The Impacts of the Political Clan-System on the Socio-Historical Transformations of the Iranian Society

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ABSTRACT

   Clan structure is an informal social organization, originally appropriated to the nomadic pastoral way of life. But, in Iran, in spite of the long history of sedentary urban living, through the dominance of Saljuq pastoral invaders on the society, the clan system was reinforced and continued to exist as an important "political" mechanism to keep power for that non-Iranian government. Then, it was institutionalized and continued up to the end of the nineteenth century. It may be said that some die-hard heritage of clan-system have remained and presented themselves as the kinship or ethnic appearance, intervening in the cultural, bureaucratic, and political networks as a whole, and it could be a strong obstacle against the development of political culture and civil society, as well.

Keywords: 1. Political Clan System 2. Zeal 3. Sedentary 4. Feudalism 5. Pastoral Culture 6. Development of Political Culture.

1. Introduction

   The tribal way of life has deep roots in the history of Iran. Before the Sassanid dynasty (226-641c.), there were some nomadic powers ruling Iran. The most powerful among them was the Achaemenid kingdom (551-331 BC), which was almost a semi-nomadic government. During the Sassanids reign, an important process of social transformation, including the agrarian revolution, noticeably took place. Afterwards, the Sassanid Empire was crushed by the Arab Muslims (641 c.). Two centuries later, a considerable cultural revival occurred in the Eastern Muslim societies, specifically in Iran, which eventually brought about a widespread development in knowledge and scientific experience. The most important feature of this event was the rise of humanism and rationalism (Ershad, 33: 2000). From the early 11th century, the Saljuq dynasty seized the power and exercised dominance, with the Turkish ethnicity, and tribal base. The conditions under such clan-system apparatus led to the transformation of rationalistic and intellectual achievements. The authoritarian exigencies of Saljuqs and their successors up to the end of the 15th century got biased toward despotism with its required mechanisms, such as vast police-spying networks with political rationality open to conspiracy. Later on, through the 16th and 17th centuries, the Safavid rulers having emerged with the Sufi background came to power. After the Safavids, another clan-based government as that of Afshar seized the power and was succeeded by two other tribal despotic dynasties. Therefore, all the governments which ruled over Iran, from the arrival of Saljuqs in the 11th century up to Pahlavi kingdom in the 1920s - except the Safavids - were inherently tribal in origin. They seized and maintained power relying on political clan-system mechanism. Even the Safavid government had a

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Turkmen tribal component (Beck, 201: 1990). From the Constitutional Revolution in the early 20th century, and especially with modern Pahlavi kingdom, the tribal sociopolitical organization, serving as the basic element of the government structures, disintegrated. That the clan-system had become deeply institutionalized in the Iranian society through that long period of one millenium is not denied, so that, after the political changes in the early 20th century, its traditional elements could not be readily changed. Accordingly, some cultural outcomes stemming from the clan-system have persisted in Iran. It seems necessary to notice that the "tribe" is indeed an abstract concept, but clan, as a kinship grouping is an actual concrete term. Based on this principle, we use the clan-system phrase, in general, to cover the whole aspects of the residual tribal life in our society.

This paper aims to consider the historical effects of the institutional clan-system on the tranformation of the Iranian society up to the present time. In this context, the main questions may be formulated as follow:

1. Can the relative weakness of rationalism and modernity processes be explained by the long life clan-system heritages?

2. How can the subjective and objective impacts of clan-system cause obtrusion on the development of civil society?

3. Has the clan-system institution been a significant factor to support historical despotism in Iran?

This study is in the field of historical sociology, and the general methodology is essentially descriptive library research work, using the related documentary resources available.

## 2. The Theoretical Framework of Clan-system

Clan organization is seen to originally serve as an indispensable institutional mechanism for the nomadic way of life. Generally speaking, we may recognize the nomadic communities – at least in Iran – by three basic elements:

1. The traditional subsistence mode of cattle-herding;

2 .The permanent migration to get access to pastures;

3.The clan organization based on kinship blood ties to handle a vulnerable primitive kind of life (for example see: Afshar-e-Naderi, 41-59: 1968 and Digar, 11-20: 1983).

Thus, it is quite evident that the clan-system has been accounted for to serve as an important structural mechanism, and rendered functional for a nomadic way of life, whereas kinship ties were the essential condition for clan organization. The vulnerable hard life of the ever-moving pastoral communities needed a relevant social supporting arrangement, and clan organization could be a justifiable response to accomplish this purpose. Kinship coherence (or *asabyya* in Ibn Khaldoun's words) fulfils a very efficient function in tribalism. "As ideal types, tribes represent large kin groups organized and regulated according to ties of blood or family lineage" (Khoury and Kostiner, 4: 1990). However, it should be noted that if the belief of mythical common descent in any tribal community is an "ideal type" for the clan faction, and especially in smaller subdivisions of the hierarchical structure of tribal informal organization, kinship tie is obviously a factual phenomena that cannot be overlooked.

It was pointed out that through the fundamental changes during the Sassanids era, the domination of the cattle-herding economy was gradually replaced by feudal agrarian production, so that the clan-system project should be substituted by another alternative being relevant to the new conditions. But, after the collapse of the Sassanid dynasty, Iran underwent a long time fluctuation, and the Iranian society eventually experienced partially reversed changes, lasting for a millenium (for example see: Lambton 1988).

According to such transformations, the political economy of the Iranian society tended to form a combination of a pastoral nomadic sector, a feudal agrarian system (mainly in the rural areas), and a petty commodity market in the cities. For instance, it is said that during the Safavid period, 33 to 40 per cent of the Iranians were nomadic pastoral people, 10 to 15 per cent dwelt in the cities, and the rest of the population were settled in the villages by subsistence agricultural production (Foran, 25-33: 1993). According to these circumstances, a tentative theoretical model has been designed by the author to show the hierarchy of power in Iran (figure 1). The main sources of inspiration were Ashraf's, Lambton, and Foran's works.
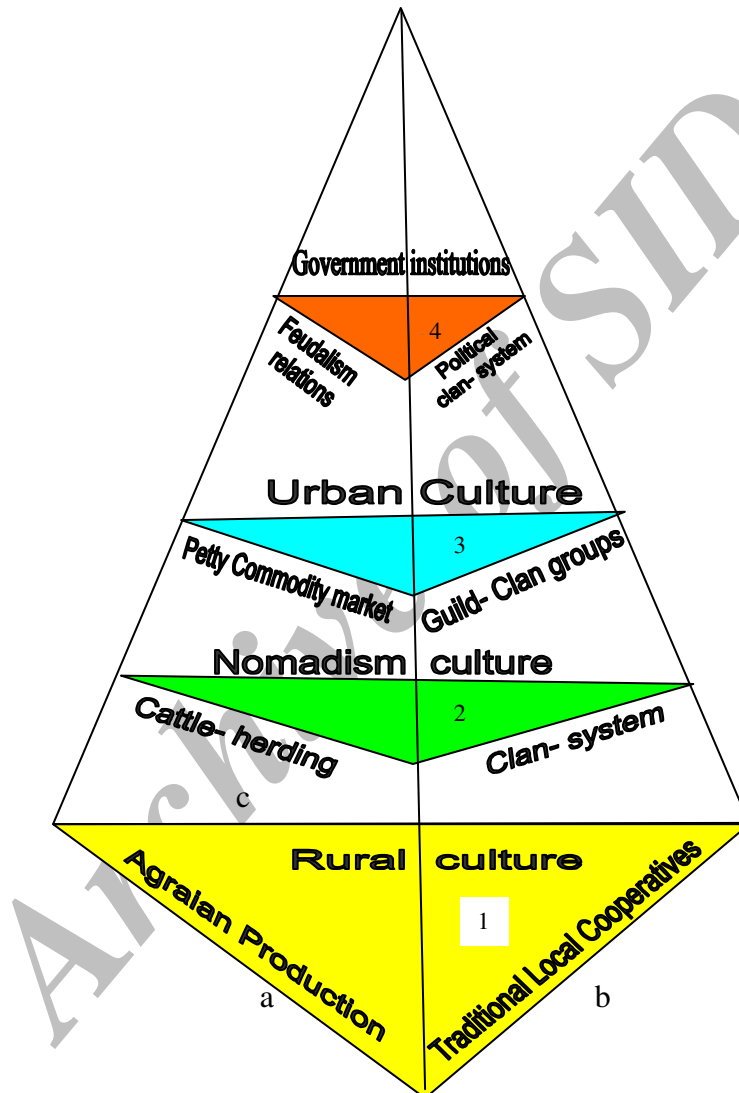
Sloping sides represent as:
a. Economic relations
b. Social institutions
c. Cultural elements

Flat levels:
1. Rural life
2. Nomadic life
3. Urban life
4. Governmental apparatus

Figure 1: The political economy structure and the pyramid of power.

In this model, the economic life (side "a"), the social institutions (side "b"), and the cultural elements (side "c") form the sloping triangle sides of the pyramid, and the flat levels shown as horizontal triangles, represent the urban, rural, and nomadic

communities constituting the whole population of Iran. At the highest level, the triangle 4 on the top of the pyramid, represents the government organizations made up of feudal relations, sociopolitical clan-system, and the vast bureaucratic apparatus and institutions, all deeply rooted in the lower triplet communities of the society. Each triangle has three sides in proportion with the sloping sides of the pyramid and clan-system is a more or less ubiquitous element in the social side of the pyramid and the triangles, as well. Finally, the nomadic level is projected in-between the urban and rural levels as clan-system have played an intermediary role between them (Ashraf, 127: 1960).

We maintain that if clan-system was an essential "social" mechanism for the nomadic way of life before the 12th century, it transformed mainly to a "political" instrument and became an efficient mechanism by means of which to seize and keep power. It should be added here that the competitive tribal powers (i.e. outside of the government apparatus) also, relied on clan-system procedure. So, in spite of that the Iranian society was gradually keeping aloof from the nomadic life then, the clan-system remained alive as a common informal political institution. In fact, the non-governmental powers appealed to the so-called clan-system and brought about weakness and instability of the government. But, it should be remembered that these governmental and non-governmental competitors were not essentially antagonistic systems in nature. Beck argues that tribes and states in Iran throughout history were mutually interdependent and maintained each other as a single system, but they did not function as separate, opposing systems. They represented alternative polities, each creating and solving political problems for the other. State rulers depended especially on tribes for military power, revenue, and regional security [read regional repression]. Tribal people, in turn, sometimes relied on state intervention in the case of regional competition and conflict, and their leaders drew sources of power, authority, and wealth from their competition with the states. Through these challenges, the common people located at the periphery – the margins and hinterlands of power – simultaneously adapted to, and resisted, domination from outside by developing competitive structures, organizations, and ideologies (Beck, 192: 1990), while being subjected to ruthless exploitation from both sides.

Resulting from these conditions, tribalism or clan-system institution, was a hard obstacle for normal social transformation of the Iranian society. Ashraf maintains that military political dominance of tribalism on Iran brought about a sort of balance between the tribal powers on one side, and on the other side it was an obtrusive factor for both the indigenous development of rural agriculture and of national urban market. Clan-system was especially a heavy obstacle for guild development as a native mechanism for political economy of the Iranian society (Ashraf, 127: 1960).

It was pointed out that kinship ties were the essential element in clan organization; but in the "political" clan-system, it served as an instrumental phenomenon. It is argued that among the Iranian people before the 20th century, the term *tribe* emerges in reference to some form of sociopolitical organization, and some elements such as ethnicity, notion of territory, tribal name and, genealogies (political characters), have been the main principles of tribal identity. When the tribal (that is sociopolitical) organizations were undermined and then got eliminated, usually under the state pressure, the tribal identities have been transformed into *ethnic groups*, and /or to *kinship-based groups* (Beck, 1990, pp.193-196). There is no doubt that the notions of tribalism and clan-system have been eliminated and even replaced by hierarchical relations of patronage and class system. In this regard, the notions of ethnicity and kinship-based ties as the specific residual forms of the sociopolitical organization of

clan institution have partially remained and have not been replaced by bureaucracy and rationalization – in terms of Weber's ideal types.

3. The Characteristics of Clan-system and Its Impacts

It seems that long lasting tribalism rule over Iran exercised heavy and deep impacts on the Iranian socio-economic and cultural relations. They were mainly – at least from the 11th to 16th centuries – non-native groups or invaders, with authoritarian politics, applying relevant methods such as those of repression and police-spying systems to keep their dominance. Some important characteristics of these governments with the common base element of tribalism, or in terms of our words as political clan-system, are given as follows:

1. Despotism and absolutism: the tribal governments rely on unlimited power, without any mechanism to control the state's power. This unleashed power tends to decay, and the agents of such power have no anxiety for legitimacy.

2. Power struggle: authoritarian clan leaders recognize no laws except their own despotic chiefdom wills. Such inflexibility leads to the rivals of power, similar to the rulers, to have no way but coercion and fight. During this millennium under study, the history of Iran witnesses many bloody struggles just for power, even between real brothers (Ghani, 642: 1962).

3. Coercion and violence: absolutism does not tolerate any opposition. Cruelty among the powerful state positions served to suppress doubts about the legitimization of power.

4. Instability: the rulers dominance in different levels of authority were unstable, firstly because of their inflexibility, and secondly, they were non-natives and had no local indigenous base, so their authority was fragile and vulnerable (Khoury and Kostiner, 10-11: 1990).

5. Social and economic insecurity: Researchers have frequently argued about the threats against the life, wealth, and prestige of the people with different positions (for example, Ashraf, 38-41: 1960). The rulers themselves were the main agents of instability. A considerable feature of this preposition was the methods of tribute gathering, which appeared as a war like behavior and justified robbery and plunder as a whole.

6. Staticism and fatalism: originally the nomadic primitive way of life is subdued by natural forces. The worldview of tribalism is static and has no perception of human will and reason (for instance see Gellner, 117: 1990).

7. Conspiracy and intrigue: in this context of primitive rivalry and struggle for power, "ends justify means", and conspiracy becomes prevalent, and even as the sign of rationalization.

Regarding the questions formulated in the introductory section of this paper, there are enough sources to support our hypothetical questions and help us to find the answers. To describe some considerable aspects of tribal society, Rezagholi emphasizes factors such as fatalism, staticism, and the aspects such as irrationality and irresponsibility. He adds that the unleashed patrimonial power tends to deny the independency of others' personalities and eliminates all other competitors (Rezagholi, 27-30: 1991). Vali explains that the state- formation in Iran, based on the tribalism during the pre-capitalist era of our society, led to the military nature of the government. He maintains that "military force, generated a rational strategy of economic appropriation, pursued by the militant state"; and so the rationality of the economic system in pre-capitalist Iranian states was military (Vali, 135: 1993). He argues that the notion of despotism based on the arbitrary nature of the political power, generated a

field of discourse characterized by the absence, or minimal development of civil society. The absence of civil society in Iran, meant that political opposition was internalized within the existing power structure. Dissentions and mutinies were frequent, but were usually led by tribal chieftains who simultaneously held high rank in command structure of the armed force. The state-tribe conflicts, resulted in the weakness of the state. The weakness of the central governments usually precipitated tribal rebellions against the state, often leading to the constitution of a new, but essentially similar despotic state – the Ibn Khaldun Thesis. So, it is reasonable to relate the historical absence of civil society to the intervention of clan-system (Vali, 13-14: 1993). Alamdari, also noticed that within the relations of Asiatic mode of production, in contrast to the European feudalism, the voluntary cooperation within the society [Especially in the cities] had no meaning. Consequently, he add this sort of relations could make heavy obstacles against the formation of civil-society (Alamdari, 174: 2004).

In addition to the economic and political consequences of the tribal states during the Iranian history, Alamdari pointed out to the cultural outcomes of clan relationship, lack of historical dynamism, and no need for the urban institutions, technology, and scientific thought. The other aspect of tribal despotism of medieval Iranian governments can be seen in the literature and poetry texts (Alamdari, 167: 2004). Bahar argued about the retrogression of thought in Iran after the fourth century (10th century, AC). He has emphasized on the regression of liberty (free thought) during the Turk sultanate (Bahar, 110: 1970). Ripka, also pointed out to the Turk usurper (especially Ghaznavid and Saljuq sultans), who needed eulogists for their flattery and exaggerating poetry on their behalf, to justify their own position and power (Ripka, 269: 1991).

4. Conclusions

In a very general proposition, it could be said that the static world-view of tribalism has been the determinant factor to explain for the Iranian backwardness. This internal element combined with the external factor of dependency institutionalized during the last clan-system dynasty of Qajar by the 19th century shaped the status of the Iranian society within the world system. Some political cultural outcomes of clan-system are summarized as follows:

1. One of the painful consequences of the dominance of political clan-system phenomenon was smothering the scientific light in Iran. The fatalistic ideology of clan-system authority did not need to or could not coordinate with scientific dynamism. As a result, rationalism and humanism weakened and despotism helped to break them down.

2. The egotistic non-Iranian rulers were enamored of power, and – like many despotic rulers – encouraged flattery and prized eulogist poets and writers. Bahar, the distinguished Iranian poet and writer, explained that the despotic Mongol rulers (1220-1500) in Iran, as outsiders and having no sympathetic affection to Persian literature, became interested in eulogist sycophants. He added that in this period the style of clear, firm, and reasonable discourse of Khorasani School got eliminated, and flattery and eulogy prevailed (Bahar, 179-181: 1956 and Ripka et. al., 282: 1981). There are still some ever-redundant compliments in Iranian speech, but occasionally to pun with words is popular practice among the middle class Iranian people.

3. The authoritarian rulers relying on clan-system, caused a deep gap between the government and the subordinates. This situation combined by the profound social insecurity, led to a severe skepticism and pessimism against the government. Weakness in some aspects such as civil society, public responsibilities, and socio-political participation of the people in public affairs are said to be the immediate results of such conditions. It is said that, if a king or a minister (vazir) would build a road, an inn

(karvan-sara), or any public construction, due to the general pessimism and reluctant public responsibility, the people were not only indifferent, they felt it as an act of cheating from the governments side and failed to provide a motive to care about it.

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