

“I am a child but I am a Bedouin, I go to school but I am a Bedouin”: Learning to Be a Bedouin in a Contemporary World

Katerina Marinaki*

ABSTRACT

This essay focuses on how the formation and experience of Bedounism are tied to maintaining traditional values and confronting concerns of modernity and how Bedouin culture is expressed through gendered activities. I give space to children's voices as an avenue for understanding the cultural components of the adult world. Children's activities provide a valuable lens through which cultural identity is represented and transmitted throughout generations. Engaging in play and storytelling, as well as performing daily tasks and rituals, are imbued with cultural significance that mirrors the values, norms, and social frameworks of the community. Specifically, I show how school, which are relatively marginal to children's cultural identity, provides a space for girls to play with gender.

Keywords: Bedouins, child, school, tradition.

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Department Balkan, Slavic & Oriental Studies, School of Economic and Regional Studies, University of Macedonia, Thessaloniki, Greece.

*Corresponding Author:
e-mail: k_amarina@yahoo.gr

1. INTRODUCTION

In the continuing dichotomy “tradition-modernity” many theorists claimed that “traditional” communities actively reinterpret their norms in response to modern influences, demonstrating that tradition is dynamic rather than static (Sahlins, 1999), or argued that global cultural flows produce “modernities” that are diverse and context-specific (Appadurai, 1996). Others emphasized how traditional values endure despite economic and political changes (Inglehart & Baker, 2000; DiMaggio, 1994). Strong cultural specificities are preserved with even more emphasis, as seen, for example, by the discussion of “the clash of civilizations” sparked by Huntington (1996). Argyrou (2002) points out that tradition is the reaction to modernity and that something is not ‘traditional’ until it is singled out or adopted by a culture to signify it. The tradition vs. modernity generated the division of “us” vs. “them” that is the otherness.

Zalabieh Bedouins extracting values, beliefs, ethics, and authenticity from tribal traditions and integrating them into contemporary life, structure their sense of belonging and *asabiya* (social solidarity) (Alshawi & Gardner, 2013).

Economic progress and reforms carried out by the Jordanian government since the 1980's have had an impact on the lives of Zalabieh Bedouins, and numerous infrastructure projects such as roads, hospitals, schools, universities, the flourishing tourism industry, and ecolodges, have altered their way of life and provided additional income. In this context maintaining values, validating, and conveying information from the past indicates their efforts to balance modernity with their unique identity as desert inhabitants.

2. AREA AND METHODOLOGY

2.1. Wadi Rum and Zalabieh Bedouins

Originally known as the Hashemite Kingdom of Transjordan, Jordan gained independence in 1946 and changed its name to the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan in 1949. King Hussein had ample



reason to want stability and unity because of the numerous wars and conflicts during its troubled history. Recruiting Bedouins for the Jordanian army and, subsequently, the police was one aspect of this endeavor. Ghazi (1999). These initiatives provided the state with an effective army while instilling patriotism and respect for political authority in the Bedouins. The recruitment of Bedouins, the conferral of privileges upon sheikhs, and the overall integration of Bedouins into governmental frameworks solidified the reciprocal dependency between these independent tribes and the state. This reliance enabled Jordan to secure its position within the political landscape of the Middle East, while Bedouins reaped the advantages and benefits afforded by the state.

Wadi Rum, often known as the Valley of the Moon, is a sizable desert region located 36 miles east of the city of Aqaba, southern Jordan. About 12 miles of Saudi Arabia is the village of Wadi Rum, which is situated at the entrance to this vast desert valley. It is populated by the Zalabieh Bedouins, who moved to the valley in 1980. They had previously resided in tents located in the isolated Wadi Rum Desert. Their community stretches slightly over a half-mile from one end to the other in a north-south direction and has approximately 800 to 900 individuals. The Zalabieh Bedouins, who nevertheless enjoy relative autonomy, are mostly interested in tourism, despite the fact that 80 percent have retired from the army, special forces, or police. Some have even worked with the secret police, and some are still actively engaged by these organizations. Wadi Rum is now recognized as Jordan's premier adventure destination. It provides multi-day desert adventures on camels or by foot as well as rock climbing.

2.2. Among Zalabieh Bedouins

In 2014, I was intrigued to conduct anthropological studies on Zalabieh Bedouins of Jordan's Wadi Rum Desert, for my doctoral studies in anthropology because of my fascination with Arab culture and tribal life, as well as my intense appreciation of desert landscapes. I lived with them 22 months, in the same house and participated in all their daily activities. Working in the field among Bedouins was tense for female anthropologists. The benefit was that I could interact with people of both genders. However, perhaps strangely, approaching males was simpler than approaching females. The men interacted every day with international visitors, and they were really happy with my presence since I was writing about them and their lives. Women were largely barred from interactions with outsiders, whether local or foreigners and stayed close to their homes. In their eyes, as men told me, I was a freer woman, not different from tourists who enjoyed sex with their husbands. Being allowed to ride camels and to accompany groups of men into the desert for hunting and camping furthered my distance from local women, who were excluded from such activities. I have made great efforts to build trust in these women. However, approaching children proved challenging. Children who unwittingly inherited cultural imperatives as habitus were not unaffected by women's opinions about me. Moreover, the children of Zalabieh seemed not to have either the curiosity or the disposition to approach on their own an "*ajnabi*" (stranger) who came to the village for some reason. A breakthrough came when my affirmative response to their question about whether I fasted during Ramadan helped to dispel any doubts about whether I respect their religious beliefs, and practices since I was Christian.

3. CHILDHOOD CONCEPTIONS IN ITS CULTURAL CONTEXT AND THE ROLE OF THE SCHOOL AS AN INSTITUTION

3.1. A Zalabieh Bedouin Child

Recognition of the commencement and conclusion of childhood is inherently culturally distinctive (Montgomery, 2009). Therefore, the roles and obligations of children, along with their passage to maturity, must be analyzed within the context. From this approach, childhood should be seen as a culturally created phenomenon that varies in time and location. It should be regarded as an integral component of the total life cycle rather than only a preparatory phase for adulthood. From this perspective, children are not only passive receivers of socialization; rather, they are social, economic, and political agents who influence their families and communities as significantly as they are influenced by them (Lancy, 2008). Children are socialized in environments where gendered norms are displayed by families, communities, schools, and the media, which leads them to enact and reproduce gendered actions through daily interactions with individuals and institutions (Garcia, 2022). Their norms and attitudes are shaped by these gendered contexts (West & Zimmermann, 1987). Different perspectives on childhood can exist even within the same cultural setting, as Taha Houssein's and Sayyid Qutb's memoirs brilliantly show. The authors from Egypt's pre-modern and post-colonial eras respectively, present opposing views on childhood ideals (Elgabalawy, 2019).

Zalabieh Bedouin children grow up in crowded settings. A wide network of relatives, including grandparents, sisters, cousins, uncles, and aunts, who come and go unexpectedly, makes their houses busy all the time. In Wadi Rum village, the family encompasses the entire kinship network. Children's

daily realities embody the daily concerns of the community since they attend all gatherings and listen to the discussions of adults. Gender-segregated environments inside and outside homes, in tents, in the desert, at wedding ceremonies, at funerals, and at various gatherings dictate behaviors that children internalize, embody and manifest via the cultural concepts of identity, ethics, and social cohesion or disarray. The boys, in the male spaces are little men, and the girls in the women's areas are small women. For example, boys listen to and usually share community concerns about economics and wilderness/desert management issues with the state. Girls typically share the concerns of older women regarding their marriage or jealousy. Consequently, girls' childhoods embody a convergence of discourses and behaviors related to motherhood and reproduction, while boys' childhoods focus on power, authority, and manhood (Scheper & Sargent, 1998).

Zalabieh Bedouins, like people everywhere, are embedded in cultural practices that they work to maintain and transfer to their children. What is distinctive about them is that they work to maintain an autonomous sense and set of practices of Bedouinism within a modern state.

One day, I talked to Ahmed about his 5-year-old nephew who was going to kindergarten. Ahmed said:

“He's gone. It's over. We can no longer call him *ayal* (a child in the Bedouin dialect). Can not you see that he goes to his grandfather and asks him to make him coffee?”

“And who do you call *ayal*”, I asked.

“Be careful while using the word *ayal*. He will be happy to show his knife. Here, boys are as young as seven drive jeeps, and we no longer refer to them as *ayal*. We call them *oualad*(boy) and they believed they have matured and that the “oualad” address confers on them the status of someone older than the child but younger than a man” he replied.

“What about the girls? How do you call them?” I asked

“We just call them *bint* (girls)” he said.

The age group that responds to the designation of *ayal* is the one that has not yet taken on daily activities; it basically includes four-and five-year-olds, and is the age group that women can still enjoy. Thus, at the stage of transition from one age status to the other, there is predominantly verbal discrimination: *ayal-oualad* for boys and *bint* for girls. *Oualad* and *bint* (boy and girl) are gender-categorizing words. These words in their indexical, performative, and phenomenological manner are for Bedouins modes of experiencing segregated worlds (Agamben, 1993; Heidegger, 1971; James, 1977; Ochs, 2012).

Each time our discussions raised the issue of children and their parents' relationships with them, I received similar responses, which initially indicated that the Bedouin men were indifferent to a long childhood and that, in particular, they considered spending time with their children a waste of time. Belonging to the desert community seemed more important than having a father playing with children. Thus, they behaved similarly toward as they did toward one another. Their children were the young adults who had to quickly learn and integrate identity and, at the same time, otherness within the Jordanian state.¹ For girls, the responses were indifferent. They did not touch on the issues of identity, locality, or belonging to the desert. The obligations of older sisters to take care of younger sisters or brothers and as future wives were given.²

However, women tended to value the presence of children more than men. It appeared that they needed more time to interact with their children. Living with them allowed me to see that their everyday activities were limited to household tasks, such as cooking, sweeping, and cleaning. They told me that they had nothing to do and were bored, and that spending time with the children filled this void in their time. They did not deal with community issues nor did they feel a sense of belonging to the desert. They were wives and mothers, and motherhood held an important place in everyday life.³

¹ In the following questions and answers were evident Zalabieh Bedouin men's perceptions of childhood. Q: “Do you play with your children?” A: “I do not have time to waste [playing with children]; the Bedouins do not need small children,” Q: “What is your son doing now in this community gathering?” A: “We Bedouins grew up like this; we were with the adults from a young age” Q: “Why are you talking to the child in such a serious tone, he is too young to understand” A: “How will he become proud with honor, how will he become a man, the desert wants men and not children, like you-Europeans who at the age of 18 cannot make a decision?”, Q: “How do you trust the jeep (for a boy)” A: “He must learn the desert from an early age to defend it, to be a true Bedouin.” Q: “Let him play as a child” A: “We do not need long childhood; how will the child learn to be a Bedouin and protect his place.”

² When I commented that a girl “does housework very well,” the mother responded, saying “she is the only girl in the family anyway, and she has to take care of the little ones, so she will learn quickly for later, leaving children out of life is not good.”

³ The following questions and answers indicative of women's perceptions of childhood Q: “I see you dealing with the kids all day long?” A: “What would we do if we did not have children, life is boring, fortunately we have babies and everyday life is full” Q: “Why do you want more children; you have already four” A: “The boys do not sit in the house; they will always go somewhere, girls are sweet when they are small, but once they start assisting with the housekeeping, I lose interest in my life, they are no longer children” Q: “Do you enjoy motherhood?” A: “I wish I had more time with the kids, but you see, the Bedouins encourage children to learn from a young age, it is the Bedouin culture.” Q: “Why are you arguing with Said?” A: “I would like to have more children but Said does not want to; Bedouins have always been like that; there is no time to enjoy my children.” Q: “Are you pregnant again?” A: “To spend time, the others had already grown up.” Q: “Your daughter is very serious” A: When the girls become a bit older, they will be like us; it won't be any difference than having a serious woman next to me,”

The Zalabieh Bedouin men's self-confidence, dominance in the desert, ability to find their orientation even in deep darkness, deal with sandstorms, hunt and track in the vast territory, climb dangerously on the rocks in their battered jeeps, recognize individual camel footprints, and accurately identify the footprints of their own people are skills constructed of lived experience and needs; their identity as Bedouin is derived from this knowledge. It is this "ideational culture" that makes them "unique" and defines their masculinity that differentiates them from other men outside the desert (Boyer, 1999). Their distinctiveness is bolstered by their attachment to both place and tribe, unlike the marginalized Bedouins of the Negev, who are ensnared in the vortex of integration and urbanization programs and maintain attachment solely to tribe rather than to place (Alhuzail, 2023).

As a result, Bedouinism hastens the end of childhood. Their power and cultural values, which are expressed and shown in numerous forms—generosity, prestige, honor, authority, conflict, camel races, and local tribe identity—should be immediately conveyed to children. It was precious for a small boy to spend time with toys. There was no reason for the child to remain there for a long time.

The children I encountered moved into the space of childhood that was created for them, adopting gender-specific practices. The boys were able to escort tourists with camels in the desert when they were eight years old; as they said, they "did business". At nine years of age, they were allowed to drive their jeeps in the desert.

Girls at this age can already successfully care for their younger siblings. Mothers trusted little girls as young as eight or nine to look after their younger siblings, sweep the house, and generally get along. The boys progressively began to take the role of protector of all of their siblings, even if there were older girls. The women I met expressed ambivalence between the short childhood that deprives them of enjoying their young children and their satisfaction with seeing their sons' become men and daughters become small women.

For Zalabieh Bedouins, there is no conception of childhood, children to play with in the way I am accustomed to Cook (2002). What matters is the difference within the modern state, preservation of tribal values, and authenticity of the desert. "*Oualad*" and "*bint*," (boy and girl) are constructed by the past, shape and construct the present, and aim for the future.

Men's authority over women also permeated their childhood experiences. As young adults, boys, dominated girls, and girls accepted the situation as given and inevitable. I observed that Zalabieh girls reproduced the subordinate status of women at least in public and visible practices. When I asked, this was justified with statements such as, "This is our culture."

3.2. *School in the Desert, School at the Margins*

I expected that I would meet children playing around the yards of houses or in desert areas on a daily basis in Wadi Rum. To my great disappointment, there were no voices of the children playing freely. To my surprise, children only seemed to play at special gatherings, such as weddings, and funerals when tents were set up, or inside the school grounds.

Two schools were located in the village: one for boys and one for girls. The Ministry of Education was responsible for girls' school. Women who had graduated from Higher Education institutions taught at girls' school. The teachers at boys' school were army officers. They were on duty and under the supervision of the National Military Command Center.

I obtained the necessary permits from the appropriate authorities to enter and stay during the day in school.

It was at schools where I was able to observe children while they played, conversed, or argued, and where I chatted with them.

I found that in the school arena, girls were detached from cultural realities. The school was a place where girls reproduced cultural values, while also, as I describe below, undermined it. Many studies on education and school indicate that school serves as a primary agency of socialization and, as a microcosm of society where cultural transmission and enculturation take place (Saldana, 2013; Theobald & Danby, 2017). However, the mismatch I observed between the school institution and the cultural structures of the community in Wadi Rum made these claims too deterministic.

The Zalabieh Bedouins I spoke about perceive the school as a state institution that does not touch on the specifics of their cultural practices. They did not perceive the school as offering special benefits. Rather, they viewed the school as an institution external to their consciousness of cultural practices. As I illustrate below, I came to understand school as a critical site where the practices associated with understanding modernity and tradition came into conflict.

I observed that the teachers, whether women at the girls' school or army officers at the boys' school, were not the people to whom the children turned to resolve their differences and settle disputes. For the children, the teacher was a "foreigner." They perceived a teacher as being of the same nationality but clearly outside of their own community, and they did not trust him or her. As a result, the teachers did not serve as arbiters. If there were conflicts or disagreements among the children, their fathers would

settle them rather than involve the teacher in the process. What I would call “children’s issues” in Wadi Rum eventually became adult concerns, precisely because there was no pure childhood as it is perceived in contemporary European societies.

For example, in a fight between two boys, fathers claimed that the teacher was unable to comprehend Bedouin culture and was ill-equipped to handle such a conflict. Teachers were appointed by the state, and Bedouins had many reasons to oppose the state. Bedouins expressed the idea that they were masters of the desert and, as such, could not allow mediation from an outsider. Since children’s future roles are already prescribed in Bedouin conceptions, the school is at the margins of the desert and at the margins of their life. Children are most likely not to leave the desert. According to what I was told, Bedouin can only be understood by Bedouin.

3.3. *School as a Place of Reproduction and Subversion of Cultural Assumptions*

One day, the girls decided to show me what they were playing at the schoolyard. To my surprise, they lined up, side by side, like men, and started singing men’s wedding songs. Though there were wedding songs sung by women, girls chose men’s. By imitating male movements and expressions, they reproduced practices associated with men. When I asked why they imitated men, they told me that this was their Bedouin culture. Their language was imbued with gender discourses (Anggard, 2011). They then started to act on the cooking process. They mimicked cutting up a goat, putting it in large pots, and cooking it. These were men’s jobs on all public occasions, including weddings, funerals, family gatherings, discussions of community issues, and so on. This suggests that the male habitus penetrated the subconscious more easily, and consequently, the gender hierarchy that was created emphasized masculinity. Bedouinism was consolidated and expressed through male authority, even by girls.

Bedouin authenticity and tribal values, as understood by the individuals I met and manifested in virtually all the practices I observed, empowered masculinity and otherness in relation to the state. The women remained at the margins and were subject to male dominance. Thus, it was easier for girls to display male practices and male power than female practices.

Fourth grade at school, served as the threshold for adulthood and gender segregation. In the fourth grade, the girls started to wear the headscarf. Despite being at the margin of broader social life, the school began at this stage to serve as a copy of public space, and the girls began demonstrating their transition to the status of women. The headscarf served as a performative practice for the coming of age, and the girls rejoiced that they had reached their expected status, a sign that they had become women. In other words, the headscarf, although clothing-wise as a religious symbol, delineates the boundary between childhood and maturity.

Later, the school was again transformed into a place at the margin where girls played a variety of games with a ball. In general, such games were not only prohibited in public areas, but also in regard to gender roles. In public, only boys were allowed to play with the ball. Even more paradoxical, however, was the fact that the girls denied playing with the ball. After watching and playing with them, when I told them that they were playing with a ball they insisted on saying “No, girls do not play ball, it’s forbidden.” To my question “What is this?” they simply answered “a game.”

In a paradoxical turn of events, the school as a transcription of the public space that served to reproduce male domination was transformed into a place of freedom where girls challenged and undermined cultural prohibitions. Here, the children spoke in terms of culture, not practice. A positive response of practice-playing with a ball would be to admit the violation of cultural prohibitions, and the speech had the potential to be heard. The practice prevailed to subvert, but language mediated to ensure culture.

4. DISCUSSION

The text aims to illustrate cultural relativism by examining the beliefs of the Zalabieh Bedouins regarding childhood and school as an institution, emphasizing their efforts to uphold traditional values in the context of modernity. The fact that the Zalabieh are not on the margins of the Jordanian state as a distinct community, allows them to more readily adhere to the desert and their traditions. Childhood, intertwined with perceptions of space and values, is shaped accordingly. Furthermore, the text emphasizes the institution of school as something required but not part of their cultural awareness. The study provides an alternative interpretation of cultural values in relation to existing studies on tribal communities by concurrently examining the direct discourse of both adults and children. Just as cultural relativity delineates the distinctions of cultures, period relativity similarly characterizes the facts inside a singular society. Further anthropological research within the same social group in a future generation would be intriguing to elucidate existing similarities or differences.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The Bedouins I met seemed to be balanced between global fantasies and local priorities. On the one hand, they implement customary rules of tribal organization and, on the other hand, they are part of the state mechanisms. They attempt to strike a balance between two identities -that of the Bedouin, the desert man, and that of the state officer—while dealing with the difficulties of modernization and the growth of tourism worldwide.

Wadi Rum's Bedouin childhood world is structured according to the demands of promoting tribal desert values and tradition, through discourses of distinction. These discourses are defined, on the one hand, in the context of differences in relation to outsiders and, on the other hand, in the context of the gendered world. School is not a place where a child is socialized. Children are already socialized and responsibly undertake social practices from a very young age. The school, as something at the margin, serves to highlight the primacy of Bedouin culture, even though children's attempts to undermine and subvert it in their play. The words "boy" and "girl," as used locally, define adulthood and limit childhood. Through play, the children highlight male authority. Female discourse, weak as it is, does not appear to have the power to externalize itself.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they do not have any conflict of interest.

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