INTRODUCTION

Ethnography as a Shared Labor of Objectification

A meaning only reveals its depths once it has encountered and come into contact with another, foreign meaning: they engage in a kind of dialogue, which surmounts the closedness and one-sidedness of these particular meanings, these cultures. We raise new questions for a foreign culture, ones that it did not raise itself; we seek answers to our own questions in it; and the foreign culture responds to us by revealing its new aspects and new semantic depths. Without one's own questions one cannot creatively understand anything other or foreign (but, of course, the questions must be serious and sincere). Such a dialogic encounter of two cultures does not result in merging or mixing. Each retains its own unity and open totality, but they are mutually enriched.

Bakhtin, Speech Genres and Other Essays

This book is a study of history making in oral and written forms. It is based on fieldwork done among the Balga tribes of central Jordan in 1989–90. During that time, I took part in local attempts (all of them made by Bedouin tribesmen) to write down and publish a body of historical traditions that, until very recently, existed only in speech. These first efforts at historiography, which began in the 1970s, have proved difficult from the start. The publication of tribal histories demands that a parochial and highly antagonistic discourse—one composed of contested genealogies, tales of warfare, and heroic poetry—be adapted to a modern print culture that is public, nationalistic, and committed to themes of Arab unity. My involvement in this process brought me face to face with issues that are now of great interest to scholars working in the subaltern quarters of complex societies. These include (1) the interplay of oral and textual accounts of the past, (2) the political consequences of mass literacy, (3) the reconfiguration (or loss) of spoken authority in modern print cultures, and (4) the relationship between nationalist ideologies and the precolonial structures of historicity and identity they now encapsulate.

In Jordan, these issues are working themselves out in fascinating and controversial ways. As the reader will soon discover, publishing the "talk of the elders" (sawalīf al-kubār) is an act of commemoration that, although seemingly innocuous and folkloric, comes fraught with political sensitivities. The
appropriateness of recording tribal histories—especially in a modern nation-state where tribalism often stands for “backwardness”—has been called into question by tribal and nontribal Jordanians alike, and the outcome of current textualizing projects is by no means certain.

My own analysis, not surprisingly, partakes in the same mood of boundary testing and reconstruction. Like Bedouin historiographers, who describe their work as a struggle against “old mentalities,” I have found myself writing against (or around) well-established habits of thought and have framed much of this study in opposition to analytical styles that are overly dependent on documentary evidence and textual analogies. I have not, for example, manufactured a conventional ethnohistory of the Balga tribes, nor have I subjected Bedouin verbal arts to the latest devices of literary criticism. The Bedouin already have their own highly nuanced ways of talking and writing about the past; indeed, a careful examination of these indigenous hermeneutic and historiographical practices lays bare many of the cultural assumptions that shape (and constrain) the methodology of ethnohistory. It also forces literary theory out of its self-referential salon and into a world where its terminologies and tropes can, at times, seem hopelessly impertinent.

The reader should not assume, however, that I intend merely to pick apart analytical styles that are currently in vogue. The materials I examine in this study, of their very nature, actually further the ends of historical anthropology and critical theory. They do so by making the “constructedness” of historical knowledge explicit in unusual ways. It is now widely assumed, for instance, that identity, representation, and power are issues that manifest themselves in the very form of anthropological writing itself and can, therefore, be problematized by means of literary experiment and the deconstruction of familiar ethnographic genres. This reflexive stance, for all its potential merits, has been plagued from the start by a debilitating tendency. Instead of producing better ethnography, it leads all too easily to theoretical introversion, to writing about writing about culture, to a reluctance to engage in representations of “the Other” that are not, at the same time, subordinated to representations of the ethnographer as self-conscious author of the text. In the Balga of Jordan, this tendency toward analytical implosion is held in check by a fortunate turn of events. In the Balga, it is tribespeople themselves who are experimenting with writing; it is they who are casting the authority of their own traditions in doubt; it is they who must come to terms with their own “positionality” in relation to the identities they create in print. The postmodernist, who wagers war on received forms, and the new historicist, who seeks to represent the past in novel ways, have in every sense been beaten to the punch.
The fact that I shared an agenda with tribal historiographers, all the while pursuing representational goals they found disagreeable, endows the study at hand with the same feeling of complicity and aloofness Georg Simmel attributed to the peculiar "objectivity" of the stranger.

Because he is not bound by roots to the particular constituents and partisan dispositions of the group, he confronts all of these with a distinctly 'objective' attitude, an attitude that does not signify mere detachment and nonparticipation, but is a distinct structure composed of remoteness and nearness, indifference and involvement. . . . Objectivity can also be defined as freedom. The objective man is not bound by ties that could prejudice his perception, his understanding, and his assessment of data . . . he is the freer man, practically and theoretically; he examines conditions with less prejudice; he assesses them against standards that are more general and more objective; and his actions are not confined by custom, piety, or precedent (1971, 145).

Simmel's observations, which first appeared in 1908, will strike many readers as theoretically retrograde, even arrogant. It is more common nowadays to dismiss objectivity as an illusion and to display one's own subjectivity as proof of analytical savvy or, in an ironic turning of tables, as a new source of ethnographic authority. When writing about the Other, many scholars now find it advantageous to be the Other. Even the Bedouin, whom Ibn Khaldun described as the most remote of all peoples, have not escaped the reach of cosmopolitan ethnographers who are willing to claim kinship with them. Smadar Lavie invokes this imagery of "collapsed otherness" when she reflects on the paradox of Jewish-Arab identity that colored her ethnographic experience among the Mzeina Bedouin of the southern Sinai.

Part of my identity is that of a Western-trained professional anthropologist. Moreover, my father was a Northern European. From my mother I have my Arab culture, color, and temperament. In spite of the fact that ethnic identity is determined by the Israeli government according to the father's origin, . . . it is my Arab half that counts socially. Since I am of dark complexion, Israelis always assume that I am a full Yemenite and treat me accordingly. Unlike my European descent, my Arab heritage qualifies me (at least in Israel) as a genuine, semicivilized Other. During my graduate studies, as I went back to classifying and analyzing my fieldnotes, I noticed that a theme of two exotic and voiceless Others emerged: my life experience in Israel was somehow mirrored in the life experience of the Mzeinis—and theirs in mine (1990, 307).

Subjective identifications of the sort Lavie describes are no less constructed, revealing, deluded, or potentially blinding than those modeled on more "objective" presentations of self. They are, in fact, self-objectifications carried
out in a personalized, confessional idiom, and they lend ample support to the conclusion that the ethnographer is always an anomalous figure; they suggest that what passes for ethnographic understanding inevitably turns on the fact that ethnographers are strange to, or at least bring unusual concerns to, the worlds they depict in writing.

When stated plainly, these observations teeter on the edge of banality, but it is worth stating them plainly all the same, since reflections on the “positionality” of the ethnographer can cause us to push simple truths aside. Lila Abu-Lughod has even suggested that the ethnographer’s status as an “outsider” is itself a faulty construction. After weighing the peculiar effects her status as a “Palestinian American woman” had on her ethnography of Egyptian Bedouin, she concludes that

the outsider self never simply stands outside; he or she always stands in a definite relation with the “other” of the study, not just as a Westerner or even halfie, but as a Frenchman in Algeria during the war of independence, an American in Morocco during the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, or an Englishwoman in postcolonial India. What we call the outside, or even the partial outside, is always a position within a larger political-historical complex (1993, 40).

The point is certainly correct, but the entire ethnographic enterprise turns on a converse truth: what we imagine to be the inside, even the partial inside, is always a position external to a local political-historical complex. “In order to understand,” Bakhtin reminds us, “it is immensely important for the person who understands to be located outside the object of his or her creative understanding—in time, in space, in culture” (1986, 7).

This sense of being on the periphery was real for me in obvious ways. I am neither a Palestinian American, nor an Arab Israeli Jew, nor a Muslim, nor even a “halfie” of any advantageous sort. When I arrived in Jordan, I had no “natural” ties to the tribal community I intended to study, only “political” ones—American, guest, client, financial resource, Orientalist, future patron, potential spy—and my hosts sought vigorously, and with genuine concern, to “naturalize” me. I was taught to speak the Balgawi dialect of Arabic; I was schooled in Bedouin manners and customs; I was even grafted, always a bit playfully, onto ‘Abbadi and ‘Adwani lineages. No one, however, mistook me for part of the local world. I was constantly slipping in and out of that world, and it was precisely this slippage, which increased alongside all efforts to incorporate me, that made me interesting, problematic, appealing, troublesome, and forever in need of instruction.

So, like all such liminal artifacts, the ethnography I have produced is an
oblique commentary on the already formed notions of history, nationality, kinship, and religion I brought with me to the field. It is also an intellectual argument steeped in the odd and utterly personal experience of “objectivity” that my marginal position in tribal society made possible. As I struggled to understand Bedouin history-making in Jordan, it was important that I not shy away from the implications of this objectivity, since the tribesmen who are writing their oral traditions down for the first time are engaged in a labor of objectification that provokes a range of similar, yet systematically different, analytical concerns. In chapters 4 and 5, I explore how my externality to the clan system allowed me to move about the tribal landscape and accumulate historical knowledge in ways local tribesmen could not. Because I lacked “natural” ties to any local personage or group, I was often assumed to be a disinterested (and ideally suggestible) collector of oral traditions. Despite all my protests to the contrary, tribespeople were quick to believe that my point of view, insofar as it was free of clannish loyalties, was also free of historical bias. This belief, which is based on indigenous notions of impartiality and fairness, is itself the groundwork for the kind of intellectual authority tribal historiographers, who must work within the local clan system, are now striving to create for themselves. They aspire, with all the moral intensity of revivalists and prophets, to possess the freedom of Simmel’s stranger, “whose actions are not confined by custom, piety, and precedent.”

The intellectual authority tribal historiographers hope to claim for themselves is constructed of very old cultural materials. It turns on a popular link between “externality,” “textuality,” and “truth.” As I suggest in chapters 6 and 7, this link is an enduring feature not only of Bedouin social thought, but of the “epistemology of revelation” that has shaped political, religious, and philosophical discourse in Arab-Muslim societies for centuries. The forms of oral and written history-making I encountered in the tribal Balga belong to an intellectual tradition of immense antiquity. It certainly pre-dates Islam, and its basic principles, I suggest briefly in chapter 8, were woven into the early structures of Muslim polity and historiography. They still inform popular images of community in the Middle East today. Because this historical tradition is based ultimately on genealogical models of society, Western observers easily equate it with tribalism. The role genealogical thought plays in the political culture of contemporary Middle Eastern states is then ignored or accentuated (depending on the analyst’s agenda), since tribalism, the emblem of all that is primitive, is supposed to have little to do with the operations of rational, bureaucratic governments.

The tendency to speak of genealogical thought and tribalism in the same analytical breath is based on gross misconceptions. In the Middle East, as I
argue in chapter 8, the two concepts are clearly distinguishable. Among Arabs there is widespread acceptance for the idea that authentic forms of human community, and certainly the most reliable forms of human knowledge, are reproduced genealogically, whether in biological pedigrees or intellectual chains of transmission. Arab identity itself is often defined, like family or clan affiliation, in an idiom of descent; most Arab states are ruled by family cliques or hereditary dynasts; even Islamic learning, which transcends the world of biological ties, has traditionally been depicted as an inheritance whose authenticity is safeguarded by the accurate, lineal, face-to-face transmission of sacred Arabic utterances and authoritative texts: in other words, by legitimate "genealogical" succession. At the same time, however, the idea that tribes are (and should be) peripheral to the concerns of the high culture—to Law, Religion, and Government—has been the moral bias of urban intellectuals in the Middle East since ancient times. To the metropolitan elites of Baghdad, Damascus, and Cairo, the tribesman has loomed for centuries as a reminder of pre-Islamic ignorance: he is ungovernable; irreligious; a menace to all refinement.

Such views are easily kept up-to-date. In the postcolonial era, when "modernity" and "authenticity" have become the twin fixations of political thought in the Middle East, it is quite ordinary for the culture-making classes to drape new identities in the legitimacy of older, genealogical traditions, and vice versa: absolute monarchies array themselves in the cloth of modern nation-states (Morocco); modern nation-states pose as big families (Libya); big families pose as state governments (Kuwait); state governments assume the shape of Islamic theocracies ruled by descendants of the Prophet (Iran). Amid all this ideological anachronism, it is still quite common for tribespeople to be portrayed (and to portray themselves) as remnants of another age, wholly atypical in their traditionalism and marginal to the national cultures in which they live.

This is certainly not the case in Jordan, where tribal groups of both Bedouin and peasant origin account for 40–50 percent of a general population that is rapidly approaching four million. Men of Bedouin descent control the upper ranks of the Jordanian military; tribal law was officially recognized and administered in much of the countryside until a uniform civil law code was adopted in 1976; tribesmen sit in parliament; they hold title to their own lands; they live in both urban and rural settings; and, like members of Jordan's Palestinian majority, they participate in all fields of public endeavor. Despite the fact that tribes are seemingly everywhere in Jordan (or perhaps because tribes seem to be everywhere), "tribalism" ('asha'iriyya) remains a source of political friction and, to the self-consciously sophisti-
icated, a cause for embarrassment. In 1984, when anti-tribal sentiment flared during parliamentary elections and editorials criticizing tribal custom began to appear in the national press, King Husayn defended the tribal way of life in terms that were bound to rattle modernist sensibilities.

Most recently, I have noticed that some articles have been directed against the tribal life, its norms and traditions. This is most regrettable because it harms a dear sector of our society. I would like to repeat to you what I have told a meeting of tribal heads recently that "I am al-Hussein from Hashem and Quraish, the noblest Arab tribe of Mecca, which was honored by God and into which was born the Arab Prophet Mohammad." Therefore, whatever harms our tribes is considered harmful to us, and this has been the case all along, and it will continue so forever (The Jordan Times, January 28, 1985).

The Hashemite regime is heavily invested in its "tribal sector." The local Bedouin tribes were effectively pacified by the 1930s, and state-sanctioned tribalism, in its politically domesticated forms, is flourishing under the king's watchful eye. In a recent essay on cultural representation in Jordan, Linda Layne (1989) explores the images of tribal life the state finds ideologically useful in its attempts to construct a national identity that is appealing both at home and abroad. These include the diacritica of tent life, coffee-making paraphernalia, elements of Bedouin wardrobe and cuisine, and other material residues of a nomadic camel culture that is now a thing of the past. This heritage is marketable, wearable, consumable, detachable from its original contexts, and thus ideally suited to touristic exploitation and political revaluation. Layne rightly points out, however, that:

In response to the denigration of tribal culture by its critics and the appropriation of tribal culture by the State as the keystone of Jordan's national heritage, the tribes of Jordan are reconceiving and reevaluating their culture. In so doing, they are utilizing some of the same discursive practices as those employed by the State and the Jordanian intelligentsia in constructing tribal representations of Jordan's past. However, these practices do not mean the same thing for local actors as they do for the bearers of the dominant discourse. Rather, they provide frameworks that tribesmen and women will fill with local content and interpret in terms of indigenous cultural constructions such as asl, (noble origins), honor, and gift exchange (1989, 25).

This dialogic encounter between tribe and state transpires not only in the realm of material culture and its meanings, but also (and more controversially) in the new historical and ethnographic literature Jordanian tribesmen are now producing. As educated Bedouin attempt to nationalize their
tribal identities by writing about them, a model that envisions a nationalist framework being filled up by tribal content begins to unravel in interesting ways. The conceptual boundaries that set tribes apart from the nation are often indistinguishable in practice—the Balga tribespeople I knew never seriously doubted that they, along with other "indigenous" Bedouin, were the true Jordanians—and the tribal content of this national identity, because it is answerable to its own hegemonic structures, is sometimes capable of reconfiguring the dominant, nationalist discourse to which it reacts.

To understand this ideological encounter, one must appreciate notions of historicity, spoken authority, and genealogical community that, despite their salience in tribal life, have never been adequately examined by ethnographers. In chapter 1, I map out the intellectual prejudices, most of them rooted in the demands of textual history-making, which have kept anthropologists from engaging fully with nonliterate ways of making the past. In chapters 2 and 3, I place the Balga tribes and their oral traditions in a context that is informed both by nationalist and pre-nationalist images of community. In chapters 4 and 5, I study the character of the oral tradition in closer detail: its form and content, its modes of transmission, and the methods by which authoritative historical speech is created and preserved. In chapters 6 and 7, I analyze the careers of two Bedouin historians: Muhammad Hamdan al-Adwan and Dr. Ahmad 'Uwaydi al-'Abbadi. The successes and failures of these authors serve as a lens through which popular conceptions of national identity, power, and historical knowledge in Hashemite Jordan can be clearly seen. I end the book by arguing in chapter 8 that genealogical and nationalist images of community are merging to form new modes of identity that, among Jordan's tribal and Palestinian population alike, give the modern nation-state a familiar, patriarchal shape. At the same time, these new forms of identity encourage tribespeople to ask, who are the true sons of this country? Insofar as the answer to this question does not include the Palestinian majority or the Hashemite elite, both of whom come originally from outside Jordan, this striving after essential identities threatens to undermine the ideology of national unity that inspires it.

The latter conclusion, though commonly drawn in Jordan, is politically subversive, and its full implications cannot be publicly discussed there. Indeed, much of the local material contained in this study, whether it deals with grave national issues or ephemeral clan gossip, will be politically offensive (in one way or another) to the Jordanians who eventually read it. This is because the collective identities I examine—Bedouin, peasant, Jordanian, Palestinian, Abbadi, Adwani, and numerous others—are all contested from multiple points of view. Contest is part of what defines them.
Early on, I realized that this ethnography could not be sympathetic in the way so many of the best ethnographies appear to be. Had I decided to respect the sensitivities of everyone involved (a relativistic stance that merely accomplishes a subtler form of insult), this book could not possibly have been written.

Once again, I found these representational challenges hard to avoid, since they confront tribal historiographers as well. In chapters 6 and 7, I examine local attempts to resolve these problems, or avoid them altogether, in print. My own solution to the problem of “partisan multivocality” was to engage actively in the historical disputes that define tribal identities and, when writing about this practice, to keep the terms of my engagement (which were not entirely local) as visible to the reader as they were to the tribespeople who sought to influence what I wrote. To attain this end, I have given special attention both to the content of the oral traditions I recorded and to the situations in which my ability to understand and evaluate these traditions gradually took shape. Conversations are reconstructed; transcripts of interviews and oral testimony are set in context; analytical distinctions between speaking and writing, between the archives and the field, between the medium of historical presentation and the message, are all repeatedly collapsed and built up again.

By showing my work in this way, I am trying to reproduce in writing the sense of intellectual migration I experienced during fieldwork. My analysis moves, as I did, from an understanding of history based on textuality to one based on orality and the authority of received speech. It moves from an outsider’s suspicion that tribal history is a logjam of variant and equally irreconcilable traditions to an insider’s certainty that some accounts of the tribal past are more accurate than others. The tribal historiographers with whom I worked were traveling the same road, but they were headed in opposite directions. We could tell one another what lay ahead, but our initial premises, our reasons for going on, and our methods of intellectual movement were sometimes radically at odds. This arena of shared interests and divergent preconceptions is the space in which I worked. As the reader will discover in chapter 1, it is a space in which implicit notions of community and history distinguish themselves with unusual clarity, and a peculiar kind of ethnography, one in which informants and analysts are caught writing up the same data in different ways, can be mined for all its insights.