Shifting Politics in Bedouin Love Poetry

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I focus, in this chapter, on the emotions or sentiments associated with relations betwe
men and women in a Bedouin community in Egypt's Western Desert, especially t
discourses of "love." My argument proceeds by way of a Bedouin love story. T
community of Bedouins about which I write are part of a group known as the Awl
'Ali who inhabit the area along the Mediterranean coast of Egypt west of Alexand
into Libya.[1] I lived in this community from 1978 to 1980, visited once for a mor
five years later, and went back for five months of fieldwork in 1987. Until abo
thirty-five years ago, those still living in the Western Desert made a living mos
by herding sheep, growing barley, and organizing camel caravans to transport da
from the oases to the Nile Valley. Now they are involved in all sorts of activiti
from the old one of raising sheep to the newer ones of tending orchards, smuggli
supplying construction materials, and speculating in real estate. They used to live
tents. Now most of them live in houses, although they still pitch their tents next
their houses and prefer sitting in the tents at least during the day. They used to ride
horses, camels, and donkeys; now they prefer Toyota trucks. Although sedentarizi
they still proudly distinguish themselves from the settled peasant and urban gro
of the Nile Valley—the Egyptians—by their tribal organization and what they se
their superior morality. But, as I will discuss, even this is beginning to change.

Here is the love story. I was back in Egypt in 1985, visiting for the first time si
my initial fieldwork the families I had lived with for almost two years. It was earl
the morning of the last day I was there. My host, the head of the family, with wh
I had lived as a sort of adopted daughter, was getting ready to drive me to Cair
catch my plane. He rummaged around in the pockets of his various robes and v
looked in his briefcase, and finally in exasperation asked his children, who wer
standing around, if they knew what had happened to the cassette of Fathalla Aj-jb
His eldest daughter sheepishly went and got it from the cassette player she and
sisters often secretly listened to when he was away. The kids put my suitcases in
trunk of his new Mercedes, I said my goodbyes, and we set off. As soon as we
on the desert highway, he turned on the tape deck and said that I had to listen to

My host listened raptly, interjected exclamations of sympathy at the end of some of the poems, and elaborated, with intense and obvious admiration, on some of the references in the poems. Among the poems were the following two:

Patience is hard,
for my heart, so freshly wounded ...

wa'r 'alēh iṣ-ṣabr
jarḥā jdīd māzāl khāṭrī ...'

I'd figured, oh beloved, that distance
would be a cure but it only made it worse ...

niḥsāb yā 'azīz il-mōḥ yabgā lī dwā nādh zādni ...

My host explained that Fathalla, the young man reciting the poems (whose kinship relation to one of our neighbors he identified) had been in love with his paternal cousin and wanted to marry her. Their fathers had first agreed to it but then got into an argument with each other. The young woman's father decided to refuse to give his daughter to the young man. In despair and thinking that he might get over this more easily if he put distance between them, the man set off for Libya (where until recently many Bedouin men went looking for work). Some time afterward, the girl's father arranged to marry his daughter to someone else. When Fathalla heard the news, he composed and recorded these poems and sent the tape to the girl's brother, a cousin with whom he had grown up. Fifteen days after the wedding, when the bride came back to her family's household for the ritual postmarital visit, her brother played her the tape. She listened to it and when it was over, she gasped for air, fainted, and then fell over, dead.

This story tells us a great deal about the politics of emotion discourse in Bedouin society.

The Awlad 'Ali are tribally organized. For them, common descent through the male line and shared blood provide the primary and the only legitimate basis for binding people together. Paternal kin live together, share some property, pass it on, and go to social functions together. They are also expected to feel close. If blood bonds between paternal relatives, male or female, are privileged as the only basis of social relationships, then heterosexual or romantic love, even in its legitimate guise of marriage, although necessary for the reproduction of society and the perpetuation of lineages, is hard to deal with. It does not rest easily within this framework for social relations and is in fact a threat.

Love and the bonds it might establish between individuals are not just threats to the framework that orders social relations, but are also talked about as threats

Even more importantly, sexual bonds are seen as threats to the authority and contro of elder male relatives who represent the interests of the agnatic family group, con trol its resources, and make its decisions. At marriage, sons begin to have a sma domain of authority of their own, and daughters leave the domain of authority c their father and kin.

The threat marriage represents is counteracted at every point by social and idec logical strategies. The marital bond is undermined in numerous ways: Women retai close ties to their paternal relatives, senior male relatives control the choice of ma riage partners, and sexual segregation ensures that husbands and wives spend littl time together. Divorce is easy and polygyny possible. And the married couple rarely economically independent. Love matches are actively discouraged. One ma told me that the only way people who loved each other would be allowed to marr was if their elder male relatives or the girl's paternal cousins did not know. Wome often told me that love matches always ended badly for the woman because sh would not have the support of her male kin if her husband mistreated her.

I have argued that the cultural preference for patrilateral parallel cousin marriage another such strategy (Abu-Lughod 1986). The Awlad 'Ali frequently marry first cou ins or other cousins on the father's side and the male even has legal claim to his pate nal uncle's daughter. This type of marriage may be upheld as the cultural ideal, becau it provides a means of defusing the threat of the sexual bond in this social system; *subsumes* the marital bond under the prior and more legitimate bond of kinship.

The moral code that prescribes modesty is the most effective means of undermi ing the sexual bond. If the threat to the social order can be made to seem a threat the respectability or moral worth of the individual, then that order will be reproduc by the actions of individuals in everyday life. The modesty code ensures that ev individuals who do not have as much stake in the system—like young men and esp cially women—will help perpetuate it, because their virtue or their standing as mo beings, as good persons, depends on denying their sexuality. As I hinted earlier, th sentiments of sexual modesty are situational. They are important to display only front of certain people—the elder male agnates. So, sexual modesty must be seen a form of deference to them. The moral sentiments of modesty are part of a discou that sustains and perpetuates the particular social system and the power of cert groups within it.

Conversely, then, the immodest sentiments of "love" are subversive. To expr them is subversive of the social order and defiant of those whose interests are ser by this order. This element of defiance is made concrete in the story of Fathalla singing about his feelings of love, he was, in a sense, defying the authority of paternal uncle, who had thwarted his desires and prevented him from marrying cousin.

the Bedouin discourse of defiance. There is plenty of evidence that poetry is in gen-
eral associated with opposition to the ideals of normal social life. This type of poetry
is considered un-Islamic. The pious shouldn't recite it or show any interest in it. It
is also considered unrespectable. Even the term "to sing" can't be said in mixed-
sex company without causing all-around embarrassment. People say that they are
ashamed or embarrassed about singing in front of nonintimates, especially elders.
Women told me never to share their poems with the men. And in the past, older men
avoided public settings like weddings and sheep-shearing parties where young men
usually recited this type of poetry. The most persuasive evidence of the oppositional
character of poetry is who recites poetry and who avoids it. Although older men
occasionally recite them, *ghinnāwas* are most closely associated with youths and
women. These are the disadvantaged dependents who have least to gain in the system
as structured.

The Cassette

One aspect of Fathalla's story I want to take up is the somewhat surprising fact that
his love songs were on a cassette. I had thought, when I left Egypt after my first
period of fieldwork in 1980, that the Bedouin *ghinnāwa* was dying out. The adoles-
cents I knew did not sing or recite this type of poetry, nor did they seem particularly
interested in it. They were beginning to listen to Egyptian radio, and it was from their
mothers, aunts, and grandmothers, and sometimes from their fathers and a few young
men, that I collected poetry. These adults offered one explanation for why poetry was
dying out: They said that there were no longer any occasions for singing. There is a
certain truth to their deceptively straightforward explanation to which I will return.

If, however, it was the ideology of the political system, with its value of au-
tonomy, that lent positive valence to expressions of love as defiance, even when they
came from below, then one would not be surprised to find such discourses dying as
the Awlad 'Ali Bedouins' political autonomy was undermined. This has been going
on for quite a while as the Egyptian state has sought, over the last 35 years, to in-
troduce its authority into the Western Desert, a process that has been underway in
Bedouin areas closer to the Nile Valley for 150 years or more. The Awlad 'Ali have
developed an impressive array of strategies to resist, subvert, and circumvent the
authority of the state, which they consider illegitimate. Since they are not fazed by
guns, and prison sentences carry no stigma, it is even hard to intimidate them into
good citizenship.

There is, however, one process that began in their region in the 1970s that,
more effectively than government efforts to disarm them, school them, put them in
the military, license and register them, is progressively undermining their resistance
to the state: the gradual shift in their economic life from herding and commercial

they are increasingly buying and relying on for a livelihood, if not actually farming
themselves. Land along the coast, on the other hand, has become valuable for touris
development, and many of them are doing quite well selling beachfront property
They are also fighting with each other over this land, which was formerly tribally
held rather than individually owned. With this involvement in land, the Bedouin
have become enmeshed in the state's legal system, since they need to get titles an
make claims through it.

This shift in the Bedouin political economy can be connected with what I see a
a shift in the dialectic of deference and defiance in which love songs are deployed
As the economic basis of the tribal system erodes, and with it the political under
pinnings of the value of autonomy, the older reality of mutual responsibility withi
the family and lineage is changing. There used to be a complex division of labo
with resources managed by elders but not owned. Now private ownership puts tre
mendous control in the hands of patriarchs. Young men suffer, as I will discuss, bu
those most dramatically affected are women. They are now economically dependen
on men, having little access to money, and their work is increasingly confined t
housework. With the moral value of modesty still in force, these women who live i
the new circumstances of sedentarized communities, where they are surrounded b
neighbors most of whom are nonkin, must be *more* secluded, more often veiled, an
less free to move around.

Older women comment on these changes, reminiscing about things they used t
do that young women today cannot get away with—like having rendezvous wi
sweethearts and exchanging songs with men at weddings and sheep shearings.[2] B
they are also convinced that they were more modest, a perception that I think relat
to a sense that it was more self-imposed. They often complain that their sons, hu
bands, nephews, and grandsons harshly restrict the girls, not letting them go an
where. Girls, for their part, are beginning to complain that they feel imprisoned. T
domestic political divide now runs along gender lines, whereas it used to be betwe
elders on one side and women and young men on the other. All men have access
the market and increasing freedom of movement; all women do not.

This shift in political economy has implications for traditional love poems, whi
as I have discovered, are not, after all, dying out. Bedouin love songs are taking
different meaning and force, having been given new life by the advent of the casse
The Bedouins had said that songs were dying out because there were no occasi
for singing. In a sense, they were right. By the time I first met them, in 1978, t
were reciting love poems only in intimate social situations. As I later learned, h
ever, the most important forum for love songs had been weddings, at which yo
men and women had sung within earshot of and sometimes to each other.[3] Th
kinds of celebrations had stopped by then, and the weddings I attended were sexu
segregated. The women sang only songs of blessing, congratulation, and praise,

kind of wedding celebration coming into fashion. At this new wedding, attended by invited guests but also attracting a growing group of somewhat rowdy young men, the small-time stars of these low-budget commercial cassettes perform. Because of the public nature of these occasions, where, unlike in the past, "public" includes a wide range of nonkin and complete strangers, women are absent. They are also, out of modesty, absent from the recording sessions where tapes are made. They make no tapes and no longer sing in public. No longer having as much social and political support for defiance, the women also seem to be losing one of the means for it—love poetry.

The poems sung on cassettes and at *mīkrofōn* weddings seem now to be part of a discourse of defiance by young men against the more absolute authority and economic control of their fathers and paternal uncles. This is a period when, at the same time, young men are beginning to have more possibilities for independence from the kin group through wage labor and more knowledge than their fathers about the ways of the state through their experiences in the army and school. A new sort of generational conflict produced by these transitional circumstances is being played out partly in the language of love.

I had unexpected confirmation of the new use of "love" on my visit in January 1987, when I was listening with friends to one of the latest cassettes of popular Bedouin songs of a different genre. There was a long and somewhat humorous song about the tribulations of a young man whose father and uncle had arranged three terrible marriages for him with women he'd never met. The first woman turned out to be bald, the second dumb, and the third insane and violent to boot. In the final verse of his song the poet, speaking on behalf of all young men who have suffered the tyranny of such fathers and uncles, sings:[4]

> My warnings are to the old man
> who imprisons the freedom of youths
> who's forgotten a thing called love
> affection, desire, and burning flames
> who's forgotten how strong is the fire of lovers
> how strong the fire of lovers who long for one another
> What's exquisite is that they're afraid
> they say, any minute my prying guard will turn up
> oh my father's about to catch us

The relationship between love and freedom in this song is complex—because, although he does not want the elders to force loveless marriages on their children, the poet recognizes that what makes love exquisite is that it is stolen—it is against the authority of elder agnates. In other words, he wants the freedom to defy the elders a

and roll, which some would argue played and plays a similar role in our society, the protests occur in an idiom that the elders can appreciate: the poetry they themselves love and must respect, given their own values. This is true even though they disapprove of the young men's bare heads, occasional long hair, experimentation with drugs and liquor, and general loss of *ḥasham*. Everyone comments on this now—the new brand of young men aren't modest in front of their fathers. According to the girls I talk with, in front of their fathers these young men not only smoke cigarettes but, worse, they shamelessly play love songs on their cassette recorders.

This is only a partial analysis of the shifting politics of Bedouin discourses on love, a complex subject on which I do not want to impose a false coherence. Yet it should be sufficient to make clear my larger analytical point regarding the anthropology of emotion. As long as emotions remain the object of study, we cannot break with the idealism and mentalism of the interpretive approach.[5] These assumptions keep making it difficult to see how, for us, emotions serve as tokens in the construction of our subjectivity, how they bolster our belief in the truth of our individuality, and how all of this might also be political and specific to our place and time—that is, something worth analyzing critically rather than universalizing.[6]

If instead we take discourses as the object of analysis, we can get at something more interesting. I am not making a narrow plea for sociolinguistics or the ethnography of communication, although they are also involved. "Discourse" is a concep that recognizes that what people say, generously defined (which is, after all, wha anyone is dealing with in the anthropological study of emotions), is inseparable fron and interpenetrated with changing power relations in social life. There is a doubl movement implied in this notion. First, social and political life is to be seen as th product of interactions among individuals whose practices are informed by avail able discourses; second, language and culture are understood pragmatically rathe than referentially. They are understood as part of social and political life. Analyzin emotion discourses as discourses rather than as data for our own "scientific" di courses on emotion provides us with a technique for avoiding the false attributic of the project of psychologizing to others as it reminds us relentlessly of the soci nature of emotional expression.[7]

A Discourse Redeployed

If any further evidence need be offered for the critical importance of retaining a sen of the always social character of emotion discourse, consider the final aspect of th Bedouin love story: the context in which it was told. Fathalla's story was told to m

for the United States. I had been absent for five years the first time, and they did not know when I would next return. I promised it would be soon.[8] Although my host and his family had begged me to stay, and my host had gone as far as to offer to set up a job for me directing a private school he would finance, I insisted that my life was in *amrīka* and that it was not likely that I would come to live permanently in Egypt. When he played this tape for me and told me its sad tale, he was not interested in explicating Bedouin emotion concepts or in understanding himself, but rather in impressing on me the force of poetry. Wasn't he, in a way, using the force of poetry on me? Of course, he knew I was writing a book about poetry, and we often discussed poems. Was there more? Did he wish to move me, to resist my departure by these songs and by telling me what effect they had had on another woman?

I sensed that this may have been part of his intent when, two years later, as I went over Fathalla's love poems with my host's wife, a woman I always talked with about poetry and who was good at explaining poems, I heard something surprising. She knew the poems and knew Fathalla's story, but said she had not heard that the girl had died. In fact, she was fairly certain that she was alive and living with the husband of her arranged marriage.

This incident can serve as a reminder that the emotional discourses we might want to use for our anthropological discourse on emotion are hardly inert. They may indeed have a cultural context, but the more important thing about them is that they participate in social projects—whether the larger ones of generational contests over power in an eroding tribal system or the local and particular ones of a conversation between a Bedouin man and a youngish female anthropologist driving to Cairo in a Mercedes.

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Notes

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1. For a fuller discussion of the Awlad 'Ali, see Abu-Lughod (1986).
2. They talk about an institution called the *mijlās,* in which a young unmarried woman would entertain all the eligible young men in a tent, challenging ther to respond to her songs.
3. Like the dissolution of the discourse of women's weaving in North Africa, 'a gued by Messick (1987) to be related to the capitalist transformation of d mestic weaving, with the disappearance of one occasion for song have died th songs appropriate to it among the Awlad 'Ali. Sheep shearings, which use to be occasions for groups of young men to go from household to househo shearing the sheep, no longer occur, as professionals, mostly from Sinai, ha taken over this work. The songs that accompanied sheep shearing were mo explicitly sexual than the *ghinnāwa,* couching in innuendo their references relations between men and women. These are no longer heard, and I heard no equivalently sexual genres.
4. The Arabic original, as sung by 'Awadh al-Mālkī, is as follows:

nṣūba minnī lish-shāyib
illī hābis hurrīt ish-shab
wnāsī hāja ismhā hub
w'atf wshōg wnār thib
yā magwā nār il-ghāwī
yā magwā nār il-'ajgīn
illī ba'dhun mishtāgīn
simāḥithā yagbō khāyfīn
ygūl in-nāgir sā'a yjī
ygūl in-nāgir sā'a ytūg