Tribal Structures in the *Badia* of Syria: Alternative Perceptions of Authority, Management and Control

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Contemporary research on the Syrian semi-desert steppe land (the *Badia)*, has begun to question many of the age-old assumptions concerning the nature of the people in this region as well as the ways in which they are managed and controlled by the State. Research is divided into two spheres of interest: one revolving around concepts of identity, revisiting the meaning of being tribal, *Bedouin*, nomadic and pastoral; the other is taken up with what can be called development. Both these interests overlap and both are concerned with: the revisiting of notions of tribe and 'tribalness' which is intimately tied up with socio-political understandings of who are the inhabitants of the *Badia;* the re-examining of out-dated typologies of nomadism and settlement; and integrating concerns with indigenous rights and knowledge[1]. Most contemporary work on the Syrian *Badia* touches upon these themes in its examination of the significance of development efforts in the region, their apparent successes and failures and the growing profile of managing conflict over natural resources, livestock, agriculture and biodiversity protected areas. After several decades of inertia where little new or innovative work emerged, we are entering the 21st century with research which is challenging long-held ideas concerning the society living in and off of the *Badia* of Syria.

The Syrian government recently has turned its attention to the *Badia* as well as the *Ma'moura,* the meeting place between the desert and the sown*;* the two together covering nearly 80% of the country's landmass. Thus the *Badia* and the *Ma'mour*a have become a focus of international development activity. Both the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) as well as the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), for example, have led the way with a series of studies aimed at making the *Badia* more productive and teaching its inhabitant (called beneficiaries) how to manage the resources in their environment. How did this disassociation of the *Bedouin* – the semi-arid steppe land dwellers of the country – from the *Badia* come about and what direction are contemporary studies now taking to address and correct this sterile separation of a people from their land.

In the local context, a '*Bedouin*' is a regional specialist in livestock breeding whose closest social and political ties are with his/her pastoral kinsmen (i.e. tribes). This kin-based tribal organization is fundamental to *Bedouin* identity. Change and adaptation are key aspects of *Bedouin* livelihood strategies and in the current global economy, many *Bedouin* have sought out multi-resource strategies, seeking wage labour in related activities such as transport and commerce, and entering into the unskilled daily wage labour market in construction and agriculture. Others have settled and become less mobile. However, regardless of their multiple occupations and residence patterns, they remain *Bedouin* culturally as long as they maintain close social ties with pastoral kin and retain the local linguistic and cultural markers that identify them as *Bedouin*.

The primary economic activity of the *Bedouin* and the culturally significant marker for self- identification is animal husbandry of sheep, goat and camel. This way of life, sometimes called nomadic pastoralism, is recognized as a specialized off-shoot of agriculture in the evolution of human society. At its core is migration determined by the seasonal variability of pasture and water. Survival of herds and herders makes movement from deficit to surplus areas both logical and necessary. Over the past 30 years, trucks and other motor vehicles have come to replace camels as beast of burden (Chatty, 1986). Furthermore, the truck has

allowed the *Bedouin* to be more mobile than in the past, permitting some to settle for much of the year in permanent villages (especially for the young and the old), while still maintaining access to water, pastures, herds, and places of employment beyond the arid steppe land that is their home.

Each *Bedouin* tribal group seeks to manage an area that contains sufficient resources to sustain communal life. It seeks to establish a definite zone of control with well-understood, though often variable, limits and certain rights of use. Among *Bedouin* groups these various zones of use-rights or 'ownership' are recognized (Lancaster, 1981). However, most governments throughout the Middle East and North Africa - Syria is no exception here - ceased to recognize *Bedouin* collective territory some fifty years ago[2]. Governments now largely consider these semi-arid and arid steppe areas 'state-owned' lands. In the past, most conflicts were among and between *Bedouin* tribal groups and generally revolved around the right to use scarce pastures and water resources. However since the middle of the twentieth century, modern state governments in the region have largely pacified the *Bedouin*, and today such conflicts are often settled in government courts relying on the expert advice of respected *Bedouin* tribal elders[3].

Most contemporary conflict in the semi-arid zones is between the state and *Bedouin* tribal society and focuses on two related areas of concern: degradation of the arid steppe land, and global interests in preserving the world's biodiversity. For decades, the Syrian government have encouraged the *Bedouin* to move off of the arid steppe land and settle. At times this policy is couched in terms of the 'damage' which *Bedouin* do to their environment and derives from theories of land use [equilibrium systems] which are inappropriate to the semi-arid and arid lands of the Middle East and North Africa. Though little, if any, empirical evidence exists to confirm this position, *Bedouin* tend to be pressured by modern governments to give up a way of life which is regard as backward, primitive and out of step with modern, settled society (Chatty, 1996). Conservation or the protection of the world's biodiversity also impinges on *Bedouin* society. In Syria, important grazing areas or *Bedouin* reserves are being taken over by the state to set up nature reserves or to reintroduced endangered mammalian species (e.g. *Taliila* Reserve near Palmyra for oryx and gazelle). The loss of these lands - generally justified on the basis of a supposed misuse by *Bedouin* - and the failure of many conservation organizations to recognize the traditional knowledge and sustainable practices of the *Bedouin* is a further blow to current livelihood strategies of the *Bedouin* (Chatty, 2000).

Recent history

In Syria the *Bedouin* have for decades struggled with two opposing forces: one compelling them to settle and engage in marginal agricultural production; the other forcing them to move away to seek multi-resource livelihoods and pastoral subsistence across several national borders (Chatty,1990). Some *Bedouin* communities - particularly the Sbaa', the Fed'aan, the Beni Khalid, the Mawali and the Ugaidat - have evolved a sustainable compromise whereby they maintain a fixed agrarian existence for a few months each year on the margins of cultivation, and then spend the winter and spring in the desert with their herds of sheep, goat and occasional camel (Leybourne et. al., 1993; Chatty, 1996).

The 1950s saw the culmination of several decades of sustained effort to control and break down *Bedouin* tribal organization (Velud, 1995). Much of the tribal leadership was co-opted into the elite urban political scene, and land holdings once held in common were increasingly registered in the names of tribal leaders and converted into farms. Some *Bedouin* families settled on the margins of this agriculture. Many combined some farming

with pastoralism, moving their herds out into the *Badia* in late winter and early summer. Others moved away from these border areas, and began settling seasonally in small hamlets in the *Badia*, and keeping their herds on the move for much of the year in search of natural graze and post-harvest stubble (Metral, 1993).

The 1960s was a period of strenuous government land reform, including the complete seizure of all common tribal land and the confiscation of the large tracts of land owned by tribal leaders. Following a three-year-long drought in which over two million sheep died, the government negotiated an internationally sponsored project to revitalize the pastoral sector of the Syrian economy. Its foremost goal was to stabilize the mainly pastoral livestock population. This proved very difficult mainly because the officials running the project did not understand *Bedouin* methods of animal husbandry.[4] In turn, the *Bedouin* had no trust in government, especially in light of the recent confiscation of grazing land, and the explosive expansion of agricultural development over nearly a third of the best rangelands of the *Badia*[5].

After a number of years of poor project results, a campaign was, launched to revive the *Bedouin* communal land tradition of *hema* (i.e. returning control over range conservation and management of grazing lands back to the *Bedouin*). After several years of trial and error, a programme of cooperatives was implemented whereby block applications by tribal units for control over their former traditional grazing lands were generally granted by the government. Each tribal subgroup petitioned the government for permission to form a *hema* cooperative, demarcating, in detail, the area to be set aside, its physical features, and the proposed management and preservation system to be implemented. By the mid 1980s the number of *hema* cooperatives was over 200 with more than 4 million head of sheep. Today perhaps two thirds of Syria's *Bedouin* population belongs to *hema* cooperatives and associated schemes, although government reports suggest that number is nearly 90%.

Syrian *Badia* and Development Planning

In the 1990s the global fashion for participation of local communities in development came to Syria. A few international development projects have allowed *Bedouin* a participatory voice in the running of sheep cooperatives. This is a significant improvement over the rigid government regulatory schemes of the 1960s. Flexibility and a *de facto* acceptance - if not full acknowledgement - of traditional *Bedouin* systems of exploitation and marketing have resulted in a national programme of some success at both the national and local levels[6]. The irony here, as Bocco (1993) so eloquently draws out, is that now, after hardly a nomad is left to be 'settled', government and international experts are beginning to invoke the very principle that their predecessors sought to annul, namely *Bedouin* tribal regulation of access to pastures as a solution to the crisis of mounting ecological degradation.

A brief review of some of the key recommendations and future strategies which are being set out on the basis of these studies shows the transformational input which current high quality sociological expertise has made. The IFAD *Badia* Rangelands Development Project aims to 'preserve the environment and improve the well-being of the *Bedouin* community' (http://www.ifad.org/lrkm/region/pn/sy_1073.htm). In this project, specific effort is being made to include not only the 16,800 families belonging to cooperatives (and encompassing 3 million ha or 29% of the total *Badia* land area) but also to recognize and integrate *Bedouin* who have not joined these government associations. It is a move which recognizes the important of *Bedouin* tribal society and the implausibility of working with only part of a tribe to achieve sound range management. Women's Income Generating Projects are another example. In much of the Middle East and North Africa this has meant teaching

Bedouin women to sew, knit or prepare other similarly exotic handicrafts like tea cosies[7] . The IFAD studies, however, experimented with familiar pastoral activities such as dairying and animal fattening as well as sewing skills. Early results clearly showed that women's income from sewing or knitting rarely compared favourable to that from livestock. The most profitable income generating activities for *Bedouin* women were those involving livestock or poultry. Clearly a transformation has begun to take place in development assistance planning in Syria. Development research in the *Badia* has begun to identify alternative paths to sustainability. Certainly this is influenced by a *de facto* recognition of *Bedouin* society and the need to integrate indigenous ideas and needs into development praxis.

Biodiversity Conservation in the *Badia*

The Syrian government has continued to experiment with protecting and conserving flora in the *Badia*. The government's hope has always been that the *Bedouin* would appreciate the benefit of fencing and exclusion and be inspired to do the same on traditional land holdings. Unfortunately this has not happened. Instead, the *Bedouin* express resentment at traditional common lands being confiscated for government experiments from which they perceive that they are deriving no benefit.

In 1992 Syria negotiated funding to establish a wildlife reserve in the Palmyra *Badia*. This project was approved, and the F.A.O. was designated to carry out the project addressing three interrelated issues: diminishing grazing land, disappearing wildlife, and increasing requirements for supplemental feeding of domestic herds. It also proposed to incorporate some of the land holdings of three hema cooperatives into protected ranges, to set up restrictions on access by *Bedouin* and their domestic herds, and to run a programme to introduce new plant species. After eight years, the project has been closed, its patchy results have resulted in a suspension of further international funding. Although the project needed the cooperation of the *Bedouin* communities that have used these grazing lands for the past few decades, there was no social scientist in the project to assist in gaining this cooperation. The indigenous *Bedouin* population, however, were only to be involved peripherally in the analysis of field data. Representatives from the grazing cooperatives were to be involved in the data recording process and in the discussion of results in order to "develop their awareness on environmental protection" (FAO, 1995:11).

What this project has revealed the short memory of government. The lessons learned in the 1960s have been simply forgotten. *Bedouin* pastoralists cannot be separated from their animals or from their common grazing land. Government efforts to rehabilitate the Syrian *Badia* rangelands in the 1960s initially failed to meet their objectives. Only when the human element was integrated into project development was there some success. Thirty years on, government and international development agencies are again proposing to rehabilitate parts of the desert and to establish wildlife reserves - without any *Bedouin* consultation. The lessons learned decades before appear to have been forgotten. The delicate balance these *Bedouin* have managed to maintain with their environment is once again threatened by plans which do not take into account their experience, way of life, or indigenous knowledge.

Sociological and anthropological research in Syria has never been easy nor formally encouraged. Some researchers have carved out significant reputations for themselves based on the quality and consistency of their work (for example, Masri, Metral, Velud, Jaubert, Debaine, Shoup). Moreover, a new crop of doctoral dissertations in the 1990s and early 2000s has moved research on the Syrian *Badia* in interesting ways challenging old ideas and opening up alternatives perceptions on *Bedouin* society and its 'contract' with the State and with the land (Leybourne, 1993; Triulzi, 2001; and Rae, 1999, Ababsa, 2004).

For centuries the semi-arid and desert fringe of Syria had been a contested land. Classically an area of shifting control between central authority and pastoral trial confederations of tribes, it remains at the beginning of the twenty-first century a region of quiet challenge between government, indigenous settled and mobile *Bedouin* tribal communities, as well as peasant and urban trader and merchant associations. Recent research is seeking to explore and understand these multiple realities and to highlight the alternative perceptions which characterize this colourful, if marginal, social and political landscape. This new research is challenging long held main-stream biases and assumptions concerning *Bedouin* and indigenous land use, degradation, and resistance to change. These emerging studies have begun to present a remarkably coherent view of the importance of challenging prevailing assumptions and perceptions. The Syrian *Badia* has been the site of contested authority and control for hundreds of years. As we enter the twenty-first century it is fitting that the former monolithic concepts and ways of viewing are challenged and alternative perceptions and studies are disseminated revealing far more complex and ambiguous sources of control, authority, and use of the *Badia* by the *Bedouin* and other inhabitants.

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1 . For most of the last century an 'evolutionary', Western-based model of progress has dominated the way the Bedouin were perceived by government and international experts. Typologies based on movement (e.g. fully-nomadic, semi-nomadic, semi-settled) were used to breakdown the organization of the Bedouin and to confirm ideas of modernization theory, that settled existence was far superior to a mobile one. Further, and more recent, tendencies to describe *Bedouin* by modes of production (e.g. nomadic pastoralists, settled pastoralists, agro-pastoralists), are primarily efforts to avoid recognizing the persistence of tribes and tribalism as important forms of self-identification among the Bedouin.

2 . Between 1956 and 1966, tribal rights and land ownership were systematically abolished. In 1958 the existing Law of the Tribes which gave the *Bedouin* distinct rights was repealed meaning that from that time on, tribes ceased to posses any separate legal identity in Syrian law. In 1961 the government set up the Steppe Directorate within the Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform and over the next few years succeeded in stripping both tribal leaders and other *Bedouin* landowners of their holdings.

3. See, for example, the study of the Ghanatsah – Sba'a treaties and court agreements up to 1988 (Rae, 1999:282-283).

4. Bedouin animal husbandry is based on risk minimalization rather than the more common western market profit motivation. See Shoup 1990:200.

5. The Bedouin 'dry farmed' cereal crops during years of good rain, but the large scale cultivation in this arid zone had never occurred before.

[6] . One example of this process is the recent work of the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD). For the last few years of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century, IFAD has been conducting studies and setting up projects in the Syria *Badia* aimed as not only improving livelihoods of small farmers but also at introducing participatory rangeland management among the herders (*Bedouin*) of the *Badia*

7. Many women's income-generating projects in the Middle East endeavor to teach the community skills to meet an ideal 'mass market' of homogenized requirements such as book covers and markers, tissue box covers, dress patterns of an unspecific 'European' origin.