

State-Community Relations in Yemen: Soqotra's Historical Formation as a Sub-National Polity

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Soqotra Island, the remote border outpost of the Yemeni state in the Indian Ocean, is a community of mixed ethnic composition with a non-Arabic mother tongue. It offers an ideal socio-political context for the study of state–community relations in terms of polity formation as part of a political incorporation process. This focus provides a corrective to the still dominant segmentary society paradigm and its tribes-driven state politics in the anthropological discourse on Yemen. Polity formation in Soqotra occurred through a series of acts of political incorporation by a succession of political regimes from the late nineteenth century to the present. The study of this process is pursued through a historical narrative of the state’s politics of administration. This narrative is aptly described as a mesography, as its analytical focus is on the meso-level institutional web of four different political regimes with their distinctive modes of polity regimentation and their structuring effects on Soqotrans’ communal life.

Keywords: Yemen; Soqotra; Mesography; Political Incorporation; Polity Formation

Introduction: Politics of Administration and Communal History

History is past politics and politics present history. (Scott 1989: 680)

Soqotra Island is the main population centre, with approximately 50,000 inhabitants, of the four-island Soqotra Archipelago, which extends the borders of the Yemeni state nearly 400 kilometres into the Indian Ocean. It is the largest island in the Arab Middle Eastern region (from the Maghreb to the Persian Gulf), and its strategic geographical

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location as the gatekeeper to the entrance of the Red Sea, the gateway to the Middle East in the Indian Ocean, as well as its middle ground position between Africa and Arabia, have attracted the attention of external political actors for centuries. Consequently, Soqotra's historical transformation was driven primarily by a series of political incorporation acts into various state entities. This process of political incorporation may be said to have begun in the seventh century BCE, when Soqotra (then known as *Sakrad*) was a plantation colony of incense-bearing trees inhabited by migrant labourers from eastern South Arabia and annexed to the ancient Kingdom of Hadramawt until the fourth century CE, when both the incense trade and the kingdom began to decline (Casson 1989; Doe 1992; Robin 1997). Subsequently, Soqotra mutated into a settlers' colony, with a mosaic population of immigrants and seasonal vagrants who turned it into a quasi-stateless peddlers' emporium that was loosely linked to various mainland and foreign political overlords and subjected to occasional raiding parties and temporary occupation from state and non-state actors of all provenances, until the island's final re-incorporation into Yemen in the fifteenth century by the Mahra Sultanate (Elie 2006a). The focus of this article, however, is on the gamut of forms of political organization and polity regimentation that Soqotrans have encountered from the late nineteenth century to the present: first as a feudatory of the Sultanate of Mahra that was subsequently annexed by the British in the nineteenth century, and whose local rulers practiced by default the indirect rule of the absentee colonial overseer. Second, the newly established state of South Yemen, following independence from Britain in 1967, brought the Sultanate to an end and initiated Soqotra's entry into the twentieth century through a modernizing socialist experiment. Third, the unification of North and South Yemen in 1990 led to a hybrid administrative regime, which sought to tribalize the clan-based social organization and its civic traditions. Fourth, the post-unity regime was launched with the adoption of a Local Authority Law in 2000 based on a World Bank inspired "good governance" re-configuration of local administration, which was preceded by Soqotra's designation as a biodiversity reserve to be protected through a United Nations-brokered environmental conservation regime.

In light of the above, Soqotra offers an ideal socio-political context for the study of state–community relations in terms of a sub-national polity formation process. The latter was structured by the Yemeni state's politics of incorporation animated by the imperatives of nation-building, with the corollary institutional expansion and the consolidation of the state's political hegemony. More importantly, the case of Soqotra challenges the dominant narrative in which tribes and state are privileged as the main, if not the sole, antagonistic actors in the process of state and polity formation both in Yemen and the Middle East as a whole.¹ This narrative portrays the region as a collection of unchanging societies, with sclerotic polities and atrophied civil societies caught in a developmental impasse, as they have been dominated for centuries up to the present by two anachronistic corporatist social categories—namely, sedentarized tribesmen as an *embourgeoisé* political elite in the urban centre with a monopoly on patronage, and politically opportunistic and predatory nomadic tribes soldered by a genealogy-based archaic cohesion ('*asabīyya*) on the rustic periphery—that have remained largely unaffected by modernity's multiple processes of change (Bonte *et al.* 2001; Lindholm 2002;

Salzman 2008). In contrast, the case of Soqotra offers an intra-national comparative perspective that eschews the conventional disciplinary recourse to the conceptual albatross of tribalism and the epistemological cul-de-sac it has engendered in the historical anthropology of Yemen (Chelhod 1984; Dresch 1989, 2001; Elie 2004). Instead it illustrates the historical (as opposed to segmentary theory-prescribed) conditions of possibility for the constantly shifting political relations and the changing profile of local polities as a result of the interactions between the state and the various sub-regions of the national territory. Such relations are contingent on these regions' various socio-cultural configurations due to their different geographical location, eco-topographical profile, resource endowment, livelihood opportunities, occupational structure, ethno-demographic composition, heterodox religious practices, diasporic linkages and social organization. It is this set of factors that mediates state–community relations and structures the formation of differentiated communal or regional polities within the state's territorial jurisdiction, as well as renders the role of tribalism an epiphenomenon of contingent historical conjunctures and not of traditional social structures.

In studying this complex process of communal polity formation, I use the term political incorporation as an analytical template, as it helps explain the state's strategic objectives and the deployment of its institutional apparatus in terms of its attempts at penetrating the sub-national community, regulating its social relations and effecting social change (Migdal 1988: 4).² In effect, political incorporation is a change-inducing form of state encompassment of a targeted community through the deployment of an ensemble of policy choices and administrative practices. Moreover, using this analytical template enables the delineation of the multiple conjunctural shifts in Soqotra's historical trajectory engendered by the periodic changes in, what Migdal (2001: 125) has termed, the "recursive relationship between [the] state and other social forces."³ The mapping of this recursive relationship is broadly informed by an anthropology of policy, which entails the study of "how institutions and policies are organized, function, and change and the way these influence social actors, social boundaries, and the construction of social identities" (Wedel *et al.* 2005: 32). However, the study of state–community relations within the framework of an anthropology of policy entails the substitution of "meso" for "ethno", given the necessary shift in the descriptive-analytical focus from the micro-level of minutiae of everyday life of Soqotrans, to the meso-level web of institutions transferred under the different political regimes, with their distinctive administrative modus operandi and their re-structuring effects on Soqotrans' indigenous institutions, traditional social structures and the associated cultural practices. In this context, my use of the term mesography⁴ is not only terminologically apt, but also signals an overdue shift in anthropological discourse from: anthropologists' preferred ethnographic practice of *representation*—ineluctably filtered through the biographical baggage and interpretive predilection of the observer—of local actors constructing their socio-cultural life-world or of institutions performing their regulatory, reproductive or symbolic functions; of *articulation*⁵—a more sociologically grounded procedure for historical contextualization—of the sequential imbrication of trans/local policies and institutions in shaping Soqotra as a communal social formation, with the aim of explaining the nature of the island's

process of change. Therefore, a mesographic approach to Soqotra entails the quest for an explanatory synthesis of the historical constitution of Soqotra as a sub-national polity, in which the analytical focus is on the preponderant role of state policies and institutions in shaping the existential context of the Soqotran community through various modes of polity regimentation. More broadly, mesography offers a conceptual alternative to ethnography given, as Axel (2002: 16) explains, the latter's compromising historical baggage as the "basic modality of colonial knowledge production", and its epistemological limitations engendered by its "foundationalism of [field] experience". Furthermore, it provides the procedural underpinning of a historical anthropology that seeks to explain the "production of people" in their spatial, temporal, among other, dimensions through an understanding of "the politics of living the ongoing connections or disjunctions" of past, present and future (Axel 2002: 3).

Accordingly, this mesography of Soqotra's political incorporation recounts the series of state-directed processes of policy and administrative encompassment along a historical continuum, as part of a broad contextualization of the institutionalization process of the islanders' successive "production" into a sub-national polity. In doing so, it retraces the historical layers of transferred institutions and their multiple effects on communal life in Soqotra, as these institutions were restructured through successive projects of political subordination, cultural assimilation, and socio-economic enclosure undertaken by various political regimes from the late nineteenth century to the present. Finally, this mesography offers a processual portrait of a community, with a mixed ethnic composition and a non-Arabic mother tongue, undergoing a state incorporation process in which the combinatory effects of state policies and politics, institutions and actors have shaped the communal context of Soqotrans' daily existence, and thus of their community's historical trajectory. In effect, it is a narrative of the state's politics of administration, which maps the "complex relationality" in the agonistic socio-cultural and politico-economic interactions between local community, national society, the state and its international benefactors. Moreover, it not only establishes the genealogy of the modern period in Soqotra through identifying the different phases of the island's political incorporation, but also documents the transition process that has taken Soqotrans through a series of social mutations. Elucidating these mutations as part of a political incorporation process entails a combination of fieldwork, which I conducted in Soqotra over a two-year period, and textual research. In the following two sections of the article I seek: (1) to descriptively analyse the four phases of Soqotra's political incorporation and the local adjustment effects; and (2) to highlight the ramifications of state-community relations in Soqotra under the current Yemeni state.

Mesography in Four Phases: The Articulation of Polity Formation

The mesography of Soqotra's polity formation process starts from the period of enforced socio-economic stagnation under the Sultanate during the nineteenth century, followed by the independence of South Yemen in 1967, and Soqotrans inauguration into modernity and nation-state citizenship. This was followed by the national unification government in 1990, which initiated the transfer of northern

Yemeni tribal ethos. This was succeeded by a post-unity regime that heralded the “modernization” of governance institutions and an international economic integration process at the dawn of the twenty-first century. These four conjunctural shifts in Soqotra’s political incorporation and the associated administrative regimes represent the major markers of the island’s recent historical evolution: Sultanate fiefdom; socialist administration; unity government; and post-unity regime. Their discussion amounts to an anatomy of Soqotra’s transition process, which simultaneously articulates the communal biography of Soqotrans in the form of a historical reconstruction of their polity formation process.

The following discussion is structured around four aspects that together convey a comprehensive overview of the nature of the governance systems and their structuring effects on polity formation in Soqotra. These four aspects are the following: (1) historical context, which sets the stage by highlighting the circumstances of the regime’s emergence and its mode of governance; (2) political geography characterizes each regime’s idiosyncratic territorial organization of the island for political administration; (3) administrative modus operandi, which define the units of administration or political offices that underpin the governance system, and the institutional mechanisms that articulate the mode of governance; and (4) economic policy identifies the economic priorities and their social ramifications.

Sultanate Fiefdom: Tributary Patrimonialism

Feudal Dynasty

Formal representation of the al-Afrar Sultanate of Mahra on the south-eastern coast of mainland Yemen was rather haphazard on the island until 1480, when Mahri tribesmen disembarked from a flotilla of ten ships to take over, or more accurately to formalize as well as to militarize their heretofore informal presence on, Soqotra in their attempt to forestall the colonial ambition of their perennial rivals, the Kathiri and Qu’aiti Sultanates in Hadramawt (Serjeant 1992: 161). They established a fort at al-Suq, which was then the capital village and the main trading port, and where a garrison of armed Mahri tribesmen was maintained to collect the tribute imposed on the Bedouins in the hinterland (Beckingham 1949). The Portuguese temporarily unseated the representation of al-Afrar Sultanate between 1507 and 1511. The latter reasserted its sovereignty upon the abandonment of the Portuguese short-lived colonizing venture. However, the new Mahri political overlord of the island seemed to have been present only intermittently, and used it for two purposes: (1) as a temporary refuge from their political enemies, as Ibn Majid, writing in the fifteenth century, explained, “to rally in it when they are weak and in danger from the Sultans of Hadramawt and others [for example, the Omanis]” (cited in Serjeant 1992: 144); and (2) as a tax farm, which was the island’s principal purpose, that set a pattern in which Hadiboh and the other coastal settlements were merely used as tax collection nodes, and that lasted until the end of the Sultanate under the al-Afrar dynasty. Soqotra was the first to have attracted British colonial interest when, in 1834, an offer to purchase the island was

made to the Sultan Amer bin Sa'ad bin Tawary al-Afrar of Mahra, but was rejected. However, the island's unsuitability as a coaling depot led instead to the occupation and colonization of Aden in 1839, and subsequently to the creation, beginning in the 1880s, of a protectorate system incorporating a motley of political entities (that is, emirates, sultanates and sheikhdoms) in the western and eastern parts of South Yemen.

The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 rekindled British geo-political concerns and was the catalyst in its annexation of the island. Indeed, its strategic location in the newly opened trading route engendered the covetous intentions among powers potentially hostile to British interests in the Red Sea and Indian Ocean: for example, the Italian government wanted to acquire Soqotra for a penal colony, a French company sought to purchase it, and even Egypt's Khedive was suspected of similar intentions. These menacing covetous dispositions of foreign powers occasioned British imperial anxieties that led them to conclude a protection treaty in 1876 specifically for Soqotra. Subsequently, in 1886, the British signed the "Protectorate Treaty with the Sultan of Socotra and Kishn", which effectively incorporated both Mahra and Soqotra under British tutelage.⁶ In effect, these two treaties seemed to have guaranteed the territorial security and integrity of Mahra from its neighbours, and thus facilitated the shift of the administrative centre of the Sultanate from the village of Qishn to Hadiboh (called Tamarida then), which turned Mahra into a neglected dependency of Soqotra.⁷ The transfer of the official seat of the Sultanate to Soqotra, which probably occurred in the 1890s, entailed the imposition of a tributary patrimonial rule under which the socio-political relations between Mahri Sultans and the Soqotran population were mediated by relations of conquest. Accordingly, the Sultans regarded the island's territory and its resources as their eminent domain and were to be compensated through tax payments for the islanders' use of these resources. This engendered and sustained a reciprocal animosity based on tax-paying Bedouins in the hinterland and rent-seeking "foreigners" on the coast.⁸ In Soqotra, this tributary patrimonialism entailed a combination of the compulsory appropriation of a surplus from the pastoralist economy as tribute from Bedouins, and a patrimonial mode of rule that extended patriarchal rule beyond the ruler's private household and over a larger territory through the use of an administrative apparatus staffed with officials, who were linked to the ruler on the basis of a kind of paternal authority (Bendix 1977: 360).

This mode of governance also brought along an ascriptive social status hierarchy, which engendered mutual perceptions of ethno-social differences between local groups. In Soqotra, this social stratification was articulated in a division of labour based on an ascriptive relationship between status and occupation in line with the following criteria:

- Dynastic political hegemony based on exclusive tribal descent of the Sultan's family and a class of notables from the mainland, known as "*shahro*" (meaning people of the mountains), who were originally from a low-status group in the Dhufar region in Oman, and became servants of the Sultans in Mahra and were subsequently upgraded in Soqotra as the Sultan's clients and main land owners, with exclusive tax-farming privileges;

- Religious piety embodied in the *āshrāf*, who were thought to be endowed with innate spiritual powers, and who claimed descent from the Prophet's family by way of Basra in Iraq through Tarim and Say'un in Hadramawt (al-Anbali 2007: 102-3), as the sacerdotal class who legitimated the Sultanate's nominal Islamic identity;⁹
- Ethnicity, *arab* essentially, which took on an economic hue, as those called Arab in Soqotra constituted a class of immigrant merchants from the Arabian Gulf region, who mediated the trade between the island, the Arabian Gulf and East Africa;
- Scribal competence, the *nūban*, a small group, in fact one extended family, of emancipated slaves who emerged under the last Sultan, and who constituted the administrative cadre of the Sultanate;
- Occupational specialization based on socio-ecological particularities, the *badū* (Bedouins), as transhumant pastoralists dwelling in the hinterland and who were the main taxpayers;
- Destitution engendered a sub-category of *badū*, especially from the more environmentally impoverished western part of the island, who were called *ākhḍām*, free Bedouin servants, and volunteered their services as irregular guards or herders to the Sultan in exchange for a part of the herd, food and an annual gift of clothes;¹⁰
- Labour conscription, mostly East African slaves (*ambuhileh* in Soqotri), who worked for some of the above groups.

Minimalist Apparatus

During the Sultanate, Soqotra was a clan-based polity with a sparse population estimated at 11,220 in 1966, and which seemed to have shared a merely episodic memory (awaken during tax collection periods and irregular meetings with the Sultan) of being part of a larger entity beyond each individual clan's territory. The population was thinly and widely dispersed throughout the island, and was congregated in caves and hamlets of a few rudimentarily built structures occupied by clusters of extended families constituting a clan collective. It was a settlement pattern that was suited to a form of pastoralism that entailed the extensive use of land as grazing ground, and which sundered the landscape into an archipelago of isolated clan hamlets. These hamlets served as the basic fiscal units of the Sultanate. Footpaths and camel tracks provided the only communication grid between the regions of the island (Wellsted 1835; Bent and Bent 1900; Botting 1958; Brown 1966). The governance apparatus was not based on an elaborate administrative organization of the island, since tax collection was the main governmental function. The treaty of 1876 seemed to have provided an incentive to assert the Sultan's authority over the island through a more sustained presence of the resident Governor in order to maximize tax revenues. By 1877, the British Assistant Political Resident in Aden, while on a visit to the island, "found that the execution of the treaty had strengthened the Governor's hand, and that the revenue had doubled" (Hunter and Sealy 1909: 113). The end result was the gradual consolidation of an administrative structure, which was captured in Douglas Botting's (1958: 65) description of the system of governance during his visit to the island in 1956: "The two of them [ministers Issa and Ibrahim (a *nūban*)] directed an administrative system consisting of

four principal *Muqaddams*, or head-men, administering four principal tribal districts, and thirty to sixty lesser *Muqaddams* administering the sub-districts.” Botting’s description is briefly elaborated upon below.

At the central level, which is in Hadiboh, the capital village located on the northern coast, there was no sheikh system, as was the case on the mainland, but a cabinet of “ministers”, which constituted a State Council composed of five members and headed by “Prime Minister” Ibrahim al-Nubi (Serjeant 1992: 163). The members of the Council were selected by the Sultan based on competence, and they were not necessarily linked through kinship. At the regional level, there was a main representative of the Sultan, acting as regional *muqaddam*. This post seemed to have been occupied by notables from Mahri tribes, or someone with an elective kinship to the Sultan usually achieved through marriage. Finally, at the local level, or sub-district, the main office was that of the *muqaddam*, as clan leader. Each village and/or each clan, almost without exception, had its own *muqaddam*, and he would serve as the political representative of his clan, police officer, tax collector, conflict mediator and manager of access to, and use of, natural resources. The social mobilization effect of this administrative apparatus was to consecrate the office of the *muqaddam* as the institutional gatekeeper of the clan structure, which made the clan the organizational pillar of Soqotrans’ communal life, and thus configured the island into an atomized clan-based polity.

Mobile “Parliament” for an Atomized Polity

While Hadiboh had its State Council, which was preoccupied with revenue generation from trade and external relations (mostly with British delegations, as the protectorate treaty forbade contact with any other foreign government), the rural areas had their own major institutional pillar, namely the “*masilhim*” [*msilihim*] in the form of a roving parliament.¹¹ In effect, the *masilhim* was an event that consecrated the Sultan’s authority as part of a political ritual that sought to palliate the deep socio-economic inequities that were reified in two topographically bifurcated domains of existence: the mountainous hinterland, where the overwhelming majority of the population practiced a subsistence transhumant milch pastoralism; and the coast, where the Sultan and his privileged entourage engaged in rent extraction. This meeting was the major act of governance of the Sultanate, which had a multiplicity of functions. Most important was its public order maintenance ritual, during which the Sultan’s power of coercion was put on public display as a dissuasive strategy: limbs of thieves were amputated and whippings were carried out, among other fear-inducing acts (al-Anbali 2007: 105–108). Indeed, fear was a fundamental part of the Sultanate governance strategy, which was further complemented by the widespread belief in witchcraft.¹² Order maintenance was a challenge, given the extreme deprivation of Soqotrans, who were plagued by perennial food insecurity and the constant threat of seasonal hunger, which drove some of them to commit desperate acts. This led to the persistence of animal theft and land dispute, which were intrinsically related to each other: theft was hunger driven, as people were stealing each other’s animals to survive while protecting their own herds. The land dispute arose out of counter claims over the construction of animal housing,

which served to protect their herds from thieves. It was this context that made the *masilhim* indispensable, as there was a constant need to dispense swift punishment if the social order was not to be overwhelmed by internal rebellion against the austere living conditions, which the Sultan was unwilling or unable to improve.

Tax Levying and Petty Mercantilism

The Sultanate pursued a two-prong strategy of surplus generation, involving a combination of tax levying, which served as a production incentive for the Bedouins out of fear of incurring the wrath of the Sultan for not paying taxes, and a form of petty mercantilism, pursued through a system of selling monopoly rights to the Arab merchants who intermediated in the export and import of goods.

Regarding the tax levying system, the barter-dominated herding economy restricted revenue generation to in-kind taxation of the main locally produced items: dates; ghee; and livestock. The incidence of taxes varied according to capacity to pay and seasonal availability of the taxed items, as both were contingent on nature's whim (for example, rain). There was a relative regional specialization in terms of the main items taxed, due to the varying resource endowments of the different agro-ecological zones of the island. Accordingly, in the eastern part of the island, where most date palm trees were cultivated, the villagers paid with dates, although they were not exempted from supplying ghee (*hami*) as well, if they owned a sizable herd. However, it was in the west, which was the territorial domain of the authentic Soqotran Bedouins (known as *saqatira*), that taxes were collected more systematically. This was because in that part, livestock was the main resource and where ghee—the island's cash crop and prized tax item—was produced in large quantities for export. In effect, Soqotran pastoralists—through the household production of ghee—participated in an inter-continental trade network, in which barter was the principal modality of exchange. Indeed, trade was a form of barter mediated by Arab merchants: the Bedouins provided the ghee, the main but not exclusive exchange item, and the merchants exchanged it for requested imported items, cereal and cloth being the main but not exclusive goods (for a list of trade goods see Morris 2002: 149–150). The standard bearer of value in this barter system was maize (*maqdere*) imported from East Africa and that was exchanged for ghee. The class of traders represented a relatively small number of Arab immigrant families, which were all congregated in a few settlements on the northern coast of the island: Hadiboh; Qadheb; and Qalansiyah being the most important locations. The main destinations for Soqotra's exports and imports were the following: Oman; East Africa; and the western coast of India. It was in this context that the allocation of monopoly rights and the imposition of custom duties were operationalized under the supervision of the State Council.

The status hierarchy was articulated with the Sultanate's economic and fiscal extraction regime in the following manner: the first group, the “notables”, was made up of the Sultan's kin and their clients, who controlled land and many date plantations, as well as slaves, and had tax farming privileges and authority positions in some regions of the island. The second group could be called the “mercantilists”, who were from the

Arabian Gulf and from Hadramawt, and constituted the main business intermediaries of the island. Their privilege consisted of being granted monopoly rights by the Sultan to trade in some commodities (for example, pearl shells), and over the export and import of goods. The third group was the “rentier class”, who constituted the political and administrative elite, as they were the members of the State Council. On behalf of the Sultan, they collected the taxes from the ports, negotiated the granting of monopolies, intermediated between the Sultan and the British, and received commission payments from the latter for the provision of labour gangs for the occasional public works they carried out (Serjeant 1992: 166). In sum, this small-scale tributary administration, which lasted until 1967, constituted a parasitic apparatus of fiscal extraction, established on the northern coast, and that was superimposed on an indigenous population of mostly transhumant pastoralists as tax tributaries dwelling in the hinterland, and the labour of African slaves residing in the coastal villages in the north.

Socialist Administration: Democratic Centralism

Undoing Indirect Rule

“For 129 years they left our country, and especially our countryside, without the most basic features of modern life: roads and means of communications, schools, health units, and drinking water wells were virtually non-existent” (Ismael and Ismael 1986: 110). This statement was the South Yemeni government’s assessment of the legacy of British rule, but it aptly describes as well the situation of Soqotra after ninety-one years of British “indirect rule”. The latter was a euphemism for the perverted practice of arrogating political authority without assuming the social welfare responsibilities it entailed, or as one scholar put it, an “imperialism of interference without responsibility” (Lewis cited in Anderson 1987: 5). Soqotra was an apt example of this practice, as Soqotrans’ needs were entirely neglected by the British and the Sultan. The British had conveniently assumed that Soqotrans were the responsibility of the Sultan, as any demonstration of concern on their part would be tantamount to interference with the Sultan’s prerogative. After all, they had already fulfilled their responsibility by paying a yearly rent of \$360 per year to the Sultan for the use of parts of the island. Only a few opportunities for short-term employment through public works were provided during the construction of the infrastructural installations needed by the British military garrison, located on the northern coast and used as a base for allied forces during the Second World War (Elie 2006a: 146–151). One British observer let out his exasperation at his government’s policy of neglect in South Arabia generally, and which aptly characterized the case of Soqotra, when he exclaimed, “[H]ad any other nation been masters of Aden, some more tangible result of our stay would have been shown … [I]t is the overseas portion of our Protectorate that has been so long and so systematically neglected” (Jacob 1923: 281–282).

It was this chronic policy of neglect practiced by the absentee landlord of Soqotra that the new administration sought to undo. It initiated the transformation of the island through a “revolutionary decolonization” process, which sought not only to

coerce Soqotrans into the modern world, but also to drastically reconfigure the island's communal life: by uprooting the social legacies of the Sultanate's feudal social status hierarchy; and by rectifying the corollary economic inequities. The emergence of this socialist administration was a politically agonizing process within the newly founded state. And its spread to Soqatra was contingent on its progress on the mainland. Indeed, the first steps toward the modernization of Soqatra (roads, schools, health clinics, etc.) were initiated after the "corrective step" (*al-khutwa al-tas'hīhiyya*) of June 1969, when the centrist President was ousted and Marxism became conspicuously the basis of state policies (Stookey 1982; Halliday 1990; Lackner 1985: 60–78). This heralded a political transition from a radical nationalism to that of "scientific socialism", which in turn entailed a deepening of the socialist transformation of South Yemen, and thus of Soqatra as well. Article 28 of the constitution promised that: "The state shall work for raising the standard of the underdeveloped areas with the aim of gradually obliterating the differences in the standard of living between the various parts of the republic" (Lackner 1985: 127; Stookey 1982: 69–71).

The implementation of this constitutional clause, among others, in Soqatra heralded a period that Soqotrans described as the "coming of civilization" (*hadhāra*). This entailed the state's deployment of polity regimentation measures as part of a nation-building process: compulsory education; conscription into military service; and the pursuit of a cultural strategy of the Arabization of the exclusively oral Soqotri culture as an administrative imperative. Subsequently, Soqatra began its gradual emergence from a feudal enclave toward its still evolving modernization path. In effect, the South Yemeni state launched Soqotrans' inaugural socialization as citizens of a modernizing nation-state, as it initiated the training of Soqotrans in the occupations needed by such a state, and fomented the generalized social inclusion of previously disenfranchised social categories. This led to the demise of the Sultanate's ascriptive status hierarchy, the abolition of slavery, and the emergence of a new social group of former slaves and their descendants, the *muwalladīn*.¹³ In addition, the policy of eradicating rural–urban inequalities engendered a reconfiguration of internal socio-cultural boundaries: from a spatial differentiation between hinterland and coast as an expression of divergent occupational identities, to a geographical bifurcation between east and west as indicative of contrary regional propensities toward participating in the cultural modernization initiated by the socialist administration.

Dis-Enclaving Grid

The Soqatra landscape provided the socialist administration with a territorial reorganization challenge to its vision of the island's new political geography. It was confronted with a residential pattern in which Soqotrans were distributed into hundreds of hamlets, each with a micro-size population eking out a subsistence livelihood isolated in their respective ecological niches by a forbidding topography.¹⁴ In this context, the administration sought to develop urban nodal points in a rural–urban grid, with Hadiboh as the strategic centre. It was reorganized into an embryonic urban agglomeration to symbolize its importance in a new political geography of the island,

as well as to herald the inclusion of Soqotra into a common national culture and shared political history. This was done through the creation of neighbourhoods named after the dates of major historical events that marked the nation-building itinerary of the two Yemeni states (Elie 2005: 69–70). Beyond Hadiboh, a few emergent urban formations were established in different regions of the island. These embryonic secondary towns were to act as attracting poles to the hinterland in an attempt to partially drain it of its surplus population. In effect, their implantation in an overwhelmingly rural landscape was based on the awareness that modernization could not be achieved through the agency of subsistence agropastoralists or cave-dwelling Bedouins unaided by an urban vanguard. This was further abetted by a Marxist theory-inspired ideological antagonism *vis-à-vis* the traditional social structure (whether it was tribalism on the mainland or clanic Bedouinism in Soqotra), which was seen as a major impediment to societal transformation.

The establishment of urban centres was accompanied by the reorganization of villages within reconfigured regional areas, as part of an island-wide integration process that would link isolated clans to larger communal groupings and to the mainland state. These preliminary steps toward the spatial and social re-configuration of the island were linked to the state's need for a bureaucratic apparatus to carry out the administrative functions (for example, census taking, local elections, committee creation, etc.) to prepare Soqotrans for political citizenship in the socialist state. A crucial part of this dis-enclaving process was the construction of the first island-wide network of car tracks, through the roads cutting initiative (*shaq al-taruqāt*), for transportation and communication links between rural and urban parts of the island. This initiated an internal migration from the mountains to the internal plains, as the Bedouins gradually but not completely abandoned their cave habitat for built structures in the proximity of the tracks.

Hierarchical Committee System for Self-Rule

Hadiboh was designated the capital of the newly constituted district (*mudīriyya*) of Soqotra. It was within the jurisdiction of Aden, the first out of the six provinces, or governorates, of the new state of South Yemen. The head of the district was the *māmūr* (governor)—a position initially, and ever since, occupied by a mainland Yemeni—assisted by two Soqotran deputies. This troika administered the island through a hierarchical committee system, linking the central, regional and local/village levels: at the central level, there was the District Committee of the Socialist Party (*lajnat al-mudīriyya li-l-hizb al-ishtirakī*), with overall responsibility for the island, and which constituted the executive committee assisting the *māmūr* in its governing tasks. The *mudīriyya* was divided into two administrative centres (*markiz idarī*), Hadiboh and Qalansiyah, and the two deputies of the *māmūr* were responsible for them. There were two more committees: the first was the Central Committee for Popular Defence (*lajnat markiz al-difā' al-sha'abī*), which was, in effect, the island's political security and ideological correctness oversight authority. The second was the neighbourhood committee (*lajnat al-wahda al-sikeniyya*), but only for Hadiboh and Qalansiyah, which

were the only two urban agglomerations. For the rural areas, there was the village committee (*lajnat al-qariyya*), headed by a locally selected chairperson, with a deputy and about five additional members. There were nearly forty such committees representing the different sub-regional areas of the island. This committee was an area-wide entity agglomerating a group of villages, as well as clans within a region, as a means of disbanding the previous local administrative structure based on clan affiliation.

The administrative system described above was adapted to the Soqotra context from the one established throughout the territory of the South Yemeni state. It was inclusively participatory, as part of a rather coercive strategy of forming the subjects of socialist emancipation through the ideological permeation, if not behavioural regulation, of clan members into administered denizens of an emergent state. More importantly, perhaps, was the need to institutionalize the new system in a manner that would ensure its social reproduction. This was attempted through the creation of a “civil society” by government-sponsored mass organizations: women’s union; youth union; defence union; etc. Their role was to be the catalyst for the spread of revolutionary consciousness. This fostering of social inclusion through the ideological regimentation of Soqotrans seemed to have been mainly intended to achieve maximum political control by the centre. This centralizing urge was motivated by a surveillance imperative, induced by a phobia of imagined enemies of the revolution. In effect, the local self-rule that was being promoted turned out to be on behalf of the state, in response to its paranoia of sovereignty and control.¹⁵ This ultimately led to the partial dissipation of the social capital it had accumulated through its progressive social policies (see below). Indeed, the observation of one anthropologist *vis-à-vis* another experiment in socialist transformation (that is, African socialism in Tanzania) occurring at the same time seems applicable to South Yemen in general and to Soqotra in particular: “[T]he socialist state generated undoings of all its doings while it waited [in vain] for the socialist dream to be realized” (Moore 1994: 369).

Subsidized Consumption

The socialist administration’s socio-economic policy was based on the provision of the population’s basic needs through subsidized consumption. This policy encompassed the following priorities, which constituted a comprehensive social policy framework: primary education; generalized access to essential food stuffs and basic consumer items; land redistribution as a means to employment generation through the commercial exploitation of natural resources; and infrastructure development (Ismael and Ismael 1986: 110–128; World Bank 1979). These priorities were framed within a societal vision of accelerated modernization of both rural and urban areas. The implementation effects of only two of these socio-economic goals on the Soqotran community are highlighted below.

The availability of the food items engendered change both in local consumption habits and in the production of Soqotra’s cash crop, ghee, which was exchanged for imported goods. The symbiotic nexus between the consumption of one of the key food items in the Soqotran diet (maize) imported from East Africa and the production for

export of ghee was broken, as the Sultanate's trade with East Africa was abandoned and maize was replaced by rice imported from elsewhere. This resulted in the discontinuation of ghee production for export, and the corresponding relegation of pastoralism from core to supplementary economic activity. Employment generation was linked to a land redistribution policy that was based on the land dispossession clause in Article 19 of the 1970 Constitution, which stipulated that the land confiscated from the rulers of the previous regime "shall be utilized by farm workers, poor farmers and citizens migrating from the towns and deserts" (Ismael & Ismael 1986: 84). This led to an internal population redistribution, albeit not on a massive scale, from the hinterland to the coast, which entailed the reconfiguration of the population composition of coastal villages and some degree of sedentarization. The purpose was to promote fishing and farming as alternative means of livelihood to an increasingly non-economic pastoralism. Accordingly, the transformation of fishing from a subsistence activity to an economic exchange activity was initiated in the 70s, following the National Front organization of local fishermen 'uprisings' (*intifādhāt al-sayādīn*),¹⁶ when the Ministry of Fish Wealth began to support the development of a fishing sector through the establishment of Soqatra's Fishing Cooperative (*jam'iyyat Soqatra al-samakiyya*), through which the government purchased the fish for sale abroad. This guaranteed an income to fishermen and made fishing an attractive alternative to pastoralism. Indeed, fishing was promoted as an integral part of local folklore through the official annual celebration of the "Day of Fishermen Uprising".

In sum, the economic policy of subsidized consumption of imported goods was necessary in the short-term, given Soqotrans' extreme state of deprivation. However, the long term impact has been the partial weaning away of Soqotrans from primary dependency on their herds as their main source of livelihood, and the consequent abandonment of their rigorous animal husbandry system. However, given the small-scale nature of the fishing cooperatives, no sustainable economic alternative was provided to the subsistence pastoralism that continued to sustain, albeit inadequately, the majority of Soqotrans. Moreover, the socialist economy had a strong urban bias, which benefited the new class of urban-based bureaucrats that was created to run the administrative machinery. Indeed, a job in this bureaucracy was guaranteed to all secondary school graduates. However, the majority of Soqotrans continued to live by the meagre productivity of their herds, the occasional public works jobs and through local recruitment into the army and police.

Unity Government: Tribal Libertarianism

Tribal Inter-Regnum

The long-deferred dream among mainland political actors of a unified Yemeni state was finally realized in May of 1990. The consolidation of this unified state brought out a sigh of political relief from Soqotrans, as they no longer had to live under the threat of suspicion of having divided political loyalty. The relief was, however, temporary, as they had to endure the overhauling of their political and institutional set up with the

introduction of the *nidhām mashāyikh* (sheikh system), which was part of a state-led tribalization process as a civic incorporation strategy. This strategy involved the wholesale transfer of the tribal social structure in North Yemen with its civic tradition based on an administrative vernacular of tribes and sheikhs, as a means of agglomerating the clan-based *muqaddam* system into regional tribal groups. In effect, this transfer sought to transform the organic clanism that previously existed into an instrumental tribalism that would foment a new tribal consciousness infused with state allegiance, as the organizational means for the population's political manipulation. It is in this light that I use the term tribal libertarianism, which refers to a social system in which political allegiance is merely a private contractual obligation with the dominant or monopolistic agency, that is, the state; and where public law is substituted, at least in part, by a network of private agreements between the state and groups of clients (Rawls 1996: 262–265). To confound matters, this tribal libertarianism was articulated with the practice of multi-party electoral politics that started in the 1990s.

In effect, the newly introduced sheikh system represented an experimental search for an effective incorporative solidarity *vis-à-vis* an unfamiliar political formation, and it was based on North Yemen's experience with nation-state building following the 1962 revolution, which engendered a tribe-dependent political system. This end result was due to the institutional reorganization and the social mobilization effects engendered by the political decisions taken by state leaders at a particular historical conjuncture. In fact, soon after the revolution, the government promulgated a number of decrees that sought to institutionalize the role of tribes *vis-à-vis* the state: starting, in 1963, with the creation of Tribal Sheiks Councils (*majālis mashāyikh al-qabā'il*) in all of the provinces of the new northern state, and subsequently the establishment of the Department of Tribal Affairs (*maslahat shū'un al-qabā'il*). This endangered a transition from an independent tribalism to an incorporated tribalism, which was dubbed "republican tribalism" (Halliday 1974; Tarbush 2003). Consequently, for the next three decades, the dominant political orientation of the new republic was to remain preoccupied with placating tribal forces, and thus the institutional modernization of the new republic was characterized by the quest for a domestic balance of forces between "tribalists" and "modernists" (Burrowes 1987). This led to the transmutation of tribes from local self-defence associations, and occasional mercenary forces to the highest bidder, to a heavily armed and mobilized countervailing power that was financially subsidized by, and promoted as privilege political interlocutor to, the state. In effect, they were consecrated as the preeminent national power broker in the emergent civil-political society of the Yemen Arab Republic, given the constitutional ban on the formation of political parties from 1970 to 1990. A preeminence that was rivalled only by the emergent Sunni Islamist movement that culminated into the formation, in 1990, of the Islamist political party, *Islah*. Subsequently, there emerged a triumvirate of political actors—the military, the tribes and the Islamists—that was to determine the nature of the unification of the two Yemens through an "annexationist politics" as well as continuing to influence the politics of the unified Yemeni state to the present (Al-Saqqaf 1999; Schwedler 2002).

This was the background to the Yemeni state's use of the *nidhām mashāyikh* as the incorporation strategy of the south.¹⁷ In Soqatra, the demise of the enforcement

apparatus of the socialist committee system led to the political demobilization of the hinterland population and a reversal to its clan organization. This facilitated the introduction of the sheikh system through the reorganization of village committees into village councils headed by the newly created post of sheikh. The state-sponsored sheikh system revised the deferential connotation customarily associated with the term “sheikh”—which was used solely in reference to a religious leader (that is, the *āshrāf*), or as an honorific *vis-à-vis* the notables—into a political one by linking it to a tribal political leader. This created a new political hierarchy: the sheikh at the apex, seconded by his personal assistant (*ma’āwun*), supported by the village wise man (*‘āqil*) and his executants, the *muqaddam*. In practice, the sheikh system was an attempt to organize the clans’ relationship to the state according to a patron–client model. However, this state-engineered tribalism was not based on the institutional pillars of the socio-political order associated with organic tribalism, as they were non-existent in Soqatra and never took roots on the island.¹⁸

In contrast, Soqotran “tribes” were not political entities but merely mutual aid “kin assemblages”, whose social cohesion was based on the ecological constraints of livelihood-making in a context of scarce environmental resources. In fact, the Soqotri concept of “tribe” is a semantic modification of the Arabic term *shatr* (part, section or segment) to which was attached a Soqotri suffix *shatrihir*, which means strips from a cloth. This aptly captures the amoeba-like sub-division process of Soqotra’s clan formation, which was an ecological adaptation to the spatial requirement of a pastoralism based on an extensive land use strategy. The state’s attempt at transforming Soqotran clans into a segmentary polity of tribes was not successful. This was partly because the resources available from the state were never significant, as Soqotra was neither an important economic prize, nor constituted a potentially significant political threat to necessitate the distribution of state resources as part of a co-optation exercise. Consequently, the state-engineered socio-organizational metamorphosis of Soqotrans into a tribal polity was not realized, but merely complicated communal administration.

Territorial Segmentation

The political significance of the territorial organization of the island into geographical regions demarcated into sub-regional areas agglomerating clusters of villages, which became important during the socialist administration in its de-clanification strategy, was to assume even greater importance in the tribalization of Soqotra’s clans. In effect, the *nidhām mashāyikh* represented a counter-permeation strategy, as every previously established structure had to be reclaimed by the new system. The formalization of this system was through the central government’s approval and remuneration of sheikhs for each of the forty-three sub-regional areas of the island. However, the demarcation of the island into segmented sheikhdoms did not create a segmentary polity, but only engendered a level of segmentary political competition, not between clan collectives, but between individual men who presumed that their personal status or prior political experience earned them the right to vie for the position of sheikh, and in some cases were aided and abetted by competing political parties. This lent an aggressive and

anarchically competitive dimension to local governance, as former chairpersons of village committees began vying for the post of sheikh. At the base of the *nidhām mashāyikh* (NM) was the ensemble of *muqaddams*, as clan representatives, who performed the same functions under all previous regimes, and remained the traditional and foundational pivot of all governance systems on the island. Under the NM, all of the *muqaddams* in each of the designated sub-regional areas would form a sort of temporary electoral college to select the sheikh for their respective regions. The selected sheikhs would select a supreme leader of them all on the island, called *shaykh mashāyikh*. The area sheikhs' main function was the maintenance of social order through conflict resolution. They were the eyes and ears of the court (*mahkama*) and the prosecutor's office (*niyāba*). The supreme sheikh managed the entire system by maintaining the official list of area sheikhs, assisting in their selection, distributing salary and liaising with the Department of Tribal Affairs in Sana'a, which has oversight responsibility for the NM in the whole of Yemen.

Parallel Rule

Following the dissolution of the socialist administrative apparatus, the new government administration was reduced to four main offices located in the capital, Hadiboh: General Director (*mudīr al-‘ām*) formerly *māmūr*; his deputy; the court; and the prosecutor's office. All links with the rest of the island were taken over by the sheikh system. It was an anomalous arrangement, as the latter was the governing institution at the local level, while simultaneously being independent of local government in Hadiboh. The NM functioned as a parallel governing institution to the district level administrative machinery, as it provided the local organizational infrastructure upon which the island's administrative centre had to rely. This created an internal wedge between the island's administrative centre in Hadiboh and its rural periphery. As a result, the NM permeated the society more thoroughly than the formal government machinery. In effect, the NM was a variant of indirect rule on behalf of the local political interests of the executive branch of the national government, whose dominant concern has been and remains the politics of internal security, to be achieved either through police action against, or co-optation of, powerful or threatening non-state actors. This was done through the Department of Tribal Affairs, which managed the NM in Soqotra, as everywhere else in Yemen (World Bank 2006: 35–39). This office's main responsibilities were to officialize the list of sheikhs locally selected, the preparation of the individual stamps that is the main symbol of an official sheikh, the distribution of honorarium, among other tasks related to the furthering of the interests of the ruling party. In effect, the NM was inscribed into a strategy that was linked to the political imperatives created by the emergence of party politics after unification, and thus of the need to enhance the prospects of the ruling party to hold on to power.

Government Sponsored Growth

The imperative of stabilizing the fusion of the two divergent administrative systems that underpinned the newly unified state led the unity government to adopt an

economic policy of employment generation through government posts creation. It was a form of over-employment, in which the governmental posts of the two administrations were maintained to ensure job security, as a co-optation strategy that would minimize opposition to, or at least palliate the disruptive economic consequences of, the unification process. This led to the accelerated recruitment of teachers, health workers and office clerks who had completed secondary school, and the expansion of the police force, which attracted pastoralists with primary school education from the hinterland escaping the arduous life of a Bedouin, and the underclass (*muwalladīn*) in the coastal areas seeking an additional source of income to seasonal fishing. The end result of this public sector employment generation strategy was the “Soqotrification” of the public sector work force, and thus the creation of a permanent class of local government functionaries.

Moreover, the lifting of the economic restrictions imposed by the socialist administration enabled the starting up of private sector activities. This sector, which was made up of a handful of home-front stores under the Sultanate, and was slightly expanded but tightly regulated under the socialist administration, was allowed to expand after unification. The latter inaugurated a period that Soqotrans called “*al-infitāh*” (the opening), which occasioned a minor exodus of surplus labour from all over the mainland, as migrants sought to take advantage of the new economic opportunities on the island. Consequently, Soqatra became the Eldorado of the economically marginalized from the mainland. The end result of their influx was the plethora of micro-capitalist ventures, symbolized in the ubiquitous presence of the grocery or variety shop in almost every built structure in Hadiboh, and to a lesser extent in Qalansiyah. Their trading activities have brokered the gradual, yet inexorable, integration of Soqotrans into a monetary consumer economy.

Post-Unity Regime: Globalizing Local Governance

Globalization Encounter

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, the Government of Yemen enacted into law a comprehensive reform of its governance system, namely the Local Authority Law of 2000. This reform was aimed at decentralizing the administrative apparatus and delegating authority and power to locally elected representatives. The impetus for the adoption of this Law was not solely a matter of national political will to decentralize and democratize the management of local affairs, but also, if not primarily, the result of international pressure (World Bank 1999). With the parliament’s approval of the Law in February of 2000, the government declared its formal adoption of the internationally sponsored discourse on good governance and democratization. In April of the next year, elections were held in all the local districts (333) in Yemen, including Soqatra, thereby institutionalizing the Local Council (LC) system as a relatively new form of political administration since unification. The law’s key objectives are spelled out in Article 4: “This Law shall be based on the principles of financial and administrative decentralization, and shall operate on the basis of broadening popular participation in

decision making and in the administration of local affairs in social, economic and cultural development through the elected local authority.”

In effect, this administrative reform institutionalized electoral politics at the local/communal level, formerly the arbitrary preserve and hereditary rule of sheikhs. The purpose was to adjust the political administration of the whole of Yemen so that it conformed to the pre-requisites of multi-party electoral politics, and to mainstream the sheikh system into a legally sanctioned and publicly vetted decision-making process. Some of the ramifications of the introduction of the LC were: (1) to integrate the parallel sheikh system within the mainstream administrative machinery by making them a counterpart of the local councillors, and to share responsibility for the areas within their jurisdiction; (2) to introduce an electoral system in the selection of local representatives in lieu of the politically arbitrary nomination process; and (3) to establish a local planning and managerial capacity for government-funded and internationally supported development projects. In this context, the LC represents the ruling party’s strategy of accommodating a politically competitive national context, while allaying international concern about local managerial transparency. The latter was the *sine qua non* for donor funding of environmental conservation projects in Soqotra.

The institutionalization of this LC system provided the fundamental frame of reference for the island’s administrative restructuring through the state’s deployment of a strategic gaze upon its territorial organization, and enhanced the value of local office holders at the lowest levels, if only during elections and mostly as convenient allies in getting out the vote. The introduction of the local council system was meant to empower local communities through the decentralization of decision-making authority, as well as the provision of the financial means to implement the decisions taken. In practice, however, it is a mechanism for external supervision. The main office-holder at the district level in Soqotra, the Director General (*mudīr al-‘ām*), is selected not through election but by political appointment, as stipulated in Article 81 of the Local Authority Law. However, the law does not mention that the incumbent should not be selected from the local community. As a rule, however, it is filled by an outsider. While this is not peculiar to Soqotra, and the practice might be justified on the basis of the impartiality of an outsider, it is nevertheless suggestive of an absence of confidence either in Soqotrans’ managerial capacity or political loyalty.

Electoral Cartography

The consecration of electoral politics as the privileged means of selection for public office led to the reconfiguration of Soqotra’s landscape. Planning for elections became the most meticulous civic operation on the island that was led by Soqotrans, as part of a state-mandated ritual of citizenship reaffirmation. This meticulousness was manifested (1) in the preparation of detailed hand-drawn regional maps, in which the voting stations of every sub-district are shown, and (2) in the higher reliability of voters’ registry than the population census, since the accuracy of the former is the political obligation of every local official and the civic duty of every citizen. The control mania of the socialist administration, with its micro-organizational urge to include every

comrade into its socialist experiment, was replaced by an electoral mania of the post-unity regime, with its phobia against the exclusion of potential voter-citizen; although this was primarily, if not exclusively, motivated by the government's quest for political legitimacy, as well as its maintenance in power. Furthermore, partly out of concern for parity in political representation, the island was sundered into two districts: the Eastern District, with Hadiboh as its capital, encompassing three-quarters of the island's territory as well as population; and the Western District, with Qalansiyah as its capital, was allocated the remaining space and inhabitants. Each district was evenly organized into five centres (*marākiz*), with each centre encompassing clusters of villages for the purpose of demarcating an electoral base and identifying the jurisdiction of members of the local council. The selection of these centres was apparently done on the basis of their geographical location within the district, and according to their infrastructural resources (that is, mosque, school or clinic) and population density. The number of councillors per district was based on a formula in the law that stipulates "A district with a population of 35,000 people or less shall have a local council of eighteen members." The end result of this election-mediated reconfiguration of the island was the superimposition of thirty-six councillor's wards over the forty-three areas, under the jurisdiction of sheikhs and the hundreds of *muqaddams* and their clan collectives distributed through the approximately 623 villages and hamlets of the island.

External Supervision

A pyramidal maze of institutions that have pledged allegiance to the neo-liberal credo of good governance constitutes the externally controlled supervisory framework for Soqatra's internal administration. This hierarchy of institutions includes the international donors (that is, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the European Union and the United Nations), the national bureaucracy (especially a troika of ministries: Planning and International Cooperation; Water and Environment; and Environmental Protection Authority), the regional Governorate of Hadramawt, and the sub-district local council. Collectively, however, they constitute an institutional web of insufficiently coordinated functions, uneven resource (human and financial) allocation, and a chronic discrepancy between centralized authority (political and budgetary) in the executive branch and diffused responsibility (service delivery and monitoring) in the public bureaucracy. The local effect of these organizational inadequacies was an administrative mode of operation characterized by the state's chronic recourse to politically expedient tactics (for example, episodic promulgation of presidential or ministerial decrees as remedial policy tools) in the top-down management of the island's political incorporation. Over a decade of donor tutorials in good governance (for example, the World Bank's "civil service modernization" and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)'s "Decentralized Local Governance" projects) has yet to significantly diminish the effectiveness gap of state institutions, or the accountability deficit of the state (ARD 2004). Moreover, the national public administration system remains hampered by the institutionally endemic centralization of power in the executive branch, which has prevented the actualization of the objectives of the Local

Authority Law. As one World Bank report explains, the reason for this “is rooted in the regime’s central dilemma: how can the political leadership guarantee that the reform will be carried out properly and the results serve the purpose of maintaining the regime?” (World Bank 2007: 18–19).

Consequently, the chronic centralization reflex of the central government was replicated in the relations between regional and local governments. Accordingly, the local council of the Governorate of Hadramawt, which has executive oversight over all of the twenty-nine districts, including Soqotra’s two districts, within its jurisdiction, mediates all decisions between the central governmental branches and the districts. Thus, no district is allowed to directly petition the central government. As a result, Soqotrans feel doubly marginalized, first by geographical distance and second by an added decisional layer, which deprives them of direct access to the central government and engenders chronic delays in the services provided. Ultimately, the proper functioning of the entire system rests on the performance of the local councillor, and who represents the potential Achilles’ heel of Soqotra’s modern democratic governance system. This is because the local councillor is an unremunerated voluntary post, and the incumbent only receives a stipend for attending quarterly meetings. How much civic commitment or ethical rectitude can be expected from volunteer legislators living under conditions of economic insufficiency? Lastly, while the Local Authority Law granted Soqotrans individual political rights to participate in the management of their community, this participatory entitlement, was, in practice, rescinded by the central government appointment of the Director General without consulting with Local Council members, while expecting their post-facto acquiescence. This, in effect, has undermined the democratic representation and accountability of the only political institution that could redeem the state’s legitimacy deficit at the local level.

Eco-Developmentalism

As the post-unity government sought or, more aptly, was constrained to integrate the international financial system, the economic policy of public sector growth that brokered its political consolidation in the immediate aftermath of unification was considered a liability to the country’s economic solvency soon thereafter. This led to the adoption in the mid-1990s of a World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) supervised neo-liberal economic reform programme, which has remained the government’s guiding economic frame of reference ever since (World Bank 1995). Subsequently, state–society relations were to be increasingly mediated by neo-liberal principles; thus communities had to lower their expectations of government, and depend more on international development assistance and private sector initiatives. The end result was that the government’s local economic strategy shifted from employment generation through public sector jobs to infrastructure development (for example, airport, seaport, asphalted roads network, etc.). Soqotra had a comparative advantage that could facilitate its adaptation to this new economic context, namely its endemic flora, which was ranked as the tenth richest among the world’s oceanic islands, and earned it the rather hyperbolic designation “the Galapagos of the Indian Ocean”. It was Soqotra’s ecological mystique that the

government sought to promote as an internationally marketable resource, when it ratified the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) in 1996. This act effectively heralded the government strategy of eco-developmentalism, namely the transformation of Soqotra into an international biodiversity reserve, a scientific research station, a destination for ecotourism, and a model of sustainable development that straddles tradition and modernity in a symbiotic embrace.

The existential *défi* confronting Soqotrans and their island was, on the one hand, a development imperative of a human population characterized by a high level of material deprivation that must be remedied; and on the other the environmental challenge of a place with a unique biodiversity of global significance that should be preserved. It was in response to this set of challenges that the formulation of a biodiversity conservation-with-sustainable-development strategy was undertaken by the UN. This strategy was launched in 1998, with the implementation of the island's first environmental conservation project. The latter formulated the Soqotra's Biodiversity Zoning Plan, which proposed a binding environmental regime for the island that was decreed into law in 2000, and which effectively transformed the island into a protected national park and conscripted Soqotrans as its unwitting custodians. Indeed, it exemplified a process of "transnational spatial governmentality", in which the environmental assets or ecological endowments and the spatial configuration of a place are turned over to the stewardship of international agents, who imposed a disciplinary environmental regime—uninformed by local environmental sensibilities—that censors the relationship between locals and their livelihood domains (Ferguson and Gupta 2002).¹⁹

After nearly ten years of implementing this internationally led eco-development experiment, the current economic configuration of the island is still at an impasse: a state-dependent communal economy, with the local government bureaucracy as main employer and social service provider in the main urban centres, since the embryonic private sector has limited employment generation prospects; while the rest of the coastal population is engaged in seasonal fishing that was, until recently, under monopsony conditions imposed by mainland buyers; and the population of the hinterland eke out a subsistence livelihood from a pastoralism of diminishing economic sustenance. This is complemented by the haphazard assistance of international agencies implementing micro-scale projects of limited duration, scope and sustainability, and seasonal jobs as tourist guides for those who speak English or have a car to rent. Finally, for the lucky few with relatives in the Gulf diaspora, they participate in a supplemental economy of in-kind remittance dependency.

Conclusion: The Politics of Recognition

Since the end of the Sultanate, the evolution of Soqotra's polity and the mutation of its internal socio-economic and politico-cultural context, as well as its physical landscape, have been intimately related to Yemen's nation-building processes and the state's expansion and consolidation of its political authority. The above narrative of the successive forms of governance introduced on the island has shown that local history

was brokered through a recursive relationship between state and community. This series of discontinuous “junctures of state–community relations” has engendered a rapid succession of types of polity that Soqotrans incarnated: from tax-paying Bedouin subjects under the social neglect of the Sultanate, then as revolutionary comrades under the socio-political regimentation of the socialist administration, to be subsequently constituted into competing tribes for the selective and haphazard attention under the sheikh system of the unity government, and finally as *mūwatinīn* (citizens) under condition of centrally supervised communal management under the post-unity regime. Indeed, the end result of this latest phase of Soqatra’s political incorporation with its administrative politics of external supervision is that Soqotrans have yet to make the transition from periodic participants in state-sponsored political events (that is, elections) to active stakeholders in the affairs of the island, and have assumed the status of spectators.

The cumulative effect of this political incorporation process is the partial socio-political metamorphosis of Soqotrans as citizens, and thus their incomplete national-cultural integration. This partial integration was exacerbated during the unity and post-unification periods by the Yemeni state’s means of incorporation, which were characterized by the substitution of strategic policy choices, by haphazard recourse to institutional redesign through central government decrees. The end result is the infrastructural deficiency of the governance institutions established on the island. This is evident in the current three-tier structure of overlapping and marginally integrated governance institutions: at the top is the local council and its retinue of councilors as the official representatives of the island’s sub-district residents; in the middle is the contingent of sheikhs, with informal oversight responsibility in their sub-regional domains; and at the bottom is the network of *muqaddams* as the traditional representatives of individual clans or clan collectives. The local effects of these institutional inadequacies and the related policy deficiencies have left Soqotrans in a quandary as to where they fit in the national scheme of things: democratic virtues (administrative decentralization, electoral politics, etc.) are vitiated by their underpinning structures; main economic activities (for example, infrastructure development) are determined by state sponsored contractors’, not local interests; development interventions are based on donors’, not Soqotrans’, priorities; institutions (for example, health and education) are established without the means (human and financial) to become operationally effective; and the state’s policy silence *vis-à-vis* the means of symbolic production (that is, language and education) confounds Soqotrans about whether or not they are free to promote the use of Soqotri, and stifles public discussion of the quality of education and what future they are being prepared for.

This litany of deficiencies and uncertainties is generative of a deeply sceptical, if not actively oppositional, political imaginary among the population. The end result is similar to what happened on the mainland: the state’s “incapacity to play a compelling educative or formative role in fashioning national persons”, which has engendered an ambiguous loyalty to the state that has imparted to it a precarious legitimacy, and consequently led to “the presence of a vague and mildly constraining form of national identification” (Wadeen 2003: 709; Wadeen 2008). Moreover, there is an

ethno-politico-religious compact that frames state-community relations in the Arab/Muslim world, which empowers the state to authenticate identity. This authentication process is informed by a hegemonic ethno-nationalist polity-formation regime that obligatorily conscripts minority communities (whether linguistic, ethnic or religious) within the state into a culturally standardized sub-national polity. This incorporation paradigm is inscribed in the constitution of nearly all Arab states, as expressed in Article 1 of Yemen's constitution: "The people of Yemen are part of the Arab and Islamic nation." This constitutional injunction seems to imply a conditional politico-cultural inclusion into the nation-state based on an ascriptive notion of national belongingness, of citizenship, that privileges an exclusionary mono-ethnic criterion. It is the awareness of this legal framework that perhaps explains the manifest ambivalence among Soqotrans about the social legitimacy of their community's ethno-cultural belongingness to the nation, and of a diffused feeling of socio-cultural subordination and political vulnerability. These sentiments are further exacerbated by Soqotrans' perception of the state's latent ambivalence *vis-à-vis* their ethno-cultural heterogeneity as potentially indicative of their propensity toward regional autonomy and provincial patriotism, in the guise of an exclusive cultural communalism.²⁰

The challenge that this situation presents is that of managing the intertwining of national political unity and regional ethno-cultural heterogeneity, and thus of reconciling communal cultural self-definition with state ideology. It is in this context that the notion of "politics of recognition" assumes its importance, as it refers to a kind of politics that "protects the integrity of the individual in the life contexts in which his or her identity is formed" (Habermas 1994: 113), which does not entail the renunciation of communal cultural particularities or ethnic homogenization as a pre-condition of citizenship. What is particularly attractive about Soqatra as a community, to which such a politics could be applied, is that it is composed of a population among which there is not the slightest manifestation of interest in the formation of any kind of autonomous political entity. Furthermore, there is neither a historical nor a legal basis for any claim by any other state against the legitimacy of the Yemeni state's sovereignty over the island. Therefore, there is no currently existing or potential threat that could induce political nervousness or security concerns about, for example, the Soqotri language being used as a cultural pretext for claims to regional autonomy. Indeed, given the current emphasis on Soqatra as a touristic destination, promoting its cultural particularities would enhance the island's attractiveness, not only for its biodiversity but also for its cultural diversity.

It is in response to the above challenge that the term "cultural citizenship" is invoked, as it refers to "the right to be different [as a communal polity] and [yet] to belong [to the national polity] in a democratic, participatory way" (Rosaldo 1994: 243). Moreover, the notion of cultural citizenship is conducive to "a process of constructing, establishing and asserting human, social and cultural rights ... [for the] restructuring and reordering" of the local socio-geographic space as the communal members see fit (Rosaldo cited in Stavenhagen 1998: 19). If this conception of citizenship were to be allowed, it would provide a corrective to the currently prevailing tendency of peremptorily subsuming the politico-cultural agency and the socio-economic preferences of

Soqotrans to externally determined governance modalities and environmental management priorities for the island. Perhaps one way of envisioning the operationalization of this politics of recognition and its corollary cultural citizenship would be to imagine Soqatra under a shared sovereignty: on the one hand, as a geo-political space, which is the exclusive domain of the uncontested political sovereignty of the Yemeni state; and on the other, as a socio-cultural place that is the vernacular domain of Soqotran “natives” who exercise local cultural self-determination. This would confirm Soqotrans’ status as an ethno-linguistic indigenous people, and transform them into a communal polity of active stakeholders imbued with a sense of ownership in shaping their collective destiny.

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Notes

- [1] I am referring to the segmentary society paradigm, which promotes a Middle Eastern exceptionalism based on a regional geo-cultural determinism, and is largely based on anthropologists’ “homogenizing generalizations” and their caricatural reductionism of tribalism into contrived patterns of alliances according to segmentary theory-prescribed socio-organizational axioms (for example, “balanced opposition”), in which human actors figure as invented ideal types. Regrettably, segmentary theory, which was initially proposed as a heuristic model (for example, Gellner 1981) has been reified into a panoptic paradigm, with tribalism as its “gate-keeping” concept (Dresch 1989; Khoury and Kostiner 1990; Salzman 2008). This is epitomized in Rosen’s (2006: 160) suggestion of a less salutary, indeed debilitating, Arab/Middle Eastern counterpart to Weber’s Western “Protestant ethic”, namely a “tribal ethic” that “pervade[s] much of Arab political culture”. It is a binding doxa, a region-specific millennial tradition, a foundational and ineluctable value system that determines cultural attitudes, structures social relations, ascribes civic identity and constrains societal change. In effect, this “tribal ethic” constitutes, as Rosen implies, a historically immutable ideological grid that perverts Arab’s adoption of modern institutions (for example, parliamentary democracy, etc.), as these are likely to succumb to the pathologies of autocracy. (See Elie 2003 for a deconstructive critique of the contrived articulation of dynamic communal processes with presumed immutable social structures imagined by the segmentary paradigm’s tribe-centric ethnographic appropriation of Yemen.)
- [2] Moreover, it is worth noting that although the term political incorporation is not commonly used in current studies of the region, it defines the nature of the relationality in (1) intra-national relations between nation-states and local communities (for example, Cohen 1977); (2) in intra-regional relations between Middle Eastern states (for example, Anderson 1987); or (3) in international relations in terms of accommodation to supra-national regimes of development and democratization (for example, Mitchell 2001). Indeed, political incorporation has been the unacknowledged paradigm in many of the ethnographies of Yemen, which explored—through a variety of thematic emphases, regional foci and historical periods—the Yemeni state’s territorial and institutional expansion as part of its polity regimentation strategy, albeit without using the term as analytical framework (for example, Bujra 1971; Dresch 1989; Messick 1993; Mundy 1995; vom Bruck 2005; Weir 2007).

- [3] Relatedly, Weir's ethnography of the northern highlands of Yemen discusses the recursive relationship between state and tribe in a manner evocative of my approach here, as she offers a historical reconstruction of four centuries of attempts at the political incorporation of Razih district, as part of a national state formation process. (See Weir 2007: 229–306).
- [4] The term “mesography” was first used by sociologist Frank Lester Ward (1902). For Ward, mesography refers to a synthetic social scientific practice—that is, a “constructive science”—that makes use of the human and social sciences to “extract truth from social facts”. Going beyond Ward, mesography is an analytical medium uncoupled from any particular disciplinary matrix and its circumscribed epistemic practices. Furthermore, the prefix *meso* does not refer exclusively to level of analysis, but to its linking function between disciplinary discourses, loci of investigation, thematic spectrum and scales of analysis. This makes it an apt conceptual descriptor of an integrative framework for interdisciplinary research practices within the human and social sciences that seek to account for the vectors, and historically mediated processes, of societal transformation.
- [5] I offer here a definition of articulation as the operational underpinning of mesography: the elucidation of the contingent connections and strategic entwinements of the multiplicity of factors (for example, political, economic, cultural, social, environmental, etc.) in the constitution of a social formation as part of a historically contextualized process of change. This definition allows contextually adaptive research and analytical practices that circumvent the parochial epistemological and methodological preoccupations of discipline-bound uses of the term articulation: for example, cultural studies' discourse analysis as political praxis (for example, Morley and Chen 1996); anthropology's idiosyncratic juxtaposition of interpretatively engineered bricolage of cultural formations (for example, Clifford 2003); philosophy's quest for a post or non-linguistic mediation of experience and meaning (for example, Joas 2002); and history's search for a conceptual exit from the dilemmas of interpretation and explanation (for example, Wuthnow 1989).
- [6] The above part of this paragraph is based on archive documents collected in Ingrams and Ingrams (1993 vol. 4: 160–185).
- [7] If the behaviour of Soqotra's last Sultan (Issa bin Ali, 1952–1967) is any guide, then administrative neglect was the *modus operandi vis-à-vis* Mahra. Indeed, the Sultan seemed to have been, as one British report puts it, “careless of his responsibilities in Mahra country ... [as] he rarely if ever visits the mainland and does nothing to foster the loyalty of his subjects there.” The British were guilty of similar neglect *vis-à-vis* both Mahra and Soqotra, which were left out of the advisory residency system introduced in the Eastern Protectorate since the 1930s. It was only when, in the 1950s, the oil company, Petroleum Concessions Limited, sought an oil prospecting lease for the Mahra region that an “Advisory Treaty” was signed in 1954. The latter would have established a formal administrative system in Mahra and Soqotra similar to that of the Qu'aitī and Kathīrī Sultanates. However, it was never operationalized, as the Sultan refused to sign the oil exploration agreement presented by the British. (For details, see Ingrams and Ingrams 1993, vol. 12: 585–611, vol. 15: 749–761).
- [8] The term “foreigner” has a long and complicated genealogy in Soqotra. It was, and still is, part of an enduring curiosity among researchers and Soqotrans concerning the ethnic origins and social categorizations of its first inhabitants and their progeny. The islanders have formulated their own division based on a cultural–spatial distinction: those who considered themselves the indigenous inhabitants prioritized a territorial self-conception rooted in a detailed knowledge of, and keen attachment to, clan geography, which induced a sensibility *vis-à-vis* spatial location of people as an index of relative cultural authenticity. Accordingly, the hinterland was the domain of indigenous Soqotrans, while the coast was that of those with foreign origins. This was a means to preserve their cultural autonomy and land ownership from their political overlords. The latter were mostly coastal residents who, in contrast, privileged a genealogical self-definition that preserved their exclusive status distinction, which was used to legitimize their rule. (For details see Elie 2006b: ch. 3).

- [9] In contrast to the Zaidy *sada* of north Yemen, who considered themselves a spiritual aristocracy of the learned and the exclusive custodian of the faith's doctrinal heritage, as well as the hereditary rulers of the political realm (vom Bruck 2005); and the Sufi *sada* in Hadramawt, who were ritual specialists and spiritual intermediaries whose veneration imparted blessing (*baraka*) to their followers (Ho 2006); the *ashraf* in Soqotra seemed to have been mostly illiterate, and thus did not have any pedagogical function as scholars *vis-à-vis* the population, but were primarily regarded as possessing magical powers and whose protection services (that is, to ward off inauspicious forces and signs) were under the exclusive patronage of the Sultan (Elie 2006b: ch. 6).
- [10] Parts of the above paragraph are based on personal communication with Soqotri ethno-linguist Dr Miranda Morris. Worthy of note is that, in Soqotra, the *akhdam* constituted a transitory class of self-indentured labourers, and never became an ethno-culturally based occupational caste subjected to social exclusion, as was, and still is, the case on mainland Yemen. (Seif 2005.) However, it is the *muwalladin*, who seemed to have inherited the social condition of the *akhdam* on mainland Yemen (see section on the socialist period below).
- [11] Although the term *masilhim* is commonly used by Soqotrans today, it is, however, of foreign origin. Probably, it is derived from the Arabic word *sulh* (peace-making). In fact, the island-wide Soqotri term used to refer to clan meetings with the Sultan is '*etihī a-sahatan*' (from the verb *etihī* meaning disputers to meet, and solve problems, etc.). Personal communication with Soqotri ethno-linguist Dr Miranda Morris.
- [12] In this context, belief in witchcraft (*sihr*) was pervasive, and it led to the dominant role played by the *makole* (traditional medicine man), who had the power to determine who was a witch, as well as to remove witches' spells. In Soqatra, it was exclusively women who were accused of witchcraft, and those found guilty were exiled to (today's) Oman and the United Arab Emirates, where they unwittingly became the founding members of a now thriving Soqotran diaspora. See Naumkin (1993: 315–323).
- [13] In Yemen, *muwallad* (plural: *muwalladīn*) refers to someone born of intermarriage between an Arab (Yemeni) father and a non-Arab mother. In Soqotra, it is used exclusively to refer to the population of African descent, in spite of the fact that there are Soqotrans of mixed Omani and Emirati origins. Since the end of the socialist period, the term is used as a euphemism for a manumitted social status marker that is evocative of an ethno-cultural distinction, if not social exclusion. For further discussion of this social category in Yemen, see Ho (2006: ch. 8).
- [14] There is an ineluctable dialectic between topography, cultural geography and the challenges to polity formation and social transformation that have affected the island's historical itinerary, and continue to affect the development prospects of Soqotrans. This is aptly expressed by Ho (2006: 33): "The lay of the land gives shape to the social formations and political relations within it, patterning themes in its history and [structuring] the flow of events."
- [15] This paranoia of sovereignty was symbolized in the State Security Law adopted in 1975, which made it an "an offense for a Yemeni to speak with a non-Yemeni without official approval" (Halliday 1990: 228). This political gag on the citizenry, or this "anti-fraternization" injunction, was also operational in Soqotra, as I was told by local informants.
- [16] The *intifādhāt* were initially a land redistribution instrument deployed by politically organized landless peasants against rural feudal landlords in South Yemen after the revolution and prior to the adoption of the second Agrarian Reform Law in November 1970. It was subsequently used in different sectors (for example, fishing) by the political leadership of the state as a means of encouraging mass demonstrations in support of policy changes. See Stork (1973: 11–19); Halliday (1979: 13); Ismael and Ismael (1986: 83–88).
- [17] However, the South had its own experience with British-instigated tribalization prior to independence, which the Socialist regime sought to undo with mixed results. Gavin (1975: ch. 8) provides an illuminating account of how insignificant clans were consolidated into tribes and organized into a congeries of micro-states, as a result of the implementation of the British policy of protectorate formation in South Yemen. This configured the South's

- socio-political geography into a cosmopolitan centre and a tribal periphery, which subsequently became part of a broader strategy of using tribes as “a counterpoise to the urban world of radical, middle-class nationalism... [in] the cosmopolitan port city of Aden” (Cannadine 2001: 82).
- [18] I am referring to the set of regulatory mechanisms (*qawā‘id*) in relations among tribes: *shura* (consultation between tribal members); *aqd* (inter-tribal protection agreement); *bay’ah* (oath of allegiance between tribal sheikh and tribesmen); the feud (*thār*); and the payment of blood money (*diyah*), among others. These are neither among the traditional governance nor of conflict resolution institutions of Soqotrans. For details see Weir (2007: 143–225).
- [19] The project has had meagre success in recruiting Soqotrans as environmental cosmopolitans encapsulated in a kind of virtual polity regimented by internationally vetted policy prescriptions, and thus unmoored from local socio-cultural realities and livelihood exigencies. In effect, its fumbling implementation of locally mal-adapted objectives has engendered among most Soqotrans a deep skepticism about the relevance of its goals, and a chronic uncooperativeness towards its activities. (For details, see Elie [2006b: ch. 7]) The designation of Soqotra in July 2008 as a UNESCO World Heritage Natural Site has granted a new lifeline to this faltering experiment in transnational governmentality. The Global Environment Facility (GEF) has approved funding for a five-year project entitled “Strengthening Socotra’s Policy and Regulatory Framework for Mainstreaming Biodiversity”. Its main objective is to reconfigure the island’s governance structures through “the creation of an island-wide local government [with an] integrated planning approach into which biodiversity considerations can become central.”
- [20] At issue here, is the official non-recognition of Soqotrans’ ethno-cultural specificity; and therefore whether or not it is politically permissible for them to claim their rights to cultural expression as an unrecognized indigenous people. Consequently, there is a chronic ambivalence about using the island’s cultural endowments as symbolic resources in an alternative project of self-making that goes beyond the exclusionary ethno-nationalist ethos of the state. For details, see Elie (2006b: ch. 6, 2008: 342–343).

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