

# Commission on Nomadic Peoples

“The Concept of Territoriality among the Rwala Bedouin”

William and Fidelity Lancaster

Nomadic Peoples, Number 20, March 1986

The Commission on Nomadic Peoples of the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences (IUAES) is collaborating with the Ford Foundation to digitize, preserve and extend access to the journal of *Nomadic Peoples*. For more information regarding the journal *Nomadic Peoples* visit the Commission on Nomadic Peoples website at [www.nomadicpeoples.info](http://www.nomadicpeoples.info) and the Berghahn Books website at [www.berghahnbooks.com](http://www.berghahnbooks.com)

## THE CONCEPT OF TERRITORY AMONG THE RWALA BEDOUIN

by William and Fidelity Lancaster

Before we can discuss what the Rwala mean by 'territory', we must clarify what the Rwala have been doing, what they are doing, how they are doing it and, perhaps, even why they are doing it - or at least the reason they give for what they are doing. We do not consider it fruitful to discuss the concept of territory that a certain society may have without taking into consideration the physical, historical and geographical factors that are or have been present, and the ideas the society may have about itself and its neighbours.

The origins of camel pastoralism are not clear, but would seem to have developed during the 2nd millenium BC, although it comes to our notice when trade between south Arabia and Mesopotamia increased. It developed in an arid environment of wide variety: sands of different sorts, gravel plains, lava deserts, oases with their arable fringes, steppes etc. In addition there were urban settlements north and south and in favoured places, linked by trade routes. Trade depended on the carriage of goods and the camel is obviously well-suited.

There are unknown factors, chief among them being some evidence for people living off camels but not being pastoralists, rather as the Plains Indians lived off buffalo (Zahrins n.d., Briant 1982). Although there are many types of pastoralism, what we would regard as the forerunner of traditional camel pastoralism seems to have developed alongside the growth of trade, which inevitably means relationships of some sort with towns and the wider world. As the desert areas of Arabia are large, it follows that groups of camel pastoralists must have had relationships with other similar groups so that goods could cross the desert at all.

Two things follow from this: Firstly, if the desert area was so large that one group of pastoralists were not able to cover it, and if there were different sorts of desert, it seems reasonable to suppose that there may be different sorts of pastoralism in the Arabian peninsula, and different sorts of camel pastoralism. We think this may be the basis of the distinction between 'noble' and 'non-noble' tribes. Secondly, trade is influenced by affairs external to the desert, such as economic booms and depressions, war and peace, as well as bad weather or crop failure and other natural hazards. In short, the political and commercial climate was as unpredictable as the physical one. Given these basic uncertainties a fixed territory seems a poor strategy. In fact, why be a camel pastoralist at all?

The answer seems to be that, for the Rwala at least, it was an ideological and moral choice. One of the stories of their beginning states that they came together and moved into the desert with camels because of the oppressions of rulers near Baghdad. They felt that only in the desert could they maintain their ideology of equality and autonomy. (The other story has the Rwala, already camel herders being near Wejh and moving to Nejd). Whether the first story is true or not is irrelevant: what matters is

that their reason for becoming pastoralists was moral not ecological. And their decision to become camel nomads gave them the mobility to escape oppression and the means of living in an unpredictable environment.

The Rwala fit themselves into the history of the Arabian peninsula through their genealogy, i.e. they trace their descent back to Ishmael as if it were a family tree, and this genealogy encompasses all those who are Bedu. However, the Bedu do not regard this genealogy as a blood relationship; it is more a commitment to the ideology, a moral statement. They illustrate this by, for example, long involved stories of some Sulubba who took up camel herding but did not behave as Bedu. The ideology has to be maintained within a system of political organization and this is provided through the idiom of segmentation, itself based on genealogical principles. Thus the political organization lends itself admirably to the formation of groups of any size, from tribe or confederation down to the individual, and this is necessary to accommodate the ideology. The possession of camels gives the rapid spatial mobility necessary in an unpredictable environment. The entire complex of ideology, segmentation and mobility represents a successful system for the management of a habitat that is uncertain physically, commercially and politically. Thus it is hardly surprising that territory as such is not an absolute for Rwala camel pastoralists. Not only do they not need it, to have a fixed territory would be a positive disadvantage.

For the sake of brevity we shall confine ourselves here to the physical environment of the Rwala. Obviously grazing and water are vital to the maintenance of the herds and people. Grazing, and to a lesser extent water, are enormously variable over the year, and from year to year. There is no readily observable pattern to rainfall except that it tends to rain in winter rather than summer. However, somewhere, at some time there will be rain: as the Rwala say 'Only two things are certain, rain and death'. All the herder has to do is to find out where it has rained, and get there, keeping his family and camels alive on the way. This demands a detailed knowledge of the desert, past rainfall, other peoples' movements (for there is no point in getting somewhere to find all the grazing has already been used), how much rain on what soil will provide grazing for how many camels at what time of year, etc. He must also know the whereabouts of wells, the state of them, the position of rainwater pools, when they filled and how much is likely to be left. He needs an enormous amount of information. The most likely place to acquire such information is from other people, so he needs to be able to assess the reliability of informants. To do this he must know who they are. Usually the most reliable informants are those to whom he is related, for their interests are common, the reliability diminishing the further away genealogically that the informant is. This does not diminish the potential geographical spread of the information as the principles of segmentation say nothing about groups keeping together. Nor does the ideology. Some spread of assets within the group of actual descent and common interest is desirable. However, some of the group will herd together, depending on the availability of grazing and water; they refer to where they are as their dira, which usually is translated as 'territory'. We hope to show that dira and 'territory' are not synonymous, at least for the Rwala.

Nowadays, the Rwala also refer to the nearest town as the dira. It gradually became clear that dira in its modern sense meant 'the administrative centre and its environs'. In the past it had the same

connotations except that 'the administrative centre' was a man who 'ruled' his immediate area. In Rwala terms, a man who 'ruled' was the man with the most reputation in the area, the man who arbitrated disputes, thereby keeping the peace, and who represented his group in dealings with other groups. As this man moved, so did his dira. Dira was only spatially delineated with reference to a moving person, it was not a geographical location. Given that there were numbers of such people among the Rwala (logically and in extreme circumstances, every individual male), it can be seen that the total spread of Rwala pastoralists and their peace-maintaining, mediatory efforts took on the air of a Rwala territory to those not cognizant of the social system.

In the literature concerning the Rwala (Musil 1927, 1928, Burckhardt 1831, Blunt 1879, 1891, and Raswan 1935) as well as in stories told by the Rwala, there is little mention of competition for what we would regard as scarce and valuable resources, namely grazing and water. This is in accordance with Rwala belief that grazing and water are gifts from God and therefore free to all. On the other hand, if there were a free for all, as there is now, grazing and wells would be ruined. So the Rwala have mechanisms for regulating access to them. The most obvious works on information gathering and the first come, first served principle. If a man finds out through his informants there is good grazing at X but the A's are already there, he may make for near X where he can make an informed guess on more recent information, but he will not make for X itself, or at least not directly unless he learns that there is plenty of grazing or his wife's brother is there or he really needs to. Access to wells works in the same way. In theory, wells belong firstly to those who dug them out and secondly to those who cleaned them out that season. But if the original diggers or their descendants do not arrive at a reasonable time, the next group can clean them and have first call on the water, although they must permit others to draw water when they have drawn what they need. In really bad years, this can cause friction but people hold a mental map of other people's movements through the year and can make informed guesses as to who is likely to be at which well when, and plan their own movements accordingly.

If a group cannot do this, or make arrangements with another with whom it has links through women for water and grazing, then khuwa links come into play (or they did in the past). Khuwa is an abstract noun derived from the same root as akhu meaning 'brother' and can conveniently be translated as 'brotherhood'. The khuwa relationship is based on the structural necessity for forming bonds between individuals representing families or groups that belong to differently conceptualised parts of the total social symbiotic system (i.e. such groups are outside the Bedouin genealogy as perceived by the Rwala). It looks as if we are moving away from territory, but while anthropologists are concerned with territory and scarce resources, the Rwala are not. As we have said, the Rwala equate territory with political behaviour, whereas one might expect them, as camel pastoralists, to equate it with grazing and economic activities. For the Rwala, grazing is taken care of by the premise that it is God-given and free to all; all the herder has to do is find it. (As an aside, our constant reference to individuals is because the Rwala emphasise individual autonomy in decision taking. Although herders may and do herd together, each does so because he has made an individual decision to do so). Economic activities such as selling camels or services means contact with the settled world for that is where the markets are; and to sell successfully, there must be a relationship

between the buyers and the sellers. Such economic relationships with towns, oases and desert-fringe villages were also khuwa, relationships which, although couched in familial terms, were outside the genealogical framework of camel herding Bedouin.

These khuwa relationships were many-faceted. Owing to the general unpredictability of the environment no one could ever be sure where he would be the next year, the following year or any subsequent one. So a man needed a variety of khuwa relationships with a variety of settlements. Equally, the settlements needed khuwa relationships with a variety of Bedu groups because their need for camels, guides and guards was reasonably constant. Khuwa relationships were renewed according to need, depending on whose dira the settlement found itself in any given year. Old khuwa relationships were not broken but left in abeyance until changing circumstances facilitated their renewal. If the Rwala, for instance, were not in the Jauf area one year, who, if it was Rwala territory, was there to fulfil the needs of the townsmen? In fact, other tribes would have been present, which has led us to suggest that there were different types of camel-herding, slightly different methods of exploiting the same environment, which made this area worthwhile for one tribe but not for another.

It is important to stress these relationships were contractual. It was not a question of 'Pay me or I bash you'. The man whose dira it was and who had a khuwa relationship had an obligation to protect the goods and personnel of the relationship from depredation; if he failed he had to pay compensation. Such contractual relationships seem similar to those mentioned in pre-Islamic times and at the time of the Prophet. (Serjeant 1981, Kister 1980). They help to establish the idea that co-operation between the Bedu and the towns has a long history, and that the idea of a symbiosis between the two is important for the successful management of the region. This is certainly how the Rwala see it today.

So far we have been at pains to stress that the Rwala system, based on the moral premises of autonomy and equality, works at an individual level for everyday life. This is so from the point of view of the people doing it, but this is not so from the viewpoint of the observer, the outsider. He will hear of the generalities of behaviour. The Rwala are aware of the general trends in their grazing patterns over the year and may explain their movements in these terms. They talk of 'going west' for the summer and 'going east' in the winter, just as reported by Musil. What these generalities conceal is that while some, maybe a majority, did this, a great many of them did not. They usually migrated in related groups, but this must be qualified as such groups rarely, if ever, comprised the totality of those who could be included genealogically. As we have indicated, a group, while it might have a core of closely related families, almost invariably included families connected through marriage as well as a few more distantly related. The personnel shifted constantly, depending on personal information, personal genealogy and personal whim. So when Musil reports that the Nuwasira summer at Taima, he means that some of the Nuwasira plus some others summer at Taima, as indeed they still do. Other parts of the Nuwasira might aggregate, along with some of their connections, anywhere from Palmyra to Gara in al-Juba or from Damascus and the Golan Heights to Kerba and Najaf in Iraq; meanwhile a variety of individual Nuwasira might be with connections through women who might be from the same tribal section, another tribal section of the Rwala or from a different tribe. In no sense can one say that the Nuwasira have territory at Taima; at the

most, one can say that the Nuwasira, or some of them, have a khuwa relationship with some of the inhabitants of Taima. While they were there it is possible to say that Taima was their dira, but in no sense did they own the area; it was not their territory. It is easier to understand the accretions of individuals into groups through the mechanisms of the genealogy and links through women rather than through ideas of territory with boundaries.

We hope that we have indicated with sufficient emphasis that the Rwala concept of territory is not the same as the one with which we are familiar. Territory is not exclusive; it cannot be owned; it cannot be sold; nor is it valued for what can be extracted from it. Rather the Rwala see themselves as managing an environment in co-operation with the other users of it for the benefit of all. How it is actually managed depends on the various geographic, political and economic factors beyond their control, but they manage it as best they can because they have a moral duty to do so. This moral duty is not only to their symbiotic partners, but to generations on both sides of the nomad/settled equation as yet unborn.

This is the ideal concept of territory, a political concept which was intimately bound up with maintaining economic assets and keeping the peace so that those assets could be pursued. The emergence of the modern state, motor transport, oil wealth and economic development have changed the reality in which the Rwala worked. They attempt to accommodate these new considerations within their frame of reference. Camel pastoralism, rather than being subsistence plus the commodity which linked the Bedouin into the wider economy, is now subsistence plus longterm insurance. Yet the Bedouin supply the economic demands of the wider society by being the largest component in the motorised transport system. Khuwa has been abolished and with it the mechanism for regulating grazing, with the result that vast areas of rangeland have been destroyed by over-grazing. Protection of the trade routes and keeping the peace have been translated into joining the Saudi National Guard and the Jordanian Camel Corps. Raiding, which as we have said in an earlier paper was primarily an economic response, has changed from raiding camels to supply the external market and gain reputation, to "raiding" the state for subsidies, to entrepreneurship and to smuggling.

The most difficult aspect of new state regulations for the Rwala is the title and registration of land. The basic distinction in Islam concerning land is that between utilised land and non-utilised land. Utilisation is normally discussed in terms of agriculture, urban development, industrial uses, and although desert land is classed as unused, there is a Hadith that says the Prophet's principle was that 'all people are partners in fodder, fire and water', a saying reminiscent of the Rwala belief that grazing and water belong to all. Land used by a community for dry-farming or for pasture belonged to the community while the land was in use, and such land could not be taken by the ruler; this is comparable to the Rwala use of dira. The Rwala also were familiar with groups buying and selling agricultural land, for there are two examples of sections of tribal groups buying, in one case, land at an oasis and, secondly, land at a desert fringe village, both examples dating from the early and late 19th century.

The history of land distribution in Saudi Arabia in modern times starts early in the formation of the state and was designed by King Abdul Aziz to 'transform the nomadic life of the Bedouins into a more peaceful settled one'

(Hajrah 1982: 52). Each tribal group was to settle round watering places, and settlement was the policy from 1912-1932. After 1932, the political union of the country made possible 'the transformation of tribal territory into land held by particular communities' (Hajrah; 41). During the 1960s various settlement schemes were established; land was distributed to large groups of individuals, although in many cases settlement was short-lived owing to problems with water, soil and salinity. The Public Land Distribution Agency, established in 1968, considered the continuation of nomadism in regard to the need to limit the 'fragmented land control traditionally asserted by nomads'. (41). The present policy of the PDLA is to develop new lands by private entrepreneurs backed by revenues from oil.

The Rwala are in the Northern Area of Saudi Arabia. Of the four areas that the PDLA have designated for agricultural development, only Jauf-Sakaka concerns us at the moment. (The others are Tebuk, of which we have no knowledge, and Wadi Sirhan and Qasim, of which we have indirect knowledge). Land considered suitable for agricultural development lies in little depressions among the rocky hills, and the pockets of soil are too small to be normally considered for distribution. The PDLA, saying the 'nomads ... are now insistently requesting Public Lands' (219), decided to distribute them 'since they could be utilised better for continuous agriculture' (217-8). These areas had been used 'in the common interest' as pasture after rains and such land should be exempt from consideration as State Lands (31). The Rwala and other tribes in the area feel that, given the land is up for distribution, they have to make a claim and some attempt at utilisation. There are now several small agricultural settlements of Rwala east of Jauf-Sakaka. But the success of these in either PDLA terms or Rwala ones needs qualifying. The PDLA is aware that in some places water is very deep and therefore costly to extract, so that some potential areas were quickly abandoned. Others have drainage and/or soil problems and all are troubled by salinity. With the poor soil, harsh climate and successful marketing of vegetables from Jordan in the area, few plots make a profit for their owners. Without the large government grants, loans and subsidies, hardly any would ever have been started, as I have said in a previous publication (1981). After two more visits in 1983 and late 1984, I see no reason to modify these statements. It is the possibility of collecting subsidies and grants that keep the Rwala there. It is temporarily convenient to have a base for the old and very young; the economically active play the system and explore other options modern and traditional.

The Rwala see the process of land distribution in one of their traditional grazing areas as an attempt by the State to undermine tribal solidarity and the ideology on which it is based, but it is precisely that ideology which enables the Rwala to resist the blandishments of individual land ownership and profit. Although they emphasise individual autonomy, they see land ownership as abrogating their ability to pursue assets and options for the benefit of the group. Agriculture in these new settlements does not fit with Rwala perceptions of a successful management of the physical environment. Camel pastoralism is both more productive and less destructive; unfortunately camels have little profit now, there being no demand for them in the wider economic market. The other skills produced by camel pastoralism have been moved to the transporting and marketing of sheep and other products, to general entrepreneurship. The only opportunities for agriculture that the Rwala are aware of are the acquisition of the available grants, loans and subsidies. Sometimes they seem to regard land distribution as an opportunity for 'raiding' the State; other times they talk

of the process as another resource to be managed as any other. The attitude taken seems to depend on context, speaker, audience and circumstances; it is not possible to differentiate between the successful and unsuccessful, or young and old.

Similar situations have been mentioned for the Shammar around Hail, by Fabietti (1982), where the land and water are of better quality and agriculture is an apparently viable option; though to what degree this would be so without aid and fixed prices is not clear. Cole (1975) reports the development at Haradh in southeastern Saudi Arabia was impeded because the al-Murrah refused to register land, seeing registration as an attempt to create differences of wealth and thus to detribalise them. The Wadi Sirhan schemes have not been noticeably effective, many of the Bedouin returning to herding with the improvement of grazing in the desert; it seems that practical and moral reasons were at work here. The latest attempt of the Saudi Arabian government to settle nomads by designating what were once community lands to be state lands, better able to benefit the state by being developed for agriculture, is regarded by the Rwala as short-sighted, dependent on oil revenues which are becoming as unpredictable as so much else in the environment. They also maintain that their idea of territory is more in keeping with what they perceive as the moral aspect of Islam rather than its political one. The Rwala know nomadism and tribalism survived the Prophet Mohammad and Wahhabism; they expect to continue.

#### Bibliography

- Briant, Pierre  
1982      ÉTAT ET PASTEURS AU MOYEN ORIENT ANCIEN. CUP.
- Blunt, Lady Anne  
1879      BEDOUIN TRIBES OF THE EUPHRATES. London.  
1881      A PILGRIMAGE TO NEJD. London.
- Burckhardt, J.L.  
1831      NOTES ON THE BEDOUINS AND WAHABYS. London.
- Cole, Donald Powell  
1975      NOMADS OF THE NOMADS. Chicago.
- Fabietti, Ugo  
1982      "Sedentarization as a means of detribalisation; some policies of the Saudi Arabian government towards the nomads". In STATE, SOCIETY AND ECONOMY IN SAUDI ARABIA, ed. T. Niblock. London.
- Hajrah Hassan Hamza  
1982      PUBLIC LAND DISTRIBUTION IN SAUDI ARABIA. London.
- Kister, M.J.  
1980      STUDIES IN THE JAHALIYYA AND EARLY ISLAM. London.



- Lancaster, W.O.  
1981 THE RWALA BEDOUIN TODAY. CUP.
- Musil, Alois  
1927 ARABIA DESERTA. New York.  
1928 NORTHERN NEJD. New York.
- Raswan, C.R.  
1935 BLACK TENTS OF ARABIA. Boston.
- Serjeant, R.B.  
1981 STUDIES IN ARABIAN HISTORY AND CIVILIZATION. London.
- Zahrins, n.d.

William & Fidelity Lancaster  
Rysa Lodge  
Lyness  
Stromness  
Orkney  
United Kingdom