

# *Yémen, passé et présent de l'unité*



Édisud

## Sommaire n° 67

### LE YÉMEN, PASSÉ ET PRÉSENT DE L'UNITÉ

sous la responsabilité de Michel Tuchscherer

Michel Tuchscherer	5	Introduction
Daniel Martin Varisco	13	Texts and Pretexts : the Unity of the Rasulid State under al-Malik al-Muzaffar
Nahida Coussonnet	25	Les assises du pouvoir zaydite au XIII <sup>e</sup> siècle
François Blukacz	39	Le Yémen sous l'autorité des imams zaidites au XVII <sup>e</sup> siècle : une éphémère unité
Bernard Haykel	53	Al-Shawkānī and the Jurisprudential Unity of Yemen
Paul Dresch	67	A Daily Plebiscite : Nation and State in Yemen
Jacques Couland	79	Genèse et étapes de l'unité yéménite. Trois décennies pour conclure
Abu Bakr Al-Saqqaf	95	Problèmes de l'unité yéménite
Blandine Destremau	109	Tendances et perspectives de l'économie yéménite
Muḥammad 'Abd al-Wāḥid al-Maytami	121	Le marché du travail yéménite après l'unification
Franck Mermier	131	Les fondations mythiques de Sanaa et d'Aden
Paul Bonnenfant	141	Unité, yéménité et modernité dans l'architecture domestique
Najwa Adra	161	Tribal Dancing and Yemen Nationalism : Steps to Unity
Jean Lambert	171	Musiques régionales et identité nationale

Najwa Adra

## TRIBAL DANCING AND YEMENI NATIONALISM

### Steps to unity

The Yemeni dance, *bar'a*, was historically a powerful tribal marker and symbol of tribal identity. Yet significant changes began to occur in the performance and contexts of *bar'a* from the mid-1970's. The locus of the dance<sup>1</sup> shifted from rural tribal areas to the public squares of the cities. Urbanites, who had in the past been only admiring spectators, now learned to perform *bar'a*, while frequency of performance decreased markedly among *qabā'il* (tribesmen). In the process, the dances themselves changed. This paper will explore the ways in which changes in the dance tradition are related to the growth of nationalism in Yemen and consequent acceptance of Yemeni unity by the tribal population.

One of the intriguing issues in discussions of Yemeni unity from a northern highlands perspective is the speed with which a tribal society picked up the trappings of a state society and then agreed to unite with the former People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, formerly a socialist country towards whose policies it had been vehemently opposed. This was all accomplished with resounding public support, as indicated both by the tremendous popularity enjoyed by Yemen's President, 'Ali 'Abdallah Šāliḥ, and the elections of 1993. Issues of identity and allegiance have been at stake.

In 1978-79 I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in al-Ahjur, a rural community about 40 km N.W. of Sanaa<sup>2</sup>. Most of the community's residents identified themselves as tribal (*qabili*). The tribal population was distinguished from *sayyid-s* of reputed descent from the Prophet Muhammad, and assorted clients to the tribes specializing in services, known collectively as *bani khums*. Neither of these groups was considered to be of tribal descent. In a rural-urban distinction important in Yemen, *sayyid-s* and *bani khums* were associated with towns and cities, while tribesmen were ideally rural.

Tribesmen in al-Ahjur were sedentary agriculturalists who saw themselves as honorable according to a set of values synthesized in the Yemeni term *qabyala*<sup>3</sup>. *Qabyala* refers to nobility of lineage, economic and political autonomy, as well as other characteristics thought to typify the tri-

bal population in Yemen. A tribesman was expected to be true to his word, quick to defend his honor and that of his group, protect the weak, to be perceptive, strong, loyal, hospitable and generous. These qualities, thought to typify tribesmen, were and still are valued by all segments of Yemeni society, including North and South Yemen. Tribal representations traditionally included the *janbiyya* (dagger), clothing (*futa* for men, a gathered skirt in the northern highlands and a sarong in the South), country foods, rural music (J. Lambert, 1990), tribal poetry (S. Caton, 1990) and tribal dancing (N. Adra, 1982, 1984).

At the time of my initial fieldwork, government influence in the area was minimal. The schools, roads, and mosques of al-Ahjur had been built through local contributions and traditional cooperative ventures. Electricity and flour mills were provided by local entrepreneurs for a fee. Disputes were resolved locally through traditional mediation processes. Meanwhile, attitudes toward socialist South Yemen were vehemently negative. South Yemenis were clearly considered to be the immoral "others". Several times I heard allegations that everything is shared in a socialist state, including wives.

By 1983, when I returned to al-Ahjur<sup>4</sup> and again on subsequent visits to the area, identification and attitudes had changed radically. Several disputes were now taken to the government court in nearby Shibām for resolution. Active participation in traditional cooperative projects had declined. With the improvement of the car road to Sanaa, the traditional weekly market had given way to the larger markets of Shibām and Sanaa, as well as a new *qāt* and soft drink market along the car road to Ṭawila. Many of the tribal population now referred to themselves as *fallāḥin* (agriculturalists) and were enthusiastic in their support of the President.

An incident that occurred during my second trip to al-Ahjur illustrates the increase in respect accorded to the government. An older woman invited me to her house in order to tell me how much she supported the President. She said that before and during the Revolution she had supported the Imam. On several occasions during Yemen's civil war she had paid a considerable sum (12 riyals) to the *sayyid-s* in the Hijra<sup>5</sup> so that they would pray for the preservation of the Imamate. "Now," she said heatedly, pointing to the television set, "God protect the President and God keep him with us" (*Allāh yihfiḏhu wa Allāh yijbirna bih*). Others in al-Ahjur expressed similar sentiments.

My purpose is to explore the relationship between changes in Yemeni dancing and shifting political identities in al-Ahjur. Traditionally, the performance of *bar'a* was admired and respected by all segments of Yemeni society. Recognized as an act of consummate skill, it held an exalted position among the dances of Yemen. The term *bar'a*, derived from the triliteral root, *b-r-'*, denotes "to excel" or "to surpass" (Ibn Manzūr, n.d. : 8 : 8). *Ibtara'a*, i.e., "to perform *bar'a*", means also "to become excellent" or "to have achieved". Whereas other dances may have been disparaged as play (*li'ba*), the performance of *bar'a* was considered an act of high achievement (N. Adra, 1982, 1984). Differences in social status were erased in *bar'a* performance. *Sayyid-s* and *bani khums* often performed with tribesmen. Nonetheless, the focus of *bar'a* and its associations were tribal while *li'ba* was associated with the urban population.

*Bar'a* is a group dance performed by men only out of doors. Any number of men may participate, depending on the available space. It is accompanied by the beat of two drums, the *ḥāsa* and the *marfa'*, usually played by *mazāyina* (sing. *muzayyin*), musicians categorized as *bani khums*<sup>6</sup>. It is performed during religious and national holidays, the afternoons of wedding ceremonies, traditional cooperative work projects (*jāyish*) and to greet important guests.

This is primarily a participant rather than a spectator event. Dancers perform close together in an open ring. The leader and the better dancers position themselves near the middle of the ring, while those still learning the dance perform towards the ends from where they can easily drop out if they cannot keep up. Essentially it consists of a step-together-step-hop, forward and backward, with a number of turns and knee bends inserted into the performance at the discretion of the leader. Performers all wield daggers (*janābī*, sing. *janbiyya*) in their right hands, and often a *shāf'* in their left hand. There are three segments to the dance, each with a faster tempo than the previous one.



Danse de la *bar'a* à l'occasion d'un mariage dans une tribu.

The aim of drummers and dancers is to maintain perfect coordination with the leader who begins slowly, then introduces more complicated changes at a faster tempo. This is not easy. True to its name, a good *bar'a* performance is a display of skill.

As the signature dance of the northern Yemeni tribe, *bar'a* served to identify performers as tribal. Because each tribe or region had its own particular variations, the various *bar'a* steps and rhythms served to distinguish tribes from each other. Competence in *bar'a* was expected of tribesmen. "Teach your son to compose poetry, perform *bar'a*, farm and attend the market regularly"<sup>8</sup>, was a verse quoted to me by Mr. 'Abd al-Karīm Sharaf al-Din of Kawkabān, when I asked him about the significance of *bar'a*. Competence in *bar'a*, like the ability to compose poetry<sup>9</sup>, agricultural work and an awareness of tribal affairs (that one would get from regular attendance at the market) were all requisite qualities of the honorable tribesman. The *janbiyya* and *shāl* carried by performers were also considered tribal symbols.

*Bar'a* performance was a re-enactment of what it meant to be tribal in Yemen, and as such it represented the concept of *qabyala* discussed earlier. In performing *bar'a*, tribesmen were practicing tribal values and, at the same time, "constructing" a tribal identity, as S. Caton (1990) argues is the case with the composition and performance of tribal poetry in Yemen. For example, the placement of the *bar'a* leader in the midst of the dancers rather than at the head of the line reflected the ideal position of tribal leaders relative to their constituents, and the ideology of equality among tribes. In the course of a performance, tribesmen were practicing and "re-creating" this ideology (see S. Caton, 1990). Significant here is that *bar'a* is performed by members of all social status groups together. *Bar'a*'s association with guests and with work projects represent, respectively, the tribal value on hospitality and tribal perceptions of themselves as hardworking. *Bar'a* is also linked with generosity. The noun *tabarru'*, derived from the same root as *bar'a*, denotes charitable gift giving. A *bar'a* performance is an occasion in which generosity toward *mazāyina* can be demonstrated; i.e., one can give them gifts of money over and above those specified by contract. Outside of al-Ahjur *bar'a* was associated with warfare, as were the tribes.

Structural aspects of *bar'a* replicate the various components of *qabyala*. The performance of *bar'a* demands a high level of energy of its participants. In order to perform successfully, dancers and musicians must maintain an intense orientation toward each other and to the leader (see also J. Lambert, 1990: 77). Each round of *bar'a* is characterized by constant movement to an ever-increasing tempo, which requires strength and endurance. The safe manipulation of daggers in the midst of fast, whirling movement is difficult. This becomes more challenging as the dance progresses, and the less experienced performers drop out. In sum, a round of *bar'a* challenges participants and teaches them to perform together as a group under difficult conditions.

*Bar'a* as tribal symbol is clearly a dance of display<sup>10</sup>. It is always performed out of doors in the daytime in plain view. The sound of the *tāsa* (drum) announcing or accompanying a *bar'a* performance can be heard over long distances. When *bar'a* is performed in the presence of strangers (e.g., to welcome guests from elsewhere, to celebrate a marriage to someone from another region, or by travelers in foreign parts) it serves to identify the group to others, affirm its coherence and strength, and show off the skills of its members. This display function of *bar'a* is underlined in the often quoted proverb: "Perform well, oh people of Tā'ir; the Imam is at the window watching you"<sup>11</sup>.

In the past, the "whole of al-Ahjur" (i.e., the adult male population of 24 villages) would perform together in 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. In 1978-79, *bar'a* 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 *bar'a* performance, saying that it used to be performed more frequently, for longer periods, and by more people. In 1983, only one of the *mazāyina* connected to a four-village cluster knew the traditional

beat. Occasionally when he played, older *bar'a* virtuosi would perform, much to the appreciation of all present. In one village that prided itself on its modernity, young men taught each other new *bar'a* steps from other parts of the country that they had seen on television or in Sanaa. This, or any other changes introduced into a particular *bar'a*, would have been inconceivable in the past. The traditional view of *bar'a* was that it had not changed since pre-Islamic times.

By 1983, many tribesmen were celebrating religious holidays by performing *bar'a* in Sanaa instead of al-Ahjur. This situation was common to other rural communities as well. The public squares of Sanaa were filled with several *bar'a* performances from various parts of Yemen going on at once. *Bar'a* was frequently performed on Fridays in the nearby town of Shibām during market hours (Shibām's market had expanded four-fold in the span of a few years.). Meanwhile, *bar'a* performance in some of al-Ahjur's villages had become a half-hearted affair. By 1985, however, *bar'a* was revitalized in new "urban" contexts: the weddings of *sayyid-s* in al-Ahjur's Hijra community<sup>12</sup>, and late at night in San'āni weddings. Whereas *bar'a* had been associated with rural tribesmen, it now seemed to be favored by urbanites and *sayyid-s*!

What had precipitated these changes? Tribesmen in al-Ahjur were quick to blame modernization for a decline in the energy level of their fellow tribesmen. Repeatedly, they would argue that they had been blemished (*ta'ayyabnā*) by prosperity and the availability of modern technology - that people no longer had the stamina to perform. They blamed auto transportation as well as the availability and consequent dependence on new, "weak" city foods, such as rice, sugar, white flour and soft drinks (as opposed to traditional tribal foods, thought to strengthen muscles such as *'aṣid* and *maḥīṭ*). Others said that there were not enough *mazāyina* around who knew the appropriate *bar'a* rhythms.

It is true that new economic opportunities for *mazāyina* lured many away from their traditional roles as musicians, barbers and circumcizers. In response to the official government policy of doing away with social status distinctions, a number of *bani khums* emigrated to Yemen's cities to engage in more lucrative professions<sup>13</sup>. Those who continued to play music had raised their fees considerably in response to inflation and the new prosperity of the region. But there were still a number of musicians around ready to perform. Interestingly, many of these were introducing new beats and new dances to al-Ahjur.

The decade of the 1970's was a time of rapid social, political and economic changes. Participation in the world market economy and the subsequent decline of subsistence agriculture had made a myth of tribal economic autonomy. As government services expanded to al-Ahjur, images of political autonomy were replaced by an increasing dependence on the government. Migrants returning from Saudi Arabia brought with them new attitudes and the desire for more urbanized lifestyles.

Television had an important impact on the ways in which people in al-Ahjur perceived themselves and the central government<sup>14</sup>. The vast majority of al-Ahjur's population was exposed to television for the first time in the Spring of 1979. Besides soap operas and theatrical works, they saw a large number of images attesting to the power and benevolence of the government. 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 T.V. could not help but engender the respect of a people who associated honor with warfare. New hospitals, clinics, schools and agricultural projects all spoke to potential government services that might benefit al-Ahjur.

On television one could see and hear Yemenis who lived in other parts of the country. Programs such as *Ṣūra min Bilādī* (a picture from my country) showed other tribesmen farming, reciting tribal poetry, and performing *bar'a* and other dances. While such programs made viewers aware of the diversity found in Yemen, they also stressed the commonality of all Yemenis. It could be seen that all, including southern Yemenis shared in valuing *qabyala*. Other Yemenis no longer seemed to be "uncivilized others", but honorable tribesmen like themselves. These "humanizing" images



La *Bar'a*, symbole de l'unité nationale : la troupe de danse de Sanaa à l'occasion de l'opéra "Wadi Saba" monte à Sanaa en 1986 (cliché du ministère de la Culture de Sanaa).

could not help but foster identification with Yemenis from other regions as co-nationals in the new economic and political environment.

During the 1980's school children learned the new national anthem and participated in discussions of *miṭāq* (the national charter). 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.

The emerging Yemeni nation is not definable only by its political boundaries. B. Anderson (1991 : 7) writes that a nation is an idea, an "imagined community... [which] is conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship regardless of the actual inequality... that may prevail [in it]". He argues that a nation is not a natural entity, but a particular model of apprehending the world, and cites the role of national anthems, poetry and songs in fostering images of unity (B. Anderson, 1991 : 22, 145). The data from al-Ahjur supports Anderson's thesis and explains the rapidity with which many Yemenis are distancing themselves from traditional tribal allegiance.

If tribesmen are no longer identifying primarily with their tribes, a decrease in the frequency of *bar'a* performance, a tribal marker, is understandable. But why the increased frequency of *bar'a* in urban contexts ? Although rural appreciation for *bar'a* performance in traditional contexts appears to be on the wane, neither *bar'a* nor other Yemeni dances have been devalued. Yemen's dance troupe performs a choreographed version of the *bar'a* daily on television<sup>15</sup>. *Ṣūra min Bilādi* always includes dances of the particular region featured. The festival set up as part of the official celebration of 26th September in 1984 featured over two hours of dance performance from all over Yemen. A key chain sold in Sanaa in the late 1980's had a photograph of the Yemeni President performing *bar'a* with Yāsir 'Arafāt in a demonstration of solidarity. It is clear that the value of *bar'a* has not diminished in modern Yemen.



Other tribal representations are also showing up in unexpected places. Whereas the *dishdāsha* (robe) that characterizes men's clothing elsewhere in the Peninsula is fast replacing the rural *fūta*, an increasing number of Yemeni men are now wearing the tribal *janbiyya*, regardless of their descent status. Even urban men who work in Western clothes usually don a *janbiyya* in afternoon social gatherings. Thanks to the ubiquitous tape recorder, tribal poetry is now heard regularly in Yemen's towns and cities (S. Caton 1990). President 'Alī 'Abdallāh Ṣāliḥ repeatedly affirms the tribal nature of Yemeni society, and has been quoted as saying, "We are all tribesmen" (P. Dresch 1990 : 276, 280).

While allegiance to a Yemeni nation has replaced tribal allegiance, tribal values have not been abandoned. The concept of *qabyala* has been broadened and adapted to the demands of a nation-state. Loyalty to a charismatic president has replaced loyalty to a *shaykh* (head of the tribe); the idea of tribal equality has been extended to include all Yemenis. The much respected mechanisms of mediation and persuasion (see S. Caton, 1987, 1990) appear to have remained as principles guiding policy in the new state; even a measure of tribal autonomy is recognized in the regional *majālis* (councils).

Just as the tribal *qaṣīda* (poem) has changed to adapt to and construct a new image of the modern tribesman (S. Caton, 1990), and changes in San'āni music have coincided with ideological changes (J. Lambert, 1990), so has *bar'a* been transformed to represent the new Yemeni national. Because *qabyala* was so highly valued traditionally, and because its representations in dancing, poetry, music and clothing were appreciated art forms in their own right, their continued valuation in the modern state system has eased an otherwise very difficult transition to nationhood. And because the values of *qabyala* were shared by northern and southern Yemenis alike, the further transition to unity could be seen as a "natural" extension of nationhood.

#### NOTES

1. Although I use the terms dance and dancers here to refer to *bar'a*, this should not be translated into the Arabic *raqs*. In Yemen *bar'a* is considered an aesthetic performance, but not categorized as *raqs*.
2. This research on Yemeni tribal identity as expressed in Yemeni dancing was funded by a National Science Foundation Doctoral Dissertation Grant and a Temple University Graduate Fellowship.
3. An extended discussion of the concept of *qabyala* and its implications can be found in N. Adra (1982). For discussion of the concept in the South, see Landberg (1901 : 1 : 682) and R. B. Serjeant (1951 : 23). In Ḥaḍramawt the term is *qabwala*.
4. On this occasion my research focused on issues of mother and child health, and was funded by MEAWards in Population and Development of the Population Council.
5. The Hijra referred to here is a village in al-Aḥjur inhabited primarily by *sayyid*-s. Traditionally *sayyid*-s would be commissioned to pray for particular issues on the behalf of *qabīlī*-s.
6. *Mazāyina* in al-Aḥjur were also barbers and circumcisers traditionally.
7. A *shāl* is a long shawl carried by tribesmen on their travels and used variously as a blanket, bag or shoulder covering.
8. 'Allim ibnak lil-shirā'a wal-barā'a wal-'amal bayn al-tirā'a wa dakhlat al-sūq kullī sā'a.
9. See S. Caton (1990) for an extended discussion on the role of poetry in Yemeni tribal life.
10. This is the reason that women do not perform *bar'a*. For a discussion of dances performed by women in al-Aḥjur, see N. Adra (1982).
11. *Ibtarī'u ṣābir yā ahl tā'ir imām bi-yibṣirkum minim jāqa*. Tā'ir is a tribe in the northern highlands of Yemen.
12. It will be recalled that *sayyid*-s, even those living in rural al-Aḥjur, were associated with urban Yemen. This association of education and refinement with city life is expressed in the English word "urbane".
13. In a discussion of traditional roles of *bani khums*, the wife of the local *muzayyin* stated firmly, "There is no more *muzayyin*, or *dawshān*, or *jazzār* (butcher), only Yemeni."
14. A detailed discussion of the impact of television in al-Aḥjur will be found in N. Adra, "The 'Other' as Viewer. Reception of Western and Arab Televised Representations in Rural Yemen" in preparation.
15. Older *qabā'il* deride these dances as not "true" *bar'a* because they lack the spontaneity and improvisation of traditional performances.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

ADRA (N.), 1982, *Qabyala : the tribal concept in the central highlands of the Yemen Arab Republic*, University Microfilms International, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 312 p.

ADRA (N.), 1984, "Achievement and play : opposition in Yemeni tribal dancing", in *The Proceedings of the Consulting Seminar on the Collecting and Documenting of Traditional Music and Dance*, Arab Gulf States Folklore Centre, Doha, 69-75.

ANDERSON (B.), 1991, *Imagined communities*, Verso, London.

CATON (S.), 1987, "Power, persuasion, and language : a critique of the segmentary model in the Middle East", *IJMES*, 19 : 77-101.

CATON (S.), 1990, *Peaks of Yemen I summon. Poetry as cultural practice in a North Yemeni tribe*, University of California, Berkeley, 351 p.

DRESCH (P.), 1990, "Imams and tribes : the writing and acting of history in upper Yemen", in P. Khoury and J. Kostiner eds., *Tribes and state formation in the Middle East*, University of California, Berkeley, 252-287.

IBN MANZŪR (d.1311 AD), n.d., *Lisān al-'Arab*, 8 vol., Dār Šādir, Beirut.

LAMBERT (J.), 1990, *La médecine de l'âme : musique et musiciens dans la société citadine à San'a' (République du Yémen)*, Thèse de Doctorat en Anthropologie, École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Paris, 2 v.

LANDBERG (Le Comte de), 1901, *Études sur les dialectes de l'Arabie Méridionale*, E. J. Brill, Leiden.

SERJEANT (R. B.), 1951, *South Arabian poetry : 1. Prose and poetry from Ḥaḍramawt*, Taylor's Foreign Press, London.