The Bedul Bedouin of Petra, Jordan

Traditions, Tourism and an Uncertain Future

by Steven Simms and Deborah Kooring

The Bedul Bedouin inhabit the region around Petra, a United Nations World Heritage Site, and the best known archaeological site in Jordan (See fig. 1). Known for its magnificent facades carved in the cliff faces and dating to Nabataean-Roman times, Petra has attracted tourists since the site was rediscovered for the western world by the Swiss explorer, J. Burckhardt, in 1812. He and others thereafter recorded encounters with the Bedul, the traditional inhabitants of the Petra Basin.

In the past decade, tourism and associated development has greatly increased, attracting investment capital and a cognizance of the need for harmony between economic development and heritage preservation. However, it is debatable if the rights, economic future, and the dignity of the indigenous population will be equally assured. Recent planning activities involving the Petra National Trust, UNESCO, and the Jordanian Ministries of Tourism and Planning indicate that the pressures for change at Petra are reaching a turning point. Yet, several characteristics of the decision-making process suggest the fate of the Bedul is tenuous, despite the potential for a positive solution and the availability of profits from tourism.

History and Traditional Economy

Numbering only about 1,000 people, the Bedul, nevertheless, represent a distinct case of an indigenous people encountering the benefits as well as the threats of rapid modernization. Ethnohistoric study secures the presence of the Bedul to the Valley of Petra to at least the beginning of the 19th century. While continuity prior to that time is indicated by oral history and the archaeological record, the absence of direct testimony makes it impossible to assign specific claims for prior periods.

After World War I, Emir Abdullah (who presided over postwar Transjordan from 1921 through independence in 1946 until his death in 1951) met with the Bedul Sheiks in 1923. They were then led by Hweimel Salem Eid, leader of one of five Bedul lineages that comprise the tribe today. Asked whether they wished their territorial claims to Petra and its environs formally recorded, and hence making them responsible for taxation (which they could not afford), they alternatively accepted government trusteeship of the land in return for a guarantee of traditional rights of occupation and use.

While international interest in Petra, exemplified by tourism, increased throughout the 20th century, the Bedul continued their traditional activities of goat pastoralism and rain farming of wheat and barley. Even in the late 1980s, most of the farming was done without mechanization, the fields tilled with ards, and even harvested by hand. Dairy products are well represented by goat milk taken daily for the manufacture of a "yoghurt," known as laban, typically processed into a highly storable dried form.

Traditional Bedul habitation in and around Petra included black tents of woven goat hair, numerous masonry structures in natural rockshelters, and the occupation of empty Nabataean tombs. The latter has received the most attention in recent years due to its visibility to the tourist trade. However, habitation in tombs within Petra itself is but one form of a diverse and extensive settlement pattern likely employed for centuries. In light of this, the direct impact from Bedul habitation upon the archaeological resources is relatively low when compared to the impacts of development and planned increases in the numbers of tourists.

A significant facet of the Bedul existence is their conflict with the Liyathnah, a neighboring tribe settled in the town of Wadi Musa, located just outside of the Petra Basin. The Liyathnah are able to enjoy the benefits of the current touristic and industrial development of the area. A construction boom in Wadi Musa during the past 10 years has transformed that small village into a burgeoning town studded with hotels, restaurants, travel offices, and souvenir bazaars. This conflict, dating at least to the early 20th century, ensures there is little opportunity for Bedul participation in the Wadi Musa boom.

The conflict between the Bedul and the Liyathnah escalated over the years as a consequence of tourist competition and differential access to education and market resources. The Bedul's involvement in tourism, although traditional and stable, remained relatively insignificant, restricted to selling souvenirs and refreshments in primitive, temporary stalls, providing guide services for extended trips, and a limited participation in the horse rental for tourists, an enterprise also dominated by the Liyathnah. The Bedul provided the labor for almost every archaeological project in Petra, and many became skilled excavators. In spite of these toeholds, the isolation of the Bedul is exemplified by popular origin myths that claim only recent arrival of the Bedul to the Petra area, or recent conversion to
notes from the field

Islam. Critical evaluation of the evidence suggests that neither story is true, but such myths serve as devices to diminish Bedul ethnic stature.

Bedul Relocation in the 1980s and its Consequences

By the late 1960s, a formal development plan for Petra National Park was funded by USAID, and the U. S. National Park Service was enlisted to advise on the future of Petra. Relocation of the Bedul away from the most significant Nabatean monuments was advised at that time, but a government-built settlement was not constructed until 1985. Now named Um El Sichoun, the village was a mixed blessing for the Bedul, bringing access to better education and health care, but decreasing their access to traditional pastoral and agricultural lands and the cash economy of tourism. Thus, many resisted the move and continued to live in caves, rockshelters, and black tents in 1988, adhering to the traditional life. Efforts to move them became more concerted, and by 1990 only a very few tent camps remained in remote locations. A road to Petra from Um El Sichoun has re-established their access to tourists, but adds one more impact from development.

The relocation process held several consequences. The Bedul are concentrated in a very high density settlement, with no space available for further expansion. Short-range goat herding from the village increases the pressure on the already-depleted rangelands immediately around Petra. Overall, fewer people participate in the traditional agricultural and pastoral pursuits while more initiative or expand their participation in the tourist trade, partially to compensate for economic losses in other areas and to support a growing population. Also, the tourism business seems to be the only option available, especially for the younger generations.

It has to be noted, however, that the establishment of the village gave the Bedul a certain measure of national recognition which they did not previously have. Most Bedul recognize the benefits from this aspect of settlement, and they desire to have some kind of participation in future tourism developments, but not if pursued at all costs. For example, few of them want to abandon their tribal lands, or give up herding altogether, and almost everyone would ideally like to have at least a small agricultural plot.

New Initiatives and Their Potential Consequences

In 1990 Her Majesty Queen Noor, the patron and the honorary chair of the Petra National Trust, requested UNESCO assistance in preparing a management plan. In the fall of 1994 a plan was approved, though in the meantime, substantial development continued, especially in construction of new hotels. Ministries within the Jordanian government, seemingly not always in concert, made decisions affecting the future of the park and the Bedul. The director of the UNESCO effort, Dr. Said Zulficar, noted at the conclusion of meetings at the Petra National Trust in Fall 1994 that there are two opposing interests—among those associated with Petra, i.e., the conservationists and those promoting the tourism industry. The UNESCO plan and the Petra National Trust clearly fell on the side of conservation, recognizing that an increase in tourism in Jordan was inevitable, especially with the historic peace treaty between Jordan and Israel signed in October 1994. Their plan aimed to carefully manage the growth. On the other hand, the pressures on the tourism side tend to be deeply infrastructural and social structural, including the attraction of large-scale capital for luxury hotels, steady population growth in Jordan, and a relatively open economy promoting entrepreneurship. These are leading to an unparalleled and uncontrolled construction boom and investment speculation.

How do the Bedul fit into all of this as anything but minor players? Certainly their historic claim to the land, the fact they were granted rights of residence and use in 1923, and the fact that they have already endured one poorly conceived relocation effort, surely grants them more favorable consideration in the future. To be sure, the interests of the Bedul are mentioned in the planning documents and in virtually all rhetoric about management, but the difficult task of translating planning into something substantive for the indigenous residents remains unrealized, even in a planning sense.

There is an ominous tone in recent announcements regarding Petra National Park planning. Mohammad Adwan, the Minister of Tourism and Omar Hayek, the Executive Director of the Petra National Trust, explained that the Bedul must be moved again (Jordan Times, October 29, 1994, pp. 3). It is also noted there is no local place for relocation, but nevertheless a decision is tendered stating that Um El Sichoun is to be turned into a tourist village for the sale of handicrafts. How many Bedul will be moved, when, and in what way they are to be trained and readjusted to a new role of producers and sellers of a “quality handicraft” is not readily apparent. Equally unknown is the area where a new residential community will be established. The aims seem to be altruistic—to create for the Bedul what some think would be a better life—but representation of the Bedul at these meetings was limited to one invited individual who was not even present for much of the workshop. Nor are any Bedul listed as participants in the document produced by UNESCO, despite the fact that there are some Bedul who are successful businessmen and respected community members.

The prospect of ad hoc planning holds several implications. Once again the fate of the Bedul is decided prior to any consideration of how this might be done, what the impacts on them will be, and how many of the systemic problems of relocation, education, livelihood, etc. are addressed. Indeed, if there is a pattern over the years, it is the mistake of seeing the proximity of the Bedul to Petra as the sole problem. The challenge of development would be more profitably seen as one of the impact of the Bedul, relative to the impact of burgeoning numbers of tourists upon Petra. It is at this point that the goals of the conservationists and those of the developers strangely merge, despite stated philosophical differences, and this merger holds no great prospects for the fate of the Bedul. It is the Bedul—let it be remembered—who hold traditional rights to the area. Yet, their presence was in the past and is now seen as inconsistent with both conservation and tourism. Once they are conceived as an obstacle to development, their fate is reclusive no matter how sympathetic the rhetoric. After all, another relocation of the Bedul which will have to be considerable in distance, considering the planned extent of the National Park, shows little sympathy for the traditional organization of Bedul society, and less knowledge about it. Strangely, all aspects of practicality and a successful adjustment to the environment, which characterized the Bedul existence in the Petra area for hundreds of years, seem to be to no avail now when facing the “needs” of conservationists and developers alike.

The UNESCO report states that the Bedul “realize the tourist trade is not forever a viable economy” and that agriculture is a more stable one. This statement seems somewhat contradictory in light of the past Bedul experiences. After all, the economy of the Bedul is
vable, and the consistent and long-standing ties to the tourist industry as it developed are very clear. The Bedul realize the tourist industry is sustainable, assuming their own niche in this industry is secured, while their demand for agricultural and grazing lands is one of practicality and a continual tie to their traditional lifestyle. Characteristics of traditional Bedouin culture, such as the value of personal autonomy and mutual support honed many of the same skills needed by the Bedul today to succeed as entrepreneurs and to take advantage of rapidly fluctuating economic and political opportunities. Examples of successful entrepreneurship, while preserving traditional values, exist among the Bedul. However, these examples seem to be unacknowledged by a planning process which proceeds by dictating decisions to the Bedul, for the most part, rather than consulting with them.

Alternative Suggestions

It is clear that tourism at Petra will continue to develop. What is needed is a specific role for the Bedul and explicit a priori consideration. This will require a more creative approach by both the conservationists and the developers, and a perspective departing from the model based on stereotypical national parks elsewhere in the world. In fact, we suggest that there are existing models of parks where the needs, convenience, and economics of tourism are shaped by the existing rights of indigenous people. An example in the United States is Canyon de Chelly National Monument in Arizona. Navajo Indians live within the canyon as stewards of the park and hold traditional rights while the government holds the land in trust. Oddly, this park is managed by the U.S. National Park Service that was represented in the recent Petra planning efforts, but which apparently never used this case as an analogy, instead referring to examples involving large numbers of tourists, but not indigenous peoples. Other examples exist in South America, such as Manu National Park in Peru, instances where the presence of indigenous peoples are seen as intrinsic to the area, and subject to the conventions regarding human rights. Once the Petra planning process recognizes the task is to accommodate the facts of increased tourism and the traditional rights of the Bedul, several means to consider the Bedul become evident:

1. There should be no agreement to, or announcement of a plan, or intent to move the Bedul without consideration of the alternatives. Announcing a move first, to be worked out later, as has been done, suggests that the underlying goal is simply to rid Petra of indigenous presence. This raises the possibility that the Bedul will be moved out of the local area completely, and into a physical and cultural environment completely different from their homeland. This would effectively remove them from any participation in the future of Petra no matter what else happens. It is already evident that earlier development plans have failed because they worked, against the traditional systems.

2. There should be no plan or announcement as to what Um al Sihoua, the Bedul village, will be in the future until it is clear how that future will be achieved. If the Bedul wish to participate in a tourist vil-

lage, and some surely do, the means of achieving this are in fact more crucial than the intention to make such a drastic transition.

3. The management plan calls for registering the land at Um al Sihoua in the name of Bedul families. While caveats that the land should not be sold for hotel development are mentioned, no registration of land should occur without such a ban being instituted as part of the process. This argument is made based on the experience of many Native Americans who were granted rights and ownership in the process of early attempts at relocation and development. However, those rights were exploited for a short term cash gain that was soon exhausted, leaving them in a worse situation than when they started negotiations.

4. The proposed ban on goat herding within the boundaries of the National Park is debatable until serious alternative means of providing a living are made. Some areas in the heart of the ancient city (which receives perhaps 99% of all visitors) require relief from overgrazing, but such a ban should be limited. Constructive discussions as for the limits of grazing range for the Bedul and other tribal entities in the area (e.g., Amarin tribe) should be held with the participation of all parties involved.

5. The Bedul are currently cut off from the bulk of their agricultural lands located several kilometers south of Petra, the development and regulation of traffic at the ancient city effectively denying them regular access. This was the area initially chosen by the Bedul for resettlement, but would require the improvement of a primitive jeep trail descending from the town of Tayibeh in order to gain regular access to make it profitable to live or farm there. Improvement of this road and consideration of making traditional Bedul agricultural land available to more families should be explored.

6. Entrance fees to Petra charged to tourists have increased 20 fold in a few years’ time (currently about US$30.00 per person). The indigenous populations of the area should be included as partial beneficiaries of this income. Since the park is utilizing the traditional lands of the Bedul, some sort of direct support, perhaps in the form of royalties or funds earmarked for education and training can promote integration of the Bedul in the new social

environment, emergent with the park’s creation.

7. It was mentioned previously that many Bedoul have earned wages through employment on archaeological projects. Many have considerable skills and experience; the management plan calls for a greatly increased archaeological effort. An explicit guarantee and plan for Bedoul participation in excavations, stabilization, and reconstruction may also alleviate the economic losses they are experiencing in other areas.

8. The Bedouin have always excelled as guides, and for decades the Bedoul have served as de facto custodians of Petra. Bedoul knowledge of the Petra Valley is second to none and contributes to assistance and rescues of tourists every year, suggesting they would make very effective guards and park rangers if provided the access to such opportunities. Furthermore, Bedoul hospitality and their knowledge of traditional values of past populations could be well used for the promotion and welfare of tourism.

9. It is the widespread opinion among the Bedoul that the planning process, thus far, has not included them in a significant manner. Broad participation of not only lineage heads, but of charismatic leaders, successful Bedoul businessmen, and younger Bedoul with some formal education, must be achieved during the planning process and continued through all aspects of implementation. Anything less is paternalistic and will amount to things being done for the Bedoul, without providing the means for the Bedoul to do something for themselves.

Concluding Observations

The merger of the "opposing interests" of the conservationists and the developers to a position, potentially detrimental to the Bedoul, is ironic. The interests of the developers is at least clear in being directed at rapid profit. The conservationist interest is more difficult to comprehend, but seems to operate with an antiquated ecological model. That is, the assumption that National Parks, or wilderness areas, etc. are static ecosystems, either preserving a "pristine" state without human impact, or serving only as full-scale outdoor museum displays for the amusement of visitors.

At Petra, the "natural ecosystem" consists of legacies left by the Nabataeans in addition to their monumental architecture. Paleoenvironmental evidence shows that the denudation of vegetation around Petra dates to the climax of the ancient city, with vegetation recovering somewhat during subsequent centuries of use by pastoralists. Furthermore, the traditional practices of the Bedoul represent a modern analogy of the infrastructure that supported the ancient city of Petra. In the hinterlands of the park, the Bedoul employ ancient Nabataean barrage dams for erosion management in their fields. They maintain and use some of the ancient trails and roads constructed by the Nabataeans. They utilize ancient threshing floors to process their harvests. Throughout history, the practices that the modern world considers to be traditionally Bedoul, have always been associated with urban centers such as ancient Petra. Before the city rose from the desert sands, Bedouin lived there. During its urban climax, Bedouin inhabited the region, and after the city fell in earthquakes in the 4th and 6th centuries A.D., the Bedouin remained.

In a truly conservationist stance, there is a role for the Bedoul because people are part of this landscape. Unfortunately, the planning, thus far, shows enormous signs of failing to address Bedoul cultural integrity. It would be a tragic irony if Bedoul indigenous rights and control of their destiny were lost in the sandstorm of economic plenty hovering over Petra.

Further Reading


Acknowledgments

Steven Simms: Pierre and Patricia Bikai, Ken Russell, Zbig, Deborah Kooring: To the memory of my father, Arund Kooring; Zhbigniew Fierna; Pierre and Patricia Bikai; to all my friends from Umm Sayhoun.

Steven Simms is an Associate Professor of Anthropology at Utah State University, Logan, and has worked on an ethnoarchaeology of the Bedoul Bedouin, linking the past with the present. Deborah Kooring is Property Director at the Multi-Ethnic Development Corporation and is affiliated with the American Center of Oriental Research in Amman, Jordan.
American Indian Religious Freedom

First People and the First Amendment
Cultural Survival

Cultural Survival, founded in 1972, helps indigenous peoples and ethnic groups deal as equals in their relations with national and international societies. Cultural differences are inherent in humanity and protecting this human diversity enriches our common earth. Yet in the name of development and progress, indigenous peoples lose their lands and natural resources, thereby losing control over their lives. The consequences are often disease, destitution, and despair for them—and war and environmental damage for us all.

Cultural Survival believes this destruction is not inevitable.

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Cultural Survival's projects around the world help indigenous peoples and ethnic groups secure human rights, land rights, build effective organizations, manage natural resources and pursue economically independence. Cultural Survival Enterprises assists indigenous peoples and ethnic groups expand the production of high value crops, through the publishing, processing, and distribution of high quality tropical products.

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Indigenous peoples are typically small market producers who sell their products to the highest bidder, often large corporations. They are denied their human rights and are destroyed by large scale, often illegal, exploitation. This exploitation abuses their human rights and destroys their resources and land in the process. Without control over their land, natural resources, and culture, indigenous societies become vulnerable to foreign domination and destruction. Cultural Survival helps to organize and support indigenous societies to take control over their resources and lands and to participate in the market economy.

Cultural Survival works with the Ayoreos and the Guaranis of Argentina and Paraguay, and with the Ashaninka of Peru in the Amazon. Cultural Survival is working with the Quichua-speaking peoples of Ecuador in the Amazon Basin.

Cultural Survival has technical assistance Project PUMAREP, a long-term, integrated effort to measure and market artisanal and interviewed wood products from the Amazon forest.

Cultural Survival Enterprises finances the construction and two expansions of the Paredes coconut processing mill, in Acre, Brazil, owned and operated by the rubber tapping cooperative of the Rubber Tappers of Acre.

Cultural Survival Enterprises supports the rainforest communities' economic initiatives by purchasing community-based products including Brazil nut, shea butter, palm and papaya oil, and cacao from Latin America as well as other rainforest products from South-East Asia and Africa.

Cultural Survival has coordinated several Special Projects funded by direct donations. These include: say Jajap, a Mayan Women's Cooperative in Mexico; the Nyae Nyae Development Fund, working with bushmen farmers in Namibia; the Jum Fund, working with the Falicke farmers in Zambia; the Kalaah Legal Defense Fund, working with the Kalahari Bushmen; and the Amazones Initiative, working with the Brazilian rubber tappers.

Invisible Persons

Cultural Survival works with the Invisible Persons, a film project that documents the story of another group of indigenous peoples who have been subject to severe intimidation and ethnic cleansing by the Guatemalan military and paramilitaries. Invisible Persons seeks to bring together organizations around the world through a series of events and information, to create a global voice for the Invisible Persons and support their efforts to protect their lands.

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Cultural Survival will host 2015 Annual Meeting in New York City, October 3-4, 2015.

Indigenous Rights Summit, a conference which focuses on protecting and promoting the rights of indigenous peoples.

Cultural Survival is currently seeking funding for the Invisible Persons project.
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American Indian Religious Freedom

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Science vs. Religion: A radar tower on a peak in the background in juxtaposition with the sacred Bighorn Medicine Wheel of the Bighorn Mountains, Wyoming. Photo credit: Don Doll, S.J.

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The Gadin, Apache Mountain Spirits, at a Sunrise or Ojic’s Pubiny Ceremony. Photo credit: Sandra Rapp"
About the Guest Editor:
Alfonso Ortiz

Alfonso Ortiz, a former MacArthur and Guggenheim Fellow, is Professor of Anthropology at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque. He is also a former President of the Association on American Indian Affairs in New York City, where he served for 15 years. He currently chairs the National Advisory Council to the Center for the History of the American Indian at the Newberry Library in Chicago.

Professor Ortiz received his Masters and PhD. in cultural anthropology from the University of Chicago, and has been a member of the faculties at Princeton University and UCLA, among other institutions. He is the author of editor of nine books on the North American Indian, and sits on the Advisory Board for Cultural Survival.

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