

THE CULTURE OF SOUTH RED SEA ŠALĀTĪN - ABŪ RAMĀD

Souzann El Saed Yousef

Academy of Arts, Cairo

Introduction

The desert plays an important role in Egyptian life. The Western and Eastern Deserts constitute the majority of the area of Egypt. The importance of the Eastern Desert springs from its strategic importance as well as its economic one. The Eastern Desert is a rocky mound stretching along the Red Sea chain of mountains (Bayoumy 1999:30).

The area of Šalātīn - Abū Ramād - Halāyib is 1200 km from Cairo in the south east of Egypt. It occupies an area of 1800 km representing what looks like an isopod triangle with a base of 300 km. The length of the eastern side overlooking the Red Sea and the western side overlooking the Western Desert is about 200 km. The head of the triangle starts at a point situated on the seacoast near what is known as the Well of Šalātīn. The area stretches until it reaches the line of the boundaries with Sudan that was demarcated by an agreement in the year 1899 (Mostafa 1998).

The environment in this area is characterized by its relative isolation and its hard terrain and a rain system that is highly changeable with periods of drought and limited natural resources, especially water (Al-Kassas 1999:173). The processes of human adaptation are based on grazing and trade. Thus, leading herds in search of food and water in the rainy season is the basis of the traditional way of life.

This study tries to discuss some theoretical issues closely related to the subject. It enumerates the special concepts which are related to surviving problems and the cultural and social operations and it tries to define the assumptions concerning the relationships that guarantee a direct connection between the natural environment and human adaptation. The concept of adaptation means the relationship between certain inhabitants and their environment. In biology, the concept refers to operations through which an animal or a plant can adapt to the environment through a wide variety in their structures, physiological and hereditary formation and in their way of breeding and their ways of defending and attacking (Abd El-Ghaffar 1980).

We find this perspective in the framework of human society. Social and cultural organizations are considered functional and adaptive mechanisms that enable inhabitants to exploit their environments without neglecting their powers in providing food. Interaction between inhabitants and other creatures in a certain environment affects the ability of survival for certain inhabitants. Adaptation is an integral process that includes how to form individual adaptive strategies within the frame of different depressants. The natural environment constitutes only one of these

depressants beside the other depressant patterns within the economic, political and social system.

This study focuses mainly on the traditional culture as one of the adaptive means with the environment.

Three main tribes inhabit the area. They are al-^cAbābida, ar-Rašāyida and al-Bašāriya. Each of these tribes differs in its ethnic origin, indigenous origin and way of living.

al-^cAbābida: They are related to their grandfather ^cAbād. This name was the name of the valley facing what is now called the town of Edfo. The al-^cAbābida is divided into 5 groups. They are al-^cAšbāb, al-Faqrāb, al-Malīkāt, al-^cAbūdiyyīn, and aš-Šanātīr. They are concentrated in Qena, Luxor, Edfo and Aswan (Abd El-Hameed 1981).

The al-^cAbābida in Abū Ramād is divided into two main branches. They are al-Ġam^cāb and al-Hamdāb. They work in fishing in spring and summer seasons. But in fall and winter seasons they work in grazing cattle and sheep or they go back to their home towns in Upper Egypt until the drought time is over. They speak Arabic and are closely related to men of religion specially al-Hasan aš-Šadīlī whom they consider their grandfather. They mix with al-Bašāriya tribes through marriage.

ar-Rašāyida: They are related to Rašīd ibn Sa^cūd. Their grandfather is King ^cAbdal^cazīz. They are related to Hārūn ar-Rašīd from Zubayda. They fled to Egypt in 1806. They have branches in Sudan, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Eritrea and Ethiopia. They live in the desert away from the city. They live in tents made of cloth and hair. They work in the trade of cattle, rocks and traditional clothes. They have their own culture that is different from the culture of al-Bašāriya. They do not mix with other tribes through marriage. They do not have Egyptian nationality. This causes a lot of trouble for them in travels. They speak Arabic with *rašīdī* dialect. They have an extensive knowledge of Arabic.

al-Bašāriya Culture

The majority of population is related to al-Bašāriya Tribe. They are believed to be the oldest group that inhabited this area. Their population is about 8 thousand people who live in Egypt, Sudan and Eritrea. They are considered a branch of al-Baḡā tribes¹. They speak Baḡāwiyya which is one of the Tabdāwiyya dialects mixed with the dialect of Upper Egypt.

¹ The name al-Baḡā refers to Inhabitant Group Union that dominates different parts of the province. The name is considered one of the common errors as it is the name that Arabs gave them. al-Baḡā call themselves (Badwāniya), g does not exist in their language.

Their complexion is black and they are very thin in most cases. Their hair is curly. They are divided into four groups: al-^cAlyāb, al-^cUmūrāb, aš-Šantīrāb, al-Humdārāb.

Some of them live in towns and the others still live in the mountains. Their relation system is based on relating to the father from joint ancestry and on a tribal system that is highly divided. The division and melting process are still very active within the system. This leads to continuous modifications to the tribe's borders.

The tribe is divided into several sub-divisions that are called ad-Dawābb or al-Badna. ad-Dawābb or al-Badna consists of a group of relatives related through the father line that established al-Badna. Concerning the relation depth of ad-Dawābb, it varies between four to five generations.

As for the tribe that is called al-Ādāt, it represents the highest level of ad-Dawābb. They go back to 16 generations. At the bottom of ad-Dawābb level, there are centred groups represented by al-Madārib. That means existing groups which are referred to as Masā or Dawā. These groups may represent a section of al-Badna. They are constituted from extended families or primary families (parents and their children). ad-Dawābb is a unit that has its group rights in land, grass and water (Enuar 1999:134).

For hundreds of years, al-Bašāriya has been moving between the Egyptian-Sudanese borders seeking grazing. Tribal trade that has been developed between the coasts of the Red Sea played a role in supporting their pastoral economy. They participated in this trade as being the main transporters for the trade, as being camels' owners, guides to travellers, water suppliers and owners of firewood.

Their animals are more beneficial than land not only because of their economic value but because they represent the main beneficial source in social life and ritual occasions. Such animals bring the cash income through selling animals, milk and fertilizers. They also provide them with essential food. Milk mixed with polenta is their main food. The value of animals extends to ritual occasions. Parents give their male and female children cattle in different occasions in their lives such as marriage, birth, and circumcision².

There are mechanisms to overcome poverty. Man can get animals from his relatives and friends. He borrows animals but does not have the right to use anything but their milk. When his crisis is over, he is to return the animals to their owner. Animals such as goats and camels prevail. Goats prevail because of their speedy procreation and camels because of their ability to stand thirst and their ability to adapt with the harsh environmental conditions. Camels play an important role in al-Bašāriya culture. In addition to the economic importance of camels, they are linked

² *at-tahniq*: After birth the new born is given a mouthful of milk in a cup provided that the baby tastes the milk after one of the tribe's members who is known of his generosity, courage and devotion drinks from it. Thus, these characteristics are transferred to the baby.

to man's honour. al-Baḡā refers to the woman's womb as *ūkam* which is the same word that refers to the camel. There is a symbolic language for al-Baṣāriya which they understand very well. If a man finds his camel slaughtered and thrown in the desert, this is a message from society that : "his wife has an affair with another man". The Baṣāri's relation with his camel is the relation between close friends. He understands what the camel feels and wants through its body's movement. If a man is obliged to slaughter his camel while travelling for certain reasons such as being infected, he becomes very sad. In this case, the tribe's individuals do not eat the camel's meat unless the owner of the camel gives them permission to eat. For them, eating the slaughtered camel's meat without its owner's permission means that they are happy because of what happened to the owner of the camel (Abd El-Kawy 2001). They believe that camels are a good omen. Genuine camels are those of blue blood.

Women are forbidden from milking goats. This job is considered completely manly. They are accustomed to what is called *simplāyit al-mubāraka* or *laqūq*. This means that when a man milks a goat, he never drinks the milk unless another man from outside the tribe tastes it.

Trade and especially the animals' trade plays an important part in al-Baṣāriya's life. The market is the main meeting place for traders where deals are concluded with Sudanese and Egyptian currency. Many traders come to this market from Sudan. During the recent years, a lot of Upper Egyptian traders emerged to the area where they stay without their families in the market. But their trade is limited to clothes and tools.

Tribes' members meet in a special place where they exchange information. Meanwhile they have their own way of sitting. They sit leaning on their sticks so that they not touch the land. They talk while the Sheikh of the tribe holds a stick that is called *al-ḥadāta* in his hand. He points with the stick to the sand. This meeting is called *as-saknāb* which is a Baḡāwī word meaning news. It refers to the transmission and exchange of news orally concerning the issues of economic, political and social importance. *as-Saknāb* is represented as a social practice in the greeting rituals that they perform and transfer into an organization to transfer and exchange information in a detailed and prolonged description of the current environmental status and the amount of rain and the distribution of grazing resources. It extends to include other information about economic life such as information about markets and products' prices.

Hunting still represents the main activity for the mountain inhabitants who hunt wild animals and use their leather especially the leather of the fox and the leather of an animal called *taytl*. They have their own traditional way of hunting these animals. They hunt this animal with the help of dogs and guides who know the places where this animal exists because it cuts rocks in places where it goes. In hunting this animal, they use a trap that consists of an ampulla that is woven from strong robes. At the end of the robe, there is a strong and flexible wood with a clutch to catch the animal.

They have their way of catching foxes that hide in the holes. They know that foxes cannot stand smoke so they make smoke at the entrance of the hole and when the fox runs out they throw their spears. But they avoid the head area because its leather is very strong and is not easily cut.

The hunter is afraid of *al-'usayla* which is a big snake that comes in summer to the open wells or to the rain water to drink. But the hedgehog (*abū qunṣud*) as soon as it sees *al-'usayla*, it waits and holds it with its body that is full of thorns. Thus, *al-'usayla* would die (Abd El-Ghaffar & Enuar 1998:57).

Wild hunting has its own laws that protect wild animals, if any one hunts in another tribe' territory, he is subjected to a special trial especially if the hunted animal was pregnant. Any one who wants to hunt in another tribe's territory is to get permission from the Sheikh of the tribe in the area that he wants to hunt in. If he is allowed to hunt, he should compensate the tribe's Sheikh. This compensation is called *al-wadb*, which is the chest of the hunted animal¹.

The cultural norm puts a special political framework that is called the Sheikh's Council. Such councils settle disputes and are responsible for arbitration. Settlement of disputes is related to the political environment of the tribe; *i.e.* it is related to the chief marshal and the sheikh. The chief interferes in certain cases. Often sheikhs and marshals settle the entire local cases that take place. In these cases, a council called *al-ḡallād* is held. This council is administered according to the *ṣarī'a*. Besides the previously mentioned leaders of the tribes, the council consists of intellectuals (*sūrkināb - al-'uqalā'*) and some of the neutral members from neighbouring tribes. The task of settlement of disputes is not only limited to cases related to economic problems but also it covers problems of honour among disputing parties such as murder and injuries.

In murder cases an *al-ḡallād* council is held and relatives of both parties are called. The family of the murderer and the family of the murdered attend and the victim's sons and relatives are given the choice to either officially prosecuting the defendant before state courts or accept ransom. If ransom is accepted, it will be the responsibility of the tribe's members to divide it among the victim's relatives. But in murders even when ransom is accepted, the murderer is considered to have personally insulted the victim's family. Therefore, he is advised, in most cases, to leave the place (Hjort & Dohl 1991).

Such trials are held in a special place designed for the men's meeting with the tribe's Sheikh. They gather in the open air at moonlit nights. They sit in an open circle. Each tribe sits beside its Sheikh. The chief sits in the middle. Mediators sit

¹ Every part of the carcass has its symbol. The chest is given to the chief of the tribe. The back legs are given to the midwife after the delivery. Some cultures prohibit eating certain parts of the carcass. The Jewish culture prohibits eating the right thigh of the carcass.

between the disputing parties. In the beginning of the session, they start praying for Prophet Muḥammad, then they start presenting their case. Each takes his turn in presenting his case. If they do not reach a verdict, the case is to be postponed for several months in order that parties may reconcile. The tribe's Sheikh listens while holding his stick in his hands. The stick is called *al-ḥadāta* and is used to refer to or draw signs on sand. If we move to the economic side we find that al-Baṣāriya have chosen for themselves a social system that is completely appropriate with the circumstances of their poor environment they live in. Since their early childhood, they are raised to be courageous and they hate lying. They do not know hypocrisy. Theft is very limited among them. Being generous to guests is a part of a man's honour. Although they carry swords and daggers while walking, they are very shy and modest, especially with their women. They hate hearing bad or swearwords and they run when they hear them.

al-Baṣāriya were able to reach a system in their clothes and appearance that completely suits the environment, their inherited culture and their beliefs about the world around them. Men grow their hair in a shape that resembles the tree that exists in the area which is the *ḡānīt* tree. A *ḡānīt* is a tree of average height and it has many branches that interlace with each other to form one unit at the top of the tree. They leave their hair in a round shape around the head and they paint it with a paint called *al-wadak* which is made of the cattle fat. They think that this fat protects the head from the heat of the sun and strengthens eyesight. They also rub their bodies with this paint to decrease the amount of sweat that the body excretes and minimise their need for water. For them, the paint and its smell affect sexual attraction.

They comb their hair with a wooden comb that is called *al-ḥalāl*. The head of this comb is engraved with drawings that symbolize courage such as the picture of Abū Zayd al-Hilālī while riding his camel or a picture of a knight holding a sword or geometric drawings. These drawings are painted with coal and then burnt by a hot metal rod. They look black. The position of the comb on the head symbolizes manliness and youth. So neither young children nor the elderly wear it.

Men wear a white dress *gallābiyya* which is made of cotton and under the *gallābiyya* they wear panties. Over the *gallābiyya*, they wear a black jacket made of wool. Men in the mountains wear the same clothes, but they prefer the beige colour because it is made of a kind of cloth that is called *ad-damūr* and the jacket is made of animal leather. Every Baṣārī carries on his neck a kink that is tied to a piece of *siwāk* that is used for cleaning teeth. Sometimes it is a permanent habit for a Baṣārī to clean his teeth.

The *taṣlīb* of the face is one of the signs of make up for men and women. The face is cut with a razor. Three wounds are made on each cheek in the area over the ear. The wound is covered with alcohol. If the direction of all the lines is downward, then they are for the protection and treatment from ghosts (Barjiebl 1997:31).

Swords, shields, daggers, sticks, mantles are accessories of their clothes. Swords are put in leather ampullae. They are ornamented with trappings made of coloured silk. They are straight swords that differ from the embowed Arabian swords. They come from Sudan.

There are different kinds of swords. *Ma'add* means divider. It is a straight sword with a wooden handgrip that is covered with leather. It is ornamented with silk and silver. *Ūkār*: There are signs on this sword and it is heavier and sharper. *Salmān*: There is Solomon's bulla on it. *Ibrāb afif*: There are two drawings on it in the shape of half moons. Inside them, there are two stars. It is a bit shorter. *Manqūr*: There is a drawing of a lion on it. *Mamsā* is more like the Arabic sword.

Daggers are carried by the youth and the elderly. They are put on the left side so they are grabbed by the right hand or vice versa if the person was left-handed. There are many kinds of daggers. *Hust* is semi straight. *Tūlīt* is used for slaughtering. *Šūt'al* is used by the elderly shields. They are used while playing with swords during celebrations. They are round. They are made of leather with bumps in the middle that are covered with iron.

There are three kinds of sheaths (*kiryābī*, *iškālib*, *abatāy*) made of different kinds of leather. *Kiryābī* is thick, *iškālib* is made of crocodile leather, while *abatāy* is bigger and covered with hair.

Sticks are called *tūkūlī*. They are used for self-defense or to defend the honour of the tribe. They are also used as a bag to carry things or to hunt small animals such as rats or deer. They are carried in way between the arms while walking to strengthen the back while walking. It is also used to lean on while sitting in the market. It is also the main tool for the shepherd in his work. The elderly carry light sticks with pointed heads to point to or draw signs on the sand while talking. There are four main types of sticks. *Ūkūlī* is big, long with a curved head. It is made of the *salm* tree or from *dalw* or *gada'* wood. *Dalāw* is made of the *šamm* trees which are in the mountains. It is a sword proof stick. *Bulbul* (*dūgrār*) is embowed and small. The edge is very sharp. *al-Hadāta* is for the elderly. In order to embow the sticks, they are put in a damp place or they are soaked in water to be easy to embow. Then they are tied in this form and buried in the sand till they dry. Some kinds of sticks such as *ad-dūgrār* are dried in fire.

Amulets: They are of the basics in the Bašariya culture. Men, women and children put them on inside houses. They are put on the necks of animals and they are put on arms and legs for treatment. If they are used for protection from the devil, they are put on the neck. They are also used as protection from nightmares or as protection from snakebite. Women put them on their waists to treat infertility. *aš-Šarīf* who is a man that memorizes the Holy Qur'an and who lives in an isolated place that is called *al-hulūw* treats people and teaches children how to read and write by making such amulets by writing verses from the Holy Qur'an on paper. A man

living in the market is specialized in making leather covers for these amulets. First they are padded with stepped-up paper.

Beside aš-Sarīf, there is another man called al-Faqīr or 'the poor' who makes the amulets. But he uses magic formulae instead of the Holy Qur'an. He makes his amulets for good and evil. He is a man that can neither read nor write and has no specific residence and looks crazy, amulets for children are made from cowries and seaweed, black sticks and from the black bugles. al-Bašāriya have a lot of beliefs about unseen creatures that inhabit the desert, mountains, trees, animals and birds and which cause magic and sickness to people.

As for women, they wear the Sudanese dress with its bright colours such as red, yellow, green and blue. Elderly women wear figured or blue colours. All women use *kubl* to protect their eyes from dust, light and to increase their beauty. Women comb their hair in several tresses where the hair is divided into three sections. The middle part is turned forward and made into six tresses that are turned over the forehead and tied together with a round gold accessory that is called *al-mirwād*. The rest of the hair is left in small tresses on both sides. Other accessories such as *šayāl* and *gumayda* are used for the hair. Women put a gold earring *talāl* and a gold necklace (*habašiyya*) and they put a *hizām* (nose ring) in the nose, a sign that refers to their tribe. The lower lip is tattooed so that its colour looks deeper than the upper lip.

They follow eating habits that protect them from a lot of stomach diseases. Their habits also suit the hot environment and the available resources. The main food is burgool, which is made from milk and cornmeal. Some people live on dates and milk because they think that eating dates and milk makes them live longer and strengthen the neurological power of the body.

They make many kinds of meat such as *at-tawā* which is spicy meat that is cooked with cattle fat. They think that cooking meat in this way strengthens the body. There are other kinds of food such as *haka* which is bread or rice with meat. There is another food which is called *kammūniya* in which meat is boiled in cumin. There is a meal that is called *al-ğuzāsa* in which meat is mixed with *mulūbiyya*. *as-Salāt* is another meal in which meat is cut into slices sprinkled with salt and put on a circle made of stone and coal is put in the middle.

They keep ghee in bags made of goat leather that has its hair so that the ghee will be preserved for a long time. As for water, it is put in bags made of the leather of the tittle animal or from the leather of the goats after taking their hair. The leather is tanned with tar acacia seeds (*al-qarab*). Women over fifty make these bags because they have plenty of spare time. When the animal is skinned, the leather is turned upside down so that hair becomes downward then it is put in the sun so that hair falls. Then the leather is washed in the sea and a hole is dug with one meter width and one meter length that is filled with water. After a while they take out the leather. By then its colour would have turned into red because the acacia seeds rebels

mould. Then women sew the leather with the sheep hair in order to make its neck thin.

They think that the tar absorbs salt from water. They prefer drinking rainwater that is kept in bags. They think that it is better than any other water even the water of the Nile because it grants health and youth.

Their favourite drink is *al-gabana* which is coffee made from green coffee that is ground with spices by a very long stick. The mixture is then put in a small pot made of clay that resembles the ewer. The mouth of the ewer is covered with a piece of the palm fibre. It is cooked on coal then it is poured in small cups.

They use a kind of antithesis that is called *as-su'ud* that is dried and added to ashed tar with little water. Men put it under the upper and lower lip. As for women they put it on cheeks for fear of the beauty of the lip. Concerning eating habits, al-Bašāriya man does not eat with his wife or with his mother-in-law but he can eat with his mother. Some cultures forbid man to eat with the woman that he wants to marry because such deed will deprive the man of his natural feeling of possession. This may also refer to the desire of the woman to gain strength or because they feel shy when eating in front of men. They are to serve food without eating with men⁴, the Bašāriya community is a male dominated one. Men fill senior positions and are the family leaders. Women live under men's protection.

The Bašāriya have not known houses until recently. They were roaming seeking grazing and they lived in houses made of palm sticks that are easy to carry. After al-Bašāriya settled, they lived in houses made of wood that are in the shape of boxes.

This box turned into a mere symbolic house that is used for holding marriage parties. The married couple stays in this house for forty days after their marriage as an evidence of fertility.

Conclusion

al-Bašāriya reached a kind of soft adaptation with their environment. This adaptation enabled them to stay within this marginal environment. The traditional culture played the role of the main depressants that kept this balance between man and environment. Among these factors are the proper local practices for the uses of land, plants and wild animals. Cultures vary according to the diversity of peoples and ethnic groups.

⁴ Food may be a symbol or a language. In every culture, there is a way for preparing food which constitutes a system of symbols and a language that has its own structure. Food is not mere substances produced and consumed. But at the same time, it is an interactive system that forms the shape of the body. Taste, smell, related rituals and the function of the food constitute a system of integration or a symbol of love as is shown in some folkloric tales such as the desire of a child to eat his mother. Eating may symbolizes sexual union and it may represent tribes' union. Both the eating process and sexual union are symbols of social union. This may turn into a dangerous act in case of hatred. Carole M. Counihan 1999.

It is considered a language that can be translated into meanings and things. Man learns a specific way to live with the society that he was born in and from what he has learnt from his personal experiences. The aim and function of culture is to make life safer and more tolerable. Man exploits his body in a way that enables him to survive. But he employs traditions that are beyond the body which we call culture and civilization in order to immortalize his existence. He depends upon the symbolic characteristics that appear in his beliefs and social, political, economic and ritual organizations and the principles of etiquette.

The traditional culture in the southern Red Sea area is subjected to severe and destructive pressures not only because of the direct effects of drought that forces a lot of people to quit grazing but also because of the cultural influences coming to the area and which forced many people to seek what they considered a better living opportunity, especially after the border dispute between Egypt and Sudan that erupted in 1990.

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The stick every one of the tribe carries for self-defence and to defend the honour of the tribe.



One of the Bašariya tribe walks carrying the stick between his shoulders to stretch it. He wears a comb in his hair; it is an accessory that signifies manhood and youth. Older people do not wear it.



One of the Bašariya with her marked face (cut and painted with *kuhl*) and tattoo on her lower lip. Her hair is done in plaits and accessorised by a golden piece called *al-mirwad*.



The camels of al-Bašariya tribe are marked by an H-shape.
The circle is the sign of the al-‘Alyāb branch of the tribe.