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Percorsi in Civiltà dell'Asia e dell'Africa II

Quaderni di studi dottorali alla Sapienza

a cura di
Marina Miranda

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9. The Tribes of the Hills of North-Eastern Jordan: Some Ethnographic Remarks

Miriam Al Tawil

9.1. Introduction

When we read about the Bedouin tribes of Jordan (al-Rawābda 2010, Bin Muḥammad 1999, Peake 1958) not much is said about the confederation of the so-called Tribes of the Hills (locally known as *Ahl al-Ǧabal, ˁurbān al-ǧabal* or *al-ǧabaliyya,* meaning "people of the mountain" or "tribes of the mountain"). This is the reason why I decided to investigate and to do intensive fieldwork in June 2020, September 2021 and May 2022 in the villages where they reside at present.

The tribes of the Hills are a local confederation of three Bedouin tribes (also known as *šawāya,* which literally means sheep-breeders): al-ˁAḏamāt, al-Šarafāt, and al-Masāˁīd. In this article I also included ethnographic data from the Sirḥān and – to a lesser degree – the Nˁēm tribes. The former is the neighbour tribe of the *Ahl al-Ǧabal*, while the latter lives north-west of Irbid, since they originally come from the Golan area and the area located southeast of Haifa, and then settled in the surrounding area of the Sea of Galilee.

During my fieldwork, in June 2020 I visited Samā al-Sirḥān, Muġayyir al-Sirḥān, Zumla al-Sirḥān, Ǧābir al-Sirḥān, and al-ˁUššah. In September 2021, I visited al-Kōm al-Aḥmar, al-Bāˁiǧ, al-Ašrafiyya, al-Ṣaliḥiyya, and Umm al-Guṭṭēn. All these villages are located in the governorate of al-Mafraq, except for al-ˁUššah, which is in the governorate of Irbid. In May 2022 I went back to Umm al-Guṭṭēn to collect further information. During these campaigns, I had the chance to converse and communicate with different members of these Bedouin tribes, who told me about their life in the past, their activities, their social events, and their oral literature tradition. I conducted the interviews in Jordanian Arabic recording thirteen people, both men and women aged between 26 and 90. Although I had planned to meet and record people from al-Masāˁīd, they cancelled the meeting because of the pandemic.

As far as my methodology is concerned, I used storytelling (life stories and memorial narratives) as a tool to interpret and understand the emic perspective (Murchison 2010). This is realised through qualitative phenomenological interviews (the focus of which is the individual experience) and conversations (which consist of questions that aim to obtain the emic perspective of the studied subject), together with participant observation. The work of Lidia Bettini, who based her dialectological investigation of the Bedouin dialect spoken in the steppe of northern Syria on the oral tradition during the transition from nomad to sedentary lifestyle, was an important source of inspiration for this ethnographic study (Bettini 2006).

Finally, the aim of my research being the investigation of the perspective on nomadic life and identity, the information reported in the article does not claim to be always historically accurate (especially in terms of birth dates, due to the lack of censuses).

9.2. The tribes of the hills

The hills that give the name to the confederation refer to the mountain range known today as *ǧabal al-ˁarab*. These mounts have a lively history in terms of toponymy. In the past, until around the second half of the XIX century, they were called *ǧabal Ḥōrān;* nevertheless in 1861 the name was turned into *ǧabal al-Drūz* following the massive migration of Druzes, who went to live at the foot (Brown 2009).

These mounts, which characterise this area of the steppe, are a series of dormant volcanic hills whose cones once deposited a mantle of basalt over a limestone plateau. These hills are located in the Jordanian Basalt Plateau and stand in between the Ḥōrān plain and the dry basaltic al-Ḥarra lands of the Syrian desert. Thanks to the annual rainfalls that fertilise the land, the plateau has always constituted not only a source for grazing but also for farming crops (even though the latter has always been a secondary activity). This feature makes this area of

Jordan different from the rest of the country (Aurenche 1993).

The presence of the *Ahl al-Ǧabal* is attested in the area at least since the first half of the XIX century; according to their present-day oral narratives, at that time, they used to compete with one another for access to resources (especially water and pasturage). In the mid-19th century, following the increase in the Druze farmer population, the members of these three tribes became the keepers of the peasants' and Druzes' livestock, and formed a firm intertribal alliance of lasting mutual benefit, as a common ancient Arab and Islamic custom.

Before moving to the life stories of the tribes and the material we have acquired, we extracted previous data from the travel reports of western travellers and intellectuals, such as Johann Ludwig Burckhardt (1784-1817) and Gertrude Bell (1868-1926), who met these tribes during the last centuries and described them in a way that allows us today to retrace the history of these people. Their presence is mentioned in western sources such as the work of J.L. Burckhardt *Travels in Syria and the Holy Land* (1822).

From their descriptions we understand that the view Burckhardt had of these tribes does not differ from the one of Bell in her book *The Desert and the Sown* (1905) when she described her journey to Umm al-Ǧimāl, saying that «these tribes are of no consideration, being but the servants and shepherds to the Druzes». Her description was probably tainted by the belief (still current) that camel-breeder tribes were richer and socially more prestigious than sheep-breeder ones.

Through these accounts we deduce that the tribes of the Hills belong to the Bedouin group that – according to an exonym – is defined as *šakkāra* (those who graze the cattle), as opposed to *raḥḥāla* (the travellers). This definition is given to them by the latter, the camel-breeder Bedouin, who still perceive themselves as superior, since they possessed large cattle and did not farm. The first time I heard this term, it was when I asked an old man of the Sirḥān, aged 90, about his tribe. He answered that there exist two kinds of Sirḥān:

> *«as-Sirāḥīn gismēn: gism raḥḥāla w-gism šakkāra. Aš-šakkāra illi yiḍallūn bi-l-bilād hāna w-yasraḥūn maˤ al-fallāḥīn, w-al-gism raḥḥāla yišarrǧūn mšarriǧ»*[1].

---

[1] Recorded in Zumla al-Sirḥān, on 07 June 2020.

> «The Sirḥān are (divided into) two groups: a group travels and the other pastures. The latter are those who stay here in the village and graze the cattle with the peasants; the former instead travel eastwards».

After this definition I could not know that the term *šakkāra* was perceived as an offence by the group in question. Therefore, I asked some members of the *Ahl al-Ǧabal* if they were *šakkāra*, as, according to the description of their activities it was obvious that they were and I wanted to know if they used that term too, considering that it is not universally used in northern Jordan and it is, for example, unknown to the people in Irbid. My question, nonetheless, caused offended and surprised reactions, which made me regret it. This is how I realised that the term *šakkāra* has a pejorative acceptation, and thus, it is not used in auto-definitions, unless explicitly elicited, after words of sincere apologies.

The *šakkāra* are traditionally those who work in the village and graze the cattle of the peasants or cultivate lands that they do not possess (Al-Šanāq, ʾAbū al-Kaʾs 2000). They generally travel for short distances moving around Jordan, Syria, and Iraq, while the *raḥḥāla* are those who travel for long distances reaching Saudi Arabia. Western scholars, starting from the French dialectologist Jean Cantineau (1937), named these two Bedouin groups *grand-nomades* (or camel-breeder nomads) and *petit-nomades* (sheep-breeder nomads) according to the kind of livestock they used to raise.

In the last two centuries, the life of the tribes of the hills has been characterised by the presence the Druzes (locally known as Bani Maʕrūf). This emerges in every conversation with the tribes of the hills, whereas when we listen to the Sirḥān's or the Nʕēm's tales, they barely mention them. The relationship between the two parts – according to the stories we recorded – is and has always been good, even if we do not know to what extent it is true. What we can affirm is that people of the ʕAḏamāt tribe used to work with them (cultivating and grazing) in southern Syria, whereas the Druzes possessed many farmed fields of wheat and barley.

As far as barter is concerned, I listened to different versions of events: some say that they used to barter their goods with the Bani Maʕrūf: the former would take crops in exchange of dairy products; some report that they used to buy crops from them, while others that they have never traded with them.

9.3. The tribes and the settling

The definition of tribe is nowadays much-disputed and the use of this term criticised in human sciences, since it does not only refer to a specific approach to social organisation, but also to a stage of evolution in human society, in a dichotomy with the modern state organisation (Bocco 1996). In the case of Jordan, the first time the term appeared (officially, in written modern sources) was in 1924, during the British mandate, referring only to a part of the local Bedouin tribes. Nevertheless, the Arabic term is still employed and well-established in local people's mentality and in the socio-political discourse. Differently from other post-colonialist realities, such as the Indian one, for which "tribe" is regarded as a European creation (Devalle 1992), the concept of tribe in this case is not an invention through which Western intellectuals constructed the local tribal situation, but rather the translation of a term (*qabīla* or *ʕašīra*) deeply rooted in Arabic culture, since pre-Islamic and early Islamic times, which already appear in the Coran to express the notion of a social unit; *ʕašīra* with the meaning of an extended family and *qabīla* with the meaning of a tribe based on a common descent (Landau-Tasseron 2006).

According to the anthropological definition by Lila Abu Lughod, a tribe is a socially, ethnically, and politically cohesive group. The anthropologist defines it as a bound group of people, whose members share not only their *ʔaṣl,* the blood of ancestry, based on the closeness of agnates (paternal relatives), but also their *garāba,* the blood of relationship. The latter is represented by their shared common principles, laws, ethos, and the same system of values (Abu-Lughod 1986).

According to the emic definition, on the other hand, when I asked the members of the confederation about their point of view on what a tribe is, they explained that the cohesion of their tribes consists in taking part in their social events (circumcision ceremonies, weddings, and funerals). Also, in the past, they recall, it consisted in fighting together, protecting each other (*fazaʕ*), migrating, and settling together. If they were fewer than ten tents, they would be called *farīq*; between ten and thirty, *nağīʕ*; more than 30 tents, *nazil* (Jabbur 1995).

This is the recording's transcription of a Bedouin woman aged 70, from the ˁAḏamāt tribe describing the settlement, the nomadic life of the tribe and the passage to a sedentary life following her marriage:

> *Wēn fi rāˁi kwayyis w-rabīˁ zēn narḥal ˁalē-h. fi nās yirūḥu yišūfu. Aywa. Ngūl haḏōl yaṭrušūn iḥna gabul al-ˁarab yigūlu yaṭraš yrūḥ yišūf al-manṭiga ygūl hāna fi rabīˁ w-kwayyse al-manṭiga narḥal ˁalē-h. Yrūḥ ˁa-l-xēl yirǧaˁ ay waḷḷa hēk al-ḥayā gabul. Ay waḷḷa. hāḏi ḥayāt al-badu. kill bēt ahal-u bu. Yišīlūn-u w-yabnūn-u w-haḏāka mušārak maˁ aǧ-ǧīrān iḥna ngūl ǧīrān […] yaˁni ma miṯil waqit-na hāḏe. gabul kull an-nās titˁallal ˁind baˁḏ̣-a trūḥ ˁala baˁḏ̣-ha ay waḷḷa w-salāmāt-kum. Bēt aš-šaˁr ana tarakt-u ṣār-l-i xamsīn sane tarakt-u ay waḷḷa ana kint ˁind ahl-i bi-bēt šaˁar, ana ˁind ahl-i bi-bēt šaˁar w-ṣār-l-i xamsīn sane hēka miǧǧawwze w-ˁašrīn ˁind ahal-i.*
> Where there is a good, beautiful "spring" (pasture), we go there. Some people go and see. Yes. We say that these men "*yaṭrušūn*". The Bedouin, before, we used to say "*yaṭraš*", one would go and see the region and if he said that there was "spring" and the place was good, we would go there. He would go on horseback and come back. Yes. That was the Bedouin life. Every tent had a family inside, they used to transport it, erect it, and this was shared with the neighbours, we used to call them neighbours. It was not like today. Before everyone used to spend some time with the others, visit them. I left the tent fifty years ago. Before, I used to live with my family in a tent, then I've been married for fifty years now. I had been with my family for twenty years[2].

After living in a tent, the woman moved to a house made of black stones, which are one of the most striking characteristics of the area. During the Ottoman era, stone-houses (*dūr al-ḥaǧar*) have been built and then re-employed by the Bedouins during the Sixties and the Seventies, when they finally settled. These houses constitute an intermediate stage between the tents (*bēt šaˁar*) and modern houses.

Some members of the tribes I interviewed settled before others. People of the Šaraˁ tribe, for example, recall that until the Nineties they were still roaming around an area that goes from Irbid to Ruwaished (which is called by the speaker "*ḥamād al-Urdunn*", a synonym for *al-bādiya*, the desert, which stands for the area between northern Saudi

---

[2] Interview recorded on 12 September 2021 in al-Kōm al-Aḥmar (al-Mafraq).

Arabia and Syria and Iraq through the governorate of al-Mafraq) and Azraq.

They also report that the city of al-Mafraq did not even exist as we know it today. It was once known as al-Fidēn, according to the local pronunciation, (corresponding nowadays to the neighbourhood of al-Ḥusayn), which is the diminutive of *fadan*, a fortified palace[3].

Then the city's name changed into the current one, which means "crossroads" because it was an intersection of roads leading to Syria, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia. The Bedouin in this region, according to one informant of the Sirḥān, started building houses and settled after 1979 and, in the surrounding villages, like Samā al-Sirḥān, they did not have energy until 1983.

The sedentarization in this specific area of the plateau, according to a Bedouin family I recorded in Umm al-Guṭṭēn, was mainly determined by the presence of *al-kalā* (water for the cattle) or *birak* (water-cisterns). They refer that the *birka* of Umm al-Guṭṭēn, for example, dates to 1957.

Before their settling, the travels from one place to another were strictly related to the need for water and sustenance for the livestock and for themselves. In particular, the ˁAḏamāt in this area used to go to the Syrian border (3 km from their village) where there were many water sources. As for the markets, they used to buy clothes, spices, coffee, and tea from Damascus, Bosra, Irbid, Suweida or from Palestinian cities.

9.4. The material life of the tribes

Before moving, they used to send one person to look for water sources, and then he would return the day after (if it was a long distance) or the same day (if close) to show the way.

Once they had collected the water, they stored it and transported it on the camels inside goatskin containers. They had different goatskins, used according to the content and the capacity. Those used to store water were (and are still) called *girba*, *ǧūd* or *rawāya*, respectively, according to their dimensions. *Girba* is the basic one, the *ǧūd* is bigger and has a capacity of 10 litres, and the *rawāya* can contain the capacity of more than 20 litres. In order to tan it, they would dry the goatskin under the sun, tan it with pomegranate skin and water or the peel of the Greek Juniper, (called *lizzāb*). In this process, the peel would absorb the noxious materials.

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[3] *Qalˁat "al-Fidēn" bi-l-Mafraq…buniyat ˁām 1517 w-istaxdamat li-ḥimāyati darbi al-ḥağği al-šāmī - ṯaqāfa -* شاهد- قلعة "الفدين" بالمفرق.. بنيت عام 1517 واستخدمت لحماية درب الحج الشامي | ثقافة | الجزيرة نت (aljazeera.net) ("al-Fidēn" fortress in al-Mafraq built in 1517 and used to protect the path of the Levantine pilgrimage).

Generally, the members of *Ahl al-Ǧabal* tribe used to have around 50 head of cattle and 10 camels.

Tents were and are still made of black goat's hair. Women would first shear the hair in springtime, then they would card it, and spin it on the spinning wheel, called *miġzal*, into thread. The wood used to spin the wool was called *naṭu*. This could also be the loom itself. The fabric, called *šiqāq*, consisted of panels, which would be stitched together to create the sides. The quality of the tent usually depended on the length of the hair and whether it was pure or a blend of hair. The longer the hair, the better the quality.

The hair was sometimes dyed in different colours – other than the natural one(s) – that could be red, green, and black. The tents could be built on two (*mgōran*) three (*mṯōlaṯ*), four (*mrōbaʿ*) or five (*mxōmas*) secondary wooden poles. The central pole was called *wāsiṭ*. The verbs used to describe the phases of building a tent were: *ġazal* (to spin), *baram* (to twirl but also to weld) and *madd* (to spread).

The tent was organised in two different spaces (*šigag*, sg. *šigga*): one was for cooking and washing, and sleeping (*al-ḥāḍir*). It also contained the furniture (*wahad*) and the gas steamer (*brīməs*), and was dedicated to the women: it was the closed part, *maḥaram*.

The other (*šigg*) was for the guests and the men to sit in and was open (*magʿad* or *rabaʿ*). There, they would also make coffee.

To wash themselves, they would use the green Nabulsi soap, or a substance derived from a tree (*ʿudu*). They would do that once every two months, according to what a man of the Sirḥān told me. Water was not always available, and sometimes they had to take it from Syria. They did not have toilets, so that they would urinate and defecate outside. In the second half of the XX century, they would use lanterns made of a glass bottle, called *finiyār* (according to the Sirḥān) or *fānūs* (according to the Šarafāt).

There were no beds; people would sleep on handmade woollen sacks called *ˁidil* (pl. *ˁudūl*) and sheets were not known.

Clothes were sewed by hand and were called *ṯōb* or *širša*, or *midraga* which were long for both men and women, touching the floor. Colours depended on the families: Sirḥān had a black cloth, women from other tribes would also wear a *gamīṣ* under the cloth. During winter, *ḏirāˁāt* (wool coats) were worn, as well as *farwa*, a coat made of lamb's wool and covered by a fabric on the outside.

During the Eighties and the Nineties, Bedouin people would go to al-Mafraq to buy everything they needed, and they had to walk and go there early in the morning or even at dawn. The handkerchief was called *muˁṣab* or *milfaˁ*.

9.5. The Bedouin diet

When asked about what they used to eat in the past, they would reply that their diet of sheep-breeder Bedouins revolves around the dairy products of ovine and bovine origin.

Milk is first milked. After the third or the fourth day, the milk is ready, and it is called *ḥalīb ġanam* (it is a mix of sheep and goat milk). Either raw or cooked, sheep milk is not usually drunk, but rather it accompanies other dishes. Camel milk is considered invigorating and restorative, and it is usually recommended to sick or elderly people.

Raw sheep milk is churned in the goatskin and then butter is produced and stored in the *mizbad*. Butter is then melted and clarified, and then it is cooled and heated up again to obtain the *semen* (or clarified butter). It is stored in the *ˁikka*.

They reported that raw milk can also be churned, then fermented to obtain yogurt (or *laban*). It is usually stored in the *šikwa* that can also contain *šanīna* (a drink made of yogurt, salt and water). A bigger goatskin was the *girgaˁ*, four times bigger than the *šikwa*. From the yogurt they also used to make *marīs*, which consists of dry yogurt soaked in water to dissolve.

As for the cereals, they would mostly consume bulgur, since rice was not common until the last decades and was imported (they called it *tumman*, as in the Iraqi linguistic variety, instead of the local *rizz*). With it they would cook *rašūf*, the local traditional dish, defined by the speakers as the "Bedouin *mansaf*", since it did not contain rice but lentils, together with chickpeas, and yogurt.

Moreover, they would also transform the fats from the slaughtered animals, roasting it, then drying and making jerky stored in a goatskin called *ḏarf* (that could also contain yogurt, cooked butter and clarified butter).

They would also use sackcloths that, transported on donkey back, were filled with teapots, bread, and food, in order to be stored and eaten during the days of travel.

A Bedouin woman from the ˁAḏamāt, recorded in al-Kōm al-Aḥmar, reported that in the past they used to consume *kišik* (dumplings filled with wheat and cheese). Camel meat was also eaten, especially when guests would visit the tribe, during which a little camel, *ḥwār*, was slaughtered.

The members of the tribes would use a cooking pot or cauldron, called *ǧidir*, that was put on the fire. The *mōgad*, the place of the domestic fire in a cavity, was surrounded by rocks (*hawādi*) that would keep the wood under it and used for low and slow heat to cook food. To this firebox, a sheet-metal lid is added (*ṣāǧ*). The food is then put on a *ṣiḥin* (or *lagan*), which is a plate used to serve the dishes. In recent decades, they have been using a *ṣiniyye*, a larger aluminium plate, the edges of which are shorter.

Cooking was (and still is) a female prerogative. In particular, elder women (*al-xitiyāryāt*) would cook meat, whereas younger women (*al-fōǧ*) would cook rice, bake bread, while chatting. Nowadays, young women live alone and tend to make everything on their own.

To store small quantity stocks (e.g., dry dairy products, salt, wheat etc.), they would use a cotton sack, called *šwāl*.

As for the sweets, they would eat the *lazzagiyyāt*, a layer of thin dough baked on the *ṣāǧ* on which dates, *ḥalāwa* (a confection of sesame butter and sugar) or clarified butter was placed. Another typical sweet of the area is *bḥata* or *baḥta* consisting of rice and milk pudding, and *hayṭaliyye*, another dessert made of handmade wheat starch and milk. *Basīse* was also a famous sweet, made of a mix of half-boiled wheat flour, oil, and sugar, called the "Bedouin *kanāfa*". *Harīse*, a typical sweet of the region, was introduced to the Bedouins only in the Eighties.

Ḏulūˁ al-fāṭir was also consumed, both by Bedouins and sedentary people in the area, and was a coloured sweet. Then there were the very popular candies, still known by the brand name– *Nāšid Axwān*.

As for the drinks, the main and the favourite Bedouin drink is the Arabic coffee (*al-gahwa al-sāda*), which was always roasted and boiled by men. Coffee prepared by women was not drunk. Tea was also consumed but it was less popular than today.

Herbs in infusions were often drunk: *šīḥ* (*Artemisia herba-alba,* a generic name of varieties of wormwood/mugwort) (Bos *et al.* 2020), *gēṣūm* (*Artemisia abrotanum*, also known in Arabic as *ʿabawtharān, ʿabaytharān, and ʿubaytharān* is the southernwood plant, or a variety of it), *zaʕtar barri* (*Thymus capitatus*, or wild thyme), and *ǧʕada* (*Teucrium polium*, or felty germander) (Miki 1976).

As for the vessels, they would drink in *zubdiyye* or in a *sḥala*, both terms indicate a deep plate used to drink water or yogurt. Food was eaten using hands.

Since there were no local markets nearby in the governorate of al-Mafraq, they would go to Syria, to Suwayda and get sugar, lentils, wheat, chickpeas, rice, dates, salt, coffee, spices, and tea (which was called *gēran*). When I asked about the currencies, I received different answers. According to the period and the area: in west-northern Irbid they said they had the Palestinian Guinee as currency and the Syrian Franc, while another Bedouin from the Šarafāt tribe recounted having bought and sold using the golden Ottoman Lira (this information cannot be accurate, since the Ottoman Lira in that area ceased being used in 1923).

9.6. Marriage

Most people I recorded told me that for young men the chances to see women from other families were usually restricted to the moments when women were going to raise water from wells or when they were going to collect wood. Otherwise, they would just marry their cousins. That was the general rule, which implied the marriage of the daughter of the paternal uncle *"bint al-ʕamm la-l-ʕamm"*, as a woman from the Sirḥān tribe solemnly stated, as if she was expressing the sacred rule, no one should dare to break. This is true for all the tribes I met and recorded: no differences were registered between them, although a member (belonging to the Šarafāt tribe) broke the rule and married a woman from another tribe during the Eighties: the exception that proves the rule.

Certainly, marriages were endogamic, and wedding a peasant or someone from the city was not allowed. A man, aged 50, even stated that «*al-badu ma kānu yizzawwağu min al-fillāḥīn* […]. *Kānat ˁin-na ˁēba*» («the Bedouins did not marry peasants […] It was a shame on us»). All the interviewees highlight the fact that today it is certainly different, since they not only marry people who do not have Bedouin origins, but they even marry to foreign people coming from Palestine and Saudi Arabia. Nowadays it is normal to find a couple in which the husband is a Bedouin, and the wife has peasant origins: «*al-ān kull-ha fallāḥāt illi ˁan-na. haḏōla xawāl umm-u fillāḥīn*» («Today those (f.) that we have here are all peasants. Those, the uncles of his mother, are peasants»).

As far as asking for the woman's hand in marriage is concerned, the people I recorded stuck to the same story: when a young man intended to propose, he would first ask his mother's advice and tell her to go and investigate about the woman he liked to get information.

On the other hand, if the man was from a different family, the male relatives of the woman would go and investigate him, asking details and opinions (*tafṣīlāt)* about his *ˀaxlāq-u* (manners), *taṣarrufāt-u* (behaviour) to ensure his liability (*amāne).* After having ensured that the man was *muḥtaram* (respectful), they would send one person to say that they agree to the marriage.

In other cases, which were also frequent, the marriage was arranged by the families, the bride and the groom knowing nothing about each other, not even having seen each other before. This was still the case 50 years ago for the parents of many people I recorded, who did not know each other before the marriage. The marriage contracts were stipulated by their parents without their knowledge, while they were working or in the army, so they would come home and discover that the marriage contract had been signed. When telling these stories, the people I recorded would be themselves astonished, even if it was the story of their parents. This shows how the marriage-situation has evolved very rapidly in recent decades.

Once the decision of the marriage was taken, a group of 10 to 15 men from the groom's family would gather and ask the family of the bride for her hand (this habit still exists, also in rural areas of Jordan, and the gathering is called *ǧāha*). During this gathering, the dowry (*siyāg* or *fēd*) consisted of head of cattle, depending on the circumstances of the families: either around 60 head of sheep and 10 camels or 30 goats and 5 camels. It was different to the Bani Ṣaxar, for whom (in the Nineties) it could also consist in gold[4].

As for the wedding ceremony: they used to take the bride on a parade, walking (*al-fārda*) on the nuptial cortège (*zaffa*); the bride used to sit on a *hōdiǧ* (which is a carriage positioned on the back of the female camel). The wedding ceremony could last 3 or 4 days (even one week) during which they used to dance various kinds of dances: *sḥaǧe, dabča, ḥabil al-muwaddaʿ* (which is a special dance where men and women that are relatives hold hands) and sing wedding songs.

The first night the groom and the bride would sleep in a little tent built for the first night of the nuptials, called *burze* or *birze*. The second night a lunch was organised and then the newlyweds would move to the tent. The typical food was *mansaf* made of *saman* (clarified butter), *laḥam* (lamb meat) and *marīs* (dry yogurt), *burġul* (bulgur) and *šrāk* (a thin layer of bread). The *nagūṭ*, which are the gifts for the bride, usually consisted in a head of sheep (*rās ġanam)* or, more generally, what they already possessed at home from their production.

During the wedding, men (*al-zulum al-ikbār* or *al-ʿōd*) would make coffee and dance *dabka*. The brides used to wear a dress called *habar*, a white veil called *guḏ̣āḏ̣a*, and a cloak, *ʿabāye*, so that her face was covered. She would put on a handmade perfume that also had the function of a make-up: it was made of yellow turmeric and carnation or jasmine pounded with the tail fat of the lamb previously boiled (called *mʿaššag*), that they used to put on their face, making it yellow.

9.7. Circumcision, funerals, and religion

Circumcision, they all highlight, was a great event: a feast, of the calibre of weddings. First, the people who were invited would bring the cattle and the wool of the cattle, they would cut the tail and burn it. It would go black, then they would beat it and sift it, and put it into a sack or a vase for the child to bring before the circumcision. Then, for the circumcision, they would take the child by the leg and cut the prepuce with a knife. During the ceremony, people used to dance and sing for a week, from Saturday to Friday. As soon as the child was back at his place, his family would prepare and give him some drops of the *zaˁūṭ*, which consisted in the substance obtained from the *ˁūd al-hawā* (*Alkanna tinctoria*, alkanet) and saffron that were boiled so that the smell of the cooked food would not affect the child, because it was believed to cause him inflammations. Others would cook onion for the same purpose. As for the condolences (*ˁaza*), in the past everyone from the confederation would go to express their condolences to the family of the deceased. The first night they would have dinner together, the second night of the *ˁaza*, the relatives and the neighbours of the relatives of the deceased would sacrifice the lamb, *wanāse*. The persons involved, filled with grief, would be considered not able to cook so, in a form of mutual aid the rest of the tribe would help. In the past they would bury the dead on high ground or in a valley, since there were no areas dedicated to burial or cemeteries.

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[4] According to the fieldwork data of Antonella Torzullo, PhD fellow at University of Vienna, collected in 2021 in Ruǧm aš-Šāmi, Amman.

Regarding their religious belief, I tried to obtain honest information, but it was not always easy, since it still represents a sensitive topic to some of the people I met. According to the sincerest testimony, some members say that in the past not everyone adhered to religious beliefs (until at least around the Sixties). It depended, certainly, on the tribes and the country, as, for example, Bedouins of Saudi Arabia are said to have been always religious (Burckhardt 1822). Others, who have lived quite isolated for centuries, are said not to have been religious at all in the past, as in the case of *Ahl al-Ǧabal*, described by the neighbour Sirḥān tribes as ignoring the Islamic precepts, even marrying and celebrating the nuptials during the fasting month of Ramadan. Travellers of the past centuries, such as Constantin François de Volney (1757-1820), William Gifford Palgrave (1826-1888), and Alois Musil (1868-1944) proved to have experienced the same lack of adherence, except for those who were in contact with people living in the city or in the villages, who fasted and prayed (Jabbur 1995).

This lack of religious practices and observance is explained as strictly and directly linked to the lack of education. As soon as education started to be widespread, Islam was taught, and the members of the tribes started to be observant.

When asked about the existence of mosques, one of them, surprised, replied – as if it was an illogical question – that they did not build mosques since they were nomads, and would not pray in fixed places. They would rather collect stones, arrange them in a circular form and pray inside that area.

Then, starting from the late Sixties, Islam progressively began to be followed and they would either build places to pray in or – those who had houses – would dedicate one of the rooms to prayer. No more than five elderly people could pray inside. From these rooms, then, they progressively built mosques.

At the time when Ramadan started to be practised, it always occurred during summer months. I asked how they could know the moment to end fasting and they replied that before the second half of the XX century, depending on the area, one would either go on a high place and call the *ˀaḏān* or they would observe the chickens: as soon as they enter the henhouse they would start eating. Otherwise, they would figure it out by looking at the sun and, as soon as it went down, they would eat. Later, cannons announced the fast breaking, and then, more recently, radio announcements, and television would declare it.

During the *ifṭār* (the end of the fast) they would eat *gamur ad-dīn* (dried apricots) and the *rašūf* (a typical Bedouin dish of northern *Bādiya*, which is made of thin bread, lentils, wheat, and meat). During the Eid festivity people of the confederation of *Ahl al-Ǧabal* used to eat raisins and dried fig, while other tribes closer to Mafraq would prepare *grāṣ ˤīd* and *lazzagiyyāt* with clarified butter and molasses. The woman belonging to the Sirḥān explained that dishes like *faṭāyir* or *ˤarāyis* are a recent acquisition. The Bedouin people in Mafraq would gather at the sheikh's tent, or at the eldest member's place and would spend the day all together, even with the neighbours. Children were given wheat, in order to barter it for sweets (especially *kanāfa*).

As for their lack of religious consciousness, a Bedouin woman from the ˤAḏ̣amāt tribe expressed this, when I asked about their faith in the past:

> *Taˤrif xāl-i axū-ha zaffu l-u b-Ramaḏ̣ān kān hu al-waḥīd illi ṣāyim. Ġaddaw an-nās, ġaddaw an-nās b-Ramaḏ̣ān, šāyif? Ma tadri an-nās w-ygūlu «al-ˤarīs ṣāyim, lēš?» Liˀanno hu ēš? kān ˤaskari w-kān ˤind-u waˤi šwayye, falasṭīni huwa kān w-iǧa min falasṭīn ˤaṭū-h ṯamāniya w-arbˤīn sāˤa yaˤni yōmēn ˤaṭū-*

> *h bass mišān il-ğīze iğğawwaz fi-h. yōmēn w-ma yadri mīn hi al-ˁarūs. Iğa hā-l-yōmēn w-ṣāyim abu al-bint hāy, ˁēlt-i hāy, abū-ha, hi bint xāl-i. iğa, an-nās titġadda w-hū ṣāyim. Gālū «al-ˁarīs ṣāyim». Gālu ēš? «Šū ṣāyim». Fi Ramaḏ̣ān w-ma yidru al-iši. Yaˁrifu aṣ-ṣūm bass yaˁni bass ma yahtammu, ma fi ihtimām.*
> You know, my uncle, who is her brother, they made his nuptial cortège during Ramadan. He was the only one fasting. People had lunch, people had lunch during Ramadan, see? People did not know and said: «the groom is fasting, why?» what was he? He was a soldier, so he had consciousness, a bit. He was Palestinian, he came from Palestine to stay forty-eight hours, I mean they gave him just two days for the marriage. Two days… he did not even know who the bride was. He came and stayed for two days, and he was fasting. He was the father of this girl, this was my family, his father, she is my cousin. He came, people were having lunch and he was fasting. They said, «the groom is fasting». They said: «What? Why is he fasting?». It was Ramadan, but they did not know this thing. They did know the fast, but they did not care, there was no interest in it.

9.8. Smoking, tattoos, and illicit behaviours

Although it is difficult to find honest answers about the habit of smoking, especially if the speakers are women, it is universally accepted that both men and women used to smoke tobacco. Nowadays this is not considered a respectful habit and when asked women usually deny that their husbands or themselves used to smoke, while men are never ashamed to affirm that they used to do that. They would use a type of pipe called *sibīl* or *ġaliyūn*. A man of the Šarafāt tribe describes the pipe like that «it was a pierced bamboo stick and then you put it in the big tobacco pipe like this one». This man also narrates that not only old women used to smoke, but that they all started smoking when they were kids. He describes this habit as something that has always existed and that now it is forbidden or badly perceived for health reasons. On the other hand, his wife – in another conversation – denies this habit and denies the fact that her husband used to smoke in order to preserve his pride and the pride of his tribe, affirming that he is a respectful man from a respectful family. Another woman from the Nˁēmāt tribe, instead, narrates that smoking was a widespread habit among women, especially during the condolences, when smoke was offered, whereas nowadays only water and dates are offered to the guests.

As for the tattoos, all the Bedouin women I have met have at least one tattoo on their faces. They usually have one tattoo painted on their forehead, and other tattoos on their chins. These tattoos were made during the women's late childhood and were considered a sign of beauty (*tġawa*). They were usually painted by the "*nūriyyāt*", the gypsy women that at that time used to conduct a nomadic life like the Bedouin tribes. Usually, parents would forbid their daughters to tattoo, so they would try to get one when parents were not with them. Many women admit their regrets for having got a tattoo in their childhood and define that as a silly mistake.

In terms of behaviours and customs, women also believe that it is not respectful for women to wear tight clothes and associate this to modern times, commenting that even brides during their wedding day are almost naked in their way of dressing, while in the past they used to wear long, black, appropriate dresses that did not allow the others to see the woman's body shape, who also wore a veil that covered both hair and face.

9.9. Childhood, games, and education

As kids, Bedouins would mostly play at night, since during the morning they had to help the family with the cattle. One of the old games that was explained to me during the interview was the following one:

> *Šu kuntu tilˁabu w-intu ṣġār? Kuntu tilˁabu? Ā! Nilˁab nilˁab! nǧīb ˁaṣa gaṣīre, ˁaṣa gašāṭa, xašab ṣġīr, xašabe zayy hāy bass ykūn gaṣīr šwayye gadd hāy xašabe. yaˁmalu ar-ruǧum hōn […] kūm ḥǧār. Ism-u ruǧum. Al-gadam kənna nˁamil-ha bə-l-ˁaṣa hāḏa, nimisk-u, hāḏ bə-l-lēl miš bə-n-nhār, taḥḏ̣ar-ha bə-l-lēl. (i)gbāl-na ˁašara w-iḥna ˁašara, ˁašrīn ādam kənna šabāb w-nimsik al-ˁaṣa hāḏa, w-nšūt-u, wēn buṭubb al-ˁaṣa? bə-l-arḏ̣ nuhǧum ˁalē-h, illi yimsik*

> *al-ʿaṣa awwal wāḥad hāḏa qaru, minšutt al-arḏ̣ xaṭṭ*[5].
> Which games did you play when you were kids? Did you play? Of course, we did! We used to play! We would take a short stick, the stick of the squeegee, a short piece of wood, a plank, like this wood, but a short one, like this one. They would pile up some rocks here, a stack of rocks, it is called *ruǧum*. We used to make it with the stick, that was during the night, not during the day, it was played at night. We had ten in front of us and we were ten, for a total of twenty people, we were young. We would take the stick and throw it. Where does it fall? On the ground, and then we would run towards it. The first one who takes it is the *qaru* (the winner), he scored the goal, and we would mark the points with a line on the ground.

This game was played on a rugged (*waʿra*) terrain, at night, to make it difficult. He continues saying that after taking the stick, the player would go to the rock pile and beat the rocks with it. If the other players see him with the stick, they can try to steal it from him. The aim is to reach the rocks without the others noticing it.

Another old game was *gəmmēze* (literally: jumping) it was played mainly during weddings as a show. A group of young men would ride the horses or the camels (which were beautifully harnessed for the event) and would compete in order to take a stick from the ground without falling.

Another game was *mbāṯḥa*, which was a fight using your hands, and its aim was to make the rival fall to the ground.

Modern games were the common cops and robbers, soccer, and blind man's bluff.

As for education, children would go to school on foot (as was the case in the villages surrounding al-Mafraq, such as Muġayyir as-Sirḥān), walking around 2.5 km, in any weather. Normally, there was just one school in each village (as in Muġayyir as-Sirḥān). In Umm al-Quttayin there were two or three classrooms with mixed classes. Teachers were not local, but were from other major cities, as Amman, Irbid, Zarga, or from abroad, from Egypt. We know that they were not numerous and, for example, in Sama as-Sirḥān, one of the speakers recounted that there were only four teachers, in Muġayyir there were three and in Zumla only one between 1979 and 1981, who was from Irbid. These teachers had to live in these villages and would go back home only at the weekend because there was no transportation.

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[5] Recorded in al-Ṣaliḥiyya, on 8 September 2021.

9.10. Entertainment and tribal values

When asked about the *taˁlīl* or the entertainment, the Bedouins I recorded would speak about the poem recitals during evening gatherings. Oral dialectal poetry is the most popular Bedouin genre (also known as *al-šiˁr an-nabaṭi*), the best expression of the tribal ideals, the Weltanschauung, the *dīwān al-ˁarab* "the register of the Arabs", alluding also to their collective memory. Usually, poem recital was and still is accompanied by the melody of the rebec, defined by a poet as *ˁišg al-bduwi*, "the love of the Bedouin" whose music is tender and melancholic. Other instruments were: *šubbēba, miǧwəz*.

Poetry has not only been a means to express emotions but has also carried an incisive social function.

Bedouin poetry is an old art rooted in the pre-Islamic bardic odes of inner Arabia (Holes 2013). It is also known as *nabaṭi*, an adjective which was initially used to designate the Bedouin language in poetry, once considered as broken and ungrammatical compared to Classical Arabic.

Since the pre-Islamic era, poets of Arabia were thought to have innate faculties and a special power.

Nowadays, poets hold a certain power over people and poetry is a deep political act, as Steven Caton argued when speaking about the role of poetry in modern northern Yemen (Caton 1985). Poetry can arouse emotions and influence people's opinions. Bedouin poets were (and still are) often socially engaged, giving voice to needs and frustrations of the people on social issues.

In the XX century, the context of Arabic poetry considerably changed and in the second half, the social and political role of poetry became more evident. Bedouin poets were often engaged socially, giving voice to needs and frustrations of the people on social issues.

Nowadays *nabaṭi* has essentially come to stand for Bedouin poetry and, as in the past, it focuses on feelings as well as political and social issues. An innovation of contemporary *nabaṭi* poetry is its interest towards national (sometimes even international) concerns.

Despite the resounding success that poets used to achieve during the evening entertainments of the tribes when they recited their odes, and even though for some scholars, such as Sowayan, *nabaṭi* poetry is the direct descendant of the prestigious ancient Arabic poetry, it has often been victim of elitist criticism owing to its language, which was not considered as sufficiently virtuous.

Thanks to modern scholars (Bailey, Dufour, Holes, Kurpershoek, Palva, Ritt-Benmimoun, Sowayan), this genre has been studied, reevaluated and enhanced as the natural continuum of Old Arabic poetry (Sowayan 2003).

Today, the poetic genres are *ġazal* (the love poem *par excellence* whose geographic origin is the Ḥiğāz), *madīḥ* (panegyric), *riṯā* (eulogy) and *waṭaniyya* (patriotic ode), that are adapted to new modern contexts like national social concerns.

The language of the poems is learnt through listening to established poets and through imitation of their speech style.

Nabaṭi poetry was originally oral, and poets were illiterate. Nowadays poets are educated; most of them write and publish their works and recite them in front of an audience during poetry festivals, as per tradition, or during the visits of some important personality, such as members of the royal family.

Technically, the main characteristics of *nabaṭi* poems are the scan and the rhyme.

As in the past, poets still have responsibilities: with their poems, they can have a role solving disputes between two parties, persons or even two judges (*gaṣīdat al-muškila* "poem of the dispute").

In the "national" poems, we hear about tribal values: words like *naxwa*, *fazˤa* and *aṭnāb*, which all have the meaning of intertribal help. The tribe is in some poems compared to a tent, which has its support-pole but needs ropes (aid or protection, *ṭanab*, was originally asked for by touching the tent ropes). These kinds of poems are recited on special occasions, such as the time before the elections. Other social poems, on the other hand, are a critique against the corruption of local management and recount the adversities of everyday life in Jordan (especially price increases). Jordan is, as a matter of fact, on an economic level, experiencing a situation of poverty; shifts in oil prices make the condition of the middle classes increasingly vulnerable.

As for the language these poems are written in, even though the “artistic colloquial” (Palva 1992) of Bedouin poetry does not reflect the spontaneity of the speech, some traits of Bedouin Arabic can be observed. This is often true for every language used in epics, as Zwettler (1978) observed for Classical Arabic (which he intended as poetic *koine* or *Kunstsprache*). Even though the poems are composed in the Bedouin variety spoken by the poet, it is possible to observe a mix, in the lexicon, of dialectal and Classical Arabic terms, as it has already been pointed out by Dufour for sung Yemeni poetry (Dufour 2011).

From a lexical perspective, these works present words and allusions that are specific to the tribal culture and unknown to the sedentary Arab world (Bailey 1991). Even when poets employ common words, they assume a different meaning alluding to the desert’s context.

These poems show dialectal “deviations” from Classical Arabic, especially in phonology and morphology, like the monophthongisation of the diphthongs, the phoneme /q/ articulated as a voiced stop /g/, the dialectal *tanwīn* and the use of the pseudo-verb *widd*.

9.11. Alternative medicine and births

Usually, the umbilical cord was cut with a rock and then she would wrap the baby in a rag and brings it with her to the tent. Many women would die in childbirth and many infants would not survive the first hours.

If they were at home, they would instead have the chance to call a *dāye*, a woman who had experience in helping other women giving birth. After the birth, women would drink infusions of herbs like wormwood and yarrows to calm the delivery pain. Common herbs used to cure the pain were: *ǧʕada, ḥummēḏ* (*Rumex acetosa,* is the Arabic name for common sorrel) and *ʿabayṯrān or ʿabawṯarān* (which, according to Ibn al-Jazzār, is another name for *Artemisia abrotanum,* or southernwood).

As for the food, the women of the tribe would prepare the *ṭuʿma* for the parturient (usually consisting of a *ʿiǧǧa* an omelette of eggs, flour, and onions). The parturient would call her baby according to the situations or the circumstances in which it was born (it was normal to call it Ṯlēǧe [feminine] or Ṯaliǧ if it was born when it was snowing or Šatwa if it was raining).

Even pains like stomach-ache were cured through herbs. If someone got sick, he had no option but to go to the hospitals in Damascus or Irbid. In Mafraq there were no doctors or hospitals. When someone died, they would not know the cause, and they would generally say that a person died because of a fever (even when it was caused by a heart-attack).

Another way to cure the wounds, the inflammations and pains was cautery *čawi*, which is also considered to be recommended by the prophet Muḥammad, using only fire and a needle. Two people from the Šarafāt recounted being healed through cautery. She had the marks from cautery on her head, because in the past her eyes hurt. Those who practised it were called *ṭibab* (sg. *ṭabīb*) and were not real doctors but just experts in cauterization.

To cure allergies, they would also put on *mġara* (or *muġra*), red ochre, on the skin. This is an earth pigment usually used to dye the back of cattle to discern them.

9.12. Conclusions

Nowadays, during fieldwork, we can observe that one of the biggest changes that has occurred in the Bedouin world is the end of raiding and the settlement. These phenomena led to the consequent development of new ways of subsistence, since attacks to take possession of others' supplies ceased, and water cisterns always had to be nearby since they settled permanently. New means of transportation have also been adopted and daily contacts with settled populations have been established, since they work side by side in the secondary and in the service industry.

This fieldwork proves that the Bedouin tribes in Jordan have been going through a social transformation that started in the last century. I refer not only to the changes mentioned above, but also to a different lifestyle, influenced by modernisation. Not only did they sell their cattle and leave their tents for houses, but they also started growing crops, purchasing goods from markets, and practicing Islam the same way as the settled populations. They ceased tribal warring and raiding, but today some of them might have tribal resentment (rooted in ancient rancour between the tribes) that sometimes gives rise to verbal or physical confrontation (which sometimes leads to murders, according to their statements and testimony). In contrast to the the past, nowadays members of the tribes can have virtual contacts through social networks and visit members of their tribe in other states.

Some of them do not wear traditional clothes anymore: younger people are not usually dressed in their scarfs, except on certain occasions and in certain contexts. According to a young Bedouin member of the Sirḥān tribe, who is a poet, the Bedouin dialect he uses in his lyrics will soon disappear in a couple of years. He admits he has to switch to the sedentary variety of the city in order to feel understood by his colleagues and professors at university. He ascribes the evolution towards the sedentary variety and the code-switching to the difficulty of the Bedouin dialect. Even the Bedouin villages are now normal villages with markets and cars, like the sedentary ones.

We could, therefore, state that the Bedouin kernel has seemingly been lost over recent decades, as far as we can judge from the superficial and external point of view: members of the Bedouin tribes today have a life as settled and comfortable as their sedentary counterpart's, they do the same jobs and have a similar diet.

Nevertheless, under more careful analysis, after hours of conversations, questions, and a more attentive observation, we conclude that it is not as clear-cut as appearances may suggest.

In fact, they have not forgotten their honourable Bedouin origins, of which they are still extremely proud; many of them make a massive use of social networks boasting about their tribes through the sharing of songs and poems, and they lament the end of a period that is (only apparently) perceived far away in time.

In 1930 from nomads (who just lived off their dairy products and meat) they turned either into semi-nomads (who also cultivate) or into settled people (with a strong legacy of their past), who could access education. In the Fifties they were granted a special legal status, which was eventually abolished in 1976 but they still are privileged in the army.

All the Bedouin families I met during my fieldwork still have a big tent next to their houses, which plays a representative role. They want to keep it for tribal meetings and formal occasions. The organisation of their houses recalls the tent's planning: they have wide living rooms, which imitate the tent style: large carpets, pillows to sit on or sofas, according to the tastes (and the economic standing). Some of them have pick-ups to transport their livestock (if they still have any), while others still have vast of plots land reserved for cultivating or grazing. As for their diet, even if it is true that they have started cultivating crops and consuming vegetables, and fruits more than they could in the past, they still cook their traditional dishes such as *rašūf*, *lazzagiyyāt*, and *mensaf*. Also, their political alliances are another proof of their tribal cohesion.

Finally, their speech, even if it has become heavily influenced by the sedentary varieties, it still preserves idiosyncratic Bedouin features in phonology, morphology as well as in syntax and lexicon (Bettini 2006).

A modern traveller who visits the villages inhabited by the Bedouins today would not remark on the same features as the travellers of the last century, who used to observe a lot of differences between the nomads and the people dwelling in the villages or in the cities. Nonetheless, on deeper analysis, we can still realise how the Bedouin identity is still alive in these tribal communities of northern Jordan, despite the end of the nomadic life.

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Con il presente volume giunge al secondo tomo l'iniziativa editoriale inaugurata nel 2021, associata a un progetto precedente e volta a valorizzare e diffondere i risultati delle ricerche di giovani studiosi che stanno formandosi nell'ambito del Dottorato in Civiltà dell'Asia e dell'Africa, presso l'Università di Roma Sapienza. I saggi qui proposti, i cui autori sono iscritti al 36° e 35° ciclo, rispecchiano alcune delle principali specializzazioni del corso in questione e spaziano dalla letteratura sanscrita, cinese e giapponese alla linguistica coreana, dalla storia degli Studi orientali ad indagini etnografiche in Giordania. Di carattere multidisciplinare e basati su fonti in lingua originale, tali studi assumono particolare rilevanza in campo accademico, arricchendo i temi trattati con analisi innovative; allo stesso tempo, a un livello maggiormente divulgativo, essi contribuiscono a una più ampia comprensione delle culture asiatiche e medio-orientali per i diversi periodi e ambiti disciplinari considerati.

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