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‘Foreword: the various manifestations of the Kurdish tribe’

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Foreword: the various manifestations of the Kurdish tribe

Martin van Bruinessen

Almost a century after Ziya Gökalp completed his interesting but relatively unknown study of Kurdish tribes,¹ Yalçın Çakmak and Tuncay Şur have brought together this fascinating collection of detailed studies of some of the major tribes of North and South Kurdistan. The essays collected in this volume bring out clearly that Kurdish tribes are not all of one type, and that there have been wide variations in size and internal organization of the tribes, and in the nature of their relations with the natural environment, with the city, and with the state. Each of the chapters deals with a tribe that is unique in at least some respects, and yet all are Kurdish. All of these tribes are still existing and remain important in shaping their members' lives and political choices, but there is also a widespread perception that tribalism (*aşiretçilik*) is a thing of the past and remains only relevant to increasingly marginal segments of Kurdish society. Most of the essays in this volume focus on the history of the tribes concerned and do not engage with the question of how the process of modernization and the consolidation of the new post-Ottoman states – with formal education, urbanization, participation in party politics – has transformed them in the course of the past century. It may be useful to dedicate a few thoughts to these questions.

My own acquaintance with Kurdish tribes dates from two years of field research in the mid-1970s, during which I spent time in the Iranian, Iraqi, Turkish and Syrian parts of Kurdistan and became aware that tribal structure differed considerably from place to place and from tribe to tribe, and that relations of the tribe with the state – or with more than one state – were an important factor in the variety of social organization that I observed. As one of my interviewees told me, “in the past, the major requirement for a tribal chieftain was that he must be courageous and generous (*mêr û merd*), but nowadays only a man who knows how to negotiate with the state can become a chieftain.” Not all tribes have powerful chieftains; some tribes are small and quite egalitarian, others are more complex and have several sections with their own leaders but lack a single paramount leader. Large tribes with a strong central leadership, however, were typically tribes that had a long-standing relationship with the state, I found. Before my experiences in field research I had assumed that the tribes represented the segment of Kurdish society that remained at the greatest distance from the state. To my surprise I found that the tribes had been shaped deeply by their interactions with the state and almost appeared as products of policies of the states that had been in control of the region.²

¹ Ziya Gökalp, *Kürt aşiretleri hakkında sosyolojik tetkikler* (hazırlayan: Şevket Beysanoğlu), İstanbul: Sosyal Yayınlar, 1992.

² I first formulated this argument in my doctoral thesis, *Agha, Shaikh and State* (Utrecht University, 1978), which was translated into Turkish as *Ağa Şeyh Devlet* (İletişim, 2003) and developed it further

States impacted on tribes in many different ways. The drawing of new borders separating Turkey, Iraq and Syria in the 1920s, for instance, forced nomadic tribes to partially settle and change their migration routes but also offered new economic opportunities in the form of smuggling. The emergence of multi-party democracy in Turkey with periodical elections after the Second World War improved the bargaining position of tribal chieftains who controlled the votes of their tribe and turned some of them into significant political actors. In Iraqi Kurdistan and later in Turkey too, tribes were recruited as militias (called *caş* or *cehş*, *korucu*) to fight against the armed Kurdish movement. Money and arms delivered by the state further strengthened the position of the chieftains in these tribes and allowed them to keep the tribes united under their leadership.

As said, there is much variation in the degree of complexity of the social organisation of Kurdish tribes, but they all share two basic structural principles, which are also found in other tribes in the Middle East.³ The first of these is the *segmentary lineage*, characterized by patrilineal descent and endogamy. This is an egalitarian principle and reflects the idea that the members of the tribe are relatives and at least in theory have equal rights. The other principle is that of an internal hierarchy and sometimes authoritarian central control of the tribe and its sections by tribal chieftains and lineage elders.

The principle of the segmentary lineage may be briefly explained as follows. The tribe consists of a number of sections that are, at least structurally, equal to one another. Each of these sections consists again of several sub-sections, which in turn are divided into yet smaller sections, and down to the lowest level of the extended family there is a strong preference for endogamy. A man is expected to marry his father's brother's daughter or, if that is not possible, another close relative. (Or rather, a father is expected to give his daughter in marriage to a brother's son or another close relative within the same descent group.) This marriage pattern keeps the daughters' reproductive potential within the extended family or shallow descent group and thereby strongly reinforces its cohesion, at the expense of its integration into the tribe as a whole or its larger segments (which might be better served by different marriage patterns).⁴ And, we should add, it significantly reduces women's individual freedom and ability to negotiate.

in a later article, 'Kurds, States and Tribes,' in *Tribes and Power: Nationalism and Ethnicity in the Middle East*, ed. Faleh A. Jabar & Hosham Dawod (London: Saqi, 2003), 165-183.

³ For a general discussion of Middle Eastern tribes, see Dale F. Eickelman, *The Middle East, An Anthropological Approach* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hill Inc., 1989), chapter 6; Richard Tapper, ed., *The Conflict of Tribe and State in Iran and Afghanistan* (London: Croom Helm, 1983); Philip S. Khoury and Joseph Kostiner, ed., *Tribes and State Formation in the Middle East* (London / New York: I.B. Tauris, 1991).

⁴ Marshall Sahlins, The segmentary lineage: an organization of predatory expansion, *American Anthropologist* 63(2) (1961), 322-43; Fredrik Barth, Father's brother's daughter marriage in Kurdistan, *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 10(2) (1954), 164-71; Bruinessen, *Ağa, Şeyh, Devlet*, 81-107.

Lineages would keep breaking up into smaller segments if this pattern were not balanced by common interests keeping the segments together, the most important of which is common rights to pasture and agricultural land. Tribes claim traditional rights to land, which have to be unceasingly asserted and defended against rival claimants. Conflicts are the glue of tribal organisation, and the segmentary structure of the tribe is best seen at times of conflict. Tribes unite in conflicts with rival tribes, but they are also often torn apart by internal conflicts, in which alliances and opposition closely follow the segmentary structure of the tribe.

Segmentary lineage theory was dominant in British anthropology in the mid-twentieth century and it inspired the first anthropological studies of Kurdish society.⁵ From the 1970s onwards, however, it came increasingly under critique. My own field research and oral history interviews in the mid-1970s convinced me that the segmentary lineage was not just a model invented by anthropologists but that it also corresponded to the way many Kurds believed their social organisation worked.

However, segmentary lineages co-exist with another structural principle that complements, and may override, the egalitarian principle of segmentary alliance and opposition, namely *hierarchy, authoritarian leadership, and relations of dependence*.

Theoretically, the most senior male in a household, extended family or lineage is the most respected person and the natural leader; there may be relations of seniority among the lineages of a tribe as well, and the senior elder of the most senior lineage might act as the tribal chieftain. However, this is rarely the case, and only in relatively small tribes. In the larger tribes it is more common to have a chiefly family or lineage that is not closely related to any of the commoner lineages that together constitute the tribe. Some large tribes are led by families that claim descent from rulers or military leaders of the early Islamic period, such as the Abbasid caliphs or Khalid ibn Walid (Halid bin Velid). It was precisely because of this prestigious foreign origin that they were capable of maintaining peace between the many groups that made up the entire tribe.⁶ In other cases, tribes may contain sections that were originally parts of another tribe or independent small lineages that joined the bigger tribe for protection. Most of the larger tribes were formed as political coalitions of groups of diverse origin, but in the course of time a sense of common identity emerged.

The social relations of the leading stratum of the larger tribes, including their marriage strategies, differ from those of common members of the tribe and often deviate from the norm of endogamy. Although many members of chiefly families do in fact marry cousins (or other

⁵ E. R. Leach, *Social and Economic Organisation of the Rowanduz Kurds* (London: Percy Lund Humphries & Co., 1940); Fredrik Barth, *Principles of Social Organization in Southern Kurdistan* (Oslo: Universitets Etnografiske Museum, 1953).

⁶ Examples in Barth, *Principles of Social Organization*; Bruinessen, *Ağa, Şeyh, Devlet*, 127-153. Ziya Gökalp also commented on this phenomenon of 'alien' leadership in Kurdish tribes, which he believed distinguished them from Arab tribes, in which the chieftains were always relatives of their followers.

closely related women of the same social stratum), strategic marriage alliances with outsiders are frequent, resulting in a conspicuous degree of exogamy. Chiefs may marry women from other Kurdish tribes; it is not uncommon for chiefs of rival tribes to seal the end of a conflict by an exchange of daughters as spouses for themselves or their sons. They may also take wives from other ethnic groups in the region, or intermarry with urban notables or families of bureaucrats. Polygamy allows them to balance such exogamous alliances with cementing ties within the family.

Important though conflict management within the tribe may be, the authority of a chieftain over his tribe depends even more on his ability to represent the interests of the tribe towards the outside world – which has at most times meant in the first place the state. Both Iran and the Ottoman state dealt with tribal populations as collectivities, developing various forms of indirect rule in which the tribal chieftains constituted the crucial interface. In Safavid Iran (16th-18th centuries) the state in fact consolidated or even created large tribal confederacies (*il*, pl. *ilat*), appointing a chieftain (*ilkhani*) over them and incorporating these confederacies in a decentralised military command structure. The Ottoman system of indirect rule allowed for large autonomous Kurdish principalities in the 16th century; as the central administration penetrated more deeply into Kurdistan in the 19th century, large tribal confederacies replaced the principalities as the units of indirect rule; and with further expansion of the state bureaucracy, ever smaller regions were left under indirect rule and the relevant tribal units became smaller and less complex.⁷

The cohesion and group feeling of the tribe (its *asabiyya*, as Ibn Khaldun called it) no doubt is in part due to the awareness of blood kinship among its major sections but is also fostered by the patronage the chieftain can dispense due to his privileged relationship with the state. A good chieftain is generous and a model of manly virtues of whom the entire tribe can be proud. He takes care of the interests and problems of individual commoners as well as the collective. Belonging to a strong tribe provides security in an otherwise insecure environment. And yet, in spite of strong *asabiyya*, tribes are fissiparous and prone to internal conflict.

The segmentary structure of the lineage is not the only reason why tribes are often riven by conflict. Another major factor is that there may be competing contenders for the position of paramount chieftain, each of which may mobilise external resources in the pursuit of his interests. Their rivalry may result in breaking up the entire tribe into two feuding factions, in which either each contender was supported by entire sections of the tribe, or each of the sections was in turn divided into factions supporting one or the other.⁸

The geographical position of Kurdistan in the periphery of several states often gave ambitious chieftains the opportunity to strengthen their position by playing one state against the other;

⁷ This process is traced in some detail in Bruinessen, *Ağa, Şeyh, Devlet*, Bab 3.

⁸ For a description of one complicated case, the Hevêrkan tribe in the Tor Abdin and the Syrian Jazira in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see Bruinessen, *Ağa, Şeyh, Devlet*, 163-169.

some of the more successful chieftains switched allegiances more than once in the course of their careers. It also happened regularly that two contenders for leadership within a tribe allied themselves with different states. These were, until the late 19th century, the Ottoman Empire and Iran; later Russia occasionally had its Kurdish tribal allies, and so had Britain since the First World War. In the post-war years and under the Mandate, British political officers propped up the power of 'loyal' tribal chieftains and found that there were also 'traitors' in the same tribes, who were in collusion with Turkey.⁹ Later yet, when Kurdish nationalist movements emerged in Iran, Iraq and Turkey, we often find members of the leading family of a tribe active in a Kurdish party and others working with the central government.¹⁰

Detribalisation

When does a tribe stop being a tribe? Historically, there have been examples of tribes disappearing, for instance after being defeated militarily by another tribe or the army of a state and losing the resources (animals, access to land, arms) that made its existence as a tribe possible. Surviving members of the tribe were dispersed: some joined other tribes, others survived as landless peasants or urban workers. In the 20th century, we see many tribespeople loosening their relations with the tribe without completely cutting their ties. Education and urbanisation placed many people at distance from the tribe to which they originally belonged, and increased the chances of their marrying someone outside the tribe and finding a way of life that no longer depended on the support of the tribe. Political movements – socialist, nationalist, liberal, Islamist – were critical of tribalism and offered different identities and solidarities from those of tribe and family. It is, in fact, surprising that after all the upheavals of the past century tribes have not disappeared completely.

Ziya Gökalp's report on the Kurdish tribes took a dim view of tribalism as a backward form of social organisation and made some concrete proposals on detribalisation and 'civilization' of the tribespeople. He recognized that tribal organization was a form of adaptation to the natural environment and defence against other groups wishing to exploit the same resources. Not all tribes were nomadic pastoralists, but the large nomadic tribes provided a model of social organization that was emulated by settled or semi-nomadic groups in the same mountain environment. It was only by removing tribespeople from that mountain environment and resettling them far to the west among Turkish-speaking communities, Gökalp believed, that tribespeople could be 'civilized,' their tribal social organization dissolved and tribal mindset reformed. From the 1934 Forced Settlement Law (Mecburi İskan

⁹ Portraits of such 'loyal' and 'unreliable' chieftains in W. R. Hay, *Two Years in Kurdistan. Experiences of a Political Officer 1918-1920* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson Ltd, 1921); C. J. Edmonds, *Kurds, Turks and Arabs. Politics, Travel and Research in North-Eastern Iraq, 1919-1925* (London: Oxford University Press, 1957).

¹⁰ Examples are given in Bruinessen, 'Kurds, States and Tribes.'

Kanunu) to Turgut Özal's final letter to Demirel on the Kurdish question ("Özal'in Demirel'e Kürt Vasiyeti") of 1993, these ideas on detribalization by massive forced migration kept appearing as part of government policy proposals. Separating chieftains' families from their tribes by sending them separately into exile was another policy aiming to weaken tribalism, practised on a large scale in Iran as well as Turkey.

Armed Kurdish nationalist insurrections changed government policies towards the tribes. Both Iraq and Turkey, and to a lesser extent Iran as well, provided money and arms to tribes that they trusted to carry on the fight against the Kurdish movement. The well-known *Aşiretler raporu*, probably prepared by Turkey's military police (Jandarma), shows that the authorities made a clear distinction between 'good' and 'bad' tribes, based on whether they had in the past been involved in uprisings.¹¹ Efforts at detribalization focused especially on the 'bad' tribes, whereas the loyal tribes were generally left to play a part in regional politics and some of them were strengthened by recruitment as 'village guards' (*korucu*) and given licence to expand their control of land at the expense of their neighbours.¹²

Tribes and Kurdish identity

For a long time, tribes have been the most prominent aspect of the social organisation of Kurdish society. Not all Kurds belonged to tribes, but many would agree that the most 'Kurdish' of the Kurds were the tribespeople. The ethnic identity of townspeople in Kurdistan, such as the people of Diyarbakir, Bitlis or Erbil, who mostly spoke Turkish, was a matter of debate, but the tribespeople of the region were unambiguously Kurdish (or Zaza).¹³ Ziya Gökalp famously argued that ethnic identity was fluid: Turks living among Kurdish tribespeople were gradually Kurdicized (such as the Karakeçili tribe), but Kurds who moved to the city would be Turkicized. He seemed to imply that settlement of the tribes and their detribalization was an important first step in the assimilation (Turkicization) of the Kurds.

On the other hand, as Kurdish nationalist intellectuals discovered early on, strong tribal identities and tribal solidarity prevented the emergence of a strong and widely shared sense of Kurdish national identity. Even in tribes that were proud of Kurdish identity, loyalty to the tribe (and to the tribal chief) conflicted with possible loyalty to the Kurdish nation, and tribal loyalty tended to be the stronger one. In the political movements that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, some younger members of the tribal elite were involved, but most of the tribal chieftains preferred to continue the traditional style of patronage politics, allying themselves

¹¹ *Aşiretler Raporu* (İstanbul: Kaynak, 1998).

¹² Mehmet Seymen Önder, *Devlet ve PKK İkileminde Korucular* (İstanbul: İletişim, 2015).

¹³ Kurdiyê Bitlîsî, "Kürdistan'daki şehirler sekenesi Türk müdür?", *Jîn*, aded 6, 25 Kanun-i Evvel 1334 (7 January 1919), 1-9. See also Martin van Bruinessen, 'Kurds and the City', in *Joyce Blau, l'éternelle chez les Kurdes*, ed. Hamit Bozarslan and Clémence Scalbert-Yücel (Paris: Institut Kurde de Paris, 2013), 273-95. https://www.academia.edu/3178729/Kurds_and_the_City.

with elements of the state apparatus or official political parties. It was only when tribal ties were loosened by mass education and voluntary or forced migration that the appeal of Kurdish nationalism could to some extent overcome the division of conflicting tribal loyalties. I am inclined to believe that especially the ‘dirty war’ of the mid-1990s, with massive repression, forced evacuations and destruction of villages, the ban to take the flocks to the mountain pastures (*yayla yasağı*) so that the tribes’ animals had to be sold caused a massive weakening of the tribes and a shift from tribal to ethnic identity. I also have the impression that the grave insecurities of the past decade caused many people in Southeast Anatolia to reorient themselves towards the tribes as safety networks. But no doubt, there were great differences from place to place and we cannot generalize about these developments. This is precisely why studies focusing on specific tribes, as presented in this volume, are so valuable. We learn much more from such case studies than from broad and often politically inspired generalizations.

The social history of Kurdistan is the history of many individual tribes, of religious families exercising authority, of the relations between Kurds and their non-Kurdish neighbours, and of the interactions between these groups and the state and the market. The collection of studies brought together in this volume constitutes an important contribution to this social history of the Kurds and Kurdistan.

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