

ROUNDTABLE: TRIBES AND TRIBALISM IN THE MODERN MIDDLE EAST

Decolonizing Tribal “Genealogies” in the Middle East and North Africa

Najwa Adra*

Institute for Social Anthropology, Austrian Academy of Sciences, Vienna, Austria

*Corresponding author. E-mail: najwa.adra@gmail.com

The continued use of the term “tribe” to describe groups with segmentary organization in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) has long been recognized as problematic, albeit without viable alternative English translations of the local terms: *qabila*, *ashira*, *sha'b*, *ilt*, and others.¹ Yet the equally problematic but enduring uncritical acceptance of genealogical classification of MENA’s tribes leads to fundamental misunderstandings of the basic principles of tribal organization as well as the multiple roles of kinship in the region. This propensity is not only misleading but is loaded with social evolutionary assumptions about presumed “stages of development” that hinder scholarship on tribes and have a negative impact on international policy toward countries like Yemen with significant self-identified tribal populations. Key to this essay is the wide diversity and flexibility in the terminology applied to tribal segments and in the sizes of segments.

Despite denials by modernist elites, significant populations in MENA self-identify as tribal. These include an estimated 75 percent of Yemen’s population of 29 million, where tribal self-identification is based on territoriality and, to a lesser extent, descent. Focusing on Yemen, this essay suggests alternative conceptualizations of tribes in MENA that reflect (or at least approximate) local perceptions of tribalism and the relevance of tribal organization to daily life. The essay is based on field research that includes long-term residence in a tribal village and consulting experience in Yemen.² Where it revisits well-worn debates in anthropology, it does so to counteract stereotypes that continue to influence national and international policy and academic discourse.

What is a Tribe in Yemen?

Tribes throughout Yemen are territorial entities that share principles of organization and customary law. Historically, tribes were rural and engaged in agriculture, herding, and artisanal fishing until labor migration diversified employment options. Those who self-identify as tribal point to respect for boundaries and protection of territory, social responsibility and conflict resolution as set forth in customary law, and *qabyala*, a set of norms locally understood to be tribal.³ The tribal economy is not communal except

¹See, for example, Daniel P. Biebuyck, “On the Concept of Tribe/Sur le Concept de Tribu,” *Civilisations* 16 (1966): 500–15; Maurice Godelier, “Le Concept de tribu: Crise d’un concept ou crise des fondements empiriques de l’anthropologie?” *Diogenes* (1973): 3–28; Carolyn Fleuhr-Lobban, Richard Lobban, and Linda Zangani, “‘Tribe’: A Socio-Political Analysis,” *Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies* 7 (1976): 143–65; Jeffrey Szuchman, “Integrating Approaches to Nomads, Tribes and States in the Ancient Near East,” in *Nomads, Tribes, and the State in the Ancient Near East: Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Jeffrey Szuchman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 1–4; and Najwa Adra, “Don’t Throw Out the Baby with Social Evolution: Revisiting ‘Tribe’ in the Middle East and North Africa,” *Anthropology News* (2015), <http://www.najwaadra.net/AN2016.pdf>.

²Field research in Yemen was funded by the National Science Foundation (1978–79), the Population Council, MEAwards (1983), the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (1983), and the American Institute for Yemeni Studies (2005).

³*Qabyala* is a distinctly Yemeni term not to be confused with *qabaliyya*, or tribalism. Najwa Adra, “Qabyala: The Tribal Concept in the Central Highlands of the Yemen Arab Republic” (PhD diss., Temple University, 1983); Najwa Adra, “Qabyala, or What Does It Mean to Be Tribal in Yemen?” in *Tribes in Modern Yemen: An Anthology*, ed. Marieke Brandt (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, forthcoming).

for the common use of natural resources, such as uncultivated land for grazing and fuel collection and bodies of water on tribal territory. Cultivable land, houses, and livestock are privately owned, and each plot of land is identified by a written deed. The management of this property is not subject to tribal oversight. Tribal honor is defined in terms of propriety, generosity, and modesty in behavior rather than heroic action. Customary law is concerned primarily with due process in the resolution of disputes and with the mutual obligations of segment members. All mediated disputes are recorded in writing, and judgments follow precedent unless the particular case requires new approaches. Customary law also delineates acceptable behavior toward those who do not belong to the tribe.⁴ Not all tribes engage in feuds, or have taken part in raids in the past, both behaviors being largely determined by livelihood security.⁵ Although historically most tribes were rural, considerable numbers of tribal families have migrated to urban centers. Some have cut their ties with their tribes of origin; most have not.

The great majority of tribal leaders, as well as tribal icons, are male, although women are considered fully tribal and share in tribal honor (*sharaf*).⁶ Tribal and segment leaders (*shaykhs*; *uqāl*, sing. *‘aqīl*; *‘uyūn*, sing. *‘ayn*) are selected through consensus and, in some areas, chosen from “shaykhly” families, although not necessarily following lineal succession. In principle, they do not have coercive power and are not owed allegiance by their constituents. Leaders mobilize labor for community projects, mediate disputes within their segments, and represent their segments’ interests to larger segments and others. They also may act as mediators of tribal disputes in other tribes and regions. Tribes in Yemen vary in size, the shape of their economies (which depend largely on environmental resources), the degrees of stratification within the tribe, the segmentary terminology they use, and the details of customary rules.

Segmentary Organization in Yemen: the Case of al-Ahjur

As is the case throughout MENA, Yemeni tribes are organized into units (segments) of increasing size and scope built on the household (*bayt*) as their central foundation.⁷ Some segments are named for putative kin, notably at the level of descent group. Others are distinguished as numerical fractions of a whole, such as *thulth* (third), *khums* (fifth), *thumn* (eighth), as parts of the body such as *batn* (abdomen) or *fakhdh* (thigh), by practical usage, for example, *bayt* (domicile), and still others by place names, for instance, al-Ahjur, Arhab, Yafi’, Khawlan. Tribal place names have long continuity, in some cases dating back at least two thousand years. Bounded communities, such as villages, are often considered tribal segments. Each segment is headed by a leader selected through consensus.

The following brief summary of segmentation in the al-Ahjur basin of Yemen’s Central Highland plateau provides a typical example of tribal segmentation among Yemen’s sedentary tribes. Al-Ahjur is officially a subdistrict (*‘uzla*) of the Kawkaban District, but it is defined by its residents as a tribe (*qabila*), and its leaders receive small government subsidies. The household (*bayt* or *dayma*) is numerically the smallest unit and the largest unit that owns property in common.⁸ It is usually composed of male patrilineal kin and their spouses and children. However, many households include more distant patrilineal, affinal kin or friends who have no other household in the area. Households are usually known by the name of their head or a descriptive nickname. All members of the household are expected to contribute labor and chores, and children are trained early to perform small chores within their capacity. The household is the unit responsible for contributing labor to community projects. Also obligatory are attendance

⁴Ettore Rossi, “Il Diritto Consuetudinario delle Tribu Arabe de Yemen,” *Revista degli Studi Orientale* 23 (1948): 1–36; Adra, “Qabyala: The Tribal Concept,” 161–211; Paul Dresch, *Tribes, Government, and History in Yemen* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1993); Shelagh Weir, *A Tribal Order: Politics and Law in the Mountains of Yemen* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2007).

⁵Feuds can be instigated and funded by external parties, including the government and neighboring states, as is made evident by the Houthi wars and the ongoing conflict. See Marieke Brandt, *Tribes and Politics in Yemen: A History of the Houthi Conflict* (London: Hurst, 2017).

⁶Najwa Adra, “Tribal Mediation and Empowered Women: Potential Contributions of Heritage to National Development in Yemen,” *International Journal of Islamic Art* 5 (2016): 301–37.

⁷Abdallah Hammoudi, “al-Dakhili wa-l-Khariji: fi al-Tanzir li-l-Zahira al-Qabaliyya, Khutwa fi Tariq Ta’sis Khitab Anthrubuluji Mustaqqil,” *‘Umran/Omran* 19, no. 5 (2017): 13–56.

⁸*Bayt* denotes “house” or “domicile.” In poetry, it denotes “verse,” the building block of poetry. *Dayma* in local dialect denotes “kitchen” and connotes “continuity.”

at weddings, circumcision celebrations, visits to welcome the return of pilgrims and other travelers or to offer condolence for the bereaved, and, for women, celebrations for mothers emerging from postpartum confinement. Any adult member may represent the household in fulfilling its obligations.

On the next level of segmentation is the descent group, the only segment that legitimately may be called genealogical. It includes several households that share a common ancestral name. In this area, descent groups are known as *lahm* (lit. meat), with connotations of corporal unity, or *ḥabl* (lit. rope), with an emphasis on holding together. Descent groups have continuity over time and may maintain ties with descent groups of the same name who live elsewhere and thus belong to different tribes. They do not own property in common. Like the household, this group may include members who have migrated to the area. The latter do not claim to share the same ancestry but are “adopted” into the descent group. Its members owe each other services that require the cooperation of units larger than the household but smaller than a village, including help with filling the requirements of hospitality when large numbers of guests are expected in any of its households. In practice, anyone who can be defined as kin, including maternal kin and affines, or who lives in one of the descent group’s households is expected to contribute labor. Marriage within the descent group is locally considered “cousin marriage.”⁹

A further level of segmentation in this part of Yemen is the village, known as *maḥall* (place)¹⁰ or *al-luḥmām*, a dialectical plural of *lahm*, to indicate that it is an aggregate of descent groups. Villages, which have clear boundaries, are the primary unit of residence, political and cooperative activity, and preferred endogamy.¹¹ Major projects that benefit the entire village, such as building cisterns and their periodic cleaning and the building and maintenance of schools, health clinics, mosques, common meeting rooms, and feeder roads to the village, are implemented by village residents, with the men providing labor and women providing the workers with food and drink. A member of each household is required to contribute labor or provide the daily wage for a substitute.

Village residents participate in the resolution of conflicts within the village. In the case of a dispute between residents of different villages, the disputants’ “entire villages” (i.e., representatives from each household) discuss the case, pay reparations that are due, and share the common meal that signals the end of the dispute. Before the monetization of the economy in the late 1960s, villages in irrigated areas needed to protect their abundant harvests from raiders of neighboring dry regions. Under these conditions, the entire village would harvest grain crops in a single day, working each household’s land in turn. Currently, each household harvests its own agricultural produce or engages others for a wage.

In this region, the next larger unit with a single leader is the tribe, *qabīla*, a territorial unit that includes all of the villages in al-Ahjur.¹² Its leader is known as *shaykh al-mashā’ikh* (paramount shaykh, lit. shaykh of shaykhs).¹³ Relations with the central government and with other tribes tend to be conducted at this level. In theory, a tribe acts together when its territory is threatened, and a quarrel between a *qabīlī* from al-Ahjur and one from a neighboring tribe is perceived as a dispute between the two tribes. Mr. ‘Abdallah ‘Abd al-Qadir, a former *shaykh al-mashā’ikh* in al-Ahjur, provided the following example:

If a car belonging to a resident of al-Ahjur broke down in Arhab [another tribe], the owner would leave it by the side of the road while he went in search of help. If someone steals this car in his absence, Arhab would be responsible for returning the car to its owner or replacing it. If Arhab refuses to do so, the owner will gather the people of al-Ahjur to create a ruckus in Arhab. They will steal cars and cause a commotion until the car is replaced or reparations are paid.¹⁴

⁹While cousin marriage is accepted, it is not generally preferred. Women often argue that they are treated better and have more bargaining power vis-à-vis their in-laws when they marry outside the lineage.

¹⁰*Qarya*, the standard Arabic term for village, is used in literary sources.

¹¹Bride wealth is reduced for marriages within a village. The preference for village endogamy is often explained as a reluctance to separate young women from their mothers.

¹²Elsewhere in Yemen, smaller groups may be named *qabīla*, and the larger group that identifies with a known territory is given other names.

¹³When al-Ahjur’s villages did not agree on a single paramount shaykh, two were selected, each with jurisdiction over the villages that supported him.

¹⁴Personal communication, January 1979.

This is the ideal scenario. In practice, however, it is rare for an entire tribe to act together. Protests against misbehavior in one tribal region are likely to be limited to the victim's village and friends and allies from elsewhere. Not all members of the tribe or its segments are compelled to participate in any "tribal" conflict. Even members of a single household may support different sides. Others may opt out if they have formed personal alliances or affinal relationships with the opposing side. Whether most individuals participate or not, the conflict will be characterized as one between tribes. A recent case in which all of the village leaders met to resolve an issue involved a *qat* (khat, *catha edulis*) thief who was caught in the act and beaten by the guard.¹⁵ Following customary law, the guard's village was held responsible for paying the thief's considerable medical expenses to cover the injuries inflicted by the guard. Although this judgment followed customary law, it appeared patently unfair. All of al-Ahjur's shaykhs then met to discuss this issue and amend customary rules regarding *qat* thieves.

A Familiar, if Not Necessarily Familial, Pattern

The recognition that tribal cohesion is based primarily on contractual mutual responsibilities rather than "affective ties" of kinship applies not only to contemporary Yemen but to tribes throughout MENA. Ibn Khaldun wrote of "multiple *'aṣabiyyas*," conditions that induce group feeling, including common residence or friendship.¹⁶ Yet his discussion of *'aṣabiyya* is usually assumed to refer to kin ties alone. Despite the Orientalism prevalent during his time, W. Robertson-Smith, who visited Hijaz in the 19th century, wrote that tribes on the Arabian Peninsula were held together by "the recognition and exercise of certain mutual obligations and social duties and rights which united all the members of the same group to one another."¹⁷ The anthropologist Emrys Peters, writing in the 1960s about tribes in Cyrenaica, observed, "The tribes and their sections correspond to an ordered division of territory," and, "Regularity in relationships does exist. . . but this regularity is not consistent with a lineage model."¹⁸ Jacques Berque argued perceptively that the genealogical veracity of tribal genealogies is not relevant. What matters is their utilization as "signs" and not as "facts" to distinguish groups from each other.¹⁹ In other words, kinship terms, like other tribal terms, are arbitrary classificatory tools, determined by practical considerations and local custom. Berque continued: "By diverting our focus to language we come close to understanding the genius of this population with an oral propensity, the power to reinterpret . . . and even to transform [social] structures."²⁰ Among contemporary anthropologists, Abdallah Hammoudi's work provides the most recent and detailed confirmation of this position. As Hammoudi has pointed out in his discussion of tribal organization among Amazigh and Arab tribes in the Maghrib, genealogical names may be based on ancestry, but names do not change even with the mixing of people of different origins.²¹

Segmentation, then, appears to be primarily an effective and flexible system for mobilizing the labor required for a large variety of tasks.²² Affective ties between kin are as important in tribal societies as they are everywhere. These are not the ties, however, that bind tribal units structurally, politically, or economically. In practice, strong affective ties often cross patrilineal boundaries. Examples within the household include affection between spouses and the particularly close relationships with mothers and maternal kin. Strong affective ties among friends and neighbors are common. Alliances that may deter participation in tribal conflicts often cross tribal lines.

¹⁵ Lucrative *qat* cultivation has replaced grain cultivation in much of al-Ahjur, increasing the threat and incidence of theft.

¹⁶ Abd al-Rahman bin Muhammad ibn Khaldun, *Muqaddimat ibn Khaldun: al-Juz' al-Awwal*, ed. 'Abd Allah Muhammad al-Darwish (Damascus: Dar Ya'rab, 2004).

¹⁷ W. Robertson-Smith, *Kinship and Marriage in Early Arabia* (Boston: Beacon Press, [1903] 1973), 1.

¹⁸ E. L. Peters, "Some Structural Aspects of the Feud among the Camel-Herding Bedouin of Cyrenaica," *Africa* 37 (1967): 262, 279.

¹⁹ Jacques Berque, "Qu'est-ce qu'une 'tribu' Nord-Africaine?" in *Eventail de l'histoire vivante: Hommage à Lucien Febvre*, vol. 1 (Paris: Armand Colin, 1953), 265.

²⁰ Ibid. (author's translation).

²¹ Hammoudi, "al-Dakhili wa-l-Khariji," 299.

²² Adra, "Qabyala: The Tribal Concept"; Charles F. Swagman, *Development and Change in Highland Yemen* (Salt Lake City, UT: University of Utah Press, 1988), 100; Adra, "Don't Throw Out the Baby."

The focus on genealogy as a primary organizing principle has a long and disputed history in the Arabic genealogical (*nasab*) literature, written primarily by scholarly elites who developed intricate genealogies to justify claims to prophetic descent and other forms of elite status.²³ Yet there is nothing particularly “tribal” about this use of kin terms, historically or today. Not only is kinship terminology utilized differently from the West in MENA, but the very conceptions underlying definitions of kin differ, as Edouard Conte demonstrates through semiotic analysis of tribal groups in Algeria.²⁴ Anne Porter argues cogently that as early as the third and second millennia B.C. people in Mesopotamia “understood that kinship was as much socially as biologically constructed. . . . Kinship was, and is, the means of time-space distanciation, functioning inclusively or exclusively according to contingent circumstances.”²⁵

Decolonizing Segmentation and Genealogy

“Decolonizing” is a strange term to apply to research on rural Yemen, most of which has not experienced colonialism. Neither the Ottomans in the North nor the British in the South exerted control over rural areas, and Yemen’s rural areas do not exhibit the societal fragmentation that often develops as a consequence of colonial domination.²⁶ The term captures, however, the necessity to rid Yemen and MENA’s tribes of externally imposed a priori meanings that distort indigenous institutions.

Maurice Godelier suggests that prioritizing kinship terminology in the discussion of tribes results from the application of external, neo-evolutionist models to tribes in MENA and reflects naturalized presumptions about non-state societies.²⁷ It may well be that preindustrial social organization in Europe and the United States was largely based on affective links between biological kin. However, given human cultural diversity, there is no reason to assume global homogeneity in historical development. The idea that solidarity in the absence of centralized, coercive governance must be due to strong affective kinship bonds also may be due to Western conflation of biological kinship with affect, as opposed to rational decision-making. It may appear counterintuitive to scholars from societies in which individualism is valued over community consensus that cohesion can be achieved primarily through contractual relations. Or, following Godelier’s argument, abstraction may appear too “sophisticated” for tribes assumed to be “primitive.”²⁸ The negative policy implications of such juxtaposed ideal types become apparent when new nations’ problems are blamed on tribalism, and when tribal self-identification is assumed to imply fanaticism and a “hostility toward the unknown.”²⁹ “Decolonizing” implies the need for tolerance and respect for political, economic, and social diversity and paves the way for international acceptance of sustainable indigenous forms of civil society as potential contributors to reconstruction and state building in war-torn Yemen.

Tribes and tribal segments in Yemen are territorial units involved in local development, maintaining local security, and resolving local conflicts, all through participatory, noncoercive means. They mobilize labor for projects benefiting the community. Customary law documents specify that tribes do not owe allegiance to their leaders, which opens the way for allegiance to the state. Is this not a model of civil society at its best, especially when the nation of Yemen is currently in need of reconciliation and rebuilding?

²³Daniel Martin Varisco, “Yemen’s Tribal Idiom: An Ethno-Historical Survey of Genealogical Models,” *Journal of Semitic Studies* 62, no. 1 (2017): 217–41.

²⁴Edouard Conte, “Entrer dans le sang: Perceptions arabes des origines,” in *Al-Ansab: La quête des origines. Anthropologie historique de la société tribale arabe*, ed. Pierre Bonte (Paris: Éditions de la Maison des Sciences de l’Homme, 1991): 55–100.

²⁵Anne Porter, “Beyond Dimorphism: Ideologies and Materialities of Kinship as Time-Space Distanciation,” in *Nomads, Tribes, and the State in the Ancient Near East: Cross-Disciplinary Perspective*, ed. Jeffrey Szuchman (Chicago: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2009), 208.

²⁶This is not to say that Yemen’s neighbors have not attempted to colonize parts of Yemen, nor that the influx of cheap food imports that has had a negative impact on agriculture do not represent a form of economic colonialism. The long-term impact of the current conflict on Yemeni social cohesion is difficult to predict.

²⁷Godelier, “Concept de tribu,” 15–24.

²⁸Ibid, 4–5; see also the impact of such ideas on colonial policy in Berque, “Qu’est-ce qu’une ‘tribu,’” 261.

²⁹Jeffrey Goldberg, “‘The Obama Doctrine’: The Atlantic’s Exclusive Report on the U.S. President’s Hardest Foreign Policy Decisions,” *Atlantic*, 10 March 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/press-releases/archive/2016/03/the-obama-doctrine-the-atlantic-exclusive-report-on-presidents-hardest-foreign-policy-decisions/473151>.