

**“Anger Be Now Thy Song”**  
The Anthropology of an Event

**Steven C. Caton**



The Occasional Papers of the School of Social Science are versions of talks given at the School's weekly Thursday Seminar. At these seminars, Members present work-in-progress and then take questions. There is often lively conversation and debate, some of which will be included with the papers. We have chosen papers we thought would be of interest to a broad audience. Our aim is to capture some part of the cross-disciplinary conversations that are the mark of the School's programs. While members are drawn from specific disciplines of the social sciences - anthropology, economics, sociology and political science - as well as history, philosophy, literature and law, the School encourages new approaches that arise from exposure to different forms of interpretation. The papers in this series differ widely in their topics, methods, and disciplines. Yet they concur in a broadly humanistic attempt to understand how - and under what conditions - the concepts that order experience in different cultures and societies are produced, and how they change.

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During 1997-2000, the School was engaged in a four-year focus on the process of globalization and different kinds of local responses to it. The 1998-99 seminar addressed questions particular to political economy, to the interrelated processes of economic globalization and political change as they are manifest in various parts of the world. Caton's paper took up the question of how such changes can be measured and how they come to be written in a communal memory. This essay is a sketch of his next book project, a study of a conflict that broke out during his fieldwork in 1980, in what was then North Yemen, between a tribe and a village sanctuary. This dispute eventually encompassed an entire region and destabilized the central state and its relationship to other nations on the Arabian Peninsula as well as to the Cold War superpowers. In documenting how a local conflict became a national crisis with global implications, Caton will examine the reciprocal relations between geo-political processes and local, day-to-day events. The book will also be a contribution to a growing body of work on violence and mediation in Arab political culture. And finally, but not least, Caton takes up the methodological question of how events are perceived and analyzed by anthropologists. When the conflict occurred in 1980, Caton was working on a study of an oral poetic system and its social and political uses in Yemen. This fieldwork put him in a position to chronicle, almost inadvertently, the ways in which the event was described by the many different people and social bodies who came to play a role in it. The complexity of establishing the "facts" of the event when examined at the level of its ongoing composition led to the further problem of how an observer, trained to document a culture, participates in it when his fieldwork and the politics of an event become fatefully intertwined. The "story" of the conflict, its ensuing violence and mediation, must be told along with the "story" of Caton's fieldwork; analysis of a historical situation must account for a more reflexive problem of how the chronicle of an event comes to be written—a conundrum that Caton calls "poetics."

—Debra Keates, Series Editor



## “Anger Be Now Thy Song”: The Anthropology of an Event

On January 19, 1980, I was loitering as usual in the market place of the *hijrah* when my companions started to become agitated about a rumored abduction of two tribal women. “See, Seif,” they exclaimed to me, “how unruly and uncivilized the tribes are. Such a thing could never have happened here, a place of piety, learning and civilization.”<sup>1</sup> They had barely finished congratulating themselves on their moral superiority when the relative calm of the market was disrupted by a furious uproar. Storming into the center where all the alley ways converged came the sheikh from the neighboring village.<sup>2</sup> Never before had I seen anyone so incensed, yet his anger was controlled as though channeled into song. Red-faced, his body rigid, and shouting at the top of his voice, he told us that two girls, ten and fourteen, were missing from his village and that a *sayyid* boy stood accused of abducting them, a nephew of one of the holy men from the sanctuary. People were scandalized. It was unthinkable that one of their own, a high-born young man who could trace his descent all the way to the Prophet Muhammad, should have committed such a deed. There must be a terrible mistake, they insisted. It was not a mistake, the sheikh replied, and ordered them to summon the uncle. When the latter arrived—confused and anxious—the sheikh performed the ritual I had seen on other, less serious occasions of public protest and disagreement. He removed his dagger from its sheath, the beautiful curved, silver blade with gazelle-horn handle known as the *jambiyyah* throughout Yemen, and held it aloft for an instant as he uttered the formula *‘ana da’i l-ak*, “I challenge you!” He then handed the dagger to a third party who happened to be standing at his side. For the time being, this man was designated the mediator of the dispute until the more important sheikhs of the region could be notified of the conflict and come to resolve it. The uncle, the person challenged, muttered the conventional response *w-ana muHtarim*, “and I am respectful,” passing his thumb across his forehead and handing his dagger to the same man who took the antagonists aside and began the mediation. First he tried to soothe the sheikh. Then he asked him to repeat his story. Not only did he accuse the boy, and his uncle who was responsible for him, of the most heinous crime imaginable, but he held the entire *hijrah* accountable as well. The sheikh’s anger mounted once again as he threw out his challenge: if the girls and the boy were not found and returned by sunset, the sanctuary and the tribe would be plunged into war. He then departed as quickly as he had come. The rest of the men in the market place closed ranks around the uncle, reassuring him that the matter must be some grotesque misunderstanding which would be cleared up momentarily, yet they were obviously disturbed. A calamity—what would be referred to for months thereafter as the *muSibah*—was in the making.

Let me halt temporarily my narrative of this . . . what? what shall I call it? a conflict? an event? and try to explain why and how I want to analyze it.

### The Status of Event Analysis in Contemporary Historiography

Historians, of course, have made events the staple of their analysis until the early nineteen

fifties, when the Annales School, first Lefebvre and then more magisterially Braudel, argued that the older event history was outmoded, intellectually bankrupt, and had to be replaced by the study of temporally longer and historically recurrent processes that lie behind them, the processes of the so-called *longue durée*.<sup>3</sup> But Braudel has not had the final word after all, for event analysis has had something of a comeback in French historiography, not in order to replace the Braudelian processual *longue durée* so much as to synthesize it with the latter. Edgar Morin (1972) and Pierre Nora (1974) were in the vanguard of this movement in the seventies, and Paul Ricoeur exercised an important influence through his book *Time and Narrative* (1984) by insisting that not only event analysis but also narrative employment were inescapable in any project of historical writing. We could add to this genealogy the work of Jacques Rancière whose *Names of History* (1994) has deep resonances with Hayden White's critique of historical writing in light of a theory of poetics. All three, that is, see the writing of history as ineluctably tied to problems more commonly considered in poetics: questions of metaphor, metonymy, irony, and, as in the case of Ricoeur, narrative.

Obviously I have time only to gesture to these works and this analytical tradition, though I continue to find them to be most important for my project. For example, there clearly is a sense in which the event that occurred on January 19, 1980 was to be affected by large-scale systems, processes, and if not exactly the *longue durée* than perhaps the *demi-durée*. After a certain period of time, it became less a local conflict over women and honor than it did a regional confrontation over power between Khawlan at-Tiyal and the central state. This confrontation, in turn, was of relatively long standing. It went at least as far back as the Yemeni Civil War (1962-1974). It was exacerbated in 1978 by an agreement that North Yemen signed with South Yemen to unify within the next decade or so, an agreement which was unpopular with Khawlan because of the assassination of some of its sheikhs that South Yemen had allegedly masterminded.<sup>4</sup> There is a larger, geopolitical context to consider as well: Saudi Arabia also feared a united Yemen as a threat to its hegemonic ambitions in the Peninsula. I was told at one point in the dispute that a car was found near the feuding villages containing a suitcase of Saudi Riyals. This raised the question of whether certain parties were being paid by a hostile power to escalate the confrontation to the point where forces in Khawlan, which had been mobilized to defend the *hijrah*, might now be used to pressure the central state into backing down from its unpopular policies.

While it is certainly true that the event was caught up in global forces of one kind or another, it is just as important to note that actors in the event represented these forces to themselves in culturally specific or singular terms, attempting to explain to themselves what was happening around them and how it affected their lives. It is this local interpretation of the event, if you will, that needs to be elucidated as well.

For example, *sharaf* or honor was the dominant cultural code in terms of which actors told themselves a story about their reasons for fighting in the early stages of the dispute (that is, that they had to fight not only to insure the return of the two young women but to reconstitute their honor so that they could negotiate with the sanctuary as equals). But in the later round of the dispute, when it became clear that the women would never be found, the reasons given for the injured party wanting to continue to fight had to do with *siyaasah* or politics (that is, the reasons the injured party or tribe of the girls continued to fight no longer had to do with the exigencies of honor but with a whole host of political issues). Such politics was interpreted to include the competing powers and ambitions of various sheikhs in the region; the failure of the region to provide effective governance due in part to the decimation of its leadership at the hands of aforementioned assassins; the historically turbulent relationship of that region to the state which views Khawlan's autonomy as a threat to its

own power; and the Yemeni state's troubled relationship, in turn, to other countries not only in the Peninsula but in the world. All of these cultural interpretations of politics now figured into—and often competed with each other in—the understanding of the event.

It is important to note in the cultural interpretation of the political in Yemen (and one could generalize to many other parts of the Arab world as well) is that poetry is part and parcel of the political process. In a previous work *"Peaks of Yemen I Summon": Poetry as Cultural Practice in a North Yemeni Tribe* (1990) I showed how, in the view of tribesmen, poetry was too precious not to use for purposes of persuasion in public agons such as dispute mediations or open criticisms of the state. One of the duties of a poet is to provide a political and moral analysis (in Arabic, *taHliil*) of a particular situation or event that seems to preoccupy the community at any one time. He provides this analysis more often than not in poetry or, to be more exact, in oral poetic performances. The poem is not merely a representation of an event but itself a political enactment, a verbal deed with its own force. For example, I have attended tribal meetings at which a particular issue was being debated where poet after poet would speak his mind. After a while, it had become clear that, through this chain of verse, a consensus had been constituted as to what should be done in the matter. No further discussion, took place and an agreement was reached almost immediately. I would argue that this kind of poetry does not separate representation from action, or art from political event.

To exemplify the cultural interpretation of politics in poetry for the dispute under consideration in this paper, here is a brief poem composed by ad-Dabaa from the tribe of ʿArush (one of the seven tribes of Khawlan). The poet is complaining that the tribes of Khawlan can no longer solve their own problems because there is no effective leader like the legendary al-Ghaadir, one of the sheikhs assassinated in the Civil War, to guide the negotiations. A metaphor, commonly found in the political rhetoric, compares the failure of regional governance to an automobile breaking down and the leadership of al-Ghaadir with that of a mechanical wizard who—as the imagery fancifully and whimsically suggests—could make an automobile run even sideways if necessary. Here is the poem:

Yaa GaaDHi, ʿirif kilm-ati w-esh iHtijaaji//yaa Hayd marfuuʿ al-janeesh  
 law ʿaad(a) shii fi-l-gabyilah gabaayil zaaji//maa yihmiluu saadat qureesh  
 khawlaan gad hum fi-t-tarab min ʿagib naaji//gad hum Dhuʿuuf ar-raHman: min-esh?  
 Gad daynamat-hum w-al-makiinah w-al-buwaaji//la shughghalat gad hiih fineesh  
 laa ʿaad(a) naaji kaan jarʿa-haa ʿawaaji//w-imla l-balad guwwat wa jeesh  
 gad as-siyaasah w-al-maʿaarif leel(a) daaji//yaa gabyilah ghabnii ʿal-eesh

O QaDHi, know my words and my plea,  
 O peak most elevated.  
 If powerful tribes are still left in tribalism,  
 They would not abandon the lords of Qur'esh [i.e., the sayyids of the sanctuary].  
 Khawlan, the tribes have been ground into the dirt since the death of Naji  
 [al-Ghaadir, the former head of the entire region during the Civil War].  
 They've become weaklings, O Merciful One. And Why?  
 Because their dynamo, machine and spark plugs don't work.  
 If tribalism were to run, it would soon collapse.  
 If Naji were still alive, he would have driven the car sideways  
 And filled the countryside with powerful forces, an army.

A gloomy night has descended on politics, shrouding wisdom//O tribes, you've been  
deceived.

### Violence of Community and Violence of Exclusion

It was in connection to these culturally interpreted, encompassing forces that what I call a violence of community transpired. Here is how I learned of it.

As search parties were out scouring the country for the missing girls, the *hijrah* prepared its defense. As it happened, the house in which I rented the first floor was on one of the highest elevations in the village, directly facing the enemy, so marksmen from among the younger *saadah* took their positions on the parapets. Shooting occurred all through that night. At dawn, however, it ceased. Then I heard a voice from the roof cry, "O, Seif? Are you down there? Why don't you brew us some tea?" *Tea*, I thought to myself in astonishment, and then, shrugging my shoulders, I thought, *why not? They're probably hungry and thirsty. It's the least I can do.* Minutes later, fumbling up the dark stairwell to the roof, and crouching as low as possible to avoid being hit, I made my way forward with teapot and porcelain cups rattling on a tin tray. Now, it was their turn to be astonished. "Why are you so frightened?" they asked. "This is just a game. They're not trying to kill us—not yet anyway," and they chuckled. The enemy was making its rhetorical point: get the girls back or the screw will be tightened one more turn. I had feared the worst, having been fed anthropological accounts of "segmentary lineage societies" in which the feud, often of the deadliest kind, was said to be "endemic."<sup>5</sup> In my experience, the feud went through different stages, being at first performative of honor and indeed constitutive rather than merely destructive of social relations. And then, only if it failed to be resolved through mediation, did it gradually become deadlier and more threatening to the lives of its participants.

Let me delve more deeply into this difference between the forms that violence can take by talking about "violence of community" and "violence of exclusion," two concepts which are more my invention than they are that of the local cultural tradition, though I would argue that they are logically derived from the latter. As we have seen, the plaintiff required a symbolic or theatrical performance of violence to reconstitute his tribe's honor, which, in turn, was a precondition for him to negotiate as an equal to the party that had threatened his honor. Pierre Bourdieu,<sup>6</sup> in his marvelous analysis of the sense of honor among Kabyle tribesmen of Algeria, has made this cultural logic comprehensible and compelling. The point to stress is that this kind of violence reconstitutes relations among parties. This is why I call it a "violence of community," a designation that may seem counter-intuitive for two reasons: one, we are accustomed to thinking of violence as inherently destructive rather than creative; and two, this violence does the work usually performed by agents and structures of the state. But in Khawlan, when a wrong was committed, it was not to the central state that the contending parties turned, or not usually, for the state, it was feared, would jeopardize the region's culturally valued sense of autonomy. Instead they turned to each other, and would enter into a complex and delicate process of feuding and mediation in the hope of coming to a resolution of their differences. By "violence of exclusion" I mean a violence that has the opposite aim, one of driving an opponent out of the community rather than trying to draw him back into it. This may be a violence of brute force, such as open warfare, or of dictat—thus, poetry, too, could escalate from a presumed rhetoric of persuasion into cursing or vilification and shaming—but the intention is the same: the removal of the unwanted person or group from the shared space of the community. To be sure, such a violence, though driving out the opponent, may, and often does, have the simul-



taneous consequence of solidifying the sense of community among the victimizers. Indeed, this gets us back to the functionalist theory of violence in so-called segmentary societies I mentioned above. But whether it does or does not have this effect is not my concern here. I doubt very much that tribesmen believe they go to war or commit other acts of exclusionary violence in order to feel stronger internally, and it is what they think or interpret, let us remember, which concerns us most here.

One of the more unsettling aspects of interpreting a particular act of violence, however, is that it is not always certain to the participants which form it is taking, whether of community or exclusion. In the conflict in Khawlan, for example, it remained ambiguous until the end whether hostilities would tip over into a violence of exclusion or whether, less ominously, it was simply a more heightened theatricality of a violence of community. Only by hindsight could I, at least, and I suspect also my Yemeni companions, see that such a point was never reached. But while one was in the event, the ambiguousness of violent actions pressed upon one like a fog.

I tried to describe this experience in humorous terms in my personal diary:

March, 1980

*. . . the sanctuary has been fighting with its neighbor over the alleged abduction of two young women. After the initial outburst, things seemed to cool down a bit, only then to heat up again, as tempers flared and differences failed to get resolved. It seemed that a wedding would be held in the village during one of the many truces, something all of us were looking forward to, as it might help to relieve the tension. I was particularly looking forward to it as I would be able to record more poetry. When the morning of what I thought was to be the wedding arrived, I heard gun shots, a signal often used to alert people about a public occasion, so I put on my headdress and sandals, slung my tape recorder over one arm, my camera over the other, checked to make sure the batteries in both were fresh, and stuck a spiral ring notebook (in which I scribbled anything interesting I might be told or had observed), stuck that inside the waist band of my fuuTah, and sallied forth. When I got halfway down the street, a voice summoned me from above. "Where are you going, Seif?" I looked up to the roof above my head. "Why to the wedding, of course." "What wedding?" was the curt reply. "Get back in your house. There's a war going on!" And at that moment, I could hear the ping of the bullets ricocheting off the walls of the house.*

Something had changed. The plaintiff in the case, the tribe of the girls, had steadfastly refused all these months to agree to a mediated settlement, on the grounds that the women would have to be returned first. But after search parties scoured the country and failed to find them, and it became increasingly clear that they would never be found, the position of the tribe and its allies was deemed intolerable by powerful mediators. The latter mainly included sheikhs from other tribes who tried to remain neutral in the dispute but also *saadah* from villages other than the sanctuary and regional representatives of the central state. The fact that the plaintiff was holding out was interpreted to have something to do with issues other than honor: namely, that he—or more likely his handlers—was exploiting the dispute for political gain. The escalation of the violence, for whatever reasons, threatened to destabilize the region, to eliminate the sanctuary, even to sever Khawlan from the rest of the country in a kind of mini civil war. To persist in his course of action meant that the plaintiff was ignoring the consensus of the mediators, and that was unforgivable. If he could not

be persuaded to stop, then force would have to be applied against him. If necessary, he would have to be driven from the polity known as Khawlan at-Tiyal. The event was understood to be taking a different turn and in conjunction with this perception, violence itself took on a different quality. Fortunately, a “violence of exclusion,” though threatened, never had to run its course because the parties in the dispute finally agreed to resolve their differences peacefully.

### Mediation and Poetry

In explaining the difference between these two kinds of violences, which, as I said, are related to different cultural interpretations of the event’s course or unfolding, it is clear that they are not only entangled in each other but also in processes of mediation. A “violence of community” made it possible for mediation to take place, but to insure that mediation would continue, the threat of a “violence of exclusion” was ambiguously present. The containment of that ultimate threat was the successful outcome of the mediation process. Obviously, understanding how parties mediated their differences is an important aim of the project.

Let me therefore say just a few things about it. I think it is important to note that mediation is an “everyday” practice of society in Khawlan. The ritual challenge to which the sheikh resorted in the story that began this talk is a performance that happens everyday. And the almost improvised nature in which a mediator was found—namely, anyone at hand who was deemed trustworthy and respectable—is quite common. It is important to capture this everydayness of mediation as something embedded in, rather than extraneous to, the society. There are, to be sure, other more formal and more elaborate structures through which disagreements can be aired and settled, and different levels of the national society that can be and were pulled into the process. In the conflict in Khawlan, mediating roles were played by renowned *sayyid*-s from other parts of the country, influential sheikhs within the confederation to which Khawlan belongs, as well as other powerful confederations within Yemen, and of course agents of the state. As it turned out, poetry about the conflict was composed and performed before, during, and after the assemblies. In addition, there were major odes composed by the main disputants and negotiators which were chanted and recorded on tape, consisting of the provocation of one poet and the answer from another or from a whole host of others coming not only from different sides in the dispute but also different levels of society, the enchanted poems forming a complex commentary on the event. These tapes were widely circulated throughout the markets in Yemen, so that the event came to be known not only in the region of Khawlan at-Tiyal but the country as a whole. And finally, I was surprised to find the discussion spilling over into poetry composed for wedding rituals and religious festivals. In these different venues and modes I was able to track the mediation of the dispute.

### Event Analysis in Anthropology

Now, anthropologists, by contrast to historians, have, with only a few exceptions, not treated events as analytical problems. To be sure they have included descriptions of them in their ethnographies, but only as “raw material” and hardly ever as that which is to be analyzed in its cultural specificity. While in the field, I averted my gaze from the event not only because I was frightened by it, but because I was not trained to see it. Rituals, of course, genres of speaking, to be sure, but events? Rules and norms or even institutional processes, but happenings that were not exactly one-time occurrences but unusual nonetheless?

Surprisingly, there is a literature in anthropology, a thin one, which has problematized events. I want to review it here briefly and critically in order to clarify my own approach.

Among the few key figures in the history of anthropology who have toyed with the idea of making events more central to their analyses of culture and social processes are Max Gluckman, the renowned South African functionalist anthropologist, Victor Turner, and more recently the historical anthropologist Marshall Sahlins. As far back as 1958, Gluckman dealt with the problem of events in an article entitled “Analysis of a Social Situation in Modern Zululand.” After him Victor Turner did so as well in his more famous and far more imaginative work on “social dramas.” Although quite different from each other, they both give up trying to capture the singularity or specificity of the event, preferring instead to highlight social norms (Gluckman) or supposedly universal ritual processes (Turner). In doing so, they reified the continuous or the non-disruptive as the everyday or the real, call it what you will. I do believe that there is a *doxa*, a normative order, but the question is whether we can assume that the “ordinary” or the “everyday”—the normative—carries its own reasons within itself (that it is self-subsistent), or whether there has to be a discourse that authorizes it as “everyday” and “normal.” Isn’t the “everyday,” as Michel de Certeau reminds us in the title of his book on anthropology, itself a “practice”? That is, It is “normal” from a particular vantage point in the social and political system. I return to this question when I take up Foucault’s contribution to the study of events. For now, I only wish to emphasize that Gluckman and Turner were content to let the content of events drop out of their normalizing or universalizing frameworks.

One could not talk about event analysis in contemporary anthropology without mentioning the work of Marshall Sahlins, especially his two remarkable books *Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities* (1981) and *Islands of History* (1985), which are concerned with the event of first contact between European colonizers and Hawaiian islanders.<sup>7</sup> I am for the purposes of this paper more interested in a lesser known essay of Sahlins’s called “The Return of the Event, Again; With Reflections on the Beginnings of the Great Fijian War of 1843-1855 between the Kingdoms of Bau and Rewa” (1991) in which he explicitly problematizes the study of events.

In my reading of this essay, Sahlins is to be commended for taking the specificity or singularity of the historical event seriously and for making it his challenge to recuperate its concreteness for us. He argues that in structural anthropology the event was prematurely dismissed as the jetsam and flotsam of once coherent cultural systems broken up by the tides of history (as Levi-Strauss’ eloquent formulation has it in *Pensée Sauvage*). Sahlins’ stated purpose in doing so is to grasp the dialectic between event and cultural structures of knowledge; that is, the concrete structure is changed as a result of material contingencies and the pragmatics of actors’ interactions and then is reconstituted in a new form by the system. We are presented with three moments in the dialectic: “instantiation” of the cultural categories in the specifics of the event; “dénouement of the incarnated forces and relations”; and “totalization of the consequences of what happened, or the return of the act to the system.” The talk of a system returning to equilibrium, or what Sahlins calls totalization, is reminiscent of an earlier normative theory of anthropology. Event, eventually, becomes swallowed up in system—to be sure, a new or a transformed system—but a system nonetheless.

Let me now turn to a figure outside of anthropology who has had an incalculable influence on it, Michel Foucault, in order to complicate a bit our notion of the event and thereby overcome some of the problems its formulations have had in anthropology. In an interview published originally in 1980, and reprinted as Chapter Three in *The Foucault Effect*

(1991), there is a brief passage of two pages (76-78) under the subheading "Eventalization" wherein Foucault remarks: "Even though the 'event' has been for some while now a category little esteemed by historians, I wonder whether, understood in a certain sense, 'eventalization' may not be a useful procedure of analysis." He then goes on to ask: "What do I mean by this term? It means making visible a singularity at places where there is a temptation to invoke a historical constant, an immediate anthropological trait, or an obviousness which imposes itself uniformly on all." To "eventalize" is not then a project of recuperating the event for historical analysis, of looking at particularly dramatic moments that can be seen to be disruptive or challenging of a normative order, so much as it problematizes the assumption of the latter as the taken-for-granted—the everyday, the normal, the uniform, the continuous, whether this be the norm of a functionalist anthropology or a totalization of a structuralist one—and to do so by revealing the struggles that go on in the course of everyday life by people who have different stakes or interests than those articulated by the normative order. If that is the case, then we have to rethink our notion of the event. It isn't a periodic or a cyclic phenomenon which appears in a moment of disruption, only then to be reabsorbed by the normative order; it is in a sense always already there, though under the surface or in the background, and then appears spectacularly for a while. (An example of the latter in Foucault's work might be his study of patricide in *I, Pierre Rivière*.) The moments which historians have traditionally called events only reveal more dramatically that which goes on simmering under the surface of things. Foucault puts it thus: "[. . .] eventalization means rediscovering the connections, encounters, supports, blockages, plays of forces, strategies and so on which at a given moment establish what subsequently counts as being self-evident, universal and necessary." It is in the space that he variously calls the "breach" that he wishes to linger. "We aren't," he reminds us, "nor do we have to put ourselves, under the sign of a unitary necessity," meaning that we do not have to de-eventalize our history (or for that matter our anthropology) by "ascribing the object they analyze to the most unitary, necessary, inevitably and (ultimately) extra-historical mechanism or structure available. An economic mechanism, an anthropological structure or a demographic process which figures the climactic stage in the investigation."

With some of these thoughts in mind, I now pick up the narrative threads of the event in Khawlan at-Tiyal. The boy who had absconded with the two young women was caught about ten days after the incident. I will call him Abdullah. He was turned over to the sheikhs in charge of the investigation who extracted from him what they thought was a truthful confession by the classic method of the "ordeal" or "trial," though applied with more modern efficiency in the form of electric shock. Under torture, he declared that the girls had paid him to take them out of the village and after driving them to Ta'iz, checked into a hotel and had sex with the oldest of them. There he left them and there they apparently disappeared. Of course, this testimony is damning for the women and for their tribe. Why would the young women have paid Abdullah to take them out of the village? Only desperation, it was thought, could have driven them to commit such a reckless act. Perhaps the oldest was pregnant out of wedlock and feared discovery? But there were others who did not believe the boy's story, even if it was extracted under torture. It turned out that there was at least one witness to the abduction, a man by the name of al-Hajbah, who owned a small convenience store by the side of the road connecting the sanctuary to the main highway leading to Sana'a. He could identify Abdullah as the man who was driving a white Toyota with two women in the back and who had stopped to buy drinks at the store. The women were veiled, of course, and al-Hajbah could not identify them but he did notice that they had not uttered a sound. This was not in itself peculiar, since women's voices are not

supposed to be heard in male public, one of the conceptions of honor being that they are nearly as enticing in the sound of their voices as they are in the sight of their faces, so the store owner was pressed to explain why his suspicions were aroused. At the time he had not thought very much about it, but upon reflection he remembered that the young women in the back had not only been still but motionless—as if they had been drugged. If true, Hajbah’s evidence would suggest that the women were not in the car out of their own volition. The confession of Abdullah and the testimony of Hajbah—especially in the absence of testimony from the young women—were not only conflicting but also circumstantial, thereby leaving room for rival versions of the “truth,” not only about what happened but who was responsible for it. If the young women were as guilty as the boy’s testimony implied, then his crime—though substantial—seemed less heinous, and the sanctuary in turn less responsible. Arguments could be made to reduce the charges, at least against the *hijrah* (the boy was doomed in any case). But if the women were abducted against their will, then their tragedy looked less like their own doing. The reason to attack the sanctuary would be unequivocal, the compulsion to seek damages overwhelming. There was yet another struggle going on which had to do with which *doxa* would prevail. Would it be tribal law *‘urf* or religious law, *shari‘ah*? The stakes were enormous for the *hijrah*, because according to tribal law guilt was deemed collective and the whole village would have to pay for it in some way or other.

### Poetics and Reflexivity in History and Anthropology

As powerful and important as the idea of eventalizing may be, Foucault is silent on two questions that also concern me, both of which we could call “reflexive.” That is, the question of his own positionality that constrains but also makes possible what he can know or say about the event; and the question of how he puts together his micro-histories. De Certeau is quite shrewd about the second question, when, in his reading of *Discipline and Punish*, an analysis of penalization as an “event,” he points out that “He (Foucault) analyzes the process of a chiasm: the place occupied by the reformist projects of the late eighteenth century has been ‘colonized,’ ‘vamparized,’ by the disciplinary procedures that subsequently organized the social space. This detective story about a substituted body would have pleased Freud” (1984:45). Elsewhere in the same essay, De Certeau observes, “In Foucault’s work, the drama pits against each other two forces whose relationship is reversed by the tricks of time.” Of course the very same criticism could be levelled at Sahlins, that he is insufficiently reflexive about his own positionality (which one could, in some sense, take to be Obeyesekere’s point) and that he seems unconcerned about the poetics of his own writing about the event, that is, about the forms of narrative or emplotment, and the effects of truth that they might have. *Islands of History*, for example, unfolds as a clever detective story which I would argue is not simply used as a “device” to entertain readers, though it does do that, but as a mechanism by which to produce the “truth” about the death of Captain Cook. In most detective stories, the loose ends are tied up and there is a sense that the good (over evil), the right (over wrong), and the truth (over falsehood) have triumphantly prevailed. We could also consider how narrative is implied in Sahlins’ analysis of linked dialectical moments of the event when he uses the terms such as “denouement.”

In contrast to Foucault and Sahlins, Greg Dening, particularly in his book *Mr. Bligh’s Bad Language* (1992), the study of another event in the Pacific, comes to grips with both the necessary poetics of his task and its reflexivity. Dening is an historian and anthropologist who has made the moment of encounter between Europeans and indigenous peoples of the

Pacific his theme—a concern he calls the “ethnographic moment.” He is notable among historians for being reflexive in two senses: 1) he tries to reflect on his notion of history while he is writing one, thereby explaining how the analysis is motivated; and 2) he tries to reflect on his historical poetics in the same act of writing. For example, in his view of history the past comes to us in the archive as already “texted” (that is, already constructed by various discursive conventions), and he sees his task as one of “re-texting the already textured past,” which requires him to reflect on the poetics of his enterprise. In his histories, he reflects critically on the kind of historian he might be, which contextualizes for us his affirmation of some things as important and others as not, and the reasons he treats them in the way he does. And he believes that the history he produces is as much a text about the past as it is about the present, and thus that it is important to explain what he means for it to do in the present. Denning, unlike Sahlins, is not afraid of ambiguity in the meaning of events or in the incoherence of representation of the event by the historian. “If I were asked what ethnographic history may ultimately be,” he explains in his book, “I would answer that it is an attempt to represent the past [. . .] in such a way that we understand both its ordered and its disordered natures” (1992:25). As for his poetics, he self-consciously adapts a theatrical frame (with a prologue, acts, *entre-actes*, and epilogues) which heightens the reader’s attention to the constructedness, or fictiveness, of the representation of the event without alienating it from a realist project. This I believe to be an important point: that one can draw the reader’s attention to the fictiveness or constructedness of the text without destroying the sense that there is a referent “out there”—an extratextual world—which the author is struggling to represent in the text, and which always eludes his grasp.

We have covered considerable ground. Gluckman, Turner, Sahlins, Foucault, and Denning: all have, though in different ways, taught us something about the analysis of the event. I have tried to argue that we need an approach that incorporates a concern with the event’s singularity or specificity along with Foucault’s crucial idea of eventalization, while preserving the strong sense of poetics and reflexivity of an ethnohistorian such as Greg Denning. But is the reflexivity of an historian the same as that of a field anthropologist? It is rare that an anthropologist goes into the field to study an event, because the latter usually happens unexpectedly and may even catch the anthropologist off guard. Furthermore, I think it does matter that the event is coeval with the fieldwork undertaken by the anthropologist, for the event itself becomes entangled in the fieldwork in quite problematic ways. It matters not only to our apprehension of the event—a kind of “I was there”-ness that such anthropological accounts share with memoirs-cum-histories (e.g. de Tocqueville’s eyewitness account of the events of 1848)—but it also matters to our fieldwork, more dramatically in some than in others, in the effects that the event has on the latter.

### Two Reflexive Ethnographic Snippets about the Event

Let me try to illustrate these various dimensions of the project—the notion of eventalizing, a meditation on fieldwork (that is, an understanding of how my representation of the event was affected by conditions of fieldwork), and the reflexivity and poetics of ethnographic writing—by this snippet. One day I happened to be walking in the sanctuary, when I accidentally came across Abdullah. He was manacled and sat on his haunches, smoking a cigarette. The sight of him gave me a shock. His head had been shaved and his face was discolored and swollen where it had received the blows of the interrogators. This image of him would come back to haunt me when I was thrown into prison under vague charges of intrigue and espionage, bearing the violet traces of some scuffling I received while resisting

arrest. When he turned towards me and smiled, I had the uncanny feeling of encountering my double. Not that we looked alike, but we seemed to be placed in the same structural position, that of the troublemaker, the infiltrator, who had to be contained and repelled. There was a line of poetry that was composed during the conflict: "Filth has entered the sanctuary." While I knew it to be an allusion to him, I couldn't help thinking that it was also an allusion to me. Why don't you come over and talk to him, his companions admonished me. "He's ordinary" (*huwa 'adi*), and they added, "no different from you or me." I nodded my head in greeting but continued on my way. What a failure of anthropological nerve on my part, one which I regret to this day. But when Abdullah was said to be "ordinary," could the meaning have been ironical? These young men may have thought that Abdullah was being scape-goated for problems that were much deeper than the evil of one individual and which affected all of their lives. Among these problems was the difficulty of marrying because payments demanded by the older patriarchal males for their daughters were becoming exorbitant, well beyond what most young men like Abdullah, with no more than a high school education and a low-paying clerical government job, could afford. In that sense, he was "ordinary," an example of where they were "eventualizing" the dispute, making his extraordinariness seem less strange or at least comprehensible. But again, this is pure speculation, because I failed to talk to Abdullah or even his young guards. There was a crucial limit to my knowledge about the boy which is in part explained by who I was and by my situation in the field, and as such it was a limit to how I could know the conflict. °Abdullah the Criminal, Seif the Anthropologist, were merging into one phantasmagorical figure in my mind, and perhaps even the minds of my hosts in the region. Confirmation of my repression may be found in something which is mentioned in my diary at around this time, a vivid dream I remembered having in graduate school in Chicago about warfare in the Middle East. At the time that I had the dream, I recalled a sense of foreboding and dread. I recounted the dream in my field diary at the time of the event, because of the uncanny feeling that it had come true.

*I once had a dream in Hyde Park [. . .] that I would land in the center of something—I didn't know what it would be, except that it involved a lot of fighting—I wonder if my dream has now become reality. I stop worrying about myself and think about what might happen to the sayyid-s—some of them may die in this war and the men who are now bearing arms must be wondering whether they will be the ones to die. Or perhaps one of their women or children?*

*And what of the tribesmen? One of them might be killed as well! And for what reason? In order to avenge a shame. I feel like I'm in the middle of a Greek tragedy.*

To add one more twist to this reflexive saga, it is also important to know that I do not refer to my meeting Abdullah in my diary. This cannot have been a simple lapse, the sort of thing one doesn't mention because one has other, more pressing matters to note. There was absolutely nothing more important or more disquieting and I ought to have said something about him. The omission was, more probably, due to repression. The problem of memory is obviously compounded here because the fieldwork and the event took place nearly two decades ago. And frankly, I have thought least about the problem of memory up until now though clearly I cannot afford to ignore it.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, I am fascinated by the question of anthropological genres and how they may be used in writing the ethnography of the event. There were at

least three distinct forms of writing that I engaged in while in the field: the field note, the personal diary entry, and the letter back home to teachers, friends, and family. I plan to incorporate them all in my book. Since they were written at the time that the event took place, they have a different status from the text that I am writing now, a text of recollection and reconstruction twenty years "after the fact." But rather than keeping them out of the book, as is usually done, because they are deemed so much undigested "raw material" that might make the text rather less than seamless or the authority of the anthropologist less than absolute, I will create, I suppose, a palimpsest—an overlapping of a newer discourse over an older one, not so that the newer might absorb or override the older but that they might "challenge" each other in interesting ways, as for example in the snippet above containing my personal diary.

If a sense of over-identification prevented me from talking to the young man Abdullah and thus of being able to say very much about him, can I say anything about the two young women who never returned? Whatever the real reason for their disappearance (were they sold into an international prostitution ring? Were they found and then killed in order to prolong the dispute for reasons of *siyaasah*? Did they seek asylum with a powerful sheikh who was then honor-bound to protect them but also to keep their whereabouts secret?), it was as if they had vanished off the face of the earth. Yet they were, by their very absence, always present in the dispute, and afterwards as well, when ostensibly it had been settled. Nagging questions persist. If they had been found, would they have "spoken"? Would they have given "voice" to their own "experience"? Would my position as a male ethnographer, on the other hand, have impeded my ability to "hear" them? And, as a consequence, would my silence on their lives continue to make them the victims of male violence?

Gayatri Spivak asks, in an article that has become canonical in feminist and post-colonial studies, "Can the subaltern speak?" (1988) and answers her own question in the negative. "The subaltern as female cannot be heard or read," she avers, and this implies that she cannot be a Subject, the author of her own discourse when it is assimilable to the discourse of patriarchy, colonialism, and so forth. And so if the young women had returned and spoken, whatever they would have said, according to this reckoning, would have been yet another silencing, operating as they (and we) do within a patriarchal order. Along with Spivak's article we can also look to Joan Scott's essay "The Evidence of Experience" (1993) to help us get through these conundrums of representation, an essay which asks the question whether, by invoking a category of experience, can we hold to a view of the Subject as speaking "authentically" about it. Scott concludes that we cannot. We could extend the question from the subject of the ethnography to the subject of the ethnographer: because of some shared identity of gender, would a female ethnographer speak more authentically than a male about women's lives in a severely patriarchal society? Or, vice versa, would a male ethnographer not be able to get at that experience simply because he is of a different gender? We are now only too familiar with the critiques of essentialism that such claims have received in post-colonial and post-structuralist theories. To be sure, a female ethnographer in Yemen has greater access to pre-menopausal and (especially) unmarried women—precisely the age group that the fugitive women came from—than would a male ethnographer, but what leverage does such positionality afford in regard to the narratives about women's lives? Are they "closer" to women's "authentic experiences"? What we might say is that the narrative is different from one solicited by a male ethnographer—if indeed they are different—and that the difference has to be explained in terms of the power relations in which ethnographer and subject are enmeshed and that affect each of them in their speaking. It may be helpful to remind ourselves that, as a male, I had no more intimacy with the culprit Abdullah than



a female ethnographer probably would have. Conversely, a female ethnographer might just as easily have been constrained in speaking to and/or about the fugitive women, for fear of how the identifications of the young women might have rubbed off on her and placed her in danger.

Is it, then, to make them "speak" or to make them present in their being, as Derrida might put it, that should be my project? After all, it was their absence, their silence, that shook the patriarchal system. Silence is not always—or not only—oppressive, as Susan Gal has shown. It can also prevent closure, prevent the patriarchal system from coming full circle and speaking for the women once again. And here it is that I begin to understand the poetics of representing the women in this event. You might have heard an echo in the title of my talk, "Anger be now thy song," of the opening lines of Homer's *Iliad*, as translated by Robert Fitzgerald. An ancient story, really, about patriarchal culture which has deep reverberations in my representation of the event. But unlike the event in question, *The Iliad*, as you will recall, ends with Helen's lamentations over the corpse of the Trojan warrior Hector and her return into the hands of her patriarchal guardians. Revenge is complete, the circle of patriarchy closed. In the story about the event in Khawlan, Abdullah, the culprit, was found guilty of the crime of abduction and rape, and executed—for reasons that are now obscure to me—by a silver bullet. His father went broke paying the damages demanded by the tribe of the missing women and went mad over the tragedy that befell his son. But the story cannot end with the appearance of the women, and so I see its poetic structure not in terms of a circle, exactly, but a chiasmus: I began with the full-bodied and full-throated appearance of the sheikh, I can end only with the traces of the two young women—the basket of wood they left behind on the hillside before they were taken away, the image of their veiled bodies in the back seat of a car, their metaphors in lines of poetry. I began with the sheikh's song, I cannot see how I might end with anything but the women's resounding silence.

I cannot, however, bring myself to end on such a somber note, so I will share a last anecdote with you. It has everything to do with our fears of violence, of the parody of those fears (not to mention the parody of fieldwork), and so I cannot resist telling it.

As the dispute dragged on, with violence and mediation entangled ever more deeply in one another, I had heard rumors that a tribal circumcision ceremony was to take place in the sanctuary.

I wrote to a friend about it in the States.

Dear Wally:

. . . Hearing the proverbial gun shots, I dutifully—though by this time, I have to confess, somewhat wearily—collected my camera, tape recorder, and notebook. To make sure that I wasn't walking into a blaze of gun fire, I peeked through the opening of my front door, and saw an old *sayyid* friend of mine, walking by himself in the street. He seemed unconcerned about his safety and so I ventured forth to greet him. After the requisite round of ritual exchanges, I got out my notebook and asked him, "So what is it this time, Sayyid <sup>c</sup>Ali, a war or a wedding?" "Neither one." He answered. "It's a circumcision" "A circumcision?" "Yes, a circumcision." The smart alleck in me couldn't resist to ask: "Well, do you celebrate everything with gun fire, even a circumcision?" "I'll tell you something, Seif. As you now have learned, the tribes are a fierce bunch. And the tribes of Khawlan are the

bravest of them all. So, whereas in other parts of Yemen, they cut it off, here in Khawlan, they shoot it off!" And as luck would have it, at just that instant a huge volley of gun fire went off in the distance. My eyes suddenly narrowed with alarm and Sayyid 'Ali, as if reading my thoughts, said nonchalantly, "And don't forget to write that in your little note book, young man."

## ENDNOTES

- 1 The names of villages will remain anonymous. I refer to the main protagonist in the story as “the sanctuary,” although it had a particular name, in part because that is what it was: a safe-haven where the tribes could congregate and pray in the mosques without fear of retaliation from ongoing blood feuds. It was a sacred space largely because it was inhabited by descendants of the Prophet, learned and pious people, who provided religious services to the tribes such as marriage, divorce and inheritance, according to the doctrine of Islamic law. In northern Yemen, the Zaidi sect predominates which is derived from Shi‘a Islam (which, in terms of doctrine, views ‘Ali, the son-in-law of the Prophet, as the rightful heir to the Caliphate or leadership of the Muslim community).
- 2 This was a tribal village (distinct from the sanctuary or village of descendants of the Prophet) and, as such, came under the political leadership of a sheikh. They might recognize the people in the sanctuary as their spiritual or moral guardians but not as their political leaders. Many such villages constitute a “tribe” and, in turn, there are any number of such tribes that comprise a particular geographic region of the country. For example, the region in which I did my fieldwork was called Khawlan aT-Tiyaal (after the Mt. Of Tiyaal that dominated the landscape) and it was said to be constituted by seven distinct tribes (though this might vary, depending on whom one was speaking to). Thus the tribe to which the girls belonged was one of the seven of Khawlan aT-Tiyaal.
- 3 Mainly these are envisioned as economic in nature, as in, for example, the emergence and spread of capitalism and its impact not only on Europe but the rest of the world. They might also be smaller in scale, however, and specific to certain regions of the world, such as cycles of growth and decline of particular agricultural systems, and so forth. The point is that they are thought to be systematic as opposed to ‘eventful,’ and causal as opposed to epiphenomenal.
- 4 Towards the end of the Civil War, a huge meeting was proposed of leaders from the royalist and republican sides which was to take place outside of Aden. As is the custom on such occasions, a magnificent feast was held to honor the guests. During the feast, south Yemeni militants, presumed to have been communist sympathizers, open-fired on pro-royalist leaders, among whom were many prominent sheikhs from Khawlan.
- 5 This was a theory of social organization put forward by Evans-Pritchard in his *The Nuer* (1941) and was subsequently adopted to explain how order was maintained in societies that had a weak or non-existent state. Because there was no central power to keep feuds in check, they were said to be “endemic.” Supposedly the “balance” between equally matched factions or sections of society kept feuds in check, for no one section could then have the upperhand. This theory has been criticized by a number of anthropologists and is highly contested today.

- 6 Pierre Bourdieu, "The sentiment of honour in Kabyle society," *Honour and shame: The values of Mediterranean society*, ed. Jean G. Peristiany (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966) 191-242.
- 7 His analyses, however, have come under attack by the anthropologist Gananath Obeyesekere in his book *The Apotheosis of Captain Cook* (1992). Obeyesekere argues that the interpretation of Captain Cook as a "god," which Sahlins presents as Hawaiian, is in fact a colonial construction, serving certain practical interests of English empire, and that Sahlins' scholarship is complicit with that colonialism by remaining silent about it. The debate is too complex to entertain here, but it is important precisely because it is emblematic of deeper rifts within the discipline itself.

## GLOSSARY

**FuuTah** -- a pleated, knee-length skirt worn by Yemeni males.

**Hijrah** -- usually "pilgrimage to Mecca" but in Yemen it also has the meaning of a sacred space, often a village, in which bloodshed is forbidden.

**Jambiyah** -- a dagger characteristic of Yemen with a horn handle and curved silver blade.

**Sayyid** [pl. **saadah**] -- a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad, considered a member of the religious elite.

**Sharaf** -- honor.

**Shari'ah** -- Islamic religious law.

**Sheikh** -- sometimes used for the leader of a religious order, but in Yemen usually reserved for the head of a tribe.

**Siyaasah** -- diplomacy, politics.

**°Urf** -- tribal law.



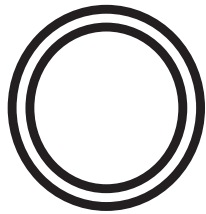
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