Sinai for the Coffee Table

Birds, Bedouins and Desert Wanderlust

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Ru‘ah Sinai (The Sinai Spirit)

Ever since Israel occupied the Sinai Desert in 1967, that piece of earth has consistently made Israeli headlines. Its media presence was only enhanced after Camp David and Israel’s withdrawal in 1979 and 1982. The public's insatiable interest in the Sinai is today reflected in copious newspaper articles, books both popular and scholarly, expensive coffee-table books, top forty pop tunes and diverse television programs. Central to this preoccupation is the Israeli fascination with the Bedouins.

The Sinai Spirit is a recent, interesting addition to the great store of Israeli knowledge about the desert and its people. The book received rave reviews in the Israeli press and its author was invited to the prestigious Yaron London television show, which focuses on the cutting edge of Israeli art, drama, film and literature. Rabinowitz writes in the ethno-poetic, self-reflexive style, one of the genres within post-modernist anthropology. Hence The Sinai Spirit can be read through the optics of contemporary interpretive anthropology, which itself reflects anthropology's current crisis of content and form.

Behind this crisis, though, are two paradoxes previously overlooked by anthropologists. First, anthropology has based itself on the preservation of authentically exotic cultures as text, and on the Western colonial heritage (and later, hegemony) imposed on these cultures. Ironically, while preserved as texts, these cultures have dissipated and disappeared as lived realities. Second, anthropology has drawn much of its persuasive power from its combination of personal experience (with all the cultural baggage of the researcher) and objective distancing (the generalizations of cross-cultural analysis). These sharply critical questions are genuinely "post-modernist" in the sense of explicitly thematizing topics neglected until the late 1970s. They include the problematic of the anthropologist’s relationship to the people she studies, as well as the ways in which she has been permanently affected by her experience with another (an Other) culture.

Rabinowitz presents himself as post-modernist, yet reveals a decidedly traditional impulse, one shared by many Israelis and other Westerners alike: a deep, romantic longing for the desert. The reader is left to wonder: is The Sinai Spirit an expression of critical anthropology—or just one more addition to Israel's desert carnival? Why does Rabinowitz, like so many Israelis, yearn for the Sinai five years after its return to Egypt?

Nature and Nostalgia

Between 1975-1979, Rabinowitz was a staff member of the Israeli Society for the Protection of Nature—a non-profit organization similar to the Sierra Club but supported by membership dues and government subsidies. The Society has "field schools" or study centers in scenic sites both in Israel and in the territories occupied in 1967. Aside from organizing hiking tours and nature seminars, and planting the Israeli flag both in Israel and in the occupied territories, staff members conduct research in geology, botany, zoology, climatology, archaeology, and other disciplines.

Rabinowitz worked at the Tzekei David (David's Cliffs) Field School, a complex comprising a modest tourist hostel, classrooms and staff living quarters, all surrounded by the majestic red cliffs of the Central South Sinai peninsula, by the neighboring Mount Moses, and by the Santa Katarina Monastery.

The field school provides the institutional context for Rabinowitz's text. The personal style and rich, colorful descriptions, together with the book's impressionistic illustrations, all evoke his unique vision of desert life. The first part, "1975-1979," narrates a happy collage of journeys, as if thickly describing slides. It relates experiences Rabinowitz shared with the Field School staff, with the Bedouins—and (anthropomorphically) with the desert mountain peaks. The second part, "1979-1985," is an account of Rabinowitz's painful journeys into the Sinai after it was returned to Egypt. Separated by a single white page, the book's concluding section, "A Winter Night on Mount Carmel," charts the author's journey into the past, to a Sabbath evening of his childhood when he first discovered the South Sinai. On that evening, leaping through a children's magazine, he found an article replete with images of the skull-filled Santa Katarina.
Monastery and of girls who combed their hair with camel urine. Ever since then he knew that he would find there "a great stillness, a storm of emotions, a string vibrating in the heart" (p. 109).

The book is a work of such lyricism that I was reminded of my years—also 1975-1979—shared with the Mzeina Bedouins as I studied their poetic responses to the military occupation. Despite its post-modernist zest, though, Rabinowitz’s text entangles itself in two thickets of old stereotypes. First, it succumbs to the web of Orientalist images to which many European Israelis (Ashkenazim) resort when examining Arabs. Second, it presents a squeaky-clean image of the Israeli Society for the Protection of Nature. The Society seeks to preserve (or recreate?) the pastoral idyll of a pristine Holy Land in the midst of 20th century military occupation. This it does by establishing field schools in the occupied territories, schools that see themselves as apolitical institutions. Although the Society does not identify with the zealous West Bank settler movement (Gush Emunim), it nonetheless accepts government subsidies as it seeks to create a safari-space for contemporary Israelis.

Renato Rosaldo, in a boldly original essay, described such lyrical yearning as "imperialist nostalgia." "We," he writes, "valorize innovation, and then yearn for more stable worlds, whether these reside in our own past, in other...putatively static savage cultures, ...or in theconfabulation of the two." This perspective may serve as a critical guide to Rabinowitz’s Sinai journeys into a wilderness yet to be discovered, an area he calls "white spots on the map." Rabinowitz’s journeys are both real and irreal, journeys into "the Sinai of the imagination...an extract of longing for innocent, thin-wasted youth that was lost" (p. 10).

The Bedouin Savage

Claude Lévi-Strauss called attention to the dichotomous opposition between Nature and Culture. Rabinowitz betrays a peculiar tendency to confuse Bedouin culture with Nature—to the distinct disadvantage of the former. "There are things," he writes, "that the trees remember, and the old man will never, ever, be able to understand" (p. 15). In many ways, "his" Bedouins are indistinguishable from Nature, leading to such juxtapositions as "a baby cries...a donkey brays" (p. 22). Rabinowitz maintains that the Bedouin hunter somehow "communicates" with his prey, "a communication that grows till the climax of love, till death" (p. 58). "Children" in the oasis of Wadi Firan "like silent bats, burst forth from the gloomy darkness of the path" (p. 22).

In the course of the narrative, Rabinowitz’s Bedouins, half-human, half-animal, living in the "alien world beyond the mountains" (p. 47), become increasingly exotic. Such a process bestows upon them "a mysterious, queer past" (p. 33), allowing their rituals to appear as "pristine yet weird remnants of events from once-upon-a-time" (p. 35). Quotidian actions such as waking up in the morning (p. 16) or rolling and smoking a cigarette (p. 14) become activities of creatures from outer space. Listing the routine activities of the field school, Rabinowitz categorizes without pause "observation of birds; observation of the [Bedouin] village" (p. 68). Indeed, one of the Tzukei David hikes offered for high-school students was an "observation-tour" of the nearby Bedouin village, el-Milga. The students were taken to the hills surrounding the village, and just as a zoologist observes an ibex herd, so the tourists observed the curious activities of the human species in their habitat. Further, they were to document those observations on special forms prepared by the school staff, and to discuss their findings when they returned to the classroom.

Such authoritarian observations recall those of European travelers concerning the African savage, a genre brilliantly analyzed by Mary Pratt. She notes that such observations typically use the passive voice. When the European traveler described "little scratches on the face of the country," the reader imagined Bushmen digging for edible roots. Rabinowitz also makes generous use of the passive voice. We read about "campfires that are lit," "coughs that get slipped out" (i.e., someone coughs), and "stacks of firewood that are brought" (p. 20). One assumes that these are activities of human beings. In one chapter there appears a series of organs in search of their owners: "an old finger bathes in hot blood," "vigilant eyes combing" (p. 22), or "mouths cooing in a buzz" (p. 26). The reader must tease out meanings that would be appropriate characterizations for real human beings.

That which on the surface reads as a poetic and sympathetic stance toward the Bedouins, in substance presents the Bedouin as some bizarre, bat-like primitive. And in Israel, that which is primitively bizarre—when associated with the Arabs—spells danger.

"Dark, Well-known Things"

One of the literary means for exoticizing the Other’s culture is to titillate the reader with that culture’s women. Consciously or not, The Sinai Spirit embroiders the reader’s fantasies of Bedouin.

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life. Rabinowitz describes veiled women as "crowded lumps of black" (p. 26), "girls...nun-like, forever mysterious" (p. 85). Describing phases of stimulation and frustration, Mr. Rabinowitz fears that, in this traditional purdah culture, "the [women's] secret will never be revealed to me. The [women's] place is on the far side of my mind—where every vagina is a trap" (p. 85). Yet Rabinowitz is not shy about interpreting the behavior of Bedouin women, even though they do not participate in his research. He acquaints us with a woman who "suddenly stands up, like a pouncing cat...she is naked under her dress...and she sweeps across [the dance floor]...continuing to hint at those dark well-known...things" (p. 26) that denied men fear to think about. With much of the text written in such suggestive, puzzling language, the reader can only wonder about this anthropologist's relation to his "subjects."

We are introduced to Bedouin women who make all sorts of sounds. One woman "softly whispers, 'Hey'" (p. 33). Another "walks while clicking her tongue" (p. 48). Grazing her goats, a third woman "gurgles, chirps, makes alerting clamors and relaxing moans" [sic!] (p. 50). As if this were not enough, Rabinowitz then describes "the eldest women of the family who wallow around...like tamed dogs" (p. 51).

The Sinai is a macho world, something immediately conveyed by the book's front cover: a spectacular picture of Rabinowitz sitting on a phallic peak, walking-stick protruding from between his legs and pointed toward the vast space beneath him. He tells us that in his spare time he likes to wander around the empty field school rooms, where "the walls breathed the pleasing scents of young women" (p. 95) who spent their two years of army service there as tour guides.
After describing his strenuous climb to the peak of Mount Umm Shoumar, the author boasts of reaching other sorts of climaxes. Descending from the peak, he recalls demonstrating his masculinity during a one-night stand. Another time we explore Nature while simultaneously examining a silent, overweight, anonymous Israeli woman. Speaking in the third person, Rabinowitz writes: "And he came between the full thighs of the woman, and the imagination carried him to wild destinies." (p. 82). Rabinowitz may be charged with more than simply the now-discredited equation: woman is to man as Nature is to Culture.

Searching for Authenticity

Whereas the Bedouin appear as savages living in Nature, on whom the transition to Culture is imposed by Israeli development projects, Rabinowitz and his friends from Tsukui David ("the desert generation of the seventies," p. 78) are people of Culture transformed by the desert into children of Nature. After their exposure to "the Sinai virus" (p. 78), they talk in "a mountainous, codified language" (p. 88). On the one hand they are "a bunch of kids staring for fun and softness" (p. 88). On the other hand, the author has the chutzpah "to confront the elderly of the tribe with angry arguments" (p. 43) that he, the cultured man, believes in the elements of nature, while they, the savages, insist on believing in a cultural phenomenon such as God.

But when these Israelis, "the desert's guardians" (p. 65), have fun in nature, Rabinowitz no longer employs anthropomorphic metaphors with which he describes the Bedouins. Here the metaphors are drawn from the Israeli reservoir of symbols: "Winter's dusk in the valleys of Santa Katarina. Silent as a Sabbath eve in a moshava [agricultural co-op] at the end of the road" (p. 19). Or again: "Suddenly, the canyon... two straight walls... like a polished master-sergeant amidst a settlement of nomads" (p. 40).

Romanticization and a continual search for biblical, in-the-beginning kinds of authenticity envelop the author's descriptions of himself and his friends. For him, the stories from the "real" Sinai fuse with the "Sinai of the imagination, not a physical place, but an extract of longing" (p. 10). He exposes the reader to a very peculiar Sinai. To appreciate "its humanistic dimension" (p. 10), Rabinowitz is aided by Avraham Shaked, the ex-director of Tsukui David Field School, who recently confessed to an Israeli journalist: "In any place I am an exile. My homeland is the Sinai. What happens with me now is a life after death. I recall the feeling I had when we left—the kind of horrendous pain you feel when you are about to die."

Such monologues, with their sounds of self-destruction, bring us back to Renato Rosaldo and his definition of "imperialist nostalgia" as "the curious phenomenon of people's longing for what they themselves have destroyed."

"A Kingdom Wholly Ours"

In the penultimate chapter, "Death of a Dune," Rabinowitz tells us about a 1985 visit to a sand-dune, one that in the past was a favorite among the many tourists who sand-skied down its slopes. The dune died under the "thousands of feet and bodies" of tourists. Only in front of the ruined dune does our "desert guardian" (p. 65) feel "the sharpened awareness: the desert is gradually disappearing" (pp. 106-07). The meeting between Israeli modernity and desert savagery "was total, elevating (the Bedouins) onto a path from which there is no sane return. Their identity is in danger" (p. 59).

Until 1987 the South Sinai was a remote and largely unexplored wilderness. Only one asphalt road connected the Egyptian city of Suez with Sharm al-Sheikh on the southern tip. Egyptians could hardly conceive of the South Sinai as a place for vacations. Also, Egyptians and scholars of Egypt suggest to me the truth of Rabinowitz's assertion that many Egyptians "fear the desert" (p. 102). This might explain why, since 1979, the Egyptian government has confiscated vast South Sinai Bedouin pasture lands to begin a resettlement project for Egyptians from the crowded Nile valley. The Egyptians thus attempt to replicate the Israeli Negev and North Sinai model of "making the desert bloom."

During its occupation, the South Sinai was used by Israel in exactly the opposite way: as an exotic colony, a safari-space where one could escape physical and social crowdedness. Israelis there found release from social norms, shed their clothes, screamed from mountaintops, climbed rocks, rolled in the sand dunes, or smoked dope—all in splendid freedom.

Rabinowitz mourns the future fate of the Bedouins, "the people whom he loved" (p. 59). He laments the disappearance of the primitive and the end of traditional society. But already in 1921 Bronislaw Malinowski, one of the founders of modern cultural anthropology, observed that anthropologists always "lose" cultures. "This "losing" of cultures always provides great grist for dissertations that advance the careers of the mourners (and perhaps anthropological theory as well). One might rudely inter-

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rupt Rabinowitz’s requiem with the question: what was the meaning of his life in the South Sinai when his permanent home was only a fence away from an Israeli army base? Why did he lead thousands of tourists into the Sinai? Why now these pangs of conscience? Rabinowitz would seem to excuse himself by writing “development assailed” (p. 63), without specifying an object, and as if “development” were independent of developers. Standing at the Taba border, he writes: “On the slope, a strange, alien line, arbitrarily partitioning a kingdom that was wholly ours” (p. 87).

April 1987 marked the fifth anniversary of the change of Israel’s border back to Taba. Instead of visiting the Egyptian South Sinai, which many Israelis fear following the October 1985 incident when a young Egyptian soldier shot and killed seven Israeli tourists, Israelis now can instantly experience Bedouinus Sinaiicus near their homes. Mishkanot Haro’im (The Shepherd’s Dwellings) on the eastern outskirts of the Palestinian side of Jerusalem is a “Bedouin” mini-encampment erected by a clever Jewish businessman. Tourists are served coffee and tea with Bedouin-style hospitality; they are also served a multimedia show suggesting that the Bedouins are a living archaeological specimen from the Biblical era of Abraham. North of Beersheba there is a spectacular museum in Kibbutz Lahav displaying desert habitats and artifacts. In light of this sentimental Sinai Spirit and the Beouin made-in-Israel carnival, one wonders: is the South Sinai some kind of magic cure for Rabinowitz, his “desert guardians” and the rest of Israel as well?

Paradise Lost

Since the dawn of the industrial revolution, Western culture has intertwined modernity with nostalgic dreams of a pastoral world of once-upon-a-time. Raymond Williams discusses this phenomenon in The Country and the City, showing how the fundamental contradiction between city and country aligns itself with other penetrating oppositions: civilized and primitive, Western and non-Western, future and past. James Clifford argues that

Williams traces the constant reemergence of a conventionalized pattern of retrospection that laments the loss of a “good” country, a place where authentic social and natural contacts were once possible. He soon, however, notes an unsettling regression. For each time one finds a writer looking back to a happier place, to a lost, “organic” moment, one finds another writer of that earlier period lamenting a similar, previous disappearance. The ultimate referent is, of course, Eden.

On the back cover of The Sinai Spirit we see a photograph of the anthropologist touring the red granite cliffs of Eden, outfitted with hiking boots, tshemel hat, backpack and violin. The humanitarian occupation of Eden proceeds without a yarmulke or an Uzi. Rabinowitz’s weapon is language, projecting longing onto pastoral spaces. “longings… arranged like rows of crops in the refrigerator” (p. 78).

Yet Rabinowitz is part of a genealogical chain of requiem singers who are also Zionist fighters and dreamers. Once in the

Footnotes

4 Rosaldo.
7 James Clifford, p. 112.
8 Etkin.