

The Politics and Culture of an Umayyad Tribe

Conflict and Factionalism in
the Early Islamic Period

Mohammad Rihan

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For Samar, Malek and Sari

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NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

In this book only *ayn* (‘) and *hamza* (‘) diacritical marks are included. All Arabic long vowels or emphatic letters were omitted in order to avoid cluttering what should be an easily accessible text. Except in a few cases, all the names, places and cities were written in transliterated forms to avoid any anachronisms. In many cases the word *ibn* (son) was abbreviated to b. as is usual in academic circles. Transliterated words in quotations from the different sources have not been altered to conform with the system used.

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INTRODUCTION

Early Islamic political history is to a large extent tribal history. The early conquests were achieved by Arab tribes while the power base of the Sufyanids and the Marwanids consisted of Arab Syrian tribes and the civil wars that marred the Umayyad period were fought among tribal factions. The relatively extensive modern literature on the Umayyad period notwithstanding, our knowledge of the tribal world in the early Islamic period remains confused and incomplete. Despite the painstaking efforts of Arab historians to write 'exact' genealogies, confusion reigns in this field. Moreover the paucity of the sources concerning Syria under the Umayyads represents a serious obstacle for a better understanding of that period. This study is mainly an effort to shed some light on the history of the Umayyad tribal world by focusing on one of its Syrian tribes: 'Amila.

The tribe 'Amila was one of the Arab Syrian tribes settled in *Bilad al-Sham* long before the advent of Islam. They participated extensively in founding, protecting and expanding the Umayyad state. Their history however is shrouded in mist and their contribution practically forgotten. A few attempts were made to sketch some of their history mainly by twentieth century Arab Shi'i historians from the region of Jabal 'Amil (southern Lebanon today). Their works, however, are incomplete and suffer from serious shortcomings. They claim, contrary to historical evidence, that 'Amila was settled in the region before the advent of Islam and that it adopted Shi'ism, through Abu Dharr al-Ghifari, since the early days of Islam.

This study proposes to set out the political history of 'Amila in the early Islamic age up to the late Umayyad period. Prior to the Islamic conquests, 'Amila roamed the Syrian desert as a semi-nomadic tribe

and probably performed its duty, as an Arab federate of the Byzantines, watching the desert frontier. After the establishment of the Umayyad dynasty in power, 'Amila evolved from a mere nomadic group into a major participant in the decision-making process and established itself, with its sister tribes of *Ahl al-Sham*, as the protectors and guardians of the Umayyad empire.

There exists a plethora of primary sources, from the books of genealogies to the traditional chronicles, that are relevant to the Umayyad period, but unfortunately, few of them were useful for this study. The tribe 'Amila has left very few traces in these sources despite its relatively long presence in *Bilad al-Sham*. Most of the extant sources reflect the anti-Umayyad and anti-Syrian bias of the later 'Abbasid historians. The use of hitherto neglected sources and a fresh look at the traditional ones is essential for relating the history of the Umayyad tribal world. The Byzantine sources are undoubtedly useful for a better comprehension of the Umayyad period. They were however used in a limited way because they lacked references to the tribe 'Amila *per se*. But many conclusions were drawn from their references regarding the other Syrian tribes such as the Ghassanids.

Modern historiography has seldom resorted to Umayyad poetry as a reliable source for establishing the political history of that era. Unlike *Jabili* poetry,¹ Umayyad poetry was not prone to significant *nabl* and its authenticity is relatively well established. Umayyad poetry has preserved for us many of the details pertaining to Umayyad political life. All the major civil wars, for instance, are reflected in the poetry of both Qaysi and Yamani poets. The *Naqa'id of Jarir*, al-Farazdaq and al-Akhtal is a good example that illustrates this point.

This study has benefited significantly from the poetry of 'Adi b. al-Riqa' al-'Amili (d.c. 720 A.D). His *diwan*² is a major testimony to many of the political and military events that occurred in the Umayyad period. Rulers, military leaders, individuals, tribes, cities, and villages were mentioned in his verses. Being the major poet of the tribe, he allocated to his tribe 'Amila a substantial part of his poetry which became 'the official public record' of the tribe. Without the poetry of 'Adi, an important part of the history of 'Amila under the Umayyads would have vanished.

Mentioned in al-Nadim's *Fihrist*, 'Adi's *diwan* was collected first by Tha'lab al-Shibani in the third Hijra century. However, many other verses are extant in other sources like Yaqut al-Hamawi who, for instance, used his poetry extensively in order to identify villages and cities in *Bilad-Sham*. His poetry comprises all the established genres of the Umayyad period: *hija'*, *fakhr*, *madih*, and *ghazal*, but first and foremost it is a registry of his tribe's deeds from *Jabiliyya* to his day. Many of the 'Amilis' battles, victories, enemies and allies were reported by 'Adi. He personally witnessed some of the events he mentioned and he was close to the Umayyad court of both 'Abd al-Malik and al-Walid b. 'Abd al-Malik which enabled him to be part of the upper circle of decision making. His poetry is a live testimony to many of the battles (Marj Rahit and Dayr al-Jathaliq for instance) fought by the 'Amilis. Those battles as described by the 'Abbasid chronicles did not mention the role of 'Amila but rather spoke of *Ahl al-Sham*. Some of his verses are the only reference that shed some light on the history of 'Amila under the Byzantines and on 'Amila's tribal alliances.

Epigraphic and archaeological evidence have been used in the discussion of the pre-Islamic past of 'Amila. The confusion reigning in the classical Arabic sources about this period discourages the attempt to write serious studies. Modern western scholarship (Lammens and Caskel) has dismissed the stories to be found in these later sources as 'unworthy of belief'. However epigraphic data may be used to support some of the accounts mentioned by classical Arab historians and to establish a firmer chronological order of these accounts.

In this book, the presentation of 'Amila's political history is preceded by a chapter that deals with theoretical questions relating to the tribal structure and its functions and dynamics. Based on modern anthropological studies of tribes and beduins in particular, this chapter intends to give a definition of the tribe 'Amila as it will be understood throughout the book.

The second chapter investigates the pre-Islamic past of 'Amila focusing on the ambiguous relation between 'Amila and Zenobia in Palmyra as it is presented by the classical Arabic literary sources and which may be better understood with the discovery of new epigraphic evidence. In the third chapter, an attempt is made to clarify further

the role of the Arab Syrian tribes and in particular 'Amila during the Islamic conquests. This role was underestimated by the traditional accounts and neglected by modern studies. In the fourth chapter, an attempt is made to retrace the political and military role of 'Amila in building and protecting the Umayyad state. Finally, the last chapter is an attempt to revisit some of the unsubstantiated stories created by modern Arabic Shi'i historians on the relation between 'Amila, Jabal 'Amil and the spread of Shi'ism in the region.

CHAPTER 1

THE TRIBE 'AMILA: BY WAY OF A DEFINITION

Writing the history of a tribe that ceased to exist centuries ago impels us early on to realize that certain technical difficulties need to be sorted out before we begin our task. Perhaps narrating the history of a modern geographical entity is more convenient. In theory, it suffices to relate the events that occurred inside a geographical entity during a chosen historical period. However, things are different when it comes to a tribal group let alone an extinct one. The major hurdle we need to overcome is to define exactly the tribe concerned: linguistically, historically and anthropologically. A tribe undergoes a process of continuous modification throughout the centuries. Its traditions, its language and its social and religious constituents are occasionally subject to radical change. The anthropological, social and political elements of a tribe discussed in the Pre-Islamic period may not be the same when it is examined in the Umayyad period. Yet it is 'the same tribe'. We thus need to ask what is meant by a 'tribe'? What do we mean exactly by the 'Amila tribe? This chapter will attempt to give some answers to these questions.

'Amila in Modern Historiography

The only attempt by modern western researchers to sketch some of 'Amila's history was written, as far as I know, by H. Lammens and

W. Caskel for the *Encyclopedia of Islam*.¹ This study represents what the modern western academic world had to say on this tribe. Other brief introductory texts were written by modern Arab scholars. One classical example would be Ahmad Rida.² Rida's text is by no means the only one discussing the history of the tribe among modern Arab authors but it is the most elaborate and very representative of their approach.

The history of 'Amila according to Lammens and Caskel is narrated in the following paragraph:

An old tribe in North-Western Arabia. The reports concerning their past are unworthy of belief. In the later genealogic system the 'Amila tribe are reckoned as belonging to the South-Arabian Kahlan. At the time of the Muslim invasion we find them settled S.E. of the Dead Sea; they are mentioned among the Syro-Arabian tribes which joined Heraclius; but do not appear again in the history of the conquest. Shortly afterwards we find them established in Upper Galilee, which is named after them Djabal 'Amila. They play a very unimportant part and are almost completely absorbed by the Banu Judham. 'Adi b. al-Rika', the poet of al-Walid I, was their chief pride; he celebrated the Djudhamite Rawh b. Zinba', as the *sayyid* of his tribe; and thereby gives a further proof of their small importance. Ibn Durayd finds few notable men among them; satire rarely deals with them. After the 5th/11th the 'Amila seem to have spread S. of the Lebanon in the present district of Bilad al-Shakif which is still called Djabal 'Amila.

According to Yakut, they also occupied a part of the country of the Isma'ilis, a day's journey to the S. of Aleppo, which he says was named after them 'Amila Mountain. This isolated reference is the most surprising in that the corresponding text of the Marasid gives 'Amira instead of 'Amila. To avoid the difficulty, G. le Strange supposes an emigration towards the N. during the crusades, but without giving references. The Arabic historians of this period are ignorant of this change of place, and continue to use the synonym 'Amila-Djalil. The application to the 'Amila

of the passage from the Kur'an, by the poet Djarir is only a sneer of the Tamimite who was jealous of the favours enjoyed by Ibn al-Rika'. The Djabal 'Amil(a) in the Lebanon was, and is, an important Shi'ite center, and several eminent Shi'ite authors bear the nisba al-'Amili.³

Lammens and Caskel defined 'Amila as an 'old tribe'. No additional information was provided concerning their tribal structure or their number. Their habitat was specified as being 'North-Western Arabia' (in the pre-conquests period). 'Amila moved to 'S.E of the Dead Sea' at the time of the Muslim conquests then finally settled in the Upper Galilee which is named Jabal 'Amila after them. This account is probably not accurate. Their presence in that region can only be confirmed as of the second Hijra century. In addition, these two scholars do not explain the factors which led the tribe to move from the edge of Northern Arabia to the heart of *Bilad al-Sham*. Their belief that two Jabal 'Amila exist (the first one in Upper Galilee, the second in *Bilad al-Shaqif*) shows some unfamiliarity in the geography of the region. In fact, these two mountains are one and the same. Historically *Bilad al-Shaqif* is an integral part of Jabal 'Amila and not the *Jabal* itself.

The authors curtly dismissed the reports written by al-Tabari and al-Isfahani concerning Amila's past as being 'unworthy of belief.' Moreover they did not specify which period of the past they thought could not be reconstructed on the basis of the traditional accounts. I would tend to think they meant their pre-Islamic past and, in particular, their connection with Palmyra. However, these reports cannot be completely dismissed since epigraphic evidence and historical interpretation might support some of al-Tabari's narrative.⁴ Lammens and Caskel stressed the fact that 'Amila played an unimportant role during the Muslim conquests and the Umayyad era. This is not entirely accurate. Recent research literature has shown that 'Amila and its sister tribes, Judham and Lakhm, played a significant role during that period.⁵ The note concerning the scant number of notable men found among them can also be ignored; Ibn 'Asakir's *Tarikh Madinat Dimashq* reveals that notable men from the 'Amila tribe were not few.⁶ Lammens-Caskel, however, cannot be criticized for their conclusions

since it is the discovery of new sources that has enabled us to modify their assertions on the history of 'Amila.

This modern western version is not completely different from the traditional local story written by Rida and others. Rida too describes 'Amila as an old tribe that migrated to the Syrian desert and Jabal 'Amila in the pre-Islamic period. According to him, its genealogy probably went back to Kahlan and Qahtan, eponymous father of the south Arabians. 'Amila's relation with the 'Amaliq in the pre-Islamic period is rejected by him as it had been by Lammens and Caskel. He too stressed the fact that their chief poet was 'Adi b. al-Riqa' and that they settled in Jabal 'Amila as of their arrival in the region.⁷ However they do differ on other points: Lammens-Caskel are more sceptical concerning the stories about the origins of the tribe, whereas the Arab historian accepts that the tribe left Yemen after the collapse of the Dam of Ma'rib.

Both versions leave many questions unanswered. What was the political and social milieu in which 'Amila survived? Were the 'Amila tribesmen nomads, semi-nomads or sedentary? Or could they have been all three? Where exactly was their home before reaching Jabal 'Amila (South Lebanon today)? What was their status under the Byzantines and the Umayyads? All these questions and many others need to be answered if we have to write the history of the tribe 'Amila. But most urgently we need to clarify the meaning of a fundamental term: what do we mean exactly by the 'tribe 'Amila?' Is it the same monolithic body that existed for many centuries without any alteration in its structure and role? Did the tribe keep the same name, 'Amila, throughout the centuries? Did the tribe 'Amila in the pre-Islamic milieu coincide perfectly with the tribe 'Amila established in the Umayyad state? No serious study can afford to leave such questions unanswered. This chapter will try to give a definition of the tribe 'Amila as we intend to view it in this book and to sketch the tribal literature necessary for this study.

The concept of tribe is unclear and controversial.⁸ The word is used to refer to a kinship group, an extended family, or a coalition of related families. It may refer to the elite family from whom some

larger confederation gets its name, to a cultural ethnic or other non-familial social group, or to conquest movements of pastoral peoples without regard for the internal basis of cohesion. According to Tapper, scholars and in particular anthropologists have failed to agree on a general definition of what constitutes a tribe. It seems impossible to find an analytical terminology that both takes account of indigenous categories and applies widely enough to be useful for comparison and classification.⁹ The definition of tribe and its application to a form of organization of peoples, societies and cultures remains confused.¹⁰

The tribe 'Amila seems to have succeeded in keeping its name unaltered for centuries. It is well established that 'Amila was the name of the tribe in the third and fourth centuries AH as corroborated by the classical Arab geographers.¹¹ The same tribe is reported to have existed in the pre-Islamic and early Islamic periods by the *futub* literature written in the early third century AH.¹² It is true that the *futub* literature is not contemporary to the period of the conquests, but it is nevertheless a well established source for the early Islamic conquests. The poetry of the Jahili poet al- A'sha and the Umayyad 'Adi b. al-Riqa' al-'Amili, al-Ra'i al-Numayri and Jarir attest to the presence of their contemporary tribe 'Amila. Ibn Khaldun in the ninth century AH related some of the tribe's fortunes in the pre-Islamic periods. It is therefore well established that 'Amila was known under the same name for many centuries. How old is the tribe 'Amila? According to the Arab genealogists the 'Amila tribal group emerged as of the third century AD. Moreover there is a possibility that the tribe 'Amila existed as early as the eighth century BC.¹³

'Amila in Classical Arabic Literature

What then is 'Amila? How did the Arab scholars identify it? How should we identify it? According to the lexicographer Ibn Durayd, 'Amila is an Arabic *Hayy* (subtribe).¹⁴ Ibn Manzur defined it also as a *Hayy* but added that it could be singled out as the *Qabila* to which the poet 'Adi b. al-Riqa' belonged. Ibn Manzur was more specific than Ibn Durayd by saying that it is a Yamani *Hayy* and its name is 'Amila

b. Saba'. However, he added that Mudaris claimed that 'Amila is of Ma'add and quotes al-A'sha, the poet:

Ô 'Amila! Why do you keep on claiming descent from other
than your noble father?

Your father is Qasit, return to your oldest descent.¹⁵

Al-Zabidi adopted practically the same view but tried to be more specific by providing the full genealogical descent of 'Amila: 'They are the sons of al-Harith b. 'Adi b. al-Harith b. Murra b. Udad b. Zayd b. Yashjub b. 'Arib b. Zayd b. Kahlan b. Saba'. They were named after their mother 'Amila b. Malik b Wadi'a b. Quda'a, the mother of al-Zuhd and Mu'awiya the sons of al-Harith b. 'Adi.' However al-Zabidi added one interesting remark; according to him there is one single false tradition, related by Ibn al-Athir, which linked 'Amila to 'Amaliq and this tradition was refuted by lexicographers.¹⁶ As a matter of fact, Ibn al-Athir is innocent of this accusation, and it seems that al-Zabidi did not check his sources thoroughly. Apparently Ibn al-Athir identified 'Amila as al-Zabidi did and tried to rectify what was claimed about 'Amila's descent from the 'Amaliq.¹⁷ Al-Zabidi, on the other hand, added more confusion by stating that another Yamani tribe, Banu 'Amal could be the same tribe as Banu 'Amala living in Jabal al-Khalil (Jabal al-Jalil).¹⁸ This reference is unique and not based on any historical reference. Obviously the individuals/groups living in Jabal al-Khalil are the Banu 'Amila and not the Banu 'Amala or the Banu 'Amal, as corroborated by different sources among which are al-Hamadani, al-Muqaddasi and al-Ya'qubi.

In summary, 'Amila was identified by the Arabic classical lexicographers as a *Hayy* and seldom as *Qabila*,¹⁹ never as a *Ashira* (clan) or *Batn* (subclan) or *Fakhdh*. No doubt it is impossible, as several scholars have noted, to write an exact definition for each tribal group. 'La confusion règne dans cette terminologie,'²⁰ and 'établir un tableau complet et définitif de la structure d'une confédération bédouine est le plus souvent impossible.'²¹ Despite the efforts of modern scholars to establish a certain order, one clear definition for each group has not been reached. But Arab genealogists tended to use quantity or volume

as a common criterion in establishing order between different groups: *Sba'b*, *Qabila*, *Batn*, *Fakhdh*, *'Ashira* in an ascending or descending order. However, even Arab genealogists did not agree on similar definitions for every group.

Al-Qalqashandi, in the fourteenth century AD, recognized the fact that the Arab genealogists did not agree on a specified order to rank every group. Thus he discussed this issue in the introduction of his book *Nihayat al-Arab*.²² He tried to introduce some definite order and thus ranked *Sba'b* (nation) as the biggest unit then *Qabila* (tribe), *'Amara* (subtribe), *Batn* (sub-subtribe), *Fakhdh* and finally *Fasila*. Al-Qalqashandi supported his argument by quoting al-Mawardi and al-Zamakhshari but he acknowledged other versions mentioned by Ibn al-Kalbi who ranked *Sba'b* as the biggest group, followed by *Qabila*, then, *Fasila*, *'Amara* and finally *Fakhdh*, while al-Nawawi included *'Ashira* before *Fasila* and al-Jawhari considered *'Ashira* to be the smallest unit.²³

Hayy was not included as a specific group by the Arab genealogists. In this case why was 'Amila described as a *Hayy*? Al-Qalqashandi included a short interesting notice in the end of his text: 'it is possible that one may substitute any group name by *Hayy*, either as a general term: this is an Arab *Hayy*, or as a specific term: this is the *Hayy* of the clan X.'²⁴

The Arab lexicographers defined the word *Hayy* as a *Batn* of the Arab *Butun*.²⁵ But some added an explanation: *Hayy* is the group of the sons of a specific father whether they are few or many, although it could also be the name of a *Sba'b* regrouping many tribes.²⁶ The word *Hayy* is never used by modern beduins to designate any kind of tribal group.²⁷ It is obvious that 'Amila could not form a *Sba'b* and in fact was never considered by the genealogists as such. The category *Sba'b* is restricted to the eponymous fathers: Mudar, 'Adnan or Qahtan and few others. Therefore the other alternative is more realistic. But was 'Amila a group of a few or of many? 'Amila, like any other tribal group, is subject to external and internal threats. These perils include famine, wars and diseases. These perils might turn a huge powerful tribe into a weak, small one and might possibly lead to its extinction.²⁸ What is clear so far is that 'Amila constituted a tribal unit (*Hayy*) which

increased or decreased in prestige, number and influence through the centuries. According to the anthropologist A. M. Khazanov, a nomadic or semi-nomadic tribe is never a purely territorial unit. First and foremost it is a political organization. Wherever territorial ties are not supplemented or mediated by political ones what we have is an ethno-linguistic unity. Whether such a unity can be regarded as a tribe is an open question.²⁹

'Amila emerged in the pre-Islamic period as a nomadic group roaming the deserts of *Bilad al-Sham*. It evolved and functioned in reaction to the external world and its threats or resources. In the opinion of Khazanov, 'the non-autarky' of the nomads and semi-nomads' economy means that their social and political organization cannot be fully autonomous and that culturally, to a certain extent, they are not self-sufficient. The latter is determined by the nature of relations with the outside world and the degree of advancement. It is no coincidence that nomads sometimes have more in common, socially and culturally, with agriculturists in the same area than with nomads from other areas.³⁰ 'Amila's interactions with the outside world defined its tribal structure, as a result, its number, strength and categorization altered throughout the centuries.

The Inner Dynamics of the Tribe: Descent, Kinship, Neighbourliness and *Muruwwa*

How did 'Amila survive as a single unit (the numbers being irrelevant)? How did the inner dynamics of this tribal unit function? What kept it together for so many centuries despite the good and bad times? It is with Ibn Khaldun that we need to start searching for answers. As is well known, Ibn Khaldun provided us with the concept of *'Asabiyya* or the sentiment of group solidarity that results from, among other bonds, kinship, blood ties and common descent:

Their defence and protection are successful only if they are a closely knit group of common descent. This strengthens their stamina and makes them feared, since everybody's affection for his family and his group is more important (than anything else).

Compassion and affection for one's blood relations exist in human nature as something God put into the hearts of men . . . (respect for) blood ties is something natural among men, with the rarest exceptions. It leads to affection for one's relations and blood relatives.³¹

The fact that tribal units held together by group feeling (*'Asabiyya*) can survive is endorsed by modern scholarship. The word *Hayy* in particular was considered by Robertson Smith as the basic single unit upon which every tribe or confederacy would be built. He translates it as a kindred group. According to him it is 'the political and social unit, so far as there was any unity in that very loosely organized state of society.'³² It is the single unit whose active members have a common interest and act together in the following cases: the right and duties of blood feud, the distribution of inheritance and the distribution of booty.³³ This group is also characterized by a common group name and the fellow-members of a man's *Hayy* are called his *abl* or *Qawm*.³⁴ Thus to Robertson Smith, it is the *Hayy* bound by '*Asabiyya* that formed the basic social unit of the tribal system. He adds:

The nomadic Arabs, whose way of life supplied the type on which all Arabian society was mainly moulded, are not to be thought of as roaming quite at large through the length and breadth of the peninsula. Each group or confederation of groups had its own pastures, and still more its own waters, beyond which it could not move without immediate risk of a hostile encounter. Within these limits families wandered at large with their cattle and tents wherever they could find water and forage. But generally these movements—say from summer to winter pasture—were made by the whole hayy together, and no small body felt itself to be safe at a great distance from its brethren.³⁵

Robertson Smith does not give an exact definition of the word *Hayy*, since Arab genealogists, in general, did not include it in their terminologies as group or sub-group. It seems what Robertson Smith describes as *Hayy* is in fact the basic tribal group related by kinship and descent.