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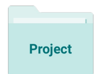

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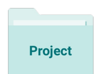

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RELIGION AND POLITICAL STRUCTURE: REMARKS ON IBADISM IN OMAN AND THE MZAB (ALGERIA)

In his recent study on *Water and Tribal Settlement in Southeast Arabia* which, greatly exceeding the scope of its title, represents the only comprehensive analysis of the social structure of traditional Oman to date, *John Wilkinson* is dealing extensively with the relationship between religious doctrine, social structure and political constitution in Oman. He argues that until the recent development of oil production in Oman the segmentary tribal and acephalous character of Omani society had been preserved by Ibadism—the Islamic tendency dominating in Oman. For Wilkinson, the key variable in this context is the unification of social structure that took place in Oman in the first centuries after the Islamic conquest. The integration of the Persian village population into the tribal system of the Arab immigrants that was facilitated by egalitarian notions inherent in Ibadism, is said to have led to the preservation of the original settlement pattern with its concomitant decentralization of economic and administrative functions. Thus the development of a central state, a general feature in Muslim history, was prevented until the last decades because of religious thinking *(Wilkinson 1977: 137ff.)*.

Whereas Wilkinson thus puts the contribution of religion to the shaping of social structure into the framework of a rather sophisticated argument, students of Mzab *(Mzāb* or *Mīzāb)* society in southern Algeria, the second major still-existing centre of Ibadi influence, have seen the relation between religion

and political structure as being much more straight-forward. "The principles and rules of social conduct which (Mzabi) society has given itself", it has been claimed in a recent study on political development in Algeria, "are directly inspired by religious doctrine" *(Merghoub 1972:32; see also Halm 1976)*.

The explanation of social patterns by the state of consciousness of individuals in not an uncommon feature in the literature on segmentary acephalous societies (for an example see *Sigrist 1967, esp, pp. 202ff.)*. For systematic reasons this argument seems misleading and remains in the last analysis tautological. In the case of Islam, a variation on this theme has produced the notion—widely held by Muslims themselves—of an "essence" of Islam that has remained unchanged over time and across different geographical areas. In the Orientalist version of this argument, this essentialist notion of Islam has been presented as the only factor that was capable of unifying and integrating "Islamic society" that was otherwise thought to be totally divided in terms of ethnicity, stratification and association *(Turner 1978:39ff.; Said 1978;* note the analogy in Wilkinson's argument quoted above).

As an explicit critique of this essentialist view of Islam and "Islamic society", recent studies of Middle Eastern societies have stressed the diversity of Islam and its adaptability to various local value systems and changing social realities (*Eickelman 1981: 201ff.* and the literature quoted there). It is in this "local perspective" that I want to look at Ibadism in pre-modern Oman and the precolonial Mzab. Though both societies are often described as "Ibadi" in character, it will be shown that in fact social patterns and political structures differed widely between them. Instead of seeing the history of both countries as a process of "Ibadisation", I think it would be more plausible to speak of an "Omanisation" and "Maghrebisation" of Ibadism respectively.

The Kharijites.

Ibadism is the moderate form of the *khāwārij*, the earliest Islamic opposition movement. Like all schismatic tendencies in Islam it was from the outset focused on the relation between religion and politics. The Muslim community in Medina had been marked by the identity of prophecy and political craft-

manship in the person of Mohammed. After his death, however, the religious and political spheres soon began to disintegrate. Already the early Caliphs, by deepening the political as opposed to the religious aspects of the Caliphate, began to break the "seamless web of Islamic political and religious institutions" *(Lapidus 1975:363)*. The Kharijite schism was a direct reaction to this development. Against the *Veralltäglichung* (routinisation) of charisma under Mohammed's successors the Khajirites insisted with their slogan: "*Lā ḥukm illā lillāh*" (the decision belongs to God alone) on the necessity to base Islamic political and religious authority on divine charisma. From a sociological point of view they were setting "charismatic" against "traditional" authority *(M. Weber)*. As this charisma might in principle show itself in every Muslim, the Kharijites logically refused granting preferential rights to the office of the caliph *(Strothmann 1928)*.

The Kharijite schism began in 657 A.D. After the violent death of ʿUthmān his succession had been disputed by *Muʿāwiya* and ʿAlī, Mohammed's son-in-law. When both sides took to arms it was suggested after several days of unsuccessful fighting that the matter might be resolved by arbitration "according to the Koran". This proposal, however, was bitterly opposed by a large part of ʿAlī's men. They thought it inconceivable to hold a human tribunal over the will of God. Protesting, they left ʿAlī's camp (*kharaja*—to leave). The protestors were mainly from the tribe of the Bānū Tamīm but were soon joined by large parts of the *qurrā'* (reciters of the Koran) and groups of non-Arabic Muslims *(mawāli)*.

This is not the place to give a full picture of the subsequent history of Kharijism. Nor do I want to deal with the religious doctrines of the movement in the strict sense. There exists an extensive specialized literature on this subject *(Levi Della Vida 1978)*. My object, here, is to underline that the conflict between the Kharijites and their opponents revolved around the double antithesis of subjective experience of the holy versus objectivated faith, charisma versus office, as they were analyzed as ideal types by *Max Weber* and *Ernst Troeltsch*. Though the Omani Ibadis were the immediate successors of the Basra Kharijites, their perspective on the problem of religious faith and political power was very different.

The Kharijites took refuge with their fellow tribesmen of the

Bānū Tamīm in Basra. Experiencing a phenomenal population growth, this town was in the second half of the 7th century rapidly turning from a military camp into an important commercial centre. Already around 700, merchants from Basra had commercial connections with the Lower Gulf, Oman, India, Southeast Asia, and China, and in the west with *Ifrīqiya* (latter-day Tunisia and eastern Algeria). Many of these rich merchants sympathized with Kharijite ideas. As a rule, however, they belonged to its moderate wing, the *Ibādiyya* (called after one of its early leaders, *'Abd-Allah ibn Ibād al-Murrīal-Tamīmī*). Contrary to the more radical Kharijites, the Ibadis did not think it necessary to spread their doctrines by force of arms. Instead, they sought to reach an understanding with the orthodox caliphs in peaceful negotiations. Ideologically this was expressed by them in the notion of the "hidden" Imam *(kitmān)*, indicating a period when the Ibadis, living under the rule of "tyrants", preferred to remain without a political organization. It was up to the learned members to the Ibadi council *(jāmī'al al-muslimīn)* to decide that circumstances were favourable enough for the sect to enter the stage of *ẓuhūr* (openness), elect an Imam (=caliph) and organize an Ibadi state.

The Ibadis in Oman.

Until then, the Ibadis zealously did missionary work. Already around 700 their envoys—many of them as members of the invading Arab armies, others as merchants—reached Tripolitania, *Ifrīqiya*, the Yemen and Oman. Around 750 they founded the Imamate of the *Julandā* in the almost inaccessible mountains of Oman, the southeastern corner of the Arabian peninsula, with a population of perhaps 700,000 people. This first Omani Imamate was, however, crushed by a caliphate army ten years later. There followed a long period of internal fighting until in the 9th century *al-Wārith ibn Ka'b al-Kharūsī* was established as the first of the main line Omani Imams.

From very early on, the Ibadis in Oman developed an explicit political theory which was fixed and passed on in written form (for the following cf. *Wilkinson 1976; Ennami 1972*). The core of this theory is the notion of the Imamate as the religious and political rule of the leader of the community of the believers *(umma)*. The basic principles governing the relationship

between Imam and *umma* are those of consultation and consensus. Added to this is the notion of an actionable social contract in which the rights and duties of Imam and *umma* were laid down by divine command. The direct opposite model of the Imam is the *malik* (king): the despotic tyrant who is completely arbitrary in his rule.

This model of political authority is especially well illustrated by two points: the rules governing the election of an Imam and those regulating his conduct of office. Election seems to have been the standard principle of choosing a new Imam. He was elected by the *'ulamā'* acting as representatives of the *umma.* It was not formally determined who these *'ulamā'* were. In practice, however, they were the leaders of the great Omani tribes who, after having first consulted their fellow tribesmen, congregated in Nizwa after the death of an Imam and deliberated on the possible candidates. In theory, every Muslim could be elected if he was physically and mentally fit and had proved his religious erudition *('ilm)* and political authority *(wilāya).* This procedure excluded dynastic government, i.e., the automatic transfer of office from father to son which for the Omanis signified the rule of *mulūk.* In practice, however, we can discern so-called "elite families" (like the *Āl Kharūsī)* whose members have provided most of the Imams until the 20th century. These elite families were socially and genealogically marked by a similar distance from both of the two great Omani tribal federations, the *Hināwī* and the *Ghāfirī.* On the other hand, the beginnings of the currently ruling dynasty show that it was not impossible for men of almost unknown descent to take over the office. But then the election of Aḥmad ibn Sa'īd as Imam in 1861 was but an *ex post* official confirmation of a *de facto* already acquired political position. By expelling the Persian army from Omani soil as much as by ruthlessly eliminating his local rivals he had proved his political skill and thus his *wilāya.*

Once elected, the Imam was the guardian of the common wealth of all Muslims *(amīn bayt mal al-muslimīn wa dawlatihim).* He had to strive for internal justice and external security. Though he should certainly consult the *'ulamā'* in important matters he had no formal council of advisers in the strict sense. Rather he had to keep exclusive personal control over all matters of state and had to be accessible to all Omanis at

all times. In particular he had to administer the property of the state *(bayt al-māl)*. Apart from the revenues from this property the only tax that could be legally levied was the *zakāh*. The income from both sources was partly spent on assistance to the poor. As the Imam was expressly prevented from keeping a professional army and his administrative responsibilities were negligible, most of the state income was in fact used to subsidize the *'ulamā'*, that is the tribal sheikhs. These subsidies were an essential factor in securing the continuing support of the tribes for an Imam, once he was elected.

Thus the institution of the Imamate did not limit the authority of the tribal sheikhs (oman. *ṭamīma*). Among them, the Imam rather had the position of a *primus inter pares (Wilkinson 1977: 136ff.)*. In fact, the conception of Imamate government as it has developed in Oman since the 9th century represents a transposition of the political structure of tribal society into the religious realm.

The political structure of tribal society in Oman was based on a hierarchy of interdependent homologous oppositions—in the context of the segmentary system on the levels of clan *(fakhītha)*, tribe *(qabīla)* and tribal federation, from a territorial point of view on the levels of village, region and "nation". Kinship and spatial principles interlocked and produced an always precarious balance between social groups that were fighting among themselves over economic, political and "symbolic" resources (cf. the concept of "symbolic capital" in *Bourdieu 1976*). Though these groups define themselves by descent, descent criteria are in fact more a legitimation of the disparity in resources enjoyed by different groups that are materially related to each other by opposition and alliance. This system worked with only a rudimentary centre and can therefore be termed *acephalous*. This does not imply, however, an even distribution of political power either across or within descent groups: For in the terms of political evolution theory, these groups were "chiefdoms" *(Service)*. On all three relevant levels of segmentation, political leaders *(rashīd, shaykh, ṭamīma)* acted as patrons of their respective reference groups. Thus the contracting of alliances and activation of feuds which lie at the base of this structure, were done by the chiefs for specific descent groups. As a social group these chiefs were defined by descent: At least for long periods of time, all the sheikhs of a tribe came

from the same family. But here again, descent criteria are in the long run flexible enough to accommodate the rise of new groups to political power. Moreover, as individuals these chiefs depended on the cooperation of their fellow tribesmen. This creates a necessity for consultation. Out of the whole elite clan, he, who most furthers the interests of the tribe (for example by concluding favourable alliances for the group), will be elected sheikh. By the same token, successful policy in the interest of the tribe increases the authority of the sheikh and gives him wider room for political manoeuvering within the tribe and against other groups.

Thus, Imamate and sheikhly system correlate in this aspect of long-term reciprocity and of a high degree of consultation and consensus between patrons and client groups.

Thus, the Imam in Oman is nothing but the uppermost sheikh and Imamate theory only the religious re-formulation of local principes of political structure. From a historical point of view, the Ibadi Imamate served as a vehicle for temporarily rallying Omani tribal society when it found itself threatened by outsiders. As soon as this outside threat receded the centrifugal forces of the tribal system re-emerge. Intertribal arguments develop over the succession of a dead Imam. A rulling Imam is accused of unjust conduct of office. These are only the manifest signs that the temporary truce between the great tribal federations has broken down *(Wilkinson 1977: 124).*

It should thus have become evident that Omani Ibadism indeed shares with Kharijism its basic orientation on the twin problem of the organization of political authority and the relation between politics and religion. But as the historical and social backgrounds are incomparable, the solutions to this common problem differ. Adapting to the social structure of tribal society, Ibadism in Oman takes on a marked "national" colour.

The Rustamids.

Let us look now at the development of the sect in North Africa. As has been pointed out, Kharijism had spread there already in the seventh century. Berber tribes in Tripolitania were the first to accept the new faith. From the outset, the Islamic Arab invasion in North Africa had met with the opposition of most of the Berber federations. When finally around 720

large masses of Berbers converted to Islam it was, as a rule, to Islam in its Kharijite version—first mainly in the form of Sufrism, then increasingly in that of Ibadism. For the Berbers, Kharijism and Ibadism with their stress on the essential equality of all Muslims regardless of ethnic origin became the religious expression of their ethnic identity and their political autonomy that they were trying to maintain against the Umayyad Arab governors. The great Berber rebellion of 740-742 belongs into this context *(Bel 1938: 137ff.; Bekri 1957: 56ff.)*

In 757, the North African Ibadis elected the Yemeni Abū l-Khaṭṭāb as their Imam. He died four years later in one of the many battles which the Ibadis had to fight against Abbasid armies from Egypt pushing them further and further west. He was succeeded in 777 by the Persian ʻAbd al-Raḥmān ibn Rustam who had belonged to the same small group of missionaries in which Abū l-Khaṭṭāb had come from Basra. He founded the Rustamid dynasty which ruled in Northwest Africa until 909 A.D.

Without wanting to go into the details of the history of the Rustamid empire, there are several interesting features of its political organization that represent a remarkable contrast to the principles of Imamate government in Oman (for the following see *Bekri 1957*): The Rustamids whom at least the Arab sources used to call *mulūk (Lewicki 1971: 106)* ruled as a dynasty. Though the confirmation by the *umma* seems to have remained at least a formal requirement, the office was as a rule passed from father to son between 776 and 909. The Rustamids also had—besides the tribal levies—a small permanent army at their command which included loyal formations of local Christians *(ʻajam)*. This mercenary army, however, seems to have been confined to the capital Tahert. Outside Tahert, the Rustamid Imams had to rely on tribal levies. Finally, the Rustamid empire could boast embryonic forms of a formal administrative apparatus within which the role of the Imam's advisers seems to have been much stronger than that of their counterparts in Oman where the Imam was not supposed to delegate any political authority. Even if their designation in the Arabic sources as *wazīr* (minister of state) should probably be viewed as a projection of Abbasid principles of court organization, they very often played a rather influential role in the affairs of the empire (on Abbasid state organization cf. for

example, *Hitti 1970: 317ff.*). This was certainly true of the governors of the outlying communities in Jabal Demmer and Jabal Nafusa who often acted almost independently from the Imam in Tahert. Other important positions were those of *qāḍī* (judge) and of the administrator of the public treasury *(bayt al-māl)*, a function that according to the Omani theory of Imamate government was strictly reserved for the Imam himself. (In the case of the Ibadi communities of the Mzab, this tendency of delegating political authority to the Imam's advisers was further developed to a point where the institution of the Imamate itself lapsed altogether and was replaced by a corporation of religious notables; see below.)

The end of the Rustamid empire came in 909 with the occupation of its capital Tahert by the Fatimids who viewed the Ibadi heresy as a thorn in their side. The Ibadis found refuge in Sedātra near the oasis of Wargla, an Ibadi enclave which had been making a living from agriculture and trans-Saharan slave trade since the 8th century. Other Ibadi groups have maintained themselves in Wadi Righ on the island of Djerba and in the Jabal Nafusa until today. From the year 1000 onwards, they began emigrating into Wadi Mzab (on the northern edge of the Sahara in latter-day Algeria).

The Ibadis in the Mzab.

There, between 1011 A.D. and 1053 A.D., they founded the towns of al-Atif, Bu Nura, Malika, Banu Isgen and Ghardaya, to which were added Garara and Barrian in the 17th century. In 1896 these seven towns on the high plateau of the Mzab, an area of about 8,000 square kilometers and one of the hottest and driest regions of the Sahara, had a population of about 25,000 people *(Huguet 1906: 19)*. Their characteristic urban civilization had remained basically unchanged until the formal annexation by France in 1882; even subsequently it has only slowly been transformed.

After the death of the last ruler of the Rustamids the Ibadis did not elect a new Imam. In Ibadi terminology, the sect entered the state of *kitmān*, of the hidden Imam, where in the face of a hostile political environment the election of an Imam could be postponed until circumstances were considered more favourable. In the absence of Imamate government, at least from the 15th century onwards, the towns of the Mzab were

ruled by two corporative institutions; the *ḥalqa* (circle) of the *ʿazzāba* (mzab. learned men) and the *jāmāʿat il-ʿawāmm* (council of laymen).

Originally, the *ḥalqas* seem to have been religious brotherhoods whose members were distinguished by their religious zeal, their erudition, their simple style of living and their celibacy. From the 15th century onwards, they became increasingly important for the political leadership of the Mzabite towns. From this time onwards, it has been argued *(Lewicki 1971a)* that they "dominated" the *jāmaʿa.* However vague this description of the relations between *ḥalqa* and *jāmāʿa* remains, it seems to be a fact that now celibacy was no longer required for the *ʿazzāba.* The 12 members of the *ḥalqa* were still co-opted for life out of the *ṭalaba:* those who had made themselves familiar with the Koran. Among them, however, certain families seem to have been strongly dominant *(Suter 1958a; Mercier 1932: 173).* Certainly their special dress, once made purely from wool and thus a sign of their ascetic life style, changed and became a mere status symbol. From now on, an *ʿazzābī* could be recognized by his white turban and by the fact that he did not carry arms *(Amat 1888: 158f.).* Inside the *ḥalqa*, itself already an exclusive circle within the whole group of *ṭalaba*, a further hierarchization took place. At its top stood a sheikh, elected for life and presiding over an inner circle of four *ʿazzāba.* This was the real decision-making organ of the *ḥalqa.*

When entering the *ḥalqa*, the *ʿazzāba* withdrew from all mundane business (unfortunately, the existing literature remains rather vague as to economic differentiations and the property structure in the Mzab and gives no indication of the socio-economic groups from which the *ṭalaba* and *ʿazzāba* were recruited). The *ʿazzāba* might, indeed, occasionally keep working in their own orchards but they tended to leave the management of their commercial interests to near relatives *(Suter 1958a).* They also enjoyed special privileges: they were neither called to military duties nor to communal works. They were maintained through the income of the numerous religious foundations *(ḥubūs)*, the management of which was one of their main functions, and through the *tnūba* (mzab., arabic: *nūba*), a kind of religious tax peculiar to the Mzab.

Ḥubūs (in other parts of the Islamic world called *waqf*) are "eternal" endowments of mobile or more often immobile goods

or their usufruct which thus become unalienable and cease to be objects of commercial transactions (for the following, see *Mercier 1927: 105ff.; Suter 1957/58)*. They are often bequeathed by last will. According to Islamic law of succession, up to a third of the estate of a deceased can be thus disposed of by himself. Even today this limit tends to be reached in most cases (the rest has to go to the deceased's family). The beneficiaries might be individuals or descent groups. By far the largest part of the *ḥubūs* in the Mzab, however, consists of houses, commercial premises, orchards or individual palm trees which have been bequeathed to the mosques. In addition to this, moreover, the mosques in the Mzab receive the proceeds from many *ḥubūs* in the Wargla oasis. These *ḥubūs* are listed for each mosque in a registry which—under the overall control of the *ḥalqa*—is kept by the *wakīl* (administrator) of this mosque *(Mercier 1927: 122f., 147ff.)*.

The *tnūba*, on the other hand, is an annual contribution in kind (mainly meat, *kuskus*, dates and bread) to the mosques. Originally voluntary gifts, they have become an easement lying on almost every house and on many palm trees and whole palm gardens in the Mzab. In a typical case, the *tnūba* of a house may consist of 10 to 20 kg of meat, 1/8 to one sheep and 20 to 30 kg of *kuskus*, and many houses are charged with up to six of these *tnūbas*. In addition to this, in many orchards the yield of all the trees has been permanently donated to the mosques. These donations are collected at fixed dates throughout the year on the holy earth of grave-yards and with the complete *ḥalqa* present. Here again one of their members controls the process by means of a register. In the 19th century, 240 hl *kuskus* and 630 sheep might be collected at one single gathering *(Motylinsky 1884: 66)*.

The yield from *ḥubūs* and *tnūba* plus the annual gifts during the fasting month of Ramadān represent a considerable part of the material product of the Mzab over which the mosques thus gain control. In the 1920s, more than half of all houses and gardens in Banu Isgen were said to be *ḥubūs*; in Ghardaya, the largest town of the Mzab with about 1/4 of its population, *ḥubūs* property amounted to just under half of all the houses and gardens *(Mercier 1927: 116)*. The income thus gained was partly used for social purposes. It also served for the upkeep of the buildings of the mosques and for the maintenance of the

'azzāba themselves and of the *ṭalaba* who were tutored by them. Through the sheer amount of gardens owned, as well as through the fact that any garden in the Mzab contains palm trees some of which are owned privately and some by the mosque but which have to be tended together because of the traditional techniques of date farming, the mosques thus gained a pre-eminent position in the process of material reproduction of Mzabi society (on the property structure in the Mzab, see *Felin 1909: 6-35*).

The second corporative institution is the *jāmā'at al-'awāmm*, a supra-tribal council in which all the descent groups of a town are represented. In 1955, for example, the *jāmā'a* of Beni Isgen had four members: apart from the *qā'id* as representative of the central government, these were the leaders *(muqaddim)* of the three tribal federations *(qabīla)* of the town respectively. In Ghardaya, on the other hand, the *jāmā'a* was formed by the leaders *(ṭamīm)* of the 19 tribes *('ashīra)*: it thus had 22 members, including the three representatives of the Arab client groups *(Suter 1958a)*. Before the French occupation, the *jāmā'a* used to select one of their members as political figurehead of all the tribes.

Leaving the purely religious functions of the *ḥalqa* aside—as religious instruction and cult actions—there seems to have existed a certain division of political functions between *ḥalqa* and *jāmā'a*. If the *jāmā'a* occupied itself with the administrative management of town affairs, the functions of the *ḥalqa* were more of a judiciary kind. It was judge in criminal cases, controller of public morals and arbiter in conflicts concerning property. Above all, in conjunction with the *jāmā'a*, it enacted general regulations (*ittifāqāt*, agreements, or *qawānīn*, laws) on all aspects of communal life which were then carried out by the *jāmā'a* (for the *qawānīn* of Malika, see *Morand 1903: 20ff.*). Students of the history of the Mzab see this as political "domination" of the *jāmā'a* by the *ḥalqa*. On the other hand, they speak of "permanent conflicts" between both institutions *(Lewicki 1971a; Morand 1903: 9f.)*. Here I would like to propose a different interpretation of the role of the *ḥalqa* in Mzabi society. Its main function seems to have been geared to the survival of the Mzabi social system. This meant the preservation of its system of economic reproduction, its social and political integration and its cultural identity. This interpretation would, for example, explain the strict opposition of

the *ḥalqa* to the emigration of women from the Mzab and to Mzabi men marrying non-Mzabi women. With the economy of the Mzab being vitally dependent on the remittances of emigrants to northern Algeria, this rule ensured that the Mzabi shopowners and craftsmen in the north would indeed send a large part of their income back home and would eventually return there. On the political level, the purely Ibadi *ḥalqa* constituted a counterweight to the centrifugal forces of Mzabi society. It is important to realize that despite all claims of the coherence of Mzabi society, it was in fact constantly torn apart by political conflicts, between tribal groups as well as between individual towns. In fact, we can discern here a tendency that has been noticed for Oman (cf. the description of tribal and interurban conflicts in *Masqueray 1886: 211ff.*). In the Mzab, this tendency was reinforced by the presence of Arab tribal groups (most of them nomadic herdsmen, some of them craftsmen) that were allied to individual Ibadi (Berber) factions. Unlike in Oman, however, these groups were as a rule not integrated into the tribal structure of the Ibadi Berbers *(Merghoub 1972: 36f.)*. Finally, on a cultural level, the *ḥalqa* were the material proof as well as the guardian of the specific, i.e. Ibadi character of Mzabi society. The Ibadi there were numerically a very small group and were threatened by the marginality of the terrain and the presence of outsiders. They thus found themselves in a constant struggle for economic and political survival. As a result, "Ibadiness" had to be constantly demonstrated, and this led to the obsession of the *ḥalqa* with public morals. Instead of seeing the "ethical vigour" of the *ḥalqa* as a potential threat to the coherence and continuity of Ibadi society *(Halm 1976)* I would, therefore, rather underline its positive contribution to the survival of the Ibadi social system. Consequently, when in the late 19th century the Mzab was annexed to France, it was the *ḥalqa* which stood at the centre of the anti-European resistance (a large part of the French literature on the Mzab after 1880 is, therefore, heavily biased against the "narrow-minded theologians" of the Mzabi *ḥalqa*, cf. for example, *Masqueray 1879*).

In view of the marked socio-political differences between Oman and the Mzab (not to speak of the original Kharijites and the Rustamids) I find it difficult to accept that both political systems (centred around the *ḥalqa* and around the Imamate

respectively) could be viewed as the direct materialization of Ibadi religious thought. In one respect, we might indeed speak of equivalent functions of both institutions: *ḥalqa* and Imam both provided for a minimum of political coherence in otherwise rather loosely integrated political systems. However, the social institutions that fulfilled this identical function were quite different. Furthermore, to a much higher degree than their co-religionists in Oman, the Ibadis in the Mzab constituted a (economically and socially) marginal group. Therefore, whereas Ibadism has been referred to as an explanation for the integration of Persian villagers and immigrant Arab tribesmen into a unified social structure *(Wilkinson 1977: 140ff.)*, one of the main problems for the Ibadi Berbers in the Mzab was how to exclude the Arab groups from their tribal system.

These doubts as to the "Ibadi character" of Mzabi political structure increase even further when we look in another direction for a comparison. It can be shown that the political institutions of the Mzab stand in a much closer North African context than has been recognized in the locally specialized literature. The Mzab was not so much Ibadi, it can be argued, as Ibadism in the Mzab was Maghribi.

Sociological and historical studies of the Maghreb have insisted upon the important role of religious brotherhoods *(ṭarīqa)* and of Marabouts *(murābiṭūn)* living locally dispersed in *zāwiyas* (see already *Montagne 1931 and Bousquet 1946: 127ff.; for more recent studies see Eickelman 1981: 222ff.* and the literature quoted there). These are institutions that without doubt go against the letter and the spirit of the Koran.

Historically, they both aided and were in turn a product of the Islamization of the Maghreb between the 8th and the 14th century. In this epoch. Islam in North Africa took on a form in which it could be more easily adopted by the Berber tribes: that of popular mysticism with strong elements of anthropolatry. The *ribāts* (fortified castles with store-houses) turned into *zāwiyas*, the seat of religious brotherhoods of *murābitūn* (i.e. those who live in a *ribāt*). Often the tomb of a dead Marabout could be found here around which there developed a holy district *(ḥurm)* serving as an inviolable asylum. A mosque, a koranic school and possibly guestrooms for pilgrims completed the picture.

The internal structure of these *ṭarīqa* was highly hierarchical. Wealth and property were concentrated at the top. This top was the *muqaddim*, often claiming to be the direct descendant of a saint. He administered the income of the *murābitūn* from their extensive landed property (most of it *ḥubūs*) and from the voluntary donations *(ṣadaqa)* made by pious tribesmen at pilgrimages *(ziyāra)* to the *zāwiya*.

The Marabout certainly played above all a religious role. Thought to have a special relationship with God, they were particularly well placed to serve as intermediaries and to communicate God's grace *(baraka)* to their clients *(Eickelman 1981: 222)*. Mediating thus between "official" Islam and tribal society which was largely constituted by customary law *('urf)* and which was ruled by assemblies *(jāmā'a)* or hierarchies of assemblies, they aided the tribesmen in their self-identification as Muslims without loss of their particular ethnic and cultural identity. The *ṭarīqa* and in particular their leaders *(muqaddim)* administered, so to speak, the *baraka* that the original founder of the brotherhood had acquired by virtue of his wisdom and his pious life and that he had passed on to his successors. The tribesmen could gain access to this *baraka* by creating, in the form of donations and sacrifices, special bonds of obligation *(ḥaqq)* between them and the Marabout.

While the dichotomy between "the sacred" and "the profane" that is constitutive for any religion was thus projected onto two different social groupings, Maraboutism at the same time implicitly assumed that human relations with the supranatural worked on the same principle that North Africans see as constitutive for the social order: that of dyadic bonds of inferiority and superiority (*qarāba*, lit. closeness) *(Durkheim 1981; Geertz 1968; Eickelman 1981: 229)*.

In addition to their *qarāba* to God, Marabouts therefore develop (either as individuals or as descent groups) social ties to particular tribal or urban groups. These ties helped them to exercise—beyond their more strictly religious functions—a wide range of economic and political roles. In particular, they served as mediators and arbiters in inter- and intra-tribal conflicts or (in Morocco) between tribes and the Sultan's court In these cases, a particular *zāwiya* or Marabout had to be found upon whom all parties to the conflict could agree. As in the case of their role as mediators between God and man, this

choice was based on considerations of comparable "closeness" of the Marabout to the disputing parties and on their reputation for settling particular kinds of disputes. Marabouts also were very often influential in the process of the election of political leaders by the tribal *jāmā'a (Gellner 1969).*

The parallels between the Mzabi *ḥalqa* and the Maghribi *ṭarīqa* are thus only too obvious. They show themselves in outward signs like dress that for the early Mzabi *ṭalaba*, like the Sufi Marabout, was said to have consisted purely of wool. They were also revealed in the spatial structure of Mzabi towns. All of them are centred around a fortified mosque, often with its own saintly tomb and buildings for *'azzāba* and *ṭalaba* alike, and including a magazin for food and an arms depot. Thus, they closely resembled the *ribāṭ*-turned-*zāwiya* of the rest of North Africa.

Moreover, *ḥalqa* and *ṭarīqa* closely resemble each other in their internal organization. Most important, however, Marabout and *'azzābī* play similar religious and political roles: that of preserving essential principles of the social and cultural order. (It is interesting to note, by the way, that notions parallel to Maraboutism can also be found in North African Judaism. See the literature in *Eickelman 1981: 232.*)

If this analysis of the close structural and functional correspondences between Maraboutism and Mzabi hagiarchy is valid, why is it then that students of Mzab society kept insisting on the specifically Ibadi character of Mzabi political institutions? There seem to be several answers for this. To begin with, the exclusively French literature of the 19th and 20th century on the Mzab was heavily biased in two respects: Firstly, it tended to idealize the Ibadi Berbers of the Mzab stressing their moral superiority over the Arabs of North Africa. This was part of the general notion held by Frenchmen of a specific "Berber" identity and should be viewed against the background of French attempts at cultivating a "Berber" elite as part of a colonial policy of "divide and rule" *(Huguet 1907: 19ff.; Eickelman 1981: 166f.)*. In fact, the French had been using Ibadi emigrants in northern Algeria as informers and spies from as early as the occupation of Algiers in 1830 onwards *(Lespès 1925: 217)*. On the other hand, after the annexation of the Mzab itself, the relations between the Mzabis and the French remained not at all unstrained. For this, the French

liked to blame the influence of the Mzabi *ḥalqa*. This led to a tendency to overstress the conflicts between them and the Mzabi *jāmā'a*, and to project onto these disputes notions of "laymen" struggling against the rule of a conservative and narrow-minded "clergy" (as the French liked to call the *'azzāba*; see for example *Masqueray 1979: VII n. 1*). It is obvious that these categories describe rather the realities of western Europe in times of *Kulturkampf* (the struggle between Church and Civic Society) than those of a Muslim society in the northern Sahara. There can certainly be no doubt that the French constantly tried to support and upgrade the institution of the tribal *jāmā'a* against the *ḥalqa* (see the texts in *Mercier 1927: 126ff.*). This, in turn, must have increased the—not so much anti-French but anti-western—suspicions of the Ibadi *ṭalaba*.

Apart from these contradictory attitudes toward the Ibadi Berbers which had their ultimate rationality in the requirements of colonial rule, the literature on the Mzab presents us with a second problem. This has to do with the process of data-collecting in anthropological field work and the construction of theory in the social sciences, and is therefore not peculiar to the literature on the Mzab.

It seems to me that by referring to Ibadism as a possible explanation for social structure the field worker has simply reproduced what has been offered to him as an explanation by the Mzabis themselves (or the Omanis, for that matter), and in particular by their articulate leaders. Asked why a particular social institution exists in his society, an Mzabi or Omani will in all likelihood refer, in one way or the other, to "Islam" as an explanation. By taking these native explanations at face value, however, the ideological discourse of the people concerned is merely reformulated in "scientific" terms. In fact, this discourse is nothing but a means of legitimizing practical interests (see on this *Bourdieu 1976*). It shows how people like to see their actions and is, as such, part of social reality. But instead of explaining in itself this social reality, these ideologies need themselves explanation in their relation to the social formations in which they occur.

Conclusions.

This finally leads us back to our point of departure: the relation of politics and religion in Ibadism. At issue is the

argument that Ibadism has been the essential factor shaping the political structure of Oman and the Mzab. I hope to have shown that the relationship was at least much less straightforward, and that Ibadism, in all the cases demonstrated, adapted to local conditions to a degree that left, in terms of political structure, little common ground between the original Kharijites, Oman, the Rustamids and the Mzab. The political significance of Ibadism seems to have been rather a negative one: it presented certain ideological barriers against the centralization of administrative and military power. As is shown by the history of the Rustamid "empire" that collapsed at virtually the first serious clash with Fatimid armies, this absence of a political centre made Ibadi states rather vulnerable to military attacks from without. They could thus only survive in regions which were either difficult to penetrate or which produced only a small surplus product, and where internal social factors were favourable to acephaly. In Oman and the Mzab, these factors seem to have existed in the combination of tribalism with long-distance trade.

It has been argued that the states that were founded in North Africa in the Middle Ages—by the later Fatimids, by the Almohads, by the Merinids—developed over the control of the gold trade from the Sudan *(Lacoste 1974; Seddon 1977)*. The rulers of these states were never more than the chiefs of tribes which had become the heads of a confederation of tribal groups. By controlling the "ports of the desert" through which the Sudanese gold flowed, this tribal aristocracy, in association with an international class of merchants, was able to appropriate a part of the commercial profit. This importance of trade profits for the state revenue could explain the feeble extent to which the North African rulers extracted a locally produced surplus product. Thus, no "redistributive" system *(Polyani)* developed. As the political authority of the rulers never really penetrated—in a sense, never had to penetrate—tribal society with its strong military traditions, it was never able to transform the social relations of production in the countryside.

I believe that a similar situation existed in Oman until the 19th century. There, the trade in question was the entrepot trade between the Persian Gulf, India and Africa. Only when this was captured by the Omanis—as for example under the reign of Sultan Saʿīd in the first half of the 19th century—did

Ibadi Oman develop embryonic forms of a central state. But the material base of the political power of this type of political rulers always remained outside the country. Under Sultan Sa'īd, this was in the Omani colonies in Zanzibar. The Sultan whose family had come to power as the leaders of a tribal federation that expelled the Persians from the Omani coast was himself the largest merchant in his country. He used part of his revenue that was almost exclusively derived from international trade, to ensure a friendly attitude of the tribes of Interior Oman towards him. In this, he never completely succeeded. There certainly was never any question of subjugating the interior which had last seen a foreign army in the 10th century (*for an elaboration of this argument, see* Bierschenk 1984).

We should therefore understand Ibadism as a religion of peripheral opposition; as an ideological form, it could only last in regions at the periphery of the great Muslim empires. Its actual content, however, was in the last analysis determined by the social structures of these regions themselves. Despite certain similarities in doctrine, both Berbers and Omanis each had their own Ibadism.

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Bibliography

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