

Bedouin Women in Egypt:

Adapting to Changing Realities

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Bedouin women in Egypt are presently exposed to a plethora of cultural changes. As a result, these women are in a uniquely challenging position where they are making pointed choices to facilitate adaptation and prosperity. They must negotiate between cultural preservation and empowerment. This essay attempts to uncover how Bedouin women are adapting to their culture's shift toward an increasingly sedentary and interconnected lifestyle. In order to adapt to the changes in their culture, Bedouin women have made deliberate and necessary changes to various aspects of their lives. Specifically, cultural changes have resulted in shifts in Bedouin women's lifestyles, participation, and status. These shifts are ultimately empowering Bedouin women as feminists given their autonomy and self-determination. Before the specific effects of the changes are examined, Bedouin culture will be

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outlined and contextualized within historical and contemporary frameworks.

Historically, Bedouins have been solely nomadic pastoralists. Since their arrival in Egypt in the seventh century, the Bedouin have "lived by a code of honour, hospitality, and revenge based in their intricate kinship system."¹ Living primarily in the Sinai, Eastern, and Western deserts,² the Bedouin relied heavily on their kin, as they could not risk trusting outsiders. The Bedouin have always spent their days adapting to new environments and learning from their experiences. They describe their traditional lifestyle as "at one with nature, the environment, and our bodies."³ Today, only the strictly nomadic Bedouin are referred to as *true Bedouins*. *True Bedouins* comprise approximately five percent of the Bedouin population in North Africa and the Middle East.⁴ The rest of the Bedouin population is referred to as *fellahin*, which reflects their sedentary nature.⁵ Further, all

Bedouins subscribe to Sunni schools of Islam.⁶ They have always been a very devout people even though their nomadic lifestyle has not favored formal worship in mosques. The Bedouin association with Islam has led to stereotyping over the years, especially when they have been intricately involved in smuggling operations. Originally, smuggling operations made use of products that were primarily stolen from groups travelling across Egypt. Today, most smuggled items are weapons being passed across the Egyptian-Israeli border.⁷ Outsiders are quick to

¹ Akbar Ahmed and Harrison Akins, "No Arab Spring for Egypt's Bedouin," *Aljazeera*, February 12, 2012, accessed March 20, 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2012/02/201221413149992744.html>.

² "Bedouin, Eastern Bedawi in Egypt," Joshua Project, accessed March 14, 2015, http://www.joshuaproject.net/people_groups/13046/EG.

³ Sofian Noor, "Who Are Egypt's Sinai Bedouin?," *Egyptian Streets*, April 27, 2014, accessed March 14, 2015, <http://egyptianstreets.com/2014/04/27/who-are-egypts-sinai-bedouin/>.

⁴ "Bedouin Culture," Manshia Gedida, accessed March 20, 2015, <http://www.bedawi.com>.

⁵ "Bedouin, Eastern Bedawi in Egypt," Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Aya Nader, "Walking with the Bedouin," *Daily News in Egypt*, June 18, 2014, accessed March 2, 2015, <http://www.dailynewsegypt.com/2014/06/18/walking-bedouins/>.

form judgmental assumptions and stereotypes, which entices the Egyptian government to intervene and salvage their nation's reputation.

Beginning in 1956, the Egyptian government began to implement policies that aimed to increase the sedentariness of the Bedouin. The government saw opportunities to improve tourism and eliminate behaviors that were deemed unacceptable in the desert such as smuggling and kidnapping. Increasing the sedentariness of over 900,000 Bedouins in Egypt was believed to be a favorable means to accomplish the government's objectives.⁸ The Egyptian government implemented privatization, monetization, and development policies.⁹ Notable changes included the installation of roads, mineral and petroleum exploitation, and eradication of smuggling operations.¹⁰ The impacts of these policies displaced many Bedouin and forced them to enter a competitive job market, which was completely unfamiliar to them. The tension between the Bedouin and the government initiated Bedouin resistance in the 1950s and 1960s, which continues to this day.¹¹ Women continue to play an important role in the resistance as they begin to develop new ways of life adjusted to the economic and social repercussions of increased sedentariness.

Living more sedentary lifestyles has not harmed the importance of kinship among the Bedouin, but it has increased their connectedness, and impacted their practices. Since women are crucial members in kinship systems, they cannot be overlooked in Bedouin society. The tribal organization of the

Bedouin does not favor leaders or political structures,¹² which allows members to excel in certain domains without dominating them. Traditionally, women were responsible for maintaining the household, which was and remains the simplest unit of production and consumption.¹³ Having the responsibility of the household gives women recognition within kinship networks, yet they remain subservient members of the society. As such, women should not be viewed as passive members of their networks because they are "active agents of change with their own economic and social interests and strengths."¹⁴ Given their unique position in kinship networks as the overseers of households, women have the intricate knowledge required to bring great change to their lifestyle. Whether they are able to use this knowledge to create lasting change is partially dependent on the growing connectedness experienced within Bedouin society.

In the past, Bedouin women had limited access to outside knowledge. They were masters of local, environmental and household knowledge, but they had no use for the external knowledge of cultures other than their own. The recent socioeconomic transformations have resulted in women negotiating lifestyles that incorporate traditional and contemporary approaches.¹⁵ The transformations that are currently occurring are increasing women's connectedness through technology and transculturism. Transculturism refers to exposure to different cultures and the blurring of the cultural boundaries across which information is shared. While their access to the

⁸ "Bedouin, Eastern Bedawi in Egypt."

⁹ Donald P. Cole, "Where Have the Bedouin Gone?," *Anthropological Quarterly* 76 (2003): 240, accessed March 2, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3318400>.

¹⁰ Smadar Lavie and William C. Young, "Bedouin in Limbo: Egyptian and Israeli Development Policies in Southern Sinai," *Antipode* 16 (1984): 35-36, accessed March 2, 2015, http://www.academia.edu/1813701/Bedouin_in_Limbo_Egyptian_and_Israeli_Development_Policies_in_Southern_Sinai/.

¹¹ Ahmed and Akins, "No Arab Spring for Egypt's Bedouin"

¹² Lila Abu-Lughod, "Modest Women, Subversive Poems: The Politics of Love in an Egyptian Bedouin Society," *British Society for Middle Eastern Studies Bulletin* 13 (1986): 161, accessed March 14, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/194623>.

¹³ John Briggs, Joanne Sharp, Nabila Hamed and Hoda Yacoub, "Changing Women's Roles, Changing Environmental Knowledge: Evidence from Upper Egypt," *The Geographical Journal* 169 (2003): 313, accessed March 2, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3451570>.

¹⁴ Ibid: 314.

¹⁵ Cole, "Where Have the Bedouin Gone?."

public sphere may be limited.¹⁶ Bedouin women are nonetheless subject to the effects of increasing connectedness. Cell phones, laptops, television, radio, and social media are infiltrating the sedentary homes of Bedouin women. Having regular access to vehicles and electricity is a challenge to Bedouin traditions such as pastoralism, but it is allowing women to be exposed to new knowledge. For the most part, women young and old are learning to adapt and take advantage of modern technologies. They suspiciously approach new technologies out of necessity.¹⁷ There are some women who blatantly question the legitimacy of electronics like televisions; “I’m afraid if I go near it it’ll kill me.”¹⁸ Attitudes like these can be attributed to the male-centric incorporation of technologies in Bedouin society. Since women have less access to education, it is likely that brothers and husbands will have increased technological awareness in comparison to sisters and wives.¹⁹ While both genders are developing new knowledge, the men continue to surpass the women when it comes to understanding the outside world. The discrepancy does not go unrecognized by the women and they are actively working to improve their skills and share their experiences.

A primary practice that Bedouin women are using as a vehicle to express their traditions, emotions, and newfound knowledge is oral lyric poetry. These little songs are referred to as “ghinnawas”.²⁰ Technologies that enable recording and transmitting of the Bedouin women’s ghinnawas are encouraging the realignment of social

relations.²¹ The poems shared by the women reveal their unique experiences. Here, it is important to note the “diversity of daily experiences faced by women.”²² Ghinnawas are very personal and no two poems will reflect identical realities. Nonetheless, there are some shared experiences that are incorporated into a great deal of oral lyric poetry. Common themes include “sadness [and] unfulfilled longing.”²³ Both of these overarching themes can be attributed to generations of disconnect from contemporary culture. Suddenly, women find themselves surrounded by new ideas and technologies, but they are not fully able to interact with them for several reasons.

Many women do not want their stories shared in a male-dominated discourse system. Since men are the primary creators and consumers of oral lyric poetry, women who manage to engage in cultural production are rare, but powerful. With select female poems reaching larger audiences, the women’s discourse is spreading slowly. Those poems that do reach the public are aiding “emerging generational and gender differences.”²⁴ Further, many men are fearful of women’s emergence in this domain and they restrict their family’s access to such cultural products.²⁵ A lesson that can be drawn from the fearfulness of men is that restricting women’s development also hinders men’s growth. The individual developments of these two genders do not occur in opposition, but rather symbiotically at the same time and as a result of the same processes.²⁶ This can be thought of in terms of a market where men are selling meat and with the money they earn,

¹⁶ Sarab Abu-Rabia Queder, “Permission to Rebel: Arab Bedouin Women’s Changing Negotiation of Social Races,” *Feminist Studies* 33 (2007): 164, accessed March 14, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20459128>.

¹⁷ Ed Douglas, “Inside the Bedouin’s Secret Garden,” *The Guardian*, September 23, 2007, accessed March 3, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/travel/2007/sep/23/escape.egypt>.

¹⁸ Lila Abu-Lughod, “Bedouins, Cassettes and Technologies of Public Culture,” *Middle East Report* 159 (1989): 9, accessed March 2, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3012513>.

¹⁹ Ibid, 8.

²⁰ Lila Abu-Lughod, “The romance of resistance: tracing transformations of power through Bedouin women,” *American Ethnologist* 17 (1990): 46, accessed March 1, 2015, doi: 10.1525/ae.1990.17.1.02.a00030.

²¹ Abu-Lughod, “Public Culture,” 8.

²² Briggs et al., “Evidence from Upper Egypt,” 314.

²³ Lila Abu-Lughod, “A Community of Secrets: The Separate World of Bedouin Women,” *Signs* 10 (1985): 654.

²⁴ Abu-Lughod, “Public Culture,” 10.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Lila Abu-Lughod, “A Community of Secrets,” 657.

their wives are able to buy wool to produce their own goods that they in turn sell at the market. As men and women begin to realize this reality, lifestyle among sedentary Bedouin becomes more productive and hospitable toward equality. Finally, even though their voices are not as loud or as popular as those of their male counterparts, women's voices are being heard and their participation is beginning to earn recognition outside of Egypt through transcultural exchanges.

Transculturism is an important factor in the changing lifestyles of Bedouin women. Whereas men used to be the only members of Bedouin communities that were exposed to outside culture through nomadic trade ventures,²⁷ women are now earning transcultural knowledge. Exposure to new ideas and practices is allowing Bedouin women to negotiate their current traditions in an attempt to improve their lifestyles. Although there are several areas of life that are being affected by transculturism, women's emerging participation in economic activity is especially significant. Through the diffusion of ideas across borders and cultures, transculturism in its various manifestations is giving opportunities to Bedouin women despite their limited access to the public spheres of education and employment. As a result, Sharp, Briggs, Yacoub, and Hamed outline that women are using deliberate strategies to enter this sector,²⁸ which is allowing them to become increasingly participatory in economic activity. Despite high drop out rates amongst Bedouin girls, their inherent ability to learn from the environment around them is helping them develop strategies to participate in economic activity. The traditional practice of rug weaving is reaching the global market as a result of transcultural forces. This is a perfect example of women marrying

their traditions with modern practices. Under educated direction, women are empowered to participate in economic endeavors. Hala Abu Shareb is a 27-year-old college graduate and weaving project coordinator and she explains:

“We don't want our tradition to fade away. With all of the modernizations of our culture and society, we are slowly losing more and more traditions. Weaving for us is our identity.”²⁹

Wool is a necessary component in the weaving industry. Women are able to make blankets, pillows, and rugs to sell to the international market with the help of the Internet.³⁰ However, wool is not the only animal by-product that women are using to break into the market economy. Knowing how to raise livestock has given some Bedouin women the opportunity to market their animal products and by-products in regional markets.³¹ One of the main challenges in the livestock and by-product market is getting women the respect they deserve from their fellow producers. Sheep production, for example, is an activity that Bedouin women have been involved in for several centuries. Their role has traditionally been predominantly geared toward the management of the household and agriculture while men have typically travelled with the grazing herd.³² Having children help with the grazing of the livestock has eased the workload, but women still struggle to earn respect and learn the subtleties of the market. Their lack of participation in the education system plays a huge role in their battle for success in the economic sector. With rampant illiteracy and lack of formal

²⁷ Briggs et al., “Evidence from Upper Egypt,” 317.

²⁸ Joanna Sharp, John Briggs, Hoda Yacoub and Nabila Hamaed, “Doing Gender and Development: Understanding Empowerment and Local Gender Relations,” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geography* 28 (2003): 290, accessed March 2, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3804577>.

²⁹ Zab Mustefa, “Bedouin Women Face-to-Face with Patriarchal Culture,” *Your Middle East*, accessed March 14, 2015, http://www.yourmiddleeast.com/columns/article/bedouin-women-face-to-face-with-patriarchal-culture_9949.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Sharp et al., “Local Gender Relations,” 284.

³² Ibid, 285.

education, it is very difficult for Bedouin women to be competitive members of the market.³³

Becoming empowered to work in the economic sector is not an easy task and it is important to note that not all Bedouin women are being empowered equally. Women in higher socioeconomic positions tend to feel more financially autonomous because they can choose to engage in economic activity without needing to earn money.³⁴ Further, there are some kinship groups that protect their women so heavily that they have no opportunities to engage in production or even purchasing activities.³⁵ In some very remote sedentary communities, Bedouin women cannot spare the time to join the market. They have too many household tasks that they must accomplish in the rough environment and they simply do not have the time to take on more work.³⁶ Thus, access to the economic sphere is not uniform across all groups of Bedouin women. If women are going to actively participate in the economy, they need continued support from their kin and the current participants in the market.

An undeniable amount of women's interaction with outside culture stems from the tourist industry. Ironically, tourism is largely responsible for placing the Bedouin in a challenging sedentary setting. When the government sold much of the land traditionally occupied by the Bedouin to tourism industries, they probably did not foresee the impact tourism would have on Bedouin culture. Tourism has played an important role in the recent prosperity of Bedouin communities.³⁷ As Douglas elaborates, "tourism could be part of a solution rather than the problem."³⁸ In particular, women have benefitted from the opportunities

offered by tourism. They are using the tourism business to their advantage to improve their participation and transcultural knowledge. An entrepreneur in the tourism industry, Allie Astell, calls Bedouin women: "some of the strongest, funniest, and feistiest women."³⁹ Evidently, Bedouin women are leaving their mark in Egypt's tourism business. Similar to weaving, tourism allows Bedouin women to negotiate between tradition and modern practices. Instead of living their traditions in a nomadic setting, the Bedouin are now performing their identity for tourist audiences.⁴⁰ While some Middle Eastern nations are exploring Bedouin theme parks as forms of tourism,⁴¹ Egypt is focusing more closely on less glamorous tourism tactics. A popular tourism company called "The Bedouin Way" employs men and women to provide tourists with real-life Bedouin experiences.⁴² Women are responsible for preparing traditional Bedouin meals and demonstrating practices such as oral lyric poetry and weaving.⁴³ Since women engage directly with tourists, they learn about other practices, beliefs, and realities. There is certainly a transcultural exchange that occurs in the tourist setting. The main difference in the cultural exchange is that the Bedouin women are usually portraying what the tourists expect to experience whereas the tourists themselves are candidly speaking about their lived experiences.⁴⁴ Nonetheless, transculturalism is allowing Egypt's Bedouin women to develop new knowledges and familiarize themselves with alternative practices.

It should not come as a surprise that "women generally are more strongly supportive than men towards the process of sedentarization."⁴⁵ Women have a lot to gain from external connectedness and increased technological knowledge. As they learn

³³ Mustefa, "Bedouin Women."

³⁴ Sharp et al., "Local Gender Relations," 292.

³⁵ Ibid, 285.

³⁶ Sharp et al., "Local Gender Relations," 288.

³⁷ Cole, "Where Have the Bedouin Gone?," 254.

³⁸ Douglas, "Secret Garden."

³⁹ Nader, "Walking with the Bedouin."

⁴⁰ Cole, "Where Have the Bedouin Gone?," 254.

⁴¹ Ibid, 257.

⁴² Nader, "Walking with the Bedouin."

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Cole, "Where Have the Bedouin Gone?," 255.

⁴⁵ Briggs et al., "Changing Women's Roles," 317.

to interact with new cultural phenomena, women are improving their relative statuses in society even though this shift may not be recognized locally. In fact, some men deny the advances that are being made by their female kin.⁴⁶ While Abu-Lughod insists that Bedouin women are not intentionally acting in a feminist manner because they are not seeking strict gender equality⁴⁷, this is a difficult notion to grasp. Perhaps Abu-Lughod's idea is slightly outdated. There is sufficient evidence to suggest that women are actively trying to improve their status given their attempts to participate in public activities. Ever since privatization and monetization have become commonplace in Egypt, Bedouin men have seemingly tried to take control.⁴⁸ Women have resisted their attempts. Actively learning about and engaging with new technologies and trying to enter the economic sector are just a few ways in which women have acted against oppression.

More recently, Abu-Lughod noted "new signs of women's resistance to restrictions on their freedom of movement are beginning to appear."⁴⁹ Given the advances that have occurred over the past several decades, Bedouin women are evidently making strides toward increased participation and status. Access to commodities and time-saving services takes away certain responsibilities that women were accustomed to in nomadic desert life.⁵⁰ Thus, women often find themselves turning to new activities to increase their participation in settled life. Whether they elect to remain active in the domestic realm or attempt to join the public spheres, Bedouin women are endeavoring to empower themselves. They have been systematically neglected in the transition toward sedentary life, but they make the most of the few empowering resources they have access to.⁵¹ Seeking out empowerment while

trying to maintain one's cultural traditions is a deliberate and meaningful task that will hopefully improve women's status in Bedouin Egypt. Given their attempts and successes at negotiating a new form of sedentary life, Bedouin women can be characterized as performing feminist acts. They may not be actively seeking equality, but these feminists engage in truly remarkable ventures despite the oppression they face on a daily basis in nearly every aspect of life.

There is no doubt that Bedouin women in Egypt are facing a monumental task of bridging tradition and modern lifestyle in their new sedentary setting. Changes in socioeconomic aspects of life amongst the Bedouin have forced women to re-evaluate their choices. Bedouin women are making deliberate and necessary changes to their lifestyles, which are impacting their participation and status. Notably, women are sharing experiences with the help of new technologies and they are participating in the developing cash economy. In using their traditional knowledges and practices like weaving, raising livestock, and hosting, Bedouin women are able to participate in transcultural activities. Through various forms of inadvertent activism, these women can be seen as pioneering feminists in a changing cultural context. Female participation in Bedouin Egypt's public spheres is on the rise. There will no doubt be significant strides made by the feminists of Egypt's deserts. In the words of the Hala, the young weaving entrepreneur, "the women will flourish and get higher education and that way the community will change in a good way."⁵²

⁴⁶ Abu-Lughod, "Community of Secrets," 641.

⁴⁷ Abu-Lughod, "Modest Women."

⁴⁸ Abu-Lughod, "Romance of resistance," 48.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Abu-Rabia Queder, "Permission to Rebel," 173.

⁵¹ Ibid, 186.

⁵² Mustefa, "Bedouin Women."