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Magritte on the Bedouins:
Ce n'est pas une société segmentaire

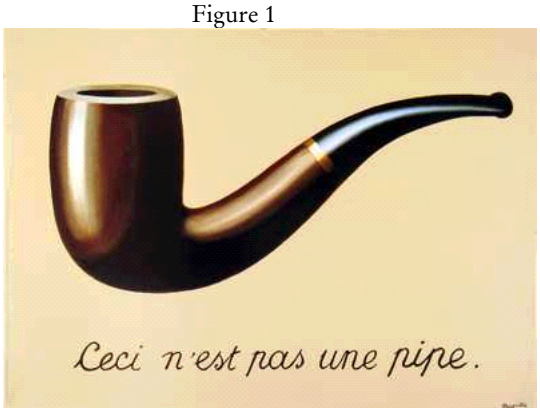
Michael E. Meeker

1. Segmentation and Representation

What is a segmentary society? This question cannot be answered by citing the example of a specific people, the Nuer, the northern Somalis, the Cyrenaican Bedouins, the Pakhtuns, or the Tallensi. It is a theoretical question that presupposes the possibility of formulating a pattern of thinking and acting. Theories of a segmentary society propose models for the formation and interaction of groupings in society. These models have the standing of ideal types.[1] They lack exact empirical referents. Segmentary theories do not perfectly account for political processes among any people on any occasion.

The example of a modern painting touches on the problem inherent in the relationship of theoretical models and their empirical referents. Consider one of the works of René Magritte (Fig. 1):

Figure 1

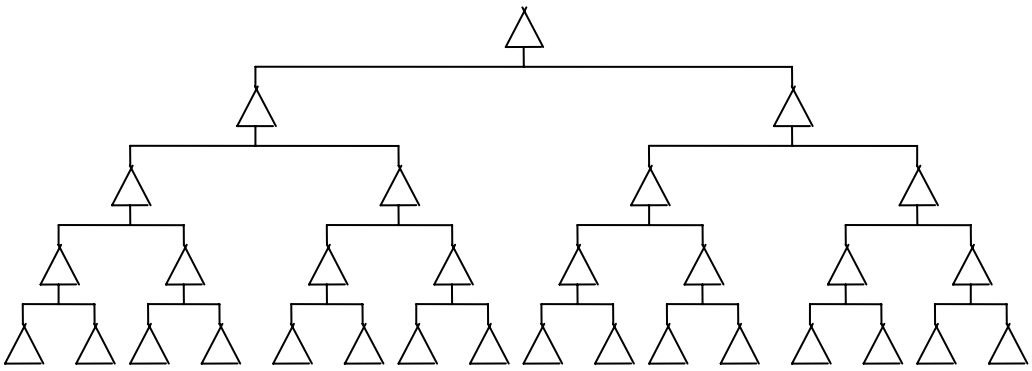


[1] See Talcott Parson's remarks on Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, 71, 98, 200.

The text beneath the figure stimulates our awareness of representation as problematic. Simply put, the painting reminds us that the figure of the pipe is not the pipe itself. However, the quality of the figure, its realistic portrayal of the object, enhances the subversive effect of this reminder.[2] This picture of a pipe which is so much like a pipe appeals to our desire to forget the difference between sign and referent, while the text abruptly reminds us that our desire suppresses this difference. Such a lesson is a useful starting point for a review of anthropological theories of a segmentary society.

Almost all theories of a segmentary society include diagrams of genealogies representing lineages. These diagrams are used to illustrate the process of male groups combining and dividing in the course of conflicts and disputes. I will cite examples of such theories later in the paper. For the moment, let us begin with a kind of parody of these anthropological illustrations:

Figure 2



Ceci n'est pas une société segmentaire

The drawing in Figure 2 is a sign that conjures up a referent. The text beneath the drawing breaks this spell: "*Ceci n'est pas une société segmentaire*". We should keep in mind that models of a segmentary society are figures, not empirical descriptions of political processes. But going further, we should also keep in mind that the figures are vehicles of a desire that would suppress an awareness of the difference between model and world.

[2] See Foucault's comments on this painting, *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*.

Once this last issue is recognized, the question of theories of a segmentary society changes. Why were anthropologists so fascinated with models of political segmentation, if they were not strictly true? There is a simple answer to this question. Tribesmen were fascinated with models of political segmentation. So why then were tribesmen so fascinated with models of political segmentation, if they were not strictly true? The answer to this question is in no way a simple one. It raises the issue of representations as desire rather than description.

2. W. Robertson Smith and the Arab Genealogists

So far as I am aware, W. Robertson Smith is the first modern scholar to identify and describe a segmentary political system.[3] This occurs in the opening passages of *Kinship and Marriage in Early Arabia* (1885) where he cites an indigenous account of tribal society in pre-Islamic Arabia:

"According to the theory of the Arab genealogists the [groupings of Arabian society] 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 the process of time it broke up into two or more tribes, each embracing 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."[4]

Smith cites the Arab genealogists only to reject their views as fictions. He believed that the political structure of the tribes of Arabia during the pre-Islamic period was even less developed and more primitive than a

[3] Dresch notes that Smith was himself indebted to both Arab and German scholarship on genealogies among the ancient Arabians, "Segmentation", 53. Smith's *Kinship and Marriage* may have influenced Durkheim and Mauss' account of segmentation among the Australian Aborigines in *Primitive Classification*. See Beidelman on this question, "Review of Smith". Smith's *Kinship and Marriage* most certainly influenced Evans-Pritchard's *The Nuer* and *The Sanusi*. Dresch cites both Beidelman and Evans-Pritchard to this effect, "Segmentation", 52–55.

[4] Smith, *Kinship and Marriage*, 4.

segmentary society. He insisted on the overwhelming importance of the vengeance grouping (*hayy*), which he described as "the ultimate kindred group". By comparison, all other groupings, both the households within the *hayy* as well as the lineages beyond the *hayy*, were fleeting and temporary, and so, of little importance. He dismissed the Arab genealogists' account of a segmentary society as a literate ideology that served the purposes of a nascent state system. Caliph Omar I had introduced registers for the control of pensions. The Arab genealogists, working in the manner of bureaucrats, had deployed a patriarchal principle in order to rationalize the distribution of the spoils of imperial conquest.

By the 1930s, French and British ethnographers had determined that genealogical traditions representing lineages segments were to be found among many stateless peoples in the pastoral zones of Central Asia, the Middle East and Africa. Moreover, these peoples commonly viewed their genealogies and lineages as the basis of a political system. Genealogical traditions representing lineages segments were more ancient, more vernacular, more cherished, and more widespread than Smith had supposed.

Anthropologists therefore began to re-consider the question that Smith had addressed in *Kinship and Marriage*. Are genealogical traditions representing lineage segments an accurate description of a political system? Or are they little more than fictions? By and large, the response to these questions drifted toward a consensus. Many stateless peoples do have a segmentary political system, but genealogical traditions representing lineage segments do not accurately describe this segmentary political system. The ethnographic work of E. E. Evans-Pritchard is a case in point.

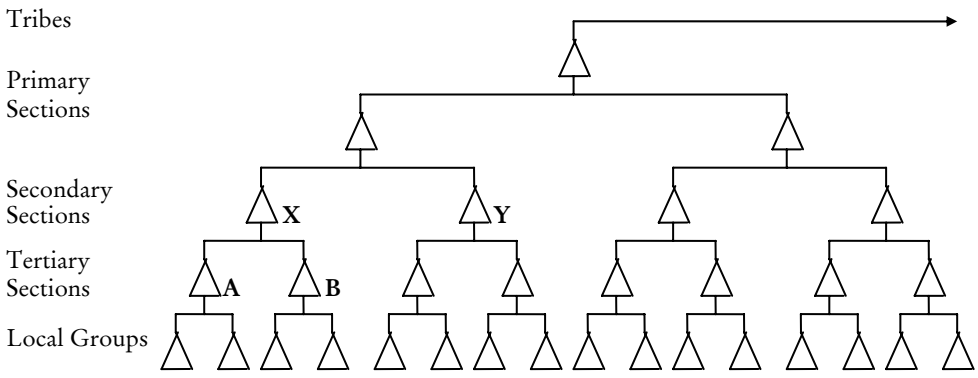
3. E. E. Evans-Pritchard: The Classical Theory

Evans-Pritchard was perhaps the first anthropologist to undertake a systematic study of the role of genealogies and lineages in order to develop an empircally based theory of a segmentary political system. In *The Nuer* (1940), he examines the political institutions of a pastoral people without centralized government. As he explains, the Nuer did not suffer from the anarchy of a Hobbesian state of nature. Instead, segmentary political institutions were the basis of a minimal but sufficient degree of stability and order.

Evans-Pritchard reached this conclusion by the following kind of argument. Segmentary political institutions provide that any conflict leads to a balanced opposition of two groupings. A small group always confronts a small group. A large group always confronts a large group. Since the two opposed groups are of comparable numbers and hence comparable force, they are obliged to negotiate their differences and make peace. This task is facilitated by outsiders to the tribal system who are ready and anxious to serve as neutral mediators. The mobilization of fighting groups is therefore the first move in a sequence of events that leads toward negotiation and settlement.

Evans-Pritchard cited the Nuer genealogies and lineages in order to explain the workings of the Nuer segmentary political system. A patrilineal genealogy defines a nested framework of lineage segments (see Fig. 3). When political conflicts occur, a pair of opposed lineage segments confront one another, but the specific lineage segments involved are relative to the conflict in question. The members of two lineage segments, A and B, might confront one another on the occasion of a conflict between their members. On the occasion of another conflict, however, their members might join together as lineage segment X to confront lineage segment Y.

Figure 3



The theory of a segmentary political system: Tertiary sections A and B might oppose one another on one occasion, then join together as a secondary section X to oppose secondary section Y on another occasion.

Interestingly, Evans-Pritchard did not see Nuer genealogies and lineages as the primary cause of their segmentary political system. Rather, political segmentation was a structural consequence of the circumstances of a primitive subsistence economy combined with the absence of an overarching centralized government. Furthermore, Evans-Pritchard did not even accept that Nuer genealogies and lineages accurately described the processes of their segmentary political system. The exact pattern of political segmentation was determined by material circumstances, such as the physical distance separating local groups and the frequency of everyday social interaction among local groups. In the final analysis, Nuer genealogies and lineages were but an abstract map of the political interactions of actual territorial groupings of mixed social composition. The genealogies and lineages illustrated the segmentary form of the fusion and fission of local groups, but they neither directly determined nor accurately described the actual political process of fusion and fission. In other words, Evans-Pritchard insisted on a difference between Nuer representations and Nuer interactions. He regarded the former as a fictional version of the latter. With regard to Fig. 3, he would have said in Magrittean French, "*Ce n'est pas la société segmentaire, mais il y a une société segmentaire*".

During the same year that his ethnographic study appeared, Evans-Pritchard joined with Meyer Fortes to generalize his theory of segmentary political institutions. In the introduction to *African Political Systems* (1940), they distinguished two broad types of political systems in Africa. There were societies with primitive state systems that featured the rudiments of centralized authority, administrative machinery, and judicial institutions. These societies were characterized by "sharp differences in rank, status, and wealth" (the Zulu, Ngwato, the Bemba, the Banyankole and the Kede). In contrast, there were other stateless societies where minimal governmental functions were fulfilled by segmentary political institutions. Among these peoples, genealogies and lineages were attributed a greater political significance, and social relations were more egalitarian than hierarchical (the Logoli, the Tallensi, and the Nuer).

Evans-Pritchard and Fortes had developed a theory of segmentary society and used it to describe the political systems of stateless peoples. In the remainder of this paper, I shall refer to it as the "classical theory".

4. Degeneration of the Classical Theory

In *The Sanusi of Cyrenaica*, Evans-Pritchard brought the modern discussion of segmentary political institutions back to its starting point: the place of genealogies and lineages among tribal Arabic-speaking peoples. In Chap. II, "The Bedouin of Cyrenaica", he describes a segmentary political system as a reality, not a fiction, flatly contradicting Smith:

"The tribal system, typical of segmentary structures everywhere, is a system of balanced opposition between tribes and tribal sections from the largest to the smallest divisions, and there cannot therefore be any single authority in a tribe. Authority is distributed at every point of the tribal structure and political leadership is limited to situations in which a tribe or a segment of it acts corporately."[5]

In contrast with Evans-Pritchard's earlier studies, *The Sanusi of Cyrenaica* was primarily history and only secondarily ethnography.[6] His description of the segmentary political system of the Cyrenaican Bedouins therefore lacks theoretical ethnographic explanations and examples. On the other hand, the brevity of the description – it consists of little more than three pages and two diagrams – indicates that the classical theory no longer required the support of either argument or evidence. The concepts of political segmentation and balanced opposition were understood and accepted. The logical implications of these concepts – that chiefly authority is distributed by lineage – could be simply asserted. That is to say, the classical theory was on the way to becoming a literate ideology of modern anthropology.

During the 1950s, the classical theory did indeed assume the status of dogma. Even the subtleties of the original analysis – the difference between segmentary representations and segmentary processes – slipped into the background. Anthropologists began to discuss genealogies and lineages as though they literally represented the actual groupings and processes of a segmentary political system. Anthropologists began to presume that any society with unlineal descent groups, whether matrilineal and patrilineal, had some kind of a segmentary political system.[7]

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5 Evans-Pritchard, *The Sanusi*, 59.

6 He was drawing on his experience as a government administrator in the Cyrenaica district of Libya.

7 Lewis noted some of these excesses, "Problems in the Comparative Study". He reviews the usefulness of a segmentary lineage model as a universal model. He questions whether such a

At the time, the search for a stateless segmentary society seems to have held a fascination for anthropologists. Such a society would demonstrate that social equality and political order were possible without a state system. Hobbes was wrong. Rulers, courts, and police were artificial additions to a state of nature that consisted of an "ordered anarchy" not a war of all against all. These were appealing ideas for anyone of a Rousseauist or Bakunian inclination, and such dispositions were not uncommon during the 1960s. Toward the end of that decade, however, an ethnographer mounted a devastating attack on the classical theory, both its original formulation as well as its degenerate receptions.

5. Emrys Peters: The Collapse of Classical Theory

Emrys Peters could be described as a priest of the church of the classical theory. During the 1940s, he was a student of Evans-Pritchard at the University of Oxford. Toward the end of that decade, he carried out field work among the Bedouins of Cyrenaica with the express intention of elaborating the classical theory. In 1959, he published an influential article that sought to resolve a technical question raised by the classical theory.[8] In 1967, however, this defender of the faith announced his apostasy:

"... the lineage model neither covers several important areas of social relationships nor enables an accurate prediction of events to be made.... For sociological purposes, this means that the lineage model, with all its theoretical presuppositions, must perforce be abandoned."[9]

To make matters worse, this disavowal came in the company of a *tour de force* of ethnographic demonstration.

Peters began his attack by examining the Bedouin view of genealogies and lineages. The Bedouins did see themselves as a segmentary society. They did explain their genealogical traditions in terms of the fusion and fission of lineage segments. Peters referred to a diagram to summarize Bedouin commentary (see Fig. 4). According to the Bedouins, tribes made

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model applies both to matrilineal and patrilineal descent systems. He questions whether genealogies and lineages always have the same meaning in different societies.

8 Peters explained how the generational depth of the tribal genealogies remained the same through time even though human reproduction implied that their generational depth should increase, "The Proliferation of Segments". Note that the theory of the Arab genealogists, as cited by Smith, assumed that the genealogies, and so the structure of the tribes, did deepen as generation followed upon generation.

9 Peters, "Some Structural Aspects", 261.

war against one another. Primary sections raided one another. Secondary sections feuded with one another. Tertiary sections exchanged blood money or exacted vengeance on one another.

Figure 4

Tribes	----------	War
Primary Sections	----------	Raiding
Secondary Sections	----------	Feud
Tertiary Sections	----------	Blood Money or Vengeance

Peters' diagram of Bedouin explanations of the interactions of lineage segments (Peters 1967).

Peters pointed out that the Bedouins were able to back up their explanations of lineage fusion and fission by citing instances of each type of interaction. They cited specific occurrences of wars between tribes, raiding between primary sections, feuds between secondary sections, and blood money and vengeance between tertiary sections. And yet, Peters insisted, these Bedouin explanations had to be considered a political ideology rather than a political reality:

"The [lineage] model, nevertheless, can only be a representation of what a particular people, the Bedouin, conceive of their social reality to be; it is a kind of ideology which enables them ... to understand their field of social relations, and to give particular relationships their *raison d'être*. But ... it would be a serious error to mistake such a folk model for sociological analysis. Such an error is difficult to avoid because the Bedouin ... are able to cite enough *bits and pieces of reality* to make their argument convincing. The flaw in [their] reasoning is seen when it can be shown that its consequences are absurd."[10] [my italics]

Peters proceeded to demonstrate the practical impossibility of both the Bedouin model of lineage fusion and fission *and* the classical theory of balanced opposition. Both were incompatible with the everyday circum-

[10] *Ibid*., 270.

stances of camel-herding pastoral nomadism. This suggested that the classical theory had in fact arisen from indigenous polemics that appealed to "bits and pieces of reality", even though the classical theory claimed to describe the empirical formation and interaction of political groupings.

Peters devoted the remainder of his article to a demonstration of the *marginal* significance of the Bedouin model of lineage fusion and fission. He pointed out that genealogies and lineages referred to a limited domain of Bedouin thinking and practice while most aspects of their social and political relations could be said to lay outside this limited domain. Indeed, the Bedouin model of lineage fusion and fission was inconsistent with the general character of affinal relationships, matrilateral ties, political authority, demographic variability, market centers, trade routes, petroleum development, state intervention, foreign occupation, world war, etc. Once the complexities of everyday life and the currents of world history were introduced into an account of Bedouin society and politics, the abstractness and impracticality of segmentary political representations were apparent.

Peters concluded by criticizing the way in which anthropologists had elevated segmentary representations (genealogies and lineages) into a dogma:

"The Bedouin conception of their social relationships in terms of a genealogical ordering of groups is a fact of their social life, and in relation to some problems it is an important fact. My objection to the use which has been made of a people's ideology of their relationships is that it has been elevated from its status as component of social life to such a position of universal dominance in all sets of social relations that 'every sociological problem' ... 'hinges on the lineage system'."[11]

This quote could be succinctly translated into Magritte's French as follows: "*Il y a des représentations segmentaires, mail il n'y a pas une société segmentaire*". So translated, Peter's conclusion can be seen to revive a problem that the classical theory had sought to resolve.

[11] *Ibid*., 279. The phrase in single quotes is a citation of Fortes, *The Dynamics of Clanship*. Interestingly, Peters chose not to criticize Evans-Pritchard's work on the Nuer or the Bedouins even though *The Nuer* and *The Sanusi* are cited in his bibliography.

6. The Politics of tribalism

Evans-Pritchard had explained genealogies and lineages as imperfect indigenous representations of an empirical pattern of social and political relationships. Peters had devastated this explanation by demonstrating that genealogies and lineages were inconsistent with the empirical pattern of social and political relationships. So why were the Bedouins so attached to genealogies and lineages?

Anthropologists were not alone in exaggerating the importance of segmentary representations. They had been aided and abetted by their Bedouin informants. As Peters pointed out, the Bedouins believed in their genealogies and lineages to the point of justifying them by specious arguments and evidence. When the Bedouins were thinking about genealogies and lineages, that is to say, they were thinking in terms of a reductive and totalizing ideology that blotted out the complexities of their social and political life.[12] In the course of distancing himself from the lineage model, Peters had demonstrated that segmentary representations were beliefs and passions that came to life *on certain occasions*. What can be said about these beliefs and passions as an aspect of the Bedouin way of life?

Genealogies and lineages refer to a peculiar kind of politics since they describe a framework for the formation and opposition of political groupings. What kind of politics is this? Given the segmentary character of the formation and opposition, it is as a peculiar politics of friends and enemies. Among any group of friends there is always a group of enemies, and among any group of enemies there is always a group of friends.[13] This is indeed a distinctive politics that combines paranoia and benevolence in equal measures. Any friend can be an enemy, and any enemy can be a friend. It would be useful to give this politics a name, and a name is readily available. Such a politics of friends and enemies is appropriately called "tribalism".

Now, a name is oftentimes a way of essentializing the qualities of a people. In choosing the name "tribalism", however, I intend to identify a marginal, not an essential, Bedouin quality. As Peters demonstrated in his

[12] Peters does not insist on the point. Perhaps he found his Bedouin informants less bloody minded than his anthropological colleagues.

[13] Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, argued for a concept of politics as a matter of friends and enemies in the context of European nationalism. This parallel between European and Bedouin thinking suggests that a politics of friends and enemies is an outlook that can grow or shrink, in any society, ranging from tribes to nations.

critique of the classical theory, the Cyrenaican Bedouin were only sometimes preoccupied with genealogies and lineages. So the name "tribalism" refers to one kind of political orientation for which the Bedouins of North Arabia had a certain propensity. And this political orientation can be contrasted with other kinds, such as dynasticism, Islamism, or nationalism, in which the Bedouins of North Arabia had been implicated at certain times and in certain places.[14] On the other hand, mounted camel-herding nomadism was strongly correlated with a politics of tribalism, which is another way of saying that camel-herding Bedouins were especially fascinated with and attached to genealogies representing lineages. And it is well-known fact that the great camel-herding tribes of the steppes of the Middle East and North Africa always had the potential to become the protagonists of a politics of tribalism. Indeed, their engagements with dynasticism, Islamism, or nationalism always carried with it the possibility of a reversion to tribalism.[15]

These remarks suggest that Peters' critique of the classical theory needs further elaboration. The classical theory had derived the political systems of stateless peoples from constraints of geography, climate, and pastoralism. In effect, the classical theory tended to remove them from history in order to better situate them in nature.[16] But the Bedouins were neither savages nor innocents. As the protagonists of a certain kind of politics, they were a people in and of history.

A few representatives of what we now call European Orientalism had seen the Bedouins in such terms during the decades before the emergence of social anthropology. Accordingly, their studies include both citations and descriptions of Bedouin convictions and sensibilities. Alois Musil's *Manners and Customs of the Rwala Bedouin* is one of the most important

[14] *The American Heritage Dictionary*, Boston 1992, defines tribalism as "2. A strong feeling of identity with and loyalty to one's tribe or group". This definition captures the importance of an individual's tie to a grouping even if entirely misses the issue of political segmentation. I considered "lineagism" and "segmentarism" as more fitting terms but discarded them as colorless neologisms.

[15] It is interesting that tribalism, dynasticism, Islamism, and nationalism are each linked with their own distinctive legal traditions in the contemporary Middle East and North Africa. For a view of contemporary Bedouins in Jordan in terms of such political alternatives, see Shryock, "Tribes and the Print Trade" and *Nationalism and the Genealogical Imagination*.

[16] This judgment is perhaps too extreme. Ibn Khaldun situated the Bedouin in nature, but he allowed for their entry into history, *The Muqaddimah*. This passage from nature to history occurred when a religious leader mobilized the tribes for conquest. Evans-Pritchard more or less follows this line of analysis in *The Sanusi*. He argues the Sanusi religious brotherhood provided the glue for mobilizing tribal sections against the Italians.

of these works. Peters' disavowal of the classical theory lent a new importance to this remarkable account of one of the great Bedouin tribes of North Arabia.

7. Alois Musil's Ethnography of the Rwala Bedouins

Manners and Customs resembles other descriptive ethnographies of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.[17] It lacks any theory or methodology. There is no development of an argument in relationship to a selected body of evidence. Rather it consists of a massive amount of information organized by topic in the fashion of an encyclopedia rather than a monograph. It includes lists and sketches pertaining to everyday life, social customs, worldview, and material culture, but also little treatises consisting of personal biographies of tribal leaders, accounts of inter-tribal conflict and warfare, and little histories of relationship of the tribes and states. But in one respect, *Manners and Customs* is exceptional as a descriptive ethnography. Musil consistently cites Bedouin poetry and narrative to illustrate his ethnographic descriptions. And in many places, he comments on the rules governing narrative and poetic composition, the relationships of narrative and poetic genres, as well as the social context of narrative and poetic recitations. In other words, he provides the outline of an ethnography of Bedouin speech forms.

Manners and Customs is arguably the most detailed account of the mounted camel-herding way of life in North Arabia that will ever be written. Musil had visited the camps of the Rwala Bedouins during the first years of the twentieth century. During the years following the Great War, the great Bedouin tribes of North Arabia gradually lost their political independence and abandoned mounted camel-herding nomadism. By the 1930s, it would have been impossible to duplicate his ethnographic investigations since so much of what he had seen and heard had vanished altogether. Ethnographers might still today recover collective memories and material objects of mounted camel-herding nomadism. They would have otherwise been unable to record the actual thoughts and actions of these peoples in the context of their pastoral way of life. In this last respect,

[17] Musil's observations on the Bedouins of North Arabia also appear in some of his other publications. See Musil, *Arabia Petraea*; *id*., *Arabia Deserta*, *id*., *Northern Negd*; *id*., *Manners and Customs of the Rwala Bedouins*.

Musil's citations of poetry and narrative is a unique record of the epoch of mounted camel-herding nomadism.[18]

During the 1970s, I became interested in Musil's work on Bedouin poetry and narrative as a way of putting contemporary ethnographic practice to a test. At the time, many social and cultural anthropologists in Great Britain and the United States devoted little attention to the speaking subject. The only voice that appeared in most ethnographies was the voice of the ethnographer.[19] One could reasonably suspect that most anthropological theories of social and cultural systems of the day depended on the suppression of indigenous verbal commentary. I saw Musil's work as a way of weighing the consequences of the omission of verbal material.[20]

Like the Cyrenaican Bedouin, the Rwala Bedouin had genealogical traditions and lineage segments. They cited them in a reductive and totalizing manner.[21] Nonetheless, Musil directed his attention to their stories and poems, which were reflective rather than dogmatic in character. What were the implications of the omission of this kind of verbal evidence from the classical theory of political segmentation? Would the stories and poems reveal more about the genealogies and lineages as marginal Bedouin beliefs? In the paragraphs that follow, I summarize my response to these questions in *Literature and Violence in North Arabia*.[22]

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[18] Musil's addition of poetry and narrative to ethnographic description is rare but not unique. See also Granqvist, *Marriage Conditions*, which is also more in the tradition of European Orientalism than social anthropology (if I may be permitted such a distinction).

[19] This generalization applies, for example, to Evans-Pritchard's elaboration of the classical theory in *The Nuer* and *The Sanusi of Cyrenaica*. At least one member of the first generation of social anthropologists did cite substantial amounts of verbal evidence. See Fortune's *Sorcerers of Dobu* and *Manus Religion*, brilliant ethnographies which had come to be regarded as eccentric. No doubt, there are other examples of earlier social anthropologists who documented and interpreted verbal material.

[20] This was my reception of the work of Lévi-Strauss on Amerindian mythologies, *La pensée sauvage* and *Le cru et le cuit*, which were belatedly appearing in English translation. Structuralism had brought representation into focus as an ethnographic object of analysis. And yet, structuralism was primarily concerned with mythology while Middle Eastern societies and cultures were historical in orientation. Accordingly, the Rwala stories and poems did not lend themselves to a conventional structuralist analysis. I eventually found a way around this problem after reading Derrida's *De la grammatologie*, in particular, the critique of Lévi-Strauss' "writing lesson", *Tristes Tropiques*.

[21] See Montagne, *La civilization*, for an account of genealogies and lineages in North Arabia.

[22] I do not review here the re-orientation of anthropological studies that took place during the 1980s. See, for example, Dresch's *Tribes, Government, and History*, a study of chiefs and tribes in North Yemen and Caton's "*Peaks of Yemen I summon*", an ethnography of speech forms in North Yemen. See also Caton, "Power, Persuasion", and Dresch "Segmentation", both of whom emphasize the importance of segmentation as a kind of political language.

Musil describes a peculiar cultural condition among the Rwala Bedouin of his day: a poverty of myth and ritual.[23] There were neither religious officiants nor religious ceremonies among the Rwala Bedouins during the first years of the twentieth century. Even the most basic *rites de passage*, birth, marriage, and death, were strikingly undeveloped if not explicitly suppressed. At the same time, Musil presented his readers with a large body of artifacts of another kind: enunciations of named individuals who spoke as participant observers reporting the course of specific incidents, in prose or poetry. One could therefore revise the claim that the Rwala lacked myths and rituals since these stories and poems could be said to stand in the place of otherwise absent myths and rituals.[24] And yet, this revision is not altogether acceptable. The enunciations of named individuals were believed or disbelieved with reference to practical knowledge and verifiable information. This means that stories and poems claimed the status of empirical description of what was said and done during the course of events. They therefore challenged the very idea of myth and ritual as forms of sacred speech and action that lie beyond present needs and constraints.

Musil tells us that certain enunciations – stories and poems of raiding and warfare – received a special degree of respect and interest. Raiding and warfare were common among the mounted camel-herding nomads, but their significance was more a matter of their consequences than their frequency. The outcome of raids and wars had a direct bearing on the fate of individuals and groupings. The consequence of such encounters might be wealth or poverty, domination or subjugation, glory or disgrace, life or death, and so on. Accordingly, the reciters of stories and poems of raiding and warfare pondered existential questions. They considered how individuals spoke and acted, effectively or ineffectively, in the setting of conflicts that threatened the well-being of tribal world.

Different stories and poems of raiding and warfare attributed a different significance to the same individual speech and action during the same course of events. That is to say, the Bedouins looked for existential meanings in the course of events but discovered uncertainty rather than certain-

[23] Musil also notes that the Bedouin had begun to be better Muslims with the approach of the political crises accompanying the Great War. See Meeker, *Literature and Violence*, 23–24, 105–107, citing Musil. They had begun to perform the prayers whereas they had never done so just a few years earlier. This is an instance of what I have described as the rise and fall of a politics of tribalism, dynasticism, Islamism, and nationalism.

[24] This last observation would be similar to saying that the human sciences, from biology to history, are our myths and rituals.

ty. Once the problematic character of Bedouin political experience is recognized, the significance of genealogical traditions and lineage segments is clarified. These artifacts of tribalism may have been invoked dogmatically, but they were nonetheless interpretive figures, even as they were presented as being descriptive and empirical.

8. The Political Economy of Figures of Political Segmentation

Consider once again Fig. 2. Perhaps, no ethnographer ever recorded precisely such a genealogy representing lineages, which is why I described it as a parody.[25] Still, the anthropological illustration is a distillation of a way of thinking. One could say then that the anthropological illustration indicates the elementary structure of a genealogy representing lineages.[26] No political association is possible without a named individual, but each named individual cannot appear except through a political association. At the same time, all political associations are both radically integrative and disintegrative. Every fighting super-group divides into fighting sub-groups just as all fighting sub-groups unite into fighting super-groups. This means that the identity of each named individual is both confirmed and threatened by politics since names both "appear" and "disappear" on the occasion of conflict. The outer limits of this problematic of associations and individuals are as follows:

1) At the highest level, the name of an ancestor/ ancestress represents the solidarity of all male tribesmen as political actors.[27]
2) At the lowest level, the names of each and every male tribesmen represents their independence as political actors.

The genealogy representing lineages is then a kind of *bricolage*.[28] It merges together contradictory values, associationalism and individualism, in such a way that they seem to be compatible rather than contradictory.

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[25] The names that appear in empirical genealogies are not always the names of individuals. The bifurcations in empirical genealogies are not always binary.

[26] Here, I am shifting from a classical Weberian to a classical Lévi-Straussian mode of analysis. The reference to an elementary structure is borrowed of course from Lévi-Strauss, *Structures élémentaires*. Otherwise, the argument is a slight revision of Meeker, *Literature and Violence*, Part IV.

[27] Peters observes that an ancestress at the apex of the genealogy of all the tribes of the Cyrenaican Bedouins. He explains that a mother is a stronger symbol of unity than a father since the latter could have two wives (hence two sets of descendants) but the former would have only one husband (hence only one set of descendants).

[28] I use the term in the sense of radical structuralism, see Lévi-Strauss, *La pensée sauvage*.

What are the circumstances and experiences that lie behind such a figure? Certain well-known features of mounted camel-herding nomadism in North Arabia provide an answer to this question.

Consider the following list of the contrary attributes of mounted camel-herding nomadism in North Arabia. A minus sign precedes those attributes that intensify an interest in independence (individualism). A plus sign precedes those attributes that intensify an interest in solidarity (associationalism).

(-) Independent group mobility: Mounted camel-herding nomadism involves the irregular movement of little communal groups far and wide over the landscape.

(+) Extended group contacts: Because little communal groups move more or less independently on their own, they come into contact with a range of other little communal groups.

(-) Camels as political instruments: Using camels as mounts, a small band of raiders can move scores of miles in less than a day. They are therefore able to strike at the little communal groups within an area of 5 to 10 thousand square kilometers. The Bedouin therefore have a strong individual interest in camel-raiding.

(+) Camels as vulnerable social wealth: The constraints of camel-herding restrict involvement in any other economic activity such that they are an intense focus of economic interests. Camels are therefore an absolute necessity for the survival of human groups. The Bedouin have a strong communal interest in camel-protection.

(-) Necessity of a politics of camel-raiding: Drought and disease constantly expose little communal groups to the total loss of their camel herds. Camel-raiding is an essential means for recovering from catastrophic losses of herds.[29]

(+) Necessity of a politics of camel-protection: It is the interest of every little communal group to have relationships and agreements with as many other little communal groups within as wide a range as possible.

(-) Camel-raiding is exciting and interesting. A youth can make a name for himself by success in looting camels.

[29] Sweet, "Camel Raiding".

(+) The loss of camels is economically devastating and spiritually demoralizing. An elder can make a name for himself by keeping the peace.

As the list illustrates, mounted camel-herding nomadism placed a premium on political solidarity even as it also placed a premium on political independence. For the camel-herding nomads, the landscape was populated with friends who might be enemies and enemies who might be friends. Genealogical traditions are then an impossible dream of the resolution of two contrary desires. They are a reductive and totalizing dogma that represses an irresolvable political dilemma.

By this measure, the stories and poems of raiding and warfare can be considered dream interpretations that explore the contradictions that underpin segmentary representations. The stories and poems of raiding and warfare expose hopes and fears that are implicit in segmentary representations. In this regard, they are reflections on the problematic relationship of associationalism and individualism.

For example, the stories and poems sometimes make reference to a creator divinity who has made both the material world and its human population. The material world underwrites the behavior of the human population. Proper forms of speech and action bring individuals together in peace and improper speech and action set them against one another in war. In the stories and poems, the course of events is related to demonstrate this lesson. The good enjoy prosperity through victory by the virtue of solidarity. The bad suffer poverty through defeat by the vice of dissension.

On the other hand, other stories and poems refer to the relationship of human passions and aggressive instruments as the basis of another kind of political morality. The human body is transformed by the use of mounts, swords, and guns so that it becomes a terrifying and irresistible force. These stories and poems argue that those who engage in bargaining and negotiating for an advantage face destruction while those who are ready to resort to fighting and conflict prove invincible.

I have chosen to mention two contrasting themes – one counseling peace and cooperation and the other counseling war and conflict – in order to illustrate how the stories and poems expand on figures of political segmentation. The creator divinity authorizes a proper individualism that insures a proper associationalism. In effect, the unifying ancestor of the genealogy appears in the form of a religious vision in the stories and

poems. The principle of solidarity is guaranteed by a divine material creation that validates the proper speech and action of individuals. On the other hand, the combination of passions and instruments means that physical force plays a key role in human relationships. Those who are ready to devote themselves to the use of aggressive instruments cannot be forced to submit to oppression and exploitation. The principle of independence is therefore inherent in a way of life that relies on mounts and weapons.

9. Nomadic and Sedentary Society in Early Arabia

These last remarks direct attention to the issue of "Difference and Integration," the theme of the SFB 586. The stories and poems collected by Musil demonstrate that the politics of tribalism among the Bedouins was of a broader scope than suggested by genealogies and lineages. The reductive and totalizing figures of political segmentation were only one dimension of a distinctive political outlook and commitment. The Bedouin could be dogmatic but they could also reflect on the course of events from the perspective of a political philosophy that addressed ethical questions.

If then the politics of tribalism had a reflective dimension, this means that it had communicative and adaptive potential. That is to say, it could move beyond the desert and steppe. Bedouins might abandon camel-herding to take up camel-transport. Bedouins might ally themselves with villages or towns. Bedouins might abandon pastoral nomadism and settle down on farms or oases. When they did so, they might find that a politics of tribalism had a marginal utility in their new circumstances. Given that interactions of nomadism and sedentarism are known to be a normal part of the history of Arabia, one would expect that these interactions featured two-way channels of philosophical and ethical communication.[30] This possibility seems all the more probable given that some of the themes of associationalism and individualism in the Rwala stories and poems bring to mind the Koranic message. The person is a construction of words and deeds. A perfect community is insured by the proper speech and action of its constituent individuals. Some persons refuse to embrace proper speech and actions and seek to sow dissension. Those who abide by proper speech

[30] Here I think it should be mentioned that the project on *Difference and Integration* includes a group that is examining the figure of the Bedouin in the Arabic literary tradition. By my understanding of this work, the Bedouin is oftentimes a positive figure in terms of moral qualities, such as simplicity, frankness, directness and determination.

and action are obliged to resist and oppose them. This suggests that the Koranic message features a problematic of the associationalism and individualism, otherwise so characteristic of the politics of tribalism.

More exactly, the Koranic message recomposes the relationship of associationalism and individualism in a way that challenges the politics of tribalism. This re-composition would have spread most effectively among townsmen, since its propositions were not supported by the material conditions of pastoral nomadism. To see the problem in this way is also to understand that mounted camel-herding nomadism provided essential resources for an Islamic exit from the tribal world. This does not mean that the Koran is somehow marked by a desert and steppe origin so much as it means that mounted camel-herding nomadism generated ethical problems and insights of universal significance.

The preceding comments might seem to depend on an anachronism. In *Literature and Violence in North Arabia*, I sought to demonstrate that Bedouin convictions and sensibilities, as documented by Alois Musil, were correlated with the structure of mounted camel-herding nomadism. I then suggested that the Rwala Bedouin of the nineteenth century resembled the Bedouin of the seventh century. This was a tempting notion since the speech forms of the Rwala Bedouin bring to mind the speech forms of early Islamic Arabia.

One could think of all kinds of objections to this argument. I will mention just two anachronisms:

1) The nineteenth century Bedouins had acquired pistols and rifles. The arrival of more dangerous weapons would have simultaneously intensified the advantages of political solidarity while the multiplying the avenues for aggressive action.
2) The reference to a creator divinity in Bedouin stories and poems during the nineteenth century could have been derived from the Koranic message rather than stand as a precursor to it.

These objections could be challenged by counter-arguments; however, they essentially raise matters of detail rather than substance.[31] The ethnography of the Bedouins of North Arabia demonstrates a pattern of the long term (*longue durée*). Basic political problems that were inherent in

[31] See Meeker, *Literature and Violence*; *id*., "Heroic Poems and Anti-Heroic Stories"; *id*., *The Pastoral Son*, for further discussion and examples of creator divinities among pastoral warriors.

mounted camel-herding nomadism were correlated with political values that were widely diffused among the people of Arabia. In my opinion, this is *prima facie* evidence of a Bedouin contribution to Arabian society and culture, and hence, by extension, to the history of world civilization. On this point, I have simply attempted to add a footnote to Ibn Khaldun.

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