

Doing Ethnography in the Land of Informants
Tribality in Taiz and the epistemology of the Yemeni situation

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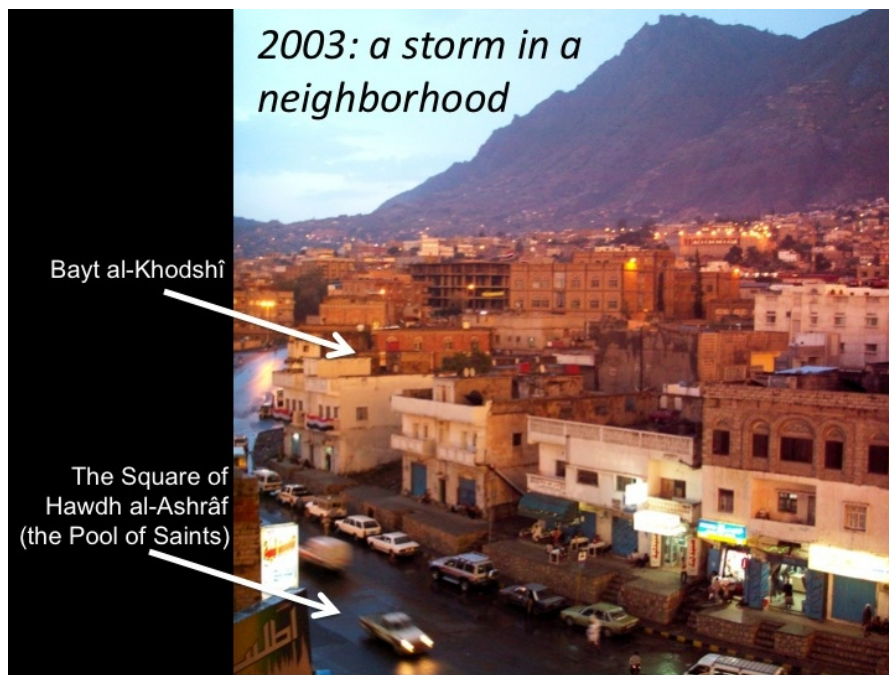
On the 19th of august 2007 at nightfall, Ziad al-Khodshî was alone in the house of his family. He gathered all the mattresses and blankets, piled them into the living room. He set them on fire, locked the door and went away. He came back after one hour, and the police took him to jail. That night I was sitting just 50 meters from there, on *gawlat* Hawdh al-Ashrâf, a particular square where I do fieldwork since 2003. I had just returned that day at noon, after one year in France. Obviously Ziad had been informed that I was back, but nobody mentioned the coincidence. People would just say :

– “This guy is crazy.”

In the following days, people came greeting me as if nothing happened. And actually, I didn't know myself how to talk about it...

I became a muslim just a few weeks later, at the beginning of ramadan. In the following years, I got closer to Ziad's family and we tried to understand each other better, with Ziad's mental health as a common concern.

This family has taught me a lot about the current situation in Yemen. Not that they informed me about specific facts : they rather confronted me with the failure of my own epistemology (the logical structure of our knowledge ; how we construct our knowledge). Gregory Bateson, as a theorist of living systems, used to say that most of the problems we face are actually generated by the way we try to solve them (Gregory Bateson 1972). My *feeling* is that the current crises in Yemen have their sources not so much in Saada, in Aden or in Abyan¹, as in the complex interaction between Yemeni society and foreign expertise. Of course, it is difficult to prove. As you can see by the title I gave, my first intention was to make a theoretical discussion about interaction, perception and epistemology. Then I thought I will just share that story with you, and you can take it as a metaphor.



Once upon a time in the 1960^{ies}, al-Khodshî, Ziad's maternal grand-father was a merchant from Shuwayfa (Hujariyya) with political connections in Taiz. In the 1970^{ies}, the family moved from the Old City to Hawdh al-Ashraf². There, Ziad's older brother Nabil, who was a strong young man, became one of the most charismatic leaders in the area. In the 1990^{ies} he was recruited by the Municipality as the chief of the police in the central souk.

Ziad was a strong leader just as his brother, but on top of that he was good at school, so he went to university. When I met him in the summer of 2003, he had just graduated in financial mathematics : he ranked first in the whole University of Taiz. He later became a much appreciated accountant, working for Yemeni companies Ha'il Saeed and Yemensoft, and for the international firm TBNG. Ziad was a radiant personality, and he had a kingdom of his own in Hawdh al-Ashraf (Vincent Planel 2004; 2005).

Three weeks after my first arrival in Taiz, I meet Ziad at a wedding, and he strikes me at once as a very clever person. Then during one week, we discuss continuously, day and night. My arabic is still very poor, but we develop a language of our own, with gestures and smiles, talking about islam and sociology, about physics and mathematics, about God, about terrorism... In Taiz I have

1 Reference respectively to the Huthi rebellion in the North, the Southern secessionist movement and al-Qaeda. To this exceptional conjunction of crises, one could add the water problem, the migration problem, and so on.

2 Hawdh al-Ashraf means "the Pool of Saints". It used to be a station for camels and until now it is the entrance of modern Taz, the final stop for taxis coming from Sanaa and Aden.

as many informants as I wish³, but nobody quite like him. At once, Ziad becomes a friend and a confident.

Once I have met Ziad, the social world divides into two groups.

Those I meet through Ziad, inside his neighbourhood, come to me saying :

- “*T’hibboh...*” (“You love him, right...”)
- “Well... Yes, he is brilliant!...”

The other group are the students and shopkeepers that I have met independently outside the neighbourhood, on the square itself. Those don't joke, even though they know Ziad, and this makes me even more uncomfortable.

After a while, they say to me :

- “Be careful : his brother is a great thief!”

I listen to them, but Nabil is actually very nice to me, and I am dealing with his brother :

- “What should I fear for myself? Are they going to rob me?...”

I keep living my life next to Ziad with the young neighbors. I become more and more at ease, not afraid to joke myself or to express my feelings. Then it becomes clear that Ziad is dependent : actually, *he* is the one “in love”, and he becomes strangely silent. From that moment, the neighbors start to tell me other things about him. They say he has a sick mind, he wants to dominate every person. “We want democracy, like in your country...” The situation degenerates, and finally Ziad bans me. On the square, they say to me :

- “You see! We told you not to hang out with them...”

But actually the neighbors stand with me :

- “He has no right to ban you! We used to fear him, but we don't fear him anymore!”.

Ziad is forced to reconcile, but he exiles to his village and leaves me alone with the neighbors. Then his brother Nabil cracks down on us ; I run away to Sanaa, and order is restored in Hawdh al-Ashraf.

This was my first field experience in Taiz, at a time when I hardly knew anything about Yemeni society. Of course today, it sounds a bit like a small-scale Arab Spring : Ziad was “*al-za'im al-makhlû'* (the deposed Leader) *haqq* Hawdh al-Ashrâf”; the young neighbors and I suddenly immersed into a familiarity that none of us would have thought possible. This was a stunning experience for all of us. But at the time we could not name what happened. Ziad was stabbed in the back by his brothers, and I myself was filled with guilt for provoking this. On the whole, that was a traumatizing experience, and a wound that never healed.

3 In ethnographic methodology and discussion, the word “informant” simply means the person through which information transits, without moral judgement. (Just like in linguistics, an informant is a native speaker acting as a linguistic reference for a language being studied.) The city of Taiz is renowned in Yemen for its open-mindedness and investment in modern education (Vincent Planel 2012).



When I came back one year later, Ziad was prostrate and the neighbors didn't want me anymore. So I stayed on the Square, exploring social diversity (Vincent Planel 2008). Only in 2006, I started joking again, and I began to analyze how Yemenis on the square test each other through jokes and sexual suggestions. That became the topic of the PhD I intended to write (gender studies and social history)⁴. But the real motivation for this approach was the “wound” and the shame that I mentioned : I *refused to surrender* to that shame. I refused to treat that story just as a *material* and move on. Instinctively, I made local society *as a whole* accountable for what happened in 2003. My relationship to Ziad was still quite conflictual, but he could not stay unconcerned as he witnessed my efforts. He started to speculate and, as I understood much later, that made him lose his fighting spirit. Being the chief accountant in top industrial groups was very demanding in terms of strength of character. After repeated professional failures, he refused to work again.

4 I conceived this approach as a combination of up-to-date ethnographic method (Florence Weber 2009) and the long term perspective of historical anthropology (Jocelyne Dakhlia 2005). Theoretical discussion can be found in unpublished papers. In English, see a paper given on June 20th 2007 at the Ethnografeast conference in Lisbon : “Veiled (male) ethnographers. Reflexive blind spots and gender segregation in Yemen”. Available at: <http://ceas.iscte.pt/ethnografeast/panels.html#vplanel>.



In the following years, the whole balance of the family was destroyed. Ziad had a younger brother, Yazid, who was a migrant worker, and proud of being a *shâqî*. He was strongly opposed to Nabil, and Ziad used to mediate between the two. But once he weakened, the two brothers allied against him. Yazid got married with Nabil's money, but he failed in his own business. Soon, Nabil himself began to encounter problems in the souk. He went to jail, and finally he died in a car accident. The Municipality wanted someone from the family to take up his position, and Ziad seemed to be strong enough for the job, unlike Yazid. But he declined the offer, so Yazid sent him to a mental clinic. Ziad was diagnosed with schizophrenia and treated with electroshocks. When he came back, he promised to burn the house in revenge, and he did it on the day I came back.



I was back in Taiz one year after the fire, when Ziad came out of jail. He was fine, except that he felt his brain was destroyed by chemicals and he feared that his family wanted to poison him. He heard the voices of someone he called “the Filmmaker” (*al-mukhrig*), to which he kept making imaginary phone calls. In his mind, this filmmaker was so greedy that all the secondary characters of his movie had decided to go on strike and occupy the scene, preventing the film to reach its end. This video was shot in november 2008, on the last day before I returned to France.



<http://youtu.be/Z0-9h6uarmc>

At the time I took this video, I did not fully understand Ziad's behaviour, because I was holding on to my analysis, the picture I had constructed in my mind. I was already struggling to write my PhD, hoping that someday I would make a living as an anthropologist, and would be able to support him. But Ziad perfectly understood that I was trapped myself, mentally enslaved by the Academy. So he would rather talk on the phone to the larger apparatus - that is, *you*⁵ -, behaving as the accountant of this larger apparatus.

Actually there was no way out of this situation. When I came to Yemen, Yazid would take Ziad out of jail, and once I return to France he would put him back. So we ended up having a big fight, after which, at least, Yazid stopped sending his brother to jail. That was in November 2010, just a few weeks before the Revolution. I have not returned to Yemen since then.

⁵ I am very grateful for this conference, which gives me an opportunity to speak out in front of researchers *and* Yemeni officials, representing both the Academy *and* the Yemeni state. Working in that perspective has been simply liberating. In this situation, it becomes absolutely clear (for me at least) that Ziad is addressing a message beyond time and place - just as I do, as an anthropologist, elaborate discourses whose validity extend beyond the field's particular situation. I put out this video this time, because I believe that it is a situation when Ziad's message may be received.

Conclusion



If you think of the first anthropological perceptions of Yemen, these were often constructed through a triangle of interaction : the Observer - the Tribal Native - the Taizzi Informant. Tomas Gerholm (1942-1995) for example, who published in the 1970^{ies} one of the first monographs on the mountains of Manâkha, placed himself under the authority of a local big man, and worked with the help of a secretary from Aden. This had consequences on the knowledge that was produced, of course, but at least Gerholm was conscious about it. He writes in the introduction :

“The main distortion that may have resulted is, I think, an exaggeration of the calculating, profit-maximizing, not to say swindling, attitude brought to human relations by my Yemeni friends. Hassan took great pride in being a clever Adeni - he had needed all his own cleverness in surviving an adverse fate and he seemed to detect hidden maneuvers everywhere. “Ah, I know what the bastard wants,” he would say with a sly laugh, “but you'll see: I'm more clever than him”. Most of the time his intuition may have been correct, but at other times I believe that his suspicions were unfounded and that they fostered an unnecessarily merciless view of my fellow townsmen. I have tried to temper my account in accordance with this, but whether I have hit upon a happy medium or not is really impossible to know.” (Tomas Gerholm 1977, 14).

Here we can see clearly how Gerholm would work.



But today, it is much harder for an observer to understand what is happening around him, because all Yemenis have learned to be both the Tribesman and the Informant. And they switch roles, according to situations... Ziad did not realise how complicated it was when he started to collaborate with me. Then he was forced to admit that I needed time⁶.

In a sense, I *needed* Ziad to go crazy to stabilise the picture, to create a local configuration, just for the time it takes to learn. He accepted to be the uncivilised fool, so that all Yemenis could play their part as informants. Actually Ziad granted me *intellectual* hospitality. Even though the relationship with him was a relentless wrestling - even as he would throw me out of the neighbourhood - that too was intellectual hospitality. And talking about him today is certainly a way for me to give him back this hospitality.

In the era before the Revolution, we could always make do without people like Ziad : this one goes mad? *Yallâ, mâshshî al-hâl...* That was the previous regime, and the course of my fieldwork too is characteristic⁷ (at least until the fire took place). But today Yemen needs people like Ziad. And we need social sciences that are able to empower such people, instead of destroying them.

6 During the Arab Spring, I have proposed an argumentation on tribality in Taiz, and it was a way for me to give credibility to the movement (Vincent Planel 2012). Before the Revolution, I never considered seriously comparing my observations in Taiz to the anthropological literature on tribality. Giving Nabil (for instance) the dignity that anthropologists associate with tribality was too questionable politically ; I preferred to talk in terms of “gender” and “homoeroticism”. My own “material” seemed much too reflexive and fragile anyway. However, it is interesting to notice that Jeanne Favret-Saada, before becoming in the 1970^{ies} a leading figure of reflexive anthropology, actually struggled in the 1960^{ies} to expand the realm of Gellner's segmentarity (re-published in Jeanne Favret-Saada 2005). My ultimate goal would be to reconstruct segmentarity as a learning process, and show the validity of this notion to organize reflexive material in contemporary yemeni society.

7 See also Emilio Spadola's criticisms (2011) on the structural blind-spots of reflexive anthropology, when addressing these recurrent situations in ethnographic research.

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