an exchange becomes heated and threatens to degenerate into physical violence, someone always steps in with a concluding poem that ends the sequence.

The *bālah* process involves three parties: the poet, chorus, and audience. The chorus, which decides the tune and the refrain, consists of two ranks of men who form a circle. One rank chants the refrain, and the other chants a part of the verse. As they do so, they move sideways to a slow beat. Meanwhile, the other guests are silently composing poems. When a poet has a verse, he enters the circle and chants the first hemistich while walking half the circle's circumference. The chorus may then chant part of his verse before he completes his, as he walks the remainder of the circle. When he is done, the poet exits the circle, leaving the chorus to chant the refrain. Then he either re-enters the circle with another verse, or someone else enters the circle and tries to top his composition. The audience listens carefully to judge verses for their quality, appropriateness and adherence to established rules of poetic composition. This game of challenge and response lasts for the duration of the party. Participation is required of all *Qabā'il* present, and a good performance enhances the poet's honor. The focus of the event is on the performance itself: the act of composition, the poets' adherence to rules of rhyme and meter, and the suspense invoked during the competition. The actual verses are soon forgotten.

The poetic text is given greater emphasis in *zāmil*, another genre of tribal poetry [Caton 1990: 127–79]. A *zāmil* is a two-line poem, composed by a single poet and chanted by two ranks of men marching towards an audience. It is performed when members of two or more families or villages meet, as is the custom during weddings, religious festivals and the mediation process in tribal disputes. Each delegation marches to the area chanting *zāmil*. The men are, "decked out in full tribal regalia, rifles slung over the shoulder; they walk in a brisk step, sometimes hand in hand" [Caton 1990: 128]. At Yemeni weddings, *zāmil* is performed in the processions that accompany the groom to the mosque and back to his house (*zaf-fah*), and by guests who come to attend the wedding party. Styles in *zāmil* performance vary with tribe. Thus performance of *zāmil*, like clothing, marks a group as tribal and identifies the particular tribe or region involved. The performance of *zāmil* may be accompanied by drumming or *bara'* dancing.

*Zāmil* poems are more politically oriented than those of *bālah*. The text always addresses a specific issue, often a grievance. The person (or group) who feels wronged will compose a *zāmil* to state his/its case. The poetic response is also couched in a *zāmil* composed in the same rhyme scheme. Parties and mediators in a tribal dispute will frame their points of view through *zāmil* poems, and someone with a grievance can shame the perpetrator into making amends by composing a *zāmil*. *Zāmil* is greatly admired as art, and the texts of good examples are recited repeatedly and preserved for generations.

Whereas *bālah* is always performed indoors at night, *zāmil* is performed outdoors. Melody is important in both *bālah* and *zāmil*, but the verb used to describe the recitation of both poetic genres is *ṣayyaha* (to chant) rather than *ghannaya* (to sing). While no musical instruments are used in *bālah* performance, *zāmil* may be accompanied by drumming. The drums used in this context are the *ṭāṣah* and the *marfa'* (two kinds of kettledrum). These drums also play important ritual roles in rural Yemeni society. During weddings, the *ṭāṣah* accompanies the groom to the

mosque and back; its drumming meets important guests from outside the village and accompanies them to the host's house. The *tāṣah* also heralds important announcements and *bara'* dancing, and its beat supports men engaged in cooperative work projects. The two drums are beaten to announce the beginning and ending of the fasting month of Ramadan. The beat of the *marfa'* alone, on the other hand, signals extraordinary events, such as a flood or a murder [Lambert 1990: 90].

The *qaṣīdah*, the third genre of poetry discussed by Caton, is a long poem composed by a master poet [1990: 180–248] and delivered by messenger to another poet. The messenger may be a professional musician, who will then set the poem to music and sing it. This type of singing, which may be accompanied by musical instruments and/or dancing, is called *ghannā'* (from the same root as *ghannaya*). It is considered frivolous play and not as honorable as chanting.

Like *zāmīl*, a *qaṣīdah* is issue oriented, but it is defined as a personal response to historical situations which touch the poet's emotions. Like the other two genres of poetry described, a *qaṣīdah* also requires a response, but the response here may be separated in time and space. The poet who composes a *qaṣīdah* "sends" it, in writing or orally with a messenger, to another poet, who is expected to compose a response.

The traditional *qaṣīdah* opens with a reference to the poet as speaker of the poem. This opening is followed by religious invocations, which are followed in turn by poetic allusions to the creative process as the poet's response to emotional distress. After this is a section addressed to the messenger, then instructions to the messenger to greet the recipients. Finally, one arrives at the message. The poem concludes in a religious vein [Caton 1990: 188–96].

In contrast to the other two genres of poetry discussed, the focus of the *qaṣīdah* is on the individual composer, and the topics covered need not be specifically related to tribal issues. Yet even the *qaṣīdah* may play a role in conflict resolution, as when it consists of an open message from one tribal leader (*shaykh*) to another [see Lambert 1990: 92].

There has always been more variation in *qaṣīdah* poems than in other genres of poetry. Currently, changes in the format and content of *qaṣīdah* poems are being used to signal a new kind of poem. In the compositions of young urban poets (exemplified by al-Gharsī in Caton's study), much of the formulaic content of the traditional *qaṣīdah* is removed. Only the religious invocations and the message are emphasized [Caton 1990: 208–215]. *Qaṣīdah* poetry is now distributed throughout Yemen by means of cassette tape recordings, and political questions are debated through this medium. W. Flagg Miller, who studied contemporary cassette poetry in Yemen, writes that traditional tribal metaphors as well as traditional food metaphors are used to discuss current events [1996a].

Currently, as in the past, tribal and national leaders try to influence public opinion through poetry. When they are not accomplished poets themselves, they try to keep poets on hand to compose for them. It is clear that poetry is a powerful political tool in this society, where power is exercised through persuasion, rather than coercion, and where political life is not divorced from social life.

Although tribal poetry is not as elaborated in al-Ahjur as it is in Khawlān at-Ṭiyāl, it is still very much part of ceremonial and daily communication. *Bālah* is



not performed north of Sanaa, and I heard *zāmil* most frequently in wedding processions. Many families hired a famous poet from the nearby town of Kawkaban to lead these processions and compose the verses that all in the procession would then recite. (Ironically, this poet was a member of the religious elite and would not be composing *zāmil* if he adhered strictly to the folk model of social structure described above.) *Zāmil* was also performed during the celebration of religious holidays by dancers as they walked from one dance site to another. Almost everyone in al-Ahjur listens attentively to *qaṣīdah* poetry sung on cassette tapes or on the radio, and they quote verses from poems to punctuate conversation. Professional musicians regularly compose songs of praise for guests at large parties; the person honored is expected to tip them. Women regularly recited verses of their own composition to express admiration or annoyance. Because women no longer grind grain by hand, however, they no longer compose poems at the mortar, and many younger women do not compose poetry at all.

### Dancing

Two genres of dancing are performed in al-Ahjur.<sup>34</sup> The first of these, *bara'*, is recognized as one of the most important tribal markers in Yemen. *Bara'* is performed by men only to the accompaniment of drumming. By definition, all *Qabā'il* perform *bara'* just as they all compose poetry. Each tribe has its characteristic form of *bara'*, which differs from others in beat, steps used, and the ways in which performers wield their daggers. Thus, like *zāmil* poetry, *bara'* performance identifies performers' tribal affiliation as well as marking tribalism in general.

The dance is performed out of doors, during weddings, religious holidays, cooperative work activity, whenever tribesmen travel together, and at home to honor distinguished guests. In other parts of the highlands, it is performed during the mediation of disputes, in conjunction with *zāmil*. *Bara'* is also performed by leaders of the republic at important functions.

There are many variations in *bara'* performance. The following describes the performance in the field site of al-Ahjur and the surrounding region. Here it is performed in an arc formed by three to over twenty men, each holding a dagger in his right hand and a *shāl* in his left. The men stand close enough to one another so that each can place a hand on his neighbor's shoulder or his waist, with elbow slightly bent [Figure 9]. To the fast paced accompaniment of one or two drums (no other musical instrument or chant is used to accompany *bara'* in this area), the men perform hops, skips, small jumps, slides, turns and knee bends while brandishing their daggers above shoulder level. The line of dancers may reverse its direction of movement, or lunge forward towards the middle of the arc and step back. The coordination of steps to drumming is so close that it is not initially clear to the observer whether changes in rhythm are initiated by dancers or drummers. In practice, all eyes are directed toward a leader who performs near the middle of the line of dancers; it is he who decides which steps to perform and initiates changes in rhythm. This leader is flanked by the older and more skillful dancers, while novices perform at the two ends of the arc. During a performance, others may join in, but always at the edges. As in most Yemeni dances, the



*Figure 9 Bara' performed in al-Huṣṣn, al-Ahjur, 1979 (Photo, Najwa Adra).*

performance is divided into three sections, each with a progressively faster rhythm. When all three segments have been performed and the line breaks up, two of the more adept dancers may perform a duet of complicated turns and grapevines, while others watch [Figure 10]. Alternately, dancers leave the dance as they tire, until only two are left to perform this duet.

In the past, the “whole of al-Ahjur”, the adult male population of some 24 villages, would perform together in what is reputed to have been a wonderful spectacle. They would begin near the bottom of the valley and dance their way toward the higher elevations in the course of an afternoon. Religious holidays were celebrated with dancing for a week or two. Yet in 1978–79, *bara'* was performed only by members of a single village together. They performed for a mere two days during each religious holiday. Members of the tribal as well as the non-tribal population often commented on the decline of *bara'* performance, saying that it used to be performed more frequently, for longer periods, and by more people. By 1983, only one *Muzayyin* connected to a four-village cluster knew the traditional beat.

In one village that prided itself on its modernity, young men taught each other new *bara'* steps from other parts of the country that they had seen on television or in Sanaa. This would have been inconceivable in the past, since *bara'* is perceived to have survived unchanged since pre-Islamic times, like the tribal names with which it is linked.

As *bara'* performance in some of al-Ahjur's villages became half-hearted, this dance was revitalized in new urban contexts. By the 1980s, *Qabā'il* were going into Sanaa to celebrate religious holidays and performing *bara'* in the public squares of Sanaa instead of al-Ahjur.<sup>35</sup> This situation was common to other rural communities as well. *Bara'* could thus be seen on Fridays in the nearby town of Shibam, whose market had expanded four-fold in the span of a few years. Traditionally, *bara'* had always been performed during the day. Now one could see it at night during weddings in Sanaa. Most surprising of all was that *bara'* was now regularly incorporated into the weddings of al-Ahjur's resident *Sādah*. This signature dance of rural *Qabā'il* now seems to be favored by urbanites and *Sādah*.

The national government has appropriated *bara'* to represent Yemeni nationalism. Government officials perform *bara'* at formal functions, and national day celebrations include performances of *bara'* from all over Yemen. Yemen's professional dance troupe performs a choreographed version of *bara'* daily on television. The choreographed *bara'*, however, lacks the improvisation and spontaneity of the dance as it is usually performed. Since many Yemenis criticized the dance as “not *bara'*”, Sanaa television has responded by bringing in expert tribal dancers to perform.

Yemenis agree that *bara'* is dancing behavior, but they do not classify it as *raqs*.<sup>36</sup> *Raqṣ*, the generic Arabic term usually translated into English as “dancing”, connotes frivolity in the Arab World. It is associated with light-hearted play, music and flirtation, and it is contrasted with the dignified presence required of leaders and scholars. While the latter may perform *raqs*, they will do so only in the most intimate contexts. In fact, the appropriate contexts of performance of all genres of *raqs* are clearly delimited. To perform *raqs* outside these contexts is



Figure 10 Duet performed at the close of a bara'. The drummer can be seen center back (Photo, Najwa Adra).

highly censured [Adra, in press]. But *bara'* performance is not defined as frivolous; it is considered a demonstration of skill and valor, and thus legitimately performed by adult men in public.

There is a second genre of dancing performed in al-Ahjur, called *lu'b* (lit., "play"), which is classified as *raqs*, and it is performed indoors, at night, to the accompaniment of love songs. Like *bara'*, it is highly appreciated by *Qabā'il*, but unlike *bara'*, it is considered play, pure and simple. *Lu'b* is not said to symbolize tribe, and the performance of *lu'b* cannot normally serve as a tribal marker. *Bara'* and *lu'b* differ, not only in their contexts of performance and verbal associations, but in their musical accompaniment, identity of performers and audience, steps, and dynamics.

*Lu'b* is a couple dance performed by two women at gatherings of women, two men at gatherings of men or, in very intimate contexts, a man and woman together. In contrast to the immutability of *bara'*, *lu'b* is expected to change constantly as new steps and tempi are added and others deleted. As with fashion changes in clothing, changes in *lu'b* performance are usually initiated in Sanaa and take some time to filter to al-Ahjur. *Lu'b* may vary with region or village, and local dancing may be influenced by steps learned from other villages through travel or from visitors.

*Lu'b* is performed in the evenings and throughout the night during wedding celebrations. It is also performed at parties held to celebrate the end of a woman's postpartum seclusion, the circumcision of a boy,<sup>37</sup> or at any other festive time. In the past, when a whole village would harvest crops together, *lu'b* would be performed in the evening after harvest.

These dancing events are held in the largest room in the village. Invariably, the room is packed with people sitting very close together on mattresses on the floor. The bride, groom, or new mother in honor of whom the celebration is held sit in the farthest corner away from the door, as do any special guests of honor. Others fill in the space as they come in. The host or hostess do not sit with the guests. They cater to their needs and those of the musicians by serving them drinks and making sure that they are comfortable.

Musicians sit near the center of the room and face a small space (about four feet square) that is left vacant for dancing. When two guests wish to dance, they get up and move into the dance space, vacating it after they finish dancing. The spectators watch the dancing while they converse with each other. Women may ululate or confer blessings on the dancers. If a dancer makes a mistake, it is recognized good naturedly with comments like "She/he lost the beat," or "She/he's going too fast." Verbal compliments are not usually given, but when a dance is performed particularly well, conversation stops.

The traditional *lu'b* performed in al-Ahjur in the 1970s only by older men and women was called the *lā'ibiyah*. It is a slow dance consisting almost entirely of the dancers, side by side and holding hands, moving slowly up and down with very small steps in place. Until the 1940s, this dance was performed on top of a kerchief (*mandīl*), and dancers had to restrict their movements to its boundaries [Al-Sayyid 'Abd al-Karīm Muḥammad Sharaf al-Dīn, personal communication]. The dance is performed in three parts, each with a different rhythm. When women perform this dance, the last part is extended into what is known as

*nuwwāsh*. Each dancer will begin rhythmically to throw her head and upper torso forward and to the sides with increasingly larger movements until the movements themselves appear to separate the partners. Then the music quickens and the performers enter the crowd of spectators each from a different side of the room while they continue to fling their upper bodies. They travel in this manner through the crowd, and their paths cross at some point near the far end of the room, ideally before the bride or guest of honor. The spectators ululate and bless each dancer as she approaches them, and they may extend a steadying hand to her. The dancer may stop to perform for short periods before a friend or an honored guest, but both dancers will eventually make their way back to the musicians whom they will kiss to signal the ending of the dance. *Nuwwāsh* is characterized by considerably greater abandon than is found in any other parts of the dance. Travelling among the spectators in *nuwwāsh* is called *khidmah* (lit., "service") and is done as a gesture of respect to spectators (*iḥtirāman lahum*). It is recognized as the expression of deep heartfelt emotion, and often performed by women whose lives are unhappy. Men do not perform *nuwwāsh*.

The traditional dances are not appreciated by the younger members of the community. Conversation level among spectators is notably higher during performance of the traditional dances than it is when contemporary dances are performed, indicating a lack of interest. Nevertheless these are the dances that are performed during an important protective wedding ritual (*mashājib*) at both women's and men's wedding festivities.

Younger women perform variations of another dance. The *dasa'*, named after the beat of the first part, involves more complicated footwork. In the first part, each dancer outlines a square on the floor through a series of weight shifts forward and back. This is punctuated by small, quick circles drawn by the left foot as it is held slightly above floor level. Dancers may turn and perform with their backs to the audience for some of the time, while remaining side by side. The second part has a faster beat and more complicated footwork. A square is also outlined on the floor, but it is done with considerably more flourish, with faster turns, and the focus of the body remains forward. A good dancer barely touches the floor during this segment. The last part is also fast, but the step is a simple sideways weight shift like that of the older *lā'ibiyah*. In the 1980s, the more accomplished dancers followed contemporary Sanaa fashions and skipped the first part of the dance, beginning with the second part, embellished with more complicated steps. Some younger dancers add a *nuwwāsh* to a dance before concluding it.

Men's dancing is similar in steps but differs in the use of space. Men face each other and move around each other instead of dancing side by side. They hold daggers in their right hands, and hold each other's left hand. Some men also shimmy their upper bodies during dancing [Figure 11]. In both women's and men's dancing, close friends or relatives usually dance together. Changes in beat and length of duration of the dance are decided by the lead dancer, as in *bara'*, but it is usually difficult to judge who the leader is simply from watching.

Whereas *bara'* is performed to drum alone, *lu'b* is accompanied by song and a variety of musical instruments: *'ūd* (lute) in urban or urbane settings; *mizmār* (a double reed flute), *ṣaḥn* (a form of cymbal in which a copper tray is struck by a



Figure 11 Men performing *lu'b* at a wedding in al-Ahjur. The two professional musicians are sitting on the right. The man is playing *mizmār*, while his sister plays drum. Her hair is covered with a black *lithmah*, which she has pulled up to cover her mouth (Photo, Daniel Varisco).

ring) and kettledrum in the countryside and by rural folk in towns. Professional musicians are hired to accompany *lu'b* at large parties.<sup>38</sup> *Mizmār* is played by men, while the *ṣaḥn* is played by women.

Song lyrics are important to the appreciation of the dance. In urban settings, they may be *qaṣīdahs* set to 'ūd music. Songs that accompany *mizmār* are usually love songs or involve praises to the Prophet Muhammad. Lyrics, which are chosen by the musicians, also may provide social commentary and praise and criticism of the dancers. Yet song lyrics considered appropriate for *nuwwāsh* are always religious and meant to support and protect the dancers.

Classified as *raqs*, *lu'b* performance is not considered dignified behavior, and its legality in terms of Islamic law is open to debate. The *mizmār*, in particular, has sexual connotations. It is jokingly referred to as the cock of heaven (*dīk al-jannah*). The act of playing the *mizmār* is said to look indecently phallic because the player's blown up cheeks resemble testicles [Lambert 1990: 315–16]. The last two *imams* of Yemen banned *lu'b* performances in Sanaa, officially for religious and moral reasons, but apparently because sung poems were often critical of the imamate. Even during the ban, however, residents of Sanaa continued to perform

this dance. They simply stuffed their windows with cushions to muffle the sounds of music or transformed the first floor windowless storage area into a sitting room (*dīwān*) so that they could dance undetected.<sup>39</sup>

In sum, both *bara'* and *lu'b* have undergone change. The changes in *lu'b* performance are expected, since change is a defining element of this genre of dancing. Changes in *bara'* and the decline in its performance were more disturbing to residents of al-Ahjur. In general, they blamed declining energy levels. They would argue repeatedly that they had been blemished by prosperity and the availability of modern technology, and that people no longer had the stamina to perform *bara'*. They blamed auto transportation as well as the availability and consequent dependence on new, "weak" city foods, such as rice, sugar, wheat flour and soft drinks. Some said that, due to outmigration, there were not enough *muzayyins* around who knew the appropriate *bara'* rhythms. Innovations in *bara'* performance introduced by young men were severely criticized, and older men, the traditional leaders of *bara'*, refused to participate in the new dances.

### THE TRIBE AND ITS MARKERS

An appreciation of the extent to which the images described in the previous section replicate and construct tribal identity depends upon an understanding of what tribalism means in Yemen. In the following sections, the social, political, and economic roles of the tribe are described, along with an explication of the tribal honor code, an important defining quality of tribal identity. Recent changes in the significance of tribalism are discussed. Finally, I trace the ways in which esthetic tribal markers replicate and construct tribal identity in the northern highlands.

#### Context: The Traditional Model of Social Status

The tribal population forms the large middle grouping in the traditional three-tiered model of social structure described earlier. Yet the model alone does not indicate the extent to which all social status groups depended on the tribes economically and militarily. The religious elite was ascribed the highest social status. Its members were asked to mediate intertribal disputes and served as healers and Quranic teachers.<sup>40</sup> In return for their services, they were paid in agricultural produce, land or sometimes currency. During the Zaydi imamate, members of the elite were in a good position to accumulate wealth, since tax collectors were recruited from this group, and the *imams* used excessive taxation to keep the population under control. The religious elite was associated with towns and identified with urban civilization. Those who lived in rural areas actively maintained ties with relatives living in towns and contrasted themselves with less urbane country folk.

The elite, like others who were defined as non-tribal, were protected by tribal customary law. That is, *Qabā'il* were honor-bound to protect them. For a tribesman to hurt a member of the elite was considered a major felony. Communities with large numbers of resident elite were designated as sanctuaries (*hijrahs*) where violence was prohibited. All towns and markets were also defined as sanctuaries,



because of their large non-tribal populations. In each case, the surrounding tribes were responsible to insure the peace of these locations [Dresch 1981].

Also protected by the tribes and associated with towns and markets were the *Banī Khums*, who held the lowest status positions in this society. Like the elite, they were paid in cash or agricultural produce for their services, and they were protected by tribal customary law. *Banī Khums*, however, were not permitted to own land before the Revolution. The low status of *Banī Khums* was due to the fact that their income depended on payment for services rather than the products of their own land. The tasks they performed were not actually considered inherently demeaning. *Qabā'il* butchered meat, cultivated onions, played musical instruments, and performed other tasks associated with the service groups without consequent loss of prestige, so long as these tasks were not considered their primary sources of subsistence. It is interesting to note that tribal valuation of economic independence similarly compromised the respect due to members of the elite who depended on wages for their subsistence.

Between the religious elite and *Banī Khums*, in a system of mutual dependence, were the tribes. The Yemeni tribe is a territorial unit [Adra 1982, Bédoucha 1987, Dresch 1989, Gingrich 1989b]. It is also a political and military unit. Lip service is given to a genealogical segmentary ideology. That is, *Qabā'il* are likely to explain the unity of a tribe or tribal segment in terms of "sharing an ancestor" (*jad wāḥid*) [Bédoucha 1987]. In practice, however, mobility between territories and shifting allegiances lead to fluidity in tribal membership [Bédoucha 1987, Dresch 1989]. Essentially, Yemeni villages and tribes are cooperative territorially based units whose members owe each other specified sets of responsibilities [Adra 1982: 115]. These units are also perceived to be analogous units in opposition to others, hence the concept of segmentation [Adra 1982: 116–32; see also Bédoucha 1987].

#### The Tribal Honor Code

*Qabā'il* are defined by a number of criteria. Genealogically, they are considered to be descendants of *Qaḥṭān*, eponymous ancestor of southern Arabs, and they maintain genealogies to a depth of 5–7 generations. This contrasts with *Sādah*, who are descended from 'Adnān, ancestor of northern Arabs, and who trace their genealogies to the Prophet Muhammad. *Banī Khums* lack a genealogical status that is recognized by *Qabā'il* and *Sādah*. Occupation also serves to define the tribes. *Qabā'il* of the northern highlands are primarily small farmers who own some land which they supplement with a variety of sharecropping and rental arrangements.<sup>41</sup>

*Qabā'il* are also defined as those who adhere to customary law. This is a flexible set of principles and precedents that is based on consensus and persuasion rather than coercion [Adra 1982, Caton 1990, Dresch 1989: 50] and on the inviolability of one's word. That is, if someone agrees to an arrangement, he or she is honor-bound to abide by it. Disputes are mediated by those who are cognizant of the principles of customary law and who are not directly involved in the conflict. Ideally, these are members of the non-tribal elite, or they may be tribal leaders from other regions. The resolution of disputes is sealed with the sacrifice of animals of varying value, according to the seriousness of the breach involved, and

all parties are expected to partake of the meat together. This meal is binding by definition. Also implicit in customary law is an egalitarianism that belies the societal status distinctions described above. The dictates of customary law do not vary according to wealth or power.

Customary law helps define and regulate a tribal honor code that, more than anything else, serves to define *Qabā'il* to themselves, and by others. In accordance with this honor code, a *Qabīlī* is defined as someone who is courageous, generous, recognizes his obligations toward protégés, is faithful to his word, values his autonomy, and is industrious. This picture is one that is shared by *Qabā'il* of themselves and forms an important element in urban stereotypes of them. Numerous verses of poetry have historically lauded these virtues of *Qabā'il* [e.g., al-Mas'ūdī 1865: 236, al-Hamdānī 1884: 194]. Piety is also an important component of tribal self-definition [Caton 1990], although one that is not necessarily recognized by the elite. These ideals provide the standards of honor that *Qabā'il* are judged against. They are not intended to define personalities. No one thinks, for example, that individual *Qabā'il* cannot also be weak, dishonest, or stingy.

It will be noted that women have hardly been mentioned in this discussion. Among Yemenis, conversations about the tribe and what it stands for are usually couched in terms of males and their responsibilities. This is not to say that women are not recognized as tribal. Women actively work towards the construction of family honor as men do and their informal input is important in the resolution of disputes. Some tribal women, especially of the eastern desert, are known for their marksmanship as well as their tribal poetry. But tribal women are not displayed as tribal symbols, and they do not participate in public rituals of tribal display.<sup>42</sup>

The complex of law, values and ideals of expected behavior is known in Yemen as *qabyalah* [Adra 1982: 139–60].<sup>43</sup> In al-Ahjur the term refers to honor and valor and signifies beauty as well. A primary component of *qabyalah* is, of course, tribal political organization, with its emphasis on autonomy, resistance to authority, and an ethic of the equality of leaders to constituents. Tribal customary law perpetuates and protects *qabyalah*. Moreover, *qabyalah* refers to proper behavior according to accepted standards and to a tribal esthetic. Honorable behavior, especially that which involves interaction with other families or groups, or contexts in which mutual responsibilities are called upon, where the welfare of the group is involved and where presentation of self is important, is described as *qabyalah*. Also described as *qabyalah* is a beautifully and appropriately dressed man or woman. For the tribal population of the northern highlands *qabyalah* represents the good, the true and the beautiful.

The tribal honor code was respected by all members of Yemeni society. Although many of the elite associated tribalism with warfare and arrogance, they recognized that *qabyalah* connotes values that they also cherish—integrity, responsibility, hospitality, and courage. In important ways all members of the population aspired to be seen as espousing these tribal ideals through their behavior.

While *qabyalah* is the motivating ideology for appropriate behavior in public contexts, it masks the importance of strong agonistic pulls that are also integral to this culture. The intense cooperation idealized in *qabyalah* is not a communalism. It is a cooperation of distinct individuals with recognized divergent interests. A.

positive valuation of political and economic autonomy is basic to customary law, but there are contexts in which autonomy is assumed which are potentially disruptive to the cohesion demanded of *qabyalah*. These include, for example, the pulls of romantic love, friendship, economic interests and personal whim, which may come into conflict with the demands of kin and tribal affiliation. The way in which these potentially disruptive components are dealt with in Yemen (and elsewhere in the Arab World) is to keep them out of the public gaze. They are defined as personal issues, not to be flouted in public and not subject to regulation by customary law. Nevertheless, they are not repressed; their expression is permitted and encouraged, but only in prescribed, carefully bounded contexts that are defined as intimate. Caton comments that, although a positive valuation of autonomy is deep and taken for granted, and autonomy as a component of *qabyalah* is readily recognized, there is no single word for autonomy as there are for other recognized components of honor, *e.g.*, piety, generosity, courage [1990: 31]. This may well be due to the ambivalence surrounding the concept of autonomy in this culture.

Historically, *Qabā'il*'s roles as Yemen's warriors were utilized rather than diffused by the imamate which relied on tribal support for a fighting force and a tax base. The civil war that followed north Yemen's 1962 Revolution was fought largely by tribesmen, with some tribes supporting the *imam* while others supported republican forces. While the elite admired the courage of *Qabā'il* as warriors, they also feared them as destructive and too easily roused to anger. In South Yemen, *qabyalah* is defined as "tribal arrogance" by those who disapprove of tribalism [M. Rodionov, personal communication]. As Dyer has observed, "cultural forms do not have single determinate meanings—people make sense of them in different ways" [1993: 2].

### The Crude and the Rude

An urban/rural distinction that cross-cuts the social stratification model that was described above perpetuates this ambivalence even further. From this perspective, the tribes are defined as rural, while members of the elite and service groups are associated with market towns. Yet even this opposition of urbane town dwellers to rural tribes is marked by ambivalence. On the one hand, the perceived leisure and wealth of townspeople are envied by rural *Qabā'il*, and the "sophistication" of urban life is sometimes contrasted positively with the "simplicity" of tribal life. Not infrequently, *Qabā'il* will apologize for their simple cuisine and their ignorance of the outside world by saying ruefully, "*Nahnu ghayr Qabā'il* (We are only tribespeople)." Yet a simultaneous disdain toward townfolk is expressed in various ways. *Qabā'il* will disparage city folk for their "weak legs" and contrast this weakness to their own physical endurance. A case in point is the relative valuation of city vs. country food discussed above.

Urban life is considered by all to be easier than farming and rural chores. While *Qabā'il* may envy urban leisure, they set a great value by hard work. The societal perception of themselves as industrious is an important component of their own tribal identification. So when a plump town dweller is described as

*muftin* ("comfortable"), the term also has sarcastic connotations of idleness. A humorous *vé*se illustrates this attitude:

*Qad qultillak lā tishfaq al-ghaliḍah*

*Yawmayn thalāth taqūl anā marīḍah*

(I told you not to fall in love with a heavy woman.

In two or three days, she'll say, "I'm sick.")

In other words, if one falls in love with and marries a heavy (*i.e.*, comfortable) woman, she would not be up to the demands of rural work and will complain of illness to avoid her chores. Town dwellers, on the other hand, compare their life of relative leisure favorably to rural hard work, and urban women value body fat over slim figures. Nevertheless, they do often express their admiration for the strength and endurance of *Qabā'il*.

Another area of ambivalence is in a differential valuation of various forms of knowledge. While the religious elite may disparage tribesmen for their ignorance of religious law, *Qabā'il* disdain the urban population for their ignorance of customary law, saying that town dwellers (including members of the religious elite) "don't know anything." Compare this with Caton's description of the urban educated attitude towards colloquial (largely rural) poetry, "denigrating it for its supposed ungrammaticality while at the same time admiring it for its spontaneity and wit" [1990: 23].

Members of the *Banī Khums* use these ambivalent attitudes to their advantage. While those who live in rural areas participate actively in tribal life, they adhere self-consciously to urban rather than rural fashions in dress, thus turning the hierarchical model on its head. They may ally themselves with the urban elite in informal conversation, implying their perceived superiority to farmers whom they refer to as *Ṣāhib al-baqarah* (rube, literally, cowman). Thus, relations between Yemen's social strata are characterized by mutual dependence, and a simultaneous mutual disdain and admiration.

### Tribal Dominance

Although the tribal population technically fell into the middle position of traditional northern Yemen's three-tiered social stratification system, tribal dominance was the established fact, historically, during the time of fieldwork in 1978–79 and well into the mid-1980s. Even before the Revolution, several factors restrained the expression of the stratification implied in the folk model of the social structure. The religious elite and the client groupings depended on the tribes economically and militarily. Tribal customary law did not grant anyone coercive power. Both the customary law and Zaydī Islamic law were egalitarian in principle. Furthermore, the tribes protected and fed the country in their roles as warriors and farmers. In return they received needed services. *Qabā'il* could not remain tribal by their own self-definition in the absence of the elite and *Banī Khums*; neither would these groups have a *raison d'être* in the absence of the tribes and tribal institutions. To top it all off, the tribes were associated with an honor code that was admired and emulated by all members of the society.

## Changes: Images of a Nation

Beginning with the Revolution and the establishment of a Republican central government, the relationship between tribes and government began to change. This shift was aided greatly by televised images attesting to the power and benevolence of the government.<sup>44</sup> The President was shown daily receiving ambassadors, conferring with other heads of state, ministering to the needs of the country, and leading the army. The impressive array of military hardware shown on TV could not help but engender the respect of a people who associated warfare with honor. *Qabā'il* joined the army, thus forming new allegiances to a national rather than regional body.

As government services, such as the provision of roads, hospitals, clinics and schools, expanded to al-Ahjur and other tribal regions, *Qabā'il* began to recognize benefits in a strong central government. Images of political autonomy were replaced by an increasing dependence on the government. Participation in the world market economy, and the subsequent decline of subsistence agriculture, made a myth of tribal economic autonomy. Migrants returning from Saudi Arabia brought with them new attitudes and the desire for more urbanized lifestyles. As Dresch observes, the outside world is no longer peripheral to tribal political discourse [1989: 167]. Tribal definitions of themselves have changed. Their lives are no longer so rugged as before. Those who remain farmers can now buy, rather than collect, fuelwood. They travel by truck, and light their homes with electricity.

Schools and television affected the ways in which other Yemenis were perceived as well. During the 1980s students in school learned the new national anthem and participated in discussions of the national charter (*mīthāq*). Through television they became aware that countless other Yemenis were also participating in such discussions. Yemenis saw themselves as working together to create a unified Yemeni nation. Television programs featuring rural life showed *Qabā'il* farming, reciting tribal poetry, and performing *bara'* and other dances. While such programs brought to awareness the diversity found in Yemen, they also stressed the commonality of all Yemenis. It could be seen that all Yemenis shared in valuing *qabyalah*. A new sense of nation as an "imagined community" [Anderson 1991: 145] was fostered.

A new, largely urban understanding of Islam was imported, along with nationalism, and taught in schools. This is a conservative interpretation of religion that encourages the veiling and seclusion of women, discourages *raqs* dancing and music, all night wedding celebrations, and recourse to customary law. This point of view, which presents itself and Islam as nationalist, is self-consciously anti-tribal.

By the mid-1980s people who used to refer to themselves as *Qabā'il* were now likely to use the term *fallāḥīn*, which denotes "farmers" and is the term most often used on television for Yemen's rural population. An increasing number of families began to refer their disputes to the government court in Shibam, instead of relying on tribal mediation techniques. Correspondingly, a number of tribal markers such as *bara'* (and *bālah*) declined in importance.

## Signs of Tribe and Tribalness

Given the tribal system described above and the changes brought about by modernization, how do old and new tribal markers signify Yemeni tribalism? Or, in Bateson's terminology, what information do the markers and the tribal system contain about each other? The way in which agricultural land is organized reconstructs iconically the fundamental relations of cooperation and autonomy that motivate tribal life. Traditional housing patterns index the history of warfare, the exceptional value of agricultural land, and rural poverty. Newer houses, on the other hand, signal greater security, the reduced value of land and a new importance attached to personal comfort.

Traditional rural foods reflected what was available. Yet, as André Gingrich argues for the Munebbih, another northern highland tribal area, "Food values... form part of a discourse... used ideologically by outsiders to marginalize this tribe," while within the tribe, "these food values still bear important social meaning" [1989a: 138]. In other words, food, as an index of rural life, took on the value ascribed to it. *Qabā'il* valued rural foods, while others disdained them. That rural foods are currently much more expensive than imports represents a belief in the superiority of all that is Yemeni, as well as a postmodern nostalgia for an imagined glorious past. The blurring of urban/rural distinctions in diet reflects a similar blurring in the new Yemeni nation.

Tribal clothing styles were also indexical of social status groups. Mundy, in her discussion of Sanaa dress, writes, "To its defenders dress is not a matter of individual style, but instead a necessary expression of 'political' order, that is, of the division of labor" [1983: 538]. To the few older men who continued to wear the highly elaborated flowing garments and cumbersome sleeves of the traditional urban elite, this has become "a symbol of the old order" [Mundy 1983: 538].

The arms carried by *Qabā'il* index their roles as warriors and protectors of the weak. The upright and utilitarian tribal *jambiyyah* is, however, iconic of tribal definitions of self, as the ornate *thūmah* was iconic of a sophisticated and protected class. That young tribal women are now wearing the urban *sharshaf* as an item of dress clothing signals a shift in identification and an increase in the values ascribed to urban life.

In terms of poetry, *Qabā'il* play at being tribal in the *bālah* event. *Bālah* performance not only establishes the honor of individual poets, it also signifies *qabyalah*: the ideal tribesman, autonomy and its relationship to tribal cohesion, the egalitarian ethic, as well as of the opposition and competition as motivating principles in tribal life. Through poetic content and the structure of the event, younger *Qabā'il* learn the attitudes and behaviors expected of them. The content of the poems is indexical: "...an image of the tribesman is constructed by the use of formulas expressing piety, courage, prowess, and other qualities of the ideal tribesman. Far more than just the composition of a poem takes place in this performance; a construction of self is achieved in the act of address" [Caton 1990: 94]. To compose a poem is a guest's responsibility to his host; the mutual responsibilities entailed in the guest/host relationship constitute a metaphor of tribal relationships [Adra 1982: 180-84, Gingrich 1989a].

The structure of the *bālah* is an icon of the principles of tribalism. The chorus both supports the poet and establishes the tune that he has to follow. When the poet recites his composition, he stands alone but within this supportive group of peers. That is, when he plays by the rules, he is allowed space in which to express himself. Anyone at the party may compose a poem, just as all are equal under customary law. The three groups—poet, chorus, and audience—replicate the three parties necessary for dispute mediation. The element of competition—of challenge and retort—represents the opposition that exists in this system between tribal units.

Caton argues further that this poetic genre is symbolic violence. He writes that *bālah*'s challenge and counterchallenge are "like a gun...a weapon by which a man wins and defends his honor" [1990: 28]. Moreover, as symbolic violence, poetry restrains the uncontrolled passion that may lead to actual violence: "We arrive here at a vital distinction between real violence—brute force expelled in an effort to coerce—and symbolic violence, whose aim is to make a statement about the actors, their relationship to each other, and the contest in which they are opposed" [1990: 30].

All of the poetic genres discussed—*bālah*, *zāmil*, and *qaṣīdah*—are iconic of the value placed on self-control:

When we see ... how massively the poet is restricted by conventions of meter, rhyme, alliteration, and line structure, we can appreciate the control, the self-possession that this art form requires. Yet the poet is not suppressing or muffling his emotions. In the poems he speaks of the great passions that events have stirred in his breast and that have moved him to compose verse. Thus, the good poet may vent his passions but always in perfectly controlled technique [Caton 1990: 31].

This is a perfect metaphor of the relationship between *qabyalah* and the agonistic side of tribalism. Within specified constraints, a tribesman is encouraged to express his emotions.

The composition and performance of *zāmil* also signifies the tribe. Moreover, by replacing coercive force with persuasion, *zāmil* is a tool that preserves the autonomy and honor of *Qabā'il* [Caton 1990: 13]. In an egalitarian system that does not incorporate any accepted means of coercion, peace can only be maintained through successful efforts at persuasion. This explains the power of poetry in dispute settlements. That this art form is appreciated by all increases its persuasive force.

The *qaṣīdah* also has considerable persuasive power. This genre, with its focus on the individual composer, and its musical and dance accompaniment, replicates and constructs the more agonistic, emotive side of tribalism. (To some extent, the bawdy humor and focus on individuals in competition of *bālah* performance also does this.) The three genres of poetry, together with their contrasting styles and contexts of performance, replicate the two sides of tribalism: *qabyalah* and that which it masks.

Changes in the poetry, such as shortening the formulaic greeting and placing greater emphasis on the message, bring this poetry in line with newer, urban attitudes and behaviors. With this new model, the *qaṣīdah* is redefined. As Caton argues, "The consequences of such redefinition go beyond esthetics to the social

construction of self. Al-Gharsī is representing himself as a different kind of tribesman from his closest competitors through the poetic practices he adopts" [Caton 1990: 184–85].

Yet even more recent poetry is actively incorporating traditional tribal and food metaphors. This is another case in which tribal images have been revitalized by young urban Yemenis. It is, as Miller observes, "a kind of self-reflexive meta-commentary on traditional ways of life and expression that many find highly engaging" [Miller 1996a: 7].

Dancing, like poetry, is thought to be inherently Yemeni. At a party in Sanaa, I once heard an older woman chiding a young woman who told me that she didn't know how to dance. "Are you Yemeni?" the older woman asked. In reply to my friend's affirmative, she said emphatically, "If you are Yemeni, you can dance!"

As the various genres of poetry replicated all aspects of tribalism, the same iconicity is readily apparent in the opposition of *bara'* to *lu'b* in the dancing of al-Ahjur. *Bara'* presents the ultimate *qabyalah* behavior, structurally analogous to the *bālah* discussed above. *Qabā'il*, by performing *bara'* outdoors in plain daylight, are showing off and constructing their *qabyalah* to themselves, each other and to any strangers present. That the leader performs in the midst of the dancers and is not distinguished by any particular markers other than his skill in dancing, is iconic of the egalitarianism in tribal society. The duet at the conclusion of a *bara'* highlights individual virtuosity. Yet the fact that it is optional and not an intrinsic part of the performance reinforces the non-hierarchical message. Performers flourish the tribal dagger, and some carry rifles while performing, both signals of tribal affiliation. Someone who does not own a dagger, or does not have his with him, will borrow one in order to perform. These also reinforce the association of the tribal population with warfare. Performing *bara'* requires endurance as well as skill, a reflection on the value placed on hard work. The skill required in performing *bara'* is not that of intricacy in steps or acrobatic prowess, but in the ability to coordinate one's movements with others and with music in a small space, where lack of such skill and coordination would certainly result in upsetting the performance but might also result in physical injury. These are exactly the skills required of *qabyalah*—to be very much aware of what others are doing and to adapt and coordinate with them. In *bara'*, skilled performers gently help guide those who are less skilled with a touch of the hand. Similarly in real life, tribesmen are expected to help those in need. Performing *bara'* is considered a performance of skill and a demonstration of honor—of *qabyalah* and all that it means to be tribal [Adra 1982: 274–87].

*Lu'b*, on the other hand, expresses and constructs the agonistic sides of tribal life. That *lu'b* is performed indoors, at night, away from public gaze,<sup>45</sup> defines the appropriate contexts for intimate behavior. Further, there is more room for personal expression in the performance of *lu'b* than there is in *bara'*. Whereas all tribal men in a particular community are expected to participate in *bara'*, performance of *lu'b* is determined purely by individual whim. Improvisation in *lu'b* is more idiosyncratic and focuses attention on the individual performer. The small space available for *lu'b* performance is metaphoric of the clearly bounded contexts in which such free expression is permitted. The message is clear: "Express yourself, but do so within accepted contexts." The available space for *bara'*



performance, in contrast, is potentially unlimited. One can perform anywhere outdoors. This then explains why *lu'b* performance is not accorded the dignity of *bara'*. A society that values *qabyalah* as the ultimate in dignified presentation behavior will not flaunt its agonistic, deeply personal side.

The following words, given to me by a Yemeni poet, support the notion that poetry, dancing and agriculture are all metaphors of *qabyalah*:

'allim ibnak lil-sharā'ah wal-barā'ah  
wal-'amal bayn al-zirā'ah  
wa dakhlat al-sūq kulli sā'ah

(Teach your son poetry composition and *bara'* performance, and work in agriculture, and regular attendance at the market [lit., enter the market every hour].)

[al-Sayyid 'Abd al-Karīm Muḥammad Sharaf al-Dīn, personal communication].

*Sharā'ah* refers to poetry, in this case tribal poetry as described above, but it can also denote adjudication, as in tribal customary law or even Islamic law (*Shari'ah*). *Barā'ah*'s most concrete denotation is the performance of *bara'*. Also intended is a pun referring to generosity.<sup>46</sup> Farming is clearly a reference to the signature occupation of *Qabā'il*. "The market" refers to weekly rural and permanent urban markets that were traditionally, and to some extent still are, major sites for the exchange of regional and national news. The market is the social center of tribal life.<sup>47</sup> The person who frequents the market participates fully in tribal life. A tribesman, then, must be knowledgeable in tribal law and lore, generous, a *bara'* performer and a poet, as well as a farmer.

In sum, poetry and dancing, like the *jambiyah*, tribal clothes and rural foods, are signs of the tribe. Particular genres of poetry and dancing are iconic of various components of tribalism, and some are indexical as well. With the changing relationship of the Yemeni tribe to the central government and to other countries came a devaluation of many tribal symbols. Many of the old images were no longer satisfying; what they expressed was no longer relevant. Paradoxically, some tribal markers have been revived with considerable enthusiasm in urban contexts. They have come to symbolize a new Yemeni who is somehow both tribal and urban. This is readily apparent in the new poetry, which uses tribal imagery to discuss issues of nationhood, in *bara'*, which has come to represent identification with the Yemeni nation rather than a particular tribe, and iconically, in the new urban costume, which superimposes the indigenous *jambiyah* on the imported *thawb*.

## CONCLUSION

I have argued in this paper that esthetic markers are not marginal to changing concepts of tribalism. The relationship between artistic process and its culture is one of mutual feedback carried on through performers and audience. As the traditional model of the self-subsistent tribe began to lose its relevance in Yemen, so did the appreciation of its esthetic representations. Enthusiasm and support for the performance of tribal symbols waned. Young *Qabā'il* began to experiment with new forms that better signified their changing allegiances and identities. That the new forms did not entirely reject traditional values will be seen in this conclusion.

Political changes in Yemen are not dissimilar from those in other Arab countries where nationalism is attempting to supplant an older, indigenous tribalism [Shryock 1997, Layne 1989].<sup>48</sup> What happens when nationalism, with its causal chronological view of history, backed by military prowess, comes to define modernism, in a society based on tribal values?

In Yemen, tribalism and nationalism are being explored in discourses, “of nationalism, tribalism and regionalism... set not so much *against* one another—as advocates of the modernization paradigm have argued—as *in correspondence* with one another through persuasive and popular visions” [Miller 1996a: 4]. President Salih has repeatedly denied that Yemen was moving away from tribalism. In a newspaper interview in 1986, he declared: “The state is part of the tribes, and our Yemeni people is a collection of tribes” [quoted in Dresch 1989: 7]. Important tribal leaders have all established a presence in Sanaa to safeguard tribal interests. A paramount tribal *shaykh* (leader) has become a major representative of the new religious conservatism. Parties in conflict currently negotiate state and tribal mechanisms to settle their differences.<sup>49</sup>

Tribal images—*bara'*, poetry, and costume—are appropriated on television, at government functions, and by the President himself. These are combined, however, with new instrumental music ensembles and imported choreographed dances. An operetta was commissioned to celebrate the opening of the reconstructed Marib dam. Itself an imported genre, it included a mixture of traditional and imported musical and dance forms [Schuyler 1993]. All of these are framed within new urban, cosmopolitan contexts that render issues such as tribal political and economic autonomy meaningless.

A modern sixth-grade textbook quoted by Dresch criticizes “tribal clannishness” as divisive, while it gives credit to the tribes for cooperation, courage, generosity, for protecting the country from foreign invasion, and for ridding it of “tyrants” [1989: 390]. While tribal egalitarianism, courage and cohesion are all praised, identification with particular tribes is discouraged. Regional particularism in words of songs or steps in *bara'* are modified towards greater uniformity.

In the name of religion, modernism, and respectability, the agonistic components of tribalism—all-night dancing, bawdy humor, mobile women—are discouraged. This does not differ from the elite condemnation of these behaviors in the past. The difference is in the number of *Qabā'il* who have come to accept and identify with this reconstructive point of view.

Urban youth are, on the one hand, rejecting some of the trappings of tribalism (symbolized, for example, by al-Gharsi's modifications of the *qaṣīdah*), while at the same time, they are reveling in other symbols of tribalism: wearing the *jam-biyyah*, eating tribal food, using tribal metaphors in poetry. The ambivalence and flexibility that have been characteristic of traditional Yemen still operate. As is the case with postmodernism elsewhere [Jameson 1991], a multiplicity of images and styles coexists, supplemented with generous doses of uniformity and nostalgia.

It has been difficult, in this discussion, to separate descriptions of culture change from images that represent culture change. The reason is that the sign and that which it signifies are always closely intertwined. Like Bateson's Balinese painting, tribal markers depict, replicate, and construct a changing tribal identity. Wearing tribal clothing, eating tribal foods, performing tribal dances, and

composing tribal poetry have all constructed images of ideal *Qabā'il* while they simultaneously fostered an appreciation of tribal values. As these values have been reinterpreted, so have the markers changed. The esthetic forms of a society appear to work together to construct notions of personhood and society.

On the keychain described at the beginning of this paper, the dancing scene only mimicked a traditional *bara'* performance. The *Qabā'il* in the photograph are not wearing the *fūṭah* and vest or jacket. Their costume combines the newly fashionable *thawb* with a modern imitation of the traditional vest that has come to represent tribalism in televised dances. In the end, the message is that tribalism is good, but not exactly...

#### NOTES

1. I would like to thank Mary Strong for encouraging me to write this paper. For stimulating discussion during various stages of research and/or for their invaluable comments on earlier drafts of this paper, I am indebted to Steven Caton, Selma Jeanne Cohen, André Gingrich, W. Flagg Miller, Mary Strong, Daniel Varisco, Delores Walters, and Shelagh Weir.
2. "Tribe" and "tribal," as used in this paper, are a direct translation of the Arabic *qabīlah* and *qabīlī*. Readers who are not familiar with the ethnography of the the Middle East may balk at the use of the word "tribe". Unlike its misuse for many New World and African social groups, the term in the Arab context denotes a regionally recognized social group with clearly defined parameters that will be described in this article. As used here, the term does not in any way connote "primitive," as may be the case in its use to describe social contexts outside the Middle East and East Africa.
3. My research in 1978–79 was funded by a National Science Foundation Grant for Improving Doctoral Dissertation Research and a Temple University Graduate Fellowship. My fieldwork in 1983 focused on local attitudes towards breastfeeding and fertility. It was funded by ME Awards in Population and Development, Population Council. Portions of this paper are taken from my dissertation [Adra 1982].
4. These trucks replaced camels as the primary means of long distance transport.
5. See Fabian [1983] for a discussion of the tendency in Western scholarship to privilege visual over aural or tactile parameters.
6. This group was sometimes called *Ahl al-Thulth* or *Khadamah*. When the term *Akhdām* is used in Yemen, however, it designates members of a pariah group not often seen in the northern highlands. Walters [1987, 1998] has written extensively on *Akhdām* in Yemen.
7. Early references in European languages that discuss social structure in Yemen include: Bujra [1971], Chelhod [1970, 1973a,b, 1975], Dostal [1974], Gerholm [1977], Glaser [1884], and Serjeant [1967].
8. Because these status groups are not social classes as such, Paul Dresch prefers to call them "estates" since "Each is associated in part with a particular viewpoint, and each might equally serve as the centre of its own ethnography" [1989: 117].
9. Peirce's triadic model of the sign (index, icon, symbol) is useful for understanding the ways in which esthetic forms signify cultural values. Like any sign, a dance, poem, or costume is simultaneously an index, icon and symbol, although the relative weighting of these three qualities will vary in each case. A sign is a symbol to the extent that its significance is conventional. It is arbitrary in the Saussurean sense when it is symbolic. A sign is iconic to the extent that it replicates significant relations in the object represented. Diagrams and metaphors are icons. A sign may also be indexical to the extent

that it focuses attention to an object, event or concept. Neither icons nor indices are necessarily arbitrary, although an index is more likely to contain conventional, hence arbitrary, elements. I thank Steven Caton for sending me back to Peirce.

10. Those who have read Bateson's article [1972] will note the congruence between this example and his of the lions at Trafalgar Square, although Bateson's example focuses on iconicity in the material out of which the lions are made.
11. See Peacock [1968] for an example from Indonesia.
12. This was not the first time that economic colonization had hit Yemen. Indian traders of the 16th century left an enduring culinary legacy. Bread is still baked in a *tannūr* (tandoori oven), with little distinguishable difference between Yemeni breads baked daily and their Indian counterparts, *nān* and *parātha*. Elsewhere in Yemen, one sees Indonesian influences on clothing styles, and, on the coastal plain, there are signs of considerable diffusion of clothing and house styles from East Africa.
13. Of the markers mentioned, music will only be discussed in its relation to poetry, dancing, and social change. Lambert [1990, 1993] and Schuyler [1990, 1993] discuss the rich music traditions in urban and rural Yemen.
14. Traditional social structure and land and water allocation systems differed between the northern highlands and the southern and western portions of North Yemen. While the northern highlands were characterized by small land holdings and an egalitarian ethic, the southern highlands and Tihama to the west were more rigidly hierarchical. There, large landholdings and access to irrigation were controlled by a few elite families. This paper will deal only with the northern highlands.
15. "Clothing was designed not so much to display or present the bodies it fitted, as to cover and hide their forms, building up and presenting planes and surfaces for decoration" [Mundy 1983: 533].
16. Yemenis have been interested in fashion since antiquity. Niebuhr, an eighteenth century traveler to Yemen, noted an interest in fashion in urban centers [cited in Mundy 1983: 533]. For details on dress and fashion changes in Sanaa between 1920 and 1975, see Mundy [1983].
17. *Fūṭah* also denotes a *sarong* that is worn in some parts of Yemen, but not in al-Ahjur.
18. Details of traditional tribal dress vary with region. For a discussion of clothing that distinguishes one northern tribe from its neighbors, see Gingrich [1989b].
19. This is partly a modesty issue, since the crotch cannot be covered while sitting cross-legged, or with one knee up, if one is wearing pants.
20. Warfare is no longer an issue in al-Ahjur. According to folk reckoning, the last tribal war occurred one hundred years ago. Although al-Ahjur's fertile fields were frequently raided in the past by its less fortunate neighbors, this has not occurred in recent years.
21. There are areas in the northern part of the country where robes with long wide sleeves are worn by *Qabā'il*, but this is a regional variation.
22. Mundy [1983: 532] writes that the elite headdress used to be much larger and heavier, and has become progressively lighter with time.
23. These dress rules are not absolute. Dresch describes one variation in dagger sheaths, "Right-hand, oblique sheaths, albeit of a less elaborate form, are often worn by the tribesmen in the east and north-east, particularly on campaign" [1989: 155, note 28].
24. In some areas, the herald (*dawshān*) traditionally wore a distinctive brown cloak and lived in a tent [Chelhod 1970]. And Dresch, who worked among tribes in eastern Yemen, saw *Muzayyins* wearing *qamīs* with sleeves tied back [1989: 133].
25. This style of dress was adopted in Sanaa in the 1940s [Mundy 1983: 539].
26. Older, unmarried girls wear the *lithmah* over a bonnet instead of a scarf.
27. Most of the silver jewelry in Yemen was made by Jewish artisans who left Yemen for Israel in the 1950s.

28. Many women in al-Ahjur have refused to join relatives who moved to the city, saying that they did not want to be confined to their houses.
29. Cooking and household chores are shared among all of the women in an extended household.
30. In most countries favorite nutritional foods are considered to increase mothers' supply of breastmilk.
31. It is interesting to note that many Yemeni immigrants in New York eat *'aṣīṭ* daily as a sign of their Yemeni ethnicity. In the absence of sorghum flour, they use semolina.
32. For example, if a woman was not pleased with a marriage match that her family was considering, she could express her displeasure through her poetry.
33. The following description of tribal poetry is taken from Steven Caton's *"Peaks of Yemen I Summon": Poetry as Cultural Practice in a North Yemeni Tribe* [1990].
34. Unless otherwise noted, the material presented here on Yemeni dancing and on tribalism is based on my own fieldwork. See Adra [1982: 238–287] for a detailed discussion of dancing in al-Ahjur in 1978–79, and Adra [1982: 209–211] on the tribal concept.
35. Until this time, those who lived in towns would go back to their home villages to celebrate holidays. Although the cities still tend to empty out during the holidays, they do not do so to the same extent that they did in the past.
36. Some scholars [e.g., Shay 1995] have argued that such performances not be classified as dancing. The English term, "dance", however, can denote any rhythmic movement. It is the Arabic *raqs* that has more limited meaning and should not be translated into dancing. It refers only to some forms of what is called dancing in English and not to others.
37. Girls are not circumcised in this area.
38. I was told that in the memory of some of al-Ahjur's residents a male musician would be asked to play *mizmār* at women's wedding parties. By the time of my residence in al-Ahjur, however, only women musicians would play for dancing at women's parties. They would accompany their singing with *ṣaḥn* and drum.
39. Ironically, in spite of the ban, Imam Ahmad was reputed to be fond of *lu'b* and an accomplished performer.
40. The first *Sādah* came to Yemen in the tenth century to mediate tribal disputes at the invitation of the tribes.
41. The vast majority of *Qabā'il* in the highlands are farmers. Many of those in the Eastern desert are nomadic or semi-nomadic herders, while those on the Tihama coastal plain may be fishermen, herders or agriculturalists. In all cases, they have been historically the primary providers of food in the subsistence economy.
42. An article on gender roles in al-Ahjur is in preparation.
43. The term *qabyalah*, which is derived from the same root as *qabīlah* and *Qabā'il*, is purely Yemeni and not found in other dialects of Arabic, although it appears to be synonymous with the Arabic *muruwwah*. See Adra [1982: 139–160] and Caton [1990: 26] for more detailed discussion of the term as it is used in the Yemeni highlands.
44. Television transmission reached al-Ahjur in the Spring of 1979. See Adra [1996] for a discussion of the impact of TV on Ahjuri perceptions of themselves and others.
45. Whereas large celebrations are not at all "private," neither are they contexts that are openly displayed to people defined as "other." A person's skill in dancing *lu'b* is admired, but it does not form part of general conversation and may not be general knowledge in the way that honorable behavior may be.
46. *Tabarru'*, a different form of the word, denotes charitable giving.
47. With reference to the market, Dresch remarks, "It is a public space or event that the tribe as such shares in. A serious demand on an outside tribe would usually be publicly made there; an outsider who wished to join the tribe would slaughter a bull in the market on market day; an announcement affecting the whole tribe would be made in the market" [1989: 130].

48. Linda Layne [1989] describes an analogous situation in Jordan, where tribal symbols have been appropriated by the state to foster nationalism. There are significant differences between the two countries, however. Not least of these is that the Yemeni president and most government officials are themselves tribal, whereas the Jordanian royal family is not defined as tribal.
49. See Swagman [1988] for a description of a conflict settlement in which state and tribal mechanisms were both brought into play.

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