

Cultures of the Middle East/ Professor Salih

Who Are the Bedouin? Debra Gorski

Who are the Bedouin? (from the Arabic " (بدوئي), badū (بدوين) baduīn, pl.") Here is the definition and etymology of the word from Merriam-Webster's Dictionary:

Etymology: Middle English *Bedoyne*, from Middle French *bedoin*, from Arabic *badawī* desert dweller, from *badw* desert, desert dwellers, Date: 15th century: a nomadic Arab of the Arabian, Syrian, or North African deserts

Briefly said, they are any of a number of nomadic peoples living in the Middle East and subsisting on a fully or partially pastoral way of life. This means that they live off the land – or the natural “pastures” of some of the most inhospitable areas of the Middle East, Near East, and North Africa. They live there because they have learned over centuries, even millennia, of existence to survive in areas where no other people can and this gives them a competitive life that is different from those who have settled permanently in villages or cities and subsist on agriculture. They have a seasonal existence in which they travel from one area of the desert to another in search of water and plant foods for their animals. They know the seasons of the desert and have a rhythm of seasonal migration, the signs and know-how of which are passed down through each generation as spoken knowledge as well as direct experience. These rhythms are part of their daily lives as well.

The Bedouin people have been formed and changed by the desert and they have also changed the desert itself with their grazing of pastures, selecting for those with forage suitable to camels or other animals and choosing temporary agricultural areas. There may be no way of knowing just how much each have evolved and changed together, no way of knowing how much impact the Bedouin have had on the desert. One thing is certain, though, the Bedouin are not immune to the changes of modern times. This knowledge has driven many anthropologists and adventurous travelers - such as Sir William Thesiger who traveled with North African Bedouins starting at the age of 23 - over the past century to seek to live for a time with Bedouin and other Arab nomadic peoples in order to record or just experience their way of life. (Asher) There are a few well-researched ethnographies and anthropological records but when looking for a snapshot of Arab Bedouin life I chose to focus on one in particular: William C. Young's *The Rashaayda Bedouin: Arab Pastoralists of Eastern Sudan*. As I began reading his account I found that it was very engaging, not overly academic, and largely respectful of the Rashaayda people. He was very self-aware and self-reflexive of his place as a stranger among the Rashaayda and the language that he used to describe everything from daily life to special celebrations enabled me to consider my own attitudes, feelings, and beliefs about customs that, until now, I only knew about from romanticized stories, movies, and fairy tales – such as a considered reading of Richard Burton's 1001 Arabian Knights – and perhaps a few National Geographic Articles over the years. It is Young's descriptions of Rashaaydii daily life, yearly life, and especially the division of space, power, and labor (or means of production) between the sexes that I will provide descriptions of in this paper. I will also include my own thoughts and reactions to Young's revelations as well as a bit about Young himself, as I found the story of this anthropologist's journey to be just as fascinating and revealing as the story of the Bedouin with whom he lived.

William C. Young and The Rashaayda Bedouins

In 1978, a young anthropological student named William C. Young, armed with a \$7000.00 grant, a plane ticket, and the blessings of his college department embarked on a voyage to visit and record the lives of the Rashaayda Bedouin in Eastern Sudan. He did not know it at the time but this was going to become a life-changing event for him.

Before his departure, Young struggled with questions of how he may or may not be invited into the society that he wished to study. Would they be friendly? Would they allow him to visit and ask questions? Could he learn their language enough to ask the questions he wanted to ask? How could he ever hope that they might allow him into their daily lives as a long-term visitor, so that he could obtain the anthropological data that he was looking for. Young hoped to prove himself to his professors and colleagues by writing a paper about a people from a far away land, who lived an entirely different kind of life than the urban, modern, Western life that Young and his colleagues were used to. And in order to create a respectable ethnographic record of a people other than Young's own, he needed to become one of them for awhile.

Young's commitment to earning the respect of the Rashaayda in order to obtain his record extended to his faith. It was generally believed by the anthropological community at that time that it would be necessary for Young to convert to Islam in order for the Rashaayda to even entertain the idea of having him live in their homes for a length of time, as was his goal. They feared that the muslim Bedouin would feel uncomfortable having a non-muslim in their homes. They wanted to be able to assure them that they would not have to accommodate or tolerate any customs that were not usually welcome in their homes. After some brief soul-searching he decided that his basic value system did not preclude him from converting to this new faith. It is this part of Young's story that captured my attention the most. Apart from his 139 page ethnographic graphic record of his two years spent with the Rashaayda Bedouin, the fact that he could make such a commitment to a spiritual discipline says a lot about his passion and desire to learn about a people so different from his own culture. As we sit in our classrooms, have discussions, read our books, and search the internet to learn about cultures of the Middle East, I find myself in awe of this lone anthropologist making this leap of faith to truly come to know another people. But it also begs the question of what his spiritual life, inner life, or personal preferences and prejudices were like before he embarked on his study.

I believe that this leap of faith is what enabled Young to create a very thoughtful, and respectful picture of these people of the desert made available to the community at large, since his book has become the most widely referenced and searchable work about the Rashaayda. However, his insights also reveal a clear preference for and identification with the Rashaayda. Throughout the book, Young often refers to visiting his "friends" in order to ask questions or take part in a particular part of Rashaayda life. I was a little confused at first when he mentioned his "friends" (were they other field anthropologists?) but I came to learn that those friends were the Bedouin themselves. He also frequently describes his observations using the second person plural "we." For example, when describing encountering the Hadendowa tribe during the annual Rashaayda migration he says "We could tell who they were, even at a distance, from the shapes of their dwellings.

They did not use goats' hair tents like we did..." (Young, 13) It is not so much the "we" in the first sentence as it is the "we" in the second sentence that seems a little suspicious to me.

The first could be a "we – the anthropologist and his hosts" but the second "we seems more like a "we – me and my people" - a tribal "we" if I may be permitted to use that word. Young continues on in the same paragraph:

"The Hadendowa were the Rashaayda's traditional enemies. If we met one of them, we would not even greet them with *as-salaamu 'aleykum* (as Muslims should) but would pass by without speaking. The Rashaayda had been competing with the Hadendowa for pasture land and water for generations, and the old men could recall many armed clashes between Rashiidi camps and groups of Hadendowa. They were also *'ujmaan* (non-Arabic speakers), whereas we were Arabs and spoke good Arabic."

Why the use of the word "we" and not "they" or "The Rashaayda?" Through out the text Young writes from his notes and observations in a descriptive language that includes the third person and first person perspective as needed but it is in these second-person plural moments that he seems enmeshed with his subjects and hosts.

If one takes into consideration human nature, we could say that it was only natural that Young would eventually come to identify himself with his subjects and feel close to them. How could you not bond and come to identify yourself with people with whom you share migratory travel, tents, campsites, and scarce resources. The Rashaayda are a nomadic people so they do everything together. They move together, settle together, they intermarry within their tribe and family groups. As a desert people's they are inherently mistrustful of strangers. There are a lot of dangers that can threaten the family unit out in the desert. The fact that they took the stranger Young into their lifestyle for so long must have meant that they felt that they could trust him and must have also contributed a sense of closeness that could have easily led to his identification with them.

It is worth mentioning at this point that in Young's Epilogue – which is a confessional, personal narrative of how Young managed his fieldwork – that much of the \$7000.00 grant that he came to the Sudan with went to the Rashaayda themselves in the form of personal loans so "which they used to invest in livestock." (Young, 134) He writes "I felt guilty that I was eating their food and sharing their housing without paying for it, but they would not accept payment. They were satisfied that I had loaned them money when they could use it, and when their business deals were complete they paid me back in full. I hoped that they had made some profit, at least, from my loan, but when I asked them how they had done they would not go into detail." The lack of mentioning seeing them come back from the market with more livestock, supplies, or any goods or services at all is telling. I wonder what his money actually went to pay for. It is known that the Rashaayda have a history of being involved in smuggling and other illegal activities and have become quite rich as a result in more modern years. (Salih) Young, himself mentions that "In early 1978 some Rashaayda were smuggling weapons from Eritrea, where battles between Eritreans and Ethiopians were occurring weekly and great numbers of automatic rifles were being sold and bartered." But he mentions that only a "small number of Rashiidi" participated in this activity and that they "kept some of the weapons themselves to protect their herds against thieves." This last observation sounds

like a justification for the Rashiidi actions. But the Rashaayda are a resourceful people and in that environment I am sure that gun smuggling itself becomes a means of survival and personal protection, not only livestock protection. The Rashaayda have shown themselves to be opportunists and this would align with Young's observations and with their history and culture. A mere objective observation of this behavior would not require a justification or defense of it. He brings up the smuggling in the context of the Rashayda's initial mistrust of him. They believed that he could have been a member of the Sudanese police trying to identify merchants who were breaking the law. So I am left to wonder: did William C. Young give money to the Rashaayda Bedouin so that they could smuggle guns or participate in illegal activities? Or did he just give the money and look the other way? It is an interesting thought.

Clothing and Tents – the Outward Manifestation of Rashaayda life

Every culture has an aesthetic – a way that they look, costume, architecture, art, distribution of physical resources that makes them recognized as “other” when seen from one's own perspective. Often cultures will purposefully use these decorations and outward manifestations to separate themselves from those around them. Young devotes significant parts of his books to the aesthetics of, and the form of Rashiiydi culture. Specifically he talks about costume – especially that of the women – tents, and camp layout.

In particular, it is Young's discussion of women's costume, their daily and special garb, that made me think about my own ideas and prejudices of Muslim women's garb, in particular the face and head-covering veils worn by women when they are in any space other than their own tents with their immediate family. I will have to admit that I have never quite understood nor have been able to form a solid idea of how I feel about the hijab or the burka – other than that the burka seems extremely limiting to me. I have had a few colleagues – but not many – who were Muslim and chose to wear head coverings but I never bothered to ask about it. I just took it for granted that it was part of their religious observance and chose to respect it as such. But it was a description of the clothing that the Rashaayda women wear that provided an interesting perspective.

I found an article by Young in a book available online called *Many Mirrors*. It is a collection of stories and essays about the ways in which people mark their bodies or dress their bodies in ways that create meaning for them. In it he speaks about several interesting things about the Rashaaydi Bedouin that he leaves out of his book and he takes past Western anthropologists to task who historically have dismissed the clothing of Muslim women as a means of seclusion and subjugation. He says that this attitude has prevented these anthropologists from exploring ideas about their costume further. (Young, 60, *Many Mirrors*)

Tents

In Rashaayda culture, women are in charge of the general aesthetics and design of the

costume and fabrics for dwellings (tents). It is especially the decorating of clothing and tents that is strictly women's work. It is forbidden for men to concern themselves with women's clothing as it is forbidden for women to concern themselves with men's work. However, a Rashaaydii man will sew and repair his own clothes, he would never concern himself with decorating them. Men are in charge of the wood for the tent poles and stakes – women are not allowed to carve or work with wood – and women are in charge of weaving the tent fabric – the raw materials of which are provided by the men. These raw materials are sheep, goat, and camel hair – sheared by the men when appropriate (usually seasonally) as well as cotton purchased by them on infrequent visits to rural markets. Additionally, in the creation of leather objects, the cutting and shaping of the material is the responsibility of both men and women but when it comes to decorating the leather, only women are allowed to participate in this activity.

Once a woman has weaved the cloth that makes the tent, the tent belongs to her. The hard materials – the supports – of the tent are the responsibility of men, but the soft materials – the cloths – are the responsibility of women. And if a woman leaves her husband through divorce she takes her tent with her and he has to go back to his mother's tent, or sleep under the stars.

The fact that the woman own these tents and also are responsible for the patterns that get weaved into the fabrics gives them the power of the visual representation of their culture and individual tribes. In my view, as a scholar of visual arts, this is not a trivial power. This puts women in the position of caretakers of not only familial memory but also, in a visual way, of tribal memory and identity. It is an example of how women in this nomadic society negotiate and own their own place in the tribal culture.

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