Can a Local Descent Group Become an International Network? Research on the Rashāyidah in Five Countries

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Abstract

Local descent groups that all have the name – Rashāyidah – are found in many places in the eastern Arab world. There is evidence that at least some of these groups originated in northwestern Arabia, where some of their ancestors lived centuries ago. More significantly, many of them have recently become aware of each other's existence. Some are constructing a historical and genealogical narrative about common out-migration from Arabia. This narrative does more than explain why they share the same name; it also (re)constructs the kinship bonds that link them. Research has begun in Jordan, Kuwait, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, and Sudan to explore this process of "awakening" to a common past. Nine researchers are collecting ethnographic and linguistic data about six different Rashāyidah groups and the various localities where they live. The researchers will describe the relationships of each group with its neighbors and will explore the motivations for adopting a new, diasporic, identity while at the same time re-working the details of their established tribal and national identities.

Introduction

New research has begun on the historical and social ties among several Arabic-speaking communities who all call themselves Rashāyidah. Reports written by travelers and scholars during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries mention groups of Rashāyidah in Egypt, Eritrea, Palestine (in both the Gaza Strip and the West Bank areas), Jordan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Sudan (cf. Agius 2012; Behnstedt and Woidich 2013:1; Dickson 1949:224, 362-64, 572-74; al-Ḥasan 1974:10-11; Irby and Mangles 1823:383-84, 390, 396, 400, 434, 443; al-Jāsir 1980:236-39, 544, 670; Lynch 1849:279-80, 281-82; Jaussen 1908:393; MacMichael 1922:345; Murray 1935:269-70; von Oppenheim 1943:73, 216-26, 258-272, 296-306; von Oppenheim 1952:152; Parizot 2004:9; Peake 1998:238, 350, 361; al-Wāʾilī 2002:287). It seems likely that at least some of these communities are historically related. Furthermore, some of them are currently in communication with each other and have established active social ties.

The idea for a new research project that would study the historical and contemporary ties among these Rashāyidah groups was developed by Leif Manger (Emeritus Professor of Anthropology at the University of Bergen, Norway) and Nils Anfinset (Professor of Archaeology, Bergen Museum). They invited Abdallah Onour (Gedaref University, Sudan), Manal Jubeh (Birzeit University), Laura Adwan (Bethlehem University), and William Young (independent scholar) to participate early in 2021. Later that year, Mohammed Shunnaq (Professor of Anthropology, Yarmouk University, Jordan) and Gunda Kinzl, a doctoral student in Arabic dialectology at the University of Vienna, joined the team. In 2022, Mohammed Shunnaq invited two graduate students in Anthropology at Yarmouk University to participate. They are Toqa Z. al-Ajarmeh and Amal N. al-Omran.

For this new project, the researchers will study the Rashāyidah in Jordan, Kuwait, Palestine, Sudan, and Saudi Arabia. They will ask whether each such community is aware of the existence of the others and will explore the extent to which they are linked by means of digital communications, mutual visiting patterns, an idiom of common descent, and marriage.

Young is the one in the group with the longest engagement with Rashāyidah studies. He originally carried out field research among the Rashāyidah of Sudan in the late 1970s (Young 1996). He is also the participant with the broadest engagement with Rashāyidah groups in differ-

ent countries. In the 1990s, Young once again did fieldwork among a Rashāyidah community, this time in Jordan (Young 1997), and in 2002 he visited another Rashāyidah group in Saudi Arabia. He found that the Rashāyidah of Sudan and Saudi Arabia were developing a sense of diasporic identity that extended beyond the boundaries of local clan and tribe across international borders (Young 2006). All this work provides a basic platform for our new initiatives, which are outlined below.

Sudan

With regard to the Rashāyidah of Sudan, one of our goals is to explore the tension between the two alternative plans of action that they are following: 1) constructing or expanding their political networks inside Sudan with non-Rashāyidah, and 2) constructing or expanding social networks with "related" or "fellow" Rashāyidah outside of Sudan. Manger first learned about the Rashāyidah's political activities from their neighbors in eastern Sudan: the Hadendowa Beja. He did field research among the Hadendowa and worked as project leader of the Red Sea Area Project (RESAP) during the severe drought years from the mid-1980s into the 1990s (Manger et al. 1996). He was also engaged in the peace negotiations in Sudan that aimed at putting an end to the civil conflict that broke out in the early 2000s in the eastern part of the country. These negotiations led to an agreement in 2006 that significantly affected the Rashāyidah's position among the many groups in eastern Sudan.

During the drought years as well as during the civil war years, the Rashāyidah of Sudan received support from their fellow Rashāyidah in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, a fact that should be further explored. They obtained political and economic support from Kuwait through their political actions; the Rashāyidah supported Kuwait against Saddam Hussein's invasion in 1990, even though this was contrary to the official line of the Sudanese regime at the time. But they also benefitted financially from their international connections through labor migration to Saudi Arabia and Kuwait and to other Gulf countries, as well. They also organized commercial ventures in Egypt and regularly sent some of their camels to livestock markets in Daraw, southern Egypt.

Even though the Sudanese Rashāyidah benefitted from their international connections, they were marginalized in Sudan and deprived of local political support by their critics, who claimed that they exploited their presence along the Eritrean-Sudanese border to engage in smuggling. They were also criticized for using child labor by sending under-aged boys to work as camel racers in the Gulf. Finally, they were (and are) characterized as major human traffickers. Once again, it is their border situation that is emphasized; claims have been made that they are utilizing their cross-border relations in both Ethiopia and Eritrea, and their camel trading links to Egypt, to engage in human trafficking. Such claims and the associated punitive actions by the Sudanese regime prompted a reaction by some Rashāyidah. In 1999, they organized themselves to form the Free Lions Movement (Calkins 2016:16; 108, fn. 16) and actively joined the National Democratic Alliance in its military fight against the regime.

Manger notes that the Rashāyidah's Free Lions military organization played a significant role in the wider "Eastern Front" movement during the conflict. Hence, in 2006, the Rashāyidah emerged from the conflict with a strengthened political position, both within the Sudanese government's administrative structures and with respect to the other local groups – such as the Hadendowa – in eastern Sudan (Manger et al. 2019; see also Small Arms Survey 2015:6, 9, 19,

26, 28, 32-33, 37-38). Manger learned about these actions when he helped lead a project that studied border dynamics in the Horn of Africa. One of the cases examined by the project was the Rashāyidah of eastern Sudan. In the publication that resulted from the project's research activities, one paper had the telling title, "Those Who Ignore Borders: the Rashaida in Sudan" (Mohammed 2019).

Abdallah Onour will follow up on several of these themes. Onour earned his Master's Degree in Social Anthropology at the University of Khartoum. He is continuing his research on the Rashāyidah in his present position as Lecturer at the University of Gedaref in East Sudan. His aim is to complete a Ph.D. degree based on this work. He is also part of a related project entitled "Assisting Regional Universities in Sudan (ARUS)," which is a joint project between the University of Bergen (represented by the Anthropology Department and Leif Manger), the Chr. Michelsens Institute (CMI) and Ahfad University for Women in Khartoum. Onour is contributing to this project by writing about the contemporary adaptation of the Rashāyidah, focusing especially on the accusations that they are participants in human trafficking across the Sudan-Ethiopian and Sudan-Eritrean borders (cf. Small Arms Survey 2015:57-58). Both his broader ethnographic work as well as the more problem-oriented focus on specific Rashāyidah activities will support the goals of the research team. His research adds to our data about how the historical adaptive histories and experiences of the Rashāyidah are translated into contemporary relationships in various economic and political fields. Such relationships affect the ways in which the Rashāyidah regard themselves and represent themselves: as a collection of descent groups, as a Sudanese tribe, and as a tribal people in diaspora.

Palestine

In Palestine, the focus on the Rashāyidah also developed from work undertaken in earlier projects. These projects were supported by archaeologists and anthropologists in Bergen and by scholars in various disciplines at Bir Zeit University. Two Palestinian researchers – who were Ph.D. students at the time – took part in those earlier projects. They are now engaged in our new effort. The first one is anthropologist Laura Adwan, who wrote her Ph.D. dissertation on displaced Iraqis in Jordan. She explored their experiences with social and political transformations during times of state development, war, economic sanctions, and forced displacement. She is presently an Assistant Professor at Bethlehem University. The second researcher is Manal Jubeh, a lawyer and lecturer at Bir Zeit University. She wrote her Ph.D. dissertation about changes in Palestinian family relations and the impact of these changes on women's demands for inheritance. Both researchers also have prior experience in earlier studies on development, gender, and human rights issues in the West Bank. They will now make use of their previous experiences to develop a closer look at the Rashāyidah Bedouin.

The case of the Rashāyidah Bedouin represents one example of the complex adaptive strategies developed by all communities on the West Bank during a long period of political and social upheaval. Politically and economically, the West Bank has become a contested zone, despite international recognition of the Palestinian Authority. Israeli military authorities and rogue paramilitary Israeli settler organizations frequently clash with Palestinians, who struggle to maintain access to transportation routes, labor markets, land, and infrastructure. Of course, these are the economic resources that local populations depend on for survival. To maintain access to these

vital resources, all of the Palestinian populations in the region have tried to leverage their own legal and cultural resources. These include deeds to land, kinship relations within each tribe and with other tribes, narratives about their long-term use of land for grazing and cultivation, and narratives about their identities. Narratives about their identities portray them as Bedouin, rural cultivators, refugees, or urban people, and also stress their national identities as Palestinians. The Rashāyidah are no exception.

Because tribal identities and strong kinship relations are resources that can be used as part of their survival strategies, all Palestinians on the West Bank continue to maintain them, regardless of whether they identify themselves as Bedouin (*badw*), rural farmer (*fallāḥ*), refugee (*lāji*ʾ), or urban (*ḥaḍar*). Tribal identities are also important because customary law associated with tribal identity can be invoked to help resolve local conflicts.

Most of the Bedouin who today live in the West Bank were originally expelled from the Naqab/ Negev region (hereafter Naqab) by Zionist forces in 1948 (Kedar et al. 2018; Nasara 2017; Parizot 2001). They now live in various localities that belong to what is categorized as "Area C" of the occupied West Bank, an area which is under Israeli military and civil control. Israel prohibits all kinds of infrastructural and planning development in the West Bank under the pretext of alleged security threats. This has further increased the conditions of uncertainty among the Bedouin, who have had to develop new survival strategies and find new sources of income.

The Rashāyidah represent one of the six main Bedouin tribes in the West Bank: al-Ṣarāyiʿah, al-Jahāliyīn, al-Kaʿābinah, al-Rashāyidah, al-ʿAzāzimah, and al-Ramāḍīn (Sharrāb 2012:59-64, 343-45). Most of these groups are described as semi-nomadic herding people. Today, the majority of the Rashāyidah Bedouin in Palestine are located in a village called ʿArab al-Rashāyidah, which is southeast of the city of Bethlehem and some twelve kilometers east of Jerusalem. A few other Rashāyidah families, however, live near the villages of ʿAyn Duyūk and ʿAyn al-Sulṭān, northeast of Jericho (Ma'an Development Center 2008:3).

The restrictive measures on mobility in the last two decades, following the Oslo Accords and the classification of their localities as "Area C" (Peteet 2017), reduced access to the pasture areas and water resources that were historically the primary economic resources for the Bedouin communities. This effectively left the Bedouin unrecognized, treated as if they were "illegal immigrants" on their own lands (Ma'an Development Center, 2008). The al-Rashāyidah survived by partially keeping their nomadic lifestyle, ignoring many of the imposed restrictions. After being expelled to the West Bank, they resumed their seasonal movements, migrating between the ʿArab al-Rashāyidah area in Bethlehem Governorate – in the southern West Bank – and Wādī al-Fāriʿah in Ṭūbās Governorate – in the northern part of the West Bank. They also went to the village of ʿArab al-Taʿāmirah, inside Israel, during the cucumber growing and harvesting seasons (Adwan 2018). Finally, they also visited relatives in Jordan. Israeli officials turned a blind eye to their border crossings (Parizot 2004:7, 9-11).

Although recent academic research has addressed the history and dynamics of change among the Bedouin in the Naqab, the existing literature on Palestinian Bedouin in the West Bank and Gaza is limited and lacks critical and in-depth historical analysis. Most recent writings in the mainstream media and in the reports published by international organizations (OCHA, Oxfam, Maʿan Development Center) tend to focus on human rights and humanitarian and infrastructural

aid for localities in Area C (where most Bedouin communities in the West Bank reside). In these reports, the Bedouin have been presented as passive recipients of aid and marginalized communities. Their rich social and economic survival strategies have been overlooked.

Laura Adwan has already started her engagement with the people living in the village of ʿArab al-Rashāyidah. Although the inhabitants of this village claim descent from several Bedouin tribes, the Rashāyidah represent one of the village's core populations. Conversations between Adwan and Fawaz al-Rashāyidah, the head of the ʿArab al-Rashāyidah village council, revealed his knowledge and personal interaction with a Rashāyidah Tribal Union or League (*rābiṭat qabīlat al-Rashāyidah*) based in Kuwait, with representative members from all the countries where Rashāyidah reside today. Members of the League meet regularly (every 5 years), each time in a different country. Their last meeting before Covid-19 was in Jordan. He also informed Adwan about the Rashāyidah welfare society (*jamʿiyyat al-Rashāyidah al-khayriyyah*) in Kuwait that seeks to provide aid and donations to Rashāyidah communities around the region.

By connecting present experiences of land confiscation to the historical effects of earlier periods and exploring the Rashāyidah's engagement with the various powers controlling their presence and space, this part of the project will examine how the Rashāyidah have responded to ongoing political and social transformations. Specifically, it will explore how this and earlier processes of categorization affected kinship relations within the local Rashāyidah tribe and with Rashāyidah elsewhere.

Jordan

To prepare for additional field research in Jordan, Shunnaq and Young reviewed the existing literature and found several locations where Rashāyidah are reported to live. Proceeding from south Jordan to north Jordan, these locations are: Maʿān (30° 11' 46" N, 35° 44' 03" E), al-Shawbak (30° 31' 17" N, 35° 34' 17" E), Wādī Faynān (30° 42' 44" N, 35° 19' 19" E), Batīr (31° 15' 51" N, 42' 17" E), al-Ṭafīlah (30° 50' 15" N, 35° 36' 16" E), al-Karak (30° 11' N, 35° 42' E), ʿAmmān (31° 57' N, 35° 56' E), al-Ẓulayl (32° 07' 15" N, 36° 16' 48" E), Jarash (32° 14' 36" N, 35° 53' 53"), and Umm al-Surab (32° 25' 40" N, 36° 18' 49" E). The next step was to determine which of these locations might have the greatest potential for successful field research. Since the locations are not described in detail in the literature, this was a daunting task; the locations are many hundreds of miles apart.

In May 2022, Young travelled to Jordan to contribute to the research effort. Shunnaq and Young visited four of the northernmost sites – al-Ẓulayl, Jarash, Umm al-Surab, and ʿAmmān – over the course of ten days, travelling for over 2,000 miles to reach these locations and return to their home base near the city of Irbid. Shunnaq identified key informants at each location who could provide overviews of the tribal composition of the local communities. In the course of five different interviews in al-Ẓulayl, Jarash, and Umm al-Surab, Shunnaq determined that either no groups named Rashāyidah lived there or, if small families with that name were present, their numbers were so small that their profile in each locality was not prominent enough to attract attention. In short, the existing literature about these locations was at best out of date or, at worst, incorrect to begin with. They were not promising research sites.

Faced with these negative results, Shunnaq and Young searched for new works about Jordanian tribes that might contain more recent data about the Rashāyidah. Shunnaq also made use

of his contacts with experts in Jordanian tribal law and history to collect more information. They found one source (Fusfūs 1993:241) that confirmed the presence of the Rashāyidah branch of the al-Daʿjah tribe in ʿAmmān. Recently posted internet pages (ex. https://www.historyofjordan.com/jordan2/jh/collection1.php?id=16&page=433) also confirmed the presence of a Rashāyidah group in the town of al-Shawbak.

Al-Ajarmeh and al-Omran will begin field research among these two Rashāyidah communities in Jordan in September 2022.

Saudi Arabia and Kuwait

Kinzl visited the Rashāyidah of western Saudi Arabia and the Rashāyidah who live in Kuwait in the spring of 2022. She collected linguistic and ethnographic data in both locations and has begun analyzing it. One of her preliminary findings is that many of the Rashāyidah of Kuwait seem to be linguistically well-integrated into urban Kuwaiti society. The members of the younger generation, at least, apparently no longer speak the distinctive dialect of Arabic that is spoken by their distant "cousins" in western Saudi Arabia. More research is needed to confirm this initial impression.

The fact that some of the Rashāyidah – in both western Saudi Arabia and Sudan – have retained their distinctive dialect, despite their long-term contacts with speakers of standard Najdī or colloquial Sudanese Arabic, is one indication of their social marginality in both locations. Kinzl will work with other members of the research team to further explore these social and cultural phenomena.

Diasporic Processes

Preliminary research results indicate that most of the various Rashāyidah groups mentioned are aware of other Rashāyidah groups. In Sudan, relationships with non-Sudanese Rashāyidah seem to have been helpful during the drought years and the years of the civil war. International contacts with non-Sudanese Rashāyidah may also have facilitated trade activities and labor migration. In Palestine, also, there are hints that the local Rashāyidah have reached out to their "cousins" in Kuwait, although this relationship has not yet been described in detail. Initial fieldwork in Jordan and Kuwait indicates that the Rashāyidah of Sudan and Kuwait are at least known by Rashāyidah in Jordan. Whether active social relationships between Jordanian and non-Jordanian Rashāyidah exist has yet to be determined. Perhaps they are (re)constructing ties of common descent to form an international social network. An important part of the project will be to follow up on these leads and study trans-national relations and networks. We will try to discover how such relations feed back into the Rashāyidah's understanding of themselves as members of a diaspora.

It could be that this process of "awakening" to a common past will transform the Rashāyidah's identity in all of these locations. Rather than viewing themselves as merely members of localized descent groups, they might develop a common identity based on a historical narrative about shared out-migration from northwestern Arabia. This would make them into something more than just a tribe. But as indicated above, the Rashāyidah are dealing with different sorts of problems in different places. Will they choose to emphasize their national identities as Sudanese, Saudis, Kuwaitis, Jordanians, or Palestinians rather than their historical, tribal, or

diaspora identities? We expect that our fieldwork during the coming year will help answer this question.

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