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RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES AND TRIBAL CULTURE IN OTTOMAN TRANSJORDAN. THE OVERLAP OF TWO DIFFERENT CULTURAL HORIZONS

PAOLO MAGGIOLINI

The prolonged absence of a central authority, combined with the particular topography of the land of Transjordan, which is characterized by important differences in terms of climate conditions and the distribution of natural resources, produced over the centuries distinct political-social spaces and a religious sense far from the orthodoxy of the great cities of the Ottoman Empire (Rogan 2002: 23, 24). The preponderance of the desert isolated Transjordan, encouraging the consolidation of a common popular culture rooted in the institution of the tribe, its customs and habits (Médebielle 1987: 176, Chatelard 2001: 14, Rogan 2002: 36). Transjordan was part of those territories within the Near East which were only nominally subjected to the Ottoman authority, dominated by powerful tribal confederations that clashed repeatedly to impose their power (Norman 1988: 3-8, Ze’evi 1996: 105-108). Far from the main trade routes and with no permanent settlement of any importance, Istanbul accepted this situation, delegating to the most powerful tribes the control of this land and the guarantee of the Hajj throughout Transjordan (Abujaber 1998: 28).

The 19th century was a period of evolution and change that deeply marked the local tribes’ lifestyle, paving the way for the emergence of the first independent state properly Transjordanian — the Emirate of Transjordan (1922). The imposition of direct Ottoman administration, the revival of ancient cities, the end of nomadism for some of its tribes, the arrival of merchants from Palestine and Syria, the settling of new ethnic communities — Circassians and Chechens — and the development of missionary establishments, Christian and Muslim, helped to evolve and stratify Transjordanian society, integrating this

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population within the Empire and the socio-economic life of the Mediterranean basin (Rogan 2002: 18-20). Nonetheless, these developments should not be considered only the products of a modernization process triggered from above. The local tribes did not passively accept the merchants’ and missionaries’ activities or the imposition of Istanbul’s direct rule. Moreover, they did not simply react or co-opt according to their personal interests, but found a way to reproduce some of their logics within the new socio-political system favouring the rise of a modernity that was the product of an overlapping process between different cultural horizons.

The land of Transjordan and its tribes at the beginning of the 19th century

At the beginning of the 19th century, the land of Transjordan was divided into different administrative units — Jabal ‘Ajlun, Balqa’, Karak and Ma’an-‘Aqaba — politically and economically separated from one another (al-Madi & Musa 1959: 5-15). These socio-political spaces were characterized by different socio-political balances. Nonetheless they shared some common elements such as their local autonomy, the strong link between people and the specific ecological and climatic conditions of the districts — crucial to the balance between settled people and nomads — and, finally, the presence of Muslim and Christian nomadic, semi-nomadic and settled tribes (Lancaster & Lancaster 1999: 147, Rogan 2002: 23, 40) respectively belonging to the Sunni and to the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate, that fought and cooperated with each other on the basis of military power and group solidarity — ‘assabiyya — rather than the faith professed (Lutfiyya 1996: 165, Rogan 2002: 36). Despite the fragmentation and the divisions, the population of Transjordan therefore shared the same cultural horizons, as evidenced for example by the spread of the institution of hospitality (Jaussen 1908: 79). The main aspect of public life was indeed expressed in the provision of buildings or tents — manzil, madafah — to host travellers, displaying the power and the wealth of the community both amongst the settled people and the nomads (Rogan 2002: 40). The language of the tribe regulated the social and political life of Muslims and Christians, directly influencing the sense of local religiosity (Tristram 1873: 93). The oral traditions passed down show a spirituality deeply rooted in a faith in the oneness of God, but also tied to nature and its manifestations, marked by superstitions and fears of a pantheon of saints — wali — and spirits — gin (Burckhardt 1822: 377, 387-388, Jaussen 1908: 294-318). Moreover, Christians
and Muslims shared common places of prayer and this habit gave rise to a religious rituality that could be called ‘popular’. Both Arab Christians and Arab Muslims thus managed their daily lives according to shared tribal customs and habits, as members of the same culture and society even if professing two different monotheistic religions (Haddadin & Haddadin & Haddadin 1991: 45, Shuweihat 1970: 111, Salman 1929: 31).

The loss of traditional autonomy. Transjordan under Istanbul’s direct administration

Throughout the centuries, between Istanbul and the Transjordanian districts developed a relationship of mutual indifference, which remained almost unchanged until the mid-19th century. The Ottomans considered Transjordan politically marginal and economically unattractive and thus decided to establish an indirect control over it (Abujaber 1998: 23). Istanbul granted administrative freedom to the local tribes as long as they recognized Istanbul’s authority (Saban G. & Ruks ‘Azayzat 1961: 147). Moreover, the Sultan accepted that some regional leaders would impose their influence within this land, as for example Fakhr al-Din II from Lebanon in the 17th century, Omar al-Dahir from Palestine in the 18th century, and Mohammed ‘Ali of Egypt in the 19th century (Rogan 2002: 41).

The autonomy enjoyed by Transjordan favoured the creation of self-ruling local regimes and made this area similar to a frontier zone. The Transjordan limes showed Istanbul’s authority slowly fading away in the direction of the Arabian Peninsula, a land culturally distant from the centres of the Ottoman political life, although never completely alienated from the Empire (Norman 1988: 3-6, Ze’evi 1996: 94, 105-109). During the 19th century, for example, a legal dispute arose for recognition of the ownership of Ghawr Abi ‘Ubayda lands (Fishbach 2001: 542) showing that even before the return of Istanbul’s direct authority Ottoman law was applied even in an outlying region such as Transjordan, despite inevitable manipulations and exploitations depending on the interests of the strongest local clans. Before the 19th century, Ottoman Transjordan was not a border between two irreducible socio-cultural systems, but rather a limes and a province largely ignored. The emergence of autonomous local potentates, associated with the same tribal culture, was not achieved by force but was the result of Istanbul’s conscious decision to leave Transjordan to its fate (Koury & Kostiner 1990: 42-44). Moreover, the political autonomy
and uniqueness of its local culture did not lead to the formation of a common Transjordanian identity, nor to a single socio-economic political structure, which always remained linked to the Ottoman Empire. Accordingly, renewed Ottoman interest with regard to Transjordan did not mean the conquest of new territory, but the decision to make this land an integral part of the Empire.

After 1840 Istanbul returned to look at the Transjordanian province, driven by the need to control a strategic line of communication between Syria, the Arabian Peninsula and Egypt. The first attempt to extend its direct administration over this land dates back to 1851. Istanbul initially tried to impose its authority only by force, but it failed due to the resistance of the local tribes (Rogan & Tell 1995: 34). The spread and consolidation of the Ottoman presence was made possible by the combination of two elements. The Vilayet law (1864) provided the legal instrument for rational control of the territory. The appointment of a strong personality such as the wali of Damascus, Mehmet Rashid Pasha (1866-1871), gave Istanbul a guide capable of imposing the Tanzimat within Transjordan, ensuring greater control over the local tribes (Salibi 1993: 37, Rogan & Tell 1995: 36). The Ottoman efforts to rule the Transjordanian districts were thus crowned when Istanbul ceased to implement a strategy marked by an excessive use of coercive subjugation and came to employ appropriate policies of integration, favouring local economical development by introducing an efficient land-property law, encouraging new commercial activities through the gradual settling of some pastoral tribes, creating unusual representative institutions that involved both Christians and Muslims thanks to the Hatti Humayun (1856), renewing the old railroad system, financing a telegraph line (1890) and the Hejaz railroad (1908), founding state schools to train a local bureaucracy and Islamic schools able to spread the religious orthodoxy and ideology of the Ottoman Empire. On the one hand, all these new institutions and infrastructure helped Istanbul to mould Transjordanian youth according to the Ottoman political culture of the Tanzimat era and to co-opt the local elites and their military forces, triggering a process of development and stratification within the local tribal society (Rogan 2002: 94). The institution of the tribe did not fade away. Istanbul did not attack it; instead it employed the most powerful tribes to control the land, making them state employees.

The Ottoman officials were not the only actors of this period of reform and change. At their side there were other players, such as foreign traders and Christian missionaries, who unwittingly helped to trigger and sustain the process of modernization (Rogan 2002: 121, 159). The presence of foreign subjects
such as the Christian missionaries was favoured by two circumstances. Firstly, the European powers pressured Istanbul for freedom to operate within Ottoman territory, seeking to affect the domestic politics of the Empire. Secondly, Istanbul initially accepted their activities in order to reinforce its control over its provinces, thus indirectly delivering throughout them health-care and education services (Rogan 2002: 140-146, Chatelard 2004: 74). If merchants’ activities favoured the growth of commerce in Transjordan, encouraging the emergence of the loan market and the accumulations of extensive property by some families (Inalcik & Quataert 1994: 861, Abujaber 1998: 66-67, Rogan 2002: 71-72), Christian missionaries, both Catholic and Protestant, brought Transjordan the institution of the religious community, legally recognized by Istanbul (Mantran 1989: 70), where before there were only tribes which distinguished themselves according to shared tribal costumes (Braude & Lewis 1982: 333).

The overlap of two different cultural horizons. Religious communities and tribal culture

After 1860, Catholic missionaries, from France and Italy belonging to the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, and Protestants, mainly British in origin and affiliated with the Church Mission Society, increasingly flocked into the Transjordan territory attracted by the possibility of freely proselytizing a population characterized by a strong Christian religiosity but with little awareness of the institutional dimension of the religion, partly as a consequence of the scant presence of official Greek Orthodox activities (Médebielle 1987: 3, Hummel 2005: 195). Aside from specific reasons of faith which persuaded these men to convert, some of the local Christian tribes, aware of the relationship between these foreign missionaries and the European powers, welcomed them in order to benefit from their protection, taking advantage of their services in health and education which significantly improved their social status vis-à-vis the Muslim component.

The arrival of the missionaries helped to support the process of social transformation, becoming another instrument of inter-tribal competition in place following application of the Tanzimat reforms. It was on this level that the process of modernization saw the overlap and the intertwining between different cultural logics. The Vilayet Law had ordered that every village elect a representative — mukhtar — for each tribal clan — hamula — so that the
number of the seats in every administrative council should respect the local tribal-community division. According to Ottoman legislation, in fact, the hamula could be interpreted as a numerous clan-tribe or a single religious community — taifah (Baer 1992: 89-91). In an already highly competitive society, the various Christian tribes, already involved in specific tribal confederations, benefitted both from the missionaries’ presence and the Ottoman laws in order to improve their socio-political condition, distinguish and emancipate themselves from traditional alliances (Pelkmans & Vaté & Falge 2005: 33). More or less consciously, they initially accepted conversion from political interests, facilitating missionary work. Leaving the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate to embrace Catholicism or Protestantism allowed them to emerge from the former tribal structure, legally becoming a separate religious community, claiming their personal mukhtar and being represented within the new local representative institutions. The conversion phenomenon was rarely linked to the individual dimension of each faithful, but instead involved all of the clan or the tribe. During the 19th century, Transjordan experienced implementation of the cuius regio eius religio principle where the single sheikhs negotiated their conversion with the missionaries, imposing their choice on the rest of the tribe (De Wandelbourg 1883: 289-291). Moreover, the choices of converting to Protestantism and Catholicism or remaining Greek Orthodox were influenced by traditional tribal rivalries. Accordingly, in every Transjordanian Ottoman district entire tribes or clans became the expression of different Christian religious communities, forging an indissoluble dyad between these two different socio-political institutions. This is the content of the overlapping process where tribal and confessional logics overlap with each other producing a form of dialectic relationship. The proofs of this dynamic are seen in the increasing struggles that broke out following the spread of the missionaries’ activities. In 1868, for example, some Protestant missionaries who settled in Salt, opening a health clinic and a girls’ school, warned Bishop Gobat that riots were erupting in the city (Tibawi 1977: 258-260). Some Arab families, just converted to Anglicanism, had requested to have their own representative in the local majlis and in the provincial council as was accorded to the Catholics of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem (Médebielle 1987: 11). Similarly, the clashes that led to the migration of the ‘Azayzat, Karadsheh and Mu‘ai‘a tribes, under the protection of the Latin Patriarchate, from Karak to Madaba (1881) were caused by the same political reasons. During the second part of the 19th century, the city of Karak was shaken by the struggle between two different Christian tribes, the Sunna’, Greek-orthodox, and the ‘Azayzat, converted to
Catholicism. Even if both of them had been part of the Gharabah alliance of the al-Majali, the two tribes had always competed to affirm their primacy within the Christian field. The ‘Azayzat’s decision to convert to Catholicism altered the former balance, favouring them against the Sunna within the Gharabah. Finally, the latent inter-tribal conflict dramatically erupted in all its violence following the abduction of a girl of the ‘Azayzat (Jaussen 1908: 416). The Sunna played on local tribal politics, persuading the al-Majali to oppose the ‘Azayzat, who decided to leave Karak and found the new settlement of Madaba where they imposed their authority without any internal rivalries, being recognized as chief tribe of that area and electing their personal representative within the Ottoman administrative system (Médebielle 1987: 208).

These examples illustrate some of the reasons for the success of the first foreign missionaries, providing a partial explanation of the mass conversions of entire clans. At the same time, however, they give an idea of the difficulties that these men had to overcome in accomplishing their mission against the inevitable exploitation and resistance of the local tribes, which initially used the institution of the religious community to further their own interests, reproducing their political culture and traditions within the new social space.

The functioning of the overlapping process

In 1886, the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem dispatched to Madaba a new missionary, Father Biever, to sustain the process of consolidating the Catholic establishment, founded within the new settlement after the migration of three Christian tribes from Karak in 1881 (Jaussen 1908: 416, Médebielle 1987: 208). In 1886, when Father Biever reached Madaba, the village was about to go to war against the tribes of Balqa and Karak. The casus belli that made the latent rivalries between Madaba, Karak and the Balqa tribes erupt into an open conflict was an offense of honour (Médebielle 1987: 227-228).

Before Father Biever arrived, a member of the Hejazin, a Catholic tribe of Karak, had visited the ‘Azayzat bearing the news that a man of the al-Majali, the leading Muslim tribe of Karak, had publicly besmirched the honour of the daughter of Giries, an ‘Azayzat’s sheikh of the Latin-Catholic community of Madaba (Jaussen 1908: 431). A tribal council — majlis — was immediately held during which it was decided to send a delegation to obtain redress for the offense. Once in Karak, the ‘Azayzat met the al-Majali and discovered that the Hejazin had lied. The lie revealed, the ‘Azayzat prepared to take their revenge. Informed of the passing of a caravan from Karak, the whole village
of Madaba assaulted it, redressing the offense. A fierce struggle ensued with a singular casualty. A mule owned by a member of the Greek Orthodox tribe of the Halasa was in fact killed. The Halasa visited Madaba claiming the right of compensation, but they met the ‘Azayzat’s firm rejection. They considered murdering a mule owned by a villager of Karak the price for the previous offense. The following night, an Halasa man went to Madaba and stole a mule. Discovering the theft, the owner of the stolen mule decided to send a new one to the Halasa asking them to accept it in return for the other.

The Halasa welcomed the donation, but refused the bargain, arousing the wrath of the ‘Azayzat. The Latin tribe, always ready to fight, did not stand for the new offense and again attacked a convoy on the route from Karak to Madaba, stealing several sacks of wheat. The Halasa, unable to take revenge against the stronger ‘Azayzat, decided to ask for the protection of the Muslim tribe of the Hamaideh, the former allies of their enemies. The Hamaideh bestowed the tanib — close neighbour status — on Halasa without any delay (Jaussen 1908: 431). The reason for this act was simple. On the one hand, a refusal to protect a weaker clan would have brought shame on the Hamaideh with all the other tribes of the district. Tribal law, in fact, imposed the obligation on any tribe to assist other weaker clans if they had requested it, even if the threat had come from their own allies, as in the case which involved the Hamaideh, the ‘Azayzat and the Halasa. On the other, the duty of the tanib would offer to them a good excuse to plunder the rich Latin tribes of Madaba. The consequences of the escalation of tension between Karak and Madaba, triggered by an insignificant incident, led to a tribal conflict involving two districts.

Father Beiver reached Madaba shortly before the outbreak of the first raid between the ‘Azayzat and the Hamaideh. During the skirmish, three villagers of Madaba were wounded. Realizing the negative consequences of this defeat, the missionary saddled his horse and went to bring them first aid, escorted by some of the ‘Azayzat’s warriors. The willingness and determination shown by Father Beiver during this episode allowed him to be immediately accepted within the tribal social context of Madaba, gaining the devotion and the gratitude of his faithful. Nevertheless, the dispute between the ‘Azayzat and the Hamaideh was not resolved, but kept on with ongoing struggles and looting that continued throughout 1886. Father Beiver tried to mediate between the two tribes, bargaining the safety and security of Madaba for the release of a member of Hamaideh imprisoned by the Ottoman officials. In 1887, however, when military pressure seemed to abate temporarily, the Beni Sakhr, one of the most powerful tribal confederations of the Balqa’ which had opposed the
‘Azayzat since the foundation of their new settlement, came to threaten the village. The Beni Sakhr, in fact, believed that the khirbet — ruins — given by the Ottomans to the Christian migrants of Karak through the mediation of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem were originally their property and therefore these tribes had to submit to their authority paying a khuwa — tribal tax of submission — or to leave it forever (Médebielle 1987: 223). Although in 1881 the Christian tribes had succeeded in rejecting these claims, the Beni Sakhr never stopped undermining Madaba. The arrival of Father Beiver and the start of works to enlarge the missionary establishment gave the Beni Sakhr the pretext for intruding in the domestic affairs of the Christian village. Sheikh Sattam, the former tribal chief of the Sakhr, was in the meantime appointed as mudir by the Qaimaqam of Salt and tried to exploit this new position of strength to control the activities of Madaba. Sheikh Sattam — benefiting from Ottoman political support deriving from the need to ensure the journey of the Hajj throughout Transjordan — ordered an attack on Madaba, trying to get revenge against the missionary and the Latin tribes with the assistance of the Greek-Orthodox (Médebielle 1987: 233-235).

The military pressure of the Beni Sakhr grew steadily throughout 1887, leading to abuses and violence which remained unpunished thanks to the coverage provided by the Ottoman authorities of the Balqa’. In 1887 the tension reached its apex and the war finally enveloped Madaba. Similarly to what had occurred during 1886, the struggle broke out from an isolated incident which involved a man of the ‘Azayzat and a tanib of the Beni Sakhr (Jaussen 1908: 432). The killing of a person protected by the Beni Sakhr by a Christian of Madaba gave Sheikh Sattam the pretext for organizing a major punitive expedition against the village in order to destroy it. The threat was great, but once again the military value of Christian tribes and the determination of Father Bievier, who promised the Ottoman authorities a baksheesh in return for their protection, saved Madaba from the overriding strength of the Beni Sakhr. The attack repelled, the Latin missionary rushed to Salt, the administrative centre of the Balqa’, and tried to obtain Ottoman military support with the mediation of Father Gatti. The attempt succeeded (Médebielle 1987: 236-237). The following day Father Bievier came back to Madaba escorted by seventy Ottoman soldiers, accompanied by an officer and a doctor. When the reinforcements reached the village, the Ottoman officer went to the camp of the Beni Sakhr to meet their sheikhs – Menawer, Gaman and Rdeifallah. The tribal leaders told him that the order to destroy Madaba had come from Sattam, who had also convinced them that he would secure their position against the
Ottoman authorities. On that occasion it was reported that the ‘Azayzat had killed one of their protected allowing them to obtain revenge. The Christian position was therefore critical. The ‘urf — tribal law — would not let them escape. Moreover the Ottoman official was about to accept a generous gift from Sattam and this would have changed their position against the Christians. Understanding the difficult situation, Father Biever went to the Ottomans and the Beni Sakhr and thanks to a munificent baksheesh again negotiated the safety of Madaba. The Beni Sakhr withdrew the murder charge on the ‘Azayzat and the Ottoman official confirmed that the tanib died in an accident (Médebielle 1987: 237).

The war finally came to the end. The existence of Madaba was preserved through the efforts of Father Beiver and the steadfastness of the Christian tribes, which, though numerically inferior, did not hesitate to give battle.

Conclusion

The progressive advancement of the imaginary border that until the 19th century had divided the territories under the direct authority of Istanbul from those only nominally subjected to its control became the clear proof of the extension of the new Ottoman central state system. Istanbul achieved this result by mobilizing all the available resources, triggering a process of modernization within its Empire during the last century of its history. The consequences produced by this new political interest in the provincial lands of the Empire have been generally considered part of the Ottoman legacy to the Near East. Nonetheless this explanation ignored the local contribution to this process of evolution and modernization. The image of the overlap between different cultural horizons tries to reconsider the Ottoman legacy to Transjordan, re-examining the process of modernization through a dialectical interpretation between foreign and local actors. While in Lebanon sectarianism was imposing its logics (Makdisi 2000: 3), during the second half of the 19th century Transjordan witnessed the ongoing superposition and the constant intertwining of different logics wherein the tribal system, the Ottoman administration system and missionary activities merged, shaping the evolutionary process of traditional Transjordanian society with particular reference to the Christian dimension.

Citing the episode described in section 3 (p. 8), Father Biever and the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem played a crucial role protecting their faithful, helping Madaba to emerge victorious from a delicate situation. The missionary
perfectly fulfilled the role of leader of the religious community and broker of its particular interest (Rogan 2002: 131. Chatelard 2004: 127). Nonetheless, all the struggles and threats arose from the tribal system where the religious element did not play a core role, except for providing them with the missionary’s strong support. Certainly, the development of religious communities involved the formation and redefinition of new religious and political identities (Chatelard 2004: 107). At the same time, however, the case being part of religious communities, it reinforced and promoted the tribal identity of the Christians, rather than dissolving it.

The village itself publicly displayed the superimposition of the tribe with the religious community. This relationship became thus spatially circumscribed and the new-founded settlement emerged as the field of the tribe and of the community at the same time.

Christian missionaries, Ottoman authorities and representatives of Western powers told the history of this region according to their roles and personal perceptions. Tribal status became the index of the backwardness of the local population, while religion was considered the main element for judging social antagonism. Nonetheless, tracing the micro-history of this land reveals a different relationship between tribes and religious communities where the two social institutions are solidly intertwined with each other.

Aside from the faith and spirituality of these men, during the 19th century the arrival of the missionaries was thus instrumental in strengthening the socio-political position of the Transjordanian Christian tribes against both their local allies and enemies, whatever their religion. This was favoured by the Tanzimat reforms which promoted the establishment of local representative institutions according to the religious-community division of the population. Following this path, the conversion of entire tribes to different Christian sects favoured their emergence from the traditional balances of power within the local tribal system. The newly formed tribe-religious community dyad helped the Christian tribes to better enact district politics against both their tribal rivalries and the Ottomans. Finally, the religious community became a means of giving them a seat in the representative councils, the support of foreign actors and services in health and education. At the same time, religious institutions engaged in local rivalries, widening their influence within the Christian dimension and the local political field. This dynamic would foster religious segregation, accentuating Christian solidarity as a means of protecting Christian minorities (Haddad 1992: 78-80).

Regarding the Transjordanian Christian dimension, the product of the
overlap process was the tribe-religious community dyad. The functioning of this relationship was characterized by high flexibility and fluidity where the social group was not only a tribe nor a community but their convergence. The legal system and ‘house politic’ which characterized the first Hashemite political field benefitted from this continuum to extend without contradiction its alliance system both internally, through the institution of the tribe which allowed it to involve the entire Transjordanian population, and externally, reinforcing Western support thanks also to an image of a Muslim state more respectful of its local Christian minority.

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