

# Bedouin society



## On Violence in Bedouin Society

At the end of our discourse into the Bedouin society we will deal with a question of greatest importance: violence. Human relationships in any society are vulnerable to many forms of violence. Violence is not a specific problem of the Bedouin world, but, as we have seen, stands out quite prominent in it. Therefore we will have a closer look on its reasons and the answers the society found to it.

Meeker has published a ethnologic study on the problem of violence in Bedouin society titled "Literature & Violence in North Arabia" from which we have cited some passages already. According to Meeker, "the crucial feature which all forms of pastoral nomadism share in common is the problem of vulnerable domestic wealth." From this he explains the aggressiveness of such societies and even attests the most aggressive potential to the camel-herding Bedouins of Arabia. He argues that Bedouin society was highly political: "The vulnerability of domestic possession (camels) precipitated by the aggressive potential of a political resource (camels) carried men away from a materially productive domestic life toward an uncertain, agonistic, political adventurism. At the core of this political culture was the exercise of political violence, an exercise conceived sometimes as an absorbing and joyful play of life and sometimes as a serious struggle against death."

*Badu* society was decidedly determined by uncertainty. Life in the desert relied on limited natural resources and on the camel. Human solidarity was a vital aspect to counteract those highly vulnerable foundations of Bedouin life and resulted in the forming of tribal structures. A successful performance in the competition for water and pasturage was a necessity for any of the different groups. *The camel as main center of life became the determining factor to shape the Bedouin society.* The Bedouin defined himself by his camels. Meeker sees two consequences resulting directly from this camel-centered life:

**1. Uncertainty and violence** in the *badu* society (see above). And **2. Bedouin talk.** As camel-herding was not a labor-intensive activity, and work was the realm of the women and slaves, the Bedouins had what Meeker called "Bedouin leisure": And there was, as well, nothing with which to fill this world of leisure other than talk. He cites Doughty, who shared the life of the Bedouins like none of the travelers into the Arabian desert, and observed that only around the little "common fire" did the Bedouins discover "the cheerful song and the cup. This in extreme contrast to the harsh circumstances of their unstable lives, which Doughty did describe as "a life of extreme poverty, idleness and malice", to name only a few of the many negative attributes he used.

One answer of *badu* society to the uncertainty of life in the arid zones of Arabia was the close human community which became ceremonialized and ritualized to a large degree. "Bedouin talk was therefore at the very center of a Bedouin formal life. Bedouin words, far more than Bedouin actions, were the center of an effort to work out the various possibilities and impossibilities of uncertain political relationships. ... The prominence of the voice in the desert and steppe did not escape Doughty's attention. ... The voice itself appears in the desert as a striking human artifact commanding attention. ... In a society where men's relationships with one another are in question, the literary voice crystallizes as a center of a formal life" (Meeker).

This literary voice was the voice of the poets. Poetry, the only art of the desert, played a central part in the *badu* society and was formalized so that it remained nearly unchanged for more than 1,500 years. Poetry "as center of a formal life" (Meeker) expresses the importance of the recited and sung words to be heard in the black tents of Arabia. Poetry and narrations were therefore the main source of education and the main expression of the human life among the nomads of Arabia. Rasheed speaks of the "power of poetry" and of the "(amir)-poets making history." Meeker coins the phrase of the "personal voice" and states: "The person, as a political actor and speaker, emerges as a central conception." This central person was the heroic raider who could proclaim his deeds in eloquent speech.

The words of the poets formed the society. These words were intertribal (Caskel), they even transcended the Bedouin world and were later adopted for the holy book of Islam. The words of the poets shaped an ideal, the poet himself, and to be more precise: the heroic **poet-warrior-rider in one person.** This was the idol of Bedouin society. And in contrast to other societies which developed a similar ideal, every male member of the Bedouin society could reach there, even slaves (most prominent example: Antara Ibn Shaddad). And the horse, the war-horse, was to become the icon of manhood and bravery, an aspect that will be discussed in detail under pillar five: Bedouin Tradition.

The answer of Bedouin society to uncertainty and violence, the personal voice of the poets, had a positive feedback to violence. Violence as an accepted, even desired, means to accomplish personal aims was fixed in the conscience of the society. Therefore the poetic verses did increase the amount of violence in the *badu* world. Meeker puts it this way: "*The violence of the desert and steppe appears as a dream of the personal voice written large. It is a dream that sometimes degenerates into a nightmare.*" In the course, a society was formed that was built on the right of the strong and favored manhood with all its attributes, like pride and arrogance, endurance and patience, courage and combat, generosity and hospitality, loyalty and individuality, circumspection and vengeance. The violent side of Bedouin society brought forth many virtues and shaped many attributes of its people, both positive and negative.

But there has always been another side of Bedouin society. We find many mechanism to counteract uncertainty and violence: Family solidarity and the unwritten law of the desert with its kinship rules, the brother-laws, and the protection of the weak. Musil reports that "there are no beggars among the Rwala." Protection of the oppressed was a vital part of *badu* society. It was performed in many ways, like countenance (*wagh*), or by companions to protect travelers (*haw*), protection by request (*dahhala*) for both persons and property, and protection in cases of thievery (Musil), and of course hospitality. Meeker also stresses that raiding and warfare were to some extent ceremonialized and ritualized, and, as we have discussed already, did not aim at the destruction of life, but at the gain of booty.

Rasheed opposes to Meeker's concept of violence, and with some right. She argues that there have been many examples in history that show that his view is insufficient. And she puts her finger to the weak point of Meeker's book: He shifted the focus of analysis from the actual raids to *badu* poetry and narratives which document their raids. Rasheed claims, that nomads and oasis dwellers of the Arabian Peninsula had always to deal with the problem of anarchy. The rise of tribal dynasties (for example of al-Rasheed in the case of the Shammar) and religious reformist movements (Wahhabism) aimed at the stabilization of political and military relations. Nevertheless, in the eyes of the author, Meeker is right in his focus on persons. Stabilization was linked to political leadership, i. e. to persons. Those stabilizing political and military relationships were always due to personal achievements of a leader and the tribal dynasties always began with, or were stabilized and enlarged by extraordinary personalities. Examples can be found in large numbers, in recent history Nuri Ibn Shalaan of the Rwala, or Ibn Saud, the founder of Saudi Arabia. In distant times we find them in the genealogies of the tribes, famous men, surviving in the memories of the Bedouins over many centuries, thanks to the oral tradition, the spoken word. So we see that all those leaders stayed in the tradition of the poet-raiders and did therefore stay in the large majority within this concept of violence that Meeker explains.

The roots of Islam and of the societies of the Near and Middle East reach back into Bedouin society. Meeker claims: "It is therefore possible that this unique period (the Bedouin time, annotation of the author), during which the personal voice was composed in a setting of uncertain relationships, may lie behind some of the most distinctive features of Near Eastern civilization. In so far as this might be the case, a study of the North Arabian Bedouins, perhaps the most extreme representatives of Near Eastern pastoral nomadism, promises to provide an understanding of the archaic foundations of the religious and political traditions of the arid zone." (Meeker) In other words, the circumstances of nomadic life, its uncertainty and its aggressive tendencies, have coined not only the foregone Bedouin world, but also the settled Arab societies until the present day.

This explains the background of Jabbur's words we have cited in the beginning of our discourse into the *badu* society and that we will hear once more:

*"The life of the Arabs has strong roots in nomadism. Even today the Arab sedentary mentality is firmly bonded to that of the Arab Bedouin. Hence, anyone trying to study the situation of the Arab world and to understand the peculiarities of the Arab mentality and the distinguishing features of Arab life must return to the source of these traits and features in the desert and Bedouin life. The Arab does not know himself, or understand his unique qualities..., if he does not know that the way he lives has its roots in the desert. The tribal spirit, and proceeding from it, family solidarity, ambitions of group leadership, personal inclinations and disputes over access to authority and leadership - all these and other matters trace their origins back to the organization of the tribe and to the influence of Bedouin life. Likewise, many Arab customs and conventions originate in well known Bedouin traditions still followed today. Among these are issues of vengeance, honor, hospitality, boasting, derogation, generosity, the sanctity of the guest, chivalry and bravery" (Jabbur).*

The "personal voice" of the Bedouin poet-warrior-rider is still heard today, maybe hidden and obscured, but still alive, not only in the Arab home, but worldwide.