Chapter 1

Envisioning Medieval Communities in Asia: Remarks on Ethnicity, Tribalism and Faith

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This chapter is written from the perspective of historical anthropology, and as a conceptual contribution to the debates that feature in this volume and at the symposium that preceded it. In particular, it follows the work of my colleagues Johann Heiss and Guntram Hazod (see Chapter 2 in this volume), with whom I have had the opportunity to share many years of collaborative research. The following remarks on ethnicity, tribalism and faith draw upon the medieval contexts of southwestern Arabia and of Tibetan-speaking Central Asia. My primary concern here is to outline and to elaborate some of the conceptual tools that historical anthropology has to offer for historical analyses of such contexts. Before that, some methodological considerations are offered to outline the background and orientations.

Introductory Methodological Considerations

The desire to conceptually and methodologically bridge the gaps between medieval history and historical anthropology follows a pragmatic as well as a theoretical rationale. The pragmatic dimension is informed by joint efforts invested by Walter Pohl, Guntram Hazod, Johann Heiss, myself and several other researchers to set up a large research network in both local Viennese and international academic contexts, and to elaborate and submit a corresponding grant proposal to that purpose to the Austrian Science Fund. The grant proposal and research network in fact resulted from this volume and the preceding conference, and consequently bore the same title, 'Visions of Community'. In these pragmatic contexts, historians of Asian and European medieval periods cooperate with historical anthropologists with some expertise in the relevant periods in southwestern Arabia and Tibet. It is this particular pragmatic setting of trans- and interdisciplinary research within a specified set of contextualized research problems that defined

the need to also review and elaborate those conceptual tools that historical anthropology has to offer for this type of academic work.

On a theoretical level, this task can be accomplished neither as swiftly nor as straightforwardly as one might expect. Initially, anthropology's own record of historical theorizing and conceptualizing requires cautious, retrospective consideration.[1] That requirement is primarily due to two structural reasons that are rooted in historical anthropology's own development. The first of these is linked to what I call an uneven distribution of workloads within anthropology. The shifting trends of socio-cultural anthropology constitute the second structural reason, which directly intersects with the first and may be referred to as the changing fashions of 'hot topics' inside socio-cultural anthropology.

The uneven distribution of workloads inside socio-cultural anthropology has resulted from the necessities of regional specialization. Those anthropologists who specialize in areas with deep and fairly continuous historical records obviously have to engage with those records as soon as their own interests shift to historical topics. By contrast, anthropologists who specialize in areas where such fairly continuous historical records are not available are unable to do so, for better or for worse. One consequence of this uneven distribution of challenges within anthropology was often a more pronounced regional engagement by anthropologists who had to face the challenge of densely available historical sources. As a result, regionally engaged anthropologists were reluctant to move beyond the specificities and peculiarities of regional expertise on occasion to engage in comparative and broader conceptual reasoning as well. By and large, broader comparative and theoretical input into socio-cultural anthropology has steadily emerged from the works of scholars less preoccupied with the burden of local and regional historical records.

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[1] In this text, the term 'anthropology' designates neither physical nor biological anthropology, nor the other two among the 'four fields' of anthropology that today dominate American academic traditions, namely linguistic and archaeological anthropology. In short, anthropology here is used as shorthand for socio-cultural anthropology in its common European and Asian academic meaning.

The changing fashions of socio-cultural anthropology to an extent are related to that uneven distribution of workloads. Today, historically well-informed anthropologists often tend to interact with their partners in regional expertise from other disciplines, such as archaeologists, linguists, physical anthropologists or, indeed, historians. They have often managed to overcome their previous marginalization as representatives of auxiliary disciplines, for which many had to live through challenges similar to those experienced by professional women in business careers: in order to be recognized as an equal partner, you have to be better than the others – or, rephrased for the present academic context: in order not to be marginalized into an auxiliary position, you have to be a good anthropologist and a respected expert in historical matters as well. On the one hand, regionally focused research agendas leave less time and energy for wider conceptual and theoretical elaborations outside one's own field of historical and regional expertise. This has contributed to the narrowing of audiences and interests among other anthropological sub-communities working in other fields: if by a certain necessity and logic, the results of regionally and historically highly specialized anthropological analyses are less and less often communicated in comprehensible terms to the anthropological communities at large, then the latter will tend less often to take notice of those results.

On the other hand, this is just one among two main reasons why during the quarter of a century between, say, the mid-1980s and 2010, the changing fashions of 'hot topics' inside socio-cultural anthropology included less often than before the insights of historical anthropology. The second factor resulting in the same effect has to do with socio-cultural anthropology's larger development throughout the twentieth century. Ever since the 1980s, this field has gone though a whole series of critical self-examinations. Some of them cumulatively built upon each other while others did not, and all of them today seem to be feeding into the beginnings of a transnational and global era in anthropology.[2] From the perspective of today's

[2] Andre Gingrich, 'Transitions: notes on anthropology's present and its transnational potentials', *American Anthropologist*, 112, 4 (2010): 552–62.

anthropology, coping with globalization and its challenges and dangers certainly is the central task of the years to come. Out of that perspective, it is evident and self-understood that historical anthropology per se seems to be a research realm of merely secondary significance – and moreover, the existing legacies of historical anthropology convey a reputation of being hopelessly old-fashioned and out of touch. Historical anthropologists today are thus struggling more often than not with skeptical attitudes toward their research agenda.

Such skeptical reactions are indeed justified to the degree that historical anthropology's record does in fact include a plethora of formerly hegemonic, outdated paradigms and models. Still, these outdated and formerly hegemonic models continue to define what commonly is understood as historical anthropology inside socio-cultural anthropology at large, and beyond it. Evolutionism, diffusionism, ethnohistory and certain elements in structuralism, functionalism and Marxism have all contributed to the promotion of definitions not only of historical anthropology, but also of anthropology at large. To a great extent, socio-cultural anthropology until the 1970s or so shared such outdated paradigms with historical anthropology.[3] By contrast, socio-cultural anthropology since the 1970s has generally ignored historical anthropology.

So, what comes next? Historical anthropology's relative insignificance within its own discipline during the last quarter of a century has had both negative and positive consequences. The negative side is that this subfield has diminished not merely in significance, but also in size and human resources. On the positive side, it has entered into its own phases of reorientation. On a theoretical level, to a remarkable extent it has absorbed the results of the critical self-examination that has characterized the field at large. Simultaneously, it has moved ahead on an empirical level in fast and pioneering ways: For some areas, such as southern Arabia or Tibet, the subjects of the present chapter, the histories of whole periods in the medieval and modern eras have in fact been written neither by philologists nor by historians but by socio-cultural

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[3] Fredrik Barth, Andre Gingrich, Robert Parkin and Sydel Silverman, *One Discipline, Four Ways: British, German, French and American Anthropology – The Halle Lectures* (Chicago, 2005).

anthropologists, among them Paul Dresch,[4] Johann Heiss[5] and Guntram Hazod (with Sorensen).[6]

As a result, historical anthropology today is a small subfield in anthropology which nevertheless has fully established its expertise and reputation in its respective regional specializations. In turn, this lean and active presence provides a solid basis for an academic future in which transnational and global issues will continue to occupy a central position inside and outside anthropology, while the continuing relevance of postcolonial studies is preparing the way for a renewal of historical interest inside socio-cultural anthropology.

Historical anthropology thus is entering new grounds while such comparative and wider conceptual tools are re-assessed and tried out across regional, 'national' and disciplinary boundaries, as in the present volume. If this is done with a focus on established anthropological concepts such as ethnicity, tribalism and faith, then this meets precisely the challenges historical anthropology has to face now.

Ethnicity Then and Now

Not unlike older debates on tribes and tribalism, some anthropologists working with a short historical perspective continue to argue that ethnicity was basically a product of colonialism. Within certain limits, this may in fact depend on the choice of definition. If primary emphasis is placed upon administrative classifications from above, then colonialism certainly aggravated and defined or redefined many forms of ethnic labeling for its own purposes of domination and practices of 'divide and rule'.

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[4] Paul Dresch, *Tribes, Government, and History in Yemen* (Oxford, 1993); Paul Dresch, *A History of Modern Yemen* (Cambridge, 2000).

[5] Johann Heiss, 'Die Landnahme der Khawlan nach al–Hamdani', in Roswitha Stiegner (ed.), *Südarbien– Interdisziplinär. Aktualisierte Beiträge zum internationalen Symposium an der Universität Graz* (Graz, 1997), pp. 53–68.

[6] Guntram Hazod and Per K. Sørensen (in cooperation with Tsering Gyalbo), *Rulers of the Celestial Plain: Ecclesiastic and Secular Hegemony in Medieval Tibet: A Study of Tshal Gung–thang* (2 vols, Vienna, 2007).

Apart from the fact that certain regions of Asia or Europe never underwent sustained periods of direct European colonial rule (for example parts of China, Tibet, Iran, Asia Minor and parts of the Arab peninsula), the argument is flawed for a more important reason. It is in fact outrageously Eurocentric to claim that only Europeans were capable of understanding that other major groups had different religions, languages and cultures, and that only Europeans were capable of identifying and naming other groups according to these criteria. There is sufficient textual evidence available from pre-modern Chinese, Indian or Arabic sources to testify to the contrary.

Today's standard definitions of ethnicity are derived from the principal anthropological authors, such as Fredrik Barth,[7] Thomas Hylland Eriksen[8] and Marcus Banks.[9] They term ethnicity a 'thin' concept, which is always shaped by, and largely depends on, other factors such as class, gender, power, religion and so forth. Still, the standard working definition for the contemporary era seems to have stood the test of time. It conceives, first of all, ethnicity as a relational term, that is, analogous to other relational terms such as marriage, alliance, conflict and so on that always imply two or more sets of persons or groups. Already in a grammatical sense, it would thus be inappropriate to speak, for instance, about 'having ethnicity' as if one were referring to one's hair color, body part or disease.

In this sense, the thin and relational anthropological conception of ethnicity refers to two or more groups of humans who tend to conceive major cultural differences between them as relevant in time. Whenever the social construction of these cultural differences gains continuing and defining relevance for group identification, we speak of ethnic groups. Ethnicity thus is the primary concept while ethnic group is the derived and dependent concept. Three important qualities come along with this working definition: first, ethnic boundaries can always be crossed

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[7] Fredrik Barth, 'Introduction', in Fredrik Barth (ed.), *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference* (Bergen, 1968), pp. 9–38.

[8] Thomas Hylland Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Anthropological Perspectives* (London, 1993).

[9] Marcus Banks, *Ethnicity: Anthropological Constructions* (London, New York, 1996).

by persons or groups; second, ethnic boundaries themselves may again and again change over time; and third, ethnicity includes important elements of culture but is not identical to culture.

Out of these main ingredients of our working definition it becomes clear that ethnic identity is never the only form of identity, but may or may not turn out to be one important among several dimensions, or registers, of identity,[10] such as age group, profession, gender, status group, religion, tribal affiliation, regional belonging and so on. Ethnic identity thus in fact contains 'situational', 'performative' and 'constructivist' elements. We may find ourselves in situations in which it is highly important for us to emphasize that we are Swedish-speaking citizens of Finland; there may be other situations in which it is more important to present ourselves as supporters of, say, the Finnish Green party or as Helsinki university professors and so forth. In addition, we may run into situations in which for one reason or another it may be advisable to conceal that we are Swedish-speaking Finns, and so we might try to behave as if we were Danes. We might, however, run into problems if we tried to 'perform' and 'construct' ourselves to the outside as if we were Japanese. The situational and performative dimensions have their weight, but they also have their limits. These limits also have to do with our minimal definitional ingredients. Because ethnicity is a relational concept, ethnic identity depends not merely on self-ascription, but also on recognition and allocation of meaning by others. If I move in a crowd of racists who are aware that I am Afro-American or Jewish, then I may try as hard as I can to behave as if my ethnic background were unimportant to me, but I still might not be able to escape the possible racist realities of such an encounter. The only important factor in such an extreme case is what matters for them about me. In less extreme cases, recognition and allocation of meaning by others are not the only factors that matter, but always interact together with self-ascription. Ethnicity may always serve as one among several registers of personal or group identity, but only to the extent that this is accepted by others.

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[10] Gerd Baumann and Andre Gingrich (eds), *Grammars of Identity: A Structural Approach* (Oxford, New York, 2004).

If we now try to translate socio-cultural anthropology's standard understanding of ethnicity to the medieval periods of southwestern Arabia and Tibet, then it soon becomes evident that the term may usefully be applied, albeit with some qualifications. In medieval Tibet the majority of the population spoke Tibetan in various regional dialects, and most of them followed one or the other prevailing versions of Buddhism. Yet there also were Muslim professional groups of low status, Indian pilgrims, Chinese merchants, Mongol diplomats and so forth.[11] In southwestern Arabia, the majority of the population spoke local varieties of Yemeni Arabic dialects, and they mostly followed two main and a few minor versions of Islam. Yet there were also Indian merchants, Jewish craftsmen, Persian intellectuals and African low-status groups, among others.[12]

It is not so difficult to envision how the main ingredients of our working definition for ethnicity might in fact have operated inside the daily lives amid the relations between (linguistic and religious) majorities and minorities of those contexts. In terms of everyday face-to-face interactions, ethnic labeling would never be explicitly mentioned out of politeness and tact. Explicitly referencing or addressing it in spoken language could initiate conflict, and would always be part of ongoing conflicts. Ethnicity thus would play a tacit, non-verbal role in peaceful interactions, but it would always be present in the mind because of its visual and audible manifestations: different clothing and dress were normal, and at times even prescribed for many religious and linguistic minorities, sometimes emphasizing a privilege and sometimes a subordinate position. The name by which a minority member was known and addressed would have added up to these main markers of ethnic difference in personal interactions. Different prayer times and eating habits would serve as additional markers in some instances, and even if

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[11] Anne-Marie Blondeau and Ernst Steinkellner (eds), *Reflections of the Mountain: Essays on the History and Social Meaning of the Mountain Cult in Tibet and the Himalaya* (Vienna, 1996).

[12] Andre Gingrich and Johann Heiss, *Beiträge zur Ethnographie der Provinz Şaʿda, Nordjemen. Aspekte der traditionellen materiellen Kultur in bäuerlichen Stammesgesellschaften*, Veröffentlichungen der Ethnologischen Kommission, 3 (Vienna, 1986).

many minority members seem to have spoken the respective majority language fluently, an accent here or there, or simply hearing that 'they' also were capable of speaking other languages among themselves would further contribute to identifying ethnic difference. Because these visual and acoustic markers of ethnic difference were much more explicit in those days than they are now, differences themselves did not have to be explicitly addressed verbatim.

At present, it is thus less difficult to see how ethnicity might best be envisioned for Central and West Asian medieval periods in daily face-to-face encounters between majority and minority members. It was a latent, non-verbal marker relatively pervasive in daily interactions. The 'situational' options, therefore, were quite narrow, and certainly much more limited than they are today. Perhaps it was possible for a Persian resident of Sanaa in the twelfth century to travel in the disguise of a Yemeni Arabic merchant, if he spoke very good Arabic – but still it would have been much more unusual than it is today for, say, Serbian restaurant owners in Vienna to pose as Italian pizza experts. And while a Jewish woman in Sanaa or a Buddhist woman in Lhasa would have been able to cover herself completely and disguise herself as a Muslim woman of the fourteenth century, Muslim male residents of Lhasa or male Jewish residents of Sanaa might have found it virtually impossible to disguise themselves as a male member of the majority population. Assimilation occurred, but did not totally extinguish status differences. One might convert to majority religions, one could immigrate from outside, but the name of origin usually remained, and continued to remind others and oneself for some generations about a somewhat different ethnic background.

While it is thus possible to operate with a slightly modified standard concept of ethnicity for minority/majority relations, relations inside the majority pose more complex problems. I shall discuss them in the context of tribalism and faith. But I remind readers that those fields also will contain fluid transitions to ethnicity inside the majority populations.

Tribes Then and Now

The dimension of ethnicity is more easily comparable between Tibetan-speaking Central Asia and southwestern Arabia than is the dimension of tribalism. When Johann Heiss and I began our

southwest Arabian field work experience in the early 1980s, demographic estimations held that some 75 per cent of the Yemen's population and some 80 per cent of southwestern Saudi Arabia's population lived outside larger and smaller cities. We thus may safely conclude that for the medieval period, the rural population of southwestern Arabia amounted to not less than that proportion, but was quite smaller in absolute numbers. From existing sources we know that among that overall rural population, the majority of residents in the northern highlands (Asir and northern Yemen) and in adjoining steppe zones to the east were regarded, and regarded themselves, as tribal; the same applied to smaller pockets in the southern mountains to the north of Aden.[13] By contrast, between the ninth and the twelfth centuries, the inhabitants of the large coastal plains along the Red Sea and Indian Ocean were still labeled as tribal, but in fact seem to have gone through a long process of de-tribalization.[14]

Today, only smaller tribal groups live in the hilly parts of these coastal plains. In short, we may conclude for southwestern Arabia during medieval times that about half of the rural population lived in social groups designated by the Arabic generic term for tribe, each of them having a collective tribal proper name. The majority of these tribes were mountain peasants, while to the east and along the coasts smaller tribal groups were semi-nomadic and nomadic.

In Tibet, there are generic terms for 'tribe', but they appear primarily to refer to nomads both today and in the past, as historical texts indicate. While the size of the Tibetan plateau is much larger than southwestern Arabia, the population level was always far lower, as was, by consequence, population density. This, in turn, indicates that 'horizontal' nomadic groups covered larger areas there, and their proportion of the overall population was larger. The settled population primarily lived in or near the few pockets of agricultural land, in hierarchical interaction with monasteries and principalities. In short, Tibetan tribes on the plateau were

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[13] See Andre Gingrich, *Südwestarabische Sternenkalender. Eine ethnologische Studie zu Struktur, Kontext und regionalem Vergleich des tribalen Agrarkalenders der Munebbih im Jemen*, Wiener Beiträge zur Ethnologie und Anthropologie, 7 (Vienna, 1994).

[14] Ibid.

usually nomads with their own leadership, subsisting on grazing in vast and scarcely populated areas at the periphery of the main settlements and trading routes. In the Himalaya and other mountain zones, the situation was not entirely different: yet there much smaller groups of 'vertical' nomadism and transhumance must have interacted more frequently with larger groups of mountain peasants.

From this initial, sketchy overview it already becomes apparent that a well-known battle cry of anthropologists of Africa and South America is quite misleading and invalid for these regions of Asia: tribes and tribalism were not an 'invention' of colonialism, nor were they in these Asian cases primarily a product of European imaginations seeking to project biblical myths upon exotic territories. Historians and historical anthropologists have to be aware that the notion of tribe was often used for colonial purposes as much as for racist and supremacist ideas about backwardness and primitive conditions of humanity. This is certainly true for large parts of Africa, Australia, some parts of the Americas, portions of southeastern Europe and also for parts of southeastern and southern Asia. Together with indigenous initiatives, many anthropologists working in these particular regions have therefore actually dropped any notion of tribe whatsoever from their academic and public terminology. The current solution is to speak of ethnic groups instead, which may work in some cases but not in most: Some large ethnic groups of more than 1 or 2 million people still continue to comprise sub-units with collective proper names, which suspiciously resemble what formerly was called a tribe.[15]

While we duly respect the necessity to criticize colonialist and primitivist mindsets where they effectively play a role, southwestern Arabia and Tibet are different examples. They represent cases in which there actually was a pre-colonial, indigenous record of conceptualizing those very units with such local generic terms that translate into 'tribe'. So historical anthropologists working in these two areas find themselves in an interesting situation: While the majority of anthropologists working elsewhere in the world, most notably in Africa and in the

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[15] Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism*.

Americas, prefer to use the more fashionable term 'ethnic groups' for almost any socio-cultural group subordinate to or intersecting with nationhood, historical anthropologists in southwestern Arabia and Tibet use the term 'ethnic group' much more selectively and carefully in the more classical and standard sense. 'Ethnic group/ethnicity', however, never appears as a generic indigenous term, but exclusively in specific ethnonyms. By contrast, anthropologists working outside the worlds of Islam and Buddhism have remained extremely reluctant to employ the term 'tribe' (although it often exists in many local languages as a generic term), whereas anthropologists working in the core Muslim and Buddhist regions happily continue to use the term 'tribe', which always corresponds to a generic local equivalent.

This sharp dissonance within anthropology concerning the uses and abuses of the term 'tribe' not only has to do with its proven pre- and non-colonial existence in the Muslim and Buddhist realm, as opposed to its proven colonial abuse elsewhere (and the frequent absence of any indigenous, pre-colonial records in that regard). In addition, similar disputes are concerned with different sets of meanings attributed to the same term. Indeed, in many parts of Africa, Australia or the Americas, 'tribe' (or the equivalent term) is invariably associated with timeless stagnation, backwardness, primitive conditions and similarly negative deficiencies. By contrast, 'tribe' in most parts of the Muslim world, and in the central Asian parts of the Buddhist realm (Himalaya, Tibet, Mongolia) refers to entirely different qualities: It is associated with freedom, independence, self-determination, autonomy and so on. In turn, this in all likelihood is related to the long enduring legacies of medieval and early modern indigenous states in these regions, and to historical records at the service of those states, as well as to local folk traditions that may have opposed state records on various important matters but obviously not on this one: 'Tribes' in these contexts indeed were also defined by their relative autonomy from the state, which nevertheless always allowed them to regularly interact in diverse ways with the state.[16] This

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[16] Andre Gingrich, 'Tribe', in Neil J. Smelser and Paul B. Baltes (eds), *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences* (Oxford, 2001), pp. 15906–9.

major commonality between tribes in southwestern Arabia and in Tibet now allows us to return to some of the significant differences between them with regard to medieval times.

I have already pointed out the larger nomadic (Yak, horse, sheep, goat) portion among Tibetan tribes, as opposed to a much smaller nomadic element (camel, sheep, goat) in southwestern Arabia. It seems that not unlike other central Asian nomads, the tribes of Tibet were often characterized by a more militaristic and hierarchical social organization. By contrast, the tribes of southern Arabia observed a relatively clear-cut hierarchy along gender lines, but inside these gender realms, their social organization was more egalitarian. This corresponds to widely differing kinship systems prevailing in each of these two regions. Tibetan kinship systems have stronger bilateral elements and display less accentuated avoidance and hierarchy between male and female, whereas much stronger hierarchy prevails inside the gendered halves of society according to distinctions of seniority. In Arabia's most common forms of kinship, the bilateral elements are much weaker, while the patrilineal components are stronger in southern Arabia and especially elaborate in northern Arabia. It would be a misunderstanding, however, to assume that tribes in southwestern Arabia or in Tibet were primarily large, extended forms of kinship and genealogy, even if local ideologies attempted to present them as such. In fact, local kinship ideologies are an impressive force of socio-political cohesion integrating anybody who comes in from the outside and is accepted, while forgetting everybody who leaves or who is expelled. In this sense, 'tribes' for these regions can be loosely defined as territorial-political units with changing degrees of self-determination, ruled by strong ideologies of kinship and genealogy, and always co-existing with nearby states and clergy. A tribal member thus always has a home territory, an armed group to which he or she belongs, and whose collective proper name is often also part of his or her personal name. Except for a few persons in their tribal leadership, most of these tribes do not read or write in the periods that concern us here. By consequence, they do not actively speak, and perhaps do not even easily understand, the standard scriptural languages that do exist in their region and time, but are reserved for the elite.

The reason why even in these western and central Asian contexts, distinctions between tribe and ethnic group may be regarded as fluent begins at this point. Since these tribes have home territories where many if not most of their members live most of the time, tribal dialects and tribal manners may acquire very heterogeneous features. A scholar from Sanaa who visits a tribal area near Asir, or a monk from Shigatse visiting a tribal area in Amdo, may require weeks if not months to be able to follow the local dialect and understand some of the major local rites and manners. Some might question whether this is not also some kind of ethnic difference? The same medieval scholar might be much more familiar and, in fact, at ease with a Muslim butcher in his Shigatse neighborhood, or with a Jewish craftsman in his Sanaa market: They are acquainted with each other and master the same local language. At the very least, it has to be emphasized that ethnic differences need not necessarily imply social distance, whereas tribal adherence and tribalism may very well include forms of vast social distance. And one may go so far as to argue that sometimes ethnic diversity may include a comfortable neighborhood and social proximity (and sometimes not), while tribal adherence almost certainly would include not only a sense of belonging to one particular home group, but also a potential to confront, and to challenge, other tribes.[17]

Faith Here and There

In terms of social history, this last section leads us to the mosque and the temple, to the madrasa and the monastery. In line with 'visions' of community as the topic of this volume, however, I prefer to discuss here not the institutions and their members, but the ideas that are taught and distributed from there, and the languages in which these ideas are conveyed.

At the end of the preceding section it was noted that literacy was confined to a small upper stratum of rural and urban elite members, most of them male. Historical anthropologists like Ernest Gellner have outlined that writing and reading connected the local elites across wide distances. In turn, writing and reading eventually led to the standardization of written and

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[17] Marshall D. Sahlins, *Tribesmen* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1968).

spoken language among those elites, which granted them privileged and exclusive forms of access to practical and spiritual knowledge, and endowed them with the aura of control over sacred texts.[18] To a certain extent, this went along with control over written commercial records, the mastering of legal texts when it came to corresponding law cases and, last but not least, with elite hegemonies in the writing of history. In all these important dimensions, faith to a certain extent rested and depended on a culture of scripturalism that was controlled by the literate elites in both regions during the periods under scrutiny here.

On this general but essential scale of similarity, two additional features of comparability should be emphasized. First, the versions of Islam and Buddhism that are relevant here did not possess an absolute institutional centre: In so far as the caliphate still existed, it had no practical relevance for southern Yemen any longer, while those forms of Buddhism prevailing at the time in the Tibetan-speaking areas where highly diverse and relatively volatile forms of spiritual leadership. Nothing existed that could compare to the Bishop of Rome's role for Christianity in high medieval Europe. Theological hierarchies and elites existed in both cases, deeply embedded in the wider culture of scripturalism, but the degree of their centralization was relatively modest. Second, another important difference to that majority of European countries in which the common people did not understand Latin was a certain degree of proximity between liturgical language and popular dialect – at least to the extent that in linguistic terms, they were closely related to each other. The common people of northern Yemen may not have been able to write and read, but at least most of them would be able to follow their Imam when he read the Qur'an, and even more so when he preached to them and prayed with them. The Lamas, monks and nuns from the nearby monastery who performed a ritual before visitors and spectators attending from various villages in the vicinity were at least understood, in spite of the scriptural Tibetan they spoke.

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[18] Ernest Gellner, *Plough, Sword and Book: The Structure of Human History* (Chicago, 1988).

To my mind, these factors should be emphasized because they must have worked in the same general directions. It does make a difference if the sacred is represented by one and only one ultimate authority, or by several of them who may change and adapt their opinion somewhat more easily. In addition, it does make a difference if you can follow what the religious expert in front of you is reading out, or if you don't because he reads it in a language that you do not understand – be it Latin in medieval London or Arabic in medieval Herat or Isfahan. What follows from this is first, that an elite culture of scripturalism existed in both cases but second, in matters of faith it was more closely intertwined with popular piety, and less distinctively set apart from it. This leads to one among two hypotheses on faith with which I wish to conclude this chapter. The hypothesis claims that in the cases of medieval Tibet and southwestern Arabia, weak forms of theological centralization and close forms of correspondence between liturgical and popular language set the stage for a dense and intimate intertwinement between scriptural and popular traditions of faith. On that basis, we may now in the end turn our attention very briefly to the main differences of theological content, as outlined in the respective scriptural traditions.

Buddhism is a scriptural tradition in which many gods, spirits, demons and other beings are subordinate to higher non-theist principles. Humans are a humble part of this world, which contains sanctity in many locations. The respective Buddhist tradition celebrates its past victories over folk religions, but allows them to live on as long as they respect the superiority of Buddhist principles. In this sense, local and house deities, ancestral spirits and elements of local shamanism may co-exist with the superior Buddhist rituals and beliefs. The scriptural elite prefer and practice one rather than the other, but accommodate folk practices as well; the common people use both in hierarchical order since they seemingly do not contradict each other: Humans are a humble part of the cycle of life, the world is a Cosmos permeated by sanctity.

Islam's scriptural traditions postulate one Creator who is sacred himself, while creation as the outcome of his activities is not sacred: Creation is not at all identical with cosmos, these are

two different visions of humanity, and thus of community.[19] Humans are not humble, but the crown of creation: Some invisible creatures such as demons are their equals while others like angels are superior to them. The rest of non-human creation is subordinate to humanity, and hierarchically ranked in itself. Some living beings are on top, such as birds, who foreshadow paradise, others are below them, such as animals with their different qualities between being edible and impure. The scriptural elite may to an extent accommodate folk beliefs. These may transform certain elements of the holy texts (such as references to demons) into something else, and combine them with the maintenance of pre-Islamic belief elements (such as sacred springs or holy parks). Yet, by and large, Islam co-exists uneasily with folk beliefs, with a tendency – sometimes latent, sometimes explicit – to seek their disappearance.[20]

In a nutshell, one vision encourages a sacred cosmos with humble humans in it; the other vision encourages a profane world in which humans are the crown of creation. On that basis, my second hypothesis argues that these are alternative visions for humanity's communities: The humble co-inhabitant of a sacred cosmos is more explicitly encouraged to seek harmony in the inner self and with his or her socio-ecological environment; the self-reliant crown of creation is more explicitly encouraged to confront obstacles in order to transform a non-sacred world in order to succeed.

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[19] Andre Gingrich, 'Kulturelle Deutungsformen der Welt. Asiatische Orte der Erinnerung, dargestellt an zwei Beispielen', in Moritz Csáky and Peter Stachel (eds), *Die Verortung von Gedächtnis* (Vienna, 2001), pp. 41–50.

[20] Andre Gingrich and Elke Mader (eds), *Metamorphosen der Natur. Sozialanthropologische Untersuchungen zum Verhältnis von Weltbild und natürlicher Umwelt* (Vienna, 2002); Marshall D. Sahlins, *Islands of History* (London, New York, 1985).