



Don't Throw Out the Baby with Social Evolution

Middle East Section

Najwa Adra

Revisiting "Tribe" in the Middle East and North Africa

In college and graduate school, smarting from years of patronizing and homogenizing images of Arabs, I rejected the social evolutionary assumptions in so many of the texts I read. I also argued vehemently against the use of "tribe" in anthropology, a term that appeared to lump most of the world into a single, *pre-modern* category. In many circles, "tribes" are still both exoticized and disdained as repositories of *tradition*, emotive survivals of a tenderhearted past, or kin-based, irrational advocates of convention, stolidly opposed to modern nation states.

I first went to Yemen to conduct dissertation research on the semiotics of dancing and settled, with my husband Dan Varisco, in al-Ahjur, a rural highlands community in which the vast majority self-identified as "*qabayil*", a term that can only be effectively translated as "tribal". Having always lived in cities (Beirut, Baghdad, Tripoli, Libya, Baltimore and New York suburbs), I had unwittingly absorbed hegemonic presumptions of unsophisticated rural life and *victimized* women on the Arabian Peninsula. As fieldwork proceeded to shatter my stereotypes, I found myself needing to understand what tribal identification meant locally, because the dance everyone suggested I study indexed Yemeni tribes. It took a full 18 months for me to understand the mix of ideology, political and economic organization and customary law that in Yemen signifies tribalism (*qabyala*). I have continued to refine my understanding over the ensuing years through additional research and consulting assignments in Yemen.

In Yemen and elsewhere in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) "tribe" refers to rural territorial groups that have long co-existed with cities and states. Tribes and tribal units are held together by reciprocal obligations of cooperation among their members. The village is the central tribal unit in al-Ahjur. Some units within al-Ahjur and elsewhere self-define in genealogical terms, but genealogies are flexible, and they are manipulated to justify new relationships or break off old ones. Eventually I realized that tribal organization provides a model which enables groups of varying size to mobilize quickly and effectively to accomplish given tasks. For a recent example, a subgroup of the Yafi' tribe in southern Yemen arranged the evacuation of thousands of Aden's residents prior to a Houthi takeover of the city in July 2015. Tribal segments are situationally defined and rarely in balanced opposition. The flexibility built into the system enhances communities' ability to adapt to changing circumstances and mirrors the flexibility and improvisation that underlie principles of architecture, poetry, music and dancing.

Tribal customary law regulates obligations within and between units. Based on mediation and persuasion, customary law is restorative, transparent, and locally accessible. It prioritizes due process and non-confrontational means of expressing anger, often through carefully crafted verse that synthesizes grievances, as Steven Caton and Saad Sawayan have shown. Customary law has maintained security in rural areas for centuries, always in coexistence with urban and religious legal systems.

Tribal honor, also called *qabyala* in Yemen, invokes local understandings of proper behavior in contexts in which the welfare of the group is involved and where presentation of self is important. These include personal qualities of courage, trustworthiness, hospitality, protection of vulnerable individuals and restraint from the facile use of force. Tribesmen in Yemen invariably add that they must never strike a woman under any circumstances.

Despite reciprocal social and community obligations, the tribal economy is not communally organized. The vast majority of farmers (tribes) in the North own at least part of the land they cultivate, and the household is the primary economic unit. Customary law does not regulate an individual's financial dealings, and entrepreneurial activity is not constrained by law or tradition. Thus, tribal economics in MENA contest Rouseau-ian and Marxist assumptions that traditional societies are, by definition, collective and not individuated.

Other classes of behavior are also not subject to the dictates of customary law, and breaches do not usually impact an individual's honor. Among these are relationships and disputes within the immediate family and artistic expression within bounded contexts, such as poetic composition and dancing. Although piety is highly valued, personal religious observance is not dictated by customary law. Within this amalgam, autonomy rules and competition flourishes, forming an antithesis to formal tribal ideology. This bifurcation opens culturally approved spaces for entrepreneurial activity as well as innovative adaptations to changing circumstances.

It also has implications for gender roles. While all legal systems – customary, Islamic and State – assume a woman's dependence on her male kin, considerable dissonance exists between the official ideology of male control and actual practice. In contrast to urban ideals of women's seclusion, rural life is not gender segregated. Rural women participate actively in the rural economy and are, consequently, assertive and comfortable in leadership roles. These traditions counteract western stereotypes of "primitivism", and they reverse and blur the usual East-West binaries and assumptions on presumably "conservative tradition" vs. "progressive modernity".

Tribalism in Yemen, as well as women's economic and political participation, are currently threatened by internal conflicts, unequal disbursal of services, government co-optation of tribal leaders, varieties of "modernism" that assume rural life is uniformly "traditional", "conservative" and hostile to progress, imported conservative interpretations of Islam and, most recently, incessant bombing by Saudi Arabia and its allies.

Perhaps the most pernicious threats to tribalism and women's empowerment stem from Wahhabi, Salafi and other forms of politicized Islam, arguably a form of modernism. Islamists yearn for a single, centralized, homogeneous Islamic nation. They consider tribal diversity divisive, condemn dialogue and consensus building as chaotic (*fitna*) and disapprove of rural gender mixing as well as Yemen's music, dance and poetic heritage. Although there have historically been Islamist movements in Yemen, Wahhabism, the Muslim Brotherhood and modern Salafism are not indigenous. This externally imposed conservative message has penetrated into rural and urban society through teachers and a curriculum controlled by members of the Saudi-funded Islamist Islah party. Its influences have become increasingly visible and audible in Yemen. Urban women complain that women are no longer as visible in public spaces as they were 20 years ago. The *sharshaf*, a covering worn by women in Sanaa outside the home, barely covered the wearer's knees in the 1960s. It has gradually increased in length until it now drags along the floor. Women's songs and dances have been curtailed, as have rural mixed gender dancing and poetic exchanges. Although women have clearly benefited from educational and employment opportunities, many young rural and urban women who have completed secondary school now idealize seclusion and accept unprecedented pressure to obey their husbands as signs of modernity and urban sophistication. Ironically, an older generation of rural Yemenis who value women's mobility and assertiveness is now considered "old-fashioned". Understandings of "modernity" vs. "tradition" in Yemen today reverse western understandings of this binary.

Meanwhile, the current bombing campaign has led to unprecedented sectarian conflict in Yemen. Random bombing has destroyed civilian homes, hospitals, schools, mosques and locally valued heritage sites. It has dispersed communities throughout Yemen. How much of Yemen's social capital will survive is unclear at this point.

In 1983, I predicted the demise of tribal identity in al-Ahjur and its replacement with nationalism. I had heard some returned migrants from Saudi Arabia criticize tribal life and refer to themselves as *fellahin* (peasants) instead of *qabayil* (tribesmen), a term that would have been deemed insulting only a few years before. Certainly, over the years, respect for the national government has increased, along with enthusiastic participation in national elections by women and men. Thus I was surprised when in 2005 my friends in al-Ahjur framed their discussion of recent changes as examples of the dynamic sustainability of *qabyala* (tribalism). Rules had been established to ban shooting rifles in the air during celebrations because of the injuries they cause, and limits were placed on bridewealth, which had mushroomed to sums unaffordable by most young men. Some tribal units were redefined to reflect population growth. Younger village leaders were elected, some from status groups not historically recognized as tribal. Community projects were still accomplished through traditional methods of tribal organization. Although some individuals were reporting disputes to the local police station, an act that forced their adversaries to pay the police a fine, most disputes continued to be resolved through traditional mediation in which all members of the community participated. What I had not foreseen was that tribalism and nationalism were not perceived as contradictory. Women and men actively debated national politics, and women were eager to show me the ID cards that allowed them to vote in the 2003 elections. Tribe and nation had become two loci of identity, each entailing its own set of responsibilities.

Nowhere is tradition static. Although foundational principles, such as egalitarianism or expectations of community involvement, tend to have long histories, specific practices either adapt to changing socio-economic conditions or are discarded. Tribalism in the MENA continues to be a viable and sophisticated indigenous institution deserving of recognition by anthropologists. Elected leaders, malleability and inclusiveness, non-confrontational approaches to conflict resolution, and women's mobility and assertiveness would be considered "modern" in the West. It is time, therefore, to stop relegating tribal institutions in the MENA to "pre-modern" status.

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Najwa Adra is Research Associate at the American Institute for Yemeni Studies.

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Herbert Lewis says:

November 23, 2015 at 6:31 pm

I want to express my appreciation for this piece for various reasons. Najwa Adra has let the realities of experience among a group of people overturn a conventional (partly politicized) taboo. She has made a sophisticated case for the use of "tribe," despite the knee-jerk horror it elicits, because it seems to be the most appropriate one for the type of social relations it describes. The word had a perfectly reasonable use in MENA studies, which should not be confused with other meanings that might be unreasonable elsewhere. And she has presented an interesting outline of the complex processes and arrangements taking place in Yemen today. It is a brief and, I believe, significant contribution.

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