

# *The Waning of Soqatra's Pastoral Community: Political Incorporation as Social Transformation*

Serge D. Elie

The Soqatra Archipelago is Yemen's ultimate frontier, straddling the African Continent and the Arabian Peninsula. Its approximately 50,000 inhabitants occupy a hyphenated geographical place as well as an interstitial cultural space. Soqatra, the main island of the Archipelago, is a community of once predominantly non-nomadic transhumant pastoralists, who are now engaged in increasingly non-pastoralist livelihoods, with a unique language and a mixed ethnic composition undergoing an accelerated change process driven by a dual incorporation process: on the one hand, the Yemeni government's modernization of its infrastructure and consolidation of its political incorporation into the national community; and, on the other, a United Nations led internationalization of its economy through the implementation of an environmental protection and ecotourism development program. This paper situates these recent initiatives, as the latest phase, within a historical process of change by retracing the genealogy of Soqatra's engagement with a modernization process. It suggests that this process was primarily driven by a series of acts of political incorporation by mainland actors. These acts are seen as the crucible of the island's history, as they set in motion the mechanism of change through the reconfiguration of its local institutions resulting in the transformation of its internal social structure as well as of the associated cultural practices. Accordingly, the paper, first, offers a historical periodization of the island's transformation process through a description of the four administrative regimes introduced under the different phases of political incorporation. Second, it describes the internal adjustments engendered by each of these administrative regimes in terms of polity formation, economic strategy, and their sociocultural ramifications. Third, it concludes with the emerging dysfunctional aspects of this change process and recommends the prioritization of cultural diversity as a potential solution.

**Key words:** Soqatra, Yemen, political incorporation, pastoralism, modernization

## Introduction

Historical accounts of Soqatra have portrayed the island merely as the playground of outsiders, mostly of European origin, on some peculiar quests. Indeed, Beckingham (1983:172), in observing the absence of a proper history of Soqatra, which has yet to be remedied, suggests that it is from the archives of European countries that such a history has to be constituted. As he puts it, "Its history has yet to be written, and must be compiled from references dispersed in a multiplicity of books and records, not so much in Arabic as in Greek, Latin, Syriac, Portuguese, Dutch, English, French, and even Danish." He is correct as far as the pre-19th century period is concerned (Elie 2006). However,

since then there has been a gradual internal transformation of the island brokered by local/national actors. Indeed, this internal transformation was carried out through government policies and the migratory movements between mainland Yemen and the island. First, at the initiative of a pre-state entity, the Sultanate of Mahra, sought to assert its authority over the island's wayward population through the imposition of an ascriptive social order and its corollary political and economic strictures. This was followed by mainland state entities deploying of different administrative mechanisms of incorporation. It was this succession of administrative regimes that brokered the island's modernization process, as a means of adapting Soqotrans' communal life to politically engendered historical changes.

In this light, Soqatra's historical evolution was driven primarily by a shifting process of political incorporation, which engendered a succession of forms of externally arrogated sovereignty. This process of political incorporation constituted the crucible of the island's history, as it introduced change through the manipulation and restructuring of its politico-economic institutions, and thus the transformation of the island's internal social structure with multiple

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cultural ramifications (see Cohen 1977). It was a series of incorporative acts that brokered the island's contact with the outside world and structured its internal dynamics as well as regulated the nature and pace of its change process. The latter was primarily of an intra-national nature, as the determining politico-cultural contact was between mainlanders as representatives of the dominant national culture and the islanders as a subnational ethno-linguistically distinct community. The international contribution to Soqotra's process of change was of a secondary significance, notwithstanding the presence in South Arabia of the British (1839-1967), the Soviet Union (1968-1990), and the United Nations (1968 to the present) (see below).

The interpretation of the nature of Soqotra's change process is based on an analytical approach that is best described by the term "morphology of governance" of the historical process of political incorporation. This entails the retracing of the historical layers of institutions and their multiple effects on communal life in Soqotra, as these institutions were reformed or rebuilt through successive projects of political subordination and socioeconomic reform undertaken by various political regimes over a period of 200 years (cf. Hansen and Steputat 2001:30). The aim of this paper is to offer a summary narrative of Soqotra's internal transformation, as a case study of the Yemeni state's politics of social transformation of a subnational community.<sup>1</sup> This might fill provisionally the current gap in historical knowledge about that crucial period in Soqotra's modernization, and also it might provide a frame of reference to those who have responsibility for its administrative oversight and for planning and managing its future development. In pursuing these objectives, the paper briefly situates the island within its peculiar geographic and cultural context; then introduces a historical periodization based on the different moments of political incorporation and the nature of the administrative regimes established; this is followed by an overview account of the multiple local ramifications of each regime; it concludes with a suggestion regarding the need to prioritize cultural diversity as a complement to biodiversity preservation that could mitigate the emerging sociocultural dysfunctions engendered by the change process.

### **Geo-Cultural Contextualization**

The Soqotra Archipelago is Yemen's ultimate frontier, dangling between the African Continent and the Arabian Peninsula. It is located within 250 km of the Somali coast and separated by a distance of about 380 km from the Governorate of Hadramawt, on the southeastern coast of mainland Yemen. The Archipelago is a haphazard clustering of isolated specks of land that straddle the entrance of the Red Sea while simultaneously demarcating the beginning of the Indian Ocean in the Gulf of Aden. The Archipelago is composed of four islands: Soqotra, Abd al Kuri, Samha, and Darsa. Its landmass represents a continental fragment that is geologically linked to the continental plate of Africa (Beydoun and Bichan 1970).

The Bents' metaphoric characterization of the Archipelago's straddling location is apt: "Cast away in the Indian Ocean, like a fragment rejected in the construction of Africa... Though it is Arabian politically, Sokotra geographically is African," and equally mixed in its ethnocultural endowment (1900:342, 345). Soqotra, the main island of the Archipelago, is the largest island in the Arab world. Its approximately 50,000 inhabitants, who are divided into about 500 clans<sup>2</sup>, each composed of a few extended families, are distributed in about 630 villages (according to the 2004 Census) and occupy a hyphenated geographical place (Africa-Arabia) as well as an interstitial cultural space (Yemeni-Soqotri).

Soqotra Island is a place that is partly evocative of one famous anthropologist's characterization of his site of study as being prey to a kind of "agitated stagnancy" encompassing a "mixture of borrowed fragments of modernity and the exhausted relics of the past, ... [where] the future seemed as remote as the past" (Geertz 1983:60). Soqotra exemplified this characterization as it had still, at least in its rural milieu, a barter-mediated social economy. Moreover, its landscape was still endowed with a relatively intact endemic flora (Miller and Morris 2004), with a culture that had not yet lost its core of traditions, and its people had not yet embraced the self-concept, defined primarily in terms of deprivation, that usually accompanies the introduction of the United Nations "development" discourse. Soqotrans have always pursued a multiplicity of subsistence livelihoods (e.g., non-nomadic transhumant subsistence milch pastoralism with herds of goat, sheep, cow, and camel, fishing, date farming, and geographically limited vegetable gardening). This practice is contingent on seasons, variations in agro-ecological zones, and further constrained by the five-month summer monsoon, during which economic life comes to a standstill. These subsistence activities are haphazardly supplemented by limited economic opportunities through an embryonic local service sector (construction, tourism, salaried posts in the island's government bureaucracy as clerks, police, and military personnel) and further complemented by remittances from the Soqotran émigrés in the Arabian Gulf.

While the island's modernization process was initiated in the 1970s under the then People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) in the south, it was only after the unification of the two Yemeni states in 1990, and more specifically in 1996, which inaugurated Soqotra's rediscovery as the "Galapagos of the Indian Ocean" that the process took an irreversible course. The Archipelago, then, came under the protective environmental circumscription of the international community and the galvanized political circumspection of the national government. This led simultaneously to a dual incorporation: On the one hand, the Government of Yemen signed the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and declared Soqotra a natural area in need of urgent protection, thereby, giving the United Nations effective stewardship, at least, over the Archipelago's environmental assets. On the other hand, the Government launched an aggressive program of political and economic recuperation through extensive infrastructural

development as well as the commissioning, with European Union funding, of the 10-year *Socotra Archipelago Master Plan*. As a result, Soqotra began a gradual adaptation to the modern institutional logic of a global environmental conservation regime, and to accommodate the political strictures of a (belated) formalized nationalization process.

### Periodization of Political Incorporation

In establishing the genealogy of the modern period in Soqotra, starting from the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century I have identified four moments, or more aptly conjunctural shifts, in Soqotra's political encompassment (i.e., Sultanate, socialist, unity, and post-unity) and their associated administrative regimes (i.e., clan feudalism, democratic centralism, tribal libertarianism, and globalizing local governance). In the discussion below, each period is identified by its political character and administrative modus operandi, and then briefly described in terms of its condition of emergence, the sociostructural ramifications, and the territorial organization, which articulated simultaneously the mechanism of rule and the dominant economic orientation.

#### Sultanate Fiefdom: Clan Feudalism

Prior to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Soqotra was a relatively neglected and barely administered territorial entity annexed to the mainland Sultanate of Mahra. The latter had formalized its political ownership of the island by establishing a fort in the northern village of Suq, and another in the mountainous interior, in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century and imposed tribute on the population. The signing of a protection treaty exclusively for the Soqotra Archipelago between the Sultan of Mahra and the British in 1876 initiated the gradual transfer of the official seat of the Sultanate from Mahra to Soqotra. Mahra eventually became a dependency of Soqotra. This took place by happenstance, as the next Sultan in line was the resident "governor" on the island when the Sultan of Mahra passed away around the 1890s (Hunter and Sealy 1909:115). However, the decision to remain on the island was abetted perhaps by the following factors: (1) the guaranteed income from the British annual payment of protectorate fees; and (2) an easily enforced taxation scheme, as the island's natural enclosure with a "captive" pastoralist population, who was unarmed and intrinsically peaceful and, thus, less prone to rebellion (Elie 2004).

The transfer of the official seat of the Sultanate led to the consolidation of an ascriptive social status hierarchy, which legitimated the primacy of the Sultanic tribe from Mahra and the subordination of the rest. This social pyramid was based on a descending scale of social prestige and related occupational functions: Sultan's family and Mahri tribesmen (main landowners and tax farmers) for whom taxation was a form of "primitive accumulation" that ensured the socio-institutional reproduction of the Sultanate; *ashraf* from Hadramawt who claimed descent from the Prophet and provided religious pro-

tection to the Sultan based on their presumed special spiritual power; Arab merchants from Hadramawt and the Arabian Gulf who mediated the external trade of the island; *badū* (*badwī* singular in Arabic and bedouins in English),<sup>3</sup> is the term used locally by, and for, the hinterland pastoralists, who were the obligatory tributaries, as pillars of the local economy based on a milk producing pastoralism that was transformed into *hamī* (ghee) for export to East African and Gulf countries; *imbu 'ile* (African slaves) who provided free labor (e.g., date plantation, construction, fishing, transport, etc.) to some of the above groups. Territorial organization was articulated to maximize tax collection (on dates, ghee, and animals, especially goats and sheep) as the island was divided into regional districts and subregional districts headed by *muqaddam* (clan leader) whose main functions were order maintenance and tax collection on behalf of the Sultan who provided no compensatory services in return. Indeed, this arrangement exemplifies Marc Bloch's summary definition of feudalism as "the rigorous economic subjection of a host of humble folks to a few powerful men" (Claessen 1996:229).<sup>4</sup>

#### Socialist Experiment: Democratic Centralism

After 91 years of "indirect rule" as a "feudatory of the British," and under the fiscal extraction regime of the Sultanate, the South Yemeni government through a "revolutionary decolonization" process began the task of uprooting the legacies of this medieval regime. It sought to usher Soqotra into the 20<sup>th</sup> century through the attempted "modernization" of the community and economy on the basis of a socialist experiment. This led to a drastic social reconfiguration of communal life, as part of the social homogenization of the previous social status distinction: the abolition of slavery, gender parity, a generalized fomentation of social inclusion through creation of mass organizations (e.g., youth, women, defense), and forced attendance at newly established schools. However, the social hierarchy was replaced by a hierarchical form of political management through a system of committees encompassing all territorial levels and settled areas from the district to the village. One Soqotran described that period as "*hukm shumūlī*" (totalitarian rule in Arabic). This was complemented by a territorial reconfiguration through (1) the building of the first island-wide roads network to replace the grid of footpaths and camel tracks that constituted the only means of traveling between different parts of the island; and (2) the development of urban spaces as administrative centers and the recruitment of mainland teachers and administrators to supervise and train Soqotrans. This embryonic urbanization process was partly based on the realization that the island's "modernization" could not be achieved through the agency of subsistence agropastoralists and cave dwelling *badū* unaided by an urban-based vanguard. The economic policy of basic needs provision through subsidized consumption—pursued through the establishment of food distribution centers, water storage systems, health units, and the creation of non-pastoral occupations (e.g., commercial fishing, collective farming,

government posts)—was partly aimed at redistributing the population from the hinterland to the coast through a shift in the island's economic geography.

### Unity: Tribal Libertarianism

The unification of the two states of Yemen in 1990 may have brought a sigh of relief to Soqotrans, as they no longer had to live under the threat of suspicion of having divided political loyalties. The coalition government that emerged from this negotiated political fusion was an amalgam of incommensurable political cultures with divergent socio-organizational modalities. The dominant idiom in the administrative vernacular of the north was sheikh and tribe with Islam as the legitimating ideology of a traditional social order; while in the south it was people's councils and committees guided by a secular ideology of progress. The institutional coexistence between these two contradictory administrative regimes could not be sustained. Indeed, the civil war of 1994 led to the hegemony of the northern model within which South Yemen and Soqatra were politically incorporated. In Soqatra, this led to the introduction of the *nidhām mashāyikh* (sheikhs system), where previously the title of sheikh was reserved for religious figures primarily and some notables among the local Mahri tribesmen. This system represented a de facto wholesale transfer of the tribal social structure of North Yemen, as a means of agglomerating the clan-based muqaddam system into sheikh led regional tribal groups. Accordingly, the island was divided into over 40 subdistricts, each headed by a sheikh as local political leader. Moreover, the sheikh system sought to foment a new tribal consciousness infused with state allegiance, as it was not integrated within the local administration system, but constituted a system of parallel rule headed by a *shayikh mashāyikh* (sheikh of sheikhs) who was primarily accountable to the *maslahat shu'ūn qabā'il* (Department of Tribal Affairs) in Sana'a, from which all sheikhs received a monthly stipend. Hence, my use of the term tribal libertarianism, which refers to a social system in which political allegiance is merely a private contractual obligation with the dominant or monopolistic agency, i.e., the state; and where public law is substituted, at least in part, by a network of private agreements between the state and groups of clients (Rawls 1996:262-265). The state continued to be the main economic purveyor through a policy of government-sponsored employment generation in the expanding local bureaucracy, and by haphazardly distributing public buildings (e.g., clinics and schools) in the rural areas.

### Post-Unity: Globalizing Local Governance

The dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century brought about a new political context in Yemen. The approval of a new Local Authority Law in February 2000 was part of an institutional mainstreaming of the governance system in Yemen. This entailed the decentralization of decision-making in the management of local districts, and the institutionalization of electoral politics in

the constitution of local councils. Article 4 of the Law states, "This Law shall be based on the principles of financial and administrative decentralization, and shall operate on the basis of broadening popular participation in decision making and in the administration of local affairs in social, economic, and cultural development through the elected local authority." The local council system became operational throughout Yemen following the local elections held in April 2000. In Soqatra, among the Law's ramifications, two are worthy of note: (1) the operationalization of a local planning and managerial capacity for government funded and internationally supported development projects. Indeed, the establishment of such a capacity was one of the main objectives, if not a prerequisite, of Yemen's international donors, including the European Union, which funded *Socotra Archipelago Master Plan*, as this system would ensure transparency in the management of donors' fund; and (2) the harmonization of the parallel sheikh system of informal subregional administration, on top of the traditional network of muqaddam as informal representatives of clan collectives, with the local councilors as the formal political representatives of the island's subdistrict residents. The functions of all these actors had to be streamlined within a local governmental system that was integrated within a national context characterized by a formally competitive multi-party politics, and international interest in local managerial transparency. Territorial organization became a matter of electoral cartography, as 36 local council subdistricts were superimposed on the 43 areas of the sheikhs' jurisdiction. The neoliberal economic policy bias urged upon the government by the donor community constrained the habitual recourse to public sector employment generation in favor of private sector initiatives, such as ecotourism development.

### Travails of Transition

Soqatra's external entanglements with the imported administrative regimes generated a process of transition that has gradually weaned Soqotrans from their clan-based communal organization and led to their partial mobilization as members of a national society. In this section, I highlight the multiple ramifications of Soqatra's incorporation in terms of the internal adjustments generated by each of the four administrative regimes: (1) the changing conditions under which Soqotrans were politically mobilized; (2) the shifting economic arrangements they had to adapt to; and (3) the sociocultural metamorphosis they have experienced.

### Polity Formation: From Denizen to Citizen

The Sultanate provides the point of departure, as it set the conditions through which the Soqotran polity was initially constituted. At that moment, Soqatra was a pre-state clan-based polity in which the relationship between ruler and ruled is best expressed in the metaphor of an absent shepherd and a dispersed flock. As the Sultan had largely delegated his functions to the muqaddam, which had sole responsibility for his

clan, and through him, and a retinue of tax farmers and other clients, the Sultan ruled by fear further magnified by superstition. It was an atomized polity made up of individual clans dwelling in clusters of villages sparsely populated and widely dispersed throughout Soqotra's wilderness. Their political isolation was mitigated by intermittently held subregional inter-clan meetings with the Sultan (called *etihi a-sahatan* in Soqotri) to administer justice and settle problems beyond the capacity of the muqaddam. These meetings took place haphazardly at designated locations in different regions of the island. Their occurrence was the equivalent of a roving parliament and this constituted the major institutional pillar of the "wandering Sultanate" in Albert Hourani's apt phrase, which characterized the mechanism of rule over the Soqotrans, that is, a peripatetic Sultan that had no permanent roots in the town and a small bureaucracy with control of the agricultural and pastoral surplus through taxation and restricted means of coercion. He ruled through constant movement, political manipulation, and the religious prestige afforded by the ashraf and through strategic serial marriages and the granting of special privileges (cf. Hourani 1990:306). Indeed, as one government approved sheikh referring to the last Sultan explains, "All he had was a wooden stick and a camel. There was no army or gun, yet he ruled absolutely." In effect, the only factor of cohesion in the Soqotran polity at that time was a livelihood-induced membership in a loose collectivity linked through a mutual aid web of domestic security, that was made imperative by their relative abandonment to the whims of nature as the primary means of survival. The latter was rendered even more difficult by the twice-yearly collection of taxes for the Sultan, which was mitigated only by adverse environmental conditions (e.g., drought).

The South Yemeni administration endeavored to infuse in an atomized population of mostly cave-dwelling bedouins in the mountainous interior, subsistence agropastoralists in the interior plains and valleys, and artisanal fishermen in coastal villages, a sense of belonging to a greater whole. This was attempted through their integration into a civil society run by a party controlled hierarchical system of committees, which undertook their ideological regimentation as members of mass organizations in the hope of effacing clan affiliation, socioethnic boundaries (between former slaves, bedouins, and Arabs), and social status distinction (between descendants of the Sultans, privileged Mahri tribes, and the rest of the population)—the core legacies of the previous regime. This was the Soqotrans' inaugural socialization as citizen of a nation-state. As one *muwallad* (*muwalladin* plural is the term used since the 1970s to designate the manumitted slaves of African descent) put it, "It was the first time we felt as full members of the community." Indeed, Soqotrans remember this period as *hadhāra* (the "coming of civilization"), as it introduced institutions that sought to weave them into a collectivity; provided education that sought to cultivate an emancipated social agency from their previous serf-like condition; constrained them to adopt a different self-concept; and, perhaps more importantly, introduced new items (i.e., tools and consumer

goods) that improved the local material culture (e.g., housing) and palliated the insufficiencies of the environment by relieving the islanders' chronic seasonal hunger. However, their integration as "comrades" into a Socialist fraternity was marred by the state's fear of their defection to the capitalist camp, which created a social atmosphere of surveillance that was enforced by the island's *lajnat al-markaz al-difā' al-sha'abī* (Central Committee for Popular Defense).

The unification of North and South Yemen heralded an era that Soqotrans called *al-infitāh* ("the opening"). This designation was meant chiefly to characterize the lifting of the veil of surveillance over Soqotrans and the freedom to practice Islam or to engage in trade or travel, which were previously tightly regulated if not prohibited at least outside of Yemen, as Soqotrans were allowed to travel to the mainland, especially to the Mahra province as seasonal laborers. However, this opening brought a new form of political organization, the *nidhām mashāyikh* (NM). The latter sundered the unified structure of the committee system to introduce a dual system of parallel rule: the local administration on one side, the NM on the other. In effect, it was a variant of indirect rule on the part of the executive branch of the government in Sana'a; as the formal village committees of the previous regime became informal village councils headed by central government approved sheikhs. These constituted the only subdistrict representatives upon whom the island's administrative center relied, but without discretionary authority over the NM's management. The attempt at foisting on Soqotrans a segmentary polity, which was the unintended effect of the NM, only succeeded in creating a situation of relative anarchy that did not exist prior to its introduction. The NM institutionalized a quasi-clientelist politics between the regions through their respective sheikhs and local branches of state institutions. This introduced an element of aggressive *laissez-faire* in local governance style, as ambitious individuals competed to become sheikh, and engendered a competitive dimension in intra-communal relations as clusters of villages vied for state resources, which turned out to be relatively meager and haphazardly distributed. The result was the gradual dissipation of the ethic of mutual help that pervaded intra-communal relations, while it induced simultaneously a persistent skepticism among Soqotrans vis-à-vis the state's political institutions and development promises.

The post-unity government's adoption of the internationally sponsored discourse on democratization and good governance finally trickled down to Soqotra subsequent to the adoption by the Yemeni government of the Local Authority Law in 2000. This law was part of a comprehensive package of institutional modernization and democratization of local governance, which included the institutionalization of electoral politics as the privileged means of selection to public office, the delegation of administrative authority to local councils staffed through elections, and the enhancement of their capacity to manage development projects and deliver social services. This modernization of governance structures not only signified the formal inclusion of the island

as a recognized entity of the unified Yemeni State, but also formalized the status of Soqotrans as *muwātinīn* (citizen) of the republic given their newly granted individual political rights to participate in the management of their community. However, this newly acquired participatory entitlement was ultimately circumscribed by the central government's appointment without consultation of the *mudīr al-a'amm* (Director General), who is the primary political authority, as head of the district local council. Soqotrans have since adopted as their collective self-reference, neither Yemeni nor Soqotran, but *muwātinīn* (singular *muwātin*).

### **Economic Disembedding: From Barter to Cash**

The shifts in the political organization of Soqotrans and the consequences in terms of the kinds of polities that were constituted had similar impacts on the nature of economic arrangements. In what follows, I re-trace the linkages between each of the administrative regimes and the type of economic agency promoted as well as the development strategies pursued.

Under the Sultanate, Soqotra was primarily a herding economy. Ecological determinants offer only a partial explanation of the persistent and overwhelming primacy of pastoralism in Soqotra. Similarly, the strong occupational affinity between the Sultans and their Soqotran subjects, which reinforced the centrality of the hinterland as the locus of Soqotrans' sociocultural and economic life, only provides a partial understanding of the sustainability of pastoralism. More important perhaps was that pastoralism was the Sultanate's primary source of revenue—through taxation of its by-products (e.g., ghee)—in a nearly cashless, and thus barter dominated economy. The taxation of pastoral products was the primary mode of surplus generation that sustained the social elite (i.e., Sultan, *ashrāf*, and Arab merchants), and subsidized the minimal pre-state governmental apparatus. The other socioeconomic groups (pastoralists, agropastoralists, and fishermen slaves) sustained themselves through the exploitation and exchange of a variety of local products (e.g., dried fish, dates, aloes juice, tree resins, skin and hides, sheep and goat's hair rugs, etc.) as part of a system of *mahrif* (mutual aid) that linked the coastal and hinterland population; in addition, the pastoralists bartered ghee for imported goods from the coastal Arab merchants. Regarding the role of the British during this period, the extent of their participation in the local economy was limited to occasional public works (e.g., airfield maintenance, some roads construction), renting of animals for overland transport, the purchase of vegetables produced from home gardens in the neighboring villages, and the occasional humanitarian food assistance in times of extended drought to alleviate famine condition (see various reports in Ingrams 1993). Indeed, it was under crisis conditions that the discourse on "development" was introduced in Soqotra. This was occasioned by the disruptions in the Indian Ocean traffic supplying the island due to the activities of German submarines between 1939-1945 when the British and allied

troops were stationed at Mori on the northern coast (Johnston 1964:92-94). The resulting food deficit, the consequences of which could be observed by the resident officers, led to the fielding of missions to look at ways of reducing the island's dependency on food imports (see the development proposals in Hartley 1993). However, these project proposals on agriculture and fisheries were never implemented.

The South Yemeni administration's economic strategy was driven by the urgency to undo the chronic neglect by the colonial administration of the socioeconomic needs of the population. One report of the southern government assessed the British contribution by stating, "They left our country, especially our countryside, without the most basic features of modern life" (Ismael and Ismael 1986:110). Hence accelerated social development was the adopted paradigm pursued through the strategy of providing for the basic socioeconomic needs of the population. Moreover, there was an ideologically induced antagonism vis-à-vis the traditional social structure (whether tribalism on the mainland, which was called "Republican feudalism" (Halliday 1974:114-118), or clan-based pastoralism in Soqotra, which I call "clan feudalism") which was seen as a major impediment to development (see Ismael and Ismael 1986). In Soqotra, subsistence pastoralism seemed to have been regarded as an economic dead-end as well as a symbol of the Sultanate's feudal system, and was relatively neglected. This led to the abandonment of the production and export of ghee. In effect, the strategy was to partially drain the pastoral domain of its surplus bedouin population in order to socialize them into agents of economic change that would propel the local economy from subsistence to exchange, and from barter to trade. Accordingly, the development of the following socio-occupational categories were targeted as the needed agents of an emergent modern social order: a class of urban administrative cadres, whose development was encouraged through guaranteed employment upon completion of eight years of schooling, which was supplemented by training opportunities in various fields in the southern state capital, Aden; fishermen, through the establishment of a fishing cooperative with guaranteed purchase of the catch by the government; and peasant farmers through the establishment of three state cooperative farms.

The government ultimately failed in its attempt to create peasant farmers out of Soqotran bedouins, as the state farm experiment failed by the 1980s, but succeeded in establishing an embryonic urban class of service providers, and made fishing an attractive alternative, or at least a seasonal complement, to pastoralism. More importantly perhaps was the generalized introduction of the use of cash as medium of exchange, and the payment of salaries, which initiated the gradual, but irreversible, retreat of the barter economy. The end result was a kind of subsidized economic agency, as everyone was beholden to the State, which after all was the main, if not sole, provider. Regarding the role of the United Nations, it seemed to have been mostly advisory (i.e., sectoral needs assessments), although it may have contributed to roads construction, water supply, and pilot projects in agriculture.

As to the Soviet Union, it did not establish a military base on the island that could have contributed to its economic development, but merely “maintained mooring buoys off the island” (Halliday 1990:203).

The economic development strategy of the unity government emerged out of a particular conjunctural synergy, namely the imperative of preventing the potentially disruptive economic and political consequences of the unification process. Hence, the adoption of government sponsored growth through extensive public sector expenditures, especially in post creation and infrastructure development, as an essential tool in the consolidation of national unity. In Soqatra, this strategy had three ramifications: First, the expansion of the social services sector through personnel recruitment in education, health, and police. The second was the construction of public buildings (i.e., schools and clinics) all over the island. This was part of the patronage politics of resource distribution linked to the sheikh system, where local social services delivery or development initiatives took on the appearance of gift exchanges. The third was the development of major infrastructural works (i.e., airport, asphalted road networks, seaport, etc.). Whether or not these “development” activities fulfilled the state’s political objectives—that is, the political cooptation of the local population—they, more importantly, generated new opportunities for locals to acquire new skills or modernize old ones (e.g., electrician, masonry, car mechanics, etc). Also, they led to new opportunities for Soqotrans to become contractors or sub-contractors in construction works and the spawning of new service providers (e.g., water sellers, general transport, etc). Finally, the lifting of the economic restrictions imposed by the Socialist administration enabled the starting up of private sector activities. This occasioned a minor exodus of surplus labor from all over the mainland, as migrants sought to take advantage of the new economic opportunities on the island. This migratory influx and the trading activities these economic immigrants undertook led to the expansion and consolidation of Hadiboh as the only market town on the island, and the emergence of a consumer culture.

As the post-unity government sought to integrate the international financial system, the economic policy that brokered its political consolidation was now considered a liability to the country’s economic solvency. This led to the adoption in the mid-1990s of a World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) supervised comprehensive economic reform program, which has remained ever since the government’s guiding economic frame of reference. Henceforth, the political rationale for development through governmental post creation was rendered economically illegitimate, at least in principle. State-society relations were to be increasingly mediated by neoliberal principles, thus communities had to lower their expectations of government and depend more on international development assistance and private sector initiatives. This is exemplified in the conditionalities for development assistance stipulated in the European Union funded *Socotra Archipelago Master Plan*: (1) “Acceptance that the role of the Government of Yemen public sector should

shift from service provider to facilitator”; and (2) “People’s acceptance that sustained development will incur a greater cost to them [i.e., the application of cost-recovery mechanism]” (EU 2000:5-2). Soqatra had a comparative advantage that could facilitate its adaptation to this new order, namely its environment as ecotouristic spectacle, which was to be promoted as an internationally marketable resource. This was the background to the Government of Yemen’s ratification of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), and which provided the framework for the implementation of all initiatives related to its operationalization. Accordingly, the United Nation’s adoption of ecotourism as the island’s “engine of development” was to be managed as a private sector-led “social business,” which refers to a type of economic activity that is market oriented but is motivated not only by profit maximization, but also by “doing good for people and the world” (Yunus 2006). As a result, there seems to have evolved a division of labor between the Government of Yemen, which assumed responsibility for laying the infrastructure, and the international community represented by the United Nations agencies, some self-selected bilateral donors, and a few international NGOs which have taken over the preparation of the island’s landscape for ecotourists. Subsequently, the contours of a service economy dedicated to the tourism industry could be observed in the spawning of new local service providers: hotels, an ecotourism association, a souvenirs shop run by a women NGO, and two environmental protection associations sponsored by the United Nations project. Bedouins were being trained as English-speaking ecotourist guides through the Australian-run English language school. (The latter was, unwittingly, furthering the national government’s undeclared objective of expunging Soqotrans’ ethnolinguistic loyalties as part of its nationalization of their communal identity.) Moreover, the scale of the infrastructure under construction (especially the asphalted roads network) suggests a discrepancy with the minimal requirements of ecotourism. This raises the possibility that two economic models are being contemplated: that of the Arabian Gulf countries as jet-set playground, and Galapagos as nature preserve. Perhaps the deciding factor will be which of the two provides greater economic opportunities to the largest number of Soqotrans.

### **Sociocultural Metamorphosis: From Badāwa to Hadhāra**

Sociocultural metamorphosis refers not only to the reconstruction of Soqotrans’ identity, but also to the reconfiguration of the Soqotran community’s repertoire of cultural practices. This metamorphosis is the cumulative effects of the political mobilization strategies and the economic policies that were reviewed above. The result is a series of spatial displacements and cultural mutations that are described below in terms of the changes in domains of livelihood, residential location, and sociocultural milieu.

The domains of livelihood refer to the spatial/territorial domains, and the resources contain therein, from which

Soqotrans eke out a living. The impact of the spatial displacement that took place within the domains of livelihood is best characterized as the delinking of livelihood-making from its traditional locales. The initial symbiosis between the pastoralist and his grazing grounds, as manifested in the seasonal circularity of the transhumant patterns called *merqīyo* and *mazhīro* of the Soqotran bedouins, has unraveled under the pressure of the external entanglements. More specifically, this has led to the partial breakdown of the two major internal cultural barriers: (1) spatial positionality, in terms of mountains vs. lowlands, as an expression of divergent occupational identities based on livelihood practices; and (2) geographical location, in terms of east vs. west, as indicative of an intrinsic barrier to cultural enlightenment based on regional origin (Elie 2007; Naumkin 1993:158-159). This also brought about the dissipation of Soqotrans' bimodal occupational specialization—pastoralism and fishing. The end result was the blurring of the boundaries between livelihood domains, first initiated by the policies of the Socialist administration, which have induced a generalized predisposition toward economic opportunism. The delinking process between the primary livelihood domain and the dominant economic agent and their transmutation under each historical period may be summarized as follows: from the grazing grounds of the pastoralists under the Sultanate, to the sea as fishermen under the Socialist, by way of the State as employees under the unity government, and finally, to the market as self-seeking individual economic actors under the current post-unity regime. The end result is a transition, still unraveling, from an environmental dependency linked to the pursuit of human survival through a pastoral mode of subsistence, to a cash dependency on non-pastoral activities that are tenuously linked to the cultural continuity of a marginalizing pastoral way of life. Pastoralism persists, but only as a defining cultural leitmotif, not as the dominant economic activity.

The residential location of Soqotrans has been the most susceptible to external entanglements. Indeed, the change in residential location can be described as the disenclaving of locality, as part of an initial process of socializing bedouins, and subsequently of spatial demarcation of the island into territorial bases for sheikhs and then for local councilors. However, the initial impetus to the reconfiguration of residential patterns throughout the island was the building of a network of car tracks in the early 1970s. This began the trend in the spatial displacement of residential locations—from mountain caves and makeshift encampments on the plains to the construction of more permanent structures in the proximity of car tracks. These tracks facilitated the bedouins' access to supply of imported goods (e.g., food, tools, etc.), and the occasional vehicular transport to and from the coast exposed them to alternative livelihoods and lifestyle. More significantly, the expansion of road construction and public sector post creation under the unity government accelerated the shift in the island's population distribution from the hinterland to the coast. This is best illustrated in the following statistics: In 1966, the year prior to the end of the Sultanate and a period

during which herding was the core subsistence activity, the population distribution was 83 percent in the hinterland and 17 percent on the northern coast (Brown 1966). Today, on the basis of the 2004 Census, the distribution is nearly reversed with an estimated 60 percent of the population on the coast and 40 percent in the hinterland, which confirms that fishing among other coastal non-pastoral economic activities have displaced herding as the core livelihood activity. Finally, post-unity regime construction led to the sprouting of schools and clinics, as modern symbols of the state's benevolence. And its more liberal approach to religion led to the building of community-funded mosques all over the island with remittances from the Soqotran diaspora in the Arabian Gulf, which have become prestige symbols in the undeclared tournament of values among villages over the relative rigorism heeded in the performance of the rituals of Friday prayers, for which mosque attendance is compulsory. The location of these types of building (i.e., schools, clinics, and mosques) has conferred main village status in any given area. Such villages have engendered a gradual process of clan aggregation and partial sedentarization. The spread of asphalted roads and the promise of non-traditional occupations (e.g., ecotourism) will inevitably lead to the redrawing of the current socio-spatial configuration of the island.

The shift in sociocultural milieu is perhaps most significant since it represents the culmination of the above discussed forms of delocalization. Indeed, it does not merely exemplify a topographical displacement from mountains to coast, or from rural to urban, but from one cultural universe to another—i.e., from *badāwa* (bedouins domain) to *hadhāra* (urban life). The impact of this shift was the reconfiguration of intra-communal social relations. This is manifested in the problematization of Soqotrans' ethnocultural identity: What is emerging is that urban-based Soqotrans very rapidly, and others in coastal villages and in the hinterland more gradually, are being compelled by a set of stimuli (e.g., political imperatives, economic exigencies, religious proprieties, and cultural alternatives) to participate in an identity formation process that unevenly accommodates communal, national, and international determinants. This identity formation process is partly driven by the incorporation paradigm being pursued by the Yemeni State, which is best expressed in Article 1 of the Constitution: "The people of Yemen are part of the Arab and Islamic nation." This entails—given the absence of a formal policy, and implementation mechanism, of cultural diversity preservation—Soqotrans' conscription, by default more than by design, as a culturally standardized subnational entity that has expunged its ethnolinguistic particularities and remodeled its sociological character to conform to the political ideal and ethnocultural identity of the dominant society. Moreover, this has given rise to the local adoption of an implicit ethnosocial hierarchy with its cultural valuation scheme: Arab/Muslim, as a pan-regional ethnic-religious membership; Yemeni, as a national corporate citizenship; Soqotri, as a communal badge of indigeneity; and muwalladīn, as a subcommunal ethnocultural minority. Consequently, negotiating entry into the



dominant politico-cultural order, as a community constituted by an ethnic and linguistic minority, has induced a diffused feeling of sociocultural vulnerability. This explains perhaps the Soqotrans' recourse to a number of accommodationist tactics in order to approximate conformity to the dominant ideal. For example, the pursuit of (1) "collective melioration" in the form of name changing and intensification of their religious demeanor, as to accentuate their distance from the island's superstitious recent past; (2) "individual mobility" through the adoption of imported cultural ways (e.g., formalized membership in the ruling party) to enhance their social advancement; or (3) "ethnic mobility" which entails emphasizing their Arab origin and spurning the use of Soqotri, as a means of shunning their mixed ethnic heritage and to negate cultural differences in order to identify with the dominant group (cf. Comaroff 1992:62). In this context, the official policy vacuum regarding the fate of the Soqotri language has left culturally conscious Soqotrans wary of undertaking public initiatives for the preservation of their language. For fear that their political loyalty to the Yemeni State may be doubted, and made to feel as lesser Muslims because of their advocacy of a language that some locals regard as a relic of *jāhiliyya* (pre-Islamic period) since it is unrelated to that of the Qur'an. Some Soqotrans have sought to demonstrate, through the method of establishing approximate similarities in sound with equivalences in meaning, that the equivalent of Soqotri words, if not the words themselves, are found in the Qur'an. This seems to be the most acceptable, that is politically innocuous, way of defending the language as not only indigenous to Yemen but also associated with the language of Islam. However, one Soqotran advocate of this line of thinking pushed it to its extreme by arguing that Soqotri is a dialect of Arabic and Soqotrans are originally Arabs, thus denying Soqotrans, and their language any autonomous existence outside a derivative cultural status inherited from an imagined Arab progenitor (Dahrī 2004).

Lastly, the pursuit of these accommodationist tactics has engendered a persistent cultural dissonance between Soqotrans' rural and urban codes of conduct. That is, the communal solidarity of the *badāwa* with its web of cooperative informal institutions and its ethic of hospitality were not transferred, or could not be adapted, to the *hadhāra* wherein prevails a pecuniary ethos with its cash prerequisite to social intercourse. One instance of this cultural dissonance is the conflicting cultural ideals between the townsmen and herdsmen, which persist as the two contrasting poles of Soqotrans' communal identification. Indeed, the townsmen cast an inferiorizing gaze on the herdsmen's rustic habits and lack of learning; and the herdsmen reciprocate with a contemptuous sneer at the townsmen's lack of etiquette (e.g., hospitality) and their abandonment of communal social mores in favor of an imported vice-ridden lifestyle. The bone of contention between them is the ultimate impact on Soqotra of the newly imported way of life, which entails attending school to learn how to read and write Arabic and English with the ultimate goal of getting a salaried position as well as indulging in vices

such as smoking cigarettes and chewing Qat (an imported plant that contains an amphetamine-like stimulant which causes excitement and euphoria) with their deleterious social and economic consequences. Nonetheless, the townsmen and herdsmen are beset by dilemmas about abandoning the *bādiya* (hinterland) for the *madīna* (city), and nostalgia once having done so as well as regret. For the main reason is to ensure the future of the new generation, whose ideal of success is a job with a regular salary that alienates them from their pastoralist upbringing, which spells the end of the traditional way of life in Soqotra. This rural-urban cultural dissonance is instructively captured in a poem, really a moral tale, by Soqotra's better known poet Ali Abdullah Al Rijdihi about the dilemmas, if not the dangers, for Soqotrans in misappropriating the new way of life in the *madīna* (see Morris 2005).

## Conclusion

Soqotra's recent historical itinerary and the changes in its polity, economy, and culture that I have outlined above exemplifies what Fredrik Barth has called a "community of fate"—that is, a group whose social situation and political consciousness were shaped by a near-exclusive dependency on external actors or state action through the allocation of resources and the determination of policy priorities in the economic, political, and cultural domains (1996:19). This dependency was exacerbated, if not initially induced, by the island's peripheral geographic location, spatial confinement, and relative resource deprivation. As such, Soqotra offers a communal context that was, and still is, highly responsive to governmental action as well as highly susceptible to external cultural influences. Moreover, the island's internal transformation could be understood as a product of the operationalization of the two principles that underpinned its political and economic incorporation process: on the one hand, political integration since the South Yemeni administration was, and still is, based on the nationalist principle of vertical integration into the Yemeni nation-state with the gradual corrosion of Soqotrans' cultural integrity as illustrated above in the problematization of the islanders' ethnocultural identity; and on the other, economic integration since unification was pursued on the basis of neoliberal principles, which encouraged individualist self-seeking that resulted in the partial dissipation of communal solidarity, as manifested in the divergences in communal ethos noted above.

The current legacy, among Soqotran youth, of this politically fluctuating, culturally unsettling, and developmentally inconclusive—but in many respects still salutary—process of change is a mood of ambivalent affiliation with their cultural heritage. Its relevance to adapting to the "modern" context is seen as increasingly marginal. This mood was partly generated by the process of the island becoming increasingly a cross-cultural contact zone, not just in its coastal areas but in the hinterland as well, through the introduction of divergent cultural influences from television, various brands of Islam, foreign languages, and miscellaneous people contacts, which

have induced the adoption of new values. These have led, in turn, to the partial devaluation of the traditional places of social interaction and cultural affirmation (i.e., the *badāwa*), and to the discontinuation of the associated cultural reproduction and socialization practices. The confluent effect of these influences was to exacerbate an already increasing feeling of cultural inadequacy among Soqotran youth, generated by a socially uneven and educationally inadequate acquaintance with literacy due to institutional and organizational deficiencies of the local school system, but unfairly attributed to the intrinsic communicative limitations of their mother tongue. Indeed, one Soqotran youth who had finished high school and was working as a storekeeper, a position he felt beneath him but also felt that his skills did not allow him to aspire to a higher function, expressed his exasperation, probably shared by many, with his perceived intellectual handicap stating, “*law ānna luġatnā rajulān la qataltahā*” (If our language was a man I would kill it!). He was, in effect, quoting a statement by the famous Muslim warrior, Ali Ibn Abi Talib, son-in-law of the Prophet, about the unacceptability of poverty. He had substituted “our language” for poverty.

It would seem that there is an imperative to re-enact on behalf of cultural diversity the same sense of urgency that was displayed by the national government and its international partners regarding the protection of the island’s biodiversity through the ratification of the CBD. It is worth recalling that the ratification was followed with unusual expediency by a Global Environment Facility (GEF) funded biodiversity conservation project formulation mission and its subsequent United Nations led implementation. There is a cultural equivalent to the CBD, namely United Nations Education, Scientific, and Cultural Organization’s (UNESCO’s) “Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity” that was adopted in 2001. It affirms that “cultural diversity is as necessary for humankind as biodiversity is for nature,” and calls on all member states to recognize that “all persons have, therefore, the right to express themselves and to create and disseminate their work in the language of their choice, and particularly in their mother tongue.” The promulgation of a Presidential decree on the preservation of the island’s cultural diversity (as was done for its biodiversity)—if only as a pilot experiment on the coexistence between national political unity and communal cultural identity—would herald a new historical period in the island’s communal life.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>The detailed substantiation and further elaboration of all aspects discussed in this paper are to be found in Elie (2007).

<sup>2</sup>In contrast to tribe, which has a known genealogy, the formal definition of a clan is that of “a unilineal descent grouping whose members believe they are descended from a common ancestor, but do not know the genealogical connection” (Keesing 1975:31). Therefore, the clan constitutes a group of households united by a common survival interest and occupying a collectively owned territory inherited from their presumed common ancestors. Furthermore, as Parkin (1997:21) noted,

“Where genealogical memory is very shallow... recruitment [i.e., clan membership] is seen as a matter of filiation [...parentage] rather than descent.” Accordingly, the tribal formation, based on the ideology of descent reified in a genealogical register that most anthropologists claim to be the defining social organization of the entire Middle East (Salzman 2007; Khouri and Kostiner 1990) or the “prime ethnographic fact” of Yemen (Dresch 1993:32) did not take root in Soqatra, in spite of the government’s attempt in the 1990s, as the clan remains the basic unit of social organization (see Elie 2007).

<sup>3</sup>It is worth emphasizing that the Soqotran *badū* bear no resemblance to the tent-dwelling in the desert and camel or pick-up truck riding nomadic bedouins elsewhere in the Middle East (Chatty 1996; Lancaster 1997). Moreover, the thematic preoccupation of the anthropology of pastoralism in the Middle East seems inextricably linked to the problematic of nomadic pastoralism and its segmentary tribal organization. These are articulated within a discourse of “perennial conflict between the state and bedouin society” both in the past and the present, given the bedouins’ uncompromising rejection of “the sedentist outlook and economy” due to their ontological commitment to mobility and migration as a prerequisite to identity maintenance and cultural preservation (Chatty 2006:25). In contrast, today’s Soqotran *badū*’s value orientation is not defined by a rejection of, but a keen receptivity to, sedentarized economic activities, especially with a guaranteed salary and not with a seasonal income. Moreover, their problem with the Yemeni state is over the political expediency, thus benign neglect, with which it addresses their basic needs (i.e., water, education, and health), and not with arbitrary territorial demarcation of pastoral lands, or its sedentarization policies, which are not relevant to Soqatra.

<sup>4</sup>In Soqatra, clan feudalism emanated not through the elaboration of conventions between ruler and ruled, but from a situation in which chronic food insecurity, low population density, dispersed settlement patterns, extensive land use strategy, transformed each village, or the territorial domain of a particular clan collective, into an insular encampment practically forced into living a socially autarkic existence. In this context, the formation of the island into an atomized clandom, as feudal-like estates, was conducive to, if not compulsorily maintained by, the tax-levying system of the Sultanate. The latter was managed through a patriarchal relationship between each clan and the Sultan, who arrogated the role of manorial overlord of the entire island, through the political office of the *muqaddam*, and other intermediaries, whose relationship to the Sultan exemplified that between lord and vassal.

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