**From Culture to Culturism: Rethinking** **“Cultural Translation” of Nomadic Bedouin Society**

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**Abstract**

This article examines the concept of Bedouin culture in the Middle East as it is perceived both by the Bedouin themselves and by various scholars. Like other cultures, Bedouin culture has undergone dynamic changes. This process can be understood as a dynamic construction process, related to agencies of change, flexibility, liquid borders, and identity politics; and can enter the modern age under conditions that will ensure its continued existence. Yet “cultural translation”, i.e., Orientalist scholars, and Western travelers and historians who followed in their footsteps, alongside imperialist and colonialist powers, viewed the Bedouin culture as weak, and detrimental to the sedentary population. Hence, this study presents a differing approach from that portrayed by Orientalist scholars, whose narratives tend to paint a negative picture, claiming that structural violence has defined the Bedouin and their relationships between Bedouin and Fellahin [Arabic for “peasants”, or settled Arabs] populations throughout history. Thus, this article seeks to correct assumptions embedded in earlier, Orientalist studies. Accordingly, the main argument is that the Bedouin culture has a material and spiritual historical reputation. Historically, there have been integrative relations between Bedouin and Fellahin. To that end, I make use of historical literature, Arab chronicles, anthropological studies and four in-depth interviews conducted between the years 2014-2016 with Bedouin from Yafa (a Bedouin-Fellahin) village.

**Keywords:** Bedouin culture, “cultural translation”, Culturism, Orientalism, anthropological interpretation.

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**Introduction**

This article examines the concept of Bedouin culture in the Middle East as it is perceived by the Bedouin themselves and by various scholars. I use the term *Orientalism* to indicate the historical platforms, both by historians such as Western/European travellers[[1]](#footnote-1) and by historiographers,[[2]](#footnote-2) used to describe and analyse Bedouin nomadic society in all its aspects: historical, cultural, social, economic, and political. The accounts of these scholars all relied upon memoirs of Western travellers. I use the term *culturism* (which I explain below) to describe the attitude of the ruling elites, such as the colonial empires and the post-colonial states, to Bedouin culture lying within their borders.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Facing these two concepts, I will analyze Bedouin culture and its relations to other cultures, such as the Fellahin Arabs,[[4]](#footnote-4) within the concept of culture as anthropology understands it. Unlike Orientalism or culturism, which are based on an ahistorical, apolitical, and monolithic conception of culture, anthropology proceeds from the premise that culture coexists within social power structures and contains differing and opposing interests and voices. From this perspective, I propose the concept of cultural relativity, as a perspective that enables to analysis and understanding of Bedouin culture.

This article’s main argument is that the Bedouin culture is an ancient one, which, like other cultures, has undergone a dynamic and ongoing process of change throughout history. This process can be framed and understood as a process of construction, agencies of change, flexibility, liquid borders, identity politics, and even ever-shifting boundaries; and it can enter the modern age under conditions that will ensure its continued existence. Therefore, it is neither a “negative culture” nor is it “harmful to civilization”, as claimed by Orientalist scholars, or as defined in governmental hegemonic policy (during the Ottoman and Britain Empires, and under the modern national colonial states that emerged after the disintegration of these empires). The current article makes a theoretical anthropological contribution to understanding Bedouin cultural identity, and the dynamics of relationships between the nomadic and the sedentary population, such as the Fellahin.

Accordingly, my research questions are: What is Bedouin culture? How has it been described by Western travelers and historiographical researchers? How did the colonial empires consider Bedouin culture? And finally, how did the anthropologists react to the writings of the Western travelers? To answer these research questions, I employ a review of historical literature, Arab chronicles, and anthropological studies.

1. **Historical Background: Bedouin culture**

The term Bedouin [sing. *badawi* in Arabic] derives from the word *badia*, or “desert”. Thus, the term emerged etymologically as a designation for “desert dwellers”. The Bedouin in general (this paper uses the term as both a singular and plural proper noun), traditionally lived in a tribal framework in the Middle East and North Africa. Over time, ecological factors played a significant role in shaping the Bedouin lifestyle.[[5]](#footnote-5) A tribe consists of a grouping of people constituting a social, cultural, economic, and political organization, whose members generally reside in a single geographical unit that they have chosen for themselves (or wherein they have come to dwell as a result of tribal rivalries or other external pressures).[[6]](#footnote-6)

Historically, the Bedouin engaged in nomadic herding, agriculture, and sometimes fishing on the Syrian steppe since 6,000 BCE By about 850 BCE,[[7]](#footnote-7) a network of oasis settlements and pastoral camps was established by a people known as “A’raab”,[[8]](#footnote-8) whose major source of income was transporting goods and people in caravans pulled by domesticated camels across the desert. Scarcity of water and of permanent graving land required them to move constantly, wandering from place to place in search of land resources, water, and pasture for their flocks.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Even before the rise of Islam in the 7th century, the Bedouin excelled in epics and oral tradition such as the poets *Al-Zeir Abu Layla Al-Muhalhal* (443-531 CE), *Antarah Ibn Shaddad* (525-608 CE), *Imru’ Al-Qais* (501-544 CE), *Tarafa Ibn Al-Abd* (543-569 CE), *Al-A’sha* (570-625 CE), and *Al-Khansa* (575-646 CE). During the period of Muslim rule, Bedouin culture as Muslims continued to exist and prosper, for example, the poetry of *Al-Mutanabbi* (915-965 CE)[[10]](#footnote-10) by a famous Abbasid Arab poet at the court of *Sayf Al-Dawla* in Aleppo – one of the greatest, most prominent and influential poets in the Arabic language – who composed 300 folios of poetry, in one of which he speaks to the power of identity and the freedom that comes with knowing oneself: (1) *I am the one whose literature can be seen (even) by the blind---And whose words are heard (even) by the deaf*. (2) *The steed, the night, and the desert all know me---As do the sword, the spear, the scripture, and the pen*.[[11]](#footnote-11)

This poetry was used as a means of conveying information and social control. We can learn much about the lives of the Bedouin, pure love, raiding/marauding [*ghazw* in Arabic], wandering, courage, economy, and other social and culture aspects therefrom.

In the Late Middle Ages, Moroccan traveler Ibn Battuta reported that in July 1326, en route from Egypt to Gaza, the Egyptian authorities had a customs post at Qatya, on the north coast of Sinai, where Bedouin guarded the road and tracked down those trying to cross the border (into Palestine) without permission.[[12]](#footnote-12) Fourteenth-century historian and sociologist Ibn Khaldun was the first to fully describe Bedouin society’s development and its transition to sedentarization in Arab towns and villages.[[13]](#footnote-13) He classified the Arab population into two categories: the Bedouin (al-Badu), and the sedentary people (*hadhar*, or rural-Fellahin and urban dwellers). Ibn Khaldun claimed that the differing lifestyles of the two groups, deriving from their distinct ecological conditions, was the key factor distinguishing them.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Under the Ottoman regime (1516‒1918) in the Middle East and North Africa, steady expansion of cultivated land appeared to shrink the number of pastoral nomads.[[15]](#footnote-15) At the same time, the latter were perceived by Orientalist scholars and by authorities of the Ottoman Empire during and after its disintegration, as hostile and a nuisance to the authorities, as will be described below.

1. **Orientalism: Historians’ and Historiographers’ Approaches**

Mainly from the beginning in the 19th century, Western travelers began arriving to the Middle East, not only for pilgrimage to the Holy Land, but also for research purposes. Following these travelers, many historiographers developed a pattern of accounts that relied on the testimony of Western travelers and has not deviated therefrom, which I discuss herein.

The first such genre, authored mainly in the 19th century, was the studies of Western travelers such as John Louis Burckhardt (1995) [1822], Henry Baker Tristram (1865), James L. Buckingham (1825), Edward Robinson (1970) [1856] and others, such as James Finn, British Consul for Jerusalem and Palestine (1878).[[16]](#footnote-16) Despite the relatively brevity of these travelers’ visits, these works, collectively, are a rich source of information about the population in the Middle East, including Palestine, at the time. The works, however, contain descriptions of the Bedouin population and the relationships between them and the sedentary population in somewhat essentialized terms, relying on stereotypical and largely uncomplimentary descriptions of the Bedouin. These works often presented the Bedouin as thieves and bandits, lying in wait for the Fellahin and their commercial convoys and pilgrims’ en route to Mecca.[[17]](#footnote-17)

In his account of his 1812 expedition, Burckhardt described Bedouin attacks on Fellahin towns (Tiberias, Safad, Nazareth, and Beisan), and even demand of protection money [*khawa*, or “brotherhood” payments] from villagers and townspeople.[[18]](#footnote-18) According to him:

The third and most heavy contribution paid by the peasants [Fellahin] is the tribute to the Arabs [Bedouin]. The Fahely, Serdie, Beni Szakher, Serhan, who are constant residents in the Haouran [Hauran], as well as most of the numerous tribes of Aeneze, who visit the country only in the summer, are, from remote times, entitled to certain tributes called Khone [*khawa*, or “brotherhood”], from every village in the Haouran.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Note that like other travellers and Orientalist writers, Burckhardt interpreted *khawa* as “being a brother/sister of the tribe”. In other words, according to his account, Bedouin would demand *khawa* in the form of money, legumes, or clothing from all those who lived in their vicinity, i.e., from Fellahin, from weaker Bedouin sub-groups, or from strangers accosted as they passed through the Bedouin’s territory. In return, these persons would become the Bedouin’s responsibility and be under their protection from robberies, theft, looting, or vandalism by others.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Another mid-19th century observer was the British Consul James Finn, who visited Palestine between 1845 and 1863, and described the “wars” between Bedouin and Fellahin that began in Jerusalem and Nablus and spread throughout Palestine.[[21]](#footnote-21) Traveler Henry Tristram, who visited Palestine in 1863, wrote of the “great tension” between Bedouin and Fellahin,” citing for example Bedouin such as Aqil Agha imposing a heavy annual tax on the village of Isfiya in return for his protection.[[22]](#footnote-22) At the same time, the tribes Banu Hassan, Banu Adwan, and Banu Saqer levied *khawa* from Fellahin villages in Marj Ibn Amer (the Jezreel Valley) and the Beisan Valley.[[23]](#footnote-23)

These narratives by Westerners reflect a form of Eurocentric and almost eclectic coupling of incidents that they observed or about which they were told, that lack a central axis. Note that until the 1980s, scholars widely considered these travelers’ accounts to be reliable and accurate, without a trace of criticism. Edward Said was the first to draw attention to their biases in his book *Orientalism* (1978),[[24]](#footnote-24) in which he took to task the observers’ skewed perspective that painted peoples of the East as primitive and weak,[[25]](#footnote-25) serving as justification for their conquest by the “civilized” [enlightened] West.[[26]](#footnote-26) According to Said, the new Orientalist cast the Orient as an “imitation” of the West.[[27]](#footnote-27) Said’s charges are also echoed in Bernard Lewis’s 1964 tome *The Middle East and the West*, wherein Lewis wrote the Levant can only “improve itself” when “its nationalism is prepared to come to terms with the West”.[[28]](#footnote-28)

The second genre of descriptions of the Bedouin consists of works by historiographers of the mid-to-late 20th century, who followed in the footsteps of the previous Western travelers. Five examples of historiographers – Uriel Heyd, Moshe Sharon, Moshe Ma’oz, Adil Manna’, and Muhammad Suwaed[[29]](#footnote-29) – and their studies of the Bedouin population in Palestine during the Ottoman period, illustrate this problematic framing: Heyd based his research on a collection of Sultanic decrees from the famous Muhimme Defterleri collection in Ottoman archives. These decrees often mention Bedouin insurrection and insubordination, including frequent references to wars that erupted between Ottoman forces stationed in the region and the Bedouin.[[30]](#footnote-30) Heyd wrote under his book’s subtitle, “Keeping the Bedouins in check”:

The domination of parts of Palestine and the neighbouring districts by rebellious Bedouins compelled the Ottoman Government to take strong measures […]. Where important roads crossed uninhabited parts of the country, new villages were established with a view to protecting the travelers against attacks by Bedouin and other brigands.[[31]](#footnote-31)

In his study on the Bedouin in Palestine in the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries, Moshe Sharon corroborated Heyd’s conclusions. In his 1964 Master’s thesis, basing his argument on descriptions provided by Western travelers, Sharon argued that the relationship between the Bedouin and Fellahin is anchored in the struggle between the desert and the sown; between the sons of the desert and the sons of the settled country [*Fellahin*].[[32]](#footnote-32) Sharon claimed that since the 18th century, the last big nomadic tribes, including the tribes Banu Saqer, Al-Shamlna, Al-Qdirat, and Turkmens, migrated from the East and places like *Hauran* (southwestern Syria) to locales in Palestine, settling in the HulaValley and Marj Ibn Amer [Jezreel Plain], and constantly attacking the settlements and villages from these vantage points.[[33]](#footnote-33)

Sharon seasoned his descriptions with terror: “…raids on trade caravans and pilgrims, and highwaymen demanding ransom”.[[34]](#footnote-34) Thus, Sharon’s perception of the relationships between inhabitants of the desert and the sown as enemies locked in mortal combat was forged, and he summed up thusly:

The Ottomans failed in this task [to keep their promise to secure the holy sites in Palestine], and as in the previous Mameluk period, most of the roads were at the mercy of the Bedouins. Rarely did the *hajj* caravan succeed in returning from Mecca unmolested.[[35]](#footnote-35)

In his 1968 work, Moshe Ma’oz claimed that a key preoccupation of the Ottoman regime was fighting the Bedouin tribes, which he defined in historical terms as “an ancient theme in Middle Eastern life”.[[36]](#footnote-36) For example, in the subsection of his book that discusses Bedouin turbulence and aggression, he wrote:

After a short period of peace and order under the Egyptians [1831‒1840], the Syrian provinces became again a vulnerable target of [for] Bedouin aggression and turbulence; as in the pre-reform era, the main victim was the peasant [*Fellahin*]. [...] One major target of Bedouin assault were the roads.[[37]](#footnote-37)

These same weaknesses are evident in Adil Manna’s essay on the Farrukh (a Bedouin tribe), the governors of Jerusalem, and their relations with the Bedouin that cites the weakness of central government and its inability to restrain “rebellious” Bedouin, while the researcher viewed positively the Ottoman government’s curtailment of Bedouin activity in the first half of the 16th century as an improvement (that subsequently petered out toward the end of the century).[[38]](#footnote-38) Manna’ even devoted a second study to the Jerusalem district – this time to the volatile relations between the Farrukhs, the Bedouin, and the Fellahin.[[39]](#footnote-39) Ties between Bedouin and governors were always at the expense of the settled population; here, Manna’ describes at length how the local provincial elite (such as the governor, Muhammad Ibn Farrukh) betrayed their duty to protect the populace and allied themselves instead with “ruthless nomads”.[[40]](#footnote-40)

The last example of the second genre is Muhammad Suwaed, who, basing his claims on Western travellers' accounts, wrote:

In addition to the domination of the Bedouin on the sedentary societies [Fellahin], they also proceeded to control the main roads in the north of the country [Palestine], especially those that connect Tiberias to the areas of the Jordan Valley, and Nazareth with Nablus, which fell within the area of movement of (Banu) Saqer tribes.[[41]](#footnote-41)

Collectively, all of these studies paint a negative image, placing an incorrect focus on structural violence as a defining factor in relations between Bedouin and Fellahin populations. The Bedouin are portrayed as wild and barbaric, terrorizing the urban and village populations, the commercial convoys, and pilgrims throughout the Ottoman Empire. These descriptions corroborate Orientalism, ethnocentric and eclectic accounts; unsurprisingly, they have generated vehement criticism since then.[[42]](#footnote-42)

1. **Culturism: Ottoman and** **post-colonial states’ discourse**

The stereotypical perception as Orientalist discourse suggesting that the Bedouin culture is negative, makes no contribution to human society, even threatens it, has continued during the colonial empires and post-colonial states period, and even accelerated to a more poignant discourse of culturism, as can be seen in three different periods of rule in the Middle East: Ottoman, British, and Israeli.

According to *The Oxford Dictionary,* the definition of culturism is “Belief in the relative superiority or inferiority of certain cultures; discrimination or prejudice based on assumptions about culture”.[[43]](#footnote-43) In other words, culturism ‒ a discourse of the majority groups/hegemony or those in power and authority ‒ focuses mainly on minority groups’ cultural, social, and political life, and presents them as negative.[[44]](#footnote-44) The use of the term “culturism” became common in the neoliberal (late 19th century) era for cases wherein “tribalism” serves (the writer or the hegemon) as a powerful element of identity or ascription (personal or collective), based on the answer to “Who are you?” and “Who are we?”. As such, culturism’s subtext forges a racist discourse that goes farther than merely accusing the natives of cultural backwardness as per a Western yardstick. Therefore, this genre has very little to contribute to understanding the Bedouin culture and its practical aspects.

During both the colonial and post-colonial periods, outlying areas and nomadic communities were subjected to various civilizational discourses and viewed as living in an extra-state space.

Ottoman period:Attitudes of the Ottomans and their administration toward tribal communities, as part of the geographical periphery, were strongly negative. As Serif Mardin noted, “The clash between nomads and urban dwellers generated the Ottoman cultivated man’s stereotype that civilization was a contest between urbanization and nomadism, and that all things nomadic were only deserving of contempt”.[[45]](#footnote-45) Moreover, the modern state’s civilizational discourse of “backward”, “savage”, “barbarian”, “constant fighting”, and “robbery” began, as argued by James Scott, exactly where states’ sovereignty and tax collections ended.[[46]](#footnote-46)

Accordingly, the Ottoman government treated the Bedouin as “civilizational exceptions”,[[47]](#footnote-47) to be the target of the *Tanzimat* reforms. These reforms were a series of edicts issued between 1839 and 1876 intended to bring about order and organize the Ottoman Empire, through various levels of legislation and implementation.[[48]](#footnote-48) These reforms were borrowed from the West, and as noted by Selim Deringil, “borrowed colonialism” came to be viewed as a modern way of being.[[49]](#footnote-49) Accordingly, increased involvement in tribal regions and attempts to extend the new administration to these regions took place under Sultan Abdulhamid II (r. 1876-1909).[[50]](#footnote-50) In doing so, the Ottoman officials dealt with the Bedouin “in the only language they could understand”. They operated on two parallel planes. On the first, government officials in any given locality – the *vali* or the *kaymakam* – may very well not have needed to enforce the center’s will, so that both he and the local power holder (sheikh, *bek*, or *agha* notable, etc.) would go through the motions of a polite fiction: Niceties would be uttered, gifts exchanged, bribes given and taken, and in return, the local power holder would acknowledge the sultan’s suzerainty.[[51]](#footnote-51) On the second plane, the officials tried to move beyond “merely” disciplining or educating [*te’adib*, تأديب] the Bedouin[[52]](#footnote-52) in order to rule during the “divide and conquer” policy of tribal warfare, i.e., tribes against other tribes such as the fighting in the Negev in the 19th century between the Tayaha-Tarabin, Azazmi-Tayaha, and others.[[53]](#footnote-53)

British mandate period:After World War I, Britain was perceived by itself as having more experience than any other country not only in war, but also in its ability to control and manage nomadic peoples.[[54]](#footnote-54) Accordingly, it employed a self-interested bureaucracy driven by a progressive imperialist ideology that treated nomadic peoples as primitive, culturally exceptional, inherently violent, and basically a nuisance to the administration.[[55]](#footnote-55) It therefore is no wonder that British policy toward the Bedouin population was aggressive, rigid, and expressed in the enactment of strict and coercive laws aimed at ad hoc oversight of this nomadic category. This policy was exemplified by the Collective Punishments Ordinances, 1926-1936 against Bedouin suspected of invading state lands or crossing international borders without entry and exit visas.[[56]](#footnote-56) The tribe of any individual violating this order would be punished collectively for his infringement as per Bedouin Control Ordinance, no. 18 of 1942.[[57]](#footnote-57) This ordinance’s purpose was to confer upon District Commissioners power to control nomadic tribal communities, including the power to investigate and punish alleged offenses committed by members thereof.

Israeli period: following its establishment in 1948, Israel conferred citizenship upon the Palestinian minority that remained within its borders. Officially, they were and are supposed to have equal rights alongside the Jewish majority. Yet in fact they do not enjoy equal rights, including those considered loyal to the state, such as the Bedouin and the Druze, who serve in the IDF. This situation is mainly due to ideological, religious, economic, and political motives. Moreover, the state has abandoned its Palestinian citizens’ security. Gun violence in Israel’s Palestinian community is on the rise, drug trafficking is spreading, and both reach the Bedouin villages in the periphery. Not only does the state fail to address the most painful issues of Palestinian citizens, but it throws up administrative obstacles owing to cultural pathology or a belief in Arab culture as oppressive and inherently violent.[[58]](#footnote-58) Within the Palestinian minority in Israel is the Bedouin minority, which suffers from a neglect by the state in nearly all areas. Facing customs and social norms such as polygamy, murder for family honor, female genital mutilation, and blood revenge,[[59]](#footnote-59) the state is hobbled in addressing these issues out of a perception that this minority needs re-education, as its culture does not properly prepare its members for life in a modern society.[[60]](#footnote-60)

This perception is apparent in everyday examples, such as the use of visual symbols as expressed in signs in parks, hung on power poles, or at construction sites proximate to Bedouin concentrations or neighborhoods in the Negev in which the text, while in both Hebrew and Arabic, the Arabic text is larger and more prominent, not only to warn Bedouin residents, but to remind the members of the majority that they are in a “danger zone”. This practice – just one of many – clearly demonstrates the concept of culturism, under which the state (representing the majority) views the Other (such as the Bedouin) as embodying cultural inferiority, as manifested in their way of life.

1. **An** **anthropological interpretation**

As aforementioned, Orientalist studies and culturism discourse portray the Bedouin as thieves and bandits, harmful to sedentary cultures. These descriptions hold steady across the tenure of the Ottoman Empire, and even after its disintegration and during the rule of the modern post-colonial states that arose, especially in the first half of the 20th century. In contrast, anthropologists challenged Western traveler’s narratives, even rejecting them outright. At the same time, anthropological research can present a more complex structure, an epistemologicalapproach, reflexive experience, and coherent interpretation of Bedouin culture and its relationships within and between tribes, and their interactions and practical relations between Bedouin and Fellahin.

As, for instance, would it be accurate to characterize all the members of a tribe – including women and children – as robbers? Or to portray the tribal structure as a segmentary lineage,[[61]](#footnote-61) which assumes that there are no differences in status and class between individual members of the tribe? Despite the utility of their accounts, the Western travelers, generally, were not in the region long enough to familiarize themselves with the actual economic, social, and cultural situation, or to culturally translate the particular phenomenology presented by the locals in a contextually reliable fashion.

Accordingly, American anthropologist Talal Asad challenged and opposed the concept of “cultural translation” that manifests in British social anthropology,[[62]](#footnote-62) arguing that cultural translation’s objective is to define by overt or covert signs. According to Asad, ethnographers should not approach the research field as group leaders or tourists who are there to interpret what the “native” says, or to “embellish illogical things”.[[63]](#footnote-63) Asad wrote: “Cultural translation is inevitably enmeshed in conditions of power ‒ professional, national, international. And among these conditions is the authority of ethnographers to uncover the implicit meanings of subordinate societies”.[[64]](#footnote-64)

Another avenue of criticism Orientalist studies was developed by anthropologists Khaled Furani and Dan Rabinowitz in their article on ethnography in Palestine,[[65]](#footnote-65) wherein they described the Western travelers’ accounts as “biblical anthropology”, i.e., in thrall to an ancient biblical symbolism, aimed at proving that the Holy Land does not belong to the Muslims, thereby justifying its re-conquest. In this sense, their argument goes, these travelers and their narratives paved the way for the early Zionists:

Proto-ethnographic work in Palestine involved European writers animating their own patrimony by following the footsteps of emblematic biblical figures. This conveniently supported a European claim to shape Palestine’s administrative reality and to morally incorporate it in a European universe […], which is mentally and politically external to the lands of Islam. One consequence of this “biblical anthropology” was validation of the nascent Zionist claim of a “historic” return to a “promised” land.[[66]](#footnote-66)

Nearly anthropologists are familiar with Tylor’s famous definition of culture, according to which “Culture or Civilization, taken in wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society”.[[67]](#footnote-67) Accordingly, some anthropologists also described the interaction between the Bedouin and the settled/Fellahin as based on flexibility, structuring, and formulation, and not on essentialist differences or dichotomous relations.

The anthropological study of Daniel Bates, which describes the relations between nomad and Fellahin populations in Syria,[[68]](#footnote-68) is a good example thereof: Bates proposed that ecological conditions contributed to the symbiosis between Bedouin and Fellahin, an example of which is the integration of the land uses of the Bedouin and Fellahin:The Fellahinwork the land; and after harvesting, the Bedouin bring their herds into the fields, contributing to land fertilization ahead of the forthcoming planting season.[[69]](#footnote-69) When the agricultural season is over, Bedouin sell livestock products*,* such as milk, cheese, butter, meat, and skins to the Fellahin*,* and buy agricultural products from the Fellahin.

Anthropologist Donald Cole addressed these phenomena in his article “Where Have the Bedouin Gone?” wherein he told of finding Bedouin working as truck drivers transporting petrol in Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Syria; transporting water for crop irrigation; or working as sheep and cattle merchants in Syria. While loyalty to the tribe has shifted to loyalty to the state, this has not necessarily changed *self-ascription*. Cole’s insight lies in the fact that changes to a lifestyle do not necessarily mean that social or cultural identities are lost or assimilated.[[70]](#footnote-70) Francoise Metral summed this concept up in one sentence:

Lifestyles change, but identities remain. For a Sukhnite [or Al-Sukhnah, a town in eastern Syria], a Bedouin, even if his family spends three-quarters of the year in town, is still a Bedouin, member of such-and-such a tribe. The same is true for [other] tribesmen.[[71]](#footnote-71)

In other words, the means and tools may have changed, but the cultural identity remains the same,[[72]](#footnote-72) as illustrated in the next section.

1. **Recent changes in Bedouin culture: Israeli Bedouin as a case study**

Change occurs daily throughout the world, and, as a result, its inhabitants are encouraged to change as well. The population learns to adapt in various ways to survive, often causing traditional practices to be forced aside to make way for more modern methods. The Bedouin has recently experienced a great many changes throughout the Middle East.[[73]](#footnote-73) Products of 20th and 21st-century technology have been imported into their lifestyles.[[74]](#footnote-74) The majority of tribes have settled in Bedouin or Fellahin villages and towns and taken up agriculture, attracted by educational and health facilities and in response to government pressure.[[75]](#footnote-75)

The Bedouin in Israel are located in four main geographical areas, namely Negev, Galilee, Ramla, and Lod. They, like other Bedouin in the Middle East, have been in the throes of dynamic and rapid change for several decades in almost all areas of their lives. Since its inception in 1948, the Israeli government has sought to resettle the nomadic Bedouin in both Galilee and Negev, partly in an effort to induce socio-economic development among this indigenous minority community.[[76]](#footnote-76) The Israeli military rule’s (1948-1966) effect on Bedouin settlements in Negev and Galilee was considerable. According to Falah in his article on the development of planned Bedouin settlement in Israel 1964-1982,[[77]](#footnote-77) the prohibition of free movement and mobility of the Palestinian population (*siyeg* in the Negev plan) and policy of expropriation of lands from Bedouin[[78]](#footnote-78) contributed significantly to their transition to sedentarization.[[79]](#footnote-79) During and after the military rule, mainly during the 1960s,[[80]](#footnote-80) Israel implemented three government programs the ultimate goal of which was to evacuate the Bedouin from areas defined as “essential lands for the state” and settle them in populated Bedouin villages or Fellahin towns and villages.[[81]](#footnote-81) This government policy “as agency” contributed largely to continued integration of Bedouin into towns and villages.[[82]](#footnote-82) After the Bedouin settled in permanent communities, they began to develop lifestyles which were drawn from their cultural history. I will mention and emphasize here two main aspects of change in economic and material culture.

**Economy**: in this aspect some of Bedouin who live in Bedouin or Fellahin settlements continue to raise livestock near their homes, including both sheep and goats, for economic capital and for their own sustenance needs. Sammy Ghazalin, about 65 years old, is married to a Bedouin woman and lives in the *Marah Alghazlan* neighborhood in Yafa (a Bedouin-Fellahin village near Nazareth). In an interview, he told me, “I am raising a small herd of about 15 animals [so that my family can] have fresh mutton whenever [we] need, especially for the holidays. Also, my wife and I make *Labaneh,* and sometimes cheese”.[[83]](#footnote-83) This indicates that the practice of raising livestock is not only for commercial purposes.

In another interview, Muhammad Hamdoun, a resident of Yafa who raises cattle and calves, said that he currently has 75 animals grazing south of the *Marah Alghazlan* neighborhood between Yafa and Migdal Ha’emek. He and his sons raise the livestock for trading purposes. He sells the calves to butchers after slaughtering them in his own cowshed.[[84]](#footnote-84)

Fatma Ghazalin is about 60 years old. Married to a Bedouin, she also lives in the *Marah Alghazlan* neighborhood. In my interview with her, her comments illuminated the cultural differences existing between Bedouin and Fellahin communities. She said: “The Bedouin today live separately from the Fellahin in the village. It is true that we grow livestock near our homes, and sell them livestock products, but we live in our [Bedouin] neighborhood…”.[[85]](#footnote-85) This is another indicator of the bifurcated path of social relations; the Bedouin have economic interactions with the Fellahin but still live in a separate neighborhood in the Fellahin village.

Marx claimed that the Bedouin immigrate in large groups of “lineages” and choose to live in tribal enclosures in town neighborhoods, tending to maintain family and social relations with their mother tribes (such as through marriage), even though they may be geographically remote from one another.[[86]](#footnote-86) The reason for this, Marx claims, is that the Bedouin are pessimistic about their economic and political position in towns and villages. Apprehensive due to the lack of employment security, the Bedouin view the tribe as a source of political and economic security. Nevertheless, commercial activity in the form of sales of meat and livestock creates an economic bridge between the Bedouin living in villages and towns and the townspeople.[[87]](#footnote-87)

In addition to livestock, some of the Bedouin have been integrated into the employment market, trade and the economy of the Bedouin village. Many works in the service industry, maintenance, construction, and small trade, both in the village and beyond.

Over the course of my observations, I identified desirable work patterns for Bedouin in Yafa, specifically in security work. There were, at the time of my research, about 18 security guards working in educational and banking institutions both in and outside the village.[[88]](#footnote-88) A total of six Bedouin youth were serving with the Israeli army, the IDF—four soldiers in permanent service and two in the prison service. Since the establishment of the State of Israel, 24 Bedouin have served in the IDF. This includes those still in service at the time of my fieldwork. The Fellahin, who are not conscripted for army service, do not look favorably on the Bedouin serving in the IDF. For historical reasons, conscription into the IDF is considered as a betrayal of the Palestinian national cause by the Palestinian Arabs who remained within the state borders of Israel after its establishment in 1948. Israel, to them, is an occupying entity plundering the homeland of the Palestinian people.[[89]](#footnote-89)

These two employment patterns demonstrate the connection between the Bedouin and their cultural past, typified by acts of bravery and demonstrated by combat, carrying arms, and riding horses. Therefore, insights can be discerned from interviews with Bedouin living in a permanent locality, such as Yafa—a Bedouin-Fellahin village—about the economic change taking place among the Bedouin society in Israel. The Bedouin adapt to an economic pattern from their cultural past of daring, courage, and heroism etc. appropriate to their locality. This change also has an impact on other areas of life.

**Material culture aspects**

The Bedouin’s official home was the tent, which is called *bayt al-sha’ar* (“house or house of hair”), which used to be a residence for the nomadic Bedouin.[[90]](#footnote-90) Recently, most of the Bedouin settlers replaced the tent with stone houses. This change shows that the Bedouin are not immune to the modernization process, but rather are active players, engaging and adapting the modern means to their needs. These changes in the Bedouin residence culture can be seen in the houses. The backyard is wide and has sheds for raising livestock and horses. The courtyard still resembles a tent with a wide courtyard including a shed, or grape shed, and inside it is a pile of firewood. Palm trees are planted at the entrance to the house, or vases with paintings of palm trees, and sometimes horse saddles are hung on the trees in the courtyard.[[91]](#footnote-91) Inside the house there are material tools that were used by Bedouin in the past or are still being used, like a mortar (*mihbash*) and pestle (*yad*) of wood with white metal decorations applied (used for crushing coffee beans), a ladle (*mihmaseh*) and stirrer (*yad*) of iron with decoration applied (used for roasting coffee beans over the fire), three brass coffee pots (*dalleh*, *balleh,* and *masab*), or, alternatively today, sometimes the Bedouin use an “artificial pot” that is made of plastic and similar in shape to a brass coffee pot,cooking pots (sing. *qidr*) and copper serving dishes (sing. *sahan*), and a fiddle (*rababah*) is often played to entertain guests.[[92]](#footnote-92)

These material objects were passed from the older generation to the younger to preserve and strengthen the Bedouin heritage, and to remind the Bedouin youth of the “noble Bedouin culture.” Their social power can be drawn from their ancient culture. Alternatively, the surrounding cultures see the Bedouin culture as unique through these material means and with symbols separated and distinguished from others. Either way, the materialist Bedouin culture continues to survive.

**Women and men’s costumes**: The traditional costumes of both men and women are well adapted to temperature extremes in the desert. They are loose-fitting with several layers providing good insulation. Clothing can denote economic, social, or marital status, and a woman’s clothing often indicates the tribe or locality from which she comes, and also the period such as Ottoman, British or Israeli. Garments of different types, colors, and ornamentation were worn by unmarried girls, wives, widows, and elderly women.[[93]](#footnote-93)

The costumes worn by Israeli Bedouin women are very different from those worn by women of the Middle East. Until recently, a woman wore a black dress (*shersh*) with colored stripes at its bottom, a black crepe head veil (*milfa’*), a silk and metal brocade head covering (‘*usbeh*), and gold coins around her forehead.[[94]](#footnote-94)

Recently, a Bedouin woman’s costume has changed according to prevailing fashions. This change in fashion required that women wear a new dress to each festive gathering. At the beginning of the 21st century, young Bedouin women wore jeans and T-shirts and no longer wore embroidered dresses (*shersh*) or coin-encrusted ornaments. Their status was displayed by wearing as much jewelry around the neck as possible.[[95]](#footnote-95) Sometimes, women can be seen wearing traditional clothes, especially at wedding ceremonies. This is not only nostalgic but is also for the preservation of cultural tradition and even confers a special beauty.

The men no longer wear the traditional costumes comprising a long white robe (*thob*), a wide sleeveless cloak (‘*abayeh*), a head veil (*keffiyeh*), or head ropes (‘*aqal*).[[96]](#footnote-96) Today, they wear modern clothes. Young people wear jeans and T-shirts, and adults wear elegant pants and button-down shirts. However, in rite of passage ceremonies such as weddings or funerals, like women, adults tend to wear traditional clothing, which shows seriousness and identification with the people at the ceremony.[[97]](#footnote-97)

In addition, from all the above, women and men use mobile phones to connect to social media and study in colleges and universities. These changes would not happen had it not been for the external and internal factors of the Bedouin themselves. The Bedouin get practical engagement and take active steps to integrate into the modern life of economy, education, and society without losing their special characteristics.[[98]](#footnote-98) Social scientists, such as Giddens,[[99]](#footnote-99) have recognized that “modernity risk culture”[[100]](#footnote-100) can create radical individuals. Therefore, if culture strives to survive, as Giddens argues, individuals must be referring to the susceptibility of most aspects of social activity as material relations of the modern conditions and know how to build their identities according to the changes taking place around them.[[101]](#footnote-101) So too are the Bedouin who adopt and accommodate modern means to their unique needs. These along with the preservation of the non-material means, such as the Bedouin dialect, which is different from other Arab dialects, such as Fellahin and urban.[[102]](#footnote-102)

**Summary and conclusion**

The article challenges us to rethink classical Bedouin culture as it is recognized in Bedouin society. The article shows that throughout various historical periods during the Ottoman and British empires, and also after their disintegration and the establishment of modern nation-states such as Israel, Bedouin culture became marginal, did not contribute to society, was considered a nuisance by the authorities, and every criminal act in a Bedouin locale was immediately attributed to the “structural violence” of the Bedouin. Such acts are allegedly attributed to a backward culture that has failed to integrate into modernity. However, anthropologists proposed a far more comprehensive and coherent alternative when they began to culturally translate Bedouin culture and its relationship with other cultures. Thus, Bedouin culture is undergoing a dynamic and trending change today, as we have seen through the cultural translation of the Bedouin population in Israel. the Bedouin are adapting modern means to their needs so to not lose their cultural uniqueness. Without it, Bedouin society would lose its valuable cultural collective. Hence, they preserve and strengthen material symbols to survive in a changing world.

The conclusion reached herein is that a cultural researcher must not only spend extended periods in their studied culture’s field to know that culture’s habitus, undergo reflexive experiences, and identify phenomena embodied in public symbols via which the members of the hegemony communicate their worldview, value orientations, and ethos, but must also be smart enough to read cultural history, in the studied culture’s language, to arrive at cited objectifications and embodiments within their cultural capital and incorporate them into their interpretation in writing culture.

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85. Fatma Ghazalin, Interview on March 25, 2016, Yafa village. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. Emanuel Marx, “Economic Change among Pastoral Nomads in the Middle East,” in Emanuel Marx and Avshalom Shmueli (Eds.), *The Changing Bedouin* (New Jersey: New Brunswick, Transaction Books, 1984), pp. 1-15. [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. Muhammad Hajajra, a member of the local council, Interview on April 16, 2016; See Also: Mazarib, *The process*, p. 227. [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. Mazarib, *The process*, p. 227. [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
90. For more information on “Bedouin tent” see Weir, *The Bedouin*, pp. 1-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
91. Mazarib, *The process*, p. 260. [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
92. For more details see Weir, *The Bedouin*, pp. 7-16. [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
93. Cecilia Meir, *Crown of Coins: Traditional Headdresses of Arab and Bedouin Women* (Tel Aviv: Eretz Israel Museum, 2002), p. 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
94. Weir, *The Bedouin*, p. 52 [↑](#footnote-ref-94)
95. Ibid, p. 23; Weir, *The Bedouin*, p. 56; Tal Segal, *The Negev Bedouin Woman in an Era of Changes* (Lahav: Joe Alon Center, 1995 [Hebrew]), pp. 34-44. [↑](#footnote-ref-95)
96. Weir, *The Bedouin*, p. 57. [↑](#footnote-ref-96)
97. Mazarib, *The process*, pp. 235-242. [↑](#footnote-ref-97)
98. Segal, *The Negev*, p. 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-98)
99. Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in Late Modern Age* (Cambridge: Polity, 1992). [↑](#footnote-ref-99)
100. Ibid, p. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-100)
101. Ibid, p. 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-101)
102. For more details see Tomer Mazarib, “Is the relationship between the Bedouin and Fellahin dichotomous? An anthropological case study,” *Currents: Brief of Contemporary Israel*, Issue No. 4 (Fall 2021), pp. 1-11; Judith Rosenhouse, *The Bedouin Arabic dialects: general problems and a close analysis of North Israel Bedouin dialects* (Wiesbaden: O. Harrassowitz, 1984). [↑](#footnote-ref-102)