

Land, Power, and Commercialization

Agrarian studies on modern Iraq generally fall into one of two economically oriented schools of thought: "modernization" or "political economy." The modernization school attributes social and economic change to the expansion of European capitalism through trade and capital investment. For example, prominent economist Charles Issawi sees Iraq as experiencing dramatic changes as trade with Europe increased following the establishment of steam navigation between Bombay and Basra in the 1860s and especially since the opening of the Suez Canal in the 1870s. Iraq, Issawi writes, "gained immensely as its sea route to western Europe was reduced from 14,000 miles to under 10,000, putting it within reach of the steamers of that time. Its sea trade multiplied several fold, and its agriculture was profoundly affected by the expanding demand for its produce."¹ According to Issawi, trade expansion also helped precipitate the rationalization of the economy and the secularization of society.²

This linear prognosis of modernization theory has been questioned by Marxist writers who assert that the impact of the world market on local economies was regressive, not progressive in nature. The Iraqi economist Muhammad Salman Hasan argues that European penetration, rather than carrying out its capitalist mission, generated a precapitalist *iqta*³ system founded on the exploitation of the peasantry by a feudal class composed of tribal chieftains, town merchants, and government officials.³ Samir Amin, while agreeing with Salman Hasan et al.⁴ that the expansion of the capitalist market did not lead to capitalist development in Iraq, argues that the underdevelopment resulted from an "unequal exchange" between the advanced capitalist countries and the periphery. The outcome of increased trade with Europe was the growth, not of a feudal class, but a dependent agrarian bourgeoisie who produced for the world market by using precapitalist methods of production and abundant cheap labor.⁵

Although their criticisms of the modernization theory are well taken, Marxist writers like Salman Hasan and Samir Amin do not question modernization's fundamental notion—that the expansion of the European capitalist market determined the course of economic development in Iraq. In ascribing societal changes to external forces, these writers, like the

modernization theorists, fail to take into account the internal social and economic conditions that shape historical development. As Robert Brenner, the most notable critic of this line of Marxist writing, argues, by displacing class relations from the center of their analysis, these writers end up constructing an alternative theory of capitalist development that is "the mirror image of the 'progressist' thesis they wish to surpass."⁶

No one can deny that the advent of the international market signaled a new era in the evolution of rural social and economic structures in Iraq. Whereas transit trade, the dominant form of trade in the premodern era, provided little incentive for the development of commercial agriculture, Iraq's incorporation into the world capitalist market encouraged the development of market-oriented agriculture. However, unlike the early modern European agricultural system where a radical change in the social division of labor (including proletarianization) and intensification of production through greater use of technology led to a decline in labor force, under *iqta*³ capital achieved control over production without undertaking its immediate organization and/or dispossessing the direct producers. Thus, paternalistic kinship relations and traditional forms of production, such as extensive expansion of land and sharecropping, continued to be practiced. However, to attribute the rise of the *iqta*³ system and shaykh-sharecropper relation of exploitation to commercialization itself is, in my view, questionable. In explaining *iqta*³, one must consider instead the particular social, political, and economic conditions that discouraged the development of the productive forces in agriculture despite the increasing opportunities offered by international trade. As I argue in this chapter, the emergence of commercial *iqta*³ lies in the constitution of power structures and the particular character of property relations among the tribal communities.

Moreover, as I will demonstrate in chapter 2, the similar sets of circumstances produced by commercialization did not precipitate the same type of agrarian system throughout modern Iraq. While *iqta*³ was typical among the tribal communities in the south and the Kurdish north; a more intensive and a relatively more efficient agrarian system emerged among the settled peasant communities. Instead of a class of a shaykhly lords under *iqta*³, an entrepreneurial class of merchants and city mullak managed to establish control and improve productivity by modernizing production. These incongruous developments in agriculture, however, cannot be elucidated by the market forces alone. As I will illustrate, it was the different histories of these regions, with their different social, economic, and political circumstances, that shaped the character of agrarian development in Iraq.

THE CASE OF *iqta*³ IN LOWER IRAQ

Even though *iqta*³ was distinctive of the tribal communities in both the south and the Kurdish north, the discussion of *iqta*³ will be limited to the fertile irrigated zone of lower Iraq, the natural locus for agricultural expansion and where the most inimical *iqta*³ relations prevailed. While the northern region, including Kurdistan, will not be thoroughly addressed, I will occasionally refer to the similarities between the two regions. In considering the case of the irrigated zone of lower Iraq, I will argue in particular that the nature of property relations was crucial to the rise of the *iqta*³ system once the old structures, including the economy of transit trade, began to disintegrate under pressure from the world market and Ottoman centralization policies.

It is important to note in this context that the system of *iqta*³, which emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, should not be confused with the military landholdings of the same name predominant in medieval Islamic societies. Modern *iqta*³ is very different in structure, content, and form.⁷ Hence, I will make qualified use of the term *iqta*³ since it is neither "feudal" nor "medieval" but a modern agrarian system characterized by patriarchal mechanisms of labor control, such as sharecropping and tenancy on large estates, similar to the hacienda common in Latin America and the *'izba* in Egypt.

Even though *iqta*³ was organized around production for a capitalist market, it did not achieve the productivity levels of advanced capitalist agriculture. Based on large estates of 100,000 to over 400,000 dunums and exploitative shaykh-sharecropper relations, this system increased output largely through extensive expansion of agricultural lands and by intensification of peasant exploitation. It was the social relations of production characteristic of this agrarian system and not "unequal exchange" or an "export-oriented economy" that blocked economic growth in agriculture. While it is true that the initial expansion of production for the market under this system moved agriculture beyond subsistence, by the 1940s agricultural production in the most fertile regions of lower Iraq had begun to deteriorate dramatically. Productivity declined and exploitation intensified, leading to the massive flight of peasants into towns.

I will discuss the development of commercial *iqta*³ in lower Iraq over three historical periods. The Ottoman period of 1850–1914 marked the first stage in the transition as the old social structures began to disintegrate under pressure of modernization and commercialization.⁸ The paramount tribal houses, taking advantage of new political and economic opportunities promoted by Ottoman centralization policies and the international market, began

to establish their control over the land. In the second period, British colonial rule from 1914 to 1932, the intensification of a market economy combined with colonial state policies accelerated the process of consolidation of huge estates and shaykh-sharecropping relations of exploitation in the countryside. Finally, the monarchic-oligarchic regime from 1932 until the national revolution of 1958 represented the last chapter in the history of *iqta*.³ In this period, the tribal landowning class, braced by the monarchic state (and Britain), engaged in income-maximizing policies that were detrimental to long-term agricultural (as well as national) growth, leading to an agrarian crisis that culminated in the national revolution of 1958. Each of these periods will be traced and analyzed individually. The final section will look at the impact of the new class relations on agriculture. The decline in productivity and the consequent intensification of exploitation in the third period in particular will be the subject of discussion in this section.

THE OTTOMAN PERIOD: 1860–1914

During this time, the advent of the world capitalist market, together with the centralization policies pursued by the Ottoman Porte, triggered a transformation in the organization of the tribes occupying lower Mesopotamia. As the foundation of the old social formation eroded, the economic activities emphasized by the tribes shifted from a predominantly pastoralist economy (animal husbandry) to one based on agriculture (cultivation). At the same time, the leading tribal houses adopted a land-grabbing strategy as they came to recognize that the new regime of power was to be founded on the direct control of the land and agricultural production. Within this context, the dominant relations of production on the land began to evolve from relatively autonomous production units based on households to cultivation by dependents who were tenants and sharecroppers.

Before examining these transformations, it is important first to describe the conditions of the tribes in lower Mesopotamia on the eve of these changes. It is crucial to note in this context that contrary to the common view in mainstream historiography, the overall communal corporate character of the tribes in the premodern era was in no way incompatible with social differentiation, structures of domination, and inequality. These social inequalities were the product of differences in power and wealth, which were closely related to the varied economic activities of the tribes and the value of their economic contribution to the larger economy. This is significant because the power and wealth of the paramount tribes placed them in the best possible position to establish control over agricultural land once the older economies, based on pastoralism and long-distance trade, began to disintegrate.

Power, Tribes, and Regional Markets

Lower Mesopotamia, which includes the modern districts of Kut and 'Amarah on the Tigris river and the districts of Diwaniyah, Hillah, and the Muntafiq in central and lower Euphrates, was occupied mainly by tribes. Along the Euphrates, from the Qurnah district to Samawah and along the Gharraf river, lived the Muntafiq confederation, whose leading units were the Ajwad, the Bani Malik, and the Bani Sa'id, and whose minor offshoots included the Bani Huchaim in Samawa, the Bani Khaiqan, and the Bani Asad. From Samawa to Musayyib along the Middle Euphrates lived a series of confederations and tribes, including the Zubaid confederation, which consisted of the Albu Sultan and Jhaysh tribes and occupied the area between the Tigris and the Euphrates; the Bani Hasan tribe, which settled west of Hindiyah between Karbala and Kufah; the Fatlah tribe, which lived on the Mushkhab and Shamiyah rivers and along Hindiyah; the Khaza'il confederation, whose many tribes and clans were scattered between Kifl, Diwaniyah, and Samawah; and the 'Aqrah and 'Afij tribes on Shatt-al-Dhagharah. Along the Tigris, from Qurnah to Baghdad, lived the Ka'ab under the shaykh of Muhammarah, the Albu Muhammed, the Rabi'ah, the Bani Lam, Shammar Tuqah, and part of the Zubaid confederation.⁹

It is important to stress that in the pre-world market era, the social and economic organization of the tribes was not "primordial" or "communal" as is often postulated in the literature. The historiography on the tribes of Iraq, for example, characterizes the "tribes" (reads also "bedouins" and "asha'ir") as having a distinctive socioeconomic nature that sets them apart, from and in opposition to, settled communities and any form of organized authority. This essentialist notion of the inherent oppositional relations between "tribes"/towns, on the one hand, and "tribes"/central government on the other, was first championed by the French Orientalists. In French colonial historiography, North African societies were viewed in terms of a state/tribe dichotomy doubled by an ethnic division between Arabs and Berbers. This "Kabyle Myth," which introduced the notion of two distinctive and intrinsically opposed social structures—the tribal, egalitarian "Noble Savages" (Berbers), on the one hand, and the despotic "Ignoble Arabs," on the other—was first elaborated by the French following the colonization of Algeria.¹⁰ The myth of Berber democracy versus Arab despotism was further refined by the French after they established a "protectorate" over Morocco. The noble savage vs. the ignoble Arab was then complemented by yet another construct—namely, the distinction between *balad al-Siba* (Tribal Independent Land) and *balad al-Makhzan* (centralized autocratic government).¹¹ In the work of contemporary anthropologists, the contradictions between these two societies were no longer just political, but also legal and religious. In contrast to the towns,

which upheld the shari³a and Orthodox Islam, the Berbers were said to uphold their customary tribal laws and local saints.¹²

This elaborate body of knowledge on the tribes helped to inform and refine how the French exercised their power in these colonies. Through the systematic adoption of different institutional practices directed at the tribes and town populations, the French regulated and normalized these distinctions between “tribes” and towns.¹³

British colonial historiography on the tribes was similar to the French. Following British rising interest in the region in the nineteenth century, the tribes of Mesopotamia became the subject as well as the object of knowledge. British officers, administrators, and travelers learned the languages common to the region (Arabic, Kurdish, and Persian) and their various dialects, then journeyed through the unknown terrain of Mesopotamia, Kurdistan, Persia, and Syria, exploring and collecting data on the tribal communities inhabiting these regions. This body of knowledge recorded the names of the tribes and recounted their lives, economies, social and customary practices, as well as their “religions.” Similar to French historiography, the discourse on the tribes reproduced the same essentialist categories and notions that emphasized the inherently oppositional character of the tribes to towns and central government. The tribes were described as a community that “recognize(d) no common civil authority,” were feared and despised by the townspeople who considered them both “a constant potential source of dissension and grave public insecurity,” and “uncivilized.”¹⁴ Moreover, while the tribes were considered to be respectful of law, it was “*their own law only*, not Turkish (Shari³a Islamic law) or European law.”¹⁵ Reproducing the “noble savage” notion, the tribes were represented in these texts as “egalitarian” and their political constitution as the “purest example of democracy.”¹⁶ At the same time, “highway robbery” and/or “plunder” were perceived as “not only permitted, but held to be a right,” and so was “warfare.” These features were viewed as intrinsic to the tribespeople’s “love of liberty” and their aversion of “authority.”¹⁷

As in the French case, this apprised body of knowledge on the tribes was used to assist the British to occupy the region during the First World War and inform the mandate regime that followed on the particular technologies and effective tactics of power to discipline and normalize the tribes as “tribes.”

The essentialist notion of state/tribe dichotomy (and its twin notion of ethnic division of Kurd vs. Arab and Sunni vs. Shi³a), however, did not end with the termination of British colonial regime. Postcolonial and nationalist writings, though they articulated anticolonial sentiments and disputed some of the postulations and assumptions made by European orientalist writers, continued nonetheless to reproduce the same categories and notions regarding the tribes.

For example, although the Iraqi historian Ghassan al-⁶Atiyyah makes a distinction between the nomadic and settled tribes, he still maintains that as "tribes" they shared communal, egalitarian, and warlike characteristics. Thus, in describing them, he says:

War rather than peace was their natural condition. Each tribe had its own rules and norms which regulated a life based on the principle of equality of kinsfolk and of the supremacy of communal interest. . . . Traditionally, the beduin tribes had defied all kinds of authority and had constituted a permanent menace to the settled tribes and fringe towns.¹⁸

The same was true of the settled tribes who, according to ⁶Atiyyah, "were continuously shadowed by the possibility of war with neighboring tribes or with central authorities . . . [who] continued to think of themselves as warriors. . . ."¹⁹

Even Hanna Batatu, whose writing marks a radical departure from "traditional" orientalist historiography, can sometimes be faulted for relying on this essentialist notion when analyzing the "tribes." His interpretation posits the dichotomy between "tribes" and sedentaries as central to understanding the diversity of Iraqi society. Thus, it is the distinctive autonomous socio-economic character of the "tribes" which, in his view, has produced the urban-rural antagonism in modern Iraq:

A wide schism . . . divided the main cities from the tribal country. Urban and tribal Arabs, except for the dwellers of towns situated deep in the tribal domain or tribespeople living in the neighborhood of cities, belonged to two almost separate worlds. The links between them were primarily economic. But even on this regard their relationship could scarcely be said to have been vigorous. . . . No less was the social and psychological distance between the urban and tribal Arabs.

Batatu uncritically adopts the anthropologist version of the "Kabyle Myth" when he writes:

In many ways they were very different from each other. The life of urban Arabs was on the whole governed by Islamic and Ottoman laws, that of the tribal Arabs by Islamically tinged ancient Arab customs . . . Many of the townsmen had, in the words of the nineteenth century Iraqi historian, 'become habituated to submission and servility.' The freer of the tribespeople were by contrast irrepressible. As far as they were concerned, government was a matter of contempt.²⁰

In common with mainstream Iraqi writers, Batatu repeatedly draws on this notion of an intrinsic contradiction between tribal and urban lives to explain the history of modern Iraq:

In brief, through the whole period of 1921–1939 the monarch, centered in Baghdad, had in effect a social meaning diametrically opposed to that of the tribal shaykhs, the then still virtual rulers of much of the countryside. The shaykh represented the principle of the fragmented or multiple community (many tribes), the monarch the ideal of an integral community (one Iraqi people, one Arab nation). Or to express the relationship differently, the shaykh was the defender of the divisive tribal *urf* (customary law), the monarch the exponent of the unifying national law.²¹

The essentialist representation of “tribes” as intrinsically distinct, separate, and hostile social entities is distortive in two ways. First, it is misleading to view the twentieth-century Iraqi tribes as autonomous given their interaction throughout history with other social groups that led to their transformation and incorporation within the larger social, economic, and political structures.²² A better approach is to contextualize the tribes—by identifying and analyzing the larger historical formation within which these tribes reproduced themselves as “tribes.” Second, precisely because of their constant formation and transformation through history, tribes as units have considerable internal variations as well as differing external relations with other social groups. Therefore, there is no fixed, characteristic socioeconomic structure of tribes simply because they are “tribes.”²³

A different reading of the historical account that contextualizes rather than decontextualizes the tribes gives us a very different chronicle of the tribes in lower Iraq. Rather than the autonomous, self-contained tribes, the revised version reveals:

- a. that the tribal economy was unmistakably an integral part of the wider economy, as it was organized not only around herding, but also around agriculture and regional trade;
- b. the interdependence of towns and tribes for subsistence; and consequently
- c. a considerable variation in the internal organization, as well as in the external relations of the tribes to sedentaries and to central power.

The Arab tribes (nomadic, semi-nomadic, and settled), far from being "primordial," were highly specialized with a substantial disparity in their economic and social organization. Correspondingly, the structure and the character of the tribes differed from tribe to tribe depending on their economic and internal social organizations, as well as their location within the larger power structure.

For example, the social organization of production varied considerably between the pastoral tribes of ⁶Anaizah and Shammar and the mostly settled tribes of Bani Lam, Rabi³ah, Fatlah, and others who occupied the middle region and engaged in agricultural production. To the nomadic mobile tribes, like Shammar Jarbah of Shammar, Ruwalah of ⁶Anaizah, and al-Sa³dun of Muntafiq, land was solely used for grazing since it was herds and not land that constituted their principal means of production and wealth. The social organization of the tribe was therefore developed around constant movement with their herds in search of water and pasture. Among these tribes, livestock was individually owned while land was collectively appropriated, whereby animals belonged to households and pastures to all.

The tribes or clans known as *ahl al-ibl* (the people of the camel) specialized primarily in the herding of camels, even though their property in livestock comprised a mixed variety of flocks such as sheep, goats, and—the highly valued commodity—horses.²⁴ They took care of their camels but hired others to look after their flocks. It is important to note that this division of labor was not so much the product of tribal culture; the so-called "aristocratic" camel herders disdaining herding sheep because of the incompatibility of herding different kinds of livestock together.²⁵ The terrain, the knowledge, and the skills involved in breeding these various flocks were markedly different from one another. Whereas camelherding involved extensive movement throughout the year, sheepherding, for example, required much less seasonal movement and an abundance of water and grass.²⁶

By comparison, the organization of production was quite different among the semi-settled groups that combined herding with agriculture. The semi-settled, like ⁶ashair al-Ajwad of al-Muntafiq,²⁷ were mostly sheepherders (*ahl al-shawiyah*) who had permanent residence and engaged in seasonal cultivation. Because they combined herding with agriculture, their internal organization, including specialization and division of labor, tended to differ from one tribal unit to another. Within ⁶ashair al-Ajwad some like ⁶ashair al-Budur (known as the aristocracy of Arab al-shawiyah) engaged mostly in sheepherding. Others, like ⁶ashair al-³Abudah of Shatrah, were largely cultivators who specialized in the production of barley, wheat, and rice. The al-Uzairij, al-Ghazi, and other tribes combined herding with agriculture and

divided their labor according to clans, whereby some members specialized in herding and others in cultivation.²⁸ Among the semi-settled, as among the nomadic tribes, livestock was individually owned by households. But land tenure was different. Property relations combined collective *lazma* with individual *lazma*, which gave hereditary tenancy to cultivating tribes.²⁹ To a degree, the differing property relations in each case depended on the economic activities of the individual tribes, clans, or households.

Variations in economic occupation and property relations were not uncommon among the settled tribes. The *ahl al-mi'dan* of Banu Asad were settled marsh-dwellers who had little agriculture and lived mostly by breeding buffaloes, fishing, and weaving reed mats. In fact, many of their component clans worked as seasonal laborers, either as sharecroppers on the estates of other cultivating tribes such as those in al-Gharraf, or as day laborers in the blooming date-packing industry in the south.³⁰ One thus assumes that the internal organization of these marsh-dwellers would be markedly different from some of 'ashair al-Majarraḥ³¹ of Suq al-shuyukh or those of Shamiyah Hindiyah,³² the settled tribes who specialized in the production of the labor-intensive crops—rice and dates. Kinship cohesion (*'asabiyyah*), for instance, was recognized to be much stronger among the rice-producing tribes than among the migrating tribespeople or the semi-settled tribes.

Most significantly, however, since agriculture was the basic means of production for the cultivating tribes, land was central to their internal organization. Therefore, the nature of land tenure and property relations was noticeably different among the settled tribes than it was among the pastoral or semi-pastoral tribes.

Property Relations: Legal and Customary

Property structures prior to the 1860s were in most cases governed not by one but two different relations, the legal and the customary. The Ottoman legal system considered all lands state land while the customary deemed land the possession of the tribe by virtue of occupancy and cultivation. The practical tradition that acknowledged occupancy rights on the one hand, and the Ottoman state that formally denied it on the other, set the premise upon which inter- and intra-tribal struggle over the control of land unfolded once the old social structures began to disintegrate.

The Ottoman state, as owner of all public lands, practiced the *iltizam* (tax farming) system in lower Mesopotamia.³³ Under this system, tribal land was farmed out in the form of estates (*muqata'at*) to the tribal shaykhs or chieftains for an agreed amount of tax paid to the Ottoman rulers in money or in kind.³⁴ The practice of tax farming, however, was not steady or fixed since

it varied from one region to another depending on the practiced policy of Ottoman rulers of the period.

As tax farmers, the shaykhs secured some control over the land. In general, the land was farmed out to the members of the prominent tribes and tended to devolve by inheritance along with the shaykhdom (*imirat*). Some of these contracts (*shartnamas*) were renewed yearly or every other year (mid-Euphrates), while others were extended for a few years at a time (the Muntafiq). As tax farmers, the heads of these households received a share of the tribal holdings, and one fifth to one third of the total produce, depending on the internal organization and economic activities of the component tribes. This share covered the state tax, as well as other private and public expenses of the shaykhs.³⁵ Most of the ruling tribes received an income in the form of rent from their cultivators for their *tal'iyah* land—rich tracts of nontaxable land granted to them under tribal customary practice to defray their public expenses.³⁶ Further down the tribal hierarchy, similar privileges were granted to leading shaykhs of individual tribes.

In contrast to the legal rights, which considered all lands state land, customary rights were much more complicated and diverse. The holding rights whose nature depended on the internal organization and the economic activities of the component tribes, clans, and households, tended to vary from tribe to tribe and from one region to another.³⁷ Besides the acknowledged communal rights in land occupancy (communal *lazma*), there were other types of holdings that gave the cultivating tribes strong rights of possession.³⁸ Other than the individual *lazma* that provided hereditary tenancy, the strongest rights, often considered closest to freehold (*mulk*), were *naqshah* and *ta'abab*.³⁹

Naqshah was closely identified with the labor-intensive cultivation of rice. It gave the tribespeople, in addition to the common usufructuary rights, the right to inherit and to alienate the land either through sale or gift. One feature differentiating naqshah from *mulk* was that under tribal customary law, transfer to persons outside the tribe was forbidden. This was not the case with *ta'abab*. Enforceable by law, the rights of the *ta'abab* included the right to inherit and the right to alienate to anyone, as long as other holders or *mullak* during the period of contract also consented. *Ta'abab* was closely associated with another labor-intensive crop, dates. In addition to his labor, the *ta'ab* contributed the trees he planted and nurtured over the duration of a contract, which might run from ten to thirty years. By planting trees, he became entitled to own a portion of the land which, along with the trees, constituted a form of freehold under shari'a law.⁴⁰

The reasons for such variations in landholding practices remains open to speculation: the size of the estates, variation in farming systems for rice,

cereals, and dates, tribal organization, and the variegated policies of Ottoman rulers are generally given as explanations. Although all are important, none of these explanatory factors alone is satisfactory. For example, the tendency toward strong property rights was clear in rice holdings of Suq al-shuyukh and Shamiyah, but in 'Amarah, the heartland of rice production, customary rights were weak.

Variations in property relations appear to be the product of a combination of factors including labor processes according to crops, the size of the estates, the internal cohesion of the tribe, and Ottoman land policy. What is most relevant here, however, is that the course toward consolidation by the leading tribes seems to have been closely related to the presence or absence of strong property rights among the tribespeople. We see this differentiated progress in land consolidation much more clearly when the old economies began to disintegrate under pressure from the world capitalist market and Ottoman centralization policies.

There was a multitude of customary holding rights among the tribes. Some of these rights gave the cultivators strong holding rights including, in addition to the right to occupy, the right of usufruct, the right to inherit, the right to alienate, and the right of pre-emption. Besides individual lazma, which gave hereditary tenancy, there were also stronger types, such as naqshah, tal'iyah, and ta'abah rights, with variations in names and content. The latter were the closest in form to freehold, or mulk.⁴¹

Due to the variations in the internal social organization of the tribes, it is rather difficult to establish a fixed, characteristic structure to the tribes by virtue of being "tribes." Even though kinship was the organizing principle among the different tribes, nomadic and settled alike, the internal organization tended to differ from tribe to tribe according to their variant economic activities, differing property relations, and their location within the regional power structure. Moreover, these variations in the internal organization of the tribes conditioned, in different ways, the social, economic, and political relations of the tribes to towns and vice versa. As the next section will demonstrate, tribes and towns were not just dependent on each other for subsistence; their relations were also not always the same, since different tribes related in different ways to towns and to the wider economy.

Tribes, Towns, and the Regional Market

The Arab tribes of lower Iraq were able to survive and reproduce themselves as tribes only within the context of the Ottoman Empire at large and the region in particular. Since the "tribal population" was integrated into the political economy of the region and the empire in very different ways, the conditions of their reproduction also varied greatly.

Of the estimated one and a quarter million people in the province of Ottoman Iraq in the nineteenth century, nearly two thirds were tribes who lived by herding, transit trade, and cultivation. The other third were townspeople who lived off handicraft industries, internal or regional market trading, and administration.⁴² Considering the different economic activities of the tribes, their contribution to the larger economy varied accordingly. Thus, pastoralism was complementary to long-distance trade as the nomadic tribes, camel-herders in particular, were the ones to supply the animals (camels and horses) needed for transportation (not to mention their military use).⁴³ The production of semi-settled and settled tribes was as crucial to the overall economy, since they supplied the townspeople with grain and dates, meat and dairy products, raw wool, and animal skin. These items that were essential for local consumption as well as for exchange. The tribes depended on the towns for their survival as well. Towns provided them with various necessities, such as manufactured goods, weapons, and tools, as well as luxury items like tea and coffee.

The local historiography confirms that tribes not only produced for the market but were extensively involved in the marketing and trading operations themselves. As a matter of fact, the regional market played an important role in unifying town and countryside as land- and sea-trading houses brought tribal-merchants and town-merchants together in the pursuit of running a greater and safer regional market.⁴⁴

Local historiography confirms that many of the important shaykhs of tribes in lower Mesopotamia and the Gulf were powerful merchants involved in trade of one form or another. For example, the prominent tribes of al-Muhammarah were well-known merchants who specialized in the grain and horse trade. The same was true of the shaykhly houses of Shammar and ^ʿAnaizah, whose pure-bred Arabian horses found markets as far away as India.⁴⁵ The early leading house of the Muntafiq confederation, al-Shabib, was known to finance resident traders and tribal merchants with loans and credits to purchase and sell goods.⁴⁶ Al-Sa^ʿdun, the leading house in the nineteenth century, continued this tradition of financing trade to Najd and Basra along with other regional and town merchants.⁴⁷ Similarly, the formidable merchants of al-Zuhayr of Najd, whose trade center was the town of Zubayr, were well known for their extensive trading transactions in Mesopotamia as well as in the Gulf.⁴⁸

Like al-Zuhayr, many of these powerful tribes had their own market towns, which they often controlled and administered. Dayr al-Zur was a depot for trade and the exchange of goods between tribespeople and townspeople. The tribes of ^ʿAnaizah and Shammar invariably used this town as their center to sell Arabian horses, camels, and sheep, and to buy manufactured

goods, including tools, weaponry, and luxury goods. Among the most famous tribal market towns was Suq al-shuyukh, the trading center of the Muntafiq tribes. Named after their shaykhs, Suq al-shuyukh was central to the trade between Najd, Basra, and Baghdad.⁴⁹ It was the center of exchange of manufactured goods such as *‘aba*, agricultural products and byproducts like barley, rice, animal skins, ghee, and raw wool, as well as camels and horses.⁵⁰

Close town-tribal relations were not limited to trading partnerships and transactions. For example, many of the wealthy tribal shaykhs owned and invested in urban property. We are told that the town of Basra, with its surrounding agricultural groves, was owned mostly by the tribal shaykhs of Kuwait, Najd, and al-Muntafiq.⁵¹ In a similar fashion, the town merchants did not refrain from investing in profitable livestock, especially sheep, which they entrusted to local tribespeople.⁵²

Tribal-town relations could not always have been those of opposition. In fact, the varying relations between town and the countryside were essential to the social reproduction of the tribes. As to how these relations contributed to the formation and transformation of the internal structures of a tribe is something that must be empirically established in each case. Different tribes related in different ways to the towns and the wider economy which, in turn, contributed to the variations in the tribe's internal structures. Therefore, it is not just that tribes and towns were dependent on each other; rather, that the social, political, and economic relations between tribes and towns were not always the same.

It is equally invalid to assume that tribes, by virtue of being "tribes," are necessarily hostile to central power. As there is no inherent contradiction between tribes and settled population, there is also no such contradiction between tribes and state. This view, of course, does not deny that opposition existed. It simply states that when there is opposition, one must identify its nature by placing it within its specific historical context. To put these conflicts in historical perspective, it is therefore necessary to identify the forces behind, the reasons for, and the outcome of the specific conflicts.

Commercialization and Ottoman Centralization Policies: 1860-1914

As the foundation of the old social formation eroded, the economic activities emphasized by the tribes shifted from a predominantly pastoralist economy (animal husbandry) to one based on agriculture (cultivation). At the same time, the leading tribal houses adopted a land-grabbing strategy as they came to recognize that the new regime was to be founded on the control of land and agricultural production. It is within this context that the dominant relations of production on the land began to evolve from relatively autonomous production units, based on households, to cultivation by dependent tenants and sharecroppers.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, seaborne trade with Europe was insignificant; but from the 1850s the rapid expansion of the international market began to undermine regional markets.⁵³ As the value of transit trade declined, many of the nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes which occupied the countryside were willing to take up farming.⁵⁴ With the rise in sedentarization, old irrigation canals were reopened, new ones were built, and the Hindiyah dam was constructed, opening large tracts of new land for cultivation.⁵⁵ By 1913, over a million of the 1.6 million dunums of agricultural land were estimated to be in the newly sedentarized regions. This expansion in agricultural land naturally led to an increase in production: the output of dates tripled between the 1860s and 1913. The expansion of date production, like that of wheat and barley, occurred largely in response to the demands of the international market, as evidenced by the sharp rise in the export of these items.⁵⁶

With integration into the world market, the primary economic activities of the tribes changed from pastoralism (animal husbandry) to cultivation. Out of the struggle to control land and agricultural production, new class relations evolved, with the dominant tribes emerging as the triumphant agrarian landed class. Ottoman centralization policies during this period proved critical for the consolidation of land in the hands of the dominant tribal households. Despite their original intention to break down leading tribal authority, the Ottomans were forced to retract and improvise methods, besides force, to co-opt the strong tribal houses into the new regime of power. This strategy varied from one district to another and from one tribal confederation to the other, setting in motion an intense three-way conflict between:

1. central authority and particular tribes;
2. tribes and their paramount shaykhs; and
3. prominent shaykhs within the same household or across competing households.

Conflicts between these shaykhs and their tribespeople were distinctive of the areas where strong customary rights to land gave tribespeople the political and economic power to resist the alienation of their lands to their shaykhs, as in Suq al-shuyukh in Muntafiq and in Shamiyah. On the other hand, conflicts within and between prominent tribal houses were characteristic of the areas where the absence of customary rights deprived the cultivating tribespeople of the power to resist land alienation, as in ⁶Amarah and

Kut. Finally, conflicts between the state and tribes were more typical in areas, such as the mid-Euphrates, where the particular geopolitical situation, combined with centralization policies, exacerbated an already existing tension between certain tribes and the state over the extraction of surplus.

The question of conflict was obviously more complicated than the binary state/tribe construction presented in the historiography. The relationship between the state and the tribes was not always one of opposition; and when it was oppositional, the conflict was not due to inherent tribal hostility to central power. As in any other social conflict, it was the product of specific historical conditions created by contradictions in interests (political, economic, and social) among the contending social groups.

The Land Code of 1858 and the Emergence of New Agrarian Relations

As part of Ottoman centralization/modernization policy, Ottoman rulers used both coercion and co-optation to try to attain dominance in the region. One strategy was to establish control over the regional market and its trade by establishing control over the major trading centers and routes, thus eradicating the economic base of independent tribal merchants.⁵⁷ Another was to try to expand commercial agriculture by encouraging or forcing the sedentarization of the pastoral tribes. A third was to replace proportional rent with a fixed rent to gain tighter control over agriculture and its returns.

The Ottoman state, seeking a more effective system of surplus extraction, attempted to centralize the collection of taxes in all of its provinces.⁵⁸ Accordingly, in 1858, the Ottomans introduced the Land Code which officially abolished the *iltizam* system and introduced direct taxation by salaried state officials (*muhasil*). As in the case of French absolutism, the Ottoman state needed to limit the power of local ruling elites so as to accrue more taxes from direct producers.⁵⁹ However, this strategy proved difficult to implement in the countryside, especially in distant provinces where the state could not impose its power and was forced to either retreat or improvise new measures to ensure control.

This was the case in lower Mesopotamia. The Ottomans, unable to establish direct control, continued to practice tax farming until 1870. Although the Ottomans were able to increase their revenues in this period, the policy of auctioning off land to the highest bidder from among the dominant tribal households precipitated political confusion and economic disarray. In the distant province of Muntafiq, the shaykhdom and the land were auctioned off every three to five years. According to local sources, the Ottomans were able to nearly double their tax revenue from the Muntafiq from 1860–1866 by pitting one member of the ruling household against another.⁶⁰ In ^cAmarah,

which was closer to the governor of Baghdad, the land was auctioned off yearly, resulting in great hostilities among and within the shaykhly houses. The tactic of having brothers from the Albu Muhammad household bid against each other, and sometimes against their antagonists from Bani Lam, in the annual auctions for the tax-farms, was disastrous. According to a British source, these yearly auctions encouraged the shaykhs "to bid against one another until the amounts bid reached a figure far above the value of the estate," and when the shaykh failed to pay his dues, "his lands and houses would be confiscated, and the estate would be put up afresh to auction and farmed for a still higher and more impossible rent to the rivals of the sup- planted man. Scarcely a year passes without conflict. The waterway of the Tigris would be blocked by the insurgent chiefs of the Albu Muhammed or the Bani Lam . . ."⁶¹

The political and economic instability in the countryside provided the new *wali* (Ottoman governor) of Baghdad, Midhat Pasha, with the pretext in 1870 to finally implement the Land Code of 1858. Under the new land code, title deeds (*tapu sanad*) were granted to individuals who proved ten years of undisputed occupancy. These deeds were expected to ratify the inalienability of usufructuary practices by giving the cultivating tribespeople legal and heritable rights to the land. The intention of the Land Code was to break down the power of the tax-farmers by registering the land in the name of the actual cultivators so that they could pay more in direct taxes to the state. This policy, as noted earlier, was far too difficult to implement in the region of lower Mesopotamia. As a result, the Ottoman rulers, including Midhat Pasha, found themselves with no other choice but to ally with, and concurrently incorporate, the leading members of the dominant tribal houses into the new state bureaucracy. Members of the leading houses of 'Anaizah, Shammar, and Muntafiq were endowed with titles of pasha and granted the official positions of *qa'immaqam* (sub-governor) and *wali* of their administrative districts.⁶² Soon after, these tribal families began to exercise their new official power, not just to extract taxes for the state, but also to promote their new interests in agriculture and thus establish control over the land. The annals of the Muntafiq history bear witness to the Sa'duns' combative drive to register land in their own names and the names of their relatives and associates.⁶³ As the new governors of Basra, the family of Sa'dun used the Ottoman army to extract their *mulkiya* (a 40 percent rent) from the cultivating tribes and to evict those who refused.⁶⁴ Although *tapu* officially came to an end following a new Ottoman ordinance in 1881, a large proportion of the land had already been legally transferred into the hands of those who had power and wealth.⁶⁵

In the mid-Euphrates, the land of the Khaza'il tribes, the situation was more complicated thus making it more difficult for Midhat Pasha to implement

his plans. Natural alterations in the flow of the Euphrates in the 1850s and the diversion of the river from its original bed in Shatt al-Hindiyah and into the Hindiyah canal diminished the fertility of land, exacerbating the conflict between certain tribal shaykhs and the state over the control of the dwindling surplus.⁶⁶ In 1869, Midhat Pasha decided to close the Dhagharaḥ canal as a preliminary step to defeat and disperse the rebellious Khazaʿil tribes in the region. The Ottoman governors who followed Midhat Pasha used *tapu* deeds as instruments to reward or punish local tribes in order to establish control over taxation. The Fatla tribe, for example, was given priority over lands of the Mushkhab in the mid-Euphrates, despite the fact that this land had been already occupied by the Shibil and Ibrahim clans of the Khazaʿil confederation. As a result of this policy, the history of this region continued to be characterized by strife between tribes competing over rights way beyond the Ottoman days.⁶⁷ As for the district of ʿAmarah on the Tigris, the Ottomans never introduced the *tapu* system and continued to practice *iltizam* since these lands were considered part of the *saniyah* (royal) domains.⁶⁸

The emerging internal tribal struggle—a crucial dimension of class struggle—over the control of agricultural land during the transition was largely influenced by the variations in land-policy practices during the Ottoman period. It was mostly in areas like ʿAmarah and Kut, for instance, where cultivating tribes could not secure any usufructuary rights to the land, that the most unmediated type of *iqtaʿ* emerged. Political and economic instability, combined with the frequent redistribution of the estates, prevented cultivators from securing any form of tenure. The constant mobility of these cultivating tribes made it virtually impossible for tribespeople to establish customary rights that would have given them the means to resist the authority of their shaykhs as landholders. In contrast, in areas such as Suq al-shuyukh, Shatrah, and Gharraf, different conditions allowed some of these cultivating tribes to establish strong customary rights to the land. This in turn made it possible for them to challenge the authority of new landholders once they tried to establish control over the land.

It is important to note in this context the common practice of sharecropping on these estates. Whether cultivators had strong customary rights as in the Muntafiq, Shamiyah, and Hindiyah, or had none, as in ʿAmarah, all cultivating tribes tilled the land against a share in the crop. The practice continued despite the introduction of commercial agriculture and cash-crop production. However, under the new agrarian system, sharecropping was recast and redefined, representing new relations of exploitation.

During much of the nineteenth century, cultivating tribes and their household units functioned independently of the tax-farmer. Production was primarily for use with a varying share of the crop owed to the landholder. The

determination of a cultivator's share appears to have been decided through negotiation between the tax-farmer and the sub-shaykh (*sirqal*), representing all the cultivating households of the tribe. In contrast, under the *iqta'* system, direct control over land and the production process by the new landholders mandated the development of new methods of control. To ensure direct control, for example, the new system required the individual cultivators to enter into contracts with landlords or their agents who not only assigned the land to be planted, seeds to be sown, and the timetable of ploughing, watering and harvesting, but also were able to keep the cultivator (*fellah*) on the land (in bondage) as long as the latter was indebted to him. Particularly where cultivators had no access to (or rights in) land, they became in practice laborers working not for a fixed wage but for a share of the crop. The share retained by the fellah under the new system varied widely, depending on whether the sharecropper had access to land under customary right or did not. Accordingly, the portion varied from as high as 60 percent, as in Suq al-shuyukh, to less than 30 percent, as in 'Amarah where the landholder provided the seeds and the tools, and sometimes charged interest on advances he made to cultivators.

This modern system of sharecropping, like *iqta'* itself, was not so clearly defined or consolidated in this period. Although the trajectory for the emergence of *iqta'* was set during the Ottoman period, it was in the following period, under British mandate rule, that the huge tribal estates and shaykh/sharecropper relations were finally implanted. The collapse of the Ottoman Empire after the First World War marked the end of this first phase of the transition and the beginning of the second.

THE BRITISH PERIOD: 1914-1932

Prior to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, British influence in the three Ottoman provinces of Basra, Baghdad, and Mosul was confined to commercial activities and political representation. The advance of Russia and the appearance of Germany as serious imperial contenders in Mesopotamia, Arabia, and the Gulf region in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, however, changed British priorities. It realized that "to safeguard the routes to India," Britain must assume "political control, direct or indirect . . . over territories through which lay actual and potential highways to her indispensable Eastern possession."⁶⁹ With the outbreak of the war in 1914, Britain made sure "to secure, once and for all, by the establishment of political control, the Mesopotamia portion of the land route to India."⁷⁰

Following their military occupation, the British in 1921 created Iraq out of the three provinces, installed a monarchy, and set up their own mandate rule over it.

Under the mandate system, commoditization and integration into the world market moved at a much faster pace, hastening the implantation of *iqta*³ relations in lower Iraq. British rule, despite its ambiguities, proved to be crucial to the emergence of the dominant tribes as the triumphant agrarian landed class in lower Iraq. Like the Ottomans before them, the British came to realize that their domination of lower Iraq was not possible without the support of powerful members of the leading tribal houses, who themselves were looking for a political power to safeguard their interest in agriculture.

The consolidation of *iqta*³ relations under British land policy generated different kinds of resistance by tribal members and cultivators. Conflict between tribal shaykhs and their tribespeople characterized those areas where strong customary rights to land allowed direct producers to challenge the claims of the paramount houses effectively, as in the case of Suq al-shuyukh. In these areas, the consolidation of *iqta*³ took longer and was less thorough. On the other hand, conflict between chiefly houses was more typical of those areas like 'Amarah and Kut, where direct producers were unable to establish usufructuary rights to the land. It is these areas that witnessed the most thorough implantation of *iqta*³ relations.

Initially, Britain's land tenure program for Iraq was neither clear nor consistent. In fact, in the early years of rule, the colonial administration was seriously divided over the issue of land policy. Colonel Stephen Longrigg, among others, wanted the mandate regime to back small cultivators' claims to land, arguing that they were morally and legally legitimate. Moreover, he and his followers considered that modernization required breaking down the traditional authority of tribal shaykhs, "liberating" small cultivators from the unjust burdens of "servitude." Others, led by Henry Dobbs, contended that the issue was not one of morality or "rights" but of political expediency. They argued that it would be impossible to maintain British rule without the support of powerful members of the leading tribal houses, particularly in the regions designated as "tribal."

The British pursued different strategies in different areas. In the Muntafiq, for example, the British administrative officer, indignant at the claims of tribal landlords, disclosed that the province was undergoing a "miniature French revolution," a "revolt of the serf population against a landed class . . . the aristocrats of the land and the absentee landlords of the worst type."⁷¹ In the initial years of its occupation, the British administration did not attempt to interfere in Suq al-shuyukh and Nasiriyah even on the issue of government tax, and accepted one tenth of the produce as rent, when given. In 1918, the British colonial government tried to raise its share to 20 percent and to endorse the tapu holders' right to mulkiya (another 20 percent in land rent), but retracted its demands in response to resistance from the individual tribes.