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W. Robertson Smith
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CHAPTER I.

THE THEORY OF THE GENEALOGISTS AS TO THE ORIGIN OF ARABIC TRIBAL GROUPS.

AT the time when Mohammed announced his prophetic mission, and so gave the first impulse to that great movement which in a few years changed the whole face of Arabian society, the Arabs throughout the peninsula formed a multitude of local groups, held together within themselves not by any elaborate political organisation but by a traditional sentiment of unity, which they believed or feigned to be a unity of blood, and by the recognition and exercise of certain mutual obligations and social duties and rights, which united all the members of the same group to one another as against all other groups and their members.

The way of life of these groups was various; some were pastoral and nomadic, others were engaged in agriculture and settled in villages or towns, and in some towns again, as in Mecca and Tâif, a chief

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[More information](#)

occupation of the citizens was trade. This of course implies that some communities were much more advanced in civilisation than others: the difference between a wild Bedouin and a rich merchant of Mecca was perhaps nearly as great then as it is now. And with this there went also considerable variety of law and social custom; thus the Traditions of the Prophet and the commentators on the Coran often refer to diversities of *'āda*, that is of traditional usage having the force of law, as giving rise to discussion between the Meccans who followed Mohammed to Medina and the old inhabitants of that town. But all through the peninsula the type of society was the same, the social and political unit was the group already spoken of.

This is not to be taken as meaning that there was no such thing as a combination of several groups into a larger whole; but such larger combinations were comparatively unstable and easily resolved again into their elements. In the greater towns, for example, several groups might live together in a sort of close alliance, but each group or clan had its own quarter, its little fortalices, its own leaders and its particular interests. The group-bond was stronger than the bond of citizenship, and feuds between group and group often divided a town against itself. So too among the nomadic Arabs we find that a certain number of groups might form a confederation presenting the semblance of something like a nation;

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but the tendency of each group to stand by its own members in every quarrel was fatal to the permanence of such unions. This was the case not only where the confederation rested on a treaty (*casâma*) and was limited in scope by the nature of the contract, but also where neighbouring and allied groups regarded themselves as brothers, united by a bond of blood. In such cases indeed quarrels were not willingly pushed to an open rupture; the cooler and wiser heads on both sides were willing to strain a point to keep the peace; but if the principals in the quarrel proved intractable the outbreak of open hostilities between their respective groups was usually a mere question of time. And then all other considerations disappeared before the paramount obligation that lay on every family to stand by its own people, that is by its own ultimate group.

It is the constitution of these ultimate groups, out of which all larger unions were built up, and into which these constantly tended to resolve themselves again, which must form the starting-point of the present enquiry.

According to the theory of the Arab genealogists the groups were all patriarchal tribes, formed, by subdivision of an original stock, on the system of kinship through male descents. A tribe was but a larger family; the tribal name was the name or nickname of the common ancestor. In process of time it broke up into two or more tribes, each em-

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bracing the descendants of one of the great ancestor's sons and taking its name from him. These tribes were again divided and subdivided on the same principle, and so at length that extreme state of division was reached which we find in the peninsula at the time of the prophet. Between a nation, a tribe, a sept or sub-tribe and a family there is no difference, on this theory, except in size and distance from the common ancestor. As time rolls on the sons of a household become heads of separate families, the families grow into septs, and finally the septs become great tribes or even nations embracing several tribes.

It is proper to observe here that in the earliest times of which we have cognisance the ultimate kindred group, which in the last resort acted together against all other groups, was never a single family or homestead (*dār*), and that the group-bond was, for its own purposes, stronger than the family or household bond. Thus if a man was guilty of homicide within his own group, the act was murder and his nearest relatives did not attempt to protect him from the consequences, but the whole group usually stood by a manslayer who had killed an outsider, even though the slain was of a brother group. In such a case they might recognise that some atonement was necessary, but they interested themselves to make for their kinsman the best terms they could. This observation, it will readily be seen, does not square well with the theory that the kindred group is only the family

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grown large ; at all events if we accept the theory it appears necessary to supplement it by an explanation of the reason why the blood-bond creates absolute obligations between all the families which form a single group, and only very modified obligations towards children of the common ancestor beyond this limit. On the theory one would expect to find that the family was the real social unit, beyond which the feeling of kinship obligation was never quite absolute, but grew continuously weaker as the degree of kinship was more remote ; whereas we actually find a certain group of families within which kinship obligations are absolute and independent of degrees of cousinship, while beyond this group kinship obligations suddenly become vague. But this is a point on which the genealogists have nothing to say ; they content themselves with offering a scheme of the subdivision of patriarchal tribes by which all Arabs who possess a *nisba* or gentile name can trace back their genealogy to one of two ultimate stocks, the Yemenite or S. Arab stock, whose great ancestor is Caḥṭân, and the Ishmaelite or N. Arab stock, whose ancestor is 'Adnân, a descendant of Abraham through Ishmael. The latter stock bears also indifferently the names of Ma'add or Nizâr, the former being represented as the son and the latter as the grandson of 'Adnân⁽¹⁾.

The elaboration of this genealogical scheme falls mainly within the first century of the Flight—though

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it was hardly completed so early—and is probably connected (as Sprenger has pointed out in his *Life of Mohammed*) with the system of registers introduced by the Caliph ‘Omar I. for the control of the pensions and pay distributed among believers from the spoil of the infidel. The pension system, as Sprenger has explained at length, afforded a direct stimulus to genealogical research, and also, it must be added, to genealogical fiction; while the vast registers connected with it afforded the genealogists an opportunity, which certainly never existed before, to embrace in one scheme the relations of a great circle of Arab kindreds. At the same time, in consequence of the victories of Islam many tribes, or at least large sections of them, migrated to distant lands, where they received estates or were settled in military colonies and frontier stations. The military organisation closely followed the old tribal grouping; the feuds of the desert were transplanted to Syria and ‘Irâc, to Spain and Khorâsân, and in all the numerous factions and civil wars that rent the old Arab empire tribal alliances and kinship played a conspicuous part. Every ambitious chief therefore was anxious to include as wide a kinship as possible among his dependents and allies, while a weak group found it advantageous to discover some bond of connection with a stronger neighbour. As the old groups were, in the various provinces, shuffled through each other in very various combinations, it

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plainly became an object of interest to reduce to system the relationships of all the Arab tribes. From time immemorial the population of Arabia had been divided into two great races—the same which the genealogists refer to Caḥṭân and ‘Adnân respectively. In all parts of the empire these two races maintained their ancestral traditions of bitter and persistent feud, and this race-antagonism was a dominating feature in the whole stormy politics of the Omayyad dynasty. In such circumstances the task of the genealogists, who undertook to trace out and reduce to system all the links of kindred connecting the tribes of ‘Adnân and Caḥṭân respectively, had a very practical interest; the questions involved were not mere matters of archaeological curiosity, but had a direct bearing on the political combinations of the time. Scientific impartiality therefore was not to be looked for; even if the genealogist himself was an incorruptible judge—and hardly any Oriental is so—he was certain to have much spurious evidence laid before him.

An example will make this clear, and at the same time shew how uncertain is even the main structure of the genealogical tree. In the form of the genealogies which ultimately prevailed, ‘Adnân, Nizâr, Ma‘add, Ishmaelite Arabs are identical terms and embrace one great nation. All other Arabs are Yemenites or sons of Caḥṭân, and these again, if we neglect the remote tribes of Ḥadramaut, may be

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taken as forming two main groups, (a) the tribes of Kahlân and (b) the tribes known under the common name of Coḏâ'a, which are traced to Caḥṭân through Ḥimyar, the eponym of the race whom the Greeks and Latins call Homerites. At first sight all this seems to be quite correct and to correspond with the historical fact that under the Omayyads there was a great and enduring hatred between the Caisites, a branch of Nizâr or Ma'add, and the Kalbites, a branch of Coḏâ'a; the feud of Caisites and Kalbites seems to be simply a local form of the feud of Yemen and Ma'add. But when we turn to the *Aghânî* vii. 77 *sq.* we find that "the genealogists are at variance as to Coḏâ'a, some maintaining him to be a son of Ma'add and brother of Nizâr, while others make him to be Himyarite." The evidence on each side consists of verses in which Coḏâ'a is referred to Ma'add or to Ḥimyar respectively. The later singers of Coḏâ'a maintained the Himyarite genealogy and made a number of verses to support it; but this, says Moarrij (a noted scholar who died A.H. 195), dates only from the last days of the Omayyads, and all older poets before and after Islam refer Coḏâ'a to Ma'add. And accordingly the *Aghânî* shews that the famous Codaite poet Jamîl, of the tribe of Sa'd Hodhaim (died A.H. 82), repeatedly speaks of his race as Maaddite.

It appears then that in this case the genealogy that ultimately prevailed was based on a deliberate

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falsification of old tradition. The motive is explained by the noted genealogist Abū Ja'far Mohammed ibn Ḥabīb (died A.H. 245), quoted in the *Tāj* v. 461: "Codā'a was always known as Maaddite till the feud between Kalb and Cais-'Ailan arose in Syria in the days of Merwān ibn Al-Ḥakam; then the Kalbites inclined to the Yemenites and claimed kin with Ḥimyar to get their help the more readily against Cais." In point of fact, at the battle of Marj Rāhit (A.H. 64) Merwān's party included besides the Kalbites the Kahlanite tribes of Ghassān, Sakūn and Sakāsik⁽²⁾.

What was done on a large scale in the case of Codā'a was doubtless done on a smaller scale in other cases. Indeed Hamdānī tells us that he found it to be the regular practice of obscure desert groups to call themselves by the name of some more famous tribe (*Jazīrat* p. 90). But for our purpose the point to be noticed is that it still was possible in the later days of the Omayyads to make a radical change in the pedigree of great tribes like the Kalb and other Codā'a. For this shews that the whole system of pedigrees was still in a state of flux, at least as regarded its remoter members and the connections between distant tribes. The Northern Arabs called themselves Maaddites even before the time of the prophet; but if this term had then conveyed the definite genealogical conceptions that went with it in later times, it would not have been possible to transfer

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a series of great tribes from Ma'add to Ḥimyar. Undoubtedly the genealogists found in oral tradition and official registers a large mass of sound information as to the old affinities and subdivisions of tribes, but this material was not sufficient for their task; it was fragmentary in character and its range was limited by the notorious shortness of the historical memory of the Arabs. To make a complete system out of such materials it was necessary to have constant recourse to conjecture, to force a genealogical interpretation on data of the most various kinds, and above all to treat modern political combinations as the expression of ancient bonds of kinship. The backbone of the system was the pedigree of the prophet—itself one of the most obviously untrustworthy parts of the whole scheme—and round this all the other Northern Arabs were grouped on the principle that every connection, real or imaginary, between two tribes was to be explained by deriving them from a common ancestor, who in turn was brought into the prophet's *stemma* as brother or cousin of some ascendant of Mohammed. To link all known tribal and gentile names together in this way, and at the same time make the lines connecting historical contemporaries with the common father tolerably equal in length, it was necessary to insert a number of "dummy" ancestors. These were got by doubling known names or using personal names of no tribal significance. The places in which the imagi-