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Traditions and Transformations: Tourism, Heritage and Cultural Change in the Middle East and North Africa Region

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Nomad Tribal Women and Tourism Development: the Khamseh Tribes, Iran

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Abstract

Despite an estimated 1,5 million nomads from over 100 different nomadic tribes, in the past years nomad and travelling lifestyles in Iran have been rapidly declining. While the role of Iranian authorities is still not clear, with some signs of the Iranian Academy of Arts pointing to the priority of cultural preservation, nomad tribes in the country are increasingly the object of the tourist gaze. This research is based on detailed fieldwork conducted in 2007 in Bavanat, a county in the Fars province, Southwest Iran. By looking at the nomad tribes of Khamseh, which have registered over 4500 visitors in the past three years, we attempt to examine the changing role of women within the tribe, and the ways in which the recent development and growth of tourism is transforming their social and cultural practices. At the same time we also analysed the perceptions and experiences of tourists on nomadic tourism in Bavanat. Interviews, Focus Group with nomadic women and guestbook analysis were used.

INTRODUCTION

It is quite a paradox that while society as a whole is becoming more and more restless and mobile, and travel is increasingly an integral part of the postmodern 'new world order of mobility' (Clifford 1997:1), tourists travel great lengths to see or to have brief and superficial contacts with nomad indigenous people. It is common for tourism agencies and tour operators to use the phrase 'authentic cultural encounters'. While tourists that want 'to be' nomads increase on a daily basis, nomads themselves are on the path of vanishing. To a certain degree this is precisely because modern societies are a threat to these ways of life. According to Kaplan (1996: 66), nomads can be understood as those that:

'can track a path through a seemingly illogical space without succumbing to nation-state and/or bourgeois organisation and mastery. The desert symbolises the site of critical and individual emancipation in Euro-American modernity; the nomad represents a subject position that offers an idealised model of movement based on perpetual displacement'.

Clearly, the Euro-American recourse to the metaphors of desert and nomad can never be innocent or separable from the dominant orientalist tropes in circulation throughout modernity. The nomad represents more than the 'other' to be visited. Above all the nomad is an idealised form of travel and freedom from the constraints of modern society. At the same time, while sedentary societies become mobile, we encounter tourists in every corner of the globe, carrying with them a specific cultural baggage. As Sheller and Urry (2006: 207) argue 'all the world seems to be on the move'. Chris Ryan and Birgit Trauer (2003: 560) argue that while there are 300,000 Australians and 100,000 Russians living in London, 'the tourist of the future may well be more of a nomad moving from temporary home to past home to future home, where holidays, business, and personal identities become increasingly associated with movement and collection of places'. Tourism became an icon of the rootlessness and alienation of modern life. Thus, it is perhaps not by chance that socio-material forms of nomadism have contemporarily reappeared in sites of hypermobility, such as motorized subcultures, alternative markets, itinerant art, transnational lifestyles, computer hacking, and so on.

At the level of the imaginary, nomads have long fascinated the West, either as a despicable case of pre-civilizational barbarism or as a romanticized figure of holistic freedom. Presently, there is a dominant view of nomad peoples as fascinating objects for the tourist gaze: they are constructed as romantic figures, positioned (in colonial discourses) as closer to nature, purer or simpler, and near to vanishing (Kaplan 1996). The nomad participates in the discourse of the 'other', signifying the opposite of the Euro-American metropolitan. Heidegger's conception of dwelling is at least partly rooted in a 'sinister...rustic romanticism', constructing 'authentic landscapes, or communities, as consisting of diminishing pockets of harmonious, authentic dwelling in an ever-encroaching sea of alienation' (Clope and Jones 2001: 657). To equate the faraway with the long ago, is to implicitly subscribe to a Eurocentric narrative. To argue that non-Western peoples, and especially indigenous peoples, live their lives through a perception of the world which is more authentic and natural than that of the contemporary West, is to categorise them in a sort of romantic fantasy of Arcadian innocence which is characteristic of many colonial and imperial representations of non-European others. Tourism can bring these ideas to life, in a neo-colonial fashion. There are many types of nomad peoples, of mobile peoples, and not all constitute a fascinating view for tourists. If the desert, steppe, ice and sea are some of the primary sites of the Euro-American

aesthetic sublime, nomads, Bedouins and other mobile tribes have been geographically located outside metropolitan locations, such as in the desert or forest, or on the peripheries of metropolitan locales (gypsies).

To a large degree, tourism and exile occupy opposite poles of the modern experience (Kaplan 1996). Whereas the former celebrates choice, the latter implies coercion (for a slightly different approach see Estelmann 2007). Tourism claims community on a global scale; exile connotes the rupture of the individual from an original community (Kaplan 1996). On the one hand many indigenous people are catering for the demand of tourists as part of their strategy for cultural survival. Their motivations include economic objectives designed to overcome poverty, political objectives associated with bolstering land claim arguments, environmental objectives such as the promotion of non-consumptive uses of resources, and sociocultural goals aimed at fostering cultural identity and pride (Hinch 2001). On the other hand, many other indigenous people are passive or even unwilling participants in this activity as they and their communities are presented as significant attractions in the tourism landscape by external stakeholders. There are numerous examples of indigenous images being used to promote destinations, including: Maori images in New Zealand (McIntosh 2004), Sami images in Norway, Sweden, and Finland (Müller and Petterson 2001), Aboriginal images in Australia (Zeppel 2000), and Inuit and Dene images in northern Canada (Notzke 1999). Indigenous peoples have often been misrepresented, and while the tourism industry has benefited from this practice through increased visitation and expenditure, these benefits have seldom been passed along to the indigenous hosts.

In this paper we understand that indigenous tourism refers to tourism activity in which indigenous people are directly involved either through control and/or by having their culture serve as the essence of the attraction (Hinch and Butler 1996: 9). UNESCO estimates that there are currently around 300–350 million indigenous peoples worldwide, or around 5% of the total world population, representing over 5000 languages and cultures in more than 70 countries on six continents (UNESCO 2006). It is recognised that well-planned ethical tourism development can provide incentives to support indigenous people's traditional customs and values; protect and respect sacred sites; and, enhance the legitimacy of traditional knowledge. (McNeely 2004; Olsder *et al.* 2006) The tourism industry is therefore a critical component in fostering global support for natural and cultural heritage conservation, poverty alleviation and indigenous community well-being.

NOMADS IN IRAN

The last available census on nomadic people in Iran dates from 1998 (the first one was conducted in 1987), and although due to be released soon, more updated data is not yet available. In 1920, about one quarter of Iran's population was nomad (Cottam 1964). Forced settlement in 1920s and 1930s considerably diminished nomad numbers, and since the 1960s, with movements towards cities and extensive land reforms (notably the 1962-63 Land Reform Law proclaiming the non-cultivated land, including pastures, to be registered in the name of the state), there has been a further decline (Tapper 1997). During Reza Shah's reign, the attempt to create a modern, independent, secular, and Persian-speaking country was opposed to nomad cultures, which were perceived as alien cultures and languages, as representing 'primitive' ways of life and unreachable to administration and the rule of law (Tapper 1997). By contrast, Ayatollah Khomeini called the nomad tribes *Zakhayer-e Enqelab*, meaning 'Treasures of the Revolution' and repeatedly criticized Reza Shah's

treatment of nomad cultures. Since the 1980s, the government has given priority to modernisation and to the provision of infrastructural facilities such as electrification, schools, health services and direct financial support to the nomads (Fazeli 2006).

In 1963, two million people (9,5% of the total 21 million people) were nomads or potential nomads (National Commission of UNESCO in Moussavi-Nejad 2003) and in 1976 there are estimates pointing to 2,4 million nomads (Moussavi-Nejad 1990 in Moussavi-Nejad 2003). According to the State Ministry of Education, there are presently over one million nomads in Iran (1,186,393), part of 104 different tribes, which represent 1,7% of the total of 70 million Iranians. The 1998 census indicated 101 nomad tribes, 592 independent clans and 198,692 families, accounting for a total population of 1,304,089 people (Moussavi-Neja 2003). Significantly, the literacy rate among nomads aged six and over is nowadays 63% and over one third of the nomads have a mobile phone. They dwell in a total land area of about 123,000 square kilometres. According to Tapper (1997), tribal groups are often listed by 'ethnic' affiliation, that is, by language and/or supposed origins, and commonly the major categories are: Iranians, held to be native to the country, such as the Lors and the Laks, the Kurds, the Baluches and the Brahuis; immigrant Turks; and Arabs (see Tapper 1997 for more detail on tribal classification). The Bhaktiari, the largest confederation of nomads, were one million in 1997, but in the course of ten years, were reduced to about one quarter of a million. Nomads transhumance routes are generally between summering and wintering quarters (usually from cooler mountain pastures to warmer plains) in order to take advantage of seasonal grazing resources. Most nomads are traditional herders of sheep, goats, camels and other livelihood, and have tribal structures often based on kinship clan and other types of communal organization.

Tourism in Iran

As O'Gorman et al (2007) argue, about 80% of Iran's exports are generated through oil and gas revenues. This simple fact has a major distorting impact on attempts to develop other sectors in the economy, including tourism. In the past decade the number of international tourists in the country has grown steadily. In 1999 Iran registered 1.341 million international visitors (32.5 million domestic tourists), and five years later, there were 1,659 million international visitors (in 1990 there were only 9,300). In 2006-2007 (the year 1375 according to the Iranian calendar), the country was visited by 2,735 million tourists (Statistical Centre of Iran 2009). Presently, international tourism generates receipts in excess of 500 million euro (ITTO 2002), and it is characterised by being mainly regional. Over 80 percent of international tourists come from neighbouring countries. The principal reasons to visit the country are related to business (30%); religion (30%), especially pilgrimages to Shiite Shrines and pilgrims transiting to Mecca in Saudi Arabia or Karbala in Iraq; and visiting friends and relatives (26%). The long-haul sightseeing segment is only 10%, which represents about 270,000 tourists.

METHODOLOGY

This research is based on detailed fieldwork conducted in 2007 in Bavanat, a county in the Fars province, Southwest Iran. Several visits were made to the region between April and November of that year, and various trips were made to Bavanat. At an initial stage these trips were made in the role of a tourist, and one of the authors travelled with different tourist groups. Afterwards, visits were made alone in the role of researcher. Bavanat was chosen due

to proximity of one of the authors work and home place in Shiraz, and also because of language proximity. Most nomads in Bavanat are Farsi-speakers, although some of them retain an Arabic accent. While some older women and men speak Arabic, they can all understand Farsi. Whenever necessary, the younger member of family helped in explaining a word or the meaning of something which was not so clear. The methodology used comprised descriptive and documentary nature, and involved direct observation, interviews with the local travel agency, the local tourism organization, rural people, tourists and finally with the nomads themselves. Various films and photos were made, and memory notes were registered in a diary. Finally, nomad women were interviewed in three focus groups. These focus groups comprised 10 women and were all conducted in the nomads tents.

NOMAD TOURISM IN BAVANAT

The region of Bavanat is bounded by Yazd province in the north and East; Abadeh, Khorambid, and Marvdasht in the West; and Arsenjan and Neiriz in the South. The region presents highly diversified natural attributes and there is a strong tourist potential. The region is characterised by a 20 kilometre long lush valley, between the Zagros Mountains in the south and the desert in the north. The wider region's natural attractions are the main reason for the organization of several types of tours: attractive mountains, desert and steppe landscapes, hunting and winter sports possibilities. The Khamseh tribes and their nomadic lifestyle are also a key component of the region's tourism. Khamseh is an Arabic name and means five. The Khamseh nomads are a confederation of five different Turkish, Arabic and Farsi-speaking tribes. Each one is again divided in other groups. Nowadays, most of its people have a settled lifestyle, but those that are left in nomadic lifestyle have the longest nomadic roads among all other nomads in the Fars province. The nomad population in Fars province is about 180,000 people (5% of the total inhabitants), which corresponds to 28,400 families. The Khamseh tribes make a total of around 75,000 people. In the late 1950s, Barth (1961) referred to about 3,000 Basseri (a Persian-speaking tribe belonging to the Khamseh tribes) tents or about 16,000 people.

Although there are many tourism agencies that advertise and promote nomad tourism in Iran, or at least some kind of visit to a nomad tribe during a specific package, in the Bavanat region there is only one tourism agency that offers these services. This travel agency works with some other travel agencies throughout the country, and it offers the nomads' tour to the customers of other travel agencies. According to the information provided by the local tourism organization of Bavanat, confirmed by the governmental tourism organization of the Fars province, between 2004 and 2006 (three years), the nomads in the Bavanat region have received 4500 tourists. Since the tourism agency is officially recognized by the tourism authorities and has even been awarded various prizes for its services, this number of tourists is widely broadcasted on the radio and even television, as a success story.

The structure of these tours often comprises a short rest in a rural house to enjoy the traditional rural hospitality and to get acquainted with some tribal rules. Afterwards, tourists travel to the nomadic places, where they have a choice of overnight in a rural house or in a tribal house (*Siah Chadors*). Based on the contact with tourists and on the analysis of the comments they wrote on a guestbook, tourists' experiences with nomads and with nomadic lifestyles were very positive. Just as an illustration of these comments, Lara, a French tourist, wrote: 'We never forget the time of being with you and the nomads. The food was perfect. Nomads were so kind and friendly. We had a very nice time with them. Thank you for the

warm hospitality'. As a demonstration of their affection to this experience and to the nomads, various tourists also wrote letters and postcards to the nomads through the travel agency. Again, these letters reflect their admiration for the nomads' lifestyle and their contentment for what they generally consider to be an authentic tourism experience. The interviewed tourists' groups varied considerably in size, ranging from groups of just two or three tourists, to a party of 32. What they have in common is the age groups (from mid 30s to early 60s), the profound interest in nomadic cultures and Iranian culture, the high level of education, a previous rich personal history of travel, and the search for a different experience, despite a certain lack of tourist facilities. They all stressed a great feeling of happiness about this contact with nomads, which they felt was an 'authentic cultural encounter', despite the lack of time to interact more deeply. At the same time, this encounter meant a trip to a simpler lifestyle, and a certain nostalgia and admiration was present in most of the tourists' voices.

Bavanat women and Tourism

From our interaction with tourists it was possible to identify the material and immaterial aspects that attracted them. They are fascinated with objects such as house furniture and handicrafts, but also with the meals prepared by nomad women and related household tasks. At the same time they clearly appreciate and rate as a unique tourism experience the contact with nomads' poems, proverbs and stories, songs and dances, traditional games, and are profoundly attentive to social relationships of respect, co-relation and union among tribal people. The vast majority of the tourists' attractions are directly related to the tribal women. Woman's tribal clothes, for example, are a key appeal, and many female tourists request to pose for photographs wearing tribal clothes.

Tourism seems to be increasing the self reliance between tribal women. There is more enthusiasm for living in traditional *Siah Chadors*, instead of living in the dedicated tents provided by the Red Crescent organisation. There is also a growing decoration of the home environment with traditional handicrafts, and wearing traditional tribal clothes and jewellery became more common and acceptable. Significantly, we registered the making of forgotten handicrafts, of different types of local carpets such as *Ghali*, *Ghali che*, *Gelim* and *Namaki*, the fabrics of *Siah Chador*, and a growing concern and interest in reviving traditional tribal literature. There are certainly direct economic impacts which are reflected through the selling of the nomad women's handicrafts to tourists and from the tourists' overnight stays and meals in the *Siah Chadors*. Tourists pay the travel agency in advance, and later the travel agency pays nomads. As during the day men are away from home (the traditional division of labour is between men who manage the herds and women who process the milk and other products), it is the women who receive the money. It was not possible to establish the amount of money that the agency pays the nomads. Yet, in a tourist agency a night with nomads is presently offered at around 30 euro. The Barzegars (family who runs the travel agency and the nomads' tour in Bavanat) also provide the nomads with some toiletries, some basic materials for making handicrafts, such as the carpet wooden frames, and some other basic medical materials such as bandages, and it is not uncommon that tourists also present some items to the nomads. All together, this makes a substantial contribution to the nomads, although it seems they have little control over it.

The growth of tourism has also been reflected in some social and cultural practices which we would like to emphasise. Nomad women have been putting more care on their homes and on the surrounding environment. They are more keen on cleaning their homes, and stopped

using disposable serving dishes for traditional food. There also seems to be a greater care avoiding having litter around the *Siah Chadors* as well as in more distant places. Litter is no longer thrown in the river or scattered along paths. From this research we cannot clearly point to any clear signs of negative impacts arising from the growth of this type of tourism.

Figure 1 French tourists in Siah Chador waiting for a meal



Source: Authors, 2007

Figure 2 French tourists being led by local woman in the role of tour guides



Source: Authors, 2007

As mentioned, women have a critical role within the nomad community regarding tourism development. Not only are they in charge of the handicraft production, but they are responsible for showing and introducing traditional tribal cultures to tourists, and to host, service and guide the guests. To a large degree they are also entrusted with maintaining the various cultural practices for future generations. It became quite clear after the interviews and the focus groups that nomad women feel that through giving access to tourists to their routine chores, and through being friendly and hospitable, they are contributing to a positive tourist experience. Based on the interaction with nomad families engaging in tourism, it was also possible to establish that tourism is bringing nomad women a sense of happiness and confidence, which positively affects the relationship between all family members. Notably, women believe that now they are more powerful than before and this is helping them to have a better relationship with others. This gain in confidence and power is materialized for example in the fact that some of them gained permission from the husbands and elders to engage in religious travel on their own.

CONCLUSION

It is clear that the role of tribal women in nomadic tourism development in Iran is an under researched area, and there are no other studies to compare the findings here established. Although it is hard to conclude from this research the extent to which there is a commodification of culture and a 'fabrication of authenticity' in the nomads' lifestyles as a result of the increasing importance of tourism, there is a need of in-depth studies of the physical, environmental and especially social and cultural carrying capacity of the nomadic society for receiving tourists.

It became clear from the fieldwork that the traditional nomadic tribal lifestyles should be preserved, while better facilities should be provided, since there are significant economic and

social benefits from tourism development. At the same time, nomadic people and specially women, who carry out most of the extra work involved in hosting tourists, should enjoy the economic benefits of nomadic tourism. Similarly to findings in ethnographic work on nomad people (see Haidari 1998 in Haidari and Wright, 2001 for example), women here work about 15-17 hours especially in spring, while men rarely exceed 10 hours per day in the same season. Tourism is an activity which brings extra work for women. Therefore, the role of woman, their perceptions and ideas regarding this type of tourism development, should be taken into consideration in tourism planning as part of a strategy for cultural survival (Hinch 2001), and not totally controlled by external controllers, as it seems to be the case at present.

In 2005 the Iran Cultural Heritage, Handcrafts and Tourism Organisation (ICHT) was planning to submit a proposal to register the Iranian nomads heritage as UNESCO Intangible Heritage. The organisation '2025 vision' aims at attracting 1,5% of world tourists by 2025, and while this long-term thinking and planning is welcomed, tourism development in Iran is tied to a larger political ambivalence. As O' Gorman et al (2007) argue, encouraging tourism in the country is a highly contested terrain between a view of tourism as means to achieve economic benefits and modernisation and a view of tourism as leading to globalisation, and consequently threatening Islamic values and norms.

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