

Out of History: A Journey to Identity through the Silenced Voices of Bedouin Women

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My father is a Bedouin Arab who lived unquestioned on his historical tribal lands until 1948, after which the village was termed “unrecognized” and “illegal.” My mother is an Arab Muslim from Nazareth. Even though she comes from one of the strongest Arab cities in northern Israel, she never identifies herself as such, choosing instead to be identified as hailing from her family’s uprooted village that existed before 1948. My name is Safa Abu Rabia. I am a Bedouin, an Arab, a Muslim, a Palestinian and also an Israeli. I am all of these things together, but, at the same time, I am none of them.

Similar Yet Different

It was not always like this, however. It all began when my very educated parents decided to move me and my three sisters from our Arab school to a Jewish school. My elementary education was in a Bedouin Arab town near Beer Sheva. There my parents resolved to educate us about our heritage in order to give us a better sense of identity. We learned about Islamic practices, how to speak the Arabic language and about our past.

My parents then decided that since the level of academic performance is higher in Jewish schools than in their Arabic counterparts, we ought to be educated in the former and thus have a better chance in life. Until that point, I was assured of my identity and place as a Bedouin Arab living in Beer Sheva. Being in a Jewish school did not affect me initially. In all outer appearances I was the same as everyone else. I looked like them, dressed like them and spoke like them. Despite this, I felt different, especially in history class, where I was either invisible or the enemy. We studied the Israeli narrative, which explained how the empty land of Israel was waiting for hundreds of years to be redeemed by the Jewish people, causing me to

question where I came from and who I was.

My Journey of Self-Discovery

This uncertainty as to where it was that I belonged started me on a journey of self-discovery. This journey took me to the university, where, in the Middle Eastern Department, I started to feel that I did have a place. I started speaking Arabic with my Arab friends and studying Islam, which allowed me to feel a sense of past and belonging. However, I could not find evidence of the Bedouin community, either in the Israeli or Palestinian formal narratives. This prompted me to attempt to unravel the question of their obscurity by searching for and documenting these silent voices. I used anthropology as an avenue of research and as part of my Master's dissertation. I interviewed Bedouin men from the 1948 generation about their past. I became privy to a very rich historical discourse, detailing the old ways of life, their expulsion from their homes in 1948 and how they yearned for this old life.

Looking for Bedouin Women's Voices

When I looked for the voices of Bedouin women, I could find nothing. Consequently, I decided to dedicate my PhD thesis to the task of finding a "her story" in Bedouin society. Every Bedouin man I spoke with insisted that women cannot communicate history. There are lots of Bedouin men who can tell you about 1948, they averred, but you will not find your answers by talking to women. This only stoked my curiosity further, but the women I met from the 1948 generation reacted in the same way, with avowals of ignorance as this was a man's job. "We did not participate in the 1948 war," they declared. "We were at home with the children...but my husband can tell you the history, as can my brother and my uncle."

I was not satisfied with this and, with some effort, managed to gain entry into the separate gender space, or "safe space," occupied by women, in which they share their stories with younger generations. I joined several family gatherings and listened to the stories, but I felt disappointed. There was no history there, only fragmented



I tried to establish a "safe space" to enable Bedouin women to tell their stories.

ideas, broken language and gaps between sentences. Absent was the logical, chronological frame of events such as I experienced with the men I had interviewed.

A Non-Western Perspective for an Oral Society

I returned to my supervisor full of despair, maintaining that the Bedouin women could not tell history and believing this meant the end of my research and thus my PhD. He responded that I reminded him of his Western academic students as I was thinking in terms of a very specific logic, which was scientific and Western in nature. “You are trying to impose this way of thinking upon these women,” he told me, “when this is a fragmented society, symbolized by survival. This is an oral society that does not necessarily permit immediate entry into internal tribal history.”

I was shocked by the extent to which I had internalized the Western perspective, but I had been educated to do so. Thus I had to alter my outlook and way of thinking before returning to these women with an open mind. At the family gatherings, I attempted to discern what was said and what was not said, to establish the subtext of their discussion. I was rewarded with a very rich and empowering historical discourse. They spoke of how land defined their gender identity and the way they had an active role in the running of the household; they spoke of how they were expelled from their lands, the resultant emptiness they experienced and the way they are yearning for their old life. They told me of how they took their children, especially their daughters, to their old tribal lands to show them where they lived and the remains of their houses. They would walk barefoot in order to feel the soil and know that they belonged to this land and that it belonged to them, to know that this was their home and they wanted to return.

The Real Meaning of History

I learned that history is not about linear, chronological events; history is about people talking about their lives and their feelings. The goal of my journey had been to find a definite answer to the question of which narrative and which history I belonged to, so that I could know where I came from and where I am going. I did not find any definite answers, however, and emerged very confused. Though I was looking for boundaries, I realize today that I am sitting on the boundaries and that I belong to more than one place and more than one history. Knowing that there is no definite answer, nor truth, nor justice has actually released me from my internal struggle.

This article is based on her presentation at a TEDx conference.