Mobile Pastoralists in the Middle East: Challenging Stereotypes

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My reflections span nearly 50 years working with sheep herding nomadic pastoral communities in Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan as well with camel herders in the Sultanate of Oman. In this keynote address, I will first explore the various terms used to describe nomads, pastoralists, Bedouin, herders, and other mobile groups in the Middle East. Then I will explore the history of these mobile social groups going back several millennia, to the first domestication of the one-hump camel. I will explore the nature of camels as baggage animals, as vehicles for warfare and 'ships of the desert' as well as the 20th century efforts to suppress and control the camel herding nomadic / mobile societies. Then I will reflect briefly on the state of 'theory' and 'conceptual debates' about nomads and Bedouin over the past 50 years as inherently unethical, uncivilised, and irrational. I will contest these 'modern' developmental theories to show that Bedouin / nomadic societies, are indeed highly opportunistic, adaptive, and morally superior civilisations. And generosity and hospitality are deeply embedded as a response to the extensive and widespread nature of the moral economy of such mobile societies.

What did these mobile groups call themselves and what were they were called locally? These social groups refer to themselves as '*Arab* (pl 'Araab) today. This nomenclature goes back to the first mention of '*Arab* in 6,000 B. C. when Assyrian texts referred to

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these mobile herding and farming tribes in North Arabia. Moving onto the 7th century A.D., we find the term *'Arab* in the Muslim Quran. Then in the 14th century, Ibn Khaldun, the Tunisian Islamic jurist, set out his cyclical history of civilization and identified the dichotomy between *hadr* (urban society) and *badawa* (rural desert society) and emphasised the solidarity of desert *bedu* and the weakness of the *hadr* urban dwellers. He sets out his thesis that civilizational renewal comes from the desert – a historical description of the numerous waves of desert tribes that conquered Andalusia in Spain. These notions in Arab historiography both idealized the strengths of desert life and spread notions of fear. But common interaction between nomads and urban dwellers throughout history is identified.

The state of theory and academic debate about nomads has moved through several phases since the middle of the 20th century. First, we have the Structural Functionalist school which gained prominence in the 1940s-1960s. This approach regarded all institutions as having a structure and a 'function'; the function of camel raiding in the Middle East, for example, was a carefully orchestrated 'redistributive mechanism' of camel herds. It was highly ritualized – no women or children were hurt or impacted. Then in the 1970s, Fredrik Barth and others, such as Philip Salzman and Richard Tapper, began to emphasize the significance of the ecology. The 'eco-niche' became important to help explain why herding animals occupied certain spaces – why goat , sheep and camel occupied different 'eco' niches and why vertical nomadism or transhumance operated as it did. By the 1980s, development discourses for Modernization emerged based on the notion of the 'irrationality' of mobile herding. This was accompanied by non-empirical notions of carrying capacity, grasslands degradation, and desertification. This mind-set emerged out of the significant development project failures with herder groups in East Africa in the 1970s and was compounded with nation-state failures to politically 'control' mobile pastoral tribes. Many failed projects resulted in impoverishing herders as land was taken away from them and they were squeezed into small areas of pastureland. To make the modernization and developmental focus on agricultural work, herders were blamed for degradation of the grazing lands**.** This degrading discourse has continued to the 21st century often without any empirical data to support such claims. Finally, we have theoretical understandings of moral economies. These are economies based on moral and ethical aspirations and institutions to preserve the foundations of social groups rather

than focus solely on capital gains. These include institutions such as generosity and hospitality *(karam)* honour (*sharaf*), group solidarity, and mutuality. These institutions in the Middle East have their origins in the Age of the Jahiliya (6th century A.D.).

Nomadic pastoral tribes are found throughout Arabia, but often at the margins of central authority's reach. To understand the development and expansion of nomadic / Bedouin civilization we need to follow the animals and their domestication. Let us look at the invention of the wheel and the domestication of the camel in the region. Wheels (for carts and wagons associated with agriculture) was superseded by the camel as a beast of burden in the arid and semi-arid lands of Arabia and eventually North Africa. Long-distant trade and mobility was not by wagon, but by camel caravan. This included the frankincense trade and the silk route trade by sea to South Arabia and transport by camel over land to the Mediterranean. At first camels were only used for transport. But in 547 B.C. there was a shift and camels were used for mounted attacks in war. According to Herodotus the smell of camels alarmed and disoriented horses. In that year, Cyrus the Great of Persia formed an ad hoc camel corps from his camel baggage train and mounted armed riders to replace baggage packs – the appearance of camels panicked the Lydian cavalry and contributed to his success in the battle against Croesus of Lydia (Western Anatolia). Both camels and horses were used in desert battles thereafter**.**

The moral economy of the Bedouin, a tribal society made up of real and fictive kin groups organized into segmentary lineages was based on fundamental concepts of honour (*sharaf*), generosity (*karam*), and solidarity (*asabiyya*). These cultural ideals and moral traditions supported a society on the mov**e**, where kin were widely disperses over extensive rangeland. Personal family and tribal honour was paramount (for forming marriage ties, and wider tribal alliances); hospitality to strangers, and generosity to all helped to accrue honour for the person and the group. The 'Golden Age' of Bedouin nomadic culture was the Jahiliya (Age of Ignorance of Islam) between the 4th and 6th century A.D. before Mohammed's preaching early in the 7th century A.D.. During this period, Arab tribes raised camels and managed the trade routes across Arabia from the south and from the east. The 6th c. oral poetry, the *Mu'allaqat* – the 7 renown (hung) poems which were displayed at the Ka'aba in Mecca, evoked the beauty of nature, of women, of landscape, and of warfare. They set out a complex system of ethical values passed down for generations. Ironically, The *Mu'allaqat* were still taught (and memorized) in urban

schools until the middle of the 20th century for the ethics and morals they taught. Memorizing them was a sign of urban civilized sophistication.

For nearly two millennium Bedouin nomadic civilization in Arabia was highly mobile. That is, it controlled the trade routes of Arabia, it provided camels to urban dealers and generally had good relations with urban traders to move their goods from one depot to another. This economic bargain required more than mobility; it required protecting caravans from raiding by other tribes. Thus, the security and honour of the tribe were deeply entwined. Bedouin controlled trade routes, protected oases, and sometimes towns. This was a strong relationship between Bedouin, farmers, and urban dwellers. Protection was by a system of tribute payments (*khuwa)* to prevent raiding (*ghazzu)* by other tribes trying to take over the security of their oases or caravans.

As trade grew between the east (Silk Route) and the south to the Mediterranean there was a growing demand for baggage camels that could carry heavier loads. Between the 16th and 18th century camel hybridization was common and became more systematic in the 19th century. This was a response to a growing demand for stronger baggage camels. The purpose was to create a bigger and bulkier camel, the hybrid Turcoman camel. Crossing the long-legged one hump dromedary with the shorted legged Bactrian two humped camel produced a better camel – more vigorous and able-bodied as a pack animal. The dromedary could carry 550 – 700 lbs in baggage but the hybrid Turcoman camel could carry loads of up to 1300lbs.

With the increase in global trade especially with the coming of the railways at the end of the 19th century, camels could reach places in Kurdistan, Persia, Iran, and elsewhere that could not be reached by railroad carrying rugs, matting, nuts and dried fruit, spices and other textiles and crafts for delivery to the Balkans, Constantinople, Aleppo, and Damascus.

It was the Bedouin who raised camels and also sold them to traders for trade caravans, as well as for meat markets in the 20th century. In northern Arabia the camel was the 'work animal' for family mobility and for trade. Family camels could easily carry household baggage from one place to another as families moved seasonally following pasture and graze for their herds of camel and often sheep and goat. They could carry far more than the mule or donkey and they could survive, if not thrive, on the semi-arid and desert vegetation of the Bedouin's traditional territories. The camel was the 'ship' of the

desert – moving households, carrying goods for export , as well as pilgrims to Mecca for the annual pilgrimage. The Bedouin were important breeders of camels for sale to merchants, and to transport companies. They provided the main beast of burden in the region until then 1950s. Trucks only took over from camels after the mid -20th century (1970s and 1980s) and trucks became important in maintaining the mobility of Bedouin / nomads. But camels did not disappear.

By the 19th century, Bedouin tribes of Arabia were found all along the frontiers or margins of the Ottoman Empire controlling trade and movement across the desert, especially the Hajj (Pilgrimage) to Mecca**.** Bedouin paid taxes to the state authority to protect their common interest in free movement and trade. The great confederations of the camel raising Aneza and the Shammar Bedouin tribes cut across Iraq, Syria, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia. Some of the tribes became important allies of the Ottoman state and were supplied with rifles to dominate other 'weaker' tribes. The Ottoman state began to better control these groups by granting the tribal leaders large tracts of public land as private ownership. With the end of the Ottoman empire in the early 20th century, English and French colonial mandate were established over Northern Arabia (Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq). The colonial powers set out to conduct the military pacification and forced settlement of the Bedouin to establish new nations and protect the oil pipelines to the Mediterranean especially the Haifa line (H4 and H5 through Iraq, Syria, and Jordan). Many tribal leaders were tempted by government offers of 'private' ownership of land for settlement, seats in Parliament, and continuation of retainer (tribute in gold) systems from the Ottoman period.

By the 1920s and 1930s some Bedouin camel herders began to switch to herding sheep and goat and just keep camels as pack animals. The Bedouin economy shifted to sale of livestock rather than controlling caravan trade. Though 'miliary' pacification destroyed the security role Bedouin had held, and many tribal leaders were compromised, their belief system or codes of morality and behaviour remained intact.

Their economy, however, changed and what emerged was an opportunistic adaptation to the modern state economy. They bought trucks and tractors which they used to move sheep more efficiently to pastures and then to regional markets, as well as hiring out their vehicles to local farmers. They maintained a moral economy which moderated the capital gains. Yet the development discourse regarding Bedouin pastoral herds be-

came one of denigration. Bedouin continued to be considered backward or anachronistic, even economically irrational by states and international organizations .

What lay behind such attitudes? The necessity of the state authority to control its populations? Were people who moved seen as a threat to the settled? What was the answer? Force them to settle, to stay in one place, turn them into 'ranchers' or farmers, break their social system, and take control of their extensive common lands? Development agencies, and their 'experts' needed to get Bedouin to become 'modern' and stop moving. Hence degradation of land became a philosophy and a firm notion among states in the region and the UN agencies that worked with them.

Development discourses were about the need to settle Bedouin who came to be regarded as destroyers of nature rather than the 'steward' of their environment. Many international agencies were complicit in this discourse. These ideas and attitudes continue today without any empirical evidence that herders degrade the pastures that they manage. Degradation occurs when herders are pushed off their land or squeezed into a small part of it. The development paradigm, that all citizens should be settled in one place and that progress or modernization was an evolutionary unidirectional movement toward civilization (capitalism), gained much currency in the 1980s and 1990s.

'Saving our Planet' is one example of such thinking. In the 1990s after the Earth Summit in Rio in 1992 many countries rushed to join the push to declare 10% of earth's surface protected (from people and domesticated animals). Reserves were created by governments where there were 'few' people (not near towns or cities) and mobile herders within these areas and their animals thrown out. The concept of nature having to be pristine, empty of people did not come from science, but from prejudice and lack of understanding of the special knowledge that nomads / Bedouin had of their environment. In Syria, for example, we had Bedouin camel herders thrown out of their centuries-old camel grazing area to create a pristine reserve to re-introduce a gazelle like animal, the Arabian Oryx, which had been extinct from the area for over one hundred years.

The main issue for us today is that centralized governments recognize private property but not land held in common by a tribe or other social group. Hence *terra nullius* (uninhabited land) *or tabula rasa* (blank slate) are used as arguments for governments to make money from multi-national extractive industry at the expense of their own nomadic citizens. Another example of this approach is in the Jiddat il Harasiis an area of 40,000

square kilometres which until 1958 had no water at all. It is a stone and gravel arid plain; a finger of the Empty Quarter *(Rub' al Khali*). The Harasiis tribe numbers about 5, 000 people; half ton trucks were just beginning to make an appearance in the Jiddat in the 1980s ; but camels were still used then to travel long-distances to water wells -sometimes two or three-day journeys from campsites.

With the uptake of 4-wheel drive transport, the camel has remained an important element of the subsistence economy - its milk is a basic part of the nutrition of the pastoral herders of South and Eastern Arabia - and the cultural heritage of the society. But the vehicle has meant that the young adult generation must work to pay for the upkeep of the vehicles, if nothing else, in the army with the police, and security services, leaving herding to the elders and hired camel herders from Baluchistan and Sindh. It is this land that has been assumed to be *terra nullius* by the petroleum companies and *tabula rasa* by international conservation organizations like the World Wildlife Fund and Union for the Conservation of Nature.

Although the camel's role in the economy of the Bedouin has declined, still it is an important symbol of their culture, and their heritage. There is growing recognition of the important of this culture - this moral economy - with many states sponsoring events, races, festivals around the 'camel' as the iconic representation of the tribes of Arabia. As camels lose their place as beasts of burden in South and Eastern Arabia, they are becoming cultural icons in the newfound national heritage and tourism trade. The celebration of 'Bedouin' heritage now pronounced in Southeastern Arabia where many of the seven emirates in the UAE try to connect their national heritage to Bedouin culture. These customs are being revived, reworked, and promoted in, for example, nationally sponsored camel racing, camel beauty contests, and hunting displays with falcons, sparrow hawks, gyrfalcons, and even golden eagles.

Contemporary Bedouin tribes continue to herd camels but also maintain multi-resource economies. In Northern Arabia today one finds mainly local sheep and goat herding tribes (with a few Aneza and Shammar tribes maintaining camel herds). In the south of Arabia many Bedouin maintain their herds for milk, but also for 'prestige' activities such as racing and beauty contests. Very large prizes are given out to winners ranging from Lexus four wheel-drive vehicles to purses often more than £200,000. Ecotourism is also of growing importance for many states in Arabia including Saudi Arabia.

Currently, Bedouin tribes, supported by academic scholars and researchers, are responding to the discriminatory stereotypes against them which have labelled them as inherently unethical, amoral, and uncivilised. In 2002, the Dana Declaration on Mobile Peoples and Conservation sought to make their stewardship of nature paramount and their special knowledge of their habitat acknowledged. Mutual respect and human rights were at the fore. In 2022, at the Dana +20 conference, academic scholars and representatives of mobile peoples met and issued their manifesto which extends their concerns beyond conservation to include the oil and mining industry, climate change, and self – sufficiency (see www.danadeclaration.org).