



NUWĒB'A, PASSOVER 1979. THE FIRST ISRAELI ANNUAL  
ROCK FESTIVAL

The Bedouin men in elegant pastel-colored terylene caftans sat in a circle on the ground, spellbound by the mimed hand gestures of a short, angular man dressed in beat-up Levis fringed at the ankles and a conspicuously short, dirty old caftan that had shrunk once upon a time in the wash. Over the caftan a brand new extra-large T-shirt, shining yellow, bore the black imprint of sun rays bursting up from behind craggy mountains that collapsed into lip-shaped sand dunes and flowed into a peaceful beach strewn with the obligatory palm trees. Above this pristine scene, a kitschy simulation of what he and his friends could see all around them, Hebrew script exhorted, "Sing a Song for Peace," and below, "Nuwēb'a's First Annual Rock Festival, Passover 1979." The man's face sported a week's growth of beard stubble, and his fingernails were long overdue to be cut. It was already Thursday—he had only one more day to eliminate this ritual pollution before the Friday Noon Prayer. His dingy headdress scarf, splotted with ketchup and car grease, was wrapped around not the usual white hand-knitted Muslim skullcap, but instead around a worn-out Sabra *tembel* (dunce) cap, probably forgotten by one of the tourists or settlers—it bore the Menorah emblem of the state of Israel.

Every once in a while during the silent spectacle, peals of wild laughter shook the properly attired men. Smadar, the anthropologist, armed with notebook, Nikon camera, and Sony Professional stereo tape recorder, hesitantly tiptoed into the *mag'ad rejjāl* (men's club—the men's public arena)<sup>1</sup> while this performance was in progress. Jum'a waved her over to an empty spot beside him. Smadar gestured "No, don't bother" to the men who were about to rise up and greet her by shaking her hand in counterclockwise order, as custom required. Sitting down, she immediately whispered to Jum'a, "What's going on?"

"Just watch," said Jum'a.

"I don't understand his hand gestures," she whispered back, starting to scribble in her field diary, "Apparently, South Sinai Bedouin mime differs from that of Marcel Marceau."

"I'll translate some for you. Keep writing."

The tembel-hatted man threw his hands over his head, miming frantic finger-picking of some stringed instrument. He writhed his hips, then immediately squatted on his hamstrings and ended up lying on his back kicking his legs in the air while furiously attacking the imaginary strings.

"He is playing now on the electric *sumsumīyya* (five-stringed lyre)<sup>2</sup> he told us about," Jum'a whispered in her ear, as the men burst out laughing again. "For three nights we couldn't sleep because of those electric *sumsumīyyas*. The goats were so out of it they refused all orders from the goatherding girls, and the dogs howled back all night. Thank God it's over."

The T-shirted bony fellow had gotten up and was now jutting his chin out at his fist, an imaginary microphone, closing his eyes as if in a trance state during a pilgrimage dance. Then he made some Bedouin deaf-and-dumb sign language gestures, which most Bedouin understand.

"Sing a song for peace, cry it aloud," Jum'a translated. "He says one of the young 'uns who knows Hebrew told him they kept singing and singing this song while they got more and more stoned, and then some of them screwed on the sand dunes while the performance was still going on."

"Hey," shouted one of the pastel-garbed men, gently tossing a few grains of sand at the mime to get his attention. "If they sing so much for peace, what are they doing on our land?"

The tembel-hatted man tilted his head up with a silly smile, formed a circle with the thumb and middle finger of his left hand, and gleefully jabbed the middle finger of his right hand in and out of it.

The group was swimming in waves of laughter. The pastel-garbed man raised his voice again, to call out: "And screwing us over while they're at it!"

Somber silence descended. The performer was wiping the sweat off his brow with the hem of his Passover 1979 T-shirt. He collapsed into an empty spot and someone served him tea.

"Now that the Feast of *Baskawīt* (biscuits) is over, the annual migration of the Jews to our beaches has at last ended," another man said. "Many people will have jobs cleaning up after them, and the goats will have lots of garbage to eat."

The Israeli anthropologist Smadar tried to smother her giggles at the irony. The South Sinai Bedouin called the Jewish Passover "The Holiday of Biscuits." For them, matzo, or the Passover unleavened

bread, fell into the same category as store-bought cookies and crackers, known as "baskawīt" or biscuits.

"Who was that guy, anyway?" she whispered into Jum'a's ear.

"Oh, don't take him seriously. He's just our local Fool."

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Although this man was just a fool, his antic miming of the three-day rock festival raised unresolved existential dilemmas that the Mzeina Bedouin, a tribe of approximately 5,000 and the largest of the South Sinai Ṭawara intertribal alliance, had to face every day.

While the free-spirited nomadic tribes who roamed the Arabian deserts attracted turn-of-the-century European explorers in search of exotic experiences, and currently have become the nostalgic subject of ethnographic literature and films, travelers' accounts of the South Sinai tribes evoke images of less glamorous but still outlandish Bedouin. Dan Rabinowitz (1985) has recently emphasized that all nineteenth- and early twentieth-century travelers to the South Sinai, expecting to find the idealized pastoral nomads, were surprised to find instead only very few camels, sheep, and goats, and therefore concluded that the region was not prime pasture land (Rabinowitz 1985: 216). Hence, when travelers to the Eastern Deserts were still pursuing their romantic images of free and independent nomads, travelers to the South Sinai peninsula had long since been disabused of all such naivetés. The latter travelers clearly recognized that the Ṭawara Bedouin of the South Sinai were almost totally dependent on the economic centers of the colonial powers occupying their territory: the Ottoman Turks and, later, the British. By the turn of the twentieth century, Ṭawara members derived much of their income from making charcoal and also from acting as authentic travel guides for genteel pilgrims and explorers, uneasily saddled on camelback, suffering through Mount Sinai and the rest of the peninsula. Ṭawara members could sell the charcoal only in the faraway Nile Valley, four to fourteen strenuous days away by camel. Or they could share camel rides and walk fifteen to thirty days north to Jaffa, to hire themselves out as the cheapest of laborers to Palestinian orange grove owners. They also cultivated date palms in the desert's few oases, tended petite mountain gardens, hunted whatever the fragile desert ecology would yield, and fished along the 'Aqaba and Suez gulf coasts.

To this day, the basic fact is that the Mzeina have been in the hinterland of every occupier of the South Sinai, and therefore have had to depend for their survival on the occupier's center of power (Marx 1977a, 1980; Lavie 1989; Lavie and Young 1984). In the course

of the Arab-Israeli conflict of the last fifty years, the South Sinai has been a political football tossed at least five times between Egypt and Israel. From the 1940s until 1952, the Sinai was governed by the Egyptian King Farouq but patrolled by British army units. From 1952 to 1956 it was under independent control of the Arab Republic of Egypt. Although the South Sinai has officially been an Egyptian territory since Ottoman times, the South Sinai Bedouin nonetheless still view the Egyptians as a foreign occupation force, now perhaps because the Egyptians, preoccupied by the tremendous problems in the densely populated Nile Valley, have been unable to develop much sensitivity toward the idiosyncrasies of their hinterland Bedouin population. In 1956 Israel, backed by France and Britain, staging one of the last major colonial wars over the nationalization of the Suez Canal, occupied the Sinai, but a few months later returned it to Egypt, which, by then aided by the Soviets, held on to it until 1967, when it was again occupied by Israel. Following the 1973 October War, and the politics of shuttle diplomacy and Camp David, Israel again returned the Sinai to Egypt in eight stages between January 1975 and April 1982 (see the series of maps illustrating the South Sinai international border shifts in chap. 2).

And throughout all this, the Mzeina Bedouin were nothing but pawns. The Egyptian, Israeli, British, American, and Soviet leaders never once consulted them or their leadership on issues of war, peace, occupation, or treaties.

This book attempts to show that the constant military occupation of the South Sinai precluded for the Mzeina the identity that both turn-of-the-century travelers' accounts and contemporary nostalgic literature or media accounts inscribed for the Bedouin: fierce romantic nomads on loping camels in the vast desert. On the contrary, the military occupation had penetrated Mzeini daily life so deeply and so long that it had become much more than soldiers, developers, settlers, and tourists impinging on the external political and economic relationships between the indigenous tribe and the state. The omnipresent occupations had permeated not only internal inter- and intratribal affairs, but also discourses as delicate and intimate as those between husbands and wives. Given that the Mzeina were helpless objects of external political processes, I argue that their Bedouin identity could be little more than literary allegory: tribal identity appeared as moralistic, multilayered narratives transcending the spatial and temporal boundaries of military occupation through symbolic defiance only,

because for Mzeinis to openly confront any armed or unarmed occupier could mean beatings, jail, even death.

Within the tribe, only a handful of charismatic individuals had the creative capacity to allegorize the military occupation by dramatizing its humiliations and absurdities for a Bedouin audience. Yet these individuals, gifted with persuasive theatrical skills, did not perform their dramatized critiques at regular, ritual-like intervals. Only when challenged by fellow tribesmembers would a Mzeini creative individual such as the miming Fool evoke the allegory of Bedouin identity. The story would unfold during the fragile interstices of a tense, discontinuous conversation. Such precious moments, filling the otherwise awkward breaks within the flow of everyday conversation, temporarily reconstructed the image of the tribe for the listeners, even though the political situation that had generated the allegory remained unchanged.

The aim of this book is to retrace the process by which Mzeina allegories of Bedouin identity emerge from performances by various creative individuals, each of whom plays a character based on his or her own identity: the Sheikh, the Madwoman, the Ex-Smuggler, the Old Woman, the Fool, the Symbolic Battle Coordinator, and The One Who Writes Us. Embedded in these performances is the poetics of military occupation.

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#### BEGINNINGS: FIELDWORK BY AN OCCUPIER

It might seem a bit awkward for an Israeli like myself to write an account of the resistance, even if only poetic, mounted to the Israeli occupation of the Sinai Desert. I grew up with the Zionist frontier mythology—making the desert bloom, all the while mourning the eradication of desert spaces, and museumizing Negev Bedouin culture even while expropriating Bedouin land (Lavie and Rouse 1988). As a twelve-year-old right after the 1967 war, I was instructed by my teachers, many other Israelis, and the radio to consider the Sinai “the last frontier,” a phrase that in the South Sinai context of the mid-1970s had ironically altered its meaning—not simply land to conquer, but land to conquer *and* preserve. Oddly enough, aside from establishing several settlements, the Israeli government had decided purposely to leave the South Sinai barely touched, as a safari space, a nostalgic replacement for the lost Negev wilderness perhaps—an es-

cape from the social and spatial crowdedness of a small country (now not so small) like Israel (Lavie 1988).

As one of those rugged Sabras, I spent one whole high school summer vacation climbing steep, majestic red granite mountains where lush cool springs led to small orchards of juicy pears and prolific old mulberry trees. We explored very narrow, high-walled sandstone canyons utterly barren of plant life, but thinly striped with striations of gold, purple, green, blue, red, and white. We snorkeled among the most beautiful coral reefs in the world, where golden fish, sea turtles, and poisonous cognac-and-black-striped lion fish with great fanlike spines swam among coral reefs colored lavender, peach, black, violet, orange, and ecru. And then there were the Bedouin, whom the various hiking guides introduced to us both as noble savages living in a state of nature, and as remnants of our dignified Biblical forefathers who gained their freedom from Pharaoh's slavery and coalesced as a people in this very desert. I wanted to come back after my compulsory army service, despite the fact that I wholeheartedly opposed the transformation of Israel into the Israeli "Empire." I began to wonder whether there was something I was not being told about the Bedouin, such as their own response to tourists like myself, and to the whole Hollywood Ten Commandments media image of their tribes that Israel promoted to attract tourists—an image that had caused gradual Western encroachment on their encampments.

A month after my discharge from the Israeli Defense Force in 1975, I arrived at the South Sinai beach village of Dahab on a hot October afternoon (see the detailed South Sinai map in chap. 2). Innocent of formal anthropological training, but driven by curiosity about the human aspect of the supposedly dangerous Arab Other, I dropped my backpack, cassette recorder, and camera bag on the ground near a thin chicken-wire fence delineating empty sitting space in front of what looked like part of an old army barracks. Most of one side of the structure seemed to have been removed, leaving an empty wall now filled with flattened cardboard vegetable boxes bearing Hebrew, German, and English print promising red-cheeked tomatoes to thaw the European winter. On the roof a sign in English, Hebrew, and Arabic (which I learned to read only two years later) announced: Zub Mar 'Awwād. I deduced this might be a local supermarket of sorts.<sup>3</sup>

Wearing my modest outfit of baggy jeans, a loose Mickey Mouse T-shirt with elbow-length sleeves, and a turquoise kerchief to cover my hair, I sank down on my big backpack to rest from the heat and was immediately swarmed by kids shouting, "A Jew! A Jew! When is

she going to take off her clothes and walk into the sea?" But at that time, the only Arabic word I knew was *shukran* (thank you). Despite the fact that my grandmother's native tongue is Arabic, she had never spoken it in the family while I was growing up. All her children, as adults, had insisted she speak Hebrew with them. My mother had willfully "forgotten" her Arabic in the process of her upscale mobility to the European-Ashkenazi culture of my father, and my parents decided it would be better for me to learn French than Arabic as a second foreign language.

"Shukran," I said demurely in response to the children's greetings. They erupted in giddy laughter.

"*Eh da?*" asked one of the group, pointing at my camera bag. I took the camera out to show it to them, and they all said in unison, "*Kamara!*" I suddenly realized that this was the crucial moment of my first lesson in Mzeini Arabic, and envisioned myself, a devout young scholar, pointing at objects, exclaiming "*Eh dah?*", and filling my notebook with new words I would memorize at night in the glow of my flashlight.

A tall, dignified old man with gray beard stubble approached to check out the ruckus. With a wave of his hand, he scattered the kids to the four winds. He opened the structure's squeaky door, and a stuffy smell hit my nostrils. In the dim light I made out flour and rice sacks bearing Arabic script, plastic bottles of oil and cardboard boxes of waffles bearing Hebrew labels, tin cans of mackerel from Hong Kong, Bazooka chewing gum, and heavy plastic cases filled with empty Coca-Cola bottles. The old man carried my stuff in and put it under a faded postcard bearing the picture of Samira Tawfiq, a famous Arab pop star. Yes, this Zub Mar was indeed the neighborhood supermarket.

From a nearby palm frond hut, which must have been where he lived, the old man brought out a handwoven rug, a pot of warm tea, and six glasses. He laid the rug right on the ground in the fenced-in area in front of the store. While I was wondering why he had so many glasses, men and women started arriving, and soon the six were not enough. He forbade the returning hordes of children to come inside the fence, so they clambered all over it.

How could I explain to these people, without speaking their language, that I wanted to live with them so that I could learn about their way of life?

I cleared my throat. I cleared my throat again. By then, everyone, including the kids, was totally silent.

“*Ebrāni, ‘Ivrīt*, speak Hebrew,” said one of the younger men in a mixture of Arabic and Hebrew.

And at that moment I made a decision, that as someone who might represent the current occupation even though against it, I would never speak a word of Hebrew with the Bedouin.

I cleared my throat again. I gestured with both hands at my heart, turned them to the ground, bent my head over my folded hands as if sleeping, then lifted my eyebrows up and tilted my chin, trying to convey that I was asking permission to stay overnight.

Some people smiled. “*Marḥaba! Welcome!*” said the old man. He pointed at me with his right hand, then put it on his heart. By that time it was dusk. The smudgy cliffs seemed to be falling into the sea. On the soft breeze drifted smells of fish and cumin. The men went to pray in a space cleared of big pebbles and delineated by conch shells, with the *miḥrāb*, the small protruding semicircle before which the prayer leader stood, pointing southeast, toward Mecca.

A crumpled old woman opened the flimsy plywood gate of the fence and came in, carrying on her head a large round platter loaded with fish and rice. Several men followed, returning from prayer. This, I realized, was my first chance to practice my newly acquired Arabic expression and see if it worked.

“Eh da?” I queried, pointing at the fish.

“*Hūt. Samak. Hūt, ḥūt,*” said the old man.

I left the circle of sitting people, went to the locked door of the store, and knocked nervously. The old man stared at me as if at a total loss, then hesitantly walked toward the door and opened it. I scrambled through the pocket of my backpack, grabbed the pen and notebook, and rushed back to my seat in front of the platter. Little did I know I had violated a prime rule of etiquette around the dinner table—one does not leave it just like that in the middle, without profuse apologies. Furthermore, if one leaves, one does not return. But I quickly slipped back to my seat and wrote in the notebook: “fish—*ḥūt* or *samak*.” Sensing that the shocked silence probably meant I had done something wrong, I looked at the ground, hoping no one would notice how I was blushing. But then my scholarly curiosity won out. I raised my head, pointed at the rice, and exclaimed, “Eh da?”

“*Ruz. Ruz,*” said the old man.

I wrote in my notebook: “*ruz*—rice,” unaware that everyone sitting cross-legged around the platter was waiting for the guest of honor to start eating so they could eat too.

After a long, nebulous silence, the old man grabbed my right hand

and plunged it into the sticky rice, so I grabbed some in my fist. Then he stuck my hand among the slippery white chunks of fish, so I grabbed a few of them. Then he gently maneuvered my elbow to bend my arm and get my loaded hand to my mouth. Being lefthanded, I had hardly ever been required to do anything important, other than play the piano, with my right hand, and was unable to control the sticky mass, so most of it dropped off bit by bit before it reached my mouth. By this time everyone was in an uproar of laughter, not only because of my klutziness but also because my hand had touched the food—that was the signal for the rest of them to dig their hands into the same platter and go to it.

“Oh, that’s easy enough,” I thought, and reached for the rice with my left hand. The moment I touched it, a stunned silence descended on the group and everyone hastily withdrew their hands. The old man patiently took my right hand back to the platter, but by this time I thought I had already made too many faux pas, whatever they might have been, and decided to give up eating for the present. I patted my tummy and waved my hands as if to say, “No more, thanks.” But this also was not acceptable. So I had to keep reaching with my uncooperative right hand, just a bit at a time, so that the rest of the men and women would not stop eating. How long will this go on? Am I to sit here and eat for ever and ever? I looked around and heard some loud burps accompanied by a certain phrase, so I gathered up my courage to produce a soft burp. This time everyone beamed at me with broad smiles of approval.

“*Rabena yaḥalaf ‘aleikum,*” the old man said twice, pointing at me, then repeated the phrase again. I got the idea I was supposed to say it, so I did.

“*Ṣaḥḥa wa‘āfia,*” everyone answered me in unison, while I scribbled both utterances down, adding, “meaning yet unknown—but important!”

By then total darkness invited a sad red moon to rise from the east out of the Saudi cliffs, and to spread its beams into the Gulf of ‘Aqaba. As soon as the men left for the *‘asha* (after dinner) prayer, all the women crowded around me and started patting my arms, breasts, abdomen, and legs through my clothes. They also touched my face and poked their fingers onto the kerchief around my head. I had no idea what to make of this behavior and just sat there on the ground in amazement, trying not to stiffen up. As soon as the moon rose and the men returned, the touching stopped.

Two years later one of the women told me that as of 1975, this was

the closest they had ever gotten to an Israeli woman, and they just wanted to see if I was a regular human woman with flesh and bones like theirs. The head poking was to find out if I had any head lice about to lay eggs. If they had touched one, it would have popped and squirted. All the while, they feared I might slap one of them, and they were surprised that I didn't. She, and other Mzeinis, also told me they all thought that just as all those hippies had come to live in the fake Bedouin-style village built for them as a tourist trap, I had come to live in the real thing. The problem was, I never took off my clothes.

My first night in the field, I was shown a corner where I could spread my sleeping bag, but I couldn't sleep all night, wondering what the future held for me.

The first week in the field everything seemed to be going quite well. Ten to thirty children constantly formed a safety belt around me, eager to chant the name of whatever object I pointed at. My notebook rapidly filled with Arabic words, nouns, and verbs, and I was amazed to discover that, fortunately, the grammar was quite similar to that of Hebrew. I started making up baby-talk sentences that seemed to be understood.

But this idyll did not last. On my ninth day in Dahab, when I returned to the store from one of the canyons outside the settlement where I had gone to relieve myself, I was shocked to find that my backpack, sleeping bag, camera bag, and cassette recorder had disappeared. What to do? In broken Arabic I managed to inform the old man and his wife. To my surprise, they said nothing and just looked at me philosophically. Did they think it was Allah's will, or what? What was I going to do? My Arabic was not good enough to consult with them about what course of action I should take. Suddenly all those vague, ominous warnings from friends and relatives flashed through my mind: "Beware of the Arabs, young lady. You are too innocent to know anything about them yet."

But the old couple was so generous. For the first time, they invited me into their modest home. They had only one spare blanket, a thin one, so they sent a grandchild to the neighbors to fetch more. The news that all my belongings had disappeared (toilet paper excluded—how lucky I was) spread like a flash flood. In thirty-five minutes thirty-five adults, and the usual masses of children, jammed the inner yard of the couple's compound. The crowd whispered among themselves but just stared at me, saying nothing to me. I felt utterly lost. Two voices counterpointed through my mind: "What on earth are you doing here?" "Fieldwork is interesting." And soon, a young man in

patched jeans and a faded Harvard T-shirt addressed me in broken Hebrew with a bittersweet, resigned smile: "You can always go to the Israeli police in Di-Zahāv. They have dogs and are very good at searching our homes."

Yes, I could have done this. But at that very moment I decided not to involve any Israeli authorities in my research, just as I had determined nine days ago never to speak Hebrew to the Mzeinis. But this moment made me understand that my fieldwork could not be objective like I thought fieldwork ought to be. How could I write "unbiased" fieldnotes about a tribe under military occupation by my own country? Anyway, if the police came in, it would be the end of my research. I would be just another Israeli.

The old man offered me a place in his own hut, and a stream of curious visitors started flowing through. In the course of a week, over fifty more people came to sympathize with me and say how sorry they were that this had happened. Though they had precious little themselves, they kept bringing me small aluminum pots of food, which I insisted we eat together. One seven-year-old boy even pressed his school notebook and pen on me, because, like the adults, he knew I was there to write.

After a week, while I was away visiting people and the hut was empty, someone left my little bag of toiletries there. I was so relieved to have my toothbrush and sunblock back. Nothing was missing. Nothing. That evening some of my blank cassettes appeared. The next morning I found my camera bag just outside the old man's hut. Then came my jeans and a couple of T-shirts. By the end of the week I had everything, including the cassette recorder and the sleeping bag. And nothing was missing. Nothing.

Had I been tested? If so, had I passed at least my first exam?

After a couple of years of hearing many arguments between old and young Mzeinis, I realized that there was a generation gap on the issue of theft from foreigners. The older generation was trying to cling to the Mzeina tradition of hospitality for everyone who arrived in the Sinai. But the younger generation protested that military officers, developers, settlers, and tourists were uninvited guests who had to be made aware that they were unwelcome. The younger Mzeinis used theft from foreigners—or as they expressed it, "taking,"—as a way to protest their presence. At times they would even "take" from foreigners things they themselves had no use for, just to make this point. Among themselves, however, Mzeinis never stole. In my thirteen years



of fieldwork, despite my repeated inquiries, I heard of no thefts by Bedouin from other Bedouin.

"It is time to make you a *ṭanība* of our family," announced the old man a month later. I could understand him because my arabic had improved dramatically—there were so many people to talk to all the time.

"Ṭanība? Eh da?"

"Say a man from the Rashayda tribe in the Sudan had a blood dispute with someone, and to save his life, he ran very far away, seeking shelter (*dākhel*) with someone from the Mzeina. Let's say he is a good man struck by misfortune. We Mzeina will adopt him into our tribe. We will offer him protection. If someone harms him, it is as if he harms the whole family who adopted him. This means trouble with our *'urfi* (customary law), which, I want you to know, is much tougher and fairer than *your* country's law. So we will make him our *ṭanīb* (person with a fictive kinship for the purpose of protection). In the old days when we all lived in tents, this Rashayda tribesman would have run into a Mzeina family tent, held on to the center pole made of a poplar tree, and begged to become a *ṭanīb*."

So the next day, in the late afternoon when the goats and sheep returned from the pasture, accompanied by the goatherd, the old man's freshly divorced adolescent granddaughter, he selected one of the best kidgoats, a plump one. With the squirming kidgoat clasped tightly under his left arm, he led me with his right hand toward the southeast corner of the inner courtyard, the corner pointing toward Mecca. He made me hold on to the twenty-five by twenty-five centimeter square pole supporting that corner. It was old gray lumber, probably recycled from scaffolding at some development site.

"But didn't you say only a man can become a *ṭanīb*?"

"Well," mused the old man, "among the *afranji* (Westerners), aside from their bodies, it's hard to tell who's a man and who's a woman. So we can make you a *ṭanība*."<sup>4</sup>

I was still clinging to the scaffolding pole as he slaughtered the kidgoat while murmuring the opening verses of the Qur'an. He collected some of the blood into an empty cleaned-out tin can and walked over to me. He dipped his forefinger into the blood, and, murmuring more verses from the Qur'an, drew on my forehead a design like a backwards *L* followed by a straight up-and-down stroke. I later discovered that this was the *wasm* (brand) of the old man's phratry—a sign branded with hot irons onto camels' necks in case they got lost, tattooed on some women's foreheads or on the backs of the hands of

those men and women who wanted it as a sign of belonging to the phratry, and also marked on hut doors for good luck and on storage boxes for identification.

While the old man was skinning the kidgoat for his wife to cook, she spontaneously lifted the thin silver medallion on a leather thong from around her neck and put it over my head. Still grasping the pole with one hand, I lifted the silver disk in the other and saw engraved on it a Bedouin man and woman whose clasped hands held the enfolded young fronds of a date palm sprout, with a star and crescent moon above. On the other side was Arabic script I was later able to decipher as misspelled Qur'anic verses.

"This will guard your way among the Bedouin," she said softly.

The miraculous grapevine (perhaps because the spectacle could be fully seen between the palm fronds that formed the hut's walls) again did its work, and neighbors started arriving to view my forehead, and to eat the meat—a rare treat reserved for religious celebrations.

Finally it was time to eat. The goat was small and the people were many. The men formed one circle around their own platter of rice dotted with a few tidbits of meat, and the women formed another around theirs. But the old woman gave me a generous plate of meat with a little rice to eat by myself.

"You expect me to eat all this meat by myself?" I exclaimed to the assembled company, throwing my hands up. Not only was I a vegetarian, a cultural concept I knew the Mzeina would not understand because they so treasured meat, but the division struck me as ridiculously unfair. So I spontaneously went over to the men's communal serving plate and carefully used my right hand to scrape half of what was on my plate onto theirs, then put the other half onto the women's serving plate.

"So, now that I am your *ṭanība*, where should I sit?"

After whispers within and between the circles, the old woman instructed me, "You will first eat with the men for a while, and then go eat with us women." And then she accompanied me to the men's circle and sat down with me to eat with the men.

It began to dawn on me that throughout my fieldwork, I was going to be a gender classification problem.

When I made a calculated reach toward the serving plate with my klutzy right hand, one of the men stopped me.

"Wait. Wait. Since you write and do all other clean things with your left hand, and probably do all unclean things with your right, you may

eat with your left hand as long as you say *bismallah* (by the name of God).”

What a relief!

Despite all vicissitudes, fieldwork began to fall into a routine. After a year, I was fluent in the colloquial dialect of the Mzeina. After two years I could recite Bedouin poetry. By the end of the fourth year, I was even able to make up some simple verses of my own. My Yemeni grandmother was quite moved that I could converse with her in her native tongue and enjoy sharing all her proverbs and puns. Her own seven children were embarrassed to speak Arabic with her because, in the European-Ashkenazi hegemony of Israel, it is considered primitive and low class (cf. Shohat 1988).

The old man and his wife gradually became like parents to me. They first told me to call them father and mother, but after they visited my real parents in the Tel Aviv suburbs, they reconsidered. They decided that, even though my relationship with them was in terms of fictive kinship, no one could have two fathers and two mothers.

“You are her real father, so she will call you ‘father,’ (*abā*)” the old man declared to my father, using me as a translator. “I am her Bedouin father, and she will call me ‘[paternal] uncle’ (*am*).” For the Mzeinis, paternal uncles were almost as important as fathers.

In the course of my first four years in the field, I gradually discovered that what I had thought would be a major liability, my ambiguous gender classification, turned out to be a major asset, giving me trans-gender mobility. The men taught me how to fish, pollinate date trees, improvise fixing jeeps, and track camels by their individual footprints in the arcosis (those small pebblestones in the wadis). The women taught me how to herd, cook, spin, weave, play the flute, and babysit the children when they wanted some time off. I participated in rituals of weddings, births, baby uvula cutting, circumcisions of boys and girls, exorcisms of *jinns* from people’s bodies and minds, ceremonial meals in memory of the recent dead, pilgrimages, funerals, date harvest celebrations, and Muslim rituals such as the Ramaḍān fast, ‘Id al-Fatr (the holiday ending the month-long Ramaḍān), ‘Id al-Aḍḥa (the sacrifice holiday ending the month of pilgrimage to Mecca), and Fadu al-Gharrā (the sacrificial meal in memory of the nocturnal journey of Muḥammad from Jerusalem to the heavens to receive the Qur’an). I was constantly weaving my way, gingerly, between the men’s and women’s spheres of action. I attended the exclusively male customary court hearings, but was not allowed into the exclusively male monthly

meetings between the Israeli military governors and the Bedouin sheikhs they had appointed.

Therefore, throughout this book I appear in both exclusively male and exclusively female contexts, as well as in mixed-gender ones. To the Mzeinis, I was genderless. Perhaps because Mzeini men had long been accustomed to tourists, developers, soldiers, and other Westerners, both male and female, I had no trouble developing strong nonsexual friendships with them. Both men and women poked fun at how easily I moved between the genders, saying “Smadar has the body (*jism*) and soul (*nafs*) of a woman and the logical mind (*‘agl*) of a man.” They often told each other, “She can churn yogurt and play the flute, as well as gallop on camels and talk foreign currency rates.” Both employed me as a go-between in romantic trysts. This would suggest that despite my trans-gender mobility, I enjoyed the trust of both men and women. In retrospect, the only person to suffer from these circumstances was myself. After my first four years in the field, four years of genderless identity, I found it a real struggle to regain a distinct sense of womanhood.<sup>5</sup>

To avoid preliminary categorization of my field data, I wrote it in the form of a diary rather than on cards classified by anthropological topics such as kinship, ritual, descent, and so forth. Each diary entry consisted of a description of the situation: time, duration, location, who participated, an almost verbatim record of what was said, facial expressions, hand gestures, and also my impressions about the situation. I wrote the diary in Hebrew and used Hebrew letters to transliterate the sounds of Arabic speech. After six or seven months, since I was always in some corner scribbling, I stopped being an attraction and people simply ignored me. This was how I acquired the appellation “*Dī Illi Tuktubna*” (The One Who Writes Us). People even made use of my record to verify what had been said in the heat of an argument, saying “It’s even written in Smadar’s notebook.”

Another fieldwork strategy was to visit people’s houses to chat and gossip, that is, to conduct extended open-ended interviews. After conflicts or rituals, I visited not only the event’s key participants, but also the observers, to chat about what happened, that is, to document “the native point of view.” I dutifully collected genealogies, descent lines, kinship and marriage networks, and the many versions of the Mzeina myth of settlement in the Sinai. Only in an oblique way did this data prove relevant to my eventual thesis about the poetics of military occupation.

To move around in the Sinai, I relied mainly on rides from Bedouin



traveling from one place to another in old jeeps and pickup trucks, and later, in dilapidated Mercedes taxis. From my research grant, I also bought part ownership in a camel so I could reach most of the peninsula, still inaccessible to motorized vehicles.

In 1977 I conducted a house-to-house census in Dahab, the largest sedentarized settlement on the East Coast of the peninsula, and composed only of Mzeina. This census provided data on population size, neighborhood composition, history of structures and buildings, age distribution of residents, household composition, family assets, and marital history of individuals.

In 1978–1979 I conducted the same type of census in al-Ṭūr, the largest sedentarized Bedouin settlement on the West Coast of the peninsula, inhabited by Mzeina and all other tribes of the South Sinai Ṭawara intertribal alliance. Because I found it difficult to stay in al-Ṭūr for a long time, I completed only half the census.

To obtain information on less sedentarized populations living in encampments, I conducted population surveys in some main geographical areas of the South Sinai. In September and October 1976 I surveyed the peninsula's northeastern mountains; in January 1978 the mid-western mountains; in September 1978 the northern part of the highland plateau; and in January 1979 the southern part of the highland plateau and the southeastern and southwestern mountains.

Before each survey I collected gossip from the Mzeinis in Dahab about the encampments in the area to be surveyed. For each survey I went with two Mzeinis who were well accepted in the area. We visited two to three encampments per day. My companions from Dahab gossiped with the locals according to our prearranged plan: I gathered information about who lived in the encampment, their kinship groups, marriage and divorce patterns, the property they owned, territorial claims, sources of water and food, their occupations, migration patterns, if any, and so on.

As for official records and statistics—due to my strained relationship with the military governor, I did not even try to request these from his office. I was therefore very lucky that one day the old Mzeini trash collector at Dahab's small Israeli army base brought me a bundle of papers he had rescued from the trash, thinking it might interest me. Though unable to read either Arabic or Hebrew, he thought it had to do with Bedouin, because the pink cover page of the top document had a drawing of a man wearing a caftan and headdress, with a camel, the proverbial palm trees, and waves of the sea. This bundle turned out to be quite a treasure: unclassified military documents regarding

the South Sinai Bedouin, dating from 1972 to 1977. The information concerned the military and civilian governing strategies used to control the Bedouin, which I will discuss in chapter 2, and the data that generated these policies, mainly the geographical distribution of Bedouin in the Sinai, their administrative division into tribal coalitions, tribes, phratries, and clans, and the main traditional and migrant labor occupations of the Bedouin. I also discovered 1975–1977 statistics on the number and residences of Bedouin in the eastern part of the peninsula, although I find these inaccurate according to my own census and demographic surveys.

To supplement my laboriously detailed fieldnotes, I made audio tapes of men's coffee-grinding rhythms and joke sessions, their camel-riding songs and songs to accompany dances, fishermen's musical-jocular shouts during fishing and their drunken songs and antics accompanied by the *sumsumīyya*, men and women reciting poetry, women's herding shouts and songs, their flute playing and wedding songs, children's songs, and various genres of speech. I was very careful to ask permission each time I wanted to make a recording, and everyone was fully aware of the presence of a cassette recorder while recording was in progress. I was interested in recording ordinary everyday conversations, to see how they were influenced by the political context of military occupation, but I found that people tended to put on a performance in front of the cassette recorder, as they were used to doing while playing their own cassette recorders. As soon as I pushed the off button, they crowded around to hear the playback of their performance. Therefore, to record the everyday dialogues—one of the main focuses of this book—I just had to write as fast as I could what people said. I blessed the fact that, once people got used to my constant scribbling, most of the time they left me alone tucked in some corner to observe the goings-on. At times they would include me in their conversation, or I would initiate my own participation.

On the whole, fieldwork was going well. I seemed to pass the occasional small loyalty tests that popped up, recognizing them as such only after the fact, because I felt more accepted.

Then in early summer of 1977, after almost two years in the field, came final exam week. I joined a fishing trip with my uncle/father, his sons, and several other men, young and old. We had to load all our gear on six camels, because no motorized vehicle could reach the shore where the red granite cliffs made their sheer drop into the sea. It was a long, five-day trip of arduous work along the scalloped coral reef that undulated in and out from the coastline ten kilometers north of

Dahab. We lived by the ebbing tides instead of the clock, fishing between tides, every five hours or so. The leader of the group was an old man with thin threads of salt sparkling in his wrinkles. As the most experienced fisherman, he knew in spite of his cataracts how to spot groups of three or four parrot fish seven meters out under water. Standing on the beach, he would consult with the other experts to decide what group of fish to attack. Then he would shield his eyes against the glaring sun and watch two seasoned fishermen, their left shoulders sagging from the lead weights of the heavy net—handwoven cotton in two layers, a white loose weave for the big fish, and a green fine weave for the small ones—walking along the edge of the shallow turquoise reef out to behind the target spot.

In back of them was a sheer drop of thirty to fifty meters into the blue-black open sea, with Saudi Arabia on the horizon. Then the old leader would do a little dance, gracefully shifting his weight from foot to foot while waving his left hand like a semaphore signal from side to side over his head. The men with the net responded by walking gingerly together, heading north to the outside edge of the reef. As soon as the leader saw that the net men were right behind the target fish, peacefully gnawing on the corals with their red, gold, and black tails just above the water line, he gracefully raised his right hand to move in a mirror image of the left. The two net men moved to either side until the net was fully open. At that moment, the youngest in the crowd, seven young men and myself, rushed into the sea, stamping and splashing and throwing stones to drive the fish into the net. With a basket on my back, its rope handles cutting into my shoulders and forehead, I ran in my plastic sneakers on the bumpy reef, praying not to fall on a poisonous stonefish—it would kill me in five minutes or less. Breathless at the net, we started killing the slippery, slithery fish by jabbing a curved forefinger from one gill-slit over to the other. Thin threads of blood diffused in the clear blue water. We hastily disentangled the dead fish from the net and flipped them over our shoulders into the baskets. We had to work very fast to get back to the beach before the sharks came after the blood.

Tired and thirsty, with blisters all over me from sun, salt, and sweat, I sighed with relief when the last day dawned.

“All I want is to load my camel and go home to pour sweet water on my aching skin,” said the salty old leader, “so let’s get on with the *suhūm* (the dividing of the catch).” He meted out the fish, one by one, into a circle of enough piles to give one to each fisherman. My eyes burned even more, trying to hold back tears, when I realized from the

number of piles that one of them must be meant for me. One of the fishermen volunteered to be blindfolded and toss red and black stones, and white pieces of dried camel manure, one at a time, from the center out toward the piles. Before each toss, he asked who would get the pile the stone fell nearest, and someone would call out a name. It was completely random and very fair.

In the middle of all this, some of us noticed a military amphibious landing craft apparently trying to land on the coral and breaking off chunks of it. This ship was bizarrely out of place—normally such ships stayed out in the middle of the gulf. Was it a landing exercise? If so, why not in one of the deep, sandy hidden bays?

“Are the Jews getting ready for another war?” asked the salty leader.

“They might be practicing to attack Saudi Arabia from the northeast coast. They could take the Saudis by total surprise and get it all in less than six days.”

“Yeah, maybe all the oil they took from Egypt in the Gulf of Suez isn’t enough for them.”

“No, no, no! America helps the Saudis, and it also helps Israel, so it won’t let two of its children go to war with each other.”

An hour passed in trading speculative political theories and also curses over the vandalizing of the very rare corals, when a small Israeli military helicopter landed just a couple of meters from our piles of fish. Out jumped an impeccably attired redheaded master sergeant, asking in broken Arabic, “Fishing licenses? IDs?” All the men scurried to their blankets and bundles to find their documents. Only I had no fishing license, because Israelis did not need one for such small amounts, and I had been so sure of myself that I had even left my ID back in the encampment.

“If you have no ID or fishing license,” ordered the sergeant, “bring me your camera.” He opened it, ripped the film while it was still in the camera, grabbed it out, and exposed it to the sun.

“That’s what you get for taking pictures of a military landing craft,” he snarled. “That’s prohibited.”

“But she didn’t take any pictures of the ship,” one Bedouin piped up. The sergeant slapped him in the face.

“Take your stuff and get in the helicopter,” he commanded me. “Move it!”

By late afternoon we landed in Sharm al-Sheikh right in front of the headquarters of the South Sinai military governor, and they threw me in jail. My dramatic entrance into the dingy, stifling hot cell stunned the fourteen Bedouin men already there.

“What are *you* doing here?” some chorused in disbelief.

“We went fishing in Ras abu-Gallūm, and I didn’t have my fishing license and ID.”

“Welcome, welcome,” one young man said. “Most of us are here for the same reason.”

“Hey, Smadar, do you also have lice on your head?”

“I think so.”

“If you’ve been in jail, and you have head lice, you are a real Bedouin.”

Early in the evening the master sergeant escorted me from the cell to the office of the military governor, glowering behind his imposing desk. When I entered he murmured to the redhead, “She even smells like one.”

“I hear that you are the one behind all this media coverage of the nude hippie beaches.”

I realized then that the fishing license was just an excuse to get me for disclosing to a well-respected Israeli journalist this governor’s extracurricular activities, selecting one-night stands from among the nude Scandinavian blondes on the beaches.

“And we here in the military government don’t like journalists. And I’m sure the Bedouin don’t like them either.”

“Well, sir, I hope you are aware of the fact that they are Muslim, and I know that they sent you several petitions asking you to erect signs prohibiting nudity, but you gave no response.”

“You know they are making money out of this too.”

“But at what cost to their culture?”

“Are you on their side, or your own people’s side?”

“I would rather not answer that, sir,” I whispered politely, amazed that I dared to say even that much.

“Get her out of here,” he barked at the redhead.

Back in the cell, I was so relieved to find my fieldnotes still in my little bundle. I asked the men if anyone had messed with them while I was gone.

“No, I don’t think they care about that sort of thing,” one said.

That whole night I couldn’t sleep a wink, anxious about what they were going to do to me. My skin itched from salt and sweat and sunburn. I longed for a shower. Early in the morning, a burly policeman with a big mustache opened the cell and declared me free. I walked out into the brilliant sun with nothing but my bundle of sleeping bag, camera, and fieldnotes. A group of Bedouin men sweeping the streets smiled broadly when they saw me. One man, when he



THE DAILY COASTAL ISRAELI MILITARY PATROL,  
NUWĒB‘AT MZEINA

discovered I had no money, gave me his whole day’s pay for the bus to Dahab. “Go to your father in Dahab,” he said. “I hope they kept your share of the fish for you.”

I arrived in Dahab at noon, and finally had a good meal and a good “shower” — cold sweet water poured from a twenty-liter jerrycan into a tin can and then over my body, along with soap and shampoo. By evening the family of my uncle/father, and the families of two of my fellow fishermen, were slaughtering goats for a feast to thank God for my return.

“I saved your share of the fish for you,” said my adoptive father.

“But they are yours. You never want money from me, or anything else.”

“Three months from now, we are going to go to Wadi Firān to exchange dried fish for dates. Bring this fish, and people will give you dates.”

From then on, I had the full trust of all the people—every Mzeini in the South Sinai knew the story of “the night when Smadar was in jail.”

In spite of the various tests of me, which were only to be expected, from the beginning of my fieldwork I had benefited from the generous tradition of Mzeini hospitality. Although the tradition was that a person was a guest for only three days, I felt that in my case this time period was unduly extended. When I protested, many said I was not a guest because I was working daily to help both the men and the women with important chores.

I wanted to compensate the old man for having me in his hut, but he refused. I tried leaving money for him in his pocket, or in the little food can used as the family kitty, or I would leave it in the place they hid the transistor radio when they were not home. But whenever I left money for him, I would find it neatly folded back in my backpack, usually inside a sock.

A great opportunity to pay him back came when his prized Seiko watch stopped, and on one of my trips back to Tel Aviv, I took it for repair to the main Seiko certified service center. After this, other Mzeinis asked me to take their watches for repair, and I gladly did it. I also paid all expenses to take him and his wife, daughters, sons, and their spouses on trips to visit my family and to pray at the al-Aqşa mosque in Jerusalem (the third-holiest site for Muslims). We also went to the movies, to the circus, and to cafes, and I bought him and his wife prescription eyeglasses. While in Jerusalem, I discovered that my old adoptive mother craved frozen chickens and chocolate cakes. Thereafter, when I traveled back to Dahab from my occasional visits to the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, I always brought her a Viennese chocolate cake from a Jerusalem bakery and picked up some frozen chickens at the local supermarket in Eilat. Also on my visits up north, I visited Mzeinis who were lonely in Israeli hospitals and really appreciated seeing me. I also bought all sorts of toys for the kids and cosmetics for the women, especially their favorite Revlon shampoo and colorful hair pins. I hoped this would reciprocate somewhat for the way the people opened their homes and hearts to me. Even after I left for Berkeley in 1979, the Mzeinis of Dahab felt free to occasionally call my grandmother and my friends in Jerusalem and invite themselves up for a couple of nights to attend Friday prayer at the al-Aqşa mosque.

In the fall of 1978, my fourth year of fieldwork, I started applying to graduate schools to continue my studies in anthropology. Many Mzeinis were baffled.

“Why do you need to travel all the way to America to write about us?” asked the old man’s eldest daughter.

“Well,” her mother responded, “everything else comes from America, so the book on us will too.”

In late August 1979, ten days before I left the Sinai, a cargo ship bound for Saudi Arabia made a navigational error and ended up in the Gulf of Suez, where it ran into one of the coral reefs near al-Ṭūr. To lighten their load, the hysterical Italian crew hurled overboard all sorts of esoteric gourmet delicacies: frozen Cornish game hens complete with their livers—a great Bedouin treat—neatly tucked inside in plastic pouches bearing mysterious Cyrillic script; from France, canned champignons, La Vache Qui Rit cheese, and purple sugar candies that looked like violets; huge apples, the size of cantaloupes, from the Po River Valley in Italy; commercial quantity cans of sumptuous feta cheese from Bulgaria; and plaid cans of Scottish shortbread. Like all the other Mzeinis, I rushed to grab these gifts from the sea for my extended adoptive family. I swam out to the ship with the men and later sorted the stuff with the women. For modesty’s sake, I had swum in my clothes, but because they took so long to dry, I got pneumonia.

My temperature was over 40°C—hot enough to cook on, said the old man, who then, in spite of my protests, went to fetch the South African Jewish doctor, a scuba-diving accident specialist, from the nearby Israeli settlement of Di-Zahāv. The doctor ordered me to take twenty erythromycin pills per day. I lay there helpless, knowing I had to be on the other side of the world in a week, while the people kept bringing me unheard-of delicacies like lobster broth with French champignons and melted Bulgarian feta. People took turns staying with me in shifts, so I was never alone. They read from the Qur’an for my recovery and brought several traditional healers who tied amulets around my neck, flicked water on me from a holy bowl, and threw smoky blankets over me to make me cough up mucus from my lungs. Finally I had only two days to pack. I had to be in Berkeley before the beginning of the academic year.

“Those Westerners feel the urge to go to America even if they are very sick,” observed the old man’s second cousin.

One of my adoptive brothers insisted on accompanying me to the airport in Eilat for my flight to Tel Aviv. He hired a Mercedes taxi,

and from the moment I got in, I cried and cried. At the airport I was so distraught, and my adoptive brother was so protective, that he managed to talk his way through every armed Israeli guard at all four security checkpoints, accompanying me to the very door of the propeller-driven aircraft. I was the last to climb the squeaky, rickety steel staircase to this civilian plane. Among all these suspicious military officials and security guards, watching out particularly for Arabs like my brother, he said his last words to me: "I am afraid they are going to kill you there in America. I am afraid you are going to die from all those serial rapists and murderers we keep hearing about on the radio. Will you ever get back here in one piece?" I last glimpsed him wiping his tears on the sleeve of his caftan. It was the only time I ever saw him cry.

The most precious piece of luggage I took with me to Berkeley was a large vinyl duffel bag weighing around thirty kilograms. I clung to it as Isaac Stern must have gripped his Stradivarius. Every time I changed planes, I had to have a furious argument with the airplane ground staff when I refused to check it with the luggage. I was a prime suspect—still tanned very dark olive, wearing around my neck all sorts of amulets written in Arabic that Mzeini women had given me for good luck, and destined for Berkeley.

"Open this bag," they demanded.

When everything was on the table, the security person looked at me in total shock. "What are all these notebooks, slides, negatives, and tapes about?" One even went so far as to suggest that I was trying to start a new cult.

"This is four years' worth of research materials on the 5,000 Mzeina Bedouin of the Sinai desert."

"Whaat? Who?"

"You know, those nomads with camels who live in the desert of the Middle East."

The airport officials looked at each other doubtfully. "Well, after all, she is headed for the *university* at Berkeley," came the usual shrug. So I got the benefit of the doubt, and with it permission to cling to my data.

My first year as a graduate student, I did all my course work, but spent every free moment indexing my fieldnotes. I gradually noticed that, in addition to the mass of data that made perfect anthropological sense, I had a fascinating body of enigmatic data, which I could not interpret. This data consisted of verbatim transcripts of arguments that led to the sudden eruption of solo performances, not only by people in leadership positions, like the sheikhs, ex-smugglers, and the Symbolic Battle Coordinator, but also by oddball characters like old women, madwomen, and fools like the mime who opened this chapter. Although I had not started my fieldwork with a focused proposal to study any particular aspect of Mzeina culture, I had plenty of conventional data, enough for several different books. But the enigmatic sequence of collective everyday argument giving way to solo performance of a personal narrative drew me like a magnet. I read the data over and over again, each time through the optics of a different theory, but they still resisted interpretation.

**Typcasting.** In the spring of 1979 I read Don Handelman's (1979) article "Is Naven Ludic?: Paradox and the Communication of Identity." In that article Handelman discussed the concept of "symbolic type"—a character enacting a certain persona, at times costumed and masked, who appears during the transformation from the linear flow of regular time to the cyclical flow of ritual or play time (cf. Leach 1961), and serves as a catalyst to move the ritual or play from one act to the next (cf. Werbner 1986). Handelman based his analysis of symbolic typifications on Richard Grathoff's theory of "contextual inconsistencies, disruptions of typified patterns of social interactions" (Grathoff 1970:12) that might get resolved in play. Grathoff described sequences where the thematic, motivational, and interpretational relevance of a social situation gradually falls apart—while still seeming to make sense, it paradoxically stops making sense, because unity of context is lost (Grathoff 1970:24–33). Such situations of anomie (Durkheim 1933:192; cf. McHugh 1968) are fertile ground for the appearance of playful characters, who reduce the context to its essence and therefore enable its reorganization. Handelman describes how this can be accomplished.

The symbolic type structures the thematic field of the situation in



AN OLD WOMAN (‘AJŪZ)

“Each Bedouin community that has more than fifty families living there more or less permanently has an ‘omda. The government appoints him. They want him to be a mayor of sorts. But for us, the title ‘omda’ is nothing but a joke. Any man who fusses and acts bossy, we call him ‘the ‘omda.’” This was an answer I received when I talked with Mzeini women and men about the official local conductors of their everyday life.

‘Omdas won their appointments because of their public collaboration with the occupiers. They received a very small salary from the civil government. In exchange, they acted as local figureheads, providing the illusion of a consultation with the local-level authority before the civil or military administration took local action.

Here are three excerpts from the 1977 logbook of the Dahab ‘omda:

- One windy winter morning. A Swedish tourist accompanies a policeman from the station of the nearby Israeli moshāv, Di-Zahāv, to visit the settlement’s ‘omda. The tourist complains about the theft of his elaborate underwater photography gear. After the visit, the policeman and the Swede conduct searches inside randomly picked Bedouin huts.
- A month later, just before the Passover holiday. The ‘omda and his extended family have a late afternoon “high tea” for a group of twenty or so American Jewish donors on a visit to Di-Zahāv. Stage managed by two Israeli civil administrators, they perform a ceremony of Mzeini hospitality that includes coffee grinding, tea drinking, and bread baking. The donors write fat checks that are to build a school for the Di-Zahāv children. The Bedouin provide the tour’s local entertainment and later, they will be the labor for building the school.
- A summer day of the same year. The local ranger drops by. He complains that the settlement is overpopulated by cats. An hour later we hear scattered shots. The next day, on the outskirts of



the settlement, I see the children playing with the corpses of eight dead cats and the empty pistol shells around them.

Often, because his official salary was too small, and despite the fact that he was always supposed to be in the settlement, an 'omda would be away for several days, working at one of the better-paying migrant labor jobs in the vicinity of his settlement. "Who fills in for the 'omda when he's away?" I asked. "Don't worry," people soothed me with slightly amused expressions. "The 'omda has a *wakil* (deputy), the 'Ajūz." The Old Woman. Seeing my surprised face, someone added, "No. Women can't have official appointments. But she acts like it is anyway."

I was baffled. Mzeinis explained to me many times that men and women were to have strictly separate domains of action. All domestic issues were to be handled by women, while all public issues, including interaction with foreigners, were to be handled by men. "In our family, the man is like a foreign minister, and his wife, the interior minister." This separation, Mzeinis argued, stemmed from the strict code of honor and shame.<sup>1</sup> The scholarly literature agrees with the Mzeini explanations.<sup>2</sup>

The Old Woman as the unofficial deputy of the 'omda posed an ideational paradox. How could a woman hold a public, even an informal public position? Yet this inconsistency was congruent with the constraints of the Mzeina's lived reality. Most men were periodically absent from their sedentarized settlements or season encampments due to migrant labor. Women thus found themselves in situations where despite the strict purdah codes they had to deal by themselves with all sorts of intruders into the normal flow of life, ranging from tourists to Israeli military reservists on patrol. The simple presence of outsiders roaming through Mzeini settlements, in effect exploiting Bedouin hospitality, which provides no way to exclude these "guests," exposed the Mzeinis to the Western model of gender relations. And much of what they saw violated the traditional code of gender separation and female modesty.

Due to the high cost of living, exacerbated by high inflation rates in Israel, the wages earned by the male heads of nuclear families were barely adequate. Some women in heavily toured settlements used the discrepancy between the purdah codes and the transnational reality of the South Sinai for supplementary income. In their husbands' absence, female entrepreneurs hosted organized tour groups in their inner yards. They demonstrated Bedouin breadmaking and sold the bread

with hot sweet tea for sums of money they negotiated with the tour leaders. Usually, in a one-hour visit, an average group would pay a woman the equivalent of her husband's wage for the day. The sum was high since the woman made sure the tour leader and his group were aware of the fact that she was violating the modesty taboos by letting a group of tank-topped and shorts-clad male and female strangers into her inner yard. The tour guides recognized the profitability of viewing forbidden, exotic women in their cloistered habitats, and so benefited as well.

While the absent Mzeini husbands were working, gossip reached them through passersby, often neighbors who on their way to work had witnessed the tourists entering the couple's inner yard. When the angry husbands returned home, they reminded their wives of the taboos.

"Why not?" protested a woman. "Even though their clothes are shameful, many tourists are nice people. And I see them half-nude on our beach anyway. And they can take my picture from afar without my permission anyway. So why not make money off them?" Her friend added, "My husband calls me a prostitute when I let tourists in and show them things from our old ways of life. He hit me on my back once for it. But when it comes to the tourists' money, he spends it without a qualm."

The older a woman grew, the looser grew the ideological taboo on her public actions. A woman became officially old at menopause. The actions of a postmenopausal woman could therefore be in contradiction to Bedouin ideas of purdah without posing a direct challenge. "I still have many years to wait until I have the freedom my grandmother has," said a woman who was about to get married. "She even sits in the mag'ad and smokes cigarettes in front of everyone." Indeed, during regular evenings anyone could see one or two of the neighborhood's postmenopausal women sitting in the mag'ad, the center of male public action. These women sat slightly apart from the men's circle, and only rarely did they participate in conversations or discussions. But when they did choose to speak, their concise observations carried great weight. During holidays, when all the settlement's men were in the mag'ads, old women avoided them. But for me, the mere fact that there was a regular female presence in this bastion of masculine power was striking.

In the Mzeina vernacular, "ajūz" was the name for a postmenopausal woman. It is interesting to note that this is the masculine form of the word. It should have been "ajūza," with the vowel "-a" that

typifies the feminine ending. Mzeinis called the husband of a postmenopausal woman a *shēba*, an old man. This word referred to a male even though it ended with the female suffix “-a.” Apparently, in old age, the man took his title from his wife’s reproductive status. When I pointed this linguistic discrepancy to younger Mzeini men, they said that an old man should indeed be called a *shāyeb* and an old woman should be called *‘ajūza*. A daughter-in-law of a feisty ‘Ajūz chided me, “Can’t you see that they swapped temperaments?” A symbolic gender reversal in old age, perhaps (cf. Gutmann 1987)?<sup>3</sup>

But these reversals were more evident in the women than in the men. Older men just mellowed, their gestures softer, their faces more relaxed. “Their penises get soft and their minds follow,” explained an arrogant young man in his thirties. It seemed that old men stopped arguing vehemently in the men’s club. They did not try to impress their friends with self-winding watches, loud after shaves, aviator sunglasses, or cassette recorders. Most importantly, they mitigated their attempts to impose their authority over their wives’ domestic power.

The change in status of old women was more noticeable since it concretely signaled the role reversal. Old women stopped wearing the wide, fuchsia-red belt that proclaimed a woman’s childbearing status, the only external expression of her sexuality she was allowed. Old women no longer had to strictly veil in mixed gender company, but could choose when to veil (cf. Anderson 1982). The veil and belt were symbols of the sexual control society had over women of reproductive age. While female sexuality was the source of women’s shame and therefore had to be controlled through *pardah*, postmenopausal women were stripped of their sanctioned sexuality. It was assumed that they should not have any.

The ‘Ajūz was especially stripped of her sexual role by a genre of “‘ajūz” smutty stories, jokes, and songs recited by adolescents in mixed gender company. Any sexual expression by adolescents, especially by adolescent girls, was strictly taboo. In sedentarized settlements, however, boys and girls danced every night on the outskirts. Unable to express their own sexuality directly, they sang and danced out sexual themes relating to the Old Woman. In this genre, the Old Woman’s libido was larger than life. “Our Old Woman can eat a young man if she wants,” said one of her sons. “How come?” I asked. “She just looks him straight in the eye,” he said with a knowing look. I made a face at him to indicate that I didn’t understand. “She has no shame,” he pronounced.

The contradictions inherent in the persona of the Old Woman—a woman referred to by a masculine term; a woman stripped of the visual symbols of controlled womanhood; a woman who is and is not subject to *pardah*—gave the ‘Ajūz the ability to maneuver in both the public and private spheres of action. The presence of a challenging model of Western gender relations, the absence of men due to migrant labor, and the need for additional household income—all stood in direct contradiction to the *pardah* taboos and practically forced the women to violate Bedouin tradition.

The Old Woman was able to dramatically enact her set of paradoxes in the interstices of the conflict between Mzeina tradition and the challenges forced upon the tribe by the transnational state of the South Sinai. Because of the publicly effective charisma of a few Old Women, they acted as informal community mediators. They were the ones who set the trend of women posing for tourists to make money. Old Women were also the first to invite tourists for an “authentic” Bedouin show in the inner yards of their married daughters or daughters-in-law. They were the spokespersons for women whose husbands were away, when they had to deal with soldiers or civilians looking for their husbands.

At times, when Mzeinis conversed in mixed gender company about the daily experiences of living under occupation, the dialogue arrived at a narration of events and feelings stemming from the men’s periodic absence and the women’s resultant necessary interactions not only with strangers, but even with nude male strangers. This was partly due to the lack of a local-level official to represent genuine Bedouin concerns and partly for the reasons discussed above. An argument might develop, exposing the rift between the ideas of *pardah* and the reality of the military occupation. Sometimes, the argument might become irreconcilable. The men would blame the women for loose behavior. The women would blame the men for their absence. At the moment in which nothing made sense any more, when reality became unreal, if a charismatic Old Woman was present, she could choose (if she wanted) to rise up and allegorize an experience she had had which touched on these problems. Because of her constant liminality, narrating an experience told as an allegory, the ‘Ajūz was able to temporarily disentangle and illuminate the paradoxes inherent both in the composition of her Self and in the pragmatics of Mzeini gender relations. Her performance, a simultaneous acknowledgment and defiance of the occupation, reestablished the validity of the Mzeina *pardah* tradition through a vivid portrayal of its contested change.

Nuwēb'at Mzeina, April 1979

The week after Passover. The hordes of tourists are gone. An unusual *ḥamsīn* storm pants from the east, bringing coarse particles of white quartz and golden black mica, shaking layers of dust from the palm tree tops. The wind pushes waves of heat before it from the ovens of the canyons, breaking free from the narrow walls, spiraling in a wild dance down to the dry delta. The wind blows the waves back out to sea, into the dark blue depth becoming red, reflecting the late afternoon hue of the Saudi and Jordanian mountains. Two flimsy wooden dinghies are trying to return from the sea. The wind is pushing the Mzeini fishermen away from the coast, and because of Israeli restrictions they have only wooden oars to struggle with. Riding on the white foam, they manage to tie the dinghies to the tidal zone boulders in the turquoise shallows and load their meager catch into large baskets of woven palm fronds. They heft the baskets onto their backs, leaning far forward for balance. Long date-trunk-rope straps on their foreheads. With bent elbows they grasp the coarse rope just under their ears, where it cuts into their shoulders. Ḥajj Ḥamdān al-Shēba, the oldest fisherman, grimaces as his old body protests the weight of the almost empty, heavy basket. A thin crust of dried sweat and sea salt glistens in tiny crystals on the men's tanned skin, refracting rainbow colors to my sunglasses.

Five o'clock. A bright neon sign automatically turns on in the settlement's outskirts. "Fishermen Village," it declares in English and Hebrew, ignoring the indigenous Arabic. The fishermen are headed toward the Israeli village's restaurant. An air-conditioned tourist bus glides down the slope from the main road to the tourist village's parking lot. Forty or so Israelis and Americans in colorful tank-tops and shorts pour out. A notebook in my lap, I sit on the coastline, feet immersed in the cool water, hoping to alleviate the stormy heat. But the anthropologist informs me that the tourists' arrival disturbs her tranquil field note-taking.

The guide announces the program: "a short, do-it-yourself tour of the Bedouin settlement followed by a fish dinner at the village."

The anthropologist decides to follow the tourists into the settlement. She is curious how the encounter between tourist and Bedouin will

develop, so I give up my late afternoon cooling pleasure. The sun, a tired red ball, deflates upon the cliffs of the Jordanian-Saudi border.

A thick-armed bleached American, her makeup dripping from her face into the folds of her neck, sighs: "How hot."

"It's not so bad, honey, the view is worth the trip," her friend soothes her.

"Hey, buddies," I hear a man's voice in Hebrew, "take a picture *now!* These fishermen really give a good perspective to the mountains and the sea!"

Click. The dripping blond takes a snapshot.

Before the group starts exploring the settlement the guide warns the tourists that they are not allowed to enter Bedouin homes without an invitation, and that they can photograph everything *but* women. "If you take a woman's picture, her jealous husband might kill her," he warns and continues with a brief explanation about what he perceives to be fundamentalist Muslim modesty and women's inferiority.

The more eager explorers join the guide and arrive at the southernmost cluster of huts. The farther from the parking lot, the more pristine the experience. The anthropologist is still following them. A bunch of runny-nosed kids welcomes the tourists, shouting avidly in a mixture of English and Hebrew, "Money! Money! *Kesef! Kesef!*"<sup>4</sup> The kids become silent abruptly when they see Ḥajja Ḥmēda al-'Ajūz emerging from her hut. Her arms akimbo, looking the guide straight in the eye, she asks in broken Hebrew, "*Yesh zberīm?*" Are there any explanations?<sup>5</sup> This is the question Israeli tourists typically ask the guide when they arrive at a new place. The surprised Hebrew speakers, shocked at this appropriation of their role by the native, begin to laugh. The guide and the 'Ajūz shake hands, gripping firmly in the Western gentlemanly manner instead of the Mzeini hugs and kisses or the feather-light handshakes. The first time I witnessed such an exchange, a young ethnographer seeking pristine indigenous experiences, I was stunned. Now, in my fourth year in the field, I have learned to accept such exchanges as Bedouin-tourists daily routines.

The guide solemnly introduces the old ḥajja to the tourists in both Hebrew and English: "This is the neighborhood's boss." After hearing the guide's lecture about the inferior status of Muslim women, several tourists raise their eyebrows, staring at this tiny wrinkled woman in her rumpled clothes, disbelief in their eyes. But to me—she looks tall. She stands firm. Her hair, gathered at the peak of her forehead, braided and wrapped around a twig to stand up, adds a couple of centimeters to her height. Decorated with a few tear-drop silver ornaments, her

yellow veil drapes from the beaded loop that hangs from her unicorn-like braid. Despite the cataract, her lively eyes shine from the exposed rectangle framed by her head-cover and her veil. On her small feet she wears rope sandals, the soles made from automobile tires. Most importantly, the old ḥajja does not wear a waist-belt, indicating to me and to the Mzeinis that she is no longer subject to the female modesty code.

"Tell them," the 'Ajūz goes into her pitch with the guide, "that if they want a picture of me, every shot costs two shekels."

"This is expensive," the bleached woman complains, getting out her camera anyway, "it's double the rate men charge for a picture on their camel."<sup>6</sup>

Covering the exposed rectangle of face with her hand, the 'Ajūz snaps in a Hebrew-Arabic mixture, "Money first." The bleached woman hands her two shekel bills.

The 'Ajūz lovingly folds the bills, then slips them into the pocket of her head-cover that hangs below her waistline down her back. After a short pause, she delves into her pocket and takes out her tobacco pipe, given to her by an admiring German magazine photographer two years ago instead of a fee. A tourist pipe-smoker gasps as he looks at her fancy pipe, made of dark hardwood, with an ivory mouthpiece, its silver lid pierced in an arabesque pattern. Pushing her veil up over her head-cover and sticking the pipe in her mouth, she carefully delves into her pocket once more and lifts out her prescription eyeglasses. Ceremoniously placing them on her nose, she poses, standing stiffly, seeming taller, and says in English, "OK."

Click.

"How sweet," a tourist gushes.

The tourist group returns to the parking lot. Ḥajja Ḥmēda invites me to her inner yard. "Yahūd (Jews)," she mutters under her breath, "can't live with them, can't live without them."

The old ḥajj has just risen from a late *maghreb* prayer, his face still quiet. Despite the fresh scent of soap there are still the ever-present delicate white threads of salt in the crevices of his wrinkles.

"Ya wife, have you become an Eilati prostitute? Aren't you ashamed of letting these foreigners take your pictures for money?" I hear the pain in the Shēba's voice.

"Ya ḥajj, tell me, ya ḥajj," the 'Ajūz immediately snaps back at the challenge, "knowing that the Jews at least triple the price when they sell fish in their restaurant, aren't you ashamed of selling them fish so cheap?"

Another unanswerable question.

The Shēba sits down next to me so that I am sandwiched between the two. I wish I could disappear. I have heard these exact lines countless time throughout the last couple of years. This was an ongoing argument. Aware of my shrinking, the Shēba turns to me wearing a sardonic smile. "I heard on the radio that women in America have something called 'the liberation of the wife.' Would they take my 'Ajūz among them?"

"What they have there is for young women, you fool," the ḥajja snaps again, "And I had to have lots of patience until my time arrived."<sup>7</sup>

The old man does not answer. He becomes immersed in rolling his prayer-beads. Gender role reversal, the anthropologist thinks. Perhaps for Mzeini women growing old has always been a liberation from the traditional woman's role (cf. Gutmann 1987).

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## II.

"Grandpa! Grandma! Smadar! Dinner is almost ready!" calls Nādia. She is the adolescent daughter of Ṣāleḥ, the couple's middle son. Following the voice, we walk through a narrow corridor and enter the main inner yard of this extended family compound.

Ḥajja Ḥmēda al-'Ajūz and Ḥajj Ḥamdān al-Shēba share this large yard both with Ṣāleḥ's family and with the family of Rāda, their oldest daughter. Rāda sits in front of the small Swedish gas camping-stove, inspecting the fish and rice. Nōra, Ṣāleḥ's wife and the neighbors' daughter, adds the final seasoning of salt, pepper, and ground cumin. Rāda's husband, 'Ōda the 'omda, is absent. 'Ōda is the local 'omda of the Darārma clan—some of the men in this family belong to it. He inherited the 'omda's title from his father, who was the local Darārma 'omda under the Egyptians. His title brings him only a meager monthly salary and also makes him the butt of many jokes, because both the Israeli officials and the Mzeinis poke fun at his inability to exercise power.<sup>8</sup> Although his position demands his presence in the settlement, 'Ōda is not here this evening. He is moonlighting, helping the Israeli ranger in an intensive garbage collecting operation, following the Passover migration of Israelis to the campsites along the coastline between Nuwēb'a and Eilat.

This is a typical fisherman family, the anthropologist observes. Unlike many Mzeinis who prefer exogamy to maximize economic and

political options, Ḥajj Ḥamdān married his children to neighbors or parallel cousins.<sup>9</sup> This family therefore formed an almost classical agnatic-corporate unit, enabling it to keep its beachfront territory to itself. Male members of fisherman families were able to fish both within the settlement boundaries *and* along the uninhabited parts of the 'Aqaba Gulf coastline. Fishing within the settlement boundaries was used for casual provision of daily meals. Any extra fish was sold to the Israeli village's restaurant and to those families who had no beachfront rights because they had moved to this community as part of the sedentarization process that took place after 1972. Expeditions to the uninhabited coastline were made for larger catches sold to Israeli fishmongers.

Nādia carries a large platter above her head, placing it in the center of the circle of men. The aroma of spices and fish permeates the yard, only to be blown away by the eastern ḥamsīn. The men, squatting on their hamstrings, waddle toward the platter. With their right hands, they grab the rice, kneading it in their palms into egg-shaped balls. Then they press into the ball succulent chunks of parrot fish from the mound of fish in the center of the platter. They eat the best parts of the fish, its tail and middle.

As is the custom at these communal fish and rice family dinners, passersby from all over the peninsula can join in. Ramaḍān, though, hesitates. He has just been released from the hospital in Eilat after an appendectomy and is on his way to his encampment in Wadi Sa'āl, in the mountains southeast of here. Umbārak is sitting cross-legged near him. Trying to be the polite guest, he takes only a few handfuls of rice and fish, but these are enormous, bursting through his fingers. Umbārak's family encamps in Wadi Islā, in the southwestern mountains of the peninsula. Tomorrow he will take the early morning bus to Eilat, returning to his job as a Bedouin busboy working for Jewish immigrants from Morocco who serve an imitation of French haute cuisine mainly to Scandinavian tourists. Between bites Umbārak imitates the owners' North African Arabic accent and everyone laughs appreciatively. Sallām, a young man in his early twenties, obnoxious although from this settlement, is another nonfamily diner. He is the youngest son of the Shēba's best friend. A week ago, Sallām's wife finally succeeded in making him divorce her. Perhaps attempting to alleviate his pain, perhaps attempting to redeem his honor, he goes from home to home in the settlement (his wife's parents' home excluded), telling anyone who can't avoid listening that one day, his ex-wife will come to realize what a great man she has lost.

I eat with the family's wives, Nōra and Rāda. We eat straight from the charcoal-blackened pot. We scrape the burned rice crust from the bottom and suck small flakes of flesh from in between the many bones of the fish's head. Umbesēṭa and Helāla, who are neighbors, eat with us. Umbesēṭa's husband is away, fishing on the tip of the peninsula. He sells his catch to Shim'on, the Israeli fishmonger who doubles the price when reselling the fish to Eilati restaurants and hotels. Helāla's husband is in prison for fishing without a license. Commonly in large settlements, when a woman's husband was away, she would not cook, but would eat at the neighbors' while her children combed the neighborhood for leftovers.

Ḥajja Ḥmēda al-'Ajūz eats the best food with the men. As long as the guests are present at the dinner circle, she slowly sticks modest handfuls of rice and fish beneath her veil. At last, the guests, maintaining politeness, excuse themselves from the dinner circle after a few enormous bites. The 'Ajūz tosses her veil up and begins to really eat, revealing her dull silver *shnāf* (nose-ring) in the light of the kerosene lantern. In her youth, it was probably a shiny little sexual secret that no man but her husband was permitted to share, and only at night. Now it lies open to public inspection.

The 'Ajūz continues to eat long after the family men have burped, washed their hands, and praised Allah as custom requires. Finally, she burps very loud, like a man. Nādia immediately rushes to her, a water can in her right hand and a rather used towel hanging from her left. She demurely pours water over her grandmother's hands and gives her the towel. Then she takes the platter outside. I can hear the kids playing and fighting over the leftovers.

The men and women gather together in a large circle. In the middle, Nōra places the hissing Swedish camping-stove, to supplant the traditional embers, and a kettle of tea. We drink the sweet tea while rolling cigarettes. A mundane conversation begins.

Ḥajja Ḥmēda sits a little out of the circle. She delves into her deep pocket for her German pipe and stuffs it with tobacco. With a pair of delicate cosmetic tweezers that her son-in-law 'Ōda found in a tourist's trash, she carefully picks up a small ember and places it on top of the silver arabesque lid. Her silence and the smoke curling around in long plumes only accentuate her apparent distance from the group.

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ḤAJJ ḤAMDĀN AL-SHĒBA: How's your health, ya Ramaḍān?

How's your stomach?

RAMAḌĀN: Thank God. Now it's much better. The hospital helped a lot.

HELĀLA: Many people say the hospital helps a lot.

RAMAḌĀN: Immediately, when the ambulance brought me, two doctors rushed to my side. One of them, you wouldn't believe it, his family name was Ḥardoun.

RĀDA [*chuckling*]: Ḥardoun? Really? Like that lizard (*agama*—Latin)?

RAMAḌĀN: Yup. Some Jews have strange names. Also one of the nurses, her [first] name was Rotem. She said it is the Hebrew for *ratam* (broom-bush).

NŌRA [*in fast staccato*]: Disgusting. Ugly.

The South Sinai Bedouin did not think that zoological or botanical names (like those typical of Israeli Sabras) were appropriate for people.

RAMAḌĀN: Nice people, though. They knew I had no family in Eilat and that the Bedouin I know in Eilat work during visiting hours. So they let them visit me whenever they could. That broom-bush brought me a big book full of pictures of us and our tents, and the lizard-doctor talked Arabic with me and gave me good cigarettes. And it was all free.

ḤAJJ ḤAMDĀN: Did you hear about the *taftīsh* (searches)?

The Shēba is referring to the systematic searches of South Sinai Bedouin encampments and settlements by the Israeli Defense Force reservists. The Israelis had been using heavy equipment to grade the foundation for a road connecting the northeast 'Aqaba Gulf coast with the Santa Katarina Monastery and the Israeli civil and military settlement nearby. Expensive Caterpillar bulldozer spare parts stored at the base camp of Nageib Merāḥla, twenty five kilometers south of Nuwēb'at Mzeina, had disappeared two months before.

RAMAḌĀN: Yes. I heard about the searches. Someone from al-Ṭūr who works in the gardens of the city [Eilat] said something.

ṢĀLEḤ: What happened in al-Ṭūr?

RAMAḌĀN: He said, the army came at night, around two [A.M.], and without knocking, the soldiers just walked into one hut after another. They emptied the contents of every wooden box and food sack.<sup>10</sup> If someone was slow with the keys [to his box], they just broke it. Beasts.

SALLĀM: Did they find anything?

UMBĀRAK: Of course not! That's what people told me when I

passed through al-Ṭūr [on my way here]. They said the army will never find anything anyway. The stolen things are big, and no Bedouin is crazy enough to hide them in his own home.

NŌRA: The same thing happened here, around a month or so ago.

They also brought dogs, enormous dogs, to help them search.

RAMAḌĀN [*with a sharp intake of breath, shocked*]: And they let the dogs go into the homes of people?

RamaḌān is shocked not only because searches by the army were frightening, but also because the dog was a polluted animal for the Mzeinis. They raised a few dogs in order to herd their few goats. But dog owners maintained a physical distance from their dogs. Furthermore, dogs were not allowed in either the human living space or the goat and sheep area of a hut or a tent.

UMBESĒṬA: Yes. The dogs—you'd say wolves—they followed them into homes of people. Allah save us from the devil! But let me explain to you what's in their minds: they know that most of the time there are not many men around here because they go to [migrant] work. I once even heard that the nicer military governor, the one from the kibbutz, from the days the military government's offices were still in Abu-Rodeis—he told the soldiers never to enter a Bedouin home unless the man is there. So this [current] governor thinks that the thieves probably hide the things at people's homes and make it appear that they go to work, thinking that the army will not enter their homes.

We are silent. The hot eastern storm brings us the distant shreds of young voices singing a jumpy *redēhi* melody and clapping hands.<sup>11</sup> The energy of youth, the anthropologist thinks. It has the power to override the purdah codes every single night.

SMADAR [*slowly, afraid to present too much of a challenge*]: It sounds like you're quite sure that the thieves are Bedouin.

*Pause.*

ḤAJJA ḤMĒDA AL-<sup>ʿ</sup>AJŪZ: Who knows?

We all look at her, expecting that this sharp-tongued 'Ajūz will continue voicing her opinion. But she returns to her elegant pipe, her hollow cheeks sinking in further as she sucks on the ivory mouthpiece.

SALLĀM: Honestly, I do not know one hundred percent, ya Smadar, but I think you are right.



RAMADĀN: I don't think so. I can swear the thieves are from Eilat. Eilat is full of criminals. It is so far from Tel Aviv, and all the big criminals go there when they feel the police in Tel Aviv are about to get them. One criminal told me this. I believe him. We were in the same room in the hospital. Someone stuck a knife between his ribs when he was drunk. And from Eilat to the Nageib Merāhla base camp, it's only one hour or so if you have a good jeep.

ṢĀLEḤ: Maybe the thieves are from Eilat. But I think they are from the Fāre' [the Western Highlands]. The searches are all over the place, though, to scare us so those who know something—they'll talk.

Because the Western Highlands were to be returned soon to Egypt, many Bedouin thought that the thieves probably came from that area. The common wisdom was that the Highlands would be returned to Egypt before the Israelis could find the stolen equipment. Under Egyptian rule, the thieves would be free to sell the goods.

UMBESĒṬA: If indeed they are from the Fāre', how could they steal from foreigners who settle on *our* territory?

SALLĀM: No problem. Everything is in compliance with the 'urfi (customary Bedouin law). [*All the men chuckle. The old ḥajja smiles*] Probably someone from here helped them. Three years from now, when Israel returns this place to Egypt, he'll get paid his share. And still, our long bill [with the occupiers] is not settled.

Pause. The ḥamsīn is beginning to subside. We can clearly hear the singing of the teenagers as they dance the jumpy redēḥi on the settlement's outskirts:

*Al-ʿAjūz al-kabīra dana ʿomrahā—  
Kam khuswu wakhusuwu gamāt shufrahā.*

The Grand Old Dame is about to kick off—  
Her greedy cunt gobbled countless cocks.

These redēḥi verses are so traditional and mundane, I think, so familiar that no one but the anthropologist pays attention. But soon enough, young Sallām, in his postdivorce obnoxiousness, proves the anthropologist wrong.

SALLĀM [*in a smug voice*]: Ya Smadar, did people explain to you the meaning of the song those guys outside are singing?

SMADAR [*laconically*]: Yes.

SALLĀM [*with a sidelong look at the Old Ḥajj*]: They are singing about this old man's wife, aren't they?

Some people smile. The anthropologist's presence forces to the surface a reflection on the meaning of smutty verses normally taken for granted. I gaze intently at the old ḥajja. She calmly cleans her pipe with a piece of rusty metal wire, ignoring both Sallām's remark and the smirks that follow. She refills it with fresh tobacco. Old Ḥajj Ḥamdān is not among those who smile. I watch his face become rigid with anger, until at last he bursts out:

ḤAJJ ḤAMDĀN: You people—your talk makes me real angry.

Since when are the Mzeina thieves? If a Ṭwairi [a member of the Ṭawara tribal alliance] does not steal from another Ṭwairi, why should a Ṭwairi be allowed to steal from a *faranji* (Westerner)?

SALLĀM: You belong to a different generation (*jīl*), ya grandpa.

People of *my* generation say that nobody invited the Israelis here. Nobody invited the Egyptians here either. If they want to be here, they should know that not everyone is afraid of them.

RĀDA [*angry*]: You hothead! It's easy for you to talk! You can "collect" things and—

SALLĀM [*does not let Rāda finish her sentence, interrupts demurely*]: Myself—I never "collected" anything.

RĀDA [*continues*]: You can "collect" things, and who suffers? The women. You men always go to work, and leave us here with all the problems.

UMBESĒṬA: With the soldiers. With the dogs. With the tourist buses. With the children. And with the military governor. We can't talk to him. He doesn't want to talk with women. He always comes here to look for the ʿomda.

RĀDA: And the ʿomda—so many times when they come looking for my husband, he's moonlighting. They always come to me when they need something. And I—I really don't know where exactly ʿŌda is. He's somewhere, either fishing or collecting garbage for the Shmurā.<sup>12</sup> What do they want from me?

ṢĀLEḤ [*lecturing*]: I don't know what they want from you. But I can definitely tell you what any husband would want from you. When he returns from a month of fishing or any other work, he does not want you to open your big mouth on him and say, "We need to buy this, and we need to buy that. And the children don't have enough food. And I don't have enough clothes." He wants you to dress nice, put on perfume, and be good to him. Work is

tough. After work a man wants to eat the peach, his heart is in the apples.

Despite the pain implicit in Ṣāleḥ's lecturing voice, everyone but he and the 'Ajūz giggle. Ṣāleḥ's last sentence was a direct quote of the last verse of a *gaṣīda* (poem). This lusty *gaṣīda* describes metaphorically the buildup of foreplay, the last line describing the feeling of the man during coitus. The fuzz on a peach skin was a metaphor for the hair covering a woman's genitals. The apples were the women's breasts.

The anthropologist notes that she has never heard either the full *gaṣīda* or excerpts from it recited in mixed company. Men usually recited it when they were fishing away from the encampment, often when they were drunk or stoned. This is a cultural incongruity, and she is astonished.

NŌRA [*blushes, raising her voice*]: Ya Ṣāleḥ, shame on you! When you guys go fishing for a month, you say you take a vacation.

UMBĀRAK: Of course! All work for money is a vacation. Vacation from home. Look at this old man, Ḥajj Ḥamdān. He just comes home from work, and here, his 'Ajūz jumps on him with complaints.

I look at Ḥajja Ḥmēda. Poised, she blissfully smokes her pipe. She returns my look, putting her veil back over her face. Is it because of the anthropologist's invasive gaze? Or is it because of Ṣāleḥ's criticisms, compelling her to conform? Perhaps concealing attentive listening? Or is it the purdah restrictions against smut?

UMBESĒṬA: Excuse me, Umbārak, but I also heard what happened. He jumped on her first. He got angry at her because she brings money home from pictures the tourists take of her.

*Carefully, self-consciously, the 'Ajūz readjusts the veil on her face.*

RAMAḌĀN: But taking pictures of women is taboo!

HELĀLA: Taboo? Up your ass taboo! It's taboo that people get angry with this Old Woman. The tourists know that taking pictures of women is taboo, and this is why Old Women can ask for more money. Even younger women. If my husband does not give me enough money—is it my fault? It's the fault of what they call on the radio "inflation" or so. The last few times, when my husband went to his *vacation* [*Helāla emphasizes the word, pronouncing it rancorously*] I invited home two groups of tourists.

I made *fatīr* (flatbread) for them and let them take pictures of me as much as they wanted. I am not an 'Ajūz, and I know it's a very big shame, but it's also work that earns very good money.

UMBESĒṬA: The tourists like it. When we let them into our homes, they think it's . . . well . . . as if it's from our hearts, for real. Let me tell you something: whether it's a shame or not, it's better than theft.

UMBĀRAK: Thank Allah this shame has not arrived to us in Wadi Islā. They didn't open an asphalt road to there, so there are only a few tourists who come by foot or on camels. Our women behave like women.

RĀDA [*loud*]: And I thought *you* are also among those who don't belong to the generation of this Shēba [*pointing to Ḥajj Ḥamdān*].

UMBĀRAK: You, listen to me! This old man is a Man, and his wife, a Woman. [*After a short pause, his angry intonation becomes ironic*] Who knows? Perhaps you also expect her [the 'Ajūz] to throw aside her black dress and put on a bathing suit, or even be nude, and join the tourists. Seek Allah's shelter from the devil!

For a moment laughter relieves the tension. Only Rāda and her mother, the old ḥajja, remain unmoved. I can read the insult on Rāda's face. Still strictly subject to the code of modesty, she probably feels her mother's humiliation. But the ḥajja remains unruffled, smoking her elegant pipe as though uninterested in this dialogue.

NŌRA [*sardonically*]: Perhaps this is the best solution for all of us.

The tourists, when they come here, the husband always comes with his wife, and the boyfriend with his girlfriend. And if someone does not have a boyfriend or a girlfriend, he [or she] picks one up here, from the tourists who are already here. They are always in couples. [*Then seriously*] And you? You think you are men? You are never home. You work. And when a man finally comes home he can't understand why he can't eat the peach while his heart is in the apples.

*No one laughs or giggles this time.*

UMBESĒṬA: When the big search was here, no men were here, except for the old ones. Even the 'omda wasn't here. And he is paid to be here.

RĀDA [*cuts Umbesēṭa off*]: One hundred shekels a month is nothing!

UMBESĒṬA [*ignores Rāda*]: And this Old Woman, she stood in

front of the captain and told him, "I am the 'omda." She accompanied him from one hut to another to see that the soldiers and their dogs did not touch the women.

RAMAḌĀN [*to Rāda*]: If so, by Allah, this 'Ajūz, your mother is worth more than your husband.

UMBĀRAK [*suffocated with laughter*]: They said in al-Ṭūr, that the top military governor himself said, that Ḥajja Ḥmēda al-'Ajūz is Golda Meir of the Bedouin.

SALLĀM: Our women—they're all like Indira Ghandi or Golda Meir.

Listening to this freshly divorced young man, his pride still smarting, all the men but Ḥajj Ḥamdān are laughing hard.

RĀDA [*angry, to Sallām*]: What's so funny here? Golda Meir and Indira Ghandi are not circumcised. Their clitorises must be longer than your penis.

Everyone bursts out laughing, the women and the men, including red-ripe-tomato-faced Sallām. Even the ḥajja laughs, her narrow shoulders shaking while she slaps her knee with her right hand.

The eastern storm seems to fade with the laughter. The hot air stands still. Heavy. The sea lies flat. Motionless. Nōra, filling the gap, busies herself making tea. From the settlement's outskirts, we can clearly hear the singing and clapping of the redēhi. Rhythmic. Voluptuous. Even the irritating hiss of the gas stove cannot distract from the music.

SALLĀM [*trying to assert himself once again*]: Is it possible that like Golda Meir, our 'Ajūz is also not circumcised?

But Sallām is not sensitive enough to notice the shift in mood. Ḥajja Ḥmēda al-'Ajūz decides to respond to this provocation, her eyes glistening with anger:

"Not circumcised? *You* are the noncircumcised! You are the *kaffār* (heretic)! You think it's better that we all suffer from the army just because some Bedouin want to make easy money! And you are stupid enough to believe that if we 'collect' enough from the Israelis or the Egyptians they will go away! Let me tell you something: As much as we need these strangers, they need us."

Everyone is astonished by this sudden outburst from the Old Woman. Her pronouncements are like the eastern ḥamsīn that has just passed. But the wind has shifted back to the customary west. Now

we can hear the waves falling on the shore, returning from their bizarre eastern course to bring the humid breeze inland.

"They need us?" Umbārak murmurs uncertainly, careful not to challenge the 'Ajūz.

"What would those Israelis do in the South Sinai if there were no Bedouin here?" the old ḥajja asks rhetorically. "Tourists from all over the world come here. The Israelis make lots of money from it. And we also make money."

The Israeli in me feels ashamed. Tour operators specializing in the South Sinai as well as other businesses catering to the Sinai tourists sprouted both in Israel and in the South Sinai. They employed the Bedouin only for the underskilled, nontenured positions. When the Mzeinis embarked on entrepreneurial ventures, renting Bedouin-style huts to tourists, organizing camel tours, or leading motorized tours from the coasts to the Santa Katarina Monastery, they charged relatively small fees to compete with the Israeli businesses. Bedouin tourist ventures were also subject to bureaucratic harassment by the military government. Indeed, the Mzeinis now had an income much larger than their income during the previous Egyptian occupation. But since basic living expenses were much higher in Israel than in Egypt, they felt deprived of their monetary gains.

"You know, people—once, around four years ago or so . . ." the 'Ajūz continues.

The anthropologist notices here the beginnings of a story. Four years are not a time span that needs a "once" as a formulaic introduction. The "once" here marks the transformation from the linear flow of events-in-time to the cyclical motion of stories about events-in-time.

\*

"Once, around four years ago or so," she says, "after the noon prayer, I walked north on the beach, thinking: to whose home should I invite myself for lunch? All of a sudden, a *gobṭar* (helicopter) came from the sky, and landed between Sheikh 'Aṭṭallah's cafe and the Fishermen's Village restaurant. I thought: maybe one of the tourists was bitten by a snake, or stepped on a stonefish, and the tour leader talked with them in the *makrafōn* (microphone, i.e., Motorola radio) so that they get the person fast to the hospital. But no! From the *gobṭar* came out a man and his wife, almost as old as myself and my ḥajj, and two other young people with pistols stuck in special pockets that dangle from their belts."

"Pistols dangling from their belts," echoes RamaḌān.

“These must be their bodyguards,” adds Şāleḥ.

“So one of those young men immediately ran into the restaurant and got Ḥawāja (Mister) ‘Amos out. Ḥawāja ‘Amos greeted the wife first, and only then hugged the husband.”

The ‘Ajūz pauses. Is it because she wants to emphasize for her audience that this greeting is the direct opposite of the way a Mzeini would greet a couple?

“Mister ‘Amos took them to his restaurant,” the ḥajja continues, “and I gave up my plans to eat at someone’s place and went home to prepare my lunch. Everyone and his work (*kul wāḥad washughlo*—to each his own).”

“To each his own,” repeats Nōra.

“So I sat here, where we are sitting now. I ground some wheat and listened to the radio.”

Grinding wheat with a pair of grindstones was a typical pastime of old women. Younger women preferred prepackaged whole wheat flour. Old women argued that the ready-made flour was too fine for the cooking of *jarīsha* (porridge).<sup>13</sup>

“So here I cook my *jarīsha* quietly. The babies are asleep, and their mothers are asleep. Suddenly, here comes Nāṣer, Mnefiyya’s naughty son, shouting, ‘Ya ḥajja! Oh ya ḥajja! A big minister is coming now with Ḥawāja ‘Amos. He is looking for ‘Ōda the ‘omda. They say he is the foreign minister or the minister of the army.’”

“The foreign minister or the army minister of the Jews was looking for our ‘omda,” echoes old Ḥajj Ḥamdān, astounded.

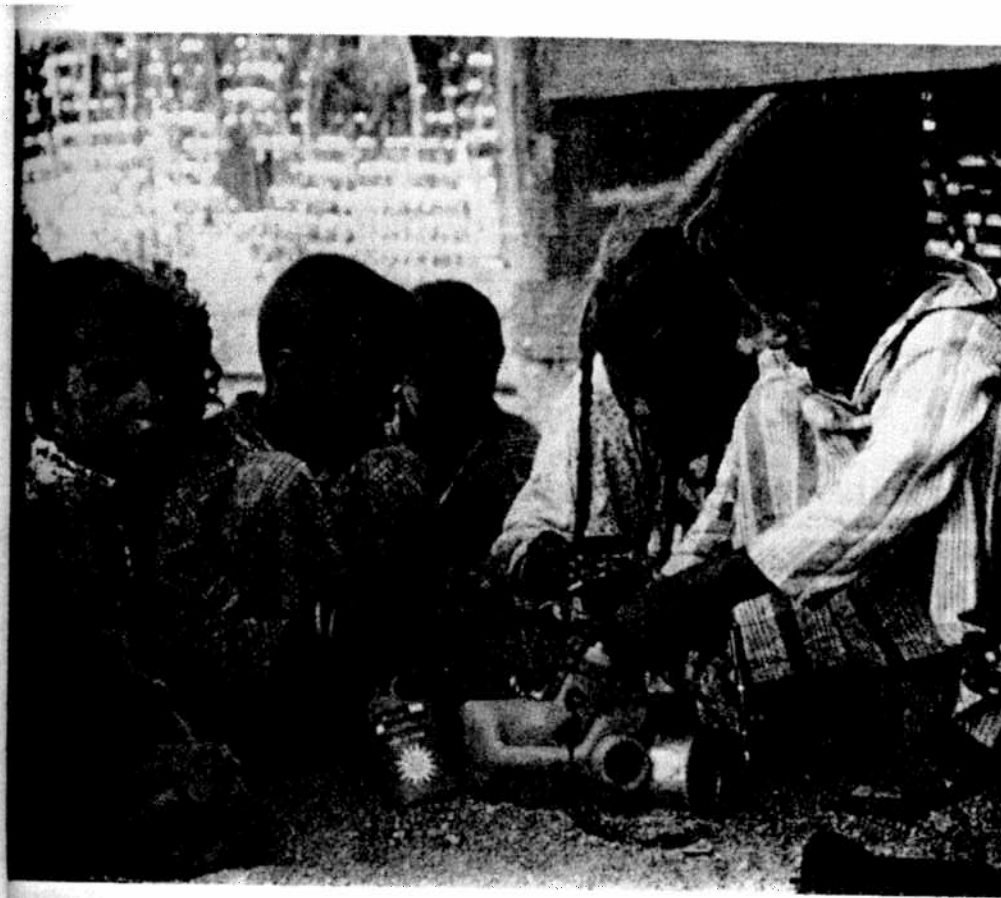
“As far as I am concerned, he could have also been the minister of the moon and stars,” the ‘Ajūz goes on, clearly unimpressed. “The problem was, he was looking for the ‘omda while the ‘omda was looking after the tourists’ garbage. It was after ‘*Id al-Baskawīt* (the holiday of biscuits).”

I am again amused by this Mzeini term for the Jewish Passover.

“I went out, and saw that here, all the children of our settlement were leading this minister to the ‘omda’s hut. And the ‘omda is always away, collecting garbage.”

“My poor husband, oh mother,” laments Rāda, “from his ‘omda salary we can’t even buy two sacks of flour a month.”

“So as I told you, I went out. I said to Mister ‘Amos: ‘Come in, please, come in, let’s have some tea. I am the ‘omda today. If you’d like, I’ll make for you some flatbread. Don’t be shy. Welcome! Welcome!’ So Ḥawāja ‘Amos laughed, and they all entered. When they were in, I didn’t make them take off their shoes, and I showed them



MZEINI CHILDREN PLAYING WITH TOYS THEY MAKE OUT OF THE TOURISTS’ GARBAGE

everything we have at home: the rugs, the blankets, the wooden boxes, the food sacks, the teapot, the coffee pot, the mortar and pestle, the chickens, the prayer-beads. I even told them that they can take pictures of everything.”

While the Old Woman reels off this list, everyone in the audience is roaring with laughter. Those Mzeinis who befriended Israeli tourists or settlers and visited their homes would upon their return constantly retell the baffling story of the strange Israeli custom—showing the guests the whole house, its contents included. They were also bemused by the Israeli lack of respect for the cleanliness of their homes revealed when the hosts failed to remove their shoes when entering. For the Mzeinis, the house was a well-bounded space, marking the private

domain of life. Showing a stranger the house and its contents was supposed to embarrass not only the host, but the guest as well, as a major violation of privacy.

"I showed them everything. Just everything," the 'Ajūz continues between bouts of laughter. "And I sat them here, where we are sitting now, and made tea for them, not on the gas stove, but on top of the fire."

"A Bedouin tea," Ramaḍān emphasizes.

"And then Ḥawāja 'Amos said, just like this, *dughri* (straight out)—like these Israelis talk (cf. Katriel 1986):<sup>14</sup> 'These people want a male puppy Saluki dog.'"

"These people came all the way from the *barlimān* (parliament) of Jerusalem to the Sinai for a puppy?" I asked, 'Are they out of their minds, or what?' And let me tell you, people," the 'Ajūz lectures us, "ever since the Jews have come here with the asphalt road, I've seen all sorts of dogs who came straight from hell. One kind look like the Tih wolves; and another kind, with long hair and small face like the face of a fly. Another kind, with a wrinkled face, saliva oozing from their mouths all the time, and our Lord made them without a tail. And another kind, also deprived by Allah of a tail, but it is a taller kind, black, with brown face and butt. And this last kind—many times a dog of this kind comes here with his tourist, it eats a whole goat alive. I swear. And these people want *more* dogs? Seek the Lord's shelter from the devil."

"Allah, save us from the devils indeed," some repeat, startled as well as amused.

"Ḥawāja 'Amos said that the Jews have many kinds of dogs, but they do not have pure Saluki dogs like the ones we have. And the minister wants a real fast dog, like a Saluki, so that he can train him to run in front of his car."

"The minister wants a Bedouin dog to run in front of his car," echoes Ṣāleḥ, incredulous.

"Perhaps he goes to hunt for rabbits with his car," suggests Umbesēṭa.

"No. He must have a servant who does it for him," Ḥamdān al-Shēba contemplates.

"Who knows?" the old ḥajja replies to these theorists and continues: "I then told Ḥawāja 'Amos: 'Tell this minister in Hebrew, that I am an old woman, older than he or his wife. And if he wants, he can throw me into the jail instead of the 'omda, because the 'omda's children have to eat, and so he works a couple of jobs and does not

stay here all the time . . . But please, tell this minister too, that if he wants something special from the Sinai, like a pure Saluki dog, he has to do something, even a little something, for the people of the Sinai.'"

"So the ḥajja said to the minister that he has to do something for the Bedouin of the Sinai," repeats Ramaḍān in admiration.

"Our ḥajja is a lioness," Nōra emphasizes the words, smiling with pride.

"Ḥawāja 'Amos translated. The minister said that he'll do something only if he'll get a male Saluki puppy *today*, a really pure dog, so that he's able to get papers for it, like the papers Jews issue for dogs who have pure roots. And all that time I was thinking of what I could request. So I told them: 'Ever since you came to the Sinai, you have brought many fuel barrels to your army camps, for your command cars and helicopters and jeeps. Many barrels are thrown away empty, outside your military bases, and no one takes them back to your country. We need these barrels. We clean them and store water in them. And if they have holes, we cut off their tops and bottoms to make a *sāj* (griddle), on which we bake bread. Here,' I showed them my *sāj*. 'Maybe the madam wants me to teach her how to make Bedouin bread? Her husband could take pictures of both of us.'"

"Forgive my wife," the old ḥajj apologizes to the audience, "shame has left her."

"Let her talk, grandpa, she's caught up with our generation," Sallām chides.

"So I baked bread for them on the *sāj*. The minister's wife just observed. Who knows? Maybe she didn't want to dirty her hands. And the minister took two pictures. I told them, 'You know? the tourist guides say that our bread is like the baskawīt of the Jews. It's thin, and it has no yeast. We make it really fast, and the Jews who ran away to the Sinai from king Far'ūn (Pharaoh) had to bake theirs really fast.'"

"But the baskawīt of the Jews is crisp," says Helāla.

"Does this really matter? What's important is the essence of the story," Rāda answers.

I order the anthropologist to write Rāda's sentence in her notebook: "What's important is the essence of the story." She presses the pen hard, then underlines the sentence, sketching three stars in the space above it.

Just at that point, the ḥajja reaches the essence of hers: "And then I told the minister: 'Listen to me well. Every year, our men go to prison because of these barrels. The army doesn't use them, but doesn't let

us Bedouin use them. Our men take them at night, and if caught, they go to prison. I'll cut a deal with you. You'll give us the empty barrels of the [nearby] army base, and I'll find you a beautiful puppy.' Mister 'Amos translated. Inside, in my heart, I was afraid. I thought the minister might get angry that I have no shame. But he laughed. His wife laughed. Ḥawāja 'Amos laughed. So I also laughed."

"What's there to laugh about?" Ḥajj Ḥamdān wonders.

"Those people—they don't laugh at what we laugh at, and we don't laugh at what they laugh at," explains Nōra.

"Then Ḥawāja 'Amos said that the minister said that if he returns today to Jerusalem with the dog, he promises, in *kalām rejjal* (man to man talk—'on his honor'), that the army will give us half the empty barrels. And only then I told them that the real Salukis are with the Ṭarabīn tribe. I told them that I'd heard that my friend, Nāfla al-'Ajūz, the wife of Ḥmēd abu-Ḥāsi from 'Ein al-Fortāga—that two moons ago, her dog gave birth to some puppies. I told them that when they go to her, they should say that her friend, Ḥajja Ḥmēda al-'Ajūz, asked that she give the ministers the most beautiful puppy, and I will give her a water barrel in exchange. And really, ya people," the ḥajja addresses us, "by Allah, they immediately flew in their gobṭar into Wadi Watīr [where 'Ein al-Fortāga is located], and I have not seen them from that day to this."

"And the ḥajja has not seen them from then until now," Ṣāleḥ summarizes.

"Wait, wait, the story is not finished yet," the ḥajja protests. "That night, the captain with his Druze translator came. Luckily, our 'Ōda the 'omda returned from his job about an hour before they came. 'The barrels,' said the captain, 'I came to talk about the barrels.' 'What barrels?' asked 'Ōda. 'It's fine. I know about it. I was the 'omda for the day,' I said. 'How many do we get?' The captain told the 'omda to come the next day with his pickup and take half of the empty barrels near the army base fence. Eleven."

"Eleven," some repeat, confirming.

"Don't you remember, ya people, how my husband divided them between the neighborhoods?" Rāda exclaims, smiling.

"And all that for one little puppy," the ḥajja produces a feeble sigh. She gracefully raises her chin, nods her head wisely, and bats her eyes—a sequence of gestures perhaps signifying that there is more to this than just one little puppy.

"Your peace," she says decisively, using the expression that marks the end of a recitation of a story or a poem. She tosses her veil up,

then delves into her head-cover pocket and draws out a fancy cigarette lighter, to rekindle her German pipe. Her eyes comb the circle of the audience and rest upon Sallām. He smiles nervously.

"*Kathar kheirok* (may God increase your well-being) ya ḥajja," he salutes the 'Ajūz, forcing a smile.

"Kathar kheirok," everyone repeats, but from the depths of their hearts.

"My mother is a lioness. My mother," declares Ṣāleḥ. "Everyone is afraid of her—the Bedouin, the Jews . . . When the Egyptians return, they'll be afraid too. She even talks back to my father."

"Don't bring the evil eye, my son," Ḥajja Ḥmēda says softly.

*Khashēt sūg al-kbār lina wuja' gāsi—  
Bighayyer al-lōn, washauf al-'ein yistāsi.*

What pain it is to enter the market of old age—

Colors all are changed, things blur around the edge.

The old ḥajja recites this poem, sadness in her voice. We are silent. From afar, we still hear the clapping hands and stamping feet of the redēḥi dancers. And the anthropologist is struck by the contrast of the redēḥi words that ridicule the Old Woman because of her relative freedom from purdah, and the poem the Old Woman chose to evoke her sense of self. While the adolescents see her as shameless and free, she is painfully aware that her period of freedom is short. Soon, the limits of the body will steal back the freedom of her soul.

"Ya Sallām, you're divorced now. Go dance with the young 'uns (*shabāb*). Go search for the peach and the apples," Ḥajj Ḥamdān al-Shēba winks.

Sallām excuses himself and leaves. We are still silent. The anthropologist anticipates what will follow: someone ought to start talking about something totally different soon. Careful to note the allegorical process just completed, she watches old Ḥajja Ḥmēda. The Ḥajja is silent, coiled within herself. But from the rectangle framed between her head cover and her veil, her eyes shine with the fulfilled glow reserved for an actor who has just completed a long and complicated part.



In the summer of 1981 I returned to Israel after two years of graduate school. I intended to spend one month with my family and two months in the South Sinai. But the day after I had arrived, my father died from a heart attack in the middle of a wedding. Two weeks later I found myself sitting in the dining area of my parents' kitchen with Ḥajj Ḥamdān al-Shēba, Ḥajja Ḥmēda al-ʿAjūz, their oldest daughter, Rāda, and my mother. My family had just risen from the *shiv'a* (the Jewish week of mourning) following my father's sudden death. The Mzeini couple and their daughter made the difficult journey from the South Sinai to the Tel Aviv suburbs transferring from bus to bus in the late summer heat. Just as they would for a condolence visit in the South Sinai, they hauled along their clothes and food bundled in their sleeping blankets. Throughout the journey they depended on the authority emanating from a small, crumpled piece of paper, a travel permit to go from a military occupied zone into Israel. They managed to obtain the permit with abject pleading, despite the military governor's ill-will toward me.

I hadn't informed any Mzeini of my father's death. There had been no time. They had known I was coming because I had sent them a cassette from Berkeley. An Israeli friend had picked up a Mzeini hitchhiker who was on his way to Nuwēb'at Mzeina from work in Eilat and told him of my father's death. The news spread with the speed typical of gossip in the South Sinai. From the three dilapidated public telephones in the eastern peninsula people called my parents' home to offer condolences while we were sitting the *shiv'a*.

But this visit from Ḥajj Ḥamdān and Ḥajja Ḥmēda was a complete surprise, and I was touched. I tried my best to be an excellent hostess. Even though I am vegetarian, I served the guests lamb's meat—that rare, expensive Mzeina food reserved for special guests or for tribal gatherings.

So we were sitting around the dining table, plates loaded with thick, succulent, homemade lamb-burgers, parsleyed rice, and chopped vegetables before my guests and my mother. The guests stared at my mother, waiting. My mother stared back at them, waiting. In a moment of cross-cultural comparison, the anthropologist recalled that Mzeina eating etiquette demands that during family or group visits, the oldest host begins eating, then the group of guests thank him for his generosity and start eating. And in Israel, the hostess waits until the guests

start eating and after the briefest pause she joins them. The anthropologist managed to suppress her rising laughter. The small electric fan on the table whirled monotonously, interrupting the nebulous embarrassment, trying, with good intentions, to alleviate the humidity and the heat.

Suddenly, Ḥajja Ḥmēda ordered in staccato Arabic: "The meat—bring it here!" Rāda and Ḥajj Ḥamdān's lamb-burgers immediately landed on the plate of the ʿAjūz. She scrupulously packed them one on top of the other, eyes shining. "Now eat. Eat," she encouraged us, sticking a fork and a tablespoon into the lamb-burger on top of the pile, chewing with vigor. Ḥajj Ḥamdān and Rāda lowered their eyes to their pillaged plates.

"The blessings of Allah upon you, mother of Smadar," the ʿAjūz pronounced, lips shining from the meat's juice.

My mom, who remembers very little Arabic, did not know she had to answer the blessing with one of her own.

"Meat brings fat, and fat makes the woman strong. You and Smadar have to put on some weight," she lectured. "Especially now that your husband has died."

The Shēba and Rāda ate slowly, quietly. My mom politely nodded her head when I translated the ʿAjūz's gems of wisdom, her face reflecting bafflement. Meanwhile, the ʿAjūz was well into the second lamb-burger, eating with blissful contentment.

"Ya ḥajja, don't you want a fat, strong husband or daughter?" I teased half-angry, feeling safe in my own home to violate the Mzeini family hierarchy. The ʿAjūz stopped her loud chewing. She lovingly cut the bottom-of-the-pile hamburger into two perfectly equal halves and passed one half onto the plate of her husband and gave the other to her daughter—my mom's eyes still baffled.

The next day we went to the Dolphinarium, a tropical aquarium and two-dolphin show à la Sea World. It had just opened, and I thought it would be fun and appropriate, because Ḥajj Ḥamdān was a fisherman. During my two-year absence, among the cassettes the Mzeinis had recorded for me and mailed to Berkeley was one that mentioned a strange event. Shim'on, one of the Israeli fishmongers, aided by three Mzeini fishermen and two American friends, had hunted two dolphins—an act the Mzeinis considered taboo. Dolphins are sacred. I collected numerous folk stories about their dramatic rescues of Bedouin fishermen and saw with my own eyes their impressive ability to trap and kill sharks. The Bedouin considered this a superhuman quality. The cassette said that Shim'on and his friends had put the two

dolphins in a huge glass box, had talked with them every day, and then had driven the box, complete with dolphins, to Tel Aviv.

The smell of fresh paint assaulted our nostrils and huge American posters of dancing dolphins confronted us when we arrived at the packed parking lot. Screaming speakers decorated with colorful balloons screeched Hebrew children's songs. We were swallowed by a mass of children and parents moving with the flow towards the ticket box.

Two policemen pushed toward us against the flow. "IDs," one barked in Arabic.

"These are my guests," I answered in Hebrew with calm firmness.

"IDs," the policeman repeated, ignoring me.

The Shēba reached a trembling hand into the inner pocket of his vest, bringing out the crumpled travel permit carefully rolled into a clear plastic bag.

"Purpose of visit?" the policemen barked.

"A condolence visit," I answered with cold politeness. "It's written here, in the travel permit."

The 'Ajūz, understanding only very rudimentary Hebrew, interjected: "We came here to see our dolphins," she shot back. "You took them from our sea. These are *our* dolphins."

The other policeman smiled and gestured toward the long, amorphous line in front of us. We were released. We continued to merge with the crowd. The 'Ajūz looked back. When she could no longer see the policemen she hissed, "Sons of bitches."

Finally, we arrived at the head of the line. "Sold out," apologized the cashier. "We are selling tickets now for shows after next week. Four?"

I explained the situation to my guests. The Shēba looked relieved. We would leave this sweating crowd and go back to Smadar's home. Rāda looked at him and at her mother, as if to say that it could have been a great story to tell back home.

The 'Ajūz grabbed my wrist tightly. "Smadar, *sawwi al-ma'arūf* (do a good deed). Tell this man in Hebrew what I am going to tell you in Arabic. Word for word. Tell him, that all the fish in this place are from our sea."

I translated faithfully, my voice trying to replicate the huff in her voice even though I felt awkward.

"Tell him, that he and Mister Shim'on are making a business here, making money from our sea. Tell him, that my husband is a fisherman, son of a fisherman, grandson of a fisherman, and we've never seen

someone fishing for dolphin. It's taboo!" she wrathfully pointed her right index finger at the cashier.

I translated, the crowd complaining grumpily that the line was not moving.

"Ya wife, we are guests in this land. Shame," whispered the Shēba.

"Shut up!" the 'Ajūz ordered in a roaring whisper. "These people are not Bedouin. Let me handle it!"

She ordered me to keep translating, saying, "Tell this man that the fish from our sea are not a gift. I am in Tel Aviv only today, and I want to see how our fish are doing here."

I translated. The cashier was silent. "I think this old lady is right," I added, trying to keep a straight face while Rāda's suppressed giggles tickled my back.

"Just a minute," the cashier left his booth, walking in the direction of the management building. On such a hot and humid summer day the patience of the families behind us was long gone.

"Arabs—go home," a voice boomed.

The cashier returned, all smiles. He told us that from that very moment we were the official guests of the Dolphinarium, to be entertained by the vice-manager. We hurried to catch the next show—it was to start in ten minutes. The amorphous line breathed in shock down our necks when they saw the vice-manager accompany us, passing the long lines spreading before the doors of the theatre. The vice-manager seated us in the center of the front row. One of the ushers immediately served us icy cokes.

Trumpets screeched from the speakers and the audience quieted down. The announcer introduced the show. Accompanied by a scratchy Strauss waltz, he brightly pitched the audience the story of the difficult operation of moving the dolphins from the shores of the South Sinai to Tel Aviv and their subsequent training. "Today is a special day for us," he announced with a festive air. "We are honored by the presence of Ḥajj Ḥamdān, one of the most famous South Sinai fishermen. He is here with his wife, daughter, and their anthropologist. Give them a hand!"

The audience clapped their hands and whistled with their fingers while I translated what he said into Arabic.

"Our dear guests, please stand up so that people can see who you are," the announcer requested.

"He wants us to stand up," I whispered.

"Stand up! Stand up!" the 'Ajūz encouraged her husband and

daughter, raising her arms to the sky to the sound of a stronger wave of clapping.

After the show, the manager came to our seats to personally accompany us while we toured the aquariums. Indeed, it was Mister Shim'on. It seemed that the 'Ajūz had correctly guessed that this was his business.

"You've got lots of brains," the Shēba complimented him in Arabic, a language Shim'on spoke. "You put the sea into glass boxes, and people pay you good money to come and watch."

Shim'on just smiled. Later, he said to me in Hebrew, "Menachem Begin sold the Sinai to Egypt, so I was left with no other choice but to market the Sinai in Tel Aviv."

The halls with the aquariums were gradually filling with the parents and children emptying from the dolphin theater. A child handed his program to the Shēba, requesting an autograph. I explained the request to the Shēba in Arabic. Embarrassed, he shook his head no.

"He doesn't know how to write," I explained to the child.

The 'Ajūz interfered, asking me to get my pen out of my bag.

"Give me your right thumb," she ordered the Shēba. She smeared ink on the thumb that had been shortened a centimeter and a half by a shark refusing to die. "*Amda! amda!* (stamp) you, the fisherman!" she proudly requested, "the same way you stamp your thumbprint on those permits. Today, the honor is yours!"

The Shēba put a hesitating thumb on the program, and then shook the hand offered to him by the delighted child. Afterwards, he stamped his thumbprint on many programs and shook the hands of the crowd of children and parents who had surrounded him asking for autographs and handshakes. The 'Ajūz would apply fresh ink to the chopped thumb every once in a while.

We left when the Dolphinarium closed, even though not everyone who wanted one had received an autograph. I drove us home. We were silent. Exhausted.

Rāda suddenly said, "There will be plenty of stories to tell back home."

Evening fell. We drove along the Mediterranean coast, stuck in the end-of-the-day traffic jam of wedding parties. To our left were the cement skeletons of modernist highrises. To our right, Charles Klor Park, a strip of green grass between the road and the sea (probably named after its American Jewish donor),<sup>15</sup> where middle-class newlyweds came to have their pictures taken. There the couples posed between the worn-out sun and garish cardboard backdrops of the

Wailing Wall or an anonymous Alpine mountain scene (hiding the highrises from view). Leaving the young couples behind, we drove through the slums of Palestinian Jaffa. We entered my hometown. Sprinklers watered the manicured front yards, and people in tank-tops played cards and ate cold watermelon on balconies.

"Our deeds today will make your mother laugh. She will definitely laugh," said the 'Ajūz.

I nodded my head. We parked and I locked the doors.

Rāda said something, as if to herself.

"Pardon me?" I politely asked.

"*A'atu sab'āt lesab'in yekhufūhen wa-a'atu banāt al-andhāl lera-māyem.*" "Give the lionesses in marriage to the lions to scare them, and marry the daughters of jerks to scum," she repeated. "It's a proverb."

As I walked to the house I wondered: was this a critique of the kitsch just seen or is this a comment about the old couple's marriage?