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Review of: W. Young The Rashaayda Bedouin: Arab Pastoralists of Eastern Sudan

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Though it deals with contemporary issues of gender roles, political inequality and cultural identity, this is really an ethnography in the old style, based on intensive fieldwork done between 1978 and 1980 among the nomadic Rashaayda. That this short book has taken almost 20 years to write is not evident in its style, which is simple and engaging, unobtrusively displaying the author’s deep knowledge of the austere world of his subjects.

The book begins with a detailed description of moving camp, thereby graphically depicting the material culture of the Rashaayda, and foreshadowing the author’s discussion of the discriminations the Rashaayda make between men and women, elder and junior, rich and poor, free and slave, white and black, insider and outsider. These crucial divisions are aptly illustrated throughout the text by representative cases and stories. In his analysis of this material, Young argues
(among other things) that Rashiidi women are not simply servants of men; they can and do use their positions as providers of food and shelter to assert their own wills. Young notes as well the importance of respect (hishma) for seniors as a way of maintaining order in the camp, since junior men will restrain their rivalries in the presence of their elders and will show solidarity in front of outsiders. The dual role of envy and of generosity in maintaining an egalitarian ideology and group cohesion is also discussed.

Additionally, Young gives us a convincing structuralist analysis of the Rashiidi understanding of space and time, with special emphasis on symbolic oppositions in the organization of tents and camp sites. Moreover, he considers Rashiidi marriage and kinship, using case studies to reaffirm what innumerable previous ethnographies of the Bedouin have already shown: their social organization cannot be understood without reference to their genealogical beliefs, since these beliefs orient and structure action.

However, Young argues as well that the present-day Rashaayda are in fact a confederation of previously unrelated Arabic speaking tribes who allied together after migrating in the mid-19th century to the Sudan, where they found themselves at odds with the indigenous Hadendowa, dark-skinned people who speak a Cushic language and have markedly different customs. These Hadendowa are the "other" against whom the Rashaayda have manufactured their own tribal identity. Given this background, it is not surprising that today the Rashaayda are relatively uninterested in tracing their patrilines, assuming instead that groups with different standardized livestock brands must belong to different "branches" of the Rashaayda "tribe." The ethnography ends by tracing the complicated historical-political vicissitudes of Rashaayda identity.

In an epilogue, Young candidly discusses his fieldwork and his admittedly opportunistic conversion to Islam—a conversion that soon became more entangling than he had ever intended. His meditations on this and other matters make a complex and personal ending to this deceptively simple account, which may be far from the "cutting edge" of contemporary theory, but which is very close indeed to a world that may well have vanished forever.

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