

Ed. by Stefan Leder and Bernhard Streck

Shifts and Drifts in Nomad-Sedentary Relations



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badw and ḥaḍar
An Alternative to the Khaldunian Model

Saad A. Sowayan

When raiding hordes from Arabia started attacking Sumer, they were considered Bedouin by the Sumerians because they were riding camels, those strange animals which for the Sumerians were associated with the Bedouin. Since their first contact with the inhabitants of Arabia, those northern nations always saw them riding the camel, the symbol of desert life and nomadism. In this way, camels and the inhabitants of Arabia came to be associated and both were linked to an exclusive nomadic existence. This is attested to by Sumerian inscriptions and biblical references. In old references “Arabs” and “Bedouin” are used as synonyms, with no distinction between nomads and settlers. Riverine people of the Fertile Crescent could not imagine that for the people of Arabia the importance of the camel for settlers, as a means of transportation and traction, was no less than its importance for the Bedouin.

Writing is linked to the rise of civilisation in the Fertile Crescent. It was used by the Sumerians to record the events of their times, including their recurring conflicts with the Bedouin, from their own point of view and according to their own interest. Thus from the start of its invention, writing contributed to the formulation, accumulation and propagation of ideologies and attitudes hostile to the Bedouin. As writing became more entrenched in the production of civilisation, it replaced the oral mode as the means of preserving knowledge and shaping human consciousness. Throughout centuries, the antagonistic attitudes against the Bedouin and their culture, which are fixed in written texts, accumulated, forming a sort of antithesis between the scriptural urban centres of civilisations with their permanent cumulative written records on the one hand, and the nomadic culture with its lore and oral traditions which are ephemeral, transient and noncumulative on the other. Such a written legacy, with its inherent biases against the Bedouin, was the foundation on which later civilisations of the Orient were built, including the Islamic civilisation. When the Islamic State was firmly established and writing took root in it, it inherited the urban hostilities against the Bedouin perpetuated by writing. Therefore, we find thinkers like Ibn Khaldun characterising Bedouinism as incompatible with civilisation. Ibn Khaldun overlooked the economic interdependence between settlers and nomads and dwelt on their cultural disparity and the belliger-

ency that characterises their relations. In his model, Ibn Khaldun equates Bedouinism with savagery and places it at the very bottom of the evolutionary ladder as a primitive cultural stage, which preceded urban cultures. He includes under the rubric *badw* even farmers scattered throughout the oases of the Arabian Desert, while restricting the designation of *ḥaḍar* to apply only to inhabitants of cities and urban centres. This corresponds to the designation used among the people of the Fertile Crescent who, from ancient times until recently, consider all the people of the Arabian Peninsula to be *badw*, including settled farmers. This conception is inculcated by the fact that the differences between *badw* and *ḥaḍar*, which are to be clearly observed in other Arab countries such as Syria and Mesopotamia, are not so well marked in Arabia where people, nomads and settlers, are closest in habits and language to desert Bedouin, wherever they are to be found throughout the Arab world.

The Khaldunian model of the *badw-ḥaḍar* dichotomy, despite its two major flaws of equating Bedouinism with primitive savagery and dwelling only on the antagonistic relationship between the two sides of the dichotomy, has become widely current and has been accepted as the official position by the Arab intelligentsia on this issue. Despite recent developments in ethnology, there are still people who see the Bedouin as savages and see herding as representing an early cultural stage which came before settled life and right after hunting, as a natural continuation of that primitive stage, since both lead a nomadic existence. This wrong assumption is reinforced by the misleading verbal (and not etymological, mind you!) similarity between the two Arabic words *badw* and *bidā'iyyah*, on the one hand, and, on the other, by the primacy of Bedouin ethos and Bedouin values in the Arab culture as reflected in the Arab language and poetry. This cultural primacy was interpreted as a historical priority and thus Bedouin life was taken to precede settled life.

Now we know that the Bedouin, as camel-herding nomads, did not appear on the historical stage until the camel was domesticated about 3,000 years ago. Domestication of the camel initiated a series of revolutionary changes in the social organisation of pastoralists, who became very important as the importance of the camel increased as an efficient means of transportation. Domestication of camels made Bedouin nomadism possible and necessary at once. But the domestication of the camel in and by itself was not sufficient to make the Bedouin a power to reckon with. They also had to develop suitable riding equipment. It took them centuries to develop the riding saddle, which went through long successive stages of improvement, until at last it reached its present perfection, just before the beginning of the first century BC. Shortly afterwards, these two cultural achievements of domesticating the camel and developing the saddle were augmented by the introduction of the horse and the discovery of the complimentary relationship between it and the camel. It was camels which made it possible to raise horses in the desert and make use of them in defence and offence. Without horses it is difficult to defend camel herds or retrieve them when they are captured by raiders, at the same time it is not

possible to keep horses in the desert without camel milk on which they feed. Now the stage is set for the Bedouin to engage in raids and violence in earnest between themselves over trade routes and also between them and civilisation centres that were trying to impose their hegemony on them. Allow me here to propose that perhaps one of the strongest motives for the evolution of raiding was the attempt of stronger Bedouin groups to monopolise trade and the principal means of commercial transportation, namely camels, and to prevent other tribes from possessing these animals in sufficient numbers that would qualify them to enter the competition, and also to impose tariff on merchandise passing through tribal territory.

At this juncture, it became necessary for Bedouin groups to develop a social and political organisation, which supersedes the organisation of the small bands of earlier pastoralists. Raiding made this necessary on the one hand, while camels and horses made it possible on the other. The only model available to the Bedouin on which to base this organisation was the kinship model and the only ideology was the ideology of blood relationship. They borrowed the concepts and terminologies of kinship to create a new and more developed organisation, which transcends kinship organisation in size and complexity, namely tribal organisation. Since nomadic society does not distinguish sharply between the political and the social, the Bedouin used idioms of kinship relationships to refer to political relations. Camels contributed to the formation of such organisation by making it possible for distant groups scattered in the expansive deserts of Arabia to move and travel and to communicate and co-ordinate with each other in order to form bigger and more powerful groups for purposes of offence and defence.

The inhabitants of Arabia, whom the Khaldunian model lumps together in one category, namely that of Bedouin, think of themselves on the local level as two distinct categories, *badw*, who are camel herders, and *ḥaḍar*, who are settled farmers. This we will call the local model or the ethno model. In other words, the *badw* side in the *badw-ḥaḍar* dichotomy of the Khaldunian model is itself split in the ethno model into *badw* and *ḥaḍar*. In this ethno model, the cultural distance separating the two sides of the dichotomy is naturally much narrower than that separating the two sides in the Khaldunian model. Therefore, the ethno model differs from the Khaldunian model in that there is much less cultural distance between the two sides of the dichotomy and in that it does not view the two sides from a diachronic perspective as two successive evolutionary stages, one necessarily coming before the other, but from a symmetrical and synchronic perspective, as two functionally interrelated sides which engage in relationships of mutual interdependency and exchange of goods and services. Thus, *badw* and *ḥaḍar* become two complementary methods of adjusting to the desert environment and getting the most out of it. This binary conception is clearly and abundantly demonstrated and expressed in the local nabati poetry which, unfortunately, we have not enough space to review here. It is always born out by the ambivalent attitudes felt by the Bedouin and settlers of the Arabian Peninsula, one group towards the other, which vacillate

between admiration and contempt, as well as by conflicting stereotypes ranging from nobility to baseness. But this distinction between *badw* and *ḥaḍar* is illustrated no more clearly than by the symbol each takes to be the mark of his identity. In the Khaldunian model the *badw* are identified as *ahl al-wabar*, people inhabiting hair tents, while *ḥaḍar* are identified as *ahl al-madar*, people inhabiting mud houses. But in the ethno model the camel is the symbol of *badw* who are identified as *hal al-bil*, people of camel herds, while the palm tree is the symbol of *ḥaḍar* who are identified as *hal al-ghars*, people of the palm plantations. These two symbols, camel herds and palm plantations, sum up the differences between *badw* and *ḥaḍar* and restrict them to differences in economic specialisation and division of labour and production. Comparisons between the merits of raising camels and the merits of planting palm trees, in short, between *badw* and *ḥaḍar*, constitute a popular theme in the local poetry.

Due to the scarcity of water, agriculture in Arabia is hard and costly with very meagre returns. Production of small agricultural plots is barely enough for human consumption, leaving hardly any surplus to produce feed for animals. A farmer must grow on his farm the feed for any animals he might have, therefore, he would raise only those which are absolutely necessary for traction and farm work. Farmers concentrate their efforts to grow dates, grain, and other agricultural products necessary for human consumption while leaving to the Bedouin the task of raising animals and producing animal products. Domestication of the palm tree nearly 8,000 years ago facilitated the spread of agriculture in dry desert areas because the roots of the palm can go deep in the soil and find moisture.

The ethno model of the *badw-ḥaḍar* dichotomy, just like any typological or theoretical construct, presents a simplified picture for a complex and intricate socio-cultural reality. The dichotomy is in matter of fact a gradating continuum of various modes of social patterns and cultural adjustments to desert ecology that interconnect and intersect at various points and levels on the continuum, whereby it becomes quite difficult in actual fact to distinguish and separate them. They constitute a total and unified cultural system, with elements and components constantly interacting on various levels of economic and social activities, and each presupposing and depending on the existence of the others. There is no clearer indication of the fuzziness of the borders of these various units than the fact that we find different lineages belonging to the same tribe each pursuing a different economic activity, from camel herding to sheep grazing to farming. Those who graze sheep, *shawāyā*, occupy somewhat a middle position between true Bedouin and true settlers. They do not keep horses, nor do they raise camels. Therefore, they do not practice raiding and they are compelled to pay protection money to stronger tribes. We can cite many poems comparing camel herders with *shawāyā* and denigrating the latter for their immobility and their inability to penetrate deep in the desert to elude the authority and power of rulers. They are lower than those who herd camels.

Despite differences in their life styles and economic pursuits, the three groups of camel herders, grazers of sheep and farmers together constitute the class of nobility, *aṣīlīn*, because they all claim tribal affiliation and who contrast themselves with the non-tribal, non-*aṣīlīn* segments of the population. The farmer is no less proud of his tribal affiliation than the Bedouin because it is an essential qualification for membership in the *aṣīlīn* class. This instills in him the feeling that no matter how long he has been settled on the land, his roots, values, and his manners remain Bedouin. It determines his identity and his social position and status and colours his whole conduct with an aristocratic outlook which determines the roles and occupations which are open to him and those which are beneath him and are better left to non-*aṣīlīn* such as blacksmith, leather worker, and others.

The classification of the inhabitants of Arabia into *badw* and *ḥaḍar* is based strictly on modes of making a living with no political implications. In other words, each does not constitute a separate political power, which stands in opposition against the other. They are simply complimentary economic units. This complementarity is emphasised by many local sayings and adages stressing the dependence of the Bedouin on grain and dates raised by farmers, while farmers need camels raised by Bedouin for traction and to raise water from the pits of deep wells for irrigation. This mutual dependence contributes to the amelioration of tension that might colour the relationship between *badw* and *ḥaḍar*. The contact between them is renewed every year during the summer when tribes collect round tribal wells and villages. This contact is not limited to economic exchanges, but it also includes social and poetic exchanges. The strong bonds and intimate friendships that develop between them through such contacts are amply documented in their poetry. Some of the most outstanding *ḥaḍar* poets dedicate most of their poems to the description of nomadic life and desert scenes and the expression of nostalgia and longing for the return of the departing tribe, when the Bedouin quit the settled country and return to the desert at the appearance of Canopus.

The *'ugayl* merchants played a crucial role in the merging and fusion of pastoral and agricultural products into one economic system. They made use of camels as means of transport and they relied on their knowledge of nomadic codes and their experience in tribal politics. The *'ugayl* caravans represent one of the most important and ancient economic activities that were the outcome of camel domestication. It is a system developed by the inhabitants of Central Arabia through the economic interaction of *badw* and *ḥaḍar* with each other, and their interaction with riverine cultures since ancient times. It can be traced back to the times of the Nabataeans and Palmyrans, followed by the Qurāish. The *'ugayl* caravans are no different from the *latā'im* which were dispatched by Kisra, or the *'ir* which were dispatched by Qurāish in their summer and winter sojourns.

Through the activities of *'ugayl* the Arabian Peninsula annually exports hundreds of horses and tens of thousands of camels to Egypt and the Fertile Crescent. The *'ugayl* merchants pay a *khwwab*, protection money, or what is called *'ilāf* in

classical times, to the heads of tribes through whose territories they have to pass. Statistics show the importance of pastoral production in the Arabian Desert. It is the only production which can attain a surplus for export, while agricultural production is hardly enough for local consumption.

The local model of the *badw-hadar* dichotomy which we have been talking about was the model which prevailed until the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century. At that time the technological base was very simple and a central authority was lacking and most tribes and regions were in a state of equilibrium, which allowed them a great deal of independence. Such a political vacuum led naturally to the multiplication of power centres, both nomadic and settled, where each was trying to preserve its independence and expand at the expense of the others.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the situation started to change dramatically. Nomadism started to decline due to several factors, the most important of which was the introduction of automatic weapons and automatic transport along with the emergence of the modern state. Raiding has always been an essential component of Bedouin way of life. Its aim was not to kill but to plunder, with the least cost in human life. Whatever blood is shed in a raid is not intentional, but it is partly an occupational hazard. Primitive weapons were not very lethal anyway, but more important was the institution of vengeance, which served as a deterrent. The kin of the slain will hunt down the killer or any of his immediate relatives to take revenge, especially since fighting with lance and sword was done face to face, which allowed the killer to be easily seen and known. Under such circumstances, even if a man were carelessly ruthless, his kin would restrain him so as not to entangle them in too many blood debts with other tribes, and if he does not desist they would repudiate him. Automatic weapons changed all this. Casualties became high without knowing who killed whom because killing was done in hiding from a distance. This method of fighting also does not allow the comrades of the endangered person to come to his defence or for him to ask for pardon, *man*⁶, which is usually given under the condition that he surrenders his mount and his weapon to the pursuer. Thus the ethics and rules, which used to regulate and govern raiding broke down and it turned into a real slaughterhouse.

When cars were introduced in the Peninsula they replaced camels as a means of transportation. At the same time, diesel pumps were introduced and replaced camels in drawing irrigation water from wells. All this led to a drastic devaluation of camels. So, nomadism no longer provided a viable economic alternative in exploiting the desert environment, an environment that was deteriorating anyway due to overhunting and overgrazing.

At the beginning of this paper I expressed my objection to considering the Bedouin mode of living and economic pursuit as a primitive cultural stage preceding agriculture and settled life. But I would consider tribal organisation to be a stage of socio-political organisation, which precedes state formation. The state transcends

the tribe and its formation is possible only at the expense of the tribe. It is well known that there is a degree of noncongruence between tribe, membership to which is determined by kinship and *‘aṣabiyyah*, and state, membership to which is determined by citizenship. The state sees in the marshal spirit of the Bedouin and their mobility obstacles to its efforts to strengthen its grip on them and subdue them. By the same token the Bedouin see the state merely as an outside power forcing them to pay tribute and enlist in its army without offering them anything in return. The state will never allow the tribe to share with it the loyalties of its members and it will not permit the tribes to practice their tribal laws and customs such as taking protection money, or giving refuge to the oppressed, or taking the law into one's hand as in vengeance, and similar institution which are in flagrant contradiction to state legislations and a clear challenge to its authority. It is not surprising, therefore, that the state should seek to undermine the tribe and disparage its values and ethics. In dealing with the Bedouin, modern states adopt attitudes not much different from those of Ibn Khaldun or those of the ancient Sumerians. They depict the Bedouin as ignorant savages whose life is not conducive to religious learning and worship and tribal judges are labelled *ṭawāghūt* because they judge according to tribal customs instead of *sharī‘ah*.

At this stage of human development, Bedouin nomadism has become a closed option. It has turned into a dead end, a closed chapter in human history. The desert habitat is deteriorating, its ecology destroyed, raiding is gone, the camel is worthless. The desert can no longer offer the Bedouin anything, and they can no longer afford to turn away from the services, facilities and amenities provided by the city. They are now forced to live in slum areas on the margins of urban centres. They have to pray, pay taxes, drink cows' milk, eat chicken and eggs, smell manure, and do all the other things they once looked down upon as loathsome and denigrating. The Bedouin are at a great disadvantage because they lack the skills necessary to adopt to urban living, such as literacy or dealing with bureaucratic agencies and government rules and regulations. They face a heavy arsenal of hostile urban ideas and attitudes which have been disseminated by the use of writing and accumulating throughout the ages, while, in return, they have no means at their disposal to combat such hostilities, because their oral mode of disseminating information does not allow the preservation of knowledge of any appreciable complexity over a very long period of time.

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