From Camel to Truck

The Bedouin in the Modern World

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For AQ

Map 1. The *Badia*

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Notes on the Transliteration of Arabic Words

Arabic terms have been for the most part transliterated upon recognized lines. All Arabic words in the text are italicized unless they are relatively common in English usage (e.g., caliph, sheikh, emir). The first time an Arabic term appears in the text the English equivalent is given in parenthesis, if its meaning is not apparent otherwise. Thereafter the reader must refer to the first mention in text or preferably to the glossary.

Foreword

In March of 1973, I sat in the sumptuous, chandelier-lit reception room of the Emir Faour of the Fadl Bedouin tribe awaiting an interview. I had visited this elegant apartment in the Corniche district of Beirut a number of times over the past six months hoping to secure permission to begin ethnographic fieldwork with an extended family of the Fadl tribe, which moved between Syria and Lebanon. I had identified this tribe the year before in the University of California Social Science Library in Los Angeles. It was the 'perfect' field site to test my doctoral dissertation hypothesis. I wanted to challenge the ontological assumptions common in the literature at that time indicating that pastoralists were irrational, backward and resistant to change. I wanted to test my own theory that pastoralists did not resist change which they saw in their own interests; that they did indeed make rational economic decisions. To that end, I had identified a Ph.D. dissertation conducted by the son of the Emir of this tribe, Sheikh Fadl, undertaken nearly ten years earlier (1964) and supervised by the eminent social anthropologist Raymond Firth, a professor at the London School of Economics. I felt that, with this earlier study as a base line, I would indeed be able to determine the extent, if any, of economic rationality, entrepreneurship and development in the tribe.

I had arrived in Beirut in October 1972 hoping to get out into 'the field' by January 1973. I had registered my interest in doing some part-time teaching at the American University of Beirut (AUB) and then proceeded to try to find the Fadl tribe. Everyone I talked to insisted there were no Bedouin in Lebanon. I persisted in my search, giving a number of talks on the subject at AUB, at the British Council and the American Cultural Centre. Finally a staff member of the British Council approached me and told me that she had been out in the central Bekaa Valley and had identified a relative, a landowner in the town of Kab Elias, just over the mountains who had good relations with the Emir Tamir el Milhelm of another Bedouin tribe, the Hassanna. That was encouraging news.

At about the same time I made another contact, someone who actually knew the son of the Emir of the Fadl. A meeting was set up but then cancelled at the last minute. Several months went by with meetings

agreed, dates changed, postponed again and then cancelled. Eventually a close cousin in Damascus realized that she knew Sheikh Fadl's sister and she too began to help me pursue a meeting with him. Then in the depth of winter a meeting did take place with the elusive Sheikh. We discussed my plans to do a follow up study to test the hypothesis of economic rationality and growth. Sheikh Fadl liked the idea and promised to arrange a meeting with his father to gain his approval.

Another round of waiting ensued, punctuated by postponed, delayed and cancelled meetings. Although I used the time as efficiently as I could, the tension and the worry as months passed that this contact was not going to work out were oppressive. Finally, Sheikh Fadl confided in me that his father had agreed to allow me to study the tribe but only on condition that my father gave his consent. That consent would have to be given verbally in a face-to-face meeting. I was dumbstruck. Having spent the last decade as an independent minor and then adult university student in California I had somehow convinced myself that I was a liberated young woman. Yet now, come what may, I was not going to be able to progress my fieldwork without intervention from my father. A phone call to Mogadishu, Somalia, where my father was completing his appointment as the WHO Resident Representative, went well. Of course he would travel to Beirut and meet with the Emir of the Fadl. It was his duty and his pleasure.

My father sat next to me on the sofa in the Emir's reception room. We were kept waiting only long enough to be served cups of dark, bitter cardamom infused coffee. As we finished this traditional Bedouin drink, the Emir Faour and his son, Sheikh Fadl, joined us. My father and the Emir engaged in a few minutes of light conversation, establishing their relationship to several circles of acquaintances and colleagues in Lebanon and Syria. Eventually the subject turned to my proposed field study and my wish to be placed with an extended family of Fadl Bedouin in Lebanon. The Emir agreed to take me out into the field and return me to my father safe and unharmed. The journey would take place the following day.

The next morning I was shown to a seat in the back of the Emir's Cadillac alongside the Emir; in the front seats were the chauffer and another of the Emir's sons. I have no recollection of our conversation during this journey; but I do remember that I noticed that every man in the car wore a large, jewel-encrusted watch, each set to a different time or time zone. The drive from Beirut to the field site was just under two hours. We arrived at a

settlement of tents and stone buildings along the foot of the Anti-Lebanon Mountains. The entourage had been expected; it was a day of celebration. The Emir's visits were infrequent, so this was a very special occasion. I believe he had other business than mine to discuss, but I was whisked away by the women of the extended family group and hosted in another compound for a short while. As the Emir prepared to leave, I was summoned to the *majlis* (reception area) where he sat with the elders of the tribal lineage. 'Abu Ali', he said to the family head, 'She is to be returned to me when she has finished her work, with not a hair on her head touched'. And with that he got up and left. My book *From Camel to Truck* had been conceived.

Nearly 35 years later I returned to this same settlement. It was 2006 and I was conducting a study of Bedouin health care in the region and I wanted to see how the Bedouin in Lebanon had fared. It had changed little except that the tents had disappeared and been replaced with small cement block units, some of two rooms, others three. I identified a few of the adults I had known; Abu Ali's daughter-in-law and her children still lived in the house I had sat in many an hour. A few of the young women I had known in the 1970s were still there. I had attended a number of their weddings. But their husbands had all died in their fifties. Health care was problematic as, for most of them, citizenship had not been forthcoming, despite constant lobbying in the intervening decades, and thus they had no access to government health services. When I had researched my book, I had been pleased to find that a policy of 'benign neglect' characterized state–tribal interaction. A move had been underway to petition the state to grant this group of Bedouin citizenship. The Emir Faour was involved in these negotiations. At the time I had thought that being ignored and left alone by the state was better than being forced to settle. What I had not considered was that three decades later they would still not have been recognized as citizens; the long-term impact of such marginalization was clearly expressed in terms of poor health care.

The lack of citizenship remains a serious issue in Lebanon but not in Syria or the other Arab states where Bedouin are found. The peculiar consociational political system set into place in Lebanon by the French during their Inter War Mandate meant that a balance had to be maintained between Muslim and Christians. Many Bedouin held centuries old grazing rights in the Bekaa Valley. They, and their leader, had refused to register with the French National Census Authority in 1932, believing it to be a colonial rule rather

than an independent nation-state. In addition, the French Authorities did not wish to add Sunni Muslim numbers – the Bedouin are by and large all Sunni Muslim – to the official population figures which would have tilted towards a Muslim majority (Maktabi 1999). The Bedouin in Lebanon are still paying the price for that decision, with either no nationality papers or papers stating that their 'citizenship' is *qayd il-dars* (under study). Of nearly 150,000 Bedouin in Lebanon only 40–60,000 hold nationality papers and have the right to vote (Chatty 2010b). Those with voting rights are now being courted by political parties determined to swing the balance of Muslims in the country from a Shiite to a Sunni majority.

In Syria my contact with the Bedouin had been more continuous over the years. I worked with and for a number of Bedouin tribes in the country in various capacities related to rural development. I had observed numerous Bedouin celebrations and interactions with non-Bedouin and I had come to know well the Emirs of the Ruwalla Bedouin visiting them frequently at their *majlis*, Beit Sha'laan, in Damascus. Over the decades I had studied the variable economic successes of some Bedouin families as well as the impoverishment of others (Chatty 1996a). Here, at least, the government policy of benign neglect had allowed some Bedouin to expand their horizons and to benefit from transnational relations and trade particularly with Saudi Arabia. Slowly, I had come to reaffirm the importance of hospitality as a Bedouin institution and a mechanism for maintaining and promoting the authority of lineage and tribal leadership. The latter was vested in a moral authority which could be augmented or lost by behaviour that either respected or disregarded family norms and custom, particularly with regard to the practice of hospitality. *Karam*, the Arabic term which can be translated as hospitality or generosity, was ultimately also about security, protection and respect. By the late twentieth century, a resurgence of tribal political strength was becoming obvious in Syria. Government efforts to snuff out tribal leadership roles in party politics seem to have backfired and instead a growth in Bedouin representation in Parliament was clearly evident (Chatty 2010c). More parliamentarians and other officials reaching high rank in the Bath party are self-identifying as Bedouin than has been the case in the past. But who exactly is a Bedouin today?

The past thirty years have seen not only a resurgence of interest in Bedouin tribes, but a confusion of concepts which originated in the neo-colonial efforts during the Inter-War years to settle the moving tribes – the