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HETERODOXY AND REFORM AMONG THE RASHĀYDA BEDOUIN¹

by William Charles Young

This paper is an exploration of Islamic reform among the Rashāyda Bedouin of eastern Sudan.² The Rashāyda are devout and sincere Muslims. Most adults are careful to perform the prayer five times every day, as their religion requires. However, they almost never pray collectively, even though group (jama^{Ca}) prayer is recommended by Sudanese religious figures. For the past century the Rashāyda have remained aloof from all reformist movements in Sudan. Within the last ten years, however, they have become more receptive. Some are building mosques and are performing the collective prayer daily, while others are showing interest in local sufi traditions and are learning to read Qur'an and other religious literature. We would like to explain why they are now interested in reform. We propose that the reason for religious change among the Rashāyda is to be found in the processes of sedentarization that are transforming Rashīdī life. The Rashāyda have always conceived of their society as both nomadic and Muslim. Now, when many of them have abandoned nomadic pastoralism, their view of themselves has been challenged and their previous understanding of Islām is being criticized and reformulated. The simultaneous occurrence of two types of change, that is, the re-organization of Rashīdī residence and the reform of their conceptualization of Islām, provides us with a chance to study the relationship between an unconscious conceptual system (residence organization) and a conscious conceptual system (residence organization) and a conscious intellectual tradition (Rashīdī Islām).

Rashīdī residence is a complex conceptual structure which is mapped onto a specific physical location every time that the nomads make a new camp. It incorporates three categories of kin: close patriline (al-garāyib), affines and matrilineals (il-'arham), and distantly related or unrelated Rashāyda (il-'ajṅab). Since residence relations are built on relations among kin, it is necessary to describe Rashīdī kinship before discussing residence.

One's rights and responsibilities vis-a-vis any of the three categories of kin depend on whether they are of the ascending or same generation as ego. Relations with elder patriline are characterized by authority, in that the older person may order any of his children, his brother's children, or his son's children. Junior patriline have a corresponding right for assistance from their fathers and fathers' brothers in getting a wife and in establishing an independent household. Relations with senior affines and matrilineals are less authoritarian. While the senior man may ask his junior relative to assist him, he hesitates to do so out of bashfulness (al-tāhashshud); at the same time, one's sisters' sons and one's sons-in-laws may make limited requests for support but are often also bashful, since they are aware of a relation of debt between one's family and theirs. This debt is referred to in the terminology applied to affines: 'arham. As a Rashīdī would say, «Our affines ('arham) are the people from whom we have taken a womb (rihim).» When it comes to unrelated older people, there is no necessary feeling of deference nor of debt. At most, one may be fearful that they envy one's successful patriline or one may envy them for their own success. Schematically:

Senior Patriline	Senior Affines	Distant Senior Relatives
deference	debt	envy

For each of these relations with senior kin there is a corresponding relationship with kin of ego's generation. One owes unconditional support to one's brothers, sisters, and father's brothers' children; they may demand anything. One's spouse and siblings-in-law, however, may only demand their due. One's dealings with these affines are guided by a careful calculation of their rights and responsibilities. Finally, one's behavior toward other, unrelated Rashāyda is characterized by hostile competition and potential enmity. To complete our chart of kinship relations:

	Patriline	Affine	Distant Relative
+1 generation	deference	debt (bashfulness)	envy
0 generation	support	rights (equality)	competition

Since all six categories of kin may live in one's immediate vicinity, residence organization must take them all into account, along with the corresponding categorical relationships. Furthermore, these relations must be mapped onto a physical area in some objective, non-idiosyncratic way. Because kinship relations are ego-centered, they cannot be utilized to organize residence without modification. To create a spatial model of residence, the Rashāyda replace the above distinction between ego's (0) generation and the ascending (senior) generation with a distinction between center and periphery. The senior household of each camp is located at its center, while junior households are located at its margin. This means that relations of authority and deference among patriline are concretely symbolized by a concentric arrangement of households in space. Affinal relations, which are marked by equality, are symbolized by placing affinally related households in straight lines. Each camp has its senior man who all other residents support and defer to in times of conflict. At such times the senior man may either lead the entire camp in military operations or may act as primary mediator in conflict resolution. The senior's close patriline cluster around him, while his affines and matrilineals reside somewhat farther away. Residents who have no traceable kinship relation with the senior live on the periphery, becoming in this context both the most distant and the most junior members of the camp. Generally speaking, the people of the camp who are neighbors but have no close patrilineal or affinal links between them are bashful of each other; they are mutually indebted, not because of any affinal exchanges, but by virtue of the ritual offerings of hospitality which they make (a subject which I have no space to discuss here). Diagrammatically: (Fig. 1).

Thus, as we see it, the Rashāyda both transform and supplement kinship relations to build a model of residence. According to the logic of their model, all non-residents are to be seen as envious non-kin, both competitors and potential enemies. In times of war, when the camp is mobilized against outsiders, this is true. Otherwise, however, this is not the case, since all camp residents have relatives who live in other camps and with whom they are on good terms.

Under peaceful circumstances, then, there is a contradiction between residential solidarity and kinship solidarity. The Rashāyda are probably aware of this logical contradiction but cannot discuss it explicitly. They are not fully conscious of the structures of kinship and residence. Instead of analyzing the contradiction they try to overcome it by making use of a conscious ideational system: Islam. That is to say, rather than following the logic of residence and treating all non-residents as enemies, the people of a camp deal with outsiders as brother Muslims.

A brief analysis of how the Rashāyda celebrate the primary Islāmic holiday, Ād al-adha, reveals how they both deny the contradiction between residence and kinship and yet reaffirm it.

The denial takes place on the morning of the holiday, when the holiday prayer (salāt il-Ād) is performed. Such Islāmic holidays are the only occasions when the Rashāyda pray collectively behind a Rashīdī imām. Even for holidays, collective worship does not involve every resident of a camp. There is, after all, always some difference of opinion about the correct date for the holiday. The people of two or three neighboring camps consult each other about this, and one faction emerges that chooses, say, Tuesday as the holiday while the other may choose Wednesday. The men who actually pray together collect from many camps and assemble near the camp of a senior man who is celebrating on that day. Their senior, the imām for the prayer, is not necessarily the senior of any camp, and they are not necessarily his co-residents.

The worshipers prepare themselves by facing the qibla and forming two lines: one line for elder men, which is immediately behind the imām, and a second line of young men and boys, which is behind the first. While they pray, they obey the imām and are careful to follow his movements and listen to his sermon. As soon as he has said his last amīn, however, the young men in back leap up and race to touch his turban. In their eagerness to be first (and so lay claim to the prayer's baraka), the boys show no deference to the imām; they crash into him playfully and sometimes knock off his turban. In short, at the beginning of the prayer a super-residential hierarchy is established that relates a senior imām to his junior ma'mūmīn. At the end of the prayer this hierarchy is reversed; the juniors become seniors and the man in the center is displaced by the periphery. After this the Muslims, now all equal, exchange brotherly holiday greetings.

The contradiction between resident and kinship reappears, however, once the holiday greetings are over. Those men who came from other camps return to their homes, and the camp residents who are celebrating all slaughter goats and sheep and cook meat for a communal meal, which is held in the camp senior's tent. Each celebrating household must send a male representative to the camp senior's tent with a bowl of meat. If the camp senior himself is not celebrating, then some other senior man who lives in the center of the camp is chosen. The senior man collects all the meat in one pot and then re-distributes it to those present. Each man receives about the same amount that he brought. The point of this rite is not to give generously but rather to re-affirm the mediating role of the camp senior.

Most orthodox Muslims would regard the Rashāyda's neglect of daily collective prayer with disapproval. In a sense, they are «bad Muslims,» but in another sense they have very conscientiously integrated collective prayer into their life by reserving it for those special occasions when Muslim brotherhood is affirmed and when the contradictions in their social life are suppressed. Although infrequently performed, the collective prayer is rich in meaning for the Rashāyda because it fulfills this transcendental function.

If the foregoing analysis is correct, and if the heterodox practices of the Rashāyda are responses to contradictions in their conceptualization of social order, what is the reason for their current attempts at reform? We suggest that, in the new sedentary villages that many Rashāyda now

inhabit, the relationship between kinship, residence organization, and authority is changed. As a consequence the logical function of collective prayer and some other acts of worship is changed, also.

The primary difference between nomadic and sedentary residence lies in the decreased fluidity of sedentary group membership. We have stressed that, for a nomadic camp, any type of kinsman may be admitted as long as he defers to the camp senior when necessary. We should also point out that a resident can leave whenever he likes, since he lives in moveable housing and has enough animals to transport it. This means that no one need accept the authority of a senior that he does not respect, nor need he tolerate neighbors who impose on him or quarrel with him. Camp harmony can be maintained easily not always by resolving every minor dispute but also by having the disputants move far enough apart or, if all else fails, by having one of them leave.

Sedentary residence in a village, by contrast, requires each villager to make substantial investments in land and in stationary housing. Since he cannot move away easily, such a villager is less willing to accept unrelated, possibly troublesome Rashāyda as neighbors. The result of this is that every sedentary Rashīdī village consists of a number of unconnected quarters, each containing primarily people from a single patrilineage. No village has either a center or a senior, and the people of the village cannot be mobilized to act in unison. Distrust and competition between lineages is more intense here than in a nomadic context.

This situation is complicated by the fact that, although the village does not constitute a unified social unit, Sudanese government officials, for reasons of administrative expediency, try to deal with the village as if it were. Their ideal candidate for the office of village mayor would be someone who was literate, who was trusted by all villagers, who was knowledgeable about administrative procedures and who agreed with government plans for the Rashāyda. Settled Rashāyda, on their part, recognize the need for one or more articulate spokesmen for each village, but often cannot choose them because of the intensified lineage chauvinism within their settlements.

The essential structures of kinship and residence have not changed; they are simply mapped onto a new physical location. This means that the same contradiction between residential and kinship solidarity that characterized nomadic life is also present, in even stronger forms, in villages. Sociologically each village quarter is a nomadic camp, having its own sociological (if not physical) center and its own senior man. Such leaders, however, are even less well-prepared than the previous ones to work effectively with non-kinsmen.

The Islāmic reformists in Rashīdī villages are attempting to move beyond this impasse. They cannot re-design the basic, unconscious structures of kinship and residence, but perhaps they can elevate their contradictions to a higher, more accessible, plane. Their traditional «Islāmic» solution, which involved assigning a transcendental function to collective prayer, once provided a satisfactory means for defining a broader-than-residential community and for selecting its leader, if only for holidays. Now the Rashāyda are testing the liberating potential of other rites and symbols. Attempts are being made to make collective prayer universal, to re-formulate the rights and obligations of married couples, to prohibit ritual visits to saints' tombs, to legitimize the purchase and use of cigarettes, and to interpret the reading of the Qur'an as an instrumental means for gaining knowledge rather than as a pure act of religious devotion.

Rather than react passively to the changes in consumption, in economic activities, and in residence patterns that have accompanied sedentarization, the Rashayda are trying to endow these changes with religious meaning. They cannot eliminate the contradictions in their conceptualization of society, since these contradictions persist without being affected by the economic and demographic conditions of the people that devise them. However, they can re-state these contradictions in new terms and view them as theological, rather than logical, problems. By shifting the difficulty to the level of theology, they may be able to transform the current state of indecision into a more dynamic and flexible debate, which might result in more criticism of tradition, more experimentation, and, hopefully, some satisfactory solutions for their immediate social and political problems.

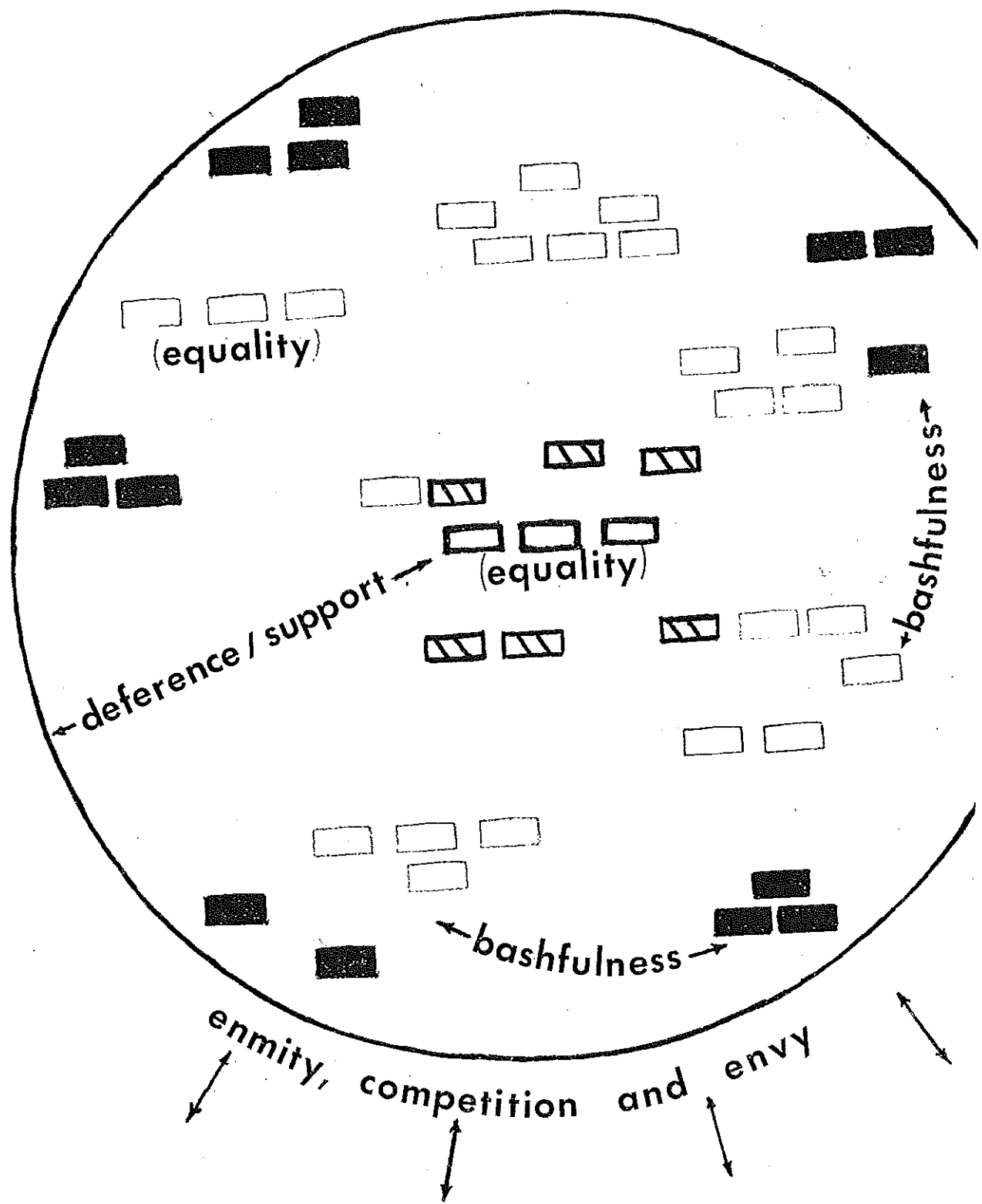
NOTES

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2. Fieldwork was carried out among the Rashayda from January, 1978 to November, 1980, and was funded by grants from the Social Science Research Council and the Fulbright-Hayes Commission.

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



-  senior's (polygynous) household
-  senior's close patriline
-  senior's affines
-  senior's distant relatives

Figure 1