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The Rashaida Bedouin

About one hundred and fifty years ago, a nomadic band of Bedouin crossed the Red Sea from Arabia entering what is today Eritrea and Sudan. These Arabic speaking Bedouin who refer to themselves as Rashaida constitute a distinct ethnic group within Sudan and Eritrea. Their culture and traditions have much in common with the Bedouin of Saudi Arabia, factors that distinguish them from other nomadic peoples of the region such as the Beja. A proud and martial race, the Rashaida continue to practice camel herding up to the present day while preserving a unique cultural identity. The following will attempt to outline the most important aspects of Rashaida society by describing their dress, language, domain, livelihood, migration patterns, gender roles, attitudes toward non-Rashaida, religious beliefs, and genealogy.

To begin with the dress of the Rashaida makes sense, since their distinctive dress constitutes the most visible representation of identity. According to the American anthropologist William C. Young, the two main indicators of Rashaida identity are the "men's turban (‘imaama) and the married women's mask (ginaa) (Young 28)." However, to draw a clear distinction from Sudanese men who also wear turbans, he adds Rashidi turbans "are much longer than those of other men in the Sudan (Young 28)." As for the married women's mask (ginaa), it is similar in function to the Niqqab. In other words, it completely conceals the wearer's face excluding the bridge of the nose and eyes. The female wearer of the mask may opt for either the plain or decorated version of the mask. The decorated kind consists of tiny lead beads arranged around the wearer's face. In W.C Young's estimation this "garment is unique to the Rashaida (Young 29)", and is never worn by women in other Arab tribes.

The Arabic language is also an indicator of Rashidi identity. Unlike the Sudanese Arabs who add the suffix (uu) when using the masculine plural form of a verb in the imperfect mood, the Rashaida add the suffix (uun). In addition many words that form the Rashidi vocabulary are unique only to the Rashaida. As W.C Young relates, "many of the terms used by the Rashaida

for household furnishings and pastoralist activities are not found in other varieties of Arabic (Young 29)." The most pronounced feature of Rashidi Arabic however is the hardening of the letters (K) and (G) when they precede (I), (ii), or (ey). With this in mind, if one were to say in Arabic the word for big which is kabeer, one would pronounce the (k) in the back of the throat, producing a sound similar to the (ch) in Loch Ness.

As a tribe, the Rashaida do not occupy a uniform territory. However when discussing the areas occupied by the Rashaida, one must differentiate between the nomadic herders and the sedentary landowners. The sedentary Rashaida live in several areas. A few of them live in the town of Al-Mugrin in the Sudan, while other sedentary Rashaida occupy Al-Tukna. As for the nomadic Rashaida, many of them live southeast of Al-Tukna camping in tents along the banks of the Atbara River during the dry-season. During the rainy season, they venture inland to herd their cattle.

Still other Rashaida are only partly nomadic. They live in the Khashm Al Girba agricultural scheme occupying the land as tenants, raising sheep and crops. Additionally, many Rashaida occupy the land east of Khashm Al Girba between the Atbara and Gash rivers. However, they never set foot in the Gash River delta. Anthropologist W.C Young explains their reason for this in detail. According to him, "the area has been utilized exclusively by the Hadendowa and Bani ‘Aamir nomads since 1938, after a series of armed clashes broke out between Rashaayda and Hadendowa. These conflicts-over water and pasture-were resolved by a government-brokered agreement between the Rashaayda and their neighbors, according to which both sides recognized the Gash River as the boundary between their territories (Young 30-31)." Whereas, the majority of the Rashaida reside in the Sudan, some inhabit the northern province of Naqfa in Eritrea. Because of their pastoral way of life, it has proved difficult to adequately estimate the total amount of Rashaida residing within the Sudan. Most estimates put the number at around forty thousand people (Young 31).

Although the nomadic Rashaida spend most of their time herding, they have other opportunistic ways of supporting themselves. Ever since they have arrived in the Sudan, Rashaida have been involved in non-pastoral activities such as the slave trade and buying/selling rifles. Now since slavery has long been outlawed in the Sudan, the Rashaida are involved in the buying and selling of trade goods. Many Rashidi men have also sought employment in Saudi Arabia in the oil industry. Noted anthropologist, Gunnar M. Sorbo elaborates, "When the oil

exporting countries of the Gulf greatly expanded their economic development efforts during the 1970s, the Rashaida availed themselves of the new opportunities across the Red Sea. The first Rashaida were hired mainly as wage herders and curiously, as expert camel racers, which were their only marketable skills. Those who left brought labor contracts for friends and relatives back home who would take over positions they had vacated (Sorbo 113-117)."

Given their pastoral livelihood, nomadic Rashaida follow a set seasonal pattern of migration and settled camp life. For the Rashaida the year may be divided into several seasons. The migration season, or Ar Rushaash, begins in mid-July (Young 34). During the season, the Rashaida leave their dry-season campsites along riverbanks, to follow the rain showers. As noted by Young, during the rainy season, the Rashaida are almost constantly on the move astride their camels (Young 34). Whereas the men manage the herd at this time and keep a look out for suitable grazing land for the livestock, the women are kept busy striking their tents with the help of their unmarried daughters (Young 35). An important note to be made is that only women own tents (Young 33). But this subject will be covered in detail later when Rashaida gender roles are covered more thoroughly.

The next season, known as Al-Khariif lasts from the beginning of August to the end of September (Young 35). It is characterized by the sprouting of new pasture and the generally more verdant desert surroundings (Young 35). During this time, the Rashaida become less nomadic since the camels take in enough food and water by grazing near the tents and don't have to be herded to different pastures or taken to wells (Young 35). Since less time is spent migrating during Al-Khariif, time is spent seeing to the livestock and to agriculture. When referring to agriculture, it should be noted that the Rashaida do not own farmland. They claim particular plots in the desert for agriculture returning periodically to cultivate and harvest the crops.

Around the time September ends, rainfall begins to subside and a new season takes Al-Khariif's place. This period which stretches from October to December is called Ad Darat (Young 40). Ad Darat is characterized by less pastureland due to the drier conditions. Less time is spent on agriculture and more time is devoted to finding pasture for the livestock. Milk yields begin to dwindle during this time for the herds, so individual households send men back to the grain plots to harvest grain crops (Young 41).

The final months of the Rashaida seasonal calendar are Il-bard and Il-geyd. Il-bard is characterized by the erection of dry season camps by reliable sources of water. Il-bard lasts from

early January to the end of March (Young 41). Il-geyd is the hot arid season that lasts from April until June. During these two seasons, pastures, milk, stores of grain, and livestock all dwindle (Young 41).

There is a structured arrangement of pastoral camp life. The smallest unit is the household, which are the adult woman who owns the tent and the people who have the right to consume the food that is stored in the tent. The next largest unit is the extended household that usually consists of two to nine households, who share the same campsite. According to Young, "the ideal is that members of the extended households cooperate whenever there is any work requiring animal labor. The animals used for this labor, owned by individuals, are put at the disposal of the entire extended household when necessary (Young 33)." Basically the extended household is a group of families that migrate together. Then there is the largest single unit of residence which is the dry season camp (al-fariig). Usually the dry season camp is comprised of fifteen to thirty extended households. There are several dry season camps from which these families can choose. But, as cited by Young, "they generally select the camp that is headed by a prominent man who they respect and whom they think will represent them effectively in any dealings with outsiders (Young 34)." This man occupies a central position in the camp and helps resolves disputes between camp residents and between Rashaida and non-Rashaida.

Men and women occupy specific roles within the Rashaida household. General notions of gender are conditioned into the minds of young children in part through their dress. Once boys and girls pass their infancy, "they are given garments that cover their legs more completely and are tied at the waist; for a girl this is along skirt (tichca), while for a boy this is a shirt and a pair of long, loose pants (sirwaal). The next step is marked by the addition of head coverings to their costumes. Girls lay a large piece of black or colored cloth (garguush) over their heads and shoulders and fasten its edges together under their chins with a pin; it covers their heads, shoulders, and chests. Boys of the same age wear a knit cap (taagiya). Further stages of maturity are marked by the addition of still more articles of clothing. Girls first add a virgin’s veil (mungab) to their wardrobe and then a black gown (thawb) that covers them from neck to ankle. Boys add a white thawb to their costume first and then follow it with a long white turban (imaama), that they wrap around their knit caps (Young 46)."

Children learn their gender roles by observing adults. As soon as a child is able to speak or walk, he/she is in charge of keeping the animals from straying into the tent. The girls are

supervised by their mothers while the mother is working in or near the tents. The girls help look after the small infants male and female and continue to look after the other girls of the family, as they grow older. When the boys are old enough to wear pants, they are expected to tie up the sheep and goats near the tents and to help care for the sheep and goats by milking and feeding them. Children of both sexes can herd sheep and goats. However, once girls start to veil themselves, they stay much closer to the tent. Women generally stay closer to the tent because the open desert, or Al-Khalaa is considered dangerous for females; for in the desert, women are vulnerable to men from other tribes (Young 14). Indeed, in Rashaayda society men are viewed as the protectors of women and are ready to defend them with force if necessary. In the last stage, after both sexes reach the age of maturity, which is when the women wear the virgin veil and the boys wear the cap, they both should be able to ride the camels by themselves when the household migrates.

Work within a Rashidi household is divided between feminine and masculine tasks. For example, only men may carve the wooden components of the tent, whereas, the women sew the tent cloth. Churning milk is another task that is done exclusively by women as is tanning animal skins. In addition when preparing food, only men skin and butcher animals while women are assigned the task of grinding grain. However there are certain tasks that fall within neither category of masculine or feminine labor. Coffee brewing is one such example and is an act that may be performed by either sex. Also, either sex may milk the camels, sheep, and goats that belong to the household. Stewing meat is another gender-neutral task. Both men and the women do not work in isolation; the whole household works together to achieve the desired result. For instance, when a woman wants to sew or mend a tent, the man goes out and collects wool from the camels while the young boys of the family shear the wool off the goats. If the quantity of raw fiber isn't enough, then the male head of the household will make up the difference by purchasing the remainder with his own money. Generally, women remain in close proximity to the tent, while the men herd the animals. Therefore the separation of labor between the man and the women revolves around feminine tasks, associated with the tent, and masculine tasks, such as herding or butchering and skinning animals.

Besides the function of the household, marriage is another powerful indicator of gender roles and priorities within Rashaida society itself. The parents typically arrange the marriages of their sons and daughters to their cousins. Rather than being based on bonds of mutual affection, "most

cousin marriages are arranged with the interests of the wider family, not the young couple in mind (Tucker 198)." Since the Rashaida constitute a minority within the Sudan, they tend to arrange marriages between cousins as a way to preserve tribal identity and interests. When a couple marries, the bride keeps the majority of the dowry that her family has received. The bride is present when marriage negotiations between the two families are made and is cognizant of the amount she is entitled to. As for the groom, his father gives him a marriage payment that he in turn gives over to his fiancé's family. It consists of livestock, cash, and some cloth that his prospective wife will use to build them a tent. As was mentioned earlier, only women are entitled to ownership of tents. Thus, a man is completely reliant on his wife for shelter and food. Usually, two newly-weds live with the wife's parents for the first year of marriage. Afterwards, the couple returns to the father's camp.

If the marriage proves an unhappy one and man's wife divorces him, she takes the household tent with her and joins the camp of either her father or one of her siblings. If a husband divorces his wife then, the husband would be obliged to make financial compensation to her. If her husband gets sick or passes away, she holds on to her jewelry, milking animals, and cash as financial security. This way, women enjoy an independent source of wealth in the event that their husbands cannot support them anymore.

Due to their Arabian origins, the Rashaida practice the global religion of Islam, as do most Sudanese themselves. Like Muslims all over the world, they face Mecca five times a day to pray. The usual age a young Rashaida learns how to pray is fifteen. Essentially, there is very little difference between formal Islam and the particular Rashaida practice of the faith. Curiously, however, traditional Rashaida never pray behind an imaam except on Islamic holidays such as Eid-ul-Fitr and Eid-ul-Adha. On these two holidays, men pray communally while the women remain in their tents and perform their prayers. During Islamic holidays, both genders change into their finest clothes.

In addition to their strong Islamic faith, some Rashaida entertain the belief in jinn (angels) and other supernatural entities such as ghosts. In fact, the Rashaida distinguish space in terms of inhabited territory (diira 'umraana), empty desert (al-khalaa), and haunted territory (diira maskuuna) (Young 75). As elaborated by Young, "haunted territory is the domain of ghosts (hilaan), ogresses (sa'aalwa), and jinn. These supernatural beings are visible only at night, when they take human form. They live far away from the camps of the Rashaida and for this reason are

encountered only by men who happen to be traveling through the empty desert at night (Young 75)." Regardless of whether most Rashaida actually believe in ghosts and other supernatural beings, these superstitions coupled with faith in Islam, form the basis of Rashidi understanding of the invisible world.

The Rashaida's relationship with other peoples occupying the Sudan is largely the by-product of history. After the Rashaida arrived in Sudan around the latter half of the nineteenth century, they attempted to adopt the combination of pastoral production and agriculture practiced by the Hadendowa and Bani Aamir peoples. Unfortunately for the Rashaida, the Hadendowa and Bani Aamir tribes resisted Rashiidi expansion into their coastal territories, and after several armed clashes between the Rashiidi and non-Rashiidi groups, many Rashaida abandoned the coast to settle farther inland (Young 105). Once inland, the Rashaida stopped raising cattle, which couldn't survive the arid conditions of the Sudanese interior, and began to raise camels instead.

As for those Rashaida who remained near the coast, they combined pastoralism with trade, sailing across the Red Sea, to exchange Sudanese goods for firearms (Young 105). Access to firearms, helped the Rashaaida to occupy and keep pastureland in eastern Sudan. Since the Rashaida inhabited territory outside traditional Hadendowa pastures, they were subjected only to small-scale raids (Young 106). In the words of anthropologist W.C Young, "encounters between the Hadendowa and Rashaida during the first half of the twentieth century were marked by hostility and conflict (Young 106)." To this day, Rashaida and Hadendowa seldom forge political alliances together, let alone intermarry with one another.

The Rashaida tend to reinforce the cultural distinction between the two groups, emphasizing that they speak Hijaazi Arabic, while the Hadendowa speak Ta Bedawie, a language within the Cushitic family (Young 107). One way they accomplish this is by customarily referring to the Hadendowa as 'ujmaan, or "speakers of uncivilized languages (Young 107)."

Despite all the time that has passed since the Rashaida arrived in the Sudan, tensions continue to simmer between the Rashaida and the Hadendowa. Nonetheless, the tensions that exist today can be traced back directly to the violent struggle for pasture land and water between the two groups in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The poor relations that exist between the Rashaida and Hadendowa are by no means indicative of Rashiidi relations with other Sudanese tribes.

It is known that the Arabic speaking Lahaawin and the non-Arabic speaking Bani ‘Aamir tribes enjoy a peaceful co-existence with the Rashaida (Young 22). Although there are noticeable genetic differences between the Rashaida and the Sudanese such as lighter skin color for the Rashaida, racism among the Rashaida is rare and throughout their history in the Sudan many have intermarried with black Africans.

Whereas the genealogies of the Rashaida are well documented, their exact origins, and whether they were native to Arabia or entered the peninsula from elsewhere remain a mystery. American anthropologist W.C Young does propose a few theories. He states that according to some of his Rashiidi informants, "they originally lived in the Hijaaz (Young 101). He notes that historical sources mention bedouin crossing into the Sudan from the Hijaaz frequently during the nineteenth century (Young 101). However, he also points to a Rashiidi origin in the Sinai Peninsula. Young substantiates the Sinai theory by taking the word Zuneymaat, the name for one of the three main Rashidi tribal branches, and comparing it with Abu Zuneyman, a town on the southern coast of the Sinai Peninsula (Young 102). The final theory Young sets forth has the Rashaida originating in Kuwait. He admits the names of the tribal branches of the Sudanese Rashaida do not match those of Kuwait, but he adds that both tribes are allied with the ‘Awaazim (Young 102). In the end, Young concedes the possibility of the multiplicity of origins for the Rashaida. He explains, "The names of some Rashiidi lineages-the Baraaghiith and the Huwehjaat-are also found in western Libya and Palestine rather than in the Hijaaz. This may indicate that the Rashaida tribe is a collection of groups originating in many places, including Libya and Sinai as well as the Hijaaz (Young 102)."

Whatever their exact origins may be, what is for sure is that all members of the Sudanese Rashaida are thought to be descendants of a certain "Rashid az-Zool." Most Rashaida regard him as the forebear of their three main tribal branches, the Baraatiikh, the Zuneymaat, and the Biraa’asa. Several tribes not associated with the famous Rashidi ancestor, also live alongside the "pure-blooded" Rashaida. They include the ‘Awaazim, Gazaayiza, and ‘Ureynaat. Associated culturally with the descendants of Rashid-az-Zool and intermarried with them, these tribes are hardly distinguishable from the "true" Rashaida (Young 102).

True nomads of the desert, the modern day Rashaida carry on the pastoral lifestyle that their ancestors established for them nearly one hundred years ago. Their ability to adapt easily to changes in their economic condition, has allowed them to carve out a niche for themselves in the

harsh arid interior of the Sudan, despite the hostility of native tribes such as the Hadendowa. Hopefully the story of the Rashaida reveals some fundamental truth of the beauty and potential of human experience. At the very least, it should inspire one to venture off of one's doorstep and to explore the world. One can never fully describe an entire culture within only thirteen pages, the foundation at least has been laid.

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