

Today's Bedouin in Jordan

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The idea of using images and text, which we chose to evoke today's bedouin in Jordan, was not evident at first. It emerged gradually as Nabil Boutros' work progressed and as a result of our discussions about his encounters and his photographs. We obviously wanted to avoid the tourist clichés as well as the usual catalogue of cultural images. In the end we allowed ourselves to be guided by what Nabil's interlocutors wanted to show of themselves, of their surroundings, activities, personalities and of their social relations. The text and photographs were completed without either trying to illustrate the other. Different threads found echoes in the differing contexts in which the photographs were taken: the northern *badia*, Wadi Ramm, Beidha, the area between Madaba and the Dead Sea, and also Amman, amongst both the poorest and the well established bedouin. This is how we came to offer these few ways of casting a different gaze on the bedouin.

Mobility

Are the bedouin viable in the modern world? The great fourteenth-century North African historian, Ibn Khaldun, had noted that the history of the Arabs was made up of successive waves during which the most powerful nomadic tribes became urbanised whilst the poorest tribes remained in the desert. In fact, for centuries the bedouin have been in transition between the life of nomadic herdsmen in arid marginal lands (the *badia*) and city life. Transition and mobility are difficult notions to grasp for sedentary and rational people, for they defy the fixed categories through which they normally perceive the world. This outlook is so dominant that the bedouin themselves sometimes have doubts about what makes their own distinctiveness: is it their nomadic lifestyle, their know-how as herders in an arid environment, their tribal organisation, or their values and morality which persist into sedentary life, diversification of economic activities and urbanisation? These questions are no doubt a reflection of the diversity of bedouin society which is neither isolated nor removed in the arid margins, but rather is dynamic and eager to

harness the benefits of the modern world while preserving its values of solidarity, pride and honour.

Many of today's bedouin have transformed their spatial mobility into social mobility, a process which, in Jordan, began in the 1930s. First there was recruitment into the armed forces and the administration, then came the widespread schooling of children and finally engagement in new economic activities or the adoption of new methods of livestock rearing. Bedouin families developed agriculture in the *badia* and the more fertile regions of the Jordanian plateau, mostly abandoning camel husbandry in favour of sheep and goats. They took advantage of modern technology, firstly motor vehicles, particularly the water tankers that made them less dependant on natural constraints, and more recently mobile phones. The ancient nomads who moved seasonally across several hundred kilometres became transhumant herdsmen living in tents for only part of the year, or sometimes not leaving their villages at all and entrusting their herds to shepherds. At the same time, a new generation was settling in the towns, completing their tertiary education and taking up new professional careers whilst still maintaining strong links with their original villages and tribes, a process which has ensured the preservation of bedouin values and identity in these city dwellers.

For the past decade or so, drought and economic constraints have posed the greatest threats to a transhumant pastoral way of life. Rainfall is limited, pasturelands are not regenerating, animal fodder is expensive and the value of the produce (meat, milk products and wool) is too low for herding to remain viable. Only those who own very large herds are still deriving some income from them. The others are forced to sell their livestock and to change their ways, often ending up swelling the ranks of the urban and rural poor of the kingdom.

A dual process of moving away from the bedouin lifestyle can be observed, either through social and professional mobility that allows access to the middle and upper levels of Jordanian society, or through spatial immobility imposed by economic and climatic constraints creating a new category of impoverished, one-time herdsmen.

Use of space

The tent (known as *beit esh-sha'ar*, meaning 'house of hair') is a mobile shelter with internal spaces that can be rearranged using movable partitions, where the transitions between the outside to the inside, light and shadow, the heat and the cool are changeable according to need. The inside can equally be aired by a gentle wind, or protected from a dust storm. It can be expanded as the family grows. The tent, which the bedouin refer to simply as the 'house' (*al-beit*), is extremely adaptable in its use both as domestic and public space. On the domestic side, the internal space can be extended outside when it is time to cook, to make bread or simply to stretch out in the shade. On the public side, the area in which visitors are received can also be extended outwards when need be, to create more internal space if there are numerous guests. There is always a clear division between the public and private sides of the tent, usually in the form of a decorated partition on the public side, which, on the private side, is lined with the domestic furniture (a chest, mattresses, bed coverings). The interior and exterior space is cut both vertically and transversally by the tent poles and the ropes with which it is stretched and anchored to the ground.

The domestic tent is maintained and erected by the women of the family, or under their supervision. They are the ones who make the tent from materials that are easily available (goat hair and sheep's wool), weaving the strips on a horizontal loom, and who repair it regularly. In the most remote areas of the Wadi Arabah mountains and the Hisma basin (in which the Wadi Ramm is located), the single or widowed men who live alone prefer either a rock shelter or cave to a tent, which has very little meaning without a female presence. However, the ceremonial tent is the sole concern of men, erected for

large gatherings, happy ones such as weddings or sad ones like wakes. The symbolic function of the tent, over and above its practical aspect, is that of a real space where guests can enjoy the hospitality and protection of the master of the house. The host's hospitality and duty of protection are inseparable from their symbolic expression: the preparation of Arabic coffee on the central hearth of the public side and the way it is served according to strict ritual. This tradition is anchored in the bedouin values that continue to be represented by the reception tent with its wood-burning hearth and the utensils necessary for the coffee ritual, even once the tent has completely lost its domestic functions and is erected behind the simplest or most luxurious of houses. The permanent tent no longer represents the mobility of the bedouin, but rather the continuation of their values and thus of their identity.

The domestic tent is adapted to the social norms that regulate relations between men and women and which allow family honour to be preserved. However, in the domestic tent there are no areas that are only reserved for men, or for women, in a permanent way. Movement between the public and private spaces by members of either sex depends on who is present in the tent: the nuclear family only, or outsiders. The basic rule, which can be relaxed at times, is that the women disappear from the reception area when guests are present who are not close members of their family. However, hospitality is foremost amongst bedouin values, and so the matriarch of the family will always make it her duty to receive visitors in the reception area if her husband is absent. In any case, the women can listen to the conversation of the men from the private side of the tent and take a peek at them through the weave of the partition, something that is commonly done when marriage negotiations are being discussed between men.

Simple breeze-block houses or luxury villas, the majority of bedouin have built solid houses whose variety and richness of

architectural references and decorations are perhaps a way of compensating for the uniformity and sobriety of the tent. Nevertheless, associations with the traditional shelter are not far away: reception areas are larger and clearly separated from the family section and have a fireplace which serves as a hearth; the interior space is often extended towards the exterior with a tent erected in the courtyard; thick curtains recall the partitions of the tent; the symbolism of the decorative objects and portraits of ancestors evoke a link with another way of life. Opulence, luxury and displays of curious and expensive objects bear witness to the social and economic success of the master of the house, who nevertheless likes to give the impression that he is still capable of doing without these luxuries by going back to live in simplicity in the *badia*.

Over the last few decades, the *badia* has in fact enjoyed some major social and economic development: projects to settle the bedouin beginning in the 1960s with the development of villages with infrastructure and social services, projects for irrigated agriculture, radical changes in the ways of livestock rearing that no longer need great mobility. These last few years, the royal initiative to build social housing has allowed several hundred poorer bedouin families to own a housing unit. But these are on uniform lots which the families find are poorly adapted to their way of life since the outside spaces are very restricted and do not allow either for the erection of a tent or for the rearing of a few animals.

Today, the bedouin who live in the greatest want are not those in the *badia*. They are to be found on the outskirts of towns, or in the most arid and rocky zones overlooking the Dead Sea, the Jordan Valley and the Wadi Arabah. The last real nomads have found refuge at the margins of the developed and urbanised areas, stuck between advancing towns, the road network, agricultural and industrial zones and the natural protected areas. These nomads do not have a solid house in a village and still practice seasonal transhumance between two or three areas of pasturage that are continuously diminishing. They can be recognised by their tents of sewn sack-cloth which is cheaper than the bands of woven goat hair, and by the apparent disorder reigning in their camps that bears witness to their

poverty and their need to keep anything that might be re-used.

The abundance of re-used objects in bedouin camps is always striking. Functionality is more important than aesthetics in a context of few belongings and little money, far removed from the idea of consumerism. The ease with which tent dwellers and recently settled families continue to recycle and repair all that can be, has its roots in the nomadic lifestyle when the distance from urban markets and the absence of primary materials made every object precious and potentially usable for something other than that for which it had been made.

As for an aesthetic sense, it does not reside in the appreciation of the formal qualities of objects. Rather, it expresses itself through poetry, in the beauty of the loved, but always inaccessible, woman or, long ago, in the qualities of she-camels and mares. Today these animals have been replaced by cars (or trucks) both in their functional uses and as a symbol of the wealth of the owner. A bedouin aesthetic of the vehicle has thus developed and it can be decorated like a favourite animal used to be long ago.

Figures of authority

Figures of authority in photographs are displayed in various places: in reception tents and salons, cars, photo albums and offices of parliamentary deputies. Their exposure to the public eye, to hosts and guests is a way of showing, without having to be explicit, to whom one acknowledges an authority above ones own, but equally from where ones own authority stems and how far-reaching it is. Respect and authority are intimately linked values, above all with regard to the respect shown to the prescriptions of Islam. Whether their religious education is limited or extensive, whether they are illiterate or university graduates, the members of bedouin society all

share a strong religious sentiment and great respect for the divine authority.

Respect for authority is no doubt one of the fundamentals of bedouin society, and even of Arab society in general. But one must define to whom this authority is given and what it encompasses. Above all, it is incumbent on the father figure, the head of the family, to make decisions concerning his children and wife. Bedouin families are patriarchal, but moderately so, for the possibility that the wives have, particularly as they get older, to take part in family decisions, whether economic or with regard to the marriage of the children, must not be underestimated. Bedouin men all recognise the importance of female responsibility in a traditional pastoral lifestyle and many encourage their daughters in their studies and professional careers. Nevertheless, the father of the family always retains the right of absolute veto on personal choices, choices that cannot be made without his agreement. The black and white photograph of the grandfather in the salon reminds everyone of the respect due to him, but also indicates that the same respect authorises his son, now the head of the family, to exercise his domestic authority in his turn. The respect shown by young, modern and educated town bedouin to the older men and women of the family is also a way of exchanging some respect for a share of authority, even if there are other aspects to the relationship, a lot of affection in particular.

At a higher social level, the group of heads of families recognises the authority of one man to whom they are all related. This man -- generally afforded the title of sheikh -- has the function of representing his kinship group *vis-à-vis* other groups of families (for example when there are conflicts to resolve) or to formal institutions. The function of this sheikh is thus more that of mediator and does not replace the authority of the father of the family. One often thinks of bedouin society as very hierarchical, but in reality what characterises it is rather the great autonomy of decision of the head of the family. The obligation of solidarity between members of a clan or a tribe cannot really be imposed by a sheikh. Each head of family is the master of his own decisions and his adherence to a collective action is not a foregone conclusion.

That is why the members of parliament, modern figures of authority amongst the bedouin, cannot do without running electoral campaigns. They must convince everyone that they will know how to be of service to the whole community and to each family individually. One of the methods of persuasion is to use visual signs, such as photos or objects of national significance (flags etc.), to express their respect for the king and nation. Before the creation of the Emirate of Transjordan in 1921, at a time when the tribes were fairly autonomous relative to the power of the Ottoman Empire, the traditional authority of the bedouin tribal sheikh came from other sources: the prestige of their ancestors and their own qualities as leaders and mediators with other tribes. During the course of the twentieth century, the Hashemite monarchy and state institutions have put bedouin authority into a national framework by encouraging the ancestral values of respect for authority, of the individual autonomy of the head of family, of honour and hospitality. It is in large part thanks to this process that bedouin identity has survived in Jordan in spite of economic, social and political modernisation, since for decades the nomadic and pastoral way of life has been on the road to extinction.

Honour and pride

A sense of honour is an essential masculine quality for the bedouin. To the point where if a man loses his honour, he also loses his right to participate fully in bedouin society, even if he continues his pastoral and nomadic way of life. This explains the efforts that every man makes, according to his means, to maintain and increase his honour, and additionally that of his tribe. The welcome of guests and its rituals are practices that have resisted changes in lifestyle: a man of honour must be generous to his guests and to the poor, even excessively so if he can afford it. Generosity is measured, for example, by the number of animals killed and transformed into *mensaf* for a wedding feast, which often means going into debt. This debauch of blood and meat can seem out of

proportion, but it developed in contrast to the frugality of the daily meals of poor bedouin who, even today, are often satisfied with bread and very sweet tea. This excess no longer appeals to all the members of the younger, urbanised generation who prefer to see a more even distribution of the abundance of food. It is a difficult debate, like all those that question well established traditions.

It is also important to be generous with ones time and social relations: to listen to the complaints of members of the tribe and others and to help them get a job or a place at university, to help with administrative dealings, to be a mediator between individuals or for families in conflict, in other words to supply what is generally called *wasta*. This term has become pejorative, for it can imply nepotism, but its etymology suggests that its primary meaning is to play the role of intermediary. Certain social positions, such as that of M.P., are better placed than others to play this role and thus to increase ones honour. But every bedouin man must respond to the request for *wasta* even if he does not have the means to do so. That is why bedouin are sometimes more apt to 'say' than to 'do', which shocks only those people who do not hold the keys to understanding their code of honour. In reality, a person making a request usually solicits several mediators in the hope that at least one will have the necessary connections to put his words into actions. *Wasta* has its critics amongst the younger generation of bedouin of middle and upper class because it sometimes puts an unbearable weight on a person. Even if it is difficult for them to express this in front of their elders, there are many young people who believe that individual merit must take precedence over social connections.

Another element of honour is military bravery and all the activities that are linked to firearms, which the bedouin continue to use for their celebrations even though it is against the law. It is both the power of self defence that is so expressed and an important mark of autonomy for the head of the family, but it is also an ostentatious sign of wealth because a weapon is expensive. Some produce a veritable arsenal of war and hunting firearms and waste as many bullets as their means allow. Besides being legally banned, this practice also has its

detractors amongst the bedouin, for accidents are not uncommon. But in this, as elsewhere, it is difficult to criticise tradition.

Joining the armed forces, and more particularly the Badia or Desert Police remains a more legal and more respectable way of maintaining the traditional sense of bravery. Created in 1931, the Badia is a police force specialised in the control of desert borders which recruits exclusively amongst tribesmen. It was a very effective means of unifying the tribes and of channeling their combative energies to the service of the State. During the 1930s, a series of small forts were built in the area of jurisdiction of the Badia, such as at Wadi Ramm. Amongst the tribes the Badia is without doubt the most prestigious of the military services. Any family which has the privilege of having a member in this corps is immensely proud of it. The role of the Badia is more than simply military: it brings help to isolated families, helps to find lost animals, and used to ensure the practice of justice according to the Islamic and tribal codes. They have opened numerous schools in remote villages, providing education to generations of young boys and girls, but also daily meals, clothing and medical care. In its police functions, the Badia enquires into the rare crimes that are committed in its areas of jurisdiction and continues to patrol the borders to control illegal traffic from Saudi Arabia, Syria and Iraq. It used to be exclusively a camel corp, but the Badia now has modern vehicles adapted to its needs. It nevertheless continues to keep a herd of camels which is said to be the best in the kingdom in terms of the quality of its animals and the care that is afforded them. The Badia is thus essential in the survival of a typical bedouin know-how and of knowledge of the desert. In addition it plays an extremely important role in the transmission of the values of bravery and masculine honour.

But honour is not simply linked to personal merit: each individual must also be able to rest on the honour of his

ancestors and of his tribe. Tribes that raised camels used to be more honourable than those that raised smaller livestock; the more warring ones and those with the most men dominated the less powerful ones and gained prestige thereby. Certain activities were not viewed as honourable, such as working the land when it became the main economic activity. The origins of the tribe and its history also form elements of its honour. There are tribes that the majority of bedouin do not consider honourable because, for one reason or another, they have lost their honour over the course of their history.

The behaviour of women is also an essential part of family and tribal honour: virtue, high morals and respect for the rules of separation between men and women when necessary are obligatory, which does not imply lack of character and invisibility. There are some strong female personalities in bedouin society who enjoy everyone's respect because they respect perfectly the code of honour.

The proud bedouin is a cliché of orientalist literature in the West. But that cliché corresponds to a certain reality which it is important to underline. Even though bedouin society is strictly structured around collective obligations, amongst them the notion of honour, there is still room for some individual expression. That is where pride finds its place: pride in continuing the traditional way of life with its many constraints (cold and intense heat, lack of water and flooding, discomfort, poverty, hunger sometimes, the difficulty of pastoral work), pride in social achievements by offering the luxury of one's home or cars to everyone's gaze, pride of one's ancestry, educational and professional accomplishments, traditional know-how, pride in one's herd or field, and finally pride in assuming one's social obligations whether it be the role of mother and wife, of head of family or of a newly-wed who is looking after his aging parents.

Transmissions

One often has the impression that everything is allowed to the children in bedouin villages. They seem to live freely, trying out all experiences including the most dangerous, and have very few

constraints placed on them. It is in fact an education in which children learn limits for themselves and make the direct experience of pain and danger, nevertheless within a framework: if the parents are not there, another member of the community is almost certainly nearby and can exercise their authority. It is a tough education with no pampering, where from their earliest age children are accustomed to the realities that will be their adult lives: familiarity with the livestock and with scenes of animal slaughtering, the responsibilities of pastoral and domestic work, driving pick-ups and trucks and the harshness of economic and climatic constraints. All this in an atmosphere of great tenderness enjoyed by boys and girls alike, with the privilege of still being able to escape the obligations of proper behaviour, of being allowed to move at will between the public and private spaces of the house or tent, and of being able to go from one house to another without formality.

Education used to be gained by the children accompanying the adults. Today, and in many cases since several decades, the ways of traditional transference of knowledge and of behaviour are in heavy competition with widespread schooling. There are not many bedouin families who choose a transhumant life for their children when they can send them to school instead. This has been an essential factor in the settling of the bedouin. Even the poorest families time their seasonal movements to accord with the school calendar. Parents hope that modern knowledge will enable their children to better themselves economically. This wish is sometimes granted and it is not unusual to meet young women or young men on a university campus whose illiterate parents still live in a tent. But many bedouin children from rural areas are not so motivated to study. In the same family there can therefore be big differences in educational and socio-professional levels.

Schooling also creates a distancing from traditional knowledge which is no longer valued. The history of the tribe

and the oral literature of immense richness that has been transmitted for generations can no longer win against the omnipresence of the television. Knowledge of animal husbandry, the sophisticated use of herbal remedies for both humans and animals, the ways of effective management of water resources and pasturage, weaving techniques, none are passed down to the younger generations whose school and university education lead them to look down on traditional knowledge.

Whilst in the richest and most urbanised countries the importance of traditional knowledge is being rediscovered, entire swathes of bedouin culture and tradition are disappearing without much notice. The staged bedouin culture offered by tour operators in the theme park that Wadi Ramm has become is a pale reflection of the real bedouin heritage. There is no need to cry for the loss of a difficult way of life that the majority of those still living it aspire to leave. But one can reflect with the bedouin themselves on ways of preserving and validating the knowledge and know-how that is born of an intimate understanding of an arid environment (as aridity is in fact on the increase) and certain elements of a unique culture that can adapt very well to modernisation.

Nomadic bedouin have not survived the twentieth century. But many signs indicate that bedouin identity is resisting in the new spaces and activities of modern Jordan. In the arid zones around the Mediterranean and the Arabian Peninsula, human history is made up of long cycles in which nomadism and sedentary life alternate or sometime co-exist. Additionally, many values and ways of social organisation in urban Arab societies came from the bedouin world. One must not ring its death knell to soon....

Géraldine Chatelard

Further readings

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