MARSH DWELLERS OF THE EUPHRATES DELTA

S.M. SALIM

ROUTLEDGE

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Foreword

DR Salim's detailed and intimate study of a marsh-dwelling community of bedouin descent on the Lower Euphrates has strong claims on the attention of both social anthropologists and students of social conditions and change in the Middle East.

In the first place it provides one of the very few systematic and carefully documented field studies of the values and social rules whereby the intense solidarity of the patrilineal and largely endogamous kin groups of bedouin society are sustained. Dr Salim shows that these values and obligations have been substantially maintained by the Beni Isad both in their initial adaptation to a new mode of life as sedentary reed-gatherers in a mosquito-infested marsh refuge, and more recently under the stress of new economic temptations from without. Collective insistence at the level of both lineage and clan on compensation for major offences and acceptance by individuals in the offending group that they must all contribute, continually reaffirm the unity of the group in the recurrent settlement of disputes over women and land as well as physical injury and homicide. The continuing economic power of a man over his wives and sons and the authority of a senior over a junior patrikinsman, which are reinforced by endogamous marriage, sustain the sense of joint responsibility within the lineage and inhibit political and economic divergence on the part of individuals.

But this study also shows that as between clans and lineages in Marsh Arab society as a whole, there have been great changes over the past generation. It analyses the processes whereby a once strongly stratified and authoritarian society has, in the course of increasingly effective external control and the introduction of new economic incentives, become a more open field of competition for status and prestige. The shaikh, who once had prescriptive right to dominate politically and economically both his own chiefly clan and through it the rest of the tribe, is gone. The slaves have been freed of economic disabilities and iron-workers may no longer be openly despised. A few of the Beni Isad have succeeded in taking advantage of new opportunities with the growth of external trade to become comparatively wealthy shopkeepers, moneylenders and exporters. But those who have taken up new and more lucrative occupations have great difficulty in securing recognition as notables, the respected status that is ascribed to the conservative heads of united lineages. These notables scorn the pursuit of personal gain and restrict their economic activities to the ill-rewarded mat weaving necessary for a bare livelihood. For nothing in the marshes has been acceptable as replacing the old prestige of camel breed-

ing. Fishing and dairying, both of which, as despised immigrants have shown, could be materially rewarding, are rejected as unworthy.

But although the old bedouin values are still asserted in an attempt to stem the tide of commerce and external influence, the conflict between new and old values and its repercussions on the solidarity of lineages and the community as a whole are increasing. In 1953, when Dr Salim lived and worked there, ech-Chibayish presented very clearly, in its exceptional and harsh environment, a crucial phase in those processes of technical, economic and social change that are inexorably transforming village communities in the Arab world. His pertinacity in carrying through a year-long study under such difficult physical conditions and his success in establishing such close rapport with opposed factions, was doubtless due in considerable measure to a deep interest in the life of the Marsh Dwellers which goes back to his youth, for he was born in Amara, a town on the edge of the Tigris marshes. When he began his anthropological studies in London in 1950 he looked forward to the possibility of undertaking field research among them. Through this book we are enabled to share in his satisfaction at having carried out so successfully what proved to be an arduous and complex task. The skill with which he has analysed the changing structure of this marsh village and traced the sources of old and new attitudes is a testimony of the good use to which he has put his anthropological training. It is also to be hoped that it will encourage further and equally rewarding field research on other village communities in Iraq.

University College London DARYLL FORDE
February 1958

Acknowledgments

FOR the invaluable help and guidance offered to me during my studies and in the writing of this book, which is based on my doctoral thesis, I should like to express my most sincere thanks and profound gratitude to my teachers, Professor Daryll Forde and Dr Mary Douglas, of University College, London, without whose assistance it could not have been completed.

I am deeply indebted to many friends in ech-Chibayish, officials and villagers, to all of whom I express my warmest thanks. My gratitude is particularly due to the late Abdil-Hadi Ahl Khayūn, the *ṣirkal* of Ahl ish-Shaikh clan, who, despite ill-health and heavy responsibilities, sponsored my work and by effective support and valuable information did everything within his power to help me.

To Tariq Ahl Khayūn I owe more than to anyone else in ech-Chibayish for his cordial and constant help. He was my chief and most valuable informant and it is to his active co-operation and deep understanding of tribal life that I owe the greater part of the knowledge that I gained in ech-Chibayish.

S. M. S.

London
April 1955

Editorial Note

THE Editorial Board is most grateful to the Ministry of Education of Iraq, and to the Cultural Attaché of the Iraqi Embassy in London, for providing a grant towards the cost of publication.

We are also indebted to the following persons, who have assisted in abridging and preparing Dr Salim's thesis for publication: Dr Mary Douglas, Professor D. Forde, Mr Robin Horton, Miss Kay Attwood, Mr John Hartley, Mr T. F. Mitchell, Mr T. M. Johnstone, and Mrs M. Horn.

The transliteration of Arabic words always presents problems. In this case Dr Salim's wish that the dialect pronounciation should be suggested in the English spelling complicated the issue. For reasons outside our control, we have not been able to consult Dr Salim as much as we have wished. Final decisions have therefore been taken without his permission. All long vowels are indicated by a line above the letter, thus: ā, ī, ū. There is one exception to this. Two Arabic words, which may both refer to groups with a patrilineal base or core and should strictly be distinguished in transliteration as *āl* and *ahl*, have both been transliterated *ahl*. Those wishing for more precise information on questions of the language used in ech-Chibayish are referred to the Arabic version:

Shākir Mustafa Salīm, *Ach-Chibayish*: *dirāsah anthrūpūlūjiyyah li-qaryah fī ahwār al-'Irāq*, Baghdad, 1956-7.

CONVERSION TABLE FOR IRAQI MEASURES

1 Iraqi dinar	=	1000 fils = £1
1 habil	=	0·62 acres / 0·25 hectares
1 mann	=	198 lb. / 90 Kg.
1 wijia	=	8·2 lb. / 3·75 Kg.

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PART ONE

Introductory

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Introduction

WHEN the Iraqi government entrusted me with the first anthropological field investigation to be carried out in Iraq, I chose to make a study of the inhabitants of the Euphrates Delta. This is largely peopled by descendants of bedouin immigrants, who have adapted themselves in one way or another to life in the marshes. I made a general survey of marsh-dwelling communities in both the Euphrates and Tigris marshes, and used this as a background for a detailed investigation of one large community.[1]

Having chosen the village of ech-Chibayish for intensive study, I had to find a dwelling, transport, servants, food and reliable informants, not easy in marshland conditions. For a dwelling, I had to rent an island on which to build my reed hut. For transport I bought a little canoe, but as it was unsafe in high water, I had to rely on larger hired vessels for much of my travelling. As it is against tribal traditions to work for wages, it took me nearly three months to secure a good servant paddler and I never found a cook. For food I relied on the village school caretaker who used to cook for some of the teachers.

My major difficulty was the suspicious attitude of the people. Only after three months did I feel the community begin to open out to me. I began to find willing informants and was admitted to any guest house. After about six months, they talked about me as one of themselves. The friendship of the head of Ahl ish-Shaikh clan and of his son were invaluable.

Wherever possible, I participated fully in village life, visiting guest houses and village administrative officers, and I made daily tours in my canoe. I obtained life-histories, and used questionnaire and discussion techniques, with discreet cross-checking of any information obtained. I made a detailed census of 120 families.

My investigations took me to Basra and Baghdad, and to Sūg ish-Shyūkh and in-Nasriya. At Basra I visited the date-packing stations for a week. In Baghdad I obtained some published materials, together with a few statistics and official data from the government offices. I visited Shaikh Salim Ahl Khayūn, the ex-shaikh of Beni Isad, who lives temporarily in Baghdad. We had long discussions and I took down from him a lengthy autobiography. At Sūg ish-Shyūkh and in-Nasriya I consulted some official documents and had discussions with administrative officers.

I made frequent short trips to the more accessible parts of the Euphrates marshes, such as il-Abid, Obū Saibaya, Lishan, il-Hammar, Beni Msharraf,

[1] In the village of ech-Chibayish, from 2 January to 24 December 1953.

Iabada, and Sūg ish-Shyūkh, and two long tours to Hor il-Hammar and the Tigris marshes, each of which took about a month. Nearly every community in the three big marshes of the Tigris region was visited. These tours enabled me to form a general idea of the Marsh Dwellers and their distribution, and provided a basis for comparison.

My intensive study of ech-Chibayish revealed a community remarkable as much for its pride as for its poverty. Pride in tribal traditions, inherited from bedouin forebears, leads them to despise occupations which would make their life less hard and precarious. They despise all trade and, though forced to live by the export of reed mats, they would be ashamed to produce other goods for sale to each other. Although abjectly poor and perennially in debt, they leave the natural food potential of their marshes largely unexploited, and buy what they consume at exorbitant prices from itinerant traders.

This pride and utter contempt of all trade makes their adjustment to modern market conditions all the more painful. The community is divided into those who uphold tribal traditions, who maintain guest houses and dispense free-handed hospitality, and those who have become business men. The latter live in separate parts of the village, build different houses, eat different food. The traditionalists drink coffee, the moderns drink tea. The business men meet to gossip about business, the tribesmen meet to arrange compensation for offences, and the marriages of their girls. The business men are preoccupied with gain; the tribesmen with status. The solidarity of clan and lineage is, however, still immense, and even those who have forsaken tribal traditions in other respects, pay the same contribution as others to the levies which are made for communal lineage or clan obligations.

Although this study was made in the peculiar environment of the marshes, much of what I record is also valid for other rural communities in South Iraq. Clan and lineage organization, corporate responsibility for offences, endogamous marriages, contempt of trade, and love of hospitality, vary little, whether in the marshes, in the desert zones, or in the rich arable plains.

I

The Iraqi Marsh Dwellers

THE Iraqi Marsh Dwellers occupy the low-lying country in the south basin of the twin rivers, the Tigris and the Euphrates. Their home lies roughly within a triangle drawn between Basra in the south and il-Kut and il-Kifil in the northeast and northwest. This area is not a continuous marsh; and much of the population inhabits the numerous towns and villages along the banks of the Tigris and Euphrates. There are also nomadic tribes of bedouin, who pasture their camels and cattle in the plains between Amara and il-Kut, in the two desert barriers dividing the marshes, or west of the Euphrates, between in-Nasriya and il-Hilla.

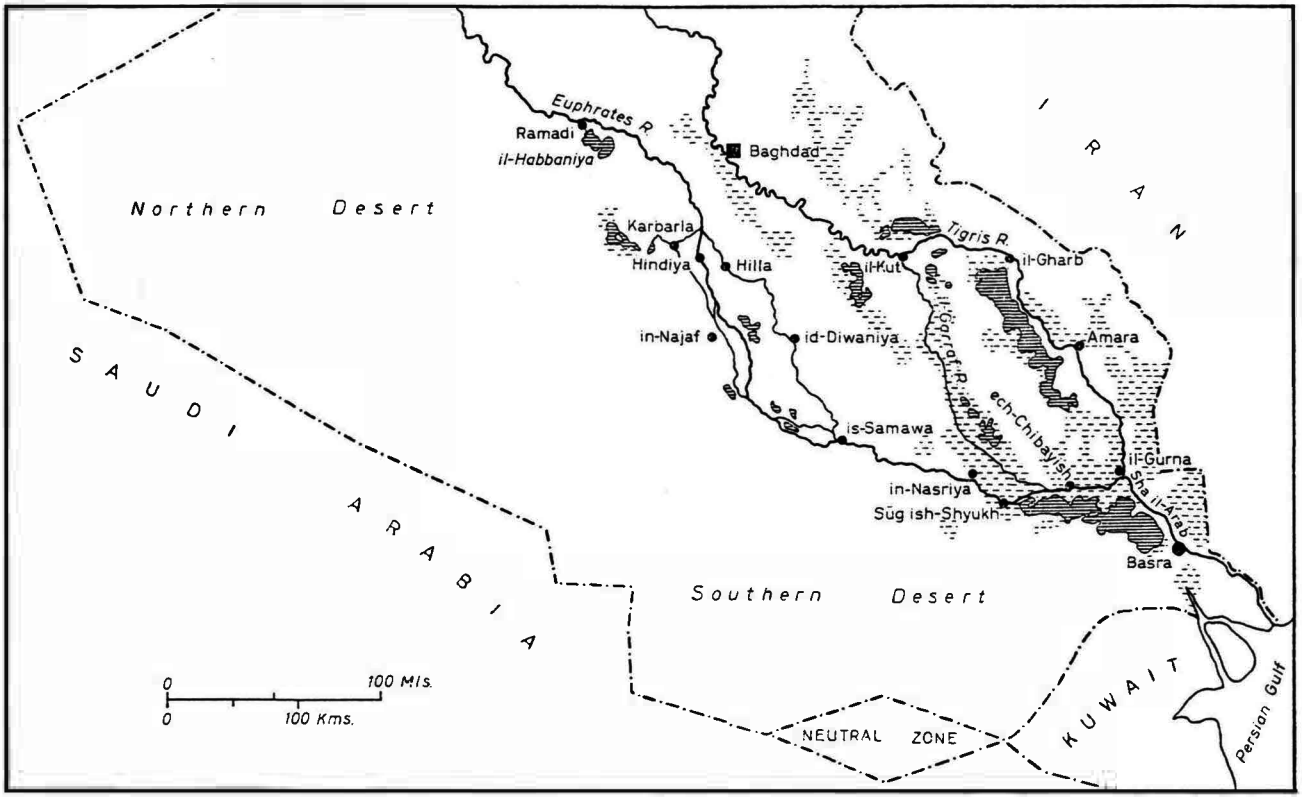
To the north the marsh region is bounded by the towns of il-Kut on the Tigris and il-Hilla on the Euphrates; to the south by Basra; to the east by the Iranian border, which runs for some distance through the marshes; and to the west by the river Euphrates between il-Hilla and Sūg ish-Shyūkh, and the southern edge of Hor il-Hammar from Sūg ish-Shyūkh to Basra.

The climate of Iraq is characterized by large diurnal and annual ranges of temperature, low humidity, and low rainfall. In the southern plains temperatures range from a cool winter to a very hot summer. The coldest months are December, January and February, when the mean daily temperature varies between 50°F and 56°F. From March onwards the temperature rises steadily until the hottest months of the year, July and August, when the mean daily temperature is about 95°F. Temperatures may exceed 120°F during the day, yet at night they may fall to 65°F. From September the temperature drops steadily, and by the end of November the winter has set in and frosts may occur.

The rainy season lasts from October to May, and during the rest of the year there is practically no rainfall. The mean annual rainfall is 200 mm. (8 inches). The prevailing wind is the *shim l*, or north wind, which comes from the mountains of Asia Minor and Kurdistan, and sweeps almost continuously down the valleys of the Tigris and Euphrates; in summer it mitigates the great heat.

The marshland of southern Iraq is probably one of the largest in the world. With the alternating stretches of bare desert, it has been estimated to cover as much as 20,000 square miles.[1] The whole country is built up on

[1] L. Dimmock, The Waterways of Iraq. *Journal of Royal Central Asian Society*, 1945.



Southern Iraq

the old bed of the sea and is formed by silt brought down by the twin rivers. Much of this potentially fertile plain cannot at present be cultivated, because its soils have a high saline content. The country is completely flat, the only elevations in the whole marsh region being occasional mounds which are thought to be the sites of ancient towns.

From March to July, when the Tigris and Euphrates are in flood, about 4,000 square miles are inundated and become almost one sheet of water, with borders and shallower parts of marsh. When the waters subside, these shallow marshes become dry land, and the former sheet of water becomes a marsh, with large permanent lakes.

Except in the deep water, the marshes are thickly covered with reeds, bulrushes, and floating water-plants. Fish and waterfowl abound. The depth of water over much of the marshes is between four and five feet; in places it is much deeper, and at one spot in Hor li-Hwaiza a depth of nearly twenty feet has been measured. The area of permanent marsh is probably not more than three-quarters of the flood-time marsh.

The three great marshy areas are the Tigris belt, the Hammar belt, and the Euphrates belt. The Tigris belt lies east of the river, and extends almost from Basra to il-Kut; the main marshes are Hor li-Hwaiza, Hor es-Saniya, Hor Ladhaim and Hor Oda. The Hammar belt extends from Gurmat Ali (about five miles north of Basra) to Sūg ish-Shyūkh, Albu Salih and ish-Shatra, around the lower reaches of the Gharraf. In this area the main marsh is Hor il-Hammar. The Euphrates belt extends from il-Khidhir to il-Kifil and is composed of a number of small lakes between the two branches of the Euphrates, the il-Hilla and the il-Hindiya.

Two desert barriers divide the marsh belts; one lies between the Gharraf and the Tigris, and the other between the Gharraf and the Euphrates.

HISTORY OF THE MARSH DWELLERS

All the big tribes of Marsh Dwellers trace their descent from one or other of the well-known tribes of Arabia, who, they claim, migrated to Iraq some time between the Arabian conquest of the country during the reign of Omar, the second Caliph (A.D. 637), and a date which may be as recent as 200 years ago. Their claims are not entirely consistent with the views of archaeologists and anthropologists. When he visited the marsh area and wished to know the relationship of the Marsh Dwellers to the surrounding Arabs, Henry Field recalled 'the theory that the Marsh Arabs are the direct descendants of the Sumerians who lived in Iraq about 5,000 years ago, and that they were driven into the marshes for protection . . .'.[1] Where did Henry Field hear of this theory? He does not state, nor do we know, whom exactly he means by 'Marsh Arabs'.

Henri Frankfort considered the Iraqi marshes to have been already settled in the fifth and fourth millennia B.C. When the northern diluvial

[1] H. Field, Marsh Arabs of Iraq, *Asia*, August 1936.