

BEDOUINS
of the
EMPTY
QUARTER

Donald Powell Cole

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To
Merzuq, Hurran,
and all the youth of the Āl Murrah
who face probably the greatest changes
of any people in the world.



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Foreword

We are here in the presence of extremes: an area so desolate that it is known as the Empty Quarter—though it is by no means empty; a place inhabited by a people so purely and thoroughly devoted to their pastoral pursuits that they are referred to as the nomads of the nomads. To the urban and peasant Arabs nearby, it is a land inhabited by jinns, but to the Āl Murrah and other camel keeping pastoralists, it provides a rich and rewarding life, for the milk is the sweetest, the air is pure and all men are brothers.

For either to survive, men and camels must live in close symbiosis; each completely dependent upon the other. The camels provide food, fiber and transport; man provides the knowledge of available resources, of which the most precious are water and the grasses that grow where rains have fallen. Donald Cole shows us that this is more complex and intricate than such a simple statement would suggest.

First of all, there is the intricate knowledge of the desert itself—its varieties, its moods, its resources. So clever are these desert dwellers that they are thought to be the descendants of the spirits—the jinns—that inhabit this world. Next, there is the knowledge of the camels—their needs and capacities, and the peculiarities of each individual animal. Knowledge of the landscape and knowledge of the animals must be brought together so the scarce resources are fully utilized, yet carefully conserved.

To wrest their livelihood from this apparently inhospitable environment, men must work in collaboration, and as important

as their technical knowledge—perhaps more important—is the structuring of social life. The tribesmen of the Empty Quarter must have a flexible social system, one that enables the individual household to operate alone when the environmental situation requires, and yet enables it to fit into a larger structure when the season demands. This means that it requires a pattern of independence and equality, while at the same time providing the necessary leadership. It means that each person must be capable of performing every necessary task, but that the chores be equitably shared by all.

The ecology of this camel pastoralism pervades every facet of Al Murrah life, and much that has seemed mysterious becomes meaningful in this context. We see the relationships of men and women in terms of the close collaboration required between them, and discover the personal element in that most enigmatic aspect of their social organization—marriage *within* the lineage. We discover qualities of personality as these relate to the exigencies of desert existence, and we see how the religion of Islam is transformed by their special problems.

The Al Murrah live according to ancient traditions forged in their desert environment, but this does not mean their life is unchanging. Cole shows us that already there are changes that began in 1932, when Saudi Arabia became a nation and intertribal raiding and warfare was brought to an end. He also shows the adaptability that they are bringing to bear as the desert is increasingly invaded by motor transport and oil rigs. Whether Al Murrah life will survive in the Empty Quarter will depend on the wisdom of their national leadership in permitting them to make the necessary adjustments in their traditional system—adjustments that they are willing and able to make.

Man everywhere must attune his life to the requirements of his economy. In a place like the Arabian desert, which places severe limits on how one must live, these adjustments are most insistent. The tribes of the Empty Quarter show us that even when these demands pervade every facet of behavior, life can still be rich and rewarding.

Walter Goldschmidt

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Preface

For two years, between April 1968 and May 1970, I had the good fortune to live in Saudi Arabia. I went there as a graduate student in anthropology to do research for my doctoral dissertation at the University of California, Berkeley. No academic anthropological research had ever been carried out in Saudi Arabia and I went there as a kind of ethnographic explorer. At the suggestion of Dr. 'Abd al-Aziz al-Khuwaiter of the University of Riyadh and of Musa'ud al-Taji al-Faruki of the Saudi Arabian Ministry of Agriculture and Water, I decided to work among the Āl Murrah Bedouin tribe. The government of Saudi Arabia was developing a large-scale sedentarization project for nomads at Haradh and the Āl Murrah were being considered for inclusion in this project. Although I was skeptical about the merits of sedentarization projects, I welcomed this opportunity to work among one of the most traditional Bedouin tribes in Arabia and to make my research of some relevance to government administrators concerned about the development of their country.

I spent eighteen months with the Āl Murrah in the desert regions of eastern and southeastern Saudi Arabia. During most of this time, I lived as a permanent guest in the tent of 'Ali ibn Salem ibn al-Kurbi of the Āl 'Azab patrilineage. 'Ali's second oldest son, al-Kurbi, was hired as a driver-guide at my behest by the Saudi Arabian Ministry of Agriculture and Water, which also generously offered me the use of a pickup truck.

The realization of this study would have been impossible without the active cooperation and friendship of al-Kurbi who not

only expertly guided me through the deserts of Saudi Arabia but guided me among the Āl Murrah as well. A young man in his early thirties, he welcomed me as a brother, helped me learn the Āl Murrah dialect of Arabic, and introduced me to hundreds of his fellow tribespeople. I also owe a special debt to his father, his father's brothers, and his mother's brothers for teaching me genealogies, for telling me stories about raids and the days of old, and for instructing me in the traditions of the Arab nomads. His brother, Merzuq, and his cousin, Hurran ibn Muhammad, both long-haired youths, taught me how to ride camels, took me herding with them, and taught me most of what I learned about the desert itself.

Because I lived with the Āl 'Azab patrilineage, those people are the ones I know best. But I also visited all the other lineages of the Āl Murrah and spent altogether about six weeks at different times with the amir of the Āl Murrah, Talib ibn Rashid ibn Shoraim, his son, Rashid, and his nephew, Faisal ibn Muhammad. All of the Āl Murrah received me with open hospitality and, in time, I became well known throughout the tribe and even among other tribes, for the news of the desert travels widely. They gave me the name of 'Abdallah and said that I was the son of the amir Talib. They said that I had come to Arabize myself, which was true in a way, and they took pleasure in teaching me the best etiquette and manners so that I could act as a *sharif*, or noble, tribesman. I spent the happiest months of my life with them and I can never fully repay them for all they taught me nor for the brotherly love they gave me.

Many others helped me in countless ways throughout my stay in Saudi Arabia. My deepest gratitude goes to His Majesty King Faisal ibn 'Abd al-Aziz Āl Faisal Āl Sa'ud, who personally approved my research program. For their continued support, encouragement, and hospitality I should like to especially acknowledge Princes Sa'ad ibn Faisal, 'Abdallah ibn 'Abd al-Aziz Āl Jiluwi, and Mansur ibn 'Abdallah ibn 'Abdurrahman; Shaikhs Ahmed Zaki al-Yamani and Hassan al-Mishari; Dr. 'Abd al-Aziz al-Kuwaiter; 'Abd al-Aziz al-Turki; Dr. Soraya M. al-Turki; Musa'ud al-Taji al-Faruki; Tarek al-Shawaf; Terry Timmons; and Vicki Caldwell Timmons. This study was financed by a research grant and fellowship from the U.S. National Institute of Mental Health, for which I am most appreciative.

This book is a completely revised version of my doctoral dissertation. My committee at Berkeley was composed of Professors Laura Nader, Nelson Graburn, and Mounah Khouri, all of whom helped me immensely in the preparation of that work. I should also like to thank Professors Robert Fernea and Talal Asad who read and commented in detail on my dissertation. The present presentation of the data and the interpretations expressed are, of course, my own responsibility.

There are always difficulties in transliterating Arabic into English. This is especially so when the speech of the group concerned varies widely from classical Arabic, as is the case with the Āl Murrah. I have tried to spell Arabic words as closely as possible to the way they are pronounced in the Āl Murrah colloquial dialect. Long and short vowels are not differentiated. An apostrophe, ' , used for the glottal stop. The barred A in Āl is used to differentiate that word, meaning People, from the definite article in Arabic, *al*.

DONALD POWELL COLE

San Francisco
June 1974

THE ARABIAN PENINSULA

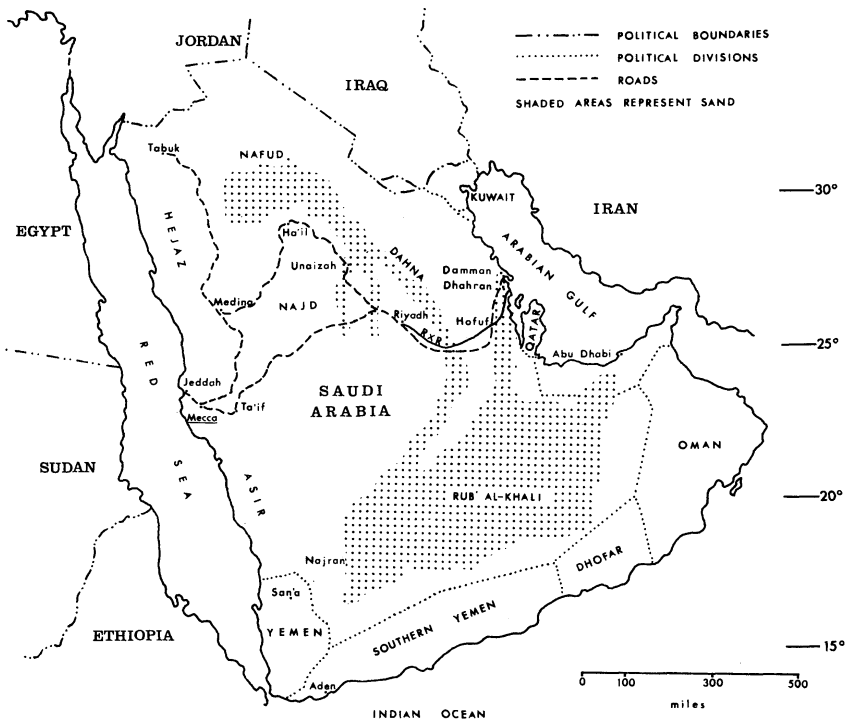


Figure 1

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

In late September 1968 after receiving permission from the government of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, I traveled to the headquarters of the amir of the Al Murrah Bedouin tribe in an abandoned worker's barracks near the oil processing plant at Abquaiq, a town in eastern Saudi Arabia. The amir, Talib ibn Rashid ibn Shoraim al-Marri, doubles as paramount chief of the Al Murrah and as head of a unit of the Saudi Arabian Reserve National Guard of which most of the members are from the Al Murrah tribe.

I was hospitably welcomed by the amir, his sons, and his father's brother's sons and during the following days introduced to scores of tribesmen who had come to perform their monthly duties in the National Guard and to collect their salaries. The amir and his eldest son, Rashid, took pains to teach me the genealogy of the Al Murrah and to tell me something of their history. Most of the other men spontaneously told me the names of the *fakhds*, or lineages, from which they came, as well as the names of other kinship groupings, all of which they would ask me to repeat. I was exhilarated by the open, straightforward, friendly manner in which these men presented themselves. They always seemed to be laughing and playing jokes on each other and on me.

Their friendly gregariousness was in contrast to descriptions I had read and heard of Saudi Arabian Bedouin as dour fanatics who, with their long hair and daggers, are barbarians who appreciate few of the finer things of life. It also contrasted with descriptions of the desert region the *Al Murrah* inhabit, the *Rub' al-Khali* (the Empty Quarter), as a barren land of madness and death. These *Al Murrah* always said, "In the *Rub' al-Khali* you will find everything: the best camels, plenty of good camel's milk, lots of hunting, clean sand and fresh air, and only one's brothers—everything." Throughout the eighteen months I lived with them, I never thought of them as barbaric or fanatical. Rather, a feeling of what I would call aristocratic simplicity was continuously confirmed by their actions and their talk. They reject the city as physically and socially polluted and prefer the desert where they can live what they habitually describe as a pure and clean life. Their rejection of the security of sedentary life is coupled with an adherence to an austere practice of Islam as taught by the strict *Handbali* Sunnites and a high valuation of the ways of the Arabs—of being generous and dispensing hospitality, of seeking revenge when wronged, and of marrying only people of one's kind.

But these people, content to keep to themselves and to exploit an ecological niche that has provided them with a relatively high level of subsistence within traditional Arabia, are now being faced with what may well be a life or death struggle for survival. What is in question does not concern so much the physical life of individual beings but whether their society, their culture, and their way of life, have a place—even in some modified form—in modern Saudi Arabia.

The world's richest known oil fields lie in eastern Saudi Arabia and its brother states that bound the Arabian Gulf. Oil was discovered in Saudi Arabia in 1938; its most rapid exploitation began after World War II; revenues rose from \$5 million in 1950 to nearly \$1 billion in 1968 and to over \$3 billion in 1973. Into this area, the cradle of the desert Arabs and of Islam itself, have gushed the consumer products of both Western and Eastern industrial economies. Trucks, cars, and airplanes have replaced camels, which had been the only means of transportation within the lifetime of people no older than thirty. Within the past ten years, the old labyrinthine mud-brick cities have felt the tread of

the bulldozer opening up broad, straight thoroughfares and are crumbling as the old houses are abandoned for modern air-conditioned villas in the suburbs or high-rise apartment buildings.

The cities have changed tremendously and are today booming with new schools and universities, with hospitals, with commercial establishments selling products from most of the industrial world, and with paved streets and broad avenues that extend for miles around the sprawling cities of Riyadh and Jeddah. To the cities and oil camps has also come a large migration of Lebanese, Palestinian, and Egyptian middle-class people, of workers from the poorer and more traditional areas of the Yemen, Hadhramaut, and Oman, and of European, North American, Pakistani, and Japanese advisers, technicians, skilled laborers, and company managers.

The towns and cities have changed more than the villages or the desert but the delicate balance between the desert and the sown, between nomadic pastoralist and sedentary farmer, has been destroyed. The majority of the nomads, probably twenty per cent of an estimated total population of eight million, continue to herd animals in the desert and to provide for their basic subsistence, but more and more of their youth are leaving the tents and the herds to seek jobs as wage laborers in the cities and oil camps. Many are staying on, bringing their wives and children, and settling down to a life as members of a wage-earning proletariat rather than as independent tribespeople.

The future of nomadism is thus uncertain. Certainly they are already changing, but is nomadic pastoralism itself altogether doomed in contemporary Saudi Arabia? Why is it cheaper and easier to import frozen mutton from Argentina and New Zealand than to use national products? Do not the deserts of Arabia still bloom and provide the grazing lands that used to allow the export of large numbers of camels, sheep, and goats throughout the Levant and to Egypt and India? Cannot the exploitation of these lands be made to contribute to the rapidly developing cash-oriented economy? These are questions we seek to answer in the latter part of this book, but they should be kept in the back of the reader's mind throughout, for they form part of the reality nomads face in today's Arabia.

Before attempting to analyze the changes faced by nomads in Saudi Arabia, and indeed in much of the rest of the Arab world,

let us turn first to a discussion of nomadic pastoralism in Arabia in its more traditional aspects. The Bedouin of Arabia have always represented only part of the total population of the area. Despite the myths of many of the sedentary people who claim to have descended from nomads, most desert people have probably always been villagers living in oases. The nomads, however, are the ones who capture the attention of travelers and who have provided much of the ethos of traditional Arabia as a whole.

In this book, we turn our attention to the nomads not because they represented an idealized and romanticized version of the "true Arab," but because we are interested in seeing how they manage to live in an environment that most people regard as more than merely inhospitable—as a land of madness and death incapable of supporting human life. They are highly skilled specialists enjoying a relatively comfortable life in a harsh environment. How do they do it?

The perspective we take is ecological. How is the social structure and culture of the Bedouins adapted to their life as nomadic pastoralists? Especially, what kinds of social groups exist within their society and how do these provide an organizational framework for the exploitation of their environment? How is the process of fission and fusion of social units, of contracting and expanding, that is so much a part of the dynamics of Bedouin social organization related to seasonal changes and to the needs of their animals? How does their desert habitation and their intimate association with animals affect their religious and symbolic life? And how are all these aspects of their life interrelated to form a coherent whole that until recently has been transmitted from generation to generation almost without change?

NOMADIC PASTORALISM IN THE MIDDLE EAST

The primarily Islamic lands of Southwest Asia and North Africa, commonly referred to as the Middle East, display a number of physical characteristics that favor the combination of sedentary agriculture and nomadic pastoralism. Rainfall is generally low and almost nowhere reaches the 40- to 50-inch yearly levels that are characteristic of the eastern United States, western Europe, sub-Saharan Africa, India, and China. Only a few coastal and mountain areas receive as much as 20 inches per year, which

is equal to the drier parts of Spain. Rainfall in the rest of the area varies from less than 1 inch per year in the central Sahara Desert and southern Egypt to 4 inches in the deserts of southern Arabia and to as much as 8 inches in northern Arabia and the Syrian Desert.

Although agriculture is severely limited to less than 10 percent of the total land mass because of lack of water, some of the world's most famous agrarian states and empires have been located in this area. Most of the crops and animals that we in the West know and use today were first domesticated here during the early period of the Agricultural Revolution, at least 10,000 years ago. Agriculture, of course, has been highly concentrated in a few areas that can be irrigated. The valleys of the famous river systems of the Middle East, most notably the Tigris-Euphrates and the Nile, have known large scale irrigation projects since at least 7,500 B.P. and are associated not only with highly intensive agriculture but with the development of urban living and the division of society into a number of different economic specializations. The state, as an institution, also had its earliest development in these agricultural centers of the Middle East.

The emergence of pastoralism as a specialized form of activity dates from the same period as the emergence of agriculture in the Middle East. Archaeological evidence presents us with a picture of agriculture and pastoralism developing more or less concomitantly and in close symbiotic relationship. Equally early dates are found for both animal and plant domesticants, which suggests a general regionwide process of cultural and ecological change. Over 10,000 years ago when hunter-gatherers first began the process of selective harvesting and of seed planting that led to increased yields and the onset of sedentary village life, they also began to control the movements of herds of wild sheep and goats to keep them permanently on the margins of grain fields. Some of these animals were captured, penned, and domesticated. As agriculture continued to develop and population densities increased, more economic specializations emerged. Eventually, full-time herders appeared, especially as they began to exploit pasture areas further removed from the centers of cultivation.

Nomadic pastoralism is thus not a holdover of the hunter-gatherer way of life of our paleolithic ancestors. Unlike the wild animals on which hunter-gatherers depend and over which they