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Back to Asia? South Asia and the Arabian Peninsula

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Bédouins et Sédentaires aujourd'hui à al-'Ulâ (Royaume d'Arabie saoudite), al-diyâr et al-Dîra dans le rétroviseur

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Bédouins et Sédentaires aujourd’hui à al-‘Ulâ (Royaume d’Arabie saoudite), al-diyâr et al-Dîra dans le rétroviseur

Vincent Battesti and Léo Marty

Translated by Cadenza Academic Translations

All ق are pronounced [g] and ح are pronounced [ç] or [d̥ç] (IPA).

Introduction

- 1 Al-‘Ulâ oasis,¹ located in the desert regions between Medina and Tabuk in northwest Saudi Arabia, had for a time been largely ignored. But a development project known as “AlUla” has brought it firmly back into the spotlight. Proactively backed by the Saudi crown, this project is a key part of “Vision 2030,” a collection of national development policies focused on preparing for the post-oil era.² This oasis, which combines an urban area and a cultivated area,³ is populated and shaped by social groups that this article seeks to “identify.”
- 2 In order to explore these questions of identity, this paper relies on emic categorizations of social organization, that is, the identity-based categories that the inhabitants themselves use to identify themselves and refer to others. This inductive approach is a way of avoiding identities being assigned *a priori*, at a time when the oasis is poised to face a new wave of upheaval in order to turn it into a tourist destination. Four decades ago, a previous wave, sparked by the redistribution of oil revenue and national public policies to “make the desert bloom,”⁴ radically changed the oasis, in particular with

regard to lifestyles, the population, and the social groups found there. What local collective identities are found there today, between these two waves of change?

Al-'Ulâ oasis: Between two waves

- 3 Locals may assert their national, homogeneous, and united identity as Saudis and subjects of the kingdom, but a certain amount of social diversity prevails, for example, in the places where men habitually socialize, such as reception rooms (*shabba*) and gardens. The composition of the groups and the discourses maintained are clear demonstrations of social allegiance. At first glance, the distinct social categories of “Bedouin” and “Sedentary” appear to be the active and dynamic local identities, although they all share the same space in the oasis today. The Bedouin’s pastoral way of life and the oasis-based lifestyle of the Sedentary community used to be as antagonistic as they were complementary. However, they have now been substituted by a seemingly more harmonious and (re)sedentarized society that is nonetheless infused with the dominant and highly esteemed Bedouin national culture.⁵ However, modern versions of the *badawiyya* (Bedouin) and *ḥaḍariyya* (Sedentary) local identity categories continue to exist and shape the sociological allegiances of the residents of al-'Ulâ. However, these categories are neither monolithic nor unanimously shared, and they are reworked on a daily basis. The dividing lines both within these polythetic categories and between them have become somewhat blurred. The Bedouin and Sedentary communities have each left behind respectively *al-diyâr* (tribal pastoral lands) and *al-Dîra* (the ancient walled city in the oasis)—incidentally, *al-diyâr* and *al-Dîra* share the same classical Arabic root: *dâr* meaning house⁶—occupying and creating a new urban centre within the oasis and a new shared, but nuanced, urban lifestyle.

Identity, identities

- 4 This article provides an initial contemporary and contextualized overview of a composite oasis society, both Bedouin and Sedentary, by exploring local alterities. It then examines the two main local generic identities (Bedouin and Sedentary) and their complex relationships with autochthony and allochthony. The article uses data collected during the collaborative ethnographic fieldwork conducted by its two authors between 2019 and 2022 (more than two cumulative years). Little social science literature exists on these issues in Arabia, and even less on the modern al-'Ulâ oasis, which represents “a grey zone of knowledge,”⁷ yet which is currently the focus of a vast tourism development programme initiated by the Crown Prince. This is a local study, and it will not explore the complex history behind the formation of the Saudi state.⁸ It provides a snapshot of the local social structure and does not address past history (unless raised by stakeholders) or hypothesize about how the Bedouin, Sedentary, and foreign communities will be reshaped in the future.
- 5 This study explores identity and, as we will see, local collective identities in al-'Ulâ, four decades after its reconfiguration and two decades after the concept of identity began to flourish in anthropology.
- 6 Lenclud’s analysis set out that “the notion of identity stems at least from two languages that have recently begun to coexist but that communicate poorly with one another: the logical language of identity [including numerical identity—being the same as oneself—,

specific identity—being the same as others within a concept—, and qualitative identity —or resemblance] and what I will call the anthropological language of collective identities.”⁹ In this instance, we are interested in the “collective identities [of anthropological language that], unlike specific identities, [recall] chosen identities, reflecting claimed solidarities and inherited or received, or even imposed identities that are subsequently, and only then, accepted or rejected.”¹⁰

- 7 We believe that the al-'Ulâ case study and the analysis of its social organization suggest a middle way between ethnological essentialism—an assumption of stability—and ethnological constructivism—an assumption of fluidity.¹¹ The identities that play a part in social structurations here are inherited and, because they are fluid and dynamic, have been reworked over the course of the last four decades with the state's creation of the figure of the Saudi who is both Bedouin and Sedentary. Today, they are on the cusp of being changed once more, as the development of tourism in al-'Ulâ is reconfiguring spaces and allegiances and risks reinforcing the difficulty faced by the oasis populations in terms of forming their own subjectivity beyond their subjectivation by and for tourism.¹² It is also, tentatively but soon on a massive scale, bringing in new figures of alterity that can in their own way impact self-identification: tourists.

The dynamics of local alterities

- 8 Far from being autarkic, oases are in fact hubs of networks¹³ where humans, non-humans, and everything that comes with them meet. Now as in the past, human communities connect with other human communities: neighbouring oasis societies and far-off urban communities, as well as pastoral groups described and identifying as “Bedouins” in the region of al-'Ulâ. Relations between pastoral and sedentary groups can be complex, involving subjugation or predation, and with necessary forms of coordination and interdependence. One group produces or used to produce grain, dates, and vegetables using the irrigated agricultural techniques typical of oases¹⁴; the other meat, milk, and fertilizer through traditional pastoral methods. To export oases' overproduction of dates, merchants from oasis cities often came to an arrangement with pastoral groups. The history of al-'Ulâ as perceived locally dates back no more than a few centuries and covers the old town of al-'Ulâ (al-Dîra¹⁵) and the outlying Bedouin pastoral lands (*al-diyâr*¹⁶). That history is marked by change, discontinuity, and movement. Successive civilizations and, over the last six centuries, the progressive arrival of different social groups would help explain the many layers of local society today. There is an acute awareness that the current situation is the result of past struggles. For example, such-and-such a tribe had its roots elsewhere but was chased away by another, or it conquered a new area at the expense of a third tribe. The same is true, if less explicitly, of the sedentary space that is the oasis, in both the inhabited and agricultural zones.
- 9 This local duality between the Sedentary and Bedouin communities is also found at the level of the Saudi state. They have both participated, and are still participating,¹⁷ in its formation, even if:
- “the Saudi state is a *Hadari* project that aimed, among other things, to end Bedouin historical hegemony throughout pre-modern Arabia.”¹⁸
- 10 To put it more crudely, “if there is a power in Arabia, it is not Bedouin; and where Bedouins remain on the territory, they are excluded by a power that has always acted

to control and neutralize them.”¹⁹ It should be made clear at this point that Pouillon understood “Bedouin” to mean those who live a pastoral life. In this article, we use an emic definition of the word, the one understood by those concerned: not the socioeconomic definition of nomadic pastoralism but rather a socioethnic category.²⁰ Otherwise, one might well ask oneself, like Donald Cole,²¹ “where have the Bedouin gone?” (Figure 1).

Figure 1



Ḥuwaytî Bedouins in al-'Ulâ take part in national celebrations for the 91st anniversary of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Sept. 2021.

Photograph: Vincent Battesti.

- 11 In 2023, the sedentarization of the Bedouin population, one of King Abdul Aziz ibn Saud's main goals from the very foundation of the Kingdom of Arabia,²² has been achieved. Today, very few Bedouin families in the region of al-'Ulâ follow the nomadic and pastoral way of life, although pastoral economic activities remain. Bedouin families live alongside the long-standing sedentary groups within the oasis as part of the same local society, which, in the first discourses encountered by the foreign observer, is presented as being united. But if Bedouin society was largely defined by an ideology based on kinship, where patrilineality acts as a central organizing principle, and if the sedentary identity is markedly more territorial and defined by shared residence,²³ how does this common sedentary/sedentarized community see itself today, and how does it work in practice? Are tales of a harmonious fusion to be believed when it is still so easy to distinguish a Bedouin from a member of the original Sedentary community in al-'Ulâ today, for example through their speech and their use of different dialects?²⁴
- 12 Al-'Ulâ society can be broken down into a series of emic categories—inhabitants willingly use dichotomous keys to illustrate how society is structured—, beginning with two major divisions. The first is observed through the separation of and relationships between Saudis and foreign workers. The second is established through the dichotomy between the Sedentary and Bedouin communities, whose ambivalent identities include assertions of both difference and unity.
- 13 The separation between Saudi nationals and the foreign workers (*al-'umâl*) employed in the domestic, commercial, and agricultural sectors is institutionalized.²⁵ It is

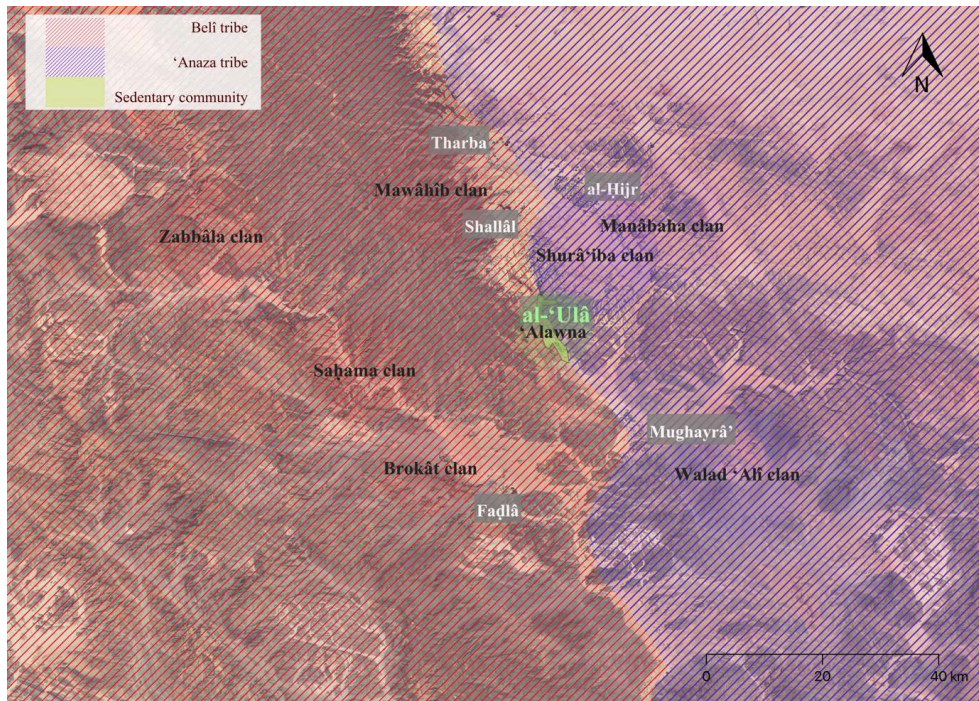
particularly noticeable even in the official censuses²⁶ that distinguish between Saudis and non-Saudis in all statistical categories. This separation is structured around a class-based relationship between those who give the orders and those who execute them, originating in the great wave of change that occurred at the beginning of the 1980s (year 1400 of the Hegira, locally considered a pivotal year). Oil revenue has enabled many Saudis to improve their material living conditions and to distance themselves from the manual labour undertaken by the foreign workers who have been invited into the country in their vast numbers, resulting in a restructuring of their way of life.

- 14 National policies to sedentarize Bedouin populations have also had consequences on allegiance-based identities in al-'Ulâ. The arrival of Bedouins in urban areas shared with the Sedentary community has helped blur the dividing lines between identities and smoothed away historical hostilities. Both the involvement of Bedouins in agriculture, particularly the cultivation of date palms, and the Sedentary community's assertions of tribal affiliations have contributed to a convergence between the two groups and clouded that dichotomy. However, the way individuals present themselves (particularly through their names) continues to emphasize distinct allegiances. The dichotomy between Bedouins and the Sedentary community in al-'Ulâ remains the most sensitive division. Sensitive because the traces of contempt or resentment between the two groups are unmistakable. Jaussen and Savignac had already observed "the contempt the nomads profess for these *fellahs*."²⁷ Polite society would have it that the hostilities of the past have been resolved. However, in private, those involved reveal their resentment. Moreover, it is easy to discover what those silent observers on the fringes, the immigrant workers, think of local society: "They don't really like one another!"
- 15 The current dynamics of al-'Ulâ's sociological structure must be considered between fluidities and alterities. The first division (Saudis/foreign workers) seems to hold strong today. But the second, although still present, is becoming blurred, a consequence of the normalization of modern Bedouin culture in a reunited and peaceful society within the kingdom, and of local efforts to shape the memory of the Sedentary community.

Sedentarized Bedouins

- 16 Several tribes, or at least several tribal allegiances, coexist within the region of al-'Ulâ. In recent centuries, the oasis seems to have been a sort of "no Bedouin's land," occupying a position between two vast tribal territories (the *diyâr*) but without being under the control of either tribe (unlike other oases, the closest being Khaybar), although al-'Ulâ could have been ruled by the Benî Sakhr in earlier times. The Bedouin pastoral areas have now been depopulated, but not abandoned. The phenomenon of rapid urbanization initiated by the authorities, made possible thanks to oil revenue, has affected the original Sedentary community as much as it has the members of the Bedouin tribes.

Figure 2



Unofficial map of areas associated with al-'Ulâ communities, al-'Ulâ AS Project 2023.

- 17 Bedouin social structures are constantly evolving.²⁸ Hierarchies exist within the tribes (*qabâ'il* sing. *qabîla*), which in the region of al-'Ulâ are subdivided into “clans” (referred to locally as *afkhâdh*, sing. *fakhdh*). One such clan dominates the tribe: the clan of sheikhs (*shuyûkh*, sing. *shaykh*). In linguistic practice, presenting oneself as a member of a tribe can be a performative act of self-protection. “Being Bedouin” carries weight, but Bedouin tribes are not all equal (in terms of how long they have existed within the region, their demographic weight, reputation, influence, etc.). Incidentally, at the state level, an individual’s identity is based on their tribe,²⁹ their clan being of secondary importance on identity cards. The dominant and most esteemed *ethos* (locally and at the national level) is that of the Bedouin.

The main Bedouin tribes in al-'Ulâ and their identities | 'Anaza and Belî

- 18 In al-'Ulâ it is said that, “in the [Arabian] Peninsula, the tribe is the foundation of everything (*al-asâs al-qabîla*).” The word *qabîla* has multiple meanings. The tribe is a group of individuals who share the same lineage and a common ancestor, and whose members demonstrate a certain level of cohesion and solidarity. The structure of Saudi society and the state itself is partly based on kinship relationships. This means that the tribe also has a complex political role. The term “tribe” is the best way to define the omnipresent emic word “*qabîla*.” Today, tribes in the region of al-'Ulâ act “like semi-autonomous social fields (and not theoretical anthropological abstractions).”³⁰ At first, in al-'Ulâ, “tribe” unequivocally appears to mean Bedouin. According to members of the local Bedouin tribes, the Sedentary community in al-'Ulâ (the Ḥaḍariyyîn) is therefore not Bedouin, although they might occasionally consider the 'Alâwna (sing. 'Alâwî, meaning an inhabitant of al-'Ulâ) a (non-Bedouin) *qabîla*. The situation becomes

more complicated when some 'alâwî members of the Sedentary community also refer to themselves as (sedentarized) Bedouins, as we will see later.

- 19 In al-'Ulâ, the main Bedouin tribes are the Belî and the 'Anaza (their respective adjectives are *balawî* and *'anazî*). It is purported that these two tribal groups have had a presence in the region of al-'Ulâ for several centuries.³¹ This presence has its roots in their claim over areas of influence that are still recognized today. Their pastoral territory lies in the immediate vicinity of the oasis: the Belî *qabîla* roughly to the west of al-'Ulâ oasis and the 'Anaza more or less to the east (see Figure 2).
- 20 Wadis mark the boundaries between these territories. For some Bedouins, the dividing line is *al-ṭarîq al-ḥadîd*, the Ottoman Ḥijâz railway that followed the pilgrimage route and "the natural passage of caravans" in the valley.³² Al-'Ulâ oasis remained neutral territory for Bedouins and was for them as much an essential trading location (butter, cheese, or meat in exchange for dates, wheat, etc.) as an object of predation. Bedouin tribes like the Belî or the 'Anaza consider themselves large enough to be transnational and boast members in Jordan and Iraq, for example. Sub-groups of both of these tribes, known as clans, are present in the region. In theory, therefore, the category of clans (*afkhâdh*) comes below the *qabîla* category at the top. The clans themselves can be subdivided into families (*'â'ila*). Jaussen and Savignac³³ added the *ḥamâ'il* category between clan and family, a term that has since fallen out of use. The concept of "*qabîla*" becomes rather fluid and dependent on the context. When those concerned describe their tribal structure more precisely, it becomes clear that the tribe, for example the 'Anaza, contains Walad 'Alî (in the south) and Manâbaha (in the north). The fluidity of the concept lies in whether or not the group Manâbaha is referred to as a tribe or clan and in the very fact of mentioning this encompassing group that is the Manâbaha. For example, it can be understood that the 'Anaza includes the Manâbaha *qabîla* (not *fakhdh*), and the latter includes the Fuqarâ' *fakhdh*, etc. The same is true of the Belî tribe (*qabîla*), where a member can present themselves as being from the Belî *qabîla* and the Mawâhîb (sing. Mayhûbî) *fakhdh*, or from the Mawâhîb *qabîla* and one of its four sub-groups, the 'Ubayd *fakhdh*. The use of the *qabîla* and *fakhdh* labels is therefore contextual and relational. A *qabîla* is the uppermost category and a *fakhdh* is a clan or subdivision of that category.
- 21 There are also other, smaller tribes in the region. Outside their own territory, they live a settled way of life here (Ḥarbî, Qaḥṭanî, Shammarî, Ḥuwaytî, Juḥaynî, etc.) and are sometimes considered large families, which is what they really are: a family or a clan that has settled here from another region (e.g., the Nazawî from Hijaz), city (e.g., the Jârallah from Mecca), or oasis (e.g., the Shammarî from Taymâ'). These tribal representatives can have close ties with one of the region's main tribes (the Shammarî with the Belî, for example).
- 22 Although there is evidence of tribal and clan solidarity, a fluidity of identity and internal rivalries exist between the various clans that make up the Belî and 'Anaza tribes.

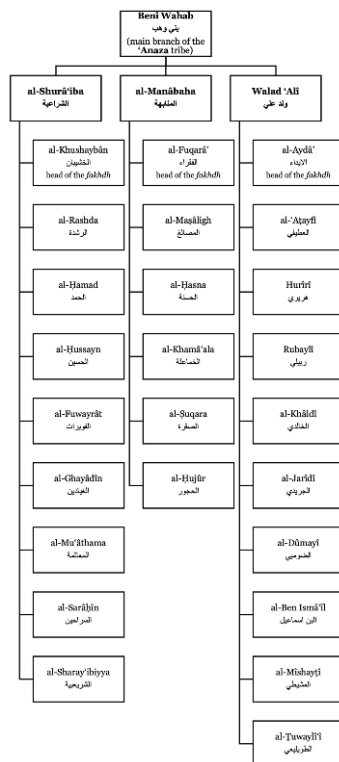
The 'Anaza

- 23 The 'Anaza tribe's historical and geographical journey varies according to the tales its members tell today. Some say that the 'Anaza originally came from Yemen, passing through Mecca and al-Qaṣîm before eventually establishing themselves in the north of

the kingdom, in the region of Khaybar, in the fifth century of the Hegira. Some members therefore present the Khaybar oasis as the tribe's historical capital. For others, clans descended from the 'Anaza purportedly came from Khaybar and settled in Madâ'in Şâlah to the north of al-'Ulâ four centuries ago. In 1908, these clans officially became protectors of the Hedjaz railway.³⁴ The 'Anaza also have ties with the royal family.³⁵

- 24 Three branches of the 'Anaza tribe—the Shurâ'iba, the Manâbaha, and the Walad 'Alî (who are led by one of their sub-clans)—are present in al-'Ulâ, and all of them are descended from the Benî Wahab *fakhdh* (Figure 3).

Figure 3



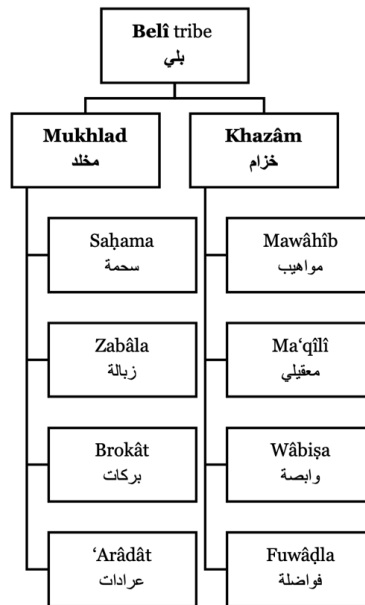
The clans of the 'Anaza tribe present in the region of al-'Ulâ, according to members of each clan.

- 25 This breakdown into clans and sub-clans automatically creates an internal hierarchy that is at the root of a number of rivalries, some of which are more overt than others. For example, it is purported that the Fuqarâ'³⁶ clan's leadership of the Manâbaha is contested by a competing branch, the Khamâ'ala. The Fuqarâ' clan is also subdivided into four families: the Mubârak family, which provides the *shuyûkh* (clan chiefs); the Muġhâṣab family; the Shafîqî family; and the Jumu'ât family. The Hamdan are also mentioned. The Khamâ'ala clan (sing. Kham'alî) has purportedly existed for 130 years according to its sheikh, and helped King Abdul Aziz ibn Saud unite the kingdom. As well as disputes with the Fuqarâ', it is said that incidents broke out between the Khamâ'ala and the Walad 'Alî in the 1990s, 90 km to the east of al-'Ulâ in a place known as Sûayr. This type of territorial dispute is a reminder that influence was established by force, at least until recent times.

The Belî

- 26 The Belî tribe includes two main *afkhâdh*, the Mukhlad and the Khazâm, according to the diagram on the official *Akhhâriyya Belî* website (<https://bluwe.com>). However, these *afkhâdh* and this category level are rarely mentioned locally (Figure 4).

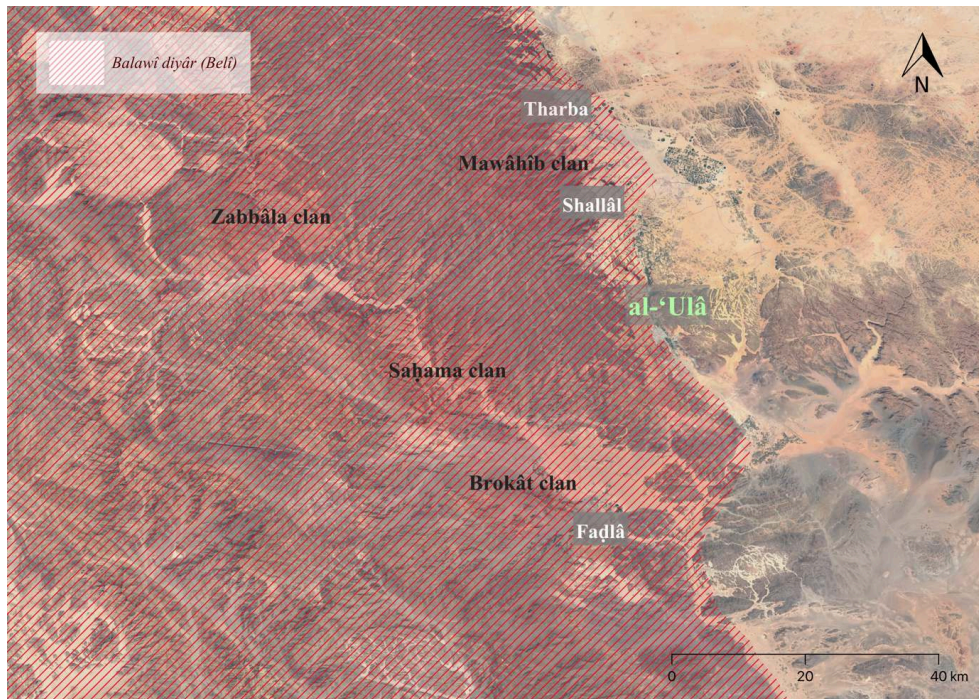
Figure 4



The branches of the Belî tribe met during fieldwork in the region of al-'Ulâ.

- 27 The Belî's *diyâr* (former pastoral lands) used to extend all the way to the Red Sea. Within the region of al-'Ulâ, the Mawâhîb *afkhâdh* can be found in Shallâl and Tharba, and the Saḥama *afkhâdh* in the vicinity of Wâdî Şadr. It is believed that the Brokât are mainly found in the region of Fuḍalâ, while the other clans are further to the west³⁷ (see Figure 5). These clans are locally subdivided. The Mawâhîb *fakhdh* is made up of the al-Sarḥanî (a), Abû Shâma (b), al-'Ubayd (c), and al-Manaṣîr (d) sub-clans, who are situated close to al-'Ulâ on the volcanic plateau (*ḥarra*) and occupy the three previously inhabited small palm groves of Tharba (b, d), Shallâl (d), and 'Awrash (a, b, c, d).

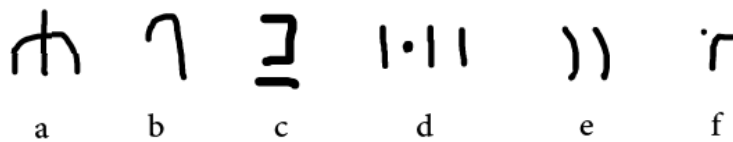
Figure 5



Areas of influence of the Belî tribe clans in the region of al-'Ulâ (unofficial map), al-'Ulâ AS Project 2023.

A fluid tribal structure as demonstrated through animal branding

- 28 Camel branding (*wasm*, plur. *awsâm*) is perhaps the most visible physical demonstration of attachment to the tribal structure, solidarity, and moral duty among Bedouins today. Camel branding is not unique to the region of al-'Ulâ, or even to Saudi Arabia,³⁸ but practices vary. Although lists containing the *awsâm* of the different tribes do exist,³⁹ they cannot do justice to the full extent of locals' graphic inventiveness.
- 29 Every clan and every family has its own *wasm*, and each *wasm* has a name. A *wasm* is a mark branded on the neck or cheek of a camel and/or its upper leg when it reaches the age of one or two years. "There is a main *wasm*, and then elements are added to the *wasm* for clans (*fakhdh*) from the same tribe. But there are no rules as such" (a member of the Belî tribe and civil servant within the governorate, Oct. 2021). An animal is individually owned. However, a *wasm* does not indicate the individual identity of the owner, but rather his allegiance to a tribal structure. The marks are often those of the tribe or the *fakhdh* (from which the tribe can be inferred), often on the animal's right cheek, and the sub-*fakhdh* or the family, often on the right leg. Camels' bodies come to represent the fluidity of the social structure as understood by their owners. A *wasm* is therefore an identifying mark shared by a social group, making it possible to recognize a lost animal or distinguish the animals belonging to various owners taken to graze by a single shepherd.



- 30 For example, the *wasm* of the Aydâ' (Figure 6)—an upside-down trident (a)—can be seen on the animal's cheek. Another mark on its leg—a “ر”—indicates that it belongs to Rajâ', a local sheikh.

Figure 6



The *wasm* of the Aydâ', in Mughayrâ. Nov. 2021.

Photograph: Léo Marty.

- 31 The *wasm* of the al-Fattûh, a Belî *fakhdh* (a sub-branch of the Zabbâla), is a cane on the leg (b). In the Rahîl clan (a branch of the Brokât), the mark is a *sîn* (س)) on the animal's neck. The *wasm* of the *balawî fakhdh* of the 'Arâdât is an underlined closing square bracket (c). The mark of one of its families, the 'Ysûb, is composed of a line by the ear and a dot and two lines on the neck (d).
- 32 The *wasm* of the Mawahîb, another *balawî fakhdh*, consists of two lines on the neck and one line on the lower jaw (see Figure 7).

Figure 7

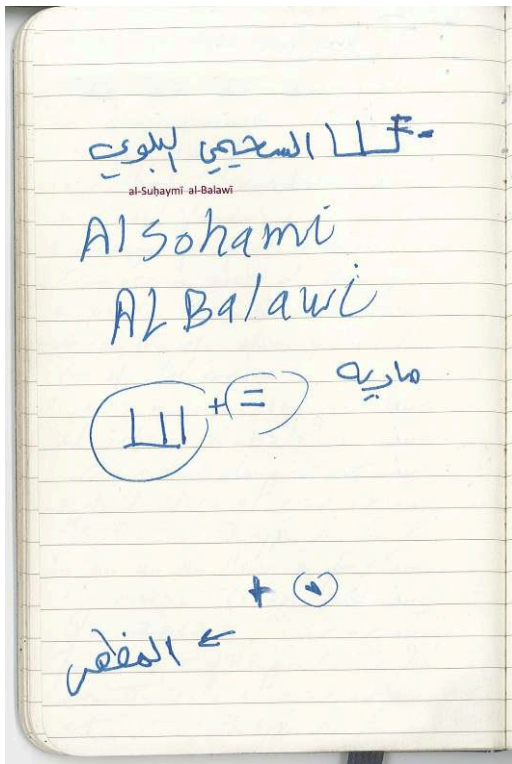


Wasm of the Mawâhib, in Tharba. Nov. 2021.

Photograph: Léo Marty.

- 33 Among the Fuqarâ' ('Anaza), the *wasm* consists of two curved lines (e), to which the 'Aḍaydât family from the Shafiqî clan, for example, adds a cane and a dot (f).
- 34 At an encampment on his land, a Belî tribe elder wrote out in Arabic and roman letters (see Figure 8) the *fakhdh* (al-Suḥaymî for the Saḥama) and the tribe (al-balawî for the Belî tribe) contained within his name, and drew the complete *wasm* (see top of the page) before breaking it down into its elements. He explained that the three teeth are for the Belî *qabîla*, the two horizontal lines on the final tooth are the *mâriyya* and are for his *fakhdh*, and finally the little line (see bottom of the page), which he calls *al-maẓher* and which is placed on the animal's leg, is for himself and his brothers. His camels are branded like this, but he also sometimes brands the ear of his *ghanam* (sheep in this instance) with the *mâriyya*.

Figure 8



A member of the Belî tribe drew his *wasm* in a field notebook and broke it down into its individual elements (see text above). March 2020.

- 35 An additional *wasm* is not automatically added if a camel is sold to a new owner from a different tribe. If a camel branded with a *balawî wasm* grazes with others branded with a 'anazî *wasm* on 'Anaza land, it will be assumed that the animal was acquired from a member of the Belî tribe by a 'Anaza.
- 36 Different designs abound, suggestive again of a fluidity between the various categories contained within the Bedouin social structure: tribe, clan, and family (extended and nuclear). It is notable that the mark is not a reference to an individual owner and even rarely to his nuclear family. Rather, it refers to categories further up the scale. This suggests that several nuclear families, at least, therefore share the same identification at a genealogical level, within which trust is established in the name of the principle of solidarity. This is all the more remarkable because in recent decades these animals have no longer been confined to the grazing route of the former tribal lands, the *diyâr*.

Urban Bedouins and their attachment to the pastoral route

- 37 Paul Bonnenfant noted that, with the creation of the kingdom, "the grazing lands specific to one tribe no longer exist. Jealously guarded in the past, and the subject of conflict between tribes who felt powerful and wanted to expand at the expense of others, these lands are now open to all those who wish to use them for extensive livestock farming."⁴⁰ For Bonnenfant, the relationship with the land seems purely utilitarian (finding a safe grazing spot) and collapsed with the peace and security established by King Abdul Aziz ibn Saud. However, as the Bedouins' economic dependence on the *diyâr* has diminished, we observe an emotional attachment in al-'Ulâ

to the old pastoral lands, the *diyâr*, similar to the genesis of the idyllic French countryside in the second half of the nineteenth century.⁴¹

The permanence of the *diyâr*. The lands associated with a tribal group

- 38 Every tribe or sub-group is connected to a territory. According to those we spoke to, among the 'Anaza for example, the Manâbaha clans have the northeast of al-'Ulâ, the Walad 'Alî clans the southeast, and the Shurâ'iba clan their eponymous locality. The notion of *diyâr* implies a boundary. The *diyâr* of a tribe or the *dîra* of a clan ends where the neighbour's begins. This system for assigning land is not disputed today and is widely recognized locally, without ownership of these former grazing areas having any official status. All land is the land of the kingdom. The creation of the kingdom in 1932 initially maintained the status quo: "The area occupied by a tribe is regarded as being in its absolute possession—as long as the tribal group can maintain by force this possession."⁴² Subsequently, the 1954 abolition of the *himâ* legal system, whereby protected grazing areas were the responsibility of the tribe, turned tribal territories into "public or state lands."⁴³ Some *diyâr* lands were individually returned to tribe members. Ownership titles were issued in the name of the tribe's sheikh, who could then redistribute them at his discretion. However, an emotional attachment to these ancient territories remains, be it based on a historical or family memory. There might also be an aesthetic attachment to its geography or an appreciation of its landscape, be it red sandstone or black basalt, flat plains or mountains, pastoral expanses or a collection of wadis (Figure 9).

Figure 9



The landscape to the west of al-'Ulâ, a plain in *Vachellia* sp., *diyâr* of the Belî tribe. April 2019.
Photograph: Vincent Battesti.

- 39 Today, this territorial connection continues through family excursions to the *diyâr* as if to "reconnect with one's original *bâdiyya*."⁴⁴ "When you're the member of a tribe, you don't camp just anywhere!" (a member of the 'Anazî tribe, Sept. 2021)

A Bedouin tent in the city

- 40 The Bedouins have left the *diyâr* behind them and are now present in the modern city of al-'Ulâ. Sedentary groups and Bedouins with different tribal origins have therefore become neighbours in the new districts constructed between the 1980s and the 2000s, such as 'Azîzyya in the south of the city (Figure 10). Some districts are fairly homogeneous, such as al-Salâm to the west of 'Azîzyya, where the Belî tribe is in the majority. However, there is an element of cohabitation. This coexistence has been encouraged by a national policy to blur the dividing lines between Bedouin and Sedentary identities with the promotion of a Saudi Bedouin *ethos*. "All Bedouins, all Saudis, all citizens" sums up the principle of this national policy to enable the state to build a nation.⁴⁵ What does it mean to be a Bedouin today? Those we spoke to referred first and foremost to the moral *ethos* of living one's life according to certain values: hospitality (*al-diyâfa*), shelter (*al-dâkhal*), a promise or giving one's word (*al-wafî*), and neighbourliness (*al-jâr*).

Figure 10



District of 'Azîzyya: A new district (end of the twentieth century) and a new urban lifestyle in the making in al-'Ulâ. Nov. 2019.

Photograph: Vincent Battesti.

- 41 The adoption of elements of the Bedouin lifestyle by the Sedentary community is an illustration of how the dividing lines between the two identities have become blurred. One example of such hybridization is the emblematic tent of hair (*bayt al-sha'r*), a mobile dwelling imposed by the pastoral mode of production. Within the city of al-'Ulâ, it is not unusual to have coffee or tea under these tents, particularly in winter. Previously a symbol of Bedouin camps in the desert, their black colour standing out from the landscape, today they are to be found in gardens and farms, or in the courtyards of Bedouin and Sedentary houses, a clear indication of a reappropriation by Bedouins, and an appropriation by the Sedentary community, of an aspect of Bedouin pastoral culture in an urban setting.
- 42 The Sedentary community, which traditionally lived in the walled city of al-Dîra, the oasis "old town," and whose social structure excluded the Bedouins, are adopting

elements that recall the old way of life of the latter group without showcasing their own. The traditional opposition between the *diyâr* and the al-Dîra oasis seems to have become obsolete. The Sedentary community is erasing its distinctive identity and claiming Bedouin affiliations—and therefore a form of allochthony.

A Sedentary community from elsewhere

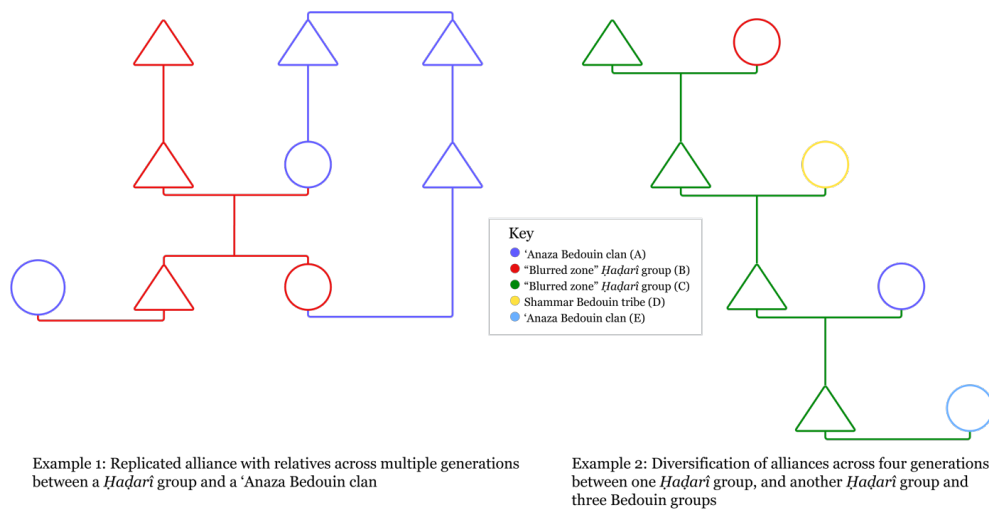
- 43 Like the Bedouin way of life, the world of the Sedentary community has undergone and continues to undergo profound change. It remains settled but is merging into an entirely new urban way of life. However, the nuanced identities of the Sedentary community, partly constructed in opposition to the Bedouin tribes, remain deeply rooted. Referring to themselves as 'Alâwna, the Sedentary community has an identity that it defends. Being sedentary, or *ḥaḍarî*, means being part of the *ḥaḍâra*—literally, part of civilization.

Segmentation within the Sedentary community (Ḥaḍariyyîn): The 'Alâwna and those from the “blurred zone”

- 44 In al-'Ulâ, Ḥaḍariyyîn refers to all the families who used to live in al-Dîra (the old oasis) before, in a parallel movement in the 1980s, the Sedentary community opted for a new urban habitat and the pastoral Bedouin tribes chose the settled way of life within the same modern urban fabric. No real claims of autochthony have been observed among the Ḥaḍariyyîn. Local historical allusions essentially tell of successive civilizations. The last one began to be established approximately six centuries ago when the first Ḥaḍariyyîn formed the Shqîq league. They were purportedly followed by numerous families who formed an alliance (*ḥilf*), constituting the sections of the second league, the Ḥilf. These successive exogenous contributions can sometimes be seen in family names: Makkî (from Mecca), al-Najdî (from Najd), Ghâzî (from Gaza), al-Iskanderânî (from Alexandria), al-Baghdâdî (from Baghdad), al-Hindî (from India), etc. More recently (in the last two centuries), the initial bipartite faction of the 'Alâwna Sedentary community has been joined by groups (tribes or families) that have not joined the alliance. These groups are therefore considered to form part of the Ḥaḍariyyîn, but they are not 'Alâwna. In fact, their claim is that they are not autochthonous, or that they are less so than the 'Alâwna. They (as they insist) can therefore more legitimately claim Bedouin tribal affiliation.
- 45 As these latter groups identify with both the Sedentary community and the Bedouins to some extent, we consider that they exist within a “blurred zone.” Their importance is not insignificant because, of the sheikhs in the region who have been formally recognized by the monarchy (from which they receive an administrative stamp, *khatam*, and mediation power), three are Sedentary: one is a sheikh from a section of the Shqîq and the other two are from this “blurred zone.” This zone is also blurred because this study only provides a brief snapshot of a very changeable set of circumstances. The positioning of groups such as the al-Nazzawî or the al-Qubala, or indeed of families known as *'a'ila ḥaḍariyya*, can, depending on those we spoke to and the discursive situations, be variously described as: completely outside the Ḥaḍariyyîn (rare); Ḥaḍariyyîn but not 'Alâwna (often); or part of a league (usually the Ḥilf), but without being part of a *'ashira* or forming one (sometimes) (see Figure 14). Ambiguity

also surrounds marital practices. The 'Alâwna prefer to marry within the extended family (*'a'ila*)—i.e., marriage between different sub-families or houses (*bayt*, plur. *buyût*). Meanwhile, Ḥaḍariyyîn who are not 'alâwna (but also some of the Ḥilf) seek out marital alliances, particularly with Bedouin tribes and clans (Figure 11).

Figure 11



Examples of marriage strategies in two ḥaḍariyyîn groups from the "blurred zone" of al-'Ulâ

The embarrassing partition among the 'Alâwna: The Shqîq and Ḥilf leagues

- 46 All the former Sedentary inhabitants outside the so-called "blurred zone" can be identified as, or identify themselves as, 'Alâwî, the demonym for al-'Ulâ inhabitants. However, this seemingly united front conceals the presence of two different leagues. There is no local word for this partition. Occasionally, the terms *qism* or *ḥayy* are used. This division splits not only the 'Alâwna (plural of 'Alâwî) population but also spaces: the old town areas of the oasis (Figure 12) and its palm grove (Figure 13) that used to be occupied by the two groups, the Shqîq league in the north and the Ḥilf league in the south.

Figure 12

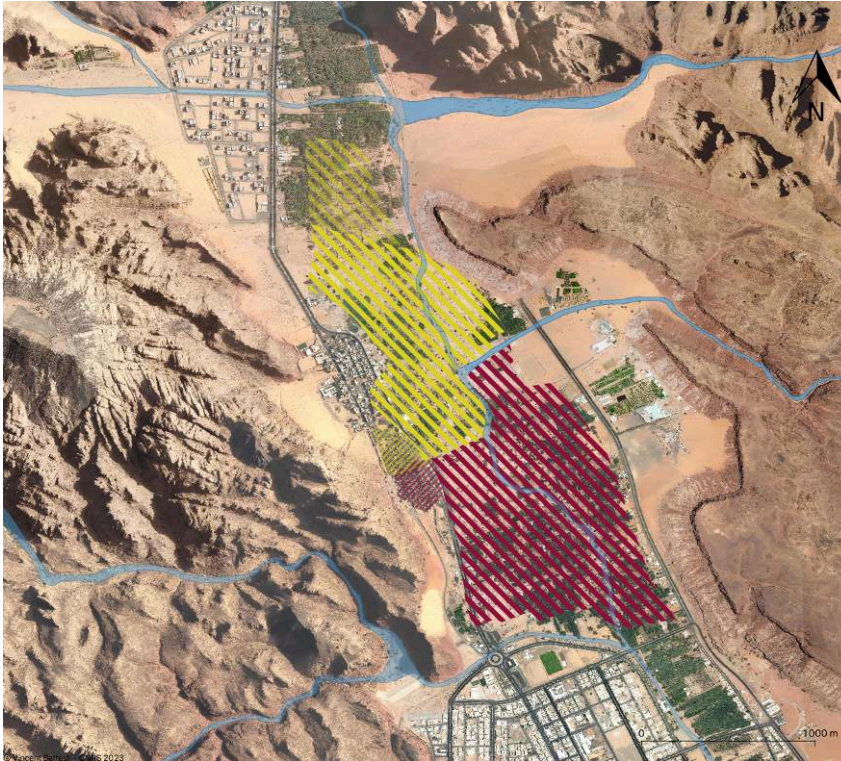


Sign indicating the Shqîq and Hîlf districts of al-'Ulâ old town, probably damaged by residents unhappy about the reminder. In October 2021, the sign was removed. Nov. 2020.

Photograph: Léo Marty.

- 47 Today, this divide in al-'Ulâ is as much denied (Figure 12) as it is ultimately recognized: as something embarrassing but established. This kind of dual system for organizing political and social life is found in most oasis cities in the Sahara and is known as *soff* or *leff*. It was first identified by Robert Montagne⁴⁶ in Morocco and it also exists in the Egyptian oasis of Siwa.⁴⁷ Today, the partition of the 'Alâwna into the Shqîq and Hîlf leagues seems to be insider knowledge among the 'Alâwna—they are all aware of this division, but they are still surprised, and sometimes even a little embarrassed, that a foreigner should know of it. It is claimed that the situation emerged from a bygone past. One is often told, euphemistically, that the names are simply a question of geography, used to describe the districts (*hayy*) of the old town to the north and south of the *jabal Um Nâşîr* landmark (a fortified *inselberg*). This geographical definition is the one provided by Jaussen and Savignac,⁴⁸ who at that time used the words *hâra* or *balad*. Today, the term *hayy* is used with the clear meaning of “urban district.” However, it can also mean “placement of the tribe, the place where it settles,”⁴⁹ “what belongs to a tribe,”⁵⁰ or, more directly, “the tribe.”⁵¹ This territorial division undoubtedly existed, but it was only the material embodiment of a social division within the oasis territory of al-Dîra. This study has demonstrated that the division was evident in agricultural land, acting as an invisible line splitting the old palm grove from west to east (see Figure 13).

Figure 13



Representation of the geographical division (according to local actors) of the old palm grove between Shqîq (to the north, in yellow) and Hilf (to the south, in red) (blue represents the wadis or *misiyâh*), and similarly of al-Dîra old town to the west (unofficial map), al-'Ulâ AS Project 2023. These allegiances continue today to the north and south in the modern palm groves.

- 48 These leagues are therefore technically not tribes (*qabâ'il*, sing. *qabila*), because that term is said to be explicitly reserved for the Bedouin community, of which the 'Alâwna are not a part (although this is subject to debate as some claim tribal affiliations).⁵² However, for the 'Alâwna, the leagues are the functional equivalent of Bedouin tribes—without the genealogical attributes—in the sense that they resulted from the first subdivision of the 'Alâwna (as was true of the Bedouin tribes) and each of them was led by a sheikh—or, in fact, one of the *ashâ'ir* (plur. of *'ashîra*) sheikhs.⁵³ The last to hold this title was the Shqîq sheikh, the highly respected Muhammad b. Khamîs al-Şâleḥ, father of the current Qarûq *ashîra* sheikh.⁵⁴ What is unusual about the Sedentary community is the almost systematic disquiet provoked by the mention of the leagues, something we can only partially explain. The long history of conflict between the two leagues within al-'Ulâ oasis is not enough to explain the permanence of this social sensitivity. One inhabitant (April 2020) acknowledged past conflicts, the fragile peace that reigns today (describing the latter as "*salâm al-nimr*" or "peace of the tiger"), and the risks of atavistic conflicts. The explanation is no doubt to be found in historically unequal relations and possible resentment as a result of this. But all this "is the past. We must speak of the future; (...) plus, there were no deaths between the 'Alâwna, but there were with the Bedouin" (a Ḥaḍarî from the "blurred zone," Nov. 2022).
- 49 According to the historian Abdullah Naşîf⁵⁵— himself from al-'Ulâ —a form of "kinship rule" existed in the oasis for centuries. Customarily, everyone settled permanently in al-'Ulâ was obliged to sign up to one of the *'ashâ'ir* by registering their name, origin, and homeland. Naşîf provides a document (dated August 12, 1897) by way of example

that describes an integration ceremony involving two brothers who were purportedly from al-Quwâra (located between al-'Ulâ and Riyadh) and who became members of the Qarûq section (and therefore the Shqîq league). However, it seems probable that the preference was for groups who subsequently settled in the city to be added to the ẖilf. The word *ḥilf* means “alliance” in Arabic. It has sometimes been interpreted as an alliance “to protect the city.”⁵⁶ At the very least, it could be said that this is an alliance of groups that arrived later and that had to negotiate their place with groups whose presence was more long-standing. The ẖilf appear to have more significant relationships and ties with the Bedouin community (particularly through marriage) than the Shqîq.

- 50 Some members of the Shqîq are demonstratively proud of being the most long-standing sedentary community in al-'Ulâ—a claim made by the Qarûq section (*'ashîra*) in particular. They maintain that they are more “autochthonous,” but they still emphasize that they came from elsewhere, and originally from a Bedouin *fakhdh* (clan) or *qabîla* (tribe). As for the etymology of the term “Shqîq”, it is subject to greater dispute among the 'Alâwna. For their supporters, this word with the شقق root is associated with *shaqîq* (brother-german, brotherhood); for their detractors, it is connected to *shaqqa* (to divide, understood to mean “he who brings division”).⁵⁷
- 51 The dispute between the ẖilf and the Shqîq is a mystery to us—it is one of the secrets of al-'Ulâ. We venture that, as elsewhere, it has no particular foundation other than being a functional necessity of a two-league system. Locally, each group discusses the reputation of the other during long discussions in the *mashab*. The ẖilf consider themselves more cultured and suggest that the Shqîq's origins lie in servitude. The Shqîq, meanwhile, claim to have better knowledge of agriculture and criticize the ẖilf's tendency for scheming. In fact, the ẖilf are more willing to assert their allegiance to their league than the Shqîq. Nonetheless, it is important not to make too much of this dispute. It does not prevent friendships among the two leagues, and the younger generation tends to pay no great heed to, or is more unaware of, the partition between Shqîq and ẖilf. However, the social category just below the 'Alâwna, the *'ashîra* (section), is clearly acknowledged by all.

The sections and their tribal affiliations: All Bedouins!

- 52 Each league is composed of sections (*'ashâ'ir*, sing. *'ashîra*), and each section contains different families (*'awâ'il*, sing. *'â'ila*). This vocabulary is specific to the region and means something different elsewhere.⁵⁸ It appears to have evolved to some extent since the time of Jaussen and Savignac.⁵⁹
- 53 Unlike the Bedouin patriarchal genealogical structure, the 'Alâwna Sedentary community is only organized genealogically in the category below the *'ashîra* (section) level, at the level of the family. We prefer to translate *'ashîra* as “section” rather than “clan” because, just as the Sedentary community's “leagues” are essentially different from “tribes,” so its “sections” are also different from Bedouin “clans” (although both are led by a sheikh). Several families in one section can be genealogically related, but these are exceptions. Most sections do indeed claim to be descended from a Bedouin tribe (that is organized genealogically), but different tribal affiliations coexist within the same section. In practice, many of the sections of al-'Ulâ possess a *majlis*, a public reception room where it is usually possible to meet the sheikh. The sheikh is consulted

about problems concerning family members within the section (often issues surrounding marriage or land disputes) or is consulted about a journey outside the region.

- 54 The Shqîq league comprises five sections (or six if we include the Tayâmina, which can sometimes find itself placed in the “blurred zone” depending on the viewpoint). No one lives in the old town anymore. It was completely abandoned in the 1980s in favour of the new residential districts and modern dwellings. However, members of this league’s sections still own the houses in the northern part of the old town, as well as the agricultural land within the northern part of the old palm grove and its modern twentieth-century northern extension. The ẖilf league, meanwhile, is composed of nine sections. Similarly, they own the houses in the southern area of al-Dîra, as well as the land within the southern part of the old palm grove and its modern twentieth-century southern extension (see Figure 13).
- 55 All the sections in both leagues claim to be affiliated with Bedouin tribes, as set out in the table below (Figure 14: some affiliations contradict those lower down). According to some actors, the Bedouin affiliations of the Sedentary sections in al-'Ulâ are recent. It is sometimes added that fifteen years ago, payment was all that was required to attach one’s section or family to prized Bedouin identities.⁶⁰ The ẖarb tribe, a fairly urban Bedouin tribe from the coastal region of Tihâma, is the most common affiliation claimed by al-'Ulâ’s Sedentary sections. Admittedly, these tribal allegiances are challenged by the region’s Bedouin community. They are also questioned by some in the Sedentary community, the ẖaçariyyîn themselves, when members of a section, family, or tribe from the “blurred zone” want to denigrate the tribal pretensions of another section, often to better assert and validate their own. This suggests the need for a long and complex study into the stories surrounding the origins of the different groups, as they see them and as they are seen by other groups in the region.

Figure 14

The table is a multi-column grid with approximately 10 columns and 30 rows. It contains a mix of Arabic text, numbers, and symbols, likely representing a hierarchical or categorical list of social groups or individuals. The text is small and difficult to read in detail, but it appears to be organized into several distinct sections or categories.

Table showing the social structure of al-'Ulâ's Sedentary community. Data in part taken from NASIF (1995) and updated and amended following our field study (2019–2022). There is not always a consensus over this structure, which is constantly evolving, but this is the most accurate version to date.

The lineage category: The family

56 Our field studies show that the 'Alâwna's genealogical memory is modest, at least today. Such a lack of historical depth possibly reduces the shameful risk of finding origins based in servitude—something seemingly feared more by the Shqîq. The true lineage category among the Sedentary community, in that it is systematic, is the family (*'awâ'il*, sing. *'â'ila*). This does not refer to the nuclear family but rather to an extended family within which all members acknowledge a common ancestor. The members are dispersed among different *buyût* (sing. *bayt*), or “houses.” The *'â'ila* (family) is held in high esteem. Their names are well known, even though placing families into the correct sections (when not one's own) appears difficult. The way new varieties of date palm from al-'Ulâ are named provides an indirect illustration of the place of the family within the Sedentary community. In al-'Ulâ, more than twenty of the date varieties currently cultivated are named after a sedentary *'â'ila* (not including ten or so similar names of varieties that have died out),⁶¹ rather than the name of the individual who discovered the variety (Figure 15). A parallel can be drawn with camel branding (*wasm*) among the Bedouin, as discussed above.

Figure 15



A 'Alawî who visits his farm in al-'Ulâ's old palm grove every day. A palm variety bears the name of his family. May 2022.

Photograph: Vincent Battesti.

- 57 For the 'Alâwna, it makes sense to claim a connection with a section (*'ashîra*) or family (*'â'ila*) because these are the social entities where solidarity—collaboration or mutual aid within the *'ashâ'ir* and the *'awâ'il*—can be expressed, avoiding the abandonment of an individual or an isolated house (*bayt*).

The Sedentary community: A civilized centre surrounded by brutality

- 58 We have discussed the fact that the 'Alâwna preferred marriages to remain within the extended family (*'â'ila*) or section (*'ashîra*). In fact, Jaussen and Savignac⁶² observed that marriages between Sedentary women and non-'Alawî men were rare, "if they happen at all, given the contempt the nomads profess for these fellahs." Among the Sedentary community, endogamy is still supported today: "*al-saman fî-l-daqqîq*" ("the [clarified] butter in the flour" and not next to it). In other words, women must not be assigned to strangers (to the social group). That is the first form of protection. The second concerns protecting the oasis land. A 'Alawî elder explained to us the dominant local arrangement for inheritance, according to which women leave land to their brothers to avoid strangers occupying the oasis palm grove. Beyond marriage, relations between the Sedentary and Bedouin communities used to be based on trading, bartering, rights of passage,⁶³ or alliances, such as the non-aggression pact concluded with the *Aydâ'* by the 'Abd al-Dâ'im and al-Imâm on behalf of the *Ḥilf* in 1898.⁶⁴ However, occasionally local memory likes to recall "the fear" that reigned between the two communities.
- 59 In the absence of Bedouin prestige, the Sedentary community claims a knowledge base (*ma'lûmât*) connected to oasis agriculture. However, this informal knowledge appears to be crumbling, and little is passed on to subsequent generations. Above all, this community lays claim to education. The fact that the fourth school in the kingdom was established in al-'Ulâ very early on in the twentieth century would appear to underline that claim. This was purportedly a civilized centre surrounded then by brutality.

- 60 Today, the Bedouin, formerly pastoral nomads, are sedentarized and seek agricultural activity in the oasis. Meanwhile, the Sedentary community now sometimes owns camels, an animal peculiar to the Bedouin and their main source of wealth a century ago.⁶⁵ Whether Sedentary or Bedouin, all now possess or rent a *mashab* (or *shabba*, a room for male socializing); all would like to have a modern farm (*mazra'a*), combining an *istiraha* (a dwelling made of cement serving as a place of relaxation) and agricultural production, acting as a source of income, instead of the traditional garden (*bustân*), a place where the Sedentary community laboured. Possessing such spaces means enjoying a social status based on the settled way of life, a standard that is shared today. The cohabitation of the last few decades within the same urban areas has smoothed relations between the Bedouin and Sedentary communities.
- 61 However, such smoothing of differences and the unity of the contemporary identity-based assertions that we summarize as “all Bedouin and all Sedentary,” which nevertheless have not silenced claims to values and identities that are specific to each community, coincided with the wave of change that began in the 1980s and that has homogenized lifestyles that had previously been complementary but also antagonistic. One side abandoned *al-diyâr* and the other al-Dîra, to find themselves living together within a modern urban centre. Bedouins and the Sedentary community are therefore discovering new ways of living in the city as they invent their new oasis urbanity,⁶⁶ modern and motorized, capitalist and globalized, nuanced but shared—and a long way from the physical labour undertaken by foreign workers.

Foreign workers: On the fringe of society

- 62 The vast influx of foreign labour in al-'Ulâ driven by the oil-induced economic boom of the 1980s and 1990s⁶⁷ has enabled local society to create a new figure of alterity that exists outside the community distinctions found within the oasis region. This can lessen the effect of these internal alterities that had to be silenced in the name of the cultural and religious homogeneity⁶⁸ advocated by the Saudi state, which uses the culture of Nadj as its template.⁶⁹
- 63 The first local social division therefore became the separation between Saudis and *al-'umâl*, the foreign workers employed in the domestic (servant, driver), commercial (trader, barber, dressmaker, etc.), and agricultural sectors. Jobs are often allocated on the basis of nationality. For example, a 'Alâwî told us (Nov. 2019) that “Egyptians are good for farming; the Sudanese for livestock; Indians, they're not bad, but only not bad; Bangladeshis all say they know how to do a job and come here not knowing how to do anything—they need several years to learn; the Pakistanis are good.” The legal status of these workers is governed by the *kafala* system, *kafala* literally meaning sponsorship. This system establishes a relationship of subordination between the *kâfil* (sponsor) and the *makfûf* (sponsored worker).⁷⁰ Social life between these two groups, Saudis and foreign workers, maintains impermeable boundaries, and communication between the two groups is essentially limited to giving and receiving orders, with the tone ranging from paternalistic benevolence to class-based contempt.⁷¹
- 64 Al-'Ulâ's foreign communities do have their own agency. For example, no doubt thanks to the Egyptian workers, diverse varieties of mango trees and citrus fruits have been imported to al-'Ulâ's farms for agricultural production and to liven up their living space. Employees often live on-site in sheds or in what remains of old farmhouses

within the palm grove farm itself. These foreigners, a significant majority of whom are men (84%), often converge in their national groups. For example, the Pakistanis hold cricket matches on Fridays decked out in full sporting regalia. When they are not working, the labourers take the opportunity to meet up, a way of maintaining ties between compatriots. The Egyptians employed in the gardens “share *kalâm wâḥad*,” the same language (although they speak dialects), understanding, and potential mutual assistance. Contact is also maintained thanks to telephone plans that allow expatriate compatriots to talk to each other all the time while working, making work less lonely.

Figure 16



Siwan workers (from the Siwa oasis in Egypt) employed to rebuild the old town of al-Dîra. Oct. 2021.

Photograph: Vincent Battesti.

- 65 Foreign workers undertake 55 percent of jobs in al-'Ulâ. They are often paid the minimum salary of 1,200 Riyals, an eighth of the national average salary among Saudis.⁷² However, this is two to six times the amount in their country of origin. Saudis no longer perform manual jobs (Figure 16), particularly in agriculture, which is the oasis' main economic activity. They manage and trade, but responsibility for the farm is entrusted to a foreign worker, often Egyptian. If necessary, additional labourers (Egyptians, Pakistanis, Afghans, Indians, Bangladeshis, Yeminis, etc.) are recruited on an annual basis or for harvests. An owner will visit his farm regularly, sometimes even daily, but often less to manage the work than to enjoy the verdant space. Some owners grow old alongside an employee who has worked for them for more than three decades. In the best-case scenario, they form well-oiled relationships. In agriculture, all employees maintain that they have had to improvise or learn the specific agricultural work in an oasis alone or sometimes from a previous worker. A mobile telephone salesman from Khartoum (Sudan) or a goldsmith from Dhaka (Bangladesh) does not arrive with prior knowledge of the diverse varieties of dates cultivated in al-'Ulâ. That crucial knowledge is acquired via a form of horizontal solidarity among employees of different nationalities working on the same farm, or among compatriots working on neighbouring farms. Their circumstances also depend on the social situation of the *kâfil*. A Bedouin's knowledge of date palm cultivation may be more limited than that of his employees, particularly Egyptian workers. One Egyptian agricultural labourer from

Qena, who has been working in al-'Ulâ for ten years, told us: "They don't know anything about agriculture here. I'm the one teaching them!" (Nov. 2019). He nonetheless later explained that he had learned from a "Saudi" how to distinguish between the *barnî* and *ḥalwa ḥamrâ'* date varieties by their *ashwâk* (acanthophylls, i.e., the palm spikes). There is therefore a paradox in al-'Ulâ, where young Saudis, even those who are unemployed, demonstrate little appetite for the agricultural sector and its specific knowledge base, while foreigners have lived and worked (without their families) on Saudi farms for twenty, thirty, or even thirty-five years. The latter have become the true, and sometimes only, custodians of an extensive agricultural knowledge and know-how, ranging from the identification of the different varieties of date palm to cultivation techniques and even detailed knowledge of how the land has been divided into plots and the community-based identities of the owners (Figure 17).

Figure 17



An Egyptian worker from Qena who has been employed at al-'Ulâ's old palm grove for more than three decades, far from his family. May 2022.

Photograph: Vincent Battesti.

Conclusions

Fluid identities and categories

- 66 The presence of foreign workers in the oasis region of al-'Ulâ seems to have reinforced a tendency to blur the dividing lines between local Saudi identities. Via a contrasting effect, these new figures of alterity have united Saudis, both Sedentary and Bedouin. Foreign labour has enabled them to distance themselves from physical work and establish a shared class relationship as those who give orders.
- 67 Within the former Sedentary community, the ancient partition between *Ḥilf* and *Shqîq* is being obscured, leaving in its place a seemingly homogeneous group identity: 'Alâwna who claim various tribal affiliations. Al-'Ulâ's Sedentary community can finally claim that they are "all Saudis and all Bedouin." The sedentarized Bedouin community, meanwhile, retains its Bedouin culture through the promotion of certain iconic values

and practices, in the name of the tribe or clan they systematically present as their identity. They now occupy urban and agricultural spaces in the oasis and are effectively “all Saudis and all sedentary.”

- 68 However, the Sedentary and Bedouin Saudi communities in al-'Ulâ have retained some antagonistic assertions and specific identities, which are as stable as they are fluid. These multiple identities, stable and inherited, yet dynamically constructed, are local resources that can be used to prevent the tearing of the social fabric and to encourage the social harmony among Saudis to which they all aspire. Their specific identities converge as much as they separate when the Sedentary community actively exhibits an allochthony and the Bedouin an autochthony, both of which appear paradoxical.

Allochthony and autochthony | Paradoxes

- 69 Our description of the situation within the oasis of al-'Ulâ can be summarized as follows: Bedouins, while declaring that they are allochthonous, also claim—as if they were autochthonous (without abandoning their notion of kinship)—a territory, the *diyâr*, of which they have effectively lost collective ownership but not the memory thereof. Meanwhile, the Sedentary community, historically and economically rooted in the land, claim—as if they were allochthonous—to come from somewhere else before al-Dîra and to be anchored in tribal lineages.
- 70 One hypothesis is that the Sedentary community's claim to allochthony is the expression of a desire to assume the prestigious motif of Bedouin society in order to cover up more controversial origins (serfdom, late local converted populations, etc.). The hypothesis in return is this: the sedentarization of the Bedouin has led to their attachment to a territory that was once unstable but that is now frozen. As they were historically the region's pastoral population, allochthony should be more befitting to the Bedouin. However, the vitality of the notion of tribal lands, *al-diyâr*, like Bedouin roots in *al-barr*⁷³ territories (desert lands they no longer officially possess), appears to remain, despite the *diyâr* no longer being used in practice as places of habitation. The boundaries between tribal or pastoral territories around al-'Ulâ remain known to all.
- 71 The population of al-'Ulâ, in all the nuances of its complex social structure, cherry picks its past in order to define itself in the present, keeping one eye on the rear-view mirror: some on *al-diyâr* and others on al-Dîra. The contours of the identities of each social group are being redefined on the basis of the fluid interpretations of identity and category we have explored. After the first great wave of social change initiated by national policies forty years ago, these aspects of society are poised to be altered again with a second great wave, brought about by the “AlUla” project. This study, based on ethnographic fieldwork, provides a local view of local realities at a time when the region's future is being shaped and determined by the kingdom's project to turn al-'Ulâ into a leading tourist destination. Doubtless, this vast programme is mindful of what local communities wish to present about themselves and is eager to avoid identity assignments on a top-down basis.

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NOTES

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2. BLIN, 2021, p. 97.
3. BATESTI, 2005.
4. CARIOU, 2019.
5. THIOLLET, 2010.
6. DE BIBERSTEIN KAZIMIRSKI, 1960a, p. 748.
7. BELLACHE, 2019. Anthropology is not taught in the kingdom, its universities do not train anthropologists, and the country has not opened itself up to examination by anthropologists (ALZUABI, 2019, p. 140). Existing anthropology studies have focused more on Bedouin social structures than Sedentary ones (DOSTAL, 1967; CHELHOD, 1969; ALTORKI & COLE, 1989; AKERS, 2001; POUILLON, 2017).
8. POUILLON & MAUGER, 1995; AL-FAHAD, 2004; BÂSHÂ, 2010; MAISEL, 2014.
9. LENCLUD, 2008, p. 449.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 451.
11. FINKE & SÖKEFELD, 2018.
12. BATESTI, 2009.
13. BATESTI, 2018.
14. An analysis of the palm groves of al-'Ulâ by the same authors is forthcoming.

15. Al-Dîra, a local toponym, refers to the old town and the old palm grove opposite. It is also the administrative name of this area.
16. The term *diyâr*, a plural noun, possibly from *dîra*, is used locally to refer to the Bedouin pastoral lands.
17. MAISEL, 2014.
18. AL-FAHAD, 2004.
19. POUILLON & MAUGER, 1995.
20. PUIG, 2004.
21. COLE, 2003.
22. BÂSHÂ, 2010.
23. AL-FAHAD, 2004.
24. BEN 'ALÎ AL-BUSHÎ, 2013.
25. THIOLLET, 2010.
26. GENERAL AUTHORITY FOR STATISTICS - KSA, 2017.
27. JAUSSEN & SAVIGNAC, 1914a, p. 45.
28. CHELHOD, 1969.
29. AKERS, 2001.
30. BEN HOUNET, 2010, on Algeria.
31. NASIF, 1988.
32. JAUSSEN & SAVIGNAC, 1914a, p. ix.
33. JAUSSEN & SAVIGNAC, 1914b, p. 4.
34. NICHOLSON, 2005.
35. AKERS, 2001, p. 169.
36. The subject of a monograph by Fathers JAUSSEN & SAVIGNAC, 1914b.
37. NAŞÎF, 1995, p. 139.
38. See for example the 'Abâbda in the Egyptian Eastern Desert: BATTESTI, 2015, p. 6-8.
39. MULTAQÎ QABÎLA BELÎ, 2013.
40. BONNENFANT, 1977, p. 126.
41. CHAMBOREDON, 1985, p. 141.
42. HAJRAH, 1974, p. 20.
43. GARI, 2006, p. 220.
44. POUILLON & MAUGER, 1995, p. 133.
45. THIOLLET, 2010.
46. MONTAGNE, 1930. See also: MARTEL, 1994; GELLNER, 2006.
47. BATTESTI, 2018.
48. JAUSSEN & SAVIGNAC, 1914a, p. 44.
49. PUIG, 2010.
50. DE BIBERSTEIN KAZIMIRSKI, 1960a, p. 524.
51. PUIG, 2010.
52. SAMIN, 2015, p. 144.
53. AL-MAHFÛZ, 2001.
54. The term '*ashîra* could be translated as "clan." However, we have chosen to translate it as "section" in this instance to distinguish it from the Bedouin clan. Unlike a Sedentary section or '*ashîra*, a Bedouin clan or *fakhdh* is organized genealogically.
55. NAŞÎF, 1995, p. 73-74.
56. AL-MAHFÛZ, 2001. The family al-Mahfûz is part of the Hîlf.
57. See for example DE BIBERSTEIN KAZIMIRSKI, 1960a, p. 1252-1253.
58. See for example ASHKENAZI, 1946/1949.

59. JAUSSEN & SAVIGNAC, 1914a; JAUSSEN & SAVIGNAC, 1914b.
60. Also in SAMIN, 2015.
61. BATESTI & GROS-BALTHAZARD, forthcoming.
62. JAUSSEN & SAVIGNAC, 1914a, p. 44-45.
63. AL-ḤARBĪ, 2017.
64. ABDULWAHED, 2019, p. 8.
65. JAUSSEN & SAVIGNAC, 1914b, p. 83.
66. This can be compared to the Tunisian south: PUIG, 2004; PUIG, 2003.
67. CHATELUS, 1982.
68. THIOULET, 2010.
69. YAMANI, 2009.
70. BEAUGÉ, 1986.
71. In accordance with the state's anti-integration and segregationist policy: THIOULET, 2010.
72. ESTRADE, 2021.
73. This is the word to refer to the desert lands in the region, but here it conveys the meaning of an area of sparsely populated countryside used for pastoral purposes, the space of the Bedouin.
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ABSTRACTS

The Saudi communities that make up the oasis of al-'Ulâ (Saudi Arabia) display a unity cemented by their belonging to the kingdom, de facto excluding foreign workers, who are nevertheless essential to the local oasis economy. This unity under the royal seal is more proclaimed than it is felt and experienced by the inhabitants of the region. Local collective identities are nested, defined by allegiance to one group as much as by its distinction from the other group of the same nature. This principle of nested subdivision begins between Bedouin and Sedentary groups and continues within them. These first results of a rare ethnographic survey in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia are intended to offer—before the completion of the project that supports them—an essential knowledge base so that the current development of al-'Ulâ, led by the Royal Commission for AlUla (RCU) and its contractors, can be carried out while paying close attention to the social realities of the local population.

Les communautés saoudiennes qui composent l'oasis d'al-'Ulâ (Arabie saoudite) affichent une unité cimentée par l'appartenance au royaume, excluant de fait les travailleurs étrangers, essentiels à l'économie oasienne locale. Cette unité sous le sceau royal est plus proclamée que localement pensée et vécue par les habitants de la région. Les identités collectives locales se vivent en réalité emboîtées, définies par l'appartenance à un groupe autant que par sa distinction d'avec l'autre groupe de même nature. Ce principe de subdivision emboîtée commence entre groupes bédouins et sédentaires et se poursuit en leur sein. Ces premiers résultats d'une rare enquête ethnographique dans le royaume d'Arabie saoudite veulent offrir — avant la finalisation du projet qui les porte — une base de connaissances essentielle afin que le développement actuel d'al-'Ulâ, conduit par la Royal Commission for AlUla (RCU) et ses prestataires, se mène au plus près des réalités sociales et de la population locale.

INDEX

Mots-clés: ethnographie, anthropologie, Arabie saoudite, al-'Ulâ, Oasis, organisation sociale, bédouins, sédentaires, identité, sédentarité

Keywords: ethnography, anthropology, Saudi Arabia, al-'Ulâ, Oasis, social organization, bedouin, sedentary, identity, settled way of life

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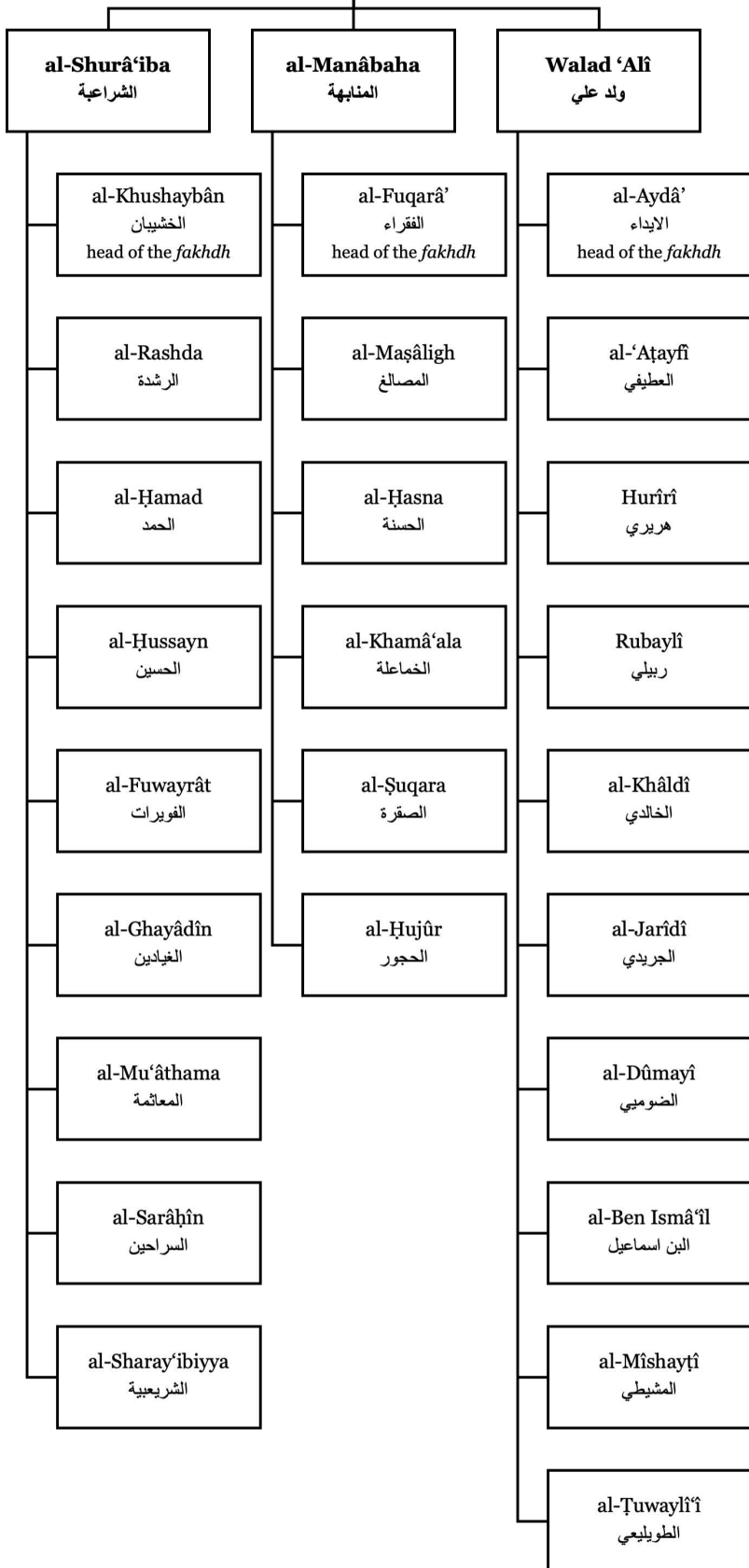
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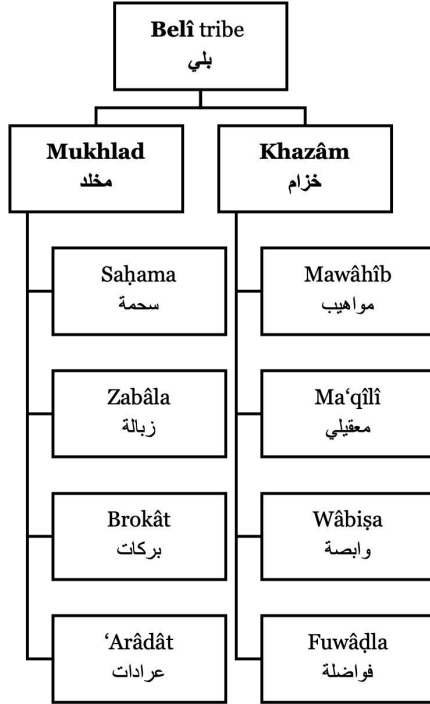
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Benî Wahab
بنى وهب
(main branch of the
'Anaza tribe)





Ḥaḍariyyîn — حضريين Sedentary community	
'Alâwna — علاونة [tribal affiliations]	
Shqîq league — شقيق [Ḥarb]	Ḥilf league — حلف
<p>al-Yusayra, descended from Ahmad bin Yusra [Subḥî <i>fakhdh</i> from the Ḥarb <i>qabîla</i>] 12 'awâ'il: - al-Ḥuwayyân (including Âl Za'îr) - al-Da'âsîn - al-Ḥâmid - al-Khalîfa - al-Nawâsira - Abû Khadîja (al-'Aqîl) - al-Rayis - Âl Manşûrî - al-Kardî - Abû Shuqayr - Bin 'Îsa - al-Lâmî (including the Ibrâhîm, Şayfî, Slimân Ḥumûd, Naşîf)</p> <p>N.B. are brothers.</p>	<p>al-Salâma [Ḥarb <i>qabîla</i>] 9 'awâ'il: - al-Ḥujîrî - al-Ḥisnân - Âl Abû al-Ḥasan - Âl Ibn Fâḍil - al-Yûsif - al-Brikît - al-Samâhîn - al-Yâsîn - al-Jûd [al-Mazru'î <i>fakhdh</i>, Ḥarb <i>qabîla</i>]</p>
<p>al-Badana [Murâ'i'a <i>fakhdh</i> from the Ḥarb <i>qabîla</i>] 10 'awâ'il: - al-Şuqairât (Al- 'Ubayd Allah) - al-Juma'a - al-Dhiyâb - al-Sanad - al-Juḥaysh - al-Ḥuwaikîm (including Âl Mutlaq) - al-Najdî (including bin Sâlim) - al-Farâhîn - al-'Ubayd Allah - al-Lwafî</p> <p>N.B. formerly Darayhîm, subdivided.</p>	<p>al-Ḥamad [Ḥarb <i>qabîla</i>] 9 'awâ'il: - Âl Şabbâḥ - Âl Ibn 'Îsâ [al-Fraydî <i>fakhdh</i>, Ḥarb <i>qabîla</i>] - Âl 'Arafa (Abû Ḥamad and Âl Bin Sulaymân) - Âl 'Abd al-Dâ'im - Bin Qâsim - Abû Sharî' - al-Khamâyisa - al-Rashîdât - Duwayri'ât</p>
<p>al-Qarûq 11 'awâ'il: - Âl Şâlah - al-Ibrâhîm - Bin Khadâsh (Bin 'Uḍ) [Banî 'Adhara <i>qabîla</i>] - al-Durayhîm (Banî 'Udra Christian tribe converted to Islam) - Âl Brâz (including the Bin Jabr, Bin Slimân, and Abû Su'ud) - Âl Jâbar - Âl Raḥma (including al-Maşa'ud) - al-Maşâ'id (including al-Jarîdât) - al-Zuwayd [Juhayna <i>qabîla</i>] - Âl Khalîfa - al-Buwâshyya or al-Bushî (alias, attached to the Şâlah) [Qahtan <i>qabîla</i>] - al-Nwaḥa</p>	<p>al-Maḥfûz [al-Sifrî <i>fakhdh</i>, Ḥarb <i>qabîla</i>] 7 'awâ'il: - Âl Ibn Mûsâ - Âl Ibn 'Abd al-Karîm - al-'Abd Allâh - Âl Ibn Ṭâlib - al-'Alwân - Âl Ibn Mâdî - Âl Ḥarmûsh</p> <p>N.B. Ḥâmad, Sâlem, and Maḥfûz are three brothers.</p>
<p>al-Budayr [Banû Tammîm <i>qabîla</i> from Taymâ or Najd] 4 'awâ'il: - al-Ḥamad - Âl Zâhir - al-Sa'ad (including al-'Umar) - al-Samâdina</p>	<p>al-Muḥammad [Saraja <i>fakhdh</i>, Juhayna <i>qabîla</i>] 6 'awâ'il: - Âl Ibn Nûḥ - Shwîkân - Bin Tuwaim [Juhayna <i>qabîla</i>] - al-Jârallâh [Banû Shayba <i>qabîla</i>] - al-'Assâf - Âl Makkî (from Mecca) [Banû Shayba <i>qabîla</i>]</p>
<p>al-Tayâmna [al-'Abda <i>fakhdh</i>, Shammar <i>qabîla</i>] 8 'awâ'il: - al-Ghaythî - al-Ghadfâ' - al-'Asâf - al-Sâda [al-Ḥaddâd from Medina] - Abû Tuwayma ['Anaza <i>qabîla</i>] - al-'Uwaidât (Al-Qamzî) - al-Khâlîd al-Tayâmna [Sa'adûn <i>fakhdh</i>] - al-Najîm</p> <p>N. B. two recent families</p>	<p>al-Quḍâ [Ḥarb <i>qabîla</i>] 5 'awâ'il: - al-Qâḍî - al-Imâm - Âl Rayyis - al-Şabara - Bin Shukur</p>
<p>al-'Awwâd described as al-'Atâiq (ambiguous name root: ancient or emancipated*) [Banû Sakhr <i>qabîla</i>] 6 'awâ'il: - Bin 'Atîq, - Bin 'Âqil, - al-Baghdâdî, - Manduzan, - al-Ashrâf (including Âl Bin Zabûn) - Bin 'Aîd</p> <p>* DE BIBERSTEIN KAZIMIRSKI, 1960b, p. 165.</p>	<p>al-'Alî [Banû Sakhr <i>qabîla</i>] 5 'awâ'il: - al-Mubâarak - al-'Abd al-Wâḥid - al-'Âmir - al-Juma'a - al-Hayrî</p>
	<p>al-Nâfa' [Ḥarb <i>qabîla</i>] 8 'awâ'il: - Âl Ibn Ibrâhîm (including Ibn Nâsir, al-Ḥalîû, and Abu Nâsir) - 'Îd al-'Aqbî - Âl Abû Ḥumûd - Âl Thâbit - al-Ibrâhîm - Âl Bin Muṭlaq - al-Kaḥlanî - al-Sulaymân</p>
	<p>al-Zuḥûf ['Anaza <i>qabîla</i>] 9 'awâ'il: - Âl Ibn Ḥusaîn - Al-Jûd [Ḥarb <i>qabîla</i>] - Ibn Nâsir - Âl Ibn Ruzayq - Âl Ibn Sa'îd - Âl Walad Aḥmad - al-Khulayş - Âl Abû Sulaymân - Âl Ruwai'î</p>
	<p>al-Wahîba ['Anaza <i>qabîla</i>] 4 'awâ'il: - Âl Manşûr - Âl Abû 'Atîq - Âl Abû Hurayr - Âl Ibn 'Abd al-Raḥman</p>
... other ḥaḍariyyîn tribes or families ["blurred zone"]	
<p>- al-Nazzawî <i>qabîla</i> [Juhayna <i>qabîla</i>] - al-Qubala <i>qabîla</i> [Quraish <i>qabîla</i>] - al-Ashqirât <i>qabîla</i> (died out)</p> <p>Other families ('â'ila ḥaḍariyya):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ḥajâj - al-Nwayşar * - al-Badrân - al-Ma'asîl - al-Fawzan - Ḥarîqî (from Najd) - Jârallâh (from Mecca, Banû Shayba, Quraish <i>qabîla</i>) * - al-Najîm (from Tayma, Shammar <i>qabîla</i>) * - Abû Smîḥ [Qahtanî <i>qabîla</i>] <p>(*possibly "also" 'alâwna, but outside a 'ashira)</p>	