

Bedouin Blues

Poignant lyric poems punctuate the intimate conversations of the Awlad 'Ali

Text and photographs by Lila Abu-Lughod

Safia, a middle-aged Egyptian Bedouin woman, talked about her divorce from the man she'd been married to for almost twenty years. The event she described had occurred a year before my arrival in the camp where I was to spend nearly two years doing fieldwork. She explained, "My youngest daughter was nursing in my arms when he left me. I was sick and tired. The man came up to me one afternoon as I sat by the oven, baking. He said, 'You're divorced.' I said, 'Thanks, that's just fine by me.' I didn't want him. I don't want anything from him except to build me a house to live in with my son. I didn't care when he divorced me. I never liked him."

Her tone of aggressive nonchalance did not surprise me. It was consistent with the way many people talked about their marriages, even when uncomplicated by problems such as divorce. Yet, two days later, as we were chatting with several other women in her household during a lull in the round of domestic activities, conversation turned to the whereabouts of her ex-husband, who was away on a trip. Safia suddenly began to recite a short and sad poem that conveyed a very different set of sentiments.

Memories stirred of the beloved
should I release, I'm flooded by them

I remember that she had also volunteered to recite some poems when I had first shown her my tape recorder a couple of months earlier. These included the following:

Oh eyes be strong
you cherish people and then
they're gone

There was no doubt in the minds of all the women who subsequently heard the tape that this poem, which hints at the effort it takes to keep from crying, was about her ex-husband.

The incongruity between what Safia said in ordinary conversation and the sentiments she expressed in poetry was striking. But her case was not unique. I found that many people I got to know in this Bedouin community in Egypt's Western Desert conveyed feelings of vulnerability and attachment in the short poems that



Bedouin women rest momentarily in the doorway of their house. The young, unmarried girl (left) covers her head with a flowered kerchief as a sign of modesty, while the married woman (right) wears a black head cloth that can be used as a veil when necessary. Married women veil their faces, a sign of respect, in the presence of older men such as fathers, uncles, male in-laws, or strangers.

All photographs by Lila Abu-Lughod; Anthro-Photo





punctuated their intimate conversations—feelings that they ordinarily denied. To understand this discrepancy, and the meaning of these often poignant lyric poems, I had to learn some important things about Bedouin personal ideals and standards of morality.

I had not come to Egypt to study poetry. When I arrived in the fall of 1978, I was interested in examining the patterns and meaning of interpersonal relationships, especially those between men and women, in a Bedouin society. Long fascinating to Westerners, Bedouins, the Arabic-speaking pastoral nomads of the Middle East, have been described in scholarly and popular accounts in terms of the public world of politics, feuds, heroic poetry,

and nomadism. Hardly anyone had paid attention to the intimate world of personal and family life or to the world of women. This was the realm I wanted to explore.

I ended up living in a small community of recently settled Bedouins belonging to the tribes known as the Awlad 'Ali (sons of 'Ali), whose traditional territory extends along a coastal desert strip from Alexandria to Libya. Although many Awlad 'Ali have become sedentary since the nineteenth century, until thirty-five years ago those who remained nomadic made a living in the Western Desert by herding sheep and planting barley. Before the railroads were built, the Awlad 'Ali also organized camel caravans to transport dates from the major desert oases to the Nile

Valley. Now they are involved in all sorts of activities, from the old one of raising sheep to the newer ones of tending groves of olive and fig trees and speculating in real estate. Many profit from smuggling and other, more legal entrepreneurial activities. The Awlad 'Ali used to live in tents. Now, although most live in houses, they still pitch tents next to their houses and prefer sitting in them because they are peaceful and nonconfining. They used to ride on horses, camels, and donkeys; now they prefer Toyota trucks.

I was welcomed into the large household of a wealthy, charismatic tribal mediator as a sort of adopted daughter. I could occupy this position because I was not only a young, unmarried woman but also

Today's preferred means of transportation for Bedouins is the Toyota truck, below. These roomy trucks allow entire families—husband, co-wives, daughters-in-law, and numerous children—to travel together. The three horsemen, left, hired to celebrate a Muslim festival, hark back to an earlier time when wealthy and powerful men rode horses. Except for certain ceremonial occasions, Bedouins no longer ride horses. The faint English lettering across the top of the tent flap is an indication of the tent material's origin—burlap bags that have been cut apart and reassembled into fabric.



come people's suspicions, first by playing up the Arab half of my identity and not identifying with Westerners, and second by behaving properly.

What I had not considered was that respectability was reckoned not just in terms of one's actions but also in terms of one's relationship to the larger social world. I had failed to anticipate that the Bedouins, for whom belonging to a tribe and family is paramount, would assume that a woman alone must have so alienated her family that they no longer cared about her. Worse yet, perhaps she had done something so immoral that they had ostracized her. An unmarried girl valued by her family would never be permitted to travel alone, unprotected and at the mercy of anyone who wished to take advantage of her. By accompanying me on my first visit to these families, my father laid to rest any suspicions about my respectability. They could see I was from a good family that cared about me. This helped them perceive me as an Arab and a Muslim, despite my poor Arabic, my American mother, and my unfamiliarity with their ways, and enabled them to accept me more easily as a daughter.

By putting me under the protection of a particular family, my father had assured

my safety. But the flip side of protection is restriction, and I found that my daughterly role had some drawbacks. For the first few months I chafed against some of the subtle ways people restricted my activities. I was expected to live in the women's social world and could only go to households where the women in my family went. More important, I was expected to live in their moral community. This put tremendous pressure on me to learn the appropriate behavior for young women, especially concerning modesty.

At first I thought I should move back and forth between the women's world and the men's, but then I realized that in order to be trusted in either I had to declare my loyalties firmly. By accepting the women's world, which was more lively, relaxed, and intimate, I finally began to reap the unanticipated benefits of my status as an adopted daughter. I began to enjoy the personal pleasures of close companionship and a sense of belonging. My research also benefited. Because I participated in their everyday lives and could not force them to answer questions or talk about what did not interest them, I could learn how these Bedouins viewed their lives.

My first clue that poetry might be a rich source of information on the relation-

because of the way I had been introduced to the family. As an anthropology graduate student bravely setting off to do research, I was greatly embarrassed when my father insisted on coming with me from the United States to introduce me. It took me a long time to fully grasp his reasons. Because he was of Arab background, although not a Bedouin, he was aware that in this culture a young, unaccompanied woman traveling on uncertain business would be an anomaly. I, of course, knew of the negative image of Western women, an image fed by rumors, films, and the frequent insensitivity of Western women to local standards of morality and acceptable social behavior. But I had assumed I would be able to over-

Milking, below, is considered women's work—whether the animals are sheep, goats, or for the very few families that have them, cows. In some areas, desert land is being reclaimed, and crops that can be fed to cattle, such as alfalfa and corn, are now being grown. Adolescent girls, right, help their mother prepare bread for baking, a daily activity in a Bedouin household.



ships I wished to study came one day when a shepherd's wife, helping out by baking bread in our makeshift oven, suddenly recited a poem after a minor disappointment. I insisted she repeat it so I could write it down. That evening as I talked with my host about what I had seen and heard that day, asking him questions and getting explanations, I read him the poem. His kindly and pedagogical manner suddenly changed. Agitated, he demanded to know who had recited it. I hesitated, suspecting that I had unwittingly betrayed something important; but when I finally confessed that it was the wife of one of his hired shepherds, he was palpably relieved. He explained that the poem had to do with despair in love; the woman sang it because she had lost one husband and her present husband was old and about to die. I then understood that he had feared that one of his wives had recited the poem.

My host's reaction suggested to me that people took poetry seriously as a very personal communication of feelings. From my host's wife I gathered that the poems were somewhat confidential. She scolded me for my indiscretion in sharing this poem with her husband and warned me never to show women's poems to men.

Everyone seemed keenly interested in

and moved by this type of personal poetry. Like Japanese haiku in their brevity and condensation of imagery, poems like the following were reminiscent of the American blues in emotional tone:

I wonder, is despair
a passing shadow or my companion
for life

I began to write or tape-record such poems whenever individuals recited them spontaneously in conversation or sang them. What was puzzling was that the sentiments expressed in the poems bore little relationship to the sentiments of ordinary life. Bedouin men and women had a propensity to joke about or deny concern in personal matters and to express anger in difficult situations. I interpreted this at first as defensiveness and thought of the poems as revelations of "true" sentiments.

But several things were wrong with my hypothesis. First, it failed to note that the poems through which Bedouins expressed what I thought of as their "true" feelings were highly stylized and conventional. Second, to label as defensive someone who expressed cool indifference to a love relationship was to impose Western psychological theories where they might not be appropriate. I had to consider what these



reactions meant to the Bedouins themselves, which required understanding the place of romantic love in their society.

Americans expect romantic love to preoccupy young people, to be the basis for choosing a mate, and to remain the ideal of all adults in their intimate relationships. The Awlad 'Ali Bedouins view things quite differently. They are scandalized by what they perceive as the gross immorality of Europeans. They even feel superior to their Egyptian peasant and urban neighbors whose laxness in matters of sexual segregation and emphasis on the closeness of married couples they find improper and embarrassing.

Although a theme of songs and stories, romantic love is for the Bedouins some-



what immoral. There are serious consequences for an unmarried girl who is discovered to have a romantic attachment. And the public display of the proof of her virginity at the wedding ritual assures that she will be wary of romantic impulses. Love is not supposed to be the basis for marriages, which are arranged by families. This is not to deny that love can develop between husband and wife or that many couples can become close over the years. Their affection, however, will never be demonstrated publicly. For the Bedouins, the deepest kind of love is expected to be between family members—siblings and parents and children.

This attitude toward love and sexuality is at the core of the Bedouin moral code of

honor. Sexual modesty or propriety is essential to personal honor and respectability in this community. The honorable woman or man maintains distance from members of the opposite sex except close relatives and denies interest in love or sexual matters. The sentiment associated with or thought to motivate this avoidance is *hasham*, which can be translated as modesty, embarrassment, or shame.

Modesty, for the Bedouins, refers to what we might think of as an internal state of shyness and embarrassment and to a set of behaviors, associated with these feelings, that conform to what could be called a code of modesty. The cultural repertoire of such behaviors includes not only sexual propriety but also requires modest de-

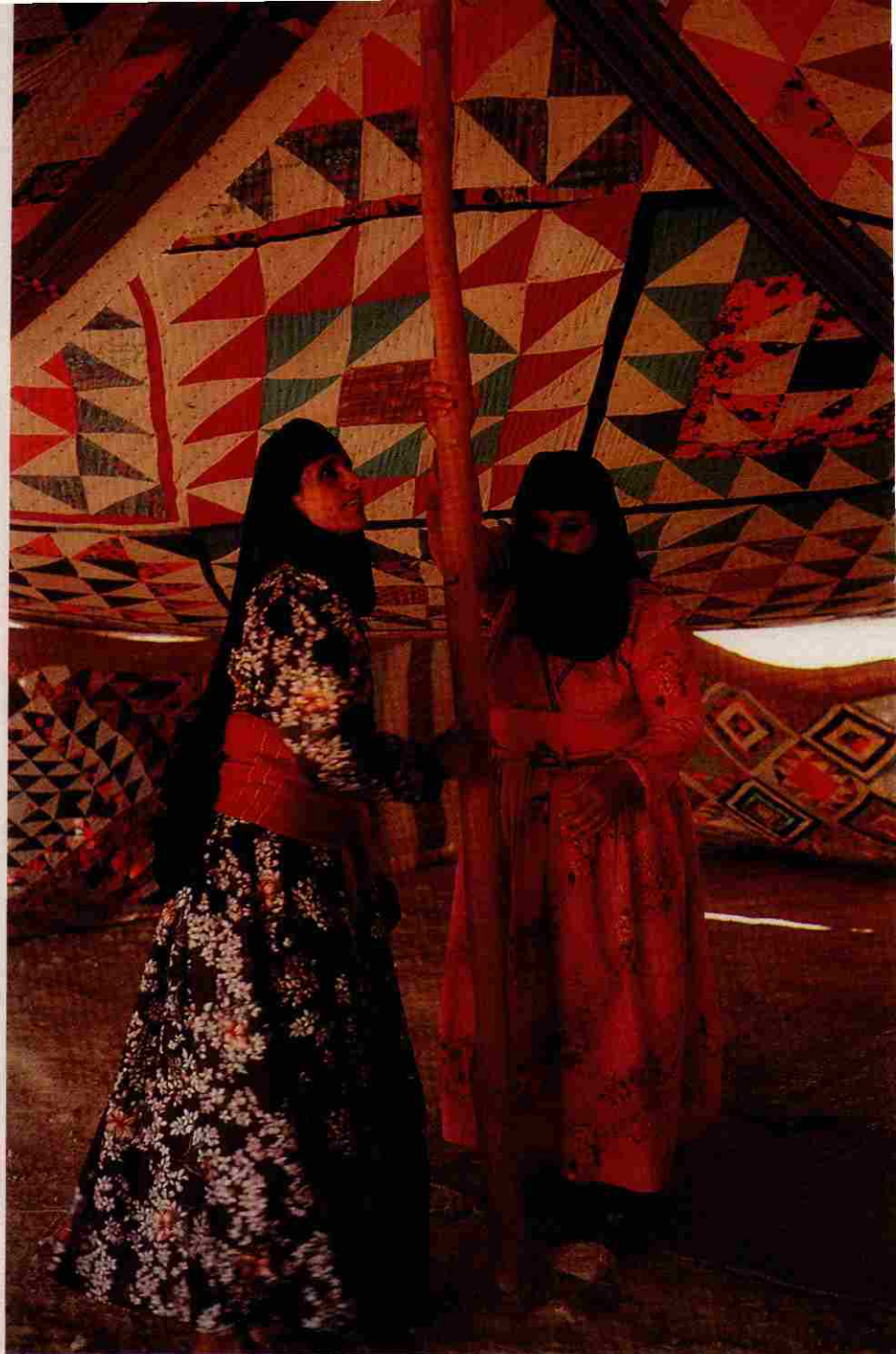
meanor and dress (covering the hair, the arms to the wrists, and the legs to the ankles) for both sexes. The modest person looks down, sits or stands formally, and does not eat, smoke, talk, laugh, or joke in certain types of social situations. For married women, veiling in front of certain categories of men, such as older relatives and in-laws, is also a mark of modesty. To act modestly is a matter of pride because it is considered a sign of respect for the social and moral system.

An important goal of socializing children, especially girls, is to teach them to be modest. I once heard a girl confide to her uncle's new wife, "To tell you the truth, I don't even know what this love is. I hear about it in songs, but I don't know

what they are feeling." The older woman responded approvingly, "That's my girl." If adolescent girls get carried away at a wedding, singing and clapping or hovering too near the bride, their mothers taunt them, "What are you so interested in? Are you looking forward to your own wedding day?" A girl is expected to cry when she hears that someone has come to ask for her hand in marriage; to be sad because she does not want to leave her family. The modest bride screams and tries to fight off the groom when he comes near her.

Even married women, to be respected, deny any interest in their husbands, not to mention other men. A woman rarely uses her husband's name, referring to him as "that one" or if affectionate, "the old man"; if she is being formal, she refers to him politely as "the master of my house/tent." At least in front of others, women are formal and distant with husbands. Although quick to admit the ubiquity of jealousy, the Bedouins still do not respect a woman who shows resentment if her husband marries a second wife. To complain if he seems to prefer her co-wife or spends more time with her indicates what Bedouins see as an excessive desire for the husband.

By the same token, men do not spend much time with their wives and rarely talk about them. They are ridiculed if they show too much concern. When Rashid's new bride ran away he sulked and looked miserable. His relatives teased and even scolded him. They encouraged and supported his later and more socially appropriate response, which was an angry search for someone to blame. He and his brother undertook an intensive investigation of the events preceding his bride's departure. When they had eliminated the possibility of some woman or child in the household having upset her, they began considering sorcery as an explanation. Rashid became convinced that his senior wife must have been responsible. A visit to the local holy man to divine the reason behind the bride's act confirmed this suspicion. In the face of opposition from many of the camp's women, Rashid persisted in blaming his first wife and refused to talk to or visit her.



After some negotiation and pressure from her family, Rashid's bride agreed to return. A day or so later, I was talking privately with him. I asked him how he felt, and he was noncommittal. But when I asked disingenuously if he cared to recite some poems for my collection, he offered the following:

Cooking with a liquid of tears
at a funeral done for the beloved

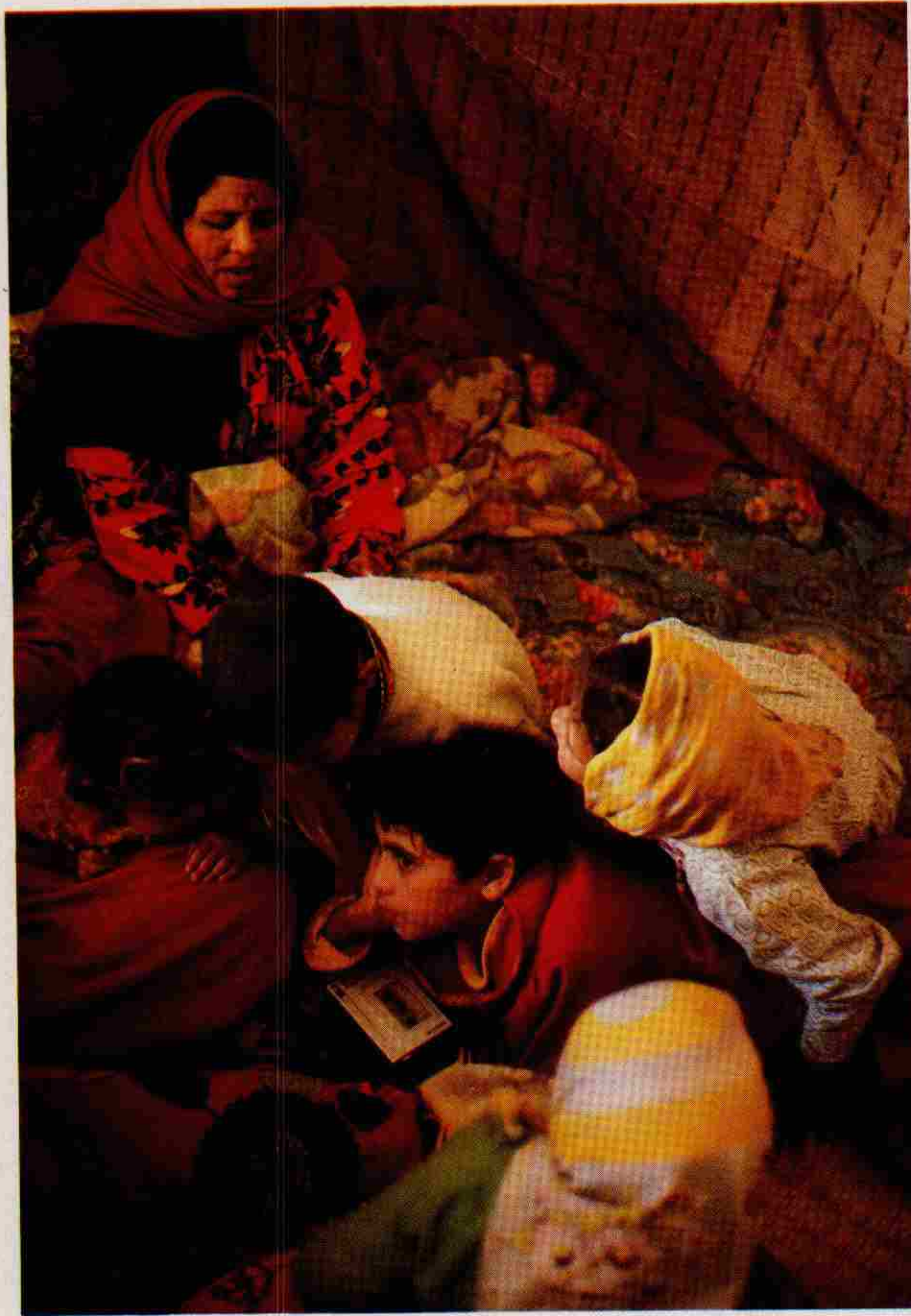
Her bad deeds were wrongs that hurt
yet I won't repay them, still dear the
beloved

Any doubts I harbored about whether these poems expressed Rashid's personal sentiments regarding the situation were put to rest a few days later. It was evening,

and he was sitting with his returned wife. He asked me to join them, requesting that I bring my notebook. "Read the talk of the other day," he said. I realized that he meant the poems. As I read them aloud, he seemed embarrassed and acted almost as if he had never heard them before. He looked blank when I asked him to explain them. The next day his wife confided to me that these poems were about her.

This incident highlights the other crucial aspect of honor, which is a kind of proud personal independence. Rashid's initial signs of attachment to this woman had nearly cost him his reputation. To be weak or dependent is shameful for a Bedouin. I came to realize that it was in light of Bedouin attitudes about the improper-

Two married women are adjusting the center pole of a large ceremonial tent, left. Made of pieces of material stitched together in patchwork style, these tents are used for weddings, feasts, funerals, or whenever large numbers of people will be together. A group of children, below, listen with rapt attention to a cassette tape of Bedouin poetry. Cassette players have become enormously popular in recent years, and tapes of songs and poetry are passed eagerly from hand to hand.



ety of feelings of attachment between men and women that Rashid's behavior, Safia's comments on her divorce, and the nonpoetic responses of so many others I encountered had to be understood. Rather than being "defensive" when they expressed stoic indifference or even anger, people were actually just living up to the

personal ideals of their community. They were showing how honorable they were—how worthy of respect.

But why could they express the other side of their feelings in poetry? And why don't they ruin their reputations when they reveal these "immodest" sentiments in their poems? The answers are complex,

but here are just a few suggestions. First, I think people are protected by the veiled and impersonal form of the poetry and the circumscribed contexts in which they recite it (they only recite poems in front of people they are close to). Second, by confining these feelings to the rigid form of poetry, Bedouins demonstrate a kind of mastery, and any kind of mastery is admirable. Third, it may be that people make their everyday conformity to the moral code more impressive by showing what powerful feelings they must master in order to live up to its ideals. Finally, reciting poetry seems to be a way of subverting the code of honor and modesty. By rebelling, in this limited way, against the demands of the system, individuals may actually enhance their honor because defiance is the ultimate expression of personal freedom. And as we saw earlier, personal independence is a linchpin of honor.

The place of poetry may be changing, though. When I returned to the Bedouin community in December 1986, just over eight years after I had first come to live with them, I noticed many changes. There were many more houses and some now had electricity. And one change was particularly interesting: the popularity of cassette players and tapes had risen dramatically. There had been a proliferation of commercial cassettes of Bedouin songs and poetry, many not of high technical quality, some practically homemade. Bought in the towns by the young men, they were passed eagerly from hand to hand. Listening to the tapes, one notices something odd—almost no women's voices are heard. Respectable women would neither recite love poetry publicly nor would they dream of sitting with strange men to make a recording.

This is only one instance in which the traditional modesty code, when applied in new circumstances, has had a more restricting influence on women's lives. Sexual segregation has ossified with the move from tents to houses. In the tents, a blanket suspended in the middle of the tent separated the men's and women's domains when men other than close kin were present. The blankets—unlike walls—were both temporary and permeable, al-

Tents allow for informal segregation; men on one side and women on the other. A blanket can be suspended in the middle of the tent should men other than close kin join the group.

lowing the flow of conversation and information. Rooms don't allow that. Also, in the settlements the likelihood that neighbors will be from different families is greater than it was in the isolated desert camps, where all the members were usually tied by family bonds. The number of unrelated visitors who come by to see the men of the community is also higher because men now have a wide range of business contacts. This means that, to maintain their honor, women have to be more vigilant in keeping out of sight; thus they spend more time veiled and confined to the women's sections of the household.

For men, coming under the authority of the Egyptian state and shifting to a market economy has meant some erosion of personal and political independence. Yet most men try to take advantage of new economic opportunities, schooling for their children, and medical care, while resisting the imposition of governmental regulations, legal procedures, and taxes. Men have become more oriented to the world outside their community and more mobile in these days of Toyotas and Mercedeses. They now have cash, which is needed to buy most things, including food. Women, on the other hand, stay even closer to home. Their work has become less essential to the community's economic survival—demoted to a devalued domestic sphere. And they have become financially dependent.

In the living rooms of their new houses, the men hang photographs of sheep and camel herds and lovingly burnish their old shotguns, now used only to hunt the occasional wild bird. Women, on the other hand, are not romantically nostalgic about the old days. They remember the hardships of herding, carrying water, chopping firewood, milking sheep, weaving, and pitching tents. What they do retain from the past is their passion for poetry. Yet with the arrival of commercial cassettes of the Bedouin blues, even this is changing. Women listen to and appreciate the tapes but do not make them. Poetry was always cherished as the voice of personal independence and the freedom to resist. Does its gradual takeover by men tell us what Bedouin women may be losing? □

