

ROUNDTABLE: TRIBES AND TRIBALISM IN THE MODERN MIDDLE EAST

Eshiretan in Kurdistan

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The “*eshiret*” (*eşîret* in the romanized Kurmanji Kurdish alphabet) is a highly variable and situated concept and social and political entity in Kurdistan, the homeland of ethnic Kurdish people. This essay is based on regular ethnographic fieldwork I have been conducting in part of Kurdistan, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. My first research stint was in the mid-1990s, and I was there most recently in 2016. During the early period of my research, I had a great deal of contact with people in nonurban settings for whom an *eshiret* may be an important social category and contributor to individual identity.

Eshiret in Kurdish has long been translated into English as “tribe” (tribes: *eshiretan* [*eşîretan*]; tribalism: *eshiriye* [*eşîriyê*]; tribal: *eshireti* [*eşîretî*]). My discipline of (sociocultural) anthropology has been moving away from the term “tribe” because of its association with colonial interpretations at the expense of local ones and the way in which “tribal categories have been both created and manipulated by colonizers and invading or hostile forces. I agree with this critique. It does appear to me, however, that the *eshiret* concept bears strong resemblance to the Arabic *ashîra*, or *qabila*, and similar social entities in other nearby languages and cultures, which also have been translated as “tribe” or “tribal confederation.” The essays in this roundtable suggest that these concepts are very relevant and active in everyday life and politics in the broader region of Southwest Asia and North Africa. Therefore, even as I proceed with a local term, I do so in a spirit of comparison. Primarily, this essay addresses the place of the *eshiret* in modern Kurdish society, and how *eshiretan* relate to the modern state.

The “*eshiret*” that has emerged from my work as an ethnographer, and that is described in the literature, is in most cases a group that one is born into through a father.¹ Alternatively, a person may be in the process of joining an *eshiret*. In my observation, this is a process that is only open to men, and it takes more than one lifetime. A man who has been accepted in a practical sense into an *eshiret*, such as through fighting for it or working its agricultural lands while living in its territory, can function as a provisional tribal member. However, to be a full, unquestionable member, a person (male or female) needs to be born to a man who is a member. Membership flows down the generations through men. Men may begin the process of leaving the *eshiret* by migrating out of its territory and building a life elsewhere, a reverse of the “provisional” process. As far as I have observed, women carry *eshiret* identity for life, even if they build a life elsewhere. They are not able to pass on membership to their children, although they may pass on strong sentiments, which may be expressed through statements such as, “I feel close to the such-and-such *eshiret* because my mother is a member.”

An *eshiret* is associated with territory and shared history, both oral and written. It has a leader or leaders. In the past, these leaders functioned like feudal lords in that they owned or controlled agricultural lands worked by peasant tribal members. Today their agricultural economic role may be lessened, but leaders of *eshiretan* do still tend to be wealthy, and this wealth may still take the form of land. *Eshiret* leaders still play roles in conflict. They may resolve conflicts between individuals or lineages. They may engage in, or serve as brokers or peacemakers for, intra-tribal conflicts. They may serve as paramilitary or military commanders over young male tribal members who either fight for the *eshiret* against other tribes or fight for a larger

¹Lale Yalçın-Heckmann, *Tribes and Kinship among the Kurds* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1991); Martin van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh, and State: The Social and Political Structures of Kurdistan* (London: Zed Books, 1992); Diane E. King, *Kurdistan on the Global Stage: Kinship, Land, and Community in Iraq* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2014); Sabahat Ölczer, *Women in the Kurdish Family: Expectations, Obligations and Values*, Familienforschung (Wiesbaden, Germany: Springer VS, 2020).

entity associated with the state. In the time period since I have been working in Kurdistan, these entities have included parties such as the Kurdistan Democratic Party and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, the Kurdistan Regional Government, and the forces of the government of Iraq.

Eshiret membership is not universal in Kurdistan; only some people who claim Kurdish ethnic identity consider themselves, and are considered by their community, to belong to one. My guess is that a majority of ethnic Kurdish people in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq do claim membership in an *eshiret* (guessing is necessary, because no census has gathered this type of information), but this membership's everyday meaning varies considerably from individual to individual and place to place. Most such groups are territorial in that their members hail from corresponding geographical areas. However, in recent decades urbanization, war and displacement, and out-migration have eroded the typical *eshiret*'s geographical associations. Even when members live away from their *eshiret*'s associated lands, it is conventional to still speak of those lands as "home." In an indirect sense, membership in an *eshiret* may be legal as well, since the Iraqi state requires all citizens to have an official residence, and that residence may remain bureaucratically official even if a person has not resided there for a prolonged period. At least one "*eshiret*" in the Kurmanji dialect-speaking area of Iraq where I work, the Kucher, is an exception. Their name means "nomadic," and their membership is comprised of people descended patrilineally from those who were nomadic throughout the year and therefore lacked a territory of their own. They are now distributed noncontiguously in cities and towns across the area where they once carried out seasonal, circular migration.

Descent and *Eshiret*

Patrilineal descent is a key element of Kurdish *eshiriye*, as it also is for social and political life in the broader geographical area in which Kurdistan is positioned. Patriliney and *eshiretan* appear deeply bound up both in everyday practical relations and conceptually. This is not a new idea within sociocultural anthropology, but it has not found much expression recently, so I think it is important to restate. My version of this assertion relies more on observations as to what seems to be absent, rather than what is present. What is apparently *not* present, based on many conversations I have had with *eshiret* members and nonmembers alike, is individuals who are *eshiret* members but not members of patrilineages that comprise tribes. This absence suggests that individuals may not be tribal members on their own (other than in the provisional way I mentioned earlier), but only in their capacity as lineage members.

How does a lineage become a member of an *eshiret*? As I have seen in my own research and as Martin van Bruinessen has previously pointed out, tribes may absorb new members by accepting refuge-seekers from other tribes.² These refugees may have low status at the beginning, but over time, as in any lineal descent system, reproduction expands the group. Men who are considered full tribal members are potential fathers, and as such, any offspring they may have constitute automatic new members for the *eshiret*. Tribal leaders by definition want their tribes to prosper and be powerful. This is achieved in part by expanding numbers. Tribal leaders, and members whose spirits about the *eshiret* are high (and tribes rely on high spirits, much like American sports teams do), therefore are pronatalist. As a patrilineage expands, its oral tradition tethers it to a biological founding father. Often the man who is later regarded as founder of an *eshiret* is the member best remembered through the generations; sometimes it is his son or grandson.

Ontology, Individual Identity, and *Eshiret* Membership

I have argued in previous work with Linda Stone that patriliney is about an ontological essence flowing through time.³ Patriliney, the receiving and giving of membership over time in a descent group through males, powerfully shapes individuals' identity claims and assumptions about individual membership in groups, including "the tribe" (also including religious groups, and religion and Middle Eastern patriliney

²Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh, and State*.

³Diane E. King and Linda Stone, "Lineal Masculinity: Gendered Memory within Patriliney," *American Ethnologist* 37, no. 2 (2010): 323–36.

are in many ways intertwined). This gives an *eshiret* a powerful *raison d'être*: it is an expression of individual identity as much as anything else. This individual aspect of the tribe is little explored in the literature, but I think it should be considered if we want to fully understand what an *eshiret* may mean to its members. I also have made an argument about *nāmūs*, the concept often translated as “honor,” that I think is nearly as relevant to the question of the *eshiret* and tribalism as it is to patriliney, the concept I originally addressed. First, *nāmūs* is frequently mentioned in the literature on Middle Eastern social life. In the past, this took the form of articles and books about honor and its purported opposite, shame (*sherim* in Kurdish).⁴ References to honor and shame have dropped off precipitously since the turn of the millennium. In my field conversations, however, references to *nāmūs* have not dropped off. *Nāmūs* seems to be as important as ever (and *sherim* too). Rather than a simple emotional quality, or even “sexual honor” as Michael Meeker argued, I argue that *nāmūs* is most accurately defined as patrilineal sovereignty: “the ability of a lineage and/or state to define its composition, to decide how it will utilize its resources, to define its boundaries, and to use violence.”⁵

An *eshiret* is like a patrilineage in that it is a group that is claimed by individuals as lending identity, allowing for “I am” statements; for example: *I am* a member of the Dilshad lineage; *I am* a member of the Mizuri *eshiret*. These types of statements, which I have frequently heard, are expressions of individual identity even as they also are statements about collective identity.

The State and the *Eshiret*

State citizenship in the Middle East during the past century of postcolonial, modern, and occupied Middle Eastern states has been almost thoroughly patrilineal, with citizenries consisting, with few exceptions (such as Israel and Turkey, where the story is more complicated), of descendants through males from an original founding citizen man in the early 20th century. So, in this region, state and tribe rely on the same building block, and this particular aspect invites problematizing by scholars. In addition to my ethnographic research in Kurdistan, Iraq, I also have carried out ethnographic observations in Turkey and Syria, and I lived in Lebanon and taught at the American University of Beirut for most of a six-year period starting in 2000. In Lebanon, the “sects” (*tā'ifa/tawā'if*) of which my students and other local interlocutors spoke appeared to function very similarly to tribes, the main difference being that Lebanese sectarian membership is compulsory because citizenship in the state first requires membership in a recognized ecclesiastical body. This membership is, with very few exceptions, patrilineal. In short, although much can be said about “the state” and “the tribe” (or “sect”), I simply want to note here that in the wider geographic region the two are, currently, built of the same stuff. This may be set to change, as social movements across the region are promoting the idea of women passing on citizenship. Several countries' laws have recently changed to allow this, which breaks up patrilineal descent at the state level and promises to bring sweeping social and political changes. If there will no longer be national patrilineages, what about lineages generally? Will this mean the eventual end of “the tribe” too?

Comparison and Culture

In closing, I return to the question of comparison and the “tribe” concept. My discipline has recently been engaging in self-critique around the idea and practice of comparison. For example, Caroline Brettell argues that we must acknowledge that much comparison in anthropology's past was problematic, leading to harmful generalizations and other outcomes that constitute a “troubled history.”⁶

Many authors writing in English and other European languages have used the terms “tribe” and “tribal” to describe Kurdish social and political life in a pejorative or exoticized way. I reject these portrayals entirely. Moreover, European colonizers exerted political control in part by propping up and

⁴John G. Peristiany, *Honour and Shame: The Values of Mediterranean Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966).

⁵Michael E. Meeker, “Meaning and Society in the Near East: Examples from the Black Sea Turks and the Levantine Arabs (I),” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 7, no. 2 (1976): 243–70; Diane E. King, “The Personal is Patrilineal: *Namus* as Sovereignty,” in *Middle Eastern Belongings*, ed. Diane E. King (London: Routledge, 2010), 60.

⁶Caroline B. Brettell, “Anthropology, Migration, and Comparative Consciousness,” *New Literary History* 40, no. 3 (2009): 649–71.

manipulating “the tribe.” So have other colonizers, such as the Ba’thist Iraqi and Syrian governments, the Islamist Iranian government, and the ethnically homogenizing Turkish government. Therefore, I advocate for taking a critical view of “tribe” in Kurdistan from all angles, acknowledging the well-documented, complicated, and complex nature of politics in the modern Kurdish homeland going back at least to the Ottoman Tanzimat reforms beginning in the 1830s.

But avoiding harmful or neocolonizing comparisons must not lead us to overlook similarities between the various political entities represented by this roundtable. Brettell concludes her piece by arguing that comparison is present even in those projects in which the researcher does not make an overt claim to be engaging in comparison, and that “comparative consciousness” is an imperative for anthropology.⁷

During the in-person roundtable discussion we had at the University of Maryland, Andrew Shryock gave a presentation based on his research in Jordan. He described groups that were both political and social, that were associated with very specific territories both on the ground and in people’s knowledge of the lay of the land, that were both sometimes parallel to the state and sometimes bound up with the state, and to which people had strong, romanticized attachments. Most of those present at the roundtable work in or on Arab settings. As one who works in a (mostly) non-Arab setting, I was in the minority. During the discussion Shryock said something like this: “It seems that many of you can relate to what I have described. I imagine Diane might not though, since she works in a different ethnic setting.” Heads nodded in agreement with both points. “On the contrary,” I answered. “What you have described is extremely familiar, and most of it could be offered as a description of tribal life in Kurdistan as well.” This was not a new thought; I also had had it (along with a lesser number of thoughts about difference) when I first read Shryock’s 1997 book, *Nationalism and the Genealogical Imagination*.⁸ Nearly a quarter century later, in addition to rich multidisciplinary analysis of an enduring social and political form, a vote for the value of cross-cultural comparison by anthropologists also was cast.

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⁷Ibid.

⁸Andrew Shryock, *Nationalism and the Genealogical Imagination: Oral History and Textual Authority in Tribal Jordan* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997).