

September 2023

Bedouins in Sinai and Petra: Nationalism and Pre-development Identity

Youssef A. Mansour

The American University in Cairo, youssefahmed3453@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://fount.aucegypt.edu/urje>

Recommended Citation

Mansour, Youssef A. (2023) "Bedouins in Sinai and Petra: Nationalism and Pre-development Identity," *The Undergraduate Research Journal*: Vol. 9, Article 5.

Available at: <https://fount.aucegypt.edu/urje/vol9/iss1/5>

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by AUC Knowledge Fountain. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Undergraduate Research Journal by an authorized editor of AUC Knowledge Fountain. For more information, please contact fountadmin@aucegypt.edu.

Bedouins in Sinai and Petra: Nationalism and Pre-development Identity

Cover Page Footnote

Youssef A. Mansour, Undergraduate Student, Department of Sociology, Egyptology and Anthropology, The American University in Cairo.

Bedouins in Sinai and Petra: Nationalism and Pre-development Identity

Youssef S. Mansour¹

Abstract

There are many preconceived notions about Bedouins, captured in general dictionary definitions of the term. For example, "Bedouin" is defined by the Oxford dictionary as "An Arab of the desert"; by Merriam-Webster as "nomadic Arab of the Arabian, Syrian, or northern African deserts." However, the laxity of these definitions can be easily confirmed by a visit to Umsayhon, Jordan, where Bedouins live in cities with urban facilities and services, or to Ossela, Sinai, where Bedouins are settled in homes with televisions, or even to Matruh, Egypt where Bedouins wear wristwatches and plastic shoes and travel in Toyota trucks. The identity of Bedouins has drastically shifted from desert roaming and herding to an urban lifestyle due to the nationalism policies adopted by the states and the tourism industry, which made their heritage a commodity.

Nationalism is a complex and contested concept that can have different implications depending on the perspective. I will focus on the element of nationalism that involves the process of nation-building, which is the construction or structuring of a national identity and unity using the power of the state or across borders. Nation-building entails developing political, economic, security, and social institutions that foster social harmony, economic growth, and national integration. However, nationalism from this perspective can also have negative aspects, such as exclusion, intolerance, or aggression towards specific groups or minorities within the state. Hence, I will be exploring some forms of this exclusion towards Bedouins and its adverse consequences on the Bedouin identity.

The documentaries "The Bedouin of Petra" (Al Jazeera English) and "The last Bedu of Petra & Wadi Rum" (SLICE) provide a close look at the impacts of tourism and developmentalism on Bedouins. By using these artifacts, along with consulting the extensive literature and discourse about Bedouins, I will be discussing how the Bedouins are depicted by states in the light of the tourism industry and their perceived role in nation building, which contributed to the undeniable fading of the Bedouin identity. Also, I will be attempting to answer the questions of who the Bedouins are, where they are today, and how they depict themselves in relation to the state. The paper will focus on the Bedouins of Petra in Jordan and the Bedouins of Sinai, Egypt. However, the same could be applied to the Bedouins in other states as they are analogous in many aspects, including being ruled by authoritarian states and impacted by tourism.

Key Words: Bedouins; Identity; Nationalism; Modernization; Tourism; Petra; Sinai; Colonialism

In order to understand who Bedouins are, I will be considering the traditional identity of Bedouins before the colonialist notions of modernization and the nationality-affirming states that made a profound shift in the "pre-development Bedouins communities." Where people identify themselves as "real Bedouins," some characteristics are usually found, mainly: strong kinship networks, value systems stemming from customary law, and nomadic pastoralism as a source of livelihood.

¹ Undergraduate student in the Sociology, Anthropology, and Egyptology Department at the American University in Cairo

Understanding the structure of Bedouin society is essential for defining their identity. "My brothers and I against my cousins, then my cousins and I against the strangers" is a widely quoted proverb that summarizes the hierarchy of loyalty in Bedouin communities. This proverb corresponds with the kinship structure proposed by Abu Rabi'a where there are degrees of kinship ranked "in ascending order... the nuclear family, the extended family, the sub-tribe, the tribe and the clan" (Abu-Rabi'a, 2006, p.865). However, the tribal alliances and loyalties are negotiated as the circumstances require (Abu-Rabi'a, 2006).

Bedouins play down wealth relative to the values which they uphold and consider to be of more importance, like generosity and ancestry (Peters, 1991). Clinton Baily (2004) collected 1350 proverbs about Bedouins in which 3 references were made to wealth while none were made to poverty, and hunger was mentioned 16 times compared to the 63 times the importance of generosity to guests was mentioned. And although resources are scarce in the desert, Bedouins refuse to commodify resources in conformity with the dominant economic practices and instead embrace generosity as a key principle. In fact, generosity is essential for their survival as it begets the reciprocal obligation on which their communities are reliant - a traveler in the desert doesn't worry about food as he is assured of the hospitality of other Bedouins during the journey (Gilbert, 2013).

Customs are another integral part of the Bedouin identity. Bedouins have a wide array of customs ranging from putting eyeliner for its spiritual properties, marking the wall of the tents with goats' blood as a mark of successful erection and habitation of the tent, to the many ways of pouring coffees, each with specific significance (SLICE, 2021; Al Jazeera English, 2014). If the coffee exceeds half the cup, that means the guest is unwelcomed to stay for longer and shaking the cup after drinking means enough coffee or the refilling will continue.

Herding is another key feature of traditional Bedouin communities as expressed by one of Gilbert's respondents who stated that "without his livestock a Bedouin is not a Bedouin." (Gilbert 45) And unquestionably, Bedouins have profound knowledge of the deserts and survival skills — knowledge that is generated over centuries of roaming deserts and that is passed down from ancestors to the successive generations. They know how to receive guidance from the stars, how to defend themselves against desert beasts, and how to make medicines from available sources in the desert (Al Jazeera English, 2014).

Bedu-state Relations

Central governments generally regard Bedouins and other non-sedentary communities as "states inside a state," which is an issue; hence, they push them to become assimilated into mainstream society through adaptive strategies. Also, Bedouins are treated as second-class citizens by their nation-states as we can infer from the policies of land confiscation, dispossession, coerced settlement, and the inequality in providing governmental services compared to other citizens (Marx, 2006). In Egypt, Sinai has undergone substantial development under the Israeli occupation, which continued even after Egypt regained its dominance of Sinai. This rapid commercial development correlated with the loss of lands and livelihoods for the Bedouins. In response to this economic development in South Sinai, Bedouin economy has shifted from being mainly premised on pastoralism and herding, which provided the livelihood for ten months a year, to almost complete dependence on paid jobs (Gilbert, 2011). However, the employment opportunities they were offered by the government did not offset the loss of subsistence resulting from land confiscation and environmental devastation, as they are only employed in menial jobs. This is a

part of the rejection Bedouins receive not only from governments but from a settled population that resists assimilating them into the national identity bearing in mind what Altorki and Cole describe in Egypt as a lingering sense that Bedouins are "not really Egyptian" (Altorki, 2006). These detribalization and sedentarization policies' main aim is to serve the State's economy as pastoralism is of little benefit to the economy compared to low-wage workers and tourism. The same pattern of governmental-settlement efforts can also be seen in Syria, Oman, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan (Cole, 2003).

After all of the Bedouins' peaceful attempts to make their voices heard failed, they turned to acts of political resistance as a last resort. They included the turning-in of ID cards by a group of tribesmen from Gararsha as disapproval of the State's failure to honor its contract to them as Egyptian citizens and of the arbitrary arrests they are subjected to (Gilbert, 2013). In 2013, after police arrested a Bedouin in northern Sinai on suspicion of theft, the angry tribesmen responded with gunfire in an attempt to storm a police station, leaving one killed Bedouin (Salon, 2012). The escalating tensions led some tribesmen to kidnap tourists, and the police once responded by beating and shooting an unrelated tribesman, according to Gilbert's eyewitness (Gilbert, 2013).

The relationship between the Egyptian State and the Bedouins in Sinai has been characterized by a deep-rooted history of mistrust and conflicts. According to the government, these conflicts have involved incidents such as armed group attacks, tourist kidnappings, and thefts. In a complete denial of these accusations, Sheik Atteya (the Sheikh of the Tarabin tribe in Sinai) said: "Our complete loyalty is for Egypt, but Egypt does not give us back." (Elshony, 2015) He raised the issues of land confiscation, taxation on Bedouin-built tourist camps without governmental aid, and unavailable governmental services in Sinai (e.g., education). "We are bored of being marginalized; we want to live like humans. We have already been ignored for 30 years; enough is enough," said Sheikh Atteya ("Bedouin's problems in Sinai.", 2015).

The Egyptian government's current investments in isolating South Sinai Bedouins from the resort city of Sharm-El Sheikh by constructing a 20-million-pound fence encircling the city to protect and revitalize tourism and curb the terrorist operations — a project that experts anticipate will widen the gap between South Sinai residents and the State — is a sign of the continuity of the unfair treatment of Bedouins till now (Mahmoud, 2019). "It would also be sending a message to the Bedouins that they are outcasts who do not deserve protection from terrorism, or that they are terrorists themselves." Said Sharif, a shop owner in one of Sharm El Sheikh resorts (Mahmoud, 2019).

The Egyptian and Jordanian states' failure to and disinterest in acknowledging Bedouins and its categorization of them as an occupational or ethnic group results in Bedouins lacking legitimate channels to voice their concerns and only perpetuates and exacerbates the tensions between them and the State (Gilbert, 2011). This has led to protests against a parliament without Bedouin representation (Fahmy, 2012) in the case of Sinai, and even to an armed Rebellion in 1970 in Bdul tribe in Jordan against forced dispossession. In 1970 the Bdul tribe experienced their greatest shock when the Jordanian government designated their home (Petra desert) as a national park. The government regarded the tribe as a bother to the tourists and an obstacle to the preservation efforts of Petra's ancient monuments and ordered the tribe's dispossession. The government was able to gradually wear down the rebellion and eventually settled the tribe in Umm-Sayhun city. However, since the government's main priority was the dispossession of the tribe and not providing services and fully developed urban facilities, the city was not well prepared that the houses were too small, and the tribe preferred dwelling in the desert but had to abide by the

deadline of 1984 set by the government to move into the city, or they will be forced out (Shoup, 1985).

How is the Bedouin identity shifting? What is being lost?

The 9-year-old Zed beholds the majestic El-Khazneh temple— one of the Nabatean ruins dating back thousands of years — in awe while his father teaches him about his great cultural heritage and his ancestors who once inhabited Petra and lived in caves (SLICE, 2021). The SLICE documentary “The Last Bedu of Petra & Wadi Rum” explores the idea that now the soul of Bedouins left Petra after their dispossession and loss of their rich cultural heritage, members of the Bdul tribe like Zed and his father, who still live in Petra, are the last hope for preserving the Bedouin identity although somehow stained by tourism. Zed's family still lives a simple, rugged life in their ancestral cave in Petra. A closer look at this conservative family could show us how the Bedouin identity is doomed to end. Although they are still shepherding, their income largely depends on tourism; even Zed wakes up in the morning to offer tourists donkey rides. Zed's older brother chose to receive education in a relatively distant school, hoping for a better future, knowing that his choice is inescapably putting an end to his father's lifestyle. Zed, on the other hand, chose to stay in the desert, and there is nothing he does not know about sheep and goats, but what future would skill like that secure for Zed? In fact, Zed is protesting against his father's incessant attempts to get him into a school. Now, generally, younger generations of Bedouin, both settled and in the desert, are becoming more literate, with rising numbers completing secondary school and enrolling in universities (Cole, 2003).

Zed's family is an example of the minority who still dwell in deserts, clinging to their ancestral heritage while the majority have shifted to living in housing units in cities. The loss that the Bedouin identity is suffering is no secret and can be seen through UNESCO-affiliated organizations that aim at the preservation of the Bedouin culture. However, it is indisputable that teaching children how to erect tents in schools does not replace passed-down ancestral knowledge of inhabiting the desert for years. The centuries-year-old ancestral knowledge has been replaced by NGO-led educational courses. Desert knowledge isn't the only aspect of the Bedouin's identity that has diminished.

An elderly Jebaali lamented the loss of the traditional Bedouin lifestyle, explaining that “in the past, people had very little, but they needed very little. Now they need a lot. They see things and want them - they want a TV, a fridge, etc.” (SLICE, 2021) Some people have acquired new tokens of wealth like trucks, TVs, motorbikes, and computers. In the past, rather than a material showcase, wealth had generally been represented by generosity, and customary law had prescribed both resource sharing and constraints on resource usage in the name of the common good. The dispossessions that Bedouins have undergone were also dispossession of their own indigenous notions of prosperity and social values. The modernization processes valorized economic wealth, discounted alternative value systems, and eroded the community cohesion of Bedouins (Gilbert, 2013).

I believe that this gradual abandoning of the traditional Bedouin identity and the accumulating tourists who—in some cases— solely travel to engage with Bedouins and learn more about their culture and identity create a paradox that turns the Bedouin identity into a show (i.e., a commodity) where Bedouins perform their culture in front of tourists' eyes for material profit while simultaneously losing their identity due to the drive to boost tourism. "To preserve the outward appearance of Bedouin tradition, Bduls sometimes have to hide their new ways of life

from the tourists." said the narrator (Al Jazeera English, 2014). After his work day ends, Abu Ismail pulls out the television stored in a dusty chest and sets it up for the family viewing (Al Jazeera English, 2014). Contrasting Abu Ismail's family with Zed's, although they both are among the minority who prefer desert-dwelling over urban life, the modern life has found its way to them through electricity and television connection in Abu Ismail's tent, formal governmental education in Zed's cave and tourism-related jobs in both families. Therefore, even conservative Bedouins in Petra are not fully shielded from the impact of modernization.

A New Identity: How Bedouins in Sinai View Themselves

The Egyptian government's designation of around 40% of South Sinai's territory and coastlines as Protected Areas, including the St Katherine Protectorate, has led to an interesting perspective among the Bedouins in Sinai. They perceive the government as a threat to the environment, which they consider their homeland. Although the St Katherine Protectorate holds the prestigious status of a UNESCO World Heritage Site, its conservation efforts, like those of Egypt overall, face significant challenges due to a lack of funds. Despite the government's claims and rhetoric, the environment of South Sinai has never truly been a priority for any Egyptian administration (Gilbert, 2013). This neglect has reinforced the perception among the Bedouins that the government poses a direct threat to the environment.

As a response to all these factors contributing to the destruction of the Bedouin identity, people devise means of asserting their identities that do not conflict with the security system. For some, this simply entails making fun of Nile Valley Egyptians. Others write poetry or narrate stories about their Bedouin characters in order to reestablish their moral power. The main response, however, was a desire to underline the role of Bedouins as nature's protectors, in contrast to others who are tasked with that job but fail to fulfill it. Bedouins single out today's Protectorate in Sinai as an object of special derision, placing a new emphasis on distinguishing themselves from "the Egyptians" by forging an environmentalist identity as a symbolic act of resistance. They believe that the government has failed to protect the environment, and they adopt a self-appointed role as guardians of nature. This Bedouin perspective on nature is Ecocentric, which means that humans are viewed as one of many valuable species and objects (such as rivers and forests) (Stets, 2003). When humans behave, they must consider environmental factors that may put limits on human activities. Those who share an Ecocentric view are concerned with the environment, characterize their connection with it as interdependent, and are active and involved in the biophysical world. "An environmental identity, then, is consistent with the resource sharing and resource-conservation practices espoused by Bedouins, and with their emphasis on group rather than individual welfare" (Gilbert, 2013, p.57).

Conclusion

The main constituents of the Bedouin identity: value systems, kinship networks, herding, and desert knowledge are being demolished due to the developmentalism, modernization, and nationalism processes the states have subjected Bedouins to — mainly resulting from tourism. Bedouins today live in cities, go to universities, and are increasingly blending with the settled citizens. However, a big portion of Bedouins are structurally marginalized, and not all of them receive education, which means they cannot compete for jobs with other citizens. Also, their poverty remains largely unnoticed and ignored by the State. The advent of tourism adds to the

issue, resulting in polarization in Bedouin society between those who have successfully adapted and those who have not. Also, due to the government's failed efforts to protect the environment against the extensive tourism and developments, Bedouins in Sinai are redefining their identity to foreground their role as natural guardians.

References

- Abu-Rabi'a, A. (2006). A century of education: Bedouin contestation with formal education in Israel. In D. Chatty (Ed.), *Nomadic Societies in the Middle East And North Africa: Entering the 21st Century* (pp. 865-883). Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789047417750_024
- Al Jazeera English. (2014, September 24). *The Bedouin of Petra | Al Jazeera World* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fb-nVvfbzVI>
- Altorki, S., & Cole, D. P. (2006). Land and Identity among Awlad 'Ali Bedouin: Egypt's. In D. Chatty (Ed.), *Nomadic Societies in the Middle East and North Africa: Entering the 21st Century* (pp. 634–653). Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789047417750_024
- Bailey, C. (2004). *A Culture of Desert Survival: Bedouin Proverbs from Sinai and the Negev*. Yale University Press.
- Cole, D. P. (2003). Where Have the Bedouin Gone. *Anthropological Quarterly*, 76(2), 235-267.
- Gilbert, H. (2013). Nature = Life: Environmental Identity as Resistance in South Sinai. *Nomadic Peoples*, 17(2), 40–67. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43123935>
- Gilbert, H. (2011). 'This is Not Our Life, It's Just a Copy of Other People's': Bedu and the Price of 'Development' in the South Sinai. *Nomadic Peoples*, 15(2), 7–32.
- Mahmoud, R. (2019, March 7). Is Egypt isolating Bedouins in South Sinai? Al-Monitor. <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2019/03/egypt-south-sinai-tourism-sharm-el-shaikh-wall-terrorism.html>
- Marx, E. (2006). The Political Economy of Middle Eastern and North African Pastoral Nomads. In D. Chatty (Ed.), *Nomadic Societies in the Middle East and North Africa* (pp. 78–97). Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789047417750_005
- Elshony. M.H. (2015, October 27). مشاكل بدو سيناء [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cg_UX6alNxs
- Peters, E. (1991). *The Bedouin of Cyrenaica: Studies in Personal and Corporate Power*. Cambridge University Press. [doi:10.1017/CBO9780511598357](https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511598357)
- SLICE. (2021, March 14). *The last Bedu of Petra & Wadi Rum | SLICE | Full documentary* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OtJ-y7O48W4>
- Stets, J. E., & C. F. Biga (2003). Bringing Identity Theory into Environmental Sociology. *Sociological Theory*, 21(4), 398–423. <https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1467-9558.2003.00196.x>
- Salon Staff. (2012, March 8). Official: Bedouins, Egyptian Police Clash In Sinai. Salon. https://www.salon.com/2012/03/08/official_bedouins_egyptian_police_clash_in_sinai_2/
- Fahmy, M. F. (2012, January 17). Bedouin leaders threaten armed rebellion against Egyptian government. CNN. <https://edition.cnn.com/2012/01/16/world/meast/egypt-bedouin-threat/index.html>
- Shoup, J. (1985). The Impact of Tourism on the Bedouin of Petra. *Middle East Journal*, 39(2), 277–291.