

First published as: Cuyler, Zachary. 2015. "The Invasion of the Desert": Expertise, Nationalism, and the Development of Egypt's Western Desert, 1954-6." *Anthropology News* website, October 2015.

## **'The Invasion of the Desert': Expertise, Nationalism, and the Development of Egypt's Western Desert, 1954-61 2014 MES Student Paper Prize Winner**

**Zachary Cuyler**

Though several works have been written about nationalism, development, and social science in Egypt, none address Egyptian Bedouin communities. Omnia al-Shakry's account of the evolution of Egyptian social science in *The Great Social Laboratory* concludes with a Nasser-era project to settle the country's deserts with Egyptians from the Nile valley, but does not engage with Egyptian expert writing on the Bedouin. This paper investigates how Egyptian experts attempted to assimilate the Bedouin through Nasser-era development projects in Egypt's Western Desert that aimed to sedentarize its inhabitants. It argues that internal contradictions in Egyptian social scientists' conceptualization of assimilation contributed, ironically, to patterns of exclusion.

In *The Great Social Laboratory*, Shakry traces the evolution of Egyptian social science from colonial era preoccupations with racial difference to interwar attempts to catalogue the peasantry's essential cultural characteristics and outline cultural differences between classes, with the practical goal of reforming Egypt's peasantry to eliminate those differences. By the republican era, this became an attempt to weld a modern "collective national subject," and was subsumed within the drive to manage human and material resources in an egalitarian fashion. Shakry illustrates this point through the Tahrir Province project, which settled landless peasants in planned communities in reclaimed desert west of Alexandria. For Shakry, Tahrir Province reflected a post-colonial turn in Egyptian social science, which had the aim of constituting and

providing for a modern, socialist Egyptian "people."

Yet expertise on the Bedouin retained Egyptian social science's colonial legacy, marking the Bedouin as external to Egypt's "collective national subject" in order to assimilate them to it. This tendency surfaced in the works of Muhammad 'Awad and Ahmad Abu-Zeid, two Nasser-era Egyptian anthropologists.

'Awad, director of the Institute for Sudanic Studies in Cairo and subsequently president of Alexandria University in the early 1950s, carried colonial-era thought into Nasser-era post-colonial reformism. His work portrayed the Bedouin as an alien threat to valley Egyptians. In a 1954 essay, "The Assimilation of Nomads in Egypt," 'Awad described the conflict between valley and desert as timeless, noting that "In some remote prehistoric period *the people* took to agriculture and a settled life, and the almost continuous struggle with *nomadic intruders* began..." He distinguished nomads from "average Egyptians," by which he meant fully settled, non-tribal inhabitants of the Nile valley. While emphasizing the Bedouins' Arab and Berber heritage, he failed to address the racial background of valley Egyptians, focusing instead on the "[absorption of nomads] into the native population." Like his colonial predecessors, 'Awad used race to mark the difference between the valley and its nomadic invaders.

'Awad later abandoned his racializing analysis in favor of an examination of Bedouin character, but he continued to advocate for Bedouins' forced sedentarization as a means of assimilation. In 1960, 'Awad reviewed the "problem" of nomadism in a paper titled "Nomads in the Arab Lands of the Middle East." He contended that nomads detest authority, and are naturally given to raiding in the absence of state power. He argued that "Agriculture is distasteful to the nomad because it deprives him of the freedom so dear to his heart, involves manual labor, which he detests, and forces him to carry out work which he often relegated to... those settled peasants over whom he tyrannized." He therefore prescribed "a subtle mixture" of "coercion and persuasion" to pacify nomads through sedentarization, the impetus for which must come from a "strong central government with an interest in the establishment of peace and order, and in the welfare of the lands and all its inhabitants."

Ahmad Abu-Zeid, a student of British anthropologist Arthur Radcliffe-Browne and 'Awad's successor as president of Alexandria University, studied tribalism and modernization among Egypt's Bedouin. Though Abu-Zeid used the terminology of structural-functionalism and modernization theory, he too characterized Egypt's Bedouin as discrete cultures distinct from Nile valley Egyptians, and advocated their assimilation. In a 1959 paper written for UNESCO's *International Social Science Journal*, Abu-Zeid described nomadism as "a real burden on the national economy of Egypt" – a technical problem of efficient land use to which sedentarization was the solution. Yet unlike 'Awad, Abu-Zeid regarded tribalism as a more pressing concern than nomadism. He conceptualized Bedouin groups as discrete social totalities with "traditional structure[s]" that gave tribal elders despotic power over other tribe members; as such, he saw state-led sedentarization as a means of dissolving Egypt's tribes and freeing their members. Though he did not posit any essential difference between valley and desert populations, Abu-Zeid argued that tribalism was an obstacle to the integration of Egypt's population that needed to be overcome.

The "invasion of the desert" began in earnest in 1961, and its execution reflected the tensions in Egyptian expert writing on Bedouin assimilation. The General Desert Development Organization (GDDO) supervised projects to reclaim land and settle nomads. It established cooperative organizations to reorganize the population, meet local economic needs, and commercially link desert and valley. "Service caravans" supervised by "social experts" came to Bedouin meeting places to help guide them "through their first period of development and change," while medical caravans provided basic health services. The GDDO also attempted to reform the Bedouin themselves, building new mosques and supplying preachers to "uproot bad customs and damaging traditions." Despite these assimilationist efforts, Mersa Matrouh, capital of a new province in the Western Desert where Bedouin settled, was nevertheless divided into 'ethnic' neighborhoods segregating 'Bedouin' from 'Egyptians.'

Sedentarization "met with tremendous resistance," and few nomads actually settled. In 1979 Abu-Zeid wrote, "The people in the desert still like to keep their own traditional way of life

and the traditional social system still prevails." Although by then "urban Bedouin" took regular jobs and sent their children to Nile valley universities, many referred to valley Egyptians as "foreigners" and "intruders." Assimilation had undone itself by its own exclusionary methods.

*Zachary Cuyler received his MA from Georgetown University's Center for Contemporary Arab Studies.*