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TRAVELING WITHOUT MOVING: A STUDY OF BEDOUIN CULTURE AND ADAPTATION

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The Bedouin are mostly nomadic pastoralists who have historically wandered the arid and semi-arid regions of southwestern Asia and northern Africa, and trace their origins to northern Arabia and Syria. Over the course of their long history, they have depended on their ability to move freely in search of pasture and water, and have defined themselves largely by the nomadic lifestyle they live. At the dawn of the twenty-first century, a confluence of factors threatens the continued existence of traditional Bedouin life; it is this transformation of what it means to be Bedouin that is the focus of this paper (Chatty, 2003; Chatty & Young, 2008).

To say that one must be a nomad or a pastoralist to be a Bedouin is, at least until recently, something of an understatement; the term itself is an Anglicization of the Arabic word for such a mode of subsistence, *bedu*, which was used to distinguish them from their sedentary, agriculturalist counterparts—the *hadar*. However, a distinction exists for "mobile" Bedouin, *badu al-rahalah*, which implies there is some degree of flux involved—a topic that will be further explored shortly. As is often the case when these two modes of subsistence exist side by side (it has even been argued they are in fact two aspects of one broader, multi-faceted subsistence approach), considerable trade between the two populations was—and continues to be—common. As Arab culture spread across the Middle East with the expanding Muslim Empire in the seventh and eighth centuries, this phenomenon of bifurcated subsistence strategies spread with it (Chatty, 2003, Chatty & Young, 2008, Cole, 2003, Evans-Pritchard, 1940, Spear, 1993).

As the regional hegemony of Arab culture began to wane throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, and the successor state to the Arabic Muslim empire, the Ottoman empire—itsself a colonizing, non-Arabic state—began to lose more and more territory to colonizing, non-Muslim states like France, Spain, Italy and England; along with new governments came new conceptualizations of property, borders, and means of subsistence. Over the next two centuries, and especially in the early 20th century, the world of the Bedouin began to be transformed under the auspices of western colonization and technological hegemony from one with relatively fluid borders and a recognizable division between *bedu* and *hadar* to a world of nascent statehood with rapidly crystallizing borders where the dividing line between the two modes of subsistence began to blur, and would eventually become entirely unrecognizable (Chatty 2003, Cole 2003).

Syria, formerly subject to the defeated Ottoman Empire, found itself under French rule at the end of World War I; initially, the Bedouin were allowed considerable latitude in self-governance, until it became clear it would not work with French conceptualizations of development—especially after the

discovery of oil in the area. At this point, the Bedouin were systematically stripped of all power, and forced to adopt sedentary means of subsistence. The threat to western petrochemical development projects posed by inter-tribal Bedouin conflict, coupled with a Hardin-esque *Tragedy of the Commons* perspective of Bedouin communal land tenure served not only to justify the forced settlement policy, but to exacerbate the already tenuous situation with an increase in population that needed in turn even more intensive agriculture on already marginally productive land; these policies of privatization with a push towards agriculture continued even after the colonial period ended in the late 1940's, with the new Syrian national government eventually nationalizing all lands formerly held by the Bedouin, and converting much rangeland into agricultural plots (Chatty 2003, Chatty & Young 2008, Hardin, 1968).

A severe, multi-year drought ensued in the early 1960's, killing off huge numbers of sheep-approximately two million-and was in large part blamed on overstocking by international aid scientists who had little knowledge of Syrian ecology or Bedouin husbandry practices; western models of husbandry built on American and Australian models were implemented unsuccessfully, due in large part to the non-recognizance of the astatic nature of the Syrian ecosystem. After a four-odd year period with these strategies failing, a re-analysis and re-implementation of Bedouin husbandry strategies was attempted-but still within the context of western conceptualizations of animal husbandry, with the focus being primarily on numbers and profitability, viewing die-offs as a failure instead of a necessary component of animal husbandry in a drought-prone environment (Chatty 2003, Chatty & Young 2008).

The lack of contextualization unfortunately led the Syrian government to enact a series of experiments, mostly involving the augmentation of local sheep breeds with ill-suited foreign ones, and the introduction of other non-local species-mostly to little effect. Blame was still typically laid on the Bedouin for failure to meet quotas for stock increases and for any further land degradation. Additionally, the general government response was to further restrict Bedouin access to grazing land, further alienating them, and driving many to neighboring countries like Saudi Arabia and Jordan. Others, as has often been the case when a strong, centralized government possessing more of a focus on agriculture is ruling over part of their territory, have given up nomadic pastoralism to partake in agricultural or other means of subsistence (Chatty 2003, Chatty & Young 2008).

Unfortunately, the Syrian Government and the legacy of western "knowledge" of stewardship, divorced from its appropriate context, has succeeded in creating at least as many problems as it has solved with modern technology and methods of governance. In its stead, it has managed to create a "tragedy of the enclosure"-as has happened with the Turkana and Maasai, for example-with few tangible benefits aside from what can be said for having a populace which does not necessitate the frequent crossing of international borders, and the increased social integration of these previously more liminal

peoples which comes with a more sedentary lifestyle (Chatty 2003, Chatty & Young 2008, Monbiot, 1994, Spear, 1993).

In Israel, the situation is somewhat different; estimates range considerably as to how many Bedouin existed both before the creation of the state of Israel, and currently, but the numbers probably lie somewhere between 50 and 100,000. Their impact on the Negev seems to be of minimal concern compared to the degree of scrutiny their cultural heritage as Arabs and nomads has brought them within the Israeli state, as they are relegated to some of the worst land in the country, and have their mobility severely curtailed; permits are required when traveling beyond the small area they have been allotted, and their livestock is limited to sheep that must be properly tagged and registered. As in Syria, many Bedouin have given up pastoralism in favor of a sedentary lifestyle, but find themselves with fewer economic opportunities in Israel, and high levels of unemployment. Their high birth rate-perhaps itself a result of the shift away from pastoralism-has been viewed as a demographic threat, likely adding to the pressure felt by this already marginal people (Manski, 2006, Cole 2003).

In the states of the Arabian Peninsula, beginning in the 1950's, many Bedouin began engaging in the cash economy alongside Hadar that arose in large part because of the region's newfound oil wealth; many returned to a pastoral life, investing their earnings in their flocks, but more and more, Bedouin began to adopt a sedentary way of life. Often, they would move to shanty-towns on the edges of existing sedentary communities; starting in the 1970's, the government began subsidizing housing for these communities, and many Bedouin began returning to the range less and less. Instead, they would act as intermediaries between their pastoral relatives and the Hadar they worked for, investing their wages in a familiar industry-herding-with a high rate of return. This in turn blurred the distinction between the two subsistence strategies of bedu and hadar in much the same manner as was the case in Tanzania with the pastoral Maasai and neighboring agricultural tribes, and potentially between the Dinka and the Nuer of Sudan. This suggests that a fluid ability to shift between subsistence strategies in response to political, economic and environmental factors may actually be a normal process historically, though one likely pushed to its limits with the complexities of the modern world, and western conceptualizations of "proper" means of subsistence (Chatty 2003; Chatty & Young 2008; Cross, 2003; Evans-Pritchard, 1940, Spear 1993) .

Elsewhere-in places such as in Egypt and Libya-the Bedouin also felt the pressure to become sedentary agriculturalists, and were viewed with some degree of suspicion because of their existence as a virtual "state-within-a-state"; here, and in nearly every Arab state, they found themselves at the bottom of the economic and social strata, with some of the highest rates of illiteracy, unemployment, and infant mortality. Here also-especially after the growth of the regional oil economy-a similar pattern to what was observed on the Arabian peninsula, with many more Bedouin seeking wage labor in settled

populations, and reinvesting in relatives flocks. Another interesting phenomena that emerged in these areas during this period that was born out of the increased engagement with a mercantile economy was the widespread adoption of motor vehicles to transport food and water for flocks, and to move them to and from markets, further eroding the "traditional" image of the Bedouin (Cross, 2003).

The Bedouin have survived as a culture in some of the harshest environments on Earth, and have seen the rise and fall of many a nation and empire; the key to their survival has been-and will continue to be-the ability to adapt to changing circumstances enough to fit the ambient state of political ecology, but all the while maintaining enough of a continuity with the past and their own self-identity. Contrary to the received wisdom of culturally obliterative modernity that has indeed swept away many other, less fortunate cultures, the Bedouin have thus far resisted assimilation to a large extent-though at a heavy price in terms of such indicators as health, wealth, and education. As they have in the past, they have bent and blurred the definitions of what it means to be a Bedouin, and have-at least for the present-managed to hang on to their cultural identity. Whether this will be the case in another generation or two is a question only time-and the Bedouin themselves-can decide (Chatty, 2003, Chatty & Young 2008, Cross, 2003).

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