

APPROACHES TO ANTHROPOLOGICAL ARCHAEOLOGY

Near Eastern Tribal Societies during the Nineteenth Century

Economy, Society and Politics
between Tent and Town



Eveline van der Steen

ROUTLEDGE

Near Eastern Tribal Societies during the Nineteenth Century

Approaches to Anthropological Archaeology

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Eveline van der Steen

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For Ulrich Jasper Seetzen and John Lewis (Johann Ludwig) Burckhardt:
travellers into the unknown

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Acknowledgements

When I started my explorations into nineteenth-century tribal territories, I had no idea what I was letting myself in for. It all started on a cold wintry night back in the early 1990s, at the British School of Archaeology in Jerusalem (now the Kenyon Institute), itself a monument from that exciting era of discovery. In search of suitable bedtime reading, I took Gertrude Bell's letters from the library and was soon hooked. Gertrude was a woman who had not only a brilliantly gifted pen, but also a sharp political mind, and a profound understanding of the fascinating power games played among the tribes, tribal leaders and governments in an era that was about to end. After Gertrude's letters I delved into the accounts of other travellers, mostly from the nineteenth century, and realized that here was a world explored but largely forgotten in late twentieth-century anthropology, in which the shots were called not by the great powers and dynamics of Western capitalist society, but by players of a different game, in which the rules were set by local power structures and a tribal ideology.

I think everyone who first reads these accounts finds it hard not to compare nineteenth-century tribal society with the world of the Old Testament. It was a favourite pastime of most nineteenth-century explorers, and it is a trap, we are told by anthropologists, that needs to be avoided. But as I explain in my Introduction, if we try too hard to avoid that trap, we risk throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Nineteenth-century tribal societies can tell us much about the Bronze and Iron Ages that twentieth and twenty-first century society in the region cannot.

My first effort to put my new-found area of research into a practical model was in a paper at the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) conference in San Francisco in 1997. Somewhat naïve, and hampered by a still very incomplete knowledge of nineteenth-century tribes, it was nevertheless enough for Anson Rainey to come over and tell me how much he liked it and what great potential he thought it had. I am still grateful for his encouragement to a completely unknown and very

insecure student. He has remained supportive and encouraging ever since, and I am sad that he is not around anymore to see this book.

In 2005 I was offered a visiting post at East Carolina University, North Carolina; with little teaching and much time for research, this was a chance to turn my rather random reading of nineteenth-century travel accounts into a coherent research project. The Department of Anthropology of East Carolina University covers a wide area of anthropological research, both in time and space, and colleagues were helpful in providing information about tribal societies from most parts of the world. My special thanks go to Linda Wolfe, head of the department, for inviting me in the first place, for being supportive, for looking after the cats and, above all, for being such a good friend. Another friend, who unfortunately passed away much too young, was Mark Brinson. We spent many hours discussing evolutionary aspects of tribalism, while sampling local microbrews.

Over the years I have received encouragement, advice and constructive criticism from numerous colleagues, too many to mention, at conferences, in discussions and in correspondence, and at the School of Archaeology, Classics and Egyptology of Liverpool University, my academic home since 2006. They all have helped to shape the book as it appears. Of those many I want to single out and especially thank Ed Noort, who was my PhD supervisor and who believed in what I tried to do, and Margreet Steiner, my long-time friend and colleague in Leiden.

Much moral support has come from my husband, Ross. He read the manuscript at least twice, removed my Dutchisms and turned everything into proper English.

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Finally, there is a large group of people without whom this study would not have been possible. They are the travellers, explorers and adventurers who journeyed through the Levant and Arabia on horseback, mule, camel or on foot, encountering, engaging with and occasionally battling local tribes, in villages and in the desert, eating their food, drinking their (often foul) water, sharing their fleas and generally their way of life, and then writing it all up so that we can read about their trials and tribulations in twenty-first century comfort. I feel particularly indebted to two of these travellers, who were the first to explore the dangerous and strange lands east of the Jordan at the beginning of the nineteenth century: Ulrich Jasper Seetzen and John Lewis Burckhardt, both of whom died during the course of their travels. This book is dedicated to them.

Introduction

For as long as we know, Near Eastern society has been fundamentally tribal. Its social structure, political institutions and economy have always been embedded in tribal frameworks. That tribal structure is not immutable, timeless or insulated from political, social and technological developments. The Near East has come a long way since the Early Bronze Age; people and societies have changed, in many cases dramatically. Nevertheless, archaeological and textual sources suggest that basic concepts of tribalism have been remarkably constant over time, and a prime mover in the history of the Near East.

Today structures of tribal organization are marginalized within small tribes on the edges of society, or transformed and incorporated within local and national governments. As a result, it is hard to imagine what a fully tribal society looked like before the age of globalization. Anthropological studies of present-day tribal societies are of little help.

There is, however, a vast pool of information, drawn from a time when the great tribes controlled the region: the observations and reports from travellers in the Near East in the nineteenth century, up to World War I (the Great War).

Napoleon's conquest of Egypt, his exploits into Palestine and the subsequent involvement of Britain shook the Ottoman Empire. The empire was already weakened by its wars with Russia and Austria, and by internal revolt. Now the French army crushed the Ottomans and they had to be rescued by the British. At the same time, the Ottoman economy was overtaken by the Industrial Revolution transforming Western Europe. Something had to give. Over the course of the nineteenth century, economic and political reform, influenced by Western ideas, although resisted by many, transformed the Near East.

Napoleon's invasion of Egypt also had another effect: it opened the Levant to the West, and explorers, adventurers and missionaries flocked in. What they found was a world utterly different from their own. The southern domains of the Ottoman Empire, the Levant and the Arabian Peninsula were virtually

independent and ruled by powerful Bedouin tribes, such as the Anaze, the Shammar or the Beni Sakhr. These tribes controlled a network of client–patron relationships and protection schemes involving smaller tribes, villages and towns, while at the same time competing with each other for territorial and economic control. The economy of the region, based largely on pastoralism, agriculture and trade, was embedded in this social framework. Many explorers felt they had stepped straight into the world of the Bible (e.g. Porter 1891: 18).

As the century progressed, so did ways and means of travel in the Levant. The first explorations, by Ulrich Seetzen and John Lewis Burckhardt, were plunges into the utterly unknown. Towards the end of the century, Thomas Cook organized camel package holidays so that its wealthy clients could enjoy “primitive living” in safety and relative comfort.

Many of the explorers and travellers described their experiences in books, articles and letters. These writings are the source material of the present study. These travellers were not anthropologists, and most of them were not primarily interested in the quirks and customs of the local population. Their observations are mostly side lines, and very different from scholarly writing today. Moreover, ethnocentrism was not a sin, and none of them, not even the most enlightened, doubted the superiority of the European races. At the same time, some were captivated by the simplicity of desert life, finding eternal truths and values in tribal laws and customs.

Chapter 1 outlines common denominators defining the meaning of the word “tribe”. The meaning of the word “tribe” is different for different people and depends upon our own background as much as on the cultures we study. Its meaning has also evolved in the past decades as a result of developments in the study of anthropology and sociology.

Chapter 2 looks at the travellers themselves, exploring their geographical and spiritual origins, the ideas and philosophies with which they grew up and which they brought with them on their travels. Nineteenth-century society, particularly Victorian Britain, but also America and the other Western European countries, had created a unique kind of traveller: self-confident, convinced of their own superiority, and with a mission to bring the blessings of the Western world to their less fortunate brethren. At the same time, many were open minded, with a hunger for learning and for absorbing what they perceived as the wisdom of the East.

Chapter 3 starts with a short overview of tribal history up to the eighteenth century, and a more extensive history of the following period, focusing mainly on Transjordan and Palestine. The nineteenth century was a period of change in the Near East, which saw the beginnings of the gradual Westernization of society. The Ottoman government, anxious to regain control over its southern dominions and to increase its revenue, reorganized its administration according to Western models. The Western powers, in their turn, saw the economic and political possibilities and vied with each other to gain a foothold in the Levant. Change came slowly, and parts of the Empire remained unaffected until the end of the century. When change came, the confrontation between old and new, between East and

West challenged tribal structures and the struggle to maintain tribal ways in a modernizing world.

Near Eastern society has always been largely illiterate. It did, however, have a well-developed and rich oral tradition, explored in [Chapter 4](#). Some of it has reached the West, the most famous example being the *Arabian Nights*: a collection of stories from India, Persia, Bedouin Arabia and Egypt, set in a Persian urban context. But oral tradition in the Near East was more than storytelling. It conveyed information through short poems, it expressed tribal identity through genealogies and hero-stories, and it was an emotional escape from the taboos and restraints of daily life. Many of these poems were eventually written down, and they convey much “inside” information about society, as seen by members of the tribes themselves. It tells us how they perceived the world in which they lived, the landscape and the people around them. It tells us how they saw themselves, their past and their future.

[Chapter 5](#) explores the meaning of landscape: the geological and geographical framework in which the history of the tribes was set. Landscape is a palimpsest, consisting of, and shaped by, many layers of history, each layer adding features, and transforming and erasing older ones. It is a jumbled mosaic of fragments from the cultural and ecological history of past millennia.

For the inhabitants, the landscape acquires different qualities. It is defined by one’s relation to it, as territory and as provider of food and life. It is also a carrier, a receptacle of power, identity, memory and religious meaning. This relationship needed to be consolidated, and tribes had various means of claiming and marking their territory. Towns, villages, tent camps and burial sites were all means of claiming the land and defining one’s relationship to it. Roads, even if they were no more than tracks, tell us how people moved through and between landscapes, and about relationships between people.

Asabiyyeh, or group consciousness, is what distinguishes tribal society from our own. *Asabiyyeh* is expressed in the concept and language of kinship, whether real or perceived. Because the interests of the group take precedence over those of the individual, tribal ideology, including the concept of good and evil, differs profoundly from Western morality, something that many nineteenth-century travellers found daunting. Raiding and robbing, for example, were not seen as bad or evil, but as a means of enhancing the position of the tribe. Leadership, power and protection also took on different meanings. Most travellers were familiar, at least in theory, with some of the tribal concepts of justice because they differed little from what was set out in the Old Testament, a book these travellers were more familiar with than many present-day anthropologists. [Chapter 6](#) looks at institutions that define the ideology of tribal societies. Many of these institutions were seen as timeless, part of an eternal and unchanging truth, something that is clearest in the observations of writers such as Charles Doughty or Anne Blunt, but that can be found in the writings of most travellers.

It has been suggested (Marx 1967; Fried 1975) that there is no such thing as an independent “tribe”; that the notion of tribe only comes into existence

vis-à-vis a higher political structure, such as a state. Without the existence of such a structure there would be no reason for kinship groups or small villages to cluster into larger units.

Emanuel Marx sees the Bedouin of the Negev as administrative units of the state. In the political layout of the Negev, where the Israeli state rules the territory, this is certainly true for the Bedouin tribes that are still in the area. Here we touch on one of the main problems of present-day ethnography and anthropology: modern state formation in the region, particularly the formation of the State of Israel, has disrupted existing power structures to such an extent that modern ethnographic research does not reflect ethno-archaeology or ethno-history. This is truer for some aspects of ethnographic research than for others, but is certainly the case for power relations in the region.

Whether Fried is right or wrong in his notion of Near Eastern tribes is difficult to establish because for thousands of years there has almost always been a state that claimed, at least in theory, supremacy over the tribal territories. In reality, many of the great tribes of the nineteenth century acted as independent operators, interacting with the state on an equal footing, or competing over power in the region. [Chapter 7](#) explores the relationship between the tribes and the state, and the way it changed during the century.

The state rarely managed to curb the power of the tribes, but could sometimes harness it, incorporating it within its own power apparatus and bureaucracy. Because of this many of the former great tribes are still powerful today, although their present power is political and diplomatic, rather than military.

The three case studies in [Chapter 8](#) illustrate tribe–state relations and the fluidity of tribal society as a whole. Tribes were never static or timeless communities. In their struggle for power and supremacy, and access to scarce resources, there were always winners and losers. Tribes could grow in terms of people, resources and territory in one decade, and shrink to almost nothing in the next. What is most clear from these case studies is the importance of leadership. The phenomenon of the hero is one of the main themes of the Bedouin epics, explored in [Chapter 4](#); but strong leadership was just as important in the real world. Akila Agha, Yusuf and Muhammad Majali, and Abdallah Ibn Rashid were the heroes of the nineteenth century.

The case studies also show that every tribe had its own history, leading to its own unique social and organizational structure. Definitions of band, tribe, chiefdom and early state by Elman Service and others, while useful labels, are insufficient to describe individual polities, not only because every tribe or chiefdom is different, but also because they change over time, incorporating and shedding traits at each stage.

The subsistence of tribal societies, while less technologically advanced than contemporaneous Western equivalents, covers all aspects of life: hunting, pastoralism, agriculture and horticulture, raiding and protection, trade, and crafts. The traditional picture of the camel pastoralist or Bedouin, retreating into the desert for months on end, living on a diet of camel's milk and dates is too limited, to

say the least. For one thing, Bedouin rarely lived on a diet that did not include cereals, and that in itself required a relationship between the desert and the sown.

Another assumption is that the Bedouin simply raided the settled lands for whatever they needed. That also is too simple a picture. Raiding of corn and other goods occurred, but relationships between the Bedouin and settlers were usually more sophisticated and complex. Raiding, protection and trade were all part of it.

Sometimes it is simply assumed that villagers and peasants did not belong to tribes. But the perception of the local population of villages and even of towns in the nineteenth century makes clear that villagers, peasants and townspeople considered themselves tribal. Many belonged to tribes that had a nomadic component. The tribal structure had clear and obvious advantages because of the networks it created. The Juhayna of Jeddah, for example, were town-dwelling merchants who largely controlled the international sea trade, but they belonged to a powerful tribe. The town of Kerak was inhabited by sections of different tribes, each in its own quarter, many with nomadic relatives on the plateau. Tribes were also flexible in their economic pursuits, as pointed out by Salzman (1980). In [Chapter 9](#) this complex picture of tribal networks and economic pursuits is discussed.

The concept of “race” and ethnicity was a favourite subject of nineteenth-century scholarship, and many travellers were fascinated by it. They were particularly interested in the origins of the various tribes, basing their conclusions on branches of nineteenth-century science such as phrenology and linguistics. Their classifications differed radically from the self-identification of Arabs and other groups. Arab self-identification was strictly based on lineage and tribe, and was expressed in – sometimes subtle – differences in dress, haircut, dialect and, of course, the relationship to other tribes.

Arab society formed a complex hierarchy. At the top stood the “noble” tribes, such as the Anaze tribes, the Adwan and the Beni Sakhr. At the bottom were the “pariah” tribes, the Sleyb, the Huteym and the Sherarat, who were rated only one step above slaves. Marriage rules were strict in determining to whom one could or could not marry one’s daughters. These differences in nobility and status were reflected in the history and the traditions of the tribe. Genealogy and heroic epics played an important role in the self-identification of a tribe. And while tribes could fission or fuse, grow or shrink in power and population, their status in this hierarchy was remarkably stable. [Chapter 10](#) explores these issues of ethnicity, self-identification and class.

[Chapter 11](#) looks at the position of women, and the interaction between the sexes. The position of women in the Near East has been both reviled and defended. It was defined by the basic principle of the tribe, that of the group interest. In marriage rules, the personal preference of a woman was barely regarded. Her task was to create male offspring for the tribe of her husband. According to most travellers, the position of women in the tent camps was slightly better than in the villages and particularly the towns, because there was less segregation. A woman had more responsibilities in a tent, particularly if the menfolk were away.

In spite of her lack of rights, a strong personality could give a woman much influence, albeit mostly informal. The famous poet shaykh Nimr el-Adwan was devoted to his wife Wazha, and he never stopped praising her wisdom. When she died he was inconsolable, and mourned her for the rest of his life.

There have also been women leaders. Some are legendary, such as the Queen of Sheba; some are historical as well as legendary, such as Zenobia of Palmyra and Mavia of the Tanukh. But in more recent times there have also been woman leaders, and even war leaders, who claimed their position on personal merit and were accepted by their male subjects.

Religion and folklore are explored in [Chapter 12](#). The predominant religion of nineteenth-century Arabs was Islam, although there were minority religions such as Christianity and Druzism. Most Arabs, particularly in the desert and villages, were not very religious and knew little about the articles of their faith, whether Islam or other. Nevertheless, they could be bigoted and clashes between groups or villages of different creeds were common, and in some cases bloody. The massacre of the Christians in 1860 started as a conflict between Druze and Maronites in the Lebanon.

Folklore and the remnants of pre-Islamic religions and superstitions continued to play a role in the beliefs of most Arabs. Wells, trees and stones were portals between the natural world and the supernatural. Efforts by the Wahabi to wipe out these beliefs had only a limited and temporary effect.

The last chapter, [Chapter 13](#), is an effort at putting my “model” into practice. Three case studies have been selected in which the use of nineteenth-century sources, and the light they throw on the tribal structure of society, help to understand events in the Bronze and Iron Ages: the Kingdom of Mari on the Euphrates, the possible origins of early Israel at the end of the Late Bronze Age, and the relation between ethnicity and pottery in the Negev Desert in the Late Iron Age.

Modern anthropological research into tribal societies is necessarily limited. Firstly, the extensive tribal networks and power structures of the nineteenth century no longer exist, and therefore cannot be observed in real time. Secondly, when anthropologists do fieldwork among tribes, they generally focus on the society or tribe that they are studying, and the information they gather and analyse is information about that tribe. It is hard, sometimes impossible, for an anthropologist to move between different societies and study the interaction, especially if there is antagonism between the two. Andrew Shryock was confronted with this barrier every time he tried to move his field of study from the Adwan to the Abbadi and vice versa.

A third limitation is that of perspective. While anthropologists have the advantage over archaeologists and historians in that they study living, functioning societies, their perspective is rarely longer than a few years, and usually shorter. The developments of tribal interaction, creation and breakdown of relationships, changes in territory, changes in power relations, are often only clearly visible in the long term, over periods of tens or even hundreds of years, and can only be

properly analysed in hindsight. This is what this study intends to address. It takes the observations of a large number of travellers, some of whom were anthropologists *avant la lettre*, while others were simply adventurers or even holiday-makers. Together they recreate a series of images of tribal society as it was in the nineteenth century – its structures, its principles, the way in which it interacted with the empire and with the ever more intrusive Western world. These structures and interactions had grown organically, evolving slowly from the Bronze Age onwards, and remained largely unchanged until they finally disappeared after the Great War.

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1 What is a tribe?

“I gave you food,” said Jack, “and my hunters will protect you from the beast. Who will join my tribe?” (William Golding, *Lord of the Flies*)

Introduction: what is a tribe?

One thing that is clear in the discourse about “tribes”, “tribalism” and “tribal societies” is that the word “tribe” has different meanings for different people. For some it has connotations with Karl May and his romantic heroes, Winnetou and Kara ben Nemshi. Others think of African bush or desert tribes and bands that have been described by European and American anthropologists. Those with a classical background may associate the word with the Celtic and Germanic tribes of pre-Roman and Roman Europe. All of these groups have traits in common: they are aggressive, warlike, sometimes heroic and primitive – at least compared to the civilization to which the narrator belongs.

Jack’s “tribe” in Golding’s book conforms to that image: aggressive hunters, painted in war-colours, with a chief at the top who orders the fighting and killing. But he adds another element: that of group cohesion, of belonging, and belonging particularly for the purposes of finding food and protection. This second aspect is more prominent in the meaning of the word in the modern English idiom: “the rules of the tribe” refers to social class. It is about belonging, about conforming to the rules that define a group as a form of self-identification.

Finally, for many people in the West the word “tribe” creates an association with the Twelve Tribes of Israel, imparting a religious, mystical dimension to that of group identification: the kinship group that expands into a powerful state, but maintains kinship bonds through a commonality of religion and ancestor traditions, and, not to forget, a tribal territory. Reflections of this can be found in the persistent search by some people for the “lost tribes of Israel”.

Elman Service (1971) developed an “overall” structural definition of early societies, based on an evolutionary model. Tribes developed from bands to form a second stage in his “hierarchy” of social and political organization. The transition from bands to tribes was made possible by the domestication of plants and animals, with consequent possibilities for producing and storing more food. This made the coexistence of larger groups possible. Tribes were segmented, consisting of clans tied together by cross-cut sodalities. They were egalitarian, with a charismatic non-hereditary leader. Justice was maintained by the corporate group, and there was no political or religious specialization (no professional priests). Finally, warfare was not directed towards conquest or expansion. The next stage, that of chiefdoms, was distinguished by the presence of hereditary leaders, responsible for the redistribution of goods. It saw the appearance of “classes” (elites) in the population, based on power and wealth, which was in its turn dependent on access to the leaders.

During the 1980s, the connotation of “primitive” that was so prominent in definitions of “tribe” led to a reluctance among scholars to use the word (Arnold and Gibson 1995: 5; Parkinson 2002: 1) and it was replaced by such terms as “ethnic group”, “lineage group” or “kinship group”, a terminology that focused particularly on systems of interrelation. Another way to avoid the tainted word “tribe” in anthropology, particularly in the Near East, was to replace it with “chiefdom”. Since then, the word has been rehabilitated, particularly in the area of overlap between anthropology and archaeology, and new efforts at defining the meaning have been made (Fowles 2002). These descriptions include aspects such as socio-political organization (in which tribes are segmented and egalitarian, with cross-cutting sodalities), economy (often sedentary, sometimes nomadic) and size (varying from several hundred to tens of thousands). A short overview of definitions of “tribe” in different cultures shows the wide variation in the trait lists and underlines the difficulty of finding an overall distinguishing descriptor.

Tribes in different times and places

Ancient Rome

Our English word “tribe” derives from the Latin *tribus*, which probably derives from the Umbrian word *trifu* (threefold community). The original tribes of early Rome were defined as three clans. Later the number of tribes was extended and eventually included the four urban tribes of Rome and thirty-one rural tribes, now representing districts, rather than clans. Every Roman citizen, whether landowner, landless freeborn or freedman belonged to a tribe on the basis of his domicile, and the name of the tribe was added to his own name. These tribes were the basic administrative units for census, citizen tax (*tributum*) and voting purposes of the Roman Republic (Taylor 1961: 3–12).¹ Here the reference to kinship lost its original meaning entirely. In the Roman Republic the word *tribus* had become a purely territorial and political concept: where you lived determined to which tribe you belonged.²

Celtic tribes

Our main source for the organization of Celtic society is Caesar's *De Bello Gallico*. Caesar wrote from the point of view of a Roman patrician for a Roman audience. The combination of the archaeological record and Caesar's ethnocentric description has led to widely varying conclusions (Dunham 1995 and below).

Caesar addressed the Celtic societies, described in his *Bello Gallico* as *civitas*, a word often translated as "tribes" in general literature, although in other contexts it means "state" or "commonwealth, union of citizens". The Gallic word for "tribe" was *teuta*. Caesar describes Celtic society as class oriented, with druids and equites as the social elites, and the lower classes lumped into what he calls plebs. Society was organized through client–patron relationships (Crumley 1987: 410). Recent studies differ as to how Celtic society in Roman times should be described. An edited volume on Celtic social organization (Arnold and Gibson 1995) has a wide variety of descriptions and terminology: according to Arnold and Gibson (*ibid.*: 5), the late Hallstatt and La Tene societies "were simply too large and complex to be called 'tribal'"; Crumley (1995: 27) emphasizes: "it is perverse to insist that such polities were not states". She refers to them as "primitive states". Haselgrove (1995: 87) makes a case for "the concept of chiefdom". Collis (1995: 76) calls the Aedui, described by Caesar, a "tribal state". Cunliffe (1997: 108), on the other hand, consistently refers to Celtic society as a constellation of tribes: "At one level, clientage in its various forms could bind retainers to individual members of the elite, but at a different level it could relate tribes one to another. This was clearly the case in Gaul in the first century BCE." The Celtic tribes, according to Cunliffe (*ibid.*: 231–2), were developing from a king-based government to a government by chosen magistrates. Cunliffe also bases his position largely on the writings of Caesar.

However, more important than the terminology is the actual social organization of the polity. Celtic archaeology is characterized by large fortified settlements, so-called "*Fürstensitze*", strategically located, often on the confluence of waterways, with evidence of metal and other craft production and groups of burial mounds. The central burial in these groups often contained rich, imported burial gifts, which according to Cunliffe (*ibid.*: 107) testifies to a hierarchical organization, with extensive trade contacts. There is evidence of ancestor worship, focused on the leaders of the community (Arnold & Gibson 1995: 6–8).

Crumley (1995: 31–2) sees Celtic society as heterarchical, with multiple power centres interacting on an equal level. She describes it as predominantly rural, with "functional centres" around a fortress. These "functional centres", often near a crossroads or waterway, provided a service function for the wider region: attracting trade, but also artisans such as blacksmiths, innkeepers and others (*ibid.*: 27–8). The fortress and the surrounding countryside were mutually dependent, and consequently power was divided, not only over the various "functional centres" but also within them.

One of the key characteristics of tribal societies – kinship or lineage systems – seems to be curiously lacking in Celtic society. Most scholars assume that the

“primitive state organization” had put an end to kinship as the organizing principle of society (Arnold & Gibson 1995: 8; Brun 1995: 14; Haselgrove 1995: 81), although Arnold (1995: 44) states that the late Hallstatt burials still contained evidence of kinship structure.

One Celtic custom that was commented on extensively was that of potlatch (Cunliffe 1997: 105–107), the need to enhance one’s status within the community through excessive generosity. According to Poseidonius, in extreme cases someone could pledge his life for gifts of gold, which he would then distribute among his friends, after which he would submit himself to death.

Ramage systems in Polynesia

Marshall Sahlins (1958, 1968) described the system of political and social organization in Polynesia as a ramage system: a unilineal descent group, in which a number of descent branches (ramages) are hierarchically related to each other, like the main branches of a tree. One’s status and position within the system was determined by the genealogical distance to the leader. So, a brother or a son of the leader would have a higher status than a cousin or a nephew. Leadership succession was by primogeniture. The paramount chief descended directly from the founder of the dynasty. Ancestors of the paramount chief were deified, endowing the chief with sacredness and divine power.

The complexity of the system needed flexibility in order to function. There were “outlets” such as the fission of large systems, creating separate ramage; adoption; breaks following internal disputes; or alignment with the mother’s father’s lineage for a generation. In his description of the system on different islands, Sahlins noted numerous diversions from the main system, clearly generated in order to solve tensions (Sahlins 1958: 151–78).

The economic system reflected the ramage organization, with regard to land rights, access to resources, *corvée* obligations and food distribution systems. Specialized production also seemed organized along ramage lines, with certain specialisms linked to certain families. This system has often been likened to a feudal system because it was so stratified. It differs, however, from feudal systems as we know them in its strict kinship organization.

Punishment for failing to fulfil one’s obligations within the system was by collective retaliation, and was dependent on the status and power of the chief and the amount of support he could muster. Political decisions were made collectively: heads of ramage determined the course of action in consultation with the members. In inter-ramage affairs, the paramount chief consulted with the heads of the ramage. Sahlins (1958) defined the largest possible economic and political unit in this ramage system as a “tribe”. This was a number of lineage groups or ramage who all claimed descent from a common ancestor. Several tribes could form military alliances (*ibid.*: 155). There also seems to have been a form of inter-tribal hierarchy, often based on military success.

North American “tribes”

Native North American groups are often referred to as “tribes”, but the exact meaning of the word depends on the context. John Swanton sums up the problems related to the use of the word “tribe” in Native American context (Swanton 1974: 1–2).³ Tribes are generally defined by territories carrying their name, but some of these named groups consisted of recent (enforced) confederations of tribes, while in Texas, “each Pueblo community was a tribe” and elsewhere the terms tribe and town were found to be interchangeable. Among the northern groups there was “a bewildering array of local bands and groups” claiming their name for a village or for a hunting territory.

In general, it seems, the term “tribe” was used for indigenous groups that shared a culture, language or territory, and that were known by one name in the post-contact American tradition, such as Sioux, Cheyenne, Apache, etc. These were, and still are, treated as coherent groups in American politics. In the recent past (end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries) they were often forced to organize politically into formal “tribes”, with a tribal chief and council – even though their original political organization was completely different. In addition, groups that before had little contact were forced to merge on the basis of a shared language or territory.

Mark Sutton (2003) gives a general overview of the different “tribes” of North America, with case studies illustrating a bewildering variety of political and social organizations, all of which are generally referred to as “tribes” by the federal government. Sutton’s own definition of a tribe (in his glossary) is general enough to include them all: “a society with a relatively large population, a number of villages, and leaders (chiefs) with some actual power”, but as a consequence becomes rather meaningless. It includes the band-like organization of the Inuit, small groups of hunter-gatherers who occasionally formed temporary coalitions, as well as the highly organized Iroquois confederacy, consisting of six “nations”, which in their turn incorporated a varying number of towns.

In anthropological studies of North American indigenous polities, three levels of political organization are generally recognized: bands, tribes and chiefdoms. Social organization was based on kinship groups and lineages (patrilineal, matrilineal or bilineal), clans and moieties. Different kinds of sodalities were common. Sometimes small groups, defined as bands or clans, could ally and form more complex “tribes” on a seasonal basis for the organization of a major hunting party, for ceremonial purposes or for warfare.

African tribes

Numerous studies have been and continue to be conducted among African tribes; but the most authoritative is still that of Fortes (1940) and Evans-Pritchard (1940). They discerned two main political systems among African tribes: one had a centralized authority, an administrative apparatus, judicial institutions and a class-like structure based on wealth and status; the other group is mainly defined

by the absence of these institutions, and conforms to a large extent to Service's definition of tribe. Three tribes are investigated in more detail as representative of the different systems: the Logoli in Kenya (Wagner 1940), the Tallensi of northern Ghana (Fortes 1940) and the Nuer of southern Sudan (Evans-Pritchard 1940).

The Logoli were a mixed pastoral/agricultural group, organized in exogamous patrilineal clans, several of which formed a tribe, united by descent from one revered ancestor, to whom sacrifices were made. The clan was the highest political unit, but tribal bonds were strong in their social framework through kinship, marriage, the working of customary law which encompassed the whole tribe, rituals and ceremonies. Group responsibility was on the clan level, not on that of the tribe, and justice was geared towards compensation and restoration of balance, rather than punishment. Leadership was heterogeneous, which meant that different persons could hold positions of authority in different areas of expertise, such as warfare, magic (rainmaking) or general wisdom. Authority was personal and without institutionalized rights or privileges. However, primogeniture did play a role in positions of authority within clans.

The Tallensi consisted of "composite clans", living in villages and bonding with other "composite clans" in a complex and intricate network of relationships. The clan was the largest political unit; the head of the maximal lineage was the highest authority. The Tallensi were agriculturalists. Land was owned privately, but selling it was almost seen as sacrilege because land was inherited from one's ancestors. Economically, they were a relatively egalitarian society, with little discrepancy in wealth within a village. There were two positions of leadership: political and religious. Leaders were elected, and the positions limited to the heads of certain clans, who competed for it, summoning the support of their clans.

The Nuer, in southern Sudan, were made famous by the publications of Evans-Pritchard. The Nuer had a mixed economy of pastoralism and agriculture, and they were semi-sedentary, living in villages in the rainy season and camping on the Savannah in summer. Tribes consisted of clans, with one dominant or leading clan. Intertribal relationships were extensive, and membership of a tribe was not absolute: any Nuer could settle in another tribe, if he wished, and become a member, so that clans were sometimes found divided over several tribes.

The Nuer had no leaders. The most influential men were the heads of families. But an important aspect of Nuer hierarchy is the age-sets. Age-sets were groups of men who had been initiated together, and they determined the relationship each member of the tribe had with every other member as junior, equal or senior.

If there is a common element in these widely differing societies it is the relationship between the individual and the group. This affiliation starts at birth and determines the course of the life of the individual. Even if, as is the case in many societies, the individual has the choice of changing his affiliation, the idea of not being part at all is unthinkable. Consequently, the interests of the group influence, and often determine, the acts of the individual. Competition for resources, territory and power is between groups, rather than between individuals. This

group ethic determines their politics, social organization and economy, rather than the other way round. It is no different in Near Eastern tribes.

Tribes in the Near East

The Near East has always been a popular area for the study of tribal groups (Salzman 1978, 2000, 2008: the Baluch in Iran; Lancaster [1981] 1997; Lancaster & Lancaster 1988, 1991, 2006: the Rwala; Barth 1961: the Basseri; Irons 1975: the Yomut; Marx 1967, 1992, 2006; Marx and Shmueli 1984: the Negev Bedouin, to name only a few). Most of these studies focus on pastoral societies, the roaming tribes of the deserts and mountains. As a result, tribalism has become almost identical to pastoral nomadism in the study of Near Eastern societies. The link between economic pursuit and social organization defined much of the research in the region during the past fifty or so years.

But this “natural connection” between pastoralism and tribalism in the region is false, as has been pointed out repeatedly in studies about tribal societies (Wilson 1987: 57; Salzman 1980; various articles in Saidel & van der Steen 2007). Whenever confronted with political or ecological constraints, tribes, many of them originally nomadic, adapted quickly to other economic lifestyles without losing their tribal identity.

Abu-Lughod (1986), in her research among the Egyptian Awlad Ali, has also demonstrated that their tribal organization did not suffer and, in some cases, was actually strengthened by government efforts to settle them and integrate them in the national economic and social system. The same phenomenon has been found in other parts and periods of the Ottoman Empire.

Tribal terminology

In late twentieth-century anthropological studies about the Near East, the word “tribe” was often seen as pejorative, but there was also confusion about the meaning of the word. Arabic terminology for various social groups was not defined properly, albeit not for want of trying. From the nineteenth century onwards, travellers and researchers attempted to define the words *Bedouin* and *Arab*, as well as *qabila*, *ashira*, *hamula* and various others. Unfortunately, their informants’ definitions varied, depending on which group they belonged to, in which region they lived or what dialect they spoke.

Ibn Khaldun, in the *Muqaddimah*, used the word *Arab* as an ethnic/national term (Ibn Khaldun 1967: 25, 99–100). He named a number of Arab lineages, some of which he considered to be “true” Arabs, who had kept their lineages pure, while others had mixed with other races and were bound to disappear over time. His “pure” Arabs were generally Bedouin: camel pastoralists living in the desert. The Bedouin, in their natural state, and because they were satisfied with the bare minimum existence, were “closer to being good” than sedentary people.

They were more courageous because they did not have the greed that weakens town people. Because of their savage nature they plundered and caused damage, but they would not fight unless in self-defence.

Jan Retsö (2003: 1–9, 78, 99–100) comes to the conclusion that “Bedouin are Arabs, but not all Arabs are Bedouin”; but he warns that the meaning of the terms Arab and Bedouin is by no means clear cut. The word Arab can mean different things in different contexts, even when used by Arabs themselves. Retsö sees it as a “class” of people in which members are distinguished by their tribal or kinship connections.

According to Bernhard Lewis (1995: 323):

the Arabic speaking inhabitants of Egypt and the Fertile Crescent called their language Arabic, but reserved the substantive “Arab” for the Bedouin inhabitants of the desert fringes. It was only in modern times, under the impact of European ideas of nationality, that literate city-dwellers began to describe themselves in these ethnic terms.

This shows that the meaning of the word “Bedouin” has changed in recent times. According to Lancaster ([1981] 1997: 175) there is dissent among tribal people about whether or not they can call themselves Bedouin. For some it means living full time in the desert (the *badia*, hence the name) and breeding camels for a living. For others, adapting to modern society, and at the same time making a serious effort to maintain their traditional values, the term Bedouin signifies independence, providing for oneself and maintaining traditional moral codes of hospitality, generosity and honour. The word “Bedouin” or “Arab” implies nobility and noble ancestry (Bell 1907: 23; Layne 1994: 15; Addison 2007: 20–22). Eickelman ([1981] 1989: 74) classifies the term as a form of cultural identity. The royal houses of Jordan and Saudi Arabia pride themselves on their Bedouin ancestry.

Words that are generally translated with “tribe” are *qabila*, *ashira* and sometimes *hamula*. According to most definitions there is an element of nesting, with the *qabila* as the largest unit, the *ashira* often being part of a *qabila*, and a *hamula* part of an *ashira* (al-Rasheed 1991: 20–22; Harris 1958: 54). They are sometimes equated with confederation, tribe and clan, respectively. The tribe was the largest unit that would normally claim a common ancestor. Having said that, the accounts of various observers (all of whom tried to find one general rule, and none of whom succeeded) provide us with a chequered picture, showing the complexity of the issue.

Among the Anaze the word *qabila*, the largest unit, was used both for the confederation of the Anaze and for its constituent groups, the Weld Ali, the Rwala, the Hesene and the Bishr (Burckhardt 1830: 19, note), who are sometimes referred to as tribes, sometimes as confederations. A *qabila* could consist of several *fendi*. *Asha'ir* (plural of *ashira*), according to Burckhardt, were smaller tribes that were not part of a *qabila*, or foreigners such as the Beni Naym. *Tayfe* was the name for a group that shared a common ancestor.

Alois Musil's informants belonged to the Rwala, one of the Anaze tribes. According to them the basic "unit" was the *ashira* or *hamula*: the tribe with a common ancestor, and consisting of several clans or *fendi*. Several *ash'a'ir* could unite into a tribal confederacy: the *qabila*. Sometimes the *qabila* also claimed a common ancestor, even though it was well known that this was a later invention (Musil 1908/III: 26). During the late twentieth century the terminology had changed. Lancaster ([1981] 1997: 28–9) found that among the Rwala, *ashira* was of a higher order than *qabila*.⁴

Among the tribes of the Kerak Plateau the terms *ashira* and *hamula* were often interchangeable (Jaussen 1908: 112–14), although in Madaba the *hamula* was considered of "lower order" than the *ashira*. Palestinian villages were described as *hamula*, consisting of non-related patronymic groups, so-called "*jeb*" (Atran 1986: 273–4).

This terminological jumble is by no means complete, but serves to illustrate the confusion that existed (and still exists). It is rooted in the fact that the history of Near Eastern tribes is characterized by a complex and fluctuating network of relations: tribes belong to confederations and are themselves divided into sub-tribes, clans and families. Tribes and confederations can belong to large, overarching "super" confederations, such as the Anaze. But these networks are also subject to change: clans expand into tribes, tribes into confederations. Confederations and tribes shrink or fission, and become tribes or clans in other tribes. Since the names by which these tribes define themselves, such as *qabila* or *ashira*, do not change, this leads to confusion within the terminology if, as many travellers have done, one tries to define these terms based on one's own observation. What may have been a large powerful confederacy, a true *qabila* in the past, may have shrunk to a clan within another tribe and still call itself *qabila*, and vice versa: a powerful tribe, or confederation of tribes, may be known as *ashira* because of how they defined themselves at a certain moment in history.

This network of political and genealogical relationships was used by governments as an administrative device to control and manipulate their subjects.⁵ The various Near Eastern governments did not try to reorganize or obliterate the tribal system, but they did use it. Frederick ("Peake Pasha") Peake's (1958) book on the tribes of Jordan was written as a means to bring order in the seemingly chaotic conglomerate of tribal identities and interactions in the British Mandate. In modern Jordan the tribal structure is incorporated in the administration. In fact, most colonial powers have used these concepts in order to control the population of their colonies (Eickelman [1981] 1989: 77–8).

What defines a Near Eastern tribe?

Kinship relations and segmentation

Kinship relations and lineage systems were at the core of tribal studies until well into the 1980s. Patrilineal, sometimes matrilineal, lineage systems were analysed,

and put into complex diagrams that were unreadable for the uninitiated, all in an effort to discover the patterns that lay at the root of the clan and tribal systems. Eventually this proved unworkable, partly because lineage systems and kinship relations were used by tribal groups for political and social purposes, manipulated to include non-members and members or even whole clans of other tribes, and sometimes simply invented. The perception of kinship, rather than the actual systems, was important for tribal cohesion. The reality of kinship relations as a basis for tribal society is undeniable, but much less strict, and more subject to manipulation than is claimed in structuralist models. At the same time, it is important for members of a tribe to stress these same kinship ties in order to confirm their identity and organize their interrelationships. Eickelman ([1981] 1989: 133–6) explains this as the difference between “segmentation” and “segmentary lineage theory” in which one is the ideological basis, and the other the actual interaction that results from it, or the “formal” and “practical” ideologies (*ibid.*: 148–9). Shryock’s (1997) analysis of the oral history of the Abbadī tribe of Jordan has some neat examples of this political manipulation of kinship notions.⁶

When Atran (1986: 272, 273–4) states that most Palestinian villages were non-tribal, he refers to the fact that these villages consisted of several corporate families, with no acknowledged kinship ties among the separate groups. Kinship above the family level was not a defining factor in the social organization of these villages.⁷ However, as Atran goes on to describe the social structure of the *hamula*, the basic social unit of the village, it becomes clear that, apart from these kinship ties, the *hamula* acted as a tribally organized group, with collective responsibility, the all-pervading concept of honour and political egalitarianism. The ties that bound the various kinship groups in each *hamula* together were the *musha* (communal landownership) system and marriage ties. So, even if recognized kinship and lineage are often an important aspect of Near Eastern tribalism, they are not a necessary condition.

Groups that formed on the basis of political or economic necessity, such as the Henadi in Galilee, or a religious order, such as the Nu’em, which were found all over the Near East, could transform into tribes over time. Marx noticed that in present-day Sinai, tribes have become “organizations” for which membership is, at least partly, a matter of choice (2006: 90).

Equality and egalitarianism

Another “dogma” of Near Eastern tribalism is the concept of equality and egalitarianism. Tribes are seen as egalitarian societies. There is generally, but not always, a chief, and there are elders, but none of these has absolute power or any power at all, except the power of persuasion. “Personal reputation is the basis of political power as far as political power exists at all” (Lancaster [1981] 1997: 73). Père Jaussen (1908: 143) mentions that in his days the Rwala shaykh, Nuri Ibn Sha’lan, did have absolute power, but also that this was an exception among

the Bedouin. Nuri's power originated in his strong personality (Lawrence [1926] 1962: 178).

For Salzman (1999; 2004: 29, 66), egalitarianism is a necessary condition for tribal organization. In his model, tribalism coincides with nomadism because contact with the sedentary centres of power induces hierarchical structures and inequality. Egalitarianism is therefore directly related to political independence. Tribes that are more integrated in the state structure (of the twentieth century) are more hierarchical.

Honour

One aspect of tribalism often mentioned with regard to Near Eastern tribes is that of honour. According to Abu-Lughod (1986: 78–9), tribal identity combines the notion of kinship with the need for autonomy. At the same time it is tied to a code of morality: the notion of honour and modesty, setting the tribe apart from other segments of society and stressing its independence. In her analysis of the code of honour, the specific “contents” of this code are less fixed than the need to strictly adhere to it. This means that the “code of honour” may be slightly different for different tribes, although it is clear that, in interactions between tribes, they must be recognizable and recognized mutually.

Honour is important because misconduct does not only reflect on the individual, but on the group as a whole. A breach of honour leads to loss of status within and for the tribe; on the other hand, an act of honour increases that status and respect.

Personal reputation

One thing that tribes all over the world have in common is the importance of personal reputation as a means of distinguishing oneself within the group. This may be a reputation as a war leader or hero, as a magician or as a poet. It may be a reputation for wealth and generosity. Generosity was an important way of establishing one's reputation in many tribal cultures, including Native Americans, Celts and Arabs. It could lead to the virtual bankruptcy of very wealthy individuals, and even to suicide, but this would only enhance the respect with which they were viewed.

Heroism in battle was another way to distinguish oneself. It was a legitimate reason for waging war on another tribe and gave the young men an opportunity to distinguish themselves.⁸

Among tribes of the Native American plains, this form of competition had developed into a “coup” (point) system, where specific brave moves on the battlefield were awarded “points”: touching a live enemy (preferably an armed one) rated higher than killing an enemy or touching a dead one. Among Celtic tribes the greatest hero had the right to the “hero's portion” at the victory feast, and these hero's portions were heavily contested at the table itself. Among Near

Eastern tribes, heroism on the battlefield was an important topic in poetry and often played a role in love poems.

One could distinguish oneself in different forms of art – mostly visual among Native American tribes, while among Near Eastern tribes it was generally through poetry. Many of the legendary tribal leaders were famous poets.

The personal reputation of a tribe member did not usually imply competition with the leader. The position of the leader, even though it was for a large part dependent on personal “achieved” qualities, was different from that of the “hero”, although the two might coincide, as in the case of some Near Eastern war leaders or poet-shaykhs. Whereas the hero only claimed fame for himself (or, occasionally, herself) and even though this fame reflected on the tribe, the position of the leader was that of representative of the tribe. He had taken on responsibility for the tribe and had to fulfil this to the best of his ability.

The economy of tribes

It is clear from the examples above that tribes exploited the full scale of economic pursuits. Many Native American tribes were hunter-gatherers, but some practised agriculture on a small scale, and trade or exchange was also practised. The Polynesian ramares described by Sahlins were mainly agriculturalists, and within the larger tribes there was specialization into different handicrafts. Celtic tribes practised agriculture and trade on a large scale. In the Near East tribalism is sometimes equated with nomadic pastoralism (particularly the herding of camels), although, in reality, tribes pursued all sorts of economic options, depending on their ecological and social niche.

Economic models of social organization, such as those of John Locke or, more recently, Émile Durkheim, focus on the acquisition and protection of property. In Near Eastern and other tribal societies, however, the concept of ownership and property played a more complex role in social strategies. In hunter-gatherer societies, as well as in nomadic pastoralist societies, land was not something one could own, either as a private person or as a tribe. Tribes had use-rights of the land, and of the springs and wells in it (important in desert societies), and these were sometimes shared with other tribes. A dominant tribe could demand payment from other tribes or individuals for the use of the land and the wells, on a temporary or permanent basis, so it can be said that they “owned” the use-rights. In many agrarian societies the land was regularly (e.g. every three or five years) redistributed among the different member families of the tribe. After the harvest it was sometimes shared with pastoralist groups, whose cattle would graze on the stubble and fertilize the land. This perception of land as a common resource may explain why Native American tribes were so easily cheated out of their land by the Europeans.

Tribe members had personal property: they had their tent or house; their personal belongings and necessities to maintain a household; and the fruits of their labour: sheep, goats or camels, the cereal that they had grown, or the revenues

from their trade activities (and, of course, their wives and their slaves). A person could gain wealth, which could be increased even more by his participation in successful raids. What he did with that wealth was of considerable importance. In many societies it was used to gain prestige by giving it away. The potlatch practices of Native American and Celtic societies, conspicuous consumption and the extreme hospitality sometimes practised by Arab shaykhs are clear examples. Wealth itself was not important; what was important was the status it could give within the tribe (and often among other tribes as well) through generosity and hospitality. It could be used to forge bonds with others and gain influence.

Two ways of looking at social organization

The relationship between the individual and the group lies at the root of what a tribe is. From the seventeenth century onward numerous theories and models were formulated to understand the role of man in society. Rousseau, Hobbes and Locke developed the idea of the social contract. During the nineteenth century, human origins and relations were hotly debated by monogenists and polygenists, with Darwin's *Origin of Species* as a catalyst. Modern discussions and ideas about humanity and society have their roots in these discourses. Two of these models seem particularly appropriate for the understanding of tribal societies.

The social contract

Philosophers of all ages have wondered about the relationship between the individual and the community. Aristotle stated in his *Politics* that humans cannot feel complete unless they belong to a community. He proposed a sequence of increasingly complex communities, starting with the unification of man and woman, and ending with the city-state as the highest form of organization. For Aristotle, the tension between the group and the individual was non-existent because it was the group (with the city-state as the highest form of social organization) that made it possible for the individual to achieve the highest fulfilment, something that individual humans were unconsciously aware of and acted upon.

Aristotle's ideas remained the dominant mode of thought until the Renaissance. Our present views originated in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in Western Europe, with the shift from faith to reason, rationality and the recognition of free will as a determining agent. The concept of free will played a major role in the philosophy of Descartes, Rousseau, Hobbes, Locke and others. They also questioned the relationship between the individual and the society to which he (in those days it was still largely "he") belonged. This led to the philosophical-political concept of the "social contract", introduced by Thomas Hobbes (*Leviathan*, 1651), and expanded by John Locke (*Second Treatise of Civil Government*, 1690) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (*Du Contrat Social*, 1762). The starting point for all

of these theories was the State of Nature. In Hobbes's version, this was a state of lawlessness, the "war of all against all", where nobody was ever secure from danger coming from his fellow creatures. Life was "nasty, brutish and short". Both Locke and Rousseau had a more optimistic view of the State of Nature; but all three researched the constraints of personal freedom while living with other individuals. In order to create security, humans entered voluntarily, but actually with little choice, into a "social contract", a mutual agreement, in which they gave up part of their individual freedom in return for mutual guarantees, expressed in communally agreed rules. In Hobbes's *Leviathan*, the government was an institution created by the "contractors" but not part of the contract, and it had absolute power. In the versions of Locke and Rousseau, government was part of the contract and could be deposed if it did not fulfil its part of the deal: representing and protecting its subjects. In order for this plan to work, both Rousseau and Locke developed systems of government that organized it, by devising and applying laws. Neither was in favour of democracy because they saw the danger that the majority suppressed the needs of minorities.

John Stuart Mill explored the tension between the group and the individual in his treatise *On Liberty* in which he limits the extent to which society has the right to infringe upon an individual's freedom. Freedom of speech and thought, according to him, were almost absolute, the only exception being where an expressed thought might induce illegal action. Freedom of action was only limited by other people's legal and intrinsic rights. Infringement on other people's legal rights was to be punished by law; infringement on people's intrinsic rights by public opinion. In Mill's vision, society was almost a necessary evil that should restrain the individual's freedom as little as possible. This emphasis on individual rights highlights a fundamental difference between tribal societies and our Western democracies.

Neither Hobbes nor Locke or Rousseau could come up with actual examples that proved their point. But when the social and political organization of tribes began to be studied, the idea of the social contract came once again into focus. According to Eickelman the notion of the tribe or, more specifically, the concept of segmentation is the "minimal" solution to Hobbes's anarchy in the state of nature. "Violence, self-help, or appeal to the shared moral conventions of the social group allow for the maintenance of order" (Eickelman [1981] 1989: 131), even though Hobbes was most vehement that an ordered society could only function if it appointed a monarch or a tyrant (a "Leviathan") to force it to adhere to the rules. The models of Locke and Rousseau came closer to the notion of the tribe as a form of social contract.

The idea of the tribe as a working social contract is appealing. Every (male) member of a tribe has responsibility for the group as a whole and, in return, is protected by the group. Membership is voluntary and a member of a tribe can always disconnect himself, although he loses its protection – but then he can attach himself to another tribe (something that happened regularly in Arab tribes). Unwritten laws exist to which every member agrees (at least in principle).