

# IMAGINING A BEDOUIN PAST: STEREOTYPES AND CULTURAL REPRESENTATION IN THE CONTEMPORARY UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

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This paper examines how the Bedouin stereotype – the idea that the Arab people are nomads of the desert - is used to represent the past in the United Arab Emirates and consequently to make statements about Emirati nationhood and citizenship. I reflect on how these messages are received by different communities either residing in or visiting the United Arab Emirates. This discussion demonstrates how a stereotype can signify different meanings for different audiences. It also shows how stereotyping can be constructed and enshrined in both popular culture and official and academic narratives.

My analysis is based on the work of a number of scholars who have recently begun to document how the concept of heritage and what constitutes the past in the United Arab Emirates have been constructed by specific activities, objects and buildings that are recognizably Arab and how these are seen as important in maintaining a sense of national self-identity. The post-oil era in the United Arab Emirates has seen the dramatic development of modern institutions that purport to maintain Emirati tradition within this framework, including seasonal camel racing, Bedouin-like hospitality tents, museums and architectural restoration projects. It is true that the United Arab Emirates together with the other countries of southern Gulf constitute a distinctive region within the Arab world. The Arabian side of the Gulf has unique dialects, a distinctive vernacular building tradition, and close historic cultural and political ties to neighboring non-Arab countries. I suggest that the new “heritage” events, objects and places, though, do more than preserve “an authentic national culture” or maintain “a cultural link between the modern changing society and the old cultural life ways.” (Khalaf: 102) In short, they construct a homogenized, unified, and romantic past for a society fragmented by tribalism and swamped by a massive imported foreign work force. Bedouinism provides a trope around which a collective national identity can be assembled and presented to outsiders as a clear encapsulating image of who the people of the Emirates are.

I am also following the tendency in contemporary post-structuralist theory to see concepts and their material manifestations as active agents in the construction of group identities. Part of this is to simply see the stereotype as what Homi Bhabha, drawing on Edward Said’s delineation of Orientalism (Said: 3), defines as a “discursive strategy” and a “mode of representation” or “form of knowledge and identification” whereby certain characteristics of a collective identity are repeated and asserted as accepted facts (Bhabha: 66). Bhabha in particular explores the use of the stereotype as a means of manufacturing and bolstering colonial power, claiming that the “objective of colonial discourse is to construe the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction.” (Bhabha: 70). What is intriguing about the United Arab Emirates, though, is that the stereotype as a tool is wielded by an indigenous minority that holds the reins of power and that projects the stereotype as a representation of the collective self rather than of the collective other.

Bedouin “signs” continue to suggest “a *secure* point of identification” for constructing a collective self (Bhabha: 69) in the United Arab Emirates. These signs as they appear in displays and

“traditional” activities are in part inspired by early colonial images of Emirati society, namely the photographs of foreign residents and visitors of the Emirates prior to the 1970s, like Wilfred Thesiger (Taylor), Ronald Codrai (Codrai), and Ramesh Shukla (Shukla and Bhatia), who, in the absence of indigenous tradition in documentary photography, provide a bank of “historic” images. These have been celebrated by indigenous Emiratis as a valuable documentation of a past now gone and provide the basis of a collective visual memory. As Paul Connerton argues, “...control of a society’s memory largely conditions the hierarchy of power” (Connerton: 1) and that the reference to a Bedouin past presupposes “a shared memory” (Connerton:3) and helps define Emirati citizenship.

However, the term “Bedouin” holds both negative and positive connotations, implying either a set of virtuous characteristics that confirm membership in the new Emirati nation-state or signifying a violent and unpredictable people without an impressive material culture and therefore without civilization. A tension exists between the outsider’s stereotyped conception of the Bedouin and its re-appropriation and re-presentation as an identity of belonging.

I began thinking about the notion of a Bedouin past shortly after I first arrived in the United Arab Emirates. It is impossible to escape the various installations, murals, photographic exhibits, museum displays, and folklore activities constructing a specifically *Bedouin* past for the United Arab Emirates. These often appear to confirm the touristic desire for a real “Arabian” experience common to visitors and the newly-arrived. I remember thinking for the first time that I had escaped the surreal transplant of air-conditioned Western modernity in Dubai when I visited the camel market on the outskirts of the city. Finally, I had discovered the Dubai that was different from Tempe, Arizona.

I was initially provoked to explore the issue of what is being represented in these various shows and events in a scholarly way by an incident during a group visit to the wonderful restoration project in Dubai’s historic Bastakiya neighborhood. The trip was organized through the university I was then working at, sponsored by the Dubai Municipality and graciously hosted by the head of the historic buildings section, himself an Emirati citizen. One of my senior colleagues at that university – someone I respected and considered an “old hand” in the Middle East because of his years of experience in Lebanon – commented on the achievement of the turn-of-the-century buildings to our Emirati host. “Not bad for Bedouin,” he said.

I could see by the ripple of a frown that flowed over our host’s face that although this was meant to be a complement, it had missed its mark. Clearly, the word “Bedouin” was problematic in this context. The term was admittedly used in a condescending way by my senior colleague, but how was it received by our host? Did he find the term itself derogatory? Or, was it simply used in way that did not suitably respect the way of life it embodied? The chain of knowledge, or fantasy, that this exchange entailed was confusing to me and this rather inane and thoughtless nonsequitor opened up a whole series of questions as I struggled to understand who were the Bedouin and what role did they have in the history of my new home. This single comment raised complex issues about who is representing the United Arab Emirates to whom and why and what is being communicated in the process. To begin with, the English word “Bedouin” derives from the Arabic “Bedu.” While related, they resonate in popular imagination in unique ways in each language. What is evoked in the mind of an Emirati citizen in terming himself and his ancestors “Bedu” differs from the perception of an outsider trying to understand Emirati culture as “Bedouin.”

To that outsider, the process of understanding the past begins with the land. The knowledge that people have eked out a living off it in this harsh climate and that therefore the culture must relate very directly to the environment shapes the way one perceives what must have been here before. You have to use your imagination though, as the past is now clearly gone. Oil has transformed life in the Emirates. Camels – those great hallmarks of Bedouin life – are a hobby pursued much like horse racing in Europe and America. During the cool winter months, they are raced around great oval tracks, their owners keeping pace beside them in powerful imported Japanese 4X4s. The land is domesticated, crisscrossed by highways and dotted with large agricultural projects, and air-conditioned towns and cities built of modern concrete blocks. The only tents you see are beneath the decorative palm trees in the great walled gardens of cast-concrete neoclassical mansions during Ramadan or raised temporarily on the edge of the street to host wedding feasts.

The landscape of the United Arab Emirates beyond the highway shoulders and new compound villas is, however, extreme, forbidding and mysterious with its great salt plains and rolling red dunes. One often wonders: who could live here without air conditioning – without the luxuries that we now associate with modern life? This land, this desert, is surely a land that only the Bedouin could tame. Furthermore, everywhere I looked - the museums, the luxury hotels, the winter camel races, the various annual shopping festivals – all paraded a related set of symbols that suggested that this dramatic and seemingly unforgiving land had been the kingdom of the Bedouin, but then that historic neighborhood of monumental courtyard and wind tower houses, constructed of mud brick and coral and decorated with marble columns from Italy, ornate stucco panels, and great wooden doors imported from Gujarat and Bombay, was built on the commercial wealth of the pearl merchants and could hardly be related to the austere, wandering lifestyle of who I thought the Bedouin to be.

Representation seemed to contradict the physical evidence of the past. Archaeology, social history, ethnography and oral history suggest that the majority of the population has long resided along the various mangrove-lined inlets on the coasts. Fishing supported a larger population and could be supplemented by the coastal palm gardens and interior mountain and oasis plots where winter rains and underwater reservoirs could be utilized by kin and kindred tribes. The waters of the Gulf provided great trading opportunities and camels drew the various geographic zones together into a single, albeit multidimensional economy. Why then does the desert warrior overshadow the more pacific coastal fisherman, merchant and town dweller when we imagine the past of the Emirates? Dale Eickelman summarizes the difficult and layered pull of the Bedouin stereotype on both Western and Middle Eastern traditions of thought: “Bedouin occupy a place in the social and moral imagination of Middle Easterners far beyond their numbers. They have also occupied a major place in the anthropological and Western imaginations, and these perceptions are longer compartmentalized and set apart from those of Middle Easterners themselves. As a consequence, any discussion of the role that bedouin...play in the Arab and Middle Eastern social and moral imagination is necessarily complex.”(Eickelman: 39)

So, while the Emirates was once a patchwork of fishing and merchant towns tied by camel trains to interior oasis and mountain valley and now hums with industry, construction and luxury cars, the nostalgic image of these nomadic camel herders still exercises a complex hold over both popular and academic imaginations. Popular historical texts are filled with romantic allusions to the desert and

its sway over the people who live in it. When British traveler Wilfred Thesiger was in what used to be called the Trucial Coast, he took pains to point out how bountiful the passage from the oasis towns of Liwa to Buraimi was in contrast to the Empty Quarter to the immediate west and described as well various coastal and interior towns and their ways of life that he had had the opportunity to see. It was, however, the desert to which he always yearned to return. Conjuring up a romanticized image of the desert warrior free from the constraints of urban civilization, Thesiger asserted that “[e]verything that is good about the Arabs has come to them from the desert. The only society in which I’ve found nobility is that of the Bedouin.” (Quoted in Taylor: 130)

The touristic desire for an “authentic” Arabia is further fed by the publication and regular exhibition of photographs by early foreign residents and visitors. These documentary photographs offer both formal and informal glimpses of life in the Emirates before the massive construction of the 1980s. They were also often staged and selected to make “a good picture” that evokes an “authentic” sense of Arabian life. The books thus abound with images of camels, armed Bedouin tribesmen, women in burkas, open-air markets and Quranic schools of latticed palm fronds. Much of this adheres to the common European anthropological concern for “salvaging” the remnants of “primitive” pre-industrial societies. This is Renato Rosaldo’s “imperialist nostalgia,” lamenting the changes that the photographers as agents of Western modernity were themselves instigating. (Rosaldo) Ronald Codrai, for one, was in the Emirates to negotiate oil concessions on behalf of Petroleum Concessions Limited, “...a company owned by five of the world’s leading oil companies...” and established “...to meet the fast-growing demand for oil after World War II.” (Codrai: 12)

These images are embraced by local and expatriate alike and serve and support the dioramic displays of the various, primarily ethnographic museums. Codrai revealingly writes: “I consider myself very fortunate for having lived and traveled in south-eastern Arabia at a time when the way of life there was much the same as it had always been...” (Codrai: 10) and that the acknowledgement of his Arabian Albums series through the Sultan Al Owais literary award was recognition “...that my books are an accurate portrayal of the past.” (Codrai:14) By association, the emphasis on Bedouin life in the museum displays, camel races, and shopping mall decorations are also “truthful” representations of an “authentic” past.

So, while for many the Bedouin is synonymous with the Middle East thanks in large part to the anthropology and documentary photography of the West, it is further inextricably tied to a sense of common Arab identity. As Jabbur noted, words derived from the “*b, d, w*” (ب, د, و) Arabic root that forms *badiya* (بادية) and *bedu* (بدو) occur only twice in the Quran, whereas *al ‘arab*, “in the sense of ‘bedouins’”(Eickelman: 29) occurs ten times. Lila Abu-Lughod, in her monumental anthropological study of Bedouin poetry in Egypt, Veiled Sentiments, spoke of her acceptance in a Bedouin family based on her own Jordanian ancestry, noting that her hosts believed “all non-Egyptian Arabs are Bedouins, speaking a decent dialect and living a lifestyle similar to their own.”(Abu-Lughod: 15) This in turn implies “a person with noble roots” (Abu-Lughod: 15) and therefore acceptable. Abu-Lughod found that the familial bonds around which both collective and individual Bedouin identities were constructed encouraged a rejection of non-Bedouin people who “are not organized tribally, do not know their roots, and identify with a geographic area or, worse, with a national government.” (Abu-Lughod: 50)

As romanticized as it generally may be, to be Bedouin means different things to different people. In trying to untangle the epistemological roots of nomadism, of which Bedouinism is of course an integral part in the Middle East, William Lancaster and Fidelity Lancaster note that "...the common equation of 'nomad = pastoralist = tribal' comes from a confusion of categories and does not stand up to scrutiny...; the three factors of movement, economic pursuit and socio-political system may coincide, but equally they may not – and they do not in the Arab world where the term 'bedu' complicates the issue further." (Lancaster and Lancaster: 24) In other words, nomadism is not necessarily Bedouinism and tribal peoples may not share all the features of the Bedouin stereotype. Eickelman reports the rejection of the appellation of "badawi" by people in the interior of Oman because it is seen as a "disparaging" term. (Eickelman: 40) In the short story, "Life is Given and Life is Taken Away," by contemporary writer Mohammed Al-Murr, the "bedu" character is a sinister harbinger of violence and banditry. (Al-Murr: 81-83)

There is thus considerable vacillation in the perception of what it means to be Bedouin. In The Bedouins and the Desert, Jibrail Jabbur describes the meeting between the societies of the Syrian desert and the village of his childhood and defines another of the basic stereotypes of the desert Bedouin:

Located on the desert fringe, the village ... is in close contact with the desert; hence the spectacle of the bedouins, whom the village folk called *al-'arab*, "the Arabs," was familiar to me... We boys all used to whisper among ourselves that these simple "Arabs" in the village were the crudest of men and those most violently inclined to plunder, pillage, and murder.... Indeed, we considered them the most evil creatures on earth, such fear and loathing probably representing an attitude rooted in the hearts of village folk from ages past, ever since they took up agriculture and sedentary life, leaving behind and despising the life of the wandering Bedouin. (Jabbur: 1)

Because the understanding of Bedouinism is complex and multi-faceted, its use to represent both past and present identities sends mixed and sometimes conflicting messages. Archaeologists Soren Blau and Daniel Hull recently explored the implications of the Bedu stereotype in the context of a past imaginatively projected in museum displays. Both argue first that there are multiple pasts represented in the Emirates, and, second, that these clash. As an example, Hull contrasts what he calls "archaeological time," or rather a measured "scientific" construction of time that is divided by material culture markers recovered by archaeologists and organized in "temporal horizons" with a more ambiguous, indigenous sense of "traditional" time, whose beginning is marked by the temporal divide between the pre-Islamic *jahiliyya*, or time of ignorance, and the light of knowledge through the revelation of the Quran. (Hull: 144) The accoutrements and activities associated with Bedouinism here signify this vague "traditional" past. Evocatively, Hull describes the nostalgic connotations of "tradition" for the present generation of Emiratis: "The very great differences between the levels of personal wealth, everyday activities, and material culture between 1960, for example, and 1990 have created a common sense of loss and nostalgia for some. It is almost as if oil is a *jahiliyya* in reverse, a time before which there was knowledge, but now ignorance." (Hull: 144)

Hull then traces the origins of these temporal conflicts through Durkheim's supposition that constructions of time are "derived from and also dictate to society." (Hull:31)<sup>1</sup> In this sense, objects

selected and displayed in museums are emblematic of time. “[T]he emblem is not merely a convenient process for clarifying the sentiment society has of itself; it also serves to create the sentiment society has of itself...” (Durkeim quoted in Taussig: 126) In support of this idea, Blau points out that the distinction between ethnography and archaeology is blurred in the Emirates and that because the first museums were ethnographic, displaying objects that were either recently or even still in use, their purpose is not to represent the past as much as it is to “encapsulate the essence of being part of the UAE...”(Blau: 124) Once again, the historicist associations of the Bedu stereotype offer a sense of unification for people in the Emirates. They identify with this romantic past of hardship and heat, which in turn implies through a complex range of associations that their “people” were in the Emirates in the first years of Islam (although, as Hull rightly points out, there is considerable diversity in the kind of Islam embraced by the people of the lower Gulf.) (Hull: 52-56) Unified through a shared past and a shared religion, they have earned the luxuries brought by the sea of oil that surges beneath the sands to which they are profoundly attached through their Bedouin ancestry..

It is, paradoxically, in this confusing well source of identity that the appropriation of Bedouin representation for the construction of a national identity makes sense. Historic tribal conflict can be mediated by the assertion that a Bedouin, or rather an *al ‘arab*, identity signifies commonality. It suggests a common origin and associates the people with the original followers of the Prophet Mohammad (Peace Be Upon Him). The understanding of a nation not as a state apparatus but rather as a homeland secures control over the land and its resources and reinforces a sense of shared community. Of course, the notion of Bedouin life represents a general stereotype for Arab culture, but it takes on additional resonance in the Arab Gulf where previously rural and politically marginal tribes have been rapidly transformed into rich and influential modern nation-states in which the indigenous population constitutes no more than 20% of the total population and substantially less of the labor force. Khalaf, translating and quoting Al Murr, reports that this phenomenon is “...alarming to many nationals as they now represent only a small minority in their own homeland....In this changing socio-cultural and economic context the nationals are manifesting in different discourses that their local national culture is threatened; they perceive it to be under siege.” (Khalaf: 104)<sup>2</sup>

Heritage and the promotion of an Arab identity then becomes important to the United Arab Emirates as they negotiate the enormous social and demographic changes oil has brought. It also provides an indirect way of diversifying the economy, especially since none of the other emirates have the oil and natural gas reserves of those in Abu Dhabi. In May 1999, Khalid bin Sulayem, director general of Dubai’s Department of Tourism and Commerce Marketing stated publicly that “[t]he UAE’s culture and heritage are among the keys to successful future growth of the tourism industry. Our heritage and cultural assets will help in the development of a sustainable tourism program.”(Gulf News, May 9, 1999:2) Fujairah has instigated a program to restore historic buildings as a means of attracting tourists. Dubai’s Summer Surprises shopping festival organizers set up displays and performances around the city and at the airport to show visitors “UAE customs

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<sup>1</sup> Hull quotes A. Gell, The Anthropology of Time: Cultural Constructions of Temporal Maps and Images, Oxford: 1992.

<sup>2</sup> Khalaf’s source is: Mohammed Al Murr, Amal Wataneyyah (Nationalist Aspirations), Sharjah: Al Khaleej Publications 1997.

and traditions.” (*Gulf News*, June 9, 1999:3) Sharjah was named the 1998 cultural capital of the Arab world and routinely advertises itself has a destination for those who want to experience Arab culture. Even in Abu Dhabi, tourist facilities have been set up to give, in one specific case, “elderly German” visitors a glimpse of “Arab lifestyle,” with “a specially built Bedouin village with a majlis, ...camels and falcons...[,] traditional Arab culinary delicacies aplenty[, and] folk dance and music.” (*Khaleej Times*, November 22, 1998:3)

It is indeed, as Khalaf points out, an irony that the various features of the “authentic” Bedouin past are at once integral components of Emirati state craft, a symbol of pan-Arabism, and commoditized and marketed to a primarily European tourist market. Speaking specifically of the various hotel-sponsored safaris to the winter camel races, Khalaf comments that this process of commoditization “...within global market forces transforms... ‘folklore’ into ‘folklore’.” (Khalaf: 102) The irony stems from the different ways in which different audiences perceive Bedouinism and its associated symbols.

What, then, does it mean to the “pare down” a national identity to “a number of symbols[?]” It is not simply that that identity becomes “simplistic, inaccurate and falsely nostalgic...packaged to fit into the tourist agenda, thus trivializing its original meanings.”(Hull: 48-51) The use of this set of stereotypes is re-shaping both self-identity and outside perceptions in the United Arab Emirates. Recent scholarship questions the veracity of the Western understanding of “Bedouinism” generally. Certainly, its applicability as a metonym for pre-oil Gulf society is doubtful. There is thus an inherent tension in utilizing symbols that are popularly associated with Bedouin life – the tent, the falcon, the camel – with the social and economic reality of the past in the United Arab Emirates.

Furthermore, how the notion of Bedouinism is perceived relates to social demography and the stratification of different peoples within the borders of the United Arab Emirates. The leadership has worked diligently and successfully to provide an extensive, well-funded welfare state for its citizenship. The vast army of poorly-paid South Asian laborers who build the highways and hospitals and the often over-worked network of multinational administrators who oversee its efficient management, however, may turn the Bedouin trope around, arguing resentfully that as a people without a clearly defined past, without a culture, they do not deserve the land grants, interest-free loans, free education, housing utilities, and healthcare that they are allocated. Of course, they can vote with their feet and simply leave, but it would be a shame to see a misunderstanding of the past and a manipulation of the symbols used to embody it fuel more tangible conflict between people.

It may seem at first glance that the Bedouin as a stereotype is simply a regional variation of the West’s age-old “noble savage” trope. However, the connotations are complexified by the term’s multiple meanings in both the West and the Arab world. As a term in both English and Arabic lexicons, it connects to a wider string of connotations. For some, the Bedouin stereotype is the Arab in general. For others, it is the rural Arab in contrast to the urban – a variation on the ancient Arabic *hadari/badawi* dichotomy. Within this context, it can further be applied to an imaginary distance between the Gulf to the south and the densely populated centers of Egypt, Mesopotamia and the Levant to the north. It is an appellation proudly assumed by some because of its imagined qualities of purity and strength. It can unify through its suggestions of a shared past, a shared religion, a shared heritage, a shared knowledge, a shared kinship. It is sometimes rejected as

backward and uncivilized. In the context of a dynamic commercial hub like Dubai, where the old waterways are lined with ultra-modern skyscrapers, the imagery of the Bedouin, of that ambiguously constructed recent past that stretches back into the first dawning rays of Islam, it serves to emphasize the rapid and dramatic achievements brought by oil. This, too, is a double-edged sword, bringing to its different audiences pangs of nostalgia for an honest and uncomplicated past and scorn for a people seemingly without a material history.

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