

Commission on Nomadic Peoples

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Nomadic Peoples, Number 20, March 1986

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CONTROL AND ALIENATION OF TERRITORY AMONG THE BEDOUIN
OF SAUDI ARABIA

by Ugo Fabietti

In the Arabian peninsula the interaction of nomadic and sedentary populations constitutes, to quote an expression used by the historian Fernand Braudel, a 'long-lasting' phenomenon. It is difficult, in fact, from an anthropological point of view also, to think of the social history of this region outside a general space-time picture thus defined. However no-one can deny that nomadic pastoralism has undergone a considerable decline in recent decades. The statistics supplied by governments in the region have at times exaggerated the extent of this decline. But it is indisputable that nomadic pastoralism as a form of ecologico-productive adaptation, is largely of secondary importance within the present social formation.

Consideration of the territorial factor may afford a means by which to appraise the position of the nomadic community compared to the other peoples belonging to the same social formation. The type of control which a nomadic group is capable of exercising over a given area depends upon a number of factors. Among these are its relations with the other elements of that social formation.

From this point of view, before the constitution of the modern state, the most significant presence for life among the nomads of the region was that of the caravan centres. These were not always centralized political organisms. However, their presence was an economically decisive factor for the nomads, while politically, the existence of such centres exercised some influence, albeit indirect, upon the condition of those Bedouin groups that relied on them as points of reference. It has often been found that some nomadic communities in close contact with the caravan economy have been subjected to processes of stratification and, in some cases, to phenomena of more or less marked political centralization. The case of the *Rwala* at the beginning of this century, and that of the *Rashid of Hail* in the nineteenth (Rosenfeld 1965), are the examples closest to the case discussed below. Such effects are set in motion by unequal access to resources other than those of grazing in the strict sense: profits earned from trade and agriculture, and from the duties paid by the fixed communities of the small oases in accordance with the huwa system.

As far as the effects of this centralization upon the organisation of territory are concerned, it must be noted that it is not the territory, as a means of production in the strict sense, which falls under the control of a ruling family or lineage. The control of that territory in fact remains a prerogative of small tribal groups fukhudh. Rather, it is the territory in its functional relation to the economy of the caravan centre that may be liable to control by a small number of individuals. Historical studies (Kister 1980) and ethnographic works (Musil 1928a, 1928b; Boucheman 1939) have shown how caravan rights of transit through tribal territories have always provided a source of income to the nomads, but particularly to those families or

lineages that act as mediators between the Bedouin communities and the caravan centre.

It might perhaps be said that, in a situation characterized by the inclusion of nomad communities in the economic system of a caravan centre, the control of territory takes two distinct forms: the control of territory as a means of production, and the control of territory as rent, which are prerogatives of the descent groups fukhudh and of the tribal élites respectively. In Arabia no form of control by these élites has ever been exercised over territory as a means of production in the strict sense (unlike other areas of the Middle East, cf. Salzman 1967), whereas participation by whole nomadic communities in the organisation of territory as rent seems to have been very limited indeed or even non-existent.

The presence of these two forms of organisation of territory is by no means exceptional. On the contrary, it is a constant in the history of nomadic groups in Arabia, at least as long as the territory could be controlled not only as a means of production but also as a functional part of the regional economy with the caravan town as its hub.

Both these forms of organisation comply with an image of tribal territory as a spatially defined entity, though not in the terms most familiar to us. The image that the Bedouin have of their territory seems to correspond to that of a given area, usually with unclarified borders, the resources of which are exploited in the first instance by its occupants. The notion of dirah, or tribal territory, is in a sense the ideological correlate of an effective control exercised upon the water and vegetal resources of a given area, while it has nothing to do with an idea of territory as the group's place of origin. In this respect it would be proper to say that the notion of dirah has an exclusively political and contextual meaning (Bocco 1985). The Bedouin talk of tribal territory only in relation to other Bedouin groups, to non-Bedouin communities or to political entities outside their own society; they do not regard their dirah as something of interest as such. Naturally, the group's collective memory does make reference to tribal territory. But the latter is not a "text" in which the group can "read" the ultimate reasons for its physical and cultural existence (an attitude which on the other hand is found among a large number of societies studied by anthropologists). The dirah is not even conceived as something immutable or permanent. Indeed the members of a group are often the first to consider their territory as having been acquired to the detriment of other groups at some point in history.

Although the form of territorial control as rent has now disappeared, there are still rights of access to the resources of a territory as a means of production in the strict sense. Concerning those rights, we may distinguish two levels, corresponding to the rights to vegetal and to water resources respectively. The Shammar of the Great Nafud, for example, declare that they are not opposed to the use of pastures on their dirah by other groups, and groups of 'Aneze or Harb families can in fact be encountered within their territory, although it is hard to say whether this attitude is not perhaps inspired by the recent government laws on the abolition of the traditional rights over grazing areas (Fabietti 1982).

Where the utilization of wells is concerned, the situation gets more complicated. The rights to wells are held by individual tribal groups (fukhudh) and access to those wells by other tribal units is subject to

requests and permissions. A group that holds the rights to a given well always justifies the fact in terms of genealogical inheritance: the well was sunk by earlier generations of the group, therefore its present descendants have inherited the rights to its exploitation. In actual fact, the real reason that makes a well the possession of one group and not of another is that the possessor group's members are the ones who have been continually concerned with its maintenance, through investment of labour and resources (Fabietti 1984:121-124).

By half a dozen years or so ago this situation could no longer be applied generally to all the Bedouin groups in Saudi Arabia, where the traditional rights to resources have been steadily eroded by a series of government decrees.

Not all the researchers who have taken into consideration the growing intervention by the state in the nomadic sector are agreed on the significance of these measures. Some interpret them as designed to remove one of the most serious underlying motives for the endemic warfare and feuding in Arabia prior to the consolidation of a centralized state power (Cole 1981:141); others see it as a varyingly conscious attempt by the state to dissolve what, materially speaking, would constitute the strongest correlate of Bedouin tribal identity, namely the possession of priority rights to the resources of a given area (Fabietti 1982).

It is probably not possible to give an unequivocal interpretation of these measures. But, in relation to the subject of this paper, which is the control and alienation of territory, my feeling is that, precisely because these measures are aimed at a destructuring of grazing land as traditionally intended, they represent a form of expropriation, carried out by the state, of rights formerly held or claimed by the nomadic communities. Expropriation, however, must not be taken to mean a transfer of ownership of grazing lands from tribes to state, but rather, as non-recognition on the part of the state of the traditional power of control exercised over the resources of the territory by the Bedouin communities.

These Government decrees may possibly have nothing to do with a detribalization policy pursued by the Saudi state for at least half a century (Farra 1973). Nevertheless I do not think it is sufficient, for the purposes of denying a connection between expropriation and detribalization, to lean upon the fact that the state continues to take censuses of the Bedouin on the basis of tribal membership or that the signature of tribal authorities is necessary to authenticate the identity of persons applying for passports, subsidies, land, register office certificates and so on. These are at the most only elements that refer back to the 'hard crux' of social organisation with which any project for change has to reckon.

The really important fact is that the nomadic community is no longer at the center of decision-making concerning the management of territorial resources. My impression is that this process of expropriation of rights from the nomadic community has brought about the conditions for social differentiation within the community itself, though of a profoundly different kind to the differentiation characteristic of the 'traditional' nomad community.

To illustrate more specifically the meaning of this progressive expropriation of rights from the nomadic community I shall refer you briefly

to my personal experience of research in the region of Jebel Shammar, in Saudi Arabia (1978-1980), concerning the local application of the Land Distribution Act.

As regards the nomads, the law is most relevant to those areas where the presence of very deep water-bearing strata of ancient formation allows for a type of agriculture using irrigation to be developed. The al-Khotta region, belonging to the administrative province of Ha'il, enters into this category. The water-bearing stratum situated in the subsoil of this plain on the southern edge of the Nafud desert was formed as a result of a multi-millennial process of infiltration and collection of rainwater. Since 1970, the year in which a settlement was established there, the government has distributed several hundred parcels of land (100 dunum each, - about 23 acres). The Bank of Agriculture made the necessary loans, half of them without security, to cover the initial costs of developing agricultural production, that is, enclosure, well drilling, and the purchase of motor pumps and seeds.

In theory, all the citizens of the kingdom can apply to the appropriate authorities for a piece of land in a region like al-Khotta; in reality, land distribution is based on criteria of tribal membership. Al-Khotta is in the traditional dirah of the Shammar tribe and all the Bedouin who have benefited from the 1968 law belong to one of the great tribal factions which make up the tribe.

At the time of my research, distribution of land took place according to the traditional system, and this tended to strengthen group solidarity and tribal sentiments. In this phase, in fact, every group involved in the distribution of lands, and in particular those who had been waiting to receive them from the authorities, tended to reaffirm, at least on the ideological level, an inner cohesion such as I have seldom heard reiterated so forcefully. In this case, furthermore, the Bedouin invariably stressed the link between the descent group and the territory in question. They drew a precise distinction between the territory of one fakhdh and that of another, being careful to underline that the criteria of distribution of lands by the authorities should effectively respect the rights of grazing resources traditionally held on those areas by the respective groups.

In reality, it is highly probable that all this had nothing to do with the system of rights to pasture held by individual fukhudh, but rather that the identification of different small tribal groups with particular areas of tribal territory was instead only a way of legitimising, in the eyes of the authorities, the request for allocation of land. In any case, the important thing is to note that, in this phase, access to agricultural resources was conceived in absolutely the same way as access to pastoral resources, that is to say, in terms of community rights: for the Bedouin it is inconceivable that access to the resources of tribal territory should not take into account the presence of corporate descent groups.

The disaggregating effects of the policy of land distribution did not appear in this phase; they only emerged as a result of a different kind of land appropriation which will now be briefly described.

It was not impossible on the al-Khotta plain to find Bedouin who, due to the low profitability of certain crops or to the possibility of obtaining other sources of income elsewhere, had alienated the land that was allocated

to them. The 1968 law, in fact, establishes that the land becomes the property of the assignee three years after he begins to cultivate it. Once the land has been allotted it can be sold under this condition. Often, in the al-Khotta settlement, the land had been bought by rich businessmen from Ha'il or by farmers who wanted to enlarge the area of land they already possessed. The land was then cultivated using salaried farm labourers recruited in other Islamic countries. The new owner did not necessarily belong to the tribal factions that originally took possession of the land and did not necessarily belong even to other fukhudh of the Shammar tribe. It is, therefore, only at the level of the first appropriation that the criterion of tribal membership was respected. When the land is alienated, this criterion is no longer the decisive factor for obtaining access to the agricultural resources. The right to private property substitutes the traditional collective right of access to the land. In fact, the 1968 law makes possible the emergence of a market for land in a society where once there were only collective rights as regards the exploitation of the resources.

This is the first important effect produced by the 1968 law on the system of community rights which are the pillars of tribal cohesion and solidarity. The most significant aspect of the law, therefore, is not the distribution of land as such, neither is it that the availability of land favours the sedentarisation of the nomads or gives them the possibility of exploiting different resources than those deriving from pastoral activities. These are all factors that do not alter per se the social dynamics of the Bedouin communities, whose productive system is a "multi-resource" system.

The Bedouin families which first received land in the al-Khotta plain started to cultivate it, first in order to develop a type of animal husbandry that lessened the risks of traditional pastoral production, and secondly, to exploit the possibility that fodder production gave them of increasing the breeding of small stock. The latter activity, given the growing demand of the home market, is reasonably profitable. Very often the cultivation of fodder, generally alfalfa, has brought in the same level of income as sheep rearing. Surplus fodder is sold on the market at Ha'il to those Bedouin who, even though they are unable to cultivate their own fodder, have undertaken the breeding of sheep and goats as a consequence of the almost total monetarisation of the pastoral economy. The breeding of small animals is a kind of husbandry which has provoked a growing impoverishment of the natural pastures, making the purchase of supplementary fodder a necessity. The fodder market owes its highly profitable character to the fact that the majority of sheep breeders, at the time of my research, had been denied access to the land.

Among the Bedouin who, having received land, had undertaken semi-stable breeding activities and trading in fodder, no reference to relations between community and territory was made at all. Indeed, what was underlined was the independence of individual domestic units, including those belonging to the same descent groups who had received land. This is not to say that every change in the procedures for appropriation of resources corresponds to an immediate variation in terms of the image which the nomads have of social intercourse and of their relation to territory. It would be more correct to say that we have two models of alternative interpretation, each of which can be activated according to context. In fact, the presence of these two models, which might be defined very clumsily as "communal" and "individualistic" respectively, is certainly not the product of fresh circumstances. These models are at work in the pastoral "traditional"

context, where they define the community procedures for exploitation of territorial resources on the one hand and the individual property of livestock on the other; but we can ascertain that, with the access of a part of the nomadic community to new resources, these models are called upon to interpret a somewhat different reality. The distribution of land, in fact, had laid the foundations for the individual appropriation of resources which previously were managed along community lines, and this has, in turn, led to the development of a market in land resources and in land itself. In this way, through the expropriation of traditional rights from the nomadic community, the conditions have been created for a process of differentiation within the Bedouin community itself, based on wealth and private property.

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