

THE HABITUS OF FIELDWORK: THE SELF AS THE NEW OTHER

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Abstract

The present study is an extensive 22-months field research in Wadi Rum Desert, Jordan. The case of Bedouin Zalabieh adds another voice to this diverse anthropological research. Fieldwork is a complicated and challenging process where the anthropologist experiences a rite of passage through interaction with his/her informants. He/she is transformed from a subject who conducts fieldwork to an object of his/her own self striving for redefinition. Incorporating the habitus of the “others,” he/she becomes an “other.” At the end of the fieldwork, he/she is confronted with multiple “others”. With reference to Bedouin Customary Law, through a “thick description” I try to focus on the habitus of my informants as something that cannot be completely understood by the anthropologist, just because it belongs to a preconscious state. A dialog between cultures, rites, concepts, and behaviors is essential for the redefinition of the self during the research as well as thereafter. Through the distinctive habitus of people, we coexist and share our lives while unconsciously constructing new selves. While we study others, we become objects to be studied; this entails an interactive study on each other. In addition, focusing on the conflict between spouses, I emphasize the new forms of practices and actions created by the interaction and coexistence of the anthropologist and his/her informants. The silent conflict between spouses undermines men’s supposed power over women. Exploiting my presence, the spouses challenged the existing cultural assumption as well as my femininity. Since everything is always a mutual definition and redefinition from a deontological point of view, instead of the term “study” (a community) I prefer the term “mediate” that can vacillate between the science of anthropology and the informants.

Keywords: Fieldwork, Bedouins, self, habitus, gender, women, femininity

MAIN TEXT

Fieldwork based on participant observation is a complicated, painful, and challenging process. Beyond the creation of an ethnographic text for the “other,” it’s a rite of passage of the anthropologist to another “self.” I leave aside the academic, ideological, and economic conditions under which the ethnographic texts are produced, focusing on the “self” and the interactive process of the anthropologist (with respect to the Other). To the question of whether my research benefits the community for which it has been conducted, I would answer by saying “I don’t know,” since I have not defined the concept of benefit. Indeed, this is the moral aspect of field research that still raises questions and concerns.

While reading an interview of astrophysicist Manos Danezis, I was impressed by the following statement: “Research is a selfish endeavor. The researcher merely tries to solve his own problems and if by doing so he helps humanity, all the better.” My own field research assignments have been conducted within a period of 22 months in the Jordanian desert of Wadi Rum.

Born in Turkey, I grew up experiencing and embodying two different cultures, with their respective historical and social settings: two identities (according to a state document that defines the citizen of Turkey), Greek minority and Turkish, two passports, two languages, and cultural influences that, by interacting and completing each other, informed my character, my identity, my and self awareness. “Anthropology” in my case started much earlier than the present fieldwork, within an initial reflective search of the “self”; a

continuous self-definition, redefinition, and a continuous effort to understand the embedded and embodied cultural beliefs. As a result of cohabitation with Bedouins, Turkey-Greece-Jordan became the cultural triptych within which to create a new “self” under a new cultural condition. As Tedlock (1991:78) states, the fieldwork process shifted from participant observation to observation of the participants, that is, a trip out of the “collective self” and again a return “within it” (Fernandez, 1980),

Initially, I focus on Bourdieu’s habitus, the socialized norms or tendencies that guide behavior and thinking, the in which way society becomes deposited in persons in the form of lasting dispositions or trained capacities and structured propensities to think, feel, and act in determinant ways, which then guide these persons (Wacquant 2005: 316, cited in Navarro 2006: 16). Habitus is neither a result of free will nor determined by structures, but it is created by an interplay between the two over time: dispositions that are both shaped by past events and structures and which shape current practices and structures, and more importantly condition our very perceptions of the same (Bourdieu 1984: 170). In this sense, habitus is created and reproduced unconsciously, “without any deliberate pursuit of coherence... without any conscious concentration” (ibid: 170). In that sense, when one enters the field, he/she enters the habitus of the “Other.” To what extent is it feasible to obtain a complete understanding of the data gathered by the anthropologist, in order to produce a textual interpretation for the “Other,” since his/her habitus is pre-conscious? In addition, to what extent can informants in the field interpret their own habitus without making the “trip out of the collective self and again return within it”?

The Arabic Customary Law or Bedouin Law (Al urf-wa-l-ada) is a good nodal point from which one can address the above questions.

A field research always holds surprises, scientific uncertainties about the anthropologist, the inability to understand situations, perceptions, attitudes, individual emotions or the emotions of the community with whom he/she shares a part of his/her life. During the writing of this dissertation, as often as I went over the information I had collected from the field, I realized that the phrase “I study them” did not fit me; it sounded very scientifically “authoritarian” and consciously “hegemonic”. As much as I had difficulty in understanding things, the concept of “study” did not express my thoughts. Thus, I began to think that the term “mediation” was more appropriate. I mediated between the science of anthropology and the people of the Bedouin community of Zalabieh, so that their “discourse”, perceptions, and beliefs took a structured form in this research.

I attempted to “understand” the Arabic (Bedouin) customary law, not in the sense of a code of rules and laws but in the semblance of a cultural practice that permeates people’s consciences and feelings and constructs codes of conduct, ways of communication and the display of hatred, and the change of posture and disposal immediately after application. I witnessed a few but substantial incidents during my stay in the field. Moreover, in each of my questions, both during the 22-month period in the desert and every time I returned, I got the same answer: “Still asking, how long have you been with us, did not you still understand?” I tried to persuade them not to apply customary law, while they repeatedly tried to explain its necessity and usefulness to me.

The Bedouin customary law (Hag Arab), which constitutes an oral tradition, constitutes a system of rules that were mandated in the deserts of the Middle East to ensure the protection of its people and, likewise, its nomadic community. The need for its creation arose due to the failure of another form of power, be it state or tribal, to provide protection in the desert. While non-institutional and extensive, this complex matrix of laws has equipped Bedouins with the essential means to maintain law and orderliness in relation to their cultural beliefs in the desert. In this way, all the nomads have survived for thousands of years in inhospitable, harsh deserts. Even in modern times, in some Middle East regions the Arab customary law has been applied to solve cases between individuals belonging to these tribes, because they would not want to resort to either state laws or to the Islamic religious law, the Shari’a (Bailey, 2009). In brief, the roots of the Arab Common Law (Bedouin law) are to be found in the deserts, where the safety and the value of family and the tribes and the rights of these nomads had to be secured by an ad hoc regulation. This Bedouin law perfectly matched the life conditions of the desert that have remained unchanged over time, since the surviving conditions in the desert, the relations between the various tribes, and the behavior of the people of the desert has undergone a very slow transformation, without the need for a different kind of regulation.

The main area where this desert code emerged and was applied is the Arabian Peninsula, which is now called the Middle East and includes all the surrounding countries. It should be noted that customary law is not related to religion, although almost all Bedouins have embraced Islam for centuries. Their laws are completely intertwined with the culture of the desert, where they saw the light (Kennett, 2011 • Bailey, 2009 • Stewart, 1987). The maintenance of law and order in the desert as well as values such as honor, religious

faith, solidarity among and unity of races, violence, etc., all come under the regulations of the Customary Law of the Bedouins. This law legitimizes the exercise of personal violence within the tribe or the community or even between tribes, provided it does not endanger the cohesion between the larger group.

Bedouin Customary Law (like other comparable laws, e.g. Albania; see Mentor, 2008) is unrecorded and orally transmitted by elders and evaluated by connoisseurs as sheikhs, Bedouin judges (Kadi), youth leaders or those who impart it to the younger generation in through rhyming proverbs or poems. This traditional verse form makes it easy to memorize the law and to preserve all these codes for centuries (Al Abadi, 1988 • Bailey, 2009: 71, 79, 109, 140, 266). All the Bedouin tribes of the Middle East carry a past rich in conflicts and inter-tribal upheavals and have resorted to resolving differences by practicing the edicts of customary law.

Because Bedouin law is transmitted orally and communities are subjected to constant change and evolution as well as adaption to the new global mindset, it is only natural that such oral traditions lose ground and sometimes get lost in the mists of time. In this continuous transformation of the Bedouin communities, one sees that the same incidents are not repeated for a long period of time, and hence the codes for solving them are buried in the depths of oblivion. This is why young people gradually start ignoring them, which explains why the oral tradition has been slowly disappearing. Moreover, precisely because there are no written laws for each separate incident, sometimes the way of resolving an incident or the punishment to be imposed for the resolution of a dispute has to do with self-improvised decisions made by a judge, Sheikh, Muhtar, or Kabir¹. Hence, there are small differences and slight variations in the decisions, depending on the area and the degree of importance of an issue. For severe cases, the general corpus of the Arab Customary code remains the same. Nevertheless, it has been observed that younger generations ignore the codes and, in case they need to settle a difference, they resort to knowledgeable people living outside their community/tribe in order to compare similar incidents and provide corresponding solutions. It is also very likely that an incident of concern might transpire for the first time. In this case, the community cannot find a solution because it is not possible to retrieve information from memory. During my stay in the field, my informants related to me an incident that happened in Sinai, where a woman killed her husband, and another case of a woman who took revenge on a Sheikh. According to my informants, the Bedouins of Sinai were unable to find an appropriate code for a penalty and the Bedouins of Wadi Rum, with whom I shared all this information, also tried to retrieve (mostly) scattered pieces of unrelated incidents relating to their traditional customary law, in order to compose and construct a new code, indeed a very complicated task. The Arab customary law as a legal system that appeared in the vast deserts of the Middle East, long before the creation of the modern nation-state, gives us basic information on how the people who practice it conceive law and justice, how common law replaces the courts and the policing of the modern state by its practices (even today), how it allows individual violence to exercise justice but simultaneously prohibits individual violence that may harm a given community.

This does not mean that violence is a basic response to all cases. There are frequent peaceful approaches for various cases; violence, or “ad-dam,” meaning “blood” or, in other words, “revenge” (blood revenge), is applied in specific cases, particularly murders or deaths due to quarrels or even negligence.

In modern societies, laws define the conduct of members and punish the contenders. They presuppose the existence of a state and its institutional power-exercising organ, which has the authority to impose penalties.

On the contrary, Bedouin tribes are characterized² by the absence of a central authority for sentencing. The difference between the modern state and the tribes of Bedouins, with regard to the legal-penal code, lies in its very conceptualization. Talking about their common law, Bedouins speak about “hag” (plural Hugug), i.e., justice³. For the Bedouin, Hag means, first of all, the right to the basic (inviolable) and supreme goods of human existence: property, honor, and life. The assumption that these rights are inviolable by other people ensures absolute justice for the Bedouins; the violation of these values is indeed considered an act of injustice. Second, it requires the permission of a community or tribe to remediate the violation of a right and for a victim to influence and determine the act of reparation. These two aspects constitute the “law” as a system with individual laws that are respectively defined as “Hag-law”, according to which each Bedouin

¹Hierarchy in Bedouins.

²In the countries where the use of customary law is still allowed, even though the Bedouins are integrated in the Modern state, the process of decisions-taking and solution-giving remains traditional, as it has been in the desert for many years. In times where nomad tribes didn't have a central power, they arbitrated the various common cases between them. These were then transmitted orally to the future generations.

³ Etymologically, the word “Hag” in Arab means “right” and “Hukuk” as a plural means legislation. The same term, Hukuk, is used by the Turks to refer to legislation.

tribe-community authorizes its members to impose justice. During my stay in Wadi Rum, I often heard people say “Hada hag”—“this is my right.” They would always talk about the rights that were violated by others and their “right to restore justice” by themselves.

The right to impose a penalty is not mandatory but only considered when a victim or someone who has suffered injustice exercises his/her right and resorts to practices to rehabilitate/punish a person’s offensive behavior. What is important for the Bedouins, as per the common law, is that punishments that may dishonor the community-tribe are not allowed.

The concept of justice for the tribes that still apply the common law has to do with the obsession about security and one’s protection against someone who attempts to eschew or violates basic rights. This concept involves the construction of a self that, in an effort to prevent delinquent behavior, projects the image of a powerful identity that has the authority to perform remediation practices. Negligence or unwillingness to apply the customary law is perceived by the other members as weakness or acts of cowardice. In essence, it seems that the exercise of customary law basically restores reputation, the image of a strong person who recovers his/her original status as a member of the tribe. In many cases, along with various punishments fines are imposed in a manner similar to contemporary civil courts.

Accordingly, a “thick description” (Geertz 1973) of the Bedouin Customary Law is possible. However, to what extent is a “thick description of the habitus of the Other” possible? I firmly believe that a lot of things remain incomprehensible to anthropologists precisely because they “belong” to the Other’s pre-conscious level. In post-fieldwork fieldwork, as per Cohen (1992), where the anthropologist mentally carries the field with him/her long after he/she has left physically, I would add a post-fieldwork to the “self” itself as an “Other.” Referring to the statements of Ottenberg (1990), “the field experience does not stop, things that I once read in my fieldnotes in one way, I now read in another” and Hastrup’s (1992) “the past is not past in anthropology, it is precisely this process of rereading that I refer to by the phrase post-fieldwork fieldwork” I would add the deep “rereading of the self who has acquired a new self through a new habitus. The habitus from a process where you are faced with that you can not comprehend” (Marinaki, 2014).

The following incident is indicative of how Bedouins regulate their lives outside the interventions of the modern state and how their own worldview remains interweaved with their deep incomprehensible habitus.

MA had a serious quarrel with B. MA was 36 years old, married with two children. We spent a lot of time together in the desert and he was one of the best men in the village: calm, kind, and honest, with stable cultural values. B was “still” 15 years old, but old enough to be involved in such a brawl⁴. During their quarrel, B threw a stone towards MA, which hurt him on the head. He was immediately evacuated to hospital, but in two days he died of cerebral hemorrhage. Surely the intention of B was not to kill MA., evident by the way in which the incident had occurred, but the result was still the same. MA died and left behind his wife and children; this is where the story starts.

According to the law of the Bedouins, the whole family of the killer, not just the nuclear family but also the expanded one, was obliged to leave the village, leaving behind all their belongings. They did leave with their personal items, but any of their real-estate property in the village was sealed. The family asked for asylum in another tribe-family in a different area of Jordan and, often, even in another country. Thus, B moved to the center of Jordan, to another Bedouins family-tribe. B was arrested and imprisoned. According to Arabic law (Hag Arab), B should have been killed in the hands of his own family; otherwise, the victim’s family had the right to kill any man from the murder B’s family. All this seemed like a fairytale to me, similar to what I had read in “A Thousand and One Nights,” but it was reality in full dimension: MA’s father had asked B’s head in a bag. At first, I thought I did not adequately understand the expression or asked myself whether the expression was symbolic, but I realized that it was literally meant. The father and all the others related to the victim were literally asking for a beheading, the head in a bag. The whole affair looked like a film! I could not grasp their reasoning. “Let’s impose a heavy penalty or, in any event, let him be put to death in prison, what is it with the head?” I asked A, a cousin of MA. “But don’t you understand? It’s not the same. The law tells us that he has to be killed by the hands of his father, what is the point to enter prison and come out even after 25 years, or even what is the point to kill him in prison? This can’t be,” he replied. Of course, I could not understand this so easily. I was still judging and condemning according to my own pre-conceived notions. The concept of six months of immunity meant a deadline before which the act had to be performed. During this period, the relatives of the victim had no right to apply customary law. If, during the course of these six months, the father killed his son, all would be over—the family could return to the village and go on with their

⁴ I use the word “still,” using my own conceptual patterns formed by my own socio-cultural mindset, which extends the age of childhood (for conceptualizations on childhood, see Marinaki 2016).

lives. After the six months, immunity would be lifted and the relatives could take revenge anytime.

The six months had passed; the victim's father was adamant, insisting on the killer's head in a bag. Many tried to dissuade him, but all efforts were fruitless. All they had managed was to extend the immunity for another two years. During this time, the case came up to King Abdullah, who came to Wadi Rum to give a solution, to dissuade the father. However, he was adamant, and the Arab Unwritten Law showed its teeth against the law of the state, even above the King. All this while, I insisted on my own beliefs. Even now, the same questions comes to me again and again: what if the MA's father forgave? Would that be so hard? The boy naturally fading away in prison, begging his father to kill him to end the story? I tried again to persuade them, getting the same answers: "But you still don't understand? The children of MA have grown up now, they're almost men, they have grown up with this hate, imagine at some time, when the others will tell them, "This is the son of the murderer of your father" or "you still have not got your revenge", or "the murderer and his family are released" and so on, how will these children feel? Where is their manhood?" The story continued. MA's brother AA was married; the widow took her and her children under his protection and everyone was waiting. The deadline was extended and the asylum continued. Until when? One who doesn't know wonders; the answer is, up to five generations. In other words, someone's grandson or even great-grandson is justified in taking revenge for his grandfather or great-grandfather. Thus, vengeance extends even to the fifth generation. That is why, after five generations the family name is changed to delete the offenses and generally detach itself from the nightmare of the customary Bedouin law. This does not mean that young families renounce their origin or name. Simply, the fifth successor to the series changes the family name and the family continues to exist under the new name.

In the end, the story continued as they had said: two-and-a-half years later, when I visited the village again, I asked about the issue and found myself watching a film by a group of Zalabieh while we were sitting around the fire in the desert. "You see what we told you", said A, "15 days ago,, the eldest son of MA, he is now 16, took an automatic rifle M16, went to Maan (the region where the family of the murderer lived under the asylum of another tribe and decimated them. But because his brain had stopped working, he made a mistake. Instead of killing one of the murderer's family, he killed another three from the other tribe. And that it is not all, he also killed them from a shorter distance than....feet. and the world turned upside down." "What a mess this is!" I erupted. I thought that I had understood the vengeance, the vendetta, but I was confused once more. I asked for explanations. He went on relating the story: "Initially, he had to kill a person from the family, but that is not all. The execution has rules, you cannot come too near, the Hag Arab says that you must find yourself at a distance of a number of feet (literally counted by steps). He made a double mistake, he firstly came too near, and then he killed another three of the others." "And now what happens next?" I asked. "Now things are mixed up because the other now are obliged to take the blood of the three back." My brain was boiling in an effort to understand and I was emotionally jagged because, as events had unfolded here, there seemed to be no end to this situation. In the end, things got solved. The distance (in feet) was measured and converted into an exorbitant sum in return for the three lives that were unjustly lost. The estimation was 1 million JD for each, 3 million JD in total, which corresponded to 3 million euros. An inconceivable amount, which was of course impossible to pay by the Zalabieh, and the only thing left was to allow the return of the family of the murderer to the village and...all well that ends well. Indeed, life followed its usual course during my stay there for a month. "And what about the other, what became of them? What will happen with the millions"? I asked. "It's over," they answered me.

Rabinow (1977) says that local people must first make sense of their own culture and then find the right discourse to explain it to a foreign ethnographer, who would lack any lived experience in the community under study. This means that their interpretation and translation, which submits them to a process of self-objectification, of themselves, their lives, their culture in general. Rabinow regarded informants situated at the margins of society, or outsiders, as ideal cultural interpreters because they have the ability to view several worlds from across the social fences that set them apart. I wonder, how "native" is this "native" point of view? At the end, is an outsider or somebody at margins a "native" or is he/she an "other" who interprets like an anthropologist? The answers of informants of an ethnographer, following Rabinow (2007), is "double mediated"; this, in my own experience, highlights the entrance and permanence of the ethnographer as an "authority" in the respective field.

All these doubts led me to refrain from submitting my subjects to such an objectification of themselves. This, on one hand, highlights the plurality and the variety of field research theories and, on the other hand, marks the belief that everything is fluid in theory and practice during the fieldwork. I think that this theory derives from the scholars whom we study. From my point of view, ethnography, more than being an intercultural and intersubjective translation, is a dialog between cultures, rituals, practices, postures, genders etc. A dialog between my concepts and theirs, between their ways and the state's, between the desert and the outside, as

it were. There is always a “between,” always questions and answers. Thus, the Bedouin Customary Law is operational between Bedouin tribal people, paralleling and meanwhile going against the state’s laws, between their masculinity and the other’s outside. Since the “bodies” of these people are molded within and by the social and cultural context, we have a “systematic accumulation of a values’ load that is reflected in practice.” Thus, subjectivity is preserved through the practice of the active subject.

Though Bedouins, Zalabieh society enforces a strict division between men and women into different social domains. One would expect by virtue of being a woman, I would have easier access to the female community in the village. On the contrary, I had easier access to men, while women were always cautious with me. There are varied experiences and views on the same. Powdermaker (1967) says that female anthropologists seem to have easier access to both sexes than male anthropologists, while Gregory (1984) has argued the contrary and Golde (1986) has pointed that once a female anthropologist has been accepted into a given society, she is expected to conform to prevailing gender roles.

In my case, two different dimensions, the scientific and the gender, have undoubtedly informed the kind of information I obtained and, by extension, marked the ethnographic description of Bedouin society. The first dimension, the scientific one, was crowned with the title of “Doctor,” which was attributed to me by men who were proud of the fact that someone was writing a book about them. They were always keen on answering my questions and, more generally, discussing my doubts. My love and my sensibility for the desert, that I would clean for whole days from any kind of rubbish scattered all over the place for years, facilitated my contact with the men; many of them tried to keep the places of the “Doctor” or “Katia” (Katias places – makan Katia in Arabic) clean.

The gender dimension was, however, determinant and may have dictated the characteristics of field research. The fact that I was a “European” woman, alone in the midst of Bedouins, even led to sexual antagonism amongst men, a fact that would determine the type of informant depending on the circumstance (policeman-officer, Bedouin, Muchtar-Sheikh, man in the exotic desert and the type of information gathered (their conceptions on masculinity, the opinions of men about women etc.). My gender, on one hand, gave me the possibility to approach the world of women, providing a kind of comparative advantage versus a male anthropologist conducting the same type of research. On the other hand, the gender aspect, accompanied by moral decline of the European woman with “loose morals”, according to the local women’s conceptions, transformed me into someone who threatened their social order. This fact, no doubt, led to a series of problems that I would have to face by inventing new defense mechanisms. I tried, therefore, to take some steps with good intentions and got involved in a procedure of gift-offering (presents) as well as doing chores (house cleaning and childcare), which were very difficult. What was, however, important in the context of my anthropological attempt, was the fact that from the viewpoint of a “power of authority” (a woman, alone, free to live the life she chose for herself and who “invaded” “their” lives to write a book), imposed on women by another body of authority formed by men, I found myself in a position of subordination. The subordinated individuals, women in this specific case, had transformed their own subordination to power and my power into subordination in an attempt to negotiate their role. The ruling instance, that they felt as a threat and which had made them suspicious towards exchanging information, became an object of manipulation. As a result, I would temper and filter my spontaneity in relation to the context and the people I encountered. I quickly realized that in this way, and with my presence in general, I created for women conditions of resistance against the men and negotiated their position and role. This gradually increased the circle of my female informants who also wished to exercise their own power in their own way. This was, of course, a source of dilemmas: How much could of this I take and what limits could I put to their exploitation? More or less consciously, I let myself be carried away by the inventions⁵ (a term by Wagner, 1981, 1986) of the members of the community, who, during the process of mutual interactions, produced new gender practices⁶ (Bourdieu, 2007).

In the first three months of my stay in Wadi Rum, I was a host of Z in the house of his second wife F, who was evidently jealous when Z went to his first wife, L. With the first wife, he had five children and was

⁵ Wagner sustains that culture is an invention of the members of society and is organized by the notion or principle of “tropicality” that places culture within the symbols such as language, education and rituals. He stresses that communication with the “self” in order to understand the “other” is a dialectical process that defines not only the “self” but also the “other”. According to Wagner, the concept of culture is understood as a series of successive and simultaneously creative transformations of meaning. Accordingly, the symbol is a vector of multiple significations and meanings. Consequently, social reality is polysemic, flexible, and synthetic and conveys multiple significations and meanings. In the actual case of Bedouin women, I do not focus on the meaning, but on the transformation itself, as created by the process (Wagner, 1981, 1986).

⁶ Bourdieu, with the “theory of practice,” focuses and emphasizes on the active subjects who develop personal choices and devise strategies for action. This is how practice transforms while being transformed and metamorphoses civilizations (Bourdieu, 2007).

expecting the sixth. By F, he had two. Thus, Z imposed me as a guest and as a “doctor” in his house and he had granted me the lounge. This F certainly did not appreciate this but she could not react. She was taught at a school and during the teaching hours she left the two babies next door, at their grandmother’s (Z’s mother). F knew that I had to attend the school space to do the job for which I went. Hence, she invented a story that the grandmother’s legs ached and that she could not run after the babies, couldn’t look after them. She decided on her own to assign me the care of her children until she returned from school. Suddenly, I found myself babysitting F’s babies; she also gave me housework, vacuuming, washing dishes etc. as per her instructions. I had become F’s maid and felt very uncomfortable, because besides the fact that I could not do my job, I was trapped and locked⁷ between four walls. I endured this situation for ten days, after I which I explained everything that had happened to Z, who was forced to move me to his second wife’s house. Z’s power to impose my presence to F and my authoritarian identity were defeated in front of the F’s authoritarian ways. She had not directly requested from Z that I leave. She had just managed my presence and made me ask Z to find an alternative accommodation. She confronted two authoritative discourses, Z’s and mine, to solve her problem. The same thing was done by L. As a host, I got the classic room, the lounge etc. L continually complained about the Z’s indifference. She and the children had made me the messenger of her claims, which were not quite heeded by Z. She was pregnant with the sixth child and, shortly before giving birth, instructed me to ask Z where I could move when she would move herself with the baby in the living room, because it was impossible to sleep with the remaining five children. As a result, I packed my suitcase again and moved to live with another family. This is how I mediated in the battle between the spouses.

The predisposition of societies for social conflict, as Ross (Ross, 1993:21) pointed out, is defined by our cultural categories that specify what objects people can invest with value, the aspects they are willing to confront as well as the appropriate behaviors in every circumstance. The confrontation, which the subjects would perceive and manage, highlights the double aspect of a conflict, as a force or action that maps the boundaries of unity within the differentiation or differentiation within the unity (Simmel, 1955)

These women’s disputes in Wadi Rum was expressed by the silent, invisible battle between the spouses, with different forms of consuming behaviors on one hand and, on the other, with a competition about who would exercise more power over me. The male priority in the home, especially in the living room, expressed as the power of men over the women, was undermined by my displacement from the space of men. The women challenged my existing cultural assumptions about the spaces, the hospitality (I was hosted by men as a “Doctor” who writes a book about them). They undermined my own status, both cultural and gendered. I was an urban woman in an external, public environment where, according to the local tradition, women’s presence especially in the desert was prohibited (camel races, camel tours and walks in the desert, events, tourism etc.). First of all, I was a Christian woman who went to do field research in an Arabic country, especially in the desert, moreover from a society harboring “liberated” perceptions about women, about gender relations, a society that would ideally not restrict or exercise power over women.

While I made the men proud because they were honored by my scientific effort to write about Wadi Rum, I was simultaneously a subject of competition between them, a subject of sexual desire, for whom men competed by displaying their Bedouin-exotic charm during the evenings that we spent in the desert. It can be stressed that this too was a reason why I presented a threat to women who saw me as their competitor. Women were convinced that my stay there would put at stake the gender equilibrium in their society. For them, my scientific approach was of no interest; I did not differ from the tourists who came to enjoy exotic nights in the desert with their husbands. My origins created distance. Being honored and sexual desired, added to the fact that my presence was a continuous source of antagonism, came across as a threat that could disrupt social ties. I had to create trust relationships which would liberate me from the bounds of gender and my socio-cultural origin. For men, my presence, a foreign woman “exotic” to them, created false expectations and fantasies, while at the same time I incarnated the venerable figure of “doctor”. In fact, I participated consciously in this game, maintaining a good relationship with everyone and somehow ensuring a continuous flow of information, seeing that all of them retained hopes from me. This opened the door to invitations to various men’s gatherings such as hunting, excursions in the desert, and everything else that happened on a daily basis in the world of Bedouin men.

Meanwhile, I had to build up my relationship with the women on another basis. They had to be convinced that I didn’t pose a threat to them and that I didn’t want sexual relations with their husbands. I haplessly struggled to find better manners through which to improve my relations with them, since I was already playing “the game” openly with the men. According to the women’s logic, it was clear that my attractiveness

⁷ She locked the house when she left to avenge herself of my presence.

raised competition from the beginning. As a scientist and researcher—another form of authoritarian modernity imposed by men on women (to accommodate me)—I became a powerful tool in the hands of women, which produced an effective power discourse challenging the existing cultural assumptions, having the power to overtrun the authoritarian male discourse (on hospitality, on spaces).

In this way, the silent conflict between spouses to undermine male dominance as a ritual of rebellion, as per Gluckman's term (1973:109), saw me being used to maintain the women's social order. My presence and my coexistence initiated created new forms of action in the female subjects.

Long after I returned home after the fieldwork, I realized that the way I walked, my posture even when I was sitting, the way I was combing my hair, the way I was talking to men, and a lot more, had changed. Movement habits have fallen into oblivion. My feminine gestures and behaviors had also taken a strange form. My femininity was cancelled. I had embodied a new habitus.

An anthropologist, while studying the "other," becomes reflective about his/her own self (Herzfeld, 1998). Therefore, he/she must distantiate his/her own self in order to become his/her own object and observe this objective reflectively. I wonder, in my case, how many "selves" should I reflectively study and understand? Further, according to Bourdieu, neither objectivism nor subjectivism succeed in reflecting their definitions. The subject/anthropologist cannot be a subject without being an object, it cannot classify without being classified. Furthermore, even in my experience, this subject, partly because of the habitus of the "other" he/she studies, is successful, whereas a great portion remains recondite, precisely because of the habitus of the "other." Thus, I believe that a thick description of "multiple habitus," that is functional in the field of the anthropologist can give us an "objective subjective" interpretation and data analysis.

As each approach and the resulting knowledge is partial, my own effort highlights the partial truths that can contribute to the partial understanding of the "other" as well as my own "self."

This is how I had to confront not only the subjects as "Other," the ones for whom I had to mediate between the science of anthropology and the native discourse, beliefs, perceptions, and assumptions, but also my self, who was not only loaded with a different cultural background and (consequently) perceptions, but in the daily interaction with the Bedouin people, unconsciously adopting ideas, embodying emotions, movements, and behaviours. This is how I found myself in a situation of constant change and redefinition, with a self that sometimes identified itself with the objects it was studying and at other times tried to create a critical distance by differentiating itself from them.

The relations of the dialog between the self of the ethnographer and the "other," the informants, our mutual cooperation, as well as the dialogue between the "self" and the "new self," orients the style of an ethnographic text. The anthropologist and the informants interacted, controlled, and supervised each other. If the non-existence of objectivity implies subjectivity in the corpus of anthropological data, my experience taught me that even subjectivity is not entirely subjective. My subjectivity also included elements belonging to the subjectivity of the "other/informants." For me, the subjects I was living with in the frame of the fieldwork research were "others", while for them I myself was the "other." In the end, I often became an "other" to my own self. Hence, the anthropological text which was created derived from the dialog between multiple "others," considering that all identities were in constant flux.

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