

# “Black People, White Hearts”: Origin, Race, and Colour in Contemporary Yemen

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## Abstract

The so-called *akhdam* (servants) or *muhammashin* (marginalized) are a minority group of black slum dwellers, often associated with impure tasks. Living on the margins of Yemeni society, they claim to be victims of ‘*un-suriyya*’ (racism) due to the colour of their skin. Drawing on extensive fieldwork in the governorate of Sanaa, this article aims to place the case of the *akhdam* in the wider context of an historical discourse on race, genealogy and colour. Focusing on the notion of *asl* (origin), it explores local understandings of “genealogical essentialism”: the belief that moral and physical characteristics pass down lines of descent. By contrasting the case of another Yemeni low status group, the white-skinned *beny al-khumus*, with that of the black-skinned *akhdam*, the article expands the notion of racism beyond the boundaries of colour and phenotype, implying an exclusion of the Other based on his patrilineal line of descent. Concurrently, it depicts race as an instrument of self-essentialization for the *akhdam*, a tool for political struggle.

**Keywords:** Yemen, Akhdam, Origin, Race, Colour

## Setting the scene<sup>1</sup>

It was November 2012 when Eysa’s rifle accidentally discharged and shot a dark-skinned young girl while she was begging for money. The girl instantly died. Eysa was immediately surrounded by his fellow soldiers in order to avoid any hasty act of vengeance from the girl’s relatives and he was arrested and taken to prison. The news of the accident soon reached the village of

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Kuthre<sup>2</sup>, where I was conducting my fieldwork, and Eysa's co-villagers, his 'brothers', initiated tribal protocols to solve the matter.

Eysa was a young man of Southern Arab origins, a soldier, a peasant and a *qabily* (pl. *qaba' il*)<sup>3</sup>. In the area of the Yemeni highlands, the *qaba' il* – peasants belonging to village brotherhoods and larger corporate groups (*qabila*) – aim to personify a gendered *ethos* which they call *qabyala*: a system of shared values and meanings, moral qualities and emotions. In their opinion, a “real man” (*rajjal*) embodies a number of virtues: he is brave, but patient; he is generous; he relies on himself; and he is a pious Muslim (Nevola 2016, p. 150). On the other hand, the girl was described by the *qaba' il* as a *khad-ima*. The *akhdam* (literally servants<sup>4</sup>) are a minority group of “black” slum dwellers, often associated with street-sweeping and other “impure” tasks. The rest of the Yemeni people consider them descendants of the *Aḥbāsh* (i.e. the Ethiopians), and, in a word, *nūqqāṣ* (s. *naqīṣ*, deficient): people lacking the moral qualities embodied by a *qabily* (Walters 1987, p. 203). The *akhdam*, however, more often describe themselves as Yemeni citizens and *muḥammashin* (marginalized), ascribing their economic vulnerability to the discriminatory politics of the Yemeni government and to the “racist culture” of white Yemenis<sup>5</sup> (Seif 2005).

Traditionally, the *akhdam* dwelled in rural areas of western and southern Yemen. However, after the 1962 revolution establishing the Yemen Arab Republic, President Abdullah al-Sallal compelled many *akhdam* to work as salaried street-sweepers in major cities (al-Hakami 2017, p. 35). During the oil boom in Saudi Arabia in the 1970s, many Yemenis – including a large number of *akhdam* – left the country, hoping to improve their economic situation. This large movement of labour greatly increased the spending power of Yemeni citizens, and concurrently it replaced old status rankings by class relations (Carapico and Myntti 1991, p. 25). After the first Gulf war, however, 800.000 migrants were forced to return to Yemen where there was no work available. Accustomed to a urban lifestyle, many returning migrants – the so-called *mughtaribin* – started living in squatter areas around the

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2 Kuthre (a false name to protect identities) is a village located in Sanḥan, south-west of Sanaa.

3 In transliterating Arabic, I have used a simplified version of the conventions of the *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, also rendering the local pronunciation of some vowels. Fieldwork and interviews were conducted in Arabic, without an interpreter. All translations are my own.

4 Shjab correctly points out that whereas the “sound” plural of the word *khadim* (servant) would be *khadimun*; the “broken” plural would be *khudum* or *khadam*. The form *akhdam* will therefore be considered a proper noun used to describe a specific group (2003a, p. 150).

5 As we shall see, both the attributes “black” and “white” do not strictly refer to skin-colour or phenotypical traits.

main cities of Yemen. For low status groups, like the *akhdam*, emigration had been a way to escape their social position, yet when they returned they were stigmatized again (De Regt 2008, p. 159, p. 164). Since they had no property or land to come back to, many of them found refuge in isolated, temporary makeshift camps called *mahwa* – a term that is typically used to describe a dog shelter – where they lacked access to water and electricity (al-Hakami 2017).

Today, the *akhdam*'s reputation is suffused by countless negative stereotypes. They are believed to be licentious in the way they let their women interact with men and to behave immorally, both ignoring Islamic religion and indulging in illicit acts like stealing and drinking. Moreover, they are considered “nomadic”, inasmuch as they have no property and thus occupy private lands, they are accused of being dirty or even impure because of the tasks they habitually perform and sometimes they are even said to bury their dead in the cellars of their houses. Moreover, *qaba'il* expect them not to follow tribal protocol in cases of vengeance.

Heading back to our case, when the two groups – the *qaba'il* from Kuthre and the *akhdam* from Khamsin Road – had to interact to settle the case, many of these stereotypes were deconstructed. The *qaba'il* offered 1.7 million riyal as blood-price (*diya*), and the *akhdam* honourably forgave the killing, refusing the money. The two groups attended the girl's funeral together and later gathered in the *akhdam*'s camp where a huge tent had been prepared (at the expenses of the *qaba'il*) to host the three-day funeral (*beyt al-mawt*). While approaching the tent, on the first day of gathering, Eysa's uncle felt the need frankly to express his surprise for the “normal” behaviour he witnessed so far. Taking me aside – as if he had to convince me – he solemnly affirmed: “They are black people (*sud*), but they have white hearts”. A few hours later, one of the *akhdam* confessed to me, “white people other than you [plural] would step on us (*gheyrakum biḍ yijou yidusuna daws*)”, and he continued: “*qaba'il* are racists (*'unsuriyyin*).”

These quotes are emblematic of the functioning of psychological essentialism (Gelman 2003), which is “a pervasive cognitive bias that leads people to view members of a category as sharing a deep, underlying inherent nature (a category “essence”), which causes them to be fundamentally similar to one another [...]” (Rhodes et al. 2012, p. 13526). This “essence” is believed to be natural and inherited, and it serves to construct cognitive categories with a strong inductive potential (Gelman 2003, p. 91, p. 22). These categories are deemed immutable (Holtz and Wagner 2009) and serve to organize the knowledge we acquire about the Other and to guide our expectations (Gelman 2004, p. 404). As Eysa's case suggests, empirical evidence of a mismatch between the cognitive category and the real world is treated as exceptional. In fact, Eysa's uncle statement is blatantly essentialist: while

acknowledging the good manners of the “actual” *akhdam* of Khamsin Road, it reproduces the dissymmetry and hierarchy inscribed in the category.

In his work on Betsileo slave descendants of Madagascar, Regnier (2012) applies the notion of psychological essentialism to the social domain of marriage strategies. In so doing, he demonstrates how essentialism is inscribed in practices, representations and discourses which are articulated with stigmas of otherness and the construction of social boundaries. Once we adopt this perspective, the possibility unfolds of exploring historical forms of essentialism as they developed in Yemen through their articulation within a particular social organization. As I shall argue throughout this paper, my *qaba'il* interlocutors did not consider “blackness” as an essential property of the *akhdam*. Rather, they emphasized that the “essence” of the category lays elsewhere, in what we will provisionally define as the origin (*aṣl*) of the group. Because this origin was genealogical, and thus a non-obvious property of the category (Regnier 2012, p. 178) – i.e. a trait that is not immediately perceivable but that defines a category essence –, most *qaba'il* also denied their essentialist attitude towards the *akhdam*.

On the other hand, many *akhdam* politicians and activists insisted on the strategic essentialization (Spivak 1987) of their people’s blackness, instrumentally resorting to the notion of racism in order to achieve political and economic rights (Yang 2000, pp. 46-47). In this perspective, they linked their claims to international campaigns addressing the discrimination of social minorities in Yemen. Concurrently, however, they challenged the “anaesthesia of reflexion” that, in Yemen as elsewhere (Thioub 2015), invests the sensitive topics of servile status and social hierarchies, heightening their own ethnic awareness (Yang 2000, p. 53).

This article analyzes historical notions of race, colour and genealogical origin, and speaks to their relationship by comparing the essentialization of two stigmatized Yemeni groups: the *akhdam* and *beny al-khumus*. It first unravels the Arabic notion of origin (*aṣl*), arguing that it provides the very material of essentialization. Secondly, it compares the condition of the white-skinned *beny al-khumus* to that of the black-skinned *akhdam*, emphasizing a common stigma built upon a lack of Arab origins combined with a different socio-economic position. Eventually, after a brief review of the emergence of various notions of racism (*‘unsuriyya*) in Egypt and Yemen, it considers how the *akhdam* and *beny al-khumus* “put at work” these notions in contemporary Yemen. The article draws on extensive fieldwork, in-depth interviews, and analysis of political discourses. I undertook my 24-month fieldwork between 2009 and 2013, mostly in the tribes of Beny Maṭar and Sanḥan, South-West of the capital Sanaa, and in the capital itself.

## A matter of origins

As, for my Yemeni interlocutors, the “essence” defining the innate potential of a human being lies in his origin, I will first explore the semantic domain of the Arabic notion of *aşl* (pl. *uşul*). The term covers a wide semantic spectrum: it implies a reference to a “beginning” which is far removed in the past but also an idea of rootedness and the nostalgic feeling that the past was an era morally superior to the present<sup>6</sup>. Not surprisingly, the derivational form *aşly* also conveys the idea of “authentic”, as opposed to “fake”, and something “traditional”, as opposed to a “spurious modernity”.

*Aşl* is patrigenealogically transmitted and reflects ancestry and behaviour, rather than phenotype (Limbert 2014). “Having *aşl*” denotes the strength of character and the nobility of descent of an individual. Meeker (1976) and Dresch (1989) reflect perspicaciously on this point, arguing that the *sharaf* of persons and groups, their “honour in its most encompassing sense,” is always related to the glorious role their ancestors played in significant events of the past. This is a case of distinction with a built-in asymmetry, what Dumont (2000) would define *l’englobement du contraire*. This way of drawing distinctions, in fact, entails a “hierarchical technique of domination” (Luhmann 2002, p. 39): as mentioned above, “having *aşl*” involves having a noble ancestry and good manners, thus denying the same privilege to the other side of the distinction.

Drawing on his Moroccan fieldwork, Rosen provides a brief yet comprehensive definition of *aşl*: “To speak of one’s origins is to imply the social and physical context of one’s nurturance or those of one’s ancestral line, and its influence on one’s contemporary existence” (1983, p. 92). In this definition, we can analytically distinguish two levels, which correspond to two ways of making distinctions: *a*) a temporal level and *b*) a spatial level. Talking about origins always implies a temporal distinction, where the concept of *aşl* stands as the unity of the difference between ancestors and contemporaries. Through this double temporality, the social individual emerges as the difference between genetic and epigenetic, nature and nurture: he is defined by his ancestry but also reshaped by his current social milieu. This latter point brings us to the spatial dimension of origins.

In analyzing the case of Zaydi believers of Highland Yemen, Haykel (2002) demonstrates that identity is always tied to locality so that no social identity can exist detached from the public reputation that a person constructs in his own village or quarter. Ghannam’s ethnography of the Cairote quarter of al-Zawiya amply demonstrates how the meaning of *aşl* can entail

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6 Whereas Western ideas about progress and development are tied to the future, Islamic notions of time imply a reversed understanding of human development (Böwering 1997).

a synchronic evaluation of the social milieu where education (*tarbiyya*) has crafted an individual (2002, pp. 84-6). In Highland Yemen, as elsewhere in the Middle East (Geertz 1983, p. 64-68), this identity is mirrored in the individual's family name, which bears the mark of geographical and tribal affiliation.

Now we reached a pivotal point in our discussion: how can someone claim to “have *asl*”? In Highland Yemen, origins need to be proved by means of specific descent-constructs, or “[...] formulations of genealogical connections between persons and their ancestors” (Scheffler 1966, p. 543). People's genealogical origin is defined on two levels, which I shall define macro-genealogical and micro-genealogical.

On the macro-genealogical level, the Northern Arabs, also called *sada* (s. *sayyid*) or Hashemites, assume a relationship by genealogical tie to ‘Adnan through the Prophet's daughter and his cousin ‘Ali. Southern Arabs consider themselves the original inhabitants of Yemen and they assume a relationship by genealogical tie to Qaḥṭan, son of Sam. They translate this macro-genealogical connection into the title *‘araby* (pl. *‘arab*) or, if hailing from the countryside, they use the title *qabily*. On this level, genealogies work as a symbolic medium to construct “imagined communities” (Anderson 1991) of contemporaries (Schütz 1967, pp. 176-214).

On the micro-genealogical level, the relevant unit of analysis is the *beyt* (literally, house). People belonging to the same *beyt* acknowledge a common eponymous ancestor on the macro-genealogical level. However, they also share a common ancestor who is three to five generations removed. People from the same *beyt* constitute a community of consociates (Schütz 1967). On this level, each *beyt* distinguishes itself from others, although belonging to the same macro-genealogical level.

As I anticipated above, origins need to be proved. Locality is the first and most important evidence of a person's ancestry. A person's title, his *laqab*, is supposed to provide his affiliation to a small community of consociates (his village, or his neighbourhood) where his reputation, and his origin, shall be in the public domain. In Yemen, where membership of a lineage is always patrilineal, an individual's origin is also proven by plentiful material evidence: his property, inscribed in contracts (*‘aqd*) and shares of inheritance (*faṣḥ*) where a chain of ancestors is listed in the “introduction” of the document (*tarjama*); his genealogy (*nasab*), explicitly stated in accurate documents (*daftar*) in order to link present-day descendants to a common ancestor (*mujma*); graves, where the genealogy of the ancestor is recounted; and so forth (Nevola 2015a).

Virtually, every Yemeni citizen is ascribed to one of the two main lineages (i.e. Northern Arabs or Southern Arabs) with only three relevant exceptions: the *akhdam*, the Jews and the so-called *beny al-khumus*. The latter category is of the utmost importance for our case, since the structural position of

*beny al-khumus* was, just a few years ago, comparable to that of the *akhdam*. Traditionally, people belonging to *beny al-khumus* are associated with low-rank caste-groups performing stigmatized tasks (e.g. butchers, circumcisers, musicians, servants, blood-letters, etc.); the *qaba'il* considered them to be one undifferentiated category, although they distinguished themselves in different *buyut* (s. *beyt*); they lived at the margin of society, since – generally speaking – they did not own land. In contemporary Yemen, they are still condemned to endogamy, since the *qaba'il* refuse to intermarry with them, and they are regarded as people lacking in origin (*nuqqas al-aşl*), and thus morally deficient. In spite of these outstanding similarities with the *akhdam*'s situation, *beny al-khumus* are “white-skinned”<sup>7</sup> people.

### “White” people, marginalized

In 2013, I recorded a number of long interviews with an 80-year-old servant named Saleh, whom Yemenis would label a *muzayyin* (pl. *mazayna*). Until the 1980s (and, less frequently, nowadays) servants performed a huge variety of tasks for small corporate communities of *qaba'il*, usually in the countryside. In exchange, the community protected them in case of offence and defence and provided for them, offering a house, a fixed annual fee (*keyla*) and occasional payments for specific services (*kira*, *shir'* or *hijra*). *Mazayna* served during life cycle ritual ceremonies and worked as circumcisers, drummers, double-clarinet players, butchers, messengers and cooks. By virtue of their origin, they acted as outsiders and “back-stagers” for the tournaments of value of the community that protected them (Nevola 2015b).

Saleh was young at the time of the Mutawakkilite Kingdom (1918-1962), under the rule of the Imam Ahmed (d. 1962). During our conversations, he described the early years of his life as like being in the Garden of Eden. Working as a servant, he combined the advantages of a “light” job – lighter than that of a peasant – with a comfortable economic situation. As a servant, the *muzayyin* was perceived by the *qaba'il* as a qualitatively different moral self. On the one hand, he was depicted as a “weak” individual, someone who – like women – needed to be protected (Vom Bruck 1996, p. 156; Mermier 1996, p. 77); on the other hand, he possessed a number of moral qualities and technical skills that “naturally” made him fit for his role. “Cleanliness” and “trustworthy” (*amana*) were considered among the core characteristics of a servant – characteristics that, today, are interestingly attributed to non-Yemenis (de Regt 2009, p. 569).

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7 I shall emphasize, once more, that my interlocutors only used the attributes “black” and “white” when comparing social groups. Therefore, in my usage, people are “white-skinned” if considered in relation to the *akhdam*.

At the time of Saleh's childhood, Yemeni society was characterized by a simple form of division of labour, a sort of "domestic mode of production", where economic roles were also kinship roles. Within this mode of production, economic skills were learnt by children working together with same-sex adult producers (Goody 1989, p. 233), thus growing up as "sons of the profession" (*ibn al-mihra*). Through the hereditary, hidden and denied transmission of cultural capital, the son of the profession acquired a *habitus* from his ancestors: unrecognized as capital (i.e. as historically accumulated work) this *habitus* functioned as "innate", almost "natural" competence, crafting the individual's technical skills, moral qualities and social attitudes (Bourdieu 1986, p. 244) – a mechanism similar to the stereotyping of workers based on their ethnic or racial background (de Regt 2009).

After 1962, Saleh's economic situation drastically worsened. As *qaba'il* gradually abandoned agriculture, the traditional rights of the *muzayyin* were slowly eroded. The creation of infrastructure fostered mobility, thus increasing competition in the service sector. New possibilities unfolded to work as state-salaried employees and to acquire a "modern" education, from which, however, Saleh was excluded (Carapico and Mynntti 1991). Looking back at his previous condition and comparing it to his current one, Saleh defined himself a "marginalized": he had lost his traditional position and rights, without accessing the new economic market. Saleh's nephews, born after the unification of the country in 1990, inhabited a different life-world. Many of them had the chance to study, to enter the army or to work as state-salaried employees. Just a few of them relied (*ya tamid*) on the traditional profession (*al-mihra*) of the ancestors because they felt a vocation (*hawaya*). Most of them, however, considered the profession as a "surplus" or as a secure refuge (*mirja*), a place to return to in case of failure.

Rarely, if ever, have I heard of people from *beny al-khumus* denying their origin or their profession. Once, I asked a young circumciser from the Old City of Sanaa, "Why would you continue in your father's profession?" He replied, "I mean, from the perspective of Islam...I mean, you owe obedience (*at-ta'a*)... One doesn't deny... One tries to get near to his father's face (*washsh*)." Otherwise stated through a traditional Yemeni proverb, "No one denies his origin, but the dog (*ma had yinkirsh asleh, illa al-kalb*)." In this sense, not only did their *asl* define their present position within the society of the highland, but also it influenced their life trajectories, shaping their aspirations and the future outcome of their lives.

As I anticipated above, *beny al-khumus* are deemed to belong to neither Northern nor Southern Arabs. During my fieldwork, however, many of them explained their "lack of origin" through narratives like the following one:

Originally, we are not...Our origin...Our ancestors have origins (*usul*). We be-

long to the origins of the Prophet...But something enigmatic happened...Our grandfather killed [someone] and he entered Sanaa...There was a lack of people working in some professions...So he started working in...How is it called? In a coffee-shop [...] And we have contracts (*fusul*), we have origin (*asl*)! We are from Beny Maṭar; we belong to the descent of the Prophet. Whatever, all praise and thanks to God. [...]

All the narratives I collected from members of *beny al-khumus* have – at least – three characteristics in common. First, they position family origin within the wider hierarchical system of the Highlands. In most cases, the ancestor is described as a prominent character: a *shaykh*, a sultan, a descendant of the Prophet, a judge (*qaḍy*), and so forth. Second, they recover locality, specifying the spatial origin of the family: the place where lands, contracts, properties and so forth were once kept. Third, they are compressed historical accounts that give an interpretation of complex historical processes through the reduction to one generative event. Usually, the ancestor either abandoned his place of origin fleeing vengeance or he entered a stigmatized craft out of necessity. This mode of narration “recovers the origins” (Prakash 1990, p. 48) condensing the entire history of a family – its current social, economic and moral position within society – in one event situated in the past.

Notwithstanding the individual idiosyncrasies of actual human beings belonging to *beny al-khumus* – who, nowadays, have access to university, to the army, to the highest ministries, and so forth – both Northern Arabs and Southern Arabs still do not tolerate their daughters marrying them. As one friend from a renowned family of the Old City of Sanaa once explained to me:

The reason why we are so conservative with these things is that we have a proverb that says, “origin doesn’t lie (*al-‘irq dassas*).”<sup>8</sup> Whatever is his morality, or anything else, eventually, under some circumstances, *his origin will come out*. What is it in his origin? For example, a *qaḍy* or a *hashimy*, he will never approach some things... He can’t lie; he can’t betray your trust... He can’t do such things... But the others, those who have little origin... Sometimes they do such things.

“Such things” encompass a long list of negative stereotypes associated with some families belonging to *beny al-khumus* and subsequently extended to the whole category: stealing, lying, disrespecting women, and so forth. These stereotypes are essentialized and translated into “history” through a

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8 Actually, this saying is not a proverb, rather a *hadith* of the Prophet Mohammad which, in its original form, reads as follow: “*takbayaru li-nutafikum fa-inna al-‘irq dassas-an*.” In this context, the term *‘irq*, literally “roots”, retains the same meaning of *asl*.

tale of the origins set at the time of the Himyarite king Sa 'ad al-Kamil. The story tells of a woman complaining to the king about her cattle having been stolen. The king creates an army that heads towards a distant place called *Zalamat*, where the thieves are believed to hide with the loot. The head of the army pushes the soldiers to enter into a dark landscape, where they are ordered to scoop up as much soil as they can. When, eventually, they emerge from the dark place, the head of the army reveals to them that what they have collected is not soil, but gold powder. Since one part of the army has not entered the dark landscape, they have gathered no gold. For this reason, they are given some of the other soldiers' powder and thus they are condemned to serve in the army. Because they number a fifth of the total, the other soldiers label them *beny al-khumus* (sons of the fifth)<sup>9</sup>.

It is worth emphasizing some aspects of this story. First, the story is set in a pre-Islamic time. As one of my interlocutors, a *qabily*, commented, "the Imam was Muslim," and the egalitarian Islamic discourse stands in antithesis to distinctions grounded in genealogical origin. Second, the story defines the moral characteristics of *beny al-khumus* and motivates their condition of dependence. Depicted as cowards, *beny al-khumus* are condemned to serve the brave warriors of the army and appear as dependent on them – in terms of both protection and livelihood. Third, the task that they are condemned to perform – which is serving – is the consequence, and not the cause, of their moral ineptitude. Fourth, after centuries, the history of their origin serves to explain their current position within the social organization of the Highlands and, more importantly, it defines the essence of their physical and moral qualities.

Having discussed the social position of *beny al-khumus* and the narratives that construct their essence, let us now explore the origins of the *akhdam*.

### The origin of the *akhdam*

Consider this brief excerpt from a longer interview with a *qabily* man from Beny Maṭar:

This social group (*tabaqa ijtima'iyya*) appeared in Yemen before Islam, in a peculiar period when the Ethiopians (*Aḥbash*) raided Yemen under the leadership of Abraha al-Ashram. And that wasn't, simply, a military campaign: it was also a religious one for [supporting] the Christian religion.

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9 The title may well be connected to the Islamic tradition of paying one-fifth (*al-khumus*) of the spoils of war to the poor. The usage seems to be widespread in the Middle East. For instance, the Moroccan *Haratin*, clients of the Arabs, are paid by their lords the *khummas* which amounts to a fifth of the harvest (Ensel 1998).

These few lines provide a widespread common-sense explanation for the origin of the *akhdam*, describing them as Ethiopians (*Aḥbāsh*), dating their origin back to pre-Islamic times, and adding an ominous connection with the Christian conqueror Abraha. Is this an accurate historical explanation?

Three Yemeni authors, in particular, engage in a thorough analysis of the historical origins of the *akhdam*. One of them, al-Sharjaby, starts his reflections from a granitic certainty: “There is a relationship – direct or indirect – between their origin and the strong contempt which they face” (1986, p. 260). Black skin, curly hair, and thick lips – in Sharjaby’s opinion – demonstrate that “the origin (*aṣl*) of the *akhdam* goes back to Africa” (ibid.). Hence the author proposes, and subsequently rejects, four hypotheses concerning their origin: *a*) they are a Yemeni indigenous “race” (*‘unṣur*) oppressed since pre-Islamic times; *b*) they are people of slave origin; *c*) they are a group of Yemeni migrants who reached Ethiopia in pre-Islamic times and later returned to Yemen with the Habashi raid of 525 A.D.; *d*) they are a group of Ethiopians who stayed in Yemen after the end of the Ethiopian occupation of Yemen and, being the lowest stratum of the army, they practiced, in Ethiopia, the same services that later they came to practice in Yemen (ivi, pp. 261-263).

The same four hypotheses are put forward by Shjab (2003a, 2003b). Shjab, however, enriches Sharjaby’s perspective by investigating the connection between the origin of the *akhdam* and the services they perform. He reviews two hypotheses: *a*) they were Abraha’s soldiers who, taken captive by the Himyarite king Sayf Bin Dhi-Yazan, were forced to perform light, impure tasks; *b*) they were the Abyssinians who betrayed and killed Sayf, but whose life was spared provided that they served the Yemeni people. This second hypothesis has an interesting corollary, which Shjab defines a “folk story” widespread in the Tihama area, on the Red Sea coast: the story goes that whereas the soldiers were condemned to serve, every commander (*ra’is*) was turned into a barber. This would explain why, even nowadays, the barber is called “*al-rayyis*” (ivi, p. 153).

There is one last historical hypothesis, which both Sharjaby and Shjab consider the most reliable, that is put forward by al-Hadramy (1976). During the caliphate of Abbasid al-Ma‘mun, in the 9<sup>th</sup> century A.D., Mohammed b. Ziyad was sent to Tihama in order to crush the local tribes’ revolts and build a new capital, Zabid (Smith 1986, p. 523). The newly founded state lasted until 1016 A.D., when a lineage of slave soldiers from Ethiopia, the so-called al-Saḥaritiyyun, whose leader was Nijah al-Habashy, revolted against their master and achieved power, thus establishing a new rule which lasted until 1159. As the “State of the Slaves” became more and more oppressive for the local populations, insurgencies erupted led by Ali Bin Mahdy al-Himyary. When the rebels gained power, in order to ease the

hatred they felt against the people of Nijah, they transformed them “not into slaves, but into servants,” condemning them to “complete social and political isolation” (Shjab 2003, p. 158).

The anthropologist Delores M. Walters, who conducted fieldwork in the Tihama area during the 1980s, admits that – from a historical perspective – it is “difficult, if not impossible, to determine *akhdām* origins and the source of their social segregation” (1987, p. 224). However, this long historical digression is justified by two factors. The first is that most Yemeni laymen, if asked “what is the origin of the *akhdām*?”, would endorse one of the above mentioned historical hypotheses; secondly, that these historical hypotheses are, themselves, part of a wider discursive formation that concurs to construct *akhdām* subjects in contemporary Yemen. This point is tied to a second important question that deserves to be answered: why is the matter of origins of such pivotal importance for Yemeni historians? I argue that it is because it seems to explain the *akhdām*’s position within contemporary Yemeni society (cf. al-Dailami 2014, p. 306).

When Shjab’s book was first published, in 2004, it was enthusiastically reviewed by the GPC’s website.<sup>10</sup> The reviewer went so far as to state that the book explained, “in a scientific style,” the tragedy of the scorn, the marginalization, and the isolation of the *akhdām*. However, as in the case of *beny al-khumus*, the “tragedy of the *Akhdām*” – a contemporary social issue – was curiously tackled through the historical reconstruction of their origin, dated to around 1.000 years ago. In formulating his historical hypotheses, Shjab affirmed that “the refusal, the isolation, and the pollution was first imposed upon [the *akhdām*] by the Mahdy State, but [the *akhdām*] agreed with that situation and its continuation, setting aside its causes” (2004). In summary: he cast blame on the *akhdām* for accepting their own marginalization.

Shjab’s perspective, I argue, is built on a culturally informed way of weaving together past and present, living human beings and their ancestors. The anthropologist Shryock describes this form of historical imagination through the notion of “genealogical imagination” (1997). According to Shryock, “The past, for tribespeople, is inseparable from the present. History is now as it happened then” (ivi, p. 35). Origins cut temporality in a vertical sense, encompassing persons and ancestors in an eternal present. Consequently, as Shryock points out, moral selves are always referred to their past origin: any claim to moral standing is also a comment on origins and it has to arise from a genealogical past (ivi, p. 11). Interestingly, all the historical hypotheses concerning the origin of the *akhdām* emphasize their immoral behaviour and their current social position as the outcome of the

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10 The GPC, or General People’s Congress, is the political party of the former President of the Republic of Yemen, Ali Abdullah Saleh. Available at: <http://www.almotamar.net/5489.htm>. Last accessed: 15.08.2017.

actions of their ancestors: black people of non-akhdam origin – whether Arabs, Somalians, or (even) Ethiopians – bear a distinct reputation. Or, in Walters’ words, “color or race is conferred on individuals as an indication of their family background – not the other way around” (1987, p. 352). In our terminology: it is the non-obvious property of the category (i.e. origin) what defines its essence; blackness is origin, not skin-colour.

There are at least two significant cases supporting this hypothesis. Firstly, it is undeniable that black skinned Yemenis exist and are considered *qaba’il* and not *akhdam*. In 2011, for instance, I had the chance to interview one of them. He explained to me that his grandfather married an “Ethiopian woman of Yemeni origin.” In Yemen, mixed-race people are termed *mu-walladin* and usually assigned to the father’s lineage (cf. Yang 2000, p. 57). Consistently, the man considered himself a *qabily*, and presented himself as such: as a *qabily* from Beny Maṭar, hailing from a village not far from Jabal al-Naby Shu‘ayb. No one ever contested the fact that he used the name of his village as a family name (*laqab*).<sup>11</sup> Moreover, he got married twice, both times with girls of *qabily* origin, thus reasserting a principle of isogyny or *kafa’a* (Limbert 2014, p. 596).<sup>12</sup> When I asked him, “What would you do if anyone called you a *khadim*?” he replied, “If a friend or a neighbour do it, I’ll ask the chairman (*‘aqil*) to judge between us (*aṭraḥ ‘aleyh*). [...] If a stranger did it, I’ll beat him up, to teach him the good manners and how to respect people.”

Secondly, it is widely acknowledged that ex-slaves, the so-called *‘abid*, hold a higher reputation than the *akhdam*. On the common-sense level, my *qaba’il* interlocutors defined them as people serving the Imam, or the *sheykh*; people living in “clean places”, unlike the *akhdam*, and working in less impure tasks. This same perception is upheld by both Walter’s ethnography (1987) and Shjab’s historical work (2003a).

## The emergence of the notion of racism in Yemen

The debate about race and racism, as in most of the debates regarding analytical categories, has been invested by a “nominalist dilemma”. Is there any form of racial thought that could stand as a nominal model for what “real racial thought” is (Hall 2011, p. 10)? And, more subtly, what is the relationship between words and social phenomena (Balibar 2008, p. 1632)? Does

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11 If he were a *muzayyin*, the servant of the village, or a *khadim*, no one would allow him to use the name of the village as a family name.

12 This case is consistent with De Regt’s observation that, though mixed-race affects social status negatively, a high status father will cast the same social status on his son (2008, p. 163).

the emergence (or the lack) of a certain word provide us with useful information regarding social dynamics? In this debate, I align my analysis with the anti-nominalist scholarship. I insist that “race” cannot be understood but as a historical phenomenon, and that “[...] practices around race articulate with other social phenomena in different historical contexts”, (Hall 2011, p. 11) thus constituting different racial-configurations.

The history of the concept of race and racism in contemporary Yemen is closely tied to the emergence of a new racial configuration in Europe during the 1930s and, later, in Egypt following the 1952 revolution. The term racism, at least in its negative form, emerged in Europe and started being used systematically in the 1930s, mainly by German authors writing in English (Miles and Brown 2003). Mirroring the European usage, the notion of *‘unṣuriyya* emerged throughout the Middle East as a semantic calque. During the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a standardized political vocabulary spread, through the propaganda of political parties, newspapers and the Egyptian transnational Arabic radio *Ṣawt al-‘Arab*. This new vocabulary transposed into Arabic some typical notions of the left-wing political ideology: the term *‘unṣuriyya* was one of these semantic calques (Marais and Waterbury 1969, pp. 66-68).

An outstanding example of this new usage emerges from the speeches of the Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser (1918-1970). Within the framework of Pan-Arabist socialism, Nasser overtly compared the racism experienced by European countries under Nazism and the “racist” (*‘unṣury*) politics of discrimination implemented by the Zionist state of Israel, politics grounded on discrimination by colour (*lawn*) and religion (*din*) (Nasser 2007a, p. 69). Nasser understood “racism” (*‘unṣuriyya*) as an intentional discriminatory practice, devoted to the plundering of Arab resources by the minority of Israel to the detriment of the Arab majority (Nasser 2008b, p. 408; 2007a, p. 171). He also interpreted it as a strategy of *divide et impera* deployed by colonialist powers in Africa, a sort of racialization of class, operated through the discrimination of people due to the colour of their skin (Balibar and Wallerstein 2011). In stressing the equality of Arab people, Nasser interestingly pointed out a last form of racism, the one based on belonging to a noble origin (*intima’ ila aṣl ‘ariq*) (Nasser 2007c, p. 179). This last point brings us back to Yemen and to the work of the Yemeni poet Mohammed al-Zubayri.

In 1918, the Imam Yahya Ḥamid al-Din gained Yemen’s independence from the Turks, restoring the Zaydi Imamate in Highland Yemen. The rule of the Ḥamid al-Din family, known as the Mutawakkilite Kingdom, lasted from 1918 to 1962, when the revolution overthrew the Imam and established the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR). Revolutionary rhetoric described the ancient regime of the Imams as an era of backwardness and underdevelopment. Whereas during the imamate political power was reserved to people

of Hashemite origin, the 1962 provisional Constitution fostered an egalitarian ideology and abolished distinctions grounded on lineage (D’Emilia, 1964). Among the prominent characters who inspired the revolution, we are interested in the figure of Moḥammad Maḥmud al-Zubayri. In 1959, he published a booklet entitled *The Imamate and its Menace to Yemen’s Unity*, which is of the outmost interest for our topic.

Taking inspiration and vocabulary from the 1952 Egyptian revolution, the pamphlet attacked the rights and the privileges of the class (*ṭabaqa*) of the Hashemites, comparing them to European feudatories (*al-iqta‘in*), and mediating the comparison through the Egyptian case (2004, p. 29). The Hashemites, defined by *a*) their political and economic power and *b*) by their lineage, were opposed to another entity: the Yemeni people (*al-sha‘b*). In turn, this entity was characterized as a “potential unit” whose cohesion had been disrupted by the *divide et impera* politics of the imams. Moreover, it was described as a “small part of the big Arab Nation” (ivi, p. 7) and as an agent with a will (*irada*) and a belief (*‘aqida*) (ivi, p. 9). Above all, the Yemeni people were defined by their “personality” (*shakhsīyya*) and their personality was defined by their “Arabness” (*‘aruba*).

In summary, while in other countries the call for Arabism involved both the free descendants of ‘Adnan and those of Qaḥṭan (Haim 1962, pp. 83-88; Limbert 2014), the notion of “Yemeni people” was exclusively associated with Southern Arabs. As Asher Orkaby has recently pointed out, the myth of the “Sons of Qaḥṭan” constituted a unifying element following the overthrow of the Zaydi Imamate in 1962 and the unity of North and South Yemen in 1990 (2015, p. 4). Even nowadays, the Yemeni Republic is annually reminded of this myth on 26<sup>th</sup> September, the anniversary of the Revolution.

Against this backdrop, we return to the emergence of the notions of race (*‘unṣur*) and racism (*‘unṣuriyya*). In his 1959 pamphlet, Zubayri creatively adapted these two concepts to the Yemeni reality. In directing his critique against the Hashemites, he firmly condemned any attempt to use genealogy as a means of ruling (*ḥukm*) and claiming distinction (*tamyiz*). The Hashemites – he argued – should blend into the populace and become “an original element (*‘unṣur*) among its elements (*‘anaṣir*)” (2004, p. 9). Zubayri continued his polemic condemning the racist *‘aṣabiyya* of the Hashemites: *‘aṣabiyya*, here, stands for “blind partisanship” to the detriment of the rest of the populace. In summary, Zubayri defined racism as the self-distinction operated by a minority on the basis of lineage, in order to gain access to economic and political privileges. A “partisanship of the origin (*‘aṣabiyyat al-‘irq*)” through which the Hashemites exerted what Balibar would call a “positive” form of racism (2008, p. 1633).

## Racism, colour and marginalization

Following the publication of Shajab's book on the historical origin of the *akhdam*, a Yemeni blogger, Ali al-Miqri (2007), wrote an interesting article entitled *How the Yemenis look at the akhdam: are they racists?* The article weaves together two different perspectives on human difference that coexist in a complementary discourse: on the one hand, the essentialist idea that people are defined by a substance, namely their genealogical origin; on the other hand, the idea that distinctions grounded on ascriptive features are tantamount to racism. Miqri observes:

Many weddings are cancelled after that the bride's family finds out that the groom's origin is *khadim* or barber. This happens in spite of the fact that they live in a decent place and their social and economic circumstances are fine. And here is the question: isn't this behaviour towards the *akhdam* descending from a profound historical racism against them?

Interestingly, Miqri's reflection compares the marginalization of the "black" *akhdam* and that of the "white" barbers. As we have seen above, both the groups suffer a "lack" of Arab origins and, for this reason, the essential self of each of their members is described as immoral. This characterization, endorsed by the Arab majority of the population, is defined by Miqri as "racist". Yet racism (*'unṣuriyya*) acquires two different meanings, depending on whether it relates to the "black" *akhdam* or to the "white" *beny al-khumus*. In the latter case, as we have just seen above, the notion of racism (*'unṣuriyya*) emerged as an object of the Yemeni public discourse during the 1950s and served to oppose the rule of a genealogically defined minority, the Hashemites. In this sense, the notion of racism did not entail any reference to distinctions grounded in skin colour or phenotypical traits. Today, the notion of racism is still understood in a similar way. During my fieldwork in the Old City of Sanaa, butchers often resorted to the notion of *'unṣuriyya* in order to criticize the stereotypes and the endogamic practices that uphold the hierarchical system of the Yemeni highlands. Consider this excerpt from an interview I recorded in 2011. In commenting on the rule of the Imam, a butcher stated:

The people didn't mix up; [the Imam] didn't let the people mix. As if he transformed the people... He distinguished them: this is a *qashsham* [green-grocer]... [he stays a] *qashsham*! Butcher...butcher! Bath attendant...bath attendant! The discrimination (*tafarruq*) came from there; the racial discrimination (*at-tafarruq al-'unṣury*) came from there.

The logic informing this brief excerpt stems directly from Zubayri's rhetoric and opposes essentialist assumptions concerning genealogical origin.

Rather than reading moral and social differences as a “natural” state, the actualization of a substance transmitted from father to son (*aban ‘an jadd*), it explains genealogical distinctions in political terms, as the consequence of the discriminatory rule of the imams. Interestingly, while recognizing a mutual stigmatized status, many individuals hailing from *beny al-khumus* are unable (and unwilling) to address their social condition on political grounds. This situation is determined by a range of factors, among which two are decisive. Firstly, each professional caste takes pride in its own lineage, in contrast to the hegemonic narratives that describe people “lacking in origin” as one homogenous group of morally deficient individuals; secondly, unlike many *akhdam*, these professional castes rarely suffer economic marginality and spatial segregation, since they have access to education and residence.

Whereas many individuals from *beny al-khumus* rely on Yemen’s recent history in order to turn distinctions grounded on ancestry into a discourse on racism, the *akhdam* resort to different conceptual tools. In 2013, Nu ‘man al-Hudheyfi – a man of *khadim* origin – participated in the National Dialogue Conference (NDC) held in Sanaa as part of the crisis reconciliation efforts following the 2011 Yemeni Arab Spring. At the time, Hudheyfi was the President of the National Union for the Marginalized<sup>13</sup> and a member of the General People’s Congress (GPC), the majority party in the country. A brief analysis of his speeches can shed some light on our topic.

In the past, Hudheyfi defined the “marginalized” as all “those people excluded from property and instruction, forced to live at the margins of society”.<sup>14</sup> But during the conference, his focus was mainly his fellow people, the *akhdam*, as he condemned the NDC’s racism (*‘unsuriyya*) by pointing out that “three million black people” had only one representative at the NDC.<sup>15</sup> Hudheyfi brought into focus the “tragedy of the *akhdam*” by defining his own people through the overlapping of two separate characteristics: skin colour and social, economic, and political marginalization. The *akhdam*, he added, are a subset of the marginalized, a minority defined by its ethnicity (*aqalliya ithniyya*). “I belong to the tribe (*qabila*) of the *akhdam*,” he continued. “Our people (*qawmi-na*)” he concluded, “is more precious than any political party, more precious than a nation that is not providing housing and instruction.”<sup>16</sup>

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13 For detailed information on the National Union for the Marginalized and a wider focus on *akhdam* politics, see Hall (2017).

14 Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VnyDwwgK9cE> Last accessed: 11/09/2017.

15 Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RPcvXOaKb64>.

16 Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VnyDwwgK9cE> Last accessed: 11/09/2017.

Many dark-skinned *akhdam* seem to emphasize a colour-based form of racial discrimination, using skin-colour as a medium to construct an encompassing group identity and to claim social and political inclusion. Running against the evidence that dark-skinned Arabs exist (and that they are not labelled *akhdam*), many *akhdam* – including Hudheyfi – would suggest that “this is the Yemeni culture: every black is a *khadim*.”<sup>17</sup> This assumption brings colour to the foreground, extending the potential number of marginalized people to “ten million Yemeni citizens”, and rearticulating the *arab/akhdam* binary as being one of “white” vs. “black”. It is worth noting that this strategy is not upheld by every member of the *akhdam*. As Hall (2017) cogently notes, the *akhdam* are not a homogenous social group, and some of them condemned Hudheyfi for reinforcing racist language and stereotypes. In July 2013, Hudheyfi founded a political party named *Akhdam Allah*. During the presentation, he affirmed, “It is a long struggle. We walk on the path of our predecessors (*aslaf*): Mandela in South Africa and Martin Luther King in the United States.”<sup>18</sup> By evoking international key figures of the black movements in South Africa and the US, he resorted to racism as a powerful, internationally recognized, tool for political struggle.

This last point brings us to a decisive matter. Unlike other marginalized caste-groups in Yemen, who are almost invisible, the *akhdam* have been tremendously successful in mobilizing international institutions and media in their support. On many occasions, international and local broadcasters (e.g. al-Jazeera, CNN Arabic, etc.) have dedicated whole reports to their condition. The International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN and AYSD 2011) has described their situation in terms of “caste-based discrimination”. The Economic and Social Council of the United Nations (EcoSoc 2011) has emphasized the “social and economic marginalization” of the *akhdam* referring to the General Recommendation no. 29 of the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination which crucially extends the meaning of “race” by including descent-based discrimination. These international reports, while recognizing that genealogical origin is still a major driver in shaping people’s economic and social conditions in contemporary Yemen, exclusively focus on the marginalization of the *akhdam*. One important reason for this focus, I argue, depends on the fact that, by transforming descent into race, the *akhdam* have succeeded in redefining their community as an identifiable “discriminated ethnic group” of “black people”.

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17 Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VnyDwwgK9cE> Last accessed: 11/09/2017.

18 Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EUz6Lo5sMsE> Last accessed: 11/09/2017.

## Conclusion

“Genealogical essentialism” is the belief that individuals are constructed in accordance with the legacy of their ancestors. The *aşl* of each individual – “proven” by specific descent-constructs, but always self-revealing in his actions – defines a person’s moral behaviour, his taste, his linguistic and technical skills, his physical appearance and so forth. In one word: his essence. Past and present, descendants and ancestors, are interwoven in their current social position by means of historical narratives informed by a peculiar form of historical consciousness. This is what Shryock would define “genealogical imagination”: the glorious deeds or the infamous acts of the ancestors concur to define moral selves in the present.

Genealogical essentialism has played a central role in upholding the social prestige and politico-economic power of the Hashemite imams of Highland Yemen; the very notion of racism (*‘unşuriyya*) first emerged in the Yemeni public discourse as a critique of any privilege grounded on ancestry. Whereas, in contemporary Yemen, political institutions are formally detached from ancestry, people of *qaba’ il* origin, Northern or Southern Arabs, still depict the “black” *akhdam*, as well as the “white” *beny al-khumus*, as “immoral selves”, people lacking in origin, on the ground of their genealogical connection with infamous ancestors.

This peculiar “genealogical configuration” is challenged by both *beny al-khumus* and the *akhdam* by means of the notion of *‘unşuriyya* (or racism) but, on the political grounds, the achievements of these two groups are far from homogeneous. On the one hand, people belonging to *beny al-khumus* have access to instruction, to profitable crafts, to successful political careers. However, they are harshly discriminated against on the basis of marriage. In spite of the common stigma they suffer, the many different “houses” (*buyut*) of *beny al-khumus* refuse to acknowledge a common group identity. Consequently, their traditional servile status remains publicly undebated, the reflection suppressed by the Arab majority of the population and avoided by *beny al-khumus* themselves (Pelckmans and Hardung 2015).

On the other hand, *akhdam* activists and politicians resort to the colour of their skin in order to denounce their people’s marginal position within contemporary Yemeni society and to claim economic and political rights (Yang 2000). This mobilization closely resembles a form of “strategic essentialism”, in Spivak’s (1987) sense, inasmuch as it downplays differences internal to the *akhdam* group in order to pursue a political goal. Moreover, it literally invents an “African tradition” (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) for people who are considered to have been living in Yemen for centuries. Spatial segregation, politico-economic and social marginality are, thus, rephrased in a language of colour and discrimination that constructs the *akhdam* as a discrete “ethnic” category. This language, amplified by international media

broadcasters and international networks (Hakami 2017), has tremendously amplified the visibility of the *akhdam*.

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