

An ethnographic curse in pre-war Taiz

Masculine sociability and reflexive blind spots in Islamic context

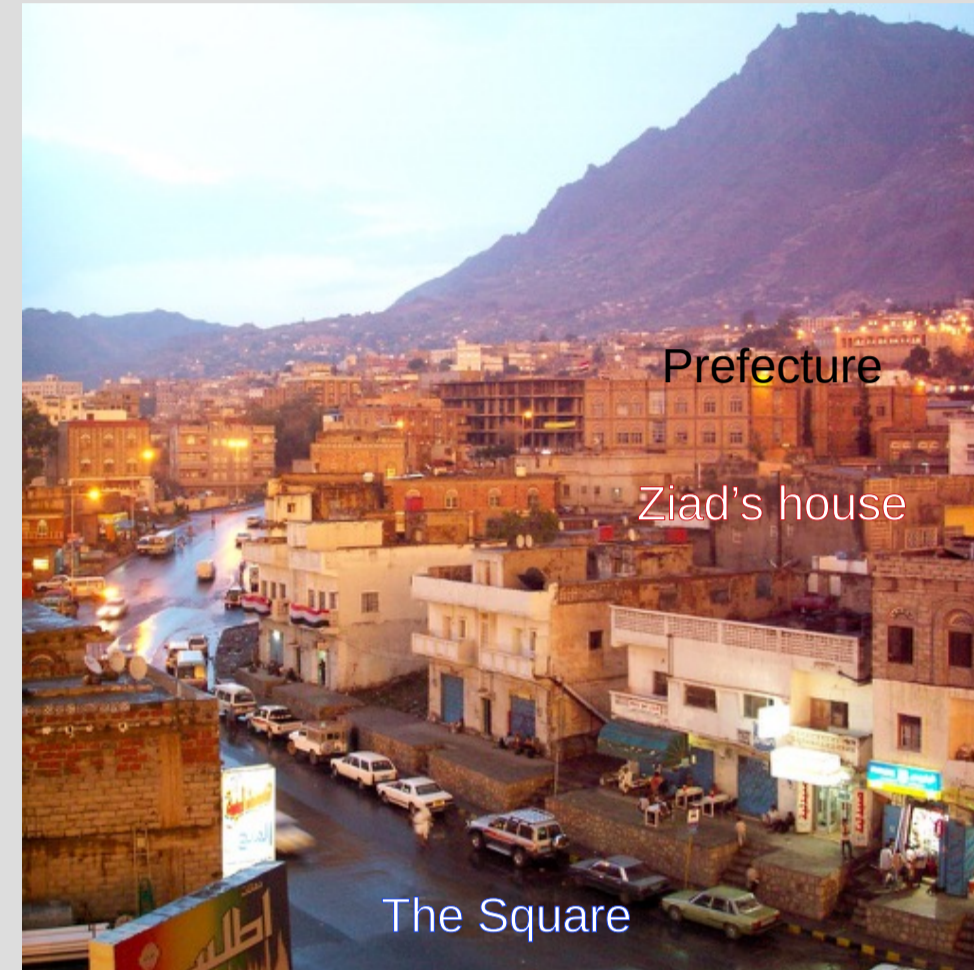
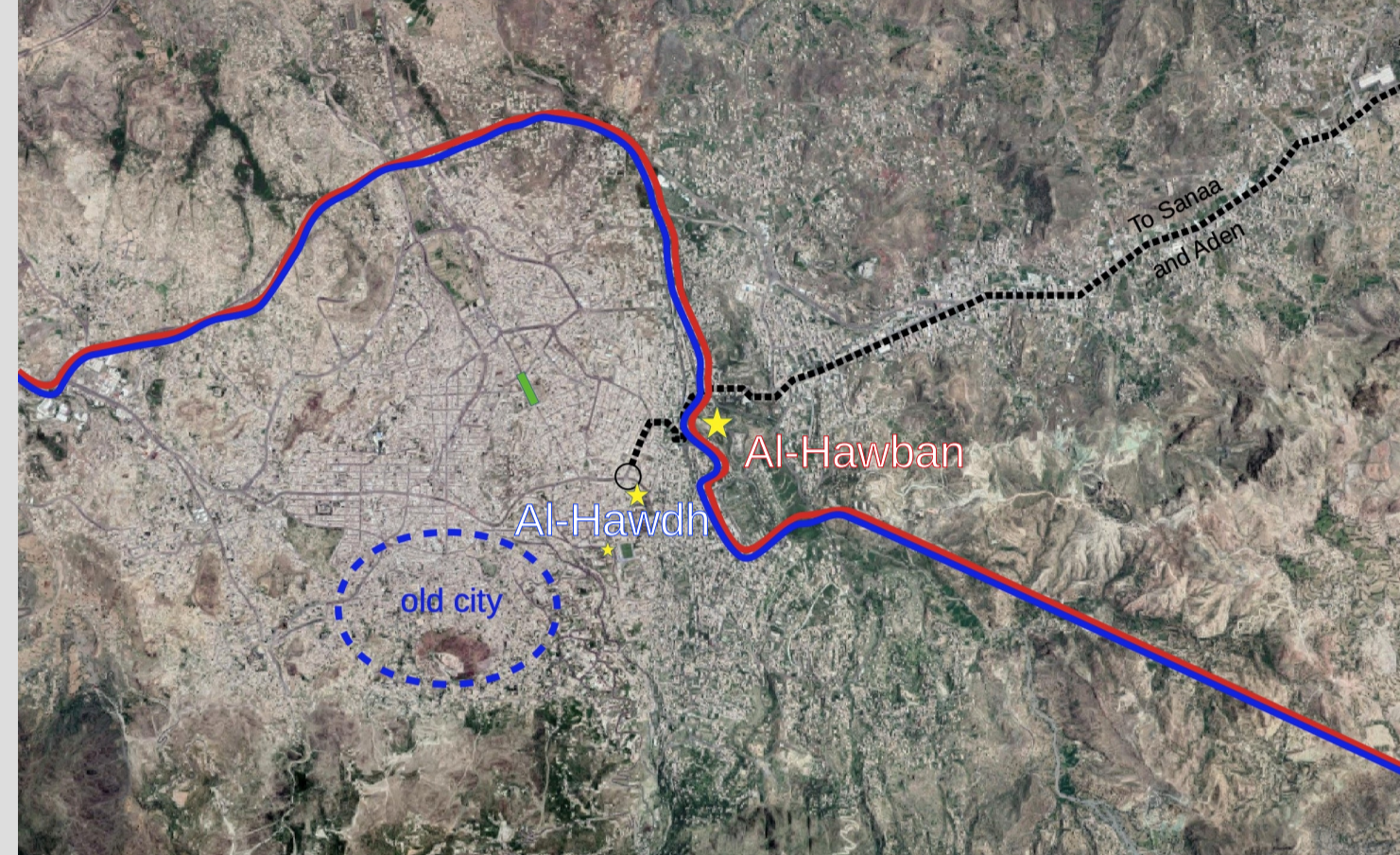
Vincent Planel, independent anthropologist (Sète, France)

Draft on June 4th

Hawdh al-Ashraf and the Battle of Taiz

Al-Hawdh is a famous square at the center of modern Taiz, with a souk and a nation-wide traffic hub coexisting with residential areas. It was the Eastern entrance of the city in the days of the Imam, when Taiz was the capital of North Yemen (1948-1962). Location of past and present seats of power, it is a stable hotspot since 2015 in the battle between Huthi and loyalist forces. I spent there three months a year from 2003 to 2010 - and in spirit the rest of the time - tied to this place by quite a different story.

★ The Imam's Palace ★ The Prefecture ★ The Presidential Palace



"Break the **pattern which connects** the items of learning and you necessarily destroy all quality. Why do schools teach almost nothing of the pattern which connects? Is it that teachers know that they carry the kiss of death which will turn to tastelessness whatever they touch and therefore they are wisely unwilling to teach anything of real-life importance? Or is it that they carry the kiss of death because they dare not teach anything of real-life importance? What's wrong with them? What pattern connects the crab to the lobster and the orchid to the primrose and all the four of them to me? And me to you? And all the six of us to the amoeba in one direction and to the back-ward schizophrenic in another?"

Gregory Bateson (1979)

Books that mattered for...

1998-2002

A student in physics learning Arabic:

Experimental documentary

(Johan Van der Keuken)

Reflexive ethnography

(Florence Weber, J. Favret-Saada)

Microstoria and social history

2003-2007

A student in social sciences, bewitched by Yemenis, uncertain as to his sexual orientation...

Historical anthropology and literature studies on "homoeroticism" in Middle-eastern cultures

J. Dakhli (+Najmabadi, Massad, El-Rouayheb, Andrews & Kalpakli)

2007-2010

A new Muslim distancing himself from Middle-Eastern society:

Gregory Bateson's

Steps to an Ecology of Mind (1972) and Mind and Nature (1979)

2011-2013

Looking for revolutionary alliances:

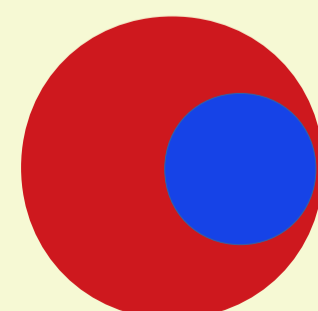
Ovimir Anjum's Politics, Law and Reason in Islamic Thought: The Taymiyyan Moment (2012).

2014-2018

Starting anew in the town of Sète :

History of ideas and mathematics, theology and laïcité.

History of kinship in monotheism (E. Todd, G. Delille)



My conclusion / working hypothesis : **Islam is a meta-context of the European history of ideas.**

The destabilization of a family system (2004-2007)

As I engage in a PhD on the role of passions in masculine urban sociability, I witness from afar how misfortune strikes Ziad's family.



Nabil's professional card at the Municipality



Ziad in March 2006



Yazid sells lime juice and samosas on the square (Ramadan 2004)

Initially, the family is structured by the ideological confrontation between Nabil (b. 1973), who works with the regime, and Yazid (b. 1982), who proudly accepts being a worker (*shâqî*), while Ziad (b. 1979) mediates between the two. But in 2003, Ziad suddenly loses his "fighting spirit" and starts to refuse corruption. By 2005, he has failed in his professional career as an accountant.

To put the pressure on him, Nabil allies with Yazid and pays for his wedding. Far from reacting with a surge of pride, Ziad feels betrayed and plunges into confusion. Meanwhile, Nabil faces increased professional mischiefs as the chief of the souk police. Nabil finally accepts to pay for him too, but Ziad fails to consummate his wedding. He takes refuge in a vow of poverty and mysticism.

Nabil dies in a car accident on December 31st 2006. Yazid doesn't have the shoulders to take up Nabil's position, so the family sends Ziad to a clinic, hoping the shock treatment gets his mind straight. On the day of my return (August 19th 2007), Ziad sets fire to the living room while I am standing on the square, then he goes to prison.

"God is with the patient ones" (2009-present)

In April 2009, a few months after Hammam Kresh (see on the right), my experimental research is awarded a grant from the French National Center for Scientific Research. On the next day, Yazid announces his intention to enter into politics : he started convincing his neighbors to secede and elect him sherif ('*âqil*) of a new administrative district : *harat gawlat [sic] Hawdh al-Ashraf* - literally, the neighborhood of Hawdh al-Ashraf Square...

I decide to keep a distance, and definitely withdraw from Yemen in November 2010.

In 2012 with the stalemate of the Arab Spring, Ziad becomes convinced that he is Jesus: he starts announcing the imminence of the Day of Judgement in the streets of Taiz. After my academic failure (2013), he retires to the countryside in al-Rahida. He considers himself a Christian and was recently imprisoned 6 months by the Houthis, for refusing to claim the Muslim profession of faith. After several years of separation, he finally caught up with Yazid in Hawdh al-Ashraf.

Except in the first weeks of this raging war (April 2015), Yazid never left his post in Hawdh al-Ashraf, and established himself as one of the few unaligned local personalities in the city.

In April 2019, Yazid was elected cheikh of the Al-Qahira district.

In return, I recently founded in Sète the association *Le Royaume de Ziad* (Ziad's Kingdom), a multi-sited alliance for a paradigm shift in Arab Studies.



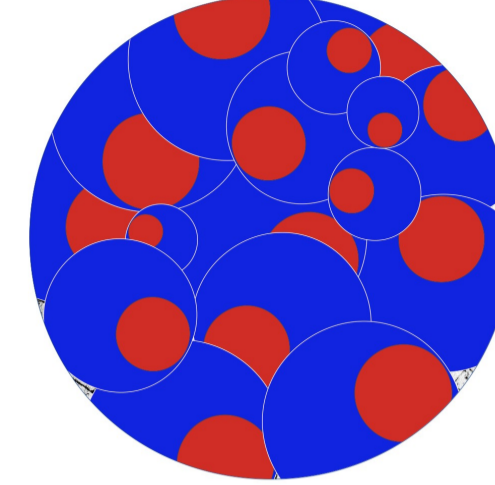
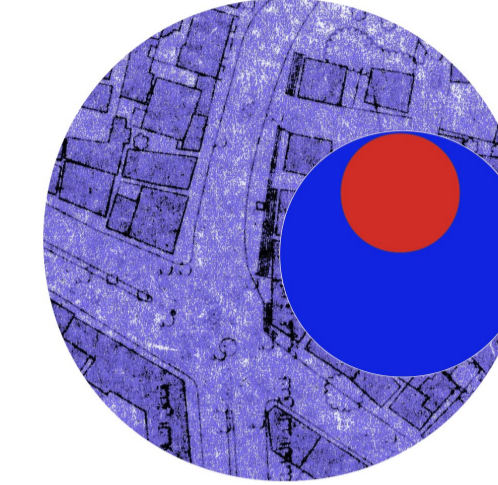
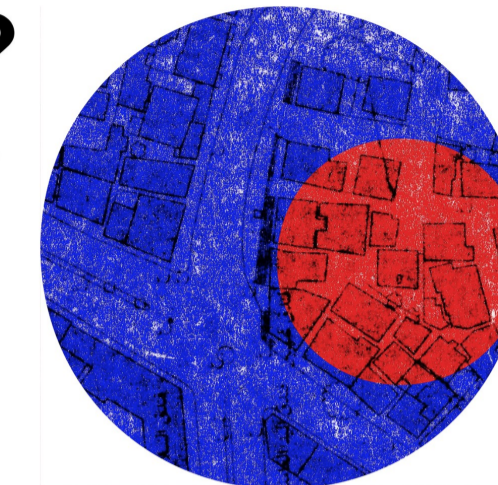
'Aqil Yazid on Eid al-Adha (August 2018)

﴿قُلْ لِلْمُؤْمِنِينَ يَغُضُّوا مِنْ أَبْصَارِهِمْ وَيَحْفَظُوا فُرُوجَهُمْ ذَلِكَ أَزْكَى لَهُمْ إِنَّ اللَّهَ خَبِيرٌ بِمَا يَصْنَعُونَ﴾
(Al-Nûr, v. 30)

How Yemenis taught me to "lower my (ethnographic) gaze"

Ziad's Kingdom (2003)

My first ethnographic immersion starts off with my sharp affinity with Ziad, also a wunderkid in mathematics, called to become an accountant in major Yemeni industrial groups.



August. Za'im Ziad and his young neighbors are "like a family". They stage for me the ideal Islamic society, while shopkeepers and students on the square give me a more sociological picture.

September. When the young neighbors realize that the Frenchman is nowhere close to conversion, Za'im Ziad faces a small-scale Arab Spring in his own neighborhood. He exiles to his village and leaves me alone in the neighborhood.

October. Yemenis' behavior becomes shady and inconsistent. Discomfort finally crystallizes in an alleged attempted rape by Nabil. I leave Taiz and subscribe to the idea that all Yemenis are more or less "homosexual".

> I fly back to France, write the predictable sociological portrait of a young charismatic leader, and then lose conscience. For the years to come, Ziad has become the only witness of my dignity.

A theorem of "ethnographic enchantment" (2007)

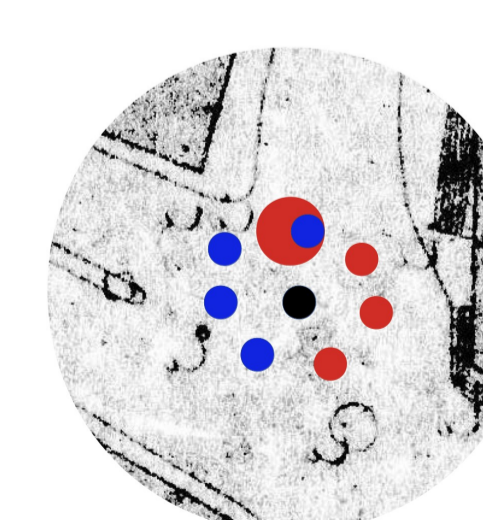
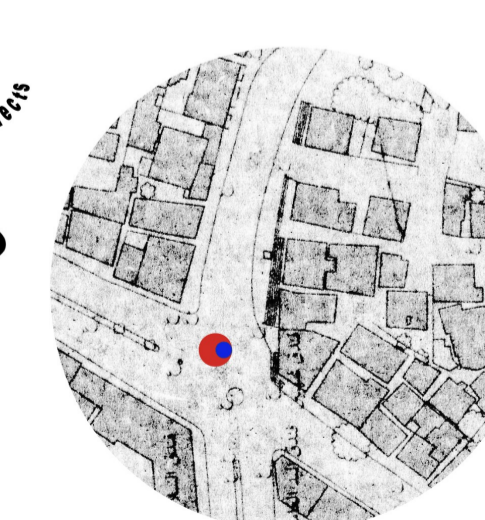
The Neighborhood	The Square
Sanaa	Aden
Tribal	Open-minded
Traditional-charismatic	Rational-Legal
Indigenous	Informant
Anthropology	Sociology

After Gregory Bateson & Erving Goffman : order in the observed reality is generated by recurrent interactional patterns.

"Wherever in the presence of a Western observer, one Yemeni strikes a pose while another gives the game away."

Hammam Kresh (2008) : an ethnography of rahma

During ramadan after fajr prayer, young men of all conditions hang out in the empty streets of Hawdh al-Ashraf, wondering whether they will go to sleep or embark for yet another morning adventure. As for me, several years have passed since I last felt the thrill of passion in Yemeni society. I moved out of the sector and now concentrate on my PhD, except for a few visits to the bedside of Ziad's schizophrenia. This morning however, something prevents me from going back home to sleep...



6:00 AM. On the square, a young man from Ziad's neighborhood, who happens to be Yazid's best friend, robbed a shopkeeper's cellphone for fun. In exchange for its restitution, he gallantly begs him to come along to the hot sources of Hammam Kresh...

7:00 AM. Trying to set up a team to rent a minibus, potential mates include young neighbors - who know all the stories in the background - and rural workers from the square, who just happen to be there. As all hesitate to embark, wondering whether they feel it or not, the adequacy of my behavior is tacitly put to the test.

8:00 AM. For the first time, observation is compatible with participation. The minibus sets off to the sources of Hammam Kresh, with the Quran tape turned on. This expedition marks my reconciliation with Ziad's neighborhood and the birth of an alliance with Yazid.