

Epilogue: Studying al-Naqab/Negev Bedouins—Toward a colonial paradigm? ¹

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The epilogue to this special issue briefly charts the main approaches to the study of Bedouins in the Naqab/Negev² and argues for forming a colonial scholarly paradigm. The essay highlights three promising perspectives within this paradigm—settler society, indigeneity and “gray space”—to form an initial step in redefining the field. The epilogue does not claim to be exhaustive, and the ideas presented here undoubtedly need further elaboration, substantiation and reflection. Neither are they entirely new, as some authors have used the colonial paradigm in the case at hand, although they have remained few and far between.

Let us start with the present issue of *Hagar*, which includes a rich set of articles that add significantly to a growing body of knowledge on Bedouin Arabs in the Naqab. To the best of the editors’ knowledge, this is the first volume of an international social science journal to be devoted to this community. This not only speaks volumes for the (regrettable) lack of past research on Bedouin mobilization, identity and politics in the context of Israel/Palestine, but also illustrates a new surge of interest. The latter is in part due to the growing influence of relevant fields of study dealing with minorities, Islam, indigenous peoples and the margins of Palestinian and Israeli societies, to name but a few. In this respect, the current volume makes a very important contribution on its own. However, it also illustrates the limits of existing paradigms for studying Bedouin society, which have been framed, in the main, by the concepts of modernization, urbanization, politics of identity and gender, and most recently globalization.

The limitations of past studies begin with the definition of “Naqab Bedouin society.” This “society” constitutes small remnants of the Arabs living in the region prior to 1948. It continues to be embedded within far wider networks in the Palestinian West Bank and Gaza, in Jordan and elsewhere in Israel (Parizot, 2004, 2005). The usage of this category should therefore be constantly problematized as reflecting a forced division of the Naqab Bedouins from other parts of their own society. I have chosen to use the term “Naqab Bedouins” in this paper chiefly because it is most commonly used by the community itself, both in Arabic and Hebrew. However I use the term with full acknowledgement of the Bedouin existence as an integral part of broader Palestinian and Arab societies.

A common scholarly approach has treated the Bedouins, previously locally known as Arab a-Sab'a (Arabs of Beer Sheva), as nomads undergoing a process of sedentarization. Rich studies have traced their subsequent modernization and urbanization, and the resultant family, economic, political and societal transformation (e.g., Abu-Rabia, 2001; Al-Ham'amde, 1997; Ben-David, 2004; Dinero, 1997; Kressel, 1993; Marx, 1967, 2000; Meir, 1994, 1997; Porat, 2006). These have dealt with key issues, such as immigration (Ben-David and Gonen, 2001), housing, economy, community transformations and—most importantly—the question of land (Kedar, 2004; Kressel, 2007; Meir, 2005).

Great attention has been devoted in academic and professional literature to the planning of Bedouin settlement, according to the “best” modern knowledge (Ben-David, 1991; Gradus and Stern, 1985; Kliot and Medzini, 1985; Medzini, 2007; Razin, 2000; Soffer and Bar-Gal, 1985; Stern and Gradus, 1979). In later years, more critical studies have conceptualized the Bedouins as a peripheral minority within a centralizing, ethnic state, experiencing multiple deprivations and marginalities (see Abu-Bader and Gottlieb, as well as Tarrow, in this volume; Abu-Rabia, 2001; Fenster, 1993, 1999; Meir, 1988; Nevo, 2003; UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 2003). These studies have focused on patterns of discrimination against the Bedouins and their geographical, economic and political marginalization (e.g., Abu-Saad and Lithwick, 2000; *Statistical Yearbook of the Negev Bedouin*, 1999; Swirsky and Hasson, 2006). Other studies have linked Bedouin marginality to a series of communal crises and pathologies, such as growing crime rates, communal violence and pervasive alienation (Abu-Rabia, 2001; Ben-David, 2004; Meir, 1997).

Another recent approach has treated the Bedouins as part of the divided Arab or Palestinian nation, embroiled in an ongoing struggle with the Israeli state. The focus has been on land, identity, Arabness, culture, Palestinization (e.g., Abu-Saad and Yonah, 2000; Abu-Sitta, 2001; Bar-On and Kassem, 2004; Cook, 2003; Falah, 1983, 1989; Parizot, 2004) and most recently on the Naqba—the 1948 “disaster,” during which two thirds of the Arabs in Palestine were driven out of Israel—and its ever-present impact on Bedouin life (see Abu-Rabia and Abu-Mahfouz in this volume). An offshoot of this approach, but from an opposite political and ideological perspective, sees the rapidly growing Bedouin community as part of the Arab and Palestinian geographic and demographic threat to the embattled Jewish state. This is common Israeli discourse articulated academically in the works of Soffer (2007; see also Krakover, 1999).

Bedouin society has also been studied in recent years using critical gender and globalization perspectives. The former places gender relations, and especially the plight of Bedouin women, at the center of inquiry, showing the prevalence of deep chauvinism, as well as increasing signs of mobilization and resistance among Bedouin women (see Gottlieb in this volume; see also Abu-Rabia-Queder, 2008; Al-Krenawi and Graham, 1999; Fenster, 2002). The globalization perspective explains the effect of economic and cultural trends on the Bedouins, linking it, *intra alia*, to

the accelerating pace of social transformation, to a marked decline in community cohesion and to growing Islamism (Gradus, 2008; Meir, 2005).

The need for a new perspective

The above approaches, sketched here very briefly, explore and explain key aspects of Bedouin life and grievance in the Naqab. Yet, past research appears to largely skirt a fundamental factor—the existence of the Bedouins as a colonized indigenous people residing within a settler state. This factor underlies much of the Bedouin experience since 1948 and has impacted every aspect of their lives. Colonialism, I argue, critically informs the modernization, dislocation, discrimination and gender inequality described by the other main perspectives.

Israeli scholarship by and large considers the state's democratic, modern and Western character as a given. This is based on its European origins, the self-perception of the state-founding elites and the existence of partial and superficial democratic “features” that have glossed over a structural process of “ethnocratic” colonization (Benvenisti, 1997; Yiftachel, 2006). To buttress this problematic perception, Israeli scholarship has used a set of erasure practices, including the near total dismissal of the Palestinian Naqba. Most historical and social science accounts skip over the events of the 1948 war and its consequent massive ethnic cleansing and destruction of Arab society in Palestine.

The routine treatment of Israel as Western and democratic has also “necessitated” the bracketing out of the Palestinian refugee issue from analyses of Israeli society. In later years, the post-1967 occupation has been treated as temporary while awaiting resolution as part of a “peace process.” In this vein, the Bedouins, too, have been presented in many studies as “only” a peripheral community struggling to adjust to life in a modern Western society. An extension of this analysis refers to Bedouin political detachment from the history of the Naqba and the daily reality of the occupation—both critical foundations of the Judaization policy that also directly affects their life in the Naqab.

Hence, as already noted, the treatment of Bedouin society as a marginalized modernizing minority, important as it is, ignores a central factor in shaping Bedouin existence since 1948—namely, Israel's ethnic colonialism in their region. This has led directly to dispossession, forced movement, refugees and constant struggle with Israeli authorities for land, development and housing rights. Bedouin concentration into planned “development towns” has been marked by poverty and social degradation (Abu-Saad, 2001; Yiftachel, 2003). Under the Israeli regime, Bedouins have become “invaders” of their ancestors' land and “obstacles” to development. Past scholarship has been unable to answer a simple question: why are the Bedouins discriminated against more than other minorities in Israel/Palestine?

The answer lies in two critical goals pursued by Zionist settler society: land and demography. Bedouins present acute impediments to Israel's "ethnocratic" regime (Law-Yone, 2003; Yiftachel, 1999, 2006) and its consistent push to Judaize (and hence de-Arabize) the territories under its control, both in Israel and the Occupied Territories. Prior to 1948, the Bedouins in the Naqab held vast expanses of lands, estimated at 3–5 million dunams in varying types of possession (Kedar, 2004). This explains the particular severity of the ethnic cleansing of this region, whereby some 80–85 percent of Arabs were driven outside the state boundaries during the 1948 war and the following years.

This has enabled Israel to "legally" appropriate their land and allocate it for Jewish use. The Bedouins who remained in Israel have been strictly controlled, and their traditional land ownership system has been disregarded (Kedar, 2004; Shamir, 1996), allowing the state to claim total territorial control. Demographically, the Bedouins are commonly accused of "dangerously" high fertility rates, which putatively threaten the modern and enlightened way of life sought by the architects of Israeli society. In these respects, an overtly racist discourse has developed, essentializing the Bedouins as different and inferior.

The above must be qualified, because the colonization of the Bedouins has not been the only face of Israeli policies, which display other characteristics, at times progressive and enabling. Moreover, Israeli policies have not been homogeneous, embodying competing approaches towards the management of local Bedouins. Yet, it is imperative to understand that the Judaization approach has provided a hegemonic *meta-narrative* for most policy directions and has provided relatively clear limits for policymakers for over six decades.

Looking again through a colonial lens: Settler society, indigeneity and "gray space"

Given the above, I suggest that scholars re-examine their approaches to the study of Bedouin Arabs under the Israeli regime. Credible research should no longer avoid engagement with the issue of the Israeli ethnocratic regime in general, and Jewish colonialism in Palestine/Israel in particular. Analysts and policymakers need to use the most comprehensive and robust frameworks of analysis that can best account for community dynamics (for some beginnings in this direction, see Abu-Rabia in this volume, as well as Abu-Saad, 2003; Al-Krenawi, 2004; Meir, 2008; Yiftachel, 2006:Ch. 8). This does not mean, of course, that studies taken from other angles are of lesser value, but rather that they would benefit from dealing seriously with the colonial dynamic. It also means that the credibility of studies using the colonial angle would also be tested by their engagement with other scholarly perspectives that highlight the complexity of societal processes beyond the colonizing-indigenous binarism.

Scholarly accuracy, however, is not the only aspect here: adopting a colonial framework is also a political act, which unveils vitally important forces in a critical and possibly liberating manner. The use of the colonial “angle” also exposes the previous scholarly “politics of depoliticization,” as it shows how the overlooking of the colonial setting conceals state and ethnic oppressions—hence, my call for a scholarship that would not only be accurate, but also amend the distortions of the power–knowledge nexus of previous studies.

There is no room here to discuss in detail the nature of colonialism and its various types (see Fredrickson, 1988; Kipfer, 2007; Stasiulis and Yuval-Davis, 1995). Suffice it to define it as a systematic collective project of seizing and expanding control over contested lands, people, resources and power. The critical issue here is that the other important aspects of Bedouin life, such as modernization, urbanization, patriarchy, education, tribalism, human rights, gender and globalization, cannot be separated from this “meta” colonial point of reference (Arab Association for Human Rights, 2006; Human Rights Watch, 2008).

Consequently, I suggest three main scholarly perspectives, through which the colonized experience of the Bedouins should be studied: settler society, indigeneity and “gray space.” This is not an exhaustive list by any means, but a suggestion for a preliminary research agenda able to tease out the profound impact of colonized subordination. As noted, these directions are not entirely new: previous research has followed Zureik’s (1979) pioneering study and framed Zionism within the colonial framework (Kimmerling, 2004; Shafir, 1996; Yiftachel, 1992; Yuval-Davis and Abdo, 1995), and several studies even analyzed practices of “internal colonialism” towards Israel’s Palestinian citizens (Falah, 1989; Yiftachel, 1996). However, apart from a few exceptions (Abu-Saad, 2003; Yiftachel, 2003), very few scholars have connected the two fields of knowledge and used these colonial perspectives to understand the Bedouins of the Naqab.

Settler society

The settler society approach has long informed the study of the “new world” and developed concepts critical to understanding the process of societal construction through “frontierism,” immigration, settlement, new nationalism and rapid development. Several important studies started to analyze Israeli society within this framework, most notably headed by Kimmerling (1982, 2004), Shafir (1989) and Yuval-Davis and Abdo (1995), who focused mainly on the sociology and political economy of the immigration-settlement process, largely neglecting the geography and planning aspects.

But geography, needless to say, is highly relevant for the interaction of the Bedouins with the institutions, practices, legalities and discourses of Jewish/Zionist settler society. The suggested research angle could focus on these interactions and

interfaces, where lofty ideas of development and progress meet the naked “internal colonialism” project which typifies all settler societies. In Israel, as is well known, the state has promoted longstanding goals of “conquering the wasteland,” “making the desert bloom” and “Judaizing the periphery.” This is a force initially imposed on the Bedouin community from the outside, but over the years has diffused into its inner workings and protocols. Although settling the southern frontier has declined in recent years as a societal value, Judaizing the region has remained high on the Israeli government agenda. For this end, new policy efforts have focused on land control, selling of land to single-family Jewish farms and attempts to restrict Bedouin construction and cultivation (Yiftachel, 2006:Ch. 8).

The most visible and painful interaction has been the practices of land dispossession and forced relocation, accompanied by segmentation and cooptation, to be discussed below. Since 1948, Israel has conducted a concerted policy to Judaize the Land of Israel, or historic Palestine, building close to 1,100 Jewish settlements between Jordan and the Mediterranean Sea. At the same time, it has destroyed over 400 Arab villages and forbidden Arabs to build new localities anywhere in this territory. The only exception has been the (coerced) urbanization of the Bedouins in the Jaleel/Galeel (in English: the Galilee) and the Naqab, for which the state has built to date 28 Bedouin towns and villages. The Bedouin experience must be studied within this highly relevant geopolitics. In the Naqab region, the state has worked to minimize Bedouin land control, block the return of refugees and marginalize Bedouins in terms of planning, development, education and local government status.

Importantly, however, settler societies are not identical, and a credible use of this perspective necessitates scholars to also engage with the specific nature of Zionist colonialism. This begins with the troubled history of persecution and genocide, which drove Jewish refugees and forced migrants to Palestine, making Zionism a “colonialism of ethnic survival” (Yiftachel, 1997). The attitude of profound insecurity still prevails among many Jews and Israeli policymakers, despite massive augmentation in Israeli and Jewish power since the early Zionist days. This constitutes the basis of the enormous importance attached to “security” within the Israeli regime and its governing apparatus.

Another important feature of Israeli settler society is the strong sense of Jewish belonging to the land. Zionism did not only aim at finding a safe haven for Jews, but carefully chose the ancient Hebrew homeland (believed to be the cradle of Judaism) as its target territory. It therefore mobilized to liberate Jews from their subaltern diasporic existence, creating a strong sense of indigeneity among the settlers. An additional factor is the intensifying diversity of Jewish society, which has deepened in recent years with the large-scale migration of ethnic Jews from the former Soviet Union and Ethiopia and with growing economic liberalization and the associated socioeconomic gaps. The above aspects, mentioned here only briefly, should be explored seriously as scholars ask questions about the interaction of Bedouins with the Jewish settler society.

To complicate matters, the Naqab Bedouins were also formally included in the Jewish state, receiving formal citizenship in 1949–1950. This has allowed them to campaign for rights and equality and organize politically in a way not possible for Bedouins under other regimes. In some important ways, the Naqab Bedouins have used the spaces of mobilization offered in Israel, most notably in the local politics of planned towns, which have created a process of democratization. Yet, outside their small enclaves, Bedouin citizenship remains only formal—a method of registration, organization and surveillance, offering negligible political clout. It has never allowed for genuine participation in state or regional affairs, or as a platform for receiving a fair share of public resources. The Bedouins have remained, as noted by Swirsky in this volume, “invisible citizens,” observing the settler state mobilizing massive resources for Jewish seizure of their ancestors’ lands. The meaning of minority citizenship in such a settler society is still awaiting serious exploration.

Typical of colonial engagements, the interaction of the Bedouins with the Zionist settler society has made them subject to policies of division and identity manipulation. In order to minimize their resistance, the state has attempted to emphasize their “Israeliness” (though, of course, not Jewishness), divide them from other Palestinian communities in Israel/Palestine and consequently “de-Palestinianize” and even “de-Arabize” their identity (Yonah, Abu-Saad and Kaplan, 2004). Bedouins have been commonly constructed in Israel as culturally “unique”: an exotic people whose loyalty belongs to the desert and not to any particular culture or nation. While the Naqab Bedouins do possess their own cultural and ethnic features, they have always been part of the general Arab world, and undoubtedly belong to the Arabs of Palestine. Their natural inclusion as “Palestinians of Bedouin origins” within Palestinian societies in exilic locations attests to this orientation, as clearly shown by Abu-Mahfouz in this volume.

The divisive colonial strategy has been accompanied by a system of partial cooptation, whereby the state has attempted to incorporate the Bedouins while keeping them on the margins. In the Naqab settings, this has received support from some local Arab leaders, who have enshrined their leadership over towns and tribes with the aid of the state’s colonizing apparatus. But state support has come at a price—the severing of ties with Palestinian and other Arab or Muslim groups, encouragement to serve in the Israeli army and condoning of the Judaization of the region outside its Arab enclaves.

This identity regime has also operated “inside” the communities with attempts to segregate Bedouin society internally by supporting the traditional patriarchal tribal system, and by condoning practices such as marriage of close relatives and minors, pervasive polygamy (Al-Krenawi and Graham, 1999) and internal racism. The Israeli state even quietly supported, until the late 1980s, the highly conservative Islamic movement, which was seen as providing a “softer” locus of identity to nationalizing Palestinian movements. Here lies a paradox: settler societies, including Israel, commonly represent themselves as modern and Western, yet they are reactive in prolonging and deepening reactionary practices among the local populations.

These aspects have rarely been studied, and their exploration is critical to the interaction of the settling state with the indigenous population.

Finally, another important interaction worth studying in the working of a settler society is the rise of civil society. Specifically, Arab–Jewish organizations have begun to articulate a joint struggle for the Naqab’s various ethnic communities. This has surfaced in joint regional struggles around environmental hazards, investment incentives and tax concessions. While this is still a minor phenomenon against a history lacking cooperation, the influence is gradually reaching regional discourses and policies. Recently, several key civil society organizations with considerable funding have begun to construct a common Arab–Jewish space and struggle, in which the democratization of a colonial settler society can be imagined, debated and planned.

Indigeneity

An important field of study, highly relevant to the Bedouin experience, has lately developed around the experience of indigenous peoples and the concept of indigeneity.³ A range of theoretical, historical and empirical studies have now accumulated into a burgeoning body of knowledge about people residing in colonized regions and states, who have subsequently become “indigenous.” This field illuminates the plight of minorities commonly “hidden” under the previous state-centric approaches of knowledge generation. It has politicized the traditional anthropological and Orientalist approaches of studying these people as exotic phenomena to be “documented” prior to their likely disappearance from the stage of history through modernist assimilation. The politicization has constructed the category of “the indigenous” as an agent of history, a perpetrator of development and struggle, no longer a passive recipient of colonial policies.

While there is no one definition of “indigenous,” most studies and legal approaches emphasize the following features:

- primary occupation and use of colonized homeland regions
- maintenance of traditional customs, laws, language and cultures
- unbroken residence in the colonized region (save forced evictions)
- widespread land dispossession
- loss of pre-existing sovereignty.

Indigeneity under the new approach has become a claim for power, self-determination, culture and place (Howitt, 2006; Smith, 1999; Tsosie, 2001). It combines scholarly approaches with an anti-colonial surge, equipping colonized people not only with a critique of the powers ruling over their lives, but with substantive knowledge about their history, struggles and resistances. This body of knowledge has found its way to a wide range of forums in which indigenous peoples have developed strategies to turn their subordination into more equal coexistence

with other groups now residing in “their” territory, while rebuilding their culture and sovereignty (Abu-Saad and Champagne, 2006; Johnson et al., 2007).

A particularly rich area of inquiry has revolved around different forms of indigenous legalities, customary laws and regulation systems, and the ability to imagine and design “multiple sovereignties” between indigenous groups and the modern nation-states established on their territories (Burrows, 2005; Daes, 1999; Kedar, 2004). In addition, “indigeneity” has inspired new epistemologies, drawing on native “ways of knowing” and traditional methods of managing indigenous lives (Louis, 2007; Malone, 2007), and new perceptions of politics, culture and identities (Riseth, 2007). The political climax of this genuinely global campaign has been the adoption in September 2007 of the UN Declaration on Indigenous Peoples, which identified a range of protections for the culture, land and sovereignty of indigenous peoples (UNPFII, 2007).

The relevance to the Naqab Bedouins is clear. This is a group that resided on ancestral land for centuries prior to Zionist settlement, while subsequently facing dispossession and marginalization. Prior to Israeli rule, the Bedouins had a system of tribal governance, as well as a set of well established traditions and customary laws, which operated largely uninterrupted under previous Ottoman and British colonial regimes. In important ways, therefore, the Bedouins’ plight is similar to other indigenous peoples, such as the Maoris in New Zealand, Aborigines in Australia and Zapatistas in Mexico; all lost their self-determination, but have continued to struggle to regain land control and cultural autonomy (Abu-Saad, 2008).

The indigeneity angle can develop these comparisons and investigate fascinating questions, such as the impact of indigenous consciousness on the Bedouins’ struggle, the rise of indigenous globalism and the intertwining of indigenous awareness and Islam. In addition, research can explore the sensitive relations between the various segments of Bedouin society itself, in which stratification is often based on an internal “indigeneity order,” whereby Arab immigrants and farmers (*fellaheen*) who mainly came to the region during the nineteenth century enjoy a lower social status than those perceived as original land owners (*asliyeen*). Another sensitive issue is the relations between the general Palestinian and specific Bedouin senses of indigeneity, as the two coexist in the struggle for a post-colonial future for Israel/Palestine.

“Gray space”

Another angle in which to study Bedouin existence is the recent developments in political geography, globalization research and urban studies, which explore the growing phenomenon of urban informality. This refers to enclaves, populations and economies only partially incorporated into their “host” society. I have termed this phenomenon “gray space,” positioned between the “whiteness” of

legality/approval/safety and the “blackness” of eviction/destruction/death. Gray spaces are neither integrated nor eliminated, forming pseudo-permanent margins of today’s urban regions, which exist partially outside the gaze of state authorities and city plans (Yiftachel, Forthcoming).

In the urban policy sphere, including planning, gray spaces are usually quietly tolerated, while subject to derogatory discourses such as “contaminating,” “criminal” and being a “public danger” to the desired “order of things.” Typically, the concrete emergence of “stubborn” informalities is “handled” not through corrective or equalizing policy, but through a range of delegitimizing and criminalizing discourses. This creates boundaries that divide urban groups according to their status: a process of “separating incorporation” and “creeping apartheid.” This double-edged move tends to preserve gray spaces in a state of “permanent temporariness,” concurrently tolerated and condemned, perpetually waiting “to be corrected.” A multitude of informalities has come to characterize a vast number of metropolitan regimes to the extent that more than half the population can be classified as “informal” (AlSayyad and Roy, 2004; Davis, 2004; Neuwrith, 2005; Roy, 2005).

The relevance to Bedouin society is obvious. Around Jewish Beer Sheva, gray spaces have rapidly grown into sprawling expanses of Bedouin-Arab shanty towns and villages, constructed of tin and wooden shacks (Yiftachel and Yacobi, 2004). This is a clear byproduct of Israeli policies, which have refused to recognize Bedouin ancestral land ownership, effectively turning them into “invaders.” Gray space is also evident in the planned Arab development towns around Beer Sheva, where squatters are increasingly occupying public open space situated on disputed land. There is also a growing number of “temporary” Arab residents in the metropolis of modern Jewish Beer Sheva, where they mainly reside in the dilapidated Ottoman-Arab city center and the adjacent impoverished neighborhoods. While around 1,000 professional Arabs are permanent residents of the city, a few thousand others constitute an “urban shadow” and are usually not registered as city dwellers, nor are they represented in its local government. Subsequently, they are denied basic communal services, such as Arab education facilities, places of worship and political representation.

The Bedouin experience around Beer Sheva can thus be compared to the plight of indigenous urbanizing populations in vast regions of the global south, such as South America, Asia, Africa and other areas of the Middle East. Studies have shown that, in such regions, new types of ethno-class relations have been formed in today’s cities, based on new spatial configurations of residence, power and capital resources. This emerging urban order may be conceptualized as the “new colonialism,” which constitutes a *de facto* form of metropolitan governance, facilitating the expansion of dominant interests through exploitation, denial and segregation (Mbembe and Nuttall, 2004; Roy, 2007).

In this sense, the existence of most Naqab Bedouins within the globalizing Beer Sheva metropolitan region exposes them simultaneously to both “old” and “new”

types of colonial relations. The former alludes to the ethno-national expansion “from above” described earlier, whereby the dominant population has seized control over indigenous groups and their resources, while the latter points to a new phase of “centripetal” colonialism, during which marginalized populations create gray spaces “from below.” In this way they become subject to exploitation and segregation and are unevenly incorporated in the latest product of capitalist globalization—urban “creeping apartheid” (Davis, 2004; Mbembe and Nuttall, 2004). It is time to explore this aspect of Bedouin existence as they face a new “layer” of exclusion, namely the economic relations forged under the current neo-liberal age.

Sumood

Importantly, processes of colonization, old and new, are never unilateral. In most cases, including the Naqab Bedouins, they meet resistance and change, which should be studied and analyzed to complete the understanding of such settings. Recent international studies have shown that, in a wide variety of cases, colonized populations find resourceful ways to challenge, penetrate and even prevail over oppressive power relations. Bayat (2007), for example, notes the “quiet encroachment of the ordinary” into spaces of opportunity in such new settings, while Perera (2002) notes a process of inverse “indigenization” of colonial infrastructure. Angotti (2006), Appadurai (2001) and Roy (2007) show how local politics are organized in today’s slums and shanty towns, and how these are creating new hubs of globalizing civil society networks, often with surprising effect on tempering centralized power.

The Bedouin Arabs, like most indigenous populations, have not been passive recipients of colonial and globalizing forces. A notable process of self-empowerment and politicization has taken place during the last couple of decades, with a stubborn struggle of *sumood*—the Palestinian-Arab term for “hanging-on” and surviving against persistent crises and difficulties. In the Bedouin case, *sumood* has meant holding on to their ancestral land and rebuilding their communities after numerous rounds of evictions and disposessions. This has been promoted through the formation of several civil bodies and institutions, most notably the voluntary Regional Council of Unrecognized Villages (RCUV), which has assumed a leadership role in guiding the Bedouin struggle.

Like most indigenous politics, which operate under the coercive, fragmenting and luring attraction of colonial power, Bedouin politics have been highly volatile. It has waxed and waned between the need to present a united front against a dispossessing government and the deeply rooted tribalism, chauvinism, cynicism and tensions emanating from the differing agendas and personalities. Another source of tension exists vis-a-vis northern Palestinians in Israel and the Palestinian national cause, all steeped in profound uncertainties and divisions, but framed within a

common struggle and a post-colonial vision. For indigenous Bedouin communities, there are powerful and confusing forces at work daily as they negotiate their position within their traditional and colonized homeland.

Finally, resistance and survival under a colonizing regime also involves positive elements, such as the nurturing of cultural traditions and community spirit. As Connell (2007) and Ehrenreich (2007) remind us, celebration and joy have always been a central part of native and minority life and survival, not the least among Palestinians (Serhan, 2008). Somewhat removed from the direct political arena, communal events such as weddings, holidays, youth activities, women's groups, plastic art, poetry, music and the valorization of public interaction sustain the various Bedouin communities and display their ability to enjoy and celebrate survival under harsh circumstances. This, too, can be a promising line for future cultural-political research.

A final word

Let me conclude by illustrating the centrality of the colonial experience to the understanding of Bedouin life with a typical story, one of hundreds, told during the eighth session of the Goldberg Commission, on March 4, 2008. This official commission was appointed in 2007 by the government to offer a solution for the Bedouin settlement and land problems. Below is an exchange which took place during the testimony of Ahmad Nasasra, representing the unrecognized village of al-Sirra:

Nasasra: I came here to ask the committee to resolve a terrible problem... After 60 years of Israeli rule, we are suddenly asked to move.

Attorney Yoram Bar Sela (a committee member): Why "suddenly"? Didn't you know this for a long time? Didn't you read the plans?

Nasasra: No, this is news to us.... We thought we would be allowed to stay....

Judge Eliezer Goldberg: I don't understand. What is your complaint? Tell me clearly, please.

Nasasra: ...We have been living on our own land for centuries and were never asked to move.... In 1973 we registered our claim for 400 dunams.... During the late 1970s, Israel built a huge military airport near us, and evicted thousands of Bedouins, but not us, so we thought we were safe... Eight months ago we were suddenly surrounded by dozens of policemen

and building enforcement units.... They told us all our houses are illegal and we have to move.... When we said that this has been our land for centuries, they showed us papers that it was confiscated in 1980 and is now classified as “land for army planning needs” ... but nobody ever told us.... Now we have demolition orders on all buildings in the village and two have already been demolished.... We wish, first and foremost, to stay here....

NOTES

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² Negev and Naqab are the Hebrew and Arabic names, respectively, for the region which is now southern Israel. I use the latter in this paper because it focuses on the Bedouin-Arab community.

³ It is recognized, of course, that the entire Palestinian population is indigenous. The approach here is to highlight the specific characteristics of the Bedouin indigenous struggle, as part of the broader Palestinian anti-colonial campaign.

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