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Placing the Blame
A Means of Enforcing Obligations in Upper Yemen

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Midway through the last century Shaykh Ahmad Salih Thawabah of Dhu Muhammad, a tribe of Jabal Barat in the north of Yemen, was at large in Lower Yemen, far south of San'a' (Hibshi 1980: 102 ff.). For some years he was a power to be reckoned with. At last he was captured by the Imam al-Mutawakkil Muhammad Yahya and in 1848 was executed at Dhamar (164). Qadi Ahmad Lutf al-Bari celebrated the rebel's death in a poem:

> Truth has raised up its loftiest domes,
> As the husks fall away from the inner kernel.
> God has wiped out the stain of tyranny,
> As heavy clouds roll back from the sun.
> The wicked falls low, having gone so long, and his
> gleam of illusion fades to nothing. (Zabarah 1929/2: 345)

Midway through the piece comes a lengthy passage in which the Devil laments the loss of his disciple, Thawabah,

> Saying, where today is support for my evil (*ṭāghūt*),
> Now that this chief of dogs has left it?
> An obedient son in my house he once was,
> Answering swiftly with what I wanted.
> He was a help and gladdened my eye,
> Giving me all kinds of mischief in plenty. (2: 345–346)

Who, asks the Devil, can continue such wickedness now that this bird of ill-omen (*ghurāb*) is dead? The varieties of evil are then listed: murder and plunder, rape, highway robbery, breaking oaths, deceiving and cheating – and, in the same breath, "setting up *jidhns*, and the white and the black."

These latter references would be less than transparent to the general reader. They are continued in the description of the shaykh's actual death:

> The *jidhn* has bowed its head after being set up,
> And brought down in the filth of the place it started.
> Mourned by the "rifles of striking down"[1]
> When fate struck him down by way of chastisement. (2: 346)

The author of the biographical collection in which this occurs says only that these obscure references derive from "the laws of the shaykhs of the *ṭāghūt*" (2: 346 n. 1). The *ṭāghūt* is customary practice at odds with Islam (Rathjens 1951). The author, Muhammad Zabarah, may well not have understood the poem. His son, Ahmad Muhammad, the present Mufti of

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[1] Literally "There wept for him the rifles of striking down (*banādiq al-naṭḥ*)," presumably meaning the shaykh's followers. The non-metaphorical meaning is explained below. It goes without saying that at many points the poem supports more than one interpretation (readers will note, for example, *ghurāb / gharrāb*, below), and I am grateful to Muhammad al-Murtada and Peggy Novelli for suggestions on reading the piece. The faults which remain are mine.