



A Day in the Life of a Bedouin

Courtesy of the CISP Team, Jerusalem

It's now mid-July (the 18th day of Ramadan), and in Jericho the temperature is 45° Celsius when we arrive at the camp of Aqbat Jaber.

The Bedouins still call it a “camp,” but now it looks more like an isolated periphery of a town; there are houses and hovels instead of tents. Our arrival at 1:30pm gave me a clear impression of what it's like living there in the summer time: from the moment we entered the camp, we had not seen anybody outside in the streets, apart from a little group of boys cycling around, heedless of the heat.

The burning heat wave strongly interferes with all daily life activities: some of them are performed earlier in the morning, whereas others activities are postponed till later in the evening. We parked the car

Herd in Jordan Valley.



Bedouins at prayer's time.

Despite incredible hardships the Bedouin community faces in Palestine, and despite the particularities of their situation that is different from any other nomadic community, they are still active as individuals and a society at large. Here's a glimpse into their daily life, and the beauty of their determination.

under the fringed shadow of a lonely tree, and then we entered Sheikh Musa's office. He stood up to greet us and welcomed us cheerfully. He is a respected religious authority in his community, the *mukhtar* of the camp of Aqbat Jaber, and also the president of C.A.D.L. (Cooperative Association for Livestock Development in the Bedouin community of Jericho and Jordan Valley). I could see from his eyes that he was happy to have the opportunity to talk about what it means to be a Bedouin in Palestine nowadays.

Sheikh Musa began by emphasizing the fact that the life of the Bedouins has been the same for centuries, since the time his ancestors moved from the desert of the Arabic Peninsula spreading throughout the enormous region of the Middle East and North Africa. Nomadic herders, masters of trade through the harsh desert routes, and guardians of the roots of both the Arabic language and traditions, Bedouins nowadays live in awful conditions of poverty and misery. The world of the Bedouins started to change dramatically since the fall of the Ottoman Empire, and the subsequent creation of national states and borders. In most of these national states, the Bedouins are still free to move within

borders without restrictions, but this is not the case in Palestine. During our conversation, Sheikh Musa referred more than once to the lucky situation of the Bedouins in Jordan (he called them brothers), who are still free to move as they wish, guiding the transhumance in springtime and autumn to whichever area is more convenient for them. Being a Bedouin in Palestine is very different, and far more restrictive.

While listening to his words, my mind could not help thinking about the situation of the Native Americans: once owners of the land of their fathers, now reduced to small areas of self-sovereignty. Sheikh Musa proudly explained that Bedouins historically provided the Palestinian market with meat and dairy goods, but this was before the Nakba, which for Bedouins in Palestine resulted in the destruction of their traditional nomadic lifestyle, including more and more restrictions of movement that have ultimately forced a sedentary life.



Bedouin woman making butter in the traditional way.

Sheikh Musa did not embellish the situation of the Bedouin communities in Jericho and the Jordan Valley, but gave us a sincere picture of a typical day in a camp. Still today, men and women have very specific and different roles. Everybody in the camp wakes up when the sun rises. Women milk the goats, and after that, if possible, men bring the goats to graze whatever is found on the dry hills above Jericho. Women remain in the camp and help the children get ready to go to school. Nowadays, both boys and girls are sent to school because their parents are aware that literacy is an advantage for communicating with tourists, and tourism has become one of their main sources of income. Then women skim the fresh milk to separate the fat from the rest using an ancient technique which they demonstrated: fresh milk is poured in a goatskin and then shaken for at least an hour till the milk is totally skimmed.

When men return from the hills, they work on the production of dairy goods while women fetch water at the nearest well. When it is time to shear the goats, it is usually the men who do it, while the women work with the loom (or by hands) to produce thick woollen blankets or traditional dresses.

The Bedouins' rhythm of life is still regulated by sunlight. In fact, most of the camps are not linked to electricity. This means, for instance, that during the short and cold days in the winter, all of the activities in the camp end around 4:00pm, and people sit by a big fire and have dinner, and after that they retreat in the tents/hovels. Whereas in summertime, the daily activities start when the sun rises, both to take advantage of the sunlight and to start working during the cooler hours of the day.

Sheikh Musa told us that traditionally, Bedouin communities bred camels, which were a tireless means of transportation as well as sources of milk, wool, leather and meat. Today, however, the price of fodder for camels has risen to an unsustainable level so that most of herders have had to sell their flocks. At the same time, the Palestinian market is flooded with cheap products, both dairy and wool products, and Bedouin products cannot compete with mass-production. This was the case with camel wool products which are more time-consuming to produce, and consequently more costly.

In theory, the Bedouins should have been granted their freedom of



Bedouin children playing.

movement, considering that they live in the so-called Area C of the West Bank, and are practically "squeezed" between Israeli settlements expanding all around, and military barracks that take possession of huge areas for military training.

There is a reason the first traces of Arabic poetry came from the Bedouin community. Their love for nature and specific relationship with what remains impermanent gives them a very different kind of beauty. It is humbling to watch them live, and from them, we all can learn how to love a land that is always on edge.

Comitato Internazionale per lo Sviluppo dei Popoli (CISP), is an Italian NGO that has been working in Palestine for almost twenty years. Since its inception, it has been coordinating development projects especially tailored to sustain the Bedouins of the West Bank. Sheikh Musa and Abu Faysal were important referents for CISP projects and gave guidance on sensibilities and traditions of the Bedouins with regards to project management. The most challenging objective remains finding some sustainable solutions to the hardship that Bedouins face every day while maintaining their traditional lifestyle.

Our Readers Say ...

"I was eight years old when this happened and I will never forget it. I was walking into a supermarket with my mother, and my height was almost as tall as the shelves with chocolate. I grabbed the chocolates, and whatever I liked, I put in my pocket and what I hated, I threw on the floor. My mom looked at me and was very embarrassed. I ended up getting yelled at, but at least I ate all that chocolate. Isn't that every little kid's dream?"

Hala Masri, Nablus

"I was once walking down the streets of Germany with a friend. We were so hungry and were really wanted to eat a simple hamburger. We asked around, and ended up asking an old man, if there was a McDonald's. His answer was, 'Sometimes.' We never found McDonald's."

Issa Habash, Jerusalem