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THE IBEX HUNT CEREMONY IN HADRAMAWT TODAY*

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Summary:

In 1987 and 1990 to the author influenced by R.Serjeant's "South Arabian Hunt" entered on investigation into the organisation of the ibex hunt in the Hadrami villages of Madudah, al-Taribah and the town of al-Ghurfa. Analyzing the stages of zaff, or the ceremonial procession with dancing and singing, the author distinguishes the features that 'resemble a marriage of bridegroom' (South Arabian Hunt, 55) and especially those of a sham play with masked and fancy-dressed actors of al-Ghurfa who symbolize the main characters of local social structure. The reference to rock graffiti proves that the ritual hunt tradition is likely to have continued uninterruptedly through more than two milleniums. The old and new examples of the Hadrami folk poetry are commented and the purpose of the ibex hunt ceremony is discussed. It is, at least partially, a worship commemorating the annual revival of Nature? Does it have something in common with the pre-thantre tragedies (i.e. with the goatsongs of Greece)? The Hadrami data tempt to answer these questions in the affirmative.

* *

In his book "South Arabian Hunt" R.B.Serjeant writes: "At present, however, it is only in Hadramawt that we know the organised Hunt, a survival of the ancient religion, is still an existence (or was so until a few

* The papers has been presented at the Seminar for Arabian Studies, Cambridge, July 26, 1991.

years ago), though it might still be reported from some of the eastern districts of the Yemen"¹. I can add that the Ibex (wa^ḥl, pl. wu^ḥl) Hunt in Hadramawt does exist today. In winter and early spring of 1987 and 1990 some field information was gathered in Wādī Ḥaḍramawt, i.e. in al-Tāribah, Madūdah, al-Qa^ḥḍah (1987) and in the town of al-Ghurfaḥ (1990).

The results of 1987 field season are summarized in my book "The Ethnography of Western Hadramawt"², so it is enough to touch upon it only in brief. In Madudah I was lucky to have as an informer 60-years-old shaikh Ahmad Sa^ḥid Bakḥḍar, a hero of "South Arabian Hunt"³, who having been a young man in the fifties has become nowadays the Headman of the Quarter (ra^ḥis al-ḥāfaḥ) and the eminent hunt leader (muqaddam al-ṣayd).

In the winter of 1986-1987 the Hunting Party of Madūdah killed only one ibex, the people of al-Tāribah took 18 heads of game (only 9 of them were "big" ibexes), the people of Dammūn got 4 heads. An ibex is considered to be "big" when it bears no less than 10 rings (cijra, pl. cijar) on each of its horns, it is called 'a bearer of twenty', i.e. 10 plus 10. The huntsmen of Madūdah and Dammūn still use hunting nets as well as firearms; people of other places do not apply nets. The West of Ḥaḍramawt (ḥAlwā) is reputed to be a poor hunting area. ḥId ḥAwad Ballayl, a hunt leader from al-Tāribah, stated that the ibexes of ḥAlwa are frightened away by hyenas (dibā^ḥ) and monkeys (ribḥān), However, the people of western Hadrami village al-Qa^ḥḍah in March, 1988, killed at the plateau between canyon of Manwab and that of Qa^ḥḍah a big she-ibex, the bearer of 64 rings, this event was even noted in South Yemeni press⁴.

Usually the Hunt itself lasts six days, from Saturday till Thursday morning, and the ritual celebrating success in hunt (ḥaflat al-qanīs) goes on for two days. The Hunting Party consists of 2 or 3 hundred of participants: e.g. in al-Tāribah winter season at the beginning of 1987 gathered 120 shooters and 140 assistants, 'carriers of water'. Those people are also the participants of the ceremonial procession (zaff) with dancing and singing, an integral part of hunting festival in Madūdah, being more

modest in al-Tāribah, the maqadimah of the letter, however, sporting special suits with wide crossribbons over their breasts.

The hunting ceremony seems to preserve in details since all the stages of ritual are documented by video and tape recordings. Some of them have been demonstrated to me in Madūdah and al-Tāribah as well as the living mock hunt I witness on February, 22, 1987 near the house of shaikh Aḥmad Bakhdar. The data reflect certain features of ancient ritual representing the feast of successful Ibex Hunt as a conjugal feast or a marital union of an ibex bridegroom with local community. This phenomenon, a mare gift for a supporter of totem theory, did not evade the attention of "South Arabian Hunt" author⁵ He mention the main centres on the Ibex Hunt in Ḥadramawt but one, i.e. al-Ghurfaḥ where some interesting information was gathered that forms a core of the present paper.

In winter 1990 the hunt in al-Ghurfaḥ started on Saturday, January 20 and lasted till Thursday, January 25. It was preceded by the appearance of the heralds (ʿānī/mubashshar/muḥawwal) who declared that they seen ibexes in the mountains.

I visited the place where the huntsmen gathered together, in the valley of al-Juʿaymah near the village al-ʿUqayqaḥ. The host of the hunters house was Mūbarak b. ʿUmar from the famous family of Bin ʿAbdat, well-known by their revolt in al-Ghurfaḥ against the Sultans and the British administration⁶ It was he as well as the hunt headmen Ṣāliḥ Maḥfūz Sharkā, ʿAbdallāh Bīk Bin Ṭayyib, Maḥfūs Sālim Bā ʿĀmir and Saʿīd Aḥmad Bin ʿUmārah who told me in detail about hunt organization and its rituals. The frontiers of the hunting areas having been strictly defined in the past are nowadays no longer observed so strictly. The al-Ghurfaḥ hunters did not use a net anymore.

Each hunting circle (hilqah) consisting of 10-12 people is headed be muqaddam who has two assistant and a cook. During the hunt rigid discipline is kept. As far as taboos are concerned it is forbidden to drink tea of coffee and to smoke. A common meal is taken by all the huntsmen every day in the evening after the hunt. For these purpose they pool their

food, each one gives a sack of rice or wheat (bor), etc. There must be 'united hand and united heart'. The breaking of this principle spoils (zayzm) the Hunt. Success in chase is believed to bring success in human activities, rain is not mentioned explicitly. In honour of the prey, i.e. ibexes, they make a dance-and-song procession (zaff) lasting for many hours that I have observed from the very beginning till the end.

Zaff does not start at al-Ghurfaḥ but at the huntsmen rally place. There, in a special house three types of drums are kept. Among them I saw a horizontal drums made of leather, big (hājir) and medium (mirwās) as well as little vertical wooden drums (maṭraqah). Before zaff the hunters have their meal together. In the house the heads of the ibexes with the freshly black painted horns are exhibited. It is called qashaḥ or qayshaḥ. In the winter season of 1990 they took 3 heads with 48, 18 and 12 rings (the rings of both horns are counted). If an ibex has less than 10 rings there is no feast.

The hunters fire at improvised targets, some of them recite poems and incantate short marching callsongs (zāmil). I have recorded and translated several examples of zāmil, e.g.:

Ahlan wa saḥlan bi-llazī qanaṣū ḥā ruūs al-jibāl

Qarḥat mayāzirhum teḥin mayādīn al-qitāl

"Welcome to those who hunted at the summits of the mountains.

Their Mauser-rifles fired loudly when they entered the fields of the battle!"

Then the procession of cars left for al-Ghurfaḥ going through all the neighbouring villages. On approaching the hunters fired into the air using live cartridges and performs zāmil. The cars came to al-Ghurfaḥ exactly in time, at 4 p.m. People formed ranks and lines, each line represents a ring of 10-12 men. The zaff participants slowly moved from the western outskirts of al-Ghurfaḥ to the town centre, repeating the words of zāmil prompted by the poet supervisor ḤUmar Muḥammud from the eminent nashayikh family Bā ḤAbbād⁷ The Chinese feast fireworks were used. The procession was greeted by the women's hallo. The huntsmen changed the way of walking from the ordinary one (qamsah) to running and jumping (khabbah). Thus 15 rows were passed, representing inhabitants of several

villages and towns, from Tarīs to Shibām. The zāmils were performed, the painted horns were waved above the heads of the crowd.

Next day morning, Friday, January 26, the feast continued. At 8 o'clock a first group of participants carrying the qasha^h horns appeared at the football field west of al-Ghurfaḥ. A petty trade started from makeshift stalls or simply from a rug or tarpaulin on the ground. An hour later the mizmār double pipes were played and the drums were beaten. In the centre of the formed circle people danced an old marzaḥah dance with qa^hha^h. The poets recited some versed. The rows were led by the maqādimah carrying barren jambiyyah daggers or, most often, just knife scaffolds made of leather. People moved rhythmically sometimes keeping in file, sometimes facing each other; they called it 'shabwānī zaff'. In the course of the ceremony the qasha^h had been passing round all the perimeter of the field.

At 10 o'clock in the morning the procession reached the qubbaḥ of mashayikh Bā^h Abbād, then moved to the qubbaḥ of Bā^h Alī and then to that of sayyed al-Habshī. Afterwards they came to the square near the mosque of shaikh Bā^h Abbād where a dance with qasha^h was performed. The procession moved towards the mosque of Bin Duhmī, the oldest mosque in al-Ghurfaḥ, then it came near the office of the administrative unit (ḥayy), where a member of local administration made a short speech into the microphone. At 11 o'clock zaff was stopped to be continued at 3 p.m. of the same day.

Near Bin Duhmī mosque they marked with ropes a place for the ceremony, the beginning of which was announced over the microphone. The audience gathered on the roofs of the houses and mosques, some gathered even on the minaret.

At 5 o'clock p.m. the qasha^h horns appeared as well as eleven fancy-dressed actors. The poet ^hUmar Bā^h Abbād explained to me that they symbolize the main characters of local social structure: a shaikh in a long garment, white turban, byspectacled; some bedouins with thick black false hair and a rope tied around, carrying wooden muskets. There were men in transitional women's dresses" an enigmatic figure in a grey uniform

wearing a conus-shaped hat wrapped in foil, his face was covered by a pale mask of a skull. I was told about the latter: "That's a mere fantasy". The socialist government was embodied by a fancy dressed man in a khaki uniform, an enormous leather holster on his belt and a bellicose moustash. Ṣāliḥ Mubārak Ḥumayd, a poet, recited his qaṣīdah about the Hunt. Then verses on the same topic were recited by a fancy shaikh and the performance was over without any mock play concerning the Hunt as we saw it in 1987 in Madūdah.

The participants of al-Ghurfaḥ Hunting Feast returned to their houses for a holiday meal. The ibex flesh was shared within ḥilqah circles; the successful marksman who has managed to hit first gets the hind right leg of a game. Some meat is endowed to Bā ʿAbbād family, the members of which are considered to patronize the Hunt; the hunting areas of al-Ghurfaḥ bears the common name Jabal Bā ʿAbbād.

The Ibex Hunt Ceremony in al-Ghurfaḥ provokes some general remarks.

The comparison of the zaff field information to the graffiti drawing and other pictorial data of Northern and Southern Yemen proves that the roots of this unique ritual which has survived uninterruptedly up to this day go far to the rocks in the traditional hunting area, e.g. in Western Ḥaḍramawt they are in wādī Manwab, wādī Mikh and wādī Ghabr (Ṣaydah Wārim). In wādī Ghabe at the rocks Ḥiṣāt al-Miḥqāt near the spring we saw the profile of an ostrich and the dedication to ʿAṣṭar and Zāt (sic!) Ḥimyam. It should be added to the silhouettes of passing ostriches (Ḥaram) about which J.Ryckmans wrote: "Nous n'en connaissons pas d'autre représentation dans l'art sud-arabe proprement dit"⁸ Concerning the couple of figures from Haram that may be interpreted as dancing women or priests-supervisors of the Hunt (their bosoms were regarded not quite feminine)⁹ one should bear in mind al-Ghurfaḥ he-actor in women dresses.

The ritual hunt widespread all over the ancient Asia was studied as ethnologic phenomenon by W.Dostal and N.Kiclyakov¹⁰ The traces of Yemeni/Hadrami local tradition can be found in poetry, e.g. in a qaṣīdah of

sayyid ʿAlī b.Ḥasah b.ʿAbdallāh b.Ḥusayn b.ʿUvar b. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-ʿAttās (1122/1710-1172/1758, the founder of Mashhad ʿAlī, a ḥawṭah sanctuary in the North of wādī Dawʿan. Sayyid ʿAlī speaking with the ruins of ancient site Raybūn named the main groups of extinct society; among them are: "the huntsmen searching for /the gazelles/ that lie down /on the ground/" (wa ahl al-qanāṣāt zī yaṭbaʿūn al-Khanab)¹¹ It may be a hint at the beduin way of hunting the game, chasing it on foot for many hours 'until it is worn out'¹²

Some pictorial data are interpreted as representing masked people. J.Ryckmans gathered information about Ḥaram (al-Ḥazm) and Qarnāw (Maʿīn) in North Yemen and about Central Arabia¹³ By courtesy of M.Piotrovsky here we may add a dancing figure presumably masked from the rock drawings near Saʿadah (North Yemen)¹⁴.

These masked figures may be well connected with those of ah-Ghurfaḥ Feast with their painted, covered of masked faces. We have called them 'actors' but the fact is that they never act. As it was noted by ʿUmar Bā ʿAbbād, these figures just 'symbolizes the main characters of local social structure'. One can recall the typical masks of the ancient Greek theatre - a mask of barbarian, a mask of woman, etc. This comparison seems to be not arbitrary if we remember that the word 'tragedy' comes from τρᾶγος, a goat, and ὤδη, a song/an ode, i.e. a goatsong. A second step leads us to pagan ritual of goat offering in honour of Dionysus, the parallel is corroborated by G.Garbin's article where Sabaeen god Almaqah is regarded as being partially assimilated by Dionysus, and Hadrami Moon/Sun(?) god Sin is presented as analogous to Almaqah¹⁵ The comparison can be developed further. According to Aristotle (The Aftbog Poetic, Ch. I-IV, VI, XXII), the tragedy originated from dithyramb songs (the Yemeni analogue is zamil) and the first function of an actor was to be a mine, i.e. not to speak and even not to act but to imitate and, I would say, to symbolize.

In pre-theatrical practice the active role of chorus is quite evident, the same is in Hadrami zaff procession. The ancient Greek orchestra was an area for dancing and singing, as it is with the football field near al-

M.Rodionov. The ibex hunt ceremony in Hadramawt today

11. Qazidah II, v.27 in Ms.: ʿAlī b.Ḥasan al-ʿAṭṭās, Kitāb al-sifr al-thānī min qalāʾid al-iḥsān wa farāʾid al-lisān, ff: 18, Hurayḍah. The Library of al-ʿAṭṭās family.
12. R.Serjeant, South Arabian Hunt, 2.
13. J.Ryckmans. Op.cit., 293-294.
14. M.Piotrovsky, Personal communication, 1990. Interpretation of graffiti by Prof.Garcia (Paris, Musee de l'Homme).
15. G.Garbini, Il dio Sabeo Almaḡah - Revista degli Studi Orientali, 1974, No.48, 15-22.
16. V.Ivanov, Dionis i pradionisiystvo (Dionysus and pradionysism). Baku,1923.