

1 Introduction: writing tribal history

Anthropology, history and ‘tribes’

In the mid-twentieth century, social scientists of all persuasions expected tribal and ethnic minorities within contemporary nation-states to succumb sooner or later to policies of modernization and national integration, and many were confident that class would replace ethnicity as the major dimension of social identity. Many anthropologists began to regard the study of their traditional subject-matter – tribal peoples – as an antiquarian irrelevance, turning instead to the newly fashionable sub-disciplines of urban anthropology and the anthropology of the state.

These expectations and trends have been confounded towards the end of the century by the persistence or creative revival of ethnic minority identities in virtually all countries of the world, and by increasing academic and popular perception of violent inter-community conflicts as ethnic in nature. Sociologists, political scientists, historians, geographers and others have shown renewed interest in the study of ethnic and tribal minorities of the ‘Fourth World’ – no longer the sole preserve of anthropologists. There has been a particular convergence between anthropologists and historians; the former ‘do history’, adding depth to their accounts of social and cultural change by scouring archives and chronicles, while the latter, not content with the often meagre ‘facts’ about tribal peoples to be established from such sources, enrich their interpretations with ethnographic, theoretical and comparative insights from anthropology.¹

There are new focuses and interests. Both historians and anthropologists once concentrated on the actors and levels of society of which their sources treated – typically ruling families and dynasties, political institutions, warriors, bureaucrats, scholars – and were content with a largely narrative history, seeking to establish ‘what really happened’: facts and

¹ For a review of contributions to this field, see Krech (1991). Relevant debates have appeared in the pages of journals such as *Comparative Studies in Society and History* and *History and Anthropology*. See also Cohn (1987), Asad (1993).

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events. They often allowed theory and interpretation to remain implicit in the categories used to translate the sources and to suggest causal relations. Now descriptive and analytical categories are more carefully examined; tribal and minority peoples and their histories are more firmly located within the context of the history of states and the world; and there is a growing concern to hear indigenous voices and to allow for the possibility that minorities as well as the state, ordinary people as well as their leaders, women as well as men will have their different pasts. Researchers now investigate these multiple pasts, who claims them, what motivates the claims, how they construct them and negotiate with their rivals.

Various minorities have participated in the economics and politics of states and empires long and actively enough to have left a considerable mark in the archives; some have produced their own chronicles, histories and anthropologies, often as part of their articulation of cultural identity and political aspirations. In other cases, relevant documentation is thin or lacking, and authentic indigenous voices are hard to discern. It is increasingly recognized, however, that particular cultural and political concerns are likely to motivate and colour not only indigenous accounts (whether oral or documentary), but those of apparently objective outsiders.

Recently too, serious attempts have been made to come to terms with the methodological – and ethical – problems involved in writing the history of other people, particularly where – as still is often the case with tribal peoples and minorities – the people themselves are silent, and the only sources relating to them have been written by outsiders. Often the only strategy available for a construction of the past is some form of extrapolation, the projection of understandings and analyses arising from one conjunction of time and space onto another.

Early European studies of the Middle East often attempted to extrapolate between ‘the society of the patriarchs’ and contemporary Bedouin in the Levant. Not only were Biblical texts used to construct what life among the Bedouins must be like, but observations of the contemporary Bedouin were applied to pad out the information on Biblical patriarchs that could be extracted from the texts. Most successful of such extrapolators perhaps was W. Robertson Smith; others were more or less fanciful and romantic.

This type of historical reconstruction – and indeed history generally – went out of fashion in British anthropology with the dominance of structural-functionalism in the 1930s–50s. Historical perspectives were reintroduced by Evans-Pritchard, Barnes and others, who were more interested in documenting at least recent historical changes. Two main

trends in anthropological history developed: anthropologically informed histories; and histories of ‘anthropological’ subjects: tribes, rural society, the poor, the fourth world. Historians have for some decades applied anthropological insights, drawn from ethnographic analyses of the cultural systems of non-literate peoples, to help in reconstructing the pasts of Western societies, and to provide ethnographic readings of fragmentary historical texts. A prominent source here has been Evans-Pritchard’s study of Zande witchcraft, and his analysis of the logic of magical thought, and the relation of witchcraft accusations to kinship and other social classifications.² More recently, historians have drawn on other concepts and insights from anthropological studies of kinship, tribalism, ethnicity and identity. At the same time, following the French *Annales* school, there has been a proliferation in studies of the social history of the ‘people without history’, in reconstructions of the social life of classes mentioned only indirectly in the sources.³ This has often involved interpretations justified by reference to current social theories, as well as more imaginative historical writing which leans heavily on extrapolation from fieldwork-based ethnographies.

Extrapolation in history or anthropology is a form of comparative method which involves extracting insights and often elements from the analysis of one society, and applying these to another society where the same detailed information is not available. Anthropologists need not go so far as either Evans-Pritchard, who held social anthropology to be ‘a special kind of historiography’, or Radcliffe-Brown, who advocated comparison as the ‘methodological equivalent of experiment’; but they must acknowledge that both anthropology and history are inherently comparative. Indeed, any study of culture at a distance – the business of both anthropology and history – involves both translation and comparison.

One problem in writing other people’s history can be a failure to recognize the full implications of the cultural distances involved, which call for several translations. Ethnographic description and analysis involve, as is well recognized, translation from the language and categories of one contemporary people into those of another. Less recognized is the translation performed by historians studying the past of their own people – ‘another country’.⁴ When anthropologists reconstruct the past of a

² Evans-Pritchard (1937). Cf. Lewis (1968); and the work of Alan Macfarlane, Keith Thomas and others.

³ The skilful reconstruction of a fourteenth-century French village by Le Roy Ladurie (1975) ‘has been hailed as opening the possibility of a more ethnographic history and a more historical ethnography’ (Rosaldo 1986: 77). See also Schneider and Rapp (1995), and the works of Eric Wolf which are the focus of that volume.

⁴ See Ingold (1994); and cf. Asad (1986) on ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ languages.

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people among whom they have done ethnographic fieldwork, a double filtering is now involved, a translation over cultural differences of both space and time. If historians, studying the past of another people, then make use of an ethnographer's account of the same people, they are now separated from their subjects by three filters, and must perform a triple translation. Already, such a history is a long way from an indigenous production.

A final degree of distancing is introduced when a historian or anthropologist attempts to reconstruct the society of one historical people by extrapolating from an ethnographic study of quite a different present-day people. Given the cultural distances involved, a convincing reconstruction through extrapolation must not only avoid ethnocentrism and anachronism but employ a theory of society that does not decontextualize, misrepresent, or distort the materials to which it is applied. Such exercises in comparison and interpretation are legitimate when approached with extreme caution, for example in presumptions about the nature of continuity and similarity between the two societies, in careful accounting for differences in their economic and political contexts as well as internal cultural differences between their values, understandings, motivations and experiences.

Now, in their study of the pasts of rural or tribal peoples, anthropologists have not always been careful or critical enough in their use of archival and other sources, and have sometimes failed for example to make adequate allowance for the impact of state policies or the forces of world economic and political systems. Historians who practise extrapolation, however, have not always done so with due consideration of the problems involved. How far is it legitimate to extrapolate from Central African witchcraft to mediaeval European witchcraft, or to popular religious practices in the Muslim world? Or from present-day Bedouin to early Israelites? Or from nomads in Iran today to mediaeval Turkish nomads?

I shall consider these problems further below by examining the ways in which certain historians have used one particular ethnographic study of nomads in Iran as the basis for reconstructing several very different nomadic societies of the past. First it is appropriate to note that not least of the problems involved is the question of the categories and terms of description and analysis to be employed, a problem which is – or should be – common to both ethnography and history.

Prominent among such terms have been 'tribe' and 'tribalism'. These refer to a category of human society whose study was once regarded as largely the prerogative of anthropology, yet anthropologists themselves have notoriously been unable to agree on how to define them. Small

wonder then if historians too, and for that matter political scientists and others interested in 'tribalism', have differed widely in their understandings of the terms.

In writing a history of tribes in Iran, it would seem essential, not so much to lay down definitions (the experience of anthropologists has shown this to be a tedious and indeed futile enterprise), but rather to examine the assumptions behind different usages, and indeed the sources from which they derive. It will be helpful first to consider the main conceptions of 'tribe' current among anthropologists, the current academic and administrative usages of the term in studies of the Middle East and of Iran in particular, and the semantics of various indigenous terms that have been translated as 'tribe'.

'Tribe' in anthropology and the Middle East

Three fundamentally distinct conceptions of 'tribe' have had currency among anthropologists. Perhaps the closest to popular English-language usage is the loose equation of 'tribe' with 'primitive society', once applied to the pre-colonial populations of many parts of the world. In this classificatory usage, the population of a country or a continent was divided into 'tribes' in the sense of objectively apprehended cultural-linguistic groups. Political structure and ideology, and usually scale, were discounted, so that 'the tribes of Africa' ranged in size from a few hundred people to millions, and from a scattering of hunter-gatherer bands to complex stratified states. Post-colonial politicians, academics and governments objected to the connotations of 'tribe' and 'tribalism', and adopted more appropriate (but still unsatisfactory) terms such as 'ethnic group', 'people', or 'nation(ality)'.

More precisely formulated is the notion of 'tribe' as a particular type of society, usually in some kind of evolutionary scheme, in which tribes (with neolithic production techniques, and egalitarian and clan-based political organization) are intermediate between simple hunting bands and more complex chiefdoms and states.⁵ A basic characteristic of such 'tribes' is the pervasiveness of kinship and descent as principles of social and political organization.

A third usage, common in British social anthropology, follows Evans-Pritchard's analysis of the Nuer people of the Sudan as a collection of tribes, that is political groups defined by territorial boundaries and by accepted mechanisms for the resolution of internal disputes.⁶ Each such tribe divides into sub-sections at different structural levels down to that of

⁵ See Sahlins (1968).

⁶ Evans-Pritchard (1940).

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the local community, and each tribe and section has a dominant descent group (clan or lineage). Descent groups in turn divide, from the level of the dominant clan in a given tribe, to that of the minimal lineage in the local community; but frequently the majority of members of the descent group reside elsewhere than in the territory of the section where it is dominant, and Evans-Pritchard carefully distinguished the genealogical framework of descent from the territorial-political structure of tribes and their sections.

Not content with any of these three usages, many ethnographers (myself included) have defined 'tribe' – or used the term without definition – to fit their analysis of a particular society, often attempting to translate a specific indigenous term. Indeed, anthropologists have followed their own varying epistemologies to emphasize widely differing criteria and thus have failed to agree on a general definition of what constitutes a 'tribe'. As with so many would-be general or universal concepts, it seems impossible to find an analytic terminology that both applies widely enough to be useful for comparison and classification and takes account of indigenous categories.

There has been much recent discussion of 'tribe' in relation to the Middle East.⁷ The first of the anthropological concepts listed above – 'tribe' as a culturally and linguistically bounded 'primitive society' – is inappropriate for the major cultural-linguistic groupings such as Arabs, Berbers, Turks, Persians, Kurds, Pashtuns, Baluches, which can hardly be termed either 'tribes' or 'primitive societies', if only on grounds of scale, complexity and lack of unity.⁸ But many writers on the Middle East, adopting either the second or the third anthropological conception of 'tribe', use the term for major subdivisions of some of these 'ethnic groups', 'peoples' or 'nationalities'. For some, a tribe is essentially an egalitarian descent group, the classical model of tribal society among Arabs and in the Middle East generally, conforming with Ibn Khaldun's conception as well as with Durkheim's notion of 'mechanical solidarity'. This criterion best fits Arab tribal society, where tribal genealogies are particularly extensive; a well-known example are the Rwala, a 'tribe' of some 250,000 souls, though some even larger non-Arab groups such as

⁷ See, for example, Eickelman (1981/1989), Beck (1986), Bradburd (1987), Tapper (1991a), several contributions to Khoury and Kostiner (1991) and reviews by Gingrich (1992) and Crone (1993). Eickelman identifies four different notions of 'tribe' in the Middle East: anthropological analytical concepts, state administrative concepts, indigenous explicit ideologies, and indigenous practical notions (1981: 88–9). A few scholars, for example Marx (1977), consider 'tribes' to have an economic or ecological basis.

⁸ Historically, however, city-dwellers in different parts of the Middle East have labelled rural and nomadic peoples as Turk, 'Arab, Berber, Kurd, Baluch, with connotations of 'primitives'. Cf. Tapper (1991b: 53–4) on urban images of tribespeople.

the Bakhtiari Lurs (500,000) of Iran or the Durrani Pashtuns (2 million) of Afghanistan have been called 'tribes' on the same grounds. Many proponents of this view would deny the term 'tribe' to any group without a descent ideology. Others, however, define a tribe as essentially a territorially distinct political group, and expect it to be led by a chief; they apply the term 'tribe' to almost equally large groups that lack unifying descent ideologies and are heterogeneous in origins and composition, such as the Qashqa'i, the Khamseh or the Shahsevan in Iran.

At this level of major cultural-political groups of 100,000 or more people, then, there is disagreement as to whether the term 'tribe' is applicable on the grounds of culture (a descent ideology) or political structure (chiefship and/or political-territorial unity). Other writers (such as myself), however, are unwilling to take either extreme position, and refer to these larger groups (whatever their apparent basis) as 'confederacies', locating 'tribes' at a lower level of political structure, that of first- or second-order components, numbering at most some thousands of individuals.⁹ Such tribes commonly (but still by no means always) combine territorial and political unity under a chief with an ideology of common descent.

It is not often recognized, however, how far the ambiguity that thus remains in discourses about 'tribes' – over whether they are primarily political or cultural – not only divides academics but obscures current political debates at national level about the future role of tribes and tribalism.¹⁰ Further ambiguity and misunderstanding arise from a notion of 'tribe' which is no part of standard anthropological conceptions but which is strongly entrenched in both academic and administrative discourses in many parts of the Middle East; that is, 'tribe' as the political and socio-cultural dimension of pastoral nomadism, such that the category of 'the tribes' is conventionally synonymous with 'the nomads'. This notion is held by numerous historians and other writers, who also assume tribes to be descent groups, often borrowing from anthropology the term 'segmentary lineage'.¹¹ Crone, for example, writing of early Islamic society, holds that it is likely that 'tribe in the specific sense of the word is an overwhelmingly or exclusively pastoral phenomenon (or so at least if we add the criterion of segmentary organization)'. The tribe, moreover, 'is that descent group within which control of pasture land is vested',

⁹ E.g. Barth (1961) on the Khamseh, myself (1979a etc.) on the Shahsevan, Garthwaite (1983) on the Bakhtiari, Beck (1986) on the Qashqa'i, Loeffler (1978) on the Boir Ahmad. ¹⁰ Cf. Tapper (1994).

¹¹ Where members claim descent from a common ancestor (the founder of the lineage, which often bears his – or her – name) and form a series of nesting subgroups (segments) descended from more recent ancestors.

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which shares the obligation to pay blood-money for an injured member, and which has a chief and forms a community.¹²

But there is nothing in either pastoralism as a system of production or nomadism as a mobile way of living that necessarily leads to organization in tribes, whether defined politically in terms of territory and chiefship, or culturally in terms of common descent. Numerous observers have noted how the geography and ecology of most Middle Eastern countries favour pastoral nomadism. The terrain and climate made large areas uncultivable under pre-industrial conditions, and suitable only for seasonal grazing; and as only a small proportion of such pasture could be used by village-based livestock, vast ranges of steppe, semi-desert and mountain were left to be exploited by nomadic pastoralists. Such nomads until very recently numbered tens of millions, and almost all were organized politically into tribes under chiefs. Equally, tribes (defined in political terms) have commonly also had a pastoral economic base and led a nomadic way of life. But an insistence that tribes in the Middle East and Central Asia were necessarily pastoral nomads, organized in descent groups, ignores major tribal groups in Anatolia, Iran and Afghanistan, which often included both settled cultivators and pastoral nomads and were complex and heterogeneous in composition.¹³ Thus, most of the Pashtuns of Afghanistan are (and have always been) farmers or traders, with little or no leaning to pastoralism or nomadism, and well-known groups in Iran such as the Qashqa'i, Bakhtiari, Kurds, Baluch, Turkmen and Shahsevan have been at least partly settled agriculturalists. Of course, by conventional anthropological definitions, many of these were not 'tribes' at all, but 'chiefdoms', or even 'proto-states'.

Any coincidence between nomads and tribes (whether descent-based, or led by chiefs) was not so much a causal relation as a function of relations of both with central states. Settled state administrations intent on registering and taxing the inhabitants of territories which they claimed to control have classically had ambivalent attitudes to both tribespeople, with their personal allegiance to each other or to chiefs, and nomads, with their shifting residence. Many earlier states, however, were themselves founded on military forces drawn from pastoral nomadic tribes, often organized in military units of tens, hundreds and thousands. Rulers have fostered pastoral nomadism in strategic parts of their territories, and have sometimes actually created tribes, tribal organization and tribal chiefs.

Officials – and many academics – have taken a highly positivist view of tribes, expecting them to be mappable, bounded groups, with little membership change, and wanting an exact terminology for classificatory

¹² Crone (1986: 55); Tapper (1991a). Crone (1993) seems to have changed her mind.

¹³ Elsewhere (for instance in Yemen), 'tribes' are not nomadic at all.

and comparative purposes. From a government perspective, even the most autonomous rural populations should have identifiable patterns of organization, and leaders who may be treated as representatives; if they do not have these patterns or leaders, they may be encouraged to produce them. Some rural and nomadic populations have avoided government control and exploitation, and even the attention of historians, by failing to produce such leaders or recognizable forms of 'tribal' organization.¹⁴ But government-created 'tribes', whose names may appear in the records as such, may exist only on paper. Further, tribal names found in official sources imply a uniformity of socio-political structure which, in so far as it exists, may be entirely due to administrative action, and may disguise fundamental disparities in culture and in forms of social organization.

A desire to establish a consistent and stable terminology for political groups has too often obscured the nature of indigenous concepts and terms, which are no more specific than are English terms such as 'family' or 'group' – or 'tribe'. Even in the most apparently consistent segmentary terminology, individual terms are ambiguous, not merely about level, but in their connotations of functions or facets of identity: economic, political, kinship, cultural. However, as with equivalents in English practice, the ambiguity of the terms and the flexibility of the system are of the essence in everyday negotiations of meaning and significance.¹⁵

Most of the terms that have been translated 'tribe' – for example *qabila*, *il*, '*ashira*, *taifa* – contain such ambiguities, and attempts to give them – or 'tribe' – precision as to either level, function or essence, are liable to be misdirected. 'Tribe' as an analytical concept, I have argued elsewhere, is best viewed as – and best matches indigenous concepts for – a state of mind, a construction of reality, a model for action, a mode of social organization essentially opposed to that of the centralized state. A precise terminology may aid comparison, but is unlikely to explain behaviour or to provide an adequate translation of local categories and perceptions.¹⁶

¹⁴ Irons (1974); Glatzer (1983); Bradburd (1990).

¹⁵ See R. Tapper (1979a) and below on the ambiguity between *tira* (tribal section, political-administrative grouping under an elder), *göbäk* (patrilineage), and *jama'at* (community, congregation) among Shahsevan nomads; and see N. and R. Tapper (1982) on the ambiguities of *qoum* (family, nation, endogamous group), *wolus* (political community), *aulad* (patrilineage), and *tayfa* (local tribal section) among the Durrani in Afghanistan. See also van Bruinessen's discussion (1978: 52–3) of Leach's and Barth's difficulties with the terms *ashiret*, *tira* and *tayfa* among the Kurds of Iraq.

¹⁶ These issues are discussed further in R. Tapper (1983b, 1988a, 1991a). Beck, writing of the Qashqa'i, defines tribe, subtribes and confederacies functionally (1986: 14–15, 174f.), and does not consider indigenous (Turki, Persian) terminology as analytically significant, noting just that the ambiguity and interchangeability in usage of *tireh*, *tayefeh*, *il* add to the confusion in tribal lists (1986: 178). In his important history of the Aq-Qoyunlu, Woods (1976) does not make analytical use of the notion of tribe, but concentrates on the structure of dominant tribal groups in fifteenth-century Anatolia and Iran: composite political confederacies of nomadic 'clans', with a dynastic paramount 'clan'.

That said and understood, I shall continue in this book to use ‘tribe’ as a convenient translation for the Shahsevan term *taifa*, as it is most often used, without expecting it necessarily to correspond with ‘tribe’ in any other cultural context. Below, indeed, I shall examine some of the ways in which the ‘tribal organization’ of the Shahsevan differs from that of others in Iran.

The tribes of Iran: classifications and comparisons

Sources for the history of tribes in Iran are mostly written from a distance by outsiders viewing the tribes with hostility or some other bias. They usually concern such matters as taxation, military levies, disturbances and measures taken to quell them, and more or less inaccurate lists of major tribal groups, numbers and leaders. They rarely deal specifically or in reliable detail with the basic social and economic organization of tribal communities; and they mention individual tribes only when prominent in supporting or opposing government, when involved in inter-tribal disorders, or when transported from one region to another.

For example, we still have only the vaguest notions of tribal economics in pre-modern times: what the relations of production were and how they have changed; who controlled land and how access was acquired; what proportion of producers controlled their own production; how many were tenants or dependants of wealthier tribesmen or city-based merchants; and whether control of production was exercised directly or through taxation or price-fixing. The sparse information in the sources must be supplemented and interpreted by tentative and possibly misleading extrapolations from recent ethnographic studies. Despite the recent shift of perspective from that of the state to that of minorities, the nature of the sources has continued to dictate a history of politics and dynasties, of the political interaction of the state with powerful chiefs and tribal confederacies. Tribal economic and social history remains nearly as obscure, and the tribespeople as faceless and voiceless, as before.¹⁷

In Iran, the ‘tribes’ (*ilat va ‘ashayer*) were generally assumed to be pastoral nomads, and in addition were strongly associated with powerful leaders, who at points in the past rivalled – and on occasion overthrew and replaced – the rulers of the state. At the same time, Iran has perhaps a longer history than elsewhere of governments creating ‘tribes’ where none existed previously, and appointing ‘chiefs’ from among either local notables or complete outsiders, in order to administer rural populations

¹⁷ This is regrettably true of almost all the pioneering historical work relevant to the tribes by Minorsky, Petrushevskiy, Lambton, Lockhart, Aubin, Dickson, Savory, Hambly, Oberling, Perry, Atkin, Gilbar, Abrahamian, Arjomand, Floor (see Bibliography).