

Between two Myths : Underproductivity and Development of the Bedouin Domestic Group

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“It would be an absurd requirement to restrict sociological interpretation to clear and distinct concepts : these are historically a rarity, and there is nothing to make one suppose that vague and broad notions, whose logical implications for conduct are ill-determined, do not in fact have a powerful and specific impact on actual behaviour.”

(Ernest GELLNER, *Cause and Meaning in the Social Sciences*, 1973).

DOMESTIC GROUP : THE NATURE OF THE CONCEPT

The works that have tackled a close analysis of the conceptual components of the notions of domestic group have produced no definition of it which is exhaustive of all its constituent variables. The expression *domestic group* is in fact somewhat vague and imprecise. It has nonetheless the characteristic, on a par with others, of being usable in a contextual way. That is to say, it can be applied to very different sociological situations. But this “vagueness and broadness” does not rule out the possibility that its use may have a “powerful and specific impact on the actual behaviour” of anthropologists, that is to say on their actual way to deal with their objects.

In anthropology the notion of *domestic group* acquired a certain prominence towards the end of the Fifties. From that period in fact dates the publication of a series of studies dedicated for the first time explicitly to the subject : *The Developmental Cycle in the Domestic Groups* (GOODY, 1958). In the introduction to this volume the domestic group was defined as “the workshop of social reproduction”, and was considered to be the seat of those cyclical

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processes which ensure the reproduction of the group itself and of society as a whole. In this perspective, still indebted to a structural-functional option, the question in fact was to find out in what way different societies manage the succession of individuals on the stage of life, while guaranteeing the continuity of the social structure.

In the following years, due to the decline of the functionalist paradigm and to the simultaneous establishment of studies in economic anthropology, the domestic group became the object of fresh attention. What interests anthropologists was no longer the cyclical aspect of processes characterizing the group's life, the succession of individuals and generations within an immutable "structural form", but rather the role performed by the domestic group within "primitive" or "traditional" economies. In 1972 the essay by SAHLINS on the *domestic mode of production* came out. This helped to spread the idea of an economy founded exclusively on the work of members of the domestic group as an underproductive economy; while not longer afterwards (1975) came a work by MEILLASSOUX, in which the domestic group was regarded mainly as *the place of reproduction of the producers* called upon to act as the supplier of a labour force within the framework of the different modes of production that have succeeded one another in the course of history. The keynote of Sahlins' essay is that the domestic mode of production is matched by an underproductive structure, in the sense that "production is low relative to existing possibilities. Labour power is underused, technological means are not fully engaged, natural resources are left untapped" (1974 : 41). SAHLINS in effect takes up the studies carried out by CHAYANOV (1966) on the peasant community of pre-revolutionary Russia. Here it was pointed out that, in an economy based on the work of the members of the domestic group, productive purposes are adjusted to limited needs, and that there is consequently no necessity to increase the intensity of labour theoretically available. The formula which according to CHAYANOV—and SAHLINS—sums up better than any other the domestic production situation within a non-marked oriented economy, is that "intensity of labor in a system of domestic production for use varies inversely with the relative working capacity of the producing unit" (SAHLINS, 1974 : 91).

MEILLASSOUX criticizes SAHLINS for his lack of concern to define the historical context in which the domestic group operates, whereas he believes it is necessary to define as each occasion arises the mode of production within which the domestic group carries out its function as the producer of labour-force. In effect, aside from the observation that this mode of production would be typical of an economy founded upon the production of values for use, and not of exchange, SAHLINS furnishes no explanation of its place in

time and space. Indeed, to his mind, the domestic mode of production is common to a type of society which he generically defines as "primitive".

On the purely technical level the notion of a domestic mode of production can thus be referred—in SAHLINS' perspective—to the majority of societies not dominated by a market economy. Nevertheless the qualification "underproductive" gives the notion a very strong ideological flavour : it is "as if" all societies whose economies are essentially founded on domestic production were implicitly defective, and lacking, in other words, that "extraordinary" capacity—which is instead a characteristic of all societies whose economies are market oriented—to gear production to the satisfaction of "unlimited human needs". As a consequence, *it is only a short step from the fact of characterizing as "primitive" all those societies dominated by the domestic mode of production to the fact of qualifying as "underproductive" the economies of those groups not having the requisites for inclusion in the market economy.*

We shall consider here the premisses and consequences of the use of the notion of domestic group as an underproductive unit with reference to a Bedouin context. More exactly, we will focus on the way this notion may have contributed to the building of an image of the Bedouin community as that of a social entity historically marked by a chronic underproductivity and, as such, the necessarily passive object of provisions taken by the authorities in matters of "development".

Our intention is to criticize both the theoretic premises on which that image is founded, and its practical effects since these coincide with the re-edition, on seemingly scientific bases, of the classic solution to the "nomad problem". What we have to deal with is not, therefore, only a stricter knowledge of the bedouin domestic group, but also the relation between the knowledge produced and the ways in which it is utilized by those having a decision-making or consultative power in policies affecting the nomadic sector of the society.

THE BEDOUIN DOMESTIC GROUP

Among the Bedouin of Arabia (1) the social entity that resembles most closely what is commonly intended by the expression *domestic group* (or *domestic unit*) is the *bayt*, the "tent". In anthropological literature the term *bayt* is generally used to indicate a family aggregate of an extended type, within which coexist numerous conjugal families of male individuals of more than one generation

united by descent. As such the word *bayt* differs from the expression *bayt as-shaar*—the house of hair—employed to indicate the tent as a physical object.

Usually definitions of the Bedouin nomadic domestic group refer to factors of co-residence, agnatic descent and its productive “autonomy”. As regards this last point COLE observes that even when it is aggregated to others similar to it in order to form, in periods of nomadization, a *dar* (“homestead”), the *bayt* of the Al Murrah of the Rub al-Khali “continues to function as an independent social and economic unit” as “there is no division of labor between bayts in the dar with regard to herding activities” (COLE, 1975 : 63).

A definition of this kind tends to emphasize the isolation dimension of the nomadic household and to underestimate its character as an interconnecting hub of practices and meanings that embrace broader, or at any rate different structures and relations, to what is commonly meant by the expression “household” (2).

Consideration of the domestic group as an isolated and, in practice, autarchic unit is, as a matter of fact, the first step towards a theory of Bedouin underproductivity. The characterization of the domestic group as an autonomous unit is in fact conjugated first of all with the surplus of labour available within it as far as herding activities are concerned.

IS THE BEDOUIN DOMESTIC GROUP UNDERPRODUCTIVE ?

In anthropological literature on the Bedouin there is indeed a predominant idea that the intensity with which members of the group are mobilized in sectors different to that of pastoral activities depends on the greater or lesser demand for labour in this sector. This is undoubtedly true but in the opinion of Donald COLE, for example, who starts out from the observations made by SAHLINS on the “underproductivity” of the “domestic mode of production”, that mobilization is explained by the chronic surplus of labour in respect to the necessities of pastoral activities characteristic of the Bedouin household :

“... there is evidence that the traditional household mode of production under which the Bedouin operated their herding activities allowed mainly for a surplus of men—i.e. the major surplus they produced was not products, although they apparently sold some animals occasionally to merchants as they do nowadays” (COLE, 1981 : 133).

Today the majority of Bedouin households would be capable of surviving thanks to the policy of public subsidies pursued by the government. COLE, who has carried out research among the Al Murrah, a Bedouin group largely dependent on the raising of dromedaries and, in the late Sixties, relatively uninvolved in other kinds of activity, describes the situation thus :

“In 1968-70 I found that eight out of the ten households I studied had at least one male in the Reserve National Guard of Saudi Arabia. In return for going to the unit's headquarters for one or two days each month to collect it he received enough money to buy all articles desired or needed by his household (other than milk which they produced)” (1975 : 131) (3).

The domestic group would thus be an underproductive structure, incapable of subsisting on the basis of its pastoral activities alone.

But this is where a fairly serious incongruency emerges. In the first place, it is difficult to understand whether the Bedouin domestic group is considered underproductive in a congenital way or because its members spend time on activities other than herding. Whatever the reason of this underproductivity may be, an idea exists of the Bedouin as being exclusively a pastoral people, compelled by necessity to fall back on other sources of subsistence. This may sound paradoxical in that COLE's line of argument relating to the household is part of an attempt to trace knowledge of the Bedouin economy to an “enlarged” socio-economic and cultural context.

The methodological and logical premises on which the idea of an alleged underproductivity of the Bedouin household is founded are incorrect. COLE refers to Ibn Khaldun's image of the Bedouin as juxtaposed to the sedentary's and connects it with SAHLINS' discussion of the “domestic mode of production”. Nevertheless SAHLINS, in order to demonstrate his keynote thesis of underproductivity of the domestic group, has studied a certain number of “primitive” settled societies based on agriculture and having a fairly limited economy of exchange. This is by no means true of the camel-herders who have, since their appearance on the fringes of the Fertile Crescent in the IXth century B.C. (EPH'AL, 1982), been included within a “pluri-economic” system, where mobility between productive sectors and the activity of exchange have always played an essential role (4).

The fact that Bedouin households are unable to subsist on herding alone cannot, consequently, be assumed as a demonstration of the underproductivity of the Bedouin household. Otherwise we would in fact be compelled to admit that the Bedouin community is based on a pure and exclusive form of exploitation of pastoral resources alone, to the exclusion of all other possible resources—an

eventuality which it has never been possible to demonstrate. In the terms in which COLE puts it, in short, the idea of an "underproductivity" of the bedouin household does not seem to make much sense, unless that group is associated with an idea of a closed and isolated "social body" tending to be autonomous in terms of the division of work, corresponding exactly to the image given of the "primitive household" by SAHLINS. The use which COLE himself makes of the notion of household, with all the characteristics attributed to it, stems, upon careful observation, from a dehistoricization of context—a criticism which has, as a matter of fact, already been levelled at SAHLINS by other authors (MEILLAS-SOUX, 1975 : 20-21).

The view of the Bedouin household as an isolated unit comes up against two substantial objections, the first of which might be expressed by the following question : is it pertinent to base the definition of a domestic unit upon criteria of residence, common descent and productive autonomy in the case of a society which makes mobility in the widest sense of the term the principal factor of its reproduction ? Mobility concerns the dimension of movement in space, both in the sense of migration and in that of temporary and contingent movement. But the term mobility at the same time refers to that particular characteristic of individuals, i.e. of the members of what we call the *domestic group*, which consists in changing with a certain degree of frequency from one sector to another of the activities into which the Bedouin economy is divided.

The second objection concerns the radical dehistoricization of the context in which the Bedouin domestic group operated in the past and continues to do so today. How indeed can it be supposed that this group has always managed only and solely pastoral resources, whereas it has been known by now for some time that the economy of the Bedouin communities has *never* been founded solely and exclusively on the exploitation of animal resources (KHAZANOV, 1984)? Moreover it is known that the actual definition of Bedouin by the Bedouin themselves or even by settled populations, is absolutely not founded on the sole criterion of pastoral activities (LANCASTER, 1988). On the basis of these considerations the image of the Bedouin domestic group could, in a sense, be seen as the reverse of the current one : the group would no longer be conceived of as something of isolated, static, and autonomous (but self-insufficient), but rather, as a *dynamic unit towards which converge resources originating from a variety of sectors, procured and organized by mobile individuals belonging to a parental group whose dimensions and composition are not definable a priori*.

THE ROLE OF THE STATE IN THE DISTRIBUTION OF RESOURCES

In order to clarify the current dynamics of the bedouin domestic group, it is important to consider it not from the accentuation of its aspects as a cell isomorphous and autonomous from others, but rather, to stress its character as a flexible unit in front of an everchanging social and political landscape.

Concerning the nature of resources to which the domestic group has possible access, I believe a number of analytical distinctions can be drawn.

Generally speaking, we may distinguish between two types of such resources :

1. Those to which the Bedouin have access through activities such herding, agriculture, commerce, transport, smuggling, etc.
2. The resources consisting in government assistance, which in Saudi Arabia range from pensions to animal subsidies, the allocation of land and agricultural equipment, to the recruitment of Bedouin in the ranks of the National Guard, the Police and the Army. To these must be added the possibility offered to the Bedouin of acquiring resources in terms of services, notably education.

From a formal point of view this distinction constitutes an element of continuity in the history of the nomad communities of Arabia. But from a substantial point of view it does not. With the emerging of the State, the distribution and administration of some resources in particular land by the State *has set in motion processes of social differentiation within the nomadic communities, founded upon a radically new logic of appropriation of those resources* (FABIETTI, 1982; 1984; 1986).

The changeability and diversity of the conditions of access by the Bedouin to resources other than nomadic pastoralism have always been determined not only by ecological and environmental factors, but by large scale political and economic ones. The event which from this point of view has exercised most influence is undoubtedly the increasingly massive assistance provided by the State. Resources made available to the Bedouin by the State range from pensions to subsidies, from agricultural land to education, from civil service jobs to service in the Army or in other armed forces. What attitude does the Bedouin domestic group assume towards these resources and what use is made of them once they have been acquired? I believe the answer to this question may contribute towards

rectifying the image of the Bedouin domestic group as that of a social unit necessarily static and underproductive from the economic point of view. But we can answer this question *only if we abandon the image of the household as an isolated and self-enclosed entity and adopt instead the opposite image, we can see in the Bedouin household an extremely effective organisation of adaptation to diversified and changeable economic situations and opportunities.*

THE MOBILIZATION OF THE DOMESTIC LABOUR

In northern Nejd the introduction of new resources into the local economic system has led to a great mobilization of individuals which clashes with the image of the household as a producer of surplus labour. In this region a new kind of pastoralism has developed where sheep and goats, and also camels are being raised mostly for the market. From this situation a series of "new circumstances ensues, where *men are no longer surplus*" (emphasis mine) (5). These circumstances represent in fact the tendency towards the total mobilization of domestic labour, where women, old people and children have a role to play in conducting market-oriented pastoral herding activities :

"A group of three or four adult males could handle a herd of 200 sheep and goats, plus 50 or 60 camels. Women are of course fully involved in the work of these groups. It is said they should not spend days with herds alone or drive the pickup trucks but some were seen doing both of these things... As with commercial ranching, the pressure of work is uneven and to some extent seasonal; nonetheless, full scale pastoralism using commercial feed and trucks is a lot of work... All this requires much coordinated activity... In one case I saw a pickup truck full of water being driven by a blind grandfather who was being guided by his grandson who appeared to be four or five years old. Pre-adolescent youngsters line up every morning with the family pickups at the wells, waiting their turn to put water in the large, rubber-lined canvas bladders which fill the beds of their trucks." (FERNEA, 1984 : 400).

The increased use of domestic labour in a market economy context would indirectly seem to confirm the correctness of the ideas held by CHAYANOV, SAHLINS and thus also by COLE with regard to the Bedouin economy. Actually the phenomenon demonstrates solely the great capacity for adaptation by the Bedouin domestic unit, and *not a structural weakness on its parts*. The market economy and the "unlimited" nature of human needs are historically contingent factors and not eternal, as seems to be maintained by those authors who consider them as objective and absolute terms of comparison.

In fact market economy and unlimited needs are both looked upon as absolute and objective factors, because they are ideological constructions extended to include contexts different to that of their original development. In effect, the scientific problem is not that of ascertaining whether or not the Bedouin may be good producers, but of seeing *how certain changes that have taken place within the management of new resources can reflect on the social life of nomadic groups.*

The first point to be considered in this connection is that State assistance in settlement schemes involving distribution of land to the Bedouin distorts the logic of appropriation of resources (FABIETTI, 1982). According to FERNEA the processes of social differentiation in progress among Bedouin in northern Nejd lay the bases for a development of a class society, with entrepreneurs active in numerous sectors on the one hand and common Bedouin, with no livelihood other than flock of sheep and goats and a few dromedaries, on the other hand, as potential wage-earners in a labour market the development of which is held up only by the importation of foreign labour (1984 : 402-403). The cases taken into consideration by FERNEA are, however, "extreme" cases. They may truly prefigure the emergence of a class society, but nevertheless they do not seem suitable to describe the situation of the majority of the Bedouin of Arabia. The allocation of land in Saudi Arabia laid the bases for a process of social differentiation among the nomadic households (HAJRAH, 1982). This concerns firstly the possibility of being able personally to count on means of production hitherto largely extraneous to the "Bedouin system" of resource management, namely agricultural land. Private land ownership is not ignored by the nomadic community but the break with the past stems from the fact that land ownership is now something much more widespread and is indeed promoted by the government.

THE DIVISION OF LABOUR AMONG THE HOUSEHOLDS

The process of differentiation between domestic units in the Hail region is concretized at several levels. The first relates the division of labour among households. Those who have been able to benefit from the distribution of land possess a resource that enables them to diversify their production. The majority of crops are given over to forage for livestock breeding, but whilst about half of this fodder is intended for animals owned by members of the domestic group, the other half is sold on the market. The fodder market is needed by those domestic units which, being unable to produce their own,

have nevertheless, as a consequence of the growing monetarization of the economy, had to reorientate their production by shifting, at least partially, from subsistence production to production for the market. This process of differentiation tends therefore to be translated into a form of division of work among households, where some enter the market at an advantage as producers of forage, whilst others enter it in a position of dependency.

The process of social differentiation between domestic units is obviously also substantiated in the disparity of resources flowing into the domestic group. A domestic group in a position to exploit an average piece of land for agricultural purposes can rely on annual earnings up to eight times more than those of a unit with no land. This stems from the fact that not only the domestic unit benefiting from land is capable of commercializing its agricultural produce, but can also practice market-oriented livestock breeding. Furthermore part of the resources derived from sectors other than those of agriculture and pastoralism tends to be invested in the latter, thereby enabling this kind of activity to expand.

Whilst in fact domestic groups having no land remain at a level which might be defined as subsistence, the others become smallholding enterprises. The wages eventually earned by members of the household in the various sectors of activity are used for the purchase of pick-ups, agricultural equipment, motor pumps and, by no means seldom, to pay the modest wages of Egyptian, Pakistani or Yemenite farmers hired through a system of recruitment run by Saudi middlemen. The hiring of these foreign wage-labourers should not be interpreted as a tendency on the part of Bedouin to refuse direct and steady involvement in agriculture. On the contrary, the Bedouin domestic group seems to undergo a process of total mobilization of domestic labour primed by the emerging of a new logic of resource control.

THE DIVISION OF DOMESTIC WORK

The work done by the adult men is mainly connected with the logistical system of pastoral and agricultural activities i.e. transport of water, livestock and forage; the buying and selling of animals and of agricultural produce; the procuring of equipment and subsidies, etc. The organization of these activities requires virtually constant availability, spent in travelling from one camp to another, from the *bayt* to grazing areas and to the market, to wells, government offices and agricultural lands.

The work of the women, too, is intensified, as the bedouin domestic

group benefits from the collaboration between its youngest and oldest members. There are, however, "structural" limitations to the work of these categories of persons, especially the women and the younger members of the *bayt*. The women's work in particular, usually confined mostly to domestic activities, now finds new applications in agriculture and in grazing for commercial purposes. The increased importance of female labour within the domestic economy is not however matched by an increase in the work time supplied by the women. The increase in women's contribution to herding activities and to agriculture is often compensated by an easing of some of the traditional domestic activities such as weaving, the preparation of certain foods, the daily search of water and firewood, etc. The increased importance of female labour cannot, therefore, be traced simply to an increase in the quantity of the work supplied, instead, it should be evaluated in relation to the nature of the small scale family enterprise represented by the domestic group.

The work done by the youngest members of the household must be considered in relation to the new opportunities for education available in many areas. Here too it is necessary to distinguish between landless domestic units and those who have been able to start up a mixed agriculture-breeding production. FERNEA has clearly shown what the landless bedouin think about schools for the youngest members of their group, which cut both ways :

"On the one hand new forms of business in the market and in government offices makes some education valuable even to full time pastoralists... On the other hand, sending a boy to school was said by many men to be at the end of their usefulness with the animals, the permanent loss of valuable labour for the family enterprise..." (FERNEA, 1984 : 401).

In the region of Hail the feelings of the Bedouin who had undertaken the activity of mixed farming and breeding were, in this regard, anything but ambivalent : the continual contact with sedentaries, and most of all with the economic and bureaucratic structures of the settled world, left them in little doubt as to the opportunity of acquiring suitable tools for operating conveniently in that environment. But, at the same time, there were very few boys in the landless *bayts* who could benefit from the educational service.

It is impossible really to say whether dynamics of this kind may lead to a differentiation of the Bedouin community into classes of the kind forecast by FERNEA. However the potential effects of processes of economic differentiation upon the system of traditional ties and solidarity must be underlined. These potential effects do not, however, authorize us to disregard the great capacity for

adaptation which the Bedouin group as revealed in recent decades, during which changes of a magnitude previously unknown in the lives of Arabian populations have come about.

It is true that in the last thirty years the bedouin population of Arabia has sharply decreased, that many nomads have abandoned the desert to settle (whether more or less temporarily, however, is not known) on the outskirts of expanding cities. Certainly this "emigration" from the desert bears witness to the fact that the Bedouin have preferred or have been compelled — by the shortcomings of their economy — to seek other means of livelihood. But it would be profoundly mistaken to outline operating policies in the nomad sector without appraising the Bedouin community's capacities for adaptation. What is certain is that, if the accepted ideas of the latter continues to be associated with the image of the household as a congenitally underproductive unit, then any possibility of discernment regarding the bedouin situation today is lost from the start. Those who think of an operating policy on the pastoral sector in terms of harnessing the great flexibility of the Bedouin domestic group are, therefore, right (LANCASTER, 1980 b). Those on the other hand who, by treating the Bedouin household as economically underproductive, conceive it as a necessarily passive object of intervention by "experts" are wrong, both from the theoretic and from the practical point of view.

KNOWLEDGE FOR WHOM ? THE "SURVEY" AND ITS FALLACIES

In a survey carried out by D. COLE in collaboration with S. IBRAHIM (IBRAHIM and COLE 1978), a picture of the Bedouin community was painted which aroused some indignation (LANCASTER, 1980 a).

The tone used by the two authors of that survey is somewhat different to that adopted by COLE in his 1981 article, which was more "scientific" in that it was written for specialist readers. The tone of the 1978 report, on the other hand, is adjusted, both in form and content, to the expectations of its clients, the Saudi ministries, which sponsored the research. It is most disconcerting, if only because the authors are an anthropologist and a sociologist from one might legitimately expect some cautions on matters of ethnocentric projections, to find that the supposed needs of the Bedouin are analysed in the light of considerations evidently deemed to be universal, but which are actually nothing more than the transposition of certain evaluational standards of a western stamp.

The fields surveyed are : the economy, housing, health, education and leisure. Here the Bedouin, interviewed according to the already questionable method of the questionnaire, appear afflicted by malnutrition and disease which would seem to reflect imagination on the part of doctors in the service of the government rather than the real facts. Furthermore their general situation is constantly contrasted with that of the settled populations, who enjoy the services and facilities placed at their disposal by the government. No consideration at all is shown for the fact that the Bedouin find it disagreeable to use the latrines installed in the houses built by the government, nor that for them overcrowding does not constitute a problem. The educational aspect is flattened out on the western model, while totally ignoring the traditional Bedouin culture and methods of its transmission. Leisure is, with some involuntary humour, identified with listening to religious programmes on the radio, without accounting for the fact that the Bedouin, to "pass their time", are accustomed to do something quite different. But it is clear that all these sectors—education, health, housing and leisure—in which the Bedouin show deficiencies, are only the correlation of a greater deficiency : their economy. Any allusion to the possibility of developing a pastoral sector based on a direct and active involvement of the Bedouin is discarded. Indeed, the question seems rather to put an end once and for all to this kind of activity and to nomadic life, when it is maintained that "their non utilization as manpower constitutes a more serious problem in a country like Saudi Arabia which is experiencing an immense labor shortage" (IBRAHIM and COLE, 1978 : 4).

In justification of COLE and IBRAHIM it must be said that it is not always easy to avoid the institutional pressures represented by the expectations of clients for this kind of research. Nevertheless it is a fact that the research is very often followed up by practical measures. From this point of view the research by COLE and IBRAHIM is just one among those commissioned with intent to lend "objective" basis to the policies of intervention in the nomad sector. Those policies are often guided by erroneous ideas which are a mixture of the authorities wills and the "experts" desire to please their clients, that is a mixture of ignorance, naivety, rhetoric, prejudice and paternalism. The fact that such ideas are expressed by local researchers or planners, rather than by western experts, does not the least help in changing the situation (6).

The ahistorical image of the Bedouin domestic group as an underproductive unit is not a creation designed to favour a policy of changes in the nomad sector. However, it does tend to justify this type of policy, by allowing a semblance of scientific method to be attributed to it. The case of the Bedouin of Arabia is actually only one among many where, in the name of productivity, an idea

derived from the West, the governments of a large part of the world strive to justify their control, when not actually the banishment and extinction, of communities that have developed other forms of adaptation. It is the example of how an academic exercise can be transformed into a dangerous ideological weapon in the hands of those who, "are totally committed to further industrialization, westernization and 'progress'", adding "academic respectability to their preconceptions" (LANCASTER, 1980 a : 26).

TRANSLATION OF CULTURES AND CULTURAL DOMINATION

In connection to what LANCASTER says, there is a problem, which all those involved in the study of communities concerned by the programmes of government authorities ought not to neglect. Such a problem refers to what Talal ASAD has called "the inequality of languages", or the unequal relationship inherent in any process of cultural translation (ASAD, 1986). Every process of translation of one language into another, of one culture into another, contains an element of distortion. This element of distortion has, especially in the ethnographic context, the peculiarity of reproducing the relationship of force that exists between the languages involved in the process of translation. "The reason for this is", as ASAD says, "first that in their political-economic relation with Third World countries Western nations have the greater ability to manipulate the latter. And, second, Western languages produce and deploy *desired* knowledge more readily than Third World languages do" (*idem* : 158). Here ASAD alludes to the fact that, in the framework of domination by one culture over another, the language of the stronger culture has the power to influence the contents of the weaker culture. This is precisely the risk of surveys like those of IBRAHIM and COLE on the so-called "needs" of the Bedouin of Saudi Arabia. They are presented in English and are conducted on the basis of typically western evaluational parameters which are used as a point of reference for schemes implemented by the authorities in the nomad sector. These works, like all ethnographic works for that matter, can thus contribute to the foundation of a knowledge considered "objective" by those who commission them, without the people directly concerned having any possibility whatsoever of verifying them. And they can also, with time, be instrumental in forming the historical memory which the people of a country have of themselves.

It is therefore worthwhile stressing that such surveys and the method with which they are conducted, do not bestow only an academic respectability on the preconceptions of those who believe

in a western type of development pattern, but also help to transplant among those responsible for policy in the nomad sector, a type of knowledge which is often far removed from the expectations of those who ought to benefit from it : with the consequence that the weaker culture finds itself paradoxically adopting precisely those errors of evaluation, if not actually the prejudices, which the dominant culture harbours against it.

Notes

- (1) Fieldwork in Saudi Arabia (mostly in the Great Nefud area, Northern Nejd, Hail region) was carried out between Fall 1978 and Spring 1980 as part of a study organized by the Société d'études pour le développement économique et social and the École des hautes études en sciences sociales (Paris) with the collaboration of the Saudi Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs.
- (2) The attempts made to define the nomadic household and/or its economy on the quantitative plane (in terms of the number of individuals who are part of it, age, sex ; or in terms of "minimum survival threshold" of "minimum herd size", etc. (cf. IBRAHIM and COLE, 1978, DAHL and HJORT, 1976, respectively) are prevalently based on statistics that respond more to the needs of an applied, and sometimes arguable, anthropology than to those of a research which tries to establish the pertinence of the concepts used in this field of study.
- (3) And with reference to a survey conducted later, on the behalf of the Saudi government and in collaboration with Saad IBRAHIM, he says :

"IBRAHIM and I found that one third of our 208 respondents said that at least one member of their household worked for the government and 36 percent admitted to receive some other form of cash from the government, though we suspect that a much larger percentage in fact receives cash from government sources." (IBRAHIM and COLE, 1978 : 131).
- (4) Nomadic pastoralism based on sheep and goat rearing seems to date at least from the 3rd millennium (KUPPER, 1957), while the south arabian origins of a "mounted" pastoral nomadism founded on the rearing of camels date from the end of the 2nd millennium (BULLIET, 1975).
- (5) FERNEA 1984 : 401. In his article about the Bedouin of Hail, FERNEA criticizes our perspective according to which a relationship between sedentarization policies and detribalization of the Saudi Arabia Bedouin does exist (FABIETTI, 1982). Our intention was not, as has instead been understood by FERNEA, to maintain that sedentarization *immediately* signifies detribalization. We have only tried to find, among the various phases in the policy of Bedouin sedentarization, a guiding thread which might somewhat justify the Saudi state's political interest in this field. These phases, corresponding to a series of measures taken towards the nomads, have been more or less directly responsible for a decline of the tribe as a unit in charge of common resources. It is therefore safe to assert that these measures come under the State's plan to detribalize the Bedouin, an objective which has more or less explicitly and more or less consciously been pursued by the Al Sa'ud since the first decade of the XIXth century (FARRA, 1973).

- (6) Therefore it is not surprising to read sentences such as these, written in the period in which the first great "sedentarization projects" were launched in Saudi Arabia (HELAISSI, 1959).

Social organisation : "Every tribe had his own social system, totally different from that of other tribes, and the struggle for tribal independence rather than work for the public and general interest has always been a ruling preoccupation" (1959 : 532).

Social values: "Bedouin society no longer lives under the threat of inter-tribal invasion. (...) This will be a factor that will greatly facilitate the settlement on the land and the housing of the Bedouins — and it will be reinforced by the belief in 'equality' (traditionally very close to the heart of these hardy tribesmen) which is thus recognised by the government" (1959 : 533).

Economy : "The oil companies had a marked effect on the Bedouins living in the operations area, many of whom took jobs requiring varying degrees of skill with these companies. Despite the fact that by nature the Bedouins hold manual skills in very little esteem, the inducement of money led them to accept these jobs." (1959 : 533).

Development : "It must be realized that the Bedouins, living as they do outside the movements of modern civilization, cannot appreciate or determine what their real interests are, nor can they envisage the means of achieving higher social standards as far as they are concerned. It is therefore necessary, we believe, that they should have full confidence in their government to accept these responsibilities and to fulfil them on their behalf." (1959 : 534).

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