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Ugo Fabietti

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Control of Resources and Social Cohesion. The Role of the Bedouin Domestic Group

Ugo Fabietti

The recurrent use of anthropological concept and notions such as "domestic group" or "domestic mode of production" do not always seem appropriate, especially in connection with the study of the Bedouin of the Arabian Peninsula. Such notions appear to be based on false conceptions of an ahistorical society suffering from underproductivity and make us to divert from a real comprehension of the current dynamics which characterize the bedouin household. Far from being an underproductive unit, the bedouin household represents the last stronghold of the bedouin identity in front of a rapidly changing economy, the decline of tribal institutions and their effects on the internal cohesion of the whole community.

The purpose of this article is to define the role performed by the Bedouin household in the processes of appropriation and control of resources within a changing economy¹. It is not my intention to review the literature on the subject in order to draw up an "ideal type" of a Bedouin domestic group, but to be guided by my personal observations and of those who have done research in Arabia and the surrounding areas, with the object of trying to clarify certain of its current dynamics. I will try to define, first of all, what is meant by the expression household in reference to the Bedouin of Arabia; then to clarify the nature of the resources to which the household has access and the ways in which they are managed; and finally, to appraise the role of the domestic group in a wider context, and specifically its role in the maintenance of social cohesion in times when the Bedouin community is going through a phase of reformulation of its material and ideological assumptions.

The Bedouin Household

The expression household is a somewhat imprecise one and therefore has the advantage, on a par with others, of being applicable to extremely varied contexts. 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 by Meyer Fortes as "the workshop of social reproduction", and was considered to be the seat of those cyclical processes which ensure the reproduction of the group itself and of society as a whole. In this perspective, largely indebted to a structural-functionalist option, the question 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.

Among the Bedouin of Arabia the social entity that resembles most closely

what is commonly intended by the expression domestic group is the *bayt*, the "tent". By the term *bayt* the Bedouin themselves refer to a family aggregate of an extended type, within which coexist numerous conjugal families of male individuals of more than one generation united by descent.

Definitions of the Bedouin nomadic domestic group refer to factors as co-residence, agnatic descent and its productive autonomy. According to Cole, 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 (Saudi Arabia) "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".

The view of the Bedouin household as an isolated unit comes up against a substantial objection, 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, as it is intended here, naturally concerns the dimension of movement in space, both in the sense of migration and in that of temporary and contingent movement, of a trip (Salzman 1971:195). But with the term mobility we intend at the same time to refer to that particular characteristic of individuals, i.e. the members of the Bedouin domestic group, which consists

in changing with a certain degree of frequency from one sector to another of the activities into which the economy of the Bedouin communities as a whole is articulated. This last point is worthwhile to be stressed insofar as it affords us an analytical tool capable to make us understand that among the Bedouin the domestic group is not something isolated, static and self-sufficient. Rather, the Bedouin domestic group seems to be a dynamic unit towards which converge resources originating from a variety of sectors, procured and organized by mobile individuals belonging to a parental group. As I have argued elsewhere (Fabietti 1990), and as I will show in a short time, the image of the Bedouin domestic group as an isolated and, in practice, autarchic unit is the first step towards a theory of the Bedouin economy as an underproductive one.

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.

The Nature of Resources

Concerning the nature of resources to which the Bedouin domestic group has possible access, I believe a number of analytical distinctions can be drawn. Generally speaking, we may distinguish between two types of resources:

1. The resources to which the Bedouin have access through activities, such as herding, agriculture, commerce, transport, smuggling, etc.

2. Those 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. I have pointed out as, with the emerging of the State, the distribution and administration of some resources by the State (land in particular) 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).

On the So-Called Under-productivity of the Bedouin Domestic Group

In anthropological literature on the Bedouin there is a diffused 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. In the opinion of Donald Cole, who bases his argument on the observations made by Sahlins on the "underproductivity" of the "domestic mode of production" (Sahlins 1972), that mobilization is explained by the chronic surplus of labour in respect to the necessities of pastoral activities characteristic of the Bedouin domestic group:

"...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)" (Cole 1981: 131).

And in a survey conducted on behalf of the Saudi Government he writes:

"...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).

The domestic group would thus appear as an underproductive structure, incapable of subsisting on the basis of its pastoral activities alone. It is difficult to understand whether Cole considers the household to be underproductive in a congenital way or whether he considers it underproductive because its members spend time on activities other than herding. In any case it seems however that, whatever the reasons 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 seem 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. I maintain however that the methodological and logical premises on which the idea of an alleged underproductivity of the Bedouin household is founded are incorrect. This idea, as I have already said, derives from the discussion on the "domestic mode of production" by Sahlins. Nevertheless Sahlins, in order to demonstrate his keynote thesis of underproductivity of the household, has

studies a certain number of (as he calls them "primitive") settled societies based on agriculture and having a fairly limited economy of exchange. This is by no means true of the Bedouin who, as Cole indeed endeavours to show, have, it seems always, been included within a "pluri-economic" context. This is particularly 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 complex economic system

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. In the opposite case 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 - but this is an eventuality which nobody has demonstrated. In short, the idea of an "underproductivity" of the Bedouin household does not seem to make much sense as it is associated with 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 (Meillassoux 1975:20-21).

Productivity of the Domestic Group and Social Differentiation

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 too. The

event which from this point of view has in recent decades most influenced the modes of access to resources is undoubtedly the increasingly massive assistance provided by the state.

Resources made available to the Bedouin by the State range, as I have already said, 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 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 necessarily underproductive and fundamentally static economic unit.

As R. Fernea has emphasized in relation to the Bedouin of the Hail region (northern Saudi Arabia), and in particular to those who recently benefitted from the distribution of land and of loans for the purchase of agricultural equipment, 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. According to Fernea in fact, in the Hail region "a new pattern of nomadic pastoralism has emerged in which animals are being raised largely for the market" (Fernea 1984:399) and from which ensues a series of "new circumstances, where men are no longer surplus". 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 pick up 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 first point to be considered in this connection is that, as I have already pointed out elsewhere (Fabiatti 1982), and as Fernea himself recognizes (Fernea 1984:396), state assistance in settlement schemes involving distribution of land to the Bedouin distorts the logic of access to resources.

According to Fernea the processes of social differentiation in progress among Bedouin in the region of Hail 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. 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 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 thinks 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.

Domestic Group, Social Solidarity and Cohesion

We cannot really say whether dynamics of this kind may lead to a differentiation of the Bedouin community into classes of the kind forecast by Fernea. We can, however, underline the potential effects of processes of economic differentiation, similar to those described earlier, upon the system of traditional ties and solidarity. For this purpose I shall also, by adopting a comparative perspective at regional level, avail myself of observations made in this sense by anthropologists who have carried out research among the Bedouin in other areas of, or adjacent to, the Arabian Peninsula. Whilst it cannot be claimed

that forms of appropriation of resources on a personal basis similar to those of interest to the Bedouin of Hail region lead to the dissolution of tribal ties, it is however true that these forms of appropriation were introduced by the State and that the Saudi State, ever since its foundation, has constantly pursued, now implicitly now explicitly, a policy of detribalization. We realize that this, for a "tribal" state like Saudi Arabia, this may sound paradoxical. History demonstrates nonetheless that aside from declarations, and from the fact that the Al Saud have pursued a policy of alliances with tribal élites, all the policies concretely implemented towards the Bedouin have always aimed—in actual fact—at undermining the foundations of tribal solidarity (El Farra 1972; Habib 1978). This is not the place to discuss in detail the policies of the Saudi state adopted towards the Bedouin in the past decades. However it is worth pointing out that when we talk about detribalization we do not in any way want to refer necessarily to something preordained by the government, but rather to an effect which may also be generated by measures not designed for that specific end. On the other hand it is a fact that the Bedouin themselves, while they appreciate the State's presence as beneficial in the resources which it offers to them, can also perceive it as something intrusive. W. and F. Lancaster, for example, referring to the Rwala, felt able to say that "[The Rwala] see the process of land distribution in one of their grazing areas as an attempt by the State to undermine tribal solidarity and the ideology on which it is based" (Lancaster, W. & F. 1986:46).

Naturally this does not mean that the Bedouin community is not capable of absorbing the blow and of putting up defences. Among the Rwala in fact a kind of moral sanction seems to weigh on those who, having the possibility of doing so, invest their earnings or the

fruit of their enterprises in something strictly private. Due to its characteristics as an organizing unit and point of influx of resources, the domestic group has a tendency always to present itself as a unit founded on cooperation and solidarity, and hence on the "moral" unity of its members.

In fact it is the household, and not other things, which is very often quoted when describing the processes by which the ideological and material assumptions of social solidarity are preserved. The analysis conducted by E. Marx on the mechanisms of maintenance of "tribal" identity of the Sinai Bedouin seems to corroborate this point.

In a study dedicated to the dimension of "economic change" among the nomads of the Middle East, Marx underlines the fact that migration to the cities and settlement in urban environments by the Bedouin of the Sinai has in no way weakened their tribal links. The subject of Marx's criticisms are those authors who, in his judgement, establish a causal relationship between a series of phenomena associated with change and the loss of tribal identity:

"...it is necessary to do away with certain widely accepted notions such as that: under strong government nomadic pastoralists settle; sedentary nomads become peasants; under the impact of a modern economy tribal organization breaks down" (Marx 1984:2).

Marx is perfectly right in his critique of such a kind of simplified Khaldunian theory of the collapse of tribal as-sabiyya, and in fact he stresses that the vast majority of the Sinai and Negev nomads who have abandoned the community of origin continue to maintain strong links with it and to return to it periodically and regularly. Marx talks about these links as tribal bonds the permanence of which is manifested in the fact that, when moving to the cities, the Bedouin live in "residential clusters", acting in a politically unitary manner, and retaining "visiting and marital links" with their group of origin (1984:9). He emphasizes

the importance which the existence of a tribal territory has in keeping these ties active between urbanized Bedouin and their community of origin. In fact he seems to maintain that the more the group can recognize itself in a tribal territory the more intense those relations will be (1984:10). The possession of a tribal territory would have an essential role in constituting the feeling which the Bedouin have of belonging to the same group and in allowing the progress of those economic activities considered part of a "security system" which they can fall back on in periods of political or economic uncertainty. Nevertheless, says Marx, if we examine what happens on the tribal territory we find a situation characterised by the following elements: abandonment of traditional economic activities; decadence of pastoral grazing and agricultural works; greater dependency of the group occupying that territory upon contributions received from emigrated wage labourers; absence of the majority of adult men, etc. But this would not by any means be, in Marx's perspective,

"a slow deterioration of the tribe but, rather, a large scale maintenance operation. This involves three main interrelated aspects: the maintaining of kinship ties, of agnatic descent groups, and tribal affiliation and of a 'traditional' economy. For most of the year these activities are carried out by the people back home, but their successful accomplishment requires the periodic cooperation of the wage laborers. They must return for defined periods and join in the activities. Thus the secure home basis is kept ready for reactivation in time of need" (Marx 1984:11).

In describing the social and economic practices through which the maintenance of tribal ties and identity is accomplished, Marx never makes any reference however to groups broader than that of the household. Although he speaks of tribal territory he does not identify any one group responsible for the control of that territory and its resources. The descent groups, which

constitute the "corporate groups" of resource management, are for Marx fast declining and their function would apparently be to mediate between individuals and the tribe.

Leaving aside the recent political context, there are without doubt some analogies between the situation of the Bedouin of Arabia and those of the Sinai peninsula. These analogies can be identified with the following points: a) the mobilization of domestic labour in diversified sectors and an increase in its exploitation; b) the centrality which the domestic unit is progressively acquiring as the operative group in the management of resources; c) the determination, on the part of its members, to reassert the group's cohesion in response to the centrifugal forces to which the Bedouin community is subjected today.

These points are interconnected and represent an aspect of the "adaptive response" developed by the Bedouin to the economic and political context that has taken shape in recent decades and to what may be regarded as a central element of it: the steady decline of the tribe, or at any rate of large descent groups, as a resource control unit.

As regard to the last point (c), among the Bedouin of Arabia the determination by the members of the household to restate the solidarity within it is expressed both in social practices and in the manifestation of certain values. These social practices and explicit values embrace not just the level of economic cooperation, but also the themes of equality among (male) members of the household, of kinship ties, of the continued reaffirmation of "patriarchal" authority, and of the ideal of lineage endogamy and tribal identity. A characteristic common to these practices and explicit values is that of being expressed in a language which for the most part refers to ties, configurations of values and levels of "segmentation"

that often reach well beyond the circle and dimensions of the domestic group. Thus, for example, to be solidal with one's *ibn 'amm* (patrilateral parallel male cousin) can signify something much less than that the term may be used to indicate, for instance, all the members of the tribe or of a patrilinear descent group. In a similar way, the fact of declaring tribal identity can be a way of asserting what the Bedouin believe to be one of their rights to the resources of a certain "tribal" territory (*dirah*), even if this does not prove that those resources are controlled by the tribe or otherwise by a segment of it as a corporate group. In the same way, the reaffirmation of paternal authority as a general principle of social order refers to the model of authority within a domestic unit. Likewise, the ideal of lineage endogamy, at times enunciated by an individual as the possibility to choose a wife within his own descent group (*fakhdh*, *ashirah qabilah*), is contrasted by the reality of a choice limited, as a matter of fact, to the few domestic units with which that person's household interacts most frequently. In short, it is our conviction that whenever mention is made, as in the case of the Sinai Bedouin studied by Marx, of "maintaining tribal ties", the reference is to a much more limited reality than the expression "tribal ties" would lead us to suppose.

Conclusion : What Does "Tribal Solidarity" Mean ?

In view of the declining forms of resource control on a community basis, or the collapse of forms of traditional political authority, the domestic group remains, where conditions permit, the principal place of material and ideological reproduction of the Bedouin community. The Bedouin household is in fact a "social body" endowed with great capacity for adaptation which allows it to mobilize, for a single or

multiple purpose, the human and material resources available to it. There is nothing new at all about this fact but, within the framework of an economy in rapid transformation and, wherever favourable conditions occur, it renders inapplicable to the Bedouin context the theory of the domestic group as an underproductive, static, isolated and "introverted" unit. The fact that the domestic group constitutes, in the presence of the decline of certain tribal institutions, the point towards which converge the efforts of the Bedouin to control the novelties originating from outside is resolved, on the other hand, in what is, ideologically also, a consolidation of the ties between members of that group. However, the economic, marriage, ritual and ideological practices in general that have the domestic group as their point of reference cannot be interpreted as definite mechanisms for the conservation of tribal identity, solidarity and ties.

Note

¹Fieldwork in the Great Nefud area, Northern Nejd, Saudi Arabia, was carried out between Fall 1978 and Spring 1980 as part of a study organized by the Société d'Études pour le Développement Economique et Social and the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (Paris) with the collaboration of the Saudi Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs.

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Ugo Fabietti (Milan 1950) is Associate Professor of Cultural Anthropology in the University of Pavia, Italy. His field-work experience include research in Saudi Arabia (1978-80), Iran (1984) and Pakistani Baluchistan (1987- in course). Among his works, *Il popolo del deserto. Gli Shammar del Gran Nefud*, Roma-Bari 1984 and *Storia dell'antropologia*, Bologna 1991.