IMAGE IS EVERYTHING: THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE NEGEV BEDOUIN AS A TOURIST ATTRACTION1

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Introduction: Heritage Tourism as a Virtual Experience

The growth of tourism in the developing world over the past few decades has fostered a considerable increase in the frequency of encounters between tourists and native peoples. The literature is replete with discussions of the various social and cultural impacts which such encounters have fostered in the developing world (Boniface and Fowler 1993; Boorstin 1961; Cohen 1979, 1988; Dogan 1989; Enloe 1990; Herbert 1995; Ioannides 1995; Lea 1988; Mathieson and Wall 1982; Murphy 1985; Nash 1996, 1989; Weiler and Hall 1992).

In recent years, these interactions have been encouraged in particular by the development of tourism that commoditises local cultures and traditions – ‘heritage tourism’. This form of tourism brings peoples from distinctly different backgrounds and cultures into close proximity with one another. To be sure, encounters have the potential to promote intercultural understanding (Boniface and Fowler 1993: xi) and to educate host and guest communities about one another. At the same time, however, the commoditisation of tradition as a tourist product also has the potential to foster the creation and perpetuation of misinformation, in the form of stereotypes, biased viewpoints and prejudices. This is due in large part to the fact that heritage tourism often serves to facilitate the construction and dissemination of ‘hyper-real’ images of the lives, cultures and traditions of host communities. In part, this process is almost inevitable, for tourists travel in order to get away from the mundane, seeking to be exposed to exciting, extraordinary and alternative ways of behaving and living in the places that they visit. As Boniface and Fowler explain (1993: 7, emphasis added):

[Tourists] want extra-authenticity, that which is better than reality. [They] want a souped-up, fantastic experience. [They] want stimulation, through simulation of life ways as we would wish them to be, or to have been in the past. As is clear, the travel industry knows it is dealing in dreams.

Such a process is further exacerbated when the traditions being commoditised belong to a native population, and the consumers share similarities (or are the same people as) their colonisers. In such a specific context, Boniface and Fowler contend, ‘tourism, in many ways, is a sort of neo-colonialism’ (1993: 19).
In the following, I discuss and critique one example of heritage tourism development, and the commoditisation of native traditions and culture by European ‘colonisers’. Using the Israeli Negev Desert as a case study, I shall attempt to show how tourism development there has increasingly served to foster a ‘hyper-real’ image of that region’s native community, the Negev Bedouin. I shall contend too that the creation of such an image may be best understood within Boniface and Fowler’s context of tourism as neocolonialism — that is, that heritage tourism can and is being used by the Israelis as an expression of power and control. In the present case of the tourism enterprise surrounding the Negev Bedouin (i.e. the Palestinian Arabs whose residence in the Negev well precedes that of Jews and the creation of the State of Israel), I shall argue that the image being created and disseminated for tourist consumption is a direct result of the colonisation of the former Palestine.

A note about methodology is in order here. Given the nature of the topic, I shall utilise both traditional and nontraditional sources throughout the paper. While the former will help to develop the theoretical framework, such sources as popular tour guides and Internet web-pages will help formulate both the content of the ‘imaged Bedouin’, and the manner in which the image is disseminated. Data from personal interviews and communications with Bedouin tourism providers themselves are included as well, in order to offer personal inputs regarding the Bedouin tourist industry. For, while an outside Western observer may see the development of the Bedouin tourism industry as a neocolonialist or imperialist effort, it is significant that those in the tourism industry do not express opposition to tourism development. Rather, all who were interviewed for this study clearly expressed their happiness at having some form of work, and a steady income. The past decade has seen a developing literature on this seeming contradiction between the views of the ‘objective’ outside researcher, and the ‘subjective’ views of those being studied (this is especially found in the feminist literature; see, for example, Gluck and Patai 1991; Smith 1987). That said, perhaps the ‘true’ nature of the Negev Bedouin tourism industry lies somewhere in between these two views.

The ‘Disneyfication’ of Native Culture for Tourist Consumption

Tourists’ reasons for travel to less developed countries are varied, but share some similarities. A common motivation, held perhaps by all tourists, is simple curiosity (Murphy 1985: 26), and the desire to experience other cultures — that is, ‘wanderlust’. While some tourists may seek recreation and escape with no particular interest in the local people, others visit a locale because they are interested in cultural practices and behaviour, and not mere physical artefacts or exotic settings. Increasingly, Western tourists in particular seek experiences in premodern or undeveloped places, in precapitalist environments where social and economic
inequities seem ‘airbrushed out by the distinctively modern bourgeois imagination’ (Selwyn 1996: 251).

Heritage tourism ‘involves some form of direct experience with the host culture and environment, usually by visits to native homes and villages to observe and/or participate in native customs, ceremonies, rituals, dances and other traditional activities’ (Harron and Weiler 1992: 84). In other words, such tourists seek a more personal, intimate and ‘authentic’ interaction with local populations (Harron and Weiler 1992: 86). What comprises this authenticity is, of course, subject to discussion. One’s perspective is shaped by images that may caricature a society’s features. It is this process which is known as ‘Disneyfication’. As Harvey describes in his discussion of place-bound identity created by Disneylands and similar theme parks, ‘the irony is that tradition is now often preserved by being commoditised and marketed as such. The search for [a culture’s] roots ends up at worst being produced and marketed as an image, as a simulacrum or pastiche’ (Harvey 1989: 303, emphasis added). The resulting decontextualisation of culture through the packaging and selling of the tourist product leads to a loss of communication or understanding between the host and tourist populations. Instead of destroying misconceptions between the two, it has been noted that “tourism perpetuates them and often creates new prejudices. Many tourists arrive with stereotypical images of their hosts and selectively perceive stimuli which will reinforce those images’ (Mathieson and Wall 1982: 164). Such images also have internal social and economic costs for local populations. As Harvey suggests, ‘the interweaving of simulacra in daily life brings together different worlds (of commodities) in the same space and time. But it does so in such a way as to conceal almost perfectly any trace of origin, of the labour processes that produced them, or of the social relations implicated in their production’ (Harvey 1989: 300).

At the same time, and perhaps more significantly, social reproduction within the host community may be impacted, as the practising of traditions is converted into a wage-labour process. The conversion of native peoples into a proletariat class is an almost certain result. Such a process also further serves to objectify and dehumanise the ‘other’ on both sides of the tourism relationship, primarily as a means of maximising economic profit and political disempowerment (Harvey 1989: 114) through an artificially constructed social interaction.

In the context of heritage tourism in colonised lands, these dynamics are perhaps even more significant. For here, former colonisers may foster the creation and perpetuation of images of local peoples that validate their colonisation, what Nash (1989: 43; 1996: 64) has called a neocolonialist tourism superstructure. Colonisers may emphasise the primitivity or savagery of the native host community, for example, where ‘other’ is equated with a romanticised version of the ‘Noble Savage’—he who needed to be conquered and tamed by the colonising force. In his critique of picture postcards from the 1800s, for example, Nash argues that such images were used as a medium of control by perpetuating the Noble Savage paradigm. He writes:
In these [post card] productions, the rather grim realities of daily life under White domination gave way to idyllic, exotic scenes apparently designed to meet the expectations of mostly White American tourists. (1996: 71)

As the Indians were pacified towards the end of the nineteenth century, the image of the Indian as ‘other’ developed still further into today’s ‘romantic picture of the uncivilized’ (Nash 1996: 72).

The creation of such images demonstrates that the power of the colonising force means ownership not only of the land, but also of the right to the cultures living there, and how they are presented to the outside world. Boniface and Fowler (1993: 19; emphasis added) observe:

Visitors’ patronage [to a colonised land] may be one thing. Quite another can be the condescension of residents of a colonised country to the indigenous peoples of the territory to which they have come to regard themselves as the rightful heirs. A font of power in an area is similarly likely to be the dominant source of culture, often, apparently at least, to the exclusion of all other. Colonisers can come to regard as solely in their ownership the culture as well as the land mass.”

Such ‘ownership’ of native culture is perhaps best seen through museum displays and representations. Indeed, Anderson (1991: 163–4) has identified three institutions of power through which the colonising force exercises its domination over the land, namely the census, the map and the museum. To be sure, museums represent a significant part of society’s cultural heritage. Still, museums must be selective in the content of their collections and their displays. Native ‘artefacts’ are seen out of the living context within which they were created and utilised. What the tourist sees ‘is seldom the living culture, but usually specimens collected and embalmed especially for him, or attractions specially staged for him: proved specimens of the artificial’ (Boorstin 1961: 102). Moreover, such collections reinforce the modern values of their Western patrons, while serving as vehicles through which such narratives are also taught to members of the community being represented (MacCannell 1976: 78). For example, the meaning and purpose of the activities or material items of a living community are difficult to present in a way that does not imply obsolescence. The very context in which an item is displayed captures only a moment, freezing it in time. Labelling an item or activity affixes meaning still further, obstructing interpretation or reinterpretation at a later time (Boniface and Fowler 1993: 110), and discouraging multiple or alternative meanings. Museums are significant forums for the presentation of images of native traditions, for often they serve as a Westerner’s first ‘encounter’ with colonised populations. In this regard, then, museums may play a particularly central role in the creation and perpetuation of consumable images of a colonised people’s traditions and culture.

Thus, images consumed by tourists in colonised lands, be they postcards, museum displays or other media, may share one thing in common: the narrative of
the ‘discovery’ and taming of the frontier and the ‘uncivilised savages’ living therein (see Boniface and Fowler 1993: 19–28). Such a myth not only supplants and controls native traditions, history and claims to the land but further, it helps rationalise their very colonisation. Moreover, such images are not limited to the U.S. case, but can be applied to other colonised lands as well. As will be argued below, a similar colonial discourse can be found in the modern Middle East where, despite decolonisation after the Second World War, Orientalist and neocolonialist attitudes continue to dominate the Western tourist’s imagination (see for example Enloe 1990; Said 1978; Yegenoglu 1998). Such a discourse is dominated by images of the Arab world as ‘a lurid nineteenth-century genre painting, full of harem girls, flyblown camels, snakecharmers and thieves’ (M. Ignatieff, as cited in Boniface and Fowler 1993: 39). Indeed, it may be contended that these images have been at the heart of the Middle East tourism experience since the nineteenth century and, as will be seen below, well inform the international tourist’s understanding of and expectations for travel in that region to the present day.

Case Study: the Negev Bedouin Community

The Bedouin of Israel’s Negev Desert have undergone an exceptional geographic, economic and social transformation over the past several decades. Three processes – denomadisation, proletarianisation and social ‘modernisation’ – are the primary components of this change. Each of these developments, largely the direct result of the forced sedentarisation of the community during that period, helps to explain and clarify the structure and appearance of the Negev Bedouin community today.

Sedentarisation and denomadisation

The Negev Bedouin were once a pastoral nomadic community of Arab Muslims, raising sheep, goats and camels while moving in an annual cycle over 4,000 km² of land. Immediately after Israeli independence in 1948, the Bedouin were placed under Military Administration and physically concentrated by the government into the *seig*, a reservation-like region of about a quarter of that size (that is, about 1,000 km²; Boneh 1983: 55–56) near the city of Be’er Sheva (see Map 1). In the mid-1960s, the government’s resettlement efforts were further intensified through the establishment of Bedouin new towns within the seig region (Map 2). The Israeli government sought to settle the Bedouin permanently in these towns, in order to end their pastoral-nomadic practices (Boneh 1983: 74) and to provide public services to the community, including electrification, running water and sewerage, schools, health clinics, and social welfare programmes. At the same time, living outside these towns, in either mobile tents or semi-permanent shack settlements, was deemed illegal.

Although the resettlement initiative faced Bedouin resistance in its early phase, settlement rates have accelerated in recent years. Indeed, in only the last decade
who are still ‘nomadic’ is increasingly limited by the state. Thus, as Meir (1997) states succinctly in the aptly entitled volume As Nomadism Ends, the Negev Bedouin community had, by the late 1990s, been swept by change over the past several decades, ‘carrying [them] to the present cultural point where only the remnant of pastoral nomadism is left’ (p. 221).

Economically, the Bedouin transition away from pastoralism and towards wage labour has occurred with some difficulty. While many ceased pastoral activity upon relocation to the town, the ability to acquire wage-labour positions remains problematic. The Bedouin experience high levels of wage-labour unemployment (see, for example, Meir and Ben-David 1993). Even when employed, very few Bedouin men (women rarely work outside the home, although this too is changing) are found in professional positions. In a survey conducted in the
mid-1990s, for example, 20 percent of able-bodied Bedouin men between eighteen and fifty-five were identified as unemployed, and 9 percent were retired. Fifty-two percent were working in the spheres of construction, as cab/bus drivers, in agriculture (that is, working on Israeli kibbutzim or moshavim), or as factory workers. About 7 percent worked in business, and another 7 percent worked in ‘other areas’. Thus, only slightly over 5 percent of those surveyed worked in ‘professional’ occupations requiring higher-level skills or education (adapted from Dinero 1999: 29).

In terms of social modernity and changing value systems, statistics gathered in the mid-1990s reveal these processes at play as well. In Segev Shalom/Shqeb, for example, the percentage of residents accessing publicly provided services rose consistently during the 1990s. The greatest change measured concerned education, where the percentage of high-school-aged children actually in school rose from only 73 percent in 1992–3 to 92 percent in 1996–7 (Dinero 1996: 70); this figure reached nearly 100 percent during the 1999–2000 school year. Similarly, by the mid-1990s, 100 percent of those surveyed stated that they and their families used some or all of the town’s health care facilities. Another measure, ownership of electronic goods, has also risen substantially over the past decade (Dinero 1996: 73). While nearly 100 percent television ownership may say little about Bedouin social development or the permanence of one’s residence in a particular location (indeed, many tent-dwellers also own TVs), the fact that more than two-thirds of Segev Shalom residents own large appliances such as refrigerators and half of them own washing machines, well reveal recent changes in Bedouin values and priorities.

Thus, by the late 1990s, the majority of the nearly 120,000 Bedouin (see Statistical Yearbook 1999: 18) lived in stone homes, spending their free time watching television and conducting activities similar to other Israelis. Most adult males ceased pastoral activities and sought wage-labour occupations, while their children attended school nearby. And yet, concomitant with the trends noted above was the development of a flourishing tourist trade to the Negev region. To be sure, it is not the Bedouins’ present lives and lifestyles that whet the tourist appetite. Rather, it is their traditions, material culture and values as nomadic desert-dwellers – much of which has been rendered obsolete by the resettlement initiative – that appeal to the romantic exotica of the tourist experience.

Traditional Negev Bedouin society as a tourist construct

Tourism, particularly ecotourism, has mushroomed in the Negev Desert over the past twenty years (see, for example http://www.virtual.co.il/beersheb.htm; http://www.isrotel.co.il; www.jewishnet.net/subjects/culture.htm/ramon.htm; Israel Ministry of Tourism, CAT. No. 164/1:22–23). Today, one can choose from over thirty places of accommodation including hotels, hostels, guest houses and field schools. There are 500 guest rooms in the city of Be’er Sheva alone, more than half of which are in the Hilton.
Once largely ignored by tourists, the Negev is marketed as a destination particularly because of its lack of development. The Israel Ministry of Tourism webpage describes the Negev, for example, as ‘deceptively quiet and barren’, home to ‘remains of ancient civilisations and nearby, modern and young pioneering settlements. Oases [are] scattered between great stretches of infertile and stark wasteland’ (http://www.dapsas.weizmann.ac.il/negev.html). Austere desert landscapes, canyons, craters, Nabataen ruins and desert fauna provide Western tourists with wild and romantic experiences. With the return of the Sinai Desert to Egypt in the early 1980s as a result of the Camp David Accords, the Negev became Israel’s only true, largely undeveloped, frontier. Indeed, the region has been referred to as Israel’s ‘Wild West’ by some in the tourist industry (Cabasin 1997: 298).

Central to this marketing strategy are the Bedouin, discussed not only in commercial publications (see, for example, a full-page spread in Cabasin [1997: 229]) but, indeed, by official Israeli government sources as well. Many, if not all, present the Bedouin as simultaneously romantic yet obsolete, noble yet primitive. States one Tourism Ministry pamphlet:

> Some people experience their strongest sense of the Bible in the Negev, with its Bedouin encampments that have not changed much since the time of Abraham 4,000 years ago. (Israel Ministry of Tourism, CAT. No. 166/1: 19).

Adds another:

> From the classical desert culture of the noble and nomadic Bedouins, who’ve lived in and off the desert for hundreds of years, to the modern and urban culture of the people of [Be’er Sheva] and other towns, the Negev is living proof of human ability to adjust and flourish in any environment. (Israel Ministry of Tourism, CAT. No. 164/1:20, emphasis added).

And finally:

> Vast areas [exist in the Negev] where modernisation has not yet arrived and the Bedouin still continue with their traditional, nomadic lives. (http://www.dapsas.weizmann.ac.il/negev.html).

The Bedouin piece of this tourism package is concentrated in three spheres: the weekly Bedouin Market in Be’er Sheva, the Joe Alon Museum at Kibbutz Lahav, and organised group tours featuring ‘Bedouin-style’ tent cafés, restaurants, and other service industry sites.

**The Commoditisation of Material Culture: the Bedouin Market at Be’er Sheva**

The Bedouin Market in Be’er Sheva is recognised as the city’s ‘most exciting’ tourist attraction (see, for example, Willard 1996: 364). Located near the permanent produce market, the Bedouin Market (suq) takes place each Thursday, and is
generally regarded as the most colourful in Israel. Indeed, tourism marketers claim that ‘an unforgettable experience is guaranteed’ at this ‘typical and traditional market’, which has survived ‘for hundreds of years’ (http://www.beersheva.com/Bedouin.html). Historically, the suq only began to attract tourists after the State of Israel was created (Kressel and Ben-David 1995: 136). Previously, it served primarily as a meeting site in Be’er Sheva for Bedouin from throughout the Negev. The town had been developed by the Ottomans and later the British under the Mandate, as an administrative and commercial centre for the region (Kressel and Ben-David 1995: 122-3; Marx 1967: 34). Indeed, the suq existed before the town did, contributing considerably to its development beginning around the turn of the century (Kressel and Ben-David 1995: 119). During the years of imposed Military Administration in the Negev (1948–66), the market provided a weekly opportunity for Bedouin household heads to acquire permission to leave the seiq (see Marx 1967: 37–38), in order to buy and sell livestock, foodstuffs and other wares, and to catch up on the latest news. By the late 1990s, the market had been developed into a new physical form, comprised of three distinct sections, and had acquired new functions largely oriented to attracting international tourists. The original part of the suq, in which sheep and goats are sold (Figure 1), continues to congregate by the Eilat Highway in a barren dirt lot next to Wadi Be’er Sheva. However, the livestock suq has shrunk in size over the last thirty years, as the community shifted away from pastoralism to wage labour.

Figure 1: The Bedouin livestock suq in 1998 (photo by the author)
Bedouin men (and some women) still converge each week to trade in sheep and goats (Figure 2). The primary buyers at this suq are other Bedouin and Palestinians, although some Jewish Israelis may make their way down to this area around the Jewish holidays, in particular Ethiopian Israelis, who use ruminants for various holiday rituals. Rarely do international tourists visit the traditional Bedouin suq, as there is nothing for them to buy there. Also, access to this suq is limited, since it is across from the wadi, which during the winter and spring is filled with water and mud. Lastly, there are no signs directing visitors to this part of the suq. Instead, signs for the ‘Bedouin Market’ point to a more accessible ‘flea market’ on the highway side of the wadi. Historically, peddlers used to sell their wares alongside the Bedouin livestock area (Kressel and Ben-David 1995: 129). Now this market area, created in the early 1990s by Jewish Israelis, particularly Russian immigrants, specialises in inexpensive clothing and house wares (Figure 3). This flea market has no connection with the Bedouin livestock market, except that it too meets each Thursday in order to capitalise on the Bedouin Market’s reputation and name recognition.

A third section of the market is next to the flea market. Historically, this was an area for Bedouin to trade in small livestock (chickens, geese, pigeons), as well as work tools, cooking utensils, and fine wood for heating (Kressel and Ben-David 1995: 137). Today, this area is comprised of two market subsections, one within a semi-walled area of portable prefabricated stalls, and the other just outside the

Figure 2: Sheep and goats dominate the traditional Bedouin marketplace (photo by the author)
Figure 3: The Russian Israeli ‘flea market’ (photo by the author)

Figure 4: Palestinian Arab merchant selling Bedouin wares (photo by the author)
walls. The areas are similar, in so far as both offer Bedouin (and other) material culture. But they are dissimilar in terms of who the buyers are, who the sellers are, who the product makers are, and so on. The sellers in the semi-walled area are, almost without exception, Palestinian Arabs from the West Bank and Gaza (Figure 4). Many come from the Palestinian city of Hebron, or its environs. It is here that one finds a preponderance of stuffed toy sheep, candelabras for the Jewish holiday of Chanukah, and similar items bearing little if any direct connection to Bedouin society (Figure 5). Indeed, their wares include water pipes from Cairo, wall tapestries from Egypt, decorative ceramic goods and glass from Hebron, and olive wood camels from Bethlehem (also part of the Palestinian Authority). These goods are all factory-made, although the sellers are sure to point out to prospective buyers that handwork is part of their production (being painted by hand, for example). When asked why such goods are sold in what is supposedly a Negev Bedouin market, one merchant responded, ‘I have worked here thirty years. I know what tourists want, the things they like, and so these are the things that I sell’.

One can, however, also find some actual Negev Bedouin products here. These are primarily of two types; old jewellery, tools, household goods and the like, as well as new products which are either made from old products, or which are entirely new but use traditional Bedouin designs in order to make them look like originals. The Palestinian merchants buy the old items from the Negev Bedouin
who no longer want or need them, and who can make a little money from their sale. States one Palestinian merchant: ‘Since they settled, this [material culture] is all from the past. They live in modern houses. They don’t need this stuff anymore’. And yet, they are not willing to part with everything, he says. ‘No, they don’t sell their good things, jewellery [for example]. The things that are still important to them, they keep’.

In other instances, the maker may sometimes have a relationship with the seller. One Palestinian merchant buys old used Bedouin dresses, cuts them up, and uses the stitched panels to make small purses and decorative mirrors. In another case, a merchant paid Negev Bedouin women to work for him. ‘I gave four or five Bedouin women a little [seed] money to buy cloth and thread. They stitch old patterns on cloth for me, and then we make these mirrors. I pay them 25 New Israeli Shekels [NIS; about US$6.00] for each one; then I charge 40 NIS [about US$10.00]’. This pricing pattern appears to be consistent throughout this part of the market. In general, the merchants set prices by asking for slightly less than double the original price that they paid the factory or other maker for the product. One merchant, for example, sells the traditional Bedouin dumbak drum, which he buys from a Hebron factory for 60 NIS (US$15.00) each. He adds another 10 NIS (US$2.50) for transportation and other costs, thus reaching a total of 70 NIS (US$17.50). He then charges 100 NIS per drum (US$25.00), but with some haggling, will settle for 80 NIS (US$20.00). Of course neither he, nor anyone else in the market, will accept less than the original price paid for any given product.

Not only are the merchants in this part of the market almost all Palestinian, but they are almost, without exception, men and boys (i.e., their sons). These merchants estimate that a little over half of their customers are international tourists (identified primarily by language); perhaps 40 percent are Israeli Jews. In the area outside the semi-walled area, conversely, the buyers tend to be Negev Bedouin women, with far fewer international tourists or Israeli Jews. The merchants here are not Negev Bedouin but are almost all Palestinians, most from the Gaza Strip. Their goods, displayed on plastic tarps on the ground under large umbrellas to provide shade, include stitching yarn and thread, cloth, and a variety of traditional Western-style clothing. One item found here which has particular tourist appeal is the colourfully embroidered black Bedouin dress, sold by virtually every merchant. Significantly, these are all factory made and, without exception, have been imported to Israel from Jordan.

Another item, sold solely for tourist consumption, is the traditional Negev Bedouin veil (burqa). Historically this veil, covered with coins, was worn throughout the Negev, but has long since fallen into disuse. And yet, like the rest of the products on the market, even the Bedouin burqas sold in the market are not what they seem to be. The following example reveals this well:

Hajja [not her real name], lays out various jewellery, clothing and other goods for sale at the market each week, among these the Bedouin burqa.
Hajja, who comes from Gaza, sells three types of *burqas*, which she buys from Bedouin women in El-Arish [Sinai, Egypt]. For the first type, once actually worn but now old, weathered, but in reasonably good shape, she seeks 200 NIS (US$50.00). For the second type, newly made, never used, but with the traditional style, she seeks 150 NIS (US$37.00). As for the third type, an original, real *burqa* which has been repaired and restyled, (‘because that’s what the tourists like’, she says), she seeks 300 NIS (US$75.00). When asked about the different types, she explained that ‘Of course I know the difference between the old and the new, the real and the fake, but the tourists don’t know which are real, and which aren’t’.

In conclusion, while these two subsections of the market are at the centre of the commoditisation of Bedouin material culture, it is material culture which, more often than not, is not Negev Bedouin at all. Indeed, it may be argued that the sale of items which (a) are no longer used by the Bedouin (that is, they are obsolete) or (b) never were used by the Bedouin, together create a muddled image of who and what the Bedouin once were, or are today. Further, the nature of the items sold is often based, it appears, on Western expectations and attitudes, only further confirming Western views. And yet, tour guides and marketers orient their information to capitalise on these dreams and expectations. This point is perhaps best made based not on the items that are actually sold in the Bedouin Market but (also in one especially symbolic case), on what is not sold there and has not been for some years: the ubiquitous Bedouin camel. One web-page, for example, advertises the Bedouin Market as:

> ...a characteristic and colourful meeting place for Bedouins and merchants. WHILE YOU CAN STILL BUY A SHEEP OR CAMEL (!), original Bedouin handicrafts such as copperware, camel bags, embroideries, and JEWELRY HAVE BECOME INCREASINGLY RARE IN FAVOUR OF CHEAP CLOTHES, BAUBLES AND HOUSEHOLD WARES. (http://www.INFOTOUR.co.il/cgi?9800; emphasis in the original).

Significantly, and contrary to this description and others like it (see also Melrod 1995: 304; Insight Guide 2000: 313), sales of live camels (as opposed to the stuffed toy variety) do not take place anywhere in the market; according to veteran merchants, camel sales ceased in the early 1970s as use of the animal declined throughout the Negev. Why then make such claims?²

One possible interpretation is that the Bedouin camel is, at its core, a symbol of the wildness, freedom and ‘otherness’ that the Bedouin themselves symbolise. Like the breaking of the untamed mustang of America’s Wild West, the commoditisation of the camel may metaphorically represent the Western desire to own and thereby control and tame something that appears ‘untameable’. Thus, some tourism vendors may assume that the idea of camel sales will add additional appeal to the market – even though, ironically, such sales do not occur there. To be sure, the Bedouin Market today continues to serve significant social and economic
functions for the Bedouin community, just as it has since it was first institutionalised in 1896. In theory, it also offers a venue through which Western tourists can interact directly with community members, presenting great potential for the exchange of culture and values between the two groups.

And yet the messages being communicated (by the sales of certain material items, for example) appear to be unclear and inaccurate, clouded largely by Western expectations of what is ‘Bedouin’, as well as a Bedouin willingness to feed those expectations. Together, both potentially serve to undermine mutual understanding while perpetuating misinformation between hosts and guests.

**Bedouin Culture on the Museum Shelf: the Joe Alon Centre**

With the exception of the Bedouin Market, the most notable site devoted to the Negev Bedouin, mentioned in nearly every major English-language tour guide, is the Joe Alon Centre’s Museum of Bedouin Culture (Figure 6). The museum is located on Kibbutz Lahav, a Jewish-Israeli communal farm. Tourists are encouraged to visit the site, despite its off-the-beaten-track location, for ‘an authentic look at the lifestyle of Israel’s nomadic people’ (Cabasin 1997: 301).

![Figure 6: Entrance to the Joe Alon Centre, Kibbutz Lahav (photo by the author)](image-url)
And yet, the authenticity of the Bedouin images, both in terms of what is presented and by whom, is questionable. The Centre memorialises Yosef (Joe) Alon, a founder of the Israeli Air Force, a renowned pilot and diplomat. The originator of the Centre was Uzi Halamish who, with the support of the B’nai Shimon Regional Council, the Jewish National Fund, and private Jewish donors, established the Centre in 1980 and the museum in 1985. The building’s architect, exhibit designer and primary curator are all Jewish Israelis (http://www.lahavnet.co.il/joalon). The museum does employ three Bedouin men as full-time guides. All are members of the Tiaha tribe, upon whose land Kibbutz Lahav – and the museum itself – are now built.

The absence of Bedouin in the executive staff of the museum may help explain the perspectives that run throughout the exhibit. It is apparent that there is an implicit presumption that Bedouin material culture and activities represented are no longer viable or extant today, but serve as “artefacts” from a culture that once was. As the museum web-page explains:

The Bedouin tribes... have undergone radical changes in recent years. As a result, many traditional Bedouin ways are disappearing, creating the urgent need to collect, preserve and document this unique culture before it vanishes. [The displays] in the museum [are] a rich collection of Bedouin artefacts, which recapture an almost extinct way of life. (http://www.lahavnet.co.il/joalon; emphasis added).

Figure 7: ‘Bedouin Male as Host’, display in the Museum of Bedouin Culture, Joe Alon Centre, Kibbutz Lahav (photo by the author)
Further, the ‘artefacts’ presented tend to emphasise Western exotic notions of Bedouin: the Bedouin male as hospitable, but with a dangerous side to him, the woman guarded and veiled yet beguiling. Displayed are the Bedouin tent (gender-divided with the male as ‘host’ [Figure 7] and the female ‘in a family context’), men’s gear (primarily weaponry), and women’s possessions (primarily jewellery). Another display features livestock, especially the camel, including saddles, equipment, and an ‘exact replica of a fully decorated wedding camel’.

There are two other parts to the Centre which present a curious context for educating outsiders about Bedouin society. The first is a wing called the Droma Museum, which displays models of caves used in the Negev throughout history. Cave use is traced, beginning with the Chalcolithic period (6,000 years ago), noting in particular their use by Jews in the Bar Kochba period (1,850 years ago) and again in the Byzantine period (1,500 years ago). This is followed by the presentation of ‘The Fallahin’s Cave’, described as ‘an authentic dwelling cave in use until the [Israeli] War of Independence (1948)’ by local Arab peasants. The second part of the Centre, adjacent to the museum, is a Jewish National Fund (J.N.F.) forest. The forest includes a permanent exhibit concerning Jewish Israeli land development and water resource management which has been carried out in a formerly Bedouin area.

While the meaning of the choice of exhibits at the Joe Alon Centre is subject to interpretation, the Jewish Israeli curators’ decision to wedge the Bedouin display between the Droma Museum and the J.N.F. forest appears to imply that: (a) the Negev has long been occupied, with a Jewish presence well preceding an Arab one; (b) the peoples of the Negev have evolved throughout history, with the Bedouin only the latest population to join its predecessors as they become one with the historical past; and (c) the Jewish presence in the region is the final evolutionary stage, a presence which long preceded the Bedouin, and which has now returned to reclaim and restore the land. Thus, it is possible to say that the Joe Alon Centre Museum is not a Bedouin museum, but a Jewish museum, which uses the attraction to things Bedouin to make a political point. While this contention is admittedly speculative, at least one Jewish website confirms this theory. For there, listed under ‘Jewish Culture’ and below the subheading ‘Jewish Museums and Exhibits’, is the Joe Alon Centre’s ‘Bedouin’ Museum.

Finally, it is significant to note that another museum, the Bedouins’ Heritage Centre (Figure 8), opened in the early 1990s in Rahat, the largest Bedouin town. Like the Joe Alon, the Centre’s highlights included ‘traditional and authentic’ food preparation, live demonstrations of handicraft production, as well as horse and camel rides. What differentiated it from the Joe Alon Centre was that it was created by Bedouin about Bedouin, and that it was located in a Bedouin town.
Yet the Bedouins’ Heritage Centre failed, closing in 1997. In part, this may be attributed to the fact that it was far less publicised than its counterpart at Kibbutz Lahav (Cabasin 1997: 305, is an exception). Moreover, outsider exposure to the resettlement sites is rarely encouraged; they are essentially off-limits to tourists. While one English-language tour guide does mention one town, Tel Sheva, in passing (Melrod 1995: 305), it is suggested that there is little to see or do there. Lastly, access to the towns by outsiders, even to the city of Rahat with a population of over 30,000, is problematic, as the towns are located well off the main highways. Direct access by public transportation to the towns also is difficult and in some cases, nonexistent.

The Commoditisation of Bedouin Values: Hospitality at a Price

For tourists who prefer a different Bedouin experience, a number of tours by 4x4 vehicle (Figure 9), donkey or mountain bike are becoming increasingly popular in the Negev. These experiences typically are promoted by tour vendors using romantic, ‘Lawrence of Arabia’-type images. Generally, group tours that may include mountain climbing, hiking (Figure 10) are also likely to include camel trekking, eating in a tent and sleeping under the stars. As a result, the local cultural
Figure 9: Equipped 4x4 vehicle used by the Ramon Desert Tours Company of Mitzpe Ramon, at the Be’er Sheva Hilton (photo by the author)

Figure 10: Tour group at Mamshit Nabataean ruins, near Dimona (photo by the author)
sites in the region have set up a variety of services in order to address the large tour groups’ interests and needs.

The Joe Alon Centre itself, for example, offers tour groups a choice of Bedouin hafla’a meals (traditional Bedouin feasts, usually associated with Muslim holidays) which are either dairy or meat-based (http://www.INFOTOUR.co.il/cgi?5848+70). Other providers offer more complete packaged experiences, of which the meal is only a small part:

It is possible… to join a group tour for a visit to a Bedouin encampment and a Bedouin-style dinner… The cost will be anywhere from $12 for the ‘short visit’, which consists of a chat with the sheik over coffee or tea, camel ride, and Bedouin music, to about $25 or $30 for the full ‘sunset visit’ with Bedouin dinner, which includes the above as well as a typical rice, mutton and fruit meal, eaten with the fingers or in pita. (Ullian 1996: 377)

An example of a tour group operator which specialises in this area is the Be’erotayim Ecotourism Company (www.beerotayim.co.il), which offers a variety of ‘adventure tours’ throughout the Negev Highlands, all featuring a Bedouin hospitality element:

[One can choose] shepherd style meals or special desert feasts, according to the famous desert hospitality tradition. You may choose from several meal courses, each one handles its own genuine desert style [sic]. Feel the touch of the Bedouin life style and enjoy the spicy ‘Masbacha’ – meat and rice dish and rich in taste salads with fresh Bedouin pita bread. In the case you prefer gourmet style, choose cheese and wine option, just pour you a glass of beautiful wine of the Holy Land and which is a nice addition to the delightful taste of the special desert style cheeses. For those of you who prefer the uniformity of the high standard Western style kitchen, there is such an option available (All the offered meals fully comply with the Kosher [Jewish dietary] requirements) (www.beerotayim.co.il; emphasis in the original).

In 1998, a three-day, four-night donkey tour following the routes of ‘our Biblical ancestors’ had a base price of US$250 per person; a seven-day, six-night desert excursion by 4x4 vehicle was US$820 per person (Be’erotayim Ecotourism Company, personal communication, 14 July, 1998)

Additionally, a handful of Bedouin tourist sites have now developed which centre their offerings around two primary products: camel rides and Bedouin hospitality (especially in the form of food and drink). A good example is the Mamshit Camel Ranch, located just outside Dimona near the Nabataen ruins of Mamshit. The Ranch offers ‘Traditional Bedouin Hospitality’ (coffee preparation, tea, baklawa, and a lecture on Bedouin life) at US$7.00 per person, the same plus a meat dinner at US$19.00 per person, and ‘The Bedouin Experience at the Camel Ranch’, including camel ride, an overnight stay and meals at US$41.00 per person (Mamshit Camel Ranch, 2000). The Ranch, owned and operated by four Jewish Israelis, was created in 1986. It employs eight Bedouin guides, who are from the
Al-Zullam tribe that resides in the Dimona region. These workers estimate that slightly over half of those coming to the Ranch are in fact Jewish Israelis, with the rest coming from the U.S. and Western Europe.

*Sfinat Hamidbar* (Hebrew for ‘Ship of the Desert’), is located off the Be’er Sheva – Mitzpe Ramon Highway about 30 kilometres south of Be’er Sheva. Unlike the Camel Ranch, the site is created, owned and operated by Bedouin – in this case, members of the El-Azazme tribe who live in the area. Atiah al-Shlibi and his brother Farhan opened the site in 1992. They employ six to eight Bedouin in the summer (their sons and others), and twelve in the winter, when Israeli Jewish schoolchildren are the main visitors. Atiah estimates that, like the Ranch, 30–40 percent of the visitors are from outside Israel, while about 60 percent are Jewish Israelis. Visits to the site are arranged and coordinated by the Israeli Ministry of Tourism (A. Al-Shlibi, Co-Owner, Sfinat Hamidbar, personal communication, 7 July, 2000).

Just as the commoditisation of material culture at the Bedouin Market serves to blur and obscure Bedouin values and traditions, the commoditisation of the various elements of Bedouin hospitality (food, drink, a sleeping space, music, ‘chat’/ storytelling) distorts a primary element of traditional Bedouin society, namely its emphasis upon welcoming the stranger in one’s midst, without expectation of payment (see el-Aref 1944: 132–42, 193; Marx 1967: 178). For, while the tourism industry is, of course, heavily dependent upon the buying and selling of hospitality (that is, where the primary product consumed by the tourist in a restaurant or hotel is service), this is essentially in direct contradiction to the Bedouin value placed on the offering of food, drink and a place to sleep. Moreover, the fact that every interaction with a Bedouin host in such settings has a price may make it difficult for the tourist to know what parts of a host’s demeanour or presentation are ‘real’, and which are merely being staged or enhanced for the tourist’s benefit and gratification.

**Discussion**

The reconstruction of native traditions and culture for tourist consumption is not limited to the Negev case. Throughout Asia, Africa, Latin America, and even North America (see for example Smith 1989) native peoples are succumbing to global economic, cultural and social forces which push them into the heritage tourism business. Within the Middle East itself, other Bedouin too are experiencing similar pressures. In Jordan, for example, the commercialisation of Bedouin images is utilised regularly for outsider appeal, presenting Bedouin society (and, indirectly, Jordanian history) as an exotic, romantic attraction for Western tourists (Layne 1996: 101–3).

One Bedouin community in Jordan, the Bidul of Petra, has undergone a series of changes with the development of the area as a tourist destination (Shoup 1985:
Not only were the Bidul resettled in order to accommodate rapid development in the tourist sector, but tourism has impacted a variety of other elements of their culture as well, including the nature of traditional handicraft production, and even the Bidul dialect. Notes Shoup (1985: 287)

The change in daily speech has affected the male population the most. Men come into contact with non-locals more often than women and must find a common ground for communication. Men still speak the local dialect with each other and with the women of their own families, but show signs of other influences when speaking to others.

In the Sinai Desert too, Bedouin society began to change considerably following Israeli efforts to open the area in the 1970s for tourism purposes during its military occupation. Further perpetuated by the Egyptian government, following the return of the peninsula under the Camp David Accords (Meyer 1996), many Bedouin have become active participants in the tourism industry. As Lavie (1990: 68) explains:

When the Bedouin discovered that the tourists would pay them for food, drinks, and articles of clothing they quickly grasped that a profit could be made from them. [They] started providing Bedouin-style hospitality for money. They built and rented out fake Bedouin villages they established.

Clearly then, it is not only the traditions and culture of the Negev Bedouin community which are being converted into a tourist attraction in the Middle East. And yet, despite the similarities, the Negev Bedouin still stand alone as members of a disempowered minority group (both ethnically and religiously) within Israel, with a unique history of land expropriation and European-style colonisation unseen in any other state in the Arab world.

Yet it would be a mistake to present the tourism situation in the Negev today as one of total Bedouin victimisation. The Bedouin have long been able to protect their interests, despite their own weakness vis-à-vis the state. Despite the challenges to the community noted above, the Bedouin to this day have striven to keep tourism in the ‘front’ regions of their community (that is, the public view), while protecting the ‘back’ regions (the private sphere; see Boissevian 1996) from tourism’s influences. In this manner, they seek to take advantage of what tourism has to offer economically, while doing the best they can to keep the tourist’s gaze out of their real lives. In other words, they seek to make the best of a situation which, from the outset, was not of their own making. For Bedouin like the al-Shlibis and others interviewed for this chapter, tourism has indeed replaced the livelihood once made through pastoral nomadism.

Thus I contend that it is difficult, if not impossible, to separate Negev Bedouin tourism development, including the Noble Desert Savage imagery it utilises, from the neocolonial context within which the construct is perpetuated. That said, it may be argued that the commoditisation of Negev Bedouin traditions and culture for Western tourist consumption is but part of a larger effort on the part of the
dominant Israeli society to foster the de-Bedouinisation of the community as a whole.

To be sure, the Israeli Jewish agenda of settling the land and controlling its borderlands, when combined with the aim of developing its growing capitalist economy, are central to the construction of Bedouin society as a tourist attraction. When viewed within the context of neocolonialism, this process may be seen similarly as the final piece of a programme of resettlement and proletarianisation of the Bedouin which has been taking place in the Negev now for over five decades.

Notes

1 The author wishes to thank Lois Beck, Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri, and Shaul Krakover, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Be’er Sheva, for their very helpful comments and advice on an earlier draft of this paper.

2 Western fascination with the camel may be traced to the mid-nineteenth century (Bulliet 1990: 239). Several efforts to breed and use the animal domestically were carried out throughout the West, all with little success. This inability to control the camel, an animal utilised quite effectively against the Europeans by nomadic enemies in the Arab world during the colonial period (Bulliet 1990: 257), was an ongoing source of frustration.

3 Such meals, separating meat from dairy, are in observance of Jewish dietary laws.

References


The Negev Bedouin as a Tourist Attraction


**Websites**

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**Résumé**

*L'image, c'est tout: développement du Bédouin du Néguev comme attraction touristique*

Depuis la fin des années 80s, l'industrie du tourisme dans le désert du Néguev s'est développée d'une façon exponentielle. Bien que l'austère topographie ainsi que la flore et la faune exotiques de la région soient l'attraction principale pour les visiteurs, la participation aux activités relatives à la communauté indigène de la
The Negev Bedouin as a Tourist Attraction

région, les Bédouins du Néguev, est devenue une partie intégrale de l'expérience touristique du Néguev.

Cet article traite la question de la transformation de la culture et de la tradition bédouines en «commodités imagées», destinées à être consommées par touristes internationaux. L'auteur les estime que la «commodification» se fait à travers ce qu'il appelle «Disneyfication», un processus qui sert à construire et à perpétuer le mythe du bédouin comme «sauvage noble du désert». L'auteur démontre aussi comment, à travers un tel discours, le développement du tourisme aide l'état d'Israël à contrôler cette communauté musulmane arabe, tout en changeant ses structures socio-économiques et ses relations globales avec le pays qui constitue aujourd'hui l'Etat d'Israël.

Resumen

La imagen es todo: El desarrollo de los beduinos del Negev como atracción para turistas

Desde fines de los años ochenta creció de manera exponencial la industria de turismo en el desierto israelí del Negev. La topografía austera y la flora y fauna exótica son los mayores atractivos para los turistas. Pero también cobró importancia la participación de los turistas en actividades vinculadas con los beduinos, que son las comunidades nativas del Negev. El artículo analiza la conversión de elementos de la cultura beduina y de sus tradiciones en mercancías, "commodities", imaginadas para el consumo internacional de turistas. La "commoditization" se logra apartir de una "Disneyfición", un proceso que sirve para construir y perpetuar el mito del beduino como el "noble salvaje del desierto". A través de este discurso el desarrollo del turismo altera las estructuras socio-económicas de los beduinos y sus relaciones con la tierra que ahora constituye el Estado de Israel. En este sentido, el desarrollo del turismo ayuda al Estado de Israel a controlar y contener a esta comunidad árabe islámica.

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