DIPARTIMENTO DI SCIENZE UMANE PER LA FORMAZIONE "RICCARDO MASSA"

Dottorato di Ricerca in Scienze Umane

Antropologia della Contemporaneità: Etnografia delle Diversità e delle Convergenze Culturali - XXVI ciclo

Blood doesn't Lie

Hierarchy and Inclusion/Exclusion in Contemporary Yemen

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Anno Accademico

2014-2015

Blood doesn't Lie

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For ʿAbdullah, Qays, and the Martyrs of the Revolution

Per il nostro piccolo Fagiolo

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Acknowledgments

I owe an immeasurable debt to all the Yemenis who let me live among them, opening their homes to me. In the Old City of Ṣanʿāʾ, and in the villages I have called al-Bustān and Kuthreh, I have learnt the meaning of the word ‘hospitality’.

Conducting research in Yemen, especially during the 2011-2013 period, was not easy nor safe. My research could not have been successful without the support and the protection of three persons in particular. Qays al-Qalīsy, Zayd Kābeʿ, and ʿAli ʿAbdulhamid Shams ad-Dīn (and their respective families) cured me when I was sick, lent me money when I had none, hosted me in their homes, and protected me against whomever caused me troubles. From my own family I would not expect more than what they did.

In Beny Maṭar, several people vouched for me, making my research possible. Among them, I owe my deepest gratitude to the paramount *shaykh* of Beny Maṭar, Yahya al-Maṭary and his son Bakil al-Maṭary. Mohammed al-Maṭary kindly introduced me to the *shaykhs* and contributed to my religious education. I owe him more than I can express. In the village I have called Armis, *shaykh* Sanhan Wahhaz and Ghazy Wahhaz kindly introduced me to the people of Kuthreh.

In Kuthreh, I owe special thanks to each single family. Unfortunately I cannot cite them all. The *shaykh* Yahya Ibn Yahya, from *beyt* Hāshim al-Maghreby, provided me with affection and support, checking on me for the whole period of my stay. Along with *shaykh* Abdurrahman Hamud al-Ḥaddy, and *shaykh* ʿAli Ahmed ʿAbdurrahman, he strove to let me stay in the village. ʿAbdullah Muhsen ʿAli, ʿAli Qizz, ʿAli ar-Reīshāny and many others helped me carrying out my research, bearing endless conversations and obsessive questions. Among the youth of Kuthreh, I remember with the most profound affection Sharaf al-Maghreby, ‘Adnan ar-Reīshāny, Taha al-ʿAsal, and Munīr al-Bahshaly.

In Ṣanʿāʾ, the list of the people who helped me is simply too long to remember. I owe special thanks to Khalid al-ʿAmmāry, director of Markiz at-Tawthiq at-Tarbawy (Ministry of Public Instruction), a person of outstanding qualities who provided me with ceaseless assistance and material of the outmost importance. In each kinship network, I was introduced by people who helped me and assisted me. I would like to remember Ismaʿil Barqūq, ʿAli Shāmiyah, ʿAbdullah al-Ḥammāmy, and Ahmed az-Zubaydī, and their families. Beyt Kābeʿ was my home and my family for months, and I am proud of having lived and worked with them. In Ṣanʿāʾ, among the friends who provided outstanding support, I must mention Mohammed al-Marwany, Ayman, Mohammed al-Qarīṭy, Khalīl and Ahmed al-Qureīshy, Mohammed al-Ḥabāby and ʿEisa.

The Yemen College of Middle Eastern Studies (YCMES) helped me secure a research visa and internal permissions and hosted me during my stay in Ṣanʿāʾ. I owe my deepest gratitude to the President Sabri Saleem and to the administrative staff. At the YCMES, I came to know Prof. T. Stevenson at a late stage of my research, and I greatly benefited from his work and from conversations with him.

At the University of Milano-Bicocca, my supervisor Prof. Ugo Fabietti deserves gratitude far beyond what is imaginable and what I can offer. He was incredibly supportive of my work, and let me conduct my research in full autonomy. His person, his works and his suggestions have been for me a constant source of inspiration. Without his support, for better or worse, I would be pursuing some other career today. The debt I owe to my co-tutor Prof. Alice Bellagamba is seemingly incalculable. During the writing, her comments have helped, sharpening my ideas and arguments. Working with her and the other members of the SWAB research group has widened my perspective to a degree I would have never reached alone. Also I would like to thank Prof. Sandra Green and Prof. Ann McDougall for commenting on some of my material during the workshop “Shadows of Slavery in Africa and Beyond: An agenda for research and comparison,” which was held in Milano, 2014.

Last but not least, my greatest thanks go to my family and to my wife Federica. Not only did they support me with unconditional love, patiently bearing the burden of my absence, but also they provided a constant logistic support to my research. My mother, in particular, was always ready and steadfast to any request of help. Writing in English, my deepest regret is that she won't be able to read my thesis. I owe the most profound debt to Federica, for too many reasons. Above all, for always being there. But also for the time she spent with me in Kuthreh, perfectly adapting to a place and a language she had never met before. She also deserves a mention of honour for reading my whole thesis and commenting on it. I want to thank all the Yemeni women who made her feel at

home in Kuthreh. In answer to the question that all of them asked us: next time, Inshallah, our child will come with us.

Finally, with deep sadness, I dedicate this work to the thousands of Yemenis who have lost their lives since the ‘Arab Spring’ erupted, in February 2011—in particular two I knew well: ʿAbdullah al-Maghreby and Qays ar-Reīshāny. ʿAbdullah was the young *nashshād* (religious singer) of Kuthreh; his voice accompanied my whole stay in the village, and his kindness made me feel at home. He became a martyr on 20 March, 2015, during the suicide attack at al-Badr mosque in Ṣanʿāʾ. Qays was a special friend, and he got married during my stay in Kuthreh, and we spent endless afternoons together. While on duty in Ṣanʿāʾ, he was killed by a Saudi air-strike, becoming a martyr of the nation.

My whole Ph.D. was funded by a grant from the Italian Ministry of Education, Universities and Research (MIUR). Currently, I am a member of the “Shadows of Slavery in West Africa and Beyond: A Historical Anthropology” research group, funded by the European Research Council, (FP7/2007-2013)/ERC Grant agreement n° 313737.

Note on Transliteration

In transliterating Arabic, I have used the conventions of the *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* with a few exceptions: (1) ‘ah’ indicates a *fatḥah* followed by a *tā marbūṭah*; (2) when the initial letter of a word preceded by ‘al-’ is *shamsiyyah*, I have replaced the ‘l-’ of the article with the initial letter of the word (e.g. ‘ash-shams’ instead of ‘al-shams’); (3) I have used Anglicised plurals for words which I commonly repeat in the text (e.g. ‘sayyids’ instead of ‘sādah’); (4) I have added diacritics to family names and toponyms. I have conducted my whole fieldwork and all the interviews in Arabic, without an interpreter. Unless otherwise stated, all translations are mine.

Introduction

> Human beings are everywhere classified by their origins, however these may be conceived; the hypothetical point, geographical, genealogical, or temporal from which they are projected—might I say ‘cast’?—into the present determines their status in it. (Pitt-Rivers, 1971: 252)

The poetics of origin

On 3 June, 2011, six months after the beginning of massive anti-government protests in Ṣanʿāʾ, the Yemeni presidential palace was shelled, leaving the president ʿAli ʿAbdullah Saleh seriously injured. The severity of the wounds forced Saleh to fly to the Saudi capital of Riyad for surgery. The vice president ʿAbdurabbuh Mansur Hady took over as acting president and supreme commander of the armed forces. A cease fire was arranged between the tribal militias loyal to the al-Ahmar family and the government, stopping the fights which had led the country to the brink of a civil war.

The attack marked a significant moment in the history of contemporary Yemen, and it set the frame for my fieldwork. After sorting through a lot of red tape, I eventually obtained my research visa on 7 July, 2011, and reached Ṣanʿāʾ on the same day. In the evening, celebratory gunfire rang out as President Saleh gave a speech from the hospital in Riyad, the first speech after the attack. Popular jubilation was the signal that a large slice of the population was still loyal to Saleh, at least in the capital. From then up until the end of my fieldwork in July 2013, eventful days followed one

after the other. On 23 September, 2011, Saleh returned to Yemen, while the country was facing a bloody escalation of street fights and gun battles. After months of negotiations brokered by the Gulf Co-Operation Council (GCCC), on 23 November, 2011, Saleh eventually agreed to transfer the power to his deputy, ʻAbdurabbuh Mansur Hady, in exchange for immunity from prosecution. On 21 February 2012 presidential elections were held with only one candidate on the ballot. The obvious—many people would say ʻfarcicalʼ[1]—result was the election of ʿAbdurabbuh Mansur Hady. Former president Saleh, whose 33-year rule had apparently come to an end, announced an imminent exile in Ethiopia. Yet he continued to manoeuvre Yemeni politics from backstage.

Saleh had gained power in 1978, following the assassination of former presidents Ibrahim al-Hamdy and Ahmed al-Ghashmi. He was a simple soldier, and the circumstances of his ascent to the presidency are obscure. In his official government biography,[2] Saleh claims that he defended the city of Ṣanʿāʾ during the civil war in 1967-68, bestowing on himself the title of national hero (Orkaby, 2015: 3). In a recent interview on al-ʿarabiyya,[3] he claimed that, "It was destiny (*qadar*), the destiny of a man," for him, to become president. Following his ʻdestinyʼ, Saleh achieved the presidency, and he employed an elaborate historical myth to build the basis of national identity (ivi: 4). According to the myth, all the people of Yemen descended from Qaḥṭān (the biblical Yoqtan), the ancestor of the sedentary Southern Arabs. After the unification with South Yemen in 1990, the nationalist Qaḥṭān myth served as the ideological basis for the unified Yemen Arab Republic (YAR).

Following the 2011 uprisings, the Yemeni republican model and its manufactured national identity disintegrated, collapsing in fractioned tribal, religious and political loyalties. Saleh's manufactured identity followed the same descending parabola. People started deconstructing it from its very base: genealogical origin. Rumours spread that ʿAli ʿAbdullah Saleh's family name was, in fact, ʿAffāsh, a title whose etymology is, in the best-case scenario, ambiguous. The word *faʻash* describes a foaming liquid substance. The derived form ʿAffāsh is traditionally associated with families of bloodletters. In Yemen, bloodletters use horns to suck blood from their patients' bodies. This blood, which is stagnant and thus detrimental for health, is poured from the horn into a basket, and hence thrown away. However, while in the basket, the blood foams abundantly. In the Yemeni highlands, bloodletters (*ḥajjām*) are deemed a low-status group, weak people (*ḍuʿafāʾ*), people ʻlacking of originsʼ (*nuqqāṣ al-aṣl*). So when president ʿAli ʿAbdullah Saleh lost his political

1 Al-Bukhaiti, H., 2015. "From failure to success: how the Houthis saved the Arab spring." Yemen times, 18 February 2015. Available at: http://www.yementimes.com/en/1861/opinion/4909/From-failure-to-success-How-the-Houthis-saved-the-Arab-Spring.htm. Last accessed: 11 July 2015.

2 www.presidentsaleh.gov.ye/shownews.php?lng=en&_newsctgry=2

3 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=15jYj8Hm804

prominence, rumours spread that he was not a Southern Arab (*ʿaraby*) or a real tribesman (*qabīly*).

Just a few days before I left Yemen, in July 2013, the TV channel al-ʿarabiyyah released an interview with ʿAli ʿAbdullah Saleh. At that time, Saleh had no official role in Yemeni affairs, yet many accused him of being involved in anti-government manoeuvres. The interviewer directly questioned him about the title ʿAffāsh:

> **Saleh:** Every person who has failed, either in the political, military, governmental or economic field, puts the responsibility on ʿAli ʿAbdullah Saleh. Before the unification, or after it, or [even] after I handed the power over. If floods occur in the capital, reaching the headquarters of the protesters (*al-muʿtaṣimīn*), they say, "This is a move from the president Saleh, ʿAffāsh," because my grandfather's [name] was ʿAffāsh.
>
> **Interviewer:** Is this word true...? Normal (*ʿādy*), I mean... isn't it that... is it normal (*ṭabiʿy*)?
>
> **Saleh:** [Are you asking] if it is true? ʿAffāsh? How? He is a great *shaykh*! Greater than any *shaykh*!
>
> **Interviewer:** Because some Yemeni people say that there are two families... That your family and Beyt al-Ahmar are not the same one...
>
> **Saleh:** My family is ʿAffāsh, not al-Ahmar, and [he is] the greatest *shaykh*...
>
> **Interviewer:** And [it is said] that you called your nephew ʿAffāsh...
>
> **Saleh:** I called my nephew ʿAffāsh... On the contrary, I am proud when people call me ʿAffāsh... al-Ahmar is the name of the village.
>
> **Interviewer:** They say, "Developments will occur, and you'll be put to trial, ʿAffāsh!"
>
> **Saleh:** There's nothing... This person, ʿAffāsh, was the *shaykh* of the tribe (*ʻashīrah*)... And the land in the village is red (*aḥmar*), so they called it Beyt al-Ahmar... Red land.

For years, Yemeni people believed Saleh to be a member of Beyt al-Ahmar, like other prominent characters of the political scene. In Yemen "[...] the question 'Who are you?' is meaningless without the questions where and of whom were you born" (Wright, 1989: 54). Even a man of solid reputation, e.g. the former president of the republic, had to justify his place of origin and his line of descent in order to find a place in the Yemenite hierarchical system, to craft his social person. The key issues which are raised by this short case lie at the core of my dissertation.

By an ominous coincidence, the national identity grounded on the myth of Qaḥṭān, and Saleh's public reputation collapsed at the same time. Almost simultaneously, other political events mirrored

the centrality of genealogies in Yemeni public life. After the 2011 uprisings, a politico-religious movement known as al-Houthi gained political momentum, filling the political and ideological void left by the fall of the old regime.

The Houthi movement is a revivalist Zaydī movement, linked to the northern tribes. The leaders of al-Houthi put to work another traditional myth legitimising their political authority on the basis of their line of descent. Defining themselves 'sayyids', Northern Arabs and descendants of the Prophet Mohammed, they legitimised their political leadership through the religious discourse of the Zaydī school of Islam, which grants the political power to Imams of Hashemite origins. Interestingly, many opponents of the Houthis challenged their claims on a genealogical ground. Consider this image which circulated on Facebook in 2012:

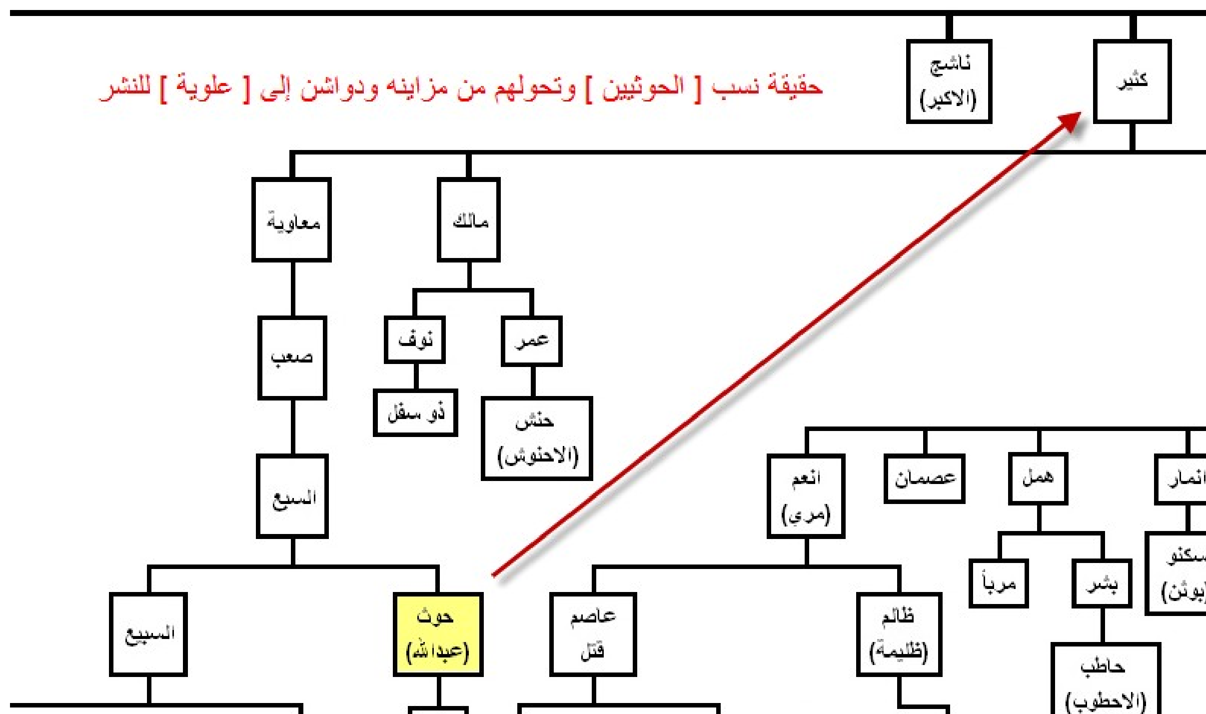

Figure 1 – A polemic representation of al-Houthi's genealogy

Through this image Sunni Muslims from the South attempted to demonstrate "The reality of the genealogy of the Houthis and their evolution (*taḥawwul*) from servants (*mazāynah*) and bards (*dawāshīn*) into descendants of the Prophet (*'alawiyyah*)," thus contesting their Hashemite descent.

Both these cases demonstrate the fundamental importance of the language of origin and descent in contemporary Yemen and its relatedness to an encompassing system of social hierarchy.

Hierarchy and the ancient regime

Bloodletters, servants, bards: from the above mentioned examples, these categories of workers emerge as the lowest degree of a ladder-like model of social ranking. Much anthropological work, especially during the late 1960's and the early 1970's, brought into focus the hierarchical organisation of the Zaydī tribes of highland Yemen. At that time, the topic of social stratification was fashionable for at least two reasons. Firstly, because at the beginning of the 1960's Louis Dumont's *Homo Hierarchicus* had triggered a heated debate around the notions of 'system' and 'hierarchy'. Secondly, because the topic mirrored a shift in the ideology and structure of the Yemeni state itself (Mundy, 1995: 6). In order to grasp the relevance of this second point, I shall propose a brief historical overview.

Zaydīs, the followers of the Imam Zayd Ibn ʿAli, are a Shī'a sect widespread in Upper Yemen. The Zaydiyyah is a moderate school, sometimes described as the 'fifth school' of the four Sunnī schools of Islam. The Zaydī Imamate was founded in the 9th century A.D. by the Imam al-Hady Yahya ila al-Haqq. Since then, Zaydī Imams have ruled the highlands, with the only exception of two historical periods during which the Ottomans occupied northern Yemen (1517-1632 and 1872-1918).

In 1918, Imam Yahya Ḥamīd ad-Dīn gained Yemen's independence from the Turks, restoring the Zaydī Imamate in highland Yemen. The rule of the Ḥamīd ad-Dīn family, known as the Mutawakkilite Kingdom, lasted from 1918 to 1962, when the revolution erupted overthrowing the Imam and establishing the YAR. Revolutionary rhetoric described the ancient regime of the Imams as an era of backwardness and underdevelopment. Since during the imamate political power was reserved to people of Hashemite origin, the 1962 provisional constitution fostered an egalitarian ideology and abolished distinctions grounded on lineage (D'Emilia, 1964).

In the wake of these historical events, Yemeni authors began to write of social ranking as characteristic of the ancient regime (Attar, 1964; Sharjaby, 1986). These authors' perspective was political, rather than analytical: they emphasised the potential of the republican ideology in undoing status distinctions. Their analysis deeply influenced anthropologists. M. Mundy (1995), as well as T. Stevenson (1985) and T. Gerholm (1977), conducted their fieldwork at the beginning of the 1970's. Their otherwise valuable ethnographies rested on a fallacious assumption: they considered the hierarchical organisation which they observed in the field as a product of the ancient regime of the Imams, a 'survival' which was soon to fade.

Exemplary of this trend is Martha Mundy's 1995 book *Domestic Government. Kinship, Community and Polity in North Yemen*. Mundy undertook her fieldwork at the beginning of the 1970's in Wādy Ẓahr, a village situated north-west of Ṣanʿāʾ. Reflecting on her own work, she observed:

> The impression given by this study, that of observing the very end of an *ancien régime*, is heightened by the attention it gives to domestic structures and marital alliances. These reflect the choices of an older generation: nostalgia is there in the material. (Mundy, 1995: 18)

Emphasising the past nature of the 'traditional' hierarchical order, Mundy observed that, "In the speech of older women the vision of social order takes the form of a tripartite division: men of religion, men of the sword and the plough, and men of service." (ivi: 39)

This tripartite model of social ranking lies at the core of common sense representations of the Yemenite hierarchical system. Moreover, it is uncritically accepted as the premise of most of the anthropological work regarding the Yemeni highlands. The model casts images of rank in terms of origins, positing a relation between descent, locality, function(s) of the social group and ties to institutional networks.

Social Group	**Genealogical Origin**	**Eponymous Ancestor**	**Function**	**Political Institution**
sayyid, pl. *sādah* (also: *hāshimy*; *sharīf*, pl. *ashrāf*)	Northern Arab; descendants of the Prophet Mohammed through ʿAli and Fatima	ʿAdnān	Religious elite/Administrative elite	imamate/protected people
qabīly, pl. *qabā'il* (also: *ʿaraby*, pl. *ʿarab*)	Southern Arab	Qaḥṭān	Peasants/warriors Craftsmen	Tribal corporate groups
beny al-khumus (also: *muzayyin*, pl. *mazāynah*; *ḍaʿīf*, pl. *ḍuʿafā'*; *nāqiṣ*, pl. *nuqqāṣ*)	Lacking (*nāqiṣ*)	Unknown	Service sector	Protected people

The *sayyids*, descendants of the Prophet Mohammed, are described as a sort of religious elite:

scholars and teachers holding the monopoly of religious instruction and a ruling class associated with the power of the Imam. Simultaneously, they are depicted as 'weak' people, people falling under the protection of the *qabīlys* within tribal territory. The *qabīlys*, descendants of Qaḥṭān and Southern Arabs, are described as self-sufficient peasants and as an arms-bearing aristocracy. If town-dwellers, they are depicted as craftsmen and deemed inferior to the countrymen. *Beny al-khumus*, people lacking in genealogical origin, are described as workers of the service sector. Simultaneously, they are considered weak people falling under the protection of the tribesmen or of the imamate.

The model presupposes a hierarchical ranking of the three levels, thus describing the *sayyids* as the first level, the *qabīlys* as the second one, and *beny al-khumus* as the third one. Much ethnography suggests a parallel between the ancient Yemeni regime and the European feudal system, thus describing the levels as 'estates'. Others look at the Indian caste system, suggesting hierarchy being conceived and imposed by the highest stratum, as a sort of 'sayyid sociology'.

After the 1962 revolution, Yemen became integrated into the world economy, greatly expanding its commercial and educational sectors. A new elite based on secular education accessed state employment; peasants abandoned agriculture for the army; a whole scenario of previously unknown professions unfolded. These rapid and unforeseen changes could not be interpreted through the categories of the tripartite model. Already during the 1970's, anthropologists observed that the model did not provide any accurate description of the social order of the highlands. Yet they resolved the gap between model and ethnographic experience by referring the model to the past and describing the hierarchical order as a survival of the ancient regime.

What is the relevance of the tripartite hierarchical model in contemporary Yemen? When I first visited Yemen, in 2006, I had no perception of rank distinctions between people. The three social groups described by the model are not distinguishable by phenotypic traits, and nor do they dress in a particular type of clothes. They are not spatially segregated or characterised by a shared class-situation. A foreigner might live in Yemen for years without noticing an underlying hierarchical system, and many, indeed, ever do. Hierarchy constitutes a sort of 'cultural intimacy' for Yemeni people. It provides insiders with a sense of understanding, of self-reflexive, ontological security (Herzfeld, 1997). Yet, at the same time, it is a source of embarrassment and criticism: discriminating against people on the basis of their line of descent, or their work, is contrary to the Islamic discourse and to republican ideology.

The notion of cultural intimacy well fits the case at hand, since it helps us to understand seeming discrepancies and contradictions in people's discourses on two levels. In public discourses or

recorded interviews, Yemenis would never assert the superiority of one's lineage over someone else's, nor the right to gain advantages on the ground of this distinction. Yet in everyday discursive practices, they often do. More importantly, distinctions grounded on genealogical origins still lie at the core of marriage strategies; they influence the division of labour; and they shape the language of politics.

How are we to explain the reproduction of a system of inequalities which was formally abolished more than 50 years ago? Is hierarchy an outcome of the political power of the imamate, or is it tied to deeper structures of the society? My answer is that in order to understand hierarchy and make sense of the tripartite model, we need to understand the role of genealogies in contemporary Yemen. Consequently, this work explores the place of genealogies in the social life of the highlands and their relationship with the legacy of past hierarchical organisation.

As it should be clear from its focus, this thesis is primarily concerned with the forces and dynamics of social reproduction. The Yemeni case is, in fact, a prominent example of what P. Bourdieu would define the 'paradox of *doxa'*. At the beginning of *Masculine Domination*, Bourdieu writes:

> I have always been astonished by what might be called the paradox of *doxa* – the fact that the order of the world as we find it, with its one-way streets and its no-entry signs, whether literal or figurative, its obligations and its penalties, is broadly respected; that there are not more transgressions and subversions, contraventions and 'follies' [...]; or, still more surprisingly, that the established order, with its relations of domination, its rights and prerogatives, privileges and injustices, ultimately perpetuates itself so easily [...] (2001:1).

The notion of *doxa* describes the social actor's taken-for-granted experience of the social world, the agreement between embodied structures and objective structures "[...] in which one attributes to the world a deeper belief than all beliefs." (Bourdieu, 1998: 81) A sceptical reader might ask to what degree belonging to a lineage pertains to the dominion of *doxic* experience in contemporary Yemen. After all, the 1962 revolution erupted against the privileges of the *sayyids,* and it abolished duties and privileges grounded on genealogical origin. Today, the very fact of equality is part of the thinkable and the sayable (Arkoun, 2002), and the critique of the 'sectarianism of origin' falls within the limits of *opinion* (Bourdieu, 1977). No one would ever admit to people deserving privilege or undergoing oppression on the basis of their lineage.

Yet many people would admit that an 'essence' passes down from one generation to another,

constituting the physical and moral qualities of the individuals. This process of transmission is what weaves together ancestors and descendants "eternalizing the arbitrary." (Bourdieu, 2001)

Blood doesn't lie: genealogies and essentialism

The principle that lies at the core of the Yemenite hierarchical system is an essentialist representation of genealogical origins. A famous *ḥadīth*, a saying of the Prophet, calls on the believer to carefully choose whom to marry since the 'root' (*ʿirq*) of the spouse will reveal itself ("*takhayyarū li-nuṭafi-kum fa-inna-l-ʿirq dassās-an*."). R. Traini, an Italian Arabist, has translated the saying as "Blood doesn't lie." ("Il sangue non si smentisce.") In Yemen, and more generally in the Middle East, metaphors of shared blood (*damm*) and shared meat (*laḥm*) stand for kinship itself, a principle already recognised by W. Robertson-Smith (1903: 27). Yet most of my interlocutors referred to their genealogical origins through the words *ʿirq* (pl. *ʿurūq*; root) and *aṣl* (pl. *uṣūl*; origin). This last word, in particular, retained a significance similar to the one reported by L. Rosen, entailing a focus on descent and the social milieu, and conveying ideas about a person's motivations and social worth (1984: 21-7). Being lacking of origins (*nuqqāṣ al-aṣl* or *qalīl aṣl*) was thus considered an index of low-status.

Most of my interlocutors recognised a strict connection between origins (*uṣūl*) and the very essence of human beings. In a sense, the *aṣl* of an individual encompassed and determined the totality of his social and biological person. In the West, we are prone to recognise that genetic traits pass down from one generation to another. My Yemeni interlocutors did not use the language of genetics. Yet they believed moral attitudes, emotional dispositions, taste, technical skills, linguistic styles, and even posture to pass down lines of descent. As the proverb says, "When origin deceives you, action gives you a clue." ("*idhā ghallaṭa-k al-uṣūl, dallata-k al-afāʿīl.*") Moral behaviour revealed the origin of people, notwithstanding their claims to social standing.

M. Regnier, a scholar of Madagascar, has described this way of representing the Other through the notion of *essentialism*. Essentialising the Other means a) construing social categories as if they were a natural kind; and *b*) assuming that there is a property causing others to be what they are (2012: 175). Regnier deploys 'essentialism' in the specific sense of *psychological essentialism*, thus attributing it a cognitive focus. Psychological essentialism[4] is "a pervasive cognitive bias that leads people to view members of a category as sharing a deep, underlying inherent nature (a category

4 T. Dilley, focusing on the discursive aspects of caste, defines stereotyped discourses on Otherness "Orientalist discourses" (2000: 150). Yet the notion of Orientalism entails theoretical consequences which Dilley himself does not explore in depth.

‘essence’), which causes them to be fundamentally similar to one another […].” (Rhodes, 2012: 13526)

The tripartite model of social ranking certainly demonstrates an essentialist bias. It reproduces social categories irrespective of internal differentiations and individual deviance from the stereotype. However, what is of interest for an anthropologist is *how* these essentialist categories are discursively constructed and *how* they are coupled with social organisation. So, starting from the first question: what is it that causes Others to be what they are? In Yemen, the answer is simply “their genealogical origin.”

Bodies and family trees: genealogies and visual metaphors

My Yemeni interlocutors' concern with genealogies should not appear bizarre to a Western reader. Notions of personhood, in the West, have long been informed by the idea of a vertical passing on of substance from one generation to another. This mechanism of transmission has been represented, throughout history, by means of two leading metaphors: the body and the family tree. According to G. Solinas (2013), the pattern of the body-scheme appeared long before arboreal metaphors. In its more common form, it depicted a web of consanguinity over the body of a divine figure. The earlier representations of Arab genealogists, too, were characterised by a corporeal language: the visual metaphor of the human skeleton was common in medieval texts. It traced ego's ancestors from the feet to the head, with each tribal division representing a major body part (Varisco, 1995: 141).

In Europe, the horticultural metaphor appeared in various forms, from at least the 11thcentury onward, but it was only in the 15th century that it acquired its canonical imagery: the founding ancestor in the trunk of a tree, and his descendants scattered among its branches (Klapisch-Zuber, 1991). Around the 17th century, the visual metaphor of the genealogical tree was transformed into an abstract graph (Klapisch-Zuber, 2000: 332). Arab genealogists seldom referred to trees, except in a general sense (Varisco, 1995: 141). Yet the arboreal metaphor is widespread in contemporary Yemen. Consider, for instance, the branched (*mushajjar*) representation of the *sayyids* of Yemen depicted in Figure 1.

Visual metaphors are not, simply, a means of representation. They unfold the possibility of a certain kind of thinking, and they borrow from precedent paradigms (Bouquet, 2006). In the West, ‘tree thinking’ is commonly associated with C. Darwin (1859) and biological evolution (or *descent with modification*). Phylogenetic trees are “[...] the most direct representation of the principle of

common ancestry.” (Baum et al., 2005) Evolutionary trees are the subject of analyses that seek to reconstruct “the patterns of branching that have led to the diversity of life as we know it.” (Gregory, 2008) The word phylogenesis itself comes from *phyle* (tribe) + *genesis* (birth). The whole point about ‘tree thinking’ is thus to demonstrate the principle of descent with modification: that “the endless forms most beautiful” (Darwin, 1859) of the living are descended from one common ancestor through a process of evolution.

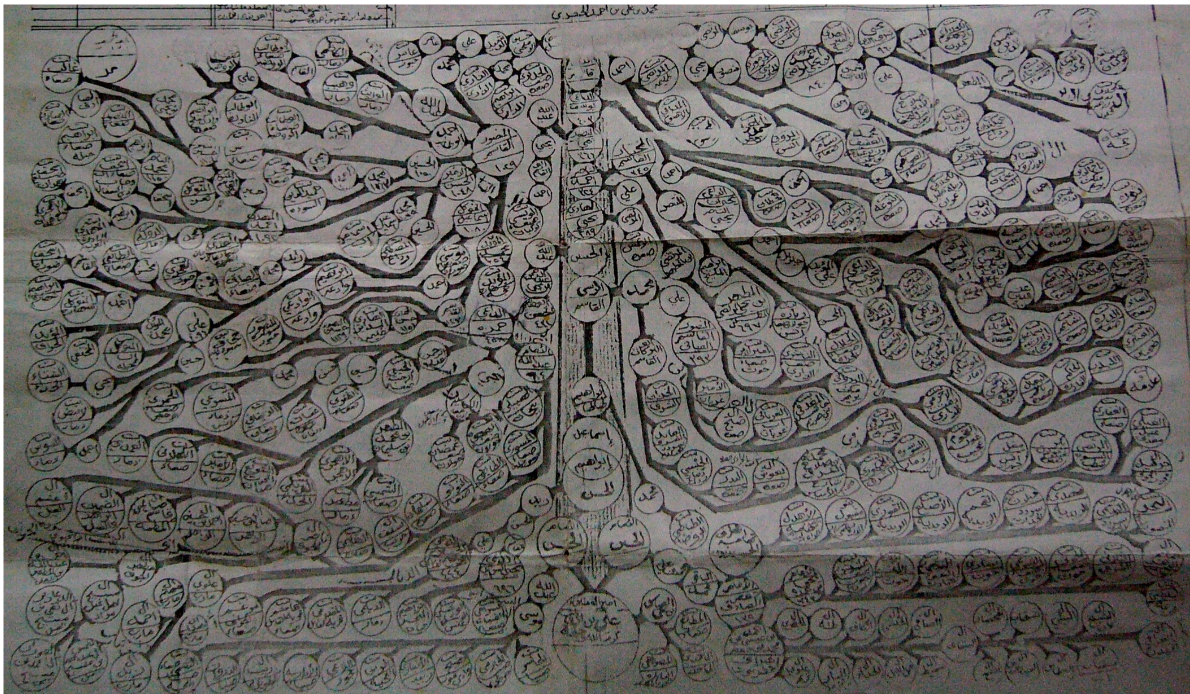

Figure 2 – A branched representation of the sayyids of Yemen

If we compare visual metaphors representing family pedigrees in Yemen and phylogenetic trees we find similarities and differences. The similarities are clearly suggested by the usage of the same metaphor. Yemenis deploy family trees in order to demonstrate their descent from a common ancestor. Moreover, they only represent one line of descent (the paternal), exactly as phylogenetic trees do (Gregory, 2008: 124). In Yemen, contemporaries are related through a common ancestor, called *mujmaʿ*. The analogous group, in phylogenetic terms, is called ‘clade’ (or ‘monophylum’): “[groups] that include an ancestor and all of its descendants.” (ibid.)

Yet one must not take this analogy too far. In Yemen, the representation of a genealogical continuum is not intended to explain differences in the present as an evolution from a common ancestor. Rather, it is meant to demonstrate that no evolution occurred at all. The relationships

between the ancestors are projected onto the present. Descendants embody the same essence of the ancestors. The tree is thus a static model: it denotes relationships in the present through a reference to the past. A 'cut tree' (*maqṭūʿ*), like in the case of *beny al-khumus*, equals the impossibility of having a place in the world.

This, again, should not appear bizarre to a Western reader. In the West, too, trees represented, for a very long time, a static (and ranked) universe of social relationships. Charles Darwin's favourite visual metaphor was, in fact, the (unranked) coral (Bredekamp, 2005), a fact which only a few people know, even among biologists.

Genealogical consciousness

The recurrence of images and metaphors in the representation of kinship diagrams shall not lead us to universalist assertions; kinship diagrams have their own historicity, and they are not neutral instruments (Bouquet, 2000: 187). Much like the living organisms we call trees, family trees are embedded in different kinds of projects, cultures, and property regimes (Rival, 1998; Jones and Cloke, 2002; Pálsson, 2007: 62).

Consider, for instance, the role of family trees in the United States. As François Weil (2013) has demonstrated, lineage consciousness was a social construction subject to different historical configurations which wove together the two shores of the Atlantic in a vigorous genealogical culture. Four dominant *genealogical configurations* emerged in the United States between the mid-18th and the mid-20th century, coupled with different political, economic and social instances. Until the mid-18th century, family trees served as a social marker in a world organised around notions of deference and difference. In the period comprised between the new republic and the antebellum, genealogies became an egalitarian, moral, and familial concern. Extending from 1860 to the mid-20th century, they represented a quest for racial purity and nationalism. Today, the genealogical configuration deals with ethnicity and the impact of new genetics.

As Weil's work wonderfully shows, the semantics of genealogy are 'put to work' through different historical configurations which comprise ideological, political, economic and social material. I shall emphasise one point of Weil's work: above all, **genealogical consciousness suggested a psychological, intellectual, and affective relation to time, ancestors, and family**. In the West, notions of personhood were strictly connected with ideas of relatedness which extended from the present to a genealogical past (Klapisch-Zuber, 2000).

Starting from the 18th century, this way of crafting human beings underwent a radical change. The work of Alexis De Tocqueville (2012) provides a reflective testimony of this epochal shift. Writing in the first half of the 19th century, in *De la Démocratie en Amérique*, he attempted to rationalise the opposition of 'aristocratic' versus 'democratic nations':

> Chez les peuples aristocratiques, les familles restent pendant des siècles dans le même état, et souvent dans le même lieu. Cela rend, pour ainsi dire, toutes les générations contemporaines. Un homme connaît presque toujours ses aïeux et les respecte ; il croit déjà apercevoir ses arrière-petits-fils, et il les aime. Il se fait volontiers des devoirs envers les uns et les autres, et il lui arrive fréquemment de sacrifier ses jouissances personnelles à ces êtres qui ne sont plus ou qui ne sont pas encore. (ivi: 456)

This passage clearly shows that the affective relation to ancestors and time entails a peculiar role for human agency. When a man knows his forefathers, it is a *duty* to act in accordance with their legacy. It is a duty to craft one's self in a genealogical shape; being a man means being the descendant of an ancestor. A further passage explores the connection between this peculiar way of conceiving personhood and the emerging democratic nations:

> Chez les peuples démocratiques, de nouvelles familles sortent sans cesse du néant, d'autres y retombent sans cesse, et toutes celles qui demeurent changent de face ; la trame des temps se rompt à tout moment, et le vestige des générations s'efface. On oublie aisément ceux qui vous ont précédé, et l'on n'a aucune idée de ceux qui vous suivront. Les plus proches seuls intéressent. (ivi: 457)

These long quotes well summarise the feeling of being on the brick of an ideological system, already foreseeing an upcoming epochal shift: the advent of egalitarianism, freedom and individualism. As A. Honneth (2004) has recently demonstrated, in modern Western capitalist societies, people are compelled to place their very selves and their self-realisation at the centre of their life-planning and practice. Diversified ways of life are opened to individuals, and this increase in the range of options is accompanied by a new focus on 'flexibility': individuals are expected to be willing to develop themselves in their work (Sennett, 2000). This peculiar way of crafting selves is tied—it is in 'structural coupling'—with a functionally differentiated global society, a society where individualism is an institutionalised feature of the welfare state (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002).

In spite of this emphasis on individualism and self-realisation, the West has recently rediscovered a renewed interest in genealogical practices (Bamford and Leach, 2012). New scientific practices enabling the visualising and mapping of genetic material, have certainly played a central role in producing a new ‘genealogical configuration’ (Pálsson, 2007). Due to these scientific developments, a “more radical conflation of inside/outside has taken place.” (ivi: 230) Genealogical identities are not to be proved anymore by means of coats of arms, family trees or land contracts; they are inscribed in the body, hidden and quiescent, waiting to be revealed. They are the haven of an identitarian quest, rather than a generative principle for the crafting of social selves.

The genealogical imagination

Unlike many Westerners, me included, most of my Yemeni interlocutors held a precise idea of their genealogical and geographical origins. In this paragraph I shall briefly explore their “[...] formulations of genealogical connections between persons and their ancestors,” (Scheffler, 1966: 543) what H. W. Scheffler would define a ‘descent-construct’ (ivi: 542).

Origins (*aṣl*) represent, in contemporary Yemen, a principle of self-ascription and ascription by others. Personal names well exemplify the way my interlocutors' identity was constructed (cf. Mermier, 1985). Consider the following example:

Title	**First name**	**Forefathers**	**Beyt**	**Badaneh**	**Village**
as-*sayyid*	ʿAli	ʿAbdulhamid Mohammed	ʿAbdulhamid	Shams ad-Din	al-Kuthry

It is customary, in Yemen, to assign a first name related to the ancestors. The complete ‘Islamic’ name of a person, composed by four names, is thus constituted by the first name and by the names of 3 forefathers. Each family has a different tradition of names. In the village of Kuthreh, where I conducted my last fieldwork, people of *sayyid* origin preferred composed names, like ʿAbdulhamid, ʿAbdullatif, ʿAbdurrazzaq, and so forth. People of *ʿarab* origin deployed names from the same roots, but not composed: Ahmed for ʿAbdulhamid; Lotf for ʿAbdullatif; Rizq for ʿAbdurrazzaq; and so forth. People from *beny al-khumus*, sometimes, deployed the shortened version of these names: Humaydi for Ahmed; ʿAbduly for ʿAbdallah; Rizeīqī for Rizq. These names were transmitted, and thus reproduced, as a form of respect for the ancestors.

The term ‘beyt’ literally means house, and it points to a patronymic descent category of varying size. It usually refers to an imagined community, with the common ancestor five-generations removed and to social units bigger than the patronymic descent category of the *usrah*, which usually includes three generations of co-resident people. The term *badaneh* was sometimes deployed, in Kuthreh, as a synonym for *beyt*, and sometimes to refer to a bigger unit. Finally, the toponym provided geographical information, functioning contextually as any *nisbah* adjective (Geertz, 1983: 65-6).

The *sayyid* ʿAli would present himself as ʿAli ʿAbdulhamid inside his own village; as a man from Beyt Shams ad-Din, to prove his descent from the Prophet; and as ʿAli al-Kuthry outside the village. People lacking of origins, would often replace the toponym with the name of their tribe (or geographical area), thus hiding the village where they lived and served. People from the towns, instead, would provide their *beyt* but not the toponym.

Enquiring into the origin of any interlocutor was customary. A typical conversation between the *sayyid* ʿAbdulhamid and a total stranger, after a few words, would proceed as follows:

> **Stranger:** Where are you from my brother? (*min feīn ant?*)
>
> ʿ**Ali:** I'm from Kuthreh, in Beny Maṭar.
>
> **Stranger:** Ah, Kuthreh. *Sayyid*, right?

Already the name of a person provided unambiguous information about his origins. Here I want to bring into focus the genealogical level. People's genealogical origin was defined on two levels, which I shall define macro-genealogical and micro-genealogical. Let me consider the first.

On the macro-genealogical level, people accepted and demonstrated a genealogical connection with the eponymous ancestor of Southern Arabs (Qaḥṭān) or Northern Arabs (ʿAdnān). Northern Arabs assumed a relationship by genealogical tie to ʿAdnān, through the Prophet's daughter and his cousin ʿAli. This macro-genealogical level was translated into the title ‘sayyid’. Southern Arabs considered themselves the original inhabitants of Yemen. They assumed a relationship by genealogical tie to Qaḥṭan, son of Sam. They translated this macro-genealogical connection into the title ‘*ʿaraby*’ or, if hailing from the countryside, they used the title ‘qabīly’.

This macro-genealogical level is the one considered in the tripartite model. On this level, genealogies work as a symbolic medium to construct ‘imagined communities’ (Anderson, 1991) of

contemporaries, in A. Schütz's definition (1967: 176-214). These macro-genealogical categories, contribute to the process of essentialisation of the tripartite model through the systematic usage of ‘generic language’ (Rhodes et al., 2012). In contemporary Yemen, the macro-genealogical level defines the boundaries among three endogamic groups: the *sayyids*, the *ʿarabs*, and *beny al-khumus*.

These three categories are internally differentiated at the micro-genealogical level. On the micro-genealogical level, the relevant unit of analysis is the *beyt*. People belonging to the same *beyt* clearly acknowledge a common eponymous ancestor at the macro-genealogical level. However, they also share a common ancestor who is 3 to 5 generations removed. People from the same *beyt* constitute a community of consociates. In A. Schütz's sense (1967): they share the same time and spatial access to each other's bodies. Moreover, they entertain with their close ancestors a relationship of ‘historical contiguity’: the life of their predecessors is still inscribed in the memory of living people by their *beyt*, as well as in the material constituents of their life world. On this level, each *beyt* distinguishes itself from others, although belonging to the same macro-genealogical level.

In order to explain this point, we shall briefly consider the case of *beny al-khumus*. People of *sayyid* and *ʿarab* origins describe *beny al-khumus* as a homogeneous social group, a sort of residual category. *Beny al-khumus*, instead, do not acknowledge any common ancestor and refuse to be catalogued as people lacking of origins. Families from *beny al-khumus* would distinguish themselves one another by means of the traditional profession of the lineage, also providing criteria of internal ranking.

In Kuthreh, *sayyids* distinguished among themselves on the basis of the profession of their lineage on the micro-level. Families of *sayyid* teachers sought to establish connections with other families of teachers, people of the same kind. *Sayyid* peasants did the same. In the dominion of conjugal choices, they followed the principle of *isogamy* (in Arabic *kafā'a*). If a marriage between distant *sayyid* families was deemed possible, marrying *sayyid* women to men of other social groups was, instead, extremely rare.

It is important to note that, on the micro-genealogical level, the generalisations expressed in the tripartite model are systematically contradicted. For example, it is never the case that *all* the members of a social group perform a particular occupation. Nor is their class-situation always similar. Not even their political status is comparable. A similar contradiction between the macro-ideological ‘system’ and the ‘empirical’ level of ‘real’ lineages has been noted by anthropologists of India (Béteille, 1971; Quigley, 1994), and formulated through the difference of castes and sub-

castes. In Yemen, these two levels need to be analytically separated. Social actors put to work both the macro and micro genealogical levels, articulating this ideological material with political, economic and social circumstances. Through this articulation, different genealogical configurations emerge in different historical periods.

The descent-constructs I have just presented depict the connection between persons and ancestors in a way which is common to many Middle Eastern contexts. This is a way of making history, of weaving together past and present. Andrew Shryock describes this kind of historical imagination through the notion of 'genealogical imagination' (1997). According to Shryock, "The past, for tribespeople, is inseparable from the present. History is now as it happened then." (ivi: 35) Genealogies cut temporality in a vertical sense, encompassing persons and ancestors in an eternal present. Consequently, as Shryock points out, moral selves are always referred to their past origin: any claim to moral standing is also a comment on origins and it has to arise from a genealogical past (ivi: 11). Any attempt at bifurcating temporality can result in a considerable loss of insight (ivi: 35).

Moving from these observations, we can now answer the question, 'what is it that causes Others to be what they are?' The answer is that essentialism, in Yemen, is inextricably tied to the genealogical imagination. Genealogies are not, simply, a principle of self-ascription and ascription by others. Genealogical consciousness pushes social actors to craft their selves in accordance with the legacy of their ancestors. Simultaneously, it defines life trajectories and future-oriented actions. As I noted above, De Tocqueville well expressed this principle: "Un homme connaît presque toujours ses aïeux et les respecte ; il croit déjà apercevoir ses arrière-petits-fils, et il les aime. Il se fait volontiers des devoirs envers les uns et les autres." (2012: 456) This quote well exemplifies what I have defined a 'vertical temporality': the conflation of the genealogical line in the present, and the expansion of the present in past and future directions. This future dimension is a necessary completion of Shryock's notion of genealogical imagination.

As W. H. R. Rivers' early comments on descent have made clear the term 'descent' has been used to report "various social processes." (1924: 85 quoted in Scheffler, 1966) Descent "[...] has been used indifferently for the way in which membership of the groups is determined, and for the modes of transmission of property, rank or office." (ibid.) With the notion of descent-constructs (Scheffler, 1966), I have distinguished the ideological aspects of descent. Introducing the notion of genealogical imagination, I have specified how descent-constructs inform notions of temporality and the relationship between ancestors and persons in contemporary Yemen. Now I shall specify how genealogies are connected with social organisation and with the material dimension of social

actors' experience. In order to do so, I shall introduce the notion of *genealogical capital.*

Genealogical origins (*aṣl*), I maintain, are the symbolic transposition of *genealogical capital.* Unrecognised as capital (i.e. historically accumulated work), origins essentialise or naturalise the transmission of cultural, social and economic capital along the paternal line of descent. In this sense not only membership, property, rank and office are handed down from one generation to another. Also a *habitus* is crafted, which incorporates the objective structures of society and simultaneously produces them. As P. Bourdieu has acutely noted, the hereditary transmission of cultural capital embodied in a family is a process that responds to a specific logic, a process through which the social conditions of transmission and acquisition are hidden and denied (Bourdieu, 1986: 244). Through this logic, selves are crafted who fit the expectations (and the stereotypes) regarding their belonging to a line of descent. Through the semantics of origins, social actors' lasting dispositions, their structured propensities to think, feel, taste and act in determinant ways are symbolised as innate capacities (Bourdieu, 1977; 1979).

Throughout this dissertation I shall bring into focus the relationship between the transmission of genealogical capital and the division of labour. From the theoretical premises which I have just outlined, it follows that knowledge and technical skills were transmitted as incorporated knowledge, and thus naturalised as innate qualities of each *beyt*. *Sayyid* teachers, for instance, appeared as well-read persons by virtue of their belonging to the Prophet's line of descent. Similarly, trustworthiness was deemed a characteristic moral quality of servants (*mazāynah*), an attribute descending from their ancestors.

Given this differential distribution of power, and the resulting mutual dependency between social groups, hierarchical models do not retain a heuristic value in making sense of the complexity of Yemeni society. Following B. Wright, I will argue that Yemeni society should be approached "not as series of hierarchically ranked groups but instead as a set of groups differentiated by innate capacity of power source, such that inequalities within the system are less a matter of rank than of culturally defined realms of power." (1989: 42) Yemeni society is thus composed by culturally defined realms of power, and their interdependence is "a precondition as well as a result of the caste system." (ibid.) This perspective has the merit of accounting for the ideological and material power of low-ranking castes, too.

Once we deconstruct the tripartite hierarchical model, the possibility unfolds of exploring inequality as a matter of 'culturally defined realms of power'. This differential distribution of power is not limited to the domain of material assets, wealth and political power. Rather, it informs the construction of different types of social persons. Those who share the same social standing are held

to possess specific qualities; they share a way of being, a form of physical and moral constitution (Dilley, 2000: 161). This differential distribution of power is represented through cultural discourses on origins, and reproduced through the transmission of genealogical capital.

This perspective does not deny the hierarchical dimension of discourses about status and social ranking. Rather, it recognises that multiple discourses on manliness, instruction, religion, work, and origins concur in defining the significance of social standing for persons belonging to different social categories. The tripartite model, which in its hegemonic form proposes a clear-cut ranking order, is one discourse among many, and it is contested by each social group. Yet this discourse lies at the heart of Yemeni society, defining the significance of being a Man. It is an essentialist discourse, since it affirms that "[...] to know a line of ancestry is to know the origin of a person and the nature of the essence passed along that line," (Dilley, 2000: 161) and it still pertains to the *doxic* experience of my interlocutors, since no one would ever deny that 'blood doesn't lie'.

Members/outsiders, inclusion/exclusion

According to N. Luhmann, functionally differentiated societies are characterised by a fragmentation of values and descriptions of realities (Luhmann, 1998). Each sub-system of a functionally differentiated society structures its communications on the basis of a unique observation code: true/false for science, lawful/unlawful for the legal system, and so forth (Luhmann and De Giorgi, 1992). Each sub-system thus constructs a different kind of social reality.

The notion of 'person' describes the inclusion and representation of human beings—physical entities and systems of consciousness—within specific communication systems (Luhmann, 2000). It follows that the same human being can be a different person, contingent on the communicative context. In functionally differentiated societies, persons are included as *individuals*. In this sense, the inclusion in one functional system of some relevant aspects of the individual means, by definition, the exclusion of the 'rest'. According to W. Schirmer, "Individuals are included specifically into social systems, in figurative terms only as 'slices', but as many different slices in many different social contexts." (2013: 48) In segmentary and stratified societies, by contrast, to be included means to be perceived as part of one and only one social system. Membership in families and/or geographical criteria more or less completely predefine the societal place a person belongs to as well as his/her life opportunities (ivi: 47).

Contemporary Yemeni society can be placed somewhere between the two poles of a continuum

between functionally differentiated societies and stratified ones. Yet it is certainly closer to the stratified pole. In spite of the egalitarian premises of republican and Islamic discourses, the question ‘Who are you?’ keeps being meaningless without the questions ‘Where and of whom were you born?’ Persons are included in social systems as a ‘whole’, and *privatus* stands for *inordinatus* (Luhmann, 1983: 69).

Consider, for instance, the ‘egalitarian’ discourse of Islam: it fosters the inclusion of the believers, irrespective of differences other than piety; yet the Zaydī school recognises the supremacy of the Hashemites in the field of religious scholarship. Citizens are all equal, by definition, and instruction is opened to anyone; yet inclusion in the administrative system, in the army, in universities and, more generally, in any public institution is subordinated to a previous inclusion in social networks of a different kind. Without personal connections, it is almost impossible to access any service. Even being hired, renting a house, and buying a car are processes which need a guarantee: they are tied to a person's social capital.

Relationships grounded on locality are certainly an important resource for accumulating social capital. As the proverb says, “Your close neighbour [is more useful] than your distant brother.” (“*jārak al-qarīb wa lā akhūk al-baʿīd*.”) In contemporary Yemen, and especially in urban contexts, relationships of neighbourhood cut across the three social categories of the tripartite model, creating connections between persons who are distant on the macro-genealogical level.

However, as I shall demonstrate throughout this dissertation, kinship networks establish a web of reciprocal rights and duties which constitute the very base of Yemeni society. Marriage practices, in Yemen, are oriented by the principle of *isogamy*. Since human beings belonging to different lineages are believed to embody different essences, conjugal choices need to be carefully valued. Substances, in fact, pass down from one generation to another from both the maternal and paternal side. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, marriages entail weighty ties between families, establishing a privileged channel of communication. For these reasons, conjugal choices are not, simply, a matter of personal preferences; rather, they are socially sanctioned.

Kinship ties and, to a minor degree, locality thus concur in the delimitation of systems of communication. A central feature of these systems of communication is their reliance on debt and exchange. The Yemeni case well demonstrates how practices of sharing and reciprocity, grounded as they are on the creation of indebtedness, retain a community-building function (Graeber, 2011). What people share (or exchange) is always, in Simmel's definition, *sacrifice*. The desire of something is always the sacrifice of something else. Following this definition, value emerges as the meaningful difference between what is desired and what is sacrificed, establishing culturally

defined regimes of value (Appadurai, 1986).

The life of the highlands is timed by exchanges of sacrifices to an extent which is hardly conceivable for a Westerner. People visit neighbours and kin, lend money, lend food, host friends and strangers, intervene in conflicts, recommend friends' friends for a job in the army, and so forth. Above all, they attend weddings, funerals and other life cycle ritual ceremonies, spending in such activities at least half of their days. They sacrifice their time and wealth to gain symbolic credits, social capital, and these exchanges of sacrifices constitute the core of their social experience, and the basis of their social standing.

As D. Graeber notes, values are always seen in comparative terms (2005: 451), which means that they are ranked. Otherwise stated, it only makes sense to speak of inclusion if there is exclusion. ‘Inclusion’ and ‘membership’ always entail the opposite: processes of othering, the creation of outsiders and strangers. I shall define ‘outsider’ as a person excluded from a particular regime of value.

The Ancient Greeks, who had a vast vocabulary to refer to membership and exclusion, widely elaborated on the meaning of ‘stranger’. The term *thuraios* is of particular interest for my argument. According to Émile Benveniste (1969), the word *thura* refers to the door of a house, and *thuraios* is he who stays outside the door. Behind the door, unfolds the intimate space of the domestic unit, the *oikos*. The inside defines the place of belonging, of reciprocity, of a shared *ethos*. Outside, at the door, an ambivalent figure is waiting: the stranger—a guest to honour and protect; a potential threat to the values of the community; a potential economic resource (Booth, 1997).

Throughout this work, I will bring into focus family histories of two groups of outsiders: people from *beny al-khumus* and people of *sayyid* origins. Both these groups constitute a minority, if compared to the great majority of countrymen, who are Southern Arabs, and both are excluded from the regimes of value of the latter.

Beny al-khumus are described, by means of an essentialist discourse, as immoral persons. Persons who, due to their genealogical origin, lack the moral qualities which distinguish a real man: bravery, generosity, and so forth. The ideal type of a person belonging to *beny al-khumus* is the servant of the village (*muzayyin*): he who works as a ‘backstager’, setting the scene for the tournaments of value of the actors on the stage. Not only he is deemed morally incapable of taking part in these regimes of value, but he is also factually excluded from them, since he cannot access the kinship networks of the *‘arabs* and the *sayyids.*

Sayyids are deemed outsiders for completely different reasons. Described, at the macro-

genealogical level, as Northern Arabs, they are depicted as foreigners, often Persians. In their role of religious scholars, they are 'migrants in the path of God', people who move from village to village, living under the protection of the countrymen. Above all—like *beny al-khumus*, but for the opposite reason—they do not take part in the countrymen's regimes of value. In fact, they exclude them by means of hypogamy, creating unbalanced kinship networks.

Setting the scene: field site and methodology

I undertook my first fieldwork in Yemen during six months from July to January 2009. My MA thesis, *Qays e Layla: Onore e Amore nello Yemen Contemporaneo*, is the outcome of that ethnographic experience. The research took place in a small village of nearly 200 adult men perched on a mountain renowned as Jabal an-Nabī Shuʿayb, south-west of Ṣanʿāʾ. I will refer to that village as 'al-Bustān'.

In June, 2011, I returned to Yemen for my PhD research. Since most Yemeni villages are connected to a market, my plan consisted in spending 1 year in a village and 6 months in a related market, in order to enquire the relationships between countrymen and town-dwellers. I meant to focus my ethnography on families belonging to *beny al-khumus*, since anthropological scholarship, with no exceptions, reproduces the perspective of *sayyids* and *ʿarabs*. Due to the unstable political situation, I could not obtain research permission for al-Bustān. Hence, I decided to move my field site to a closer destination. From July to December 2011, I conducted participant observation fieldwork in the Old City of Ṣanʿāʾ. Meanwhile, I attempted to open up a new field-site.

Just a few kilometres south-west of Sanʿāʾ lies a village perched on the hillside, whose valley is famous for growing delicious pears. I arrived in this village almost by chance, while searching the countryside for a tasty bundle of qāt. I immediately found myself impressed by the good manners of the villagers, their outstanding demonstration of hospitality and the astonishing luxuriance of the valley. Apparently, just a few years before, it looked like a paradise. As the inhabitants told me, "Trees covered our valley like an umbrella, not a single ray of light could pass and reach the land." Historically, the village was also considered a *hijrah*, a 'sacred enclave' within Beny Maṭar's tribal territory that allowed religious scholars (*sayyids*) to live under the protection of the tribesmen (*ʿarabs*). I decided to conduct my fieldwork in this village, which I shall call 'Kuthreh', and I lived there for almost one year, from July 2012 to July 2013.

Methodologically, the two filed sites posed different challenges which I shall explore separately.

Let me start from the Old City of Ṣanʿāʾ. Sanʿāʾ is the capital city of Yemen. From the 1980's up to nowadays, it has witnessed a formidable expansion, due to demographic explosion and immigration from the southern provinces. Conducting participant observation fieldwork in such an urban environment poses tremendous challenges, among them, the delimitation and selection of a network of interlocutors. I aimed at producing an ethnography from the perspective of *beny al-khumus*, and the ethical implications of such a commitment immediately impacted on my research.

Beny al-khumus are considered by other social groups as the lowest degree of the ladder-like model of social ranking. Yet the egalitarian discourse of Islam overtly forbids discriminations among the believers. As soon as I started my research, I realised that most of my Yemeni friends did not belong to *beny al-khumus*. Moreover, they overtly discouraged my attempts at enquiring the topic of 'social stratification', deeming it a racist theme. Some people even asserted that no hierarchy existed in Yemen, until scholars like me divided the Islamic nation. Except for the conspirationist argument, this critique made a solid point: scholarly research has a prominent role in essentialising hierarchically ranked social categories.

In spite of these critiques, I contacted an old friend of mine, a butcher. He enthusiastically introduced me to his family and to his work. Given the impossibility of living 24/7 with my interlocutors in an urban environment, I put myself in the role of the apprentice. Trevor H. J. Marchand (2001; 2008), and before him other eminent anthropologists, have employed apprenticeship in their fieldwork with notable success. This method results in different kinds of benefits. Working with butchers, green-grocers, circumcisers and so forth, I obtained a thorough understanding of the technical aspects of their professions. This knowledge cannot be specifically taught: it is associative and intuitive (Forrest, 1986: 433). This 'implicit knowledge' (Goody, 1989), embodied knowledge passed down from one generation to another, constitutes the very material through which essentialism is crafted. The illusion of a 'natural essence' is produced by the union of "secrets and skills." (Dilley, 1989)

Some people refused to teach me the secrets of their profession. Circumcisers, for instance, thought I wanted to open a clinic in Italy and resisted my requests for weeks. However, most of the people from *beny al-khumus* were glad to teach, and especially to show that an Italian 'professor', as they labelled me, was eager to work in their tasks. They used my apprenticeship to raise their own social standing. Concurrently, the attitudes of the community towards *beny al-khumus* were acted upon me (Coy, 1989: 134), influencing my social standing and my relationships with other social groups. As Michael W. Coy has noted,

> [Apprenticeship] is an extremely stressful way to experience the host culture. However, the value of such an experience is great and the intimacy with which one experiences the attitudinal dimension cannot be broached in any other fashion. (ibid.)

In 2011, due to the upheavals, most of the southerners left the capital. As a result, I could easily distinguish people hailing from the old city. Once I started working with butchers, following their kinship networks I reached many green-grocers. Circumcisers and leather-workers I met through the kinship network of the servants of Kuthreh. Finally, I met bath attendants in the easiest way: attending the bathhouse.

With these people I worked on a daily basis, and chewed *qāt* with in our spare time. Chewing qāt is part of the routine of the vast majority of Yemeni people. Qāt (*catha edulis*) is a mild amphetaminic, and Yemenis chewed *qāt* leaves every day, after the *ʿaṣr* prayer, for some hours (at least until the sunset). During *qāt* sessions, I collected in-depth interviews and 'family histories', confronting them with historical data. These histories bore the mark of some reality external to the story, and concurrently they conveyed the selves of my interlocutors (McDougall, 1998: 299), and presented and negotiated in conversations they entertained with me. Above all, family histories emphasised how social actors from different generations, although inhabiting the same space-time, experienced different life worlds.

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Fieldwork in Kuthreh was problematic, for a number of reasons. At my arrival, the community was crossed by latent tensions. During the Mutawakkilite Kingdom, a 'village' amounted to 600 adult men. At the end of the 1950's, Kuthreh's population amounted to ¼ + 1/8 of a village: 225 adult men. Sixty years later, when I arrived in the village, male population was more than doubled. The demographic explosion caused a fragmentation of land, triggering conflicts and tensions. Moreover, the village was inhabited by people belonging to three social groups: 2/3 of the village were *sayyids*; one third were *ʿarabs*; only one family of *muzayyins* dwelled in the valley. In 2012, a small group of *sayyid* people had joined the Houthi movement (a Zaydī revivalist movement which fosters an anti-occidental rhetoric), and this politicisation of the Hashemite descent was opposed by people of *ʿarab* origins.

I gradually introduced myself in the village by means of intermediaries, mainly prominent *shaykhs* from the area. I rented a room in the village in the house of an old widower, the *sayyid* ʿAli ʿAbdulhamid, and presented my references to the *shaykhs* of Kuthreh, who welcomed me. Yet, on

my second day in the village, some of the Houthis ‘invited’ me to stay in a tower-house in the old part of Kuthreh, in order to verify my ‘true identity’. I was accused of being an American, or perhaps an Israeli, almost certainly a Jewish agent. This adventure did not last long: some friends rescued me, and supervisors of the Houthi movement ordered people not to bother me. Yet an atmosphere of suspicion surrounded my first months in the village.

It took a lot of effort and a great amount of patience to convince some of the Houthis that Italians are not Americans, that we do not speak (nor write) in English as our mother tongue, and that we are not descendants of Beny Israʾīl. Especially this last point, I suspect, never fully convinced my interlocutors: apparently, they knew nothing about the curse of Ham and the story of Yafith. They would divide the whole world between Arabs and Jews. It was, however, interesting that my own identity was constructed in genealogical terms. I finally overcame this difficulties after a long interview on the TV channel Yemen Today proved me innocent. From that day on, people started boasting of my presence in the village.

A last hindrance to my research was the fact of my wife living in Italy. Yemeni society is characterised by a rigid segregation of the sexes. Women constitute the *sharaf* (sexual honour) of a *qabīly* and must be veiled, or covered (*sātar*, *ghaṭṭa*). Assuring this coverage is a fundamental dimension of the manliness (*rajūleh*) of a man. A foreign man living alone in a village cannot but be considered a serious threat to the *sharaf* of the community. As soon as I arrived in Kuthreh, my conjugal situation was immediately investigated. I declared I was married, and assured people that my wife had every intention to visit me. Yet, being alone in that moment, I was forced not to live with a family. During my first month in the village, people were extremely suspicious of my possible sexual misbehaviour. When my wife reached the village, at the end of September, I finally settled the controversies around my identity.

This point brings into focus a central feature of my research: this is a gendered ethnography, an ethnography of men, conducted by a man. It couldn't have been otherwise. Due to sexual segregation, I never had the chance to talk with women, if not for short and awkward conversations. In Ṣanʿāʾ I conducted some interviews with teachers from my college, but this cannot be considered an exhaustive work in any sense. Women appear in this research as represented through the eyes of men, both that of mine and my interlocutors.

If generosity gives the measure of a *qabīly*'s social standing, people from Kuthreh were all *shaykhs*. After I settled the first controversies, families started competing to have me as a guest in their houses. Generally speaking, most of the people were very cooperative and willing to help with my research. Yet, as other authors have noted (e.g. Dresch, 1989), obtaining recorded interviews

from *qabīlys* was an extremely demanding task. Before I could record my interlocutors, I had to spend some months in the village. Some of them never agreed to be recorded, and so I collected their life histories in my field notes.

As I recalled above, during my stay, the village was crossed by latent tensions. Many of these tensions were related to land property. I followed land conflicts on a daily basis, and for this reason I had the chance to access many written documents: mainly land contracts, but also testaments and genealogies. These documents provide my research with a micro-historical background of the village of Kuthreh and surrounding villages. My assertions on land properties are grounded on these documents and on a survey I conducted in the village. After mapping the land of the inner valley, I calculated the surface with a GPS mapping system (ArcGIS, ESRI).

Genealogies are powerful material in Yemen. Not only do they construct selves: they also prove property. The names I use in this dissertation are names of fantasy. Although my interlocutors would certainly recognise their stories, by changing the name of their villages I have provided a reasonable degree of anonymity. It has not been an easy choice: many of my interlocutors wanted me to talk for them and about them. I hope they will understand, if not justify, my choice.

Outline of the thesis

Three key arguments are common to most of the chapters of this thesis. Through the study of genealogical origin I address the topics of essentialisation, hierarchy and inclusion/exclusion.

In Chapter 1 I provide a historical background to the role of genealogies in contemporary Yemen. I bring into focus the political clash between the Imams who held the political power during the Mutawakkilite Kingdom (1918-1962), and the opposition of the Free Yemeni Movement. This clash, I argue, produced a new genealogical configuration. Firstly, it revived the opposition between Northern Arabs and Southern Arabs, hence redefining distinctions grounded on genealogical origin as a form of 'racism'. Through this lens, I redescribe the tripartite model of social ranking as the political product of the anti-*sayyid* propaganda that emerged in the late 1960's. The focus of the analysis is on the macro-genealogical level.

Chapter 2, 3, and 4 are built on a similar structure. They explore the connections between life histories and the structural changes that interested Yemen from the Mutawakkilite Kingdom up to the present time. Focusing on three social groups (*beny al-khumus*, *sayyids*, and *ʿarabs*), they present three strategies for constructing genealogical knowledge and examine how these strategies

are related to social practice and to shifting economic and political structures.

Chapter 2 discusses the construction of moral selves at the micro-genealogical level and focuses on *beny al-khumus*. These people are often described as a residual category, the lowest ladder of the tripartite model of social ranking. My ethnography overturns this perspective, exploring the way people from *beny al-khumus* actively construct their moral selves in accordance with the legacy of their ancestors. Apprenticeship is presented as a means to craft selves through the transmission of worldviews and incorporated knowledge. Insights are provided of how *beny al-khumus* recover their lost origins through historicised narratives. This strategy of 'recovery' is compared to the essentialist and stereotyped representations of *beny al-khumus* provided by other social groups.

Chapter 3 brings into focus Hashemite descent. It explores the scriptural construction of genealogies, and the relationship between religious knowledge and politics. The macro-political events of two historical periods are precipitated in the social life of the village of Kuthreh: the emergence of the Mutawakkilite Kingdom, at the beginning of the 20th century, and the emergence of the Houthi movement (2011-2013). The chapter explores the dialectics of the macro and micro-genealogical levels, bringing into focus the politicisation of genealogical origin. Through the analysis of the Occidentalist narratives of the Houthi movement, it demonstrates how the genealogical imagination provides an interpretive framework for global events.

Chapter 4 investigates the connections between property, locality, means of subsistence and the construction of origins. For peasants (*qabāʾil*), it is argued, owning land amounts to having origins, and having origins demonstrates the possession of land. The chapter further demonstrates how different ways of earning a livelihood distinguish families on the micro-genealogical level. '*Sayyid* peasants' rely on agriculture and self-sufficiency exactly as '*ʿarab* peasants' would do.

In contemporary Yemen, different lineages are tied to different ways of earning a livelihood, and the traditional profession of a lineage is considered the outer expression of an inner essence. Chapter 5 introduces the topic of livelihood, bringing into focus the notion of *rizq* (livelihood). It attempts at unravelling the 'mystery' of people living under the threshold of poverty, yet earning their daily sustenance. In doing so, the chapter provides an introduction to the networks of reciprocity which constitute the base of Yemeni society.

Chapter 6 develops the notion of networks of reciprocity, addressing the connection between descent-constructs and descent-groups. How are corporate groups constructed in contemporary Yemen? Once we dismiss segmentary lineage theory, the possibility unfolds of considering practices of sharing and reciprocity which constitute and extend the base of a community. The

chapter explores the meaning of ‘brotherhood’, and the process of construction of a corporate group in the village of Kuthreh, composed of both *sayyids* and *‘arabs*,

Finally, the concluding chapter discusses the relationship between descent and work, and its patterning through the notion of caste. Investigating the association of *beny al-khumus* with stigmatised tasks, it demonstrates how work is constructed as an innate quality of particular social groups. It is, thus, the association with stigmatised groups which makes certain professions stigmatised. This principle, I argue, keeps structuring the division of labour in contemporary Yemeni society.

Chapter 1 – The Racialisation of Genealogical Origin

Towards a genealogy of the tripartite model of social ranking

> Individuals do not endure forever, nor do families, but the principle endures and circulates with generations.
>
> Ahmed ash-Shāmy

This is a chapter about semantic reversal and emancipation. Building on the analysis of three historical phases of modern Yemen history, it investigates the interrelated strategies that led to the 'othering' of state power and the crafting of new, emancipated identities. These complex strategies led to the reconfiguration of the role of ancestry and genealogies and to the emergence of a tripartite model of social ranking. Structural-functional anthropology has deployed this tripartite model as an analytical tool to describe the social organisation of the Yemenite Highlands. My aim, in this chapter, is to retrace the genealogy of the tripartite model, reconstructing the historical configuration from which it emerged and redescribing it as a political tool.

The Mutawakkilite Kingdom

Othering the Ottoman 'Impious Oppressor'

The isolation of the highlands of Yemen is a mythopoeic feature of the narratives regarding this

land. In 1630, after less than a century of dominion, the Ottomans withdrew from Yemen, abandoning these territories to the authority of Zaydī Imams (Tritton, 1981). For nearly two centuries thereafter, the Imams ruled a fragile state, always compromising with the surrounding tribes and maintaining a limited number of contacts with the outside world. In the 19th century, however, because of its strategic position on the Red Sea, Yemen "[...] involuntarily became the arena in which the two great empires met and finally compromised over their "spheres of influence in southern Arabia" (Wenner, 1967: 41): the two great empires were Great Britain and the Portuguese, and an era of isolation was moving towards its end.

In 1872 the Ottomans, who had already seized al-Ḥodeīdah and portions of the Tihāmah on the Red Sea coast, entered Ṣan'ā' when it capitulated. They took advantage of the conflicts which were opposing competing contenders for the imamate, gaining the support of the exhausted local population (ivi: 43; Bury, 1915: 15), and they conquered Ṣan'ā'. This is a first important point that I shall emphasise: at the end of the 19th century, when these events took place, the Ottoman administration was well-liked by the Yemeni people. In a correspondence with the Italian magazine *L'Esplorazione Commerciale*, Giuseppe Caprotti, who reached Ṣan'ā' in 1885 to assist his brother in the management of a trade enterprise, praised the Turkish administration. He emphasised the indulgence of the Turkish towards the population, adding that "[...] giammai l'Yemen, dacché fu occupato dagli Ottomani, non ha goduto tanto benessere quanto sotto l'amministrazione dell'ultimo governatore Osman Nuri Pascià e dell'attuale Ismail Akki Pascià." (De Leone, 1955: 4)

We can gain a different perspective from the travel account of another Italian, R. Manzoni, who visited Yemen between 1877 and 1878:

> Benché il fondatore dello Islàm non abbia stabilito distinzioni sociali tra i Musulmani, e benché non esistano, nell'Impero Ottomano, caste privilegiate, nello Yèmen due razze, che, malgrado la religione comune, non si sono mai mescolate, sono ora nuovamente in presenza l'una dell'altra. La prima, come già altra volta, ha il potere, gode dei suoi trionfi, ne trae vantaggio; ed è la turca. La seconda è condannata alla dipendenza, ne subisce la vergogna, ne sopporta i pesi; ed è l'araba. (Manzoni, 1991: 197)

Manzoni was probably framing this conflict by means of categories drawn from the Italian Risorgimento.[1] As we shall see below, these categories were not widespread in Yemen. However,

1 Describing human relationships in terms of an opposition between 'nations' was certainly a major theme at that time. Moreover, the notions of 'race' and 'nation' were barely distinguishable and often used as synonyms (cf. Patriarca, 2012).

Manzoni's point of view was interestingly close to that of the Arab modernists, whose lines of thought were flourishing in Egypt and Syria at the end of the 19th century.[2] Let me deepen this point.

First, we need to recall that in the eyes of Islamic law all believers are alike, except in virtue. In spite of this principle, throughout the first half of the 19th century, the consciousness of a difference between Turks and Arabs started growing among the subjects of the Ottoman Empire (Hourani, 1983: 262), consolidating after the 1850's. The book *The future of Islam* by W. S. Blunt (2014) testifies that during the early 1880's the idea was current that, in order to liberate Islam from the weight of Turkish stagnation, an Arab caliph was the solution (ivi: 268).

During the same years another influential author, the Arab writer A. al-Kawakibi (1849-1903), was developing similar reflections. In trying to find an explanation for the decline of Islam, al-Kawakibi started blaming those who ruled the Arabs, namely the Ottomans. His reflections brought him to develop a distinction between ‘a just State’ and ‘despotic State’ (Kawākibī, 2003). As we shall see below, this distinction would inspire many Yemeni reformists. Moreover, al-Kawakibi proposed to reform the law by means of *ijtihād,*[3] fostering a proper religious education and eventually encouraging a shift in the balance of power inside the *ummah*. With regard to this last point, he affirmed the need of an Arab Caliph of the line of Quraysh (Hourani, 1983: 272-3; Rossi, 1944: xii; Haim, 1962: 79). These brief outlines shall lead us to raise a few questions: to which degree did these ideas spread in Yemen at the end of the 19th century? How did they influence the political situation?

To answer these questions we shall take a step back in time. As I have stated, the Ottomans conquered Ṣan‘āʾ in 1872. However, their dominion was not tolerated in Yemen for long. In 1891, the accession of a new Imam, Mohammed Yahya Ḥamīd ad-Dīn, triggered the revolt of Zaydī rebels who seized Ta‘iz and besieged the city of Ṣan‘āʾ. The revolt was soon suppressed. The rebels took up arms again in 1895-6, without achieving any further success.

In 1901-2, al-Kawakibi visited Yemen and met the future Imam Yahya, the son of Mohammed al-Manṣūr billāh (Douglas, 1987: 32, fn. 17). We are thus sure that Yahya accessed the emerging ideas of Arab reformism. Notwithstanding this encounter, Yahya did not phrase his resistance against the Ottomans in racial terms. He did not call upon the Yemeni populace to rise against the Ottoman oppressor. As other authors noted, the Imams opposed the Turks on the sole basis of religious assumptions, accusing them of neglecting *sharī‘ah* law (Malvezzi, 1911: 9; Douglas, 1987: 11; Wagner, 2015: 17). Concurrently, as we shall see in Chapter 3, people of Hashemite

2 Evidence exists of historical connections between the Italian thought of the Risorgimento and Arab nationalism (Rossi, 1944: xi).

3 The Ottomans had famously declared the doors of *ijithād* closed.

descent started fighting a moral battle to spread the principles of the Zaydī school.

If Yahya Mohammed Ḥamīd ad-Dīn was concerned with reformist ideas, the populace had in mind considerations of a more mundane, material kind. At the turn of the 20th century, G. Caprotti, who was at first a staunch supporter of the Turks, recorded the laymen's substantial change of mood. Famine in southern areas, worsened by indiscriminate fiscal pressure, led Caprotti to foreshadow an imminent revolt:

> Dell'Imam per ora non si sente niente: pare sia tutto tranquillo, ma c'è da attendersi a qualche cosa di grosso verso l'autunno essendo la generalità della popolazione molto eccitata per le nuove tasse sul bestiame, case, persone, ecc. (De Leone, 1955: 6).

In June, 1904,the Imam Mohammed al-Manṣūr billāh passed away and was succeeded by his son. Caprotti commented stating, "[...] è probabile che il nuovo Imam vorrà farsi conoscere e allora cercherà di sollevare qualche questione con i Turchi." (ivi: 6, fn 5) Caprotti was right: the accession of the Imam Yahya Mohammed Ḥamīd ad-Dīn, 'al-Mutawakkil 'alā Allāh', triggered new fighting against the Pashas, channelling popular discontent. In 1906, after a treacherous siege of Ṣan'ā', Ottoman officials embarked upon a series of negotiations with the Imam, and Yahya asked and obtained the reinstatement of the Sharī'a as a legal system for Yemen.[4] A conciliatory phase followed, during which Yemeni-Ottoman relations improved.[5]

In considering these developments we cannot overlook the international framework. In 1908, the Young Turks Revolution sparked a chain of events that had ideological consequences. As A. Hourani noted, from 1908 to 1922 Arab Nationalism turned into a conscious political idea (1983: 298). This evolution can be followed throughout the pages of al-Manār, a periodical published in Cairo by Rashīd Riḍā. In 1909, Rida "[...] was at pains to stress the loyalty of the Arabs to the Ottoman State." (ivi: 302) However, during the First World War, the policies of turkification implemented by the Young Turks led him to envision the necessity of an Arab State, and he endorsed the Imam of Yemen as a possible caliph (ivi: 305).

The first effects of this policy of turkification were witnessed in Yemen in 1911, when the Turkish language was imposed in Yemeni courts as a result of the reforms of the new Liberal government in Istanbul. Zaydī rebels reacted with a new revolt which needs to be understood in the

4 The documents which I present in the appendix and discuss in Chapter 3 already foreshadowed such a core interest and the religious language that framed Yahya's opposition against the Ottomans.

5 In fact, however, the lack of revolt might have been caused by the exhaustion of local populations, heavily tried by the 1904-5 revolt (Wenner, 1967: 46).

wider historical framework of that time, not only because reformist ideas were spreading throughout the Ottoman Empire, but also because international networks were connecting local leaders. In Yemen, for instance, Mohammed ben Ali ben Idrissi, a charismatic character and a respected member of the Senussia, orchestrated the upheavals. A letter sent by the Imam Yahya to the Idrissi can shed some light on how the Imam himself interpreted these revolts:

> Costoro (i turchi) sfuggirono dalla verità come lo sconfitto in guerra, e si travestirono coi vestiti dei crudeli e degli stranieri, e se non vi fossero i discendenti di Maometto, i vizi mondani sarebbero stati il morso in bocca a tutti gli uomini. […] Forse avrete saputo ciò che è successo fra noi (yemeniti) e un altro popolo (i turchi) e quanto abbiamo fatto per cancellare le cose che non piacevano a Dio restaurando le giuste leggi che fanno prosperare il paese, e cioè sopprimendo i tribunali idolatri (dei turchi) [...] (Malvezzi, 1911: 16).

In this letter, the Turks are described as impious, westernised infidels, and the defence of the Truth is entrusted to the descendants of the Prophet, the Hashemites. Needless to say, both the Idrissi and Yahya considered themselves descendants of Mohammed.

A truce was arranged between the Idrissi and the Ottoman officers, and finally, in 1913, the treaty of Da‘‘ān ratified most of the demands previously made by the Imam, implementing his *de facto* control over Zaydī districts (Wāsi‘y, 2010: 355-8).[6] In November 1918, Yahya entered Ṣan‘āʾ triumphantly and established the Mutawakkilite Kingdom. Yemen was the first independent Arab state moving out from under Ottoman domination.

The history of modern Yemen is a complex topic, and its details are beyond the scope of this chapter. However, this brief outline of Yemen's history aims at illustrating how the Yemeni-Ottoman relationship was socially constructed. My argument is threefold: *a*) the general framework of the revolt was a ‘religious’ one: in promoting the Zaydī school and the rule of the Hashemites, the Imam opposed the Ottomans for their ‘being impious’ and thus unfit rulers; *b*) the upheavals were tied to a broader historical framework: the Imam acted within the framework of a pan-Islamic, international movement; *c*) the layman's perception of these events was not necessarily the one which has been handed down by history: as far as we know (cf. Chapter 3), people were more concerned with taxes and harvests than with ideological justifications of state government.

6 Other sources stress that the imam's authority was nominal in nature (Kuehn, 2011) and his power tenuous even in Zaydī-majority regions (Blumi, 2011).

Foreign-educated Yemenis

In 1918, after the departure of the Ottomans, the Imam Yahya confronted the challenges posed by the reorganisation of state administration: tax collection, internal security, and protection of the country borders (Wenner, 1967: 55). However, by the mid-1930's multiple factors had prepared vast sectors of Yemeni society to oppose the imam's rule (Douglas, 1987: 15).

In 1933 the newly established army of the imam faced Saudi troops in southern ʻAsir, claiming the provinces of ʻAsir and Najrān. Due to the emerging emphasis on pan-Arabism, the fighting was immediately echoed internationally, being labelled as a fratricidal conflict (Hourani, 1983). The conflict resolved in a humiliating defeat for the Imam, who had no choice but to accept Saudi demands (Douglas, 1987: 24), thus losing the two provinces.

This defeat yielded unforeseen consequences. Yahya's role as a Zaydī imam was questioned by members of the al-Wazīr family, a family of Hashemite descent. Yahya, in fact, did not take part in the fighting for ʻAsir, and a warrior-like attitude was considered a prominent characteristic of Zaydī imams (Douglas, 1987: 28). More importantly, the comparison with the better equipped forces of Ibn Saʻūd emphasised the inadequacy of Imam Yahya's army. Until that very moment, the imam had pursued a strategy of isolation (Douglas, 1987: 24). The defeat in the competition for ʻAsir pushed him to compromise this policy. In 1931, the imam had signed a Treaty of Friendship with the soon-to-be-independent state of Iraq (Rossi, 1944: xxxvii-viii; Burrowes, 2005: 190). After the defeat in 1934, many young cadets left Yemen and went to the Military College in Baghdad for further training (Wenner, 1967: 58).

A comprehensive list of these cadets is provided by J. L. Douglas (1987: 26-7). None of them had been selected from prominent *sayyid*[7] families. The rationale of this strategy was clear: the imam did not want to encourage any internal opposition to his temporal rule. Many of these young cadets had previously studied in the Orphans' School (*dār al-aītām*). As we shall deepen in Chapter 3, the access to the Orphans' School was itself regulated by a similar criterion of ʻharmlessness' (Carvajal, 2010). For reasons that cannot be attributed to chance, many of these young cadets turned into promising revolutionaries. Almost as soon as they returned home, their opposition to the imam became manifest. Yahya immediately changed his policy in these matters, redirecting the following generations of cadets to other foreign countries, Egypt for example.

7 The word *sayyid* (pl. *sādah*), on the highlands, is a synonym of Hashemite. It thus describes people belonging to the Prophet's offspring. I shall discuss this term below in this chapter.

The outcome was not any better. Many young men from the first generation of cadets became involved in attempts to overthrow the Imam Yahya and later on his son Ahmed. These men and subsequently the group known as the Famous Forty (Burrowes, 2005) would come to dominate the political institutions of the Yemeni Republic. In the four decades following the 1962 Revolution, these foreign-educated Yemenis translated the education received abroad into the designing and staffing of the modern state infrastructure of Yemen (Orkaby, 2015: 3).

Among these men, it is worth mentioning ʻAbdullah as-Sallāl. Son of a blacksmith (Douglas, 1987:30; Serjeant, 1979) or, some rumourmongers would say,[8] of a butcher, he led the 1962 coup against Imam Ahmed, thus becoming the first president of the Yemen Arab Republic. He and the other members of the missions to Baghdad, Egypt and Syria brought back to Yemen the literature of the Arab Awakening. This is how as-Sallāl recalls the feelings and the aspirations which he experienced during his stay in Iraq:

> We talked about Arabism and the future of the Arab struggle. And I was thinking while listening to these discussions about my country... which was ruled by despotism, in ignorance, backwardness and underdevelopment. Hope began to stir in my chest... Why don't we spread the call for progress when we return to Yemen? (Luqmān and Luqmān, n.d., quoted in Douglas, 1987: 30).

Before we move on, one more question needs to be addressed. As we have seen, many of the foreign-educated cadets, belonging to the first or to one of the subsequent groups, turned against the imam. Was it by chance or bad luck? In 1947 the imam was persuaded to send a group of boys abroad for secondary and higher education. This group became known as the Famous Forty. Thanks to Robert D. Burrowes (2005), we can reconstruct their subjective experience in bits and pieces.

Consider the experience of these young men. In Yemen they had received little formal education, mostly of a traditional and religious nature. They were naif and innocent, as one of them, ʻAbdullah al-Kurshumi, told Burrowes: "We were so innocent, like babes in the woods, so unaware of the world out there. Beyond family and village, we only knew of Allah and the imam." (ivi: 85) Suddenly, these young boys were "[...] exposed to some degree to some variant of the modern world

8 In the area of Ṣanʻāʾ, being a blacksmith or a butcher is not the same thing: the latter profession is, in fact, stigmatised, while the former can be undertaken by anyone. Here, however, I'm not very interested in the actual genealogical origin of President Sallāl. It is definitely more intriguing to consider how non-*sayyid* presidents have been depicted as men of low ranking. The same happened just a few years ago to ʻAli ʻAbdullah Ṣāleḥ, who was directly asked to justify his title, ʻAffāsh, on a live broadcast on al-ʻArabiyyah. The common sense assumption of the legitimacy of low-status presidents has greatly contributed to the egalitarian ideology of the Yemeni Republic (cf. Vom Bruck, 1996: 151).

and a modern education." (ivi: 86)

How did this experience abroad change these young boys? What new social and political identities did they acquire? Firstly, they started identifying themselves as one group, considering themselves as an elite; secondly, they acquired elements of a modern vision and sensed the mission of ending Yemen's backwardness, and most of them developed the idea of a Yemeni nation and identified with this imagined community; eventually, becoming acquainted with the basics of a political education. Many started with the ideas of the Muslim Brotherhood, while many others migrated to pan-Arab nationalism (ivi: 87-8).

Why are we interested in the subjective experience of these foreign-educated young men? Not really because some of them materially triggered the revolution. Rather, because these personalities had a central role in the production of a new kind of discourse. Their subjective experience became the linking factor between the discourse of the Arab Modernists and the political reality of the Mutawakkilite Kingdom. Moreover, after 1962, these men accessed institutional positions in the Yemeni Republic, thus transferring their ideas in the process of institution building. After 1962, they would have literally become "the face of the new republic."[9] (Orkaby, 2015: 3)

The Free Yemeni Movement: the reformist phase

These foreign-educated Yemenis were known as the *shabab*, the youth. During the 1930's, the *shabab* were mainly concerned with political freedom. In Yemen, there was no freedom of the press, and it was illegal to organise public meetings. Radio broadcasting was also prohibited. A second major concern was with the material effects of underdevelopment. The lack of hospitals, tarmac roads and schools seemed to characterise Yemen as the most backward country in an awakening Middle East.

We can carry our story a little further and consider the biography of Mohammed az-Zubaīry. His story deserves our attention, if for no other reason than because, in contemporary Yemen, he is considered one of the symbols of the 1962 Revolution and a hero of the anti-*sayyid* propaganda.

Zubaīry was, in a sense, a typical Yemeni from Ṣan‘āʾ. He was born 1919 in the heart of the old city and he got married at the age of 15, and he was a Zaydī. What was unorthodox about him was his father's connections with the al-Wazīr family. We have now arrived back at the point where we

9 It is enough to mention that from 1967 up to 1980, between one-third and one-half of all cabinet appointments originated from the Famous Forty (Orkaby, 2015: 3).

left the imam in 1934. During the ‘Asir conflict, negotiations had been carried out by ‘Ali al-Wazīr, and the Wazīr family was very close to Ibn Sa‘ūd. Zubaīry's relationship with the Wazīrs made him one of those well connected Yemenis whom the imam feared to send abroad. In hindsight, his fears were justified. In 1940, the Wazīrs and Zubaīry met Ibn Sa‘ūd, and later ‘Abdullah al-Wazīr and Zubaīry went to Cairo, in order to dodge any investigation by the Ḥamīd ad-Dīn family in Yemen.

In Cairo, Zubaīry became acquainted with Ahmed Nu‘mān (Douglas, 1987: 41). They both shared the desire for a modern education and the disappointment for not being allowed to pursue it. In fact, a baccalaureate was necessary for the admission to King Fuad I University, and even the word ‘baccalaureate’ was unknown in Yemen at that time. In mid-1940, Nu‘mān and Zubaīry formed al-Katībah al-ʾŪlā, an association of foreign-educated Yemenis with reformist goals.

The first thing to grasp about the Katībah is that it was strongly influenced by and materially connected with the Muslim Brotherhood (al-Abdin, 1979). This point is important for my argument in a controversial way. Nu‘mān formed a strong relationship with Fuḍaīl al-Wartalāny, an Algerian Brother (Douglas, 1987: 53). In the near future, this scholar would have inflamed the hearts of many young literate Yemenis, giving a substantial contribution to the writing of the Sacred National Charter (Dresch, 2000: 56). However, in 1941, his influence was not yet formalised in any writing. He encouraged Nu‘mān to return to Yemen with the goal of turning the positive attitude of Saīf al-Islām Ahmed, the son of the Imam Yahya, to the advantage of the Free Yemenis and the Muslim Brotherhood.

In the same year, Mohammed az-Zubaīry returned to Ṣan‘āʾ. He was carrying with him the outcome of years of work, hope and aspiration: a pamphlet bearing the title *al-Barnāmij al-Awwal min Barāmij Shabāb al-ʾAmr bi-l-Ma‘rūf wa-n-Nāhī ‘an al-Munkar*. Against the advice of Nu‘mān and of the Muslim Brothers, Zubaīry presented the pamphlet to the imam himself. The imam reacted angrily and arrested Zubaīry. Here, I am not interested in the historical fact in itself. For our purposes it is more important to consider the content of the *Barnāmij* itself.

The *Barnāmij* was a plan for reforms formulated in a religious language. It did not challenge the temporal power of the imam or sought an alternative to its government. Basically, it was an anti-backwardness *manifesto*. It reflected the main concerns of the foreign-educated Zubaīry, which in turn reflected the core topics of Arab modernism.

As J. Leigh Douglas pointed out (1987: 55), we can sum up the Barnāmij in four points. Firstly, it was a call for the awakening of the true spirit of Islam in Yemen. How was this theme related to backwardness and progress? The connection between ‘true’ Islām and progress was one of the core

topics of Arab modernism. The decay of the Arab Nation was, in fact, attributed to the corruption of Islamic religion due to the Ottomans. This decay was in turn compared to the progress of Western countries. How is it possible, Arab modernists wondered, that non-Islamic Western countries have reached such a high degree of civilisation, while the Islamic Nation is perishing? The answer was commonly phrased as follows: in many respects, Western countries are more Islamic than Arab ones. Consider, for example, these lines from al-Kawakibi:

> [... the] lamentation [of the Islamic Nation] will last until the Judgment Day if it does not consider a consultative (*shūry*) political system; Western countries have turned to such a system; those countries, it is just to say it, have taken advantage of Islam more than the Muslim people themselves. (My translation, 2006: 51)

Democracy was a prominent example of a Western achievement considered Islamic in its nature. Arab Modernists conceived 'progress' and 'Islām' as synonyms. Even scientific discoveries were punctually traced back to their religious origin.

> [...] science, during these last centuries, has discovered many truths and mechanisms whose discovery is attributed to European and American scientists. The reality is that most of them are to be found in the Quran […]. (My translation, ivi: 61).

Both variants of this theme are still hot topics of conversation in everyday street conversations among Yemeni folks and contribute to inform local representations of the West.

Returning to the *Barnāmij*, the second point was fighting ignorance through the expansion of education. Not only the number of schools was considered inadequate, but also the subjects themselves, being mostly religious and distant from 'modern' requirements, were criticised (remember that Zubaīry and Nu'mān were not admitted into University because they were not in possession of a baccalaureate). We shall deepen this theme in Chapter 3. The third point was the introduction of economic reforms, and the fourth was the strengthening of ties with other Muslim states.

The *Barnāmij* is interesting for its content. However, in hindsight it is even more interesting for what was *not* stated in it. No direct attack against the imam was formulated. Zubaīry did not seek political reforms, but rather material reforms: hospitals, schools, tarmac roads, mines to exploit the country's resources. With the arrest of Zubaīry, the first phase of the development of the reformist

movement came to an end, and its political goals changed drastically.

The Free Yemeni Movement: the revolutionary phase

Zubaīry was not detained for long, and in June 1944 he moved to ʻAden with Nuʻmān. This migration marked a new stage in the development of the reformist movement. Zubaīry and Nuʻmān created a new political entity, and they named it *Ḥizb al-Aḥrār al-Yemeniyyīn*, Party of the Yemeni Liberals[10] (or FYM). At the end of 1946, they started publishing a newspaper called *Ṣaūt al-Yemen*. Its main purpose was to voice the Liberals' demands for the introduction of reforms into Yemen.

As we have seen above, the theme of Yemeni backwardness first emerged as a point of friction between Yemeni modernists and the imam. This theme was strictly interrelated with another narrative trope: the theme of 'isolation'. For political purposes which clearly emerge from the pages of *Ṣaūt al-Yemen,* Yemen was *discursively* constructed as an isolated country. Consider this article significantly entitled *The Ignorant and Ignored Yemen*:[11]

> The idea of a global system—which has circulated thanks to mass media and a widespread global knowledge—has created, already, a unity a the global level, and this unity is necessary for civilisation. Only one country in the world does not feel this global consciousness. This country is Yemen, a country that stays unknown, of which the world knows nothing. And from its side, Yemen knows nothing about the world, so much so that his people do not know Yemen itself. And even people from the ruling class are not ashamed by the fact that their knowledge of the country does not extend to all of its provinces. And the word 'al-Yemen' does not recall to the stranger (*ajnaby*) anything but coffee whose export diminishes day after day. And the books about Yemen are just a few, and they provide a historical gaze on the perpetual war between the *shaykhs* and the princes of Yemen. Other books, written by travellers, provide a misleading picture of the country. And among the causes of a lack of thorough studies focusing on Yemen—on its glorious past and weird present—there's the complete isolation wanted by the government and the families who do not want any contact with foreigners, whatever their nationality. And this happens while foreign goods are imported into Yemen. But they do not accept to see a foreigner in front of them on Yemeni land. And this situation endures because of the lack of trust and the hostility against any person who is not Yemeni. A lack of trust which depends

10 The term 'Liberals' needs here to be understood in Hourani's sense (1987: iv): a thought about politics and society created by the growth of European influence and power in the Middle East .

11 *Ṣaūt al-Yemen* n. 16, 20 Feb., 1947. A similar perspective is reported in Attar, who attributed the following saying to the Imam Ahmed: "Il s'agit de choisir entre la liberté dans la pauvreté et la dépendance dans l'opulence. J'ai choisi, moi, l'Indépendance." (1964: 73)

> on the chaos and the lack of government that the country suffered for centuries, due to the Mutawakkilite and Ottoman rules. And regarding the topic of foreigners, it is said that once Imam Yahya, the absolute ruler of Yemen, told a visitor while talking with him: "Me and my people prefer to live poor, grazing grass, rather than allowing foreigners to enter the country, rather than granting them privileges, even if their presence could bring advantages for Yemen." [My translation]

This short article is important for several reasons. First and foremost, for the chain of causation that it represents. Yemen is depicted as an ignorant country, and ignorance is tied to isolation and isolation is the outcome of the political strategy of the imam. This discursive construction deserves our attention. On the one hand, we notice a shift in the political strategy of Yemeni reformers: the imam, in fact, is addressed directly. On the other hand, a subtler rhetorical strategy is deployed. We might label it 'hyper-agentification', and it consists in holding the imam responsible for, literally, any event that happens in Yemen. In this anecdote, as in many others, the imam carries the burden of the past and present stagnation of the country, of any decision and imposition. In sum, he is depicted as the quintessential tyrant, capable of total control.

It is time, now, to appreciate this shift in political rhetoric. As we have seen, Zubaīry's demands for reform were shaped in a religious language and aimed to obtain material development for the country. From the early 1940's, the ground was paved for a different kind of critique. Following al-Kawakibi's insights on the characteristics of tyranny, Yemeni Liberals started criticising the institution of the imamate itself, the legitimacy of the imam, and, by extension, the whole *sayyid* class.

This reversal in the Liberals' political rhetoric is not devoid of irony. As we have seen above, al-Kawakibi had been supporting the idea that an Arab from the tribe of Qureīsh, a Hashemite, should have been the Caliph of Islām. Other Arab modernists, like Mohammed Rashīd Riḍā, had gone even further, indicating the imam of Yemen as the most suitable candidate to guide the Islamic Nation. However, the ideas that once animated the Arab Awakening were gaining an autonomous semantic life.

In 1948 the Imam Yahya was assassinated. The revolt, however, did not gain ground, and the coup was soon repressed by Yahya's son, Ahmed. If the reader has received the impression that this whole reformist movement was an elitist one, detached from the problems and sensibilities of the layman, I have reached my goal. As many authors have noted, not only the Arab modernists lacked support from the people (Douglas, 1987: 55): in all probability, people beyond Ṣan'ā᾽ never even

heard a word about their reformist intents (Dresch, 2000: 57).

If the coup did not materially reach its planned goals, a revolution was, however, underway. The reformists, in fact, had set in motion a historical event in the Foucauldian sense: "An event, [which] is not a decision, a treaty, a reign, or a battle, but the reversal of a relationship of forces, the usurpation of power, the appropriation of a vocabulary turned against those who had once used it […]."(1977: 154)

Yemeni Liberals developed a new vocabulary, a new discursive framework which reversed the imam's rhetoric. A good example of this kind of reversal is the trope of isolation: the politics of isolation, seen from the point of view of the imam, were a redeeming countermeasure; from the standpoint of the Liberals, however, they turned into the cause of backwardness.

It is worth noting, once again, that the Free Yemenis' discourse did not gain its political momentum during the 1940's, and that it was not popular among the Yemeni people. Why, then, should an anthropologist be interested in this elitist discourse? My answer is simple: because, as we shall deepen below, the ideological state apparatuses of the Yemen Arab Republic turned it into a hegemonic discourse, and today, in contemporary Yemen, this discourse is common sense.

Turning Ancestry into Sectarianism

The ʿAdnān versus Qaḥṭān motive of the anti-sayyid propaganda

Returning to the 1940's, I am interested in understanding how the emergence of the Free Yemenis' discourse reversed local notions of genealogical origin, turning 'roots' (*ʿirq*, *aṣl*) into race (*ʿunṣūr*). This is a subtle, complicated argument, and we need to move a step back to fully understand it.

At the end of the 9th century A.D., a follower of the Imam Zayd Ibn ʿAli came to the highlands of Northern Yemen. His name was al-Hādy ilā al-Ḥaqq Yahya, and he had been invited by local notables to solve a dispute in a tribe called Khawlān. His intervention sorted out the conflict, and he returned to the city of Ṣaʿdah, welcomed by copious rains, an unmistakable sign of his *baraka* (Serjeant, 1982, 1969a, 1969b). Ever since, his grave is situated in Ṣaʿdah, and the city is considered a stronghold of the Zaydī school in Yemen.

Al-Hādy Yahya considered himself a descendant of the Prophet Muḥammed through ʿAli and

Fatima; he was a *sayyid* ‘Alawy Fāṭimy. ‘Ali, the parallel patrilateral cousin of the Prophet, had two sons from Fatima: al-Hasan and al-Hussein. Al-Hādy Yahya was a member of the Ḥasany branch of the Prophet's offspring.

A candidate for the Zaydī Imamate must fulfil certain conditions for the accession. The first binding condition is being a descendant of ‘Ali and Fāṭimah (Wenner, 1967: 31). Descent, however, is not accepted as the only criterion of succession: the imam must stand forth publicly and claim recognition. Fourteen prerequisites are commonly recognised as fundamentals for playing the imam's role, and this kind of indeterminacy has often led to fratricidal fights among people of *sayyid* origin. We have opened this chapter narrating the internal tensions that favoured the Ottomans' entrance in Yemen at the end of the 19th century. Moreover, we recalled that, in 1934, Yahya's authority as an imam was questioned because he did not prove his courage during the ‘Aṣir conflict. This peculiarity of the Zaydī school led to the existence of multiple-imams and, sometimes, of anti-imams. However, the necessity of an ‘Alawy Fāṭimy imam had never been questioned in itself. This situation drastically changed, starting from the early 1940's.

If we refer to scholarly literature, only R. B. Serjeant developed this perspective in an article entitled “The Yemeni Poet Al-Zubayrī and his Polemic Against the Zaydī imams” (Serjeant, 1979). This is not surprising if we consider that a hegemonic anti-Hashemite discourse has been reproduced in Yemen after the 1962 Revolution.

Now our story proceeds as follows. During the early 1940's, while Mohammed Zubaīry was presenting his program of reforms to the imam, Mohammed Nu‘mān ventured on a riskier road, directly attacking the ruler of the Mutawakkilite Kingdom. In these early publications, Nu‘mān was still arguing for material reforms. However, his strategy was soon to change. Mohammed Nu‘mān is, in fact, credited with the development of the ‘Adnān versus Qaḥṭān motive (ivi: 97).

From here another short digression follows necessarily. Who are ‘Adnān and Qaḥṭān? Provisionally, we can describe ‘Adnān as the eponymous ancestor of Northern Arabs and Qaḥṭān as the eponymous ancestor of Southern Arabs. ‘Adnān and Qaḥṭān do not lie on the same genealogical level: their common ancestor, Shalekh, is only two generations removed from Qaḥṭān, whereas he is eleven generations removed from ‘Adnān. Apparently, both these characters have a ‘biblical’ background. Arab genealogists insist that Qaḥṭān was, in fact, the equivalent of the biblical Joktan (Yaqṭan), the ancestor of several peoples of South Arabian reference (Fischer, 1986). On the other hand, ‘Adnān is the link between the peoples known as Northern Arabs and the biblical characters of Abraham and his son Isma‘īl. Another important feature that distinguishes and opposes the two characters is that Qaḥṭān is considered the ancestor of the *‘arab ‘āribah*, while the genealogical

descent of ʻAdnān is composed of ʻ*arab mustaʻaribah*. The meaning of these two expressions is soon explained: *mustaʻaribah* means 'Arabised', and it refers to the popular tradition that considers Northern Arabs as 'latecomers', people who acquired their 'Arabism' at a later stage. The *ʻarab ʻāribah*, instead, are 'original' Arabs—which means Southern Arabs, people coming from Yemen.

Now I shall specify why I am interested in this genealogical pedigree. I am not concerned with the rationale that originally motivated the construction of these lines of descent. Nor am I concerned with their 'historical accuracy', if this implies any degree of equivalence between written genealogies and actual generations of human beings. Eventually, I am not looking for a correspondence between genealogical structure and social organisation, although I shall face this thorny topic in Chapter 6. Here I am concerned with the way these labels, ʻAdnān and Qaḥṭān, first arose as objects from a specific 'surface of emergence' (Foucault, 1989).

This brings us back to Mohammed Nuʻmān. As R. B. Serjeant points out, "Yemeni literature seems devoid of the anti-Hashemite motive after the days of Hamdānī and the 6th/12th century Nashwān b. Saʻīd, until pamphlets (*manshūrāt*) on this topic began to appear in the early 1940s." (Serjeant, 1979: 97). Why did Nuʻmān revive this theme? And how was the opposition ʻAdnān versus Qaḥṭān shaped?

In an attempt to answer the first question, we might start depicting the broader intellectual framework in which Nuʻmān was formulating his thought. As we have seen, Arab nationalism owes its origin to the struggle against the alien domination of the Turks. The oppressors were labelled 'impious innovators' and the struggle was constructed by reference to the Faith (Khan, 1979: 360). By the end of the First World War, however, this semantic framework proved inadequate.

During the war, the Anglo-Arab alliance had envisaged the creation of an independent Arab state, in return for the rebellion of the Arabs against the Ottoman ruler. Pan-Islamism was, by then, an obsolescent framework to justify actual strategic alliances; after all, albeit 'impious innovators', the Turks were Muslims, whereas the British were not. Arab independence needed a more secular framework for its justification: a racial, territorial, and political framework (ivi: 365). With these considerations in mind, Sherif Hussein fostered the creation of an independent Arab state on the basis of "[...] a race worthy of respect owing to its glorious history." (Haim, 1962: 65)

The notion of race worked as a medium which made it possible to imagine a commonality of values, culture, and interests among the Arabs. On the basis of this commonality, some political parties carried forward the idea of an Arab nation grounded on the notion of race. In 1940 the Baʻath party was founded. According to the party's constitution, the Arabs formed one nation "[...]

characterised by virtues which are the result of its successive rebirths." (Khan, 1979: 365; Haim, 1962: 233-41) The concept of race started replacing pan-Islamism as the founding notion of an intellectual framework aimed at bonding together peoples and states in a new political unit.

Shifting from the international framework to Nu'mān's biography, there is one more fact that we need to consider. Mohammed Zubaīry was a Zaydī, 'Adnāny by descent, although not an 'Alawy Fāṭimy *sayyid* (cf. Serjeant, 1979: 95). He had no direct interest in rephrasing the opposition against the imam in terms of a genealogical rivalry between Northern and Southern Arabs. The fear of an anti-*sayyid* turn of the reformist movement had already pushed away some worthy men of *sayyid* origin (Douglas, 1987: 70). On the contrary, Mohammed Nu'mān was a man of *'arab* origins, and he was a Shāfi'y.[12]

While in other countries the call for Arabism interested both the descendants of 'Adnān and those of Qaḥṭān (Haim, 1962: 83-8), in Yemen the racial argument was played against Northern Arabs. From the columns of Ṣaūt al-Yemen, articles exalting the Arabism of Southern Arabs and their pride of belonging began to appear.[13] Consider the one below, printed in 1946:[14]

> **I am 'Araby.**
>
> We say that a person has an Arab character (*'arab*), meaning that he makes his intentions and his hidden feelings clear . And for this [reason] the Arabs are famous for the integrity of their soul (*nazāhat at-taḍmīr*) and the purity of their aims (*ṣifā' as-sarīrah*).
>
> In addition to this, we can also say that the title *'Arab* goes back to *'Arabeh*, and this is a district in Tahāmah, in the Peninsula, which is itself called 'the Isle of the Arabs.' And they are the Noble Ancients in their Arabism (*'arūbah*) or the genuine Arabs. The name *'arab 'āribah* is remembered in history. And among them you can find some perished tribes (*qabā'il*) like Ṭasam, Jadīs, Jurhum, Thumūd, and the First 'Ād and the Second 'Ād. And the first Arab King was 'Ād, the ancestor of the tribe Second 'Ād. As for Qaḥṭān, he is the son of 'Ābir, one of the sons of Sām, son of Nūḥ, and he was crowned King of Yemen in 2030 B.C. The son of Qaḥṭān is Ya'rub, whom we praise and remember, since we are Benī Ya'rub… And the name Ya'rub contains the meaning of Yemen and of *felix*… And from this root comes the name of his country: Yemen, or Arabia Felix. […] [My Translation]

In this piece, the Arabs are first depicted by means of their defining moral qualities. This is a point to which we shall return in the next chapters: genealogical origin is inextricably tied to different

12 Which means that he was a follower of the Shafi'ite school, one of the four schools of Islamic law in Sunni Islam.

13 As we shall see below, the Qaḥṭān myth served as the ideological basis for both the YAR and the unified Yemeni republic after 1990. Yemeni people were, in fact, described as 'sons of Qaḥṭān'.

14 *Ṣaūt al-Yemen* n. 6, Nov. 1946.

kinds of humanity, characterised by heterogeneous moral qualities. Secondly, they are historically and geographically situated, establishing a connection between their ancestors who inhabited the Arabian Peninsula and ‘present-day Arabs’. Both these points need to be understood relationally, or differentially, with reference to the social construction of Northern Arabs. This leads us directly to our second question: how was the opposition against Northern Arabs shaped?

Basically, Northern Arabs (and thus the whole *sayyid* group) were described as foreigners and oppressors. Let me start with the latter point. As we have seen, starting from the early 1940's, the institution of the imamate itself was put under critique, following al-Kawakibi's insights into the role of kings and princes in the decline of nations. This should have been a critique of the institution in itself. However, the new discursive trend extended the attack against the imamate to the whole category of the *sayyids*.

The logical process that lies behind this shift deserves some attention. During the 1940's a new consciousness developed among intellectuals about their being ‘Arabs’. Arabism was thus defined in genealogical terms, as a quality of the descendants of Qaḥṭān. Hence it was specified in territorial terms, through the statement that Yemen was the land of the Arabs. As a result, people of non-Qaḥṭāny descent were labelled as foreigners. Specifically, Northern Arabs were labelled as Furṣ and individuated by means of their line of descent. Furṣ here stands for ‘people coming from Irān, Persians’. This argument is grounded in a specious interpretation of history. Two versions of *sayyid* origin are provided, one identifying the *sayyids* with the Persian invaders of the 5th/6th century and the other considering the Imam al-Hādy Yahya ilā al-Ḥaqq himself of Persian ancestry. Needless to say, both interpretations are nonsense, as Ahmed ash-Shāmy well demonstrated (Shami, 1966). However, they are of paramount interest for my argument: in contemporary Yemen these interpretations are, in fact, common sense.

In sum, through the ‘Adnān versus Qaḥṭān motive of the anti-*sayyid* propaganda, the critique against the (*sayyid*) tyrant of Yemen overlapped with the critique of his line of descent, so that the category of the *sayyids* arose as an object from a new kind of discourse.

The end of the reformist movement

In February 1948, Imam Yahya was assassinated by tribesmen from Benī Murād. A short interreign followed, during which ‘Abdullah al-Wazīr proclaimed himself imam and sought an international recognition of the new government. Meanwhile Ahmed, Yahya's son, who had escaped an

assassination himself, sought refuge in Ḥajjah, where he had previously been governor for his father. There he organised a campaign to overthrow the revolutionary government. By March 1948 the revolt had been suppressed, and Ahmed proclaimed imam (Wenner, 1967: 98-104).

A second significant upheaval needs to be remembered. In 1955, minor clashes occurred between government tax collectors and the Hawbān tribe, North of Ta‘izz. Colonel Ahmed Yahya ath-Thalāyā asked permission to retaliate and attack the tribe, but Imam Ahmed refused and sent a small regiment trained to keep order and enforce tax decisions. As a response, ath-Thalāyā asked Ahmed to abdicate because of his ill health and old age. Ahmed's fortress in Ta‘izz was surrounded by ath-Thalāyā's forces, and Saīf al-Islām ‘Abdullah, the imam's brother, allied with the colonel, hoping to become imam (ivi: 115).

We are not interested in the details but in the outcome: Ahmed rapidly crushed the revolt and restored order. However, the 1955 coup sealed a phase of the political history of Yemen. Both in 1948 and 1955 the purpose had been to replace the incumbent imam with one more amenable to change. Following the failure of the second coup, the revolutionaries started planning a different political strategy, claiming the abolition of the imamate itself.

Mohammed Zubaīry was among those reformists who changed their perspective after 1955. This change of perspective is testified by two short pamphlets published in 1959 and entitled respectively *The Great Deception in Arab Politics* and *The Imamate and its Menace to Yemeni Unity*. These two pamphlets are of the outmost importance for our study, since they were reprinted in 2004 with an introduction by the former Yemeni President ‘Ali ‘Abdullah Ṣāleḥ. Moreover, during the upheavals of 2011-12 they became one of the symbols of the political propaganda deployed by the Iṣlāḥ party against the Hūthy movement.[15]

The first pamphlet is significant because it signalled a change in the way Zubaīry conceived the political institutions of his country. In this pamphlet, for the first time, he expressed the idea that the solution to the country's underdevelopment should have been popular sovereignty. As R. B. Serjeant noted (1979: 96), these remarks were expressed in a vocabulary derived from the West. Zubaīry, in fact, was questioning the ‘divine will’ through which the imams legitimised their rule, claiming the

15 Islah and al-Houthi are two of the main political movements in contemporary Yemen.

right of the populace (*sha'b*) to have a government representing it.

My interest in this pamphlet is twofold: on the one hand, I want to emphasise that it was still devoid of the 'racial theme' which characterised the second pamphlet; on the other hand, it is necessary to note that it influenced and shaped the political thought of Muḥsen al-'Aīny.[16]

I had no chance to access al-'Aīny's work, *Battles and Conspiracies against the Yemeni Cause*, but the main themes are well summarised by Serjeant (1979). Al-'Aīny was a man from the countryside, a *qabīly*[17] and a Ba'athist. He argued in his own terms for a secular, popular government: "We want a ruler who derives his power from us—we the tribes. We want a ruler stripped of his holiness—we want a ruler called Mus'id, Ṣāleḥ, Sa'īd, 'Al ī, Mohammed." (1979: 96) Al-'Aīny was subtle enough not to confuse the whole *sayyid* class with the rule of the imams. Nonetheless, his sketchy and stereotypical description of the *sayyids*' role is exemplary of how later generalisations depicted them:

> [...] you tribes and men of the Yemen are those who diligently sought out the *sayyid*, looking everywhere for him, according him the place of honour at your meetings, urging him to idleness and seeking good fortune (*barakāt*) through him. You made the *sayyids* a special class neither cultivating nor labouring, but ruling, judging and living by your efforts. (ibid.)

This last quote is of the outmost importance, since it contains truth beside some plain invention. Let me start with the invention. As I shall try to demonstrate throughout my work, not all *sayyids* were religious scholars or bearers of 'good fortune'. My fieldwork in Kuthreh is exemplary in this sense: most of the *sayyids* were simple peasants. This generalisation is, thus, stereotypical. However, this kind of representation of the whole *sayyid* class as a bunch of lazy deceivers has been institutionalised by the 1962 revolution, and it is common sense in contemporary Yemen. This is just another demonstration of the blurred boundary that separated the critique of the ruler from the critique of his line of descent. Moving to the truth, al-'Aīny is right when he makes 'the people' responsible for revering the *sayyids*. His statement demonstrates that deference was genuine, and

16 Muḥsin al-'Aīny was the first foreign minister of the country, and between 1962 and 1975 he served as prime minister. We can trace his political beginnings to the Famous Forty group.

17 The term *qabīly* is often deployed, in the anthropological literature, as a synonym of 'tribesman'. The meaning of this term is differentially constructed in terms of genealogical origin, profession and social function, so as to oppose the *qabīly* (Southern Arab, peasant and warrior) to the *'arab* (Southern Arab working in crafts), to the *sayyid* and to people working in the service sector. In my terminology, coherently with travel accounts, the word *qabīly* only points to peasants and people hailing from the countryside, notwithstanding their genealogical origin. The consequence is clear: *sayyid* peasants are called *qabīlys* of *sayyid* origin.

not normatively imposed. He is somehow exposing a sort of 'false consciousness'.[18] Also this second argument is common in contemporary Yemen.

The imamate and its danger for Yemen's unit

Coming to Zubaīry's second pamphlet (2004 [1959]), we find the same arguments enriched and expanded. Zubaīry's argument is refined, and this pamphlet deserves a thorough analysis. For our purposes, three levels of his argument need to be emphasised: *a*) the relational construction of social identities; *b*) the borrowing of Western notions and concepts, acquired through the Egyptian revolution; *c*) the development of discursive themes that are common-sense in contemporary Yemen.

The core argument of the pamphlet is clearly phrased in a Western language. The fundamental problem and the biggest, says Zubaīry (ivi: 24), is the problem of divine right in the government of the populace (*mushkilat al-ḥaqq al-ilāhy fī ḥukm ash-sha'b*). All tyrants and kings, Zubaīry continues (ivi: 13), in order to preserve their thrones, resort to two means: partisanship (*'aṣabiyyah*) and stratification (*ṭābaqiyyah*). How does the imam implement this twofold strategy? By asserting that he derives his power directly from God, and that he is his vicarious on earth and his *khalīf*. From these assumptions, the consequence follows that the imam's rule does not descend from the people (*leīsa mustamidd-an min ash-sha'b-i*) or from their favour, but directly from heaven (*hū manḥat-u min as-samāʾi*).

Let me consider these passages. Firstly, I want to point out that the notion of *'aṣabiyyah* emerges as a negative concept. All along the pamphlet the term is deployed with the meaning of 'irreflexive solidarity between people belonging to the same line of descent, against a general interest'.[19] This 'general interest', in the context of the pamphlet, is the interest of the Yemeni populace (*sha'b*).

Secondly, *ṭabaqiyyah* is a notion that explicitly refers to social strata and class dynamics. Zubaīry describes a stratum of privileged *sayyids* within the wider stratum of the Hashemites, and he overtly compares them to European feudatories. The comparison is mediated by the Egyptian case. The exact sentence goes as follows: "The first thing that [the Egyptian revolution] erased was the existence of a class which has privileges over the populace, like the Pashas (*al-bashāwāt*) and

18 This is significative, since post-revolutionary propaganda, on the contrary, described *sayyids*' privileges in terms of normative impositions.

19 I consciously use 'general interest' in a vague sense, since this interest needs to be defined contextually. In ash-Shawkany it was the interest of 'reason' in the religious exegesis. In Kuthreh, where I have undertaken my fieldwork, it was the interest of the brotherhood against that of any line of descent. At the same time, it was the defence of 'right', as defined by the *'urf* (customary law), against individual interests.

the Feudatories (*al-iqṭā'īn*)."[20] (ivi: 29)

Above all is the critique against 'divine right'. This language, too, belongs to a secularist tradition. Interestingly, this critique does not spare the Zaydī school. The imams, says Zubaīry, have opened the door of *ijtihād* (independent reasoning) with only one objective in mind: distinguishing the Zaydī school from the other four schools of Islām, reserving the *khilāfah*[21] for people of 'Alawy Fāṭimy origin (ivi: 16). Zubaīry is thus depicting the stratum of the *sayyids* by means of two characteristics: *a)* their line of descent; *b)* the concentration of political and economic power in their hands. Meanwhile, he is opposing this privileged stratum to another entity: the populace (*ash-sha'b*).

It is time now to address this last concept: what does Zubaīry mean when he mentions the term *sha'b*? Though we cannot individuate an overt definition, the usage is clear. "Yemen is a small part of the big Arab Nation (*waṭan*)." (ivi: 7) This is a first, solid statement, claiming that Yemeni people are just a part of a wider whole, the Arab Nation. Second, the Yemeni populace is defined as a 'potential unit' whose cohesion has been disrupted by the *divide et impera* (*farriq tasud*) politics of the imams. In this sense, the term *sha'b* is deployed to describe an imagined community yet to be: the union of northern and southern Yemen, of Zaydīs and Shāfi'īs. Other divisions are significant, and we shall consider them below. Third, a kind of transcendental agency is bestowed upon the *sha'b*: the populace, in fact, is described as an active agent, with a will (*irādah*) and a belief (*'aqīdah*) (ivi: 9). Eventually, the defining characteristic of the populace and of the Yemeni 'personality' is its *'arūbah*, its Arabism. This is the notion, the *medium*, that allows Zubaīry to imagine one Arab Nation grounded on common values which descend from Arabism.

Now that we have defined what Yemeni people are *in posse*, we still need to explain why they are not a Nation *in esse*. To answer this question, Zubaīry elaborates a rudimentary theory of hegemony and false consciousness. The imams, he argues, made a political use of the Zaydī school (ivi: 16), masking their temporal rule in a religious guise: "When the sectarianist attitude [of the *sayyids*] […] wears a religious mask, a fictitious, hypocrite common-sense view spreads and the people fraternize and defend the āl al-beyt […]." (ivi: 22) This blind attitude of the people must be overcome, since "[...] the populace today has developed, struggled, and revolted, and exhaled the

20 We need to spend some more time to explain the term *ṭabaqah*. At the time when Zubaīry wrote this pamphlet, a popular, vulgarised political vocabulary was spreading in the Middle East. The term *ṭabaqah* was thus deployed as a semantic calque of the Western notion of 'class'. The same term was already deployed in Yemen, at least from the time of ash-Shawkany, to refer to hierarchically ranked levels of instruction (Shawkani, 2010; Messick, 1996). The *'ammah*, composed by religious scholars, was thus the highest level. The *khaṣṣah*, composed by the illiterate populace, was the lowest one. No reference to the possession of the means of production was here implied.

21 The Caliphate (*khalīfah*) is a form of Islamic government where the caliph (*khalīf*) is recognised as the leader of the whole Muslim community.

shout of the awakening and revolting Arabism. It is not possible that tomorrow will be like yesterday, or the future like the past […] and it is impossible that [the populace] believes that heaven has made its choice […].” (ivi: 23-4) This kind of cultural hegemony of the imams “[...] has crushed the Arabism (*‘arūbah*) of Yemen and its popular personality (*shakhṣiyyat-hā ash-sha*‘biyyah).” In sum, a set of hegemonic ideas prevented the Yemeni populace from organising their common sense experience, thus preventing them from revolt. Isn't it Gramscian?

Turning to the *divide et impera* strategy, it is now time to specify which partitions (*taqsīmāt*) of the society were opposed one to the other at the time of Zubaīry. Or, following his line of reasoning, which partitions of Yemeni society were pushed by the imam one against the other. “We have already seen that the imamate broke the back of the populace creating two partitions: the Zaydī and the other one, the Shāfi‘y […].” (ivi: 21) This kind of partition was called, and it is called nowadays, *madhhaby*, meaning that it pertains to the religious school. However, the same labels were indicating a geographical separation that sketchily distinguished the highlands from the rest of Yemen. In this case, as in all the other cases that will follow, Zubaīry is very sophisticated in demonstrating the fictitious nature of the opposition. His rhetorical aim is completely clear: putting the responsibility of the division upon the imam(s). “From the perspective of the Shāfi‘ys, the imamate is one power, and the Zaydīs all together rule the Shāfi‘ys, and dominate them, and exploit them.” (ibid.) On the contrary, he continues, the Zaydīs “feel hard and bitter sentiments, because it is [only] a particular stratum of Hāshimy families that enjoys the divine right of ruling […].” (ibid.)

The second opposition is that between people from the countryside (from the villages, *al-qurā*) and city dwellers. “The peasant countrymen (*qabā᾽il*), and those of them who are not peasants, generally speaking, have a bitter feeling against city dwellers, as if they shared the spoils of the rule of the imams […].” (ivi: 22)

The third is that between lineages. “The tyrannical behaviour [of the imams] […] develops a spirit of glorification of the origin (*‘irq*) and of the lineage (*as-salālah*).” (ivi: 8) Zubaīry develops this last opposition in only one direction: a critique of the Hashemite lineage. Being himself a *sayyid*, Zubaīry is very concerned with distinguishing the institution of the imamate from Hashemite descent itself. “Then if we consider the Hashemites, we find among them the miserables, the victims, and the disadvantaged. Then we find only one [privileged] family of Hashemites, and that's the ruling family.” (ivi: 21) The imamate, Zubaīry continues, is dangerous for the *sayyids* themselves. Not only because it fosters fratricidal struggles, but also because “The populace feels that the whole number of the Hashemite families are a distinguished and privileged stratum, a stratum separated from the populace as if they differed from it in everything.” (ivi: 25)

It is from this standpoint that Zubaīry introduces the notion of *'unṣuriyyah*, a term which is commonly translated in modern standard Arabic as 'racism'.

'Unṣuriyya *or the partisanship of the origin* ('aṣabiyyatu-l-'irq)

The term *'unṣur*, in its philosophical meaning, translates as the Latin *elementum*, and it specifies, in Arabic, the four Empedoclean elements of fire, air, water and earth. However, in its general meaning, it describes a wide range of notions such as 'origin', 'family', and 'race' (Netton, 1986: 868). This is the meaning of the term that we find in the Encyclopaedia of Islam.

As B. Hall (2011) well explains, in Sahelian Arabic no precise word existed to translate Western notions of race. Terms such as *qaūm*, *qabīla*, and *'irq*, stood for the concept, "[...] but there was no Arthur de Gobineau or Herbert Spencer of the West African Sahel." (ivi: 10) In a sense, this is not particularly surprising. Even in Europe, the notion of race was not sharply distinguishable from the neighbouring concepts of nation or populace. During Italian Risorgimento, for instance, concepts of nation and race were almost completely overlapping (Patriarca, 2012) and even in travel accounts regarding Yemen we can find an ambiguous usage of the two terms 'caste' and 'race' (cf. Ansaldi, 1933; Manzoni, 1991; Volta, 1941). At the turn of the 20th century, French Nationalists would present themselves as racists, claiming the superiority of the French race over its enemies and internal aliens (Balibar, 2008; Miles and Brown, 2003: 59; Taguieff, 2001: 85-6).

Now, the debate about race and racism, as most of the debates regarding analytical categories, has been invested by a 'nominalist dilemma'. Is there any form of racial thought that could stand as a nominal model for what 'real racial thought' is (Hall, 2011: 10)? And, more subtly, what is the relationship between words and social phenomena (Balibar, 2008: 1632)? Does the emergence, or the lack of a certain word provide us with useful information regarding social dynamics?

In this debate, I align my analysis with anti-nominalist scholarship. I insist that race cannot be understood but as a historical phenomenon, and that "[...] practices around race articulate with other social phenomena in different historical contexts." (Hall, 2011: 11) A corollary to this statement is that I am not simply interested in the semantics of race. Rather, I am concerned with the interaction between racial attitudes and structures of power (ivi: 14). Or, to put it differently, I would like to investigate the social 'work' that racial ideas are made to perform (Holt, 2000: 27), thus distinguishing racial ideas from ideas about alterity that do not produce any symbolic and social exclusion of the other.

If we move from ‘race’ to ‘racism’, we encounter another historical configuration of meaning and other structures of power. This term, at least in its negative form, started being used systematically in the 1930's, mainly by German authors writing in English. Its first occurrence is recorded in a book by Magnus Hirschfeld in 1933–4, subsequently published in an English translation in 1938 (Miles and Brown, 2003). However, two historical processes put the new idea to ‘work’: 1) the growing body of scientific evidence that undermined the idea of ‘races’ as natural, discrete and fixed subdivisions of the human species; 2) the semantic shift from ‘Judaism’ to ‘Jewishness’ (ivi: 30-2) and the development of an increasing awareness of the way in which the discourse of ‘race’ was being used to legitimate the exclusion and genocide of Jewish people and other sections of the German population (ivi: 59).

These brief insights into the history of the category of racism and its social usage are tied to our argument both on the theoretical and the historical levels. A first remark is a corollary to the nominalist debate: the emergence of a new word does not, automatically, point to a new configuration of structures and semantics; conversely, the absence of a word does not implicate the absence of social phenomena. However, more often than not, the individuation of new words can have a heuristic value in determining new configurations of power. ‘Racism’ and ‘anti-Semitism’, in fact, signalled the emergence of a new kind of configuration (Balibar, 2008: 1632). Secondly, the symbolic and social exclusion of the other is often associated with a “reform of the category of the human.” (ibid.) Whenever we find a new anthropology, we construct and exclude a new Other.

So, returning to the notion of *‘unṣuriyyah*, we first need to consider that it emerged as a semantic calque. During the first half of the 20th century, a standardised political vocabulary spread in the Middle East, through the propaganda of political parties, newspapers and the radio ‘Ṣaūt al-‘Arab’. This vocabulary translated in Arabic, by means of semantic calques, some typical notions of left-wing political vocabulary: class (*ṭabaqah*), feudal (*iqṭā‘y*), struggle (*niḍāl*), and so forth (Marais and Waterbury, 1969: 66-8;). The term *‘unṣuriyyah* was one of these semantic calques, and it was intended to translate the notion of *racism*.

Reconstructing a genealogy of the term is beyond the scope of this chapter.[22] However, in order to set a frame of reference, I shall recall that the term *‘unṣuriyyah* was part of the political vocabulary of Jamal ‘Abd an-Nāṣir. Consider, for instance, the text of the announcement of the Arab Socialist Union (*al-Ittiḥād al-Ishtirāky al-‘Araby*). In that speech, Nasser deployed repeatedly the attribute *‘unṣury* (racist) in a clear sense. Consider this excerpt:

22 To my knowledge, such a study has never been accomplished.

> Our people will continue to resist any racial discrimination (*tamyīz ʻunsūry*). This [descends] from a proper acknowledgement of the real meaning of racial politics (*siyāsat at-tamyīz al-ʻunṣury*): the risk is the reality of colonialism, to which the people are exposed; the domination by a stranger, the exploitation of [the people's] resources and work. And racial discrimination is just one colour of the many colours of exploitation of the resources and of the work of the people. So the discrimination of the people because of their colour is the preamble of the distinction of value among their efforts. [My translation]

Racism is here unveiled as part of the politics of the colonial powers: a strategy to divide the people and exploit their work and material resources. A sort of racialisation of class, operated through the discrimination of people due to the colour of their skin (*laūn*) (Balibar and Wallerstein, 2011).

There is, however, a further meaning which is deployed throughout the text. As it is well known, Nasser was a zealous supporter of pan-Arabism, and he repeatedly urged the need to preserve the unity of the Arab Nation and its territorial integrity. In his opinion, the Nation was endangered in its integrity by two risks: conservative rulers cooperating with the colonial powers (*ar-rajaʻiyah al-mutaʻawinah*); and the colonies of the 'racist Zionist movement' (*al-ḥarakah al-ʻunṣuriyyah as-ṣahyūniyyah*). In both these passages, the meaning of racism was clearly influenced by Western understandings of the concept.

From here, we shall finally return to Zubaīry's pamphlet. Zubaīry, and there is no doubt about this, adopted the term '*ʻunṣuriyyah*' from the 'transnational political vocabulary' of Nassirism and pan-Arabism, along with many other terms: *rajaʻiyah*, *niḍāl*, *ṭabaqah* and so forth. However, he creatively adapted the semantic calque to the Yemeni situation, 'grafting the new onto the old'. In a passage significantly entitled, "A Hashemite lineage among the Arab and Islamic peoples", Zubaīry wrote:

> In Egypt, and among the other Arab people [people of *ʻarūbah*] and of Islām, Hashemite lineages (*silālāt hāshimiyyah*) preserve their genealogy (*ansāb*) and pride themselves on it. But they do not use this genealogy as a means to rule (*ḥukm*) and to distinguish (*tamyīz*). For this reason, they blended into the populace, and they became an original element (*ʻunṣur*) among its elements (*ʻanāṣir*). (My translation, 2004: 27)

Zubaīry continues, recalling the many successes that the Hashemites obtained in Egypt, and thus he concludes: "But it is certain that, if they had insisted on their genealogy and discriminated the populace through it, they would have never obtained what they did, in fact, obtain." (ivi: 28)

First, we need to recall and appreciate the 'reform of the category of the Arabs' that constitutes the background of this whole discourse. The Hashemites are distinguished against the backdrop of a homogeneous Arab populace. How are they distinguished? By means of their *silālah* (descent, lineage, or genealogy) and their *ansāb* (ancestry, ancestors). They are described as elements which are neatly distinguishable from the Arabs. Now comes the important point: in order to blend into the populace, the Hashemites do not have to abandon the preservation of their lineage. Rather, they have to abandon the privileges tied to it and become an 'element among the elements of the populace'. Through this passage, the lineage (*silālah*) turns into 'an element' (*'unṣur*) among other elements, which have the same weight. Value is not attached to lineage anymore; it is attached to individual merit. This is the first occurrence of the word *'unṣur.*

The term emerges for the second time in a paragraph entitled, "No partisanship" (*lā 'aṣabiyyah*). The partisanship which is here refused is the "racist partisanship" (*'aṣabiyyah 'unṣuriyyah*). I am translating *'unṣuriyyah* with 'racism', but we need to be careful so to consider 'racism' as an empty signifier until we will specify its significance and its social work. So returning to our text: here Zubaīry is criticising the partisanship of an 'element' of society, defined in genealogical terms, against the others. As in previous passages, the Hashemites are accused of positively distinguishing themselves (*tamyīz*), rather than negatively excluding the others. So, in this context, *'unṣuriyyah* indicates the attitude of those who consider their lineage superior to the others and for this reason demand political and economic privileges:

> Those who believe in racism (*'unṣuriyyah*) defend differences and privileges which divide themselves from the rest of the parts and the strata of the populace. And they insist on distinguishing themselves from the populace, and to separate themselves from it by means of political and social rights […] This arrogant attitude is a racist attitude, and this is the most dangerous thing for the Hashemites, Whether they live in Yemen or in any other Arab country. (My translation, ivi: 28)

In Zubaīry's description, the Hashemites are comparable to the French nationalist for a positive use of the word racism. Rather than excluding and discriminating the other for his racial background, they take pride in their own lineage. This is a *positive form of racism* (Balibar, 2008: 1633).

This representation of the Hashemites is deeply enmeshed in the relation of power that Zubaīry is describing and opposing. If the Hashemites are represented as 'arrogant' people boasting of their genealogical origin, it is because they (a part of them) hold political and economical power. This is

the kind of attitude that F. Nietzsche would ascribe to the nobles: their feeling of being ‘good’, superior people (Nietzsche, 2000: 15), a positive self-description. However, the possibility of a reversal of this semantic lies around the corner. Hashemites themselves accused Zubaīry of racism —negative racism, or discrimination—which clearly emerges from passages of the pamphlet in which he defends the reformist movement from such an accusation: “It is the biggest mistake and a reversal of logic to think that those who claim a popular rule are trying to spread a ‘racist partisanship’ (*‘aṣabiyyah ‘unṣuriyyah*).” (ivi: 28) The reversal, in fact, did happen as soon as the Hashemites were overthrown. We shall deepen this topic below.

The conclusion of Zubaīry's pamphlet is significantly devoted to Egypt and racism. The paragraph is entitled: “The Egyptian revolution is not racist”. The first sentence is of the outmost importance for our study: “The Egyptian revolution is not racist, because the Egyptian populace is the furthest from a partisanship of origin (*‘aṣabiyyat-il-‘irq*).” As we have seen above, the condemnation of a blind partisanship of origin was not a new theme in Yemen. However, Zubaīry is moving a step forward. In his language, the partisanship of origin is termed ‘racism’, *‘unṣuriyyah* for the first time. The *‘unṣuriyyah* is condemned against the backdrop of a broader kind of solidarity: the Arab populace. Zubaīry is thus shifting the level of solidarity from the lineage to the whole populace, defined by means of its Arabism (*‘arūbah*). In this definition, racism is claiming the solidarity of the lineage against the broader solidarity of the Arab populace. From this discourse, claiming the belonging to a line of descent emerges for the first time as a form of *‘unṣuriyyah*.

The 1962 Revolution and its Aftermath

The provisional constitution

It might seem that I have dwelt too long on the genealogy of this discourse, but the background is necessary; it is the only way to make sense of the 1962 Revolution as a Foucaldian event.[23] Through the pamphlets of Moḥammed Zubaīry, I have illustrated, without demanding completeness, the main themes and objects of a discourse which started emerging from the early 1940's. I have attempted to show how this discourse arose from a historically shaped ‘surface of emergence’: a

23 “An event, consequently, is not a decision, a treaty, a reign, or a battle, but the reversal of a relationship of forces, the usurpation of power, the appropriation of a vocabulary turned against those who had once used it […].” (Foucault, 1977: 154)

field of relationship shaped and structured by local and international forces.

Zubaīry, and the Yemeni Liberals, succeeded in shaping an 'emancipated identity' long before the 1962 Revolution. I deploy here the notion of emancipation in Laclau's sense (1996). Emancipatory discourses, Laclau argues, have been historically constituted by means of two main axes: a *radical chasm*, emancipating a new identity vis-à-vis an oppressing force; *a common, positive ground* of exchange between the old and the new social order. Clearly, the two principles are incompatible. On the one hand, in fact, the agents of emancipation have an identity whose constitution and/or development is prevented by an existing oppressive regime. The oppressor constitutes a 'radical otherness' which has to be thrown away. A corollary to this argument is that the emancipated identity needs to pre-exist the act of emancipation itself: "[...] without this pre-existence, there would be no identity to repress or prevent from fully developing […]." (ivi: 3) On the other hand, this radical foundation of an emancipated identity is logically tied to the relationship of oppression itself, preventing any possible radical foundation.

Zubaīry's discourse suffered these logical difficulties. On the one hand, he envisioned an identity to emancipate: the populace (*sha'b*), defined by its Arabism (*'arūbah*). This identity was, however, relationally tied to the identity of the oppressor: the Hashemite tyrant. Moreover, his critique of the class dimension of the Hashemite power, based as it was on the refusal of 'the partisanship of the origin' (or *'unṣuriyya*), was relevant to Arab identity itself. In 1962, the revolution of the officials overthrew the imam and established the Yemen Arab Republic. The logical discrepancies of Zubaīry's discourse immediately appeared in the text of the 1963 provisional constitution.

The identity of the populace, the newly emancipated subject, emerges immediately from the first lines of text: "Nel nome di Dio, il Clemente, il Misericordioso. Nel nome del nobile popolo yemenita che ha spezzato i vincoli della tirannide, dell'oppressione e dell'asservimento […]." (Minganti, 1963: 28) However, the oppressive regime is immediately called back to mind in a long passage which is worth quoting in full:

> La banda di amici del demonio (*shaīṭān*) della famiglia di Ḥamīd ed-Dīn e dei suoi agenti ha potuto, con i suoi ignobili metodi, rendere disunita la parola della *Ummah*, dividere la nazione in fazioni e partiti che si colpivano l'un l'altro alle spalle, mirando a portar via il cibo ai cittadini, rapinarne i beni, considerare lecito il loro sangue: con questi sistemi è stato agevole per quella banda di oppressori imporre al popolo yemenita anni di tirannide e di oppressione e una pesante coltre di ignoranza, povertà e malattia. (ibid.)

In this short passage, which makes a radical break with an irrational and evil past, the ‘product of ignorance and the folly of men’ (Laclau, 1996: 4) is summed up well.

The positive principles of the new, emancipated national identity are soon explained. The text, in its general form, is inspired by an ‘Arab Islamic Socialism’, as promoted by Jamal ‘Abd an-Nāṣir (D’Emilia, 1964: 303). Arabism is fostered (*al-waḥdah al-‘arabiyyah*) (Minganti, 1963: 28-9) in opposition to the isolationist politics of the imam (D'Emilia, 1964: 305). A general reference to Islām and *sharī‘ah* is intended to include Zaydīs and Shafi‘īs in the fledgling Yemen Arab Republic. The material reforms (hospitals, schools) become a constitutional objective. Significant for our argument is the second article of the constitution:

> […] I cittadini siano tutti eguali davanti alla legge, equivalendosi nei diritti e nei doveri pubblici senza discriminazione per razza (*jins*), origine (*aṣl*), lignaggio (*sulālah*), lingua (*lughah*), credenza religiosa (*‘aqīdah*) o rito (*madhhab*), uniformandosi alla parola di Dio “I credenti sono fratelli” e applicando I principii della retta religione che considera riprovevole il trarre vanto dalle nobiltà personali e dal lignaggio, e pone il timore di Dio quale suprema nobiltà e più onorevole lignaggio, attenendosi alle parole del grande Inviato: “La sola superiorità dell'Arabo sul non Arabo è il timore di Dio.” (Minganti, 1963: 28)

In this passage, it is explicitly forbidden to perpetrate any form of discrimination by means of genealogical origin (*aṣl*) or lineage (*sulālah*). This principle was restated and, somehow, extended in the first of the sixth objectives of the 26th September Revolution, which I report below:

1- Liberate the country from tyranny and colonialism, establish a just, republican rule and eliminate differences and discrimination between social strata.	1- التحرر من الاستبداد والاستعمار ومخلفاتها وإقامة حكم جمهوري عادل وإزالة الفوارق والامتيازات بين الطبقات
2- Build a strong national army capable of defending the nation, its revolution and its gains.	2- بناء جيش وطني قوي لحماية البلاد وحراسة الثورة ومكاسبها.
3- Improve the country economically, socially, politically and culturally as the third objective.	3- رفع مستوى الشعب إقتصاديا وإجتماعيا وسياسياً وثقافياً.
4- Build a cooperative, fair, democratic society, which derives its regulations from Islam.	4- إنشاء مجتمع ديمقراطي تعاوني عادل مستمد أنظمته من روح الاسلام الحنيف.
5- Realise Yemen's unification as part of a comprehensive Arab unification.	5- العمل على تحقيق الوحدة الوطنية في نطاق الوحدة العربية الشاملة.

6- Respect the conventions of the United Nations and international organisations, positive neutrality, non-alignment, support international peace and consolidate the principle of peaceful co-existence among peoples.	6- إحترام مواثيق الامم المتحدة والمنظمات الدولية والتمسك بمبدأ الحياد الايجابي وعدم الانحياز والعمل على إقرار السلام العالمي وتدعيم مبدأ التعايش السلمي بين الأمم.

If we read the sentence "[...] eliminate the differences and privileges between the social strata (*at-ṭabaqāt al-ijtimā'iyyah*)" through the lens of Zubaīry's discourse, it emerges with a precise meaning. *Ṭabaqah* is the Arabic equivalent of 'class', in its general political sense. However, in this text, as in the discourse of Zubaīry, the reference is to the privileges of the *sayyid* lineage. 'Class', in a vague, non-specialistic sense, and lineage are thus fused in one meaning. Moreover, a further hierarchical significance is added by the word *ṭabaqah*, which in Arabic stands also for level, floor or stratum.

The tripartite model

Let me sum up my argument. During the early 1940's and through the 1950's, the idea emerged that the tyrannical rule of the imam had turned Yemen into an underdeveloped, poor, ignorant country, a country internally divided between city dwellers and peasants, Zaydīs and Shafi'īs, Arabs and Hashemites, a country where class privileges were tied to a specific kind of racism: a racism of origin, tied to lineages and lines of descent. The racist and tyrannical rule of the imams was thus opposed to the rule of the populace (*ḥukm ash-sha'b*).

These ideas, which before the 1962 Revolution were almost esoteric, during the 1960's became part of the official ideology of the fledgling Yemen Arab Republic and were thus inscribed in the 1963 constitution. Interestingly, during the early 1960's the topic of social stratification entered scholarly debate too.[24] One of the first texts which aimed to interpret the shifting reality of Yemeni society was Mohamed Said el Attar's *Le Sous-Développement Economique et social du Yemen: Perspectives de la Révolution Yéménite.*

Mohammed al-'Aṭṭār was one of those foreign-educated Yemenis who during the 1940's and 1950's studied abroad, later holding ministerial positions (Burrowes, 2005). The title of his book discloses his approach. Following the discursive trend that unfolded during the 1940's, he described Yemen as an underdeveloped country, pointing out precisely who bore responsibility for this state of

24 A thorough analysis of the scholarly debate regarding Yemeni social organisation is beyond the scope of this chapter. For such an analysis see Chapter 7.

affairs. In his account of the historical reality of the imamate, Attar deployed harsh words, resembling those of the anti-Hashemite propaganda,[25] thus moving beyond the political critique of the Free Yemeni Movement (FYM). He described, for instance, the Imam Ahmed as a 'demon' (*jinn*), a fool, and a man addicted to morphine:

> Cet homme intelligent, voire génial (autrement, comment expliquer ce règne qui dura 14 ans), tombait en enfance et sombrait parfois dans la folie. En outre, il était extrêmement comédien, charlatan, et le tire que le peuple lui avait donné, "Le Djinn" (le diable) lui convenait à merveille. Ahmed aurait un cas psychologique curieux à étudier. (ivi: 73)

These tropes regarding the imam were rooted so well in popular discourses that an Egyptian film built an entire comedy on the stereotypes tied to the Imam Ahmed.

Even more important to our argument is the fact that Attar provided one of the first hierarchically ranked representations of Yemeni society. With some precautions, Attar compared Yemen to other stratified societies. He distinguished a sort of religious caste, the *sayyids*, although specifying that no castes existed in Yemen as closed and rigid as the Indian ones (ivi: 102). Hence he described the country in feudal terms, focusing on "[...] l'exploitation sans frein de la masse paysanne qui cultive la terre," (ivi: 103) albeit specifying that Yemeni feudalism was not a feudalism in its historical sense.

He pushed this second metaphor further, depicting six stratified classes, ranked from the highest to the lowest: 1) sayyids; 2) sheikhs; 3) traders and craftsman; 4) peasants; 5) slaves; 6) akhdams.[26] The first class, or stratum, was depicted as follows: "ils constituaient la classe de la noblesse, l'aristocratie, et sont les grands propriétaires fonciers, les hauts fonctionnaires, les gouverneurs des alwiyah[27] et autres dignitaires du régime." (ibid.) This description is miles away from the careful, nuanced critique of Zubaīry, which was directed against one family among the *sayyid*. Attar's model depicts the whole *sayyid* group in terms of a religious aristocracy and builds the whole model out of a class structure.[28] Genealogical descent is taken into account only for the first class, the *sayyids*.

As I shall make clear in Chapter 7, I do not mean to argue that the revolution created these social

25 Consider, for example, the vulgar anti-Hashemite propaganda of the Nasserite agent A. al-Baydani (1993), well exposed in his work *Asrār-ul-Yemen.* R. B. Serjeant defined this propaganda "plainly lying invention." (1979: 95)

26 'Attar defines the *akhdām* (s. *khādim*) the "pariah of Yemen": people of low class and of Ethiopian origin, working in demeaning professions.

27 The *'alwiyah* was an administrative unit during the Mutawakkilite Kingdom. For further details, see Lambardi (1947).

28 For a similar account of the 'traditional sections' of Yemeni society, see Sharjaby (1986).

categories anew. On the contrary, various ‘sections’ of Yemeni society, depicted as ‘races’ or ‘castes’, were distinguished and described even by European travellers, who also noted an articulated social ranking (cf. Glaser, 1885). However, after 1962 these very same categories were translated into a new language, emerging from a different kind of discourse: the emancipatory discourse of the revolution which emphasised a radical chasm between the Mutawakkilite Kingdom and the Yemen Arab Republic.

During the 1960's and 70's, the image of a hierarchically ranked, or stratified, society was reproduced both by ideological state apparatuses and Western scholarly literature (Mundy, 1995: 7). Western accounts, however detailed and sophisticated they might be, tended to reproduce a tripartite model of social ranking, with minor variants, a model where class and status, sometimes hybridised in the notion of caste, overlapped. As M. Mundy acutely pointed out: “Until the late 1970s the dominant image of Yemeni society was that of a hierarchy of social statuses and the central object of debate the nature of stratification” (ivi: 6). Curiously, Martha Mundy herself provided a brief and clear-cut reproduction of this ‘stratified model’. I say ‘curiously’ because, albeit defining the model a ‘survival’ of the ancient regime, she contributed to reproduce it as most anthropologists did.

To my experience, M. Mundy's version of the model is the closest to the emic experience of the Yemeni people with whom I worked and, provisionally, it will constitute our point of reference. Mundy states, “[i]n the speech of older women the vision of social order takes the form of a tripartite division: men of religion, men of the sword and the plough, and men of service.” (ivi: 39) First we need to focus on the tripartite nature of the model, namely, how it is conceived by the members of Yemeni society. Although not specified by Mundy, it is important to note that each level of the model is termed *ṭabaqah,* and that the overall model describes *aṭ-ṭabaqāt al-ijtimā‘iyyah* (the social strata). Referring to social strata (*aṭ-ṭabaqāt al-ijtimā‘iyyah*) in Yemen equals distinguishing three hierarchically ranked levels:

- the first stratum includes the *sayyids* (s. *sayyid*, pl. *sādah*) and the *qaḍys*[29] (s. *qaḍy*, pl. *quḍā’*). The *sayyids* (or *ashrāf*, s. *sharīf*) are Northern Arabs, descendants of ‘Adnān and Hashemites, descendants of the Prophet Mohammed through ‘Ali's son al-Ḥasan[30]. The *qaḍys* are Southern Arabs. Both *sayyids* and *qaḍys* are described as part of the ruling elite of the ancient regime, or as learned religious scholars;
- the second stratum is composed of the *qabīlys* (s. *qabīly*, pl. *qabā’il*). They are described as

29 The term *qaḍy*, in this sense, does not refer to a judge or a religious scholar, but rather to a person of *‘arab* origin holding a position in the government (Lambardi, 1947; Wenner, 1967: 63).

30 In northern Yemen, the vast majority of the *sayyids* belong to the Ḥasany branch of the Prophet's offspring. On the contrary, in Haḍramaūt, the majority of the *sayyids* belong to the Ḥusseīny branch.

Southern Arabs, warriors and peasants.

- the third stratum is composed of people from *beny al-khumus*, people 'without origin' and tied to the service sector.

Several other aspects of the model are deepened by Mundy and have been closely examined by other authors: the opposition between market and countryside (Stevenson, 1985); the relationship between social strata and institutional networks (Gerholm, 1977); the opposition between 'protected people' and warriors (Caton, 1984; Dresch, 1989).[31]

Interestingly, an attempt has been made by many authors to describe the three social groups by means of conventional sociological categories such as caste, class, status group or estate. To my knowledge, no one ever reached any noteworthy result, and this is not surprising. The reason is simple: as described by the model, the three social groups never existed, either before or after the 1962 Revolution. The model is empirically inconsistent and analytically heterogeneous. It mixes class, status and genealogical origin together. The result is twofold: not only can we not describe the three social groups by means of analytical categories, but we also cannot approach the analysis of social organisation from a sketchy, inaccurate generalisation.

Consider, for example, the case of the *sayyids*: as I shall demonstrate later (cf. Chapter 3), just a minority of them were religious scholars, and their class situation was highly heterogeneous. Many of them were peasants or craftsmen. Moreover, while some *sayyids* lived in protected enclaves, and others were directly under the protection of tribal brotherhoods, many of them protected themselves, exactly as 'real' tribesmen would do.

However inaccurate is the tripartite model, drawing on these ethnographies, we grasp the impression that during the 1960's and 70's it was common sense among Yemeni people. At the same time, the model was experienced as a legacy of the past. Commenting on the model, Martha Mundy states that, when she undertook her fieldwork in Wādy Ẓahr during the early 1970's, she grasped the impression of "[...] observing the very end of an ancient regime." If the social order represented by the model was already fading during the 1970's, or if it had never existed, why should I be interested in reviving its analysis for the umpteenth time?

In my opinion the answer emerges clearly from the words of my Yemeni interlocutors. Consider this excerpt from an interview which I conducted in 2011 with 'Abdullah Jazzāry, a wealthy man

31 As we have seen above, these further distinctions were already recognised by Zubaīry. Moreover, they constitute important axes of everyday discursive practices and boundaries of actual social groups. In this sense, these distinctions are more analytical than the tripartite model. However, Mundy is perfectly right in describing them separately from the model: social actors, in fact, do the same.

and the *shaykh* of butchers in the market of Bāb as-Sabāḥ:

> **Luca:** What's the difference between, for example, the blacksmith and the greengrocer, or the butcher? I can't understand it, because even the blacksmith works in a craft (*mihnah yadawiyyah*). What's the difference between the butcher, the greengrocer, the bath attendant and, for example, the carpenter or the blacksmith?
>
> **'Abdullah:** It is, let's say, the name of the craft. The name of the craft. Regarding us, the imam considered us the third stratum (*aṭ-ṭabaqah ath-thālithah*). This means: the butcher, the green-grocer, the bath attendant, the tanner (the one who works leather).
>
> **Luca:** But, I mean, what's the reason? I can't see any connection among these [crafts].
>
> **'Abdullah:** It's nothing more than a racial discrimination... This is a racial discrimination (*tafriqah 'luqunṣuriyyah*).
>
> **Luca:** Why are they called *beny al-khumus* (Sons of the Fifth)?
>
> **'Abdullah:** *Beny al-khumus*, we say it's the third stratum. They are *beny al-khumus*.
>
> **Luca:** Why the fifth? What's the reason of this naming?
>
> **'Abdullah:** It's their name. *Beny al-khumus* are now called the third stratum. The imam called them *beny al-khumus,* and they are the third stratum.
>
> **Luca:** Isn't there any meaning? What do you mean with 'beny al-khumus', is there no meaning?
>
> **'Abdullah:** There's no meaning, nothing.[32]

The model is still reproduced in everyday discursive practices, and it is the frame of reference to discuss any distinction grounded on genealogical descent. This short passage tells us a lot about the pedantry of an anthropologist and even more about the tripartite model. In Caws's terminology (1974), 'Abdullah Jazzāry is formulating a representational model of Yemeni social structure. A representational model is an explanation and a conceptualisation of a social system as provided by the members of the society itself (ivi: 4). The *ratio* of this model overtly differs from the *ratio* of Western explanatory models, which we define as 'scientifically rigorous representational models' constructed by an observer (ibid.). However, both types of models have blind spots and both contribute to construct the social reality which they represent. In Caws's terms, "A society is, in the last analysis, nothing except what is said and thought about it, by those who observe it as well as by

32 Several hypotheses have been put forward regarding the origin of the label *beny al-khumus*. I shall discuss them in Chapter 2 and Chapter 7. However, from an emic perspective, these hypotheses have no value. The great majority of my interlocutors from *beny al-khumus* had no idea of the historical meaning of the term.

those who compose it.” (ivi: 10)

Otherwise stated, both types of models are observing observations, describing descriptions that are themselves observable. From this perspective, reality is nothing more than an aid to reach one construction from another (Luhmann, 2002a, 2002b: 55) and, in itself, has no describable qualities as an object completely isolated from knowledge. This assumption, I believe, compels us to consider the blind spots of both types of models (representational and explanatory)—their founding paradoxes—considering reality as the product of the internal recursive operations of each system of knowledge.

Now, as I interpret it—and my observation is observable too, and subject to blind spots—my Yemeni interlocutors deployed the tripartite model in continuity with Zubaīry's tradition. This means that, in 21st century Yemen, the hegemonic description of the imamate[33] was still the one which arose during the Foucauldian event of the 1962 Revolution. However, they considered this discourse an objective historical truth.

This emerges clearly—at a first, elementary level—if we consider the language deployed to describe Yemeni social organisation through the model. This language is strikingly similar to the one which we have examined above: a language that first emerged during the 1940s and 1950s. Hierarchy is thus described in terms of ‘social strata’ (*ṭabaqāt*), and the *sayyids* (*as-sādah*) are depicted as the first stratum, the *qabīlys* as the second and *beny al-khumus* as the third. Moreover, social distinctions grounded on origin and lineage are conceived as a form of ‘racial discrimination’ (*‘unṣuriyyah*).

If we examine the *ratio* of this model, it immediately becomes clear that there is no *ratio* other than the dominion of the imam. The model in itself does not express any principle of order. It is pure ranking, without any further meaning: things are like they are. Now, if we come to the cause of the state of being, we find a clear statement: things are like they are because the imam established this order. From this standpoint, the model expresses an overt hypothesis regarding the *genesis* of social order: it descends from the will of a class of people, a privileged class of people, who divided the rest of the populace by racial means. This perspective is clearly a simplified version of the political discourse of the Yemeni Liberals, where the imam(s) appear as a sort of *deus ex machina*, as the ultimate explanation of every unjust feature of Yemeni society. Consider this excerpt from an interview conducted with an Arab student of law from Kuthreh. He is trying to safeguard the Zaydī

33 Stating that this representation of the historical phase of the imamate was ‘hegemonic’, I basically mean two things: 1) this representation was officially upheld and reproduced by the state; 2) counter-discourses were intended as such —as challenges to a hegemonic view—and reproduced by a minority of people, usually old men who experienced the imamate or Zaydī revivalists.

school, separating it from the actions of the imam(s):

> I am completely Zaydī. The Imam Zayd is different from these ones: they are from the Hadawy school. There's a friction between the Zaydī school and the Hadawy school. It is true that the Imam al-Hādy descends from the Imam Zayd… But they are different in matters of thought, to a great extent. For example there's a great friction between the Imam Zayd and the Imam Hādy… With regard to marriage, the Imam Zayd says: you are Muslim and you can get married to a Muslim girl. It's normal. But al-Hādy came and discriminated (*atā bi-tafrīq*). For example he said: a Qureīshy man with a Qureīshy woman, a Hashemite man with a Hashemite woman, an *ʿaraby* man with an *ʿaraby* woman… And a Hashemite man can marry an *ʿarab* woman, but an *ʿarab* man can't marry a Hashemite woman. And the government is reserved for people from the *ahl al-beyt*… This is the Imam al-Hādy.

And another passage from ʻAbdullah Jazzāry:

> The people didn't mix up; he didn't let the people mix. As if he transformed the people... He distinguished them: this is a *qashshām*... *qashshām*! Butcher... butcher! Bath attendant... bath attendant! The discrimination (*tafarruq*) came from there; the racial discrimination came from there (*at-tafarruq al-ʻunṣury*).

In these two passages, the imam(s) are held responsible for having imposed endogamic practices over the populace. In similar passages of many other interviews, the dress code of each social group is described as an imposition of the imam(s). Social ranking itself, and particularly the stigma attached to the service sector, is considered the outcome of the imams' rule.

In considering this model, there is one feature which I find particularly astonishing: the model is conjugated in the past. In both scholarly literature and common sense discursive practices, the present social organisation is depicted as the legacy of the past dominion of the imam(s). Somehow, schizophrenically, people keep asserting that the imam(s) and the *sayyids* are the cause of present social inequality, racial discrimination and backwardness; concurrently, they admit that the *ancient regime* is gone, that the republic has cleared these inequalities.

This is obviously a paradox and, as I see it, paradoxes have a heuristic value in unfolding the blind spot of discursive constructions. Deconstruction, ultimately, is nothing else than second-order observing.[34] In this case, I maintain that the tripartite model is built on a paradox that we have

34 However, I prefer ʻsecond-order observingʼ for it explicitly admits the contingency of the analyst's observation (cf.

already revealed through our genealogical analysis. The tripartite model, in fact, simply reproduces the paradox of radical foundation and common ground (Laclau, 1996) that constitutes the emancipated identity of the Yemeni populace. In other words, while a radically new identity is claimed, this identity is continually constructed against the political system of the *ancient regime*.

As I have argued above, this emancipated identity was genealogically framed by the opposition between ‘Adnān and Qaḥṭān, from which authentic Yemeni people emerged as descendants of Qaḥṭān. This new kind of discourse, which I consider in itself a Foucaldian event, emerged from the experience of the foreign-educated Yemenis, who later translated it into state ideology.[35] As Asher Orkaby (2015) has recently pointed out, the myth of the ‘Sons of Qaḥṭān’ constituted a unifying element following the overthrow of the Zaydī Imamate in 1962 and the unity in 1990 (ivi: 4). The Yemeni Republic was annually reminded of this myth on 26 September, the anniversary of the Revolution, when the former President ‘Ali ‘Abdullah SAleh would describe himself as the “main representative of the ‘sons of Qaḥṭān.” (ibid.)

Orkaby is certainly right in pointing out the importance of the unifying rhetoric of the sons of Qaḥṭān. However, its counterpart is equally significant: the opposition to the sons of ‘Adnān, the *sayyids*. Consider, for example, the speech which the former Yemeni President ‘Ali ‘Abdullah Saleh gave in 2010, on the occasion of the anniversary of the 26th September Revolution. The aim of the discourse was to provide an ideological framework to the Ṣa‘dah wars:

> […] Those martyrs, those children who died prematurely… While you rush to gain positions, to write articles, and to spread leaks on the internet. Oh you haters, they died instead of you, they died instead of you. We don't retreat, we don't move back. The battle goes on, should it continue for 5 or 6 years. We don't withdraw, we don't stop. We fought from the 26th of September, from the morning of the 26th of September until the 1970s. And we face the challenge, we will face this threat. This is obviously an extension of the clerical (*kahnūty*) regime of the imam. They are the same merchandise. The same *forma mentis*. The same family. So it's a duty for the sons of our populace to counter their evil actions. We didn't choose the war. They have a clear plan for [implementing] the imamate. Of the same kind of their companions from Iran. [...] In 47 years they haven't learned, they haven't understood, while our people have reached a higher level. Why do we have more than 17 universities? And more than 6 public universities? They haven't come from supplications and chaos. We study, and we learn, and we gain culture: Islam, Arabic language, physics, chemistry, medicine, agriculture. We learn so that the days of the imam

Luhmann, 2002c).

35 As we have seen above, foreign-educated Yemenis had a central role in the practices of institution-building of the fledgling Yemeni Republic (cf. Douglas, 1987; Orkaby, 2015).

> will not come back. [The imams] that froze the Yemeni populace for centuries. They made us ignorant. They were against school, against hospitals. And the greatest proof of that is what they do and the people they imprison in Sa‘dah. It's the same rationale: either they wear a *qub‘* or a *‘Imamah*. With the *ṭarbūsh* or the *‘Imamah*, it is the same clerical thinking, a conservative and underdeveloped thinking. [My Translation]

This short passage well summarises all the themes which we have considered so far. The return of the imamate is here described as a concrete possibility, an imminent danger. The war against the Houthi movement is overtly compared to the 1962 Revolution.[36] The achievements of the republic are exalted against the backdrop of the underdevelopment of the imamate. *Sayyids*, in the case at hand, the Houthi family, are compared to the imams by virtue of their genealogical origin (*nafs al-‘ā’iliyyah*). We can find similar considerations in the introduction to Zubaīry's pamphlet which the President ‘Ali ‘Abdullah Saleh wrote in 2004:

> […] This noteworthy book has to enter the house of each Yemeni, and every school, and every university so that it will be read generation after generation, and they will understand that the thought of the imamate is a risk for the unity of Yemen. The imamate was the most underdeveloped among the systems of the world. A system based on a confessional secularism, on the sole *zakāh*, without hospitals, or schools, or roads or universities… Nothing but ignorance, diseases and the imam. […] We offer this book to the new generations which didn't experience the oppressive imamate, in order not to forget the suffering that our people experienced under the oppression of the clerical rule of the imam. That suffering that some supporters of the imam (*al-imamiyyin*) want back again, with the return of the dark ages of Yemen… But history does not move backward. (My translation; Zubaīry, 2004)

From hierarchy to discrimination

In sum, from the perspective of my Yemeni interlocutors, the hierarchical principle that structures the model is dominion, the past dominion of the imam. If we move to the analysis of explanatory models, we find a central concern for ranking and hierarchy—after all, we are talking about a model that distinguishes ‘strata’. How could we ignore this feature? Scholarly literature, however, faces

36 The Sa‘dah war is a civil conflict which opposed the Yemeni government and the Houthi movement in northern Yemen (cf. Chapter 3).

the problem of social ranking from a perspective which differs from that of my Yemeni interlocutors'.

T. Gerholm, for instance, describes the model as the product of a 'sayyid sociology of Yemen' (1977: viii), "an ideal construct legitimizing the position of a stratum of religious specialists and freezing social reality into an immutable hierarchy."[37] However, he adds that no single principle can account for hierarchy;[38] status groups reflect the interlocking of a tribal structure with two non-tribal institutions, the sanctuary (*hijrah*) and the market (*suq*) (ivi: 107). For Stevenson (1985), the founding opposition is that between two modes of production and the related, incompatible, *ethos*: peasantry and trade. *Sayyids* are included in the model as foreigners, late comers. Influenced by R. B. Serjeant (1977), P. Dresch (1989, 1986) reverts to the hierarchical principle, asserting the superiority of the tribesmen, a superiority which is grounded on their *sharaf*, honour in its most encompassing sense. S. Caton (1986) is more sophisticated in discerning different regimes of value, each characterising a different social group. For F. Mermier, status groups are the outcome of the modulation of two principles: ancestry (*aṣl*) and work (1997: 74).

Explanatory models are more sophisticated, but they have blind spots too. The more evident, I maintain, consists in missing the political function of the tripartite model and the historical configuration from which it arose. This self-description of Yemeni social organisation is not a legacy of the past. Rather, it is a product of the 1962 revolution, the outcome of what L. Dumont would term 'a modern ideology'. Let me address this point.

In his *Homo Hierarchicus*, L. Dumont famously argued for a watershed distinction between two types of society: a modern, egalitarian, individualistic Western society as opposed to a hierarchical, holistic, traditional non-Western society. I do not aim to revive this kind of sharp binary opposition, which has a long tradition in anthropology and Western philosophical thought. Rather, I wish to focus on Dumont's conclusions. One of the ironic contradictions of modernity, states Dumont, is that ideologically egalitarian societies cannot avoid turning hierarchy into discrimination (2000: 422). When a society's self-description conceives individuals as 'equals', there is no room left for distinctions other than exclusion. Differences cannot be related to a whole, to an overarching social system; they are substantial, and thus need to be expelled.

As R. Parkin notes, in Dumont's work making distinctions means differentially valuing what is distinguished: "We only distinguish in order to state a preference, that is, to allocate different

37 Isn't this the perspective of the Free Yemeni Movement?

38 This statement needs to be understood against the backdrop of L. Dumont's theory. In fact Gerholm is denying the existence of a single principle structuring the system (Dumont, 2000: 123).

values." (2010: 249) Now, allocating different values requires a shared 'regime', the recognition of a common ground. This is pretty much what hierarchy stands for: a relational system of values, differently distributed among the parts of a whole.

Heading back to contemporary Yemen, we can immediately recognise that, since 1962, the tripartite model has not described a hierarchical order in Dumont's sense; rather, it has been deployed to highlight discrimination. Yemeni citizens are normatively defined as equals, yet practically distinguished by means of their profession and genealogical origin. This is what *'unṣuriyyah* ultimately means: the recognition of ascriptive differences against the backdrop of ideological equality. From this point the consequence descends that the tripartite model of social ranking is not the outcome of hierarchy but its denial; it turns relational differences into discrimination.

When I undertook my fieldwork, I started investigating the life histories of old men who lived before 1962. I mainly focused on people from *beny al-khumus*, expecting to gather subjective accounts of oppression. After all, scholarly literature describes them as the last stratum of the model, as people without honour and means of production. On the contrary, most of these men described the period of the imamate as a golden era: a period of high income and justice. Whenever questioned about their relationship with the *sayyids* or the *qabīlys*, they would answer: "We would walk our way." (cf. Chapter 2) On the other hand, younger men who never experienced the rule of the imams would complain about it, attributing their low status to the legacy of the ancient regime.

The tripartite model of social organisation accounts for this contradictory state of affairs. It describes a simplified version of a system of distinctions and concurrently condemns it. These distinctions, read against the backdrop of ideological equality, are turned into discrimination. This gap lies at the heart of contemporary Yemen, fostering contradictions that I shall analyse throughout my work: dependent servants who claim their right of dependency (Chapter 2); oppressed *sayyids* described as oppressors (Chapter 3); peasants who boast of self-sufficiency, but do not cultivate anymore (Chapter 4). How are these distinctions reproduced in spite of the efforts towards equality?

My argument is that the enduring social distinctions that the tripartite model approximately depicts are based on the prominent role of genealogies in contemporary Yemeni society. Genealogies have a generative role in crafting anthropological subjects in at least two senses. On the one hand, *genealogical imagination*, weaving together the legacy of the ancestors and a horizon of future possibilities, structures the expectations of social actors and their future-oriented practices. On the other hand, *genealogical capital*—cultural, social, and economic capital shared by members of a patrilineal descent—provides material constraints to social action, crafting the *habitus* of social

actors.

In the next chapter, I shall explore the family histories of people belonging to *beny al-khumus*. Excluded from the macro-genealogical level of the ʻAdnān versus Qaḥṭān narrative, these people were secluded from history during the Mutawakkilite Kingdom and depicted by other social groups as a residual category ʻlacking in origins'. In contemporary Yemen, they still constitute an endogamic social group, and they keep practicing their traditional professions in accordance with a fundamental principle: "No one denies his origin but the dog."

Chapter 2 - Blood doesn't Lie

The Genealogical Construction of Moral Selves

The servant of a nation is its master.

Khādim al-qaūm sīd-hum.

Beny al-khumus is a social category that designates a number of individuals who are regarded as a unit by people from other social groups. *Beny al-khumus* are considered the lower degree of the tripartite model of social ranking. This categorisation is grounded on two characteristics that are putatively shared by individuals belonging to their group: *a*) their genealogical origin; *b*) their reliance on stigmatised tasks.

As we shall see in Chapter 7, it is not possible to individuate one or more structural principles underlying the whole range of stigmatised tasks. Stigma is the historical product of social, economic and ideological factors. However, this does not prevent the possibility of considering the dynamics that lead to the reproduction of stigma in a specific time and place. Nowadays, people hailing from Ṣanʿāʾ and Beny Maṭar are generally prone to acknowledging that the following tasks are somehow *ʿayb* (shameful): the barber (*ḥallāq*), the circumciser (*khaṭṭān*), the bloodletter (*ḥajjām*), the butcher (*jazzār*), the leatherworker (*munaqqil*), the wool-worker (*ṣāniʿ*), the bath attendant (*ḥammāmy*), the green-grocer (*qashshām*), the oil miller (*ʿaṣṣār*), the potter (*maddār*), the kettledrum player (*ṭabbāl*), the double flute player (*muzammir*), the cook (*dabbākh*), the coffee seller (*muqahwy*) and the *kebāb* seller.

I have intentionally left out the figure of the *muzayyin*, the ʿaybservant of the village'. The *muzayyin* usually practices many of these tasks, which in an urban milieu are, instead, the specialisation of different families. For this reason, he is often considered the ideal type of person from *beny al-khumus*. In this chapter I will analyse the life history of a family of *muzayyins*: Beyt Zuleīṭ, the servants of Kuthreh. Starting from this life history, and complementing it with insights

from my fieldwork in the Old City of Ṣan‘āʾ, I will address the problem of the construction of moral selves in a hierarchical system. In this chapter I argue that the notion of origin (*aṣl*), entailing the transmission of genealogical capital and a specific relationship with the past, keeps informing the constitution of moral selves in contemporary Yemen.

Apprenticeship, Embodied Knowledge and Future Horizons

The origins of Beyt *Zuleīt*

My grandfather, Hady, fled after killing someone... he was from Beny Zuleīṭ in Beny Sureīm...

Mujahid Zuleīṭ lived his life after the 1962 revolution, in a period of rapid and unforeseen change. When I arrived in Kuthreh he had already passed away, so I collected the story of Beyt Zuleīṭ from his old father, Saleh, his two sons, ‘Ali and Mujahid, his brother, Mohammed, and other people in Kuthreh and Shimās.

Most of the people in Kuthreh completely ignored the historical origins of Beyt Zuleīṭ, assuming that they had always dwelt in the village. I gathered a different account of their history from the *shaykh* of a neighbouring village, Shimās. The ancestors of Beyt Zuleīṭ, the *shaykh* recounted to me, were *mashā'ikh* in Beny Zuleīṭ, a section of the bigger tribe of Beny Sureīm. A member of this family, Hādī, fled after killing someone and, in order to escape vengeance, he sought refuge in Beny Maṭar. A *shaykh* in Beny Maṭar accepted to protect him, but under a condition: the fugitive could stay under the protection of the village if he gave up his position of status to work as a servant.

Hady accepted this condition, and when the people of the victim (*ahl al-maqtūl*) reached the *shaykh* and asked for the fugitive, the *shaykh* replied, “What do you want? This is my servant.” The fugitive was hiding from death (*yinajjīh min al-maūt*), and a real tribesman (*qabīly*) would die rather than serve as a servant (*khaddām*). For this reason, considering the fugitive ‘socially dead’, the people of the victim renounced to exact vengeance from him. Informally, the *shaykh* paid a blood-price (*diyah*) to the family of the victim and settled the case.[1]

1 When I undertook my fieldwork in al-Bustān, in 2009, I collected a similar story regarding the *muzayyins* of the village: Beyt Jawleh. They fled from Arḥab, escaping vengeance, and they sought refuge in al-Bustān. When the people of the victim reached the village to exact vengeance, the ancestor of Beyt Jawleh came out from the house of

Whether these events are historical or not, the point is that Mujahid, and his father and his ancestors before him, lived and worked as *muzayyins* in the village of Kuthreh. At the turn of the 20th century, the people (or the *badaneh*[2]) of Beyt Zuleīṭ dwelled in a tower house in the old village of Kuthreh. The tower house was, and still is,[3] property of Beyt ar-Reīshāny. Mujahid's great grandfather lived in the tower house for free, descending this right, besides many others, from his role of *muzayyin.*[4]

At that time, the *shaykh* of the village was ‘Abdulhamid Shams ad-Dīn, a *sayyid* from Beyt Shams ad-Dīn. Between 1893 (1311 h.) and 1904 (1322 h.), ‘Abdulhamid acquired a huge amount of land in a territory north-west of Kuthreh, not far from the so-called *ṣalabat-ad-diyah.*[5] From those contracts we come to know that Mujahid's great grandfather, Saleh Ibn Saleh Zuleīṭ, was a literate man and a *trustful* (*amīn*) one: he was the agent (*wakīl*) that negotiated and acquired land for the *shaykh* ‘Abdulhamid. Some fifty years later, right before the 1962 revolution, Saleh's grandson,Saleh Ibn Saleh Ibn Saleh, still worked in the village as *muzayyin* with his two brothers: Ahmed and Hussein. Their tasks were multiple, their rights and duties customarily fixed.

Abandoning religious study

Saleh lived part of his life, his childhood and the critical period of transition to adulthood, under the imamate. I first met him right before the wedding of one of his nephews. He dwelled in Armis, a neighbouring village of Kuthreh, with Mujahid Ibn Mujahid, his nephew. In spite of his age—we estimated him to be over eighty since he had know the Imam Yahya—he was outstandingly energetic and lucid. His piercing blue eyes were framed by a light make-up of antimony (*koḥl*). He wore a *janbiyyah* (pl. *janāby*) that immediately caught my attention. It was a big dagger, bigger than the ones I was used to, worn in a curved sheath decorated with green leather strings (*maḥbas*, pl.

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the *shaykh*, playing kettledrum as only a servant would do. Being ‘socially dead’, the people of the victim let him live.

2 The term *badaneh* points to a patronymic descent category of varying size. It usually refers to an imagined community, with the common ancestor five-generations removed and to social units bigger than the patronymic descent category of the *usrah*, which usually includes three generations of co-resident people. The word *ʿaylah* is sometimes used as a synonym of *zaūjah*, referring to *ego's* wife, or, more generally, to a nuclear family.

3 During the 1962 revolution, the *shaykh* of the village was from Beyt ar-Reīshāny. Since the *muzayyin* would live in a house belonging to Beyt ar-Reīshāny, next to their tower house, it is probable that at the time of the arrival of the ancestors of Beyt Zuleīṭ, the *shaykh* of the village was from Beyt ar-Reīshāny, thus a man of *ʿarab* origin.

4 It is worth noting that the fact of not possessing a house is a constant threat to someone's stability inside a village. We will further deepen this point analysing Mujahid's life history.

5 The word *ṣalabah* stands for dry and uncultivated land, full of *zīl* (grass). It is said that one man was killed in Beny Maṭar, and the culprit remained unknown. The Imam, considering a murder without a culprit intolerable, ‘stopped’ the land were the body was found as blood-price (*diyah*) for the people of the victim, in order to push the one responsible to reveal himself. Apparently, he did not, and nowadays *ṣalabat-ad-diyah* is still dry, uncultivated land.

maḥābis). The sheath was worn obliquely to the right, with its tip covered with a silver decoration called *thumah* (or *tūzah*). The whole assemblage (*al-jihāz*) was fixed at the front of a belt decorated with silver garments (*talbīsah*). A few days later, his son Mujahid described this dagger with the following words:

> Once it was [a symbol] of honour (*fakhr*). Only the *shaykh*, or the judge (*qāḍy*) possessed a *thumah*. I mean, an official, someone full [of money]... Its value is also due to its decoration, its hilt. [..] It's an antique. Once, only the Imams wore it. This is the inheritance of my father's grandfather, the grandfather of my grandfather who got it from a judge. He went with him to a wedding and [the judge] gave this to him as a gift. My grandfather inherited it from his father, and he preserved it as you do with anything valuable... Even when he wears it, it gives him the appearance of a distinguished person.

In this case, the *janbiyyah* is a heirloom through which the identity of the family is symbolised and reproduced, generation after generation (Weiner, 1980, 1979). Many authors have emphasised that, during the ancient regime, people were normatively compelled to dress according to their stratum by the political power of the Imam (Mundy, 1983). I consider these accounts, based on second hand testimonies, as heavily distorted by the revolutionary rhetoric. A thorough analysis of clothing practices in contemporary Yemen would require a standalone study.[6] However, I would like to emphasise that clothing practices cannot be reduced to an epiphenomenon of the political power of the Imams. During my fieldwork I met many old men from *beny al-khumus* wearing their traditional clothes, the same clothes that distinguished their family and their profession within the overall hierarchical system. Wearing those clothes provided a sense of belonging.[7]

Saleh was clearly one of those men who felt proud of their origin and profession. As soon as I manifested my interest in his work, to my great surprise he started showing off his work tools, describing them one by one. He had a sharp knife right behind the sheath of the dagger, for slaughtering animals. In a pocket of his jacket he kept a pair of scissors to cut hair and in the other a blade to shave. From another pocket he extracted some thread and a big metal needle (*makhyāṭah*), which he used to stitch and close the bags of wheat. Since he was young, he had been offering his services to many villages, he explained to me, and thus he wanted his instruments to be always with

6 Some were urged by the practical necessities of the profession (e.g. the peasant and the green-grocer would lift their tunic); some others needed to be understood through a semiotic approach (e.g. the *ʿimāmah* and the *thumah*, as we have just seen, were not a prerogative of the *sayyid* stratum, rather they were a symbol of religious instruction); some of them were related to political positions and to economic status.

7 Similarly, clothing and hairstyle distinguished Jews from Muslims. Sartorial signposts marked social boundaries, since no physiognomic distinction existed between Jews and Muslims. Jews actively opposed changes to their own traditional modes of dress (Wagner, 2015: 69-70).

him.

Saleh was a barber and a butcher. He was a *kayyāl*, the one in charge of esteeming the quantity of grain to pay to the tax officers. He was a phlebotomist, slicing peculiar veins in order to heal thrombosis. He also knew how and where to 'burn' (*yikwī*) the human body, in order to cure the most disparate illnesses. Beside these secondary tasks, Saleh's main talent, what he took the most pride in, were his skills as a circumciser (*khattān*). Being that Saleh was an orphan—his father died when he was underage—he recounted to me the difficulties that he had faced in order to learn his profession (*mihrah*) from his relatives and maternal kin. While I was mainly interested in his work and his social status, Saleh directed his narrative towards his main regret: the abandonment of religious instruction.

Saleh started recalling the story of his life with a religious episode. When he was just a child, Saleh studied with a *faqīh*, a religious teacher, in a small room next to the mosque in al-Mahāqirah, a village not far from Armis, "I've studied the Qurʾān. I've studied with a *faqīh*." That place was called *matkab*. Before the 1962 revolution, in fact, there were neither schools (*madrasah*), nor teachers (*ustadh*). The students were calling the *faqīh* '*yā sīdanā*',[8] because "He was our master; he knew the Qurʾān by heart (*ḥāfiẓ*); he mastered the Qurʾān."

The *faqīh* dressed like the *sayyids* and deserved the same title, '*yā sīdanā*', by virtue of his religious instruction ("The *faqīh* and the *sayyid* had the same *ʿīmāmah* and the same dress. But one was a *sayyid* and the other a *faqīh*.") Saleh learnt the last part (*juzʾ*) of the Qurʾān, the shortest, by heart. Then he had to leave his study: "[...] I studied until I knew a whole part. [...] The last part of the Qurʾān. After that, I left my study and I took up this profession (*qumt lil-mihrah hadhihi*)."

As I have noted above, Saleh was an orphan. When his father died, his sister's husband (*nasīb*) moved to Kuthreh to live with him and his brothers for a while: "We were underage (*quṣṣār*), so he stayed in our house, and he taught us everything. Moreover, I've learnt by myself among the people, filling my eyes (*umallī ʿaīny*). And this was enough." With bitter remorse, Saleh took up his apprenticeship and left religious scholarship.

An orphan 'son of the profession'

At the time of Saleh's childhood, Yemeni society was characterised by a simple form of division of

8 Here, again, it is interesting to note that the expression "yā sīdy" was not referred exclusively to the *sayyid* stratum (cf. Sharjaby, 1986). Rather, it was a general form of respect, used to address people considered of a higher status: religious scholars, descendants of the Prophet, old men. Usually, the grandfather is called "*sīdy*".

labour, a sort of ‘domestic mode of production’, where economic roles were also kinship roles. Within this mode of production, economic skills were learnt by children working together with adult producers (Goody, 1989: 233). This method of learning is well described by the popular proverb, “He who studies one year does not equate the son of the profession.” (“*ibn al-mihrah wa lā muta‘allim sanah.*”)

The ‘son of the profession’ is the one who pursues the traditional task of his ancestors, directly acquiring cultural capital from his same-sex parent or from siblings. Interestingly, this specific way of learning is usually not recognised as a form of apprenticeship, apprenticeship being considered a form of “learning from an expert outside the natal family.” (ivi: 239) Following this definition, apprenticeship is tied to an increasing complexity of the division of labour and entry of domestic production into the market. As a result, in an apprenticeship system, youths seek to learn occupations different from those of their fathers (ibid.).

The logic of transmission of knowledge that characterises the son of the profession is radically different. As P. Bourdieu has acutely noted, the hereditary transmission of cultural capital embodied in a family is a process that responds to a specific logic, a process through which the social conditions of transmission and acquisition are hidden and denied (Bourdieu, 1986: 244). This logic of transmission predisposes cultural capital to work as symbolic capital. Unrecognised as capital, i.e. as historically accumulated work, it functions as ‘innate’ competence. The ‘son of the profession’ owes his technical skills, his moral attitudes and his overall behaviour to his ancestors, to his origin (*aṣl*). His skills are considered part of his nature.

Saleh's case is both exceptional and paradigmatic, since he was an ‘orphan son of the profession’, and he had to pursue apprenticeship without the inner circle of his close relatives. His biography sheds light on the hidden processes of transmission and acquisition of knowledge that characterise a domestic mode of production. As T. Marchand has pointed out, apprenticeship is a model of education that, while teaching technical skills, provides the groundings for the acquisition of social knowledge, worldviews and moral principles (Marchand, 2001; 2008: 246). Following this lead, we shall consider how social and personal identities are inextricably tied to professional skills and how the transmission of knowledge in a learning environment produces and organises subjects by means of ‘systems of knowledge / power’ that reside beyond their conscious control (Foucault, 1978).

What I have just labelled ‘systems of knowledge / power’ actually structure the apprenticeship of social actors in a ‘silent’, practical way; as T. Marchand has demonstrated through his study of minaret builders of Ṣan‘ā’, “[...] learning is achieved primarily through observation, mimesis and

repeated exercise." (2008: 247) This practical constitution of skilled labourers and moral selves gives rise to local reasons that have no 'logical' or deductive form: skills cannot be generalised and mechanistically applied to different situations.[9] A system of knowledge of the kind I have just described can only reproduce itself maintaining a certain degree of inequality. Access to apprenticeship is not freely granted to any individual. Rather, it is regulated by kinship networks through which knowledge is transmitted.

Returning to Saleh's story, we pointed out already that he started his profession practising a peculiar task: that of the circumciser. One day, his *nasīb* (his sister's husband) woke him up early ("*bakkir bakkir!*"), in order to let him assist in the circumcision of a child. Saleh prepared himself to hold the baby and actively participate in the operation. Instead, his relative pushed him aside and warned him to observe, "Watch and remember so that one day you will be ready to do it!" As Goody (1989: 247) has pointed out, periods of low-level routinised participation "acts to lay down a basic framework of implicit meanings and premises" that constitute the premise for further improvements in the craft (quoted in Marchand, 2008). This episode also emphasises the twofold hierarchical organisation of crafts: not only they imply an unequal distribution of knowledge within the overall society, they are also internally ranked.

Saleh followed his brother-in-law a second time and a third, carefully observing his practice. Suddenly, one day, being that his relative was busy, he had to do the work by himself. He reached the house and greeted the family of the child, *pretending that he was already an expert circumcisor*. Then he entrusted himself to God ("*tawakkalt 'alā Allāh*") and concentrated on his work. He accomplished his task perfectly, and the family brought him a second child. As he finished, they congratulated: "You're better than your brother-in-law!" Saleh commented on this episode stating, "My heart rejoiced (*qalby faraḥ*)." Since the family did not have money to pay him, they gave Saleh a *qadaḥ*[10] of grain. He took the grain and reached the mosque where he used to study. "I said [to the *faqīh*]: take this to read (*tadrīs*) the whole Qur'an (*khitmah*) or more." He asked, "For whom shall I study?" Saleh replied, "The intention (*an-niyah*) is that God improves the work, improves my work, so that I can take up this profession (*mihrah*)." From that day on, his activity improved continuously:

> Then this profession [grew], next to it, next to it, over it, over it, until I took all the tribal sections (*'uzal*), section (*'uzlah*) after section, until I reached to the paramount *shaykh*. [...]

9 See on this point the two notions of *situated reason* (Gudeman, 2001: 39) and *mimesis* (Gudeman, 2001; Scott, 1998).

10 One *qadaḥ* corresponds more or less to 30 kg.

> For my whole life... There were no doctors, or anything like that... And when the doctors arrived, the people still wanted me. They would call me 'traditional circumciser' (*khattān balady*).[11]

Saleh's attitude, in this second episode, might appear naive and dangerous for his young clients. Yet it is perfectly consonant with local assumptions regarding skilled labour. As T. Marchand has noted, Yemeni skilled labourers claim that their know-how is intuitive: "[S]uch claims serve to reinforce commonly-held beliefs that skills are innate […]." (2008: 253) As we shall see in Chapter 7, such an assumption is the basis for the whole organisation of the genealogical division of labour. As I have stated above, the 'son of the profession' (*ibn al-mihrah*) apprehends the traditional task of his family since childhood, gradually and without any formal period of apprenticeship. The profession is naturalised as part of him, being acquired as embodied knowledge. This process of naturalisation of the accumulated labour that stands behind one's technical skills deeply contribute to the strict association between origin and skilled labour, and to the unequal distribution of knowledge within the society.

While I was working with the butchers, in the Old City of Ṣan'ā', it was common to bring with us little children three or four years old. While we were slaughtering, cutting up and selling the meat, they were miming the work of the adults, getting acquainted with knives, blood, cut heads and leftovers of the butchery process. What would scare unaccustomed children to death was for them the highest source of fun. "What would you like to do when you grow up?" I would ask them. "The butcher," was the ritual answer. *Fear and disgust management* is apparently a common feature of the apprenticeship process, especially in tasks that demand a continuous relationship with pungent smells and unusual inversions of the cultural world order.

Let me consider a further example. In the Old City of Ṣan'ā', only one family was deputed to bloodletting: Beyt al-Qummaly.[12] Bloodletters were harshly despised for the gross procedures of their art (cf. Chapter 7) and systematically compared to vampires. The younger heir of this family described for me his first experiences with bloodletting, stating that he started the apprenticeship late, when he was already ten years old, "because of fear." He had to get used to horns and blood.

Saleh, being an orphan, had to overcome these difficulties, and many others, by himself. As soon as he took up his new profession, he tried to specialise in new tasks, facing the opposition of the

11 This excerpt emphasises a point that we shall examine in depth later. Even when 'modern' professions grew next to the 'traditional' ones, *muzayyins* kept working, basically for two reasons: first, their expertise and the efficacy of their work was widely recognised; second, *muzayyins* are usually cheaper than their 'professional' counterparts.

12 The etymology of this title cruelly points to this stereotype: *qamlah* literally means louse. People from Beyt tal-Qummaly call themselves "al-Ḥumādy".

other *muzayyins* in the area. Tasks like that of the circumciser were subjected to a market regime even before the 1962 revolution, so the *muzayyins* were moving from one village to another in order to provide their services. As Saleh recalled, he addressed his competitors with harsh words:

> "I swear by God, what's wrong with you?" I would say, "Let me see what you are doing," because he was capable of doing that work, he could do it... but one would insult me, while another one would say, "Let him see, he is from our people (*qaūmy*); he will take up the profession." I would have liked to kill them, I swear by God, I would have killed them.

Gradually, Saleh improved in many different tasks and gained economic niches. First, he learnt to play kettledrums. During ceremonial occasions, he watched the other *muzayyins*, waiting for his chance to come:

> [I would say], "Give it [the *marfaʻ*[13]] to me, my brother. Give it to me, my uncle. Or I would challenge them in competitions. "Give me the *ṭāsah*, let me play (*aqraʻ*)..." And then I played. They would say "Ooh," while I was improving. I improved, until my hands became light. I made my hands light. Time after time... Until I beat them!

Subsequently, he acquired skills in cooking and butchery:

> I would watch how to slaughter in the market [in Ṣanʻāʾ]. I would watch how to cut (*tafṣīl*) the different parts (*mafāṣil*). [...] Or in the weddings, "Give it to me!" "Take it!" "Give it to me!" And then I would cut... Until I understood [...]

This whole process of apprenticeship, conducted through a mixture of competition and solidarity, was grounded on the pivotal role of observation:

> With my eyes (*bi-n-naẓr*), I watched the one [working] right in front me. I watched what he was doing; I valued each action... And I remained silent (*wa anā sākit*), trying to understand. "Go there boy, go there." Some *muzayyins*, and they were old men, didn't want to teach me. So I went to other ones.

13 Kettledrums are composed by a bass drum (*marfaʻ*) and a snare drum (*ṭāsah*). Apprenticeship always starts from the first, since the second entails a perfect knowledge of rhythm, a long technical training and good capacities of improvisation.

Apprenticeship, in every trade, is hierarchically organised so that a practitioner belongs to the lower ranks of his craft. It is from this marginal position that an apprentice "must effectively 'steal' trade knowledge through careful observation, listening and mimesis." (Marchand, 2008: 252) In such cases, the apprentice is said to 'steal the craft' (*yizakkī*[14] *al-mihrah*), since he is acquiring a craft monopolised by a family which is not his own. The expression itself, 'stealing the craft', exemplifies the difficulties and the waste of time which is implied in such an attempt (cf. Bourdieu, 1986: 245). In a domestic mode of production, learning is hierarchically ranked as well: the practitioner is embedded in a web of duties and rights that descend from the hierarchical relationship between generations (Viti, 2006). Yet skills, technologies, contacts, and market niches are handed down directly, 'smoothly', from father to son.

Apprenticeship and imaginable futures

Saleh described to me the sensitive period of his biography that unfolded after his father's death. This period led to radical transformations in his life: abandoning religious study and taking up a new profession meant to him leaving childhood for adulthood. Following J. Johnson-Hanks (2002), we shall characterise such 'critical duration' through a unit of social analysis based in 'aspiration rather than event'; this unit is called the 'vital conjuncture'. A 'vital conjuncture' describes a "[...] socially structured zone of possibility that emerges around specific periods of potential transformation in a life or lives. It is a temporary configuration of possible change, aduration of uncertainty and potential." (ivi: 871)

The 'vital conjuncture' is an analytical unit apt to describe 'critical durations' characterised by extreme uncertainty and the potential of radical transformation. In these durations the futures at stake are significant—imaginable futures that are hoped for or feared—and constitute the 'horizon of the conjuncture' (ivi: 872). Moreover, the notion of 'vital conjuncture' tries to emphasise "[...] the intersection of structured expectations with uncertain futures" (ibid.) focusing on the interplay between socially structured constraints (structure of expectations, institutionally shaped forms of imagination, etc.) and idiosyncratic aspirations.

'Aspiration' is quite a generic term, and Johnson-Hanks does not explicate how we shall

14 Following M. Piamenta (1990), a more literal translation might be "to attain the craft." Yet the verb *zakkā*, as it was used by my interlocutors, always entailed an overt reference to the monopoly of knowledge that families exerted over crafts. The attainment was thus to achieve in a tricky, competitive way.

conceive it at a theoretical level. Considering that the ‘objective’ (in Bourdieu's sense) side of the concept is overtly delineated in the notion of ‘vital conjuncture’, my option for the subjective side will be phenomenological. Following Luhmann's interpretation of Husserl, I will consider intention as “[...] nothing more than the positing of a difference, the drawing of a distinction with which consciousness motivates itself to designate, to think, to want something determinate (and nothing else).” (2002a) Now, this act of consciousness is constitutive of meaning, defined as the *temporalised* form of experience processing that integrates “[...] the actuality of experience with the transcendence of its other possibilities,” (Luhmann, 1990: 26) thus distinguishing a self-reference and a hetero-reference. In this terminology, the term ‘aspiration’ points to “[...] recursive regressions and anticipations of currently non-actual but actually graspable temporal horizons of past and future […],” (Luhmann, 2002: 55) a point otherwise formulated by A. Schütz (1967) through the definition of the present as the difference between remembered pasts and anticipated futures.

From this standpoint, Saleh's taken-for-granted, self-evident, lifeworldly experience was explicitly conceived as a selection against a horizon of possibilities. In turn, the criterion of this selection, its blind spot (Luhmann, 2002b), simply remained *unthought*—exactly in M. Arkoun's sense (2002).

From this standpoint we shall interpret Saleh's narrative asking a number of questions: what kind of material, social and cultural constraints were shaping his claims to individual self-realisation? Which imagined future possibilities were informing his action? Against which horizon of ever greater possibilities was he distinguishing his own lifeworld? Here I will focus on his taken-for-granted experience of a world inhabited by Others, “always perceived and understood as particular types of beings.” (Duranti, 2010: 12) The overall framework that emerges from Saleh accounts is that of a lifeworld where the possibilities of vocational choice were extremely narrow. Basically, four ways of life were available to Saleh's experience: that of the religious scholar, that of the peasant, that of the soldier and that of the *muzayyin*.[15]

Since Beyt Zuleīṭ had a limited amount of land (cf. Chapter 4) agriculture was not a reliable source of livelihood. However, generally speaking, the material aspect of property was not the critical dimension in determining occupation. In Kuthreh more than one family did not have enough land to survive, but sharecropping was an available option, and a widespread one. However, non-peasants, and *muzayyins* among them, were prone to despise agriculture, considering it a hard and

15 In small villages like Kuthreh, but also in bigger ones like Armis (which was considered half a village, counting more or less 300 adult political members of the community), working in crafts like carpentry was not an option, basically because there was no market to make a living out of such a craft. A few persons (just 2 in Kuthreh) would work as carpenters in their spare time, crafting simple objects like fences.

miserable occupation. The *muzayyins* of Armis, for example, had huge properties, but they did not work the land but indulged in their traditional tasks, pursuing religious study and assigning their properties to sharecroppers.

In many passages of the interviews which I conducted with Saleh, he plainly emphasised a simple condition of things: "I did not farm because I was not a peasant." He was not a peasant, and nor did he desire to be one. As we have seen, practising a profession did not simply entail the control of material resources and the acquisition of technical skills. It involved the crafting of a peculiar type of moral self. From this perspective, a *muzayyin* was not a *qabīly* and a *qabīly* was not a *muzayyin*. They were two different types of human beings, inhabiting intersecting, yet distinguished, lifeworlds. This perspective is emphasised in this excerpt, where Saleh proposes a historico-mythological account of the birth of his profession, commenting on the etymology of the word 'muzayyin':

> What did the Prophet, the exaltations of God shall be upon him, say? We heard from the *ḥadīth* that [...] he said, "Oh companions (*ṣaḥābah*), who is going to decorate us (*'a-yi-zayyin-nā*) with wool?" And some people from the companions garnished each other with the razor (*al-maūs*). After they finished garnishing, the [companions] said, "[These people] have been created for a light profession, *not for agriculture and for hoeing the land* [...]. A light profession through which they will benefit people with their right, or a light one like garnishing, or cooking, or garnishing their appearance." So they said, "This is a *muzayyin*.

This account does not refer to an authentic *ḥadīth* and, with any probability, does not recount a historical fact. Yet it throws into relief Saleh's interpretation of his own work. There are several important points here.

Firstly, Saleh legitimises his task in religious terms: the Prophet himself acknowledged the task of the *muzayyin*, and the first *muzayyins* were appointed in his presence. As we will see, other myths strictly associate social ranking and profession, building the figure of the *muzayyin* out of a reference to the pre-Islamic period, thus justifying a hierarchy that is denied by the Islamic religion.

Secondly, the profession of the *muzayyin* emerges as a 'useful' task, a needed task, a task from which the whole community benefits.[16] As Saleh once told me, "I decorate (*uzayyin*) during their meetings... I honour them, all of them... I play [kettledrums] (*ubarri'*) for them... It's a decoration."

16 This perspective, emphasising the complementarity of the different tasks within the Islamic community, was already widespread during the classical period (cf. Brunschvig 1962: 45). We will discuss a similar perspective in Chapter 7, in relation to the notion of moral economy.

What is relevant here is not just the value-adding function of the task; it is the positioning of the *muzayyin*. Saleh describes himself as someone standing 'outside of the community'. In this passage, he is an outsider in two respects: first, as someone working backstage, being that his work is the premise for the exhibition of social actors; second, as a non-peasant, someone who, being not occupied in agriculture, has *time* for other tasks (cf. Peters, 2007c).

Thirdly, Saleh describes his task as 'light' work and as work for which some people are fitter than others. From this standpoint, the *muzayyin* has elective qualities that other people do not have. These 'others' are clearly the peasants, those who practice a 'heavy' task, hoeing the ground. Here I want to emphasise two aspects: the interrelatedness between occupation and moral qualities in the construction of social selves and the advantageous material conditions implied by the role of the *muzayyin*. Let me start with the latter point.

Market-situation as a source of prestige

A common feature of many life-histories that I have collected while working with people from Beni al-Khumus is the pivotal role that they attribute to their market-situation and the recurrent comparison with the miserable condition of the peasants, the so-called *qabā'il* (s. *qabīly*) and the *sayyids*. Among many accounts which I have collected, one stands out for its vividness, describing the sufferance and the grief of a poor peasant. The man speaking is 'Abdullah 'Allāny, an old butcher from the Old City of Ṣan'ā᾿:

> **Luca:** How was the situation of the peasant (*qabīly*)?
>
> **'Abdullah:** He would work 24 hours in the fields. [...] He would work, till, sow... Once, one of us went out for a trip in Beny Maṭar, with his family... [The peasant] woke up, and he went to wash himself... He arrived, and the water in the tank was solid. [...] He did like this [he mimes the gesture of smashing something] on the water, and he broke the ice. Then he plunged in.

Similar insights into the condition of the peasants will be presented in Chapter 4. Here I am concerned with the interviewee emphasising the peculiarity of the market-situation of the butchers, a situation shared also by green-grocers (*qashshām*) and bath attendants: these professions, in fact, granted a daily income. Peasants, on the contrary, relied on seasonal harvests. Here follows another excerpt where a 40-year-old butcher, Zayd Jazzāry, compares the income of craftsmen and that of

the *sayyids*:[17]

> I told you, they were poor. The *sayyids* were... Look: craftsmen, like this one, the carpenter, the blacksmith, the butcher, and so on... From the days of the *sayyids* (*ayyām as-sādah*), from the days of the Imam until 1985... It was money! It was money! Everyone working in handcrafts, it was money! On the contrary, a state employee or an employee for the Imam was poor...

Many accounts of old people belonging to *beny al-khumus* present the period that started under the Imams and lasted until the end of the 1970s as an Edenic era, characterised by exceptional incomes. Is this perspective an outcome of 'structural nostalgia' (Herzfeld, 1997: 147)? I maintain it is not.

Consider Saleh's situation. He was entitled to a share of the harvest from each peasant of his village: "They would put aside a specified part of the crop (*al-maḥṣūl*) for the *muzayyin*: this was the right of the *muzayyin* (*hū hadhā ḥaqq al-muzayyin)*." This right, in Kuthreh, was called *al-keīlah*[18] from the name of the container used to measure the quantities of crops. Yet the crops were just a small part of the income of a *muzayyin*. He had a right to the whole range of agricultural products, including fruit: "When the trees were in bloom, I was bringing [the fruits] home, and that was a right." As many people explained to me, the rationale of this fee was conceived as follows: "He [the *muzayyin*] does not have land, so we must give him. He does not have trees, so we must give him." More generally, the idea was common that *a muzayyin was entitled to take, without giving*.

Besides the basic right of the *keīlah*, the *muzayyin* was in fact paid for each of his services. After slaughtering an animal, he had the right to keep for himself the neck and the skin. For any other service, he was paid a fee, generally called *shirʿ*, *hijrah* or *kirā*.[19] His economic situation was comparable to that of a medium peasant: "I was like a medium peasant; me and the medium peasant were the same," but his work was lighter. Being free from the heavy task of working the land, the *muzayyin* had time for other occupations, not least religious study. Explicitly asked about his

17 Recorded interview, 23 October, 2011. This interview, as many others, needs to be understood as a speech event and interpreted as such. It was recorded in a small room were butchers rested after work, in the presence of a carpenter, a neighbour of theirs. The conversation itself was started by the carpenter, who harshly opposed the *sayyids*. For this reason Zayd is opposing handcrafts, in general terms, to state salaried occupations. Assimilating butchery and handcrafts is itself a rhetorical strategy that Zayd can adopt because of the particular setting. In any other situation people of *ʿarab* origin would argue against such a generalisation.

18 I have no certain information regarding the exact amount of the *keīlah*. Generally speaking, the fee of the *muzayyin* was probably decided by the generosity of the people whom he served.

19 "A wedding [was paid] 5 or 6 riyāl. A big wedding, with 5 or 6 grooms, was paid 10 riyāl. Ten riyāl was the spending money (*maṣrūf*) for one year. Spending money for one year! One riyāl was spending money for one month, for every need. Even the gas bottle was 2 *buqash*." One buqsha amounted to 1/40 of riyal.

condition before the 1962 revolution, Saleh commented: “It was a blessing (*kānat al-barakeh*).” Right after, he specified the terms of comparison:

> If you consider [the situation] now... We have neither fee [*kirā*] nor anything... We are the marginalised (*muhammashīn*). Go and tell to the people of the [National] Dialogue. Tell them that we are the poor, those who did not study[20] and didn't do anything, and we are neither employees, nor we are anything... Since when we grew up, we are unemployed (*‘aṭīly*) and we do not have anything. Who wants, if he pays money, we serve him. What he wants, we do it for a fee (*bi-ḥaqqeh*). We do not work the land, or anything else... We serve the people.

Here, again, a sceptical reader might sense a kind of ‘structural nostalgia’. Yet Saleh is not referring to a time before his time. He is describing his own experience and the way it worsened after the 1962 revolution up to nowadays. As we will see, this profound change was caused by economic, rather than political factors.

As we shall see in Chapter 4, from the standpoint of a peasant, the condition of depending on others for obtaining his sustenance (*rizq*) was humiliating. Here is how one man from Beyt ar-Reishāny, the nephew of the old *shaykh* of Kuthreh, described the condition of the *muzayyin*:

> I say that history turned people into *muzayyins*, or *dawshāns* (bards), or *ṣāni‘s* (wool-workers), or people like them, just because of poverty... They have no work! They have no land! They don't know where to go... So they told him: you serve us, and we pay you. You serve us, and in exchange we give you a fixed amount for each *qadāḥ*, for each *libneh*... Something like this, and you serve us.

This man from Beyt ar-Reīshāny is discussing the point of entry of the profession of the servant. From this perspective, an individual cannot but be forced to serve by necessity.

The *muzayyins*, on the other hand, discuss their present situation. They have already crossed the boundary. From the standpoint of a *muzayyin*, the perspective of peasants and *sayyids*, and more generally that of everyone criticising them, is informed by malicious envy biases. If compared to agriculture, their tasks require mild efforts and grant higher incomes.

Consider now the situation of the soldier. In 1918, after the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in the

20 Here, Saleh is clearly referring to the new system of education that grants positions as state workers.

First World War, the Imam Yaḥyā endeavoured to organise a modern army. It is a common-sense understanding that enrolment was reserved to ‘*arabs* and *sayyids*, and this very fact is believed to prove the degree of discrimination to which *muzayyins* were subjugated. Saleh's narrative provides us with a different perspective:

> **Luca:** Was it possible for you to work as a soldier or not?
>
> **Saleh:** I didn't want to enlist... My profession is better. My profession is light; I didn't want the army because it's a tie.
>
> **Luca:** Ah... Was your profession better?
>
> **Saleh:** It's only a military tie... How much is your monthly salary? 4 riyāl. 4 French riyāl each month.
>
> **Luca:** Was your income better?
>
> **Saleh:** I had other advantages... 5, 10 riyāl from the weddings, up to 20. From here, from there... Better than the army! 4 riyāl a month didn't work. I preferred my profession, it was better than the army!

Here is another excerpt from an interview that I have conducted in Ṣan‘āʾ with an old butcher:

> **Luca:** There were soldiers from the butchers or from the green-grocers?
>
> **‘Abdullah:** They didn't give us value...
>
> **Luca:** It was forbidden, right?
>
> **‘Abdullah:** It wasn't forbidden. It was normal... We were walking our way, it was normal...
>
> **Luca:** Normal?
>
> **‘Abdullah:** Normal. We do our business, we work... But they would see us relaxed, having baths and chewing everyday... And their heart burnt, they would get crazy. We have a bath, we chew, we go and we come back and they... They didn't have [money], so they searched for what to do against us.

Here I shall emphasise two points. Firstly, envy[21] emerges as the language that people from *beny al-khumus* use to describe the feelings of members of other social groups towards them. This putative

21 The language of envy has deep roots in the Islamic tradition as well as in popular believes about the evil eye. The Qurʾān itself describes the relationship between the Islamic community and the Jewish one in terms of envy of the latter towards the first.

envy was directed against their advantageous market-situation. Secondly, work opportunities other than their traditional tasks are not presented as an attractive yet forbidden or unreachable, possibility. They are depicted as harsh jobs not worth the effort.

Contested hierarchical models

As I stated opening this chapter, *beny al-khumus* are often considered the lower degree of a tripartite hierarchical model of status. This model, which for a long time has been reproduced by Western scholars and by the Yemeni state, describes the traditional hierarchical system as a legacy of the ancient regime, assuming a direct correspondence between genealogical descent and work. Rather than being an analytical tool, it merely constitutes a self-representation (or a representational model) of Yemeni society, and its political aim is overt.

Stratified models of social organisation are, by definition, vertically structured: they entail a top and a bottom and a defining criterion to arrange groups and persons along this continuum. This way of representing social relationships automatically suggests a certain degree of privilege for the higher ladders of the system and a certain degree of oppression, dependency and marginality for the lower ones.

Yet oppression, dependency and marginality are not the same thing. Oppression, as an analytical category, often refers to class-related phenomena. From this standpoint, the lower degrees of a social organisation are characterised by a high degree of economic exploitation. It is within this framework that individuals are constructed by means of a dyadic opposition between domination and resistance. Whereas some authors adopted a minimalist approach to the definition of resistance, limiting the usage of the term to visible and collective acts resulting in social change (Rubin, 1996), others, J. Scott (Scott, 1985; 1990) *in primis*, emphasised the commonplace, ordinary nature of everyday practices of resistance.

If applied to the case in point, this second approach is unsatisfactory for a number of reasons. First and foremost because, translating the "apparently trivial in the fatefully political," (Sahlins, 1999) the notion of resistance has been used to describe a tremendous diversity of behaviours and settings, losing analytical efficacy (Hollander and Einwohner, 2004). As M. Brown has pointed out, "[A]ll social life entails degrees of dominance and subordination [...] Resistance to such power can no more explain the myriad forms of culture than gravity can explain the varied architecture of trees." (1996: 734) More importantly, the politicisation of the entire spectrum of the social life

nullifies the possibility of representing the social world of our interlocutors in ways that make sense to them.

Did Saleh consider himself oppressed? In his narrative *there is no subjective account of oppression*, or any overt desire to resist any putative form of exploitation; there is no intent to resist, not even ‘privately’ (Schaffer, 1995; Scott, 1990). These considerations leave room for another question: was he ‘objectively’ oppressed? As far as we can understand, he was not. Rather, he was *dependent*, and dependence can point to active, almost ‘normal’ relationships (cf. Viti, 2006: 12; Ferguson, 2013). As J. Ferguson has pointed out, Western epistemologies fail to understand *ascriptive hierarchical* systems, since they cannot conceive dependence as a legitimate form of construction of the human subject: they fail to understand that people can *actively* pursue dependence (Ferguson, 2013: 224). Whereas, in many cases, power and hierarchy conflate, the Yemeni case calls for an alternative interpretation.

Moving away from political theories of domination and from the dyadic opposition between one-dimensional victims of similarly one-dimensional oppressors, opens the possibility of interpreting motivated human action. We owe to M. Weber (2007 [1948]: 180-193) the analytical distinction of status and power that later influenced both T. Parsons and L. Dumont. As T. Parsons (1953) has made clear, meanings and values motivate human action, and values are always hierarchically ranked. L. Dumont (2000) has further developed this perspective, demonstrating that order and dominion are not necessarily related, that hierarchy is not dependent on vertical concatenations of power, and that the self-representations of societies and the ideologies on which they are grounded are fundamental in order to understand motivated human action. However, in my opinion these self-representations are not rational and coherent wholes, systems organised by a defining principle.

N. Luhmann (1983) convincingly deepened these achievements, showing that in stratified social systems equality and inequality do not compensate; focusing on the repartition of goods and chances only leads to a reductionist approach. Inequality, Luhmann argued, is a principle of communication between subsystems, and equality is the principle of selection within them; the *function* of stratified social systems is achieved through the isolation of peers for improbable communication (ivi: 72). In stratified social systems persons belong, through their family, to one stratum and only one. Being ‘individuals’ is not an option: *privatus* stands for *inordinatus* (ivi: 69). This theoretical approach is grounded on two points of paramount importance: *a*) a reformulation of the definition of equality / inequality; *b*) an analysis of how human beings are included within stratified social systems.

The first point pushes us to consider inequality as a means to construct the environment from the

standpoint of a system. Such an approach retains similarities with F. Barth's notion of *boundary* (1998) and its function in the organisation of integrated social systems. As we have seen above, the hierarchical self-representation of a 'stratified Yemeni society' is to be considered virtually non-existent: it is contested, plurivocal, multi-accentuated. It is the result of a struggle between social groups, which do not necessarily have a class dimension. Given these premises, I argue for abandoning vertical models of social structure in favour of a thorough analysis of horizontal ties within and without the social groups considered. Whereas inequality is the form of the relationship *between* these social groups, the form of their differentiation, equality is the form of the relationship *within* these social groups.

These assumptions lead us to reconsider the construction of human beings in hierarchical social systems as a relational process. As A. de Tocqueville stated, "[W]here inequality reigns, there are as many distinct humanities as there are social categories." (2012 [1835]) Whereas egalitarian societies expel inequality, transforming hierarchy into discrimination and difference into racism (cf. Chapter 1; Dumont, 2000), hierarchical societies tend to naturalise inequality.

This leads us directly to point *b*): as Saleh's life history demonstrates, being a *muzayyin* was something profoundly different from being an 'individual' in the Western sense (cf. Dumont, 1986). The classical studies of Emile Durkheim and Georg Simmel, among others, have characterised the transition from 'traditional' to 'modern' societies emphasising the processes of individualisation which led to an increase in the possibilities of choice and in the range of imaginable life-styles. As A. Honneth has demonstrated, in modern Western capitalist societies, people are compelled to place their very selves and their self-realisation at the centre of their life-planning and practice (2004: 473). Diversified ways of life are opened to individuals, and this increase in the range of options is accompanied by a new focus on 'flexibility' (Sennett, 2000): individuals are expected to be willing to develop themselves in their work.[22] This peculiar way of crafting selves is tied—it is in 'structural coupling'—with a socially differentiated global society (Luhmann, 1977; Luhmann and De Giorgi, 1992), a society where individualism is institutionalised according to the welfare state (Beck, 1999: 9; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002).

This condition is radically different from Saleh's subjective and objective situation. Self-realisation meant, for Ṣālēh, being a good Muslim and a capable *muzayyin*. Dependency was a right and not a form of oppression. Interpreting an ascriptive society against the backdrop of a lack of freedom, of a limitation of the possibilities of choice, is deceptive. As we shall see later in this

22 This peculiar way of constructing human subjects, Honneth argues, is supportive of the demands of modern capitalism. Rather than enhancing autonomy and well-being, it produces symptoms of inner emptiness (2004: 467).

chapter, the imaginative possibilities of human subjects are not necessarily orientated towards the future and the realisation of the 'individual' as an autonomous self. They can actively point to the past, to the construction of subjects in accordance with the legacy of their ancestors and their ascriptive role.

These considerations have important theoretical consequences. Saleh, as many of the old men from *beny al-khumus* with whom I lived, talked and worked, did not express the desire to change his situation in any way that could be different from those typical of his social group. He did not imagine nor crave a social order other from that in which he lived—not even, *pace* Scott, a world turned upside down. The internal, subjective structures of his *habitus* matched the external, objective structures of society: a situation that we shall characterise through the notion of *doxa* (Bourdieu, 1998: 81; 1977). Saleh was not, simply, *working* as a *muzayyin*; he *was* a *muzayyin*. The objective conditions within which his *habitus* was crafted provided him with a peculiar way of organising his thoughts, feelings, attitudes and perceptions. For this reason he was considered a person morally apt to occupy his social position within the tribal system. In order to prove this last assertion, we shall deepen our understanding of Saleh's social and political position within the tribal system along with his subjective experience of such position.

Beny al-khumus as moral selves: beyond the metaphor of protected subjects

Without exception, scholarly literature describes the *muzayyins* as 'weak' or 'protected' people. The two terms are associated, since anthropologists have systematically observed that, within the tribal system, killing a *muzayyin* is considered a 'black shame' (*'aīb aswad*), the worst kind of opprobrium, and it requires a four-fold compensation (Dresch, 1989: 56, 61, 199). This circumstance is usually explained by the fact that the *muzayyin* falls under the protection of the tribe, like women, children, and, more generally, weak people. But how do anthropologists, and how do native Yemenis, construct a weak/protected person?

I shall first point out that the label 'weak' people (*ḍa'īf*, pl. *ḍu'afā'*) is not pertinent if we refer to the area of Ṣan'ā' or Beny Maṭār in present day Yemen. No one ever refers to *beny al-khumus* as 'weak'. Moreover, if we move to analyse carefully localised ethnographies regarding the highlands, the term never appears (cf. Stevenson, 1985; Gerholm, 1977). Rather, it is used in contexts where sedentary life is opposed to nomadic life and, in fact, it was first introduced in scholarly literature by R. B. Serjeant, with a reference to pre-Islamic Arabia and Haḍramaūt (Bujra, 1971; Serjeant,

1987). Later, following P. Dresch's usage, it became a literary trope (cf. Vom Bruck, 1996). For these reasons, in a first sense, defining my interlocutors from *beny al-khumus* as ‘weak people’, using the word ‘weak’ as label,[23] is problematic because it is ethnographically inaccurate.

This leads us to a second, general observation: many ethnographic accounts make use of an umbrella vocabulary which does not belong to any specific area or period of Yemen's history. This rhetorical strategy prevents the possibility of analysing semantic change, systematically relating it to structural changes and historical configurations. Meanings should be carefully contextualised in place and time.

Moving from the label to the substance of weakness, anthropologists have elaborated different perspectives. If we choose to follow P. Dresch and S. Caton, weakness is defined by means of its reverse. This means that the *muzayyins* emerge from the anthropological discourse as ‘residual tribesmen’, tribesmen lacking in honour. If tribesmen are armed warriors (Dresch, 1989; Serjeant, 1977), people endowed with *sharaf* (Caton, 1986), muzayyins are unarmed people, people that lack honour.

If we follow G. Vom Bruck (1996), the core feature of weakness and vulnerability becomes the profound association the *muzayyin* have with femaleness (cf. Mermier, 1996: 77). For Vom Bruck, weak people are generally attributed symbolic elements of the female, namely, “inconstancy of mind and social vulnerability.” (ivi: 152) She pushes her argument so far as to assert that the *muzayyin* has inherited a “biologically female disposition.” (ivi: 157). This comparison automatically justifies the inferior position of weak people, establishing a comparison with women.[24]

Both these accounts depict the perspective of tribesmen. Consequently, ‘weak people’ emerge as a residual category: inferior and polluted people lacking honour and lacking origin. This perspective is important, and I shall develop it below. In Luhmann's terminology, this is the language of inequality that permeates the relationship among social systems. However, we should not consider this perspective for more than what it is: a tribesmen's strategy for Othering another social group. The language of social ranking completely flattens a whole category of people to their negative qualities, representing them as *immoral selves*. However, if we abandon the vertical language of social ranking, the possibility unfolds of describing *beny al-khumus* from their own perspective. Not

23 Sometimes people are referred to as ‘weak’, and this applies to *beny al-khumus* too. I will expand this argument in Chapter 4. ‘Weak’, however, is used as an adjective, and not as a name denoting a social category.

24 It is worth noting that Vom Bruck's argument does not properly distinguish the perspective of members of Yemeni society from the author's perspective. It is true that, somehow, Yemenis compare weak people and the *ḥurmah*. But the multiple parallels that Vom Bruck establishes between *muzayyins* and women belong to her analytic perspective, and they are not widespread cultural assumptions. Vom Bruck’s position is ethnographically untenable.

as the result of someone else's power, but rather as the outcome of their own interested actions.

Now consider, for instance, the *muzayyin*'s role as a messenger. It is usually explained as a consequence of the *muzayyin*'s political guarantee: being that his murder is a black shame, the *muzayyin* can work as a messenger without any risk. Yet, I argue, this causal connection is fallacious if so stated. The *muzayyin* can work as a messenger because of his position within the tribal social structure. Otherwise stated, he can work as a messenger because he is an *outsider* and a *non-peasant*.

Firstly, by virtue of his not-being-a-peasant, the *muzayyin* can maintain a different relationship with objective space and time: he acts as a messenger simply because he has free time to do it.[25] Until very recently, the role of the messenger practically entailed the transmission of a written piece of paper (*al-maktūb*) or, rarely, an oral communication from one *shaykh* to another. Given a landscape of bad roads and uneven mountains, the task required legs (*rujul*), knees (*rukab*) and days of forced march. Peasants, busy in the fields, could not afford such travel with the high frequency of the need of messengers required by tribal life.

Secondly, the *muzayyin* does not belong to the village or to the tribal brotherhood where he lives. He is an *outsider*. For this reason, in case of offence or defence, he needs to rely on the tribal brotherhood (*akhuwwah*) for protection;[26] he needs their backup. His *sharaf,* in my terminology his 'sexual honour', and his *'arḍ*, his reputation as a social individual, depend on the protection of a tribal brotherhood to which he does not belong.[27] He is entitled to protection, but he is not compelled to protect, and this is a right.

From this second point, a corollary descends: being that the *muzayyin* is an outsider, he is considered a well rounded middleman (*wasīṭ* or *wāsiṭah*). As 'Ali, Saleh's nephew, once explained to me, talking about his grandfather:

> He was like a middleman (*ka-wasīṭ*) between the *shaykh* or the *'āqil* and the people from the village (*an-nās al-'āmīyin*): at their meetings, on their behalf for a mission, with their communication about something important... For example when they had to pay a blood-

25 This observation might appear naive. However, E. Peters has emphasised a similar dynamic among the Bedouins of Cyrenaica (2007: 50). Different tasks objectively imply a different relationship with space and time and strongly contribute to the shaping of differentiated communicative systems and to the division of labour.

26 I am well-aware that other authors (Dresch, 1989; Rossi, 1948; Vom Bruck, 1996: 154) have described this institution of protection by means of the term *jiwār*. However, even if explicitly questioned on the topic, my interlocutors never acknowledge such a usage, neither in al-Bustān nor in Kuthreh.

27 My interlocutors in Kuthreh explained to me that the *sharaf* of the village does not exist: each family has its own *sharaf*, except for the women of the *muzayyin*: they are the real *sharaf* of the village. This means that their defence is a duty of the whole village, since they do not belong to any family in particular, and the *muzayyin* himself has no backup.

> price to other people, or they had a problem with some people, or when a village met another village... He was a middleman between this and that [...].

In case of conflict, a *muzayyin* can act as a mediator because he does not hold any responsibility on behalf of the tribal brotherhood. He is not one of them, and the dynamics of segmentary proclivity do not involve him.

Moreover, his role as a middleman is not confined to situations of conflict: “Even during an engagement he [Saleh] was the middleman between the groom's father (*abū al-ḥarīww*) and the bride's father (*abū al-ḥarīweh*).” As many authors have noted, in many historical segmentary societies, social institutions and roles have been developed which constitute a neutral space within the oppositional dynamics of a segmentary system. Classical ethnographies have highlighted the role of mediation of the so-called saints, individuals qualified by virtue of their genealogy, their *baraka*, their generosity and their pacifism (Gellner, 1969: 75).

The case that I have so far presented emphasises the fundamental role of mediation carried out by the servant of the village. The *muzayyin* is entitled to such a prominent responsibility because of his peculiar position within the social structure of the highlands. This social structure was, and in this respect still it is, comparable to a closed-system, in Watson's meaning (Watson, 1980). Being that the *muzayyin* is considered an outsider by virtue of his genealogical origin, he is denied active political rights with no possibility of being included into the brotherhood.

In considering the *muzayyin* as an outsider or a mediator, rather than a weak or protected person, we obtain two results: *a)* we provide an account which is nearer to the experience of the *muzayyin*; *b)* we punctually describe the *muzayyin*'s role within a tribal social organisation.

Now we can consider another puzzling feature of the *muzayyin*'s role. As other authors have noted, encounters between servants[28] and women are greatly tolerated (Vom Bruck, 1996: 154; Dresch, 1989). P. Dresch has attempted to explain this circumstance, stating that the *muzayyin* has no honour, and thus ‘nothing is at stake’ (1989). This interpretation is etymologically[29] suspicious and empirically ungrounded. Considering the importance that the tribesmen bestow on the defence

28 Vom Bruck speaks generally of “greater tolerance of encounters between women and the *duʿafa.*” If so stated, this observation is false, or at least inaccurate. As I have already specified, *beny al-khumus* do not constitute a homogeneous group. It follows that this ‘greater tolerance’ in cross-gender encounters is only granted to servants, or to people who know how to behave. Butchers, for instance, do not belong to this category of people. A second, important point is the relationship between male tribesmen and women from *beny al-khumus*. Even with regard to this second point, each family from *beny al-khumus* has different traditions. We shall deepen this point in Chapter 7.

29 The whole misunderstanding descends from considering *sharaf* “honour in its most encompassing sense”. The adjective *sharīf*, as referred to Saleh, has a more limited significance: it describes a chaste man, someone who respects someone else's women.

of their *ḥurmah*, it is hardly conceivable that having a man around the house would be an innocent matter, especially a man 'without *sharaf*' (Dresch, 1986).

Also Vom Bruck elaborated on this matter, observing that weak people are not considered to pose a sexual threat by other men. This very fact is first explained with multiple hypotheses: socialising with other men's wives is an act of public shaming which signals a weak status (Gilmore, 1987: 11); women are less formal with men of lower status because of their exclusion from the category of potential marriage partners; weak people can have peculiar cross-gender encounters because of their femaleness.

This last option is tied to an argument which I have already criticised. Gilmore's hypothesis is interesting, however, it does not explain why a man should trust a servant to stay alone in his house with his women. Eventually, stating that women are less formal because servants are not potential marriage partners is simply wrong; as we shall see in Chapter 3, this should foster augmented precautions. Now, given the fact that less formalised relationships occur between servants and tribesmen's women, I am interested in asking how this effect is obtained. How are women educated not to consider men from lower strata as a sexual threat or as possible partners (cf. Chapter 3)? And how do servants obtain the appearance of trustworthiness?

My answer is that this effect is obtained by naturalising moral qualities. As we have seen above, labour skills are naturalised through apprenticeship, along with worldviews. Shifting our terminology, we can consider the brotherhood as a social field of struggle, a result of the interplay between the rules of the field, the *habitus* of the social actors and their capital. A *muzayyin* and a *qabīly* inhabited intersecting yet distinguished fields of struggle, and the structure of these two fields, the historical product of a previous generation's actions, was incorporated in social agents as a *habitus*: a structured and structuring structure, the generative principle of different constructions of social reality, different interests and different actions.

A *muzayyin*, acquiring a specific *habitus* within a specific field, was predisposed by the historical legacy of his ancestors to act, to think and to construct the social world and his own personhood, so as to distinguish himself from a peasant. This process, resulting in the incorporation of the objective structures of society, was naturalised through a process of euphemisation, consisting in the symbolic representation of the *habitus* through the notion of origin (*aṣl*). The *habitus* of the *muzayyin*, incorporated through the silent and often subtle lessons of everyday life, would craft individuals perceived as morally different from the members of a brotherhood. Consider these excerpts from Saleh's interview:

> Oh professor, this profession (*mihnah*) requires honesty (*amānah*). You are with an attendant [to a ceremonial occasion, a guest] or you come to gather the attendants of a wedding, or of a funeral, or whatever it is. The *muzayyin* comes. He enters your home, and he says, "Go, go with the people and leave me the keys of the storeroom... Go!" And the people trust (*beīn an-nās amānah*); they trust that you are honest (*amīn*). I enter among the women (*adkhul 'and al-ḥarīm*), and I say, "Give this and that." It's normal; I'm one of the family (*beīt*). And between me and you everything is secret (*kalimat sirr*). When I'm at your home, my tongue doesn't go out so that you can feel the trust; you can sit and have lunch [at the wedding or the funeral, ecc.]. [...] You know that I'm trustful (*amīn*), that I can enter near your wife (*'aīlatak*).[30] [...] Yes, I'm honest (*amīn*) like the father of the house and of the storehouse: my brother I know your keys, when I arrive everything is clean and when I go away it is clean. [...] When I come a second time, they say, "ahlā ū sahlā, Welcome back." Cause I'm clean.

By virtue of his *amānah*, the *muzayyin* was entitled a privilege that no one within the brotherhood could boast: he could enter anyone's house, seeing women and interacting with them. Not because of his lack of honour, or his lower status. Rather, because of his moral standing.

To make sense of these circumstances we need to imagine a social reality where practising a craft is the equivalent of being someone, because each craft entails the possession of different moral qualities, a social world where different genealogical origins describe different types of human beings. Among these different types of human beings, the *muzayyin* was considered the prototype of the *sharīf* man:[31] he who actively kept himself from interacting with anyone else's women. Consider this excerpt from Saleh's interview:

> I lived in a clean way (*bi-naẓāfah*); I lived with honour (*sharaf*). Both women and men loved me, they were saying, "Catch it," and they were giving me a goat buck (*taīs*). [...] I was coming back after one week and they, women and men, were saying, "*ahlā ū sahlā*, You are *sharīf*; you are good. There's nothing black behind you." "You hear, "*ahlā ū sahlā ū quwweīṭ*," and the woman thanks you, and she says, "He is good," You are trustworthy to her. You are trustworthy, because she doesn't speak unless she knows you. She knows better than the men. The men do not know. The woman knows if you are a devil. She knows the *sharīf* and the empty (*fārigh*). [...] This is respect (*iḥtirām*): self-respect.

30 Here the term *'aylah* stands precisely for 'wife'.

31 These considerations cannot be extended to *beny al-khumus* in a general sense. *Beny al-khumus*, although described as one category from the outside, are internally differentiated.

Now consider the words of ‘Ali, Saleh's nephew, a young man in his late thirties. When I left Yemen, he was still working in Kuthreh, he told me the first time we met, as servant of the wedding-hall:

> The attendant (*‘amīl*) is one from the family (*wāḥid min al-beīt*). He enters the house, the diwan, the kitchen... He enters among the women. I mean, as if **he is one from the family**. He's entitled a **place of trust** (*maḥall thiqah*). Because he will help the people of the house with the cooking, in things that he knows better than the women... He will tell them, “With this, do like this...” He will give suggestions and information that they do not know. It's normal that he enters among the women (*‘and al-makhālif*) to help them... Or among the guests, to serve the guests. He serves water, or this... He will serve them. For this reason they will say that the *muzayyin*'s fee is owed (*shir‘ al-muzayyin yijī laḥāleh*). This is well known. They were saying: his fee is 5.000 riyal for each groom. This is necessary. Even if they [the people of the groom] bring someone from outside, in order to play the drums, or to slaughter, or to dress the groom... [The *muzayyin*] must help them. The important thing is that he joins these tasks. It is necessary that he works in something... If, for example, he doesn't slaughter, because some butchers came and they didn't let him... Or the cook says, “*khalāṣ, barak Allāh fīk.*” He is like one of the people of the wedding (*ahl al-‘arus*).

This excerpt is important for two reasons: first, it gives us a hint of how the *muzayyin* worked in one of his main tasks. Second, it emphasises the ‘place of trust’ which was assigned to him within the village community. Here follows one more excerpt, where ‘Ali describes the reason why the *muzayyin* was traditionally entitled to enter among women:

> He [his grandfather] entered among the women (*al-ḥarīm*) because he was trustful (*amīn*). This is a necessary thing. Trustful, a source of trust (*maṣdar thiqah*). I mean, **he doesn't take the secrets** (*asrār*) **from one house to the other**. “This is Fulān, their house is like this and like that...” Or, “That one has a woman that is like this and like that...” I mean, this is one reason. He is considered a member of any house that he enters, one of them. **He doesn't expose [the house] to other people**, or to anyone else... He is a source of trust among the people and among the people of the village where he lives. And our intention (*niyah*), in this regard, is that we only want to serve... We don't interfere in anything else.

This passage highlights with outstanding clarity that the *muzayyin* was an outsider with respect to the game of segmentary opposition. Furthermore, it explains how he was expected to act, so as to be considered a trustful individual. Honesty, loyalty, and trustworthiness (*amānah* in Arabic) were

moral qualities attributed to his role and incorporated in the *habitus* of the person, transmitted from one generation to the following through a process of domestic apprenticeship; each *muzayyin* knew how to act *as if* he was a trustful servant, in order to be considered such. Interestingly, his actions were considered an outcome of his inner dispositions, a natural propensity, and a moral attribute of his people.

One last piece of evidence of this interpretation can be retrieved in a legal document, the *corpus iuris*, known as Qānūn Ṣan'ā', which dates back to the 18th century. As we shall see in Chapter 7, women were, and still are, often considered companions of a man in his profession. The wife of the *muzayyin* often worked next to him as a servant of the village, with similar responsibilities: playing the drums, dressing the bride, cleaning the wedding-hall, cooking, and so forth. Among her gender specific tasks, she had the role of *shāri'ah*: she was deputed to visit women and judge the integrity of their hymen. This role was similarly enacted by the female counterpart of green-grocers, bath attendants, circumcisers and blood-letters in the city of Ṣan'ā'. These women were also deputed to rent out jewels and valuable clothes for ceremonial occasions such as weddings and births. Given these premises, here is the specification of this role in Qānūn Ṣan'ā':

> The *shāri'ah*, who is the *muzayyina* for the weddings, is responsible for everything that she rents out for the bride. She has to bring back the rented effects by herself. In this task no one is accepted except she who is recognised for her honesty (*al-makana*). No one is accepted, except those who belong to the people of this task (*ahl hadhihi-l-ḥirfeh*).

As the proverb says, "The servant of a nation (*qaūm*) is its master." This simple statement well expresses the ambiguity between a servant's power and his low status, almost as if the power granted by his knowledge needed a counterbalance. As we have seen, butchers were, similarly, considered a threat, because of their wealth. It is tempting to observe a direct connection between stigma and threats to the constituted order of a society, between pollution and danger. However, I do not consider these co-occurrences as the cause of stigma. We shall deepen this point in Chapter 7.

Endogamic networks of dependency

At this point of our discussion my argument should be clear: ascriptive origin was a central feature in the social construction of human beings, and it both constituted a principle of ascription by others

and of self-ascription. The notion of *aṣl*, working as a *symbolically generalised medium*, helped people in imagining groups of human beings who shared work, knowledge, technical skills, moral dispositions, linguistic and bodily abilities, material and immaterial goods, etc., and it actively pushed these human beings to live up to the example of their ancestors.

This kind of social organisation, entailing a high degree of complexity and, thus, of selection, was highly improbable to achieve. Contact between persons of different groups could have easily led to a transfer of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and so forth. For this reason, as we shall see below, intergroup communication was strongly discouraged, while ingroup communication was facilitated. Labour was, itself, a great channel of communication. Different tasks implied a different relationship to objective space and time, causing communication with co-workers to be less improbable. Just to give an example, the time schedule of butchers was, and still is, completely out of sync when compared to other tasks, leading butchers to spend time with one another. Moreover, some tasks were practically connected by material necessities. The blood-letter was seldom in need of heads and nerves, which he obtained from butchers. The bath attendant needed leftovers of meat and bones, to burn them in the heater. The *qashshām* would buy ash from the bath attendant, to fertilise his garden. And so forth.

As we shall deepen in Chapter 6, ties of kinship and affinity implied a web of duties and rights that constituted a privileged channel of communication among kin. This network was built up and maintained by means of endogamic marriage strategies. Scholarly literature generally argues that the underlying principle of endogamy was the so-called *kafāʾah*: a doctrine which "[...] required the husband to be the equal of his wife (or her family) in various specified respects, including lineage, financial standing and profession [...]." (Bravmann, 1972: 301) As B. Messick (1996: 163) and others demonstrated, this principle was in fact recognised and theorised by many Muslim authors. Yet, as far as I can tell, it always seemed to me a rationalisation of long established habits which are self-evident to the layman: endogamy is not enforced by rules but is inscribed in the practice.

During my fieldwork, I have reconstructed the full kinship network of several families.[32] The kinship network of Beyt Zuleīṭ fully covers two generations (methodological aspects are discussed in the appendix).[33] A first point that I want to highlight is that, if we refer to *beny al-khumus* as a category, the entire number of the marriages are endogamic. Moreover, in the first generation that was taken into consideration, all marriages are between families of *muzayyins*.

The *muzayyins* were a minority of the population. In Kuthreh they were just one family: Beyt

32 For a graphical representation of these networks, see the Appendix.

33 We have to remember that the mortality rate was astonishingly high: many of my interlocutors would tell me, "I was one, son of one, son of one; the other brothers passed away."

Zuleīṭ; in Armis Beyt al-Faqīh; in both Shimās and Azraq, services were performed by people from Beyt Zuleīṭ. Consequently, the *muzayyins* did not have much choice: in order to get married, they had to move to other villages or, if possible, to marry the FBD. As a consequence, and it emerges clearly from image 1, they created connections with other villages (Amreh, Armis, Ṣan'ā', Murjān, Shimās, etc.),[34] yet constituting a minority in each of them.

Affinity ties entailed a number of rights and duties with respect to ceremonial occasions (which I fully describe in Chapter 6); as a consequence of endogamy, this privileged channel of communication was directed towards people from *beny al-khumus*, thus excluding ties of reciprocity with *ʿarabs* and *sayyids*. In the Old City of Ṣanʿāʾ, where each craft counted a considerable number of people, these ties of solidarity linked people from *beny al-khumus* in corporate groups which closely resembled a tribal brotherhood (cf. Ch. 6).

Knowledge, both objectified in technology and incorporated, was transmitted through the same channels. Saleh learned his profession from his brother in law, from Armis. Mohammed and ʿAbdullah, his brothers, learnt to work as *munaqqils* (leatherworkers) from Beyt Nabīlah, in Ṣanʿāʾ,[35] and immediately created a tie of affinity. Bath attendants were handing down knowledge regarding Turkish massages. Circumcisers from Beyt ʿAnbarūd transmitted self-made tools, unknown to other families, from one generation to the other. Bloodletters from Beyt al-Qummaly improved their art of acquiring knowledge from an extinguished family of bloodletters.

Now, consider the networks of Beyt Jazzāry (butchers from Ṣanʿāʾ) and Beyt al-Amīn (bath attendants from Ṣanʿāʾ); the same tendencies emerge clearly. Older generations opted for endogamic marriages within their own craft. We shall analyse this feature below in this chapter (cf. also Ch. 7). New generations started getting married from the wider category of *beny al-khumus*, yet keeping a preference for people of their own craft. Moreover, marriages from peculiar families called for other marriages from the same families. Through these networks, bath attendants and green-grocers safeguarded their monopoly over *waqf* properties. Butchers established extended credit networks to buy beasts for slaughtering, thus sharing their meat.

Although people from Beyt Jazzāry and Beyt al-Amīn reported marriages of women from their families to men of *qabīly* families, thus boasting of their women 'marrying up', I could not verify these assertions. In the reported cases, the term 'qabīly' only referred to men coming from the countryside who actually worked as butchers or bath attendants.

34 As we have seen, the work of the *muzayyin* entailed a great degree of mobility. Creating contacts in other villages was, thus, an easier task for the *muzayyins* than it was for a tribesman.

35 It is not a chance that one of their nieces got married from that same family.

Servants who do not Serve anymore

Saleh's lifeworld dramatically changed after the 1962 revolution. As we have seen in Chapter 1, the transition from the imamate to the republic was framed by political narratives that emphasised such notions as citizenship, Arabism, and equality. These narratives pushed for the abolition of any distinction grounded on origin or race. Notwithstanding this semantic framework, the radical change that occurred in the social and economic conditions of Beyt Zuleīṭ was mainly prompted by social and economic factors.

During the 1970s, when the Yemen Arab Republic consolidated, important structural changes occurred. The entry of capitalism was encouraged (Halliday, 1974), mobility enhanced and infrastructures built. A conspicuous number of Yemenis migrated to Saudi Arabia, fostering local economy with remittances. Subsistence agriculture declined, while the number of employees drastically increased. A widespread system of public instruction reached even remote villages in the countryside (El Mallakh, 1986; ʿAmmāry, 2013). As ʿAli, Saleh's nephew, noted while commenting on his grandfather's situation:

> Certainly, before, his tasks were numerous; he had a lot of work. He was compelled to accomplice his duties in the same place, in the same village where he was living. The services of a society were multiple, and he was urged to do them.

As a consequence of the rapid increase in the mobility and of the demographic explosion, the situation drastically changed:

> ʿ**Ali**: As the days passed, some people wanted him and esteemed his work. They were saying, "It's ok, for God's sake! God has willed it![36]" They esteemed his work...While other people didn't appreciate it, they were saying, "He does that wrong; we don't like this; this way we don't like it; we don't like his work." For this reason, a divergence occurred between the peasants (*al-qabāil*) themselves. Some people wanted [the work] like this and like that... They wanted Saleh Zuleīṭ to work for them, "'Cause he will do a good work". Some people were saying like this, some others were saying, "Saleh Zuleīṭ doesn't do anything, he doesn't do good things, he will be careless in something... His work is not good; it's not special; it's not what we want..." For this reason, step by step, some people got

36 I translate with 'God willed it' the Arabic '*mā shāʾ Allāh*'. Yet in this context, as in many others, this formula expresses a genuine appreciation.

> involved... I mean, another one whose name was al-Hamīm arrived next to Saleh Zuleīṭ...
>
> **Luca**: From another village?
>
> ʿ**Ali**: From another village... For example another one whose name was Muqbil arrived next to him... Some people stayed with Muqbil, some others with Saleh... Step by step this issue developed, until no one let him cook anymore. Everyone was bringing a different cook; everyone had a specific cook... They started bringing cooks from Ṣanʿāʾ, from the city... From where did this divergence come? From the divergence of the people among themselves. I mean, from within the society in which he was living... Saleh Zuleīṭ, you can say, that he had an income... His sons, which means us, for example... We didn't get anything anymore.

This excerpt emphasises the pivotal role of economic factors. This narrative evokes a sense of loss, in a way which is discordant with the picture of an oppressed *muzayyin*, a person compelled to work and condemned to the lowest degree of the social ladder. As we have seen in Chapter 1, the FYM and, subsequently, the state rhetoric described the 1962 revolution as an emancipatory act. Did Saleh experience a sense of emancipation in any of its classical meanings after this event (Laclau, 1996)? Apparently he did not, since even before the 1962 Revolution he had never experienced being an Other, preventing the full constitution of his identity (ivi: 2).

Mujahid, Saleh's son, experienced a lifeworld which was radically different from his father's, primarily because the revolutionary rhetoric turned the *unthought* into *unthinkable* (Arkoun, 2002). It opened up the possibility of systematically reflecting on the contingent character of the fact of being thus and so: being a *muzayyin* was not anymore a *doxic* experience. New imaginative possibilities unfolded, fostered by revolutionary rhetoric, and new models for crafting selves spread.

During the 1970's, the fledgling Yemeni Arab Republic started a recruitment program aimed at fleshing out the ranks of the army, thus materially opening up the possibility for previously nonexistent careers. Mujahid found himself in a particular historical contingency; being that his social status contested and his market-situation eroded by an increasing competition, he turned his attention towards new options. Infrastructures were turning North Yemen in a smaller and interconnected place, while new work possibilities were suddenly imaginable, as a civil servant or a soldier. Given this overall situation and the multiple factors that we have just accounted for, Mujahid decided to join the army.

Following a path that seems to be widely beaten by people from *beny al-khumus*, he enrolled using his traditional skills as a fast track, thus reconverting his genealogical capital in a new field.

The tasks associated with *beny al-khumus* were, in fact, stigmatised and avoided by tribesmen. For this reason, the army strongly needed butchers, cooks, barbers and musicians. Mujahid opted for the latter option; he joined the army as a drummer and, subsequently, he earned ranks. By the early 1990s, he was a military officer (*naqīb*), and many villagers from Kuthreh, of *sayyid* and *ʿarab* origin, were subjected to him, being that Mujahid was the head of a whole military unit (*katībah*).

As his son ʿAli recounted to me, during that period some harsh clashes involved his father and the villagers. One sentence clearly summarises ʿAli's perspective on those events: "*They cut on us and we cut on them (qaṭaʿū ʿaleīnā ū qaṭaʿnā ʿaleīhum).*" This comment points to the economic changes that occurred right after the 1962 revolution. As we have noted above, the *muzayyins* of Kuthreh faced harsh market competition, losing the monopoly over their traditional tasks and a large part of their income. Yet something else, something more subtle and profound happened: most of the villagers abandoned subsistence agriculture (cf. Chapter 4). As a consequence, the *muzayyin* lost his role as a *kayyāl* and his annual revenue (*keīleh*); he lost the right to be dependent on the peasants for his livelihood.

This change did not pass unnoticed. Mujahid gradually abandoned the services that were once offered by his father. First, he stopped slaughtering animals. This was not a revolutionary act; most of the peasants knew how to perform this task by themselves, and leaving it for the *muzayyin* was a right traditionally associated with a wider notion of moral economy (cf. Chapters 5 and 7). Yet for some reason, not least the envy for his position in the army, some of the villagers felt the need to put Mujahid back into his place. Once, the son of the *shaykh* of Kuthreh invited the soldiers of Mujahid's unit to attend a wedding in the village so that when they reached Kuthreh they found their officer playing kettledrums 'as a *muzayyin*'. The embarrassment was so great that Mujahid planned not to serve anymore in the village. As the first wedding neared, he did not show up to prepare the wedding-hall and to receive guests. On that occasion, some young people from Kuthreh decided to put him back to his role with menaces and harsh words. As one of them recounted to me, they reached Mujahid's house and they urged him to serve in the wedding-hall: "You are a *naqīleh*," they told him. "If you don't accomplish your work, you'll have to leave the village."

Once again, it is interesting to note that the whole process of transition from the imamate to the republic is interpreted as a process of loss. As ʿAli stated, "They cut our rights, *and so* we cut our services to them." The process is directional. The second important point is political: as Mujahid brutally discovered, the erosion of his economic rights did not entail a comparable increase in the political ones. Not only the villagers urged him to leave his house, they also emphasised his position as an outsider, stating that protection under the brotherhood was the counterpart of his

service. Moreover, Mujahid started experiencing the 1962 revolution as an incomplete emancipatory act, one that did not burn bridges with the ancient regime. Paradoxically, he felt oppressed by an Imam under whose rule he had never lived, while his father, who experienced the imamate, had never craved for emancipation. He was not a *muzayyin* anymore, and neither yet a citizen.

From dependence to multiple economic strategies

In Saleh's lifeworld, being a *muzayyin* was still a matter of dependence. His son lived right after the 1962 revolution, thus experiencing a strong call against the social categories and relationships which had characterised the ancient regime. How do new generations conceive the legacy of their ancestors? Mujahid's son, Mujahid Ibn Mujahid, described for me the changes that occurred in his family. Starting from the erosion of his family's traditional rights, he described how he and his brother headed towards new and different options:

> We addressed ourselves to study. Slowly, we studied... I mean, we had a lot of spare time... Our times are beautiful, wonderful... We study; we search [knowledge]... We have a light work... And this light work provides money which is sufficient, all praise and thanks to God. For this reason we can, for example... I relax, [the work] relaxes me. It gives me money [...]. Now, I studied, I worked and I became an employee. I don't belong (*lā antamī*) completely [to the profession]... I started not to belong completely to the profession that my grandfather practiced. Why? Because it's enough for me... I am a man of science (*rajul ʿilm*). I'm an employee and I have my qualifications (*muʾahalāty*) and my degrees (*shahāīdy*)... Since when I became an employee, I have had my occupation that will give me what I need, which is money. For example, I have the salary at the end of the month and I rely and relax on it, it's enough... I never do this [his traditional tasks]; I do not have the readiness. Unless, for example, if it is an extra... How do they say? I mean, an increase. Yes, so that I can increase my income. And, for example, if it is at a specific time so that I don't have to leave my work, the fundamental one, which is study or training or things like these. I'm an employee in the army; there are a lot of people like me. When I'm free I study, or when I'm free if there is work, if there is a wedding, it's normal, I go for one reason: to increase my income. I only increase my income.
>
> **Luca:** Yes, livelihood (*rizq*) is the most important thing.
>
> **Mujahid:** Yes, for this reason you can find the difference... You can understand the difference between how they, the old men and the ancestors (*ash-sheyebāt al-awwalīn*), would rely on it [on the traditional tasks] and the way we rely on it. They would rely on it

(*yaʿtamidū ʿaleīh*) as something fundamental (*asāsy*)... But for us it is an extra.

Mujahid, like his brother ʿAli, obtained a secondary school degree in Kuthreh. Later, thanks to the newly paved road and the capillary system of public transport linking Beyt Qaūs and Ṣanʿāʾ, he had the chance to study in high school. Hence he joined the army, a decision prompted by a desire for stability. Eventually, he started studying at university in order to obtain a bachelor's degree, access the military college and gain ranks. Concurrently, he kept working in his traditional task.

This movement between different forms of economic life is a defining characteristic of Yemeni labourers today. We shall address this topic at a theoretical level in Chapter 4. Here I want to emphasise that today *muzayyins*, unlike *sayyid* descendants of teachers or state employees (Ch. 3) and peasants (Ch. 4), largely benefit from the traditional tasks of their ancestors. Not only have they a privileged access to these tasks by means of their genealogical capital (technical skills, contacts, tools and etc.), an advantage that in contemporary Yemen might be well overcome since information can freely circulate through other channels, but *beny al-khumus* can also count on a privileged access to these tasks because of the stigma which is still associated to them, a stigma that directly links labour and origin.

As L. Dumont has pointed out, the best kind of comparison is that between the observer and the observed (1986: viii). When, in 2004, I had to choose my path of study, I automatically, almost unreflexively, excluded the Faculty of Law. When a colleague of my father's asked me anxiously, "Why don't you wanna study Law? You would be a good lawyer..." I replied immodestly, "I know. And I'd probably like it... But I don't wanna be the lawyer son of a lawyer." I sincerely did not want people to think, "He is his father's son": I wanted to find my own way. Probably I was just a selfish, unaware bearer of 'modern ideology' (Dumont, 1986). Western notions of 'individuality', an almost unconscious desire for self-realisation, constituted the substratum of my *doxic experience*. An experience that, many authors would argue, well fits the structures of our society (Honneth, 2004).

So, moving from this standpoint, while I was working with *beny al-khumus*, one question was obsessing me: if they have a full range of options available, why do they keep working in tasks that are overtly stigmatised? This question clearly needs a multilayered answer, and constitutes what we might term the muzayyin dilemma: keeping working in stigmatised but highly remunerative tasks which reinforce his traditional status position or pursuing new identities which, however, always remain beyond reach since, as we shall see later, '*origin doesn't lie*'.

First we need to emphasise that, today, a change of profession is an ineffective strategy if aimed

at covering someone's genealogical origin. Even renowned officers, managers, ministers, etc. cannot hide their genealogical descent. The ex-president of the Democratic Republic of Yemen himself, ʿAli ʿAbdullah Saleh, as soon as he resigned, was publicly called to justify his family name, ʿAffāsh, in an interview on al-ʿArabiyyah.

While working with *beny al-khumus* I only encountered a few cases of people trying to dismiss their origin. One boy from Beyt al-Ḥammāmy, for example, left his job as a bath attendant and changed his title (*laqab*) in ‘al-Jābiry’. His relatives commented on his effort stating its pointlessness: “His friends know his origin. When he'll try to get married, he won’t be able to marry a *qabīliyah*.” Investigations regarding someone's origin were indeed very accurate and socially legitimated. Relatives, neighbours, friends, the *ʿāqil* of the quarter, colleagues on the place of work... Before consenting to a marriage, the reputation of a man (and, through other channels, that of a woman) was double-checked in many ways. While I was in Kuthreh, my host received at least two phone calls, aimed at certifying the *sayyid* origins of some boys from the village. The *shaykh* of Kuthreh himself, when he got married from a tribe near Taʿiz, had to undergo a long process of investigation.

So, returning to *beny al-khumus*, another famous case of failed ‘origin covering’ was recounted me by a man from Beyt Jazzāry, a family of butchers:

> There are people from Beyt Jazzāry, original Jazzāry... We know all the people from Beyt Jazzāry... There are people from Beyt Jazzāry who changed their name in al-Ḥāshidy or al-Ḥārithy. There's a big professor, whose name is ʿAli Jazzāry. He was the director of the office of education and instruction in Taʿiz. He is from the same family as Beyt Jazzāry, from our ancestor, Ḥasan, from Mārib. He is a famous teacher, renown in the state, and he doesn't want the word Jazzāry. [...] But all the people know that he is Jazzāry, in every province of Yemen.

In sum, one reason not to leave a lucrative, yet stigmatised task was the poor gain in terms of status, since in the context of marriage strategies it is clearly stated that ‘origin doesn't lie’. However respected a judge, or even a president of the republic, the baseline of his identity was always defined in genealogical terms.

Besides this reason, which was certainly important, another factor encouraged people from *beny al-khumus* to keep working in their traditional tasks, a factor that, for the reasons which I have specified above, was inconceivable for me at first: the loyalty to their ancestors. As far as I can

remember, the first time that I noticed such a peculiar way of constructing the relationship between a person and his ancestors, I was talking with a butcher. He was recounting to me that he left study and started working in the profession of his father. I asked him, “Why?” Curiously, he answered, “Because my father and my grandfather were butchers. I knew already how to do it; I felt a vocation (*hawayyah*) from the inside.” From that day on, I focused on the term *hawayyah*. Rather than being used in its common sense meaning ‘hobby’, the term was used to describe an inner inclination and an innate talent for a profession. This inclination, perceived as it was as something ‘interior’, as a ‘natural attitude’, was clearly the result of an apprenticeship as ‘son of the profession’.

One day, while talking with a young woman from Beyt al-Qummaly, I asked her, “Is the Qummaly working in the market selling scarfs one of your family?” Significantly, she answered, “They don't accept the profession of bloodletting (*mā yitaqabbalūsh mihrat al-ḥijāmah*).” Thus she mimicked the gesture of arrogance (*kibrah*), and eventually stated: “No one denies his origin (*mā ḥad yinkirsh aṣleh*).” Kamāl ʿAnbarūd, a young circumcisor working in the army as a barber, expressed the same principle in a recorded interview.[37] When I asked, “Why did you continue in your father's profession?” He replied, “I mean, from the perspective of Islam... I mean, you owe obedience (*aṭ-ṭāʻah*)... One doesn't deny... *One tries to get near to his father's face* (*washsh*).”

The point is clear: denying one's profession means denying one's origin. And “No one denies his origin, except the dog.” The respect for one's own father, for one's own ancestors, wins over any other consideration. Denying their origin, people from *beny al-khumus* would deny the memory of their fathers. And this is not just a negative principle; trying to craft one's self in accordance with the legacy of the ancestors is a positive and generative principle. Obviously, this is true if we are talking about glorious ancestors, and it still is if we are talking about humble barbers.

The profession as a refuge

Vital conjunctures do not open up at defined (let' say biological) turns of someone's life. Rather, they are socially constrained. From the perspective of an observer, the vital conjuncture is an analytical unit which works differentially: it helps emphasising sensitive choices against the backdrop of imaginable alternatives. Now, consider the decision of pursuing studies further: to my interlocutors it was a choice against the backdrop of a working career. Most of the people whom I interviewed would consider institutional education as a means to obtain a decent job in the future. However, in this field, as in any other, their choices were the complex result of structural constraints

37 Recorded interview, 16 June, 2013.

and idiosyncratic aspirations.

In contemporary Yemen, institutional education is still a new experience. Very often, boys and young men ranging between 16 and 20 years old are the progeny of illiterate parents. These parents, especially if they belong to *beny al-khumus*, are often prone to grant their sons the education they were deprived. Consider this excerpt from a man belonging to Beyt Zayd, a house of *qashshāms*:[38]

> **Luca:** Was it possible to study at the time of your grandfather?
>
> ʿ**Abdullah:** They didn't let us study at the time of my grandfather... Why? 'Cause we worked with animals, and looked after animals. With the bucket (*malānah*), we drew water from the well (*nisnī*). They tell you, "Why do you want to study? For whom is [the work] with the *marna*ʿ? Who will draw water?" Until they made us accept this... [...] At the time of our ancestors, they told you, "What do you study? What will study make for you? Work here, it's better!" But our children, we want to compensate them (*nu*ʿ*awwiḍhum*); we compensate them, letting them study!

Very often, this push towards education needs to be read against the alternative that it prefigures: working, from an early age, in the traditional craft of one's forefathers. As we shall deepen in Chapter 7, the profession ('*al-mihreh*') is often considered as a sort of refuge (*mirja*ʿ) or base, a starting-point to which it is always possible to return in case of failure.

Now, while many young men from *beny al-khumus*, like Mujahid, chose to become soldiers, to study, and to keep their traditional profession as a 'surplus', but many others chose the opposite path, embracing their traditional profession in order to avoid an education for which they did not feel any interest (*hawāyah*). Kamāl ʿAnbarūd, for example, studied until the sixth grade in elementary school. His father, as he told me, "was giving [money]... He made many efforts to let me study. But me, me myself... I didn't have any interest." For this reason, his father urged him, "No study and no shop? Sit here." Kamāl started working in the clinic, until "the profession was in [his] hands."

I collected a similar story from Sadiq Jazzāry, a 30-year-old butcher.[39] The son of a wealthy family, Sadiq was pushed by his grandfather to study, and yet, as he told me, "Study did not enter my soul (*mā kānsh yidkhul fī bāly ad-dirāsah*). I didn't want to learn. I couldn't." His grandfather 'forced' him to learn (*kān yishtīnā nita*ʿ*allam bi-l-quwwah*), but he obtained the opposite result:

38 Recorded interview, 11 May, 2013.
39 Recorded interview, October 23, 2011.

Sadiq abandoned study and started working as a butcher. This is not just an example of how difficult it can be to convert economic capital into cultural capital. Sadiq, in fact, left his studies because he had a valid and lucrative alternative within range: becoming a butcher. For men belonging to *beny al-khumus*, the profession of one's forefathers keeps being a generative force in crafting selves.

A Matter of Origins

Genealogical imagination and genealogical capital

As I have tried to highlight through Beyt Zuleīṭ's family history, the practices of social actors and their life trajectories, their aspirations and future horizons are widely informed by local conceptions of intergenerational links. These ties are locally symbolised through the notions of descent (*nasab*) and origin (*uṣūl*).

In Yemen, as in many other Middle Eastern contexts, genealogies convey local notions of personhood, providing the symbolic repertoire to construct the individual in accordance with the moral and physical legacy of the ancestors (cf. Goldziher, 1967). They select the transmission of economic, cultural, and social capital through marriage, providing the basis for political organisation (Bourdieu, 1986). They regulate the acquisition of incorporated knowledge, naturalising labour as a pivotal dimension of personhood (cf. Ibn Khaldún, 1978). Projecting the past onto the present, they foster a 'genealogical division of labour', transferring stigma (or honour) from people to work and vice versa (Brunschvig, 1962).

In order to understand how these multiple functions are linked to genealogies, it is not sufficient to consider them as a social topography of the present, anchored to a territorial system of access to the means of subsistence (Peters, 2007; Marx, 1977), or as a segmentary structure of the tribal political organisation (Gellner, 2010), or as a sacred historiography (Meeker, 1976: 258) representing timeless social relations, or as a structure of meanings rooted in the semantics of honour (Meeker, 1976: 252; Dresch, 1986), or as a practical or metaphorical idiom through which identities are negotiated.

Synchronic approaches miss a central point: my interlocutors considered genealogical narratives as veritable accounts of the past, explicitly distinguishing them from myth (*ḥizwiyyah* or *usṭūrah*).

In the Middle East, genealogies entail a peculiar way of constructing the relationship with one's ancestors; this is a way of making history, of weaving past and present together. Andrew Shryock has described this kind of historical imagination through the notion of 'genealogical imagination' (1997). From this perspective, genealogies articulate past and present in a culturally informed way of transmitting history, a way that is always partial, fragmented and inherently oppositional (ivi: 17).

Genealogies, as any historical knowledge, are a way of imagining the past; they talk about history. This kind of historical imagination is characterised by modes of narration that diverge from the agenda of 'real history' (Anderson, 1991). For this reason, in order to make genealogical narratives historical evidence, we need to analyse the practices by which they are remembered, transmitted and performed (Prakash, 1990: 39).

As many authors have noted, problematising the textual authority of historical accounts is the first step in order to comprehend how oral traditions imagine the past (Shryock, 1997: 30-4; Prakash, 1990). Genealogical narratives are inherently intertextual, being inscribed in oral traditions, myths, land contracts, last wills, graphic representations, landscapes and so forth; they distribute historical knowledge in 'bits and pieces' (Shryock, 1997: 23), but they also use watersheds to distinguish historical eras. Moreover, genealogies explain historical chains of events through a mode of narration that 'recovers the origins' (Prakash, 1990: 48); in this sense, the tales of the origins are compressed historical accounts that give an interpretation of complex historical processes through the reduction to one generative event.

All these modes of narration have important consequences for the construction of historical consciousness. Present conflicts and divergences, claims and objectives are often interpreted and shaped by past tensions and oppositions, as a prosecution of the actions of one's ancestors. The interpenetration of temporal levels is such that present conflicts are rhetorically fought in the past, through the opposition of historical characters (cf. Goldziher, 1967: 61), and as well as imagined past conflicts inform the action in the present. As A. Shryock has noted, "The past, for tribespeople, is inseparable from the present. History is now as it happened then," and any attempt at bifurcating this temporality can result in a considerable loss of insight (1997: 35). Moreover, whereas Western ideas about progress and development are tied to the future, Islamic notions of time imply a reversed understanding of human development[40] (Böwering, 1997): "[...] according to a famous *hadith*, the Prophet had said that his generation was the best of all, that the one which would come

40 This 'reversed' conception of temporality is extremely diffused at common sense level. For a more nuanced analysis of Islamic temporalities, emphasising cross-cultural borrowings and historical developments. See G. Böwering (1997).

after him would be the next best, and after that each succeeding generation would be worse." (Hourani, 1983: 8)

The usage of watersheds is another common feature of genealogical imagination, part of the narrative strategy that we have labelled 'recovering the origins'. These origins, these roots (*ʿirq*, pl. *ʿurūq*), can be a positive term of reference as well as a negative one. However, what is of central importance is that origins set a term of comparison and establish a circular relationship where past and present are structuring structures which cannot be separated. This kind of temporality is similar to what many authors have labelled 'vertical time' (Anderson, 1991; Bowering, 1997): the simultaneous experience of all times.

It follows that the genealogical mode of narration which I have so far sketched was not simply a narrative strategy. Rather it was a culturally informed way of constructing a historical consciousness, which was dynamically used to construct selves. The genealogical construction and interpretation of history was, in fact, articulated with a profound reflection on what it meant to be a human being and a moral person. As A. Shryock noted, moral selves are always referred to their past origin: any claim to moral standing is also a comment on origins and it has to arise from a genealogical past (1997: 11). Drawing on I. Goldziher's pioneeristic work, M. Meeker (1976) and P. Dresch (1986, 1989) acutely reflected on this point, arguing that the *sharaf* of persons and groups, their "honour in its most encompassing sense," is always related to the glorious role they played in significant events of the past. Yet this role is not always significant or glorious; inglorious acts are accounted as well, and they keep informing the social standing of living human beings (cf. Brunschvig, 1962).

From this perspective, as we shall see, persons are deterministically shaped by their genealogical origins. A famous *ḥadīth*, states: "*ikhtārū li-naṭafi-kum fa-inna al-ʿirqa dassās*". We might translate it as, "Choose a suitable mate for your progeny, because origin doesn't lie." Now, the authenticity of this *ḥadīth* is discussed, however, the second part of it has become a common sense proverb which rationalises a well established principle: descent and moral behaviour are inextricably tied.

In this sense, the notion of origin (*aṣl* or *ʿirq*) and the kind of imagination that it entails condense and naturalise accumulated history, symbolising chains of historical events through one determining episode. They describe in symbolical terms the fact that capital (historically accumulated labour in its objectified or embodied forms) constitutes a set of constraints that determine the chances of success for practices (Bourdieu, 1986: 241), guaranteeing the coalescence of internal dispositions and external structures of the society. This euphemisation of a historically shaped distribution of power through the notion of origins is grounded on a twofold process: on the one hand, origins set

constraints to social action; on the other, they provide social actors with a specific "feel for the game." In sum, origins both symbolise accumulated history, functioning as '*genealogical capital*', and describe a peculiar way of imagining history.

Although it can be interesting to investigate how proud descendants boast of the glorious deeds of their renowned ancestors, it is certainly more intriguing to explore how persons that belong to inferior status groups manage the legacy of their disgraced forefathers. It is, in fact, in this sensitive *locus* that the 'feel for the game' emerges overtly. As I have noted, the proverb says, "No one denies his origin, but the dog (*mā ḥad yinkirsh aṣleh, illā al-kalb*)." Being that origin is a foundational principle of the *doxic* experience of social actors, its denial implies a denial of the social self.

"My grandfather fled after killing..." Oral traditions as history

Mohammed Zuleīṭ, Mujahid's brother, was an expert crafter of traditional Yemeni sandals. He undertook his apprenticeship before the 1962 revolution, when he was still young and capable of reaching the old market of Ṣanʿāʾ on foot. Leather-work was traditionally practised by Jewish people from Hurm, a village not far from Kuthreh. However, after 1948, when most of the Jewish people left Yemen, new interesting economic niches opened up. Mohammed took this opportunity, and he 'stole the profession' (*zakkā al-mihrah*) from an old man belonging to Beyt Nabīlah, a man who worked in Sūq al-minqāleh.

Until 40 or 50 years ago, Sūq al-minqāleh was a section of the old market of Ṣanʿāʾ shared by three families: Beyt ʿAnbarūd, a family of circumcisors, Beyt Nadameh and Beyt Nabīlah, two families of leather-workers (*munaqqilīn*). Nowadays, the word *munaqqil* refers exclusively to low status people repairing shoes, mainly people from Ibb or Reīmah. However, up to the 1970's, the *munaqqil* crafted a wide set of leather objects:[41] the whole cultural world was crafted locally by specific families. As the market transformed, some of these objects became useless, replaced by technological changes; some others became expensive, replaced by Chinese commodities.[42] In the 1970s, when the economic crisis turned out to be serious and irreversible, one of the men from Beyt

41 This point is of the uttermost importance: artifacts were part of the subjective experience of a natural world transformed into a cultural world (Kulturwelt) by human presence and human labour (Duranti, 2010:12). Each craft, and thus each family, was associated with a peculiar number of crafted objects (or services). The *munaqqil* produced a limited number of leather artifacts: sandals, small bags (*qurʿah*), bags (*masabb*), water containers for shepherds (*gharab*), ropes (*marsab*), leather tapes (*sīr*, pl. *suyūr*), buckets for the well (*dalū*), washbowls (*lajan*) and bags for grain (*khurj*). Nowadays, some of these objects are crafted out of tyres. Most of them have disappeared, replaced by commodities crafted by unknown producers.

42 As Wagner has well demonstrated, this is not a process that started in the 1960's: crafts underwent several crises (2015: 99).

Nabīlah managed to ‘steal’ a new profession. He undertook an apprenticeship with an old Turkish Jew, Hārūn al-Yahūdy (cf. Wagner, 2015: 97), who had no progeny, and he became a candy maker. The new task rapidly spread through a shared kinship network so that people from Beyt Nadameh rapidly ‘converted’ to the new job.

While I was in Yemen, ʿAli Nabīlah was a candy maker in Sūq al-Minqāleh. He was about 35 years old, married with two sons. Here is how he recounted to me the history of Beyt Nabīlah:

> ʿ**Ali**: Originally, we are not... Our origin... Our ancestors have origins (*uṣūl*). We belong to the origins of the Prophet... But something enigmatic happened... Our grandfather[43] killed [someone], and he entered Ṣanʿāʾ... There was a lack of people working in some professions... So he started working in... How is it called? In a coffee-shop, and at the same time... He got married with a woman whose name was Nabīlah. So his father, his brothers and his children, they took the title... [People] saw him working as a baker... And they said, “Ok, they don't have origins (*haūlā mā fish maʿhum uṣūl*).” These people were especially the Yemeni tribesmen... So he said, “I will work on my own.” And he changed his name, and it became... Nabīlah's husband, I mean the husband of Fulānah. Until he had children, and he didn't give them his name, he gave them his wife's name. *In the village they didn't know his wife's name*. And we have contracts (*fuṣūl*); we have origin (*aṣl*)! We are from beny Maṭar; we belong to the descent of the Prophet. Whatever, all praise and thanks to God. [...]
>
> He killed and he fled from the village... He took another title... And now you see them everywhere... One works as a *muzayyin*; another one is a barber (*ḥallāq*)... One has a coffee-shop (*maqhā*); another one works... But our origin is from the descent of the Prophet, upon Him prayer and peace. How do they say? Hāshimy... Yet... That's what happened... They repudiated him (*tabarrū minneh*) [...] Now, if I kill someone and I flee.... [When they say,] “Are you a *muzayyin*?” [If you are a *muzayyin*] that's all, they don't speak anymore...
>
> **Luca**: Why do they say it like this?
>
> ʿ**Ali**: That's it; it's something... You are ‘lacking’ (*nāqiṣ*), in their eyes... They do not know that we are all the same, that the Islamic religion is one... The Prophet slaughtered, he shaved... My brother, that's how they are!

This history condenses many clichés (Miller, 1980). The core of this narrative is shared by most of the origin histories that I have collected from *beny al-khumus*[44] (cf. Appendix), and it can be briefly

43 ʿAli is referring to his father's grandfather. The setting of this story is thus to refer to a period comprised between the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century.

44 These collections of life histories simply contradicts Vom Bruck's assertion: “Others believe that as a result of

summarised as follows: a man kills another man from his own village, or from his own brotherhood, and, instead of facing vengeance, he flees, seeking refuge from death in another brotherhood.[45]

Noteworthy is the fact that, when the ancestor flees from his own village to another one, he has to abandon all his properties. Leaving behind his means of subsistence, the ancestor finds himself vulnerable to conflicts and economically dependent on the host brotherhood. This second circumstance is symbolically pictured in the narratives when the fugitive is offered—by the *shaykh* or by the *Imam*—to work as a servant or as an inn-keeper. Yet the assumption that the fugitive is a vulnerable person needs a further clarification.

As J. O'Neill (2011) has noted, a person is vulnerable when he is compelled by 'necessity', and the concept of necessity is historically, socially and culturally bounded. Shall we consider the *muzayyin* compelled by necessity at the point of entry into this relation of dependency? Moral and ethical considerations actively concur in selecting the scope of acceptable alternatives and in shaping historically informed notions of "necessity". From the standpoint of a tribesman, the lack of livelihood is not a 'necessity' *stricto sensu*: poverty is not a shame; working as a *muzayyin* is. Moreover, in the narratives which we have taken into account, the fugitive is always threatened with death, and *thus* he accepts to work as a servant. Avoiding death might be well considered a necessity, but, again, is this the case for a tribesman?[46] As many of them told me during my fieldwork, "I'd die rather than work as a servant."

From this perspective, the fugitive, who is guilty, having infringed the values and norms of his own society, is firstly compelled by his own actions: he knows that, as a tribesman, he should face vengeance. Yet he decides to take a way out of the tribal game and to lose his status in order to save his own life. In short, the fugitive is not taking up the profession of the servant because he is without means of livelihood, although, factually, he lacks them. He is taking up the profession of the servant in order to cross a boundary, in F. Barth's sense. The picture of a former tribesman playing the drums is a powerful trope, symbolising his social death. As ʿAli stated, "Are you a *muzayyin*? [If you are a *muzayyin*] that's all, they don't speak anymore..."

Moving back to the 'practical' dimension that emerges from the narratives, we shall highlight

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committing a crime, of cowardice, or of capture in war, people - who might even have been noblemen - were forced to engage in degrading service. Their descendants were considered uprooted and 'deficient' by virtue of their ancestors' moral failure. The *qalil asl* never assent to this second version." (1996: 148)

45 I have collected only two histories that differ from the 'vengeance' version. One is Beyt Jazzāry's (cf. Appendix), where the ancestor flees in order to marry a girl with whom he has fallen in love. The second is Beyt al-Amīn's, which I shall present in Chapter 7.

46 Surely it was not for Bedouins in pre-Islamic times. As far as we know, they were in fact despising death from natural causes (Watt, 1948).

that upon leaving his village the fugitive leaves behind something more than his means of subsistence and his political rights: he abandons *al-uṣūl wa-l-fuṣūl*. This expression needs to be thoroughly explained. It is a common sense assumption that the two terms, *uṣūl* and *fuṣūl*, stand as synonyms, meaning 'origins' in a general sense. Yet the practical meaning of this expression refers to a wider cultural framework. As we shall see in Chapter 4, a *faṣl* (pl. *fuṣūl*) is a written document through which inheritance is divided among heirs. Each one of the heirs is entitled to a *faṣl*, proving his rights and possessions. This written document accounts for the identity of a tribesman, linking property and the construction of personhood so that when someone needs to prove someone else's identity, it is common to say, "Give me a *al-uṣūl wa-l-fuṣūl.*"

As B. Haykel (2002) demonstrated, even in the religious tradition of the Zaydiyyah, identity is always tied to locality so that no social identity can exist detached from the public reputation that a person constructs in his own village or quarter. For these reasons, he who flees from his own village leaves behind the very possibility of demonstrating his origins and his identity. He is 'lacking origin' (*nāqiṣ al-aṣl*) in a sense which is not simply metaphoric: actually, he has no means to prove to which people he belongs, having left his written documents, his properties and his reputation.

Through the narratives that I have so far presented, people from *beny al-khumus* attempt to recover their origin historicising the events that led them to their present situation. They never refer to the lack of moral qualities that tribesmen ascribe them, or to the 'polluting' nature of their tasks; they emphasise the contingency of the accident that occurred to their ancestor. Concurrently, they boast of noble origins (e.g., "We are descendants of the Prophet." "We are descendants of Sultans." "We are descendants of *shaykhs,*" and so forth), which they are unable to demonstrate for practical reasons. Finally, they appeal to an egalitarian Islamic discourse in order to re-establish the legitimacy of their professions.[47] Interestingly, these narratives do not break with *doxic* assumptions regarding the relationship between genealogical origins and moral attitudes. Rather, they 'recover' the lost origins.

Origins and negative stereotypes

While people from *beny al-khumus* attempt to historicise the accidents that led their ancestors to lose their origins, their identity—along with their moral qualities—is differently constructed by people that belong to other social groups. In Chapter 1 we have considered how the present social

47 Interestingly, there are neither myths nor any historical accounts pointing at the stigmatised nature of *beny al-khumus*'s professions. We shall deal with this topic in Chapter 7.

organisation is constructed and represented in accordance with a political discourse that emerged in the 1940's and spread after the 1962 revolution. From this perspective, ‘social strata’, along with other differences grounded on descent, are considered a legacy of the political dominion of the Hashemites. Yet, in terms of common sense, different assumptions inform the construction of moral selves.

Why are *beny al-khumus* named so? Most of the people from *beny al-khumus* with whom I have worked have no answer to this question, other than, “We don't know; The Imam created social strata.” An alternative hypothesis emerges from C. Ansaldi's “*Il Yemen nella storia e nella leggenda”*. *Beny al-khumus* are called that because they belonged to five castes: the butcher, the bloodletter, the barber, the bath attendant and the tanner. All the other occupations came later. I have heard some people, especially in the countryside where the number of the professions practised by *beny al-khumus* is limited, advance a similar explanation.

As many authors noted, the origin of *beny al-khumus* is sometimes explained by means of an unworldly myth (Caton, 1984; Stevenson, 1985; Mundy, 1995). I have collected four different versions of this ‘myth’, all of them similar in plot and interpretation. Before moving on and analysing them, I shall make three observations.

Firstly, it is important to note that this myth was not well renowned; only old men and an infinitesimal part of the young people knew it and, as I have just recalled, people from *beny al-khumus* completely ignored it in Ṣanʿāʾ.[48]

Secondly, it is fundamental to account for the speech acts within which the myth was recounted; the myth, in fact, was always set in opposition to a putative egalitarian Islamic system (cf. Mermier, 1996: 84-5). Once I approached an old man in Shimās. I explicitly asked him to record the myth. As soon as he finished telling me the story, he added, “We are all sons of the nine [months]. God created us from one human being, Adam. Jews, Christians and Muslims; we are all from Adam, Adam and Eva.” Another time, a man started recalling the myth after stating: “No, the Imam was a Muslim. It's impossible that he created social strata... Here is what happened...” And he recounted the myth. Thirdly, what I have until now called a ‘myth’ was considered, by most of the people, a historical truth:

> **Luca:** Is this a legend (*usṭūrah*) in Yemen?
>
> ʿ**Ali:** No, it's not a legend... There's no legend. It is said that this is reality (*ḥaqīqah*).

48 Only people from Beyt ʿAnbarūd recounted to me the myth (cf. Appendix).

The story recounted in the myth is set at the time of the Himyarite king Saʿad al-Kāmil. A woman complained to the king about her cattle having been stolen, so the king created an army that headed towards a distant place called Ẓalamāt, where the thieves were believed to be hiding with the loot. The head of the army pushed the soldiers to enter into a dark landscape, where they were ordered to scoop as much soil as they could. When eventually they came out from the dark place, the head of the army revealed to them that what they had collected was not soil but gold powder. Since one part of the army had not entered the dark landscape, they had gathered no gold. For this reason, they were given some powder from the other soldiers, and thus they were condemned to serve in the army. They were about 1/5th of the total, so the other soldiers labelled them *beny al-khumus*.

Here I want to focus on two circumstances. The first one is this: the people who did not enter the darkness came out as 'dependent' people because they were given the gold from the other soldiers. As M. Mundy has acutely noted, in the Islamic tradition the poor are entitled a 5th of the loot after a raid, and this 5th is called 'al-khumus'. I find this circumstance significative, not for the interpretation of the label *beny al-khumus*, whose etymology might well remain an unsolved conundrum, but for the relationship that it expresses. In this story, as well as in the other stories we have considered, people from *beny al-khumus* are *economically* dependent on the warriors. From this observation immediately stems the second one: why didn't they enter the darkness?

> **Luca:** And why this 5th did not enter to get the soil?
>
> ʿ**Ali:** Because they were cowards... The others were courageous, strong. And they caught the thieves and they recovered the loot...

Beny al-khumus are cowards: they lack the moral qualities of the warriors. Since they cannot fight, they have to work as servants, and they are dependent on the warriors to get a share of the loot. While describing and reproducing the relationship of dependence that ties the servants to the warriors, this story distinguishes two different types of moral selves: that of the coward servant and that of the brave warrior. This picture reflects the position of a *muzayyin* within a brotherhood, where he emerges as an individual incapable of defending his person, his reputation (*ʿarḍ*) and his sexual honour (*sharaf*), As someone who has to rely on the tribesmen for the protection of his *ʿarḍ* and his *sharaf*.

Through Saleh's life history, I have tried to demonstrate that moral selves are constructed *aban*

ʿan jadd, in accordance with the legacy of one's ancestors. Emphasising this point of view, I have so far described the positive moral qualities that *beny al-khumus* attribute to themselves, qualities that in small rural communities like Kuthreh are largely acknowledged. However, in an urban context like the Old City of Ṣanʿāʾ, people from other groups mostly imagine *beny al-khumus* as a unit and describe them by means of negative stereotypes.

Here I report a further conversation that I had in Ṣanʿāʾ regarding the negative moral qualities of *beny al-khumus*. The setting is public, but no one from *beny al-khumus* is attending the *diwān*. My two interlocutors are a young *sayyid* from Kuthreh and a young *qabīly* from Ṣanʿāʾ. The speech act starts off from an etymological concern of mine, moves towards a discourse on *beny al-khumus*'s moral qualities, and concludes with my interlocutors trying to justify their refusal to marry people from *beny al-khumus*:

> **Mohammed:** The cause of the label *beny al-khumus* is the profession in which they work... They are the cobbler, the butcher, the green-grocer, the barber... What's left? The inn-keeper, the bath attendant...
>
> **Luca:** But why sons of the 5th? There's no reason...
>
> **Mohammed:** Their profession.
>
> **Hamud:** Because they are bad; their situation is bad.
>
> **Mohammed:** For example... Now you are a butcher... And I am a green-grocer... Your behaviour (*sulūk*) is not good... And my behaviour is not good... That one, for example, is a *sayyid*. How can he desire to get married with you, while his morality (*akhlāq*) is ok whereas yours is not good? This is the reason for the label *beny al-khumus*: their attitude. [Among them,] you don't find religious piety (*nask*), whereas you find an unbalanced speech... I mean, their behaviour... On the contrary, he who has a moral standing (*ibn an-nās*) is different. He has a balanced behaviour; everything is balanced... Not like *beny al-khumus*. The sons of the 5th are not fine-tuned... I mean, when we meet, he is dirty, bad... Disgusting. He says [things like], "son of a bitch, adulterer." For him it's normal, but for people with a moral standing it's a shame (*ʿayb*).
>
> **Hamud:** These are just the butchers and the green-grocers... And those are the *sayyid*, the qabily, the qāḍy... And this is a butcher... What has he got? Blood... That's gross... How can you sit next to him?
>
> **Luca:** So what's the problem with the green-grocer?
>
> **Hamud:** The green-grocer? [He sells] leeks... And his clothes are different, not like ours... The tunic is lifted...

Mohammed: Even their clothes... Our clothes are different. We have our clothes and they have their clothes... We have our taste and they have their taste.

Hamud: They don't get married with us, and we don't get married with them... But their women? So beautiful...

Luca: How do you know that they are beautiful?

Hamud: Because they sell bread...

Luca: Don't your women sell bread?

Hamud: No.

The central feature that I want to highlight from this excerpt is the focus on different ‘linguistic games’ and the relationship it maintains with the construction of moral selves. When I first arrived in Kuthreh, I was returning from 6 months of fieldwork in Ṣanʿāʾ, which I mainly spent with butchers and green-grocers. As a result, my Arabic was heavily shaped by this experience. Bad words and sexual allusions were part of a linguistic repertoire which I had started to consider normal. Having my Arabic and my Ṣanʿāny dialect greatly improved during my experience with the butchers, I was hardly aware of the ‘stigmatised’ nature of the linguistic register which I was using. This sensation of ‘naturalness’ was emphasised by the positive reinforcement that the butchers themselves were providing me with on daily basis. In a short period of time I had become a great ‘player’, and they were encouraging my jokes and my newly acquired language. My reputation and my inclusion, in that particular milieu, passed through the acquisition of such a peculiar linguistic register.

As I arrived in Kuthreh, my distinguished host, the *sayyid* ʿAli ʿAbdulhamid, immediately corrected my ‘misbehaviour’, explaining to me that we were not in Sūq al-Milḥ. Among the tribesmen, he explained to me, “Speech is valued (*al-kalām muthamman*).” Not only actions, but also speech needed a balance. If, among the butchers, addressing someone “*yā makhnūth*! (Hey poof!)” was almost a meaningless habit, a harsh way of talking, but in Kuthreh it was a deadly offence to the *ʿarḍ* of the tribesman, an offence to be made up for with at least the offer of a ram.

I shall deepen these considerations in Chapters 6 and 7. The point that I want to underline here is that what I have so far described as a ‘linguistic game’ was described by my interlocutors as a moral difference between different human types. It was not simply a matter of performance, of interaction, and of contextualised speech acts. My interlocutors considered the communicative acts of peculiar persons as a reflection of their internal moral attitudes, moral attitudes inextricably tied to the genealogical origin of these persons. In order to bring under conceptual control these kinds of

differences, they resorted to the notion of origin, to ‘natural’ differences, thus adopting a sort of ontology of difference. Cybernetically stated: they didn't conceive a second-order level of observation—the one implied, for example, in the notion of ‘racism’ as formulated by the FYM.

Theoretically, these emic assumptions are better interpreted if we replace the notion of ‘linguistic game’ with that of ‘field’, assuming the emergence of this field in the interaction of capital, moral *habitus* and structure. Butchers and tribesman have a different ‘feel for the game’, structured by embodied dispositions and structuring their respective fields of interaction. This theoretical construction gains solidity when we consider that action, being grounded on moral *habitus*, is valued and interpreted through the lens of genealogical origin. Even in contemporary Yemen, the *dawshān* is entitled to occupy private land in tribal territory, without consequences; the *muzayyin* is still considered *amīn* and *sharīf*; and the dirty jokes of the butchers, rather than being considered offensive, are still judged funny; and so forth.

Changing habitus, lasting origin

The economic, political and social structural changes that have transformed Yemeni society since the 1962 revolution have caused deep transformations in the imaginative possibilities of social actors. The crafting of their *habitus* is not anymore exclusively linked to kinship networks, or to the legacy of one’s ancestors. Yet, I argue that genealogical capital, symbolised by the notion of origin, keeps informing the construction of anthropological subjects. In this chapter I will present a last case related to marriage practices. Others will follow in the next chapters.

As we have seen above, if we consider *beny al-khumus* as a group, hypergamic marriages are statistically nonexistent: men from *beny al-khumus* never ‘marry up’. Concurrently, people from other groups rarely ‘marry down’. However, exceptions do exist. I have recorded the following story during an interview with a highly literate young man of *sayyid* origin, a student from the village of Kuthreh who has spent all his life in the Old City of Ṣanʿāʾ. In this case, as in the other presented above, the distinction between *beny al-khumus* and the other social categories is emphasised against the backdrop of a possible marriage:

> I know two of my neighbours... They, their origin... They are not butchers, but they have little origin (*qalīl aṣl*). But their knowledge... They are well-read men (*mutaʿallimīn*); they have culture (*muthaqqafīn*). I mean, the sons [of that family]; God willed it... The culture, the knowledge they have, and their morality, and their good manners (*adab*), and their

education... They have every quality. They both got married with girls from beny Hāshim. The first got married, saying, “I am Fulān son of Fulān,” and he knew his origin (aṣleh w faṣleh). And they were from beny Hāshim, renowned people, a respected, and noble family. So, you know, nowadays what causes many problems is that sometimes people change their title. This is a problem... For example, he is from Beyt Fulān, but people do not know that he has little origins, because there is Beyt Fulān with the same title, and they have origin.

[With the second one,] they didn't understand that he was of little origin, and they thought that he had origin. Not like a *sayyid*, or a *qāḍy*... The important thing was that he had origins. Like from a middle family. They didn't understand that he had little origin... They accepted him, and the reason is that his morality (*akhlāq*) and his good manners, his knowledge, his culture... So the people of the bride arrived on the day of *dukhla*... I don't know who told them. Also with a behaviour that was not good... Like a spy. [...] They knew and they got angry with the people of the groom. They got very angry. They refused to take the bride to the groom. A problem arose. The people of the groom went to them and entrusted some rifles as a guarantee... They said, “This is your shame, because you didn't ask. *We are renowned; we do not deny our origin*. We followed God's law and the traditions of the Prophet; why are you making a scandal?”

Other mediators entered this case, until they accepted... It was sensitive, and what's the reason? They didn't ask... They should have asked... The people of the groom were smart; they said, “Why did you accept him? *Because he is the son of Fulān or because of his morality*? You should avoid considering his origin...

The reason why they are so conservative with these things is that we have a proverb that says, “Origin doesn't lie”... Whatever his morality was, or anything else, sooner or later, under some circumstances, *his origin will come out*. What is it in his origin? For example, a *qāḍy* or a *hāshimy*, he will never approach some things... He can't lie; he can't betray your trust... He can't do such things... But the others, those who have little origin... Sometimes they do such things.

This last case is meaningful because it demonstrates how the notion of origin structured the expectations of my Yemeni interlocutors. A hypogamic marriage with a person belonging to *beny al-khumus* was simply unthinkable, for a number of practical reasons: first and foremost, because the idiosyncratic preferences of particular individuals were subjected to strong social pressure from their peers (cf. Ch. 3); secondly, because marriage is not (only) a matter of romance: affinity ties establish a privileged channel of communication between families. These different interactional fields select different moral *habitus*. Even when the genealogical capital of an individual does not correspond to that of his line of descent, his ascriptive identity wins over his acquired qualities, since “[W]hatever his morality was, or anything else, sooner or later, in some circumstances, his

origin will come out.” Origin doesn't lie.

Chapter 3 - From Knowledge to Politics

Construction and politicisation of the Hashemite descent

The label 'sayyid' (pl. *sādah*) denotes a social group composed of descendants of the Prophet Mohammed. The *sayyids* are alternatively called *ashrāf* (s. *sharīf*), *hāshimiyyin* (s. *hāshimy*), *ʿarab mustaʿaribah* (arabised Arabs) or *ahl al-beyt* (people of the house). In scholarly literature and common sense discourse they are often described as the first, or the highest stratum, of the tripartite model of social ranking (cf. Ch. 1). This social group is further qualified in terms of its putative politico-economic role within the ancient regime. From this perspective, *sayyids* are qualified as *a*) nobles, landowners or feudatories; *b*) religious scholars; *c*) individuals protected by armed tribesmen.

In this chapter I challenge the biunivocal relationship between the genealogical origin of the *sayyids* and their politico-economic role. The normative association between descent and social position is here replaced by an analysis of ancestry as a generative force. Throughout history and struggling fields, notwithstanding the economic and political changes that occurred in Yemen in the last century, *sayyids* keep reproducing their genealogical capital and their genealogical capital keeps influencing their life trajectories.

Natural Disasters and Sinful Behaviour

"God cursed the percussionist and the dancer"

As M. Douglas has pointed out, “in all places and all times the universe is moralized and politicized.” (1992: 4) Yemen makes no exception to this general principle. The people with whom I worked inevitably interpreted catastrophes and natural disasters—more generally ‘risk’—as the direct consequence of moral behaviour or political events. Following local theories of how the ideal order of society should be and what kind of behaviour might wreck it, they deployed elaborated strategies and theoretical constructions to cast blame and counteract threats, thus restoring order.

At the end of the 19th century, a catastrophe of unprecedented violence struck Kuthreh. The village was devastated: orchards and fields of grain stopped providing sustenance (*arzāq*, s. *rizq*) for the people of the valley. We are clueless about what exactly happened: both droughts and floods were common in the area of Bilād al-Bustān. Whichever natural event actually caused these catastrophic events, in 1899 (1316 h.) people of Hashemite descent dwelling in the village promulgated a rule (*qāʿidah*) by the hand of their *ʿāqil,*[1] the *sayyid* ʿAbdulhamid Mohammed Shams ad-Dīn. The text of the rule[2] gives us the chance to understand how these catastrophes were discursively constructed: “[…] All praise and thanks to God, who drove the sins (*maʿāṣy*) away from *us* and from *the people of our land*. [...] the catastrophe that struck us was sent from God because of our actions (*aʿmāl-nā*) […].”

Sins (*maʿṣāh*, pl. *maʿāṣy*) clearly belong to the discourse of religious faith, and the whole text of the rule is constructed through constant references to the Qurʾān and to the will of God. In this text, the construction of nature and of natural disasters is overtly moralised (Douglas, 1992, 1966): some major sins have unleashed danger on the community, triggering God's anger, and blame needs to be attributed. But how to cast blame? The rule is quite specific in this regard: “[…] There is no doubt that *the catastrophe regards the collectivity, while mercy regards the individual* […].”

Even though sins are committed individually, by specific and—probably—known people, the sinful behaviour of a few causes catastrophes that strike the many (whereas good actions are rewarded individually). One of Kuthreh villagers deepened this point for me, recalling a story:

> Once Moses asked God, “Why are you torturing all of us and he is the one who committed sin?” Right after, an ant stung Moses. In order to hit that single ant, Moses killed them all. One single ant caused a disaster which involved all the others. So God asked Moses, “Why did you kill them all?” And Moses replied, “How can I know which one stung me?

1 The term *ʿāqil* (pl. *ʿuqqāl*) is translated by Chelhod (1984: 19) as ‘wiseman’. As we shall see below, the *ʿāqil* is the representative of a group, which can be defined territorially (as the quarter of a town) or by means of kinship ties. The *ʿāqil* represents the group towards the outside, acts as mediator in disputes, collects money in any needed case, and so forth. He is an elective figure.

2 For a copy of the original rule and the full translation of the text cf. Appendix, Ch. 3, Doc. 1.

In such a perspective, the believer is not, simply, an individual-in-relation-to-God (Dumont, 1986): he is first and foremost a brother-in-relation-to-his-brothers, the member of an Islamic moral community, called a Zaydī. Faith and sin are not an individual matter, one that remains bound within the relationship with God; individual sins regard the entire moral community.

After having delineated the principles of blame attribution, the rule continues circumscribing the atrocious sins that unleashed catastrophe on the community:

> […] God cursed the percussionist (*al-muṭabbil*) and he for whom he plays. [...] Likewise He forbid women's howl, *al-wulwulah* [...] [and He forbid] the people to enter each other's houses without men's permission, because such an act calls for sins […]

Eventually, it specifies how to cope with this behaviour in order to avoid risk. Whereas disaster descends, as we have seen, from a moral construction of nature, the coping strategy is shaped in political terms: "[...] we decided for him who infringes those [rules] a fine of ten riyāls, and all the companions agreed. The behaviour of one person is sufficient to destroy the whole of our people (*qaūm*) […]."

In short, blaming behaviour was geared into the making of community consensus around a specific conception of moral order. This moral order was enforced by sanctions. Needless to say, the entire operation was political, since the upcoming new order was tied to the ascent of the *sayyid* faction of Kuthreh.[3] In turn, this ascent was tied to broader historical processes. In 1899 North Yemen was under Ottoman occupation and *sayyids* were leading the resistance against the foreign, impious (Sunni) oppressor (cf. Ch. 1). The campaign was based on the accusation that the Turks were debasing the religious principles of Yemeni society.[4] (Douglas, 1987: 9) In the span of two years, the new moral prescriptions would have been extended from Kuthreh to neighbouring villages, thus to the whole tribal section (*mikhlāf*)—including Jewish enclaves.

Before we move on, I would like to propose a formal interpretation regarding how danger was perceived, blame culturally distributed and society protected from danger. At the time of the rule, *a*) risk was *local*: the point of origin and the point of impact of the catastrophe were coincident; *b*) *blame was internally attributed*: the disaster was caused by the behaviour of members of the

3 This rule was initially signed by the *sayyid* group of Kuthreh. Later, the same moral constraints were extended to neighbouring villages and, eventually, to the whole tribal section. We shall deepen this point below.

4 As we have seen in chapter 1, as soon as the Ottomans embarked in negotiations with the Imām Yahya, he asked and obtained the reinstatement of the Sharīʿa as a legal system for Yemen (Wenner, 1967: 46; Wāsi‘y, 2010: 355-8).

community; *c*) *nature was moralised*: it was shaped by God, not by human action; human intervention upon danger was possible—if God willed—through moral behaviour; *d*) *knowledge was limited* to an Islamic background: diaster was caused by sinful behaviour; it was possible to cope with it simply following the Islamic law; *e*) *time was localised*: localised pasts constituted the premises to interpret the future.[5] All these features clearly differentiated Kuthreh society from a modern risk society (Beck, 1999, 1992). However, as we shall see below in this chapter, in the span of a century, blame attribution strategies drastically changed, along with local constructions of risk.

Moral laws and political order

The implementation of new moral constraints ensued from a multifaceted scenario involving, on the one hand, the contingency of the catastrophe and the broader political and historical context; on the other hand, from the internal field of struggle constituted by the two factions of the village itself. As we have noted above, the rule was in fact conceived by the *ʿāqil*, the *sayyid* ʿAbdulhamid Mohammed Shams ad-Dīn. We already became acquainted with this character in chapter 2, while he was busy acquiring lands at the turn of the 20th century by the hand of Ṣāleḥ Zuleīṭ, the *muzayyin*.

When ʿAbdulhamid promulgated the rule, he was a rich landowner, but that had not always been the case; ʿAbdulhamid, in fact, obtained all his fortune by marrying the daughter of Loṭf al-Bāry Hāmish, a rich merchant of humble origins—which, in Yemen, means someone from *beny al-khumus*—and a *mutashayyiʿ*: a fervent supporter of the *Ahl al-Beyt*. From the standpoint of ʿAbdulhamid, this was a hypogamic marriage (if we choose to refer to status, but a hypergamic one if we refer to class).

In all likelihood, ʿAbdulhamid became *āqil* by means of his newly acquired economic standing. An *ʿāqil* is like a *shaykh*, but on a smaller scale. His role mainly consists in solving disputes and gathering the consensus of the community around his decisions. This consensus is often constructed dialectically, through endless debates which bring the extremes of the argument closer together (cf. Caton, 1987). However, a *shaykh*'s opinion is always strengthened by the symbolic reference to the men who support him. The proverb goes, "Men constitute the '*shaykhness*' of a *shaykh* (*mashyākhat-ash-shaykh ar-rijāl*)," and men can be obtained in two ways: through displays of generosity (*karam*, *muruwwah*; cf. Chapter 5 & 6), which bind people to reciprocate; or by means

5 M. Douglas has a point when she states that "Sins work forward just as well as risks." (1992: 27).With respect to the temporal dimension, the difference between sin and taboo, on the one hand, and risk, on the other, resides elsewhere: namely in its localisation *versus* its glocalisation.

of an uncompromising moral standing, a fame of impartiality (*inṣāf*).

ʿAbdulhamid had both wealth and moral standing. Yet his Zaydi moral principles ran against long established tribal traditions. As soon as the rule was signed and promulgated, it seems that some women from Kuthreh commented on it sarcastically, channeling their grievances through a short poem which is still handed down by the villagers:

Oh swift who said that you can fly?

yā jaūlabeh man qāl li abūsh tiṭīrī

ʿAbdulhamid will dress you a belt and a uniform

ʿAbdulhamid ʿā yilbasish ḥizām w mīrī[6]

As the proverb says, "The breaking of a tradition equals hostility (*khalf al-ʿādah ʿaduwwah*)," and, following the general case, the innovation introduced by ʿAbdulhamid met resistance. At first, the rule was not immediately received by the whole village. The document, in fact, states on the back: "[...] this is a rule for our companions, the noble *sādah*, people of Kuthreh. God preserves their progeny." ʿAbdulhamid himself was labelled "our *ʿāqil*"—meaning "the *ʿāqil* of the *sādah*"—and never described as the *ʿāqil* of Kuthreh. Kuthreh was not yet described as a *hijrah*—a term to which we shall return later, which can provisionally translate as 'religious enclave'.

Extending the rule, and the moral universe it advocated, to the *ʿarab* faction of the village and, later, to the entire tribal section (*mikhlāf*), implied long and gradual political work. In 1901 (1318 h.), the *muzayyin* of the village swore to God not to play the bass drum. In 1902 (1319 h.), the noble *sādah* (*as-sādah al-kirām*) and the respectable ʿarab*s* (*al-ʿarab aṣlaḥ Allāh shānahum*)[7] signed a conjoint document,[8] acknowledging to "command what is just and forbid what is evil as it is a duty for all the adult men." Specifically, this document enjoined women to avoid insults (*sabb ū shatm*) and obscenity (*faḥishah*), prescribing a fine for these sins—small or big, depending on the sin. This document was later emended to register that the *ʿarab* people from the neighbouring village of Shimās had accepted the judgement from the people of the *hijrah* of Kuthreh (*al-hijrah ahl Kuthreh*). This judgement implied abstaining from evil actions (*qaṭʿ al-manākir*), and the banishing the double clarinet (*mizmār*), along with 'other things' (probably referring to the bass drum).

6 The swift (*jaūlabeh*) is the symbol of an innocent, vulnerable creature, whose song was regimented by the harsh laws of the *ʿāqil*.

7 Interestingly, in this document the village is termed *hijrah* ("*maḥall Kuthreh, hijrat bilād al-bustān*"), a term I shall fully discuss below. In older documents I have never found this label.

8 Cf. Appendix, Ch. 3, Doc. 2.

The next step was extending the rule to the whole *mikhlāf*, a district of 17 villages—including Jewish villages—under the rule of *shaykh* Daʾyān. I shall emphasise that this was further accomplished by means of a rule which was not 'exported' by any representative of Kuthreh as a community. Another character, in fact, was gaining influence by virtue of his knowledge (*ʿilm*) and his outstanding reputation as a religious scholar. This man was the *sayyid* ʿAli Ahmed al-Muṭahar, the only one among the *sayyids* of Kuthreh who made history. We will consider his biography below.

ʿAli Ahmed figures as the *muḥarrir* of the first two documents which we have taken into account. Tribesmen used to stamp their signature by means of a ring decorated with a carved plate. In the first two documents, ʿAli Ahmed's stamp (*khatm*) is found next to his signature (*ʿalāmah*) and the specification of his role. In the Dāyān's documents, however, only the stamp appears, and he is the only representative from Kuthreh to sign it.

The two Dāyān rules,[9] especially the first one, are of paramount importance, since they enlarge our understanding of what a moral community was intended to be. Natural disasters are signs of God's anger, the proof that sinful actions have caused his fury. But who belongs to the moral community? Whose behaviour is susceptible to causing God's anger? How far could Kuthreh people cast blame so as to set the boundaries of their moral community? After all, when one's behaviour is irreproachable and disasters keep happening, evil must reside elsewhere.

ʿAli Ahmed had something similar in mind when he collected all the remaining people of the *mikhlāf* in Dāyān. At that time, tribal territory was interspersed with the Jewish enclaves of Hurm, Ḥāfid, and Beyt Qaūs. Shimās and Hurm were divided by the low ridge of a mountain, and both belonged to Beny Maṭar; Beyt Qaūs was visible from Armis, and it belonged to Bilād al-Bustān; Dāyān itself is renowned for having been a Jewish community. It is said that a last Jewish village clung to the tip of the mountain right over Kuthreh, competing with Murjān in height, as if both wanted to fall on the village. It was called Qaryat al-Ḥaram.

When people (*ahāly*) from all the *mikhlāf* gathered in Dāyān, Jewish people were summoned too. Not only people from Hurm and Dāyān are enlisted between the attendees: their presence is overtly stated in the text, throughout several passages. At the bottom of the document, Jewish people are explicitly greeted:[10] "[...] and greetings for he who followed the guidance […]." Other passages emphasise the superiority of the Islamic religion, as the classical passage states: "[...] if anyone

9 Cf. Appendix, Ch. 3, Doc. 3, 4.

10 Some years later, in 1911, *sharīʿah* law would be enforced over all the subjects of the Imām by means of the treaty of Daʿʿān between the Ottomans and the Imām himself. In the article 6 of the treaty, *sharīʿah* law is explicitly applied to Muslims and 'Israelites' (cf. Wāsiʿy, 2010: 355).

desires a religion other than Islam, never will it be accepted of him; and in the Hereafter he will be in the ranks of those who have lost."[11] Passages of this kind are usually deployed in the presence of non-Muslims.

This rule, combining verses from the Qurʾān, sayings of the Prophet, and traditions from ʿAli Ibn Abū Ṭālib, attempted to eradicate transgressions emanating from music. The quoted verse from the Qurʾān proceeds as follow: "And of mankind is he who purchases idle talks to mislead from the Path of Allah without knowledge, and takes it by way of mockery."[12] The exegesis of this verse is potentially ambiguous. Yet, in the rule, it is changed so as to overtly point to music through a subtle operation of bricolage: the verse is cut, and the following words are added, "*ilā* [ ] *al-ghinā* (towards singing)." This interpretation is reinforced through the quoting of a *ḥadīth* from al-Bukhary: "[The Prophet] said slslm, two sounds are dissolute: the sound of a melody for idleness and play and the double clarinet of Satan;" and it was also reinforced with another *ḥadīth* from ʿAli Ibn Abū Ṭālib: "The first at singing was Iblīs, then he played (*zammar*) the double clarinet, eventually [ ]."[13]

The rule continues, compelling people to avoid sinful behaviour and threatening transgressors with a fine of one riyāl. The final greetings, as we have seen, are addressed to the noble Shiites, to the people of *mikhlāf* Dāyān, and to those who should welcome God's guidance.

In sum, thus far, the documents are imposing the moral order of the Zaydiyah on some traditional practices which, up to the present time, characterise the rural areas of northern Yemen. These efforts and the results achieved by the *ʿāqil* and by ʿAli Ahmed must be considered exceptional. The double clarinet (*mizmār*) had a central role in the social life of rural areas. During weddings, the entire *samrah*, the vigil that takes place on Wednesday night (cf. chapter 6), pivoted on the wild dances that sprang from the sound of the *mizmār* and the rhythm of the *ṭablah*. Dancers from Kuthreh and from the surrounding villages would travel for hours in order to engage in fanciful competitions that arose from these 'evil' melodies and rhythms. The *mizmār* was the core of any wedding and of most other ceremonial occasions.

11 Qurʾān 3:85.

12 Qurʾān 31:6.

13 The reader might wonder what was the rationale behind such prohibitions. This question shall be answered on two levels. On the first level, the one that receives an imprimatur in the text, what matters is order. As it happens with most of the religious prohibitions, no explanation is given nor any required: to belong is to submit. The genealogical research of the causes of a prohibition is part of our epistemology, but it is inappropriate if we aim at understanding cultures 'in the making'. This tradition was handed down, generation after generation, as opposed to other traditions. More often than not, cultural traits emerged as the residual product of conflicts, as the 'cultural stuff' of a boundary: they were given significance *ex post*. Moving to the second level, the level of significance, the prohibition was reflexively motivated in two ways: *a*) music would encourage passion and inappropriate behaviour; b) music would distract people from the remembrance of God.

However, at the turn of the 20th century, morality and politics walked side by side, organising opposition to the Ottoman ruler. As we have seen in Chapter 1, this opposition was phrased in religious terms and the Ottomans described as 'impious oppressors'. The four rules, by forbidding music and dance, imposed a Zaydī moral order which was overtly based on the *sharīʿah.*[14] This result was achieved step by step, gradually spreading a discursive order which granted the *sayyids* a privileged moral standing.

The Historical Pedigree of the Sayyids of Kuthreh

A ḥākim *and a* sayyid

While the *sayyids* of Kuthreh were gaining influence and prestige in their tribal section, other *sayyids* were organising the resistance against the Ottoman rule. The Turks first attempted controlling Yemen in the 16th century. They were forced to abandon the country in 1630. A second attempt occurred in 1849. In 1882, after several military operations, the Ottomans achieved taking control of the Northern part of the country. Almost immediately, Zaydī rebels started fighting the invader. In 1891, Zaydī troops lead by Yahya Ḥamīd ad-Dīn besieged Ṣanʿāʾ and took Taʿiz. The Turkish governor Faizi Pascià crushed the revolt. In 1895-96, the rebels took up arms for a second time, under the command of Maḥmūd Ḥamīd ad-Dīn, Yahya's son (De Leone, 1955).

In all likelihood, it is during this period that ʿAli Ahmed al-Muṭahar fought alongside the Imām against the Turks, since in 1899-1900 he was already a grown man and a renowned mediator. The rule of the Ḥamid ad-Dīn family gradually consolidated during the first years of the 20th century. In 1904, Yahya Ḥamīd ad-Dīn led the umpteenth revolt against the Turks. By 1911, tired of Yahya's attacks, the Turks signed the treaty of Daʿʿān, thus conceding to him responsibility for local government and the administration of justice in Zaydī areas. In 1918, Yemen was independent.

The prestige and reputation of ʿAli Ahmed al-Muṭahar, which until that moment had stemmed

14 The fourth rule overtly opposes the *sharīʿah* in favour of the rule of Beny ʿOthmān. The third rule overtly endorses a Shiite moral order. The term *shīʿah*, which was rarely used in Yemen, needs to be understood in opposition to the Sunni Turks. Traditional wedding ceremonies, in Turkey, are very similar to Yemeni ones (I gained this insight visiting the ethnographic museum in Ankara). For this reason, I have the feeling—but this is just speculation—that the *mizmār* and the *ṭāsah* had been, at the turn of the 20th century, recently introduced by the Turks. Especially the *ṭāsah*, which is similar to a modern snare drum, was not crafted in Yemen. This would explain why this music was associated with a secular moral order. Further evidence is given by the fact that muzayyins, even nowadays, phrase their rhythms on the *marfaʿ*, a small bass drum carved in wood and goat skin.

from his own knowledge and acts, gradually became attached to the state administration of the Ḥamīd ad-Dīn family. He served the Imām Yahya (d. 1948) until the end of his days, and his story is exemplary of how (some) *sayyids* managed to convert their genealogical capital into a state salaried occupation during the Mutawakkilite Kingdom (1918-1962). I have collected ʿAli's story from his grand nephew, Mohammed Yahya.[15]

ʿAli was a man of outstanding qualities. Famous for his attractive appearance, he would wander around with his face wrapped in a veil (*mulaththam*), inspired, as he was, by a firm faith (*imāneh*), a precaution that aimed at preventing chaos in the heart of any woman (*ḥattā mā yiftinsh ayy mareh*), and also, and I guess this was the main reason, to protect himself from the evil eye. He studied in Ṣaʿdah, and later he worked as a judge in Hamdān, al-Ḥeīmateīn, Madhḥaq, Bilād ar-Ruʾūs and Bilād al-Bustān. In each of these places he bought land and property, and often he got married—at least six times—giving birth to only one son, Hussein, and two daughters. Under the Imām Yahya he became the official *ḥākim* for the entire *mikhlāf* Dāyān. It's an often told story that the Imām described him stating, "Yā Jamāly[16], you encompass three qualities." "What are they?" He asked. "The head of David in the study of the Qurʾān, the beauty of Joseph, who was handsome, and the modesty of Mariam, who was chaste," the Imām replied.

ʿAli worked in Ṣanʿāʾ at the court of the Imām (in the *diwān ash-sharīf*). Apparently, his wisdom and his handsomeness overshadowed the Imām himself, who reacted by forcing him to retire in Kuthreh. When he complained, stating, "Poverty already killed me with its sword," the Imām replied, "Be patient, oh Jamāly! (*aṣ-ṣabr yā Jamāly!*)." This story was told to me as proof of the fact that *sayyids* were not necessarily privileged at the time of the Imām.

ʿAli Ahmed died when he was just 55 years old. His son, Hussein, attempted following in his footsteps. Greeted respectfully by the Imām Ahmed by virtue of his ancestry, he asked for a job. The Imām addressed him, asking, "Did you study?" He replied that he didn't, and so the Imām ordered, "Let the *qabīly* son of ʿAli study in Ṣaʿdah." The term *qabīly*, here, is used in its original sense: to describe a peasant, a simple person, someone without any religious knowledge. Hussein studied in Ṣaʿdah with al-Houthi,[17] for 12 years. He became "*mudīr al-qalam*" in the Ministry of Justice and *ḥākim* in Thuleh, al-Maḥwitt and many other places. Being a famous scholar, and the son of a man of great renown, Hussein fell victim to his own reputation. Driven by arrogance (*kibrah*), he squandered the richness of his family, selling a lot of lands and properties.

15 Recorded interview, Kuthreh, 9 February, 2013.

16 Each name, in Yemen, is associated with a nickname referring to a quality. Thus ʿAli is 'al-Jamāly', the handsome; Ahmed is 'ash-sharafy', the noble; and so forth.

17 It is chronologically possible that Hussein studied with Badr ad-Dīn al-Houthi, who entered Dār al-Muʿallimīn in the early 1920s. However, this might be a projection of the present fame of al-Houthi onto past events.

His son, Yahya, knew a different world. Born while his father was *ḥākim* in Jibleh, he studied the entire Qurʾān with the *aḥkām* and the *tajwīd,*[18] then, after the revolution, he started his career as a soldier, in the fledgling Yemeni Arab Republic. It was the end of an era.

Mohammed Yahya, Yahya's son and ʿAli Ahmed's grandnephew, recounted to me the story of his ancestors with a mixture of admiration and regret. The organising principle of his narrative was clearly the descending parabola of his family's education: "My great grandfather was a renowned religious scholar (*ʿallāmah*). My grandfather '*lā bas*', he had a good religious training. My father was a soldier." Even though Mohammed Yahya studied in high school, he presented himself on the lowest rung of the ladder of his family's social standing: "I am a soldier and I work as a taxi driver with my motorbike," he explained. Thus he added:

> Schools arrived, and we didn't study such things anymore [he is referring to the religious study. n.d.a.]. [Now] we study a limited number of chapters [of the Qurʾān]. Even the one who graduates from university doesn't know the judgements [*al-aḥkām*]... And they don't even know anything about their religion. Some people don't even know the obligatory prayers, ritual ablution, I mean... They don't know. Most of the people are taught things different from an Islamic study. Some people specialise in Islamic studies, but the old knowledge was different... The one who studied before, was more specialised... Specialised in the Holy Qurʾān, its exegesis, Arabic language, Sharḥ al-Azhār,[19] the judgements for the *sharīʿah* law. And there are still people like those... I mean, al-Houthi, *sīdy* Maḥmūd al-Mūʾayyad, Mohammed al-Manṣūr... If they studied like we did, they wouldn't be able to judge between their sons. They couldn't judge between their children... [...]
>
> Some people, even the one that graduates in university, they lack, they lack some things. The things which I have told you... It's embarrassing. They cannot pray among the people. They read the Qurʾān and they distort it. [Instead], if you go to the Great Mosque to study, or to the an-Nahreīn mosque, where sīdy Maḥmūd al-Mūʾayyad was teaching, or in Ṣaʿdah, you can understand... You have to go back to these things. To the right knowledge, the real science. Which is the science of religion. Because our studies [nowadays]... I mean, you graduate and you are semi-cultured, not completely well-read. I mean, you have social knowledge, but the religious one is zero. I will tell you... For example: the *jināzah* prayer... Some people do not know what is it... Because they didn't study. Because our method [of study] became approximate... There's just a little about religion. There's much about material matters, but nothing about religious ones...

18 Tajwīd refers to the rules governing pronunciation during the recitation of the Qurʾān.

19 Kitāb al-Azhar is a work of (*fiqh*) by Ibn al-Murtada (d. 840/1437). This work and its commentary serve as a reference points for Yemeni law and for the Zaydī Hadawy school (Gleave, 2006: 732). 'Hadawy' refers to the school founded by the Imām al-Hādy Yahya ilā al-Ḥaqq in the IX century.

Mohammed concluded our interview with a reassuring purpose. “For me,” he said, “it's too late. But now I know how to educate my son.” This family history brings to the forefront two points of paramount importance: the role of the example of the ancestors and the role of religious instruction. Mohammed Yahya's narrative is structured by a comparison with the lives of his ancestors. These biographies are at once objects of critical reflection and models for action; Mohammed's self is the product of the consciousness of his family's past, and yet this past is also drawn upon when making plans for the future.

We cannot understand Mohammed's narrative but against this backdrop. If he were not the descendant of ʿAli Ahmed al-Muṭahar, his life would be quite satisfactory: a good level of instruction, two jobs, two houses, innumerable lands, a wife and children. However, Mohammed describes himself as ‘lacking’ when compared to his ancestors. Lacking what? Lacking morality, lacking religious instruction—which brings us to the second point: secular instruction is not considered a source of prestige. It is only instrumental to obtain a state salaried job. As Rosenthal has observed, “*ʿilm* [knowledge] is Islam.” (Rosenthal, 1970: 2; quoted in Messick, 1988: 646)

I need to emphasise a last point: obviously, Mohammed's imagination was not only shaped by the legacy of his ancestors. This legacy articulated with the present; it combined with the historical time of Mohammed's life. At the time of the interview (February 2013) Mohammed's ancestry acquired a new significance in the wake of the rise of the Houthi movement. We shall deepen this point below.

Written genealogies

During my fieldwork I focused on the life of ʿAli Ahmed al-Muṭahar, for several reasons. First because, despite his uniqueness, he represented the ideal type of the ‘sayyid’: a great religious scholar, a man of the administration, a rich landowner and an inspirational figure for his descendants. This uniqueness stood out against the humbleness of his *sayyid* fellows in Kuthreh, mostly poor peasants. However, there was a second factor that pushed me to deepen his biography: ʿAli Ahmed al-Muṭahar is the character who fixed Kuthreh in history.

As we have seen in chapter 2, people from *beny al-khumus* do not exemplify their origins in two senses. First, in a metaphorical sense, their moral status is described as deficient. Yet in a second more literal sense, they are materially incapable of proving who they are and where they come from. Their ‘origins and testaments’ (*al-usūl wa-l-fuṣūl*) are lost, along with their properties. It

follows that ‘having origins’ not only implies a certain moral standard; it urges the need to prove one's ancestry. This need is particularly urgent when someone is claiming no less than the ancestry of the Prophet Mohammed.

How did *sayyid* people from Kuthreh prove their ancestry? Most of them referred to history books and, among these books, they would often quote a famous one: M. Zabārah's *al-Anbāʾ ʿan Daūlat Bilqīs wa Sabāʾ*.[20] M. Zabārah reported a great amount of information regarding Yemeni families of *sayyids* and *qaḍys*, dedicating a whole paragraph to ‘sādat Kuthreh’.[21] In short, he certified that the *sayyids* of ‘hijrat Kuthreh’, south of Ṣanʿāʾ, were the progeny of the Imām Mohammed Ibn al-Qāsim (d. 403), martyr on the field of battle, and that al-Qāsim Ibn al-Hussein (d. 394), his father, discovered the source of water known as Gheīl Ālāf.[22] Al-Qāsim Ibn al-Hussein, who died in Dhamār, was later buried in al-Jaūzeh Saḥar, in Wādy al-Ajbār. Zabārah's paragraph regarding “sādat Kuthreh” ends with the following sentence:

> And among them in our age, [we remember] the brother al-ʿallāmah ʿAli Ibn Ahmed al-Kuthry, who was appointed judge in al-Ḥeīmah al-Khārijiyyah, then in Hamdān and other places, and who died in Ṣanʿāʾ in 1344 h. (Zabarah, 1984:139).

In sum, Zabārah recognised that ʿAli Ahmed al-Muṭahar was a direct descendant of al-Qāsim Ibn al-Hussein, the mythical ancestor who extracted Gheīl Ālaf and whose body was buried in al-Jaūzeh.

Nowadays, in Kuthreh, we can count between 9 and 21 *bidīn* (s. *badaneh*), depending on how we choose to set the genealogical bar. Almost any *sayyid* from these *bidīn* would agree that the ancestor of the community is buried somewhere in al-Jaūzeh, and that his name was Shams ad-Dīn.

Generally speaking, people from Beyt al-Maghreby—the most numerous *badaneh* in the village—would assume that Shams ad-Dīn is their ancestor and that anyone in the village would thus be a *Maghreby* (pl. *Maghāribah*).[23] Minor *bidīn*, like Beyt Muḥsen ʿAli, Beyt Aḥsan Loṭf and Beyt al-Ḥaddy, generally acknowledge this theory, recognising their convergence towards Beyt al-Maghreby and from this point of convergence, the common ancestry up to Shams ad-Dīn,[24]and yet

20 A second book, *al-Muqtaṭif min Tāʾrīkh al-Yemen*, provided the same genealogy and some further information.
21 The transcription of the genealogy provided by Zabārah's is in Appendix, Ch. 3, Doc. 9.
22 This spring of water, until quite recently, flowed in the surroundings of Artil, reaching a quarter named Ṣofyah Hāmish in Ṣanʿāʾ. For more details about the *ghuyūl* (s. *gheīl*) of Ṣanʿāʾ, cf. (Serjeant et al., 1983).
23 A great example of this kind of discourse is provided by the document in Appendix, Ch. 3, Doc. 7. The transcription is in Appendix, Ch. 3, Doc. 9.
24 A graphic representation of this version of the genealogy is provided in Appendix, Ch. 3, Doc. 10.

none of these families can provide written documents proving their ancestry.

Being Beyt al-Maghreby and the biggest *badaneh* in the village, their ancestry is the first I stumbled onto. However, as soon as I started digging, I ended up in a contested discursive field. Some Maghāribah—along with people from minor *bidīn*—would provide a 'minority report'. Consider the following excerpt from an interview with a 25 years old man from Beyt Muḥsen ʿAli:

> **Luca**: So let's say you are from Beyt Muḥsen ʿAli, right? Your origin is from Kuthreh, or…
>
> ʿ**Abdullah**: No. Our origin is not from Kuthreh, or from any village, whichever it was… Most [of the people] come from Marib from the time of Arwā and Bilqīs… When the dig of Marib got destroyed, at that time, all the Yemeni people spread… The mouse, they say… [he laughs]. This is the story… But the oldest, Beyt al-Maghreby, Beyt ʿAbdulhamid, Beyt Muḥsen ʿAli… This is our tree. Beyt Loṭf and Beyt Muḥsen ʿAli… We are one tree, and we belong to Beyt Hādy. Then you have Beyt al-Maghreby… How many Maghāribah are there [he laughs]? They belong to two brothers: the outer house and the inner house.
>
> **Luca**: So Beyt Muḥsen ʿAli belongs to Beyt al-Maghreby?
>
> ʿ**Abdullah**: No. To Beyt Hādy. We have a tree and we even bury people in the same cemetery… If you have a grave in the same cemetery, they are brothers or paternal uncles…. From the same *badaneh*. It's not possible that one comes and digs… Only if the land is free, then you can use it for yourself and your family. But that land belongs to Beyt Muḥsen ʿAli.

Muḥsen ʿAli, the ancestor of this *badaneh*, moved from the old village of Kuthreh to Beny Wārid, where he settled. Actually, many people from Beyt Muḥsen ʿAli lived in Beny Wārid during my fieldwork. ʿAbdullah's paternal uncle, however, never admitted this history, proudly restating often that every *sayyid* in the village was Maghreby.

Beside the 'minority reports', I soon discovered that people from Beyt Shams ad-Dīn and Beyt al-Muṭahar were overtly contesting the genealogical reconstruction fostered by people from Beyt al-Maghreby. "Shams ad-Dīn is our ancestor (*jaddanā*). A few years ago, they were not claiming this ancestry. Now everyone becomes Maghreby (*yitamāghribū*) and every Maghreby belongs to Beyt Shams ad-Dīn." This genealogical construction was interpreted as a massification strategy, a move to gain political weight.

One day, I finally obtained a written genealogy from people belonging to Beyt al-Muṭahar, a document of astonishing importance for our study, since ʿAli Ahmed al-Muṭahar himself wrote it.

With great surprise, I found no point of contact between the original genealogy written by ʿAli Ahmed al-Muṭahar[25] and the Zabārah's version.

Following this finding, I organised—with no ease, given the political situation of that time—a trip to al-Jaūzeh Saḥar. Soon I discovered that the name 'al-Jaūzeh' referred to a district of four villages, which I visited one by one, mosque by mosque. I only found one grave,[26] lodged in an old mosque decorated with a block of stone of Himyarite origins. Over the grave, an inscription commemorated a martyr: "ash-Shahīd an-Nabawy al-Imāmy al-Hussein al-Hussein Abū-l-Qāsim Ibn al-Ḥasan Ibn ʿAli Ibn Abī Ṭālib," (d. 581 h.). The name and date of burial were completely at odds with Zabārah's version.

The day of my trip to al-Jaūzeh I was accompanied by ʿAli ʿAbdulhamid who, as we shall see below, was profoundly convinced of the correctness of his ancestry. As soon as we found the grave, he transcribed the name with irrepressible joy. When I compared it with Zabārah's version, clumsily stating, "It's wrong", he attacked me with irrepressible anger. "This is my grandfather," he stated. "Are you saying that I'm not a *sayyid*?" I immediately adjusted the focus, stating, "Surely Zabārah is wrong." However, the machine was set in motion, and my host decided to prove to me his ancestry. In this way, a few days later, I obtained the written genealogy of Beyt Shams ad-Dīn, to which Beyt ʿAbdulhamid was said to belong. Mohammed Shams ad-Dīn, an old man who would spend his entire days in the old mosque of the village, provided me with two written documents. These two genealogies of Beyt Shams ad-Dīn revealed a new truth.

The first document had been written in 1984 (1405 h.) by Shams ad-Dīn Ibn Mohammed, who was born in 1911 (1330 h.). The head of the document depicts the descent of al-Hādy Yahya ilā al-Ḥaqq, the founder of the Zaydī school in Yemen, up to ʿAdnān. Right below, the maternal side of ʿAli Ibn Abī Ṭālib's descent is depicted. Thus the descent of Beyt Shams ad-Dīn is reported. The second part of this document is a commentary written by the son of Shams ad-Dīn. It clearly recognises that Shams ad-Dīn—weak of eyesight—misreported a part of the genealogy. Thus it proceeds to state that Zabarah's version is wrong, eventually providing the 'correct' genealogy: "So the truth is found in a record book (*kurrāsah*) [which belongs] to our affines, the *sayyid* people of al-Marwān, whose grandfather moved from Beny Sām to Ṣanʿāʾ, and he is Nāṣir ad-Dīn Bin Ṣalāḥ […]."

It should be clear, at this point, that no common ancestry was proved by means of written genealogies. Each *badaneh* of the village provided a different ancestry, and some proved none. This

25 Cf. Appendix 1, Ch. 3, Doc. 5.
26 Cf. Appendix 1, Ch.3, Doc. 8.

information, taken by itself, would hold great political value for the ʿarab*s*. Delegitimising the ancestry of the *sayyids* was, in fact, a widespread political strategy. Moreover, as we have seen above, the dynamic through which all the *sayyids* were presenting themselves as "Maghāribah" was overtly interpreted in political terms. However, how was this peculiar construction of the ancestry tied to the genealogical imagination of the *sayyids* and to their genealogical capital?

We can highlight five points of interest. First, in all the examined cases, a *sayyid* identity was taken for granted and a genealogical proof was provided *ex-post*. Even written mistakes were not considered as a disproof of the genealogy. Being an affine of a *sayyid* family was, somehow, considered proof of a Hashemite ancestry, even in the absence of written documents. Second, in all the examined cases, the procedure was 'cladistic': the *sayyids* attempted to prove their genealogy by tracing it back to a common ancestor named '*mujma*ʿ', an ancestor shared with other branches of the *sayyid* family. This is particularly evident in document 6 (appendix, Ch.3), where some names are listed of people who 'group (*yijtami*ʿ)' different branches of the *sayyid* family. Third, the *mujma*ʿ is, generally speaking, someone rooted in history, someone whose grave is tangible, and whose deeds are renown. Once the genealogy is proven up to a *mujma*ʿ, the rest of the Hashimite ancestry is taken for granted.

If compared to the genealogies of peasants,[27] *sayyids*' genealogies are different for a fundamental reason: they are 'only' genealogies, and the genealogy in itself constitutes capital. As we shall see in Chapter 4, peasants do not hold any piece of paper proving their origin, which is inscribed in their contracts, in their documents, and in their testaments. In a word, it is written in their property; it is tied to the land. It is a local identity.

It is not by chance that only two families of *sayyid* origin had written documents proving their ancestry. These families, in fact, were families of teachers and scholars, people who had knowledge of and interest in writing down their ancestry, but above all, people who had the need to prove it beyond the boundaries of their village, since they were 'migrants in the path of God' (*muhājir fī sabīl-il-lāh*). A *sayyid* teaching in a foreign village was *muhajjar*, a foreigner dependent upon a tribal brotherhood. He had nothing with him but his science and his ancestry.

Eventually we shall consider that the genealogy in itself, with the correct list of names up to ʿAdnān or even Ādam, was esoteric knowledge. Just a few people knew how to read and write. Fewer had access to documents of the kind we have examined in this chapter. We might thus hypothesise that an ancestry of this kind was transmitted from father to son, in its correct form, and that it constituted inaccessible knowledge for people who did not belong to the *sayyid* group.

27 I purposely use the label 'peasants', thus comprising peasants of *sayyid* origins, who had no written genealogies.

The Scientific School (al-Madrasah al-ʿilmiyyah)

ʿAli Ahmed al-Muṭahar, along with a few other villagers from his generation, had the chance to improve his level of instruction. At that time, the privileged *locus* for the transmission of knowledge were mosques. The Great Mosque in Ṣanʿāʾ and other renowned centres, such as the ash-Shamsiyyah Mosque in Dhamār and the ones in Thulāʾ, Kaūkabān, Shahārah and Ṣaʿdah (Baradūny, 1991: 416; ʻAmmāry, 2013: 15), provided the fundamentals of Islamic instruction, within the borders of the Zaydi school. Next to these renowned centres, instruction was conducted in the so-called *katātīb* (s. *kuttāb*), small rooms attached to the peripheral of mosques, were both guests were hosted and students trained. The highest degree of instruction, in these Koranic schools, was the completion of reading of the Holy Quran (*khatm al-Qurʾān al-karīm*).

It didn't take long for the Ottomans to understand that this education system was fostering the Zaydi and the Hādawy schools. As a reaction, the Turks started building schools in compliance with the Ottoman system. In Ṣanʿāʾ, they inaugurated the Instructional School (*al-madrasah al-irshādiyyah*), reserved for personalities from both the Turks and the Yemenis. The overt goal of this institution was that of creating a new ruling class. Concurrently, a Teachers' House (*dār al-muʿallimīn*) was established in order to stand in for the traditional ʻcircle of study'[28] of the mosques, training a new generation of Yemeni teachers in the Sunni *fiqh* and the Ottoman system (ʻAmmāry, 2013:16).

The Turks withdrew from Yemen in 1918. The Imām Yahya, in quality of subject of the Ottoman empire, but also as one of its administrators from 1911—had already experienced the nature of a modern state and of its institutions (Carvajal, 2010: 3). One of his first initiatives consisted in turning the Ottoman ʻOfficers Club' into the ʻOrphans' School' (*madrasat-al-aytām*).[29] By 1925, he transformed the ʻRest House of the Wāly' (*dār istirāḥat-al-wāly*) into the ʻScientific School' (*al-madrasah al-ʿilmiyyah*) or House of the Sciences (*dār al-ʿulūm*).

28 "Circle of study" (*ḥalaqat-ad-dars*) is a term which is still used in the mosques. It probably refers to the disposition of the students, who sit with the teacher on the carpets of the mosque, in a circular shape.

29 On this point I follow ʻAmmāry (2013: 16), whose work I consider highly reliable, he being the director of the Markīz at-Taūthīq at-Tarbawy. This perspective openly contradicts the idea that the Orphans' School was established during the Ottoman period. Cf. Carvajal (2010: 8) and Farah (2002: 58)

These places of education have been described as insufficient in number and underdeveloped with respect to the subjects of teaching (ʻAmmāry, 2013: 20; Douglas, 1987: 11). Generally speaking (Cf. Ch. 1), this was one of the main critiques advanced by the liberal exponents of the Free Yemeni Movement against the Imāms. The first point needs no objection: the schools were few in number. The second point resulted from anti-*sayyid* propaganda. As F. Carvajal has pointed out, "This has been due to a discourse, whether in Western literature or the Republican government's narrative, to dismiss Ḥamīd al-Din's as a time of tyranny and backwardness alone." (2010: 5) Modern subjects like History and Geography—argued some authors, like Douglas (1987), thus spreading the point of view of the FYM—were not included in the program of the Scientific School. As far as I know, this information is not empirically grounded: Chemistry, Physics, History and Geography figure among the subjects taught in the school. A third point of friction regards the genealogy of the students allowed to study; it is common sense opinion—fostered by eminent exponents of the revolution—that only *sayyids* were allowed to study in the school (Carvajal, 2010: 9). Here, again, empirical data dismisses this hypothesis.[30]

As soon as the Scientific School was established, five men from Kuthreh started their religious training in this institute. They were all of *sayyid* origin and of humble economic status. Why did people of *sayyid* origin—and not *ʿarabs* or people from *beny al-khumus*—enter the institute? First we need to clarify that there was no normative constraint keeping an ʿarab away from instruction. On the contrary, we have clear evidence that the Imām was fostering non-*sayyids* in positions of responsibility, in order to avoid challenges from people of Hashimite origin (Carvajal, 2010; Douglas, 1987). Once we dodge the stereotype that instruction was *only* for *sayyids*, we open up the field for new answers to the old question: why were *sayyids* pursuing religious instruction? I shall answer this question empirically, presenting the family history of Beyt ʿAbdulhamid from the perspective of the *sayyid* ʿAli ʿAbdulhamid, the man who hosted me in Kuthreh for almost one year.

As with most of the stories which we have taken into account in the previous chapter, this family history arises from the description of an ancestor, not someone, in this case, who has lost his origins, a coward or a person in need, but rather a well-read man, a great scholar—what Yemenis would call an *ʿallāmah*: the mythical Shams ad-Dīn, the putative ancestor of the *sayyids* of Kuthreh.

> **Luca:** Present me Beyt ʿAbdulhamid, the way you prefer...
>
> **ʿAli:** Beyt ʿAbdulhamid? My grandfather is ʿAbdulhamid, son of Mohammed, son of

30 The empirical findings to which I refer are contained in manuscript scholar registers of the Scientific School, which I had the chance to study in Markiz at-Tawthiq at-Tarbawy in Ṣanʿāʾ, Ministry of Instruction.

> Ahmed, son of Shams ad-Dīn. I don't know if this Shams ad-Dīn... I don't know if he is the one buried in al-Jaūzeh. But our ancestor is buried in al-Jaūzeh, a village in Sanḥān. And we still have a plot of land there, called al-Maksim. Obviously, my grandfather Shams ad-Dīn is our ancestor (*jaddanā al-kabīr*), the *ʿallāmah*, who is remembered in the books. In al-Hamdāny's Iklīl and in many books of history. This is Shams ad-Dīn, our grandfather.

What distinguished Shams ad-Dīn, what made his descendants proud of remembering and imitating him, was clearly his status of *ʿallāmah*. But who is an *ʿallāmah*? The word comes from the root of *ʿilm*, and it describes a person of outstanding religious knowledge:

> He was a great *ʿallāmah*, he knew the entire Qurʾān by heart. Without seeing it, he was capable of reciting it. The whole Qurʾān, the *khitmah*. A great *ʿallāmah*, meaning that he could recite the Qurʾān through seven ways of reading [seven melodies], he knew the exegesis, he knew the *sharī'ah* of Mohammed Ibn 'Abd-il-lāh, he knew the laws of inheritance... When someone tells you that a scientist (*'ālim*) is a great *ʿallāmah* it means... As the Qurʾān says, "Only those fear God, from among his servants, who have knowledge."[31] And this verse tells you that they fear God for His fearsomeness and they know God of His knowledge. I mean, they only know Him [*muwaḥḥidīn leh*]. And there's a second verse in Āl ʿImrān: "It is He who has sent down to you, [O Muhammad], the Book; in it are verses [that are] precise - they are the foundation of the Book - and others unspecific. As for those in whose hearts is deviation [from truth], they will follow that of it which is unspecific, seeking discord and seeking an interpretation [suitable to them]. And no one knows its [true] interpretation except Allah . But those firm in knowledge say, "We believe in it. All [of it] is from our Lord.[32]" Two verses in the Qurʾān regard the scientists. And there are proverbs: "Scientists are the inheritance of the Prophets." They possess a great science, *subḥān Allāh.*[33] I can't describe this knowledge for you, because I know just a little of it.

From this knowledge many functions descended. One of them was that of mediation. Both al- Hādy Yahya, founder of the Zaydi school in Yemen, and ʿAli Ahmed al-Muṭahar were famous mediators. Shams ad-Dīn was not an exception to this tradition.

> The tribesmen (*al-ghuramā*), when they had a fight, were coming by themselves, saying,

31 Quran 35: 28. Note that the verse is not complete.
32 Quran 3: 7.
33 Subḥān Allāh literally means "glory be to God." Yet in this passage, as in many others, the formula is referred to the substantive of the previous sentence, functioning as a sort of attribute. So the whole sentence could be translated as "They possess a great science, what an astonishing science!"

> “We want Fulān to judge us.” **They loved every scientist with a true faith (*ʿālim mūʾmin*)**. The *mutashayyiʿīn* peasants loved [the scientists]. And when I say “*mutashayyiʿ*” I mean admirer (*muḥibb*). Admirers of the person... Of the learned person, because the scientist doesn't uphold but the truth. He fears God, I mean, he doesn't make mistakes, nor he flatters one tribesman or the other... I mean, for money... He doesn't do that. “Oh Fulān, judge us!” Before they were saying: oh sīdy Fulān, meaning that he was a *sayyid*, Hāshimy... I mean, it was from themselves. **You didn't urge them to say *sayyid*, this didn't happen, it would have been shameful** (*ʿayb*). They were saying, “Oh sīdy Fulān, we want you to judge this and that.” [...] For him who was from the line (*silālah*) of Beny Hāshim, I mean, it was normal: people knew that he was a scientist, that he was a good man, because he is a *sayyid*, it is said *sayyid*... You don't find among Beny Hāshim people... that make many mistakes. They hold the book of God and the law of Mohammed Ibn ʿAbdullah.

There are two points that I shall emphasise. First, in this narrative—as in many others that I have collected—the distinguishing quality of a *sayyid* is religious instruction. As we shall see below, for a long time, being a *sayyid*—a *sayyid* worth this title—meant being a well-instructed man, a scientist of religion. In this sense, the distinction between the *ʿālim* (he who has knowledge) and the *jāhil* (the ignorant person) (Messick, 1988: 642) or the *khaṣṣah* and the *ʿammah* (Shawkani, 2010) was a fundamental strand of hierarchical identity. Moreover, religious knowledge was not, ultimately, a monopoly of the *sayyids*: as we have seen in Chapter 2, achieving knowledge was a means of social ascent, also for a *muzayyin*. The second point is that peasants paid a genuine deference (*haiba*) to the *sayyids*, a respect inspired by their moral standing, in turn associated with their religious knowledge. We shall deepen this topic below.

After presenting me his ancestor, ʿAli turned to the description of another man of renown with whom we already acquainted: the *ʿāqil* ʿAbdulhamid Mohammed Shams ad-Dīn. We left the *ʿāqil* at the turn of the 20th century, when he was a prominent character of his village and a rich landowner. The *ʿāqil* had two sons, Mohammed and ʿAbdulkarim, from whom a large progeny descended. Moreover, he built a house for his family, physically separating it from Beyt Shams ad-Dīn:[34] nowadays, in fact, Beyt ʿAbdulhamid is considered a *badaneh* in its own respect. We shall consider the branch that stemmed from ʿAbdulkarim in Chapter 4; here I am concerned with the story of Mohammed and his descendants.

34 The processes of fission of a lineage were strictly tied to the materiality of houses. Each house was shared by more than one nuclear family (what is nowadays called *ʿāīlah*). Different families eating from one kitchen were still considered one *usrah*. The proverb says, “*ʿādhum fī jifneh wāḥidah*”: they used to eat from one bowl. Instead, when each family had a different oven (*tannūr*), each nucleus of commensals was called a *ḥilālah*.

Mohammed was what we might define a rebel son. His sinful behaviour was a constant source of regret for his authoritative father. It is said that once ʿAbdulhamid tied him up and dropped him in an irrigation channel, in order to punish him. Not satisfied, he decided to use his son as a *qalabeh*, one of those banks of earth which direct the flow of water for irrigation. Apparently, these exemplar punishments did not yield the expected results. Mohammed engaged in a disastrous career as a merchant, progressively dissipating all his wealth. As people used to say in the village, "He sold the sun and the wind (*bāʿ ash-shams wa-n-naūd*)." As a consequence his sons, ʿAbdulhamid and his brothers, did not have any source of income, since, "Basically my grandfather, Mohammed, sold everything to become a trader."

In sum, during the early 1920s, when the Imām had just created the scientific school, a vital conjuncture (Johnson-Hanks, 2002) opened up for ʿAbdulhamid. He was a grown man, and he had no source of income to maintain himself and his family. How did he choose to become a teacher? On the one hand, he was certainly constrained by his material conditions. Yet, on the other, "They [he and the other *sayyids* from Kuthreh] entered study because they were *sayyids*, I told you already... *sayyids*!" The inner drive that pushed ʿAbdulhamid to pursue a religious instruction was his genealogy, his origins (*aṣl*). Here, again, the term *aṣl* stands for the symbolic transposition of what we have previously defined as *genealogical capital*.

This capital—accumulated labour in objectified and incorporated forms—shaped the motivations of ʿAbdulhamid, selected them, so as to make some paths more probable than others. Capital contains a tendency to persist in its being (Bourdieu, 1986), to reproduce itself. It surely provided a network of contacts that facilitated the access to the institute (social capital) and a motivating environment that actively pushed ʿAbdulhamid towards religious instruction. Concurrently, it literally crafted his person, shaped his moral habitus and provided him with an almost natural, incorporated knowledge, transmitted hereditarily (cultural capital).

ʿAbdulhamid spent his entire life teaching. First in Tahāmah, on the Red Sea coast, in Ḥarāz and Sanḥān, in Ḍabaʿāt, where he got married with a *sharīfah*, a girl of Hashimite descent, in Jadir, not far from the International Aiport of Ṣanʿāʾ, where he worked with Badr ad-Dīn al-Houthi, a coeval of him, in ʿAmrān, where his son ʿAli ʿAbdulhamid was born, and eventually in Hamdān, 40 years of teaching, until the 1962 revolution.

How was teaching at that time? I have collected witnesses from students that studied before the 1962 revolution. The basic kit of any student was composed of a wooden inkwell (*dawāh*), some white powder (*midād*), a pen and a small wooden black-board (*laūḥ*). The students had the responsibility of providing the pen and the white powder. The pen was carved from a cane (*ḥallāl*).

The white powder, which functioned as a sort of ink, was obtained from a white kind of clay (*gharāḍ*), which children collected in the mountains. The inkwell and the small black-board were brought from Ṣanʿāʾ.

The teacher himself had a big wooden black-board, hung in a small room called ‘*al-maktab*’—literally ‘the office’. This room was usually situated next to the mosque, and it also functioned as a guest-room for travellers and poor people. Students were called the teacher “*yā ustādh*” or “*yā seīdanā*”.[35] At first, students were asked to learn the alphabet, with the vocals. As many old men recalled, they would repeat in a chorus, “aaa, iii, uuu; baa, bii, buu; taa, tii, tuu,” in order to apprehend the *fatḥah*, *kasrah* and *ḍammah*. Thus, they used to learn to tie the letters together. The study of the Qurʾān proceeded from the last chapters, the shorter ones. Hence students were taught the *tajwīd* and some *aḥādīths*, and how to pray in the correct position.[36] They grasped basic notions of history, especially regarding the life of the Prophet (*as-sīrah an-nabawiyyah*). They learnt the basic mathematical operations: addition, subtraction, division and multiplication. Eventually, they learnt some famous maxims, like the renowned:

> Learn science to become a prince, and don't be ignorant looking like a donkey
>
> *taʿallam al-ʿilm li-takūna amīra, wa lā takūn jāhilan ṭalʿatu-l-ḥamīra*
>
> Science erects houses that do not need a foundation, and ignorance destroys the houses of esteem and honour
>
> *al-ʿilm yaʿlū buyūtan lā asās lahā, wa al-jahl yihdam buyūt al-ʿizz wa-sh-sharaf*

Even after the 1962 revolution, many *sayyids* were held in great respect because of their educative role. Yet, next to this function, they were paid a sincere deference by people who wanted to obtain *barakah*.

The term *barakah* has a history of its own within the vocabulary of social sciences. Ernst Gellner (1969) has the merit of having drawn attention to the importance of such a notion, but is also responsible for for many misunderstandings. *Barakah* is not something that a person can have or not have: it is not a super-power, or a quality of the person. *Barakah* is sent to man by God, and we shall translate the term as ‘blessing’. A good periphrasis of the term is exposed by Colin (1986:

35 Cf. the information provided in chapter 2 by Ṣāleḥ Zuleīṭ. Before the establishment of the Teachers' Institute, there was no “ustādh”, only the *faqīh*.

36 As we shall see below, the Zaydī school is distinguished by some gestures during the pray. Yet one of the most difficult positions to learn, for children, was that of the right foot, which during the prayer remains unnaturally overburdened.

1032), where he states that *baraka* is “a beneficent force, of divine origin, which causes superabundance in the physical sphere and prosperity and happiness in the psychic order.” (ibid) Yet I do not agree with him when he argues that the descendants of Mohammed “[...] may communicate the effluvia of their supernatural potential to ordinary men [...]” (ibid). A soberer explanation fits the case in question, one that does not entail irrational beliefs regarding supernatural powers.

People—this is true—were pursuing God's blessings, God's *barakah*, through the intercession of the *sayyids*, but not because of their origin; rather because, generally speaking, the *sayyids* were people of science. In turn, they were people of science because a peculiar genealogical capital was transmitted from generation to generation, facilitating the transmission of knowledge and inspiring a certain way of crafting selves. Consider this excerpt from an interview with ʿAli ʿAbdulhamid, the son of ʿAbdulhamid:

> This one from Nimrān came to our house... He was telling my father, “Buy from me this [land], oh sīdy ʿAbdulhamid.” My father, and God knows better, didn't have money, or he wanted to marry us, or I don't know what was wrong, honestly. That peasant was telling him... He was coming, and staying with my father... Pursuing blessings from his words (*yitabārak bi-qaūlateh*). He didn't have sons, and he had a lot of land... 70 or 80 libneh. He told my father, “Give me what you have, and for the rest study the Qurʾān for me. What's in your possibility...” My father said, “No, I'm not able to do this (mā fīh ly qudrah).” “What's in your possibility, sīdy ʿAbdulhamid. I want to give them to you.” God knows, what was wrong with my father... He didn't have money, or he couldn't study... With this amount of land, probably he thought, “I will die before I finish to study the Qurʾān.” Because it was a lot of land...

This excerpt depicts a faithful, rich peasant, trying to achieve merit from God through the intercession of a learned, pious, religious man. He is trying to pay him in order to study the Qurʾān (*tadrīs*, which simply means reading it with a certain intention), since the remembrance (*dhikr*) of God can provide a blessing in this life (*barakah*) or a merit in the afterlife (*ajr*). Yet, in turn, this learned, pious man—the *sayyid* ʿAbdulhamid—is refusing to do the *tadrīs* because he fears God, and he is afraid to die before fulfilling his commitment.

People would pursue *barakah* through the intercession of the *sayyids*, and ‘being a *sayyid*’ meant being a man of science. This point emerges clearly from another excerpt:

> **Luca:** You told me that people were coming to obtain a blessing from your father... What

do you mean?

ʿ**Ali:** My father was the more learned, as far as I know, he was the greatest among them... Among those who studied science (*ʿilm*) and religion (*diyānah*)... People say, "ʿAbdulhamid didn't walk, but studying the Qurʾān." My father was studying the Qurʾān, he was praying... Guiding the prayer on Friday. When the earthquake happened, he went to pray for the people of Shimās... During festivals, ʿayd Ramaḍān, ʿayd ʿArafeh. He was giving the speech... The speech for the ʿayd, the ʿayd prayer... And they were paying him... People were coming from Nimrān, Beyt Maḥfad, from Ḥāleh... People were coming, 15, 10, 2... And he was studying and doing things... From the Qurʾān! And they were giving butter, they were slaughtering rams...

There is one last kind of cultural capital which was transmitted as esoteric knowledge, from father to son, and only within the boundaries of a line of descent. This was knowledge "to do things," a knowledge that brought tangible benefits in earthly life. The *sayyid* ʿAbdulhamid, for example, knew how to encourage conception, and how to cure high fever. This last procedure consisted in writing with rose and pomegranate water, on a copper dish, the following verse of the Qurʾān: "We said: oh fire, be coolness and peace for Abraham." The name of Abraham had to be substituted with that of the sick person, the dish washed with water, and the water drunk. As simple as it might seem, this procedure was secret, and other *sayyids* did not know it. Each family, in fact, jealously guarded his own knowledge.

One last point needs to be added. By virtue of their religious knowledge, some *sayyids* were actually believed to embody supernatural powers. Generally speaking, some of them were labelled *ahl al-khaṭwah* (people of the step) and believed to embody the power of teleportation. The Imām Yahya was said to be an individual from *ahl al-khaṭwah*, and I heard innumerable tales regarding his supernatural powers. For instance, during the 1930's, a British attack was suddenly prevented because of mechanical damage to the airplanes. Popular tradition recount that the Imām teleported to ʿAden in order to sabotage the British fleet.

These stories might not be surprising, if referred to the Imām. However, each ancestor of the *sayyids*, in Kuthreh, was somehow remembered for his supernatural powers. The ancestor of Beyt Aḥsan Loṭf, for example, would cure people with his saliva, and once he captured a *jinn* embodied in a goat. This story was particularly famous, since, every year, the people from this *badaneh* would receive a goat, as a gift, that their ancestor recieved from the family, capturing the possessed goat. The ancestor of Beyt ʿAbdeh, I was told, once fell into the water, and his lamp (*fānūs*) did not die out; not all the powers were equally impressive.

Often, after hearing these stories, I would ask my interlocutors, “Why don't we see such things anymore?” Invariably they replied, “The ancestors (*al-awwalīn*) were learnt persons.”

On the meaning of hijrah

In 1962 the Imām Ahmed died. A short interregnum followed during which Badr ad-Dīn, his son, attempted reforming the Imāmate. He did not have the time to establish a new course before the revolution began. Immediately, Yemenis polarised into opposed factions: the loyalists (*al-malikiyyīn*) and the republicans (*al-jumhuriyyin*). Interestingly, this distinction cut across pre-existing loyalties and identities. At the beginning of the 1970s, when the Yemen Arab Republic was finally established, the impression that a new era was beginning was widespread, and scholarly literature widely mirrored this standpoint. The reader might imagine that, after these events, genealogical capital stopped crafting the selves of my interlocutors. However, my argument hinges on the reverse: the fields of struggle changed, yet genealogical capital kept having a generative function.

When the revolution began, ʿAbdulhamid was in Hamdān with his family. He dropped the *ʿimāmah* and the *thumah*, wrapping his head in a turban (*taṣammad*). He put the distinguishing signs of the religious scholar on his shoulders, and he fled. He returned to his village, Kuthreh, with his family, escorted by men of *shaykh* Hamdān.

Models of social organisation which depict the *sayyids* as ‘nobles’ heavily distort empirical evidence. As I have tried to show above, the class-situation of the *sayyids* was largely variable, ranging from rich landowners to poor teachers. The same holds true for most of the status groups considered in this study; we cannot assume any direct correspondence between class-situation and status. When the revolution began, it was directed against the Ḥamīd ad-Dīn family and, in a general sense, not against the *sayyids*. Yet a certain degree of confusion between the ruling family, the Imāmic state, and the whole category of *sayyids* immediately arose, stabilised and, eventually, left a semantic sediment that keeps informing political representations in contemporary Yemen (cf. chapter 1).

> When the revolution erupted... “The revolution erupted” means that the people revolted against Beyt Ḥamīd ad-Dīn. But they invented that it was against the *sayyids*, all of them... It wasn't against the *sayyids*. The *sayyids* left their jobs, and they didn't bring with them [properties] from Beyt Ḥamīd ad-Dīn. They didn't have relationships, nor money, nor they

> oppressed anyone... Nothing! Everyone needs to be judged for his actions!

This is how a *sayyid* from Kuthreh commented the 1962 upheaval. As we have just seen, many *sayyids* were teachers, and they travelled around the country teaching science for a modest salary. ʿAbdulhamid, for example, deeming his salary insufficient, asked the Imām for an increase.[37] The Imām replied, “You already earn the salary of an emperor.” During their travels, the *sayyids* would create connections, and often they got married, establishing extended networks of kinship that, up to the present, tie people together establishing a direct and privileged channel of communication between them.

> One of us, *ʿammy* ʿAbdulkhaliq, he was in Beny Maṭār. He was staying there, he wasn't sent by the Imām. Just to teach, nothing else... He went by himself, to teach the people. The peasants loved him. When the revolution erupted, he met as-Sallāl in Bāb al-Yemen. [As-Sallāl] told him, “Come.” He was talking to him, because he was wearing the *ʿimāmah*. He reached him. As-Sallāl told him: “Is this a *sayyid*?” He replied, “Yes.” As-Sallal said, “Aaaaah.” He was with the *shaykh* Ahmed ʿAli al-Maṭary, who knew *ʿammy* ʿAbdulkhaliq. So as-Sallal said, “Where are you from?” He replied, “The *sayyid* ʿAbdulkhaliq al-Kuthry.” And Ahmed al-Maṭary said, “This is our *hijrah*, in Beny Maṭar”. ʿAbdulkhaliq knew that as-Sallāl wanted to punish him, or something... So he said,“Look, President, my grandfather came up *naqīl*, and he came down *naqīl*.” Which means, that he was trying to get married, from the peasants. “For me, even after one thousand years, the presidency is yours.” And as-Sallāl transferred for him 1000 riyal.

As we have seen above, the village of Kuthreh was considered a *hijrah*, or so it is stated in many documents. The word *hijrah* and the institution itself have been an object of an intense academic debate, mostly devoted to the role of sacred enclaves in tribal territory within a segmentary system. I have contributed to this debate elsewhere (Nevola, 2013). Here I want to consider how the term *hijrah* and the derived adjective *muhajjar* were usedby the *sayyids* with whom I worked.

People moving within Kuthreh, from the valley (*wādy*) to the old part of the village, in order to study with the Houthi group in the old mosque, would describe themselves as ‘*muhājirīn fī sabīl Allāh*’. A boastful self-definition, in the opinion of the *ʿarabs*, yet a valid suggestion of how the root *h j r* was used. The reference was, clearly, Koranic, as in the verse: “[...] the emigrants for the cause

37 As M. Wagner has pointed out, during Yahya's rule, even “judges had no source of income other than bribes and “fees,” since they received a starvation salary (2015: 30-2).

of Allah (*muhājirīn fī sabīl Allāh*) [...]."[38]

The adjective *muhajjar*, a past participle stemming from the II form of the root *h j r*, adds something to this meaning, as it refers to someone moving from his own brotherhood (*akhuwwah*), nation (*qaūm*), or people (*ahl*), to a foreign land. As R. B. Serjeant has acutely noted, the term *hijrah* itself, if translated as 'flight', loses some of its significance.[39] The *sayyids*, in their role of teachers, were clearly *muhajjar* people: emigrants for the cause of God, *dependent for protection and livelihood from an alien political community.*[40] As we have seen in Chapter 2, the *muzayyin* was considered, for completely different reasons, *muhajjar*; he was in the same condition of dependency as a migrant teacher.

The term *hijrah* can be applied both to individuals and communities. A *muhajjar* teacher in a village was labelled '*hijrah*', but the same holds true for a number of individuals who gathered to study religious sciences. The case of Kuthreh is interesting since it suggests that *sayyids* reached the village as 'emigrants for the cause of God', overlapping the original *ʿarab* community. A detailed report of these migrations is detailed in appendix 1 (Ch. 3, Doc. 6). As the *sayyid* community grew bigger in numbers, its members diversified their occupations. Most of the *sayyids*, in Kuthreh, were in fact peasants, providing sustenance and protection for themselves as members of the brotherhood. The village took the label 'Hijrat Kuthreh' when it was finally associated with some scholars of renown, like ʿAli Ahmed al-Muṭahar. When the YAR established a system of public instruction, teachers slowly started to lose their old role.

False consciousness, or hegemony with hindsight

ʿAbdulhamid fled from Hamdān with his family. He came back to his village, Kuthreh, were his father, Mohammed, had already sold all his properties, even 'the sun and the wind'. What was left? A share of the tower house of Beyt ʿAbdulhamid, built at the turn of 20th century by the *ʿāqil*, and a small plot of land with two acacias, down in the valley.

Using the slope of the mountain over the two acacias, what Yemeni people would call a *rahaq*

38 Qurʾān, 24: 22.

39 "[...] properly speaking Muhammad's *hijrah* chiefly involves the concept of seeking protection with powerful armed tribes" (Serjeant, 1983: 40, 1982: 26-27).

40 Each Thursday, teachers were entitled to an egg from each of their students. Moreover, a part of the harvest was considered their share. This information, confirmed by all my interlocutors, is also found in ʿAmmary (2013: 15). A bright picture of the life of a teacher is depicted in the famous soap opera "*Ḥaqq Barakat-nā*". The author of the text, a villager from Kuthreh, probably relied on the life of his father, the *sayyid* Mohammed ash-Sharafy, one of the 3 teachers who studied in the Scientific Institute.

(cf. Ch. 4), ʿAbdulhamid built a small shed. Using the shed as a base camp, with the help of his sons —the younger was ʿAli, 11 years old—he started building two terracings (*qism*, pl. *aqsām*). First he built the walls of stone, and then he filled them with sand, bag after bag. Meanwhile, he started raising chickens. These early efforts would provide, in a few years, a good cultivation of qāt and livestock of 80 chickens and four cocks: enough to make a living. Meanwhile, during the harsh period that followed the revolution, ʿAbdulhamid had to enter Ṣanʿāʾ on a daily basis. He would buy the bread of the army (*kidām*), a mixture of grains that would fill the belly of a dinosaur. His wife would mill the leftovers, baking them again in order to sell.

This first period in the village, right after the revolution, left a deep impression on the young ʿAli. He attended his first wedding ceremony, and his first funeral. He knew fatigue and hunger. With some embarrassment, he discovered that he was a *sayyid*. ʿAli described to me this event as a sort of epiphany, something that fell outside the ordinary experience of his life. One day, not long after their return to the village, ʿAli and one of his brothers were walking down the valley, not far from an area called Lūleh Hāmish (cf. Ch. 4).

At that time, that part of the valley was cultivated with cereals, since no houses were there, no houses, that is, except one: that of ʿAbdullah aṣ-Sulṭan, an old man who erected a small hermitage on the slope of the mountain. As this old man saw the two young boys walking down the valley not far from his shed, he stopped them crying out, "How are you? How is *sīdy* ʿAbdulhamid?" In an excess of joy and reverence, the old men bent down trying to kiss their knees. The boys, surprised and daunted by such a display of submission, withdrew and ran back home.

'Kissing hands and knees' was, and still is in Yemen, the highest demonstration of reverence and submission. Many authors, especially Yemeni ones, have interpreted such displays of reverence as forced acts of obedience, imposed by the ruling elite to powerless people. This interpretation echoes the 'layer cake' hierarchical model which I have presented in Ch. 1. This excerpt from ash-Sharjaby is somehow paradigmatic of this interpretation:

> It is possible to say that respecting [the *sayyid*] is a duty for other people […]. The first duty – maybe the most important – is the necessity for all the other people to call them "yā sīdy" […]. The second of these customs is the duty for the citizens in front of a *sayyid to kiss his hands and knees as a greeting*. (1986: 147-8; my translation)

Yet the scene which I have depicted above, along with the rest of this chapter, replaces compulsion with spontaneity, abnegation with awe and admiration. It could be that some *sayyids* demanded

respect and deference from unwilling people. Yet, generally speaking, religious scholars were genuinely revered, and *sayyids* were very often learned people.

The Zaydī discourse—a sceptical reader might observe—was hegemonic, imposing 'the conception of the world' of the ruling class onto the ruled, generating subjugation through false consciousness; awe and deference—he might also note—were products of the hegemonic order of society imposed by this discourse. This Gramscian paradigm, at first sight, fits quite well the case at hand. 'The People of the House (*Ahl al-Beyt*)', in a Shiite milieu, were effectively more venerated than non-Hashimite religious scholars, and the devotion for the *Ahl al-Beyt* was promoted by means of several devices: *ḥadīths* regarding ʿAli Ibn Abū Ṭālib; religious hymns; supplications; exegesis of the Quran (*tafsīr*); and so forth. Even everyday speech and acts were imbued with declarations of devotion directed towards the *Ahl al-Beyt*.

Yet, if we want to pursue the Gramscian path, we need to ask ourselves: who produced these discourses? Was it the 'ruling class'—which in a Gramscian sense means the bourgeoisie, those who possessed the means of production and the political power—aided by the coercive power of state apparatuses? My answer is clearly in the negative. The Gramscian framework entails a historical configuration which cannot be compared to the Yemeni one, a configuration that applies to advanced capitalist societies (Hawley, 1980). In Yemen, status groups do not overlap the economic structure of society.

We are thus describing a relation of power which is not grounded on dominion or on vertical structures. Here I am advocating a diffused notion of power that is located 'everywhere' (Foucault, 1978: 92-102). This is power as a mode of action upon the action of others (Foucault, 2010: 291), power relationships mobile and multidirectional (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 2010: 250), what Borch, inspired by N. Luhmann, would term *semantic power* (Borch, 2005: 163), the power exercised through subjectification.

This decentred understanding of the locus of power relationships bears with it a number of corollaries: a critique of the judicio-political schema of power as sovereignty; the refusal of power as causality and power as repression/sanction; the refusal of power as a localised, or 'owned' entity. After this critique, what are we left with? B. Wright (1989) has recently argued that Wolof society should be approached "not as series of hierarchically ranked groups but instead as a set of groups differentiated by innate capacity of power source, such that inequalities within the system are less a matter of rank than of culturally defined realms of power." (Dilley, 2000: 155)

This model, I believe, fits well the Yemeni case. What is left to explain is *how* the differential

distribution of ‘power sources’ was achieved and reproduced. Thus, heading back to religious knowledge: how was this special kind of knowledge associated to a peculiar ascriptive social group, that of the *sayyids*, in absence of normative constrictions? My answer is that this differential distribution of power was obtained through the reproduction and monopoly of peculiar types of genealogical capital.

So moving back to the family history of Beyt ʿAbdulhamid, we have left the young ʿAli daunted and scared, running away from an old toothless man trying to kiss his knees while calling him “*yā sīdy.*” When he got back home ʿAli, trembling and crying, told his father the whole story. The *sayyid* ʿAbdulhamid reassured him, explaining what being a *sayyid* meant. At this turn of the story, I asked ʿAli, “Was the education (*tarbiyyah*) of a *sayyid* different from that of other people?” Here is how he replied:

> **It wasn't different, how can I say, ‘officially’. It was from the family**... I have studied the Quran with my father, and mathematics... And my study was directed, face-to-face, by my father, not only through the Quran... A daily study. Regarding the Quran... [He was saying], “I want you to learn the Quran, I want you to learn the prayer, you are *sayyids*! You are *sayyids*, if one day you reached a village, and they knew that you are from Kuthreh and you are son of ʿAbdulhamid... This is my father! The son of ʿAbdulhamid! They make you lead the prayer, and you don't know what to say? Whether it is the Friday prayer or... In the morning it was necessary, before we had breakfast. We went to pray with my father, in Kuthreh's mosque, and we came back from the *fajr* prayer, everyone over his Quran, studying, I mean, studying... Until breakfast time. Then we stood up to have breakfast, every day. Yes. This study... We studied... Without *tajwīd*, we just read... I mean, what do you say, when you see your own father, **when you witness that people respect him, they honour him... You respect him more, you are in awe (*haiba*) of him**.

Interestingly, this answer perfectly parallels that of Kamāl ʿAnbarūd, a circumcisor. When asked about his profession and the social standing of his family, he replied: “People respect us for our work.” This sentence summarises well the feeling of ‘having a place in the social world’.

From scholars to soldiers

When the 1962 revolution began, ʿAbdulhamid wrapped his head in a tribal turban and left teaching. Not all the *sayyids* followed this path. As we have seen above, some of them kept dressing

like they once did, and they continued teaching. Yet the general climate was overtly hostile to the old administrative elite and—by a fallacious generalisation—to the whole category of the *sayyids*. As a consequence, when new opportunities opened up to make a living, the great majority of the *sayyids* of Kuthreh took that the chance.

As we have seen, ʿAli's family was experiencing great difficulties. At the beginning of the 1970's, when the Republican Army opened up the enrolment, the sons of ʿAbdulhamid, one after the other, joined the army. As ʿAli recalled:

> I mean... Here we had nothing, nothing... All the people joined the army. All the people of Kuthreh are soldiers. There's not even one without salary. The one who doesn't join the army... How can he get an income? There's nothing... I entered [Ṣanʿāʾ], joined the army... I became an employee in this army.

From the 1970's on, all the villagers from Kuthreh, irrespective of their origin, joined the army. As we shall see in the next chapter, the salary was incredibly high, so high as to convince them to abandon agriculture. ʿAli, who unlike other people from the village had no source of income, joined the army with four of his coevals. One day, after a short period of service, an officer came and asked the new recruits, "Among you, who can read and write? Who has a junior high school (*al-mutawassiṭah*) certificate? Raise your hands!" ʿAli, who unlike other people from the village had received an accurate education from his father , raised his hand, even though he did not have any certificate.

His knowledge was examined. The exam was made up of four questions, a great testimony to the cultural level of that time. The first question was a religious one: "Number the pillars of Islam and describe them. Number the obligatory prayers." The second was about geography: "Which countries border Yemen?" The third about mathematics: "Solve these mathematical problems with addition, subtraction, multiplication and division." The fourth was political: "Number the goals of the 26th September Revolution and describe the first and the second." Ironically, part of the answer to this last question was, "the removal of the differences between the strata and of their privileges," a clear reference to the putative privileges of the *sayyids* during the Imāmate. Among the 270 candidates that took the exam, ʿAli classified tenth, obtaining the rank of sergeant (*raqīb faṣīlah*), starting a brilliant military career which brought him to the role of vice-director of the Secret Service.

Generally speaking, with only one exception out of the whole village (the *sayyid* ʿAbdulkarim

ash-Sharafy), all the *sayyids* of Kuthreh abandoned the guise of religious scholars to undertake a military career. For many of them, the category 'sayyid' slowly became an empty label, an identity that mattered only at the time of marriage.

The Houthi Movement

The Zaydī revival and the ḥizbiyyah

The 1962 revolution overthrew the Ḥamīd ad-Dīn family, who had so far guided the Imāmate, and instituted the Yemen Arab Republic, led by the President Abdallah as-Sallāl. This is not the place to carefully analyse the changes which took place in that period (Halliday, 1974). However, it is important to recall that in 1978 ʿAli ʿAbdullāh Ṣāleḥ came to power. The new president focused the economic resources of the state on metropolitan areas and areas rich of natural resources, neglecting northern provinces in terms of infrastructures, security, instruction and social welfare (Orkaby, 2015; Salmoni et al., 2010). Concurrently, the government started subsidising the building of Saudi-style Sunni schools and mosques right in the Zaydī heartland.

As a consequence, during the 1980's, the learned elite of young educated people from the northern provinces started to develop the awareness of being an 'imagined community'[41] set in opposition to the careless—if not hostile—Yemeni government. These young men expressed their growing discontent in a religious language which led to a revival of the Zaydi school.[42] During the 1990's, this process underwent a rapid acceleration. In 1990, the two Yemens were unified and democratic elections held. Even if democracy—in the sense we attribute to this word—did not take roots in the country, elections had long lasting consequences. New political parties were created, and the newly unified Yemen knew for the first time a phenomenon that, nowadays, is well renowned: the so-called *ḥizbiyyah.*

The *ḥizbiyyah* is a multifaceted phenomenon, and the term needs to be interpreted on several levels. Generally speaking, it refers to the appearance of political parties on the public scene,

41 Anderson B. (1991), *Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*, Verso, London; New York.

42 Cf. Salmoni B. A. et al. (2010), *Regime and periphery in Northern Yemen the Huthi phenomenon*, RAND, Santa Monica, CA. Apparently this choice was dictated by multiple factors. One was certainly the concurrent spread of the Wahhabite ideology. A second factor, but this is just a speculative hypothesis, might have been an attempt at returning to the 'science of religion' (which means Islam), defined in opposition to school programs grounded on the 'material sciences' (*ʿilm ad-dunyah*).

something that, in Yemen, was simply unknown until the mid 1980's (Dresch, 2000). However, when people refer to *hizbiyyah*, they are pointing to a wider phenomenon. First, they are talking about political partisanship. This entails recognition of the disruptive potential of the sense of belonging to political parties, a new kind of loyalty that is fracturing Yemeni society. This tension and this chaos (*fītnah*) are usually exemplified by the ideal typic image of a family were the father is Muʾtmary, the son Iṣlāhy, and his brother Houthi.[43] Moreover, *ḥizbiyyah* refers to a repartition of state resources between political parties and politics of patronage.

At the beginning of the 1990's a new political party entered the political arena to represent Zaydis: Ḥizb al-Ḥaqq. The social component of this party, the Believing Youth, was organised around sport clubs and associations.[44] From these embryonic networks, the Houthi movement subsequently evolved. Hussein al-Houthi was elected as a member of the Yemeni parliament for Ḥizb al-Ḥaqq during the period 1993-7.

In 2001 the World Trade Center was attacked, and ʿAli ʿAbdullah Saleh presented his government as a strategic partner of the U.S. in the global war against terrorism. Concurrently, Hussein al-Houthi held, in his private residence and in the mosque where he was Imām and preacher, a number of conferences characterised by a double register: religious and political. Before we move on to analysing these speeches, I will briefly present a theoretical framework that might shed some light on al-Houthi's conferences.

al-Houthi and the formal structure of Occidentalism

Orientalism as understood by E. Said, is the bundle of mechanisms through which the West manages its relationships with the East. These mechanisms define the “Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.” Besides this function of dominion, Orientalism provides an interpretive framework to represent the West through the comparison with an imagined East. As Said would put it, “[...] the Orient has helped to define Europe for the West as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience.” (Said, 1979)

This second point has been thoroughly analysed by G. Baumann, in his *Grammars of identity / alterity* (2004). In Baumann's approach, Orientalism is a “socially shared classificatory structure,”

43 Al-Mu'tamar (or General People's Congress) is the political party of the former President ʿAli ʿAbdullah Saleh; al-Iṣlāh is the Yemeni equivalent of the Muslim Brotherhood, and it is strictly tied to the al-Aḥmar family, the *mashaīkh* of the Ḥāshid confederation.

44 It is said that, in this early phase of the Yemeni democracy, ʿAli ʿAbdullah Saleh supported financially Hizb al-Haqq and the Believing Youth, against Islah. My source, at the time of the events, was in the position of knowing such facts, and I consider him reliable. However, ironically, I might be affected by the fascination of conspiracy theories.

(ivi: 19) one out of three ‘grammatical’ ways of constructing the ‘other’. These three grammatical ways are opposed to an anti-grammar which “de-humanizes the other—until there is no grammar left in which the other can be construed as a legitimate other.” (ivi: 43) When language fails, violence ensues.

Consider the formal structure of the Orientalist grammar. Following Baumann, we can argue that Said recognised “[...] the binary grammar at work in the long historical process of Westerners representing ‘the Orient’ to themselves.” This grammar does not simply dichotomise the West and the East, stating “we are good, they are bad.” Rather, it is a binary opposition “subject to reversal,” a reverse mirror-imaging. As E. Said himself recognised, Westerners “[...] not only denigrated that which they called ‘oriental’, but also desired it.” (ivi: 20)

There is a second point of interest in Baumann's analysis. Orientalists, he observes, were intellectual and creative elites: “What made the caricatures intellectually interesting and aesthetically challenging for such elites, many of them tired of and estranged from their own cultural milieus, was also the cultural self-critique that an orientalizing of the other made possible and [...] communicable.” (ivi: 20)

Given these premises we can move on and analyse al-Houthi's discourses. The Houthi movement is well-known for its political motto, which famously begins with “God is great, death to America, death to Israel.” This slogan first emerged in the wider framework of conferences held by Hussein Al-Houthi, right after the American intervention in Afghanistan. Yet besides the motto, which was clearly imported from Iran, the shape of his discourse was ‘occidentalist’ in the sense that we have just outlined. He was using distorted, timeless and highly negative images of the West as a means to criticise Yemeni society itself. His main antagonist, and the recipient of his critique, was the Yemeni government, which he depicted as a submissive accomplice of the US and as an incompetent administrator of the Yemeni Republic. Following a reverse mirror-imaging, he was sketching Western qualities in order to emphasise Eastern flaws, and *vice versa*. Besides the frequent attacks on Jewish people and Americans (attacks grounded in the past of the Quranic text), his pamphlets proposed a biting critique of the Arabs themselves. Here follow some excerpts from *The danger of America's intervention in Yemen*:

> Because they—it is their habit in every country—they deceive us, they deceive. And Arabs are easy-minded (*busaṭā᾿*), their gaze is shallow, and the first to recognise this was the Imām ʿAli (peace upon Him), he himself. We will tell ourselves, without shame: Arabs are very shallow, and Yemenis—among the Arabs—are the shallowest. Yemenis are the easiest

> to deceive.
>
> [...] Our hearts are flexible, we quickly believe what is 'right' and quickly believe what is 'wrong'. It is said that a man from San'a' heard someone saying, "The people of Yemen converted with a letter." So he replied, "...and they will apostatise with a testament."

Concurrently, the pamphlets constituted an overt attack against the Yemeni government:

> Between you and me, why [the Americans] want to enter our country? And who let them enter our country? Did they enter as traders? There are American companies extracting oil from Yemen... But soldiers occupying military positions... People scream, with one voice: where's the state? Who let them in? Where's the army that consumes the economy of these people with its exorbitant cost?

From these passages emerges a dialectic that both Said and Baumann underestimate: the internal dialectic of power that produces the occidentalist discourse. Hussein al-Houthi was not talking to the U.S., nor was he realistically conceiving the possibility of dismantling their supremacy. His entire discourse was a painstaking critique of Yemeni society, and particularly of his political counterpart: the Yemeni government.

Six wars and an Arab Spring

In 2004, dozens of people rallied behind the Houthi motto in the streets of Ṣanʿāʾ. They were protesting against the politics of the Bush administration, particularly against the military intervention in Iraq. Concurrently, they were protesting against the Yemeni government. How did the government react? ʿAli ʿAbdullah Saleh launched a military operation against the Houthi movement and offered a bounty for the capture of its leader, Hussein, who eventually was killed in 2004. This first military intervention led to a total of six wars against the Ṣaʿdah province, which took place between 2004 and 2010.

Here we might ask dozens of questions, especially if we chose to indulge in macro-politics.[45] I'd

45 ʿAli ʿAbdullah Saleh was renowned for his cunning political strategies. He always preferred to co-opt his enemies, rather than facing them frontally (Cf. Dresch, 2001). Why did he choose to tackle the Houthis? Official motivations are well-known; al-Houthi was accused of planning to overthrow the government in order to set himself up as Imām, and the Yemeni government alleged that Iran was directly supporting the insurgency. If we move to a conspiracy theory level, general Ali Muhsen, commander of the 1st Armoured Division (*al-firqah*), apparently had a direct ideological interest in defeating the Houthis, being a supporter of the Islah party (the Yemeni branch of the Muslim Brotherhood). And so forth...

rather emphasise the ideological aspects of the dispute. ʿAli ʿAbdullah Saleh and al-Houthi were constructing their rhetoric in opposition to one another. As we have seen above, al-Houthi was deploying occidentalist images of the U.S. in order to discredit the Yemeni government, creating a direct association between the external enemy and the internal competitor. On the other side, ʿAli ʿAbdullah Saleh was perpetuating the main ideological framework on which he grounded his political legitimacy: the fulfilment of the objectives of 26 September Revolution.[46] (cf. Ch. 1)

In 1962, when the Imām was overthrown and the YAR established, the 6 objectives became the main guideline to drive Yemen out of backwardness, poverty and ignorance (Attar, 1964). Was Yemen actually backward, poor and ignorant? Many of my interlocutors, especially old men who lived before the revolution, would object to this description. They would state that life was blessed, the Imām was just, and people were trained in the only field of knowledge that counted: religious science (*ʿilm ad-dīn*).

Revolutionary rhetoric was, quite obviously, upholding the reverse point of view, blaming the Imām of having condemned Yemen to the worst of catastrophes: underdevelopment (*takhalluf*). ʿAli ʿAbdullah Saleh constructed his political strategies within the ideological framework outlined during the revolutionary period (Orkaby, 2015). His greatest achievement was unification, obtained in 1990 and secured in 1994 after the civil war. His greatest enemy, at least rhetorically speaking, remained the Imām, the ancient regime, and, through an improper generalisation, the *sayyids*. When the government launched the campaign against the Houthis, the ideological framework was still the revolutionary one. In 2009, right before the Houthi wars came to an end, ʿAli ʿAbdullah Saleh gave a speech. Significantly, it was 26 September, and he chose to recall the motivations that led the government to war, and the objectives achieved. In that speech he overthrew the Imām for the umpteenth time, claiming the successes of the Republican era, establishing a direct link between al-Houthi, the *sayyids* and the ancient regime.[47] In Chapter 1, we considered these historical events in detail. Here, however, my aim is to consider how they impacted the lives of *sayyid* people.

This climate of the condemnation of the whole *sayyid* group, in fact, was not just political rhetoric. During the Houthi wars (2004-2010), claiming a *sayyid* identity was inappropriate, if not dangerous. This situation drastically changed when the Arab Spring erupted in February 2011. "The people want the fall of the regime" was, in Yemen as elsewhere, the core hymn of the revolution.[48]

46 Even during the Arab Spring, the 6 objectives were a constant frame of reference. Cf. http://www.yementimes.com/en/1611/report/1454/26-September-revolution-objectives-What-has-and-hasn%E2%80%99t-been-achieved.htm

47 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EW_8cmHSmno

48 But what did people mean with the two words "*shaʿb*" and "*niẓām*"? Niẓām, regime, had a clear meaning: it referred to the political system represented by the two main Yemeni political parties: al-Mūʾtamar and al-Iṣlāḥ, being the first the party of ʿAli ʿAbdullah Saleh and the second the Yemeni branch of the Muslim Brothers. These two parties

People's claims were (justly) targeting the whole regime, and not just president ʿAli ʿAbdullah Saleh, who was simply considered the tip of an iceberg. Significantly, one of the most famous mottos of the revolution was, “Our people want to relax, [we say] no to al-Muʾtamar and no to al-Iṣlāḥ (*shaʻba-nā yishty yirtāḥ, lā al-muʾtamar lā al-Iṣlāḥ*).” At that time, al-Houthi was not yet part of the political theatre, at least not officially.

I came back to Yemen for my PhD fieldwork in June 2011. As soon as I visited the ‘square’, the epicentre of the protest, I was astonished: a whole branch of the camp was hosting Houthi supporters. His political pamphlets, along with t-shirts, stickers and merchandising, were available in the camp. Coming out from the darkness of illegality, the Houthi movement was slowly becoming visible. Moreover, it had three advantages if compared to other political competitors: 1) the Houthis were the emblem of the oppressed, after 6 years of wars and destruction, whereas the regime was the symbol of oppression; 2) the critique of Hussein al-Houthi, focused on the corruption of the Yemeni government, was similar to that of the youth; 3) al-Houthi was the only outsider in the political arena.

In 2011 the city of Ṣanʿāʾ was besieged, militarised, and divided in three parts: Beit al-Aḥmar controlled the North part of the city, called al-Ḥaṣabah; ʿAli Muḥsen controlled the square of protest (*as-sāḥah*); ʿAli ʿAbdullah Saleh controlled Taḥrīr, a central square. While people were left without electricity and petrol, risking their life because of the clashes between these 3 factions (cf. Ch. 5), al-Houthi gained his political momentum.

Oppressed oppressors: the sayyids *of Kuthreh*

Post-revolutionary rhetoric (and, sometimes, scholarly literature) described the *sayyids* as a group of oppressors, noble landowners and tyrants.[49] The *sayyids* of Kuthreh were, quite to the contrary, humble peasants and teachers. Some of them—this is true—were greatly respected. Yet this deference was not commanded or urged; it was spontaneously displayed to *sayyids* who distinguished themselves for their religious knowledge.

When ʿAli ʿAbdullah Saleh gained power in 1978, many *sayyids* in Kuthreh immediately perceived a negative bias from the new President. In the 1990's, after the unification and the 1994

represented, somehow, a deeper network of interests, loyalties and clienteles. Both the parties had tribal connections that clearly unfolded in March 2011, when Beit al-Ahmar besieged the North of Ṣanʿāʾ. The people, meaning all those Yemenis who were excluded from this networks, were thus (rightly) accusing the regime of being corrupted.

49 Cf. Sharjaby, Q. (1986), *ash-sharāʾiḥ al-ʾijtimāʿiyyah at-taqalīdiyyah fī-l-mujtamaʿ al-yemenī*, Dār ul-Ḥadāthah, Lebanon.

war, all the officials of *sayyid* origin were compelled to retire. This fact might well be slanted, if only qoutedby *sayyid* sources. However, men of *ʿarab* origins confirmed it. Consider this excerpt from an interview with an old man from Beyt Qizz:[50]

> Let's say Sir, that all the Yemeni people bear a shame when... For example: let's say that your father is a criminal, whereas you are respectable, you just want to build the Nation... No! They won't let you work! [They will say,] "That one is the son of the criminal *Fulān*!" Ok, I mean, my father is gone, I am a good person! No, it doesn't work this way... After the war, I was about to become the head of my unit (*katībah*). Then, they said, "Where is he from?" They meant me... They said, "From Kuthreh! Aha, in Kuthreh they are *sayyids*, it's not possible that a *sayyid* guides a unit, and he is a *sayyid*." This is the most important point in Yemen. This hatred... If your father, before, committed a crime, or anything else, and now you are a straight person, a patriot, someone who works hard... Do you get it? It doesn't work... "Your father was, they were, they were..." Moreover, they do not have precise information.

This brief excerpt is important for three reasons. First, it confirms that *sayyids* were, somehow, excluded from high-profile offices in state institutions. Second, it highlights, once again, the importance of ancestry. Third, it brings to the forefront a common misunderstanding in identity attribution: confusing ancestry and place of origin.

The difficulties that *sayyids* faced in the army were so pressing as to push some of them to compose poetry. This is an excerpt from a poem composed by Yahya Shams ad-Dīn, the nephew of one of the old teachers:

> I start invoking You, You one and only //
>
> Creator of the universe in which everything is your servant
>
> And you created the life for Yahya Shams ad-Dīn, to endlessly investigate it //
>
> hidden, forced and happy, all the days passed as festivals...
>
> He certainly is a servant of his dad and mum, but he doesn't serve any other //
>
> he's from the free people, not from the slaves
>
> He works for himself, he gathers the harvest //
>
> he didn't sell himself to anyone for all his life, and he lived happy

50 Recorded interview, March 17, 2013. I conducted this interview in the morning since my interlocutor did not chew *qāt*. We were alone in the fields.

I'm the son of him who studied science and Quran in our village //

oh fools, oh fat-heads, the smartest of you is dumb

I am the cuddle of that lion //

Yahya Ibn Shams ad-Din, call me father and *sīd*

My father didn't enrol and my grandfather wasn't a soldier[51] //

I didn't know the calm, nor I stopped being careful, nor I ever greeted an *'amīd* (colonel)

This state is just for a limited number of persons //

they don't accept sayyids, there's no officer who wants them

A corrupted, unbelieving State and more //

they changed the constitution as if it was the State of Yazīd[52]

In 2009, during a heated phase of the Ṣa'dah war against the Houthis, a checkpoint was placed right in the middle of Kuthreh, at the entrance of the valley. The government overtly accused the villagers of being Houthi supporters, by virtue of their genealogical origin. One day people from the village found a putative shepherd searching for caves in the valley. Considering him a spy, they urged him to abandon their territory, shouting: "This village is called Kuthreh and we are *sayyids*... *sayyids*! And we are proud of it... But we don't have Houthis among us. So write your report, there are no Houthis nor weapons."[53]

On 26 September 2010, ʿAli ʿAbdullah Saleh pronounced the famous speech which I fully reported in Chapter 1. In Kuthreh, it was received with controversy. The *sayyid* faction of the village felt hurt and betrayed. Consider the words of ʿAli Abdulḥamīd:

> During the fourth war against al-Houthy... [ʿAli ʿAbdullah Saleh] said, "al-Houthi wants to revive a cadaver. He wants to bring back the wheel of history, back to 50 years ago. They [the Houthis] are like this. They want to bring back the Imāmate. The way it was before the September revolution, the regime of the Imām. He wants to bring back the Imāmate, al-Houthi wants to be Imām. Al-Houthi or anyone else, whether he is the *sayyid* al-Houthi wearing a *'imāmah* (*mu'ammam*) or a turban (*muqabba'*) or anything. It's the same stuff

51 This statement is suspicious. Yahya's grandfather, it is true, was a teacher, and he never joined the army. However, both Yahya and his father were state salaried employees. What he means in these lines is that they never actually served in the army.

52 Yazīd is the son of Muʿāwiyah, a symbol of corruption of the Islamic religion.

53 Recorded interview. Ṣanʿāʾ, May 27, 2013. The man who recalled this fact, a *sayyid* from Kuthreh, was describing them for me and for another man, a *sayyid* hailing from the South.

(*nafs al-biḍāʻah*). He or Beyt Ḥamīd ad-Dīn.

This is how the speech of ʿAli ʿAbdullah Saleh remained impressed in Ali's mind—in my opinion, the original speech was even harsher. And this is how ʿAli commented on the speech:

> I have served the revolution, I didn't even know the rule of the Imām... I used to love him and respect him [ʿAli ʿAbdullah Saleh]. He doesn't know me personally... Only through my work. Until this hatred against the *sayyids* started... I was telling myself, "I am a *sayyid*. It never came to my mind that I want to rule or to make a coup..." I served my country, I served my country for 35 years. In many places... And I hated this speech. I swear to God, I hated it.

The so-called social strata, officially abolished with the first provisional constitution, never actually faded away. Revolutionary rhetoric, perpetuated by the Republican state, kept reproducing these distinctions discursively. Before the 1962 revolution, *sayyids* were identifying themselves as religious scholars. They made their living from the most disparate occupations, as peasants or craftsmen. Yet, a fundamental part of their sense of belonging to their line of ancestral descent consisted in acquiring at least the basics of religious science. The proverb said of an ignorant *sayyid*, "an *ʻimāmah* over a chopstick."

After the 1962 revolution, the hierarchical organisation of values within Yemeni society drastically changed. Most of the Kuthry *sayyids* left their religious careers and became soldiers. During the ʿAli ʿAbdullah Saleh era, especially after the unification and the civil war, *sayyids* rediscovered their identity as oppressed oppressors: people secluded from political and economic power in the present, yet accused of having been oppressors in a past which they had never experienced.

Endogamic habits.

Two different ascriptive groups inhabited Kuthreh. We are already acquainted with the *sayyids*, Northern Arabs and descendants of ʿAdnān. The second group was that of the *ʿarab* (s. *ʿaraby*), Southern Arabs and descendants of Qaḥṭān. The antagonism between ʿAdnān and Qaḥṭān is somehow legendary, and it was revived by the Free Yemeni Movement during the 1940's (cf. Ch. 1). The political discourse of the Free Yemeni Movement depicted the whole *sayyid* class in terms

of a bunch of invaders, oppressors who conquered Yemen and established tyranny. This political discourse gained its *momentum* after the 1962 revolution and subsequently informed state rhetoric. But what was the relationship between *arabs* and *sayyids* in Kuthreh before the revolution?

Basically, the *ʿarabs* were looking at the *sayyids* for what they were: peasants, craftsmen, religious scholars and teachers. Consequently, displays of deference and respect were only directed towards those *sayyids* who distinguished themselves by virtue of science and knowledge. The specialisation of the *sayyids* along with this aura of piety and mystery was maintained by means of endogamy. Their knowledge was transmitted from father to son, along with a certain taste, certain bodily dispositions, and a peculiar moral *habitus*. *Sayyids* were trained to act as *sayyids*, yet the transmission of this cultural capital was naturalised and thus attributed to their *aṣl*, their origin, or their ancestry. Their selves were crafted *aban ʿan jadd*: in accordance with the legacy of their ancestors. Endogamy secured the perpetuation of the *genealogical capital* which distinguished the *sayyids* from the *arabs* and vice versa.

However, by virtue of the prestige tied to their lineage, *sayyids* occasionally managed to arrange hypogamic marriages; they succeeded in getting married with women from the *ʿarab* people and from Beni al-Khumus. This kind of marriage, which was craved by the *mutashayyiʿīn*, was overtly despised by the *sayyids* themselves, who preferred to marry their peers. Exceptions happened though, for two main reasons: love and capital. Beautiful women, large properties (economic capital) and alliances (social capital) were good reasons to indulge in hypogamy.[54]

When the revolution began in 1962, the whole village of Kuthreh sided with the Imām.[55] Kuthry people supported him until the mythical betrayal of ʿAli al-Ghādir, *shaykh* of Khawlān. It is said that, near the end of the civil war in the late 1960's, the President as-Sallāl asked his advisors, "What's the situation?" And they replied, "We conquered all Yemen, except Kuthreh." When he sent his officers to exact *zakah* from Kuthry villagers, they inflexibly refused to pay. A brawl followed and one soldier was killed. The army reacted, and three people from Kuthreh lost their lives. Rather than submitting to the Republican army, they urged their tribe, Beny Maṭar, to intervene. When the paramount *shaykh,* Ahmed ʿAli al-Maṭary, who sided with the Republic, refused, they joined[56] the Sanḥān tribe. As a response, as-Sallāl sent the army with heavy weapons;

54 At the turn of the 20th century, a rich merchant of humble origins whose name was Lotf al-Bary Tamish chose to marry his daughters to the *ʿāqil* of the *sayyids*, to another learned *sayyid* and to the *shaykh* of Kuthreh. He chose men from Kuthreh because he did not have sons, and he wanted to leave his lands within the village. He chose the two *sayyids* because he truly respected them. Half a century later, the *shaykh* of Kuthreh, a man of *ʿarab* origins, married all his daughter to the *sayyids*. These two cases should give us an idea of the respect devoted to *sayyids* by people of different lines of genealogical descent.

55 With just a few exceptions from both the groups, those people who were working as soldiers for the Imām, in fact, joined the new Republican army.

56 They made *mukhāwah*, which means that after slaughtering a determined number of bulls, they became part of the

they bombed the old village, completely destroying the house of Kuthreh's *shaykh*, a man of *ʿarab* origin.

After this episode, the village capitulated. Yet the whole story is a bright demonstration of the loyalty that tied Kuthreh to the Imām and the Arabs to the *sayyids*. The people of the village, at that time, were one community: “One hand, one heart, and one mind,” as one of the villagers told me. The village was woven like a net (*mashbūkah*) by kinship ties; as villagers used to say, “We are all uncles (*akhwāl*) and nephews (*abzyāʾ*).”[57] The village was one brotherhood,[58] and there was no trace of antagonism between the sons of ʿAdnān and those of Qaḥṭān.

Thus the YAR was established. People became soldiers and state salaried employees, abandoning agriculture. New infrastructures, slowly, linked the village to the capital city, Ṣanʿāʾ. More importantly for our argument, schools were created in almost every village, and new didactic programs spread, setting aside the ‘science of religion’ in favour of ‘material sciences’. In this new setting, *sayyids* completely lost their prestige; they became soldiers, like everyone else, yet soldiers with endogamic habits.

We can only imagine how everyday episodes of conflict deteriorated the relationship between the ʿarab and the *sayyid* groups. Marriage strategies were certainly a point of friction. Love happens, especially in a small village were each door opens into the courtyard of a neighbour and houses are stitched from the roofs. One man of Arab origins, one that served in the revolution, recounted to me his love for a *sharīfah*, a girl of Hashemite origins. The same fate occurred to his son, and both had to cover up their feelings.

As far as I witnessed, in Kuthreh conflicts would develop from sudden breaches in the social fabric, from offensively banal events that focused latent tensions in one moment of explosion. Once the breach opened up, the conflict proceeded overtly, demanding official solution. One of these breaches occurred during the 1990's. One man of *sayyid* origin married a woman from the Arabs. For offensively banal reasons he divorced her, and then he tried to take her back (*istirjāʿ*). His attempt met with some difficulties, and the man's anger exploded, causing him to heavily insult his (ex) wife in front of her parents. In a tribal milieu ‘speech is valued’ (*al-kalām muthamman*), and the insult to the honour (*ʿarḍ*) of the woman was of the worst kind. For these reasons, the man had

Sanḥān brotherhood.

57 The *khāl* is the maternal uncle; the *bazzy* is ego's father's sister's son. In Kuthreh, the relationship was asymmetrical, since (because of hypergamy) only the *ʿarabs* were *akhwāl* of the *sayyids*, and only the *sayyids* were *abzyāʾ* of the *ʿarabs*.

58 The term ‘brotherhood’ translates the Arabic *akhuwwah*. It reminds us that the community acted as a corporate group for offence and defence, but not on the basis of a shared line of familial descent, as segmentary lineage theory would argue.

to pay (*yuhajjir*) a bull (*hajar*) to repair his offence. The divorce became definitive, a new conflict opened up for the alimony of their sons, and the whole matter generated hatred for years.

This episode reinforced a grief that was growing stronger among the Arabs from the new generation: “Why should they marry from us, if we can't marry from them?” One day this very question was raised in brutal terms inside the mosque of the village, right after the Friday prayer. One boy of Arab origins explicitly stated, “The *sharāʾif*[59] can't love us because you don't let them go out from their house.” This sentence, implying a sexual reference and involving the whole *sayyid* group, triggered some violent reactions.

Yet the situation definitely degenerated when, in 2005, the first hypogamic marriage finally happened in the village. A love story flourished between a young boy of Arab origins and a *sharīfah*. The fact of their love was itself a small scandal (*faḍīḥah*). Generally speaking, *sayyids* educated their daughters so as to preserve not only their sexual honour (*sharaf*), but also their feelings. As one *sayyid* confessed to me, “We educate our daughters so that they can distinguish between the *sayyid*, the *qabīly* and the *muzayyin*, so that they can distinguish whom to avoid.”

This girl, instead, desperately fell in love with the Arab boy. She confessed to her father, “I'm your *sharaf*, I won't do anything wrong. But I won't marry anyone but him.” Her father gave his consent, and he fixed the date of the engagement. That very same day, his house was bombed by his fellows, the *sayyids*. An inquiry by the police followed, without any result. The villagers solved the case internally, slaughtering two bulls as *hajar,*[60] yet the wound did not heal.

From sayyids *to Houthis*

When I first settled in Kuthreh, in August 2012, villagers were looking at the remains of the past luxuriance of their land. Most of the old trees had dried out, and entire areas of the village were left uncultivated. If once people harvested three times a year, in 2012 even two harvests were a mirage, with the summer monsoon more and more delayed. The banks of the *saīlah* (the channel which gathers rain water) were dismantled, causing frequent floods during the monsoon season. Agricultural production had drastically decreased.

The situation was objectively crumbling, yet easily explainable. Starting from the early 1970's, most of the villagers had joined the Republican army, thus drastically reducing their agricultural

59 The label ‘sharīfah’ (pl. *sharāʾif*) was itself criticised by the Arabs. They would tell me, “Why do they call their women *sharāʾif*? Aren't ours *sharāʾif*?

60 *Hajar* is the sacrifice of an animal, to amend a tort.

efforts. Subsistence agriculture, and especially the cultivation of sorghum, had been abandoned in favour of *qāt*. Following the demographic explosion of the 1980s, new buildings spread along the valley, and with buildings seed-eating birds started raiding the grain. An important premise for the spread of buildings was the provision of water. Water pumps appeared all along the valley, drawing groundwater from aquifers. Old trees, whose roots were drawing water from the same profound level, dried out. Concurrently, there was a drastic decrease in rainfall.

This explanation appeared to me completely rational, and it was suggested and confirmed by the observations of many villagers of *ʿarab* origins. Yet the same facts were interpreted by some *sayyids* in a different way.

The undeniable state of decay of the village was attributed to the action of a group of individuals: the 'Americans', or, better, the American government and its true rulers, the Jews. "Trees, people explained me, dried out because American agents (*ʿumalāʾ*) poisoned them." "At the time of the Imām, Yemen was self-sufficient, and now we import grain; they purposely undermined our economy." "It's not raining anymore because we abandoned our religion. They have established an intellectual occupation (*iḥtilāl fikry*) entering our houses through television." From this standpoint, dependency and corruption of moral habits were just preliminary steps leading to the unfolding of a master plan: t**he ultimate goal of this strategy was the military occupation of the country**. The perception of this threatening risk was completely determining the thought and action of these people.

In August 2012, a minor faction of the *sayyid* group had already officially joined the Houthi movement. They were close relatives of Kuthry people living in Saʿdah. These people completely restructured their lives in accordance with a daily schedule of religious practices called "The Program" (*Al-Barnamaj*). The core of this program was the study of Hussein al-Houthi's political pamphlets (*malāzim*). Every day, with no exceptions, they would meet in the *maktab* (the office were once Abdulhamid once taught), spending the time between *ʿaṣr* and *maghreb* reading the pamphlets and commenting on them. Each phase of these meetings was marked by the loud shouting of the motto, "Death to America..." The politico-religious teaching was interspersed with documentaries and news from the newly established channel al-Masīrah:[61] "One eye to the Quran and one eye to reality."

The event that triggered an explosion of the situation was the inappropriate spread of the unjustly famous "trailer" of the film *Innocence of Muslims*. Suddenly, on 11 September 2012, the news of a

---

61 al-Masīrah is the official channel of al-Houthi. It started transmitting during the Arab Spring, and it had a fundamental role in spreading a construction of reality consonant with the Houthy point of view.

'Jewish-American' film mocking the Prophet spread all over the country, arousing a wave of anger[62] —the appropriate term, here, would be *ghīrah*. On 12 September a huge demonstration was organised in Ṣanʿāʾ. On the same day, in Kuthreh, we were at a wedding and a funeral, both regarding the same family, a family of Arab origins. A great number of *sayyids* abandoned the ceremony[63] to join the demonstration. That day the American Embassy was assaulted: 4 people died and 48 were injured.

This event had long lasting consequences, both on the national and local level. It opened up a breach through which latent tensions erupted and thus exploded. The Old City of Ṣanʿāʾ, during those days, was covered wall to wall with the Houthi Motto, mechanically transposed with the help of a stencil. The same thing happened in Kuthreh. This apparently innocent political strategy triggered an actual '**war of the symbols**' between al-Houthi and Islah that lasted until I left. More importantly, it publicly signalled the acceptance of al-Houthi and its official entrance into the political arena. **Even non-*sayyids***, even people thinking that al-Houthi was attempting to 'bring back the wheel of history', **were shouting his motto that day**. He provided a **ready-made tool** to criticise the enemy, and at the same time to channel consensus.

Following the general pattern of what we have termed 'occidentalist narratives', al-Houthi was blaming the U.S. in order to achieve internal consent. His real antagonists were the Yemeni Muslim Brothers, personified in the person of General Ali Muhsen al-Ahmar, in the Islah party, in the heads of the Hashid confederation, Beit al-Ahmar[64] and in the Government. Generally speaking, the connection between the external and the internal enemy was shaped as depicted in image 1.

In sum, **he was framing the conflict in genealogical terms**. While trying to keep all the Muslims together, through reference to an external enemy, he was drawing an internal boundary: that between a legitimate Islam and a false one. Leaving the religious argument in the background, al-Houthi was gaining a consensus because his *political* claims were shared by most of the Yemeni citizens.[65]

62 The appropriate term would be *ghīrah*. This word describes a sentiment of anger, jealousy and heat that constitutes the inner drive pushing any 'real' man to react in certain situations. It is *not* only referred to women: we can have *ghīrat al-waṭan* (jealousy of the nation) and *ghīrat al-Islām* as well.

63 Weddings, funerals and births are considered a *maūjib* (pl. mawājib): mandatory ceremonial occasions.

64 It is not surprising that, during the recent upheavals of September 2014, the Houthi militias have targeted places and persons symbolically connected to Beit al-Ahmar and General Ali Muhsen.

65 Even the recent fights in Sanaa, with the consequent success of al-Houthi, have been motivated through a highly shared concern of Yemeni citizens: the price of the oil.

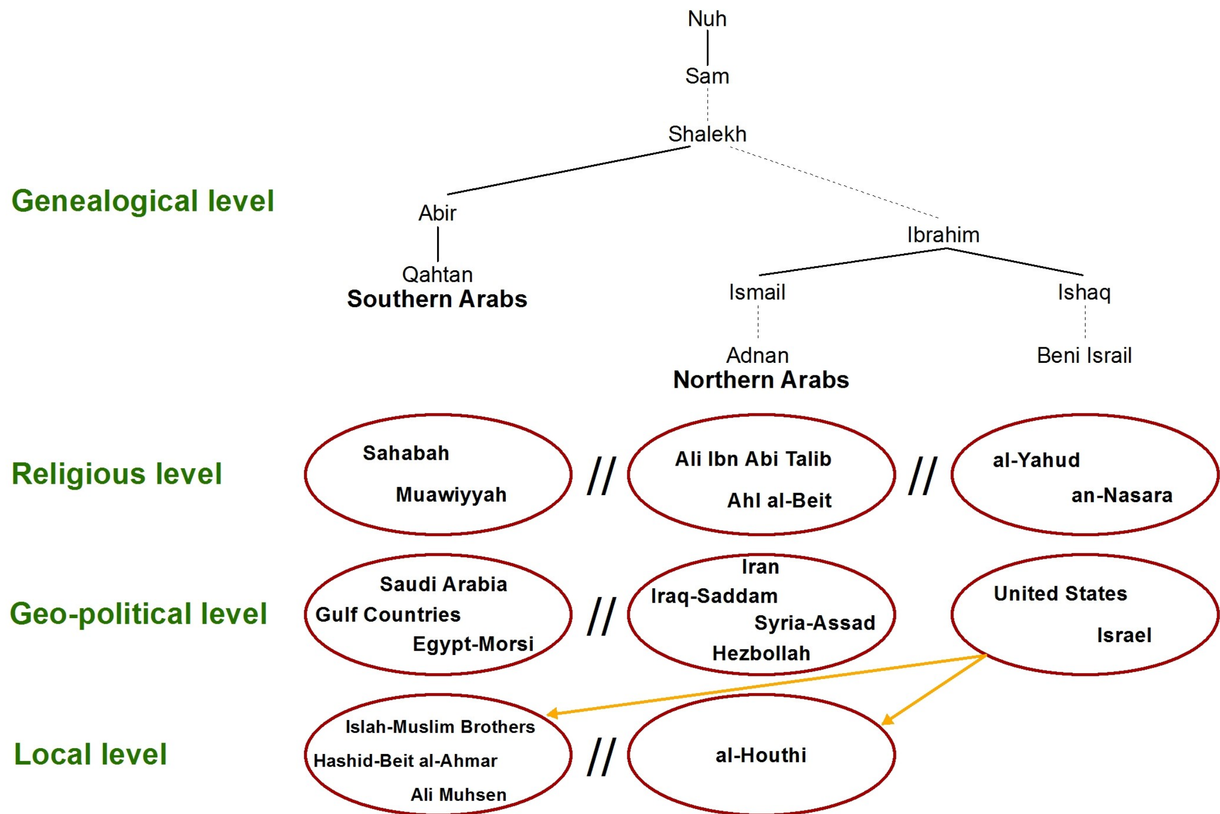

Figure 3 – A sample of genealogical imagination

What happened in Sanaa concurrently happened in Kuthreh. Those who wanted to express their anger and their hatred towards the U.S., suddenly discovered that there was a political movement supporting their claims. They adopted a ready-made language and style to express their point of view. Suddenly they discovered themselves Houthis. Most of these people—I'd say all of them with two exceptions—were *sayyids*. Joining the small faction that pioneered the movement, they overtly became Houthi supporters. **They turned their ascriptive genealogical origin into a chosen political identity**. The Houthi motto (*aṣ-ṣarkhah*) appeared almost everywhere in the valley: over houses, on trees and even over the slope of a mountain. The sun, symbol of the Muslim Brothers, immediately followed, regaining lost ground.

Right after the clashes that interested the American embassy, 'the danger of an American intervention in Yemen' became real, almost tangible. "10,000 marines disembarked in Aden.[66] They say that it is to protect their embassy." The number of marines increased again and again. Risk, the reality status of no-longer-but-not-yet (Beck, 1999: 135), became a new public frame of reference:

66 The same rhetorical strategy was deployed by Hussein al-Houthy in his pamphlets.

people felt no longer secure and not yet in danger. “They mock the Prophet and then they don't want us to scream death to America?” As the days passed, and the festival of ʿAshūrah approached, the Houthi discourse developed in unprecedented directions.

Al-Houthi's discourse has a peculiarity. It reads the future as if it was written in the past, namely in the Holy Quran. If the Jewish—in al-Houthi's discourse—have always been labelled as ‘enemies’, on the basis of Quranic verses, the Christians were still categorised among the *ahl al-kitāb*, the nearest people to Islam. In that period everything changed. Through a clear manipulation of the Quranic text, the Houthis turned Christians into cursed enemies. Affected by a sort of siege mentality (Nader, 1989), the Houthis started to describe all Westerners, me included, as infiltrated agents (*ʿumalāʾ*), spies (*jawāsīs*) or orientalists (*mustashriqīn*).

The use of media such as television and the internet unfolded new imaginative possibilities, reconstituting the simultaneity of global and local in a new glocality. It twisted time, projecting the future risk of an American invasion on the past threat of Jewish and Christians communities of the 7th century. Risk became delocalised: the point of origin and the point of impact of the American danger were not coincident, and the cause of risk was externally attributed. Nature was not anymore shaped by God, as a consequence of sinful behaviour; it was corrupted by human action, by the action of external enemies.

From Zaydīs to non-Houthis

As I have noted above, before the Arab Spring all the people in Kuthreh considered themselves Zaydīs (*Zaydī*, pl. *zuyūd*), with no exceptions. The Zaydiyyah is a moderate Shiite school, sometimes described as the “fifth school” of the four Sunnite schools of Islam, and the Zaydī *fiqh* is similar to that of the Sunni Hanafy school. The layman has no opinion regarding the theological and ritual differences that separate the Zaydiyyah and other Sunni schools of Islam. At the common sense level, people distinguish Zaydīs, Shafiʿites, Wahabbites and Salafis by means of a limited number of differential traits which constitute a boundary between the different schools—or I'd rather say, between the groups that locally identify themselves with one school or the other, since the traits vary over time and in space.

Among the traits that visibly distinguish Zaydīs and Sunnis (in a general sense), only one is ‘universally’ recognised: during the prayer, Zaydīs leave their arms extended and place their palms on their thighs (*sarbalah*); Sunnites cross their arms over their stomachs (*ḍammah*). Yet besides this

‘marked’ sign, there are other ‘unmarked’ ritual differences that do not neatly codify for one school or the other. Contrary to Shafiʻites, Zaydīs do not raise their index finger while they pronounce the final testimony, and they do not pronounce the word ‘amen’ during the prayer. These are minor differences, and they have always been tolerated. The symbolic language of the prayer has always been loose, its borders fuzzy, and many Zaydīs would pronounce the word ‘amen’. Yet the Houthi orthodoxy tightened the borders of this ritual language, clearly defining a ‘right’ way to pray and a ‘wrong’ one. The index finger and the word amen suddenly became marked traits, capable of distinguishing the ‘real’ Islam from the ‘Islam of Muʿawiyyah’.

During a Friday prayer in the old mosque of Kuthreh, one man of Arab origins loudly articulated the word ‘amen’ during the prayer. Maybe it was provocative. But it was a legitimate religious expression, and one contained within the borders of Islam. As a response, right after the prayer, while the believers were still performing their supplications, the Houthis screamed their motto, right in the middle of the mosque. A violent clash followed, a clash that split the community along its two lines of descent: on one side the *sayyids*, the vast majority of whom supported the Houthis, and on the other side the southern Arabs. Just a few weeks later, during the Friday speech—which equals two *rakaʿah*, and thus needs to be attended silently—the preacher screamed from the pulpit, “*Allāhu Akbar.*” The Houthis immediately replied, “*al-maūt li-amrīkā, al-maūt li-isrāʾīl.*” As soon as the prayer finished, a violent scuffle exploded in the middle of the mosque. That was a point of no-return.

Hegemony with hindsight: a native theory

The Arabs of Kuthreh were Zaydīs and they shared, like most of the Yemenis, a sincere concern regarding the role of the U.S. in the Middle East. So why did they not join the Houthi movement? These days most of the commentators describe al-Houthi as a Shiite movement, thus establishing a link between Yemen and the rest of the Middle East through the common sense opposition between Sunna and Shīʿa. My argument hinges on the reverse: this opposition, I argue, is the consequence and not the premise of the conflict. As one young man overtly explained to me, “If the *sayyids* had joined Iṣlāḥ, we would have joined al-Houthi.” **The focus of this conflict was about the two lines of descent**.

So why did it only explode when the *sayyids* joined al-Houthi? Because the diffusion of what we have termed *ḥizbiyyah* triggered a determinant shift from ascriptive towards political identities,

leading to a new interpretation of the old conflicts between the two groups. As soon as the *sayyids* rephrased their ascriptive genealogical origin in political terms, the Arabs reinterpreted the identity of their former fellows through the 'liberal' categories of the 1962 revolution. They immediately depicted ʿAbdulmalik al-Houthi as an aspiring new Imam, as the representative of the *sayyid* group. They directly labelled the Houthi movement as 'racist' (*ʿunṣury*), shaped around the putative superiority of the *sayyid* lineage over the others. Thus they proceeded to characterise al-Houthi and the *sayyids* in genealogical terms, as 'relatives' of the Jewish people—also arrogant (*mutakabbirīn*) like the Jewish people, who considered themselves '*ash-shaʿb al-mufaḍḍal*'. Eventually they recalled how the *sayyids* managed to exert power through the monopoly of religious knowledge, how they stole the land of the Arabs by indulging in hypergamic marriage strategies, and how they deceived their forefathers by means of this cultural hegemony.

These arguments against the *sayyids* were organised in a coherent theory of *negative ideology.* In the definition of J. Larrain, negative ideology is "[…] a particular form of consciousness which gives an inadequate or distorted picture of contradictions, either by ignoring them, or by misrepresenting them." (1983: 27) This distinction has been further developed by Purvis and Hunt in the notion of *critical ideology*: "[...] a realm in which social knowledge and experience are constructed in such a way as to 'mystify' the situation, circumstance or experience of subordinate classes or dominated groups." (1993: 478) In this definition, ideology exhibits a *directionality*; it works to favour some and to disadvantage others, or, as Thompson (1984) would put it, it is essentially linked to the process of sustaining asymmetrical relations of power—to maintaining domination by disguising, legitimating, or distorting those relations.

The 'native theory' of my young interlocutors of Arab origins used the notion of *khudʿah* (deceit) in a way which is similar to the notion of 'critical ideology'. In fact, they described their ancestors —those ancestors who used to awe the *sayyids*—as people deceived by an ideology which favoured the imamate and the *sayyid* class. Coherently, they depicted the *sayyids* as a privileged class—with this echoing the revolutionary rhetoric described in Chapter 1.

As soon as the *sayyids* adopted a new political language to describe their identity, the Arabs opposed them on the same level. At first, as a joke, they painted suns (the symbol of Iṣlāḥ) all around the village. Concurrently, they started challenging the Houthis on a theological level. They accused them of having abandoned the Zaydiyyah, turning into Twelvers. Thus they engaged the *sayyids* in a perpetual dispute over the role of the Ṣaḥābah.[67] These discursive practices completely

67 This is a classical point of friction between Zaydīs and Shafiʿīs. Cf. Kohlberg E. (1976), *Some Zaydī Views on the Companions of the Prophet*, Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London 39(1), pp. 91-98.

overwhelmed any previous relationship, making impossible the coexistence of *sayyids* and *arabs* in the same *diwān*. Eventually, the Arabs officially joined the Iṣlāḥ party, opening an office in the village and establishing formal contacts with the organisation in Ṣanʿāʾ.

Gradually, some of the Arabs started praying like Sunnis do, crossing their arms over their stomachs. However, most of them remained loyal to the confession of their forefathers. Consider, for example, this interview with a twenty years old student of Arab origins:

> **Luca:** Do you consider yourself Zaydī? Or after the crisis you changed...
>
> ʿ**Adnān:** No. I am Zaydī. Before the crisis or after the crisis. Houthi or non Houthi. Islah or non Islah. I am Zaydī. I am completely Zaydī.

People like ʿAdnan remained loyal to the confession of their forefathers, challenging the Houthis on the theological ground of the Zaydiyyah:

> There's a difference between the Imam Zaid and the Imam al-Hady. For example the Imam Zayd said, regarding marriage, that a Muslim man should marry with a Muslim woman. On the contrary, al-Hady fostered division. For example he said, the Qurayshi man with the Qurayshi woman., the Hashimy man, with the Hashimy woman, the Arab man with the Arab woman.... But the Hashimy man can get married with an Arab woman, but not the reverse. And the government is only for *Ahl al-Beyt*.

ʿAdnan joined Islah. "Why," I asked him, "was it in spite?" I was provocative. He replied, "This is how bad meets evil." Thus he explained that, in sum, Iṣlāh was better than the Houthis. They accepted anyone, Zaydī or Shafi'y or whomever, while the Houthis spent their time turning other Muslims into infidels, thus fostering sectarian divisions (*madhhabiyyah* or *ṭāʾifiyyah*).

Over the course of one year, the social fabric of the village completely deteriorated. Long established habits suddenly became contested, leading to previously unknown tensions. Dancing to the double clarinet, in Kuthreh, was forbidden: a rule established at the turn of the century by the *ʿāqil* ʿAbdulhamid and always respected by all the villagers. One day, the Houthis tried to sing their religious hymns at the wedding of an *ʿarab* man. When the Arabs reacted, a huge scuffle exploded. From that day on, Arabs deliberately broke the rule of avoiding music and playing the double clarinet at weddings. As a result, *sayyids* stopped attending them.

Curiously, the newly established Iṣlāh faction of the village rephrased its claims, drawing from the same vocabulary used by al-Houthi: the Occidentalist one. Consider these excerpts from one of their leaflets:

> It is renowned and there's no need to prove it, that America and Israel are hostile to the Muslims. [...] It is natural the American / Zionist enemy participates in the guidelines and the instructions, according to its interests, supporting what hinders the genuine and moderate efforts [of the Muslims].

In a short introduction, it is explained that the American/Zionist services manipulate every motto, every alliance and every trade. The truth is always hidden behind the veil. The Houthi wars need to be analysed from a different perspective:

> What is interesting in this painful war is that the Houthis and their followers entered it under the motto "death to America and Israel," justifying by means of the Quranic culture the opposition to Jewish and Christians. Behind this cover, Houthis coopted many people that burn with passion to defend the Muslim nation and to confront the Americans and the Zionists. The results and the conquests of these bloody wars are clear, and there's no doubt about them: death didn't touch America, nor Israel and the victim—in the end—is the Yemeni Muslim. […]

A list of uncanny connections between the Houthi movement and the U.S. followed, thus the conclusion:

> It is necessary that the smart person asks himself: what's the relationship between the Americans and al-Houthi? So we say: some years ago, the American administration started a program called "The Great Middle East", with the objective of ripping apart Middle Eastern countries, causing clashes. And in order to legitimate this operation, it has created a political theory within which to legitimise the operation, the theory of Creative Chaos (*al-faūḍah al-khilāqah*). So the Houthis, fostering internal sectarian divisions and entering many internal wars, save a part of the American project for the area—whether they know it or not. So this is the bitter truth: American and Zionists succeeded in exploiting the poor sons of Yemen as fuel for their interests.

What happened in Kuthreh was the result of latent, unresolved tensions. These tensions had been provoked by the rapid upheavals that, from the 1960s onwards, led to semantic and structural changes in northern Yemen. Traditional categories, rituals, and values were not apt anymore to inform the action in a structurally changed social environment. The Arab Spring provided a new language to reshape identities, to construct a shared moral, to select reciprocal acts, and so forth – in sum, to create society in a world transformed by mobility and global cultural flows. Within this framework, nature kept being moralised and politicised, yet through a new language of risk: that grounded on occidentalist narratives.

Chapter 4 – Land Talks about Origin

The construction of genealogical selves through property

Property, in Middle Eastern contexts, has been traditionally understood in its relationship with social structure and law (Nader, 1985). In an introduction that is still considered a foundational text of Middle Eastern economic anthropology (Elyachar, 2005), L. Nader has individuated four interpretive strands which explore property law *a*) as an idiom of social relations, *b*) as a means of control and centralisation, *c*) as a means to gain personal power and achieve mobility and *d*) as a means of social engineering (Nader, 1985: 2). Throughout this chapter I attempt at developing these strands while showing how property is embedded in people's quotidian lives: how it is imbricated in social ideals, political situations, economic circumstances, national politics and historical idiosyncrasies.

Given its importance for our discussion, I will briefly touch upon the first strand as an introductory note. The first interpretive line (‘property as an idiom of social relations’) has argued for a non-materialist explanation of land disputes, considering property “relatively incidental” to economic organisations (ivi: 3). From this perspective, the idea descends of property as a ‘metaphor’, a ‘concrete form’ or a ‘code’ standing for social relationships. In Nader's terminology, “[…] the ‘thing’ mediates relationships, rather than being sought as the object of the relationship” (ivi: 5).

A vivid example of this interpretive line is Hammoudi's research on water rights in Morocco (1985). In this analysis the argument is clear-cut: property is about relationships, not about

substance. Since water in itself cannot be controlled as property, rights in water need to be controlled through social relationships. Property needs to be understood through social lenses, in the interlink between history, customary law, Islam and cosmologies.

The opposite approach is well exemplified by E. Peters (2007). In his study of the Bedouins of Cyrenaica, Peters has deepened the binding relationship between genealogies and property. In Cyrenaica, freeborn tribesmen are those who can "[…] offer an unbroken line of descent from their immediately deceased forebears to the founding ancestress of all noble tribes." (ivi: 43). Their clients are, instead, unable to prove "nobility of descent." This way of conceptualising the relationship enables the freeborn "[…] to see themselves as a class against the clients" (ibid.): genealogies are not, thus, the real cause of the relationship between the freeborn and clients. The real cause are relations of production, and Peter's solution is thus materialist: "The genealogy is, in other words, the model the Bedouin use for conceptualising their territorial relationships […] Ancestral names and the positioning of descent lines formed from them are of serious concern to the Bedouin because they document landed property relationships." Genealogies are a rationalisation, an epiphenomenon of the base.

Out of the dichotomy between social and material aspects of property, I align my perspective with S. Gudeman who understands the base as "anything that contributes to the material and social sustenance of a people with a shared identity," (Gudeman, 2001: 27) including material factors, symbols and values.[1] I am interested in investigating the multifaceted relationship between genealogies and property, sense of belonging to a lineage and means of subsistence. I shall first consider the economic pattern that has characterised the household economy of Kuthreh until the mid1960's. Secondly, I shall move to explore the people's construction of their land and properties. Thus I will investigate how genealogies and property are co-constructed, and how the sense of belonging to a lineage passes through a peculiar way of earning a living. Eventually, I shall conclude with moral and political considerations regarding a changing system of self-sufficiency.

A Double Economy

Agriculture and pastoralism

1 Gudeman's notion of base refers to common property, while my interlocutors possessed land privately. I am aware of this apparent contradiction, and I shall expound it in this chapter and in Chapter 6.

The economic pattern that I shall now describe, in its general features, has probably endured for several hundred years.[2] Following Gudeman and Whitten (1982) we shall call it a household, domestic or *oikos* model.[3] In this kind of model, the institution of the household was the primary unit of production and consumption, based on a division of labour between the sexes and—we shall add—a hierarchical relationship between the generations (Viti, 2006). The productive system was based on a dual economy: villagers both practiced agriculture and pastoralism.

Throughout rural areas, land was owned predominantly by absentee landlords. Peasants worked these lands as sharecroppers (*sharīk*, pl. *shurakāʾ*) and daily wage workers (*shaqy*, pl. *ashqāʾ*). Besides, each household owned privately small plots of land and was granted access to common pasture land.

A variety of crops were raised, according to the characteristics of the land. People distinguished types of land according to two criteria: *a*) access to water, and *b*) depth of the land itself. In Kuthreh, there were seven springs of water (*gheyl*, pl. *ghuyūl*). Two springs (al-Ithwām, and al-Kuẓāmah[4]) were permanent and deployed for agriculture. They were, in fact, connected to pools (*berek* or *mājil*), and water usage was regulated by written documents. Two other sources (al-Barid and ad-Dīr) were permanent too, but not deployed for agriculture. The remaining three sources were seasonal and deployed for agriculture.

Two channels (*saqiyah*, pl. *saqāyah*) ran along the whole valley,[5] one stemming from a-Ithwām, the other from al-Kuẓāmah. Through a complex system of small embankments (*ʿarīm*, pl. *aʿrām*), these two channels brought water to a limited number of plots within the valley. This kind of land—situated within the valley and served by permanent springs of water—was called *māl al-gheyl* ('land of the spring'), and it was the most expensive in the area.

Two other huge channels ran along the whole valley, separating the two sides of the mountains (the North, *qibly*, and the South, *ʿadany*) from the land in the middle of the valley (running West to East). These two channels (*saylah*) were deployed as 'roads' for most of the year. However, during the monsoons, they would gather water from surrounding valleys hosting majestic flows of water (*sayl*, pl. *suyūl*). These 'rivers' were contained by means of double-walled embankments (*kābeh*, pl. *kawābeh*) and redirected towards the plots by means of small embankments (*maradd* or *yadd*) that obstructed the *saylah*, channelling water into small splits of the *kābeh*. The land that had an access

2 I provide below an account of how this pattern changed during the last century.

3 M. Mundy (1995) has emphasised the centrality of households in the social organisation of the Yemeni Highlands.

4 The spring, called al-Kuẓāmah, was connected to the mosque and the pool used to gather the dirty water coming out from the mosque. This water was thus drinkable at the source, but not when it was running out from the pool. In the lower part of the valley, people used to drink water coming out from the Ithwām pool.

5 For a sketchy map of the village see appendix, Ch. 4 Doc. 5.

to this second type of irrigation was called *musayyal*, or *masqawy*. The third and last type of land was the so-called *'aqar*. A plot was defined *'aqar* if it were only irrigated by rainfalls. Most of the *'aqar* land bordered, to one side, patches of land (*rahaq* or *marhaq*, pl. *marāhiq*) that were simply too sloping to be cultivated. These patches—the *marāhiq*—were attached to cultivated plots as property, since they channelled rainfalls towards arable land. The *marhaq* was considered private property, as far as access to water was concerned. As pasture land, however, it was considered common property.

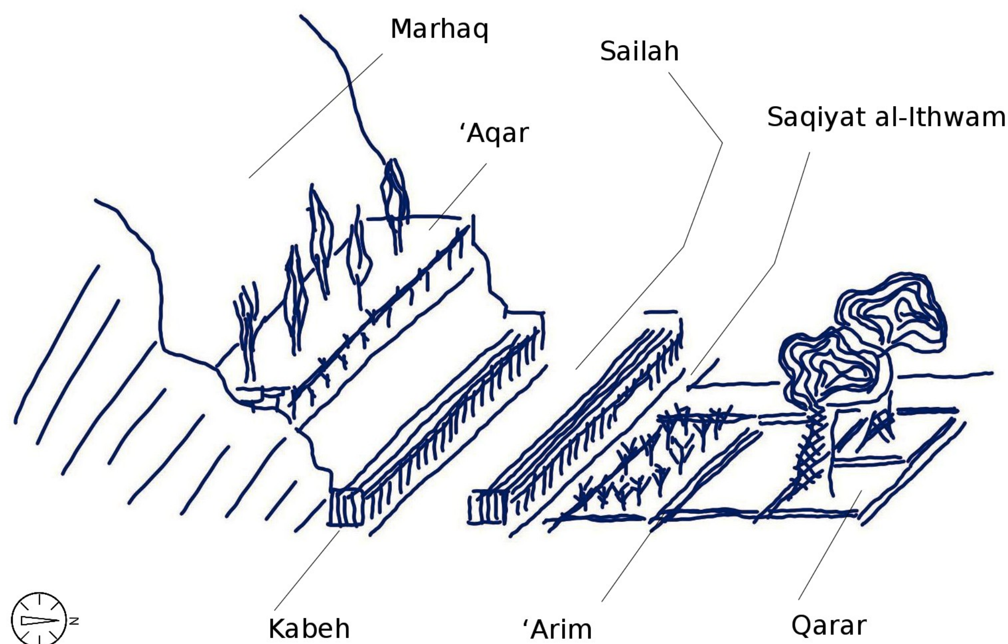

Figure 4 – The inner valley in Kuthreh

The relationship between land and access to water was meticulously detailed in property contracts (*baṣīrah*, pl. *baṣā'ir*). Since water was recognised as a flow, its usage was described by a so-called '*ādah* (custom): a rule for the usage of water which allocated to each plot of land a portion of time within the overall flow of water. In the appendix, I provide the turns of water linked to the permanent spring "al-Ithwām" (cf. Appendix, Ch. 4, Doc. 1). However attached to land, the turns of water were often sold for money or granted to needy people. The turns of the *waqf* were regularly sold, and thus shared between villagers.

Lands were further catalogued by means of their depth. The land of the valley, for instance, was considered *māl kabīr* (literally 'big land'). The *māl kabīr* was at least 20 meters deep, and water penetrated profoundly into the ground. The *māl kabīr* was described in opposition to the *qaṭaf*: a

land which was only 3 to 5 meters distant from the rock of a mountain. This second type of land was incredibly fertile, even if not irrigated, and thus more expensive.

As I have anticipated above, various crops were raised according to the quality of the land. The *'aqar* land was mainly dedicated to the cultivation of sorghum (*dhirih*), white or red. The cultivation of this crop was thus completely dependent on rainfall.[6] Lentils (*bilsen*), peas ('*atar*) and broad beans (*qilleh*) where cultivated on *'aqar* land of the *qaṭaf* type. Other crops needed more water. Among these we shall mention two varieties of barley (*sha'īr* and *saqleh*), corn (*rūmy*) and wheat (*qamḥ*). These crops where cultivated within the valley in *musayyal* plots of land and in the outer valley, again on *musayyal* plots.

Each type of grain was transformed into a limited number of products for consumption. From sorghum, people baked *luḥūḥ*, *qafū'*, and *jiḥīn*: three different types of bread. Moreover, they cooked *'aṣīd* a sorghum mush to be accompanied with meat broth. From barley and wheat they baked *khubz* and *malūj*, two types of bread, and they cooked *harīsh*, a wheat mush to be accompanied with butter and honey or meat broth. These products, consumed at every meal, were said by the people to be a *necessity*: they constituted the 'staff of life'.

How was the *māl al-gheyl* deployed? The turns of water of the two permanent springs were mainly deployed in the upper (West) part of the valley, and were for irrigating the orchards. Kuthreh was, in fact, renowned for its luxuriance, being mainly associated with centuries-old fruit trees. Pear trees (*'anbarūd*), apricot trees (*barqūq*), almond trees (*laūz*), vineyards (*'inab*), a few coffee trees and and peach trees (*firsik*) were once cultivated in the valley. Among these varieties, Kuthreh was famous for its pears. The pear tree, in fact, was only raised in two other locations—Wādy Ẓahr and Radā'—since it needed a huge amount of water.[7]

Vegetables like leaks (*beī'ah*), male and female onions (*baṣal* and *baṣalah*), garlic (*thumah*), coriander (*kabzarī*), parsley (*baqdanūs*), radish (*qushmy*[8]) and so forth were not cultivated as large crops. Each household raised these vegetables in vases or small gardens and acquired the rest from *qashshāms*, who would go out daily to the countryside in order to sell their products. All these vegetables, in fact, needed to be irrigated every week and needed an amount of water which was not available to the average peasant. Moreover, vegetables—although tasty—were not considered a

6 Only a few *musayyal* plots in the outer valley were cultivated with sorghum. It was, in fact, a waste of water which was better used for barley or other crops.

7 Pear trees were, in fact, irrigated by means of the *saylah* during the monsoon. Moreover, they needed two sessions of irrigation from the *gheyl*. The first session, called *ta'shiyyah*, took place before the leaves fell in autumn. The second, called *liqāḥ*, took place in winter when the tree was already bare (around January). The fruits were collected between May and June.

8 The label *qashshām* clearly derives from radish (*qushmy*).

necessity by the peasants.

Moving to pastoralism, each household had at least one cow (*baqareh*). Milking was an exclusively feminine task. The outcome was mainly butter (*samn*) and milk to be consumed as *laban*. No cheese was produced. Bulls were mainly deployed for ploughing the fields. Pastoralism was mainly tied to sheep. Each household had a flock of at least 40 or 50 head. In the morning shepherds—in this case also mainly young boys and girls, rarely men—would take their herd out of the stables.[9] This movement was so majestic that it was labelled *kharajat ghanam* (literally "the going out of sheep"). As we shall see in Chapter 6, sheep were raised for the purposes of consumption, but also—I shall say mainly—for transaction.

The land map

In order to understand the 'people's construct of their land' (Gudeman, 1986), it might be useful to start our reflections from pastoralism. As I have anticipated, sheep grazed in common areas. The attribute 'common' is, however, misleading, since every inch of space in the area of the village belonged to specific individuals. Only spaces that were not cultivated, like the *marāhiq*, were considered 'common', although only with regard to pastoralism. In a sense, the rigid organisation of private property stood in opposition to a fluid—and hardly controllable—flux of sheep that was granted the right to leap over any border.[10]

An interesting exception to the observations we have just made is the so-called *ḥadd w balad* (border and country). The reader—especially if acquainted with scholarly literature (Dresch, 1989)—might expect the border between two villages to be neatly defined. This is, at least, what I expected. Experience, however, soon proved me wrong. Roaming West, East, North and North-East of Kuthreh with people from the village, I often slipped from one territory into another without even noticing. When I started enquiring about the borders, I explicitly asked my friends to indicate them while we were walking. No one had any clear idea of where, exactly, an imaginary line divided two territories.

A further inquiry led me to understand that borders were fixed and described in old documents called *raqm* (s. *arqām*). These documents, written in response to conflicts that exploded between people belonging to neighbouring territories, described the border by means of recognisable

9 The stables for the flock were called *kirs*, and those for the cattle *ḥār*.

10 The access to private property was, in fact, rigidly guarded. In order to grant people the freedom of moving around the village, common areas and roads were cut out from private property and refunded to the owners.

features of the landscape: "the border runs from the black rock to the acacia." Moreover, they specified the amount and disposition of common lands for pasture. The documents, however, were not common knowledge nor held by the head of the village; they were scattered in private houses, jealously hidden or simply forgotten.

Was there a biunivocal relationship between borders, common land and pasture land? As far as I can tell, there was not. Many borders, for example the one which divided Kuthreh from Western villages, had no relationship at all with pasture land. On both sides of the border, land was owned privately. Moreover, land that fell within the border were not a privilege of the inhabitants of the village: people from neighbouring villages—or from any other area—had the right to buy land within a village's territory.

So what was the border for? As far as I can tell—and my interlocutor widely agreed with my interpretation—what caused conflicts over the border were not territorial claims, nor fluxes of people. The main cause of conflicts were flocks of sheep. In appendix (Ch. 4, Doc. 2) I provide the text of a rule which was jointly promulgated by the *'āqil* of Kuthreh, the *sayyid* 'Abdulhamid, and the *'āqils* of Beyt Maḥfad, a neighbouring village (to the north). The rule established a normative framework to sanction any damage caused by the flock of one village to the fields of another. In an environment where the bundles of rights associated with land were rigidly allotted, fluxes of sheep were a constant threat to order and private property. Boundaries—especially when they contained pasture land—were thus sensitive places that signalled where the flocks of neighbouring villages had to stop.

Given these premises, I shall now spend some time on land and private property. Peasants would divide the entire land surface of the community into irregular patches, conceptually ordered into an unwritten land map. All areas were included—even caves, mountains, springs—so that there were no empty spaces. Each physical feature of the village was designated and socially constructed. The spaces contained within the valley were labelled *mauāḍi'* (s. *maūḍa'*). Each *maūḍa'* was an area of variable size with precise physical boundaries delimited through references to stable features of the landscape: a stone, a terracing, a channel, an old tree, and so forth. The boundaries of each *maūḍa'* were entrusted to oral tradition; they were not fixed in written documents.

The name of each area was sometimes taken from natural features found in the area, but mostly from social referents. A mountain, for example, was called 'The Two Horns' (*al-qarneyn*) for its shape. However, most of the regions were named after their social function or their past owner. One region, for example, was termed 'Walnut Hill' (*till jaūz*) because once walnuts were raised there, another 'The Storages' (*al-makhāzin*), because of its social function, and another, 'The Bare Land'

(*aṣ-ṣalabah*), because it was abandoned. Many regions were, instead, labelled after their historical owner. For example, Beny Zāhir once belonged to the namesake family (which was still living there), and 'The Bare Land of the People of Azraq' belonged to people from the neighbouring village of Azraq. 'Lūlat al-'Abd Hamish' once belonged to Lotf al-Bary Hamish, a rich merchant from Ṣan'ā'. The eighteen turns of water were similarly labelled after social referents of the recent past.

Many labels were simply untranslatable and obscure, for the villagers as well. According to the people, the names were there when the first inhabitants of the village arrived. However, other labels —as the ones we have analysed above—were treated as historical evidences of a recent past. The regions described by the labels were not homogenous in terms of area, ranging from less than 500 square meters to more than 3,000. In spite of this inaccuracy, the land map was perfectly functional in providing directions. Meetings were habitually arranged with references to these macro regions whose location was common sense among the villagers.

This topography had also another function. It constituted an encompassing grid of reference for subtler distinctions in terms of property. Contracts, in fact, usually localised property by means of a general reference to the *maūḍa'*. Hence, within the *maūḍa'*, contracts detailed how a peculiar patch of land bordered other properties in each direction.

This land map well expressed two opposing principles. On the one hand, it represented the natural environment through labels which did not denote individual or village appropriation in the present. The labels of the *mawāḍi'* were, in fact, stable, public, renowned, common sense, and they conceptually organised the whole territory of the village. They bore traces of past owners, but nonetheless they described land as available to everyone.[11] On the other hand, these *mawāḍi'* contained private property. Private property was dynamic, always shifting from one family to another through inheritance, trade and usucaption. Being the plots defined by means of relationship to other plots, the contractual organisation of private property lacked a stable frame of reference. As we shall see below, this mechanism favoured generation after generation, a redistribution of land and an informal acquisition of it.

Since my purpose is to illustrate how people constructed their relationship to the land, it is important to emphasise that 'usefulness' and 'possession' were the core images through which

11 The turns of water were labelled in a similar way so as to generically refer to the turn notwithstanding the actual owner. M. Mundy, referring to water rights, has argued that documents do not accurately convey the exact way in which property is transmitted, since a woman's personal name cannot be written on paper (1995: 172). This was not the case in Kuthreh: women were mentioned in written papers, without causing any breach in their family's *sharaf*. However, they disappeared from the turns of water because turns bore 'generic', stable labels.

nature was represented. Above all, natural resources were said to be *ḥaqq*, i.e. they 'belonged' to someone. While roaming around with my interlocutors, they presented their community to me as a huge property partitioned among the villagers. "This plot is mine, that one is my brother's." "I have the right to half of this pear tree." "Once every three years, I am entitled to chop down this acacia." "The tower house is my grandfather's." Concurrently, each tree and each plant had a socially established function. "This is a willow (*sayyāl*)... We use its wood to build roofs!" "This is an acacia... Its wood can only be burnt down." "We use the leaves of this plant to cure headaches." And so forth for each single feature of the landscape.

Once, while I was heading back home after a *qāt* session, I noticed a sixty-year-old man shouting at his nephews. He was literally furious, waving a long wooden stick and menacing them. He did not want to hear excuses and eradicated with his bare hands a whole row of qāt trees that his nephews had just planted. After a while, the whole matter became clear: he was furious because the boys had invaded his property, trespassing on his plot. From my perspective, the offence was risible, since the two plots had no clear boundary and the contested invasion was a matter of no more than 2 metres. However, I soon understood that another principle informed my interlocutors' perspective. "What belongs to me belongs to me!" ("*ḥaqqy ḥaqqy*!") No matter how small, abandoned and insignificant a plot of land was: it always belonged to someone and not to others.[12]

Papers and genealogies

The paramount importance of private property is well documented in written documents, most notably testaments. During my fieldwork, I had the chance to consult many of these documents. Despite the widespread idea that women do not inherit in tribal law, the documents I had the chance to examine rigorously allotted properties to men and women in the proportions fixed by the *sharīʻah* law (as Yemenis would say, "one man inherits as two women").[13] When a man—or a woman—passed away, all his or her belongings were listed and their value estimated. In the case of

12 This principle does not only apply only to real estate. I remember similar conversations with bath attendants, circumcisers and greengrocers in Ṣanʻāʾ. Due to an outstanding demographic increase, many of them had inherited turns or plots of land that did not suffice to make a living. When I asked them, "Why don't you abandon your turn?" theywould reply, "Ḥaqqy!"

13 T. Gerholm (1985) is right in assuming that women inherited property, preferentially, gold and jewels, while lands were for men. Men, in fact, bore the burden of 'maintaining' their family, while women had the right to be maintained. However, the value of inherited goods was, usually, carefully balanced. In Kuthreh, it was common to reserve fragmented patches of land for women, reserving arable surfaces for men. This practice of exchange was signalled, in testaments, by the term *tanāqul*. Often, women inherited land in the outer valley or in places were land was too far away to be regularly cultivated. If married to distant villages, usually women did not inherit property. For further analysis regarding the inheritance of women in Yemen see Mundy (1979).

vast properties, the intervention of a professional measurer (*mulabban*[14]) was requested. The properties were later divided between the heirs, sometimes by means of a draw.[15] Eventually, the shares of the inheritance were registered in a document called *faṣl* (pl. *fuṣūl*).[16]

Here we reach a point of paramount importance, and it is worth illustrating it with an anecdote. Armis—a neighbouring village of Kuthreh—was famous for hosting an outstanding number of families of *shaykhs* (*shaykh*, pl. *mashā'ikh*). Beyt Wahhās was one of these families, endowed with both a distinctive reputation and important wealth. I was well acquainted with many members of the family, whom I first met in the Old City of Ṣan‘āʾ. One of them, Sanḥān Wahhās, acted as an intermediary for me, introducing me to people in Kuthreh when I first opened my new field-site.

In order to help me with my research, some members of the family provided me with old papers belonging to their lineage. ‘Abdallah Wahhās promised me a document that, he said, "will prove our ancestry." I was expecting a paper like the ones presented in Chapter 3: a genealogy *stricto sensu*. He brought me, instead, a wrapped *faṣl*. As we unrolled the document, four pages of thick calligraphy were revealed, for a total extension of more or less one metre and a half. The document listed and allotted all the properties of Beyt Wahhās, and it was not complete: ‘Abdallah had copied only the part regarding his branch of the family.

The document was structured thusly: the top of it provided a sort of introduction, the so-called *tarjamah*. This introduction detailed the name of the deceased and of the heirs and provided a brief summary of the properties to divide. The rest of the document, instead, listed the share of each heir. Each part of the share was introduced by the preposition *ileīh* (literally "to him") and followed by a detailed description of the properties and their value. I shall emphasise that each plot of land was univocally described by the name of the village and by the name of the *maūḍa‘* within the village. It was further circumscribed by neighbouring plots, named after their owners. Consider, as an example, this line of the document:

> *[...] ileīh mā ḥadd Su‘ād qibliyan al-ḥajj Saleh, wa ‘adaniyan ‘Ali ‘Ubād, khamsīn libneh qīmeh ithnā ‘ashar qirsh w nuṣṣ qirsh [...]*
>
> […] To him what borders Su‘ād [the name of the maūḍa‘] North [of what belongs] to the

14 *Mulabban* comes from *libneh*, the local unit of measurement. This task required mathematical skills, and for this reason it was sometimes practiced by the *muzayyin* (Stevenson, 1985). In Kuthreh, however, it was practiced by a *sayyid*.

15 In this case, small pieces of paper indicating properties of the same value were put in a leather bag (*qur‘ah*) and thus randomly extracted. The outcome was registered in a document detailing the shares of the inheritance (*marākiz as-suhūm*).

16 People would say that the *faṣl* is so called because it, "separates all the claims and requests (*yifṣul jamī‘ ad-da‘wah wa aṭ-ṭalab*)."

ḥajj Saleh, and South [of what belongs] to ‘Ali ‘Ubād, 50 libneh, for a value of 12 qirsh and half qirsh […]

These lists were incredibly detailed. People would literally divide anything: mattresses, tools, trees (measured in arms), rooms (measured in number of beams of the ceiling). If any of the heirs had benefitted from any share during the life of the deceased—for example cultivating a plot for himself—he had to compensate for this advantage to the other heirs.[17] If someone had worked more, and the other heirs benefitted from his work, they had to compensate him with a share.[18]

This picture detracts from the idea of a liable agnatic group where lands bind people together (Peters, 2007; Abu-Lughod, 1989: 281); once the head of a family passed away, each heir acquired a direct control over the means of production. Being property appropriated individually, each heir had the chance to manage his own land and his own water in the way he preferred. Kinsmen were closer than non-kin, in a very material sense: they had to share the same tower house and the fruit of their trees; their plots neighboured one another, and so forth. This forced proximity was, however, a cause of tension rather than an incentive to union.

Before we deepen this point, we have to fully analyse the other part of the *faṣl*, namely, the introduction (*tarjamah*[19]). When ‘Abdallah Wahhāz presented the document to me he explained: “the *tarjamah* proves our ancestry. You can gather the rest of it from my uncle; he has a history book.” The important point here is that the great majority of the peasants would prove their ancestry by means of land contracts and testaments. Property and origin were interwoven and connected by a biunivocal tie: ownership proved ancestry and ancestry proved ownership. It is not by chance that people were asked to show “*al-uṣūl wa-l-fuṣūl*” to prove their ancestry; origins (*uṣūl*) and shares of the inheritance (*al-fuṣūl*) amounted to the same thing.

With the only exception of the *sayyids* from Beyt al-Muṭahar and Beyt Shams ad-Dīn, everyone in Kuthreh—or in al-Bustān, Armis, or Shimās—always demonstrated their origin to me by means of contracts of ownership. By retracing old contracts people retraced their ancestry. Exploring old papers, they would tell me, “You see, this was my grandfather! Fulān ibn Fulān!” Concurrently, each property contract provided information regarding the social texture of the village. As the *muzayyin* once told me, “*al-aūrāq tiḥky ‘an ḥaqq an-nās* (papers talk about the property of the

17 Privileges of this kind were listed in the testaments under the label *mustafād*.

18 A typical case is when the elder brother works for his younger brothers. His work is recognised through a share of inheritance named *kubbārah*.

19 This usage of the verbal noun ‘tarjamah’ is reminiscent of the biographical significance of the word described by Eickelman (1986). Dating back to the 11th century, the word *tarjamah* described, especially in North Africa, short biographies written in the third person. These biographies included a genealogy.

people).” What he meant in that situation—and I will provide the full account below—is that these documents recounted shared histories; what is not mentioned in Fulān's papers might be found in someone else's, since his lands bordered someone else's.

When my host the *sayyid* ‘Abdulhamid was trying to reconstruct his ancestry, he first took me to ‘Ali Ahmed ‘Abdurraḥman, a man from Beyt al-Maghreby. This man showed us contracts of his family where lands belonging to the grandfather of my host were mentioned along with his name and ancestors. Interestingly, that same day ‘Ali Ahmed ‘Abdurraḥman decided to demonstrate his own ancestry to me. I will expound uponthis life history below. Although he was an affine of the Imam Yahya (his grandfather married the Imam's daughter), he had no family tree, only land contracts. He documented his ancestry by showing me a *tarjamah*.

A popular proverb says, “*waraqah wa lā alf shuhūd*,” (“a document demonstrates more than a thousand witnesses,”) emphasising the importance of written documents. Losing ownership contracts, for whatever reason, was a tremendous threat both to the identity and wealth of a family. As we have seen in Chapter 2, many people from *beny al-khumus* lamented the fact that they could not prove their origins because they had the *fuṣūl* and the lands in their native village, from which they had to flee. Some of my interlocutors would claim that, when Ṣan‘āʾ was sacked in 1948, many people lost their origins. This hypothesis is speculative, but it could be a good approximation of historical events.

During my stay in Kuthreh, one villager was caught stealing gold from the house of a co-villager. He was immediately exiled from the village, and he had to leave behind all his belongings. Similar circumstances, in 21st century Yemen, are not as disastrous as they were some fifty years ago. Nowadays people are salaried state employees, and they can easily rent an apartment in Ṣan‘āʾ and make a living far away from their property. The thief did not have to accept any demeaning task, and nor was he questioned when he moved to Ṣan‘āʾ. Some fifty years ago he would have probably started working in one of the services tied to *beny al-khumus*.

Just a few years before my fieldwork, a violent conflict exploded in a neighbouring village, Beyt Maḥfad. A man sold the *marāhiq* belonging to his land, which went against a disposition of the village which forbid such practice, considering the *marāhiq* common land. When the village decided to compel the man to pay, he refused. A huge scuffle insued, involving men from his family and others from the village, eventually turning into a shooting. The man fled, and while fleeing he killed one of his fellow villagers. In order to escape vengeance, he journeyed to Kuthreh by foot and sought refuge in the tower house of Beyt Shams ad-Dīn. Once the head of Beyt Shams ad-Dīn heard the whole story, he refused to take the runaway under his protection, judging him guilty, and forced

him to leave. The man managed to reach Hithāt, where he had some real estate, and went into hiding. His fellow villagers eventually tracked him down, and upon finding him, killed him. Again, we can only imagine what would have happened if he had accepted to work in a demeaning task.

Moving from the domain of speculation to empirical data, it is a fact that claiming lands and origins without written documents was a complicated quest. After the 1962 Revolution, Kuthry villagers opposed the Republic until the late 1960's. After the betrayal of *shaykh* 'Ali al-Ghādir,president as-Sallāl sent military troops to the village, probably Egyptian soldiers. These troops destroyed the house of the *shaykh* Hamud ar-Reīshāny. Unfortunately, most of the documents belonging to Beyt ar-Reīshāny were destroyed in the resulting fire.

This event damaged the family in terms of wealth, since they could not prove anymore the ownership of many lands—with the exception of those ones which were right in the middle of the inner valley. Yet the biggest threat turned out to be in regards to their origins. People started insinuating that Beyt ar-Reīshany was a *nāqiṣ* (lacking) family, a family without origins (*mushhum aṣl*). In order to face these rumours, Hizam ar-Reīshāny embarked on a quest to retrieve his family's origins. Beyt ar-Reīshāny was said to be a branch of Beyt Jābir, a family belonging to a village called Ḍūrān, in Āns. Hizam brought with him one of the few documents that survived the fire and with it reached the *mashāikh* in Ḍūrān. The *mashāikh*, in turn, certified the origin of Beyt ar-Reīshany with the document which I reproduce in Appendix (Ch. 4, Doc. 3).

The property map

The pivotal role of written documents has been challenged by informal practices on many levels. This is particularly evident if we consider the distribution of lands within the valley. I cannot provide the complete pattern of distribution, for several reasons. First, the records regarding the payment of taxes (*zakāh*) were not stored in a public archive. Rather, they were kept in the house of the *shaykh* (or the *'āqil*). Since the *'āqils* would change frequently, often one village was represented by more than one *'āqil*, and tax records were scattered in more than one house. Although I had access to most of the documents belonging to the *shaykh* 'Abdulhamid Shams ad-Dīn, I could not find any tax record, and all the documents belonging to the *shaykh* Hamud ar-Reīshāny were burnt during the 1962 revolution, along with his tower house.

In many villages, the *'āqil* was flanked by an *amīn*. The *amīn* was responsible for validating and archiving property contracts, testaments and so forth. However, as the word itself denotes(it stems

from *amānah*, trustworthiness,) an *amīn* was compelled to silence. He could not divulge any information in his possession. Moreover, often there was more than one *amīn* per village. In spite of these difficulties, I have tried to sketch a property pattern by indirect means.

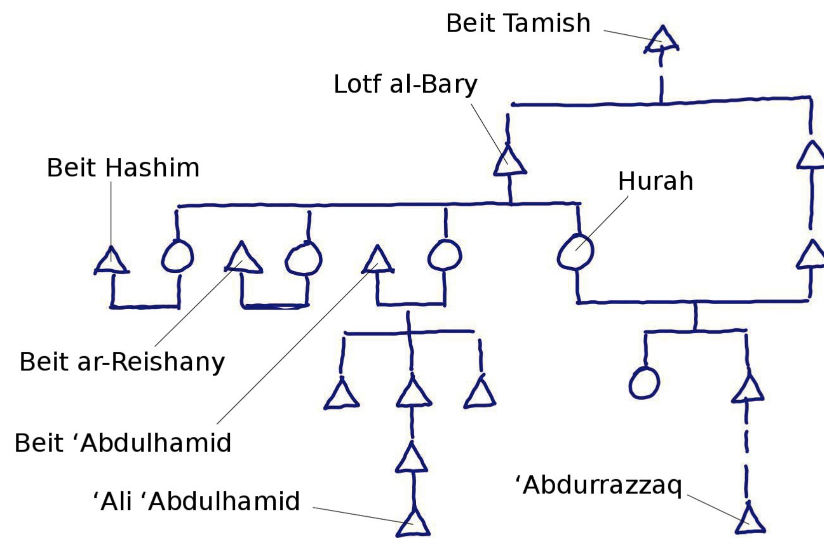

Figure 5 – The legacy of Beyt Hāmish

As I have stated above, a *maūḍa'* of the village is labelled "Lūlat al-'Abd Hamish". This label recalls a historical fact: a huge amount of lands in the village belonged to the rich merchant Lotf al-Bary Hamish. The *maūḍa'* came to be called Lūlat al-'Abd Hamish after the passing of the merchant, since it makes fun of his dark complexion (*'abd*, in fact, means slave). To make a long story short, Lotf al-Bary Hamish was a coffee merchant and had no sons. He married his three daughters to prominent men of Kuthreh. These men belonged to three families: Beyt Hāshim (Beyt al-Maghreby) and Beyt 'Abdulhamid (both *sayyid* families), and Beyt ar-Reīshāny (*ʿarab*). As a consequence, these three families inherited a huge amount of land within the village.

In a strange twist of fate, the merchant's wife was pregnant when he died. She gave birth to a daughter, Hurah, and this daughter married her cousin (FBS). In 2012, I met 'Abdurrazzaq 'Abdullāh Ahmed Hamish, Hurah's descendant. Being a man of incredible wealth, he had no interest in claiming back his property in Kuthreh. However, he provided me with the *faṣl* that contained the complete list of the lands belonging to his family. From the copy (*naqlah*) of that document, we can gather information regarding the valley at the end of the 19th century.

If we consider the inner valley of Kuthreh, Lotf al-Bary Hamish owned about 8,500 square metres of *māl al-gheyl*, divided between 10 plots. In the outer valley, he owned about 8,600 square metres, divided between 7 plots. Moreover, there is strong evidence that other families from the Old

City of Ṣan‘āʾ had vast possessions in the valley. People from Beyt ath-Thaūr, a rich family of Quḍāʾ, had a tower house in Beny Zāhir and lands North of the village, in Sidd Sabarān. Two turns of water are named after Beyt al-Ward and Beyt Hamish, and surely Beyt al-Ward once owned lands that now belong to Beyt al-Qizz by usucaption.

This evidence suggests that many people in the village used to work as *shurakāʾ* (sharecroppers) or daily wage workers for a few big landowners. Among these big landowners we shall certainly recall people from Kuthreh itself. Beyt al-Muṭahar gathered a huge amount of land during the days of ‘Ali Ahmed, and they still possess a lot. Beyt ‘Abdurraḥman, too, obtained a huge amount of land, and after that one of its descendants married a daughter of the Imam. Some other families, instead, had nothing.

How did these people survive? One century ago, land—especially in the outer valley—was very cheap. People would say, “we bought land launching a riyal coin: where it fell, there arrived our property.” Most of the families had some plots in the highlands right above the inner valley or in the outer valley. These plots only produced grain, and being far from the village it required a great effort to reach them. However, this land provided sustenance. Moreover, just a few trees in the valley were enough to guarantee a good income: pears, in fact, were very expensive.[20] Families that —literally—had nothing, made their living working as sharecroppers or wage-workers. Owning abundant land, men were the real wealth. If we choose to consider the period before 1962, we cannot draw on quantitative data. Yet despite this lack of information, we can get some insight into that period from old documents and in-depth interviews.

At the beginning of the 19th century, the head of Beyt Abū Ḥusseīn passed away, leaving behind three male orphan sons, and surely some daughters, though they are not mentioned. His progeny had no means of providing subsistence, and so they ‘cleared’ some abandoned lands in Sidd Sabarān, a fertile area on the highlands right above the old village of Kuthreh (to the north). From document 4 (Appendix, Ch. 4), we can deduce that the family had no other lands, and thus the Imam Yahya granted the young *sayyids* the privilege of acquiring the lands by usucaption. This circumstance is instructive, for many reasons. First, it signals that some families made a living from poor, almost nonexistent resources, combining their meagre income from properties with other forms of income. Second, it reminds us that the property system was flexible, and open to usucaption

Third, it introduces the matter of the ‘extinct families’. As far as we know, the three sons of Abū

20 Nowadays a tree can produce fruits for 2,100,000 riyal a year. As many of my interlocutors pointed out, in order to prove me the value of trees, “a pear tree is worth the price of a Toyota.”

Ḥusseīn passed away without giving birth to any male descent. For this reason, nowadays, Abū Ḥusseīn is a family that belongs to the past: it is not anymore represented in the village.

The Beyt Qizz family is another interesting case; they had almost nothing. They cultivated two plots of land, for a total surface of about 900 square metres (about 20 *libneh*). Those plots belonged to a rich family from Ṣan'ā', Beyt al-Ward, along with the associated turn of water. Over the years, Beyt Qizz obtained ownership of the lands from the Imam by usucaption, in a procedure similar to that applied to Beyt Abū Ḥusseīn. These two plots can be considered *māl al-gheyl*, since they were in the inner valley, and Beyt Qizz had access to Beyt al-Ward's turn of water. Consistently, they were harvested two times a year. In recent times, people from Beyt Qizz cultivate corn mais and then fava beans. In the past, they preferred wheat and fava beans.

Villagers estimated a production capacity of half a *qadaḥ* for a *libneh*,[21] which means 3,300 kg per hectare. As a comparison, this figure is two times the production of wheat in Italy in the mid-eighteenth century. We shall consider it a plausible valuation, since people from Beyt Qizz actually made their living from these two plots and a few other expedients. Mujahid, a sixty-year-old man from this family, recounted to me his father was, "one, son of one, son of one (*wāḥid ibn wāḥid ibn wāḥid*)." His grandfather had just one son and two daughters, so he could not take care of a flock of sheep ("sheep want children (*al-ghanam yishtī jihhāl*)"). He made a living cultivating the two plots and selling the turn of water when he did not need it. He sold fodder (*qaḍb*) at the market. Sometimes, he worked as *sā'y* or *dallāl*: an intermediary for the sale of lands. In sum, he exploited multiple sources of income. This was not an isolated circumstance. Many villagers used to complement their subsistence production with a vast number of waged activities: gathering wood, harvesting fruits from the trees,[22] and so forth.

People from Beyt Qizz were a branch of a bigger lineage called Beyt al-Ghumeīr, and consequently they used to share a tower house with the rest of the family. Beyt Qizz acquired an independent identity and a new title when Mujahid's great grandfather moved to a new tower house: the house that once belonged to Beyt Abū 'Ali, the extinct lineage I just mentioned above.

As the family was in need, Mujahid's father joined the army of the Imam, right before the 1962

21 A *qadaḥ* amounts to about 30 kg. A *libneh* amounts to 44.44 square metres.

22 The verb describing the action of harvesting fruits from the trees is *janā, yijnī*. The man harvesting fruits is thus called *jāny*. The *jāny* would climb up the trees, gathering fruits in a shawl (*zennah*) fastened to his back, so as to function as a bag. He kept for himself a share of the fruits, called *ḥijzeh*. This task, due to its dangerousness, was very remunerative. Fruits were piled (v. *naṣā, i*) in small stacks called *naṣwah* and thus counted. The counter grasped five fruits with his left hand and five with the right, thus counting "one!" He counted fruits until he reached a hundred, equalling 1000 fruits (5x2x100). Every thousand fruits he had the right to his share of one fruit, usually the biggest. This selection of the best fruits of a tree was called *'addeh* (from the verb *'add*, to count) and it was well-paid in the market.

revolution. When the revolution began, he remained in the army, serving the Republican cause. His two sons, Mujahid and ‘Ali, followed the same path. Each of them built a new house in the inner valley of Kuthreh, and they both kept working in the army and in the fields. When I asked Mujahid about his double occupation, he answered as many other villagers did: with the demographic explosion—he explained to me—plots got fragmented, and what was barely enough to maintain one family—and Beyt Qizz is a tragic example of this situation—was suddenly split between two, three, four brothers or even more. The salary from the state was equally insufficient to maintain a family, leading the peasants to adopt multiple economic strategies.

An interesting example of these multiple economic strategies is the life history of ‘Ali, Mujahid's brother, and his sons. ‘Ali joined the republican army after the 1962 revolution. He was trained in Iraq, and he spent his whole life between the army and the fields. He had the chance to build a new house in the inner valley of Kuthreh, thus establishing a nuclear family: an experience that none of his ancestors ever knew. After the 1994 civil war, ‘Ali was forced to retire—as most of the people from Kuthreh were (cf. Ch. 3)—and was granted a good retirement.

Yahya, one of his two sons, in turn became a soldier. As he explained to me, his dream was to become an official like his father. He studied at the high school, but he did not meet the graduation requirements to join the military college (*kulliyah*). Hence, he started working as an ordinary soldier, reaching the rank of *musā‘id*. Seeing no better perspectives for an improvement in his career, he decided to enrol in university: the only chance to gain access to the military college.

Yahya was married with two sons. He lived in the basement of his father's house, and he dreamt of building an independent house—as his brother already had done. Living with his father, he was compelled to share part of his salary with the family. He earned 45,000 riyal a month, plus provisions: sugar, rice, 50 cans of beans, and two bags of wheat.[23] Yahya worked for the army 8 days a month, devoting the rest of his time to agriculture. This was not an anomaly, considering that most of the people in the village granted half of their salary to their superiors. His income was completed by the grain harvest, more or less 8 *qadaḥ* of rūmy, divided between the two families (‘Ali and Mujahid), and *qāt* from terracing, which provided two harvests a year. The average consumption of this household was of 2 *qadaḥ* of grain per month. Yahya alone, however, chewed qāt for 30,000 riyāl each month.

This life history is typical; it perfectly sums up the material constraints and expectations of most of the villagers from Kuthreh. They considered instruction as a means to reach one goal: a good salary from the state. They worked as soldiers, but because their wages were below the cost of

23 The bag (*ghyrah*, pl. *gharāir*) contains 2 *qadaḥ*.

living, they had to pursue subsistence production and activities in the informal sector—in sum: broad economic changes induced reactions in household organisation that are well exemplified by Yahya's case. However, I do not mean to suggest any typological link between social change and economic change. As R. Wilk has pointed out, “[...] households do not adapt to a type of society or a stage of development. They are instead concerned to deal with very local circumstances, with problems and issues of a relatively immediate time span.” (1997: 30)

Formal economic activities were generally complemented by occupations traditionally associated with lineage. As we have seen in Chapter 2, in the case of the *muzayyin,* working in the informal sector meant serving in wedding ceremonies, working as a musician, or as a butcher. Most of the peasants, instead, devoted their efforts to agriculture: both for self-consumption and for the market. However, new solutions were creatively sought. Some villagers opened up petty shops[24] (*baqqālah*) or started working as taxi drivers.[25] In sum, like the urban workers K. Harth studied (1973) in Ghana, they resorted to multiple economic sources, complementing formal and informal economy in creative ways, as real bricoleurs would do (Fall, 2007). Within the debate regarding post-peasantry, M. Kearney has characterised such trans*form*ing (1996: 141) economic identities through the notion of polybian (*poly*, many, + *bios*, mode of life): like a chameleon, the polybians “[...] adapt their being to different modes of existence as they opportunistically move in and out of different life spaces. […] To describe a polybian locally and ahistorically he or she might indeed appear in one context − perhaps at one moment in his or her life − as a peasant, in another as a plantation worker, and in others as a petty merchant or an urban slum dweller.” (ivi: 141-2)

However useful the notion of polybian might be to redefine the ‘peasant type’, it suffers from two limitations. First, we need to remember that—as we have seen above—multiple economic strategies are not a new feature tied to a complex and globalised world (Schüren, 2003); the peasant, as a pure type, never existed—at least in Yemen. Second, the notion of polybian somehow underestimates the weight of culturally oriented interests. Rationality and maximisation, interest and opportunity, are always referred to a cultural framework.

Moving from this critique, I will try to demonstrate how subsistence agriculture, rather than being simply a material source of income, amounted to a fundamental dimension of the identity of a *qabīly.* These insights into the life of peasants have far reaching consequences for our understanding of what we have so far defined the ‘genealogical imagination’. Being a *sayyid* or an *ʿarab* was, in fact, not relevant in the field of peasantry. What mattered was how people gained their livelihood

24 In Kuthreh there were 11 petty trade shops. All of them opened during the last five years.

25 Two men from the village had small buses (*dabbāb*), one had a taxi, and several others worked on motorbikes. All of them worked connecting Be īt Baūs to Ṣan‘āʾ.

and—more importantly—how their ancestors did.

Land to Defend

The qabīly*'s* sacra

Conflicts are a privileged locus to understand social practice. During my stay in Kuthreh, a number of land-related conflicts happened. It is worth noting that such a high degree of infighting was something new to the experience of the villagers. However, the causes of this new phenomenon were not a mystery: a mixture of demographic increase and state intervention.

The demographic explosion had a twofold effect: first—as we have seen above—lands had to be divided among an unprecedented number of heirs; second, villagers from the new generations started building new houses both in the inner and outer valley.[26] This second phenomenon was not only tied to the demographic increase; it was strictly related to state salaries. As new generations started receiving a salary, young men suddenly felt the opportunity to become autonomous from their agnatic group. This dynamic was completely new: when land was the only source of income for peasants, the head of each family had an almost complete control over his sons, and the agnatic group encompassed the household. Another consequence of the demographic explosion was related to ritual ceremonies. Wedding ceremonies, for example, were quickly becoming economically unbearable, since the number of guests (and the number of sons to marry) dramatically increased.

Besides, the Yemeni government was directly reshaping the life of the peasants through huge infrastructural interventions. During my stay, the construction of a dam started right above the village. Moreover, a new road called "*khaṭṭ al-mīʾah*" was planned to cross the outer valley, bordering the north side of the inner valley following an East-West direction. This majestic work was meant to connect Ṣanʿāʾ to Beny Maṭar, circumventing the problematic area of ʿĀṣir. Locally, it had the effect of drastically increasing the price of the lands bordering the road. As a result, the cheapest lands of the area—those of the outer valley and of the so-called Mibrāʿ—suddenly became extremely expensive, increasing their price tenfold.

These lands, being valueless and useless in agricultural terms, were usually left undivided

26 The houses of the old village numbered about 30. The first house built in the inner valley appeared during the 1970's. At the time of my stay, I counted 156 houses within the sole inner valley.

between the heirs and signalled in the *faṣl* as *matrūk* (literally ‘left out’), or they were assigned to women. As the price increased, rough competitions started among the heirs to establish a right of precedence over these neglected lands. People started hunting old *fuṣūl*, visiting uncles and far kinsmen. They started claiming their right to the *marāhiq*, once considered common land for pasture. Selling these lands, some families organised sumptuous wedding ceremonies, marrying 4 sons in one shot, inviting guests from all the neighbouring villages. Other families wanted to follow suit.

In the wake of this unprecedented transformation, a man called al-Bedū brought news that transformed the social life of Kuthreh for the months to come. It was December 2012. The Bedouin, al-Bedū, was a man of about 40 years, with a slender build and a sharp angular shaped face framed by impressive moustache. If not for his accent, the shape of his turban, and his uncanny habit of roaming alone 24 hours a day, he would have been a typical Kuthry villager. These peculiar features were the legacy of his mother, a woman from Ma'rib, and Mohammed—this was the real name of the Bedù—used to cling onto these customs with a conscious stubbornness.

The Bedù used to live in a tower-house in the old part of Kuthreh, and he had a small flock of sheep. In 2012, he was the only villager grazing a flock on the highlands right above the village. Those highlands ran all along Kuthreh's valley, and they were neatly divided in two ‘zones’ (*maūḍa‘*, pl. *mawāḍi‘*): al-Mibrā‘ and Sidd Sabarān. Al-Mibrā‘ was a spare plane, where the villagers once grew sorghum. Sidd sabarān, in contrast, was a small valley nestled in the highlands, where the peasants grew lentils. North of these areas, a boundary divided Kuthreh's pasture lands from those of the village Beyt Maḥfad.

One day I was heading back to Kuthreh with people from the village and, among them, was the *sayyid* ‘Ali ‘Abdulhamid, my host. It was nearly midday and we stopped in Armis after noticing a small assemblage of people. The *shaykh* ‘Ali Ahmed ‘Abdurrahman—one of the prominent characters in Kuthreh—was discussing something with the Bedù. From that talk I only grasped some sentences, shouted by the Bedù in his Ma'rib accent: “I was in Sidd Sabarān grazing the flock,” he said, “when I noticed some chalk. Someone is getting ready to build on the border.”

That very same day all the representatives of Kuthreh gathered in the house of ‘Ali Ahmed ‘Abdurrahman. This might be the place to detail the political structure of the village. The village was guided by a *sheīk* and 4 *‘ayns* (s. *‘ayn*, pl. *a‘yān*). Each *‘ayn* was elected as the representative of an extended family (*badaneh*, pl. *bidīn*) by collecting the signatures of the majority of the adult male members of the *badaneh*.

At the time of my fieldwork, Southern Arabs had one representative (*ʻain*). The *sayyids*, being more numerous, had two: one for Beyt al-Maghreby and one for Beyt Shams ad-Dīn, Beyt ʻAbdulhamid and other minor houses. Above the *ʻayns*, a man from Beyt al-Ḥaddy (a branch of Beyt al-Maghreby) was termed ʻshaykhʼ. However, he had no factual power and his authority was contested. In situations of conflict, ʻAli Ahmed ʻAbdurrahman would act as if he were the real *shaykh* of the village.

When ʻAli Ahmed reached the aggressor by phone, the man claimed his right over the lands. He affirmed that he bought them, years before, from a man of the village; twist of fate, that man was ʻAli Ahmed's brother. The news was shocking, but tribal procedures ran their course. ʻAli Ahmed urged the man not to undertake any further action by shouting: "*al -maḥall yiḥjir lak! Ant maḥjūr bi ḥjr Allāh!*" This formula, not easily translatable in English, expressed a clear pragmatic principle: "you have no rights over the lands until we clarify the situation: don't build anything!" The situation was even more sensitive because the lands were near the border between Kuthreh and Beyt Maḥfad. The *shaykhs* immediately reacted, appointing (*ʻayyan*) 15 men to defend the border, balancing families (*badaneh*, pl. *bidīn*) of *ʿarab* and *sayyid* origin. Hence, they set an appointment for the following morning, right after *fajr.*

The village did not react as the *shaykhs* expected. The following morning, just a few men made the appointment, fully armed with their kalashnikov. Among those men, only people from Beyt ʻAbdulhamid climbed the mountains and reached the border. The reason was, at a time, economic and ideological. While I was climbing up the mountains, armed with my own kalashnikov borrowed from a pliant Maghreby man, ʻAli ʻAbdulhamid confessed his inner motivations. Despite the common belief that his grandfather Mohammed had sold everything, even "the sun and the wind," ʻAli ʻAbdulhamid had jealously treasured an old contract (*baṣīrah*) belonging to his ancestor, a contract that certified the ownership of a small plot in Sidd Sabarān, one of the areas affected by the aggression. As we reached the highlands, while I was taping, he explained to me::

> **ʻAli**: This is mine (*ḥaqqy*)! Someone came from Radā… From Radā, they said his name is Muḥsen as-Salāmy, or al-Ḥammāmy, or al-Ḥarāmy[27]…
>
> **Luca**: What does he want?
>
> **ʻAli**: He wants to build here, over what is mine (*ḥaqqy*)! What belongs to my grandfather and my great grandfather! I swear (*amānah*) I will die of the worst dead here, but he won't have what is mine (*ḥaqqy*)!

27 This is a play on words. The name of the man is changed in *ḥammāmy* (bath attendant) and *ḥarāmy* (thief).

The core of this whole outburst was the notion of *ḥaqq*, a common sense notion, endowed with the characteristics of naturalness, practicalness and thinness, depicted by C. Geertz (1983: 85). The term *ḥaqq* was simply language in use, with a few reflective corollaries. An indexical term, it was apt at connecting individuals and physical things, capable of establishing an emotive and symbolic relationship between persons and inanimate realities, a term loaded with thick cultural assumptions embodied in practice rather than explicated in cosmologies, functioning "[...] less to lead into more troubling questions […] about how the world is put together and what life comes to, than to block such questions from view." (ivi: 79)

We can appreciate the common sense quality of this term by comparing it to other theoretically loaded concepts, like *qabyalah* and *sharaf*. Most of my interlocutors were ready to interpret such notions, to explain them in referential terms (Silverstein, 1976), clarifying meanings through meanings. It is not by chance that anthropologists prefer such notions, since they provide a handhold for theoretical reflection. These meanings are, already, phrased in referential terms. They can soon be called to do service in a higher order, sometimes functioning as analytical categories for comparison (Pitt-rivers, 1971: 232). Terms like *ḥaqq*, deeply rooted in common sense and social practice, are harder to grasp, and harder to explain. However, in their usage, they give clear hints regarding the orientation and structure of social action.

That day on the highlands I tried to deepen the ideological branching of our ready intervention in defence of the border, but I didn't gain any further insight. Some days later, we reached the highlands with other members of Beyt 'Abdulhamid with the goal of building a guardhouse to oversee the land. Here is how 'Ali 'Abdulhamid[28] explained to me our presence on the highlands:

> **'Ali**: This [place] is called Sidd Sabarān. My grandfather (*sīdy*) […], my father's father, Mohammed 'Abdulhamid Shams ad-Dīn, bought here 12 *libneh* and a half, *'aqar*, in the *mauḍa'* [called] as-Sid. Now the state has created a road, and they say that the width of this road is 100 metres. They buried our land. This ridge (*'arḍah*) is over our plot (*jirbeh*), over the *maūḍa'* that my grandfather bought. This ridge, what lies on the width of the mountain, we call it *'arḍah*, and it belongs to our plot and to the people next to us, our neighbours. However, we measured already 25 metres width and God knows how much is the height, over the road.
>
> **Luca:** And why are we building a guardhouse (*deīmeh*) over there?

28 Recorded interview, December 31, 2012. 'Ali and I were sitting on the highland, chewing qāt, while his younger nephews were building the guardhouse.

‘Ali: So that we can defend (*niḥmy*) our land. No one comes to bother,, no one comes to take what is mine (*ḥaqqy*). That's the point, more or less... And [we built the guardhouse] so that people know that we fixed our land (*mathbūt*), that this land is part of our *marāhiq*.

Luca: What did you tell me before... That, this way, people will see... what?

‘Ali: Our resolution (*‘azīmah*) and the strength of the man!

Luca: What is the *‘azīmah*?

‘Ali: *‘azīmah* means that what is ours... We are resolute... I mean... They have the confirmation that we don't leave what is ours. They see us resolute and strong.

Luca: Can I say that your land is your *karāmah*?

‘Ali: No...

Luca: Ok, maybe your *sharaf*?

‘Ali: No... *Ḥaqqa-nā* (it belongs to us)! If anyone takes it from us, how can I say that, people will feel that we are weak (*ḍu‘afā’*). If someone takes it, we are weak...

Luca: You are not men...

‘Ali: It's not that we are not men... I mean, we are weak. Or you can say that we have no manliness (*rajūleh*). I mean, poor people (*masākīn*) who cannot defend their belongings...

In this excerpt, ‘Ali clearly expressed the gendered *ethos*[29] of a *qabīly*. Interestingly, he expounded in a plain, colloquial way, terms that in the anthropological tradition have a typological value. The two adjectives ‘*ḍa‘īf*’ and ‘*miskīn*’, in this excerpt, do not refer to social groups: rather they describe the *ethos* of men living in a territory where rights are defended by force, either physical or symbolical. ‘Ali affirmed, “We won't leave behind what belongs to us.” Abandoning property is, in itself, a display of weakness. Why, in this particular situation, did ‘Ali need to display strength? Because other people, both from within and without his village, were making claims to his land. Following what we shall later label segmentary proclivity (cf. Ch. 6), in this situation he could only rely on his close kinsmen. We shall deepen this point below. Another way of shaping the same claim, was usinga religious language:

29 Before we move on, there is another point that I shall emphasise. ‘Ali is describing a gendered *ethos*, because no one would ever expect a woman to shoulder an AK-47 and defend a border. This is the expected behaviour for a man. However, we shall be accurate enough to understand that ‘manliness (*rajūleh*)’ is here usedin a metaphorical sense to describe a shared moral universe, not to define feminine or masculine qualities. People that cannot defend their *ḥaqq* are considered weak people. They can be weak for contingent reasons, like a guest. Or weak because their origin describes them as cowards, like a *muzayyin*. However, *pace* Vom Bruck (1996), weak people do not share any moral quality with women: they share a political position of dependence. In this sense, also the *muzayyin* is said to be *ḥurma*.

Luca: Is this also a religious duty?

'Ali: Ah, sure! I told you that the Prophet said, your blood, your women (*a'rāḍ*) and your lands are *ḥarām* for you. The meaning of *ḥarām* is that abandoning these things is not licit. Your *a'rāḍ* means your *sharaf*: your wife, your sister, your mother... This is *'arḍ*.

Luca: Forbidden women[30], right? Also your aunt (*'ammah*)...

'Ali: Your aunt, your father's sister... Your brother's sister. Your cousin [FBD]. Yes, this is *'arḍ*. If anyone insults her, or something like that, I will die for her, I kill him. This is *'arḍ*. You can find [the verse] in the Qur'an, "And those who accuse chaste women...[31]" For example they say, "Fulāniyah is an adulterer." This is *'arḍ*. And the land (*māl*)... Blood (dimāʾ), women (*a'rāḍ*) and land (*amwāl*) are *ḥarām* for you. This is land [referring to his land]! if we abandon it, *ḥarām* upon us! And the blood, I mean, when you and another person [have a fight], you don't abandon the blood of the person who died... God has said in the Qur'an, "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth and for wounds is legal retribution.[32]"

This short statement bears significance on many levels. First, it defines values which the *qabīly* considers *sacra*: inalienable possessions (Weiner, 1992; Elyachar, 2005: 518), as land or a house, and vulnerable subjects as women, the *ḥurma* (Bourdieu, 1977: 61). Second, it clarifies the importance of gun culture (Heinze, 2014) for a countryman; in tribal contexts, where state is overtly opposed and autonomy greatly exalted, proving not to be weak implies the capacity of defending the *sacra* by means of physical or symbolic violence. Third, it highlights how 'tribal' values and Islām are often interpreted as two overlapping and inseparable moral systems, delimited by fuzzy boundaries.

This is how 'Ali 'Abdulhamid justified his claims and his actions in public discourses: whether in front of his kinsmen, in tribal gatherings or in any *diwān*. Living with him day and night, however, I benefitted from a privileged point of observation on his inner motivations.

Land talks about origin, origin talks about land

Let me retrace the strategy of 'Ali 'Abdulhamid as he explained it in the quiet of our night talks. He was, indeed, the legitimate owner of the lands in Sidd Sabarān. Those lands had been bought by a

30 Literally I said "muḥarramāt", meaning women with whom sexual intercourse is considered incest. The term *sharaf* covers all the women with whom sexual intercourse is forbidden, but it extends to others with whom it is licit. A case, above all, is the patrilateral parallel cousin (fbd).

31 Qur'an, 24: 4. The entire verse: "And those who accuse chaste women and then do not produce four witnesses - lash them with eighty lashes and do not accept from them testimony ever after. And those are the defiantly disobedient."

32 Qur'an, 5: 45. The verse is cut and incomplete.

member of Beyt ath-Thaūr in 1316 h., in the presence of Mohammed Ahmed Shams ad-Dīn[33], the grandfather of ʻAli (four generations removed). Seven years later, in 1322 h., the nephew of Mohammed—named in turn Mohammed ʻAbdulhamid—bought these lands from Beyt ath-Thaūr. This passage of property was recalled on the back of the contract.[34]

The lands legitimately belonged to all the heirs of Mohammed, thus including the cousins of my host. Yet, given his precarious economic situation, he had convinced them, some years before, to renounce their rights to the lands, giving them to him as *wahb*, an irreversible gift. His brother, too, had renounced to his rights to the lands, signing a *tanāzul* (cession). Some years before, in fact, those lands were almost useless; they were just a far *ʻaqar.*

The relationship between ʻAli ʻAbdulhamid and his cousins was—at the time of my fieldwork—tense. Some years before he had overtly accused them of having stolen the lands of their common ancestor, Mohammed. Moreover, since they were staunch supporters of al-Ḥūthy, my presence had only worsened the relationship. Starting from this point of rupture, however, ʻAli ʻAbdulhamid managed to put all the family back together. Simply, he renounced the land to the *wahb* and the *tanāzul*, turning the land in Sidd Sabarān into common land and his cousins into our best allies. If, when the conflict started, he was a weak man—chewing alone with me over the highland—twenty days later he had men to back his claims. This is how we ended up on the highland building a guardhouse.

The ultimate goal of ʻAli ʻAbdulhamid and his agnates was to sell the lands—although this could not be overtly stated. But sell the lands to whom? And where did the man from Radāʾ end up? In order to answer these questions, we shall move a step back.

As soon as the threatening news of a foreign aggressor building on the highlands right above the village spread, most of the people from Kuthreh reacted as my host did: publicly exposing their claims. During that period, on a daily basis, we attended an infinite number of qāt sessions were people from each family vented their rights. After a number of meetings, in order to reach a solution to the problem, people started asking one another, "show me your papers." It might appear bizarre, but the papers never appeared; everyone claimed to have papers, but no one ever dared to show them.

The reasons were multiple. Some people were plainly lying: they knew they had nothing, but concurrently they knew which lands were free to claim. Some others had a vague idea of their

33 This man was the father of the *ʻāqil* ʻAbdulhamid, whom we met in Chapter 3. ʻAli ʻAbdulhamid reconstructed his own genealogy from this contract of ownership, since he had no other proof.

34 The contract was called *baṣīrah*. The front of a contract was called *baṭn*. When something was written on the back, usually a transfer of property (*intiqāl*), the *baṣīrah* was defined *muʻaṭṭalah*.

belongings and tried to buy time: meanwhile, they desperately searched for centuries-old papers. Some others—with various degrees of honesty—played the card of genealogical uncertainty; as we have seen above, lands talk about other people's lands, and they often do it in elliptical terms.

This last case is certainly the more interesting one. People, in fact, started claiming lands through references to other people's papers. These claims were—clearly—unverifiable, and precisely for this reason very believable. Most of the papers did not report the full genealogy of the buyer nor that of the owners of the neighbouring plots. Especially when the buyer or seller were not from the same village, just a few names were reported in front of the *nisbah* adjective referring to the place of origin.[35] The situation was further complicated by the presence of female heirs in the contracts.

Just a few days after the news of the aggression, one fact was clear (although unofficially): there had been no aggression. The plan was far more elaborated: two persons from the village were planning to sell the border lands, which did not belong to anyone. Concurrently, they were trying to understand who owned what around the common land, in order to sell undisputed plots directly and buy the rest to sell it later. A buyer was, in fact, ready to acquire the whole highland.

This case is interesting for at least two reasons. First, it shows the relationship between genealogies and land contracts; second, it highlights the dialectic between personal interest and public language. Let me start with the first point. Although land contracts never appeared in public gatherings, people would show 'what they had' in more intimate situations. For instance, the contract that proved the possessions of my host in Sidd Sabarān triggered, almost immediately, a dispute between people from Beyt Hāshim Zayd (*sayyids*) and Beyt Kuthry (*ʿarab*). The document, in fact, listed a neighbouring plot (to the west), belonging to 'Zayd al-Kuthry'. Both Beyt Kuthry and Beyt Hāshim Zayd did not have any document proving a direct possession of the land, so they had to resort to genealogies. After a long and complicated process, Beyt Kuthry proved its possession.

Something similar and extremely more complicated occurred for the lands of Beyt Abū 'Ali. As we have seen above, Beyt Abū 'Ali was an extinct lineage—and not a wealthy one. This, however, is information that I gathered some months later, and that I kept to myself. The important point is that Beyt Abū 'Ali did not have male heirs, so that a woman, Muḥsanah, inherited all the wealth of the lineage. This fact emerged clearly from some *fuṣūl* we examined in different houses. While the

35 As far as I can tell, and I have read dozens of contracts, the *muzayyin* was always referred to with the name of his own *badaneh*, thus avoiding identifying him with the name of the village where he used to live. In some cases, his role was specified. On the contrary, in modern ID cards, the *muzayyin* usually takes the title of the village where he lives. This very fact frequently produces conflicts, since peasants can hardly conceive of a barber's shop with their title written on the sign.

fact was clear that Muḥsanah inherited lands, who she did marry was not clear at all. Three different houses started disputing their descent from her. Interestingly, among them, there were people from a *badaneh* called Aḥsan Muḥsen. Before this conflict erupted, everyone thought Beyt Aḥsan Muḥsen to be a branch of the lineage called Beyt al-Muṭahar. Yet when old papers eventually proved that—actually—they had an ancestor called Muḥsanah, another truth emerged more troublesome: that they belonged to a *badaneh* called Beyt Ṭalab. In a word, they gained land but they lost their ancestry.

This was, somehow, a common dynamic: most of the peasants—*sayyid* or *ʿarab*—had no clear information regarding their genealogy. Most of them were illiterate and had no means to analyse old papers written in hieroglyphics.[36] Consider this excerpt from an interview with ‘Ali Qizz:

> **Luca**: You, Beyt al-Qizz, you belong to Beyt al-Ghumeīr. But how do you know it?
>
> **‘Ali**: How? I don't know... How did we know? [laughing]
>
> **Luca**: I don't know... You should know it... [laughing]
>
> **‘Ali**: Now I will tell you how I got to know it. My father and ‘Ali Ḥizām, the father of ‘Abdullah Ḥizām and Ahmed Ḥizām, had a legal controversy when one [member] of our family died. So what did the judge say? He said, “Everyone gives his origin (*aṣl*). Our ancestors, you know, they didn't know [their origin]... They knew Fulān son of Fulān and that's all. What did the judge say? “Everyone gives his origin (*aṣl*) and his land contracts (*baṣāir*) and I will understand the origin by means of the contracts. So he traced back our genealogy (*nasab*) by means of the contracts, until he reached the ancestor whom was at the centre of the legal controversy. He said, “He is from the progeny of Aḥsan ‘Ali,” who is our ancestor.
>
> **Luca**: This way? Through the contracts?
>
> **‘Ali**: Yes. Al-aṣl wa-l-faṣl. What's his origin and what are his properties. Nowadays, since when people opened, all of them can read, and now they make the tree, with the names.
>
> **Luca**: So the tree is something new...
>
> **‘Ali**: Something new but... It completes what is old. You, for example... You are Luca Roberto Nevola... And that's all, you know until here. I want to know until your last ancestor, your origin. If someone tells me, “What ties you to Beyt al-Ghumeīr? What's your

36 Land contracts were, in fact, almost illegible. The style was refined and the calligraphy had no diacritics, or diacritics different from those of modern standard Arabic. Moreover, numbers where written with symbols (cf. Appendix, Ch.4 Doc. 6). The Arabs called this calligraphy “Khaṭṭ al-Furṣ (Persian calligraphy)”. They overtly meant that the *sayyids*, the ‘persian oppressors’ (cf. Ch. 1), purposely deployed an illegible calligraphy to maintain their monopoly over knowledge. Truth or not, just a few persons in the village were able to read old documents, and only after getting acquainted with the calligraphy of the writer. My host was one of those people, and this explains why I had the chance to vision and translate such a remarkable number of papers.

> name?" I say, "I'm 'Ali, son of Mohammed son of 'Ali son of 'Abdullah son of 'Ali son of Aḥsan son of 'Ali son of Hādī al-Ghumeīr. And this is my cousin [fbs]: Ḥadī al-Ghumeīr bonds us (*yijma'nā*). And three brothers descend from him: Saleh 'Ali, who gave Beyt Ḥizām or Be īt an-Najjār; Aḥsan 'Ali, the ancestor of Beyt al-Qizz and Beyt al-'Asal; and Aḥsan Ahmed, the ancestor of Beyt Aḥsan Ahmed."

This excerpt, I believe, expresses with extreme clarity the interrelatedness between properties and origins: to prove one's possessions requires proving one's origins and *vice versa*. He who has left behind his papers and his possessions is—literally—lacking origins.

Between interest and duty

We can now move to the second point: the dialectic between personal interest and public language. No better definition of honour I have found than that of Pitt-River's: "honour is the value of a person in his own eyes, but also in the eyes of his society" (Peristiani and Pitt-Rivers, 1966: 21). And again: "honour, therefore, provides a nexus between the ideals of a society and their reproduction in the individual through his aspiration to personify them" (ivi: 22). This definition brings into focus a central point: how human beings define themselves in accordance with the ideals of their society. However, in its clarity, it presupposes a relationship between human motivations and 'the ideal of society' that, in its straightforwardness, is misleading.

P. Bourdieu was certainly more refined in recognising the complex interplay between human interests and social constraints. In his magistral analysis of FBD marriage practices among the Kabyle of Algeria, he caustically described the social actor who, "[...] failing to identify his particular interest with the "general interest", is reduced to the status of a mere individual, condemned to appear unreasonable in seeking to impose his private reason—*idiotes* in Greek and *amahbul* in Kabyle." (Bourdieu, 1977: 40)

This observation perfectly fits the case at stake. What was the relationship between 'Ali 'Abdulhamid's personal interests and recognised social ideals? Even without indulging in psychology, we can readily observe that he was acting following a double-standard. In public, he shaped his claims in socially legitimate terms. In private, he planned to sell his lands and—possibly—someone other's so to solve his disastrous economic situation.

As he confessed me, 'Ali had an accurate long-term strategy. As soon as he started claiming lands in Sidd Sabarān—for which he had a contract—he vented his right over another area called

Shaʿb adh-Dhiʾīb—for which he had nothing. At first, like anyone else in the village, he refused to show his papers. Yet when it became clear that two men from the village were involved, willing to buy land and work as intermediaries or to steal unclaimed plots, ʿAli started contacting them informally. He clarified his intention of selling his properties—both in Sidd Sabarān and Shaʿb adh-Dhiʾīb. The men demanded to see the contracts, and after making them wait for weeks, ʿAli showed his only paper, demanding to be paid immediately for the land.

The two men, who were waiting to understand the complete configuration of the highland, did not pay. ʿAli menaced them, "If you sell what belongs to my grandfather, I will kill you *mishī*." *Mishī* means killing from behind, without facing the enemy. This kind of killing is considered black shame (*ʿaīb aswad*). The two men reacted by contacting me and asking me to deliver a message: "Tell ʿAli that he is crazy (*majnūn*). He has nothing in writing on the highlands; his grandfather sold the sun and the wind." However, sensing an imminent storm, I went back home and delivered the message. ʿAli became furious. Considering the sentence an insult to his own *ʿarḍ*, he immediately grasped a wooden mace and ran towards the house of one of the two man. The man did not come out, and he let his wife face ʿAli. The whole situation was so demeaning for the man that ʿAli returned home. From that day onwards, he started justifying the fact of not showing any paper: "I showed them my papers, and they did not pay."

In February ʿAli had played out his strategy so well that everyone was convinced that he was the legitimate owner of the lands in Shaʿb adh-Dhiʾīb. Unfortunately, he had no papers to claim those possessions. The two men started putting pressure on him to complete the transaction. They would visit our home on a daily basis. "Why did you change your mind, ʿAli?" They would ask. He would reply, "One of my nephews asked me—*ʿamm* if you sell the lands, where will we build our houses?" Meanwhile, he was trying to secure control over the lands of Shaʿb adh-Dhiʾīb.

He explained to me that people that worked a land, even if they did not own it, had the right to sell it "*rafʿ yadd*", literally 'lifting the hands'. This formula, in land contracts, sounded like this:

> *"[...] ma hū thābit ʿaleīh al-yadd wa taḥt taṣarrufeh wa ḥāṣid thamāreh sanawiyyan [...]"*
>
> he whose hand is stable over [the land], and its under his work, and harvests its fruits every year […]

He justified this possibility on two levels. First, he told me, he who cultivates an abandoned land gains a merit (*ajr*) in front of God. Why? Because he makes a living for himself and for his progeny

(*yitarazzaq minnahā*). Second, he who cultivates a dead land has a right over it (a principle stated in the same terms by the proverb "*man aḥyā arḍ mayyitah fa-hū aḥaqq bi-hā*"). These two principles were confirmed by a customary habit (*'adah 'urfiyyah*) of conferring a quarter of a land to the people who worked it, in case the owner reclaimed it. Coherently with this complete reversal between social ideals and individual interest, later that year—and precisely in May—we climbed up the highlands with seeds and a plough (*ladā*).

Land as a Way of Earning a Living

Self-sufficiency and the market

The last conclusions of 'Ali's discoursebring us to an unexplored field of enquiry: the understanding of land as a way of earning a living. However strange it might appear, anthropological literature has characterised the *qabīly* by means of his warrior-like features, thus overlooking the relationship with his means of subsistence. Land is not—simply—a right to defend, in order to prove one's strength. Nor it is only a source of wealth. Land, for a peasant, is first and foremost a guarantee of independence.

The great majority of the villagers in Kuthreh were peasants—irrespective of their genealogical origin. Before the 1920's there were not many alternative ways of making a living. The only available possibilities were entering the market to learn a craft or wandering around the country teaching science. This situation underwent a slight change when the Imam Yahya established the army and the scientific school. As we have seen in Chapter 3, 5 men from the village—all of them of *sayyid* origin—undertook a teaching career. Just a few, however, entered the army.

The reason for this last fact is soon explained: a soldier was considered a lazy person, and abandoning the fields was strongly discouraged. As 'Ali Qizz explained to me, his father joined the army because he liked idleness. He even bought a gramophone and spent his days listening to music. Other people, however, entered the army because they were of low extraction. In sum: before 1962 becoming a soldier was a sanctioned choice for a peasant.

In order to deepen this concept, we shall examine the narratives of a villager endowed with the gift of eloquence: Yahya 'Abdulkarīm 'Abdulhamid, the cousin of my host. Yahya was the *'ayn* of Beyt 'Abdulhamid. A fervent supporter of the former president Saleh, he had protested for months

against the Arab Spring and helped me throughout my first months in the village. Then, after a conversion to the Ḥūthy religion on the way to Sa‘dah, he caused me trouble for a while, eventually redeeming himself with this fascinating narrative, a narrative through which he wove together politics and agriculture in a reflexive, self-critical way.

> **Yahya**: Here, in Kuthreh, we had [everything]... You didn't find one nor two persons buying wheat from Ṣan‘āʾ.
>
> **Luca**: Was it shameful to buy?
>
> **Yahya**: *‘aīb* (shame)!
>
> **Luca**: In many books it is written that it was *‘aīb* to sell... But I know that sometimes people used to sell the crops... Is it right?
>
> **Yahya**: Yes, but rarely. They used to say that it is shameful to buy from outside if you have land to plough. People would laugh at you. They used to say, “no one buys, but he who hasn't got land”. He who had land, it was a shame for him to buy, because he could cultivate his land.

From this first excerpt a principle emerges which we’ve met already: to abandon uncultivated land was a shame. However simple this principle might seem, it bears overwhelming consequences for our understanding of Yemeni social organisation.

Scholars have often depicted a watershed distinction between two socially defined domains: the market and the tribe. From this perspective, for a peasant it would be shameful to enter the market and sell his products. I argue that this assumption, if so stated, is misleading, and it needs to be reversed: it is not shameful to sell products in the market; rather it is shameful to buy *necessary* food instead of producing it.

Consider the practical circumstances of the life of a peasant. The grain produced by each household in Kuthreh, was—in most cases—barely enough for sustenance. Selling was, simply, not an option. However, whenever peasants had any surplus, they would load grain over donkeys and enter the market in Ṣan‘āʾ. Storage in the *madfān*[37] was, in fact, a viable option for just a few years, before moisture corrupted the grain. Big landowners habitually sold their products in the market,

37 The *madfan* (pl. *madāfin*) was a rock warehouse carved in the mountain—one of the main reasons to build tower houses on the slopes. Peasants would stock their grain in the *madfan*, moving small quantities of grain to small containers (*ḥaqb*, pl. *ḥuqūb*) next to the kitchen (*deīmeh*) on weekly basis. Extracting the grain was, in fact, slightly dangerous since the *madfan* was deep and the air, sometimes foul. From time to time moisture penetrated the *madfan,* which was not hermetically sealed, corrupting the grain. On the average, grain resisted corruption in a *madfan* for two or three years. Nowadays, people use barrels sealed with rubber. Some families have been storing grain for 20 years.

benefitting from the work of intermediary traders from Ṣan‘āʾ. In this second case, the intermediaries ‘went out’ to the countryside in order to buy huge quantities of products. Each agricultural product had a specific *wakīl* (agent) from the market of the Old City: Beyt al-Ḥabbāby for the grain, Beyt al-Qaḍḍāby for the fodder, Beyt al-Ghaīlān for the fruits, and so forth.

As we have seen above, for most of the peasants, the priority was to earn a living. They cultivated grain for subsistence, and concurrently they sold everything they could: fodder, fruits, *qāt* and even animals. Some *qabīlys* worked as traders in cattle and sheep. The *jallāb*—this is the name of a trader in animals—roamed the countryside searching for livestock to buy and sell in Ṣan‘āʾ to the butchers.

It is clear from the testimonies which I collected that peasants would sell their products in the market, either entering themselves in Ṣan‘āʾ with their products or selling wholesale in the countryside. However, in both cases, what they never did was sell retail to the final consumer. This was, simply, an operation incompatible with their way of earning a living, requiring a long-term residence in the market.

Then why is it said that, once upon a time, selling *qāt* was *‘aīb*? Qāt was despised, and it is, indeed, today, because, “He who is addicted is not a man (*al-maūla‘y mushūh rajjāl*).” Chewing qāt is, in a sense, antithetical to the work in the fields, since consumption leads to idleness. This point joins a second central principle in defining the dangerousness of the ‘evil tree’: “*qāt* forbids people from [cultivating] the grain (*bi-l-ḥubūb*).” *Since the entire system was oriented towards inward subsistence, the cultivation of cash crops for the market was harshly stigmatised* (cf. Wilk, 1997:139). Stored grain and livestock were an insurance against hunger, and both could be converted to cash in case of need.

It is tempting to affirm that ‘autonomy’ was the ideal behind this ideology. However, I never heard such a formulation of the principle. I never found an umbrella term conveying our notion of autarchy or autonomy. If urged to answer—“is *istiqlāl* or *ḥurriyah* a value for the *qabīly*?”—most of my interlocutors did not get the point. All of them, instead, were aware of another fact: a few decades before, villagers did not need anything from the market. This was, somehow, the organising metaphor of their way of earning a living, and this was a fundamental dimension of a *qabīly*: being a man who does not need anything from the outward, market system.

Taking care of lands and trees was a fundamental dimension of being a ‘man’ in the wide sense we defined above: a person constructed in accordance with social ideals.

Luca: What did you tell me...? That the person who left his lands was... lacking (*nāqiṣ*)?

Yahya: They say about him, "happy is the one who has land under the land of the base person (*sa'id lan māleh taḥt māl al-andhāl*)." It means that if one is lazy with his belongings, the good soil will go to the other one who will cultivate it, the one who is diligent.

'Ali: And how do you feel yourself lacking? How is it?

Yahya: eh?

'Ali: How is it when someone feels that he is lacking?

Yahya: He feels that he is lacking when he walks... [and people talk about him]

'Ali: When do people talk about him?

Yahya: When he walks, and he is lazy with his land, and he fails in agriculture. Otherwise, if he went to work [the land], they would not say that he is lacking. "This human being (*adamy*) is not a man." There is a discrepancy. [The proverb] says, "There's no discrepancy, but the discrepancy of the man: otherwise land keeps giving (*mā khulf illā khulf ar-rijāl, mā al-māl lā zād addā*)." This is a discrepancy, this is ṣaī'ah. He doesn't care about his trees or his belongings... Look how they are! And he is not abroad, or I don't know where... He is here! This man, God already inveigh against him, he is already gone to the bad. And all the people fault him.

On the contrary, when you see that his belongings are luxuriant, he is the highest example for the village. [It means] that he is a solid (*mathbūt*) man, he is diligent with his belongings, he erects the banks, he fixes things, if there's a dry tree he eradicates it... I mean, he is complete (*mukammal*), he is the example for the village. And for this reason you take him as an example to every person, so to make him an example (*qudweh*) to others. So that they follow his example and they compete with him [to be better]. This is an incentive for the competition, because everyone wants to be more useful than the other. And the other one, they despise him, until he starts to despise himself, and he searches for the approval of God.

Luca: Yes, it's a form of encouragement. Thank you.

Yahya is stating a clear-cut principle: if a person works, the land gives fruits. If the land does not give any fruit, then there is a discrepancy; it means that the person is not working. Off the record, Yahya explained to me that—just a few years before—being a hard-worker was a fundamental requisite for marriage. Peasants who had land and worked hard guaranteed their family livelihood and subsistence. It was better to be tired and dirty than clean and dependent. This is a principle well expressed in many famous Yemeni proverbs: "The honour of a peasant is his village, even if he

ingurgitates catastrophes (*‘izz al-qabīlī bilādeh wa laū tajarra‘ balāhā*).” Interestingly, peasants acknowledged the perspective of town dwellers on the harshness of their work and made of it a point of honour.

When I compare inward-oriented subsistence agriculture and outward-oriented cash crop production, I am not only referring to *qāt*. Vegetables are an enlightening example of a subsidiary crop cultivated for the market. Exemplarily, most of the perishable vegetables are associated with the *qashshām,* and cultivating them is considered a shame (*‘aīb*). Let me deepen this point.

Cash crops as a social boundary

When I refer to vegetables, I have in mind a limited number of crops which make Yemeni food ‘tastier’: radish (*qushmy*), garlic (*thumeh*), male and female onion (*baṣal and baṣṣālah*), leeks (*beī‘ah*), coriander (*kabzary*), parsley (*baqdanūs*), mint (*na‘na‘*) and so forth. As we have seen above, peasants would cultivate vegetables in small vases or little plots of land near their houses. However, this production was completely oriented to household consumption. Vegetables needed a constant and abundant amount of water, which was not usually available to peasants. Hence, a first point that we need to keep in mind is that, even if they would have wanted to, peasants were materially unable to cultivate leeks or garlic in great amounts.

It is not by chance that the *qashshāms* grew their crops in small vegetable gardens next to the mosques, where water was abundant and available on a daily basis. Here a short digression on the role of the *qashshām* necessarily follows. A *qashshām* was, basically, the servant of the mosque. Each mosque was associated with a well, and the well was linked to a structure called a *marna‘*: a 15 metre long and 5 metres high ascent. The ascent worked as an auxiliary structure for the donkey, which descending from the structure lifted a container full of water. This complex mechanism was necessary to provide huge amounts of water for the believers to wash in the mosque. Every morning, the *qashshām* lifted clean water and emptied the dirty water in a pool (*berek*) right outside the mosque. He had, thus, the chance to benefit from a whole pool of water on a daily basis.

This system granted the *qashshām* the possibility of cultivating highly remunerative fresh crops, with just two ‘limits’: these crops did not provide the necessary material for subsistence since they were, simply, cash crops; and being highly perishable products, vegetables needed to be sold in the market and in the countryside on a daily basis[38]. This is a characteristic that vegetables shared with

38 This is a characteristic that vegetables share with qāt and meat.

meat and qāt.[39] This common feature is, somehow, recognised in the organisation of the market itself: even nowadays, *qashshāms* and butchers share the same areas right outside the market of sūq al-milḥ, next to the historical doors of the Old City.

The vegetable garden (*miqshāmah*) was subdivided into rectangular plots (*sabbah*, pl. *sabāib*), separated by small banks (*'arīm*, pl. *a'rām*). Most of the plots were cultivated with leeks (*bei'ah*), while onions and radish where distributed on the sides of the plot, right above the banks. The irrigation system was similar to the one we have analysed above: water was channelled between the *a'rām* so as to reach the desired plot of land. The irrigation process followed a defined procedure: a circle tied to the growth cycle of the leek. Each plot of leeks took between four days and a week to reach full maturation. An expert *qashshām* was able to irrigate the plots and bring the vegetables to maturation so as to harvest new products every day. Although highly remunerative, this process forced *qashshāms* to harvest and sell on a daily basis. Thus it is not by chance that leek, in dialect, is called *beī'ah*, from the root 'selling'; even women and young boys sold the products in the market, while men loaded the vegetables on a donkey and went out to the countryside.

As I have noted above, this type of agriculture was impossible in the countryside until a few decades ago. Mechanic pumps, however, opened up new possibilities. Indeed, villages too, expanded along the valley following the pumps. These machines were very expensive, so that villagers had to share capital in order to buy, install and run them. On the average, a pump worked 12 to 14 hours a day. The turn of each shareholder lasted one day, after which he had to wait until all the others used their water. On the average, a pump was shared by 6 to 8 shareholders, so that the turn was every 6 or 8 days. The main reason for buying and installing a pump was bringing water to the houses of the inner valley. The cultivation of qāt, however, was a second good reason. As soon as the pumps spread, the possibility of cultivating crops which required huge amounts of water opened up and 4 men from the village rented their lands to *qashshāms* from the outside.

One of these families was from Barḥān, a small village in Beny Maṭar. The head of the family, Qāsim, was a 50-year-old man with piercing blue eyes—like most of the *qashshāms* I have met. Qāsim's father once grew leek in Barḥān—an unusual circumstance given the premises I have exposed above—since he had access to *māl al-gheyl*, land irrigated by the spring. When the source of water dried out, Qāsim moved with his family to Armis, renting house and lands. In 2011, with the crisis, he could not afford to buy diesel for the pump, so he left the lands in Armis[40] and rented

39 This common feature is, somehow, recognised in the organisation of the market itself: even nowadays, *qashshāms* and butchers share the same areas right outside the market of sūq al-milḥ, next to the historical doors of the Old City. It is interesting to note that this organisation of the market led butchers and qashshāms to work side by side on a daily basis, thus getting acquainted. Matrimonial exchanges between the two groups are, in fact, very frequent.

40 The land he rented in Armis was more expensive because it was situated on a main road.

cheaper ones in Kuthreh for a total surface of 150 libneh.

When I first met him, he was working with his 4 sons. Two of them were married. The younger, Anwār, recounted to me that he left the school when he was 7 years old to help his family with the work. They all lived together in the same house in Armis. Working with them I discovered a complicated and tiring system which is worth analysing.

As in a traditional garden (*miqshāmah*), the plots were divided in *sabāib*. Each *sabbah* was ½ or ¼ of a *libneh*. As I have noted above, the work of a *qashshām* was mainly tied to the leek. It consisted in cutting (*yiqla‘*, *yiqḍab*) the bundled leaves of each vegetable with a saw-toothed knife (*sharīm*), thus bundling the three or 4 vegetables with strings made of dried banana leaves.[41] Each *sabbah* gave more or less 150 / 175 bundles. The *qashshāms* would count the bundles 5 by 5; 25 bundles composed a *marṣaf* (pl. *marāṣif*). 5 or 6 marāṣif composed an *‘aluwah*, a big ‘bag’ full of leeks.

Each *qashshām* knew exactly how to harvest, bundle and count, since each phase of the work had a specific protocol. The goal was to speed up the work, since everyday it was necessary to harvest 11 / 16 sabāib, in order to obtain 2.000 / 2.500 bundles. Why was it necessary? So as to complete the cycle of irrigation and start again from the first *sabbah* as soon as the leek crop was ready to be harvested. The work was so demanding that the lack of even one worker needed to be replaced, usually with women from the family. Similarly, if the work was late, women complemented the men.

It is worth noting that this kind of work was very remunerative. Qāsim's family earned about 20,000 riyāl a day[42]—so that two days of work equalled the monthly salary of a ranked soldier. However, this work implied a relationship to objective space and time completely different from that of a peasant. Like butchers, *qashshāms* were isolated from people working in other fields by the features of their own work. They produced for the market and not for subsistence. Eventually, they embodied a lore of knowledge transmitted from father to son, which peasants could not even imagine. When I started working with them, I was put aside more than one time so as not to slow the rhythm of work. As Anwār once told me, watching me disconsolate while I was trying to bundle some leaves, “*Ibn mihrah wa lā muta‘allim sanah.*” In sum, the *qashshāms* were constituted by their way of earning a living as human beings radically different from the peasants, which they superficially resembled if observed from the outside.

As the reader might have noted, there is nothing polluting nor disgusting in the work of a

41 Or with rubber bands. Dried banana leaves were cheaper.
42 The money was undivided. Qāsim, his sons and wives and their sons constituted one household.

qashshām—especially when compared to the work of a peasant. If, traditionally, the *qashshām* served in the mosque, a peasant that chose to grow leeks would have been exempted from this service. However, peasants in Kuthreh did not even consider the possibility. Only one of them, a man of *sayyid* origin, sensed the business and started cultivating radishes and leeks. When we discussed this topic, he explained that yes, some years before he had cultivated vegetables.[43] However, he did not sell the entire product, keeping most of it for his family and the people of the village. In sum, he tried to emphasise that he was not making a living out of selling leeks, as a *qashshām* would do, because it would have been shameful. As M. Weber noted discussing the notion of caste, social ranking is strictly correlated to specific ways of earning a living (2007 [1948]: 399). People do not work as *qashshāms* (or peasants); they are *qashshāms* (or peasants).

Sayyid *peasants*

This last observation brings me to a point of fundamental importance: profession and origin were not tied together at the higher level of eponymous ancestors; they were related in the locality of households and lineages, of renowned people and reputations. However, the two levels were, somehow, interwoven, bringing together the stereotypical representations regarding Northern Arabs, Southern Arabs and *beny al-khumus* with the local histories of households and families. This is how genealogical imagination produced historical human beings: combining a mythical past and a localised present in the *habitus* of social actors. This is how it produced families of religious scholars from *beny al-khumus*, carpenters from peasants of *ʿarab* origins, and peasants from people of *sayyid* origins.

At the turn of the 19th century, one man from Kuthreh—a *sayyid* from a branch of Beyt al-Maghreby—fought the Turks alongside the Imam. Later, he started studying religious science (*‘ilm*) in Ṣan‘āʾ. He was a peasant and son of a peasant, who felt the need to actualise his mythical origin, and so he started studying in the great mosque with a cousin of the Imam, Ahmed Ismā‘il Ḥamīd ad-Dīn. One day the young peasant saw his teacher's daughter and fell in love with her. At that time, people did not ask “Who is this? (*ayyeh hadhā*?)”: he asked to marry the girl, and Ahmed Ismā‘il replied, “This man studies science, I can give him my daughter, it's normal (*insān byidrus ‘ilm, uzawwijeh bintī, ‘ādī*).”

The Imam's cousin visited Kuthreh with his daughter, and they checked the decency of Beyt al-Maghreby, both the ‘physical’ house and the family. At that time three families shared a tower

43 We shall label this attempt ‘strategy of diversion’, a term that I will fully explain in Chapter 7.

house in the old village. Notwithstanding the humble location, the daughter of Ahmed Ismā'il consented to marriage, and she soon adapted to agricultural habits.

"She wanted to cultivate, to work... Even if she was the daughter of the Imam! (*kānat tishtī titrawwi', tishtaghil... wa hī bint al-Imam!*)" She did not want to give up the work in the fields, even in case of visits from her father. The Imam would send the *muzayyin* to announce his arrival, and she would complete her work and head back home to have a bath. "She was a girl of origins! (*aṣl, ya'nī, aṣl hī!*)"

"My grandmother was the daughter of Ḥamīd ad-Dīn; she was wise..." Once she had to teach one of his sons the value of work in the fields. "She grasped a wood-stick! Come on! If you don't plough, I will plough over you! She was incredibly harsh... In order to teach him the value of land, the value of the land over which you get tired, you must learn its taste, the taste of its value, the taste of bread. The bread from which you eat, taste it with strain and sweat!"

The man who recounted to me this story was the nephew of the Imam's daughter, son of 'Ali Ahmed 'Abdurraḥman. He was nicknamed '*al-azraq*', because he had green eyes, a circumstance that often led people to mistake us as brothers. Mohammed was a 40-year-old married man, and this is how he recounted to me his life history:

> I have studied. At first I've studied here, cultivating qāt and grain... Then I started high school, I entered Ṣan'ā'. I studied, and after I studied in joined the army. I studied in high school to enter the military college... But I did not have an intermediary (*wāsiṭah*). Because... There has been a period during which... If you were *hāshimy*, *sayyid*, they used to hinder you. It was a war against us. We applied for the college, and they didn't accept... They didn't let us in... They made us miserable soldiers...

This first excerpt displays once again the theme of the oppressed *sayyid*. Given the importance that Mohammed gave to agriculture and the few opportunities he had in the state, I asked him why he did not rely on agriculture. Here is his answer:

> No, look... Here, there's a war against agriculture. Corn or barley... They have no value anymore, nor request, nor encouragement from the state. So we left [agriculture]... They did not encourage the dignity of people working in agriculture. There was no encouragement. It first happened when the 'Canada' arrived, the wheat from abroad. Each bag was cheap: something like 300, 100 riyal... Whereas before it was expensive. Look: they attempted an

> intellectual raid (*ghazwah fikriyah*). They raided us with this grain, and people started enrolling... We used to say: I join the army and with the salary I buy a car of grain: a car!
>
> And so did I... I entered Ṣan‘āʾ to enrol and abandoned agriculture. Everyone did like that. They raided us, an intellectual raid. Grain had a value, before, the peasant made a living out of it, and people living next to him. It all started with them giving us grain... And then all the peasants... Enough, they didn't want to grow grain anymore!
>
> They raided us... And who did raid us? America. They gave us grain, how do they call it... They called it American grain. Canada!

In these passages Mohammed complains about his personal situation and relates it to broader circumstances caused by external actors: he did abandon agriculture, because the U.S. raided Yemen, providing cheap grain; he could not gain ranks in the army, because the state hindered people of *sayyid* origin. We have already analysed the same pattern of blame attribution in Chapter 3. Mohammed compares this image of a helpless, dependent country with that of a previous ‘golden era’ of independence:

> American Canada... And that's the grain they give to animals, don't think that they love us and give us something special... Our sorghum is homemade, the taste is different., what a taste... Something descending from divine wisdom! You try [our] bread and the other, and ours is different from what the Americans give us. You would say that the other one is poisoned...
>
> We had everything, even the *madfan*... We had water in the well. At home, in the well we had water. In our house in Ṣan‘āʾ, we still have the hand well. We had the hand mill (*maṭḥan*). We had the *madfan*, for 100 *qadaḥ* of grain, at home. In case of siege, we could have resisted even ten years. **Now instead, it is as if they killed us with their own hands**...
>
> And we are stupid, stupid, don't think, Luca... We forgot what our fathers and our ancestors used to do... No, this... This [he is looking at his own house with scorn]: if they saw this mountain, pure rock... First of all they would have dug a well here, the hand well, down to the water... And next to the well, the well for grain, the stock for grain. They didn't have barrels.
>
> We had grain in a squared *ḥaqb* (pl. *ḥuqūb*) […]. In one we had wheat, in the other sorghum, the third barley, lentils, peas, beans... All the products in the *ḥuqūb*, at the first floor. At the ground floor the *madfan* and the well, to drink. Even in case of besiege or war, they were ready with the rifle or the sword. They stayed at home, and they could eat, he and his sons... And he had firewood. He had stocks, called *makhāṭib*. […] Next to the well they

> had firewood. I mean: **everything you needed, you had it in your home.**

I would be tempted, here, to talk about structural nostalgia. After all, Mohammed never knew the ideal society he was depicting, and he lived his present in a passive, subjected way. Drawing on Occidentalist narratives, he blamed the Other for the decaying status of his moral community. Yet, I argue, this narrative points to something deeper. The tragic events of 2011 and the ongoing war of 2015 are the practical demonstrations of a common sense principle: against the backdrop of an unstable society, the household is the only stable refuge. It is, at the same time, the place of identity, of economy and of politics.

Rather than depicting an ideal state of autarchy, Mohammed's narrative points to what U. Fabietti (2002: 46) has termed an *ethos* of insecurity: a contradictory relationship between the achievement of desired goals and socially shared motivations which inhibits this achievement. This contradiction is triggered by the combination, in a single *ethos*, of two contrasting principles: independence and interdependence. The *qabīly* is the ideal type of this contradiction: he seeks autonomy in every domain, while recognising that, ultimately, the guarantee of this autonomy is the backup of his brothers.

While Mohammed, and many others, blamed the Occidental Other for their present state of dependence, other villagers encouraged a more active ideology. Among them, Yahya ʻAbdulkarīm, as I have noted above, like most of the *sayyids*, was a fervent supporter of al-Ḥūthy. During a conversation, my host ʻAli, who had no sympathy for al-Ḥūthy, overtly provoked him:

> **Yahya**: Notwithstanding the fact that, let's say, the way we harvested and our operations were elementary, that we didn't have modern means, that we got tired... However, if you worked, you obtained results... Despite the obstacles, [agriculture] used to work. Now we idled... We all sleep in the houses waiting for the salary from the state. […] This is the biggest problem. And how hard is it for the state to give a salary to the whole Yemen? From where [to get it] even if the sea was made of money?
>
> **Luca**: This is the right point of view...
>
> **ʻAli**: God bless those who help us [he is referring to the West].
>
> **Yahya**: How much are they going to help us? How much?
>
> **ʻAli**: My brother, the granting countries will give...
>
> **Yahya**: Where? You don't mercy yourself and you don't cultivate for yourself. And you want them to mercy yourself?

‘Ali: They already give, God bless them, Great Britain, and France and America.

Yahya: Look, if you rely on the other (*idhā rakant ‘alā gheīrak*)... **It is from your weakness** (*hādhak min ḍa‘fak*). One day they won't give you anything anymore. Deal with it, otherwise you're not a human being (*adamy*)! If you rely on them, you're finished. Rely on Him who created you and ask God!

If you rely on others, you are weak. We met already this point of view, expressed by ‘Ali ‘Abdulhamid. Weak is the one who depends on others, either economically or for protection. Women, children and old men are weak, in this sense. Guests are too. And of course, a *muzayyin* is. Is there any alternative to the politico-economical weakness of dependence on the state or dependence on the U.S.? There is, Yahya tells us, if Yemenis go back to their land:

Yahya: If your bread (*rizq*) got close (*qarab*), you already got close (*qurubt*) to your bread.

Luca: Ok. And it means that...

Yahya: It means that my bread (*rizq*) is in the harvest to which I get close. I give it, I get closer, I make it giving fruits. […] You get closer, you give more, so that it will give you back what you're expecting. […] If you care for it, and you get close to it, it will get close to you and you will get close to it.

[…] Not only the apricot. In general terms: even the sorghum, or the barley or any thing: if you get close and you give it what belongs to it, it gives you the good fruit, it doesn't give less […].

In this excerpt the usage of the word *rizq* is recurrent, which we met already in the previous chapters. I have translated it here as bread, but it refers more generally to livelihood. Yahya is redundantly emphasising a principle of reciprocity that ties together livelihood and human effort, giving and receiving. Interestingly, the principle is expressed through a metaphor of proximity, which is the same that lies at the core of the kinship system. Kinsmen are ‘close’ people, people tied by a thick web of rights and duties—or I would better say of debts and credits.

The more you give, the more you can expect back. This principle refers to agriculture, but is often extended to social life at large. This principle weaves together independence and interdependence: the more I serve the other, the more the other will serve me. In Chapter 5 and Chapter 6, I will deepen this point, exploring the relationship between livelihood (*rizq*), reciprocity and the construction of a moral community.

There is a last point that we shall emphasise here: this whole moral philosophy is clearly related to individual responsibility. If you do not give, if you do not get 'close', you do not belong to the community; you are in the structural position of the *muzayyin*, who passively takes and is unable to give. You are weak, as when you receive grain from the United States. Is there any way out of the cycle of dependence? For Yahya there is:

> Every time you give, it gives you. This is a characteristic of mankind, when we give efforts. If we give efforts in something, and it does not give... The mistake is not in the thing, it is in you. You did not give it what belongs to it, and it doesn't give what belongs to you:
>
> We blame our time, but the blame is in ourselves
>
> and there's no shame in our time as there's in us
>
> So we ridicule the blameless time
>
> and the time makes ourselves a laughing stock
>
> The wolf does not eat the meat of another wolf
>
> but we eat one another, exhausted

Chapter 5 – God Exists in Yemen

On the meaning of livelihood (rizq)

> If you can rely on God with due reliance, He will provide you with sustenance in such a manner as He provides birds and beasts. (A saying of the Prophet)

The notion of *rizq* can be broadly—and provisionally—translated as 'sustenance' or 'bread', keeping in mind that English glosses always need to be used with caution. Sustenance, or *rizq*, is a central feature of how social actors construct their everyday existence and give meaning to their economic practices. It is a 'common sense' concept in C. Geertz's definition, one endowed with the characteristics of naturalness, practicalness and thinness (1983: 85). As we have seen in previous chapters, this notion is of widespread usage, and it structures many of the narratives that I have presented.

Since this topic has been of central interest for Islamic theologians and for Arab intellectuals, not the least Ibn Khaldun, I shall start my analysis presenting some classical Islamic understandings of sustenance. As we shall see, three main themes overlap in the discursive construction of *rizq*: *a*) the theme of predestination, which is connected with Arab emic conceptions of what we would call 'agency'; *b*) the related theme of human freedom and endeavour, often declined as 'labour'; c) the theme of livelihood and sustenance itself. Hence I will show how *rizq* emerges as a contested notion within local and historical discursive practices. Eventually, I will argue that the notion of *rizq* provides the semantic background for a whole range of economic practices of reciprocity.

On sustenance and Islam

Rizq and Predestination

M. Watt is one of the few authors that have proposed a thorough interpretation of the notion of *rizq*. The general framework of his analysis is presented in *Free Will and Predestination in Early Islam* (1948) and can be briefly summarised as follows. Broadly speaking, M. Watt recognises that a ‘predestinarian view’ is to be found both in the Qurʿān and in the Traditions (or Sunna, the inspired sayings of the Prophet of Islam). Yet these two sources represent two opposing trends as to the interpretation of *liberum arbitrium*, divine sovereignty and human responsibility. M. Watt labels these two trends ‘the theistic view of destiny’ and the ‘atheistic conception of Time (*dahr*)’ (ivi: 20).

In the Qurʿān, regarded as a unitary whole, we can individuate a ‘theistic view of destiny’. This position strongly emphasises what M. Watt calls the ‘majesty and omnipotence of God’ in overt opposition to the notion of a ‘predetermined character of man's life’ which is drawn from the Sunna in continuity with pre-Islamic thought (ivi: 20). Hence, in the Qurʿān “[...] the conception of the righteous God demanding righteousness from His creatures leads by an irresistible logic to the doctrine of human responsibility with its corollary the doctrine of Qadar, namely that man has the power to perform the duties imposed on him by God.” (ivi: 38) Human beings are intended to live and work in the direction expressed by God's guidance. Since the dependence on God implies duties (ivi: 24), they can handle their freedom in accordance with God's moral to improve their achievements in the after-life, as well as in this life, or they can choose to ignore Good and pursue Evil.

This attitude is directly opposed to an ‘atheistic conception of Time (*dahr*)’ (ivi: 20), drawn from the Sunna, that directly leads to inactivity, to resignation and to idleness. This conception of Time is overtly fatalistic, stating that human life is controlled and fixed by mysterious and impersonal forces and often leads to a “let us eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die” attitude (ivi: 23). Generally speaking, it opposes the idea of the Judgement and of future life itself. These “impersonal and rather atheistic conceptions belong to the system of ideas that were current among the Arabs and the surrounding peoples before the coming of Islam [...],” (ivi: 20) and they have been thoroughly criticised in the Qurʿān.

It is interesting to note that a pivotal node of the debate resides in the attribution of good and evil to God's knowledge (*ʿilm*) and command (*ʾamr*). In what we have so far labelled as a 'theistic' conception of predestination, Evil deeds cannot be attributed to God's command. On the contrary, in the 'atheistic' conception of predestination, everything descends from God.

Now that we have set the general terms of the debate about predestination and free will, we can try to understand how the notion of *rizq* has been constructed at the intersection of different discursive regimes and how these conceptions have been affected by specific notions of predestination. As M. Watt has noted (1948: 16), the notion of *rizq* has been discussed in connection with predestination on the basis of the following Qurʿānic verses: "There is not a beast in the earth but God is responsible for its sustenance; He knoweth its lair and its resting-place; everyone is in a clear book." This conception of *rizq* is—by acknowledgement of M. Watt himself—very close to an 'atheistic' conception of predestination and hence to those notions which have been held to be characteristic of the Tradition.

These verses describe *rizq* as something settled by Fate. This peculiar notion of sustenance has been interpreted as an "[...] obvious consequence of the harsh desert environment of Arabia, which could be not be altered much by individual human effort," (Bosworth, 1986) and hence in continuity with pre-Islamic conceptions of sustenance. Whether this interpretation regarding the 'origins' of the relationship between notions of sustenance and a harsh desert environment is verifiable or not, it is not our concern here. What is central is that the ambiguity of the Qurʿānic verses has led the notion of *rizq* to a prolific discursive career, both theological and political.

The problem at stake can be briefly summarised as follows: if sustenance descends from God, how are we to interpret unlawful sustenance? The debate is, again, centred around the problem of avoiding fixing evil on God. Thus, given the ambiguity of the verses about *rizq*, how has this theological dilemma been solved? First consider the positions of the Muʿtazila: it generally holds that God creates only lawful sustenance. So what a man obtained unlawfully, stolen goods for example, was not appointed to be his sustenance by God (Watt, 1948: 67). This interpretation clearly stretches the meaning of the Qurʿānic verses, with the goal of supporting the anti-fatalistic perspective of the Muʾtazilite school.

Other authors attested to overtly fatalistic positions. In this perspective, the Qurʿānic verses about sustenance lead to a completely opposite interpretation. An-Najjār, and more generally the theological currents that M. Watt defines the 'orthodoxy', argued that God provides both lawful and unlawful sustenance (ivi: 146).

Predestination and the Zaydī school

During my fieldwork, most of my interlocutors defined themselves 'Zaydīs', followers of the Imām Zaīd Ibn ʿAlī, the grandson of Ḥussaīn Ibn ʿAlī Ibn Abū Ṭālib. The Zaydīyyah is a moderate Shiite school, sometimes described as the "fifth school" of the four Sunnite schools of Islam. As we have seen in Chapter 3, in the period between 2011 and 2013, the traditional 'Zaydī identity' of many of my interlocutors was being questioned. Due to the complex historic-political scenario set in motion by the Arab Spring and the controversial conflict between the Yemeni Government and the Huthys in the north of the country, 'being a Zaydī Muslim' suddenly became a politically marked option.[1]

As a result, many theological aspects of the Zaydī school became symbolical flags in a complex process of selfing / othering that opposed the Huthys and Iṣlāḥ (the Yemeni Muslim Brotherhood).[2] The theme of predestination was one of these symbolical flags, since many Zaydīs maintain that Muʿāwiya, a historical character accused of rebelling against the lawful Imām (ʿAlī Ibn Abū Tālib), was an unbeliever because of his many sins, which included the belief in predestination (*jabr*) (Kohlberg, 1976).

Hereafter I will propose a brief analysis of Zaydī theological conceptions of predestination since, I believe, they are a good starting point to analyse local notions of agency. How do Zaydīs conceive of predestination and free will? As W. Madelung (1986a, 1986b) has argued, we can distinguish two phases in the development of the Zaydīyyah, related to two different conceptions of *liberum arbitrium* and predestination. The early phase can be traced back to the period of Zayd's activity in Kufa, in the late 30's of the 8th century. The so-called 'Kufan phase' was characterised by a strong opposition to the Qadariyyah and to the Mu'tazila. Hence, Zayd Ibn 'Ali was a determinist. In *Majmu' al-Fiqh*, Zayd appears as an "anti-Qadari supporter of predestination." (1986a: 474) This work, first published by E. Griffini as *Corpus Iuris di Zayd B. 'Ali* (Zaid ibn 'Ali and Griffini, 1919), presents many passages that, in a general sense, explicitly condemn the Qadariyyah and the Murji'ah.

Furthermore, there is one *hadith* that, I believe, can give us a hint of the focal points of the discussion. The *hadith* relates a dialogue between a Qadary supporter of 'free will' and 'Ali Ibn Abu Talib.[3] From the dialogue it emerges clearly that Qadary positions are considered apostasy. But

1 A similar political use of the distinction between Zaydīs and Sunnite Shafi'ites can be traced back to the early 40s, when the Free Yemeni Movement questioned the political power of the Imam (cf. Douglas, 1987).

2 In chapter 3 we considered how some of these theological themes have been constructed in historically and locally shaped discoursive practices, leading to a disruptive reshaping of the political community of Kuthreh.

3 The *hadith* can be found in *Majmu' al-Fiqh: 938* and — translated — in Appendix.

what does it mean to be a 'Qadary'? A focal point of the *hadith* seems to be the *attribution of evil to God*. While the Qadary refuses to consider evil actions as stemming from God's will, 'Aly represents the opposite position.

Thus, as we have seen, the position of Zayd Ibn 'Aly was clearly an anti-Qadarite one. Various dates are mentioned for Zayd's death. The most likely is March 740. The Zaydī Imamate in Yemen was founded some 150 years after Zayd's death, in 897. The Yemeni Zaydīyyah reached ideological positions close to the Baghdad school of the Mu'tazila, overturning Zayd's position in less than a century and a half. In fact, referring to the doctrine of destiny, the Imam al-Hādī Yaḥya ilā al-Ḥaqq, founder of the Zaydī Imamate in Yemen, adhered completely to the Qadary principles (Madelung, 1986b).

The mainstream of later Zaydī thought steadily remained on this position. Consider, for example, the exegesis put forward by a famous Zaydī scholar on a popular Zaydī website, www.anaZaydi.com. A Zaydī follower asks: "If an individual kills his wife, can we say that [his action] resides in God's knowledge [*'ilm*] but that God didn't order it [لم يقدر الله قتل]?"[4]

The Zaydī scholar's answer emphasises many crucial points, one of which is of paramount importance: is it possible that something resides in God's knowledge but is not foreordained by Him? The answer is clear: from God descends freedom, the possibility of choosing what is good and avoiding what is evil. God knows his servants, but he does not compel them to act in any way. Thus while the early Zaydī positions on this matter pointed clearly to a determinist ideology — both good and evil descend from God — the Yemeni Zaydī school seems to take the opposite position: the individual is free and God holds no responsibility for the individual's actions, despite the fact that God's knowledge knows no limits and hence he can foresee an individual's choice.

Similar positions are widespread at the common sense level.[5] Consider the position of Zeīnab,[6] a young teacher from the Old City of Ṣanʿāʾ:

> Yes, the person is free in everything he does. It's true that everything about us is written by God, with his science and his knowledge of us, but still the person is free to choose [*mukhayyar*]. In everything, he can choose what is good or what is evil, he's not at all obliged to do anything, for example when the teacher knows that one of his students will be successful in an exam and another one will flunk, he didn't coerce them. But he knew it

4 For the full text in Arabic: http://www.anazaidi.com/zaidiblog/?cat=7.

5 I have analysed this theme in a paper titled *"It Wasn't destiny": Love and Work in the Old City of Ṣanʿāʾ*, presented at the annual BRISMES Conference in Brighton, 16-18 July 2014.

6 Zeīnab was interviewed in the ambit of a research on love and marriage strategies.

through his science and his previous knowledge of them. Because God knows us all.

Generally speaking, most of my Zaydī interlocutors were ready to admit that the individual is “free and not compelled in his choice (*al-insān mukhayyar w laīsa musayyar*)” and that “God did not write anything but what is good (*mā katabsh Allāh illā al-kheīr*).” A corollary of this anti-fatalistic ideology was an emic theory of agency whose focal points are well summarised in this excerpt:[7]

> If God had taken us out from our mothers' bellies, letting us bring our page in our hands... then human beings would stop working, giving efforts, being diligent. And God's will regarding the examination of his servant would be disrupted. [If we knew our destiny] the diligent believer who knows that, eventually, success will be his ally, would be lazy. And in the same way, the loser would hesitate, knowing that, whichever his efforts, failure is always his destiny of being miserable!! If the person knew what is waiting for him—the fears of life and the tribulations of death for the decision of his age—he would hide himself, terrified and scared, and his life would be disrupted, earth would become desolated and so everything that moves in its constructions and buildings!!

The duty of the believer, Taghrīd concludes, is just one:

> [...] what is asked from the individual is to think and to ask the guidance (*ihdāʾ*) and the adequacy of all his choices. And the person doesn't need to bear the burden of thinking what his Creator has planned for him as *aqdār*. The duty is to believe that he's free...

In sum, the believer is free to act. His duty consists in following God's guidance, although he is not coerced to do so and act *as if* he is free. In fact, in an inversion of the Weberian argument (Weber, 1958), if he knew what is written “he would hide himself terrified and scared, and his life would be disrupted.” Do these principle about human freedom and human agency apply to the notion of *rizq*? We will answer this question ethnographically after taking into account the matters of endeavour and work.

Sustenance in the work of Ibn Khaldun

We have so far considered how the notion of *rizq* has been constructed and interpreted within the

7 Taghrīd is a young teacher from the Old City of Ṣanʿāʾ. She also was interviewed in the ambit of a research on love and marriage strategies.

classical Islamic theology. We have considered the pre-Islamic genealogy of the term, its connection with a fatalistic view of life, and the subsequent development of the notion within two classical trends of Islamic theology, the Zaydī theological school and the common sense discourses of Zaydī followers.

Now I would like to deepen our understanding of the notion of *rizq* by presenting the analysis of the famous Moroccan sociologist Ibn Khaldun. His perspective is interesting because it weaves together a theory of value and Islamic conceptions of sustenance and predestination. We can summarise Ibn Khaldun's interpretation of sustenance starting from his definition of the notion of 'profit'. What is profit? *Profit*, argues Ibn Khaldun, *is value realized from human labour* (ivi: 479). On the basis of this general definition, he distinguishes between natural and unnatural ways to obtain profit. Agriculture, hunting and fishing, the crafts, and commerce are a natural way of making a living. They are natural because they are based on human labour.

On the contrary, it is not natural, for example, to make a living from exercising political power or searching for buried treasure.[8] This last task is considered a devious way of making a living since it is an attempt to gain profit without effort and trouble (ivi: 486). But why is the exercise of political power not a natural way of making a living? The argument, here, is more subtle: people with a high rank are served by the labour of others who want to please them; the value that they realize from such labour becomes part of their profit because there is a wide gap between the value produced by the labour of their servants and the prices they pay for the services. Thus the exercise of political power is not a 'natural' way of making a living, because it entails the exploitation of someone else's labour to gain surplus.

Now that we have clarified Ibn Khaldun's definition of profit, we can address the matter of sustenance. *Sustenance,* Ibn Khaldun argues, *is the part of profit that is utilized*. He reaches this conclusion drawing on the Koranic text and on the Sunna of the Prophet, quoting, for example, the following *ḥadīth*: "The Prophet said: 'The only thing you (really) possess of your property is what you eat, and have thus destroyed; or what you wear, and have thus worn out; or what you give as charity, and have thus spent.'" Sustenance is the income that a person obtains through his own effort and strength and that is spent upon his *interests and needs*. Thus the definition of profit encompasses that of sustenance, sustenance being the 'utilized' part of the profit.

While reflecting on the notion of sustenance, Ibn Khaldun addresses two themes that are of fundamental importance for our work. The first theme can be summarized as follows: is 'unlawful

8 This last task might appear odd to a Westerner reader. Yet, even nowadays, people searching for treasures are incredibly common, as it is very common to hear incredible stories about hidden treasure.

sustenance' provided by God? As we have already seen, this was a focal point of debate in the discussion about sustenance and predestination. The Mu'tazila, that first raised this point, clearly answered that unlawful sustenance was not provided by God, although this solution presented some contradictions on the theological level. Zaydīs followed the Muʿtazila. Ibn Khaldun upholds the opposite position: "[...] God sustains him who acquires property wrongfully, and also the evildoer, the believer as well as the unbeliever." (ivi: 480)

The second theme refers to the relationship between human effort and sustenance. Ibn Khaldun develops this point addressing the contradictory assumptions regarding God's omnipotence and human freedom. On the one hand, Ibn Khaldun reminds us that that 'everything comes from God'. A famous Koranic verse states: "Thus, ask God for sustenance"[9] and this implies that the effort to acquire sustenance depends on God's determination and inspiration. On the other hand, he observes that sustenance requires effort and work, and human labour is necessary for profit and capital accumulation. From this perspective, the remembrance of God is a necessary but insufficient condition to obtain sustenance. We will further analyze this theme on the common sense level.

In sum, classical sources have discursively constructed the notion of *rizq* around the following questions: *a*) Does *rizq* descend from God? *b*) Is it (or not) related to human labour and endeavour (and hence to human agency)? *c*) Is it (or not) related to the quality of human action (to its moral value)? *d*) Is it what subjects need to 'live'?

God Exists in Yemen: the Moral Economy of Rizq

On the role of 'deafness' and theoretical metonymies

In a general sense, *rizq* and the nominal and verbal forms related to it refer to God's provision and sustenance. The word *rizq* itself occurs in the Koranic text 55 times. Its related verbal forms occur 68 times (McAuliffe, 1986). I have no statistical insights as to the frequency of the usage of this word in everyday language, but during my fieldwork I had the feeling that *rizq* was something worth knowing, at least because it was a central concern for my interlocutors. This should not be surprising; in a hand-to-mouth economy, sustenance is quite a central topic.

Yet, to my knowledge, anthropologists have not written a single word on this topic. Unlike other

9 Koran, surat al-Ankabut, ayah 17.

celebrated notions, *sharaf* being the most controversial, the concept of *rizq* has remained segregated to the periphery of our discursive constructions.

J. Elyachar has recently observed that economic anthropology, in the Middle East, “is a sub field waiting to exist.” (Elyachar, 2005) Her consideration echoes a famous article by L. Abu-Lughod (1989) that describes Yemen as a Middle Eastern ‘zone of theory’. A zone of theory is a discursive construction that entangles places, ideas and images. It constructs the ‘natives’—in our case Yemeni natives—through anthropological tropes, that: *a*) sum up the cultural complexity; *b*) transcend intra-regional specificities; *c*) organise the anthropological debate; *d*) provide a link between (native) internal realities and (anthropological) external preoccupations (Appadurai, 1988).

A theoretical metonymy is a conceptual tool that sums up an entire society, working as a gate-keeping concept: a “concept that seems to limit anthropological theorising about the place in question, and that define the quintessential and dominant questions of interest in the region.” (Appadurai, 1986: 357) Abu-Lughod lists three themes that have worked as theoretical metonymies in the anthropology of the Middle East: segmentation, the harem and Islam (1989: 280). I would add, as a fourth, the complex of honour and shame.

Is the power of our discursive constructions so pervasive? Do we construct representations of the ‘other’ in such a referential way? Apparently we do. The anthropological theory sheds light on peculiar, legitimised themes, preventing us from seeing what lies in the shadows. The segmentary lineage theory has worked, in Yemen, as a theoretical metonymy, flattening the construction of the anthropological subjects to that of one-dimensional tribesmen.

Anthropologists have widely used the metaphor of ‘deafness’, and this metaphor can probably teach us something about our ability to learn. Consider, for example, the reflections of A. Weiner on the notion of *mapula*. Describing the process of her understanding of the concept, she observed: “The problem with *mapula* was that, *a priori*, I accepted its original Malinowski definition, and I then proceeded to take its meaning for granted. [...] In retrospect, *mapula* was so much a part of my own exchange vocabulary that I remained deaf to what my informants were really saying to me.” (1980: 77)

Consider another example. S. Gudeman has put forward similar reflections on the role of ‘listening’ in the practice of anthropology: “The anthropologist produces a text, as we do here, but only as one part of several larger conversations; and the anthropologist must certainly have a “good ear” as well as a facile pen.” (1990: 4) S. Gudeman undertook his fieldwork in Colombia with another scholar, A. Riveira. The two scholars were recording their discussions with local people:

“More often than we would like to admit, each of us had missed something the other had heard, or heard the “same thing” differently.” (ivi: 6)

When I undertook my first fieldwork in Yemen, in 2009, I had been very influenced by the magnificent works of P. Dresch and R. B. Serjeant. I thought of *sharaf* as a central notion in Yemeni culture and society. Consequently, I started discussing this topic with my Yemeni interlocutors. Their reaction, a mixture of blush and indignation, surprised me—as probably my question surprised them. Soon I discovered that *sharaf* stands for what we might gloss ‘sexual honour’, and it is not a convenient topic of conversation. Yet, for a long time, I was not able to reconcile what I heard from my Yemeni friends and what was so strongly rooted in my theoretical biases.

Something similar happened to me with the notion of *rizq*. Although *rizq* is a widespread common sense notion, I did not ‘hear’ the word for a significant span of time. Here I need to specify what the verb ‘hear’ stands for; the metaphor of deafness operates at two levels. First, it stands for a ‘cognitive’ inability: some words and some notions are silent to the anthropologist, until they come into focus. We can hear them hundreds of times a day, yet we do not perceive them. Second, it is a theoretical inability of the kind described above: the extreme difficulty of recognising a theme, or a notion, as an anthropologically sensitive one.

The Yemeni Arab Spring: crisis and revolution

So how did I stumble onto *rizq*? On 7 July, 2011, soon after my arrival in Ṣanʿāʾ, I was welcomed by a stunning pyrotechnic show. Thousands of rifles started shooting at the moon, dressing the night in leaden garments. The heated bullets turned the sky red and danced over our heads for more than one hour. Thence, above our heads, they started falling, causing tens of injured people and two deaths. Later, in the morning, children gathered those weird bullet-shaped-hailstones for hours.

That sudden hailstorm was the consequence of a seemingly strange and painful circumstance. On the 3rd of June 2011, a presidential compound had been bombed, and the explosion ripped through the mosque during the pray. The president ʻAli ʻAbdullah Saleh and several others were injured in the attack, and five people died. The president was readily transferred to Saudi Arabia, for medical treatments. The following day, the vice president al-Hādy took over as acting president. During the subsequent month, uncontrollable rumours spread regarding Saleh's condition, his death, and the possibility of a transfer of power.

Eventually, on 7 July—the day of my arrival in Yemen—the president gave a speech. He

appeared on television, heavily injured and burnt all over his body, and he talked to the Nation from a hospital in Saudi Arabia. Yemeni people, especially in Ṣanʿāʾ, greeted this speech with irrepressible joy and in their celebration and started shooting at the moon. This is how I ended up in the middle of a hailstorm of bullets during my first day in Ṣanʿāʾ; this was my first encounter with the Yemeni Arab Spring.

Similar, and worse, episodes of violence and joy occurred during my entire stay in Ṣanʿāʾ, which was until the end of December 2011. During this period, the capital city of Yemen was literally divided in three areas. The north of the city, especially al-Ḥaṣabah, was controlled by armed tribesmen led by the paramount sheikhs of Beīt al-Aḥmar, the leaders of the Ḥāshid confederation. The second area, the so-called 'square', was the site of the protests and the cradle of the Yemeni Arab Spring. It was a wide area, extending between the old and the new university on 'Ring Road' (*ad-Dāʾiry*), and it was controlled and 'protected' by ʿAlī Muḥsen al-Aḥmar, a major general of the Yemeni army, commander of the First Armed Division (known as 'al-Firqah'). The third area was, more or less, the rest of the capital city, controlled by Ahmed 'Ali Saleh, the son of the president and leader of the military division called The Republican Guard. The main camp of loyalists was in Taḥrīr square.

Hence, Ṣanʿāʾ was under military occupation, and every night we could hear explosions and gunfire, as a consequence of the clashes between the three factions above mentioned. The Youth and, more generally, the protesters were, occasionally, demonstrating in the streets, spending most of their time sitting in the tents of the 'square', chewing qāt and eating food provided by unknown suppliers. Meanwhile, in Taḥrīr square, the loyalists, the so-called '*balāṭijah*',[10] were spending their days in a similar fashion: chewing qāt and eating rice and chicken, without even bothering to engage in any sort of political activity.

My description is overtly sarcastic, since the first signs of a drifting of the political aims of the revolution were already in the wind. I remember the genuine enthusiasm that characterised—at that time—the purposes of many of my friends and the harsh disenchant that would follow a few months later. Against the backdrop of this political turmoil, most of the people were concerned with more basic problems. The 'revolution' was a daily topic of conversation during qāt sessions, and a heated one. Supporters of the youth and supporters of the president faced each other every day, engaging in exhausting verbal fights. Yet 'active' participation was very limited, and behind the political scenes were lurking serious economic issues. Many people, especially supporters of the president, were

10 My interlocutors hold that the word *balṭajy* (pl. *balāṭijah*) was borrowed from the Egyptian dialect. The etymology should stem from a contraction of '*bi-lā ittijāh*' ('without direction') and thus denote a 'drifter'. In fact the loyalists were often perceived and described as dirty, rude and venal people, sometimes as mercenaries.

overtly engaging in a semantic battle to redefine the revolution as a crisis (*azmah*). They were not completely wrong.

Electricity, in Yemen, has always been a big issue. As far as I remember—and I first visited Yemen in 2006—blackouts have always been an everyday occurrence, turning our *qāt* sessions into gloomy encounters for one or two hours a day. Yemenis have always been extremely ironic in this regard, mixing harsh critiques of the Government with funny jokes about their situation.[11] But in 2011 the situation became unbearable, leaving 'normal' people with only one or two hours of electricity per day. The Government explained the crisis blaming 'the tribesmen': either the ones from Ḥāshid that concurrently were putting the north of Ṣanʿāʾ to the sword or those from Maʾrib who had become a traditional scapegoat for any sort of Yemeni issue.

Whatever was the cause, the blackouts paralysed Ṣanʿāʾ. The price of candles increased from 10 to 70 riyal. Cold bottles of water were available at 100 riyal, two times the price of normal ones. Many shop keepers purchased (Chinese) electric generators, just to realise that they could not afford the petrol to make them work. Concurrently, in fact, the capital experienced a drastic shortage of petrol and gas. Since the great majority of Yemeni houses are not served by gas pipelines, in most of the quarters people buy gas bottles from the *ʿāqil* (the representative of the quarter), and in exchange they give back the empty bottles. For this reason, they are not free to buy as many bottles as they wish. During the crisis in 2011, the shortage of gas forced many families to buy them from the black market, at higher prices.

Yet the most dramatic problem was the shortage of petrol. Before the crisis, the price of one litre of petrol was 70 riyal. During the crisis petrol simply disappeared from petrol bunks. Thus, in order to obtain it, it was necessary to wait for hours—sometimes for days—in endless queues. I remember waiting for two days—eating, chewing and sleeping in the car—without getting a single drop of it. As with gas, petrol was available in the black market, the price of it being around 600 riyal per litre.

In the countryside the situation was not any better. Many Yemeni villages are not reachable by car, and of course they are not served by running water. While in the cities each house has its own tank, which is filled through pipelines or, usually, by water wagons, in the villages people completely rely on the pumps,[12] which extract the water from groundwater aquifers and pump it to the tanks. In Kuthreh, the village where I would stay the following year, people recalled the days of

11 A good example of this irony is the song "Happy Yemen", where the video is suddenly interrupted and starts again with candles, imitating a blackout: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1ISArE-H0cY.

12 Each village was once built in the proximity of sources of water. But recently, as a consequence of a steady diminution in the precipitation, many sources have dried out. Concurrently, the demographic explosion has lead to a growth in the dimension of villages that frequently cannot rely on traditional water resources.

the crisis as a dramatic period. The houses and the mosques remained without water. Peasants could not irrigate *qāt* trees and, more importantly for Kuthreh, pear trees. One of the villagers, the owner of a gas station, was injured and robbed while on duty. The situation, in Kuthreh as in many other places, was mitigated through the recourse to 'mediation' (*wasāṭah*). One of the villagers, the personal guard of the Minister of Oil, mediated (*tawassaṭ*) to obtain a special supply for Kuthreh: 25,000 litres of petrol, at the price of 90 riyal each.

Against this backdrop, 'normal' people—those who did not have the money to buy a generator and the connections to obtain petrol—lived a literally dark period.

Managing a birth during the crisis

Against the backdrop of the crisis, despite the climate of violence and the promises for a revolutionary change, most of my Yemeni friends from the old city of Ṣanʿāʾ, where I was living in those pacey days, were concerned with making a living.

When I use the verb 'to live', I am translating the Arabic *ʿāsh,* and I need to specify the semantic range of this term. Here, again, Ibn Khaldun can give us some useful insights. Debating on the ways, means and methods of making a living, Ibn Khaldun specifies that the noun 'maʿāsh', a verbal noun constructed from the verb *ʿāsha*, stands for the meaning of 'livelihood', and it implies 'the desire for sustenance and the effort to obtain it'. Subsequently, he adds an interesting comment: "The idea is that *ʿaīsh* (life) is obtained only through the things (that go into making a living), and they are therefore considered, with some exaggeration, 'the place of life'."

In contemporary spoken Arabic '*ʿaīsh*' immediately recalls the meaning of 'bread', as in the widespread formula '*beīnanā al-ʿaīsh wa-l-milḥ*' (literally, "between us the bread and the salt"), and the term *maʿāsh* is univocally referred to as one's 'salary'. In a sense, bread and, nowadays, one's salary, are the places of life, because they are fundamental for making a living. They are, literally, sustenance, the very essence of *rizq*. Yet 'making a living' implies something more than the mere satisfaction of primary needs, and my interlocutors were highly aware of this subsidiary meaning of the expression. 'To live' is not just 'to eat' and the 'things that go into making a living' need to satisfy social necessities, not just biological ones.

Keeping this in mind, we can return to July 2011, the middle of the revolutionary crisis. When I arrived in Ṣanʿāʾ, one of my best friends, Qays, had just had a child, and another friend, Rashid, was about to have one. Having a child, in Yemen, is a social fact of the uttermost importance, a social

fact that entails a number of rituals and practices that cover a period of 45 days. This period, with the related rituals and practices, is called '*wilād*', and it is tremendously expensive. A traditional Yemeni proverb states: "Two weddings do not equate a birth (*wilād*) (*ʿaruseīn wa lā wilād*)," and it refers explicitly to the expenses of the *wilād,* which are comparable to that of two marriages.

Qays's economic situation, at the time of the *wilād*, was nearly desperate. Qays was a man of nearly 40 years that traced back his origin to a small village called al-Bustān, in Beny Maṭar (a northern tribe located south-west of the capital). He considered himself a Southern Arab and a *qabīly*, being his origin was from the countryside. Yet he lived and worked in the old city of Ṣanʿāʾ since he was a little child. I first met him in 2006, when he was the manager of a famous hotel of the old city and a tour operator.

From 2009 onwards, tourism started to decrease drastically, mainly because of the continuous kidnappings, the menace (real or imaginary) of al-Qāʿedah and the ongoing war between the Yemeni government and the so-called 'Ḥūthy movement' in the north of the country. Qays experienced these difficulties losing everything he had built: first his cars, then his hotel and eventually his house. In January 2011, when the Arab spring exploded in Yemen, he started working as an interpreter for a British journalist, ending up as the main character of the world famous documentary *The Reluctant Revolutionary.* Despite this experience giving him room to breathe, in July 2011 Qays was 6 months late on the rent of his house and 2 months late on that of his office. Not a single possibility of income was available on the horizon, and the Yemeni crisis had reached one of its highest peaks. Yet he organised the *wilād* for his wife.

Here we need to spend some time to describe this social institution. The *wilād* starts right after the birth of the baby and lasts for forty five days during which sexual intercourse is forbidden. The *wilād* can be of two types: 'open' or 'closed'. 'Open' means that every day the *wālidah* (the woman that gives birth) receives guests, bearing the responsibility of entertaining them.[13]

Due to his economic circumstances, Qays opted for a 'closed' *wilād,* and he made it shorter than 45 days, opening his house to guests after 30 days for *yaūm al-wafāʾ*[14] (the day of fulfilment). He negotiated the presence of a *nashshādah*, a religious singer, for 8,000 riyal (while she was asking 15,000 plus 2,000 riyal for *qāt*). He paid for the *ḥammām* (the turkish bathhouse) and the *naqsh* (a body decoration provided by the *munaqqishah* for 500 riyal) the day before *al-wafāʾ*. He rented a

13 'Entertain', here, means that—at the very least—she will provide *madaʿāt* to smoke, a servant to prepare them (usually a *qashshāmah*), tobacco (*titin*) for everyone and *saūd*, a special substance to give it aroma. This normally costs something like 6,000 / 7,000 riyal a day.

14 After al-wafāʾ, the house (which in this circumstance is called *makān al-wilād*, 'the place of wilād') stays open for guests for 15 days, in order to give them the time to visit the *wālidah*.

diadem and a necklace for his wife for 500 riyal.

During the 30 days of the *wilād*, Qays had to host and sustain his wife's sister so that she could take care of her. It is not uncommon, in these circumstances, to let the *wālidah* stay in her mother's house[15] to be more comfortable and to receive useful suggestions regarding the care of the baby. In Qays's case, this turned out to be inconvenient because of the stingy attitude of his brother-in-law, (*nasab*) who immediately specified, "Salt and sugar are up to Qays (*al-milḥ wa as-sukar maʿ Qays*)," making Qays envision a nightmarish bill for the whole 30 days.

Moreover, the *wālidah* is provided a special meal every day: *fattah* (bread made from scraps of honey and butter), *harīsh* (cornmeal mush), broth and one kilo of ovine meat or as an alternative one chicken. Moreover, juices, coffee, *kīk* and popcorn had to be provided for occasional visitors. Every week Qays had to buy 6 or 7 boxes of incense, sandalwood incense for the day of *wafāʾ*. Besides all this, of course, he had to buy everything needed by the baby (*ṣarfat-al-wilād*).

I still recall with anguish the days spent with Qays before the *al-wafāʾ*: his endless attempts to provide a respectable feast negotiating the prices, loaning money, delaying the debts, fleeing from the owner of the office and begging the owner of the house to be patient, to understand the situation. Yet he succeeded. The money he obtained constituted part of what Yemenis would define as 'rizq', sustenance, and organising the *wilād* was considered by Qays a necessary part of his responsibilities.

As I have already mentioned, during the same period, another friend of mine, Rashid, was waiting for the birth of his baby. We were chewing gat together by candle light every day: me, Qays and Rashid, in Qays's office. And while Qays was paranoid about the upcoming *wafāʾ*, Rashid was dealing with his mother-in-law (*ʿammah*) about *ṣarfat al-wilād* (the shopping); he had a long list of food and supplies needed for the baby and his mother, written on a small piece of paper. He was mechanically alternating managing the cleansing of *qāt* leaves, short sips of *shaʿīr* (a malt beverage) and long, extenuating phone calls with his *ʿammah*, following which he was deleting or adding things to the list.

It is in this context that I had my first conversations on the topic of sustenance. Needless to say, I was worried for my friends. With hindsight, my attitude towards them was somehow paternalistic, but I could not believe the waste of money that I was witnessing every day. An extraordinary increase in the price of *qāt* was, in fact, one of the consequences of the crisis, and my friends—my

15 When there are no relatives available, a stranger is paid to take care of the *wālidah* and to cook. The woman that performs this duty is called *musabbirah*.

broken friends—chewed every day.

Just a few days before the arrival of Rashid's son, he had not purchased half the items on his shopping list, yet he was chewing qāt every day for 1,500/2,000 riyal and complaining of not having enough money. I remember the first time that I criticised him: “Your son is coming; how are you going to feed him?” He turned to me, ecstatically calm, and he said, “Look at what happened to Qays. He gained 140,000 riyal from the BBC, and then he got the money from you, right before the *wilād*. *Rizq Allāh*.”

Just a few days later he brought his wife to the hospital for the delivery, and right after he came by the office to chew qat with me and Qays. He was completely broken. Qays told him, “God will give you the money; you are *marzūq* (*al-fulūs ʿa-yiddī lak Allāh, ant marzūq*).” Noticing, from my facial expression, that I was astonished, Rashid explained to me, “I have many friends; I am generous (*karīm*). Often I play [music] for free. Someone will give me the money that I need. *Allāhu Karīm* (God is generous).” Thus he sketched for me the general features of an ethic of piety and dependence:[16]

> **Rashid**: For example, God makes use of this [person] for this [person]. Now Qays doesn't have [money]. God will put in my heart to give him. Do you understand? Because [God's] name is ‘justice’. We, the people, we are always discussing—and this is remembered in the Koran. We don't try to listen piously, to see what is right. But it's never difficult. Never, never, never. And then you feel a peace that has no comparison. It never happens a day that you feel tired or oppressed... You feel strong, you feel completely in peace [...].
>
> **Luca**: And why all the difficulties?
>
> **Rashid**: Which difficulties? Say, “My Lord, help me!” He said like that. “If you turn to someone for help, turn to God.”[17] Like Beny Israʾīl, they asked God even the salt. Sometimes... We go and we say I don't know what... First of all, my brother, says, “Oh Lord!” and then go. Like when you are sick. First of all say, “Oh Lord!” You pray, for example two *rakaʿah*, you say, “Oh Lord!” And then you go to the doctor. Like Mariam.[18] Did He feed her to her mouth? No, He said shake [the tree], so that the date fell down. It means that you have to do something, you have to help yourself. He will help you, but it's necessary that you help yourself. For example you ask, you do, you search...

Here the argument is twofold. Rashid describes the feelings of the believer when he entrusts himself

16 Recorded interview, 18 October 2014, Ṣanʿāʾ, Qays's office.
17 This is a *hadith*, “إِذَا سَأَلْتَ فَاسْأَلْ اللَّهَ, وَإِذَا اسْتَعَنْتَ فَاسْتَعِنْ بِاللَّهِ”.
18 Here the reference is to the story of Mariam, as reported in the Qurʿān in surat Mariam (19).

to God: peace (*rāḥah*) and strength (*quwwah*). God is generous (*karīm*); He always listens to his servants,[19] but they have to listen to what is right; they have to follow His guidance. Moreover, they cannot 'seat'; they have to move, to make an effort. The example of Mariam is enlightening, since she is an exemplary woman, the mother of the prophet Jesus. Yet she had to shake the tree to get sustenance. A last point lurks behind Rashid's first sentence: God inspires people and people act on His behalf.[20] As the proverb says, "God provided me sustenance, and provides it through me (*allahuma arzaqnī wa arzaq minnī*)."

The overall picture that emerges from Rashid's case is consonant with a perspective that emphasises what M. Watt has called "the majesty and omnipotence of God." It presupposes the possibility of the intervention of God in human affairs, but it leaves room for human action, an action inspired by God's guidance. Believers are not (or should not be) indolent, passive servants of God. Rather they are fostered to act in two ways: first worshipping God, that is to say: praying and remembering Him (*dhikr*); and second behaving with other people in the 'right' way, for example, as Rashid emphasises, displaying generosity. This perspective, I argue, is *generative* rather than fatalistic; it informs human action.

Allāh fī-l-Yemen

How do Yemenis survive? How can a soldier, that earns 30,000 riyal a month and chews qāt every day for 600 riyal, make a living out of his salary? Why do people waste their money, rather than enacting budgeting strategies? These are just a few questions that I had in my mind during that period.

One day I discussed such topics with Lotf, a young man my age that I first met in 2006. He was hailing from Manākhah, and he moved to Ṣanʿāʾ when he was a teenager, to make a living. For our purposes, it is sufficient to know that during the crisis he was unemployed. He was living for free in Qays's office, having been a former employee of him in his hotel.

Talking about poor people, generous people and desperate people, Lotf recalled a story that I had already heard many times, without taking it seriously: "Some people say that God exists in Yemen," he told me laughing. "Some years ago, a foreign journalist visited Yemen, asking your same questions... People answered, "God is generous," "God will help me," and so on... So he titled the

19 We will see an exception to this point in the paragraph about *ibtilāʾ*.

20 In the last paragraph of this chapter we will analyse the cultural notions that inform the action in a manner which is consonant with God's guidance through a mechanism of symbolic capitalisation.

article *God does exist in Yemen.*"

Then he told me another story, to exemplify what he meant:[21] "Even when I do not have a single riyal, even if I do not have a house, nor a work, every day I eat." He quoted a saying of the Prophet (*ḥadīth*),[22] "If you entrust yourself to God, He will provide you sustenance (*rizq*) the way he provides it to the bird, feeding his hunger and filling his belly." Hence, he continued: "One day I was wandering around, and I wanted to chew qāt. *Tawakkalt ʿalā Allāh* [I entrusted myself to God]. A friend of mine passed by, walking. I picked him up with the motorbike, and I delivered him to the *qāt* market. He paid me 1,000 riyal, and this way I chewed *qāt*."

To make the point clearer, he added another story: "In our village, young people have started a collection [*jammaʿiyyah*] for the weddings. One month, the one entitled to the money cancelled his wedding. So the next one in the list received 300,000 riyal from the *jammaʿiyyah,* and he had only one month to collect the remaining 700,000 riyal to get married. *Tawakkal ʿalā Allāh*. No one knows how he gathered the money, but after one month he got married."

Just a few days later, by chance, I found an article in a newspaper, entitled: "Allåh fī-l-Yemen."[23] Here follow some excerpts:

> It seems that in Yemen we got used to poverty, unemployment, hunger and filthy streets, while the crises follow one another over our heads. And you find out that many people here in Yemen got used to sitting next to garbage dumps or sites of explosions, and I do not understand one thing: how can they stay before those sights and next to that smell which would repel insects? [...] I remember some words that I read in a translated book. Many years ago a European writer visited Yemen and conducted a survey to know how the Yemeni people make a living (*yaʿīsh*) with a small salary, many expenses and many family responsibilities. So the people replied to his question, which was, 'From where do you get money when your salary is over?' In this way, "God will transfer it! My Lord will manage it, it's up to God, God is generous..." They replied with expressions of dependence (*alfāẓ ittikāliyah*) and reliance (*tawakkiliyah*) of which we do not know the meaning, yet we just pronounce them. For this reason, the European called his book "God in Yemen." (Allāh fī-l-Yemen) Yes, God gives and hence He simplifies, but He constricts for whom He wants; and God bestows, enriches or he makes poor whom He wants; and He protects, preserves and cures, or He makes sick, and He is the most Merciful. But we are a society that lacks a full understanding of the causes (*al-asbāb*) [...].

21 Fieldnotes, 21 October 2011. Old city of Ṣanʿāʾ.

22 لو توكلتم على الله حق توكله لرزقكم كما يرزق الطير تغدو خماصا وتعود بطانا

23 Al-Ahdal, A. 2011. Allāh fī-l-Yemen. Al-Jumhūriyyah, 28 Oct 2011, no. 15315. The full translation of the article can be found in Appendix.

This text represents, of course, a particular perspective, a critique. Yet it depicts characters and situations in a way which is familiar, evocative, for Yemeni people. Altogether, it is a harsh attack against indolence. This is the point that I want to highlight here. How are Yemenis described in this article? They are people relying on God, people dependent on God. The author is criticising their passivity, their indolence, the fact that—rather than 'moving', rather than giving an effort—they simply ascribe any event to God's will. The author's critique is somehow similar to the critique I directed towards Rashid and Qays. I looked at them as passive, lazy people. This attitude is well summarised in Arabic by the formula '*tawakkalt ʿalā Allāh*'. It implies submission to God from his servants, and basically it states, "If you ask God, He will give you sustenance." (Hamdy, 2009)

Now this perspective might be well understood as fatalistic, or deterministic, and this is exactly the interpretation that we have taken into account through M. Watt's work. Labelling an attitude as 'fatalistic' is, beyond doubt, a good way to make it familiar to a Western reader. Yet I suspect that this kind of labelling does not explain anything regarding how social actors give meaning to their experience. Rather, it contributes to hide several meanings that lie under the surface.

Consider, again, the formula '*tawakkalt ʿalā Allāh*'. It does not mean that our sustenance, that our *rizq*, is pre-written, foreordained. Rather, it implies that the pious Servant (*ʿabd*), the one who worships God and follows his guidance (*ihdāʾ*), will be 'nourished like a bird'. Being a straight Servant is not an easy task and surely not a task for lazy people. So just to give an example, which was a rather common one: the one who is found sleeping at *fajr* time is not an exemplary servant; nor is the Muslim that does not fast during Ramaḍān. As we will see, being a pious servant is a necessary but insufficient condition to ask God for sustenance. This is a first level on which the doctrine of sustenance pushes subjects to action, an action which is morally shaped by Islamic precepts.

A second point of interest is the philosophy of causation that underlies local notions of action. This point emerges from the last line of the article, when the author states that Yemenis lack a "[...] full understanding of the causes." We cannot fully develop this point here, but a brief explanation is needed. God's knowledge is all-encompassing, and it holds past, present and future. Yet individuals are not compelled to act; they are free. As we have seen already, this assumption is widespread on the theological level and on the common sense one.

Now, returning to the article, what the author means is that God is the cause of everything; He is the possibility of everything but 'everything' means 'everything', means positive and negative: God

cures and makes sick, gives or takes. Since God does not compel human beings to act, they are free to pursue what is good, free to enhance their life. These themes emerge clearly in a conversation that I had with Lotf—whom we've met already—and Mohammed ʿAlī 'Ḥāly' Jazzāry. Beīt Jazzāry is a family hailing from the Old City of Ṣanʿāʾ, traditionally associated with the task of butchery. Mohammed, whose age is more or less 40, managed the manufacturing of leather for his family.[24]

> **Luca**: What does it mean *rizq*? Because we don't have a word with a similar meaning...
>
> **Lotf**: It is said that *rizq*...
>
> **Mohammed**: God gives the *rizq*. Who serves God, God gives him *rizq*. This is so.
>
> **Lotf**: From an endeavour (*saʿā*)... And from the trust [in God]... I mean, the one who works or do something...
>
> **Mohammed**: Now consider the trade. One trader gives me [the money] ʿalā Allāh [relying on God], not relying on what he has got. Another tells you, 'God will give; God will bring everything'. This is *rizq*.
>
> **Lotf**: You ask God [*tiṭlub Allāh*], I mean beside your endeavour... I work with this one, I work with that one... And God gives you *rizq*. It is your endeavour through which God gives you *rizq*. On the contrary, if you seat and you sleep and you want *rizq*, it's not possible that it comes to you. *Rizq* happens... I mean, God gives *rizq* to his servant. This money [Mohammed's money]... It means that God loves his servant. When He sees that [the servant] pursues endeavours and he asks *rizq*... The one who says, 'I don't pray *fajr,*' and he doesn't regret... will God gives him *rizq*? I mean, it's lost...
>
> And the one that sleeps, relying on charity, and idles during the day... His *rizq* will be limited.
>
> **Luca**: Does it mean that it comes from piety [*at-taqwah*]?
>
> **Lotf**: From piety... [but] He is the most merciful, [so] the one who is disobedient could get more than [the pious one]. God tries [*yibtil*] the Muslim, the Believer. He tries the Believer, testing his patience [*ṣabr*]. I mean, prophet Jacob's patience was a patience that lasted eighteen years. And people were telling him, "For God's sake, you are Prophet! God will give you *rizq*." He said no. I stayed healthy and happy, with money and sons for seventy years. And now I can't be patient for eighteen years? I will wait for another seventy years, and after seventy years God will give me [*rizq*]. For seventy years I had a quiet and lovely life, now I can bear suffering for seventy years. Then God will give [*rizq*]... [...] Nowadays people say, "Jacob's patience," and it's a proverbial expression. No one can be patient as the prophet Jacob has been [...].

24 Recorded interview, 30 April, 2013, Ṣanʿāʾ. The setting is Mohammed's office, during a qāt session.

In the first part of the conversation, Mohammed and Lotf disagree about the meaning of *rizq*. Mohammed proposes a sample of the ‘semi-fatalistic view’ on which we have already commented: God provides sustenance to his servants; there is nothing more to say. Lotf amends this assumption, clarifying a point that we have already taken into account: the servant needs to be a ‘straight’ servant, a pious one, since God gives sustenance to the one who follows his guidance.

A second point of paramount interest is the one related to ‘endeavour’ (*saʿā*). The servant is entitled to get the sustenance when he gives an effort, when he works. The one who sleeps during the day and relies on charity, in fact, will obtain a limited *rizq*, or no *rizq* at all.

Ibtilāʾ or God's Trial

Sometimes the straight servant does not obtain sustenance, while the ‘disobedient’ one prospers. How do social actors deal with such events? In my experience, social actors are completely aware of this apparent contradiction, of this paradox in the logic of sustenance, and they readily admit and rationalise it.

Lotf gives us a clear sample of the meanings and symbols through which the exceptions to the logic of sustenance are turned into a constitutive part of the logic itself, providing a rational image of the world. In this operation of rationalisation, the notion of *ibtilāʾ* is a pivotal one. *Ibtilāʾ* is a word which stems from the root ب ل و, whose semantic field suggests both the meaning of ‘putting someone to the test’ and that of ‘afflicting someone’. In this perspective, the misfortunes of the pious, virtuous servant of God are interpreted as a trial that directly descends from God Himself.

Lotf's narrative depicts Job as an emblematic figure, the personification of the virtue of patience (*aṣ-ṣabr*). The story of Job is not fully recounted in the Koranic text; there are just a few verses and passages that refer to him. From these few verses we come to know that, in the Islamic tradition, Job is considered a prophet. We have, in particular, two set of verses that refer to the sufferings that he bore and that describe his steadfast to God (cf. 21: 83-84; 21: 41-44):

> And [mention] Job, when he called to his Lord, "Indeed, adversity has touched me, and you are the Most Merciful of the merciful." So We responded to him and removed what afflicted him of adversity. And We gave him [back] his family and the like thereof with them as mercy from Us and a reminder for the worshippers [of Allah].[25] And [mention]

25 Sūrat-al-Anbyāʾ, 21: 83-85.

Ishmael and Idrees and Dhul-Kifl; all were of the patient.

***

And remember Our servant Job, when he called to his Lord, "Indeed, Satan has touched me with hardship and torment." [So he was told], "Strike [the ground] with your foot; this is a [spring for] a cool bath and drink."And We granted him his family and a like [number] with them as mercy from Us and a reminder for those of understanding. [We said], "And take in your hand a bunch [of grass] and strike with it and do not break your oath." Indeed, We found him patient, an excellent servant. Indeed, he was one repeatedly turning back [to Allah].[26]

Job's story is well-known and thoroughly described in the Christian tradition. The Islamic version is not much different and is recounted in many collections that depict the life histories of the Prophets, the so-called 'Stories of the Prophets'. These 'Stories of the Prophets', in Yemen, are available at every street corner, and, many of them, are often recounted during *qāt* sessions, taught in the mosques or represented in main stream soap operas. Lotf, like many of my interlocutors, had a fragmentary idea of Job's story, assembled through these heterogeneous sources. Yet the focal point of the story seems to be clear, both in our conversations and in the Koranic text.

Consider the first passage: Job emerges as a Prophet among the Prophets, and they are all described from the perspective of their leading virtue: patience. Ismaʿil, Idris, Jonah, Zachary and Mariam, they are described, one after another, in their steadfast obedience to God and exalted for their motivating virtue: patience.

Describing the notion of 'trial', *ibtilāʾ*, we have reached a point of pivotal interest for our discussion. What emerges from the notion of trial is that *the whole ideology of* rizq *needs to take reality into account and justify it.* In the next chapter we will consider the notion of moral economy and compare the sustenance model that we have so far described to other moral economy models. The difference between these models lies in the way they are related to 'reality'. The moral economy model is inherently political; it is a program for the action, and it describes the world as it ought to be. In this, it recognises the distance between the envisioned world and the actual one. This is a model 'for' (Geertz, 1973), and the discrepancies between 'model' and 'reality' are overtly considered the terrain of politics. We will consider models of this kind in chapter 6 (the egalitarian model) and chapter 7 (the moral division of labour).

On the contrary, the 'sustenance model' describes the world *as it is*. It does not envision an ideal

26 Sūrat-aṣ-Ṣād, 38: 41-44.

world, or a political path to reach it. Rather, it states: "This is how everything works, so if you want to obtain sustenance do this and that."[27] This is, obviously, a 'model of' (ibid.), since it claims to empirically (or cosmologically) describe 'reality'. Whereas the moral economy models describe how to change society for the benefit of a community, the 'sustenance model' describes a moral pattern of behaviour from which only the individual (the Believer) will benefit.

Capitalising Piety and Generosity

As we have seen so far, the philosophy of *rizq* emerges in conversations and texts as a contested semantic field. Yet this semantic field is structuring expectations for social actors' and is concurrently structured by them. In order to understand how social representations about sustenance are linked to social action, I will use the notion of symbolic capital as thoroughly analysed by Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 1986).

In this chapter we will analyse two notions of 'generosity' that structure social expectations regarding reciprocity so as to turn *social capital* into *symbolic capital* (Bourdieu, 1986). These two notions are those of *karam* and *muruwwah*. In the next chapter we will consider similar notions of generosity related to hospitality and tribal values, such as the notion of *qidr* and duty (*wājib*).

Muruwwah *as* virtus

The notion of *muruwwah* has entered the scientific debate through the classical study of I. Goldziher, which produced "Muruwwa und Dīn" (*Muhammedanische Studien*, I, p. 1-39), first published in 1889. The main aim of this study was to highlight the sharp contrast between the spiritual and ethical foundations of pre-Islamic Arab life and the values and ethos of the religion founded by the prophet Mohammed.[28] This distinction, the one between pre-Islamic Arab life and Islamic religion, was a classical concern of early Islamologists and a structuring category of their discursive field. We have already taken into account a similar interpretation in the work of M. Watt (1948).

27 On the political level, it might well have the function of a tautological self-description of society, as described by N. Luhmann (Luhmann and Fuchs, 1988).

28 "The highest ethical perfection in the eyes of pagan Arabs could often be regarded as the lowest moral decay from an Islamic point of view and vice versa." (Goldziher, 1967: 18)

Against this backdrop, we can briefly analyse the notion of *muruwwah* as it emerges in Goldziher's study. First, *muruwwah* is overtly introduced in opposition to the prophet's ethical teachings:

> The gulf between the moral views of the Arabs and the prophet's ethical teachings is deep and unbridgeable. If we seek slogans to make this contrast clear, we can find none better than the two words: *dīn* and *muruwwa*; the first is the 'religion' of Muhammed, the second the 'virtue' (literally and etymologically the Latin word *virtus* corresponds to the Arabic *muruwwa*) of the Arabs. (Goldziher, 1967: 22)

Muruwwah, in this sense, is an umbrella notion that encompasses all the paramount virtues of pre-Islamic Arabs: the observance of duties which are connected with family ties, the relationships of protection and hospitality, and the fulfilment of blood revenge (ibid.).[29]

Goldziher's interpretation has been harshly criticised by B. Farés (1986). The terms of the critique are consonant with the main theme of the debate: the continuity (or discontinuity) between pre-Islamic and Islamic ethics. Farès thesis is clear-cut, which explains that if we have to define a general meaning of the word, a conjunction of two contrary elements should be distinguished: a concrete meaning (wealth and management of property), characteristic of the pre-Islamic era; and an abstract, Islamic meaning, referring to 'good manners' and virtues (ivi: 637). Goldziher's thesis is completely overturned, since Farès refers the development of the 'virtus' connotation of *muruwwah* to the Islamic period.

M. Bravmann has pushed this critique even further, stating that the contrast that Goldziher has tried to establish, the one between *dīn* (Islamic religion) and *muruwwah*, does not exist at all (Bravmann, 1972: 2). Yet, he has refused Farès's interpretation regarding the 'concrete' meaning of the term, whose character he considers moral-spiritual (ivi: 7).

How can we benefit from this debate between Islamologists regarding the etymology and the meaning of *muruwwah*? A first point emerges clearly in Farès's opening statement:

> In the Arabic language there are a number of terms the meaning of which is imprecise [...]. Consider the term 'muruwwah' itself: it refers to an astonishingly wide semantic field,

29 Given this, it is not accidental the fact that Goldziher compares the two notions of *muruwwa* and *marjala*. *Marjala* is a notion that overtly refers to manliness, and Goldziher considers the usage of the second in Haḍramaūt. As we will see, in northern Yemen the umbrella expression for tribal values is *rajūlah*, a word that stems from the same root as *marjala* and refers to manliness.

> ranging from the concrete meaning of property, to the abstract one of *virtus*; from chastity, good nature and observance of Koranic laws, with the Rightly-guided Caliphs, to dignity and compassion with the Umayyads. (Farès, 1986: 637)

It is pointless, I argue, to seek systematic correspondences between symbols and meanings, and it is fallacious to subsume one general, all-encompassing, ahistorical meaning from diverse local, contested and historicised sources. As we will see dealing with the notion of *sharaf*, this matter engages anthropologists and anthropology directly.

Muruwwah *and* Karam*: local notions of generosity*

Turning to the meaning of *muruwwah* the way it was interpreted by my interlocutors and constructed in our conversations, we can clarify how it is related to the model of sustenance that has emerged from the above discussion. Of the many conversations I had on the topic of tribal values and, specifically, about *muruwwah*, one was particularly enlightening. I recorded it on 7 June, 2013, and it was the umpteenth attempt to precipitate in a recording the many conversations that I'd already had on this topic.

It was one of those sunny days that precede the monsoon. The Old City of Ṣanʿāʾwas steadily absorbed in the morning idleness, crippled by the bluest of the skies and enveloped by a thick blanket of dust. Qays, his father and I were coming back from his father's shop, a modest phone centre in the middle of the old city, heading towards their house in Zirāʿah. The Saīlah, a long road that splits the old city in two and that conveys the rains during the monsoon, was crawling with cars, as usual. Qays's father, Aḥmed, a man whose moral standing has always inspired in me profound respect, stopped in the middle of the Saīlah and helped a car out of the gridlock. As a result, another car hit him from behind, lifting him up over the hood.

The accident did not injure Aḥmed, so that in a twinkling he was trying to pull the driver out of his car, urging him to apologise. As a response, the man locked himself inside the car and started staring at the horizon like nothing happened. Aḥmed turned to us, who urged him not to waste time with that man, and eventually, visibly altered, he shouted, 'What happened in this country (*bilād)*? There's no more *sharaf* (*mā ʿād fish sharaf)*, no more *muruwwah* (*mā ʿād fīsh muruwwah)*!' Later in the afternoon, I discussed this episode with Qays. I will leave out the discussion about *sharaf* here because we will deepen this subject in the next chapter. Here follow some excerpts from the

conversation that I had with Qays:[30]

> **Luca**: May I ask you if you can explain me what is *muruwwah*?
>
> **Qays**: *Muruwwah...* You find it among your people [*ahl*] or your neighbours [*jiran*]... Or even between the stranger and the stranger. It is *muruwwah* when a person is in a problematic situation, or in a crisis, or he needs money because he has a birth [*wilād*] or a sickness or an accident... So you give him some money, **without him asking you** [*bidūn an yiṭlub-ak*]. And this is considered a '**returned debt**' [*deīn marjūʿ*]. Why? Because you will not ask him [the money back], but when the circumstances of this person will improve, **he will give you back your *muruwwah*** [*yurajjiʿ lak muruwwat-ak*]. So if you have *muruwwah* [*ant ṣāḥib al-muruwwah*] you will hand it back when you obtain what is yours. This way you people have settled, it's plain. And you have saved him in the time of need.

Consider this first excerpt. Many characteristics of *muruwwah* emerge clearly. First, *muruwwah* is related to a 'spontaneous' action. A person has *muruwwah* if he offers his help without his help being requested. Second, it is conceived as a 'returned debt', but without any date of expiration. This means that a person expects *muruwwah* to come back, but he has no information available as to when or how this will happen. The way it is returned, as we will see, might constitute part of someone's *muruwwah*.

Third, *muruwwah* is used as a noun, and hence it has a substantial nature. As one of my interlocutors told me, "*Muruwwah* belongs to the person (*al-muruwwah tabʿ ash-shakhṣ).*" It is correct to say that a person 'has' *muruwwah*, not that he 'is' *muruwwah*, since it is not a quality of the person. Moreover, people talk about *muruwwah* as something that can be transferred from one person to another. Also, it has a quantitative nature: you can have more or less *muruwwah*, depending on the value of your good deeds. One interlocutor once told me, "The *muruwwah* of some people is like a mountain (*mithl al-jabal).*" A fourth characteristic of *muruwwah* is that it is always relational. It does not make sense to say that someone has *muruwwah* in general terms; he has it in relation to someone. For this reason, a person can hand back to someone his *muruwwah* and even say that he has more *muruwwah* than him when he returns more than what he had first obtained.

A sceptical reader might wonder why I am not translating 'muruwwah' in the language of debit and credit, since its meaning and usage is very similar to that of symbolic credit. My answer is that a similar gloss would prevent us from understanding the role of spontaneity and time. Also—and

30 Recorded interview, 7th of July 2013, Old City of Ṣanʿāʾ. The setting is Qays's office, during a qāt session.

probably this is more important—my interlocutors were reflecting on the meaning of *muruwwah* as overtly opposed to the meaning of 'debt' and 'credit'. Consider this excerpt from the same interview:

> **Qays: *Muruwwah* is when you do something between you and God**, Ok? Instead the person who asks the thing... This is considered a debt that he must give back [*deīn muʾakkad yiddī*]. *Muruwwah* is when God has decreed that the person is in the situation to give you back. If [God] didn't decree, it's circumstances. Because you are the one who decided to make a good deed [*tifʿal al-kheīr*].
>
> **Luca**: Ok... And if one doesn't give you back *muruwwah*... I mean, does he lack *muruwwah* [*hū nāqiṣ al-muruwwah*]?
>
> **Qays**: There's a lack if he was capable and he didn't do anything... He's lacking.
>
> **Luca**: And [you told me] that you say "you and your *muruwwah* [*ant ū muruwwatak*]?" Or how do you say?
>
> **Qays**: **You and your *muruwwah*.** And if you get into *muruwwah* more, you say, "This is a person whose father had *karāmah*." Because you interfered in a difficult problem and you solved it... With your money, your speech or your position.

The debt, as we can understand from this excerpt, is when someone asks explicitly for any kind of help. On the contrary, the one who has *muruwwah* (*ṣāḥib al-muruwwah*) acts spontaneously. When someone lends money spontaneously, his money might not come back, depending on his material conditions and possibilities. If he is not capable of returning the money, he does not lack *muruwwah*, since he did not ask for any help: someone offered it spontaneously. On the contrary, if he is capable of returning the *muruwwah* and he does not return it, then a person can say, "you and your *muruwwah* (*ant ū muruwwatak)*." This is a common formula, that stands for a lack of a moral quality, as in the formula "you and your *qabyalah* (*ant ū qabyalatak*)." In our case, it means that alter is "*nāqiṣ al-muruwwah,*" meaning that he lacks *muruwwah*.

From this second excerpt emerges another pivotal aspect: the reference to God. Here my argument is twofold. On the one hand, the reference to God reminds us of the impossibility of neatly distinguishing a 'tribal' set of values, meanings and symbols and an 'Islamic' one.[31] In contemporary discourses, the two languages are always overlapping, and not even flag concepts

31 This distinction has been used by many scholars. We have already considered how it has been used by classical Islamists such as I. Goldziher and M. Watt. S. Caton (1986) has pushed forward this argument, arguing that 'personhood' itself is constructed according to honour (*sharaf*) in the case of the *qabīly* and religious piety in the case of the *sayyid*.

such as *sharaf* or *muruwwah*, concepts that within literature stand for pre-Islamic tribalism itself, are ever safe from religious influences. On the other hand, the reference to God is significant because it is completely incoherent with the rest of Qays's argument. Let me deepen this point.

Qays's interpretation of *muruwwah* is grounded on the relational quality of the concept and on its contextual meaning. This interpretation emerges clearly, I believe, from the above excerpts, and Qays pushes forward with this point, comparing the two notions of *karam* and *muruwwah*. In this perspective the reference to God is completely out of context, since it points to a 'generalised reciprocity'.[32]

> **Qays**: The difference between *karam* and *karāmah*... *Karam* is when the person has already given a loan, or charity or anything else... **He is *karīm*, for God**. And it is also *karam* when you are patient despite someone being late returning you a credit, or when you have a pawn and you wait patiently, even if the period already expired. *Karāmah* is when the person holds something that belongs to you, and between you and him there's a promise, and he plays... You say, "You, you don't have *karāmah*." He is not afraid for the *karāmah* of himself.
>
> **Luca**: Like the reputation [sumʿah]?
>
> **Qays**: Yes. [...]
>
> **Luca**: And so you told me... What's the difference between *karam* and *muruwwah*?
>
> **Qays**: *Karam* is when a person gives to everyone [*lil-kull yaʿṭī*]. *Muruwwah* is when circumstances [*maūqif*] happen. What was the situation of ʿammī ʿAbbās, the one we recalled? He was bringing out [food] in Ramaḍān. Because it was the occasion of Ramaḍān and they had just a little work... His *muruwwah* is that he makes good deeds. And they didn't ask for it.
>
> **Luca**: Like ʿammy Mohammed?
>
> **Qays**: Exactly, circumstances. Like today, my circumstance... I was heading back to az-Zirāʿah and [Mohammed] said, "No, come and eat lunch with me".
>
> **Luca**: This is *muruwwah*!
>
> **Qays**: It is *muruwwah*!

The two notions of *karam* and *muruwwah* are somehow overlapping. They emerge, in this recording

32 This kind of incoherence is pervasive in the conversations that I have collected. Common sense notions are constructed at the intersection of multiple discoursive fields and are often contested. Moreover, they usually have a practical meaning rather than a rationalised one. Finally, meanings are not equally distributed among people in the same community; this is a matter of sociology of knowledge that we already analysed in chapter 3.

as in many other conversations, in a reflexive process of construction in which the anthropologist himself has a determinant role. Yet, gradually, these notions condense and reach a stabilised meaning.

Karam emerges as a moral virtue. It is defined in opposition to *muruwwah* and is not anchored to a specific situation, nor to a specific relationship; it is not necessarily spontaneous; it does not structure the expectations as a 'returned debt' would do. As Qays stated, "You are *karīm* for God." Both the notions of *karam* and *muruwwah* entail a return, a reward for the good deed accomplished, but what differs is the time perspective. Whereas *muruwwah* specifies the relationship within which the return will happen and strongly structures the expectations of both parties, *karam* points to a generic return that will be provided by God, in this life or even, in the afterlife. As the Arab proverb says, "Accomplish good deeds and throw them to the sea (*ifʿal al-kheīr w-irmīh ilā al-baḥr*)."

The 'magic' of *rizq*, the feeling that 'God exists in Yemen', is the result of such an intricate system of reciprocity, a system through which *rizq* is effectively delivered to the needy in time of need. The point that I want to make here is about the relationship between individual agency and the philosophy of *rizq*. Notions such as *karam* and *muruwwah* provide a symbolic medium to capitalise labour and a meaningful horizon for action. In this way, individual actions are *orchestrated* in a general system of reciprocity without being the product of the organising action of any conductor (Bourdieu, 2003)—except maybe God Himself.

An interpretative model such as the one proposed by M. Sahlins (1965) does not help in clarifying the notions that we are analysing. Sahlins presents a scale that would correlate reciprocity and trade with close and distant social relations. In this scale, close social relations would correspond to "putatively altruistic" transactions defined as *generalised reciprocity* (ivi: 193-4). *Karam* seems to be related to 'putatively altruistic' transactions, but at the same time it does not entail a 'close social relation', as the example of charity demonstrates.

For these reasons, in the next chapter, I will propose a general theoretical framework grounded on the anthropology of economy of Steve Gudeman, taking into account the role of time (Bourdieu, 2003) and reproduction (Weiner, 1980). Relying on such a theoretical framework I will argue that general systems of reciprocity that 'deliver' *rizq* to the needy (*al-marzūq*) are grounded on individual agency through the accumulation of symbolic capital whose dimensions are structured by and for local and historical fields of struggle.

Chapter 6 – On the Meaning of Brotherhood

The economic base of corporate groups

> I've seen my companions gathering and tears welled up in my eyes. I knew that my brothers truly stand beside me. No one can divide us.
>
> *Shuft asḥābinā mutajammiʿīn ū dammaʿt bi-l-bukāʾ. ʿaraft inna ʿindy akhwāty ṣaḥ. Mā yi-farriq-nā-sh ayyī mufarriq.*[1]

Mujahid al-Bahshaly was standing at the bottom of the *diwān*, his arms hanging loose. He moved one step forward and two steps back, trying to reach a balance. The *diwān* had turned into a tropical forest, an undergrowth of *qāt* leaves and broken branches, the heat almost unbearable, the couches and the floor crawling with exhausted, yet buzzing human beings. Mujahid spoke, with his voice broken by yelling and exhaustion, reaching every corner of the square, touching every heart. A tragedy had just been solved and the unity of the village recovered, after months of internal struggles and conflicts. "No one can divide us," screamed Mujahid, and it was liberating, for each one of us. The people of Kuthreh were brothers, again.

This story started just a few hours before Mujahid's speech. ʿEisa, Mujahid's nephew (his brother's son), was on duty, guarding a post office not far from Beyt Baūs. While sitting in the guardhouse, he was cleaning his rifle. Then, suddenly, a shot rang out. When, a few days later, I visited him in jail, he told me, "I was cleaning the rifle, and probably there was a bullet in the barrel... I don't know, I just heard the shot and I thought, 'who fired a shot?' And it was me..." The bullet crossed a whole square and eventually hit a girl in the neck. She died immediately.

That girl was a mendicant, a *khādimah*,[2] and ʿEisa knew her well. They had had lunch together

1 شفت اصحابنا متجمّعين و دمّعت بالبكاء. عرفت ان عندي اخواتي صح. ما يفرّقنا اي مفرّق.

2 For a brief introduction to the so-called *akhdām*, see Sharjaby (1986: 259-277).

the previous day, as on many other occasions, at the entrance to the guardhouse. For this reason, when the soldiers came to arrest ʿEisa, the victim's sisters surrounded him, backing his claims of innocence and guarding him from their furious relatives, from any impulsive attempt of revenge. The soldiers took ʿEisa in custody, and the chief of his division (*mudīr al-Munshād*) started negotiations with the victim's family, following tribal protocol. Four rifles were immediately provided by the army[3] as a symbol of guarantee, two for the blood (*ḥaqq ad-damm*) and two for the judgement (*ḥaqq at-taḥkīm*[4]).

Thus the army contacted the *mashāykh* (s. *shaykh*) of Kuthreh, who readily intervened. They met the chief of the division and provided the full value of the rifles[5]. Afterwards, they went to visit the family of the victim. They met her mother, since her brother was not in Ṣanʿāʾ and her father was dead. That woman proved herself to be a person of immense compassion. She forgave ʿEisa, and thus she added, "Go back and solve the matter. His mother will be worried." Thus they arranged to meet her son the subsequent day. At that point a happy ending was around the corner.

Meanwhile, the news of the accident spread in Kuthreh. Almost every *gharrām* (pl. *gharrāmah*) of the village immediately mobilised. In a few hours most of the people from Kuthreh 'entered'[6] Ṣanʿāʾ and gathered in the house of Mohammed al-Ghumeīr. Mohammed, an affine of Beyt al-Bahshaly, generously hosted all the *gharrāmah*, providing water for the *qāt* session.

After the *ʿaṣr* prayer, the *mashāikh* reached us. The delegation was composed of ʿAli Ahmed ʿAbdurrahman (Beyt al-Maghreby), Mohammed Ḥizām and ʿAbdullah ʿAbdulhamid.[7] If the meter to judge a *shaykh* can be considered the way in which he is welcomed and the place where he sits in the *diwān* (Gerholm, 1977; Caton, 1986), the *shaykh* of Kuthreh was ʿAli Ahmed ʿAbdurrahman (cf. Ch. 4). As he showed up, all the people in the *diwān*, including the elders (with the only exception of me, a guest), exhibited a sort of standing ovation, competing to let him sit in their place. The *mashāykh* recounted the case as I have just depicted it, and the *qāt* session proceeded in a relaxed mood, as we were finally relieved from the tension of the accident.

3 In this case, the one who factually gave the rifles and the order was the *amīn aṣ-ṣundūq*, the treasurer of ʿEisa's division in the army.

4 The blood price, at that time, was fixed and decreed by the law: 1,700,000 riyal for the *diyah khaṭāʾ* (manslaughter); 5,700,000 riyal for the *diyah ʿamd* (voluntary manslaughter).

5 The rifles, as well as some money for any further expense (more or less 20,000) were anticipated by Mohammed al-Ghumeīr, an affine of Beyt al-Bahshaly, an outstanding proof of *muruwwah*.

6 A villager would say that he enters Ṣanʿāʾ (*yidkhul*) when he leaves the village, and that he goes out (*yikhruj*) when he comes back. These verbs are used in an absolute sense, without an explicit reference to the village or to Ṣanʿāʾ, so that the sentence "*anā kharijy*" (I'm going out) can mean that someone is coming back to the village. Interestingly, the adjective 'foreign' was formerly translated as "*dākhīl*.

7 The only 'officially appointed' *shaykh*, between these 3 people, was Mohammed Ḥizām, the so-called *ʿayn* of the ʿ of Kuthreh. The 'real' *shaykh* of the village, Mohammed Ḥamūd al-Ḥaddy, played no role in this case, as in most of the cases that I witnessed.

The weather in the *diwān* turned foggy, the air saturated with cigarette smoke. As the Maghreb drew close, the mood of the *takhzīnah* turned gloomy.[8] Right before we left, Mujahid al-Bahshaly stood up and expressed his gratitude to his brothers. We headed back to the car and set off for Kuthreh. In the car, the mood turned enthusiastic. My companions started emphasising the extraordinary solidarity Kuthreh people showed, the great generosity of Mohammed al-Ghumeīr and of the chief of the division, the merciful attitude of the mother of the victim, and the outstanding reputation of ʿEisa, which channelled positively the efforts to solve the matter ("He is beloved (*hū maḥbūb*). God, glorified and exalted be Him, doesn't turn against an innocent (*Allāh subḥaneh ū taʿālā lā yiqlab ʿalā barī*).") However, overall, they were celebrating their recovered unity, the fact that Kuthreh people were still *brothers*.

On the Meaning of Brotherhood *(Akhuwwah)*

Becoming a brother

As we have seen in Chapters 1 and 3, the people from Kuthreh describe themselves as descendants of two different ancestors: ʿAdnān and Qaḥṭān. Nearly 2/3 of Kuthreh villagers consider themselves Northern Arabs, descendants of the prophet Mohammed, *sādah* (s. *sayyid*). The remaining third is composed by Southern Arabs, the so-called *ʿarab*. Moreover, within the two groups, most of the *bidīn* (s. *badaneh*) do not claim a common descent.[9] Since there is no common line of descent for the *bidīn* of the village, not even in an imagined sense, what is brotherhood (*akhuwwah*) all about?

The point that I want to make is that being a 'brother', being part of the brotherhood, is not an ascriptive status, but rather it is a role that constantly needs to be enacted. In the same way, the *akhuwwah* is not a stable, fixed corporate group, but rather it constantly needs to be reproduced.

8 The time between the *maghreb* prayer and the *ʿishā* prayer is commonly known as 'as-sāʿah as-Sulaīmaniyah', the hour of Suleiman., Around *maghreb* the overall mood of a *diwān* turns gloomy and reflexive, a contributing factor being the stimulative effect of many hours of a *qāt* session (*takhzīnah*). The *mukhazzīn*, the *qāt* chewer, stares at the horizon, compulsively curling up his beard. Usually he formulates paranoid thoughts (*yiwishsh*) or indulges in magnificent and unfeasible plans for the future. A reference to this attitude is contained in the article *Allāh fī-l-Yemen* (appendix, Ch. 5), a scholarly reflection on the topic in Dubhany (2008), where the *mukhazzin* is compared to Don Quijote de la Mancha. An overall analysis of qāt sessions is contained in Varisco (1986).

9 As we have seen in Chapter 3, some of the *bidīn* manipulate their genealogy to claim a descent from a common ancestor. Yet most of them do not, stating explicitly that each *badaneh* has a different origin. A sceptical reader might consider Kuthreh an exceptional case, since it was a *hijrah,* and it witnesses the coexistence of Northern and Southern Arabs. Yet the very same situation was found in al-Bustān, were all the villagers considered themselves Southern Arabs, but from different families and different origins.

The brotherhood is not a matter of 'shared' origins but rather a matter of 'having origins', of enacting them.

Let me consider a first point of interest: not all the people that inhabit Kuthreh are considered brothers, and not all of them are part of the *akhuwwah* in an active sense. An adult member of the *akhuwwah* is called a *gharrām* (pl. *gharrāmah*).[10] In Kuthreh were at least three families whose adult members were not considered part of the brotherhood and hence were not *gharrāmah*. One was the family of the *muzayyin*, which I have thoroughly described in Chapter 2. The other two were families of *naqāʾil* (*s. naqīl*). A *naqīl* is someone that has moved from his own village to another one, without acquiring the political rights implied by the brotherhood or being compelled to fulfil its duties.

As I have said, in Kuthreh there were two families of *naqāʾil*, one from Taʿiz and the second from Dhamār. Both families purchased land in Kuthreh and started dwelling in the village, although they had to face some resistance and a lot of suspicion. The heads of the two families wittingly decided not to become *gharrāmah*, although people from Kuthreh asked them to make *mukhuwwah*.

This fact brings us to a pivotal point of the discussion: becoming a brother, a *gharrām*, is possible. The one who decides to become a brother ('*yikhāwī*') of a political community needs to purchase and sacrifice a bull. This bull will be ritually slaughtered by the *muzayyin* of the village and subsequently the meat shared between the *bidīn* and within each *badaneh* between the families (pl. *usar*, s. *usrah*). This ritual, starting with the slaughtering of the bull and, most importantly, concluding with the sharing of the meat is called *mukhuwwah.*[11] The ritual is a necessary but insufficient condition to be a brother and a *gharrām*. The role of the brother, in fact, needs to be enacted.

ʿAdnān, the *naqīl* from Dhamār, refused to make *mukhuwwah*. He moved to Kuthreh just to be nearer to the city of Ṣanʿaʾ, where he was working, and he did not intend to enter the complex web of duties and rights that characterise the life of a village and the role of the *gharrām*. The one who lives in a village without making *mukhuwwah* is alone; he is called a *qaṭīr.*[12] His status is different from that of a *muhajjar* person, such as a teacher or a *muzayyin* (a protected one), and a guest.

It is said that once a *naqīl* dwelling in Shimās, the village next to Kuthreh, made an agreement with a man from Kuthreh. He took 1.6 million riyal, and he promise to go back to his native village

10 Hereafter we will further analyse the meaning of this term.

11 Nowadays the meat is shared between the *bidīn*, becausethe village is too big to have lunch in one house. The meaning of the ritual, however, would consist in sharing a meal, eating together.

12 Rossi (1948: 4) compares the *qaṭīr* to the *jār*, but between the two statuses lie a profound difference: the *jār*, in fact, is under the protection of the tribe.

and find 4 wives for this Kuthreh man and for his relatives, but he ran away with the money. People from Kuthreh complained to the *shaykh* of Shimās, who answered, "He is not a *gharrām*. You can do to him whatever you want; he is not under my responsibility."

It is interesting to note that, being the *mukhuwwah* is a voluntary act of affiliation to a brotherhood, it is possible to abandon a brotherhood and join another one. This is not a remote theoretical possibility. Rather, it is a widespread practice. While I was in Kuthreh it happened two times. One villager from Beyt al-Muṭahar joined the brotherhood of Arlin, and another one from Beyt al-Maghreby joined the brotherhood of Shimās.[13] The two cases were different; the first was related to a loan and the second to a land conflict. Yet, the reason for joining a different brotherhood was the same: these two persons felt that their brothers from Kuthreh did not support them in the troubles that they were facing. Both of them did not physically change their residence to the village of their new brothers, since this is not a requisite of the *mukhuwwah*.

Once, a man from Shimās made *mukhuwwah* in Kuthreh, and his former brothers came to 'bring him back', (*yistarfaʿ*) and they sacrificed one bull (*rās baqar*) in Kuthreh as *istirfāʿ* (the price to return to a previous brotherhood). The *shaykh* of Shimās announced his intentions two days in advance, and hence he arrived with 20 people that together gave a Zāmil and paid *istirfāʿ*.

The whole village of Kuthreh, after the 1962 revolution, joined the tribe of Sanḥan (cf. Ch.3), thus changing tribe and tribal confederation[14] (before they belonged to Beny Maṭar and, geographically, they still do). Yet, some families from the village remained loyal to Beny Maṭar, so that in the 1970s the village was divided between two tribes and two tribal confederations.[15]

Consider another case. The *mikhlāf* is the administrative division superior to a village and inferior to a tribe. Ahmed al-Ḥizāmy was the *shaykh* of *mikhlāf* Daʾyān, the former *mikhlāf* of Kuthreh. He had a fight with Ahmed al-Maṭary, the *shaykh* of Beny Maṭar, and so he decided to join Sanḥān. He tried to make *mukhuwwah*, but the *mashāykh* of Sanḥān refused him, so as not to create a diplomatic case with Beny Maṭar. Hence, Ahmed al-Ḥizāmy commented, "I got off from a white horse and got on a crippled cow," and he returned to Beny Maṭar.

All these cases confirm that belonging to a brotherhood is not merely a matter of genealogical

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13 Note that in this last case a *sayyid* from Beyt al-Maghreby joined the village of Shimās, which is completely inhabited by *ʿarabs*. Moreover, Shimās is in Beny Maṭar, while Kuthreh is in Sanḥān. Beny Maṭar is in the Bakīl confederation, while Sanḥān in Ḥāshid. So he changed villages, tribes and his confederation. During my stay in Kuthreh, a third person tried to make *mukhuwwah* in Shimās, but being considered a wrong person to do that, he was refused the *mukhuwwah*.

14 Beny Maṭar belongs to the Bakīl confederation, Sanḥān to Ḥāshid.

15 Even in this case, the division did not occur along genealogical lines. In fact, some Northerns and some Southerns joined Sanḥān, and some others Beny Maṭar (cf. Chapter 1).

origin, or a matter of residence. So, again, what is *akhuwwah* all about? We can get some useful insight from an interview that I recorded the day of ʿEisā's accident. My interlocutor is ʿAli ʿAbdulhamid, whom we've met already more than once:[16]

> **Luca:** I wanted to tell you... They were saying: "This is *qabyalah*; this is *akhuwwah*..." What's the meaning?
>
> ʿ**Ali**: It means... This *akhuwwah*... It means that this accident happened, and the boy is from us, from Kuthreh... So we consider all the people in Kuthreh brothers. No one can divide us. None of us said, "I will not go to him." They are all good people, this sincerely (*hadhā bi-l-amānah*)... **This one is from this or from that...** For any reason, this doesn't happen. Because this is a matter that interest all. **Today it happens to me, another day it will happen to anyone else in the village...** Like a car accident... This is *akhuwwah*. And for this *akhuwwah* praise and thanks be to God! We are still brothers... Praise be to God... We still love each other. [...]

In this excerpt, the first concern of ʿAli is to clarify that all the people from Kuthreh are brothers, irrespective of their genealogical origin. There is no difference between 'this' (a Northern Arab) and 'that' (a Southern Arab), and no one can divide the brothers.[17] A second point of interest is the formula, "Today it will happen to me; another day it will happen to anyone else in the village." This formula, in fact, depicts explicitly the rationale of the brotherhood: the effort that I spend today to help a brother is in my own interest, since tomorrow the same circumstances might happen to me. The brotherhood is accumulated[18] *social capital* (Bourdieu, 1986), and for this reason any brother can expect that, with a high degree of probability, his acts will be reciprocated. A third point of interest is that *akhuwwah* is always defined in opposition to *ʿaṣabiyyah.* Consider this excerpt from an interview with Qays al-Bustāny:[19]

> **Luca**: But, for example, if you back your brother from al-Bustān, is this from *muruwwah* or is it a duty (*wājib*)?
>
> **Qays**: It's a duty (*wājib*) when there's no *ʿaṣabiyyah*, when my brother knows that he's not wrong. Instead, if he is in the wrong, it's up to him. Because you are wrong if you back him. If he wants to cause more oppression, I don't back him. Why do they say, "This is for the *mukuwwah* (*ḥaqq al-mukhuwweh*)?" I come to know that your son and Mohammed's son

16 Recorded interview, 28 November, 2013, Kuthreh. The interview was conducted in the *diwān* of ʿAli ʿAbdulhamid.

17 Beyt al-Bahshaly, in fact, is of *ʿarab* origins, while Beyt ʿAbdulhamid is of *sayyid* origins. Interestingly, Mujahid al-Bahshaly and ʿAli ʿAbdulhamid used the same expression: "*Mā yi-farriq-nā-sh ayyī mufarriq*."

18 Precisely because the *akhuwwah* is a social field in which social capital is accumulated individually, the egalitarian ideology is often contradicted. We will deepen this point.

19 Recorded interview, 7 June, 2013, Ṣanʿāʾ, Qays's office.

> beat each other. He is from my village, and you are from another one. I see that Mohammed's son is the one that beat yours: he's the one in the wrong! I tell Mohammed, “For the *mukhuwwah*: solve it.” This is a duty; I must intervene.

This example might appear simplistic, but it well represents the tension that lies between the two concepts. On the one hand, *ʿaṣabiyyah* describes a solidarity that slides into partisanship. On the other hand, the *akhuwwah* is (or at least should be) always related to the circumstances, and it is associated with the active capacity of human beings of discerning what is right and what is wrong; it is associated with their *ʿaql* (social sense). This point emerges clearly from ʿEisa's case. The intervention of his brothers from Kuthreh was immediate, for two reasons: because he did not kill on purpose and because his reputation was one of having outstanding manners.

This is not always the case. While I was in Kuthreh, one of the brothers, a man from Beyt ar-Reīshāny, was beaten, tied, and kept prisoner in Arlin, for two days. We met him while he was returning home, walking with a limp and heavily injured. No one from the brothers of the village intervened because his bad reputation was renowned. Nighttime he had ‘metaphorically’ knocked on a door in Arlin, attempting at meeting a woman, without being enough cautious not to be discovered. He did wrong, and for this reason the brotherhood did not intervene.[20] In Kuthreh, the so-called *taʿaṣṣub*, was heavily sanctioned. That is to say, if two families, or on a superior level, two *badaneh,* entered a conflict, it was prohibited to support either sides. The fine was the slaughter of a bull (*raʾs baqar*).

There is a last point, the fourth, that is worth analysing here: what kind of subjectivity, of culturally constituted feelings, thoughts and meanings (Ortner, 2005), informs the agency of the brothers? Here follows another excerpt from the interview with ʿAli ʿAbdulhamid:[21]

> **Luca**: They also told me, “What a great blood the people from Kuthreh!” What's the meaning here?
>
> ʿ**Ali**: It means that the blood is *jidd*. Yes... *ghīrah*, they have *ḥamiyah* (heat). I mean, it doesn't happen that I see you in trouble and I don't help you. No, it means that I am cold-blooded (*fātir*). The brother, we call him a companion from the village if he's present in every problem that happens to any person from the village... But if there's nothing... He walks his way and I walk my way... But if a problem happens to me, it's necessary that he follows me (*yirubbani*), if he's a brother. This is a brother!

20 Nor anyone blamed the people of Kuthreh for his behaviour.

21 Recorded interview, 28 November, 2013, Kuthreh. The interview was conducted in the *diwān* of ʿAli ʿAbdulhamid. We were alone.

ʿAli ʿAbdulhamid recalls an opposition whose usage is widespread in Yemeni society. The cold-blooded (*fātir*) is opposed to the person who has warm blood, a serious (*jidd*) blood. *Jidd* is an adjective that stands for all the proper qualities of a tribesman, a sort of umbrella term. A person with warm blood is someone that feels '*ḥamiyyah*' (heat), someone that is pushed to act by an internal need. This feeling, this need, is described through the metaphor of warm blood, and it is causative of action. The trope of the blood exemplifies a point that we have already analysed in Chapter 2: local notions of personhood describe the moral qualities of the individual as delimited and selected by constraints that are strictly related to his biological genealogy, since one's blood is inherited.

If the trope of blood is metaphorical, there is another notion that needs a further interpretation in order to understand local conceptions of personhood and subjectivity: the notion of *ghīrah*. The word g*hīrah* is usually translated into the English language gloss as 'jealousy', but this gloss is completely misleading (cf. Herzfeld, 1980). *Ghīrah* is the internal feeling, the internal force that pushes an individual to act. It is the feeling that makes his blood warm, compelling him to act in specific circumstances. In sum, it is the feeling that pushes the actor to back his brother in difficult circumstances, to move when his *sharaf* (the sexual honour of his female relatives) is at stake, to react when his lands, his house, or his reputation are offended, and so forth.

On the meaning of ghurm

We have so far described a political community that acts as a corporate group in circumstances related to offence and defence in support of its members, the so-called brothers. Furthermore, we have depicted the social boundaries of this community, emphasising the processual dynamics of their construction and the efforts which lie behind their reproduction of it.

In this interpretation, the notions of *gharrām* and *ghurm* are central and deserve a further analysis. The *gharrām* (pl. *gharrāmah* or *gharrāmīn*) is usually defined as a man that already wears the sheath (*ʿasīb*, pl. *ʿaswāb*). The sheath, here, stands as a metonymy for the dagger (*janbiyyah*) and, more broadly, for an adult person.[22] From the number of the *gharrāmah* are excluded all the persons that do not fully participate in the political rights and duties of the community: the children,

22 Once, a boy was considered adult at the age of fifteen (cf. Ansaldi, 1933). Nowadays, the *gharrām* needs to be eighteen years old.

the old men, the women, the servants (*mazāīnah*), the guests and all the protected outsiders.[23]

Now consider the duties and the rights of a *gharrām*. As we have seen in ʿEisa's case, in a situation of offence/defence, all the *gharrāmah* are expected to provide their support.[24] When the case is of paramount importance, at least one *gharrām* from each family is expected to intervene. In cases of lesser importance, one *gharrām* for each *badaneh* might be sufficient.

For example, while I was in Kuthreh, the northern boundary of the village was attacked (cf. Ch. 4). The news of the putative 'invasion' reached the *shaykh* after sunset, while we were chewing *qāt* together. He immediately appointed (*ʿayyan*) one *gharrām* for each *badaneh*, compelling these people to reach the boundary right after sunrise and give an account of the situation.[25]

Eventually, the *gharrām* has the duty to pay *ghurm*. The *ghurm* is nothing more than a collection of money whose function is to relieve the victim of whatever misfortune, from the full burden of it, a burden that, individually, might be unbearable. So, for example, in ʿEisa's case, each *gharrām* of the village had to pay 2,000 *riyal*.[26] ʿAli ʿAbdulhamid commented: "The father of this boy [ʿEisa], doesn't even give one riyal: only the *ghurm*. [...] He doesn't bear the burden of the full amount."[27]

Unpacking segmentary lineage theory

The political function of descent groups

The brotherhood, as we have so far described it, acts as a Weberian corporate group in case of offence and defence (Weber, 1964: 145), and its function seems to be comparable to that of a group based on genealogical descent as described by Meyer Fortes (1953). In sum, if we limit our considerations to the putative political function of the brotherhood, it fits the definition of vengeance group.

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23 Once I asked *shaykh* Wahhāz, a renowned *shaykh* from Arlin, if the village of Kuthreh had ever been a hijrah (cf. Chapter 3). He answered that no, Kuthreh was not a *hijrah*, since all the *sādah* were *gharrāmah*; they would pay the *ghurm*, whereas a *muhajjar* person would not pay it. The same point has been confirmed by many old men from Kuthreh.

24 Being the support of his brothers the main duty of a *gharrām*, a brother who is particularly eager is called 'gharrām aṭ-ṭaḥīn': a brother who would even grind the corn in order to help, this being a typical female task.

25 cf. Chapter 4.

26 The total amount, in this case, was 850,000 for the *diyah khaṭāʾ* of a woman (which is half the price); 200,000 for the burial; the expenses for *mujābarat-al-maūṭ*: 3 days of qāt session, as a commemoration of the dead (110,000 for qāt, plus water for all the guests).

27 Recorded interview, 28 November, 2013.

We have many classic examples of such an institution, ranging from one side of the Middle East to the other: Marx's *khams*, a co-liable group of men "[...] who can trace common descent to an ancestor five generations removed" (1967: 64); Lancaster's 'five-generation *ibn 'amm*' (1997: 29); Cohen's *ḥamūlah* (1965); Peters's tertiary section (1967). In all these cases, the vengeance group is the minimal section that is jurally responsible for its members. The totality of the 'vengeance group' models is theoretically informed by the so-called segmentary lineage theory.

With hindsight, we can individuate at last three problematical areas of segmentary lineage theory which have seriously misrepresented Middle Eastern societies: *a*) the conflation of segmentary theory and lineage theory; *b*) the overlap of lineage dynamics and territorial dynamics; c) the theoretical confusion between analytical models.

The African model of segmentation has long dominated accounts of social structure in the Middle East (Appadurai, 1986: 358-359; Dresch, 1988: 52). The central feature of this model is the political function of descent. In *African Political Systems*, M. Fortes and E. E. Evans-Pritchard distinguish two main categories of political systems: those characterised by the presence of a 'primitive state' and the so-called 'stateless societies'. This second group comprises "[...] those societies which lack centralized authority, administrative machinery, and constituted judicial institutions—in short which lack government—and in which there are no sharp divisions of rank, status, or wealth" (Fortes and Evans-Pritchard, 1970: 5).

Stateless societies are thus characterised by the particular role played by lineage systems in the political structure. In these societies, in fact, unilateral descent groups constitute a segmentary system of corporate units (the lineages) with political functions (ivi: 6). This segmentary lineage system regulates political relations between *territorial* segments, fulfilling governmental functions in stateless societies. To properly understand what is meant by 'segmentary system' we must refer to Evans-Pritchard's classic work, *The Nuer*:

> Any segment sees itself as an independent unit in relation to another segment of the same section, but sees both segments as a unity in relation to another section; and a section which from the point of view of its members comprises opposed segments is seen by members of other sections as an unsegmented unit. (Evans-Pritchard, 1974: 147, quoted in Dresch, 1988: 313)

As P. Dresch has noted (1988: 313), segments are defined by mutual contradistinction and by balanced opposition. This definition points to the overall structure of the encompassing tribe, within

which levels and sections are defined in terms of descent. A ‘segment’, in Evans-Pritchard's sense, is a descent group and to smaller segments correspond closer genealogical relationships between their members. Segments are thus dynamically and situationally defined on the basis of a larger genealogical structure, in relation to a whole. This model is politically significant because it further entails that, when ego kills alter, a number of consequences ensues according to the genealogical positions of the persons and of the groups concerned.

During the 1960s, the segmentary lineage model was applied to Middle Eastern societies and discussed in relation to its theoretical groundings. E. L. Peters attempted to describe the political action of the camel-herding Bedouin of Cyrenaica, focusing on a permanent state of hostility which is usually defined as a ‘state of feud’ (1967: 262). He demonstrated that Bedouin describe their political relationships through a lineage model, although this lineage model does not account for political events nor enable any accurate prediction of them. The lineage model—he concluded—is not a sociological one, rather it is “[...] a representation of what a particular people, the Bedouin, conceive their social reality to be” (ivi: 270), a ‘folk model’.[28]

In *Saints of the Atlas,* Ernst Gellner upholds the opposite position (1969), describing the segmentary lineage model as an ideal typical yet effective one. For Gellner, in fact, people's action was actually informed by the assumptions of the model. Following Caws (1974), we might assert that Peters considered the lineage model a *representational* one, while Gellner describes it as an *operational* one.

In 1982, Kuper proposed an intellectual genealogy of lineage theory and presented a substantial critique of the lineage model. He showed how the lineage model resuscitated and relaunched the classical ‘clan model’, reshaping the long debated opposition between territorial and descent units and conferring on it a political function within the new paradigm of the British functionalist school (ivi: 79). The lineage, described as a corporate, localised, exogamous, unilineal descent group, became a principle of political organisation.[29] (ibid.) Kuper criticised the lineage model, defining it theoretically unproductive for two reasons: *a*) because it would not represent folk models in which actors anywhere have of their own societies; *b*) because repetitive series of descent groups do not organise vital political or economic activities in any society (Kuper, 1982: 92).

28 Peters advanced four objections to the validity of lineage theory: *a*) the principle of balanced opposition is never empirically verified; *b*) groups do not come together to constitute larger segments; *c*) segments are not equal in numbers of people and economic resources; *d*) the theory does not account for matrilaterality (Peters, 1967: 271-272).

29 In monographs such as *The Nuer*, the old antithesis between descent groups and territorial groups in political organisations is recomposed, stating that “the lineage system provided a language, an idiom, in terms of which the territorial political relations were articulated.” (Kuper, 1982: 80)

Sharaf *and balanced opposition*

In 1986, Paul Dresch reviewed and widened this debate, turning North Yemen in an anthropological zone of theory (Abu-Lughod, 1989). He shifted the focus of previous anthropological works, which were mainly concentrated on matters of social stratification, turning his attention to tribalism and to the political organisation of the tribes (cf. Mundy, 1995: 6).

Dresch's argument, prompted by Kuper's critique (1982) and by the divergent positions of Peters (1967) and Gellner (1969), can be summarised in three points: *a*) segmentary theory and lineage theory need to be separated; *b*) the focus of the analysis needs to be shifted from the distinction between representational and operational models to the system, the 'relations between relations'; *c*) *sharaf* is the key element that organises the tribal system of values and gives meaning to social action, informing the principle of balanced opposition. In order to better understand Dresch's argument, I will separate the theoretical assumptions of his interpretation from the ethnographic insights.

The idea of segmentation and lineage theory, Paul Dresch argues, "are not at all the same thing." (Dresch, 1986: 309, 1988: 57) Whereas lineage theory describes a system where liable groups (corporate groups) combine or conflict in predictable ways sustained by a balance of power, segmentation deals with 'relations between relations'. If lineage theory is about social masses and the balance of power, segmentation is about balanced opposition between formally equivalent (and mutually contradistinctive) segments.

The two theories are informed by different theoretical premises. Lineage theory, in Gellner's (1969) and Peters (1967) formulation, assumes a necessary correspondence between the ideological level and that of actual human *behaviour*, concentrating on the presence (or absence) of liable groups. On the contrary, Dresch attempts to emphasis the 'structural principles of segmentation', the system of meanings and values that constitute a premise for human *action.*[30] He is mostly concerned with the purely formal relation (balanced opposition) between the elements of a system, rather than being interested in the empirical observation of actual behaviour (Dresch, 1986: 318).

Dresch connects this structural theory to (his) Yemeni material through the notion of *sharaf*. He defines *sharaf* as honour "presented to the outside world" (ivi: 310) and maintains that honour projected depends upon the protection of ʿarḍ, or "honor defended." (ivi: 311) Honour, in P.

30 Dresch's interpretation is overtly and explicitly influenced by Louis Dumont's work, as demonstrated by the reference to the system and to the relation between elements, as well as by his emphasis on the formal relation between the elements to the detriment of empirical analysis of behaviour.

Dresch's sense, is a relational quality; it only exists in opposition. That is to say, honour emerges when it is at stake. From this it descends that the tribal structure, the segmentary structure, is of honour, not of cohesive groups (ivi: 315): “The elements of the tribal system (hardly more than names for most purposes) are opposed to each other in terms of honor.” (ibid.) These ‘elements’ are thus relationally defined when *sharaf* is at stake. A last corollary of this theory is that “[...] higher-order elements are more ‘significant’ (more honor is at stake, if you like) than those of lower orders.” (ibid.)

My critique to Dresch's insights is twofold: at the theoretical level, I consider it useful to dismiss lineage theory while retaining segmentation theory. Yet, I argue, Dresch's structural framework hides more than it explains. At the ethnographic level, Dresch's material overtly contradicts my own. Let me start with this last point.

On the meaning of sharaf

Dresch's conception of *sharaf* does not emerge clearly from the above mentioned excerpts. Glossing *sharaf* and *‘arḍ* with the English word ‘honour’ simply does not explain anything. We can infer that *sharaf* is both an individual quality and a collective one and that more *sharaf* is at a stake when we consider a higher level of tribal organisation (1986: 315); that *sharaf* always emerges situationally and relationally (ivi: 311) and that, somehow, it is related to the defence of a protected space, in its wide symbolic meaning: a territory, its borders and the people it contains, whether tribesmen or dependants.[31] (ibid.)

This understanding of *honour* is completely consonant with M. Meeker's interpretation (1976). Meeker's theoretical framework is interpretive, rather than structuralist in a Dumontian sense.[32] Action, he argues, is given significance through historically and locally constituted meanings that structure the expectations of social actors. In many Mediterranean and Near Eastern societies, the overall context of significance is structured by the notion of *sharaf*, honour in its most encompassing sense (ivi: 244). (Segmentary) *sharaf* is a relational characteristic,[33] and one strictly related to the legacy of the ancestors (ivi: 252; cf. Chapter 2).

The concept of honour often includes both a sharaf-like and a namus-like component. Namus can

31 It is worth noting that women are never mentioned.
32 “This system of meaning is not a logical structure. It can be used to structure, even though it is not itself a structure.” (Meeker, 1976: 252)
33 “The sharaf of a clan (or segment) is not something that is its own affair in any of these near Eastern societies, rather the sharaf of a clan denotes its relationships vis-à-vis other clans (or segments)." (Meeker, 1976: 250)

be broadly defined as ‘sexual honor’ and, unlike *sharaf*, refers to the ‘state’ of a person or of a small collectivity (ivi: 260). This means that a person either has *namus* or does not have it, and that this state is reflected in ‘communal opinion’ (ivi: 261). Sharaf-like and namus-like components of honour constitute a continuum that is associated with social structure in a way that Meeker tries to figure out comparatively.[34] Containing the discourse about honour to an alternating insistence on change (represented by *sharaf*) and changelessness (represented by namus), it is differently associated to different types of social worlds. ‘Segmentary societies’, Meeker argues, tend to emphasise the idiom of *sharaf*, while ‘communal societies’, emphasising the idiom of *namus*, stress communal convention or custom (ivi: 264).

P. Dresch, in his 1986 essay, stresses the sharaf-like idiom of an ideal typical Yemenite segmentary society. Later, in *Tribes, Government and History in Yemen* (1989), he complements this interpretive framework. Deeply influenced by R. B. Serjeant's work (1977),[35] P. Dresch (1989) highlights the warrior-like component of tribesmen's identity (ivi: 41), the role of weapons in the definition of honour, the connection between shared ancestry and shared *sharaf* and, eventually, the opposition between *sharaf* and *ʿayb* (shame).[36]

Sharaf *experience-near*

When I conducted my first fieldwork, in 2009, I was greatly influenced by Dresch's theory and by S. Caton's works (1984, 1986). Hence I started to painstakingly enquire into the theme of *sharaf*. Since then, I have never collected a discordant voice on this topic, neither in Ṣanʿāʾ nor in al-Bustān or Kuthreh: *sharaf* is sexual honour.[37] Consider this excerpt:[38]

> *Sharaf* is... In sum, *sharaf* is *ʿarḍ*, nothing else. I mean, your *ʿarḍ* from your female relatives. This is my *sharaf*. I mean, it's impossible that one attacks you, or your daughter, or your wife or your sister or your female relatives... [...]
>
> I'll tell you one thing. If we consider the level of the village, only the brother defends his sister, because we are in the village. And if we are in Ṣanʿāʾ, and a girl from Kuthreh goes

34 Meeker considers meanings as historical products rather than ‘reflections of an underlying social structure empirically induced’ or ‘logically derived’ (Meeker, 1976: 260).

35 “The tribesman regards himself as the possessor of the quality called *shara* or honour, but the most important constituent of this honour seems to be the tradition of bearing arms and being capable of defending oneself and one's dependants.” (Serjeant, 1977: 227)

36 This opposition, which we can trace back to Abou Zeid's pioneer work (1966), has been sharply criticised by U. Wikan (1984). Her critique well fits my understanding of the usage that my interlocutors made of the word *ʿayb*.

37 This is consonant with Meeker's theory (1976), since Yemeni Tribesmen are peasants.

38 Recorded interview, with ʿAdnān ar-Reīshāny, 14 May, 2013, Kuthreh.

> to Ṣanʿāʾ, I will be her relative (al-qarīb)... So I will preserve my *sharaf*, which is the *sharaf* of the village. And if I were in another province, or in another place, like ʿAden, and I knew that she is from Ṣanʿāʾ... It's possible that you will feel *ghīrah* and you defend her. Even if I were in a European country and she were Yemeni: she's my *sharaf*, she's Yemeni, and I will kill for her. This is *sharaf*. **Only what is related to the woman**.

Sharaf is about women. Usually, ego considers his daughters, his sisters, his wives and his mother as the 'inner circle' of *sharaf*. This means that ***his* sharaf *depends on them***. Their behaviour, and particularly their *sexual behaviour*, is susceptible to influence a man's *sharaf*.

Sharaf and *ʿār* are synonyms. A famous story recounts two tribesmen travelling by car with their wives. Some bandits stopped the car and asked the tribesmen two consign the women. This option being unacceptable, the tribesmen drove their car down a cliff, and they died with their wives. The proverb says, "The fire and not the *ʿār* (*an-nār wa lā al-ʿār*)." It is better to die, rather than accept an attack on women.

Beside the wife, ego's daughters and sisters are of particular concern. The proverb says: "Whose daughter is the whore? And whose wife is this naked girl? (*qaḥbeh bint man w ʿāriyah marat man?*)" A daughter's misbehaviour, in fact, always falls upon her father,[39] even if she is married. The man who reported this proverb explained to me: "I say that my daughter is my *ʿār* (*binty hī ʿāry*), because her behaviour falls upon my reputation. People will say, 'she's the daughter of Fulān (*hī bint fulān*).'"[40] A central concern of a father is, in fact, to 'cover' (*sātar*) his daughters, to preserve them from any source of immodesty and prevent any misbehaviour.[41]

This is actually achieved in many ways. This man from Kuthreh recounted to me that he was literally obsessed by the preservation of his daughters' virginity. He did not allow them to visit any female friend—not even inside the village—until they got married. He explained to me: "I told them, 'If you want to see your friends you can invite them here. Here's the television, here are the popcorn and juices. I will go to the other room.'" In the case of a wedding or a *wilād*, or in any other occasion, he prohibited them from coming home after sunset. He recounted to me that, "Once, a man dressed like a woman. A girl was returning home after a wedding. He assaulted her, inside the village. He touched her, lifting up her skirt. If it is dark, how can you tell who he is?" Both his daughters got married on the same day. He described that occasion as one of paramount tension and danger ("I was scared to death (*kunt akhāf al-maūt*)"). He did not relax until his daughters were

39 Cf. Dresch (1989: 45) on this point. Her husband, on the contrary, is in charge of sustaining her.

40 Fieldnotes, 4 June, 2013.

41 We will cover this point extensively in Chapter 7. Some crafts and trades are stigmatised precisely because they contradict this point: they expose women to an immodest task.

delivered to their husbands' houses.

The reason why daughters and sisters, especially them, are described as a sensitive point of *sharaf* is plain, and R. T. Antoun—*pace* Abu-Zahra (1970)—pointed it out in 1968: if a girl is virgin, her father's *sharaf* is always at stake. As far as I know, women are profoundly aware of this connection and inclined to highlight it. Poems, sometimes, trespass the wall of intimacy. So we know that one daughter from Kuthreh, being aged and in wait for a husband, told her father:

Abeh abeh, khazzin w luff qātak	Oh father, oh father, chew and enjoy your *qāt*
wa-l-ins wa-n-nāmūs fī banātak	'cause your daughters have good manners and *nāmūs*

Nāmūs is clearly sexual honour, and this poem is both a way of reassuring a father and foster him to find a husband for his daughter.

A last point of interest is that what is actually significant is not a woman's behaviour *per se*, But rather, her behaviour as mirrored in people's talk (*kalām an-nās*) (Wikan, 1984). A girl can try to hide her immodesty, but someone always finds out: "Oh whore of the pastures, even mountains have ears and eyes (*yā qaḥbat ar-raʿyān, maʿ al-ḥuyūt ʿuyūn wa ādhān*)."[42]

When a girl fails to hide her immodesty—or when it is impossible to hide it, since she is not a virgin anymore—male relatives try to solve the matter without fostering further rumours. While I was in Kuthreh, an unpleasant accident happened. A woman, the wife of a villager, returned to his parent's house[43] (*ḥāniqah*) because her husband did not honour his sexual duties. The case was particularly sensitive: the husband, in fact, had been forced to marry this woman, after having had sex with her before marriage and having gotten her pregnant. Not satisfied, he got married a second time, causing profound disappointment in his first wife. When she returned *ḥāniqah* to her parents' house, her brothers visited him and beat him with wooden sticks. While he was being beaten, he screamed three times the ritual formula and divorced his first wife—an act of overt provocation, since he had been forced to marry her after getting her pregnant. While the whole village was in a

42 Or everyone knows, except her close relatives (cf. Wikan, 1984). The proverb sats "Seven villages knew, and the people of the whore didn't know (*sabʿ qureh diriyat wa ahl al-qaḥbeh mā diriyūsh*)."

43 She was *ḥāniqah* (v. *ḥaniqa*, *yiḥniq*). A wife can return to his parent's house when her rights are not honoured by her husband. If she wants to 'tiḥniq', her husband has the duty to bring her to her parent's house or—if he does not want to—he has the duty to inform them. Depending on the seriousness of the matter, it can be solved with a talk in a few days or it can last for months and require a *hajar*. If the husband has insulted or beaten his wife, the *hajar* starts from the slaughtering of a lamb and the delivering of a *kiswah* (a full set of clothes), and it can require, for serious matters, a bull or more (cf. Chapter 3).

ferment to solve this complicated puzzle, one of the brothers of the girl fled with her to Beny Jabr, Khaūlān, and made *mukhuwwah.*[44] As a result, people from Khaūlān had to intervene in the case.

Here we are interested in two points: *a*) the family in question was a *sayyid* family. Yet, being the *sharaf* of the family at stake, the Islamic protocol was dismissed, and an informal one was applied. The family tried to bury the whole matter; *b*) from this case we can appreciate the segmentary nature of *sharaf*.

Let me deepen the latter point. The notion of *sharaf*, as I have so far described it, is consonant with Meeker's *nāmūs*. It is a state—either you have it or not—and a state that needs to be reflected in 'communal opinion'. Moreover, it emerges relationally when it is at stake. The one who breaks (*kasr*) someone else's *sharaf* looses his own and is considered a person of 'broken sharaf' (*maksūr ash-sharaf*). For obvious reasons, *sharaf* is like a glass; once it is broken, there is no way to restore it (Caton, 1984).

Sharaf is the state of a person, or of a small community. As we have seen, a daughter is primarily the *sharaf* of her father and of her brothers: people will say, "She's Fulān's daughter." Yet she bears the name of a whole family, so that when rumours spread, the *sharaf* of a whole *usrah*, or *badaneh*, might be at stake. People will say, "She's from Beyt Fulān," raising the level of the matter. In the case that we have just considered, rumours spread until they reached another tribe, Khaūlān. A man from the village, concerned for his own reputation, said, "They are damaging our *sharaf*." When asked to further explain the matter, he stated, "In Khaūlān they will not say, 'She's bint fulān or from Beyt Fulān,' they don't even know it. They will say, 'she's a girl from Kuthreh.'"

Segmentary proclivity

P. Dresch (1986) proposed to dismiss lineage theory and reconsider segmentary theory. Yet what he actually did was to dismiss corporate groups and reintroduce the principle of balanced opposition on the level of values. He depicts these values as univocally linked to a notion of *sharaf* which, as I have tried to show, is an ideal typical construction that finds no equivalent on the empirical level (at least in my ethnographic material). Moreover, he depicted *sharaf* as a quality shared by the descendants of a common ancestor, this way reintroducing the structuring role of lineage theory.

My proposal is to seriously pursue Dresch's former path, 'unpacking' segmentary lineage theory and dismissing lineage theory. A similar approach has been fostered by other scholars. M. Herzfeld

44 An affine of this family, in fact, was *shaykh* in Khawlān.

(1984) has developed interesting theoretical reflections on the topic of segmentation, starting from the analysis of Greek villagers' reverence for icons. He showed that the association of specific saints with specific families or villages was interpreted "in terms of existing social relations," (ivi: 654) and that one form of fragmentation of religious icons was blasphemy, the widespread practice of impugning the saint 'of' an opponent.

Blasphemy *as such*, notes Herzfeld, has segmentary properties, since "segmentation does not necessarily entail a unilineal descent system." (ivi: 655) Segmentation is an idiom, a language. For this reason, it is misleading to speak of segmentary societies, "[...] rather than of segmentary proclivity and of the forms it takes in various societies." (ibid.) The segmentary idiom, he states, is not necessarily related to a political organisation. Iconographic segmentation, he concludes, "[...] is a practical relativity. It marks the level of social, cultural, and political differentiation that are salient for a given community [...]." (ivi: 661)

This segmentary proclivity is apparent in many features of Middle Eastern societies, and it is not necessarily related to lineage or common descent. C. Geertz's observations on the *nisba* adjective (Geertz, 1983) are a great example of how identities are situationally constructed and related to different hierarchical levels, to a different set of distinctions. Segmentation is a way to relate an individual to a larger whole (Gudeman, 2001: 31; Baumann, 2004) through symbolic means of a heterogeneous kind that need to be shared and recognised by a community of values.

I have presented some examples of segmentary proclivity in the previous paragraph. Another great example has been given to me by a *qabīly* from Beny Maṭar, right after the accidents of Jaulat Kentucky, Ṣanʿāʾ, in 2011 (Nevola, 2011):

> I compare Yemenis to the sea: sometimes they are quiet, as the calm before the storm. Sometimes they are rough as sea waves. And what is it that moves the sea? The wind. And how did the wind reach Yemenis? Through their dignity (*karāmah*), their Arabness (*ʿarūbah*), their religion (*dīn*), their honour (*ʿirḍ*), their soul, their property... Or through whichever right aroused their heart. And what is the wind? Now the wind is the wind of oppression (*aẓ-ẓalm*). Yemenis never experience peace, they always fight each other: wars, raids, civil wars. But if a foreigner's hand tries to catch them—even when they are at odd between themselves—they gather, as if they are the heart of one person, against the hand that penetrated their houses, their families, their souls. Yemenis are like the oil: they do not accept water to enmesh with them.

Segmentation does happen. But it does not follow necessarily the lines of descent. If liable groups

are not to be understood as descent groups, and if segments are not defined by the balanced opposition of *sharaf*, then what is it the defines *akhuwwah*? How do people from Kuthreh imagine themselves as one community, as one brotherhood? To answer these questions we need to introduce an alternative theoretical paradigm.

The Economic Base of Political Affiliation

As we have seen, classic ethnographies describe the vengeance group as a unilineal descent group. Yet, at the same time, this principle is mitigated by the acknowledgment that—after all—common descent is just an idiom, a language: blood is a trope.

Robertson Smith, while clearly recognising the primacy of blood relationships (1903: 26, 27, 69), admits that "brotherhood in the Semitic tongues is a very loose word." (ivi: 15) Practices of alliance (ibid.) and adoption (ivi: 52) were quite ordinary in pre-Islamic Arabia. Marx has thoroughly described the reciprocal practices of the members of a camp (1967: 177-180). Lancaster has observed that "three-generation 'ibn amms' that don't cooperate closely can't be closely related." (1981: 32) Peters painstakingly analysed reciprocal practices of hospitality (Peters, 2007c) and debt relationships (Peters, 2007d), emphasising those areas of social relationships that the lineage model did not cover (Peters, 1967).

In the case of Kuthreh, the term 'brotherhood' is explicitly metaphoric. As a villager told me, it is an analogy. No common ancestry is recognised between the families and the *bidīn* of the village. Kinship is not an available language to imagine the unity of this community. Brotherhood, I argue, is constantly produced and reproduced through practices that are closely related to the territory, and to the shared life of the people of a village, or a quarter. To understand these practices we need to further analyse the notions of 'reproduction', 'base' and 'reciprocity'.

Reconsidering reciprocity

Annette Weiner has criticised anthropological understandings of reciprocity grounded on a linear 'give and take' rationale, which first emerged from Malinowski's Trobriand studies (Malinowski, 1922). She replaced the 'reciprocity approach' with the notion of 'model of reproduction' (Weiner,

1980; Narotzky, 1997). In this model, norms of reciprocity must be analysed as part of a larger system, "a reproductive system in which the reproduction and regeneration of persons, objects, and relationships are integrated and encapsulated." (Weiner, 1980: 71) In this perspective, the reproduction of social relations is a process that continually demands work, resources and energy to transmute or transcend the effects of deterioration and degeneration (Weiner, 1992: 7). Moreover, such a perspective recognises the fundamental role of temporal aspects in exchange processes (Foster, 1961; Bourdieu, 1977), the heterogeneous nature of what is being exchanged and the integration between the cosmological domain and the social one (Weiner, 1980: 73).

Weiner has further developed her reflections introducing the notion of 'inalienable possessions' (1992). A central strategy of any process of reproduction consists in fact in keeping some objects transcendent and out of circulation, in the face of mounting pressure to do so. The act of 'keeping' brings a vision of permanence into a social world that is always in the process of change. Hence, inalienable possessions act as a stabilising force against change, their presence authenticating "cosmological origins, kinship and political histories." (ivi: 9) Yet these very same possessions may become the symbols of change. Since each inalienable possession is unique, a symbolic repository of genealogies and histories, its ownership confirms difference rather than equivalence, transforming difference into rank and hierarchy.

For A. Weiner, what motivates reciprocity is not a structural principle (Lévi-Strauss, 1969 [1967]), or the pressure of custom (Malinowski, 1926), or the spirit of the given thing (Mauss, 2001 [1925]). Rather, what "motivates reciprocity is its reverse—the desire to keep something back from the pressures of give and take." (Weiner, 1992: 43) The achievement of rank—as well as the construction of hierarchy—is dependent upon the success of institutionalising difference "through exchanges that demonstrate one's ability to **keep-while-giving.**"

Stephen Gudeman has extended the two notions of 'reproduction' and 'inalienable possessions' and reinterpreted the function of reciprocity, developing an encompassing theory of economy as the differential domain of communal and commercial value. Gudeman's definition of community is quite broad. Communities, he argues, range from small intimate assemblies to imagined groupings that never meet. They can be "hierarchically arranged, embedded, and overlapping [...] each linked to a different identity,"[45] (2001: 25) ranging from small Yemenite villages to transnational groups. More important, the community realm is built upon social values that stand in opposition to the domain of anonymous, short-term, socially disembedded exchange.

The community realm is grounded on a **base**, "[...] the social and material space that a

45 This point is of crucial importance for any discussion about segmentation.

community or association of people make in the world. Comprising shared material interests, it connects members of a group to one another, and is part of all economies." (Gudeman, 2005: 94) The base, or commons—what people have in common—is shared interest, or value (2001: 27) and, as such, is regulated through moral obligations. Denying others access to the base denies being in community with them (ibid.). The core of the base is defined, following M. Mauss (2001), as *sacra*.[46]

Sharing a base and maintaining the group and its values, are the central activities of the community realm and it marks independence at the borders of a group. Reciprocity comes at a later stage and is thus secondary. In Gudeman's perspective, "[...] providing gifts and enacting reciprocity are tactical acts that extend the base to persons outside a community." (2001: 80) The gift is an initial attempt at reciprocity, an experiment, that might remain unrequited. It "[...] extends the commons to someone outside the community, offering temporary participation or even permanent inclusion." (ivi: 86)

Sharing a base

The theoretical paradigm that we have so far exposed fosters us to ask a number of questions. What does constitute a 'base' for the people of Kuthreh and for those of the Old City of Ṣanʿāʾ? And within this base, what is considered the core, the *sacra*? Which moral rules regulate the processes of allotment and of sharing within the community? And how is the community extended by means of reciprocal acts? How is this communal realm opposed to that of market exchange?

In the previous chapters we have already answered many of these questions. The communal life of a village, and similarly that of a quarter, rests on the material reproduction of shared commons. The mosque is the symbolic centre of a community, and it is always associated with a spring of water (*gheīl*, pl. *ghuyūl*). The *diwān* of a *shaykh*—now substituted by the *ṣālah*[47]—is of similar importance. At a lower level of extension—and a higher level of sharing—the physical building of a house is what literally constitutes a *badaneh*. Within the *badaneh*, and within the house, each family (*usrah*) had its own milling machine (*maṭḥan*), differentiating a lower level of extension and thus a higher level of sharing.

In Chapter 4 we have considered the distribution of lands in the community of Kuthreh. Pastures

46 The notion of *sacra*, or core, is similar to that of 'inalienable possessions'. Yet Gudeman's acceptation of the term is wider, being Weiner's one restricted to objects.

47 The *ṣālah*, in most of the villages which I have visited, is commonly purchased by means of a *ghurm*. We will further analyse this point.

(*ḥadd w balad*) were commons, and the borders of a community emerged when pastures were disputed.[48] Farming tools were widely shared within a *badaneh* and between the *bidīn*. Whereas every *badaneh* had its own cow (or cows), bulls were widely shared in order to plough. In harvest time, work was apportioned[49] by means of an institution called *ʿānah*.[50] The time and the common endeavour was shared and regulatedby the rhythm of the drum.

In Kuthreh, now that the community has grown bigger, this apportionment of work only interests the *badaneh*. The same is true for other activities. The work of restoring the banks (*kābeh*, pl. *kawāibh*) of the *saīlah* during the monsoon was considered *ʿānah*.[51] Building a new house was that sort of event and an effort that implied the shared work of all the villagers. The moral economy of self-sufficiency that we have described in Chapter 4, rather than being a factual recognition of autarky, was part of those 'rules', of those moral regulations, intended to preserve the base and the commons, marking the independence and the borders of the group (cf. Gudeman, 2001: 43).

The transmission of farming skills as incorporated knowledge and their deployment as situated reason (ivi: 39), developed in relation to the material space of Kuthreh (Gudeman, 2005: 98), constituted a pivotal part of the commons of the community. In a similar way, religious knowledge (Chapter 3) and craftsmanship (Chapter 2) constituted a base, or commons, for religious scholars and for *beny al-khumus*.

I have depicted these practices of allotment and apportionment in the past tense, since demographic factors, new infrastructures and job opportunities, political changes and semantic shifts have heavily transformed the community of Kuthreh. Processes of debasement are occurring. The way people relate to their material and shared commons is changing, as are the 'rules' (the moral economy) that once regulated the relationships between people and objects and between people themselves. Yet, I argue, the boundaries of the community and the boundaries of the brotherhood, are still produced and reproduce through practices of sharing. The brotherhood—considered as available social capital in case of feud—is the result of such practices.

The duty to share

ʿEīsa's accident happened on the 28th of November. Two days later, a representative number of

48 As we have seen in chapter 4, there is no border—and no community—until the border is constructed and fixed through a dispute. Private lands, in fact, trespass the borders of the communities.

49 The term apportionment refers to dividing a flow, such a harvest or a service. Allotment describes how a permanent fund, for example land, is parted for use (Gudeman, 2001:52).

50 In a way that reminds us of the Kekchi of Belize described by Wilk (1997:93-94).

51 The practice of reaching the *saylah* to check and fix the banks right after the rain is described by the verb *sayyala*.

gharrāmah from Kuthreh attended the burial of the young victim. That day, and the subsequent two days, representatives from Kuthreh attended *Beyt al-maūt*, literally ‘the house of death’. For three days, Kuthreh people spent their whole *qāt* session engaging in conversations (*mujābarah*) with the victim's people. This is a duty (*wājib*) for all the *gharrāmah*.

Meanwhile, in Kuthreh, each *gharrām* of the village had to deliver to the *ʿayn* of his *badaneh* 2,000 riyal, as *ghurm*. As we have seen, there are different kinds of *ghurm*. All of them are compulsory, but not all of them need to be delivered with the same urgency. In this case, it being a case of killing (*qatl*), the term was fixed in three days, because it needed a fast solution (*ghurm min al–ḥill*). The agreement on this term required a long and heated debate that we cannot further analyse here. What is interesting is that in this heated debate the word ‘*akh*’ (brother) recurred several times. The sense of the whole debate was clear-cut, and ʿAli ʿAbdulhamid well summarised it during a harsh clash with the *ʿayn* of his *badaneh*: “He who doesn't give the *ghurm* in three days, he is not a brother anymore **and we won't attend his marriage nor his funeral**.”

The missing part of this syllogism is the missed connection of much ethnography. Being part of a vengeance group is just one side of the coin; the brotherhood entails a number of other duties. He who is not a brother in everyday practices, he will not gather men in the time of need and *vice versa*. In case of feud, or killing, or in everyday practices, the principle is the same and it is well expressed in the proverb: “He who does not answer a summons, he screams and no one answers him (*allī mā yijāwibsh dāʿī aṣ-ṣaūt, yiṣīḥ mā ḥadd yijībeh*).”

Ritual occasions called *mawājib* (s. *maūjib*[52]) are of central importance in these dynamics. The term *maūjib* comes from the root و ج ب (w j b) and hence implies a sense of ‘duty’. *Maūjib*, in a loose sense, is an occasion that is mandatory to attend. It usually implies a *mujābarah* and the sharing of food. Weddings (*ʿarus*, pl. *aʿrās*) and funerals are paradigmatic in this sense, but we can list a number of other examples: the so-called *maūlid*, a celebration of the Prophet; the celebrations for the pilgrimage (which entail a breakfast at the departure of the pilgrims and a lunch on their return, plus the *mujābarah*); someone's return after a long trip, or after traveling for curing a serious sickness.[53] In the female domain, we have considered the example of the *wilād* (cf. Chapter 5). The other male *mawājib* are mirrored in the female domain.

All the brothers are expected to attend these *mawājib*. The absence of a brother is painstakingly

52 cf. Rossi (1948: 8, 28, 30), Serjeant and Lewcock (1983: 225, note 242) and Mermier (1996: 189). Rossi clearly compares ritual ceremonies and gift exchanges (1938: 28, 30).

53 When someone is sick, and he is staying at home, it is a duty to visit him and bring some money, at least 1,000 riyal. The act of visiting a sick person is described by the verb *badā*, *yibdī ʿalā*. When someone has an accident, in order to recuperate, if possible he should eat 1 kg of ovine meat and 5 eggs (from a virgin chicken) everyday, for three months.

noted and remembered, and it has to be justified. If someone deserts these duties, he is paid back in the same coin. The language explicitly refers to debts and credits. As one villager told me, "At my brother's funeral people showed up from everywhere: Arlin, Murjān, Ḥaleh... But Fulān didn't show up. At my father's funeral, again, he didn't show up. I thought, 'Ok, at the first chance I'll pay you back (*anā ʿad aqḍīk*).'"[54]

Interestingly, the same practices are to be found in an urban context, like in the Old City of Ṣanʿāʾ. In a city, there are no such words as 'brotherhood' or 'ghurm'. Yet a group of relatives and affines, or a group of neighbours, can act as a corporate group.[55] Such corporateness is constructed through marriage and through reciprocal practices. In this excerpt the *shaykh* of butchers, ʿAbdullah Jazzāry,[56] describes how greengrocers, bath attendants and butchers are now in 'contact' (*mutawāṣilīn*), having become one family:

> Now, for example the greengrocer... He will invite greengrocers, and he will invite butchers, because they have a common progeny (*sulūl*); they are relative by marriage (*nisbeh*), from a long time, from before and currently, they are in contact... It means... He comes from Mekka... The butcher went on the pilgrimage, he came back from Mekka. People come to visit him (yijābirū). The butchers come and the greengrocers... And now the neighbours, the friends, the sayyids... Or death... They come to visit.

Reproducing the brotherhood

Weddings, as I have said, are a paradigmatic case. Here I will consider some aspects of the male ceremony.[57] There are three main themes that are worth emphasising: the sharing of food; the apportionment of services and the display of hospitality; and the pivotal role of matrilateral kinship ties.

Traditionally, the wedding ceremony was concentrated in one *samrah* (a vigil) on a Wednesday night and a full day of *mujābarah* (hence comprising the *samrah*) on a Thursday. Dinner was

54 In the case of a wilād, the proverb says: "*jamaneh bi-jamaneh wa jihr bi-jihr*, a coffeepot for a coffeepot and a bottom for a bottom," since women—when they visit a *wālidah*—bring a coffeepot and sit for the *mujābarah*. The proverb expresses the expected reciprocity of the act.

55 cf. Wilson (1983).

56 Recorded interview, 6 December , 2012, Ṣanʿāʾ.

57 For a complete description of this kind of ceremonies see Chelhod (1973, 1984). For further information about women's ceremonies see Makhlouf (1979) and Meneley (1996).

offered to the guests (people coming from outside the village[58]) on both Wednesday and Thursday. Yet the focal point of the ceremony was the lunch on Thursday and the subsequent *mujābarah*,[59] to which all the villagers (and some outside guests) were invited and expected to come.

Thursday lunch was a collective enterprise, featuring men from the *usrah*, from the *badaneh* and the affines of the groom on an all night vigil to cook and prepare all the food. Nowadays, even when cooks are hired, an effort from close relatives is always necessary. Pots and trays are gathered from all the families of the village. Seldom is the number of guests so considerable as to make it necessary to fix up a tent. A task that necessitates the collaboration of many men and a whole afternoon of work.

Lunch was regulated by rigid rules. The menu was composed by corn mush (*harīsh*) with broth (*maraq*), butter (*samn*) and milk. Meat was served to the commensals while they were leaving the *diwān*. The *muzayyin,* standing right outside the door, apportioned pieces of meat over pieces of bread. Two rams (*kabsh*, pl. *kibāsh*) were slaughtered for the whole village plus the guests.

Here we need to consider a point of paramount importance. In weddings, as in many other occasions, what constructs a community is **the sharing of food**, particularly meat. The saying, 'Among us bread and salt (*beīnanā ʿaīsh w milḥ*)' is literally compared to the brotherhood itself:[60] people who eat together are brothers. When someone offers *hajar* (the slaughtering of a beast to recompose a conflict), what matters is not the sacrifice itself, but rather the fact the two parties will have to eat this meat together.[61] When the 'peace' of a village is broken by any assault, for example a shooting, the offender has to pay *hajar*, usually a bull (*raʾs baqar*, literally the head of a bull) to make things 'square' (*ḥaqq as-sāḥah*). This meat will be shared between the people of the village and the offender.

Robertson Smith (1903: 176-177) clearly recognises this point: "The bond created by eating of a man's food is not simply one of gratitude, for it is reciprocal [...]. It seems rather to be due to a connection thought to exist between common nourishment and common life." Peters has further clarified it, observing that "[...] co-residents who ate of their products together established a common life—hence the term *ḥayy*, which means "life" or "living". The *ḥayy*, then, was never a

58 On Thursday evening the dinner was offered to everyone, villagers included, by the bride's father. Dinner meant: red sorghum mush (*ʿaṣīd dhirih*) with broth (*maraq*).

59 Nowadays, when it is possible, two lunches are organised: on a Wednesday and Thursday. Sometimes the Wednesday lunch is limited to selected guests, usually close relative and affines.

60 Dresch (1989: 64) observes that is shameful to offend someone with whom you have eaten together and to kill him is 'black shame'.

61 When someone (called *muhajjir*) makes *hajar*, a bull is followed by 15/20 people, called *matābiʿ* (s. *matbaʿ*). The meat is so divided: 1/4 for the muhajjir; 1/4 for the mashāykh; 1/2 for the *nāṣifeh*, the group that receives the *hajar*.

unity of blood but a political and social unity [...].” (Peters, 1903: vi)

A second point that might seem trivial but is of pivotal importance, is related to the menu of the lunch (and that of the dinner): the menu is fixed. The reason for this limitation is overtly stated, and it is strictly related to what we might call the moral economy of an ‘egalitarian society’. Since everyone has the right to get married, marriage *ought to* be affordable to everyone. A display of wealth, in this circumstance, is discouraged.

While I was in Kuthreh, the menu was fixed by a collective decision (*raqam*), which had been signed by all the *gharrāmah*: rice with meat, *saltah*, and *bint aṣ-ṣaḥn*. Seemingly, the bride-price and the engagement had a fixed limit. One of the pivotal functions of a *shaykh* consists precisely in coordinating an agreement on such matters, in tempering individual initiative in order to reach an agreement. He who cannot afford to offer lunch on a Wednesday and Thursday can announce[62] that he is *mutaqaṣṣir*, meaning that people will only participate in the *mujābarah*. This practice is by no means a shame, but it is something new. Once, the wedding was all about the lunch; now it is all about the *qāt* session, during the *mujābarah*.

This change is highly significant and it is, in part, determined by demographic reasons. As we have seen in Chapter 4, right before the revolution, the *gharrāmah* were (more or less) 225 people, and Beny Zāhir (which now is a part of Kuthreh) was considered a separate village. Two rams were sufficient for the villagers and for the guests. Nowadays, the 2014 census lists more than 2,000 inhabitants. The average number of slaughtered bulls, in the weddings which I have attended, was four. In Arlin, in a wedding that will pass into the annals of history, were slaughtered 14 bulls and two tents were organised for the lunch.

Gathering all the brothers, now, requires more resources. This situation is tempered with demographic considerations themselves: more brothers constitute more social capital. As we have seen in Chapter 5, the individual who approaches a ritual occasion is ‘*marzūq*’, endowed with *rizq*. This practically means that a number of people will be fostered to help him, in order to increase their *karam* and their *muruwwah*, in order to gather social capital. This circuit of reciprocity cuts across the wider texture of the brotherhood.

Another common strategy consists in organising the wedding outside the village. One of the villagers, a *sayyid* and a fanatic follower of al-Ḥūthy, organised his wedding in Ṣanʿāʾ, without giving any announcement in Kuthreh. In fact, he decided to invite a consistent number of guests from his sect, especially from Ṣaʿdah. This way, he succeeded in offering lunch to all the guests,

62 In the village, weddings are publicly announced one week before the wedding, after the Friday pray. The verb that refers to this action, and to any official announce, is *labbā*.

avoiding being *mutaqaṣṣir*. Yet from this strategy there rose a number of complaints in Kuthreh, which will be probably translated in reciprocal acts. This is clearly a strategy of debasement.

A third point is the role of service, ***khidmah*** in Arabic. I argue that **service is the core of *qabyalah*, the core of tribal values**. This runs against much of the anthropological literature, and it needs to be discussed.[63] Consider this excerpt from an interview with ʿAdnān ar-Reīshāny:

> One serves his guest, to any possible extent (*min qadr mā yistaṭaʿ*), until he feels that his guest is relaxed (*murtāḥ*). If my guest is relaxed the task is accomplished, I'm relaxed; the guest is the most important thing. Even in weddings. In a wedding what is important are the groom and the guest. If I feel that my guest [isn't relaxed]... That I'm negligent in his regards... In hospitality is at stake the very reputation of a person. And I give what I can...

During a wedding, as during a funeral or in other ritual occasions, a number of men are mobilised to serve. They actually perform any kind of service, even, or especially, the ones associated with the *muzayyin*. They slaughter, cut the meat, and they cook it. They serve lunch, dinner and clean the *diwān*. They prepare the *qāt* for the guests and deliver it during the *mujābarah*. They dress the groom and guard him. The closer they are to the groom, the more they serve him. People from his own family (*usrah*) and from his own *badaneh*, along with his affines, are thus expected to give the greatest effort. For two days, during a wedding, the groom, along with his guests, is served by all his brothers. Hospitality is about serving and honouring. A key term, in this regard, is the term '*qadr*'. Consider this excerpt from ʿAli ʿAbdulhamid:

> Esteem... (*taqdīr*). When you honour me (*tuqaddirny*), I honour you more (*uqaddirak akthar*). As when someone, for example... We ended up in his home and he respect us (*iḥtarmnā*) and honours us (*qaddarnā*), and he greets us (*yibashshī banā*)... As it happened with the director of the Munshād, the one who solved Eīsā's case... Did you hear what they [the *mashāykh*] have said? They went to him, and he stood and poured the coffee, he himself, he honoured those people. It's [a sign] of esteem (*taqdīr*) from him. And they respected him even more. Because he didn't consider them ordinary people... (*ayy kalām*). They arrived and he's the director... [He could have said to anyone]: give them tea, give them... Instead he gave them [the coffee]... I mean, he honoured them. [...] He's a serious person (*jidd*), he honours people; he honours the guest. [...]
>
> For example, look... If anyone comes to my house, I honour him (*uqaddireh*). I respect him

63 Consider the work of Herzfeld (1987). As many works not yet—or not anymore—influenced by segmentary lineage theory recognise, tribal values are displayed along two main dimensions: the protection of a vulnerable space and the display of hospitality (Ansaldi, 1933; Rossi, 1948; Manzoni, 1991; Shryock, 2004).

> (*aḥtarimeh*). I greet him (*abeshsh beh*). I greet him means that I put him at ease (*urayyiḥeh*), ahla w sahla, hayyā allah min jeʾ, this way... I mean, I put him at ease. So that his heart is comforted. [...] For example, if anyone comes to visit me, or I go to him in his village and he honours me and respects me... If he comes to me I must respect him and honour him more than he honoured me... That day, I told to al-Kahfy, "I will slaughter... Come to me." I was ready. Obviously! He didn't slaughter [for me], but I wanted to honour him more.

A general pattern lies behind the notions of *karam*, *muruwwah* and *qadr*. As Weiner has sharply pointed out, what motivates reciprocity is its reverse: the desire to keep something (1992: 43). Yet this 'something' is not necessarily an object (Gudeman, 2001: 88); it can be symbolic capital. The notions of *karam*, *muruwwah* and *qadr* are social capital predisposed to act as symbolic capital: the more you give, the more you keep with yourself *karam*; the more you honour (or serve), the more you keep with yourself *qadr*. In egalitarian societies, wealth is transformed in status through the act of giving.

Practices of sharing and practices of reciprocity often overlap; they are the two ends of a continuum. The practices of apportionment and allotment that we have so far analysed construct and reproduce the borders of the community, of the brotherhood. They are enforced by custom and by a normative frame that penalize the brother that does not behave as such. Brothers construct, through the base and in the base, a shared and stabilised social capital. Dyadic acts of reciprocity (Foster, 1961) cut across the community and the base, sometimes extending its borders, sometimes creating internal conflict.

The enthusiastic reaction of Kuthreh people after ʿEisa's accident, for example, was mainly one of relief and surprise; after the internal conflicts of the preceding months (Cf. Ch. 3), a corporate intervention of the brotherhood was not sure nor expected.

Practices of sharing and practices of reciprocity are characterised by a temporal dimension that sometimes transcends the life cycle of an individual and guarantees the reproduction of the base of a community through generations (Foster, 1961; Weiner, 1980; Bourdieu, 1977). On a Thursday night, after the *zeffah*—the celebration of the groom—all the brothers consign to him the *rifd* (v. *rafad*, *yirfid*). The *rifd* is a small amount of money, that usually ranges between 1,000 and 2,000 riyals for the brothers and 5,000 riyals for the affines that come from another village (*mukhrajiy*, pl. *īn*). The ceremony is public, and while the groom sits on a small stage, two persons, usually relatives or affines, manage the ceremony. One announces, yelling or, nowadays, in a microphone, the name of each contributor and the amount given. The second annotates (v. *qayyad*) the names

and the amount on a small notebook. These notes will work as a remainder for the groom. When all the *rifd* is collected, it is gathered in a shawl and hence put inside the tunic of a relative of the groom, who brings it home.

The *rifd*, even if it is a material amount of money, is subject to the same dynamics that we have so far considered for *muruwwah*, *karam* and *qadr*. It is not mandatory to consign it to the groom, and he is not obliged to return it. *Rifd* can be given to a neighbour or to a friend, opening up a new channel for a relationship.

Once a villager from Kuthreh brought me to a wedding in Hudeyan, a small village two hours away by foot. He recollected the whole story of his *rifd*, that received and given. He told me, "I received on my wedding 270,000 riyal. I have returned it all, already. Before my son gets married, I want to give rifd for 500,000 riyal. I've reached already 40,000." Rifd is a form of budgeting. At the same time, it is a concrete help for the groom, a marriage being incredibly expensive. It contributes to create the illusion that a groom is *marzūq*, and that he is endowed with *rizq*. Yet, the total amount collected is never sufficient to cover the expenses of a marriage.[64] What *rifd* does is to create relationships that surpass the life cycle of individuals.

After that *rifd* has been delivered, the *ḥarawah*[65]—the bride's procession—goes to bring the girl and deliver her to the groom's house. When this burden—as we have seen, a sensitive one—is accomplished, they come back to the *ṣālah,* and they enter it, one by one. The people of the groom receive them standing, arranged in a half circle. The last man from the *ḥarawah* recites a poem, named *ḥāl,* and the people of the groom reply with another *ḥāl.*

At this point in the ceremony it is usually night (9 p.m. or 10 p.m.). The groom waits in the *ṣalah*. Usually, after two or three days of wedding celebrations, he is exhausted, nervous and overwhelmed by the responsibility of proving, on his first night of marriage, that he is a real man. His friends surround him, encouraging him and giving practical suggestions. Before heading back home where the bride is waiting for him, the groom is at the mercy of the bride's maternal uncle, her *khāl*. He is the one endowed with the privilege of freeing the groom, yelling the formula: "*al-ḥarīw mafsūḥ* (the groom is *freed*)."

64 In most of the cases, the whole wedding cost something like 1,5 / 2 million riyals, and the *rifd* was not more than 300,000 riyal.

65 The *ḥarawah* is usually composed of 15 people, and the number of people is fixed in the *sharṭ* of the marriage contract. If the bride is *mukhrajiyah* (coming from another village), more people are allowed into the *ḥarāwah*. The *ḥarāwah* is composed of the father of the bride, her brothers, her paternal uncles, her maternal uncles and one person from each *badaneh* of the village.

Matrilateral kinship ties

The focus on lineage theory has led to neglect the fundamental role of matrilateral kinship ties. Here I will focus on the relationship between an individual[66] and his maternal uncle, his *khāl*.

The first time I asked, "What is it that makes the people from Kuthreh one community?" I received this answer: "Kuthreh is all interwoven (*mashbūkah*); we are all *akhwāl* [s. *khāl*] wa *abzyā*ʾ [s. *bazzy*]." As we have seen in Chapter 3, in spite of the fact that the *sayyid* people of Kuthreh practice hypergamy, all the *bidīn* of the village are linked by intermarriage.

Given the importance of *sharaf*, intermarriage is an interesting example of keeping-while-giving. A daughter, in fact, always remains part of her agnatic group, and giving a daughter in marriage[67] establishes an outstanding number of reciprocal duties between the men of the two families. From a man's perspective, the relationships between *khāl* and *bazzy* (his sister's son) and *khāl* and *bazziyah* (his sister's daughter) are ones of primary importance, as it is the one between brothers-in-law (*nasab*, pl. *ansāb*).

The *bazzy* carries the qualities of his maternal side, as well of those of the paternal side. The proverb says: "Half of the *bazzy* comes from the *khāl* (*nuṣṣ al-bazzy min al-khāl*)." For this very reason, as we have seen in Chapter 2, the affines need to be chosen with accuracy. The proverb says: "Select the *khāl*, [because] from him comes the son (*istanqī al-khāl, yātīk al-walad*)." Once, a villager from Beyt al-Maghreby stated, "My son is so smart. It must be from the maternal side, Beyt ʿAbdulhamid."

A *khāl* is considered, with reference to his *bazzy*, a substitute for the father (*maqām al-ab*) and the *bazzy*, in turn, carries the rights and the duties of a son. Often proverbs express a duty in negative terms. For example, the 'bad' *bazzy* is described by this proverb, giving us a hint of the duties of the 'good' one: "Oh khāl, if my mother died, what are you for me and what am I for you (*yā khāl lā mātat ummy, waīsh ant lī, waīsh anā lak?*)?" The tie between a *khāl* and his *bazzy*, in fact, is supposed to persist even when the 'biological tie' between the two (the mother for the *bazzy* and the sister for the khāl) is nonexistent. Similarly, the relationship between brothers-in-law should overcome the tie constituted by the presence of a woman: "There's no brother-in-law, but after divorce or death (*mā nasab illā ba*ʿ*d maūt aū ṭalaq*)." The real brother-in-law remains loyal, even after a divorce.[68]

66 An individual, in reference to his maternal uncle, is called *bazzy*.
67 This act is described by a transitive verb in Arabic (v. *zawwaj*).
68 As Rossi (1948: 23) noted, affinity ties (*ṣihr*) extinguish if the woman dies, or if she is divorced, without leaving a

In ordinary everyday practices, as in case of a feud, the affines are always involved.[69] During the main festivals, for example ʿAyd al-Aḍḥā, the visits to and from the affines are rigidly specified. Moreover, these ties are reinforced by a thick web of reciprocal duties, customarily fixed. In case of a funeral, right after the burial, each member of the funeral procession throws dust over the grave for three times, pronouncing the Koranic verses: "From the earth We created you, and into it We will return you, and from it We will extract you another time." (surat Ṭaha, 20: 55) Then, each member of the procession greets all the relatives of the deceased, saying, "May God increase your reward (*ʿaẓẓam Allāh ajrakum)*." Within the number of the relatives, are comprised the maternal kin.

The *khāl* pays for the circumcision (*khiṭānah*) of his *bazzy,* and if the *bazzy* dies, he is supposed to bring a bull to sacrifice. Even if the *akhwāl* live far away from a village, in the case of death of a *bazzy*, they must be informed with a written note (*taʿziyyah*). Delivering this note was traditionally one of the tasks of the *muzayyin*. Consider these excerpts from a letter that the *akhwāl* of Beyt ʿAbdulhamid wrote to their *abzyāʾ*. One of them, in fact, tragically died, and the *akhwāl* were not informed of the funeral:

> [...] We belong to God and to Him we return, but confusion is our companion and lingers the question about how the deceased died and what happened to him. And what happened to him and when he died, since we gathered this news from some people, and they keep being uncertain and not detailed. And through this we felt and we sensed your concern for your *akhwāl*... One thousand times shame on you! How can you neglect your *akhwāl* and hit them from the back, and cut the connections (*awāṣil*) of the tie (*maʿlāq*), the tie between the *bazzy* and his *khāl*, in addition to the tie of affinity (*nisbah*), of blood (*damm*) and of meat (*laḥm*), that make the *sayyid* ʿAbdulhamid the father of all of us, God preserves him. So you already neglected us; you didn't even send a written note, or a messenger to inform us about the death of the deceased. And we are loyal, we are not deficient in anything. For this, we hold against you the tie between the *bazzy* and the *khāl*, and the tie of blood and meat and affinity, with the right of ancestry of the tribes and their customary right (*aslāf al-qabāīl wa aʿrāfhā*). We request greetings and a reply from our father the sayyid Ḥamūd Ḥaddy.

The matter is so serious that this letter ends with the request of an official intervention from the *shaykh* of Kuthreh, the *sayyid* Ḥamūd al-Ḥaddy. It is worth noting that the tie between the *khāl* and

progeny. This confirms the pivotal role of the relationship between the *khāl* and his *bazzy*.

69 This is a further reason to abandon the lineage model: it cannot predict any behaviour in case of a feud, because it does not account for affinity ties.

the *bazzy* is described as “a tie of blood and meat,” and that the father of the *bazzy* is called father (*wālid*) by the *khāl* of his son.

Returning to the wedding, the *khāl* has several rights and duties. The father of the groom has to pay, besides the bride-price, the sharṭ and all the other expenses, the so-called *ḥaqq al-khāl* (the right of the *khāl*),[70] a gift for the *khāl* of the bride. In turn, the *khāl* of the bride will pay to his *bazziyah* a special *rifd*, usually 5,000 riyal. As we have seen, he is part of the *ḥarawah* of his *bazziyah,* and he can decide when the groom will finally reach the bride.

There is one last custom that we need to analyse in order to understand the importance of the role of matrilateral kinship ties and the ambivalent power of reciprocal acts. We have already analysed the practices connected to the notion of *rifd*. Yet there is one more kind of *rifd*, one reserved to the *akhwāl* of the groom and more generally to his affines and to the affines of his father. Whereas, generally speaking, the wedding is announced publicly one Friday before the event, the *akhwāl* must be invited personally at least two weeks before the wedding.[71] With the invitation, it will be specified if the house of the groom is opened (“*anā fātiḥ Beytī*”) or closed (“*anā mutaqaṣṣir*”). If the house is opened, the *akhwāl* of the groom must bring an animal to sacrifice: a bull (*rās baqar*) or a ram (*rās ghanam*). The *khāl* who brings this kind of *rifd* is called *raffād*, and he can bring with him his people (*tabbāʿ*): 18 persons, if he slaughters a bull;[72] 4 persons, if he slaughters a ram. The *raffād* and his people will stay as guests, in the groom's house, for three days, a day more than the two days of the wedding: Saturday, Sunday and Monday. ‘Guests’ means that they will eat and chew qāt at the expenses of the groom's father. This *rifd* will be potentially returned when the *khāl* himself or one of his sons get married. I say potentially because, as we have seen, it is not a duty; it is an act of *muruwwah*.

It is important to understand that, usually, the *raffād* is a *khāl* that comes from another village (a *mukhrajy*). **If the *khāl* is from the same village as the groom, he should not bring any *rifd***, since he does not need to stay as a guest. Moreover, in any village as interwoven as Kuthreh is, or even more so, practically every man of the village can be considered a *khāl*, certainly everyone at least a distant affine.

While I was in Kuthreh, I attended a wedding where the house was opened for the *akhwāl* (cf. *infra* figure 6). The groom (1) was from Beyt ad-Deīlamy, *sayyid*, and his mother, Loṭfiyyah (2),

70 It is called *thaūb al-janb*, and it is a very expensive shall that men wear on their left shoulder.
71 Even nowadays, this task is not an easy one, since it entails visiting the *akhwāl* at home. While I was in Kuthreh, it happened that people from Hudeyan came by foot to the village, to announce their wedding to the *akhwāl*. This means more or less a whole day of walking.
72 With the bull follows the so-called *dhifleh*: a sack of sugar, one of corn, one of flour, one of wholewheat, and a can of butter (2.5 kg).

was from Beyt Zāhir, *'arab*. His *khāl* Mohammed (3), a man from Beyt Zāhir, did not have any duty regarding the *rifd*, since he was from Kuthreh, like the groom. Yet the situation was complicated by the fact that the grandmother of the groom (4) from the maternal side, had been divorced and got married a second time from another village, Beyt Zabatan.

This woman (4), considering her sons from the second marriage (5) *akhwāl* of the groom (1), compelled them to bring a bull.[73] Mohammed (3), not to be *nāqiṣ* (deficient), brought a second bull. When the bull arrived, the *mashāikh* of Kuthreh immediately complained, "This way you make us deficient (*taqaṣṣir minanā*). You will start a competition (*qimr*)." Mohammed (3) replied, stating that he was the *khāl,* and he could not accept that a bull had been brought from Beyt Zabatan and not from him.

Yet the *mashāykh* were right. At the end of the day, there were 7 bulls. One was brought by the brothers of the bride (6), as affines, one from the husbands of the groom's sisters (7), as affines, one from the husbands of the groom's father's sisters (8), as affines, one from the husband of the sister of the bride (9), and one from his father, he being a distant *khāl* of the groom (10). In sum, 4 *bidīn* or more were involved. The groom's father, desperate at the idea of returning the bulls, instead of slaughtering them, refused them and sold them back. The people from the village commented, "He doesn't know the *qabyalah*".

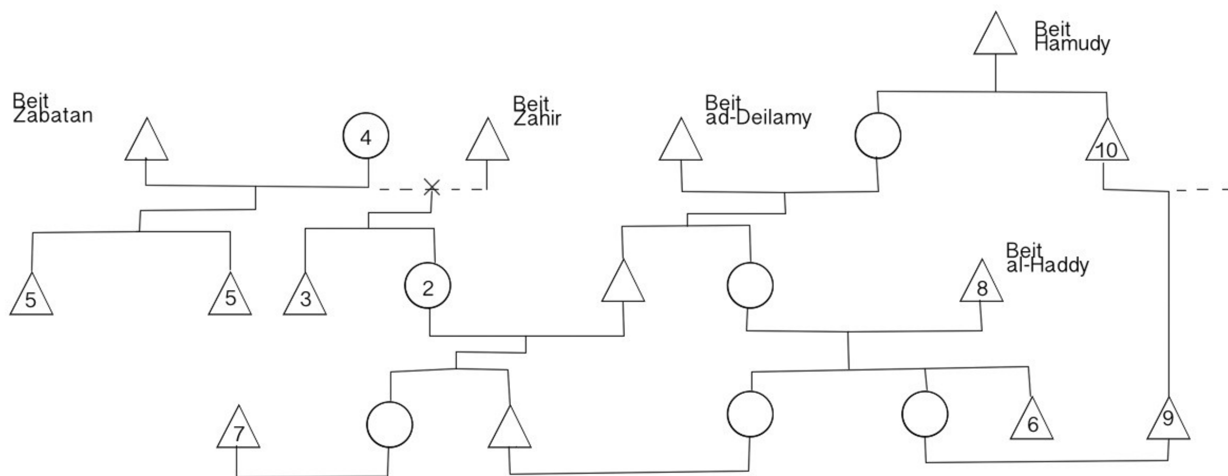


Figure 6 – The creative destruction of rifd

Being reciprocity intended as a "foray across group boundaries" (Gudeman, 2001: 92), it can extend the borders of a community. Yet, when it is displayed within the borders of the community itself, it can be disruptive, fostering antagonism and what Schumpeter calls "creative destruction." The

73 They were, in fact, brothers of Loṭfiyyah (2) from the maternal side.

moral economy of an egalitarian society is, precisely, intended to regulate disruptive displays of reciprocity.

Objects and practices shift in meaning as they move through distinct regimes and circuits of exchange. In the complex subtleties of sharing and exchange, people develop a sense of belonging to their household, to their agnatic group (*badaneh*), to their brotherhood and, eventually, to broader networks which crosscut the whole tribal territory. In the act of sharing and exchanging, people construct their selves in accordance with the gendered *ethos* of the *qabyalah*, and, concurrently, they define themselves in opposition to 'others' who are excluded from these spheres of exchange. Building on these theoretical assumptions, in the next chapter we will reconsider the stigma attached to the services associated with people from *beny al-khumus*.

Chapter 7 – Stigma and the Division of Labour

Livelihood, moral economy and regimes of value

> Fuori dei privilegi dei said e delle costrizioni cui sono soggetti gli ebrei, la popolazione yemenita è proprio divisa in caste. E qui venne fuori una storia di insospettate distinzioni fra quelli che esercitano un ufficio e un altro; venne fuori una storia pochissimo chiara, raccontata con molte reticenze, contraddizioni, oscurità; una storia assai misteriosa che il racconto, invece di chiarire, ingarbugliava sempre di più. (Volta, 1941: 88)

As we have seen in previous chapters, the social organisation of Northern Yemeni tribes accommodates ideological conceptions of 'hierarchy' and 'inferiority' through a language that refers to 'origin' (*aṣl*) and the division of labour. These two highly redundant principles concur to define distinctions of status between the *sayyids* (Northern Arabs), the *'arabs* (Southern Arabs) and the so-called *beny al-khumus*, people 'lacking of origin' (*nuqqāṣ al-aṣl*).

In this chapter I shall bring into focus the work ideology associated with stigmatised tasks practiced by *beny al-khumus* and its relationship with the overall social organisation of the Yemeni highlands. I shall first demonstrate that Yemen retains fundamental traits of caste-like societies, and that purity and pollution are not a defining characteristic of caste-like systems. Secondly, drawing on Appadurai's reflections on the social life of things (1986), I shall demonstrate how the stigma attached to services is related to a peculiar phase of their life, namely their commodification. Thus I will argue that the commodification of services is shameful and not services themselves. Eventually I shall demonstrate that the stigmatisation of work has a welfare function, and it provides an economic niche for disadvantaged people.

A Caste-Like Society?

On the meaning of caste

I shall start my analysis by discussing a matter which is only apparently typological: is Yemen a caste-like society? Since, at least the 19th century, European travellers have described Yemen as a caste-like society, individuating a close relation between labour and social ranking. In the early accounts of R. Manzoni (1991), who visited Ṣan‘āʾ between 1877 and 1878, the term ‘race’ is deployed to distinguish two people: the Arabs and the Turks. ‘Caste’ and ‘corporation’ are, instead, used to describe the internal organisation of Yemeni society itself. E. Glaser's (1885) account depicts the social organisation of the highlands as a ranked caste system. Interestingly, both Manzoni and Glaser visited Yemen during the Ottoman occupation, and they did not mention the category of *beny al-khumus*.

During the 1930's, a few Italian travellers visited the reign of Imām Yahya. Without exception, they built on the vocabulary of their predecessors to describe a society were social groups, labour and rank widely overlapped, and they used the word ‘caste’ to describe this system. In their accounts, a new category, *beni al-khumus*, made its appearance.[1] C. Ansaldi, an Italian doctor, describes “humble craftsmen gathered in castes” as men of inferior an race capable of evil actions, adding that well-mannered people should avoid any unnecessary interaction with them (1933: 218-9).[2] E. Rossi, an Orientalist, describes *beny al-khumus* as people with “little origins (*qalīlīn aṣl*)” employed in humble tasks (“lavori vili”). He also notes that they are used to intermarry and are distinguished by their clothes, by the shape of their dagger and of its sheath, and by the way they bear it (1939: 142).

These observers deployed ‘caste’ as a common sense category, probably mediated by the Indian case of the same. As J. Pitt-Rivers has pointed out, the etymology of the word caste can be traced back to the Gothic *kastas*, meaning “a group of animals or a brood of nestlings.” (1971: 234) This semantic configuration merged into *castas*, a word originating in the Iberian Peninsula. Until the sixteenth century, *castas* referred primarily to “species of animal or plant and race or lineage of men.” (ibid.) It is thus understandable that the Portuguese applied it to the ‘castes’ which they

1 The sudden appearance of the category of *beny al-khumus* in the Old City of Ṣanʿāʾ might well be associated with reforms introduced by the Imām Yahya. As M. Wagner has well demonstrated, the Imām overhauled the entire judiciary system, and he attempted to renew the association between certain families and peculiar tasks (2015: Ch. 2). Whether or not these reforms touched the lives of people practicing ‘humble tasks’ is yet to demonstrated.

2 Ansaldi reports a proverb: “Evita la compagnia dei beny Khoms, e così eviterai di commettere il male.” (1933: 219)

encountered in India. But for the French and English the distinction between tribe and caste didn't became clear until the 19th century.

It was, however, during the 20th century that the category was first formalised as an analytical tool within the discursive formation of sociology. In a 1916 essay titled "India: the Brahman and the Castes", Weber individuated two fundamental dimensions of the Indian caste system: *a*) social ranking and *b*) the religious/ritual aspect (2007a [1948]: 397). Weber describes the two dimensions as interrelated in the figure of the Brahman and the Brahman as ritually pure: "In the last analysis, a rank position is determined by the nature of its positive or negative relation to the Brahman." (ibid.; cf. Weber, 1996 [1958]: 29-30)

Weber's perspective merged into L. Dumont's *Homo Hierarchicus* (1998 [1970]). Dumont's work famously defined the Indian social organisation as a system characterised by three fundamental characteristics: 1) separation (or mutual repulsion); 2) hereditary specialisation (or division of labour); 3) hierarchy (ivi: 43). These three dimensions were first outlined by C. Bouglé in his classic 1908 work *Essays on the Caste System*. Bouglé was mainly concerned with a systematic comparison between Western 'egalitarian' societies and non-Western hierarchical ones, a concern which widely informed Dumont's work. Yet Dumont complemented Bouglé's definition with Weber's emphasis on ritual purity, thus asserting that "The three 'principles' rest on one fundamental conception and are reducible to a single true principle, namely the opposition of the pure and the impure." (1998: 43) Dumont also retained Weber's analytical distinction between status and power (Weber, 2007b).

During the 1960's, a nominalist debate developed around the notion of caste. It hinged on whether or not the notion could be used to refer to societies other than that of the Hindus. Some authors, in the tradition of A. Kroeber (1948), defined castes as "closed classes". G. Berreman (1960), an anthropologist who undertook his fieldwork in the North of Uttar Pradesh, applied a *classifying approach*, thus turning the notion of caste into a category for the comparative analysis of social systems. Others, like L. Dumont himself (1968) and E. Leach (1960), argued for a *culturalist approach*, considering caste a purely Hindu phenomenon. Authors aligned with this second trend considered the religious dimension of the Indian caste as a *sine qua non* condition for applying the label 'caste' to any social system.

In 1971, J. Pitt-Rivers attempted to seal the debate, affirming: "If by way of analytical definitions we can find none that is acceptable between Dumont's, which applies only to India […] and Berreman's, which applies to any traditional system of social differentiation […], we should perhaps abandon the hope of using caste." (1971: 251) Yet, despite this lapidary assertion, the debate

migrated to new zones of theory.

In a 1977 article, "Caste in Africa?", D. M. Todd reviewed several attempts at labelling African societies as caste-like systems and thus presented his ethnographic findings regarding the Dime of South-West Ethiopia. He basically accepted the six defining characteristics individuated by E. Leach[3] (1960) and complemented them with a Dumontian emphasis on ideology, thus stating that purity and pollution are concepts we shall expect to find in systems warranting the label caste. He concluded that "[...] the Dime have a division of labour which is divinely approved, and protected by pollution concepts […]," and are thus a caste-like society. Some two decades later, A. Pankhurst (1999) replied to Todd's article reconsidering the evidence from South-Western Ethiopia. His conclusions are of great importance for our topic.

Pankhurst denies the applicability of the label caste to East African societies on the basis of the following arguments: *a*) "[u]nlike caste systems, a contiguous contrasting purity-impurity dyad is not a central organising principle;" (ivi: 490) *b*) the farming majority is not considered 'pure'; *c*) the status of marginal groups is not purely or exclusively negative in all contexts (ivi: 491); *d*) 'caste' concept is not used of the entire society, but only of a minority. In sum, Pankhurst did not recognise, in Eastern Africa, some of the defining criteria of the notion of caste, and, above all, the purity/impurity dyad, which led him to dismiss South-West Ethiopia as a caste-like system.

Given these premises, we can return to Yemen. While the first European travellers described Yemeni society as a caste-like system, thus emphasising the complementarity between lineage, status and labour, during the 1960's a new model dominated the discursive construction of Yemeni social organisation. As we have seen in Chapter 1, eminent personalities of the Free Yemeni Movement, which represented the opposition to the regime of the Imām, compared the Yemeni politico-economic system to the European feudal system. Much anthropological work followed this lead, thus depicting *sayyids*, *'arabs* and *beny al-khumus* as estates of an overall stratified system (Attar, 1964; Serjeant, 1977; Dresch, 1989) conflating power and status.

Other authors, instead, resorted to a 'caste' vocabulary or benefited from Dumontian insights. J. Chelhod (1985), C. Makhlouf (1979), D. Walters (1987) and G. Vom Bruck (1996) explicitly defined Yemen a caste-like society, without systematically discussing the implications, nor the premises, of such a theoretical commitment. T. Stevenson (1985), built on Béteille's classical definition of hierarchy, which reads it as "a rigid system of ranking based on well-defined boundaries between strata with little mobility." (1971: 60) Yet he did not discuss the strata as if they

3 The six criteria are: endogamy, restrictions on commensality, hierarchical ranking, pollution, traditional occupation, and ascriptive status.

were ‘castes’. Both P. Dresch, in an early article (1986), and F. Mermier (1996: 75) resorted to the Dumontian notion of *system*, yet avoiding the notion of caste itself. Although T. Gerholm (1977) discussed the term, he chose to dodge it, in favour of a less theoretically loaded analytical distinction between status and power.

The label ‘caste’, I argue, shall be retained to describe the general traits of traditional Yemeni society: a society composed of endogamous specialised groups inheriting their professional potentialities genealogically. Although in contemporary Yemen the association between labour and lineage is not as strict as it was before the 1962 revolution, I argue that the general features of a caste-like system are still widely reproduced.

By defining the Yemenite social organisation as a caste-like system, I am widening Dumont's traditional definition of caste. Scholarly work on West Africa (Wright, 1989; Dilley, 2000) can shed new light on caste-like societies, bringing into focus previously overlooked structural traits. This new perspective is grounded on two premises: *a*) the purity/impurity dyad is an idiosyncratic cultural trait of the Hindu society; *b*) the emphasis on hierarchy needs to be tempered taking into account lineages' interdependence. Let me start with the latter point.

In Dumont's work, due to a fundamental Weberian influence, social ranking is relationally defined as the distance from the purity of the Brahman. Hierarchy, a merely religious and ideological fact, is thus represented through a ladder-like model. Eminent Indologists criticise the heuristic value of such a representation of the Indian system itself. Declan Quigley has proposed to dismiss ladder-like models in order to focus on the fact that caste systems are relatively centralised forms of political organisation (1994: 40), where the ‘pull of the lineage’ interacts with economic, political and ritual centralised forces. Robert Parkin, a commentator of Dumont's work, has pointed out that, in Dumont's theory, making distinctions implies a differential evaluation of what is distinguished (2010: 249). In my view, this is precisely what characterises a caste-like system: the construction of distinct yet interrelated regimes of value through kinship and labour.

Drawing on evidence from West Africa, Bonnie L. Wright has proposed a similar theoretical framework. Following a rich trend in African scholarly literature, Wright argues that “The West African caste system, rather than being composed of hierarchically ranked groups, is really best understood as a set of groups differentiated by innate capacity or power sources.” (1989: 42) A caste society is thus composed by culturally defined realms of power, and their interdependence is “a precondition as well as a result of the caste system.” (ibid.)

This definition might sound familiar to the reader. In Yemen, as I attempted demonstrating in

Chapter 2 and 3, crafts were transmitted from father to son as an esoteric form of knowledge. Practicing the traditional craft of a lineage was, at one time, a right and a duty. People were mutually dependent, interwoven by the products of their labour. Given these premises, it should not be surprising that low-ranking families, a minority of the population, were respected, sometimes even feared (Maclagan, 1992: 169; Vom Bruck, 1996: Wagner, 2015: 96-7) for their work and their irreplaceable role within the 'whole' of the society (cf. Wright, 1989: 48). Wright's reading of the meaning of caste has thus the merit of accounting for the ideological and material power of low-ranking castes as well.

Thomas Dilley (2000) has complemented Wright's perspective focusing on the Tukulor craftsmen of Western Senegal and exploring the 'discursive aspects of caste'. Dilley's work focuses on the caste as 'cultural difference', investigating the discursive production of 'casted' subjects. From this standpoint, being a casted person is more than pursuing an occupation, being that "the craft or métier of a social category is [...] only the outer manifestation of a way of being, a form of physical and moral constitution of those who share the same social standing." (ivi: 161) Following Wright (1989), Dilley criticises the emphasis on social ranking noting that, among the Wolof, each social group describes itself as superior: "Superiority arises from a set of moral qualities claimed by [each group] but thought to be lacking in others." (ivi: 163) Each group thus develops a muted version of social reality, describing the Other as inferior by means of stereotyped cultural traits and itself as superior.

The works of Bonnie Wright and Thomas Dilley raise a number of questions: *how* do the discursive aspects of caste construct subjects that share a "form of physical and moral constitution"? How are these traits connected to the division of labour? Why is stigma attached to certain professions and not others? I have addressed the first question in previous chapters. In what follows, I wish to explore the connection between lineage and the division of labour, on the one hand, and the problem of stigma, on the other. Once we abandon the dyadic opposition of purity/impurity as a constitutive trait of caste-like societies, the possibility unfolds of understanding how cultural difference is constructed in the Yemeni context.

Purity/impurity: a cultural idiosyncrasy

Much anthropological work on highland Yemen has focused on the perspective of the so-called 'tribesmen', warrior-like peasants of *'arab* origin, thus assuming their putative 'superiority'.

Scholarly literature describes the *ethos* of the tribesmen, the *qabyalah,* in substantive terms, comparing it to the *ethos* of other social groups described differentially. Much of the ethnography is nuanced enough to recognise two principles at work in the self-definition of tribesmen: their warrior-like nature and a fundamental emphasis on self-sufficiency.

The works of R. B. Serjeant (1977) and P. Dresch (1986, 1989) are a paradigmatic example of the first principle. Tribesmen are described as an arms-bearing aristocracy whose *sharaf*, honour in its most encompassing sense,[4] depends on the possibility of providing protection. Other authors, like F. Mermier (1996), T. Stevenson (1985) and T. Gerholm (1977), have recognised the pivotal role of the tribesmen's mode of production, emphasising a watershed divide between market and countryside, peasantry and crafts/services. Within this general framework, much ethnography oppose the tribesmen's identity (*qabāil*) to that of the people of the market (*awlād as-sūq*). This second category emerges as an undifferentiated whole containing non-tribesmen described as weak and dependent people, working in crafts or services in town markets.

The boundary countryside/market certainly constitutes a fundamental dimension for the Yemenite politics of identity. Its ideological rendering is, clearly, contested. We shall thus expect town dwellers to argue for their superiority over countrymen, and *vice versa*. The works of A. Meneley (1996), who focused on the town of Zabīd, and G. Vom Bruck (2005), who focused on religious elites in the Old City of Ṣan‘ā’, well demonstrate the way town dwellers construct their superiority over tribesmen. As we have seen in Chapter 1, the distinction countryside/market was a heated political topic even during the Mutawakkilite Kingdom. In 2011, during the "Arab Spring", former President ‘Ali ‘Abdullah Saleh opposed the ‘civilisation’ of the towns to the unlawful rule of the *mashāikh* in the countryside.

The distinction countryside/market constitutes a fundamental boundary for social organisation and a contested ideological field. Yet the analysis of this boundary does not provide any insight into status differentiation within the market itself. Town dwellers of *‘arab* origin neatly distinguish themselves from *beny al-khumus*, both in terms of ancestry and occupation. So what is it that characterises these two categories, if they are both constituted by protected/dependent people?

This problem remains unsolved in scholarly literature. According to T. Gerholm (1977), there is no single principle accounting for the stigma attached to *beny al-khumus.*[5] He individuates 5 principles accounting for the stigmatisation of crafts in a general sense: *a*) accepting tribal protection (as townsmen do) is demeaning; *b*) in each service (*khidmah*) there is an element of

4 In previous chapters (4 and 6), I have criticised this definition of *sharaf* as honour in its most encompassing sense.

5 Gerholm refers to *beny al-khumus* using the term *sūqy*, or market-rat. To my knowledge, this term is never deployed in the North, though it is certainly used in the South (cf. Serjeant, 1977).

dependence which contradicts the tribal ideal of autonomy; *c*) as M. Douglas (1966) has argued, activities related to bodily and conceptual margins are often stigmatised. Significantly, Gerholm concludes stating: “Why the weaver, the blacksmith[6] or the green-grocer are look down upon remains, however, a mystery.” (1977: 132) To solve this ‘mystery’, the same that S. Volta addresses in the epigraph at the beginning of this chapter (1941: 88), Gerholm adds a further criteria: *d*) every activity other than agriculture is likely to be despised (ibid.).

Since principles *a* and *d* are shared by any craft or métier, what remains to distinguish stigmatised tasks are principles number *b* and *c*: the association with services and with bodily and conceptual margins. Other authors have supported a similar perspective. F. Mermier has observed the proximity of stigmatised tasks with the impurity of the body and the tribal loathing for services (1997: 76). Yet Mermier's work, as does Gerholm's, leaves ‘impurity’ unanalysed, vaguely referring to Mary Douglas's work. Yet according to Mary Douglas, dirt and pollution are residual categories: they are passed on “[...] any object or idea likely to confuse or contradict cherished classifications.” (1966: 37) From this assumption two points follow. First, there is no such a thing as pollution in itself: objects and ideas are catalogued as polluted according to symbolic systems of historical human societies (ivi: 4). Second, dirt is a relative idea (ivi: 37): ideas and objects acquire their polluting significance according to circumstances and contexts specified by the symbolic system. The same object can be considered pure in some circumstances and impure in others.

Given these premises, we shall ask ourselves: are categories of purity and pollution pertinent in the analysis of the Yemeni case, and how are they constructed? Is social ranking tied to notions of purity/impurity? Is there a mutual repulsion between castes grounded on the purity/impurity dyad? Is the division of labour legitimised by a divine cosmology? My answer is clear-cut: although concerns exist in the Zaydī school regarding ritual purity, these concerns do not structure the hierarchical order of Yemeni society. Let me deepen this point.

To my knowledge, M. Wagner's work (2015) is the only systematic attempting to analyse the purity/impurity dyad in the Yemeni context. Wagner's book is concerned with the relationship of Muslims and Yemeni Jews in early 20th-century Yemen. In Chapter 2, however, he well summarises a debate that emerged at the end of the 18th century regarding the so-called ‘Latrines Decree’. The idea that Jews ought to collect excrement was the brainchild of the famous Muslim thinker ‘Ali ash-Shawkany (1760-1834). The decree itself was probably promulgated in 1775 by the chief *qāḍy* of the Imām, a man named Saḥūly, but Shawkany became the first advocate of the law.

Apparently, the debate was first triggered by the fact of Muslims collecting and burning Jewish

6 The blacksmith is not despised in the area of Ṣanʿāʾ and Beny Maṭar.

faeces in bathhouses. Shawkany argued for forcing Jews to collect excrement on the basis of three arguments: *a*) God recommends humiliating non-Muslims; *b*) non-Muslims ought to provide some interest for the Muslim community; *c*) Muslims collecting excrement damages their pride (2015: 44). The task was hence considered demeaning for Muslims, and a form of humiliation for Jews. Matters of ritual purity were not, yet, tied to this debate.

Some famous scholars replied to Shawkany's assertions. ‘Abdullāh b. ‘Īsa al-Kawkabāny challenged his idea that touching faeces was a disgrace for Muslims, observing that using faeces as a fertiliser had been deemed permissible by a wide range of scholars (ivi: 46). Shawkany eventually replied to this circumstantial critique by stating that the admonitions against Muslims becoming ritually impure outweighed the permissibility of using it.

The whole debate raises points of fundamental importance. First, we need to consider that the Zaydī school is particularly punctilious in the avoidance of ritual impurity. A drop of blood or urine, or any contact with faeces, prevent Zaydīs from praying, forcing them to change their clothes and to renew ritual ablutions. This concern for impurity is not, however, all-pervasive as in the Indian case (Shah, 2007); it is restricted to the context of the prayer. Matters of purity do not entail any limitation of contact or commensality. More importantly, they do not qualify people's social ranking. Ritual purity does not constitute, in Yemen, a rational and coherent language giving meaning to the experience of social actors.

Many professions associated with *beny al-khumus*, this is true, entail an everyday contact with ‘impure’ organic substances: the butcher handles blood, faeces and urine; the potter handles faeces and urine (Wagner, 2015: 97); the same holds true for the tanner; the bath-attendant burns faeces in the oven; and so forth. Yet this connection proves nothing. Countrymen enter into contact with faeces on a daily basis: they use them as fertiliser, or let them dry, shaping them into cakes (*kibeh*) deployed as kindling to light cooking fires. Peasants slaughter and graze flocks, yet they are never defined ‘impure’. As a matter of fact, many tasks associated with *beny al-khumus* have nothing to do with impure substances (e.g. the *dawshān*, or bard, the *muzammir*, or double flute player, and so forth), yet they are stigmatised. Moreover, people from *beny al-khumus* were not prevented from exerting ritual tasks, even during the imamate. The *muzayyin* of Kuthreh, due to his thorough religious knowledge, would lead the prayer in absence of persons with a higher degree of science.

We can shed some light on the whole matter if we carefully take into account the perspective of social actors themselves. Most of my Yemeni interlocutors of *‘arab* and *sayyid* origin were reluctant to talk about *beny al-khumus*. Against the backdrop of the egalitarian ideology of Islām and it considered state policy to foster a struggle against the ‘racism of the lineage’ (cf. Ch. 1), people did

not like to emphasise distinctions grounded on lineage in public discourses or recorded interviews. However, the topic was widespread in everyday discursive practices. Generally speaking, my interlocutors asserted that it was *ʿayb* (shameful) to practice the tasks of *beny al-khumus*, never, though, referring to purity. If asked, “Why is it shameful to practice these tasks?” would reply, “It is not a law (*mushūh qānūn*), or something official (*mushūh rasmy*), but it's their right (*ḥaqqahum*).” Street philosophers, if encouraged, sometimes attempted to provide a coherent theory of social stigma. Yet these were idiosyncratic attempts, since no coherent ideology informs the stigmatisation of crafts in Yemen. Crafts are shameful for one reason: because they are tied to a peculiar social group, *beny al-khumus*. Given these premises, it is useful to analytically distinguish the cultural construction of work and its association with peculiar social groups.

The rhizome of work ideology

In Yemen, as everywhere else, work is socially constructed by means of shared cultural meanings and values. As we have just seen, there is no single principle accounting for the stigma attached to crafts and services associated with *beny al-khumus*. Labour emerges at the intersection of heterogeneous discourses on religion, tribal customs, secular instruction, laziness and so forth. Fredrik Barth in his study of Sohar society (‘Oman), has well demonstrated that, even in the absence of a ladder-like ranking based on one organising principle, social actors can express socially shared opinions regarding the prestige of an occupation (1983: 60-1). Barth's approach can be usefully applied to the Yemeni context.

Work, in Yemen, is often considered a ‘familiar’ enterprise. As a *qashshām* once told me, “A woman is the partner of her man in his life (*al-māreh sharīkat-ar-rijāl fī ḥayyāteh*).” What he meant is that women are expected to work with men in their traditional tasks. This assumption lies at the basis of most occupations: female peasants, for instance, often work next to their husbands and brothers in the fields. Yet some tasks entail a frequent contact between women and strangers, especially in the market. These tasks pose a potential threat to the *sharaf* (sexual honour) of a man.

Consider, for example, the case of a *qashshām* (green-grocer, cf. Ch. 4). The cycle of production of leeks often forces women to sell fresh products in the market, thus interacting with male strangers. This circumstance leads people to argue that *qashshāms* have no *sharaf*, or that they do not feel *ghīrah* (cf. Ch. 6): their blood does not ‘heat up’ in defence of their women. Concurrently, their women are said to have a less strict standard of modesty. Nowadays, in the Old City of Ṣan‘āʾ,

many *qashshāms* have abandoned their traditional task due to water shortage in their gardens. Yet their women keep selling in the market. Most of them sell *luḥūḥ*, a spongy sourdough sorghum flatbread, which once was only made by Jews (Wagner, 2015: 72).

Likewise, the work of the *muqahwy* and that of the *samsary* are both associated with dubious standards of female modesty. Women, in fact, once worked in the *maqhā* (coffee shop or inn) and in the *samsarah* (a sort of caravanserai) serving customers and making bread. It is common sense, and some travel accounts support this view, that many of these women would flirt with customers. For these reasons, the *muqahwy* and the *samsary* are said to lack *sharaf*.

As one butcher made clear, "A *qabīly* would say that it's shameful (*ʿayb*) when the *qashshām* lets his wife (*ḥurmah*) or his daughter go to sell."[7] The very fact of letting women sell in the market stands as an internal criterion of ranking between people from *beny al-khumus*. Butchers, for instance, keep their wives at home, and they would never let their daughters sell in the market. This principle of ranking is often denied in a religious language. As one butcher told me,

> Islām, all the heavenly books that descended upon the Prophets, do not forbid that you let your wife or your daughter or your mother sell anything, but what is *ḥarām*. The important thing is that they are veiled (*muḥajjabah*) or covered (*musaṭṭarah*) and that their only behaviour is selling and buying.

While male butchers accomplished their task without any help from their female kin, other stigmatised tasks necessarily implied cooperation between the two sexes. The work in bathhouses, for instance, divided in turns for men and women, necessitated the work of both sexes. Similarly, the wife of a barber would 'decorate' women with *naqsh* (thus working as a *munaqqishah*) and take care of their make-up and hairstyle. In the Old City of Ṣan'ā', blood-letting was often practiced by women.

Bloodletting is often considered a demeaning task. As we have just seen, this profession implies a dubious standard of female modesty and a contact with an impure organic substance, blood. Yet most of my interlocutors despised bloodletters on different grounds. "They are like vampires; it's disgusting," many people would tell me. Bloodletting was traditionally practiced sucking blood through flat horns. Bloodletters themselves, with whom I worked (cf. Ch. 2), justified themselves, asserting that blood never reached their mouth. They admitted, however, that bloodletting was a scary task, even for them, and that they needed training before doing it.

7 Recorded interview, 7 October, 2011, Ṣanʿāʾ.

This line of reasoning can be applied to many other tasks. Butchery, as many butchers admitted, was deemed an inconvenient task because it implied an all day long contact with blood and organic substances whose smell many people considered disgusting.[8] At the same time, many town dwellers (who had no experience with animals) feared slaughtering animals. Similarly, the debate regarding the collection of excrement was inseparably tied to considerations regarding bad smells, rather than ritual purity (Wagner, 2015: 37). Tanners lived in a separate quarter in Bāb al-Yemen, since the smell emanating from their houses was deemed unbearable (Serjeant, 1979: fn 67; Mermier, 1996: 77).

Some professions were considered close to practices despised (*makrūh*) or forbidden (*ḥarām*) by religious law. Bloodletting, for instance, was described by many as a pre-Islamic, almost 'magical' practice. Bloodletters, in turn, justified their activity quoting *aḥādith* from the Prophet as a legitimation of their trade. Magic being forbidden by the Zaydī school, Muslims recurred to Jews in order to obtain amulets and 'bills of love' (Wagner, 2015: 104). Jews also inhabited a liminal place between sobriety and intoxication, working as producers and intermediaries in the selling of alcohol. Some professions were inextricably tied to alcohol usage. Butchers, for example, inhabited a circadian trap: everyday they woke up before dawn to slaughter, and hence they chewed *qāt* in the afternoon which prevented them from going to sleep early. With such a justification, many of them would consume alcohol to help them sleep.[9] Artists, especially musicians playing the *'aūd* (a sort of lute), are often considered alcohol addicted. Moreover, with no exceptions, religious schools describe love music as *ḥarām,* and during the imamate, playing musical instruments was forbidden.

'Normal' crafts were, from time to time, distinguished from 'stigmatised' crafts and services through the opposition of *miḥnah*/*mihrah*. As people from *beny al-khumus* themselves explained to me, a *miḥnah* is a *tashkīly* craft: a craft that shapes the world. Blacksmiths, carpenters, tailors, and other non-stigmatised crafts, produce objects that remain in the world. The *mihrah*, instead, does not create anything. Services are exemplary to this regard: they do not last and are simply performed. This opposition was a form of refined self-reflection of some of my interlocutors, and not a shared, common sense form of classification.

Some of these street philosophers also observed that many stigmatised crafts are connected to religious endowments (*waqf*). Bathhouses, gardens (*maqāshim*, s. *miqshāmah*) and caravanserais are, indeed, *waqf* properties. This fact, in itself, is not shameful or demeaning. Yet oral histories seem to prove a connection between these places and the fact of being under the protection of the

8 It is not by chance that butchers went to the *ḥammām* (bathhouse) on a daily basis (cf. Ch. 2).
9 According to M. Wagner, "Chewing qāt caused insomnia, and many Muslims could blame their contravention of Islam's ban on alcohol on sleep deprivation." (2015: 106)

imamate.[10] The connection is subtle, and it can be thus stated: it is proven that certain families were tied, by law, to certain crafts. In Chapter 2 I have provided proof from *Qānūn Ṣan'ā'*, demonstrating that only women from certain families were allowed to work as 'obstetricians'; butchers, and other people from *beny al-khumus*, were deployed as guards in the market. Wagner well demonstrates how certain Jewish families were forced to accomplish tasks that Muslims despised, for the most various reasons (Wagner, 2015: 42). People from Beyt al-Bawāb, who belong to *beny al-khumus*, were hired to exact taxes at the gates of Ṣan'ā'. In sum, being hired in certain positions, during the imamate, meant belonging to families from *beny al-khumus*. These tasks constituted a right/duty of certain families, as we shall deepen below.

Selling fresh products in the market is another disliked job. Especially butchers and *qashshāms* are compelled to sell their products within a day, two at most. The job is considered demeaning for at least three reasons. First, it entails a constant contact with the market. As many authors have pointed out, from the perspective of a countrymen the market is a place not to be (Messick, 1996). The reason is quite simple: as one interlocutor told me, it is a place that "gathers all kind of people," good and bad, in short, a place where people have no reputation and can act as strangers. Secondly, butchers and other traders selling fresh products need to bargain on a daily basis. As we shall see below, the behaviour associated with trade and bargaining is thought to weaken the moral qualities of the trader. Thirdly, the everyday income of a butcher (or a *muqawwit* or a *qashshām*) is compared with the seasonal harvest of the peasants.

These traits, among others I have probably overlooked, constituted part of the 'work ideology' of my interlocutors. As I have tried to demonstrate, the semantic area tied to these signs was fuzzy; the signs, multi-accentuated and contested, acquired their meaning through use. The 'class' of the stigmatised tasks had no nucleus, no central significance, and no organising principle. To say it in R. Needham's words, "Among the members of such a class there is a complex network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing," (1975: 350) what L. Wittgenstein would define as 'family resemblances.' Now, in my usage, 'family resemblances' are not a theoretical instrument of the observer, a means for polythetic classification (Needham, 1975). Rather, they represent the way my interlocutors gave meaning through the usage of linguistic signs to a number of tasks which they considered, somehow, 'similar' although not organised by one defining principle of a class. In this sense, my interlocutors' work ideology constituted a sort of rhizome of meanings,[11] with a lot of

10 In Chapter 2 I have discussed the case of 'fleeing tribesmen' in search of protection from a vendetta. In this chapter, we will consider the case of 'needy tribesmen' in search of sustenance. I have collected interviews in which *qashshāms* are said to be ex-prisoners, freed to work for the imamate as servants of the mosques.

11 I am here using the metaphor of the rhizome, rather than the Wittgensteinian thread, since the thread suggests, somehow, linearity and a direction. The rhizome, on the contrary, can be thicker or thinner in some points, but it has

overlapping, no centre, and enlarging (or shrinking) suburbs. This rhizomatic configuration interacted with social organisation in circular, complex ways.

I shall now provide two examples of how the two levels which I have just distinguished analytically interacted and mutually produced each other. The first example is historical. Grinding flour is considered, in Yemen, a feminine task. It was one of the defining features of the routine of peasants: in the morning, women would collect grain from the *ḥaqb* (cf. Ch. 4), grind it into flour and make bread. In the 19th century, the Ottomans needed women to grind flour for the army, a task which implied dubious standards of modesty. Performing such task would have been inappropriate for women of *sayyid* or *ʻarab* origin. Hence, the ottomans devolved it upon poor and widowed Jewish women (Wagner, 2015: 40). A task which was undesirable for the standards of the *ʻarabs* and the *sayyids*, thus came to be a sort of economic niche for the disadvantaged.

The task remained 'attached' to the Jews so that some decade later, when mechanic mills broke down during Imām Yahya's reign, the task devolved upon Jews. The Imām agreed to pay one-half riyal per 55 kilos of flour (ivi: 41). Interestingly, once the possibility of a payment became reality, Muslims wanted to grind flour as well, attempting a strategy of 'diversion' (cf. *infra*). Yet the Imām refused, "arguing that the Jews were entitled to the task and to payment by virtue of having done it for free for so many years." (ibid.)

In sum, a task considered demeaning because it was associated with women and dubious standards of modesty and was first assigned to needy Jewish widows. Hence, it was taken up by Jews, in a general sense, and eventually it became a right/duty enforced by state authority. Once it became a paid male task, Muslims themselves attempted to work in it. However, it was too late: a boundary had been built. From this case we come to understand that peculiar tasks came to be associated with certain groups on the basis of historical reasons emerging from debates and struggles that we need to contextualise. Once the association was established between a lineage and a task, it became a feature of social organisation. People have no memory of such historical events, and nowadays grinding flour is remembered among the tasks associated with the Jews or with *beny al-khumus*: a stigmatised task.

Now consider a circumstance I observed during my fieldwork. Music is a recent fact in highland Yemen. During the Mutawakkilite Kingdom, the lute was forbidden,[12] as the gramophone was forbidden. As the revolution erupted, music spread. Famous singers, like 'Ali al-'Ansi, encouraged the revolution with their songs.[13] Most of the singers from this first generation performed music for

the potentiality of a three dimensional growth.

12 Before the 1962 revolution, people did not play the modern *ʿaūd*. They used a smaller instrument, called *ṭurby*.

13 http://www.yementimes.com/en/1715/report/2938/%E2%80%98We-will-revolt-my-brother%E2%80%99.htm

the sake of art (*fann*), not as a profession. They were people of *ʻarab,* or even *sayyid*, origin. Today, a wedding ceremony without singer is almost unconceivable, and the request for singers has drastically increased. Yet people of *ʻarab* and *sayyid* origin are ashamed to *work* as singers. Many of them play in their houses, for a small number of guests.[14] Some others, among them famous singers, play for the sake of art, on a limited number of occasions. Yet no one wants to be associated with a work that, if practiced on a daily basis, is considered *makrūh* if not outright *ḥarām*.

For this reason, many people from *beny al-khumus* have started to work as singers. As one *ʻaraby* from Kuthreh once explained me, "Since they played the *ṭablah* and the *mizmār*, they started playing the *ʻaūd*. But the lute is another thing; it wasn't *ʿayb*." The points, here, are that people from *beny al-khumus* play for money, and that this occupation is increasingly associated with their social group, preventing other people working as singers from not being mistaken for people of low-status. Consider this conversation about normal/stigmatised tasks. My two interlocutors, a *sayyid* from Kuthreh and another one from al-Marwān, were listing non-stigmatised crafts:

Mohammed: Look... The blacksmith, the carpenter, the plasterer (*muqaṣṣiṣ*)... What else?

Marwāny: The singer (*al-fannān*)

Mohammed: No, the singer is considered lacking (*nāqiṣ*), among us... But Fūʾad al-Kibsy, he is a *sayyid*... But he loves singing (*yuḥibb al-ghināʾ*)! It's a vocation (*hawāyah*), ok?

Marwāny: He doesn't play in any wedding.

Mohammed: He plays for the ruling class; he takes 5,000 dollars for one wedding. He never enters a tent. If it is a wedding hall, he enters. In a tent, he will say, "No, impossible."

Marwāny: Then, Luca, let's say that he plays for the ruling class, or on television... He doesn't have any new songs. Or sometimes he works as a presenter, for as-Saʻīdah... Did you see him? For charity...

Mohammed: He is a gentleman.

Marwāny: Moreover, Luca, I will tell you: among [the *sayyids*] it is not an inherited tradition (*wirātah*)...

Luca: What about ʻĀdil al-Fulāny [a famous singer]?

Mohammed: Luca, listen. I don't know if Beyt al-Fulāny is *muzayyins* or not. But if he sings... It's certain, it's certain... This is a thing...

Marwāny: But, Luca, I don't think that the singer is considered a *muzayyin*...

Mohammed: I don't know if he is a *muzayyin* if he plays the lute... But I tell you that if he

14 In Kuthreh, we had two ʿaūd players. They never performed in public, or for money.

plays the *mizmār* or the *ṭablah*, *ʿayb*... In both cases he is a *muzayyin*.

This dialogue well exemplifies how work is socially constructed. The singer (*al-fannān*) is a new profession, a profession which is not, yet, tied to specific families. This profession is associated with some negative traits (e.g. drinking alcohol, fostering passion), and at the same time it is dangerously close to other stigmatised professions, like playing the *mizmār* (double flute) or the *ṭabl* (bass drum). For these reasons, many people from *beny al-khumus* have started to practice it. In a modern urban context, it is hard to make an association between families and professions, and yet both my interlocutors had the feeling that playing the *'aūd* (lute) was becoming increasingly associated with *muzayyins*. Consequently, they reasoned, it is licit to play the lute, but not in a tent, like a *muzayyin* would do, and not for the sake of money.

From these cases we can outline two structural principles, which I shall thoroughly analyse below: *a*) practicing an occupation as a means of subsistence, in Yemen, invariably points tobelonging to a lineage; *b*) tasks only become shameful when, for historical reasons, they become associated with lineages lacking in origins. This second principle was first formulated by Robert Brunschvig, a French scholar of Islam, in an article entitled "Métiers vils en Islam" (1962). While analysing the stigma attached to the profession of the blood-letter in the 7th century, Brunschvig acutely observed: "[f]aut-il penser qu'à cette époque, ou peu auparavant, le métier de ventouseur était au Hedjaz une occupation d'esclave?" (ivi: 47) The task, Brusnchvig suggests, was despised because it was associated with despised social groups: "il ne serait pas absurde d'imaginer que précisément dans une période de transition, durant laquelle ce travail d'abord servile serait passé de plus en plus aux mains d'hommes libres, certains eussent tenu à dénoncer avec force son originelle vilenie." (ivi: 48)

T. Gerholm has downgraded this hypothesis as tautological. Stating that the stigmatised are despised because they are associated with despised social groups, he reasons, "solves the problem only creating a new one." (1977: 131) Yet tautology is a characteristic of common sense constructions. In C. Geertz's words, common sense affirms that "everything is what it is and not another thing" (1973: 79-80). Asserting that some professions are *beny al-khumus*'s professions, in Yemen, is common sense. These professions are stigmatised because they are associated with a social group which is constructed through a process of othering: *beny al-khumus* are *not 'arabs* nor *sayyids*. They are *outsiders*, excluded from the regimes of value of other social groups. Thus, once a task becomes exclusively associated with the Other, it becomes a task which cannot be performed by anyone other than the stigmatised or outcast.

R. Brunschvig's hypothesis, as he himself admits, is merely speculative: we have no certain proofs of an association between blood-letting and slavery. Yet the Yemeni case can provide an empirical confirmation to his assumptions. During my fieldwork, many of my interlocutors attempted to unravel the ‘mystery’ of stigmatised professions. Some of them, especially people from the countryside, acutely noted that the crafts associated with *beny al-khumus* were practiced, before 1949, by Jews. According to M. Wagner, when the Jews left Yemen, the authorities attempted to force “Jewish tradesmen who practiced trades that were exclusively Jewish and who wanted to leave Yemen to teach their skills to Muslims.” (ivi: 48) From the same account we come to know that different tasks were handed down to specific families.

Given these premises, it is not hard to imagine that some tasks were despised because they were practiced by the Jews. Practicing a profession, in Yemen, equals belonging to a lineage. In fact, when Muslims took Jewish jobs, “many of their [Muslim] brothers looked down upon them […] saying that if they practiced these professions there was no doubt that their grandfathers were Jews who converted to Islam.” (ivi: 96)

In what follows I shall provide an interpretation of the strict relationship between genealogical origin and work. Yet before we deepen this point, I wish to further explore the relationship between work as a means of subsistence and social stigmatising.

Moral Economy and Regimes of Value

From stigma to commodification

In order to understand how genealogical descent and the division of labour stand in relation to one another, I will now introduce the reflections of A. Appadurai as exposed in his essay “Commodities and the politics of value” (1986).

Appadurai aims at proposing a new perspective on the interpretation of the circulation of commodities in social life. The underlying thesis of his work is that value is created in economic exchange (and it is not an inherent property of objects). Commodities acquire value through circulation, and “what creates the link between exchange and value is *politics.*” (ivi: 3) Quoting G. Simmel (2004 [1978]), Appadurai considers the fundamental temporal dimension of every economic exchange, stating that value emerges “in the space between pure desire and immediate

enjoyment." (ibid.) This space is overcome by economic exchange. It follows that economic exchange is always an *exchange of sacrifices*, since the desire for something is always fulfilled by the sacrifice of something else. Value emerges in this exchange of sacrifices as a result of the balance between what is worth desiring and what is worth sacrificing.

Appadurai continues his reflections defining a commodity as "any thing intended for exchange", its socially relevant feature being "exchangeability (past, present, or future) for some other thing." (1986: 13) The commodity situation is thus considered a *phase* in the social life of a thing (ibid.). The standards and criteria that define the exchangeability of a thing, and thus the beginning of its commodity phase in any particular social and historical context, are defined as the thing's *candidacy* (ivi: 14). The overall cultural framework—a bounded and localised system of meanings—that defines the commodity *candidacy* of things is defined as a *regime of value*. In sum, what gives significance to the value of a thing, the criteria that make it desirable or expendable within a socio-historical cultural framework, is what we have just labelled a regime of value. Defining a regime of value is a political act, since it always implies the establishment of a set of criteria (symbolic, classificatory, and moral) that make things eligible for exchange. As we shall see below, since different parties have different interests in any specific regime of value, commodities tend to breach these regimes. The politics of tournaments of value and of calculated *diversions* might lead to new paths of commodity flow.

While exposing this general theoretical framework, I have always referred, as Appadurai does, to the commodity situation of *things*. Notwithstanding this delimitation, Appadurai himself admits the possibility of extending his reflections and his theoretical tools to the analysis of *services* and, more generally, of labour. From this standpoint, services are considered as a commodity, as a flow whose value is mainly defined by the criteria of exchangeability in different regimes of value.

Let me expose briefly some cases that I will analyse further in this chapter. ʻAli Zuleīṭ, the *muzayyin* of Kuthreh, could not play the snare drum (*ṭāsah*). He would do his best to provide an adequate substitute (cf. Ch. 2), and yet one day he did not find one. That day, when the groom approached the door, he found two uncanny musicians beating kettledrums, flushed and sweaty as if they were possessed. One was Mohammed Shams ad-Dīn, and the other a relative of him, two old *sayyids,* dressed up in formal dress—turban (*ṣamāṭah*), *thūmah* and everything—leading a wild *baraʻah* dance, beating leather skins with wooden sticks.

Once, a man from Beyt ar-Reīshāny, a house that provided many *shaykhs* to the Kuthreh village (cf. Ch. 4), recalled for me the story of his grandfather. He was an ingenious and dynamic man, one that liked to do everything by himself. He would spend his free time crafting useful objects.

Apparently, he was specialised in crafting a wonderful *marsab*, a rope made of stranded leather strings. "But don't think he was paying the fee to the *munaqqil*, even if he crafted the rope by himself," his nephew told me. "He would slaughter goats by himself, but left the neck for the *muzayyin*," he added.

Mohammed ash-Sharafy, one of the old teachers of the village (cf. Ch. 3), would travel long distances by foot in order to fulfil his teaching duties for the Imām. His son confessed to me that, in order to make his humble wages, during his travels Mohammed would slaughter animals, keeping the neck for himself as payment, *exactly as a butcher would do*. During my fieldwork, in the *'aīd* period, his nephew would do the same: when the *muzayyin* was not available, he slaughtered animals for the villagers, keeping the neck for himself.

Most of the shepherds—the majority of the peasants were shepherds—wore a sharp knife right behind the sheath of their *janbiyyah*. This knife served the purpose of slaughtering animals. Slaughtering, sometimes, was necessary in areas far away from the village. However, on other occasions, the reason for accomplishing this task without the *muzayyin*'s help was purely economic: paying him to do it was, in fact, quite expensive.

Generally speaking, the *muzayyin*'s wife was entitled to work as a beautician for women; she garnished their bodies with the so-called *naqsh* (thus working as a *munaqqishah*). She was specialised in haircuts and make-up, and she prepared their outfit and, sometimes, she even rented clothes and jewellery for ceremonial occasions. In urban environments, due to the higher number of customers, some women specialised in such tasks, working as *kawāfīrāt*[15] in dedicated shops. In Kuthreh, this role was performed by a woman of *'arab* origin.

I might carry on with the examples, but these few sketches shall suffice to clarify one point: *the tasks associated with beny al-khumus can be performed by people belonging to other social groups without necessarily losing status*, and this statement holds true even when we consider the situation before the 1962 revolution. This fact is widely acknowledged by the great majority of the people with whom I have worked. To clarify this point, we shall consider an excerpt from an interview that I conducted with a young *sayyid* from Kuthreh, who spent his whole life in the Old City of Ṣan'ā'[16]:

> **Mohammed:** Luca, once upon a time, there wasn't something called 'butcher' for slaughtering animals. Only rich people [turned to the butcher]... Once upon a time, they would buy chickens, and it was expensive to have someone slaughter it... Once upon a time,

15 This word is clearly a loan from the French 'coiffeur'.
16 Recorded interview, 10 Noveber 2011.

> women bought chickens, going back home and slaughtering them in the courtyard. Even *sayyids*... In our village, the *sayyids* couldn't pay someone to do the slaughtering. [...] The butcher is he who slaughters and sells. Who does it for himself [is not a butcher]... The Prophet, the exaltations and peace of God be upon Him, he would slaughter for Himself, and he was Hāshimy... His father was Hāshimy, and his grandfather, ‘Abd-ul-Muṭṭalib, was Hāshimy... Sayyid! And he didn't give [the beast] to the butcher, for slaughtering... He would slaughter it by himself. **Slaughtering, when you do it for yourself, is not shameful** (*ʿayb*). It's shameful if you sell to people, and you have a shop... If you are a *sayyid* it's shameful!

This excerpt is remarkable for many reasons. It is not, of course, a reliable account of the past. Mohammed would have probably been disappointed to know that, in his own village, *sayyids* were not just slaughtering chickens; they were actually breeding them, only some 15 years ago. But precisely because this is an idealised account, one point emerges clearly: there is nothing shameful in slaughtering animals, if you do it for yourself. *It is shameful if you make a living out of it.*

Starting from this general assumption, I want to focus on three points. First, emic notions of stigma are never grounded on such notions as purity or impurity: stigma is related to shameful acts and marked by the semantic area to which the word *ʿayb* refers. Second, the service is not shameful in itself, but rather making a living out of it—which means a peculiar *phase* of the social life of the service, corresponding to its commodification in a specific regime of value. Third, the division of labour that stigma encourages is strictly connected to local ideas of how a moral economy should work.

The moral economy of livelihood

Returning to the Old City of San‘a', I will briefly present the family history of Beit Jazzāry. Beit Jazzāry is a family that has long dwelled in the Old City of San‘āʾ, so long that they are considered hailing from the old city. Their genealogical reminiscences go back to their great-great-grand-father, Ḥusseīn. This man settled in Bāb ash-Shu‘ūb in a mythical time and started working as a tanner. One of his sons moved to Bab as-Sabāḥ, one of the four traditional markets of the old city, and started working as a butcher. His progeny followed his lead.

Among Ḥusseīn's descendants, one in particular has much to say in our story: ‘Ali Qāsim. He lived during the period of the 1962 revolution, witnessing both the imamate and the fledgling Yemeni Arab Republic. He was one of the first butchers that imported cows from Africa to the Old

City of Ṣanʿāʾ, and, in a few years, he collected a huge capital and an astonishing network of trade contacts. He soon became the official supplier of the Yemeni Economic Organisation in San‘a', an organisation established by the former President Ibrahim al-Hamdi in the late 70's. In the late 80's, he decided to invest this capital, diversifying his business. He entered many different trades, none of which led to a substantial success. Here is how Zayd, his son, recalled that period:

> One of my father's boats sank. During 1987 and 1988, my father faced problems from every side, problems from the boat that drowned, problems with the Sudani... My father had an agreement with this guy from Sudan, to import cows for the Yemeni Economic Organisation, for the state. [...] And then it happened the problem with the paint that came from Italy. He asked for oil paint, and they brought water paint. Thus, when the paint arrived... No one uses this paint in Yemen. They tried to sell it and they couldn't... Until it became dry, it became like stone. [...] My father's secretary, an Indian, went to Italy. And he saw that the company had announced bankruptcy. The problems that happened in 1987 and 1988 were not normal...

This is how Zayd recollects some of his father's business misfortunes. Following these problems, his father got sick. Subsequently, new problems feel upon the Yemeni Economic Organisation. Eventually, Zayd's father died. These tragic events were witnessed by ‘Abdullah, ‘Ali Qāsim's brother and Zayd's uncle. ‘Abdallah, during my fieldwork, was the *shaykh* of butchers, in Bāb as-Sabaḥ and he was ‘Ali Qāsim's partner in business in the late 80's. His narrative is of paramount interest for our topic, since it weaves together ‘structural nostalgia’ for a vanishing moral economy and ‘Ali Qāsim's failed attempts to escape his traditional profession, giving an interpretation of this linkage through the notion of *naṣīb*, destiny (cf. Ch. 5).

I shall first consider his interpretation of what we might call, following E. P. Thompson (1971), a moral economy. ‘Abdallah's narrative is characterised—as I have argued above—by ‘structural nostalgia’, since it depicts “an edenic order—a time before time—in which the balanced perfection of social relations has not yet suffered the decay that affects everything human.” (Herzfeld, 1997: 147) Here follow some passages from ‘Abdallah's considerations:

> If you consider our ancestors... They were honest people. Look, our ancestors... For example: someone comes to me to buy a dagger, then comes a second one... And my companion, next to me, hasn't sold anything yet. When the customer asks me something else, even if I have it, I say: no, go to my companion, next to me. **Why? I let him work**.

> [...] Why did our ancestors let many crafts exist? The one who has daggers, he could craft this sheath [pointing to his sheath]... He could craft it... He could craft shoes, he could... But no, he has a principle (*qanāʻah*). I craft the hilt and that one, our companion, crafts the sheath. And the other crafts the *ḥinām*. And this way, we have three crafts. **Why? So that the people can live**. This is our ancestors' wisdom...

In this perspective, the division of labour has a welfare function. But there is more:

> You might be thinking: "He is a blacksmith, he can craft anything. But here, in Yemen, it's not like that. Everyone lives in his own way, **the way his grandfathers lived**. Why is this so? Because **this way all the people are ordered**. You see how [wise] were our ancestors. [...] Why? So that everyone can be proud. Everyone has a reason to be.

This brief excerpt testifies to the deep connection that links an individual to his ancestors. As we have seen in previous chapters, what we have labelled 'genealogical imagination' actively pushes social actors to construct their selves in accordance with the legacy of the ancestors, exerting a generative effect on their life trajectories. The sense of belonging to one craft constitutes a fundamental dimension of this legacy and a central feature of social organisation. From this standpoint, which is an emic one, the function of the division of labour is twofold: it guarantees sustenance to every family, encouraging a hyper-specialisation of the crafts and a segmentation of market niches; it provides the inner drive, the vocation (*hawāyah*), that pushes individuals to specialise in a task which they, and only they, can handle professionally. From these premises follow ʻAbdallah's considerations:

> This is so since a time before time. I mean... Let's say from the days of the monarchy, those evils. I mean, the one who slaughters sheep, he doesn't slaughter anything but sheep, from the days of his grandfather. He follows his grandfather, slaughtering sheep. Even if he tries to change, the day he changes and slaughters cows, he doesn't succeed. I swear on God. He goes back to the sheep.

When Zayd, who was listening to our conversation, heard these observations, he commented: "The one who can work in sheep and has the capacity (*qadārah*) and the *qadar* (potentiality), he succeeds". Subsequently, he offered in a few words an overt explanation of the incorporate knowledge which is necessary to work in such a task:

> When you buy or sell the cows you have a large breath. The customer can tolerate if you add a slice, or some meat or some stomach or something like that... But [if you work in sheep] he doesn't put up with it. I mean, it needs precision. Precision when you buy and when you sell.

Given the premises, ‘Abdallah's judgement on his brother's trade will not be surprising. His account of that period, of those misfortunes, anguishes and failures, is a tragicomic one. His narrative—a narrative that describes the same troubles that we have already met in Zayd's account—is interspersed with hard, bitter laugh:[17]

> We imported paint from Italy, a whole ship. There is oil paint and water paint... And they brought only water paint... And at that time, if you were a big trader, you were moving ten trucks of paint. We received a ship, a ship of paint. And it was water paint. It appeared in the newspapers that the company that brought us this paint had gone bankrupt. And the paint was in the storage and it turned dry. At that time, the whole of Yemen needed ten trucks a year. And we brought a whole ship, more or less two hundred trucks [...]. This was the first stroke. Another stroke happened with a ship of bananas. They brought us the bananas and they just started to become yellow, edible. They don't last... The bananas arrived at the port of Hodeida. If we did that nowadays, with the trucks and the motorbikes... With the heat, all the bananas perished. What remained? A ship full of bananas... and we should have sold them in three days. We lost all of them. [...]The wool jackets... What do I tell you? The merchants usually bring a truck. My brother ‘Ali brought ten. The rich, the poor, the orphan... All of them should have worn wool jackets, all the people [he laughs]. He wasn't bringing the apt things. [...]Look... ‘Aly [‘Abdallah's brother] was a dreamer, he was choosing the wrong goods... What was not in the market... As soon as we brought it to the market... The week when we brought it to the market... The market was suddenly full of it! [He laughs]. **This is nasib [hadhā an-naṣīb]**. Every time we entered into a trade we didn't succeed.

‘Abdallah concluded stating: “This is *naṣīb*”. In this narrative we can appreciate the opening of a range of possibilities, a ‘horizon’ of expected futures, of wished futures, and their closure. The money collected by ‘Aly Qasim and his brothers opened up a ‘vital conjuncture’, a critical duration that could have led to a better life. So how can we interpret the formula ‘this is *naṣīb*’? ‘Abdallah is simply stating what he knew from the beginning: when someone leaves his traditional profession,

17 Interview with the Sheikh ʿAbdallah Kabeʿ, 6 October 2011.

failure is behind the corner. His final comment is more than explicit in this regard:

> I got tired from this trade and I went back to butchery. Immediately, I succeeded. [...] [You do succeed] because butchery is your profession. If you enter into an investment... Like we did with these trades, we didn't succeed. **The refuge (*al-mirja‘*) is your profession, butchery**.

The craft is a refuge; it guarantees stability and success. Belonging to a lineage provides an inner drive for motivation pushing people to self-realisation in the tradition of the ancestors. Simultaneously, the division of labour is a feature of social organisation that guarantees an equal distribution of sustenance. Let me deepen this last point.

When livelihood wins over values

As I have stated above, it is not shameful to perform any of the crafts associated with *beny al-khumus*; it is shameful to make a living out of them. Below in this chapter I will thoroughly consider how some of these tasks entail the commodification of tribal values. Here I shall consider the welfare function that this kind of division of labour entails.

As we have just seen, local notions of moral economy consider the division of labour as a means to equally redistribute sustenance (*rizq*) between the members of a community.[18] This model of division of labour, rather than being a survival from a time gone or an imaginary product of structural nostalgia, is still productive in contemporary Yemen.

Consider butchery. Butchers distinguish themselves in 4 specialisations: people cutting meat are called *muqaṭṭa‘īn,* and they do not need any capital, working as employees; "Those who work in the heads" are people who carve meat from bovine heads[19] and clean livers and hearts (they need a small capital, and often they take heads on credit); people selling meat as retailers (*bi-t-tajziʾah*) usually acquire half a bull or a whole one each day,[20] thus needing moderate capital; people selling meat as wholesalers (*bi-l-jumlah*), like the *shaykh* Jazzāry,[21] need substantial capital. These specialisations are also significative of butchers that deal in ovine meat. In the sūq of Bāb as-Sabāḥ,

18 Yemenis would probably talk about the families of a community, rather than the members, being that the household the fundamental productive unit.

19 This meat is usually minced, and cooked small balls of meat are called kebāb.

20 The price of a bull ranged between 150,000 and 200,000 riyals.

21 The *shaykh*'s family was slaughtering 6 or 7 bulls every day. Most of this meat was sold to big chains of restaurants. Each family of butchers was linked to different restaurants or to the state.

each specialisation was associated with a different family, or, more often, to different branches of the same family.

A similar division of labour is found in most of the markets. Generally speaking, a *kebāb* restaurant does not prepare tea or sells bread; someone else will specialise in these tasks and thus obtain *rizq*. *Saltah* restaurants do not prepare *zaḥāwiq* or sell leeks: someone in the surrounding community will provide these goods. Exceptions to this general model exist and are widespread nowadays. Yet the model persists, and no one would ever blame a customer for bringing his own tea in a restaurant that specialised in *saltah*, even if the restaurant prepares it.

One of the most outstanding examples of this division of labour is the *janbiyyah* market. Next to the newly produced 'Chinese *janbiyyas*', the trade of traditional crafts is still flourishing. In order to produce a *janbiyyah*, 7 specialisations are needed: a carpenter to craft wood for the sheaths; a *dabbāgh* to prepare the leather to cover it, one piece or multiple strings; women to braid together these leather strings; people of 'arab origin to compose the sheath (*al-jihāz*); a blacksmith to prepare the blade; other people of 'arab origin to craft the hilt; a *munaqqil* to prepare the belt. When the surface of the sheath (*ṣadr*) is decorated, a *mulaḥḥim* is needed. Thus the same object is the result of the work of people of *'arab* (or sayyid) origin and people from *beny al-khumus*.

These three examples present specialisations that need low capital or no capital at all and a limited experience compared to others that entail a great expertise and a significant amount of resources. Lowly specialised tasks were overtly described, by my interlocutors, as an entry level into the profession and as a sort of 'refuge' in case of failure. As people would state, "*ar-rizq 'alā Allāh* (sustenance depends upon God)." "*Rizq* moves, from one person to another: one day you have a queue outside your shop, the following day you have nothing." The stratified organisation of professions was explicitly meant to leave economic niches for everyone.

Given these premises, we shall ask ourselves: what does it mean that it is shameful to work in specific crafts? Once I was discussing this topic with some countrymen of *'arab* origin, while chewing *qāt* in a wonderful tower-house. I asked them, "Is it true that, once upon a time, it was shameful for a *qabīly* to sell *qāt*?" They confirmed this, so I asked them, "Why was it shameful?" One of them, the son of the *shaykh*, replied, "This way two people gained sustenance (*hakadhā yitarazzaqū shakhṣeīn*)."

Unlike other crops, for example grain, *qāt* has to be sold by the end of the day. In this regard, it is very similar to leeks. For a *qabīly* it was possible to reach the market and come back home within a day, selling the entire product. However, being that retail selling was considered shameful, two

people would gain sustenance from the same trade: the *qabīly* and the *muqawwit.*

A similar perspective can be applied to stigmatised tasks. Somehow, they constituted, and still do, an economic niche that can be exploited in two ways: *a*) people belonging to *beny al-khumus* simply exact their 'right', working in their traditional tasks; *b*) needy people can gain an easy access to market labour from this point of access. I do not maintain that these tasks are purposely stigmatised in order to provide a source of sustenance for the poor. However, being these tasks are stigmatised and thus undesirable, competition at the point of access is not as harsh as in other crafts or occupations.

We have a lot of evidence of such an interpretation. As we have seen in Chapter 2, nowadays *beny al-khumus* have a privileged point of access to the army. People working as butchers, barbers, cooks and so forth are always requested, since persons 'with origins' would never work in these tasks. At the same time, persons 'with origins', if they are in need, can access the army through these occupations, trying to hide their tasks when they deal with their peers outside the army.

If we consider the period before the 1962 revolution, we have evidence of similar issues. As we have considered above, in Qānūn Ṣan'ā', we find a few lines that explicitly specify how people from *beny al-khumus* were hired to work as guardians of the town. From these regulations, we come to know that dyers and butchers "must acquit their duty to guard the town in case of necessity, as they are usually used to." (Mermier, 1996: 188) The same is specified for potters (ivi: 195). A similar circumstance is referred by T. Stevenson (1985) for 'Āmir, and we have met a similar case in Chapter 2, considering the family history of Beyt Nabīlah. The ancestor of Beyt Nabīlah is said to have devolved all his properties to the Imām, in exchange of protection. In exchange, the Imām granted him the possibility to work as a *muqahwy* in a *samsarah*, a caravansary. The caravansary, like the *miqshāmah* and the *turkish ḥammām*, was a religious endowment, a *waqf*, and, as such, property of the state. As many of my interlocutors from *beny al-khumus* and, more generally, from the Old City of Ṣan'ā' have acknowledged, these tasks were constantly understaffed.

As I have anticipated in Chapter 2, most of the origin histories which I have collected from *beny al-khumus* explain the access to stigmatised tasks by means of two rhetoric devices: *a*) recalling the flight of the ancestor and the subsequent abandonment of all his properties; *b*) describing harsh economic conditions that forced the ancestor to work in a stigmatised task. I have thoroughly analysed the first point in Chapter 2, and now I will consider the second one.

Beyt al-Amīn is a family of bath attendants. A Turkish *ḥammām* (bathhouse) requires two tasks: an attendant fuelling the boiler from dawn until late night (this is a male task); attendants washing

customers, scrubbing their whole body with a bag-shaped glove (*kīs*, from which the verb *kayyas*, meaning to scrub the skin) and providing massages. The income is outstandingly high: a turn of one day can be worth 7/10,000 riyal. The turkish *ḥammām* is a *waqf*, a religious endowment, and the members of Beyt al-Amīn inherit turns of work in it. The demographic explosion that has interested Yemen in the last 50 years has proliferated the branches of Beyt al-Amīn, so that bath attendants are facing the same problem that peasants face with land: a fragmentation of property (in this case, of the service). The situation, for bath attendants and *qashshāms*, is somehow less dramatic than that of peasants. Women, in fact, do not inherit the turn: they usually work in the *ḥammām* of their brothers—if unmarried—or of their husbands. This expedient limits the degree of fragmentation.

In 2011, when I worked with Yahya al-Amīn, he had two turns a month. As a real polybian (cf. Ch. 4) would do, he would integrate this income with two jobs: as a bus driver and as retail seller of second-hand jackets. Here is how Yahya recalled the family history of Beyt al-Amīn:

> **Yahya:** My grandfather was a judge (*ḥākim*), a judge in Thuleh. During the Ottoman occupation, he entered Ṣan‘āʾ. At first, he bought a Turkish Ḥammām [bathhouse] in al-Būniyah.
>
> **Luca:** Is this place in the old city?
>
> **Yahya:** Yes, in al-Qā‘, next to the radio station... He bought it and then he went back to Thuleh. But he was a judge, and his father knew that he bought a Turkish ḥammām. The bath attendant, the green-grocer, the butcher... Their level was weak, in Yemen. So my grandfather got this news, and he wrote a letter to the Imām... The Imām Yahya, I don't know, Aḥmed... "My son entered in [this task] and bla bla bla." And he demanded resignation from this position.
>
> **Luca:** Because he bought the ḥammām...
>
> **Yahya:** He bought it! He didn't work in it! He was renting it to a person... Shame! A judge working [in a Turkish ḥammām]... But today even the *shaykh* works in the ḥammām! So they left my father; they disowned him (*tabarrū minneh*). They said, "It's enough; you're not anymoer from the family."
>
> **Luca:** What's your family name?
>
> **Yahya:** al-Amīn... And the origin (*al-aṣl*) is from Thuleh... So my grandfather said, "Ok, it's enough; there's no advantage. I enter Ṣan‘āʾ". So he entered and he started working in the *ḥammām*. It's normal... And he left his lands, his properties; he left everything in the village..." [...] There are judges from Beīṭ al-Amīn calling us, or they come and they say, "Change your name; we are Amīn; call yourself al-Ḥammāmy." And I say no... They tried to give us money...

Luca: Your grandfather knew that this work was shameful... So why did he work in the *ḥammām*?

Yahya: Because there was an income... A *ḥalāl* income. Working as a judge is *ḥarām*... In Yemen this is renowned; they are famous for being *ḥarām*.

This family history proposes an inversion of the pattern that we have observed in previous chapters. In this narrative there is no talk of moral failure or cowardice. The ancestor of Beyt al-Amīn is pushed to buy a Turkish *ḥammām* by economic motivations, and by virtue of this decision he is disowned and deprived of his origin and possessions. His social position defines his origin.

A similar trajectory is depicted in the family history of Beyt Ṭanṭan, a house of butchers. Beyt Ṭanṭan is a branch of Beyt al-Baqdanūs, butchers from the Old City of Ṣan‘āʾ that traditionally worked in Bāb al-Yemen. Nowadays, they monopolise the sale of meat for the Yemeni Economic Organisation, a trade that once belonged to Beyt Jazzāry. Mohammed al-Baqdanūs-Ṭanṭan, the man who recalled for me the story of his ancestors, was a well-read young man. He obtained a law degree and abandoned the Yemeni army, so to remain coherent to his main passion: religious study. In 2013, when we spent some days together in the Old City of Ṣan‘āʾ, he was a fervent supporter of al-Ḥūthy and, more generally, of the *ahl al-beyt*. Here is how he recalled the history of his family:

We... My ancestors (*ajdādy*) are from Thuleh, the historical city of Thuleh. Thuleh, son of Sabāʾ, son of Ḥimyār. My ancestors died in Thuleh. We lived with descendants of the Prophet (*ahl al-beyt*), and they are descendants of the Prophet: my ancestors, from the maternal side. They are from Thuleh, in the province of ‘Amrān. But we belong to a Hāshimite family, a family of Hāshimites... When Turks entered [Yemen] we fled to Thuleh... The city of Thuleh is a fortress. The Turks raided the town, and my ancestors remained there to fight, under the Imām Ibn Sharaf ad-Dīn... They killed the Turks; they couldn't surround us. They surrounded us for a period, I mean one year, two years, and we were in the fortress, with animals and plants... When the Turks got in, some conflicts happened between us and the followers of al-Mutawakkil, between the Imams, within the Hāshimite descent... We left religious study (*taraknā ad-dīn*), and we migrated (*hajarnā*), because there was a feud between us (*thāʾr*)... Our family split in three, from Thuleh to ‘Amrān... We were living in Thuleh; we were the religious scholars (*fuqahāʾ*) of the city. We didn't possess anything: we didn't have land to cultivate; we only had knowledge (*‘ilm*). Our ancestors only had knowledge. We didn't possess anything: we didn't have land to cultivate, we didn't have a craft, we didn't have anything... So how did we split up? From whom did we learn? Our neighbours were butchers, our neighbours... I mean, they slaughter... This a craft (*mihreh*) among the others: butcher, *qashshām* (green-grocer)... All

> of them are jobs that help you make a living (*yusāʻidak ʻalā al-ʻaīsh*). There is no preference for Arabs over non-Arabs except through righteousness (*lā farq beīna ʻaraby ū aʻjamy illā bi-t-taqwā*). These crafts... We were watching the butchers with a daily income... My grandfather, my ancestors, what were they seeing? Every day, [the butchers] were slaughtering 5 or 6... And we didn't have anything to eat, except what? Some money for reading the Qurʾān (*ḥaqq ad-darīs*) when we were lucky... So my ancestor decided to learn butchery, in the town of Thuleh. And his name wass al-Wajīh Ibn al-Mutawakkil Ibn Sharaf ad-Dīn. So this one, our ancestor, decided to learn from the butcher; he learnt how to slaughter, how to sell, and [he was telling the butcher], "Pray, the exaltations of God upon the Prophet, pray, pray..." And he was telling him, "Pray God, remember God!" So where did the butcher go? To the pilgrimage... For 6 months. When he came back we were already, our ancestors, over his spot, in his place, selling meat in his stead. [The butcher] came and he said [to my ancestor], "Why father of Hāshim? Not this way father of Hāshim! You are a *sayyid*; you are a scholar (*faqīh*); you are a *ʻallāmah*." Our ancestor replied, and what did he say? "**The father of Hāshim shall die of hunger? Do I sit watching you while I die of hunger? I must ask God a craft**, next **to my knowledge..."**

There is an important point here. As we have already noted while analysing other family histories, origin and work are *redundant* in defining the social position of social actors from *beny al-khumus*. This is not always the case for the other social groups: a *sayyid* working as a peasant does not turn into an *ʻarab*, he remains a *sayyid*. Yet working in tasks associated with *beny al-khumus* equals being one of them, and it implies the crossing of a boundary, especially if the profession becomes hereditary. For this reason, making a living out of these stigmatised tasks is a decision that implies a strong compulsion from the outside. Usually this compulsion is a threat of death, in the two forms of a violent vengeance or of a complete lack of sustenance.

When I worked in Bāb as-Sabāḥ with the butchers from Beyt Jazzāry, I met a man of *sayyid* origin. He worked as a butcher for a wholesaler. He was too shy to discuss his origins with me, but here is how one man from Beyt Jazzāry commented on his situation:

> […] He is from Beyt al-Fulāny, sayyid, and he works with butchers. […] But do't tell him "You are a sayyid"... He will get angry, because people don't seek refuge in butchery, or as *muzayyins*, or bards, or *muqahwy*... […]
>
> He is a poor person, without money, a vagabond (*ṣuʻulūk*). He doesn't have even one riyal. Either he works as a butcher or he doesn't chew, he doesn't eat a good meal, he doesn't live (*yiʻīsh*). Should he spend his life in poverty? Better to work, not to be unemployed. It's not shameful... Any service: there's no shame. […]

> The name [*i.e.* the reputation] is not important. Money is important; it's important that he works. Only sick and ignorant people use the words butcher and *muzayyin*. […] If I am a *sayyid*, shall I sit and die of hunger? Without working? It's better to clean bathrooms, to take away the shit... the most important thing is money... I work in every task. I don't care [to be considered] a *qabīly*... The important thing is to earn money for me and my children. Working is a fundamental point in serving God. When you work, in any task ḥalāl, with your sweat, you are serving God.

In sum, the boundary had a positive function next to its 'negative' one: it guaranteed, and still keeps guaranteeing, an economic niche for needy people. Moreover, it provided a way to reintegrate excluded people into the society, even from the lowest degree of status. We have so far considered how stigmatised tasks are linked to a specific pattern of social organisation, and how it is tied to the division of labour. Yet I haven't answered the question with which I opened this chapter: why are these tasks, and not others, considered shameful?

Shifting Regimes of Value

The commodification of the base

When I first arrived in al-Bustān in 2009, my first concern was to find someone able to cook for me. The market was two hours away by foot, and I did not have a vehicle to reach it. I arranged an agreement with a family from the village; we estimated the monthly cost of food for one person, and for the whole period of my stay in the village they provided me with lunch and dinner every day. From my standpoint, the agreement was fair, if not even penalising for the family. The head of that family agreed to take the money, but demanded from me the most complete discretion regarding our small trade. Soon I discovered the reason for such cautious behaviour: his co-villagers immediately started investigating our relationship, urging me not to pay one riyal for food. As a guest, they told me, I had to stay for free in the village. Making me pay, they explained, would have been a shameful act, a breach of tribal values.

Something similar, and even more extreme, happened to me in Kuthreh. When I first moved into the village, I rented a room in the house of the *sayyid* 'Ali 'Abd-ul-Ḥamīd. One of his relatives agreed to cook for me, taking some money in advance. As the news of these agreements accidentally spread, a real scandal overwhelmed both these men. The *sayyid* 'Ali publicly stated

that I was like his son, and that he would have refused any further rent. The second man hurriedly gave me back my money, refusing to fulfil our agreement. When I turned to the *sayyid* ‘Ali, who was my neighbour and my host, to resolve my food issues, he firmly marked off the boundaries of our culinary cooperation. “This is the kitchen,” he said. “We can cook together, or I can cook for both. You can use the kitchen whenever you need it. *But I don't want money for this; I'm not a muqahwy.*” This simple statement encompasses the core of the entire system of tribal values.

In Chapter 6, I have tried to demonstrate how flows of services and sharing practices are deployed to construct the base of a political community, how acts of reciprocity can manage to extend it, how these practices are individually capitalised by social actors, and how they constitute part of a wider field of struggle. Eventually, I have argued that *serving, rather than being a shameful act, is the very essence of the tribal system of values*, the *qabyalah*. From this standpoint, **shameful is not the act of serving in itself; shameful is its commodification**.

How is the *muzayyin*'s act of serving different from that of a *qabīly*? We have already answered this question. The act, in itself, is not different—the *muzayyin serves exactly as a qabīly would do in similar circumstances*. What differs is that the *muzayyin*'s service does not meet the requirements of commodity candidacy of the tribal regime of value. Why not? Because the *muzayyin* demands a compensation for his services, makes a living out of them. As we have seen above, many authors maintain that the tasks associated with *beny al-khumus* are despised because they are associated with services—assuming that tribesmen consider it shameful to serve. My argument hinges on the reverse: precisely because tribesmen do serve, and because they attach a huge degree of value, expectation and calculation to reciprocal acts of service, they consider it shameful to serve for compensation. We are talking about the same act, the same sign, in two different contexts, in two different regimes of value.

It is worth noting that, in Appadurai's sense, both the *muzayyin* and the *qabīly* commodify a flow of services. In both cases, in fact, the relevant feature of the service is its exchangeability. Yet as we have seen in Chapter 5 and 6, in a tribal regime of value services are not exchanged for an immediate compensation: in the act of serving a relative, or a neighbour, or a guest, a *qabīly* achieves *muruwwah* or *karam* and accumulates the support of men, social capital in symbolic forms. On the contrary, the *muzayyin* is he who takes without giving, not only because he is protected without providing protection (cf. Chapter 2), but also and mainly because he is unable to create symbolic credits because his services are immediately repaid, he cannot provide hospitality, and he is excluded from the tribesmen's tournaments of value.

Before we move on with our discussion, we need to untangle several analytical levels. First, does

being excluded from one group's tournaments of value equate being inhospitable people? If we consider the actual behaviour of real persons, this assumption obviously does not hold true. People from *beny al-khumus* can be as generous as anyone. Likewise, tribesmen can be greedy and valueless. Yet different roles define different structures of expectations, or said otherwise, the individual identifies with particular subject positions within discourses. Consider, for example, the cases which I have exposed above. All the mentioned people—and they were people of *'arab* and *sayyid* origins—asked me money in exchange for hospitality. They overtly contradicted the tribal regime of value, and their actions were considered shameful by virtue of their ascriptive origin. Yet, generally speaking, tribesmen's action is oriented by their regime of value: their inner drive, their moral *habitus*, is constructed in accordance with the expectations of the system. If a *muzayyin* had acted as these tribesmen did, in the same circumstances, his actions would have been judged according to his ascriptive origin, which means, as his normal behaviour. When I was in al-Bustān, the *muzayyin*'s wife hosted women in her *diwān*, buying them popcorn and juice, for money. This was perfectly coherent, since she was a *muzayyinah*. People from *beny al-khumus* are, nowadays, perfectly aware of this point of friction. For this reason, as we shall see later in this chapter, displays of hospitality have become a genuine point of resistance. Yet before we tackle this point, I ought to solve another logical discrepancy of my argument: why should labour and the construction of moral selves be interrelated? Why does the stigma attached to a profession or a craft define the moral features of an individual?

Labour and the construction of moral selves

Ibn Khaldūn provides us with some useful insights to interpret this peculiar relationship. A *habit* (*malaka*), in Ibn Khaldun's formulation, is "[...] a firmly rooted quality acquired by doing a certain action and repeating it time after time, until the form of (that action) is firmly fixed. A habit corresponds to the original act after which it was formed." (Ibn Khaldun, 1978: 505) Two features descend from this general perspective. First, both vices and virtues are acquired through repetition, depending on the quality of the 'original act' that is repeated (ivi: 503). Second, once a *habitus* takes root in one's character, it becomes almost unchangeable: "[T]he reason for this is that habits are qualities and colours of the soul. [...] When the soul has been coloured by a habit, [...] it is less disposed to accept (another) habit." (ivi: 512)[22]

22 As S. Mahmood has made clear (Mahmood, 2012: 137), Ibn Khaldun's understanding of *malaka* retains considerable resemblances with Aristotel's notion of *habitus* and it differs from Bourdieu's formulation with respect to two features (ivi: 138-9): 1) Bourdieu's understanding of bodily dispositions would be characterised by a sort of socioeconomic determinism; 2) Bourdieu would underestimate the pedagogical process by which a *habitus* is

Significantly, Ibn Khaldun develops this entire philosophy of *malaka* while discussing craft apprenticeship. A craft, he explains, "[...] is the habit of something concerned with action and thought." (ivi: 505) As long as we are concerned with "things that are corporeal and perceptible by the senses," direct practice and direct observation are the best means to acquire a habit (ibid.). This process of acquisition, pursued through the enacting of reiterated actions, has a direct influence on the moral *habitus* of an individual: "[...] it is unavoidable that actions influence the soul. Good actions influence it toward goodness and virtue. Evil and deceitful actions influence it in the opposite sense." (ivi: 503)

This perspective enriches the considerations which I have exposed in Chapter 2. During an apprenticeship process not only technical skills are acquired; a worldview and a moral *habitus* are transmitted as well. While *intentionally* learning a craft, individuals—*pace* Mahmood (2012)—*unintentionally* craft a moral self. How is this possible? Following Ibn Khaldun we understand that a moral value is attached to actions themselves, and that the performance and reiteration of actions construct the moral self of individuals. This process is described as a process of saturation, where the individual is gradually filled by each action, until no room is left to learn something new.

Ibn Khaldun exposes this model in a masterly account of the moral qualities of merchants. Merchants, he states, are mostly occupied with buying and selling, and this necessarily requires cunning. The character of the merchants, he continues, then adopts the bad qualities that follow from cunning: quarrelsomeness, cheating, defrauding and so forth (ivi: 504). Similarly, the leading quality of farmers must be humility, since agriculture is a natural and simple procedure (ivi: 496). Interestingly, these moral qualities require more than one generation to leave a sediment: "[c]ustoms become firmly rooted only through much repetition and over a long time. Then, their colouring becomes firmly established and rooted in successive generations." (ivi: 507)

This theory of *habitus* resonates with my interlocutors' common sense understanding of the relationship between action and the construction of moral selves; if reiterated actions define the moral character of individuals, there must be a direct relationship between the moral standing of craftsmen and the actions implied by their crafts. From this standpoint, when the *muqahwy* sells coffee, he is not only *doing* something shameful, but he is also constructing his moral self in accordance with his actions. He *is* someone from whom a tribesman cannot expect acts of generosity. A Yemeni proverb goes "Don't become a companion of the butcher and the *muqawwit*

acquired, emphasising the unconscious power of the embodied structuring structures. As I see the problem, these perspectives are complementary. Even in Ibn Khaldun's work a certain degree of intentionality is always involved in the construction of *habitus*. Yet, once acquired, the *habitus* 'colours the soul' in a way that is largely unconscious. The degree of intentionality by which a *habitus* is acquired might well be an analytical index of *doxic* experiences.

(*lā tuṣāḥib al-muzayyin wa-l-jazzār*)," and it bears significance, in this context,[23] because it points to the negative qualities of people who sell in the market every day: cheating, defrauding and so forth. The *qashshām* leaves his women to sell in the market, and thus he has no *sharaf*, and so forth.

These insights hold true even if we consider the positive moral qualities of *beny al-khumus*. As we have noted in Chapter 2, the *muzayyin* of a village is perceived, above all, as a trustworthy person (*amīn*). Apart from his idiosyncratic personal traits, he stands in relation to the tribesmen as someone whose role requires trustworthiness. We have here reached a point of fundamental importance. The moral qualities of a social group are constructed, by other groups, relationally., which means giving meaning to their spaces of interaction. In a caste-like system, a cultural discourse of each group on each other is thus a necessary premise to structure reciprocal expectations in places of interaction. But there is more.

Consider the role of the *muzayyin*, the servant of the village. In his guise of outsider, he plays the necessary and irreplaceable role of the 'backstager'. While peasants put on stage their tournaments of value, based on practices of sharing and reciprocity that both entail competition and solidarity, the *muzayyin* sets up the stage. Yet serving for money, his structural position prevents him from acting on the stage, next to the peasants. It is, thus, in his relationship with the peasants that the servant can never be generous or embody the values of the *qabyalah*. This undeniable fact, however, does not prevent him from acting on a different stage, from performing tournaments of value with his peers. This last consideration brings us to focus on the tournaments of value of *beni al-khumus* themselves.

Generous butchers

At the time of my fieldwork, the language of the *qabyalah* informed a sort of hegemonic discourse. Even people who did not belong to the *'arabs* or the *sayyids*, in fact, constructed their reputation in accordance with the values of the *qabyalah*. As we have seen throughout this work, social prestige was constructed and measured through the lenses of multiple discourses based on religion, instruction, gender, geography and profession. Yet the values of the *qabyalah* constituted a sort of substratum, a semantic platform that provided a shared, common sense language to define manliness (*rajūleh*).

23 A second meaning is related to the act of bargaining itself. In dialect, bargaining is termed *murājalah*, implying a direct reference to manliness. While bargaining, a real man displays his virility. Bargaining with close friends is impossible cannot be a real competition. So it is better to avoid close butchers and *muqawwits*.

Given this premise, it should not be surprising to understand that people from *beny al-khumus* asserted that the *qabyalah* did not belong to any social group, but to the people who performed it. A brilliant example of this principle is offered by this recorded conversation between me, Loṭf (a boy of Jewish origin who converted to Islām), and Mohammed (a butcher from Beyt Jazzāry). As Mohammed made clear, “the *qabyalah* is not a matter of rifles:”

> **Loṭf:** […] The *qabyalah* speaks to any person. I mean, even if the person is a butcher... People say “This is a *qabīly.*” Why do they say “He is a *qabīly*”? Because of his generosity (*karam*), of his goodnes (*tīb*), of his behaviour with other people. They say “What is this [man]?” “A *qabīly.*” But if he is a man, I mean, rude, or if he killed... I mean, even if he is the son of a *sayyid*, they say “[Look at] this moron, this dirty person.” […]
>
> **Mohammed:** You see the *qabīly* from his generosity (*karam*), his generosity! The one who tells you “*ahlā w sahlā*”, and other things... He is generous (*karīm*)! [But] the Generous is God; human beings cannot be generous... God is Generous. […]
>
> **Luca:** So... Is generosity something important?
>
> **Mohammed:** Generosity is the most important thing. There is nothing fundamental in the *mashyakhah*, but generosity. A *sheīk* gives: to this, and that... That's what people consider a *shaykh*.

This brief account is congruent with what observed in Chapters 5 and 6. The core of the *qabyalah* consists in ‘giving’, in being generous in a wide sense. This point is reinforced by a further consideration expressed by Mohammed: “[The *shaykh*] intervenes in problems, but not for his own interest. He intervenes to fix them.” Helping another without pursuing a personal interest, not, at least, in a direct way, is what constitutes the *qabyalah*. Possessing *muruwwah* means nothing but this: gaining a symbolic credit through disinterested actions. The commodity phase of reciprocal acts is the denial of this process of euphemisation.

The emphasis on reciprocity has an important corollary. Wealth, in itself, is not a direct index of status, and class privileges cannot be directly turned into prestige. The *shaykh* is not the one who *owns* money; he is the one who gives it to other people, thus accumulating social capital. Owing wealth can help gain prestige, since the more you have the more you can give. But, as we have seen in Chapter 6, excesses are tempered by social norms in order to prevent the disruptive outcomes of reciprocal acts. Moreover, *muruwwah* is not necessary tied to wealth: intervening in other people's problems or sharing all that is available, are outstanding acts of *muruwwah*. In this sense, Yemeni society is an *egalitarian society*: wealth cannot be turned into status but by being given away,

another interesting aspect of the paradox of keeping-while-giving (Weiner, 1992). The consequences are twofold. First, the wholesaler butcher will not be recognised as superior in status, unless he gives his wealth away in reciprocal acts.[24] Second, offering reciprocal acts in exchange for money cannot but be stigmatised. *beny al-khumus*, because of their professions, are structurally prevented from being generous with peasants.

Yet, interestingly, butchers, like most of the people from *beny al-khumus* with whom I worked, asserted the 'ecumenic' dimension of the *qabyalah*, striving to impose the idea that it belonged to any human being who could actualise its values in social action. Simply put, they deployed the language of the *qabyalah* to appropriate symbolic capital within a field of struggle restricted to people sharing their genealogical origin. This means that they rarely indulged in acts of reciprocity with people of *'arab* or *sayyid* origin. Most of them played their tournaments of values following the rules of the *qabyalah*, and yet selecting players from *beny al-khumus*.

This very fact needs a multifaceted explanation. Endogamy remains the core fact. Since people from *beny al-khumus* rarely, if ever, succeed in practicing hypergamy, they cannot establish with *'arabs* and *sayyids* those ties of affinity which foster the construction of networks of reciprocity (cf. Ch. 6). Talking about this sensitive topic, Mohammed's opinion was clear-cut: "Butchers with butchers, peasants with peasants." Other interlocutors boasted of affinity ties with 'the *qabāil*', yet when I enquired into the factuality of these claims, I could not even confirm practices of hypogamy on the part of *'arabs* or *sayyids*.

During my fieldwork, I witnessed people from *beny al-khumus* attempting practices of diversion; these people abandoned their traditional tasks, thus avoiding the commodification of the values of the *qabyalah*. In sum, they provided their services for free, as real countrymen would do, or indulged in acts of generosity towards people belonging to other social groups. Such practices, more and more common since interaction between the social groups has become habitual, create networks and establish connections between neighbours and friends. In some years' time, they might disrupt the whole hierarchical system. In the present, however, they never lead to inter-group marriages, especially between *beny al-khumus* and other groups. *beny al-khumus* themselves, as well exemplified by Mohammed and many other interlocutors, are prone to avoid requests of marriage from other groups, in order to avoid the probable humiliation of a refusal.

Diversions: stingy peasants

24 I owe this insight to an inspiring conversation with Prof. Sandra Green.

As we have just seen, *beny al-khumus* attempted service pathway diversions by indulging in reciprocal acts with the *qabāil*, and yet this strategy did not usually led to substantial gains of status. Simultaneously, some countrymen attempted pathway diversions in the opposite direction, striving to legitimise the commodification of services.

Many peasants gave their loyalty to the values of the *qabyalah* with a mixture of frustration and envy towards *beny al-khumus*. I remember one peasant of *sayyid* origin complaining, during a qāt session, of his humble economic situation. The man was a soldier, and he made his living by cultivating *qāt*, yet living on the poverty threshold. One day, exhausted by his economic situation, he complained "Why do we still follow the *qabyalah*? Why can't we enter Ṣan'ā' and make money?" Some peasants, indeed, followed such a path.

Qaīs, a 40-year-old man from al-Bustān, invested his savings in opening a restaurant in the Old City of Ṣan'ā'. He rented a small shop and bought a barbecue for cooking rotisserie chicken. As this business took off, Qaysinvested a larger capital, renting a whole building in which he set up a hotel. Both his businesses, the restaurant and the hotel, were 'modern versions' of traditional tasks associated with *beny al-khumus*, the *maqhā* and the *samsarah*, and as such they were interpreted by his relatives. Moreover, the idea of opening a tourist hotel was dubious in religious terms:

> **Luca:** What did people think about the hotel?
>
> **Qaīs:** You mean my family (*usraty*) or the people (*an-nās*)?
>
> **Luca:** The people and, then your family.
>
> **Qaīs:** People were against the hotel, especially its name... A preacher gave a speech over my head... He said: "[…] they want to make a discotheque; they are dogs..." And it was not true. And there were neighbours coming and asking, "What are you planning to do?" [...]
>
> **Luca:** Once upon a time, did people say the hotel (*fundūq*) was shameful?
>
> **Qaīs:** Yes. They would say... It's like the *samsarah*. The *samsarah* was a hotel... The peasant would enter, if he had work in Ṣan'ā' […], and stay in the *samsarah*... There was coffee and the place for the donkey... They were like *muzayyins*.
>
> **Luca:** And [what happened] when you opened [the hotel]?
>
> **Qaīs:** When I opened... I had some trouble with the people, with friends and with the family too... My affines caused some trouble. They said, "Are you going to open a *maqhā*? You are a *qabīly*; you are this and that..." They said they wouldn't have given me back my wife.[25] I said, "There has been development; this is an investment. And the most important

25 When Qaysentered his new business, he was divorced. His efforts were, somehow, directed at collecting money to get his wife back (*istirjaʿ*).

> thing is that this is a work... You provide a service (*khidmah*), and the service gives you money. There's nothing for free.” So there was a sort of pressure, but not a strong one, especially from the family. […]
>
> I am renting from a *sayyid*. How is it possible that a *sayyid* turns his home in a hotel? […] People need money...
>
> **Luca:** And the people who served in the hotel... Didn't they consider it shameful (*ʿayb*)?
>
> **Qaīs:** It was normal, because before they worked in coffee shops, or things like that...
>
> **Luca:** Did people from Ṣanʻāʾ, or from the North, *qabīly*, work in [the hotel]...?
>
> **Qaīs:** For example: I had Loṭf, *muzayyin*, Mohammed Zayd, *qashshām*, Niḍāl, from Ibb... You're right... No one from Ṣanʻāʾ. People from Ṣanʻāʾ can work as bookkeepers […]... More than this is impossible. You can't find it.
>
> **Luca:** Not even cooks?
>
> **Qaīs:** The cook is not a man of origins (*ʻayikūn mush aṣl*).
>
> **Luca:** And your cook?
>
> **Qaīs:** He was from Ibb... He was a *qāḍy*... Qāḍy and cook. They don't recognise shame (*ʿayb*) in the work. […]

This excerpt is significant for the honesty that Qaysinfuses into his reflections. First, he describes the negative qualities associated with hotels. On this level, the discourse is mainly religious: working with tourists might entail *ḥarām* activities. On a second level, he recognises that the profession is tied to *beny al-khumus* being that it is a prerogative of *beny al-khumus*. In this second comment, the cultural construction is thus tied to a feature of social organisation, and the two levels are circularly connected. A last point of interest is the considerations regarding people from Ibb, which I shall deepen below in this chapter.

Diversions are attempts at creatively deforming regimes of value, and Qaīs's strategy runs in this direction. Firstly, he admits that his main concern is with money: he is working in a service in order to make profit, a profit that once was reserved to people belonging to *beny al-khumus* or to individuals desperate enough to cross a boundary. Secondly, he recounts the way he tried to give a new meaning to an old business. Hotel-related activities emerge from his narrative as a sort of investment (*istithmār*), where the director (or the investor) is not directly involved in the service.

Legitimising services through the language of investment: rather than being an idiosyncratic trait of Qaīs's personality, this rhetoric strategy was a widespread strategy of diversion. As mentioned in Qaīs's interview, many *sayyids* would ‘invest’ in hotels. Chains of restaurants were owned by people

of *sayyid* and *ʻarab* origin, who dismissed stigma through the language of investment. A famous *shaykh* worked in the frozen chicken trade. Accused of being a butcher, he defended himself asserting that he was, simply, a trader.

Such attempts at pathway diversions were contested from multiple sides. The families of those who attempted the diversions, as in Qaīs's case, feared a loss of reputation. Yet people from *beny al-khumus* themselves harshly opposed these strategies. Many of my interlocutors emphasised the contradictions implied by these strategies. They felt, in a sense, doubly mocked: not only people of *ʻarab* and *sayyid* origin exploited their economic niches, but also they continued to reproduce the stigma attached to these professions. Consider this excerpt from the heated debate that exploded one day between a *sayyid* from al-Marwān and a butcher. The butcher was pointing out that a relative of the *sayyid* worked in a *būfyah* (pl. *bawāfī*), a sort of modern-day coffee shop where tea is served along with sandwiches, chips and breakfast. Here is how the *sayyid* justified the fact:

> **Marwāny:** Do you know Ibn Fulān? In *sūq* al-Baqar... It's their work. Tea and milk: his origin is *muqahwy*... They go to make coffee (*yiqhū*); do you understand? And there's another one, next to him, and other people in Bāb al-Yemen. In front of him there's a *būfyah*, next to him *bawāfī*... But the people from Ṣanʻāʾ, when they want coffee, they go to him. Why? Because their origin (*aṣl*) is well known. They are famous, [people know] that they sell coffee.
>
> **Luca:** Why is the *būfyah* ok and not the coffee?
>
> **Marwāny:** Because you know that he is a *muqahwy*... Do you understand?
>
> **Luca:** So the problem is with the coffee?
>
> **Marwāny:** I mean that we, today, there's no one Marwāny working in a *būfyah*. There's not.
>
> **Luca:** I still don't get what's the problem with the *muqahwy*...
>
> **Marwāny:** The *muqahwy*, Luca, specialises in coffee. Do you understand?
>
> **Luca:** And what's shameful in the coffee?
>
> **Marwāny:** There's no shame (*ʿayb*). But people will say that it diminishes your value; do you understand? But there's no shame.
>
> **Luca:** On the contrary the *būfyah* is normal... Right? And the restaurant?
>
> **Marwāny:** When you buy *saltah* [a Yemeni soup], you don't say that it's coffee... Ok? It's a restaurant. And in the *būfyah* you don't go to buy coffee, because it doesn't specialise in coffee...

While traditional coffee shops only serve coffee, the *būfyah*, or *kafītīryah*, offers a more variety of dishes. On this basis, the *sayyid* attempted to distinguish between *būfyah* and *maqhā*, producing a cheerful effect in the people listening to our conversation. If so stated, the point was, actually, ridiculous, and the butcher, who was insisting on the similarities of the two tasks, joked that sandwiches made working in the *būfyah* is a suitable task for *sayyids*. Yet al-Marwāny's syllogism had a different logic, which we can sum up as follows: some families are traditionally associated with the coffee shops; these families are lacking in origins; working in a coffee shop is demeaning. Moving from this assumption, al-Marwāny's argument was twofold: the work in the *būfyah* is not exactly like the traditional work in the coffee shop; Beyt al-Marwany is not associated with the work in the *būfyah*. These strategies of diversion implied a harsh struggle over the fundamental distinction between status and power. If people from *beny al-khumus* strove to gain status, people of *ʿarab* and *sayyid* origin strove to access a higher economic situation through diversions that legitimised the work in stigmatised professions.

Consider the story of Yūsef, a 30-year-old *qabīly* from Manākhah. Son of a humble family of peasants, Yūsef had worked since childhood in the most various activities: guard in a hotel, qāt seller, peddler of sandwiches, and bricklayer. He graduated from high school, and yet only reaching a modest level of instruction ("I cannot read an entire copy of the Qur'an"). As he graduated, Yūsef decided to 'enter' Ṣanʻāʾ. How did he imagine this working perspective? Basically, he followed the example of other people from Manākhah, among whom were some of his relatives, who paved the way in the capital city, establishing networks of contact and providing a niche for apprenticeship. Once Yūsef reached Ṣanʻāʾ, he started working in the field of restoration, always taking advantage of the connections and the capital of his relatives. After some years of apprenticeship and a few failed entrepreneurial ventures, he eventually inaugurated a rotisserie restaurant.

The main drive that motivated Yūsef's actions was economic. As he told me, "What pushed me from Manānkah to here? My economic situation. Livelihood (*ar-rizq*). Money." He perfectly knew that working in a restaurant was a task associated with *beny al-khumus*, and yet he commented, "Shall we leave all the money for them?" Thus he continued, explaining that selling *qāt* was once the biggest shame (*akbar ʿayb*). "One of my maternal uncles has a *būfyah* and he makes tea. Once it was the biggest *ʿayb*." His rhetorical strategy implied a recognition of the on-going changes in Yemeni society in order to legitimise his diversion strategies. "Playing the double flute, bass drum, slaughtering, working as a bard. This is shameful, this did not change. But if you work in a restaurant or in a *būfyah*, it's ok...." In this case, as in the examples we considered above,

genealogical origin prevailed over work: “Even if you sell coffee... Even if they know that I have a *būfyah*, and I sell tea... If I am a *qabīly*... They don't care about my task (*mihrah*). They care about my origin (*aṣl*). ‘What's his origin?’ ‘They say *qabīly.*’”

The economics of origin

In the last 30 years, especially after the unity in 1990 and the civil war in 1994, the capital city of Ṣanʿāʾ has received internal migration from all the Yemeni provinces. The details of this migration are intriguing, but they would take us too far afield. What I want to bring into focus is the accommodation of migrant workers in the overall texture of organised labour. A first point that we need to keep in mind is that trades and businesses of the same type are usually distributed in the same area of the city. The second point is that each craft, each trade and each business is culturally associated with a peculiar social group. Most of the people working in restoration are from the cities of Ibb and Taʿizz; people selling clothes on Qaṣr street are from Taʿiz; painters (*rannāj*), whose shops are located in Ḥaddā, are from al-Baīḍāʾ; plasterers (*quṣṣāṣ*) are from Yarīm; people working with hand-carts are from Reīmah; and so forth.

If statistically verified, these associations might not be true. Yet they organise the division of labour and the distribution of knowledge. Consider, for example, the case of people from Reīmah. A famous joke recounts that, after passing away, a man from Reīmah reached heaven and, astonished by the abundance of fruits and vegetables, he exclaimed: “Where is my hand-cart?” This joke says a lot about the association between work and place of origin. An outstanding number of people from Reīmah actually work with hand-carts, both filling them with products to sell or using them to carry heavy cargo. People from Ṣanʿāʾ do not consider working with the hand-cart shameful, and yet they consider it “the work of people from Reīmah.” Even in this case, there is no single principle defining for work ideology; what gives meaning to the association between a social group and a profession is the belief that work and genealogical origin are strictly associated. This connection is discursively constructed in the most various of ways. What matters, however, is the connection itself, not the cultural stuff that constitutes it.

As some of my interlocutors from Ṣanʿāʾ explained to me, Reīmah, which is situated North-West of Ṣanʿāʾ, is a mountainous country. It follows that people from Reīmeh are used to lifting heavy weight and working with the hand-cart (*ʿarabiyyah*), which requires a great deal of effort. An alternative to this weak explanation was the observation that working with the hand-cart requires

patience (*ṣabr*) and consistency (*jalādeh*). People from Reīmeh, Taʿizz and Ibb are considered patient, consistent people. Why? The nature of their land ("*ṭabīʿat al-arḍ ḥaqqahum*") builds their character. They rarely get bored ("*mā fish malāl*"); they try to accept (*yitaqabbalū*) and tolerate all things. Above all, they inherit (*yitawārithū*) these qualities. Work is always connected to 'innate', natural qualities of peculiar social groups. These qualities are constructed by means of discourses about the Other which are, often, stereotyped.

These essentialist discourses are always contradicted by the historical accounts of people who actually work in the crafts. Consider, for example, the painters. Most of the painters in Ṣanʿāʾ come from al-Baīḍāʾ, a province in the South. According to my interlocutors from the area, the tradition of painting spread in the area during the 1970's, when many people from al-Baīḍāʾ migrated to Saudi Arabia and learnt the profession. Afterwards, these people went to work in Ṣanʿāʾ for several reasons. First and foremost, they sought to provide their daily bread (*luqmat al-ʿaīsh*); they needed to work, and from the 1990's onwards Ṣanʿāʾ provided good opportunities. As the first pioneers established their reputation in the capital, other people from the area followed their lead. As in Yūsef's case, they deployed a network of covillagers to ease the point of access into the labour market. These well-known people from their own area provided material support and a privileged channel to learn a new profession.

As I have noted above, the stigma attached to work varies geographically and historically. This means that, in different areas of Yemen, different professions are deemed shameful. Working in restoration is stigmatised in the North, but it is not in the areas of Reīmah, Ibb, Taʿiz and in the South. This fact explains how people from these areas have found easy access into the labour market in professions that people from Ṣanʿāʾ consider associated with *beny al-khumus*.

In sum, the evidence that I have presented seems to suggest a circular relationship between work ideology and genealogical origin. Stigmatised tasks are deemed demeaning since they are traditionally associated with people lacking in origin, the so-called *beny al-khumus*. This principle is not limited to marginal groups and despised tasks, and the association between work and origin is not only a negative one. As we have seen in previous chapters, lineages are tied to the specialisation of 'close' ancestors, notwithstanding the farther connection with eponym ancestors (ʿAdnān and Qaḥṭān). Genealogies craft selves, defining their *habitus*: their moral, their taste, their language, their incorporated knowledge, their attitudes and so forth. The isolation of social groups, mainly obtained by means of endogamy, reinforces a differential distribution of power, and the discursive construction of Otherness through stereotyped cultural traits. The language of inequality regulates intergroup relations, while equality informs intragroup ones. This principle, I have argued

throughout my work, is still productive in contemporary Yemeni society, leading, in Wright's sense, to the reproduction of a caste-like system (1989). Interestingly, the association between work, lineage and place of origin keeps organising the division of labour even in the complex urban environment of the city of Ṣanʿāʾ.

Conclusion

Middle Eastern contexts have often been depicted as a mosaic of tribes, sects, and people, the metaphor of the mosaic suggesting the idea of a 'static tableau'. In the view of most observers, the great majority of the region was imagined as being in the grip of an authoritarian spell which slowed down the flow of time transforming people into docile citizens (Lewis, 1982). These discourses depicted Islamic societies as an undifferentiated whole, unreceptive to processes of modernisation and economic development (Acevedo 2008: 1713; Huff and Schluchter 1999), scientific knowledge and new technologies (Hamdi 2009: 174).

The spark of what was initially defined by many as the 'Arab Spring' had among its numerous effects that of changing people's perception about the Arab world. The pieces of the mosaic were suddenly being moved, as if they were coloured pieces of glass in the tube of a kaleidoscope. 'Kaleidoscopic change' replaced older metaphors, describing a movement of recombination which would produce changing social patterns from a limited number of elements (Freeman, 2013).

As I am writing, much of the Middle East is in turmoil, and Yemen is facing a tragic civil war. While the Houthis are fighting to take the control of ʿAden, a Saudi Arabian-led coalition is carrying out airstrikes in the north of the country, in order to restore the 'legitimate' power of President 'Abdurabbuh Mansur Hadi. The conflict has so far caused thousands of victims, and among them some of the friends I remember in this work. How will the Middle East look like, when the kaleidoscope will finally stop turning?

This is a question no one can answer, but let it be said it addresses one of the core topics of this work: the relationship between historical change and social reproduction. The metaphor of the kaleidoscope depicts historical change as the outcome of the recombination of a limited number of elements. Yet this metaphor does not account for a fundamental characteristic of the processes I

describe in my work: simple patterns repeat at ever-increasing levels. In a 1978 article, "Does complementary exist?" P. Salzman introduced the notion of "structure in reserve," (ivi: 63) in order to explain the recurrent re-emergence of the segmentary model and its relationship with social behaviour. His point is that, in face of shifting historical circumstances, Middle Eastern people would deploy recurrent schemes to construct and organise their social world.

In my opinion, the idea of recurrent structures re-emerging against the backdrop of historical change is better understood through the metaphor of fractals, suggested by U. Fabietti.[1] Fractals are models in which patterns recur at progressively smaller scales, and they explain how ordered patterns can repeat themselves in disordered ways. The outcome is history.

The outstanding structural changes which occurred in Yemen over one century of history neatly contradict the image of as a 'static tableau'. Starting from the end of the 19th century, Yemeni people have experimented the Ottoman occupation, the imamate and the republic; two civil wars (1962-1970 and 1994) have torn apart the country, and a third one is ongoing, creating new identities, new loyalties and new foes through violence; foreign investments and capitalism have transformed the economic structure; infrastructures have prompted new possibilities of exchange and a different perception of space-time; a capillary system of public instruction has created new roles and new criteria for social ranking; demographic explosion has led to a fragmentation of land and to the abandoning of subsistence agriculture; and so forth.

Now, in spite of all these macro-structural changes, on a 'smaller scale' the genealogical imagination still retains a fundamental role in crafting selves and organising society. It would be unrealistic to affirm that persons are defined as a 'whole' by the fact of belonging to a lineage. What I am arguing is that genealogical consciousness has a generative role in shaping life trajectories and horizons of future possibilities. This holds true even if we consider low-status groups. The case of *beny al-khumus* (cf. Ch. 2) well demonstrates how genealogies not only provide an essentialist vocabulary to construct the Other, but they also provide a positive principle of self-identification. Separating these two poles—the genealogical construction of Selves and Others—cannot but lead to analytical distortions.

The imaginative dimension of genealogical consciousness has its material counterpart in the genealogical capital. Whatever the idiosyncrasies of specific human beings, genealogical capital retains a fundamental role in constructing persons who are defined in their physical and moral constitution by the structured dispositions of a *habitus*, and perceived as 'naturally' different. Although, in contemporary Yemen, an increasing degree of interaction between social groups is

1 Personal communication.

leading to a thinning of these differences, in the domain of conjugal choices the principle holds still that ‘blood doesn't lie’. The groups with whom I worked were completely endogamic, and the only case of hypergamy I witnessed led to the disastrous consequences which I discuss in Chapter 3.

In contemporary Yemen, lineages still provide a basic unit and a model for the reciprocal acts which constitute the base (Gudeman, 2005) of a community. On the level of a *beyt*, practices of sharing are considered a duty and constitute the very essence of belonging and the substance of corporateness. The base can be extended by means of reciprocal acts beyond the boundaries of agnatic groups, and a privileged channel for this extension is constituted by ties of locality and affinity. The case of Kuthreh is a paramount example of how reciprocal acts can constitute a political community out of a number of lineages with no common ancestry. ‘Brotherhood’ is just a metaphor symbolising a community which is kept together by spatial contiguity and networks of reciprocity. Being included is, first and foremost, a matter of participating in specific regimes of value.

Distinctions grounded on the macro-genealogical level set the boundaries of endogamy. These distinctions are further specified on the micro-genealogical level, creating sub-kinship networks on the basis of *isogamy*. Kinship networks are tied to regimes of value in complex and subtle ways, which I have analysed throughout this work. Being excluded from a kinship network equals being excluded from particular regimes of value; this is the place where essentialism and inclusion/exclusion meet social ranking. It is interesting to note that emerging political movements (e.g. al-Houthi and Islah) attempt to extend their influence by means of an egalitarian language which refers to marriage and reciprocity: they literally promise a world were conjugal choices will be freed from genealogical considerations. Hierarchy and endogamy walk side by side and, from this perspective, endogamy lies at the core of the hierarchical order of highland Yemen.

The ‘simple’ patterns that we can describe at the level of the lineage recur at higher levels, producing random outcomes. In this sense, the Yemeni social organisation is ‘fractal’. Consider, as a last example, the division of labour. In contemporary Yemen, every citizen is free to access the labour market. ‘Traditional’ professions are slowly fading away, and new professions are emerging. However, these new professions are still socially constructed by means of a fundamental principle: work, morality and lineages cannot be separated. This principle keeps shaping the organisation of the labour market. New professions gradually become associated with certain social groups, identified by means of their origins. Car-washing is for Somalian; street-cleansing is for the black *akhdām*; instruction is for people from Taʿiz; and so forth.

Even if we consider ‘traditional’ professions, they almost retain nothing of their old shape.

Barbers, nowadays, work in modern saloons, and they do not serve anymore (or not necessarily); musicians play keyboards, lutes, or even modern DJ consoles; bloodletters have abandoned horns in favour of cups; and so forth. To say it with Ahmed ash-Shāmy, “What endures is the principle:” certain tasks are the specialisation of certain lineages, and this connection is the result of historical struggles. What makes certain professions ‘shameful’ is their connection with stigmatised groups of outsiders.

Moving from this last point, we can eventually reconsider the tripartite model of social ranking. As I have attempted to demonstrate throughout my work, the association between lineages and work, on the one hand, and lineages and social institutions, on the other, have never been biunivocal as it is depicted by the model, not even during the ancient regime. Tasks that we would consider ‘traditionally’ associated with *beny al-khumus* were in many cases a prerogative of the Jews (Wagner, 2015). The association between professions and lineages was a dynamic process and the outcome of contested fields of struggle. The tripartite model is, thus, a prominent case of invention of the tradition (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983).

The tripartite model has emerged as an instrument of political propaganda, contributing to the essentialisation of social groups on the macro-genealogical level. Yet the distinction in *sayyids*, *ʿarabs*, and *beny al-khumus* is not a product of the political power of the imams. These social categories are reproduced by social actors themselves and grounded on the principle that the essence of human beings is transmitted from one generation to another, along a line of descent. Genealogies structure the relationship between human beings, in the present as well as in the past, and human beings are now as their ancestors were then. This principle I call genealogical imagination, and it states that *al-ʿirq dassās*: blood doesn't lie.

Appendix

Chapter 2

Part 1 - Kinship Networks

In what follows my aim is to present the kinship network of two families belonging to *beny al-khumus*. Much anthropology has represented Arab genealogies depicting the sole paternal line of descent. Whether scholars describe a "public/private" opposition of domains (Bourdieu, 1977), a "genealogical amnesia" which suppresses matrilateral links (Murphy and Kasdan, 1967) or an endogamous unilineal descent group (Patai, 1965), they always recognise that, in the Middle East, genealogical models tend to exclude affinity ties. If we only refer to written and oral genealogies, this is certainly true. However, matrilateral kinship ties hold a fundamental practical function and constitute the object of a painstakingly accurate 'horizontal' knowledge. I have taken into account the practical function of matrilateral kinship ties in chapter 2 and 6. Here I shall focus on the 'horizontal' form of this knowledge.

Whereas genealogies have a vertical, diachronic dimension, the construction of matrilateral kinship ties is synchronic, with reference to the genealogical level, and horizontal. To my greatest surprise, when I started enquiring marriage strategies, I discovered that the vast majority of my interlocutors had an almost complete knowledge of their entire kinship network. In order to collect and represent the kinship network of different families, I proceeded as follows.

Firstly, I used to ask my interlocutors to list their whole line of descent. Starting from themselves, they would list their ancestors up to the eponymous ancestor of the *beyt*, usually 3 or 5 generations removed. Once I wrote the main line of descent, starting from the eponymous ancestor, I would enquire each genealogical level, expanding the descent of each male member of the family. Interestingly, my interlocutors would also list female members of the lineage[1].

Once I had completed this preliminary work, I started enquiring affinity ties. Surprisingly, adult members of each lineage had a complete knowledge of these ties, covering at least two generations. However, they did not know how to represent them in a linear, diachronic form. The overall picture of a kinship network was thus constructed as a ladder (the paternal line) which gave access to

1 I never asked the names of female members of the families, only their genealogical position. Most of my interlocutors, however, were not concerned about the names of their female ancestors. They only hid the names of young, living women.

multiple floors (affinity ties).

Even though, in many cases, my interlocutors had a profound knowledge of the genealogical structure of their kin's lineages, they rarely ventured in this territory. After all, that was the dominion of their *ansāb* and *akhwāl*, the periphery of their kinship network. What mattered were the ties, the bridges between the two domains. Generally speaking, I collected most of the information from trusted people of each family. The work was, in fact, huge and it took many hours (if not days) for each kinship network. After this preliminary step, I rechecked missing information and uncertain data with other members of each family.

Below I have sketched three kinship networks. I have constructed them by means of Gephi, a network analysis software. Even in a 3D environment I could not represent the verticality of generations, as a family tree would do: the graph would have been too complex and too confused. For the sake of clarity, I have thus decided to spatialise diachronic relationships. Older generations are represented by bigger symbols. Ego's lineage is red, whereas affines are yellow. Lineages and locality are represented by a pentagon. Patrilineal descent is described by black lines ending with an arrow, marriages by a black double line. Clusters are created by the software itself, showing major or minor degrees of proximity between the nodes of the graph. These ties need to be understood, in anthropological terms, as channels of communication and vectors of everyday practices.

Figure 5 represents the kinship network of Beyt Zuleīṭ, the *muzayyins* of Kuthreh. The whole number of marriages is between people from *beny al-khumus*. When marriages are not within the lineage of Beyt Zuleīṭ itself, they are justified by ties of spatial contiguity. The villages I call Armis, Murjān, Amreh, Hithat, and Shimās are situated in Bilād al-Bustān, and are reachable by foot from Kuthreh. The only exception is Beny Ḥārith.

Figure 6 represents the kinship network of Beyt al-Amīn, bath-attendants from Ṣanʿāʾ. Being Beyt al-Amīn a historical lineage from Ṣanʿāʾ, this configuration is a bit different. Rather than 'moving out', people from Ṣanʿāʾ have a wide spectrum of available options for marriage in the old city itself. Moreover, following the process of urbanisation which started during the mid 1980's, they acquainted with numerous lineages coming from the countryside. Beyt al-Hamdāny, al-Jaūfy, al-ʿAmrāny, and so on, belong to the countryside. However, they are people from *beny al-khumus* in their respective places of origin. This fact, proved by their professions in Ṣanʿāʾ, is also confirmed by their titles. A *qabīly* of *ʿarab* or *sayyid* origins would never use the name of his tribe as a title. *Qabīlys* always specify their place of origin, their village, the place where their reputation can be confirmed and where they own lands.

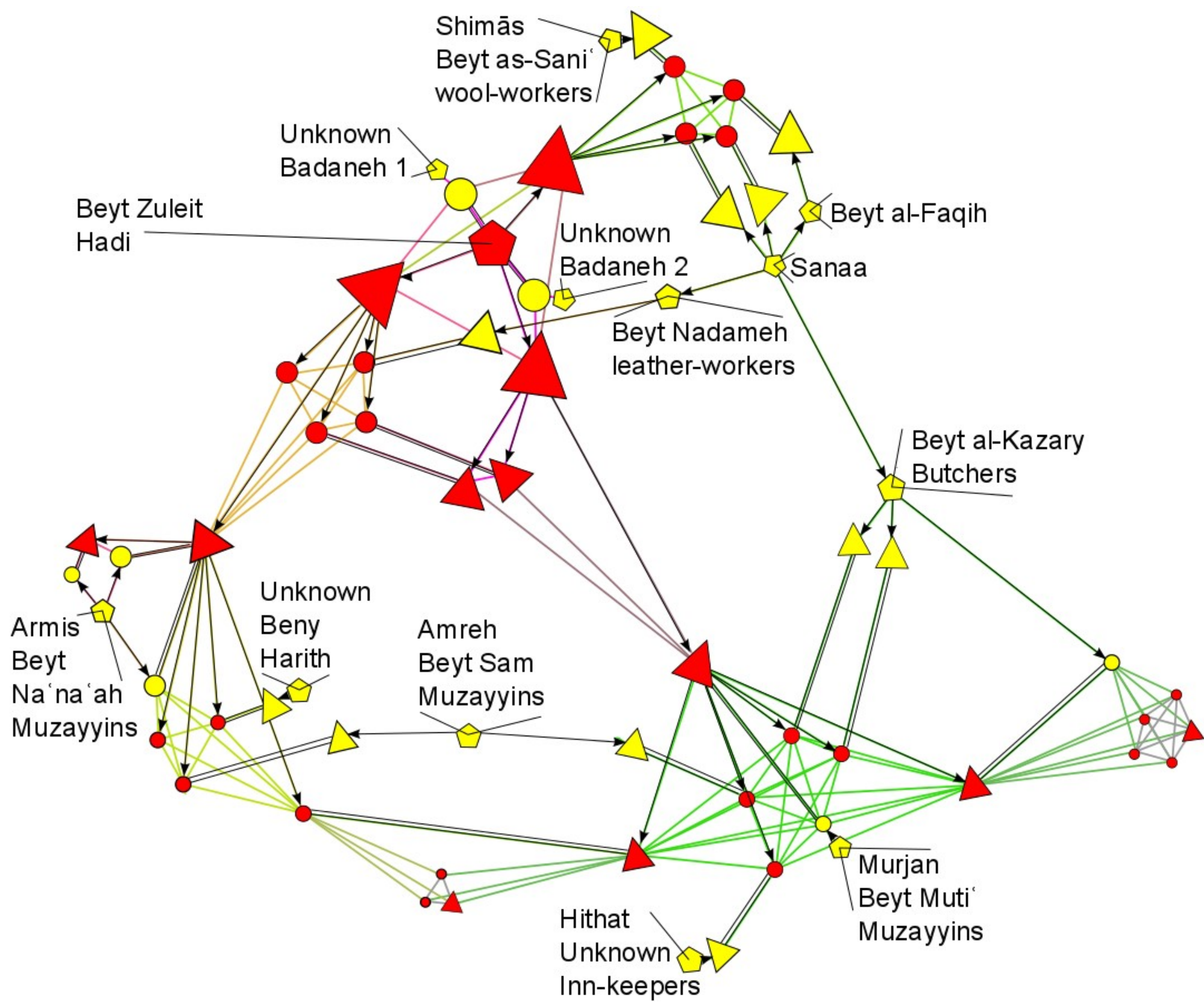


Figure 7 – The kinship network of Beyt Zuleīṭ

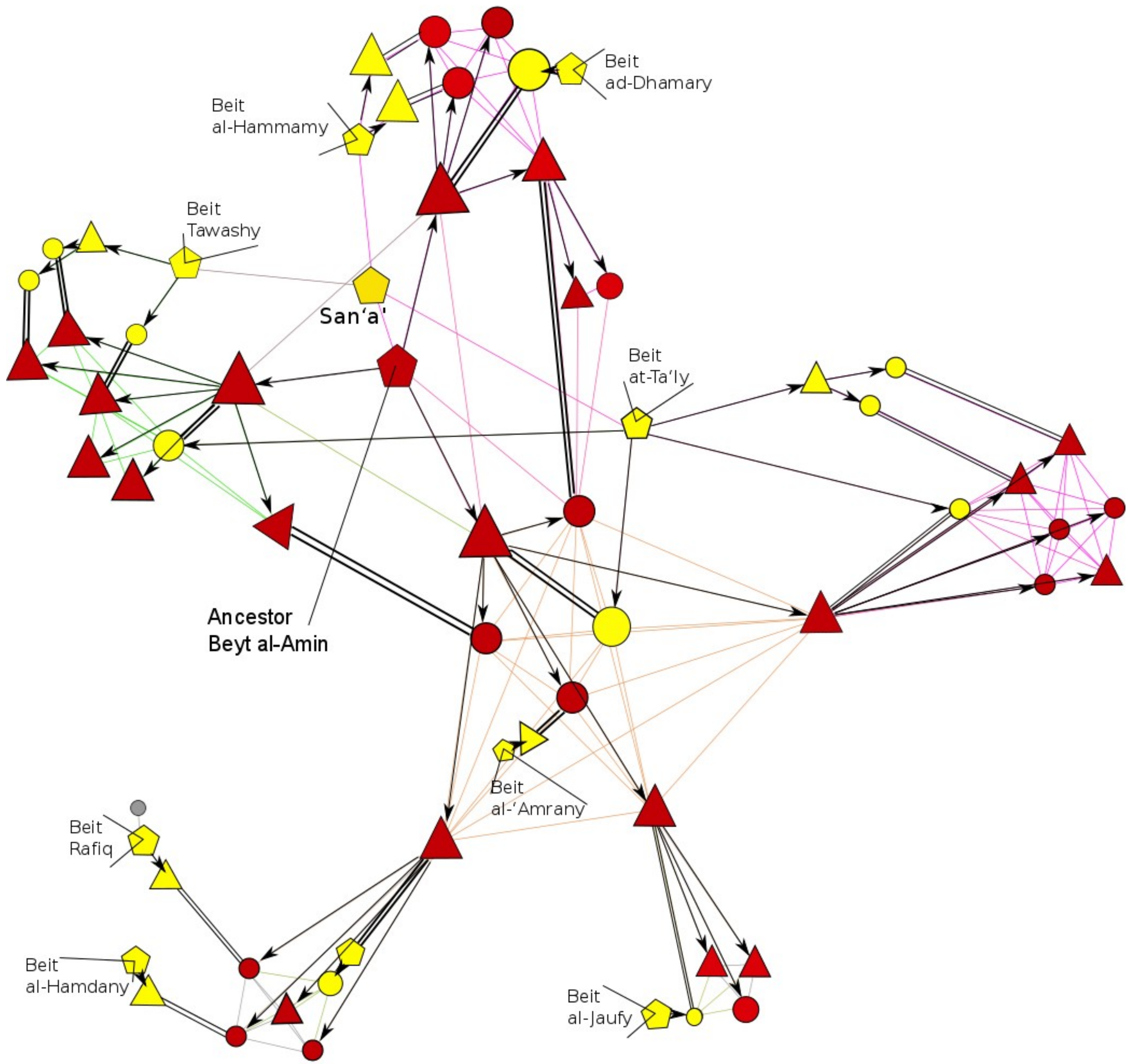


Figure 8 – The kinship network of Beyt al-Amīn

Beyt ʿAnbarūd

I have recorded this interview with Ismaʿil ʿAnbarūd, a 25-year-old circumciser while we were chewing *qāt* in his tower-house in the Old City of Ṣanʿāʾ, in company with his paternal uncle. Ismaʿil described his ancestor as a man of science, a man of outstanding qualities. Moreover, he depicted Beyt ʿAnbarūd as a lineage of Sultans, probably referring to the Mamluk Burji dynasty of Egypt.

> Our origin... We are sultans (*ṣalāṭinā*). We are ʿAnbarūd, I mean, the origin of our forefathers... They were sultans. There's a sultan in Egypt... In Egypt there's a ʿAnbarūd mosque, a ʿAnbarūd town... In Yemen, in Ans... In Ans, this is what we heard, there's a village, or a quarter, and they are from Beyt ʿAnbarūd. In Bilād ar-Ruʾūs there's Beyt ʿAnbarūd. Because we... In Taʿiz, there's Beyt ʿAnbarūd. This is what my father told me... And the origin, my father says that we are sultans. And the ʿAnbarūd who entered this profession, the one who entered this profession... He was from Ans. My father says that there was one ʿAnbarūd... One from the righteous people (*ahl al-ḥaqq*)... He was a believer, would wear the *thūmah*. Like the *sayyids*. He had blue eyes, and his face... God has willed it! He was strong, strong... Not fat, nor weak... This man from Beyt ʿAnbarūd was strong, trustworthy (*muṣaddaq*). My father told me that he was able to heal the people from their head down to their feet... […] My father said that our forefathers fled... The grandfather of my grandfather fled to Ṣanʿāʾ... [...]

Beyt al-Ḥammāmy

I have recorded this interview with ʿAbdullah al-Ḥammāmy, a bath attendant (approximately 30-year-old). We were alone, chewing *qāt* in his tower-house in the Old City of Ṣanʿāʾ. As in many other accounts, the ancestor is here described as a *qabīly* who fled after killing someone. Being in need after the flight, he started working as a bath-attendant.

> **Luca:** Can we start from Beyt al-Ḥammāmy? Is your origin from Ṣanʿāʾ or from somewhere else?
>
> ʿ**Abdullāh:** Our ancestor (*al-jadd al-awwal ḥaqqanā*), his origin is from Nihm, from Bilād al-Ḥānashāt. My grandfathers, my uncles and my fathers, explained to us that our grandfather, this one from Nihm, fled from our village because he killed someone. So he

left his village, over there. So he arrived in Ṣanʿāʾ, and he asked God to work. So he worked in everything he could find. Until he found a work in a bathhouse (*ḥammām*), and given the situation he accepted... So he got married, he lived his life, and he had a progeny. His sons inherited the *ḥammām*, and they got married and they had a progeny. Our origin (*al-aṣl ḥaqqa-nā*) was from Beyt Jābir. Our origin is Jābir. Until my ancestor entered the *ḥammām*: that's it! People from Ṣanʿāʾ gave him the title al-Ḥammāmy, until it became a habit to call him al-Ḥammāmy. Otherwise, he was from Beyt Jābir.

Luca: They judged that he had to work in the *ḥammām*, or he chose the *ḥammām*?

ʿ**Abdullāh:** He worked in any task, until he found the *ḥammām*... He entered the *ḥammām*.

Luca: Did he buy it or was it *waqf* [a religious endowment]?

ʿ**Abdullāh:** *Waqf*! Until now, it is *waqf*... He got married, he worked, he had a progeny... His sons helped him, then they got married, and then the sons of his sons got married and they inherited the *ḥammām*... [It went] this way, and the rent was for the *waqf*. And they lived for years, even now, and it belongs to the *waqf*. And all of them had children, and all of them would work in the *ḥammām*. And we all inherit our turn in the *ḥammām*. […] My father had four daughters... He would work, and get tired... He traded in India, while working here... Until I grew up, and I was 7. I started to study... I studied, studied, studied, till the second grade in high school. I worked and studied, to help my father: every time we had a turn, for the whole week. And I helped my father... Until my father got tired and I grew up, and he left the *ḥammām* for me. Now I work in the *ḥammām* by myself. **I worked in the *ḥammām* like my father used to do, I did what my father used to do. I do like that until now. And my father watched what his father used to do. So that we obtained our experience one after the other.**

Beyt Jazzāry

Beyt Jazzāry is a lineage of butchers, whose ancestor started working as a tanner in Bāb ash-Shuʿūb. In this recording, I collected the life history of *shaykh* ʿAbdullah Jazzāry, the shaykh of butchers in Bāb as-Sabāḥ. Quite unexpectedly, Zayd Jazzāry, one of his nephews, provided me with an account regarding the origin of his lineage. In this case, the ancestor is said to have run away with his wife, with whom he had been urged not to marry. This excerpt starts with the *shaykh* explaining how the *sayyids* divided people in social strata.

ʿ**Abdullāh:** People didn't mix up…. He didn't let the people mix up, as they do today… He distinguished people: this is a *qashshām*, *qashshām*! This is a butcher, butcher! This is a bath-attendant, bath-attendant! This sectarism comes from there, this sectarism, this racism (*ʿunṣūriyyah*).

Luca: Especially if one fled from vengeance, or from any trouble… He left the tribes and he entered Ṣanʿāʾ, in this third stratum… Right? This is what I've heard… For example, what's the origin of Beyt Jazzāry?

Zaīd: Once I met [one person], I told my uncle already to come there with me. We were entering the desert, and someone invited us. This one who invited us was Sabry, from Ta'iz. He invited us to chew *qāt* and the paramount *shaykh* of Taʾmīn, of all the divisions of the touristic police, was there. [This *shaykh*] heard, "Yā Zayd Jazzāry", while he was on his car. And we were on one of his cars, with guides carrying wood. He called ʿAbdulghany, and told him, "Where is he? Where is he? I heard calling Jazzāry... Yā Zaydī or yā Zayd Jazzāry." So the one who was on the car called me, and he said, "Jazzāry from where?" So I didn't enter the desert and I chewed with him. We let the tourists move to the cars, and I stayed with him in Maʾrib, in his hotel, "The Throne of Bilqīs." So we talked, and he recounted me, "There are Jazzāry among our people and they are a *shaykhs*." The biggest farms from Wādy ʿAbīdeh belong to them. His mother was from Beyt Jazzāry.

[…] So I came back alone and they hosted me and they told me things. They were all *shaykhs* from Beyt Jazzāry. The *shaykh* ʿAbdullah ʿAbdullah Ahsan Hussein Jazzāry. He hosted me for one day, and he never said the word 'butchers'. The following day, at dinner, he explained me that our grandfather in Shuʿūb and their grandfather belonged to one family. There was one of them, one from Maʾrib, that fled... He fled... He and his wife. He loved a woman and he fled. He fled to Ṣanʿāʾ, he stayed in sūq al-Milḥ, an then he worked with a Jew, a tanner. He told me like this, and he said, "Look, I would pay 20, 25 million dollars to change the task of the sons of Muʿid Jazzāry."

The story of Saʿad al-Kāmil - ʿAli ʿAbdulhamid

I recorded this interview in the *diwān* of ʿAli ʿAbdulhamid al-Kuthry, a sixty years old man of *sayyid* descent. He gathered the information contained in the first part of the story from his father—who worked as a teacher during the Mutawakkilite Kingdom—and from some 'old books', which I had the chance to consult in his house.[2] The second part of the story is the account of a speech event to which ʿAli participated, in Shimās, with an old man of *ʿarab* origin.[3] The contours of the setting are specified in the interview itself.

First part:

ʿ**Ali**: Let's talk, oh master of people, about the story of Saʿad al-Kāmil, about his story. He

2 Being these books badly ruined, I could not get the references. Generally speaking, they only contained sporadic references to Saʿad al-Kāmil.

3 I interviewed Moḥammed Munīf and he recounted me the same story, yet I prefer to report, here, ʿAli's version. While the plot is almost the same, this version is, in fact, more linear and complete.

was a Himyarite king, and he, this Saʿad al-Kāmil, his name was not Saʿad al-Kāmil. His name was Ḥimyār. He was given the title Saʿad al-Kāmil because his land, during his days, was a place of prosperity (*saʿd*), of good chances (*suʿūd*). Life was blessed. Everything was cheap: meat, crops... God sent the rain abundantly. So it is said that he was the Ḥimyarite king, but why did they call him Ḥimyary? It is said, and God knows better, that [his face] had one human side (*ṣābir min beny ādam*) and one donkey side (*ṣābir min ḥimār*). This is what I've heard. For this reason, they called him Ḥimyār. And until now, on the books which I have found, the old books, they say that he is called al-Ḥimyār, Ḥimyār, but they do not know what's the meaning of Ḥimyār. This is what the books say, many books. And now I will tell you the story.

Let's say my brother, that once a woman went to him to complain. The guards, his guards, didn't let her reach him. Later, she found his son. The son of the Himyarite king called Saʿad al-Kāmil. And there's a second nickname for him: Shammār ʿIrāsh. He was called Shammār ʿIrāsh because, it is said, whoever met him to talk, the one who talked in front of the king, trembled (*yirtaʿish*). So he had two titles: Shammār ʿIrāsh and Saʿad al-Kāmil.

So she found the son of the Himyarite king, Saʿad al-Kāmil, and she said, "I came already many times, I want to reach your father to complain, but I can't get in." So the son said... His son was playing with a stick and a ball, a silver ball... A small ball, let's say 5 square centimetre, or 10. Like that plastic ball, you know it? Like that one, but silver. And the stick was golden. And she complained with him. He said, "Sit here, until my father comes. Then tell him, 'who's the one who created you with one human side and one donkey side?'" He was always walking with his face covered. No one knew it. So that [when she said so,] he gave her his attention...

He gave her his attention... "What does she want? What's wrong with her?" So he called her, he invited her to reach him. She arrived and she said, "I'm oppressed." "I want... Forgive me." He said, "I forgive you." He took her in the middle of the room. He said, "I just want from you one thing. What did you say to me? [You said,] 'Who is the one who...?'" [She replied,] "Who's the one who created you with one human side and one donkey side?" [He said,] "And how did you know about such a thing?" She said, "A boy told me, the one who plays with the silver ball and the golden stick." He knew that the boy was his son. He said, "Ah, ok." No one knew, except his wife and his sons, that he had a human side and... Only them. So he knew that his son sold his secret.

And it is said that this one, Saʿad al-Kāmil, discovered springs, springs of water. I mean, in Yemen. And he hid many treasures... The proverb goes, "Fulān's father doesn't hide his wealth, but for his heir, for his son." Golden treasures, and statues, things of this sort... And he was stopping up the springs... So they told him, "Why do you stop up the springs?" And it wasn't avarice... "Fulān's father doesn't hide his wealth, but for his heir, his son, his heirs." This is what I knew about the story.

Second part:

ʿ**Ali:** The second part...

Luca: Is this a legend (*usṭūrah*), in Yemen?

ʿ**Ali:** No, it's not a legend... There's no legend. It is said that this is reality (*ḥaqīqah*). And I've heard a similar story, more or less two months ago. Now we are in November, 2012. It was October... I told you! After Ramaḍān, in Shaʿwāb. October 2012. I went to Shimās, I was searching for *qāt*. I found there two *mukhazzinīn* that invited me to chew with them. I got in and I started to chew, they gave me *qāt* from there... From the brother of this *mukhazzin* [...]. Next to me there was Moḥammed ʿAli Munīf, he is from Shimās. "*Ahlan, ḥayyā Allāh man je...* Sit *sayyid* ʿAli." The one talking is Moḥammed Munīf. They were recounting a story. I said, "What story is this? What are you talking about?" He said, "I was explaining to ʿAbd-ul-Jabbār the story of *beny al-khumus*, when they labelled them *beny al-khumus*." For example: the *muzayyin*, the *qashshām*, the *ṣāniʿ*... And the *Dawshān*! They are five. I said, "Yes, how is their story?" He said, "Their story starts with the king Saʿad al-Kāmil... A woman reached him to complain. And she said to him, "Who's the one who created you..." So he asked her, [and she said,] "Some thieves robbed me." "From where?" "Foreigners, not from Yemen... From America!" She said, "They stole from my house, they stole from my cattle, for example from the sheep and the goat, rams..." So the king Saʿad al-Kāmil arranged an army, and it advanced on these thieves. They had precedents, they stole many things..."

This is what he explained me. He told me that [the king] enlisted soldiers, he appointed a chief and advanced on the thieves, because they knew where they fled... Where did they flee? To "Ẓalamāt". Where is this Ẓalamāt? He told me, "I don't know, abroad, towards America." [...] So they arrived to Ẓalamāt. They attacked this place, and the group of the thieves. The official entered with them, not the king... He was like a chief of the unit. He was very smart. [The king] told his official, "You have to reach Ẓalamāt, enter and take back everything that was stolen." And everyone started scooping the place, everyone scooped the soil. Because half of this soil was gold. You see how clever? [...] So everyone was scooping... So let's say that they were 5.000... When they got out, everyone had soil with him. 5 kilos, 10 kilos... And half of it was gold... Everyone got out... From the 5.000 thousand, 4.000 thousand brought the soil. The fifth thousand didn't bring the soil. So they said, "Ok, you will be the servants for those who brought the soil." They prepare the food, they play for them bass drums (*ṭabl*, pl. *ṭubūl*)... [...] And he organised them: these will cook, these will play the bass drums... For example, 200 hundred play, 200 cook, 200 shave, 200 encourage the army—they are *ad-dawāshīn*. I don't know, he didn't remember the *ṣāniʿ* in this story... And the *qashshām* either. The blood-letter, if there was anyone sick, he can suck the blood from his head... [...] They called them *beny al-khumus*.

Luca: And why this fifth did not enter to get the soil?

ʿAli: Because they were cowards... The other people were courageous, strong. And they caught the thieves and they recovered the loot...

Chapter 3

Document 1

The rule promulgated by the ʿāqil *ʿAbdulhamid Shams ad-Dīn in 1899 (1316 h.)*

In the name of God, the most gracious, the most merciful.

All praise and thanks to God, who guided us to this, otherwise we would have not followed divine guidance, if God had not guided us. All praise and thanks to God, who drove the sins (*maʿāṣy*) away from *us* and from *the people of our land.* Sins that hindered[4] our sustenance (*arzāq-nā*) from the trees and from the rest. And the catastrophe that struck us was sent from God because of our actions (*aʿmāl-nā*). And there is no doubt that *the catastrophe regards the collectivity, while mercy regards the individual*. All praise and thanks to God, who prevented us from [persevering with] that [sins].

And [God] exalted be Him said already, "So take warning, oh people of vision.[5]" And [God] exalted be Him said, "And let those who oppose the Messenger's order beware, lest some *Fitnah* befall them or a painful torment be inflicted on them.[6]" And this is an order from God, exalted be Him. So he who opposed God exalted be Him, he already did wrong (*āsā*), he encroached (*taʿaddā*), [ ]. And after this: it was the first Thursday of Ramaḍān 1316 (h.), and most of the people of Kuthreh attended. So we discussed of the forbidden things (*manākir*) that caused God to get angry with us. So we found them, and they are what follows. And God did not get angry with us except for them, so we persevered until we forbade them. And [one of them] is the bass drum (*ṭabl*). And He, slslm [the Prophet] said already, "God cursed the percussionist (*al-muṭabbil*) and he for whom he plays (*al-muṭabbal leh*)." And likewise he forbid women's howl (*aḥjār*[7] *an-nisā*), the *wulwulah*, and likewise he forbid the people to enter each other's houses without men's permission, because such an act calls for sins. And God already ordered us not to enter without the permission of the people of the house. We decided for he who infringes those [rules] a fine of ten riyals, and all the companions agreed. A nation (*qaūm*) is never destroyed but because of [the behaviour] of one person. So we created this rule (*qāʿidah*) by the hand of our *ʿāqil*, the *sayyid* ʿAbdulhamid Ibn Mohammed Shams ad-Dīn. And we are with the right of God next to him, because we all agreed already, since we have frequent news of the agreement of the absents. And with this we remove what is forbidden (*al-munkar*) and we put an end to chaos (*fitnah*). And it is a duty for every adult male (*mukallif*) and every Muslim. God renovates the good actions and destroys the morally deviant, and in the name of God circumstances will get better, through the love of Mohammed and his people.

4 The verb is *kaff*, *yikiff*. It is used, in this context, as a synonym of *manaʿ*.
5 Qur'an 59: 2. In the document, the original verse "*fa-ʾiʿtabirū yā ʾaūlī al-ʾabṣār*", is turned into "*fa-ʾiʿtabirū yā āl al-ʾabṣār.*"
6 Qur'an 24: 63.
7 This peculiar sound, made by women in ritual occasions, is called in dialect *ḥajar* (pl. *aḥjār*). The verb is *ḥajar*, *yiḥjir.*

وقد حلفت بالله العظيم ثلاث ايمان انه لا نطرب طبل للنساء ولا لغيرهن وكان الحلف في شهر محرم الحرام العام ١٣١٨ه

بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم

حسبي الله كفى كتابه العزيز ولا يأب كاتب ان يكتب كما علمه الله

الحمد لله الذي هدانا لهذا وما كنا لنهتدي لولا ان هدانا الله الحمد لله الذي اذهب عنا وعن
اهل بلدنا اكثر المعاصي التي كشفت عنا ارزاقنا من اشجار وغيرها وهذه مصيبة صابتنا من الله حال اعمالنا
ولا شك ان المصيبة تعم والرحمة تخص الحمد لله الذي نهانا عن ذلك وقد قال تعالى فاعتبروا يا اولي
الابصار وقال تعالى فليحذر الذين يخالفون عن امره ان تصيبهم فتنة او يصيبهم عذاب اليم وهذا امر من
الله تعالى فمن خالف الله تعالى فقد اساء وتعدى وجزاه شر الموعد وبئس فانه لما كان يوم
اول شهر رمضان سنة ١٣١٦ حضر واكثر اصحابنا اهل حمل ثم اتانا ناهينا عن المناكر التي غضب الله
علينا بها فوجدناها وهي التي تكون ما غضب علينا الا بسببها فامرنا وجمعنا على منع ذلك
وهو الطبل وقد قال صلى الله عليه وسلم لعن الله الطبل والمطبل ومما منع اجحار النساء وهي الى المولد ومما منع عدم
دخول الناس بيوتهم بعضا من دون اذن الرجال لان ذلك يؤدي الى ارتكاب المحارم
ومن قد امرنا الله ان لا ندخل الا باذن اهلها اعني البيوت وقد جعلنا [illegible] على من خالف ذلك
عشر ريال جزاء فعله وقد رضوا بذلك جميع الاصحاب وما يهلك قوم الا بسبب واحد وقد
جعلنا هذه القاعدة بيد عاقلنا الوالد السيد عبد الحميد بن محمد شملان [illegible] ونحن بخيته الله عليه لان قد
رمينا بذلك جميع بسبب الاخبار المتواترة بارضنا عن الغايبين وهذا امر انه منكر وان اتى
الا فتنة فهو واجب على كل مكلف مسلم والله نصلح اعمال الصالحة ونخرب الفاسدية والكتبة
عن امر الامور رقعة محمد ولد

هذه قاعدة على اصحابنا السادة الكرام اهل [illegible] اصلح الله شانهم

هذه قاعدة على اصحابنا السادة الكرام اهل [illegible] اصلح [illegible] شانهم

Document 2

The rule that extended new moral constraints on the ʿarabs of Kuthreh and to the neighbouring village of Shimās in 1901 (1319 h.)

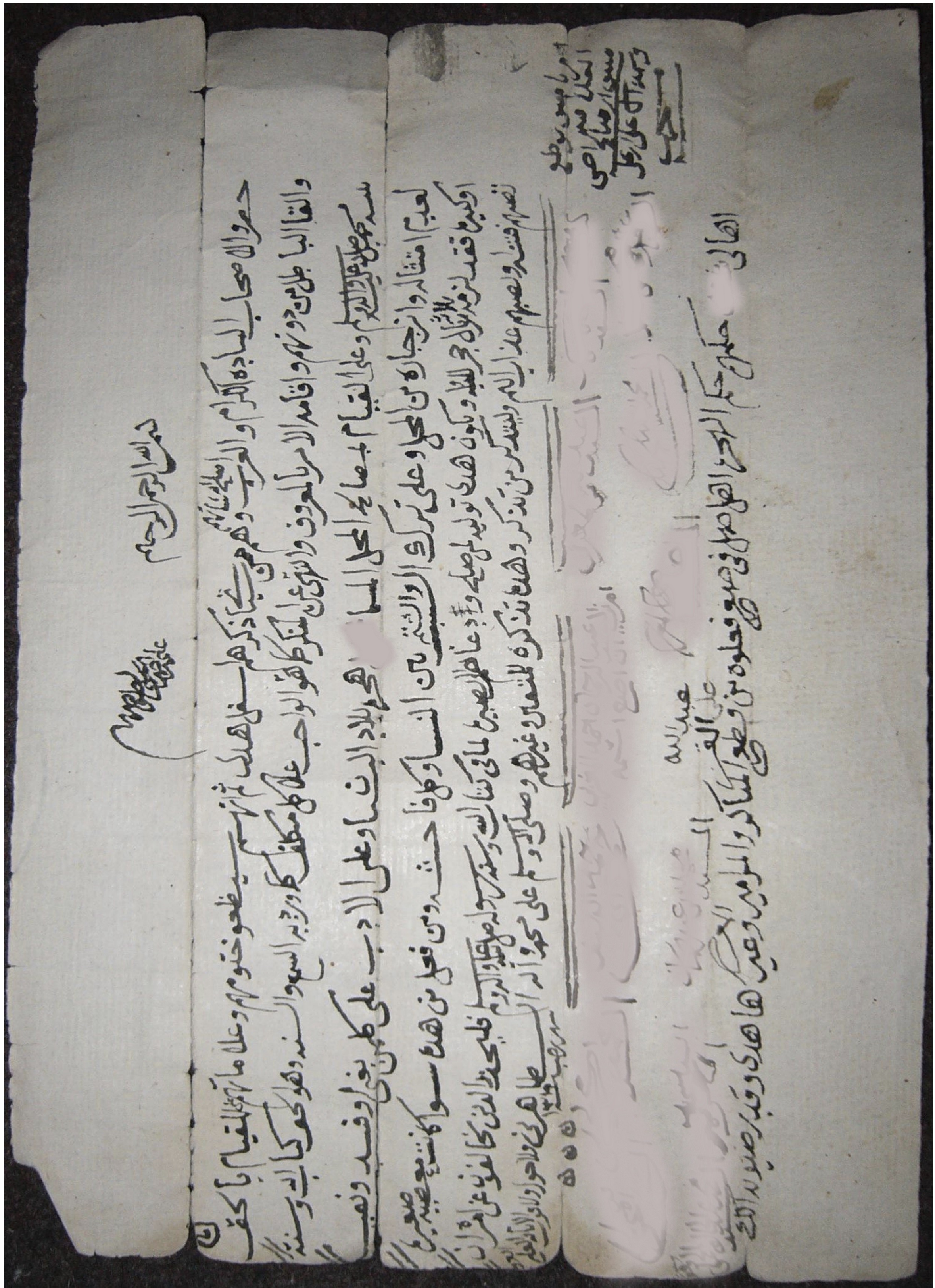
In the name of God, the most gracious, the most merciful.

Attended this meeting the noble *sayyids* and the *ʻarabs*, God rights their situation. And they were those whom are remembered below, and they will put their stamps and their signatures to uphold what is right and find what is wrong, and command what is just and forbid what is evil as it is a duty for all the adult men, a commanded obedience and support, and it is the right in the book of God and the Traditions of His Prophet Mohammed [ ]. And they stood in the interests of the place called Kuthreh Hijrat Bilād al-Bustān, and [they agree] on a fine for anyone who oppresses or corrupts or steals. **And he who doesn't conform to the rule will be exiled from the village**. And women have to abandon any insult or obscenity. And he who commit these things, small or big sins they are, must pay 3 riyal *ḥajar.*

Bottom of the document, under the signatures:

The people of Shimās have ratified the judgment (*ḥukm*) of the *hijrah* of the people of Kuthreh. They will cut what is wrong (*al-manākir*) and the double-flute (*al-mazāmīr*) and the rest. They have been guided and they already agreed with that.

The rule that extended new moral constraints on the ʿarabs of Kuthreh and to the neighbouring village of Shimās in 1901 (1319 h.)



Document 3

The first Daʾyān rule 1901 (1319 h.)

All praise and thanks to God who clarified the Truth and offered all the evidences of what is the noble *ḥalāl* and what is *ḥarām*. And this proof (*burhān*) is like the light of a lamp for the people who have reason (*ʿuqūl*) and a sound mind, those who are guided towards the revealed Truth in the book of the Lord of the Worlds: the Furqān[8]. [It provides] all the answers, and the superior religion[9] (*dīn*) among the religions, as God said:[10] "If anyone desires a religion other than submission to God, never will it be accepted of him." Which is the Truth, even if the heathen hated it. And from the glorious book, God has said: "And of mankind is he who purchases idle talks to mislead from the Path of Allah without knowledge, and takes it by way of mockery[11]" from the path of God [ ] towards [ ] music. And the Prophet said: "Two sounds are dissolute: the sound of a melody for the sake of idle and dancing and the double-flute of Satan." This fact is from the word of God [ ]. And the Prophet said: "The passion for singing and dancing is what gathers people, few or many they were, to idle and play, thus closing for them the doors of mercy. And God cursed them." And the Prophet said: "God forbade who listens to the sound of idle and singing from accompanying the honest people, and the witnesses and the right people." And ʿAli, peace upon him, said: "The first at singing was Iblīs, then he played (*zammar*) the double clarinet, eventually [ ]». And the Prophet said: "[ ] and don't be among those who follow what enrages God and don't despise His approval. He who is guided in enriched. So be careful when you enter dangerous (*muhalakāt*) and obscure (*mudalhimāt*) things of Fulān son of Fulān.[12]" And the *muzammir* (double-flute player) signed an agreement to forbid the double flute and the percussions because they are dangerous for the people and for the fruits. And the people that agreed to [swore their right] and they [have signed] on the bottom of this document. We ordered to be guided (*bi-l- hudā*) to all the noble Shiites[13] (*ash-shīʿah al-kirām*) of the *mikhlāf* Daʾyān and to implement this rule to all the *ʿāqils* and [ ] with that, their commitment to the punishment of God, and one riyal to be paid to the *ʿāqil*, for the entrance in what is false and deceitful of the truth and guidance. And God forbade them from these sins. So he who disobeys his order has to be careful, because chaos (*fitneh*) and a painful punishment will struck him. And peace upon those who followed the guidance, and the mercy of God and His blessing.

al-Qaʿedah, 1319.

8 Furqān is a Quranic term and it was often used as a synonym of Quran.
9 The word *dīn*, in this context, might be better translated as 'law'.
10 Quran 3: 85.
11 Quran 31: 6.
12 This is a hidden reference to an actual person, who was probably known by all the attending people.
13 This overt reference to Zaydī people as 'shīʿah' cannot but be interpreted against the backdrop of the Ottoman occupation.

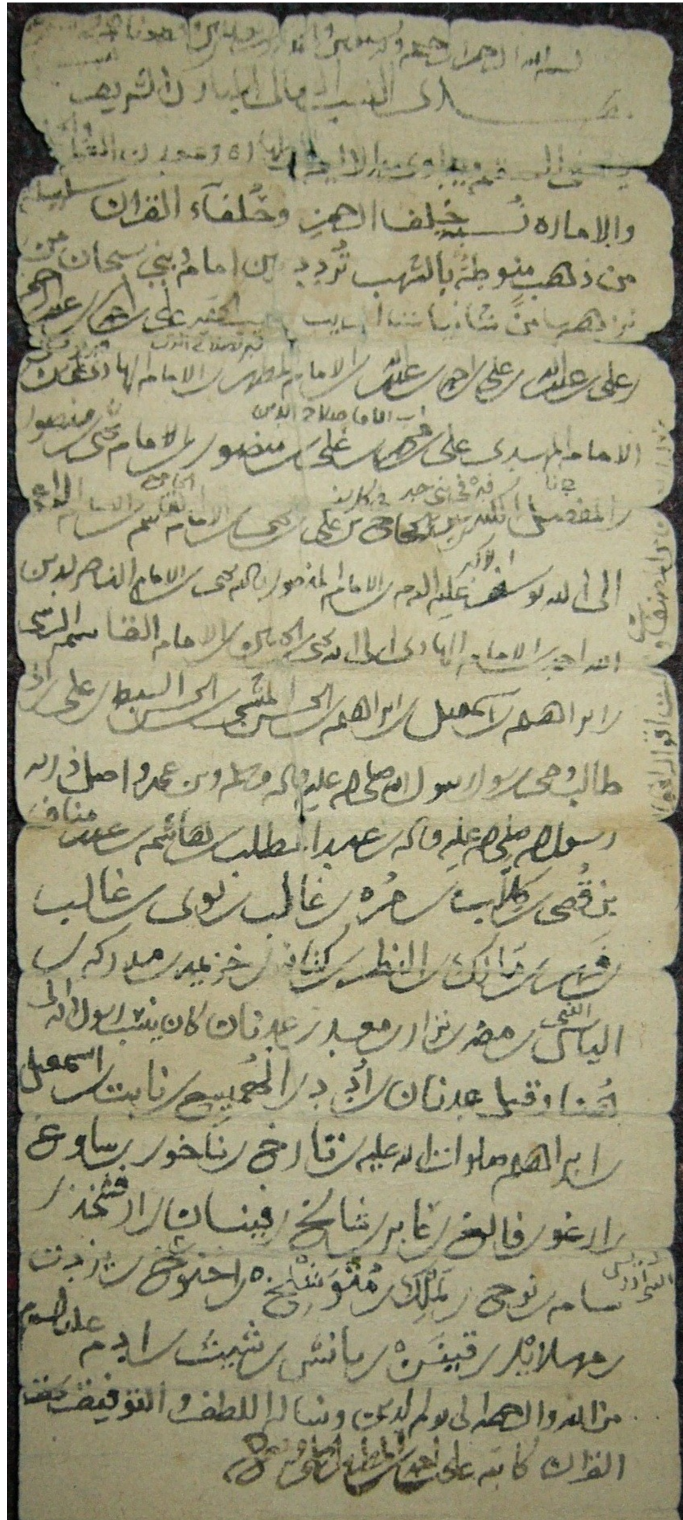
The first Daʾyān rule 1901 (1319 h.)

Document 4

The second Daʾyān rule, which imposes the application of the sharīʿah *law*

Document 5

The genealogy of Beyt al-Muṭahar, written by ʿAlī Aḥmed al-Muṭahar (transcription below, Document 9)


والإمارة نسبة خلفاء الرحمن وخلفاء القرآن
من ذهب منوطة بالشهب
الإمام المهدي علي بن محمد بن علي بن منصور بن الإمام يحيى بن منصور
إبراهيم بن إسماعيل بن إبراهيم بن الحسن المثنى بن الحسن السبط بن علي بن أبي
طالب بن عبد المطلب بن هاشم بن عبد مناف
بن قصي بن كلاب بن مرة بن كعب بن لؤي بن غالب
فهر بن مالك بن النضر بن كنانة بن خزيمة بن مدركة بن
الياس بن مضر بن نزار بن معد بن عدنان
إبراهيم صلوات الله عليه بن تارخ بن ناحور بن ساروغ
بن أرغو بن فالغ بن عابر بن شالخ بن قينان بن أرفخشذ بن
سام بن نوح بن لمك بن متوشلخ بن أخنوخ بن يارد بن
مهلائيل بن قينن بن أنوش بن شيث بن آدم عليه السلام

Document 6

The genealogy of Beyt Shams ad-Dīn

Line 1

الإمام الهادي يحيى ابن الحسين بن قاسم الرسي بن ابراهيم بن اسماعيل بن ابراهيم بن الحسن المُثَنَّ بن الحسن السَبط من امير المؤمنين علي بن ابو طالب

al-Imām al-Hādy Yaḥyā, son of al-Ḥuseīn, son of Qāsim ar-Rasy, son of Ibrāhīm, son of al-Ḥasan al-Muthannā, son of al-Ḥasan aṣ-Ṣabṭ Prince of the Believers ʿAlī Ibn Abū Ṭālib.

بن عبد المطّلب بن هاشم بن عبد المناف قصي بن كلاب بن مرّه بن كعب بن لؤي بن غالب بن قُرَيْش

son of ʿAbd-ul-Muṭṭalib, son of Hāshim, son of ʿAbd-ul-Manāf, son of Quṣaī, son of Kilāb, son of Murrah, son of Kaʿb, son of Luʾaī, son of Ghālib, son of Qureīsh.

Line 2

بن مالك بن النَضْر بن خُزيْمه بن مدركه بن نضر بن الياس بن مضر بن معد بن عدنان و منه الى الجد الاعلى بن اسمعيل بن ابراهيم الخليل عليه السلام نسب النبي صلّى الله عليه و آله و سلّم

son of Mālik, son of an-Naḍr, son of Khuzeīmah, son of Mudrikah, son of Naḍr, son of Eliās, son of Muḍar, son of Maʿadd, son of ʿAdnān. And from him to the highest ancestor, son of Ismāʿīl, son of Ibrāhīm al-Khalīl, peace upon him, the genealogy of the Prophet (*nasab an-naby*).

و من جهة الأم محمد بن آمنه بنت وهب بن عبد مناخ الى اخره

And from the maternal side, Moḥammed son of Āminah, daughter of Wahb, son of ʿAbd-u-Manākh, and so forth.

Line 3

و نسبه علي رضي الله عنّه من جهة الأم فاطمه بنت اسد بن هاشم بن عبد المناف و الى اخر

His son-in-law (*nasab*) ʿAlī, raḍī Allāh ʿanneh, from the side of his mother Fāṭimah daughter of Asad, son of Hāshim, son of ʿAbd-ul-Manāf, and so forth.

الاسلام قام على يد المصطفى و سيف المرتضى و من بعده الاسمى من اهل البيت الطاهره صلوة الله عليهم اجمعين امام المذهب الشريف

Islām was erected by hand of the Chosen and thanks to the sword of al-Murtaḍā, and after them from the highest and purest of the Ah al-Beīt, prayers of God upon Them, the Imam of the Noble School.

Line 4

الهادي لأمْر الله يحيى بن الحسين عليه السلام

He who guides by order of God, Yaḥyā son of al-Ḥussein, peace upon Him

صلى الله عليه، من[ ] جدّد بعلمه و سيفه المجرَّد

God pray upon Him, he who renewed with his science and his sword

و اللذي عليه للإرشاد بضَرْبَته نُصف اليمن هو الى منَ يرجع كل مِنْهُم

Under his sword half of Yemen submitted to his guidance. To him everyone returns.

حُرِّرت هذه ضعفاً عليَّ في المَبْصَر، ولدت في سنه ١٣٣٠ و الى تاريخ سنه ١٤٠٥، إنَّ العمر خمسه و سبعين سنه

I composed this [document] weak in sight. I was born in 1330 (1911) and in the year 1405 (1984) my age is 75 years.

شمس الدين ابن محمد

Shams ad-Dīn Ibn Moḥammed

Line 5

تَتَّصِل ذُرِّيَة احمد بن شمس الدين [بنت علي مغربي] بن علي الحج و بن حسن بن حسن بن احمد و بن عبد الرحمن بن الشرفي، وَسَعَتهم مِن عبد الرحمن بن علي بن احمد بن اسماعيل بن يحيى بن يحيى بن احمد سعدي، لقبا و سهم زيد بن اسماعيل بن علي بن احمد و [ ] شمس [ ] اصلا من عبد الرحمن بن احمد اخي محمد جد جد بني المغربي لقبا و منهم في المرون و الرجم انس كما شرح ادنى و هذا اصل المشجر الكامل لمن اراد الاطلاع.

Is connected the offspring of Aḥmed son of Shams ad-Dīn (daughter of ʿAlī Maghreby) son of ʿAlī al-Ḥajj and son of Ḥasan son of Ḥasan son of Aḥmed and son of ‘Abdurraḥman son of ash-Sharafy, their extension from ‘Abdurraḥman son of ‘Alī, son of Aḥmed, son of Ismāʿīl, son of Yaḥyā, son of Aḥmed Saʿdy (his nickname), and [ ] Zaīd son of Ismāʿīl son of ʿAlī son of Aḥmed and [ ] Shams [ ] originally from ‘Abdurraḥman son of Aḥmed brother of Moḥammed grandfather of the grandfather of the sons of al-Maghreby (nickname). And we find from their people in al-Marwan and in Rujm Ans as I explain below. And this is the complete tree of our origin for him who wants to walk through it.

بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم

و كما تسلسل نسبه الى النهايه من عند احمد بن شمس الدين و اخذ ربيعه و من اعلى ابائه و اجداده رحمهم الله رضي عنهم و الحقنا بهم صالحين.

In the name of God, the most gracious, the most merciful.

This is how the genealogy is concatenated (*tasalsal*) until its end from Aḥmed son of Shams ad-Dīn [ ] and from the highest fathers and forefathers, the mercy and blessing of God upon them, we found that they were righteous.

الحمد لله رب العالمين و الصلاة و السلام على رسوله الصادق الامين و على آله الطاهرين. و بعد إنَّ الوالد العلامه علي بن ابراهيم رحمه الله التقط هذه النسب و اليه للاخوه اهالي محل كثره الساكنين محزة صنعاء و من اليهم من المرون و من الرجم آنس و ارتل و غيرهم من من تنقل الى محل حر و ذلك في سنة ١٣٩٣ [1973] و وجِد الغلط كما افاد فيما نسبه الأخ العلامه محمد بن محمد زباره و كان الأطلاع على كتب التاريخ و السير و الانساب فوجد الحقيقه في كراسه في انساب الساده اهل المرون، جدهم الذي

ارتحل من بني سام الى صنعاء و هو ناصر الدين بن صلاح بن محمد بن المطهر بن اسماعيل بن هاشم بن صلاح بن علي بن محمد بن منصور بن () القطع السطر الثالث قبل كماله و يذهب بالسطر الرابع لضعف البصر و قد اشرنا بالعلم الاحمر

All praise and thanks to God the Lord of the worlds and peace and prayer upon His messenger, the truthful the honest, and upon his people the pure. My father the *ʿallāmah* ʿAlī son of Ibrāhīm, mercy of God upon Him, composed this genealogy. And [to this genealogy return] people from Kuthreh, maḥazzat Ṣanʿāʾ, and from there to al-Marwan e Rujm Ans and Armis and other places. Some moved to Ḥarr and that happened in 1393 (1973). And I have found the mistake in the genealogy as it is indicated by the *ʿallāmah* Moḥammed Moḥammed Zabārah, and this mistake goes up to the books of history and in the biographies and the people. I have found the truth in a notebook[14] which belongs to our affines, the *sayyids* people of al-Marwan. Their grandfather travelled from Benī Sām to Ṣanʿāʾ and his name is Nāṣir ad-Dīn son of Ṣāleḥ son of Moḥammed son of al-Muṭahar son of Ismāʿīl son of Hāshim son of Ṣalāḥ son of ʿAlī son of Moḥammed son of Manṣūr son [ ]. The third line is cut before it is completed, and it goes to the fourth line because of the weakness of the sight and we have highlighted that with a red sign.

***

مطهر بني اسماعيل يجتمع هو و بني شرف الدين، ساده محل الرَجُم جوار المروان و من اليهم مثل اولاد السيد علي شرف الدين بن مطهر بن شرف الدين الساكنون ضوران انس، و يرجع اليهم السيد صلاح الدين صنوه يحيى الذين سكنوا ارتل حزة صنعاء

Muṭahar [1] son of Ismāʿīl gathers (*yajtamiʿ*) himself and the sons of Sharaf ad-Dīn, *sayyids* from Rajum, neighbours of al-Marwān. And we can trace back to them [people] like the sons of the *sayyid* ʻAlī Sharaf ad Dīn son of Muṭahar son of Sharaf ad-Dīn, dwelling in Ḍarwān Ans. And returns to them the *sayyid* Ṣalāḥ ad-Dīn, whose brother (*ṣunūh*) is Yaḥyā who lives in Armis, Ḥazzat Ṣanʿāʾ.

اسماعيل يجتمع هو و بني عبد الرحمن بني شمس الدين و بني المغربي لقباً في هجرة محل كثره. و منهم السيد هادي بن احمد من المرون آنس

Ismāʿīl [2] gathers himself and the sons of ʻAbdurraḥman and the sons of Shams ad-Dīn and the sons of al-Maghreby (nickname) in the *hjrah* of Kuthreh. And among them the *sayyid* Hādy son of Aḥmed, from al-Marwan Ans.

صلاح بن علي يجتمع [ ] عبد الله الذين جدهم بالمرون السيد قاسم بن محمد و كان مقبورا عدني مسجد المرون. تم نقل

14 Kurrāsah is a term deployed specifically for a notebook of geanealogies.

المحوطة الامام ناصر الدين جد سادة المرون عند توسيع مسجد المرون

Ṣalāḥ [3] son of ʻAlī gathers ʻAbdullah, whose grandfather lives in al-Marwan: the *sayyid* Qāsim son of Moḥammed and who was buried north of the al-Marwan mosque. The one who moved (*naql*) to Maḥwiṭah is the Imām Nāṣir ad-Dīn, ancestor (*jadd*) of the *sayyids* of al-Marwan, who expanded the mosque of al-Marwan.

علي بن محمد الجامع بقيته و بين الامام صلاح الدين المقبور بجامع صلاح الدين بصنعاءو -- محمد بن علي بن محمد المذكور هنا

ʻAlī [4] son of Moḥammed is the one who gathers (*al-jāmiʿ*) the rest of them and between the Imām Ṣalāḥ ad-Dīn who is buried in the Ṣalāḥ ad-Dīn mosque in Ṣanʿāʾ and [ ] Moḥammed son of ʻAlī son of Moḥammed, whom we remembered above

علي بن منصور يجتمع بسادة كثره و المرون مثل بني عبد الرحمن بن شمس الدين و بني عبد الله و بني الولي. لان هولاء الثلاثه اولاد هادي و المهدي و صلاح افاده المسجد الصحيح بقلم السيد العلامه احمد الوزير رحمه الله بتاريخ ١١٧٦ [176].

ʻAlī [5] son of Manṣūr gathers (*yajtamiʿ*) the *sayyids* of Kuthreh and al-Marwan like Benī ʻAbdurraḥman son of Shams ad-Dīn and Benī ʻAbdullah and Benī al-Waly. Because three are the sons of Hādy; al-Mahdy and Ṣalāḥ

منصور يجتمع هو و اولاد المهدي بن احمد، بن يحيى بن المرتضى المفضل مؤلف الازهار و اولاده اهل كوكبان و بيت المرتضى هم و بيت مفضل الذي التاشير عنده الجهاد تمت مع اتفاق النسبه على الصحه الماخوذه من مشجر كثره و المرون -- و من مؤلف العلامه مجد الدين

Manṣūr [6] gathers himself and the sons of al-Mahdy son of Aḥmed on of Yaḥyā son of al-Murtaḍā al-Mufaḍḍal, author of the [Sharḥ] al-Azhār and his sons are the people of Kaūkabān and Beīt al-Murtaḍā and Beīt al-Mufaḍḍal, where the notations is kept. Our effort is completed with the agreement of the correct genealogy of Kuthreh and the one taken from al-Marwan, written by the ʻAllāmah Majid ad-Dīn.

و من هنا تسلسلاً لجيل الصاعد من بني شمس الدين و بني المغربي لقباً و بني اسمعيل بن يحيى و الاصل متصلاً غير منفصل كانشي عليه عند الجامع و[ ] فيه.

علي عبد الله.

And from here, as a chain (*tasalsal-an*) to the generation of as-Ṣāʿid, from Benī Shams ad-Dīn and Benī al-Maghreby (nickname) and Benī Ismāʿīl son of Yaḥyā. And the origin (*al-aṣl*) is continuous (*muttaṣīl-an*), unbroken (*gheīr munfaṣil*) [ ].

ʻAlī ʻAbdullah

Document 7

The genealogy of Beyt al-Maghreby, written by a member of Beyt 'Abdeh (transcription below, Document 9)

Document 8

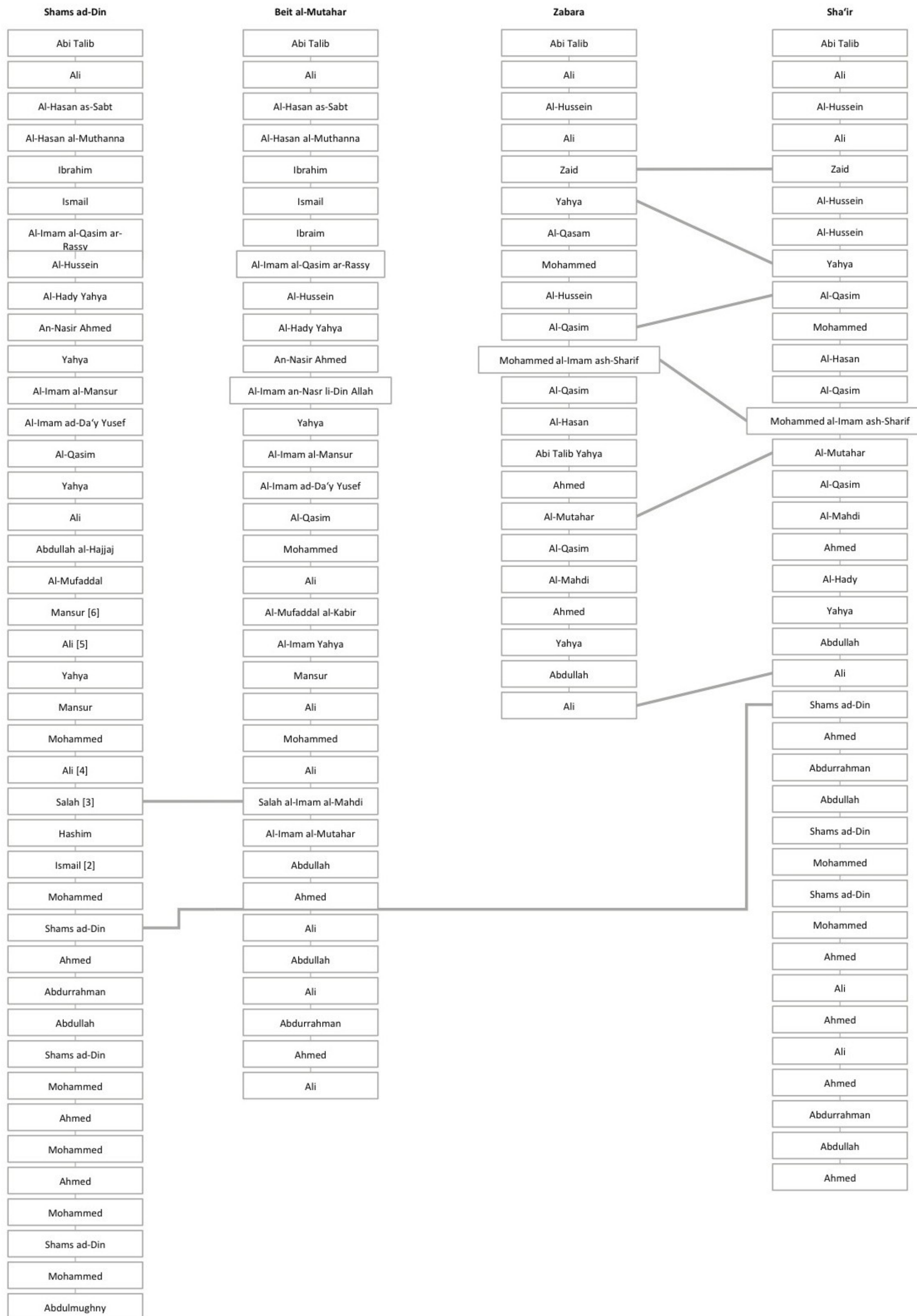
The grave of al-Ḥusseīn al-Ḥusseīn Abū al-Qāsim, in al-Jaūzeh Saḥar

سبحان من تعزز بالقدره و البقاء و قهر العباد بالموت و الفنا	
الحسين الحسين ابو القاسم ابن الحسن ابن الحسن ابن علي ابن ابي طالب صلوات الله عليهم اجمعين. كان وفاته قدس الله روحه سنه ٥٨١	باسم الله الرحمن الرحيم كل من عليها فان و لا يبقى إلا وجهه ربك ذو الجلال و الاكرام. هذا قبر الشهيد النبوي الامامي

Praise to whom is reinforced by power and endurance, this servant of God defeated death and dissolution	
In the name of God the most gracious, the most merciful, everything dissolves and nothing remains but the face of your noble and majestic Lord. This is the grave of the martyr, the Imam	al- Ḥusseīn al-Ḥusseīn father of Qāsim son of al-Ḥasan son of al-Ḥasan son of ʿAlī Ibn Abī Ṭālib, all the prayers of God upon him. Was his death, God blesses his soul, in the year 581 (1185 AD).

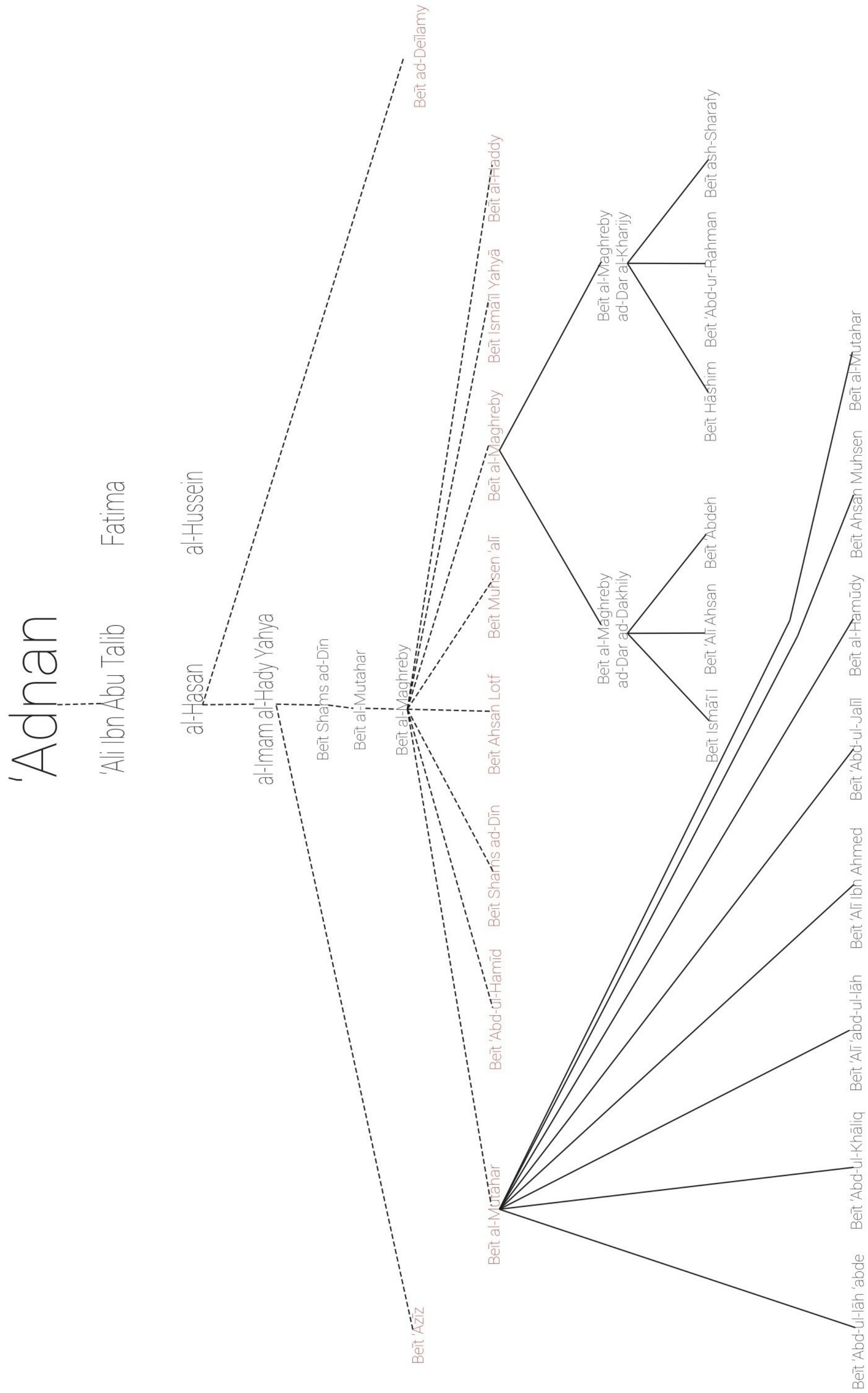
Document 9

A comparison between the three genealogies presented above and the one reported by Zabāra

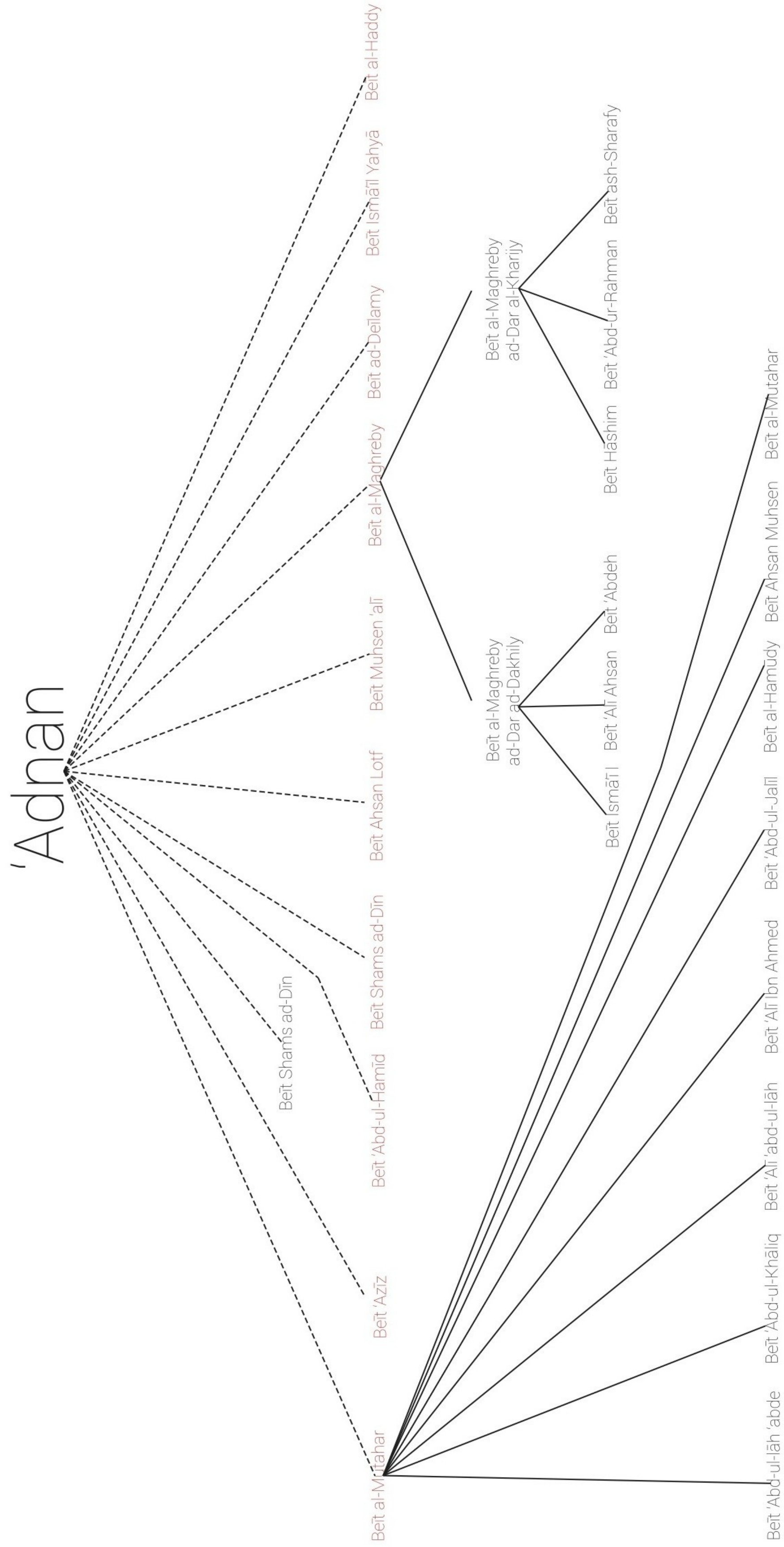


Document 10

The two versions of the genealogy of sayyid *people from Kuthreh. Version 1: most of the* bidīn *return to Beyt al-Maghreby*



Version 2: each badaneh *has a different genealogy*



Chapter 4

Document 1

As specified in Chapter 4, seven springs of water looked on to the inner valley of Kuthreh. Of the seven, only one was still deployed for irrigation during my fieldwork: al-Ithwām. Everyday, the water of this spring was gathered in a pool called *mājil*, whose size was approximately 12 x 4 x 2,5 metres. The pool had a valve of entrance called *madrab* and one of exit called *fūreh*.

Timing was calculated by means of rock, called *ḥajarat-al-ʿalam*, placed over the slope of the mountain, on the south side. Each day, at around 5 p.m., when darkness covered the rock, the owner of the upcoming turn used to close (*sadd*, *yisidd*) the *fūreh*, obstructing it with a mixture of rock and sand, so as to let the pool fill until the next midday. The next day, the owner of the turn used to open (*fajar*, *yifjir*) the *fūreh* with a long wooden stick fixed at the bottom of the pool in proximity of the exit valve, at around 12.30 / 1 a.m..

Rotating the stick, called *mabāḥ*, people moved the sand and the rock, thus liberating the obstructed *fūreh* and the flux of water. The flux was considered appropriate, if it covered the diameter of a rock placed right under the poll. Whenever the pool gathered, during the night, more water than its capacity, the exceeding quantity flowed in a special channel by means of a rock 'valve' called *mansāḥ*. The exceeding water was called *ʿatad*. Each turn of the pool, during a whole day, was said to be enough to irrigate more or less 300 *libneh* (13,332 square metres) of arable land in the inner valley, the so-called *māl al-gheīl*. For this reason, 1 libneh of this land was valued as 7 libneh of the land in the outer valley, or over the highlands.

When anyone had the right to a turn of water, he usually prepared the itinerary from the pool down to his own fields during the morning. The flux of water, in fact, directly poured out from the pool to the channel (*sāqiyah*) that covered the whole valley. Consequently, peasants had to close all the valves (*qalūbeh*) on the path. Since the water of the pool was, habitually, divided in more than one turn (*diyāl*, pl. *āt*), people had to signal where one's flux of water started, and where it ended. The water that remained in the channel after the end of a turn was called *qaūd*, and the end of the flux was signalled throwing a dozen of wood sticks in the channel.

Quantities of water were measured in *qadaḥ*, and the *qadaḥ* was measured referring to the depth of the pool: one *qadaḥ* of water equalled the height of seven fingers. Each turn of water had a name

and it was associated to a whole ‘pool’. Turns were, thus, internally divided between different families, and—again—between members of the family. Turns where, in all, 18. This means that, each owner had the chance to irrigate every 18 days. Turns where thus divided:

<table>
<tr><th>Day</th><th>Name of the turn (diyāl)</th><th colspan="3">Owner</th><th colspan="3">Owner</th></tr>
<tr><td>1</td><td>Waqf</td><td colspan="3">Waqf</td><td colspan="3">Waqf</td></tr>
<tr><td>2</td><td>Waqf</td><td colspan="3">Waqf</td><td colspan="3">Waqf</td></tr>
<tr><td>3</td><td>Waqf</td><td colspan="3">Waqf</td><td colspan="3">Waqf</td></tr>
<tr><td>4</td><td>Rubeʿ</td><td colspan="3">ar-Reishāny</td><td colspan="3">ar-Reishāny</td></tr>
<tr><td>5</td><td>Ṣanʿāny</td><td colspan="3">Ismāʿīl</td><td colspan="3">Ismāʿīl</td></tr>
<tr><td>6</td><td>Kubāny</td><td colspan="3">Waqf</td><td colspan="3">Shurakāʾ</td></tr>
<tr><td>7</td><td>ʿAṭiyyah</td><td colspan="3">Hāshim</td><td colspan="3">al-Hadāyā</td></tr>
<tr><td>8</td><td>Beyt Ṣāleḥ Hādy</td><td colspan="3">Hāshim</td><td colspan="3">Hāshim</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">9</td><td rowspan="2">Ṣulaīʿāt</td><td colspan="3">al-Ward</td><td colspan="3" rowspan="2">Waqf</td></tr>
<tr><td>Reīshāny</td><td>ʿAbdulhamid</td><td>al-Qizz</td></tr>
<tr><td>10</td><td>Waqf</td><td colspan="3">Waqf</td><td colspan="3">Waqf</td></tr>
<tr><td>11</td><td>Waqf</td><td colspan="3">Waqf</td><td colspan="3">Waqf</td></tr>
<tr><td>12</td><td>Waqf</td><td colspan="3">Waqf</td><td colspan="3">Waqf</td></tr>
<tr><td>13</td><td>ʿĀrimiyyah</td><td colspan="2">Hāshim</td><td colspan="2">ʿAbdurraḥman</td><td colspan="2">ash-Sharafy</td></tr>
<tr><td>14</td><td>Ṣanʿāny</td><td colspan="3">ʿAbdullah Aḥsan</td><td colspan="3">Azraq</td></tr>
<tr><td>15</td><td>Khuṣurūf</td><td colspan="3">ʿAbdulhamid</td><td colspan="3">Shurakāʾ</td></tr>
<tr><td>16</td><td>Hāmish</td><td colspan="3">ar-Reīshāny</td><td colspan="3">Yahya ʿAbdulhamid</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">17</td><td rowspan="2">al-ʿAbd</td><td colspan="3" rowspan="2">al-Maghreby</td><td colspan="3">Shurakāʾ</td></tr>
<tr><td>Reīshāny</td><td>ʿAlī ʿAbdeh</td><td>Waqf</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">18</td><td rowspan="2">Ṣulaīʿāt</td><td colspan="3">al-Ward</td><td colspan="3" rowspan="2">Waqf</td></tr>
<tr><td>Reīshāny</td><td>ʿAbdulhamid</td><td>al-Qizz</td></tr>
</table>

Waqf	Religious endowment
Shurakāʾ	People sharing a turn
Blue	People of *sayyid* origin
Red	People of ʿarab origin
Green	Outsiders

The division of the turns is of outstanding interest. Most of the families (*bidīn*) of the village do not have any turn of water. Some small families, instead, are over represented.

Firstly, we need to consider the legacy of Beyt Hāmish. As we have seen in Chapter 4, three

families inherited lands and water from the rich merchant: Beyt Hāshim, Beyt ʿAbdulhamid and Beyt ar-Reīshāny. All of the three still detain the right to turns of water. Beyt Hāshim has maintained a huge amount of turns. Beyt ʿAbdulhamid has donated many of them as religious endowments. It is worth noting that the turns of this family, nowadays, only belong to one branch of it, since Moḥammed ʿAbdulhamid 'sold the sun and the wind'. Beyt ar-Reīshāny is the only family of *ʿarab* origins which detains turns of water. Beyt al-Qizz, in fact, obtained the two turns (9, 18) from Beyt al-Ward by usufruct, with a written concession from the Imām. Curiously, Beyt al-Ghumeīr, the oldest family of the village (a family of *ʿarab* origin), has no turns of water.

The place of 'outsiders' is considerable: people from Azraq still have half a turn of water; Beyt al-Ward and Beyt Hāmish, about one century ago, almost monopolised the pool.

Document 2

A rule (qāʿidah) of agreement *between the people of Beyt Kahf and the people of Kuthreh.*

Attended [this meeting] the *sayyid* 'Abdulhamid, *'āqil* of the village (*qariyah*) of Kuthreh, and his companions from Kuthreh. And attended ʿAbdullah Mohammed Munassar al-Maḥfady, and among his companions the *ʿāqils* of Beyt Kahf.

And we reached already an agreement between the two places (*maḥalleīn*) regarding the damages of the land (*amwāl*) of the two places by sheep, cattle and flock.

The first condition is that if any animal, sheep or cattle, belonging to Beyt Kahf attacked and damaged the land of Kuthreh, the fine (*jazā*) is of ten riyals: five for the *ʿāqils* and five for the state, plus the damages if the land was bearing products.

And the same for the people of Kuthreh: if anyone of them attacked the land of Beyt Kahf with an animal, cattle or sheep, damaging the products of the land, so they will pay a fine of ten riyals: five for the *ʿāqils* ʿAbdullāh Moḥammed al-Maḥfady and the *sayyid* ʿAbdulhamid, or for whom was *ʿāqil* in the two places, and five riyals for the state. [ ]

The same for the (*maḥāshir*), everyone has the right to his belongings and no one has the right to attack. We reached the agreement on this.

On the date Salkh Jamād al-Ākhar, 1317.

With the testimony of those who attended:

ʿAli Ahmed an-Nihmy, from the people of Ṣanʿāʾ

and witnessed Hussein Ahmed Zuleīṭ, from the people of Azraq

and witnessed Yahya Naʿnaʿah, *muzayyin* of Beyt Kahf

Document 3

A document certifying the origin of Beyt ar-Reīshāny.

Top left.

We have already examined what Ḥizām Bin Ṣaleḥ al-Jabry ar-Reīshāny [ ]

what we read is that the origin is from Beny Jabr [ ]

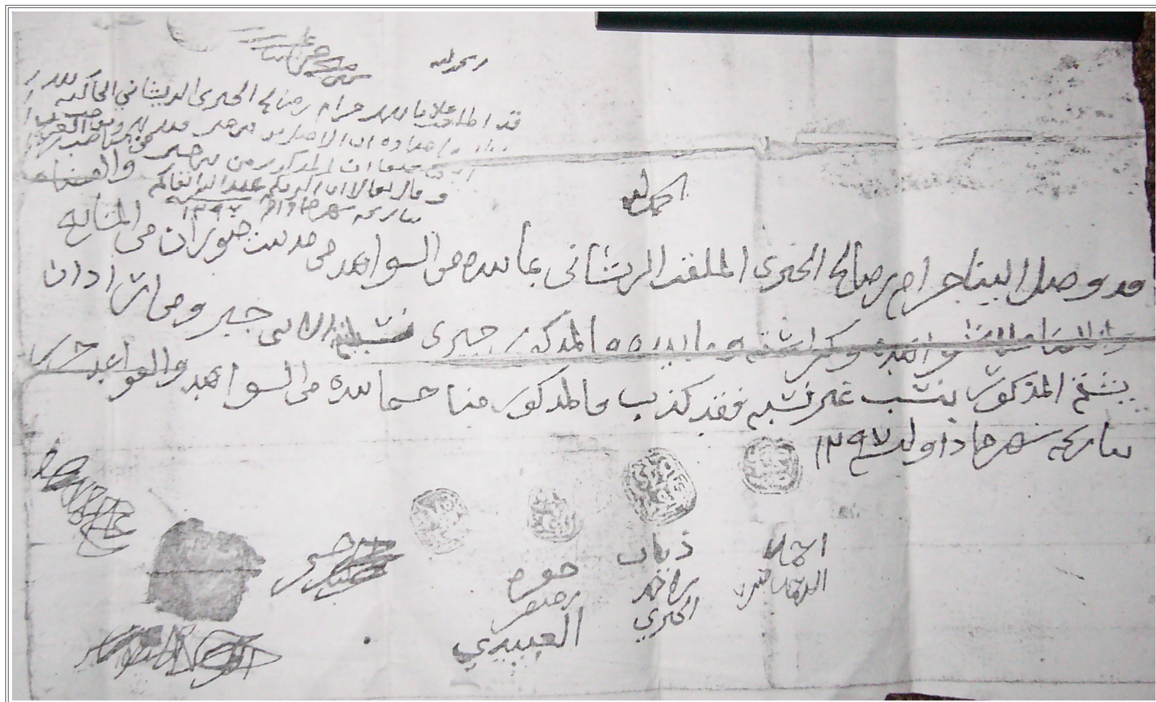
and when the above mentioned is from Beny Jabr, [he is from] positions of the arabs (*manāṣib al-ʿarab*).

And the Almighty said that the noblest of you, for God, is the most pious.

Body of the text.

Hizām Ibn Ṣāleḥ al-Jabry, titled ar-Reīshāny, has reached us with what they have of documents from Beyt Ḍūrān، from the *mashāikh*. [And given] the documents, the notebook, and what he has written, the above mentioned is Jabry, his ancestry from Beny Jabr, and clarifies that anyone who attributes to the above mentioned an ancestry different from his ancestry is lying. And the above mentioned is from us, proved from his documents and by the rules.

In date Dawliyah, 1397.

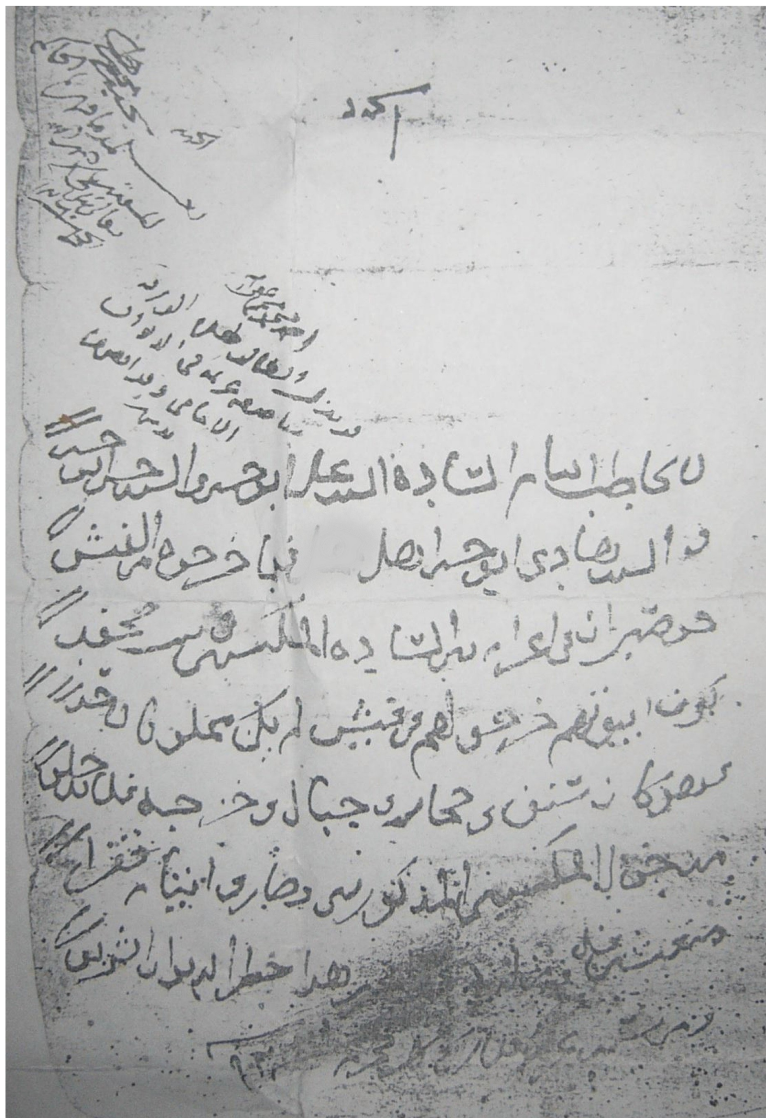


Document 4

A document from the noble diwān of the Imām, granting land to the orphan sons of Beyt Abū Hussein.

All thanks and praise to God.

[ ] the orphans of the *sayyids*: the *sayyid* ʿAli Abū Hussein, the *sayyid* Hussein Abū Hussein, the *sayyid* Hady Abū Hussein, their origin from Kuthreh, from what they extracted from the *feīsh* of Ṣabarān in the aʿrām of the sayyids who got land in Beyt Kahf, where their fathers extracted for them in a *feīsh* that was not property of anyone and it was bramble, stones, mountain and pasture land. So no one has a right on it but the above mentioned individuals who obtained it, and they became orphans.



Document 5

A map of Kuthreh and of the neighbouring villages

Chapter 5

Majmūʿ al-Fiqh, 938

Zaid related to me from his father, from his grand-father, from ‘Ali, that ‘Ali came with a Qadary. So ‘Ali told him, “What do you argue?” So he said, “I argue that God does not foreordain evil, nor preordain it, nor He blames what He foreordained and preordained, nor what He appreciates.” So ‘Ali told him, “So tell me about your actions, who ordered them and decreed them, you or God?” He said, “I did them.” So ‘Ali told him, “You fled from the answer. So tell me about your possessions. Do you possess this or not?” He said, “Yes, I possess it”. So ‘Ali said, “Do you possess it with God or without God?” The Qadary fell silent and he did not answer anything. Thereafter ‘Ali said, “If you answered me with one of the two options, you would have damaged your neck. If you argued that you possess it with God, you would have declared that you partake [of God]. If you argued that you possess it without God, you would have argued that you are a God without Him. [...] It is necessary that every Nation knows a heresy and the first heresy is the one about *qadar*. Did you know that the Magianists declared that God [...] did not create ugliness? And they apostatised. And so you declared that your Lord is not capable of Good and Evil and you committed apostasy […] [My translation]

Mā al-Farq beīna-l-Qaḍāʾ wa-l-Qadar wa ʿIlm Allāh?

http://www.anazaidi.com/zaidiblog/?cat=7

A thorough exposition of the matter of “al-qadar wa-l-qaḍā” has been presented in the fundamental books of the [Zaydi] School, like the collection of the Imam al-Hadi ila al-Haqq Yahya Ibn al-Hussein [...] In brief and in accordance with the example of the questioner, a man kills his wife: how can we assume that this is in God's knowledge [ʿilm] and that God does not order it to him? So God, exalted be Him, created the individual and He, exalted be Him, wanted that individual willing to pursue the Good and the Evil by himself, capable [qādir] of doing or avoiding something, free to choose and not compelled in his actions [مخيّرٌ غير مُسيّر في أفعالِه]. If the individual chose to kill his wife, this will [irādah] is ascribed to him and not to God, exalted be Him, because [the individual] is the one who wanted [to commit this action] with his own personal choice. God only wanted the individual to be willing on his own, so that he could want the Good or the Evil. But it is the individual who wanted to kill his wife, and he was capable of not willing it. Thereafter God created that individual capable [qādir-an] of acting conveniently respecting the parts and the tools (an individual who is not incapable). Thus with that will [irādah], that consciousness and that power [qudrah] of acting, that individual killed [his wife]. And at the same time, it was possible for him to do something different from killing. [...] Thereafter it is the individual who committed the murder, with his own will and and his own action, and it was possible for him not to want the murder and not to commit it. So the individual himself, and only him, is the one who wanted and committed the murder. And God bestowed on him the **freedom of choice** [ḥurriyat-al-ikhtiyār, al-irādah] and the power [qudrah] to act. Hence the action [the murder] does not descend from God, but descends from Him the possibility to avoid it! And God, exalted be Him, knows what his servant will choose. **And His majestic knowledge encompasses what was,**

what is and what is being. [My translation]

Allāh fī-l-Yemen

A. Al-Ahdal, Al-Jumhūriyyah, 28 Oct 2011, no. 15315

It seems that in Yemen we got used to poverty, unemployment, hunger and filthy streets, while the crises follow one another over our heads. And you find out that many people here in Yemen got used to seat next to garbage dumps or sites of explosions, and I do not understand one thing: how can they resist before those views and next to that smell which would repel insects?

Why is ambition dead in our souls? Where is hope gone? Did politics play with us until they plundered our sensitivity for beauty? Did they plunder our aversion to ugliness? Why did we start melting so fast after these events, as if we are chemical elements in test tubes? Why did we start wearing the dress of desperation? Why did we become like the chicken that digs in the dust to wash itself?

Actually I was in a quarter, wandering to buy some vegetables. I turned my attention to the greengrocer who started to compact the bundles of leek before the shop. This happened despite the presence of a river of crystal-clear and healthy water passing exactly in front of his shop. So I remonstrated and then I asked him, ‘why are you doing this?’ So he answered, ‘The leek is wet and I want it dry!’ Thus I replied, ‘but you know that this place is filthy and you know that bacteria swim in the air, and that you might poison someone...’ So he replied, ‘I had my breakfast in front of the shop, and I eat any sort of food in the same place. I don't see anything wrong in this matter... And I can confirm that my health is like iron, because every time I entrusted myself to God (*tawakkalt ʿalā allāh*) before sitting in front of this polluted water!

So what could I do but go away after my business? I remember some words that I read in a translated book. Many years ago a European writer visited Yemen and conducted a survey to know how the Yemeni people make a living (*yaʿīsh*) with a small salary, many expenses and many family responsibilities. So the people replied to his question, which was, ‘from where do you get money when your salary is over?’ in this way, ‘God will transfer it! My Lord will manage it, it's up to God, God is generous...’ They replied with expressions of dependence (*alfāẓ ittikāliyah*) and reliance (*tawakkiliyah*) of which we do not know the meaning, yet we just pronounce them. For this reason, the European called his book «God in Yemen» (Allāh fī-l-Yemen).

Yes, God gives and hence He simplifies, but He constricts for whom He wants; and God bestows, so enriches or he makes poor whom He wants; and He protects, preserves and cures or He makes sick and He is the most Merciful. But we are a society that lacks a full understanding of the causes (*al-asbāb*). We only excel in inventing the beginning of everything, but then we ignore how to possibly end it and how to stop the congestion, whichever was its kind. We excel at relying on someone, even in the ambit of our economy, despite the fact that Yemen hides under its dust countless treasures. But we take care of them accepting regional and international aids, without feeling any shame!

So why are we satisfied with the whole world staring at Yemen as the homeland of poverty, backwardness and social

fragility while most of what we do after... let's say between 2 p.m. and 6 p.m. turns Yemen into an eastern part of Europe! In fact every *mukhazzin* [a person chewing qāt] builds factories, fortresses and commercial centres in a quantity that the geographical area of Yemen cannot hold [tastawibʿ]. Yet, after spitting — whether it is on the sidewalk, or on the sides of the water closet, or even in the qāt bags that some hours before were worth nothing — Yemen comes back as it was: narrow streets built out of dry walls with a random shape, water that washes the entrance and the exit of the quarters, dated and unorganised markets, people that wash each other with curses as if they were greetings or hot feelings!

This way we go back as we were and as we started, satisfied behind the illusion of wishes. Even when we rose up our revolution was accidental and without purposes. It was drowned in the seaweed of politics and full of the fetid corruption that we ourselves created. We lost many people, without gaining anything!

I get very sad when I read and hear about this confusion that strikes all the people. Is this the time when no one pays the bills? Or when God's will refuses to show the right that is silent for humans? In the next days we will get a clear, and brief answer, one without blanks! [My translation]

Chapter 6

Document 1

Taʿziyyah to Beīt ʿAbdulhamid

الحمد لله القائل "قل لن يصيبنا الا ما كتب الله لنا" انّا لله و انا اليه راجعون

الى الابزياء الكرام عبد الله بن عبد الحميد و علي عبد الحميد الكثري

المحترمين

God be praised, Say, "Never will we be struck except by what Allah has decreed for us." We belong to God and to Him we return.

ببالغ من الحزن و الاسى تلقينا من الناس نبأ وفات

ًالفقيد المرحوم البزي محمد ابن عبد الحميد الكثري رحّمه الله و أسكنه فسيح

جناته و ألهمنا و أهلي و ذوي الصبر و السلوان انه سميع مجيب

و نحن إذ نرفع اليكم محرّرنا هذا و قلوبنا تتكبّد حزنا اعيننا

تذرو دمعاً على الفقيد ألراحل و لكن ماذا نقول، انا لله وانا اليه راجعون

و لقد صاحبتنا الحيره و التساؤل عن كيفية وفات المرحوم

With major sadness and sorrow we received from some people the news that the late Mohammed ibn ʿAbdulhamid al-Kuthry, our *bazzy* (ss), God bless his soul and eternal peace upon him. And it fills us with patience and consolation [the fact] that he listens and responds. And we submit to you this paper and our hearts suffer, the sadness of our eyes spreads tears upon the late that is gone, but what can we say? We belong to God and to Him we return, but confusion is our companion and lingers the question about how the deceased died and what happened to him.

و ما هو الذي حصل له و في أي يوم توقى لأن ما لمسناه من

بعض الناس خبر متداول بدون تفصيل و مع هذا

شعرنا و أحساسنا بإهتمامكما و تقديركما لأخوالكم

فألف سبحان الله عليكم كيف كيف تهملون أخوالكم و تستدهفون

بالجناب و تقطعون أواصل المعلاق معلاق البزي و الخال

إضافة إلى معلاق النسبه و الدم و اللحم كما يحاول والدنا جميعا السيد عبد الحميد حفظه الله.

And what happened to him and when he died, since we gathered this news from some people, and they keep being uncertain and not detailed. And through this we felt and we sensed your concern for your *akhwāl*... One thousand times shame on you! How can you neglect your *akhwāl* and hit them in from the back, and cut the connections (*awāṣil*) of the tie (*maʿlāq*), the tie between the *bazzy* and his khāl, in addition to the ties of affinity (*nisbah*), of blood (*damm*) and of meat (*laḥm*), which make the *sayyid* ʿAbdulhamid the father of all of us, God preserves him.

فقد أهملتمونا حتى من الإنباه بكتاب

او رسول يخبرنا بوفاة المرحوم. و نحن وافيين غير قاصرين

لهذا نحن مثورين عليكم معلاق البزي و الخال و معلاق الدم و اللحم

و النسبه على اسلاف القبايل و أعرافها و دمتم و السلام و الجواب

مطلوب بواسطة الوالد السيد حمود حدي المعرفين اليكم

أخوالكم السيد احمد محسن السراعي

و اخي علي محسن السراعي و أولادهما

So you already neglected us, you didn't even send a written note, or a messenger to inform us about the death of the deceased. And we are loyal, we are not deficient in anything. For this, we hold against you the tie between the *bazzy* and the *khāl*, and the tie of blood and meat and affinity, with the right of ancestry of the tribes and their customary right (*aslāf al-qabāʾil wa aʿrāfhā*). We request greetings and a reply from our father the *sayyid* Hamud Ḥaddy.

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Glossary of Yemenite Terms and Abbreviations

akhuwwah	‘brotherhood’, both metaphorically and as a corporate group
ʿamm (pl. *ʿumūm*)	paternal uncle (FB)
ʿaqar	the slaughtering of an animal to obtain forgiveness
ʿaṣabiyyah	spirit of kinship in the family or tribe; ‘blind’ solidarity to the agnatic group
aṣl (pl. *uṣūl*)	origin, both in a genealogical and geographical sense
ʿayāl as-sūq	sons of the market
ʿayl (p. *ʿayāl*)	child
ʿaʾilah	nuclear family; wife
ʿayb	shame
ʿayn (pl. *aʿyān*)	representative of a number of close lineages
ʿimāmah	turban of the religious scholars
ʿirḍ	honour of the self
badaneh (pl. *bidīn*)	a lineage whose ancestor is at least 3 or 5 generations removed
bazzy (pl. *abzyāʾ*)	from ego's perspective, his sister's son
beny al-khumus	people ‘lacking in origin’
beyt	house (building); wife; lineage
FYM	Free Yemeni Movement
dabbāgh	tanner
dākhil ad-	the outside
dawshān	bard
diwān (p. *dawāwīn*)	a living room for relaxing and socialising

diyah	blood money
ghanam	livestock, predominantly sheep and goats; sheep-goat patrimony
gheyl (p. *ghuyūl*)	spring of water
ghurm	an amount of money which every *gharrām* is obliged to pay as a support for members of his corporate group
gharrām (pl. *gharrāmah*)	an adult member of a brotherhood, obliged to pay *ghurm*
ḥaddād	blacksmith
ḥammām	bathhouse
ḥammāmy	bath attendant
hajar	the sacrifice of an animal, to amend a tort
hijrah	migration; a village hosting the migration of religious scholars
'irq	root; genealogical origin
janbiyyah	a traditional Yemenite dagger
jazzār	butcher
jidd	a man retaining all the qualities of a real man
karam	generosity
khaddām	servant
khādim (pl. *akhdām*)	black people of Abyssinian origin
khāl (pl. *akhwāl*)	maternal uncle; by extension, the corporate group of a maternal uncle
khaṭṭān	circumciser
mahr	bride-price
māl (pl. *amwāl*)	land
marfaʿ	bass drum
mashyakhah	the fact of being a *shaykh*
mauḍaʿ (pl. *mawāḍīʿ*)	a circumscribed area of a territory, defined by a name
mawjib (pl. *mawājib*)	a ritual occasion which is mandatory to attend

mikhlāf (pl. *makhālīf*)	an administrative unit which encompasses a variable number of villages, usually more than 10; also a corporate group composed by the same number of villages
mizmār	double flute
mujmaʿ	common ancestor, or clade
mukhuwwah	the sacrifice of a bull in order to become a member of a tribal brotherhood
munaqqil	leatherworker
muruwwah	the quality of a man who helps another; symbolic credit; virtus
muzammir	double flute player
muzayyin (pl. *mazaynah*)	servant of a village
najjār	carpenter
nasab	genealogy
nasab (pl. *ansāb*)	brother-in-law; affines
naṣīb	actualisation of destiny
nāqiṣ (pl. *nuqqāṣ*)	lacking; often used to signify 'lacking in origin (*nāqiṣ al-aṣl*)', thus pointing to people belonging to *beny al-khumus*
qabīlah (pl. *qubul*)	a large corporate group, composed by a number of *makhālīf*
qabīly (pl. *qabāʾil*):	peasant or countryman; sometimes referred to people of *'arab* origin
qabyalah	the gendered *ethos* of people from the countryside
qashshām	green-grocer
qaddar (v.)	to honour a guest
qidr	value
qāt	*catha edulis*, a mild amphetaminic
qism (pl. *aqsām*)	a terracing
rajjāl (pl. *rijāl*)	a man, meaning who embodies the values of manliness
rajūleh	manliness, or an umbrella term for the gendered ethos of people from

	the countryside
rifd	gift for the groom
rizq	sustenance
saltah	traditional soup
ṣāniʿ	woolworker
sayl (pl. *suyūl*)	floods of water
saylah	a channel
sayyid (pl. *sādah*):	a descendant of the Prophet Mohammed, through ʿAli and Fatima
shaykh (pl. *mashāʾikh*):	the representative of a corporate group; someone who embodies the values of the *qabyalah*, especially generosity
sharaf	sexual honour
sūq	the market
ṭāsah	snare drum
usrah (pl. *usar*)	family
YAR	Yemen Arab Republic