

# Higher Education as a Platform for Cross-Cultural Transition: the Case of the First Educated Bedouin Women in Israel

Sarab Aburabia-Queder, Blaustein Institute for Desert Studies  
Ben Gurion University, Israel, sarabab@zahav.net.il

## Abstract

*This article examines two groups of Bedouin women who studied in different cultural spaces. The first group, due to a lack of high schools in the Negev (during the 1970s), were obliged to leave the village to study and reside in boarding schools in the central and northern regions of Israel. These women returned to their society of origin after the completion of their academic studies. The second group went to Jewish universities in a town near their homes (Beersheba), attending daily and returning home each night to patriarchal control. The article examines the experience of these pioneers in higher education as a form of cultural transition and internal immigration, with an emphasis on the unique characteristics of each of the two groups. Going out to gain higher education is seen in Bedouin society as a form of immigration, and the first educated women therefore became a type of immigrant.*

## Introduction

This article examines one form of cross-cultural contact in the context of acquisition of higher education by members of the Palestinian-Bedouin minority in Israel. The relevant literature generally characterises cross-cultural contact as a process that occurs when individuals brought up in one culture travel to other lands, usually as immigrants to a new country or as part of an experience of international education (Stonequist, 1935; Furnham and Bochner, 1982). In contrast, this article defines the world of higher education entered by pioneer Bedouin women as a cross-cultural contact zone between two cultures

in the same country: Bedouin culture and Israeli culture. It focuses on identity formation in two groups of Bedouin women who studied in different cultural spaces and it examines the coping mechanisms that resulted from this process.

Due to a lack of high schools in the Negev during the 1970s and fear of social regulation, in order to study, the first group was obliged, with the rare support of their fathers, to leave the village and reside in boarding schools in the central and northern regions of Israel. These women only returned to their society and culture of origin after the completion of their academic studies, at which time they had to cope with their new status of being 'strangers at home'. The second group attended Jewish universities located in a town near their homes (Beer-sheba), commuting daily and returning home each night under the watchful eyes of their society. This scenario involved coping with a cultural crisis stemming from simultaneously living in and sharing two contradictory cultural systems.

The contribution of this study is in the association it forms between literature dealing with cross-cultural transitions and immigration and with the issue of women's coping strategies in the domain of higher education. For the first group, going out to attain higher education is seen in Bedouin society as a form of immigration and the first educated women therefore became a type of internal immigrant. The gaps created by the two cultures in both of the groups can be understood in the context of the background of the national, geographical division of Israel. Arab and Jewish settlements exist in separate areas but all institutions of higher education in Israel (especially the universities) are located in the main Jewish cities. Therefore any departure to acquire education constitutes a form of inter-cultural transition (addressing the mental transition and gap between Bedouin and Israeli cultures) between Palestinian culture (with its differences) and Israeli culture. This results in inter-cultural conflict between the women's self-perception as educated women and Bedouin cultural perceptions and expectations of them (Erdreich, 2006; Weiner-Levy, 2006).

In this respect this article aims to challenge the literature on gender and higher education (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1969; Komulainen, 2000) that perceives higher education as empowering of minorities and women in their personal and public lives. It examines the aspects of marginalisation involved in acquiring higher education in the context of a marginalised minority, in this case two groups of Bedouin women from the same society.

*Women and education in Bedouin society*

Education of women is not a new phenomenon among the Negev Bedouin. It harks back to the British Mandatory Authorities, who in 1917 created parallel education systems for Arabs and Jews, thus affecting the approximately 65,000 nomadic Bedouin living in the semi-arid regions of the Negev. In the 1930s, the authorities established a boarding school in Beersheba at which Bedouin children, mostly sons of sheikhs and notables, could continue their high school studies. By 1934, there were two schools, one for boys and one for girls (Al-A'raf, 1934; Abu-Rabia, 1994).

In May 1948, as a result of the war, most of the region's schools were closed for a period and Arab education was only available in the north of Israel. Bedouin had to request special permission to access educational and employment opportunities. As a result an entire generation of Bedouin tribes, and especially the women of these tribes, had virtually no access to formal education.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Israeli Government built seven villages for Bedouin in the Negev Desert, seeking to gain control of their lands (Human Rights Watch, 2001). These villages, named 'permanent settlements', were populated by about 50 per cent of the Bedouin by the early 1990s. The rest stayed on their land, a measure considered illegal by the Israeli State. Those who remained did not benefit from any basic services, such as running water, electricity, sewage or schools.

These approximately 40 'unrecognised villages' are not identified on any map. As a result they have responded to the immediate need for temporary education. Classes take place in shacks with no electricity or water. No other educational facilities or equipment are available, such as libraries, laboratories or learning aids. Roads to these schools are unpaved and weather conditions preclude regular attendance. As such, most students do not benefit from normative learning conditions (Human Rights Watch, 2001).

Educational conditions in the permanent settlements are also far from optimal. Although part of the recognised educational system, the schools continue to suffer from low budgets and impoverished facilities, not unlike the rest of the Arab education system throughout Israel. It was not until the late 1970s that two high schools were built in two recognised villages. Very few of the participants in the current study attended those schools, the remainder seeking education in Arab or Jewish boarding schools in northern Israel.

It was not until 1988 that the first Bedouin woman was admitted to university in the Negev region. By 1998, only 12 Bedouin women had attained their bachelor's degrees, including the author (Negev Centre for Regional Development, 2004).

### **Methodology**

This study focuses on narrative research that addresses meaning as part of the participant's life story. The narrative stream characterises each person as someone who creates stories concerning his or her identity, focusing on the participant's interpretation of his or her life (Bertux and Kohli, 1984). It is an indigenous study, stemming from the author's cultural positioning as an Arab Bedouin examining her own culture.

#### *Research population and sampling method*

The study employed a purposive rather than random sampling method, sampling individuals who have a special interest in the matter at hand. Miles and Huberman (1994, p. 28) would refer to these as 'politically important cases'. A total of 17 women were interviewed, each being the first from her village (recognised) or tribe (unrecognised) to attain educational qualifications at an institute of higher learning in Israel.

These Bedouin women were located through the familiarity of the researcher with these women in this region. Since there were not many of them it was not difficult to reach them. Those who could not be reached in this manner were found through Bedouin men who had studied with them. Participants' ages during the study ranged from late 20s to early 50s.

#### *Interview procedure*

All interviews were conducted at a local university in Arabic, the mother tongue of both the participants and the researcher. This site was chosen as it was a quiet setting where there would be few distractions from family members. In-depth narrative interviews were held in two sessions, although some continued for four or five sessions. The interviews sought to obtain a rich and authentic narrative concerning different aspects of the participants' lives (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). The interviews employed two methods found to be mutually complementary in this study: Rosenthal's (1994) open-ended questioning to produce a narrative life story followed by semi-structured questions that conformed to Corradi's (1991) approach. This was supplemented with questions relating to specific themes not addressed in the life stories such as marital life and secret relationships with men. These

interviews were ethnographic as they also involved 'discovering' and 'describing' and aimed to uncover and construct the reality of these women's worlds (Spradley, 1979).

#### *Analysis of the interviews*

The interviewees' stories were analysed via a holistic approach that relates to the entire life story, whereby some parts of the context are interpreted by other parts of the narrative (Lieblich *et al.*, 1998). Content was examined on two levels, the exposed (what happened) and the hidden (the underlying motives) (Rosenthal, 1994).

#### **Narratives of the first educated Bedouin women: near and far**

This section presents the personal narratives of the first educated Bedouin women from the Negev region in Israel (hereafter referred to as 'First Women'). Since all the interviewees were of the first generation of educated women in Bedouin society in southern Israel they are easily recognisable. Thus all given names are pseudonyms and any information regarding name, age, marital status, number of children and profession has been kept to a minimum in order to protect their anonymity.

The narratives represent two groups of First Women who acquired higher education, separated according to the proximity of the location of the institute of study. Their proximity or distance from the educational setting determined their identity configuration upon returning home from their studies. The first group, who went to study far away from the Bedouin community, chose to distance themselves so that they would not be publicly witnessed going to college. Being watched by the tribe would involve the witnessing of a violation of the traditional, accepted behaviour of Bedouin women. During their studies this group of women lived in a non-Bedouin culture, far from their families. Being away from Bedouin mentality, they absorbed non-Bedouin cultural values and therefore they felt like strangers in their own culture upon their return.

The second group of women went to study in a nearby university located in the Arab-Jewish city of Beersheba. They differed from the first group in that they returned home every day to the watchful eyes of their resistant relatives. During their studies these women experienced two cultural worlds simultaneously: Bedouin culture in their homes and Israeli culture in university campus life.

### The first group: internal immigrants

#### *Exiting Bedouin culture: physical and mental distance*

The women in this group described their status in the new culture as 'stranger'. This is defined by Schuetz (1944, p. 499) as 'an adult individual of our times and civilisation who tries to be permanently accepted or at least tolerated by the group which he approaches'.

Tamara, a single woman in her 50s, was the first woman from her tribe to acquire any education at all. Since there was no school in her village she attended an elementary school in a nearby Bedouin village to which she travelled by donkey. She felt like a stranger in her encounter with the new environment. She was younger than her classmates and was a rare girl, along with two others, amongst a majority of boys. Her leaving the tribal borders violated the Bedouin code of non-appearance in public. This caused her relatives to attempt to prevent her from attending school as they perceived her public appearance as a stain on the family honour:

When I started studying my relatives started to threaten me, my father and my brother. They said to [my father]: 'Your daughter will bring us only shame'. They swore that, if they catch me, they will not let me go back to school.

To protect her from these threats her brothers and father decided to transfer her to a Jewish boarding high school distant from her village. Naturally, at first, this transformation to a different culture and her lack of knowledge of Hebrew caused her to feel like a stranger. To overcome this she sought closeness to the Jewish girls who studied with her:

In high school, when I needed something, I used to ask my Jewish classmates. I used to visit them in their homes and they also came to visit me.

This brought her even closer to Jewish, Israeli culture. Amongst these girls she was no longer a First Woman.

Asma, in her 30s, describes her experience as a student in a strange city where she nevertheless felt a sense of belonging and closeness. Lacking a nearby high school in the Bedouin Negev area, Asma attended a Christian boarding school in northern Israel:

From age 6 I studied at a private boarding school. We used to sleep at school, eat and study there. We returned home only on Christian holidays.

When asked whether she felt different among others, she answered:

Everyone was from a different place but the life we lived was without discrimination.

Like Tamara, by being close to other educated girls similar to her, Asma felt less lonely and less of a stranger. When she finished high school Asma went to study in a distant city to complete her higher education. She describes her initial difficulties there as similar to those experienced by immigrants. Her first difficulty was in not knowing the language:

You feel lost. You want to talk to them, you can't, to explain to them, you can't.

Regardless of the difficulties she went through, she felt a sense of belonging:

Since I did not start this in the middle of my life, I started it from the beginning of my life, I never felt any difference. We were there since we were kids. At school we were from the Negev, Nazareth, Gaza, from different places and families, so we got to know each other. When you live in a society where everyone is alike you don't feel like a stranger.

A factor that also made her feel comfortable with her new surroundings was that her friends accepted her as a Bedouin, whose norms differed from theirs:

I used to explain to them about our gender norms and religion and how it is important for me to keep those norms as it would be a big achievement for me. They are used to kissing each other on the cheek when they meet. When they come to say hello to me my friends tell them to stop and not kiss me 'because it is not accepted among them'. They would warn some friends before they could kiss me.

The acceptance of her different norms made Asma feel that her friends in the 'strange' city were her defenders, something that was lacking for her upon returning to Bedouin society:

This [outside] society is very humane and understanding. When I was a stranger among them, I got their support. When I came back to my Bedouin society I could not find this understanding.

Laila, married with three children, studied in another boarding school in northern Israel at the beginning of her teen years. She described the difficulty in transferring to the north in harsh terms:

At those times it was like a world war. Girls did not go to study, rather the daughter of [her father] went to study.

Entering a new society initially made her feel like a stranger:

At first it was difficult. All the studies were in Hebrew. Suddenly you see yourself among Jews and everything has changed – clothes, norms. At first I

felt *ghurba* [in exile]. This was my first time leaving home and sleeping away from home. I felt like I was in *ghurba*, even though it was not out of the country.

What Laila describes is akin to the feeling of an immigrant who comes to a new society. She tried to adjust and feel close but this was only accomplished by emphasising the differences between her and her new schoolmates. She consciously turned the source of difference into a source of normality. She turned what she could not do, such as have a boyfriend like her Jewish friends, into a source of pride:

I knew from the beginning that what they [the Jews] do, I am forbidden to do. The girls have boyfriends but I did not feel that something was lacking for me. I knew inside that those things do not belong to us. They go to parties, to movies. I knew where my limits were. Even if I was far from home and could do whatever I wanted there are things that you know do not belong to you. I was not ashamed of that. I felt very proud that we (Bedouin) don't have boyfriends.

Both Laila and Asma behaved as strangers when they approached the new culture, questioning almost everything that appears unquestionable to members of the approached group. In the space of the new culture they continued to maintain the values and norms of their culture of origin and did not violate them. This is a typical situation in which strangers who approach new cultures continue holding on to the cultural patterns of their home group as the 'unbroken historical scheme of reference' (Schuetz, 1944, p. 502). Although these First Women felt like strangers and experienced difficulties on encountering the new society, eventually they were able to adjust, feel a sense of belonging and alleviate their estrangement, due to the presence of other educated women in their new surroundings.

The adaptation of these 'strangers' to a new culture that at first seemed alien and unfamiliar to them is a continuous process of inquiry into the cultural patterns of the approached group. When it succeeds, the pattern and its components become routine to these women, offering them shelter and protection (Schuetz, 1944, p. 507).

#### *Returning to Bedouin society: being a stranger at home*

Mental and emotional estrangement was stronger upon returning to Bedouin society and re-encountering its norms. After years of growing up, studying and living in a different society, these First Women returned to their society as 'strangers' and 'others'. They returned as professional women with academic degrees, women who had acquired not only

knowledge but also different values. Gender and ethnic gaps between their identities and those of Bedouin society now became more apparent.

Returning to her village to work as the first Bedouin female teacher among male colleagues, Tamara found it difficult adjusting to Bedouin school life:

I studied in a Jewish school. Those things [common to a Bedouin school] were never part of it. When I returned to Bedouin life, I found everything – teaching style, methods, books – everything was different, all was strange to me.

Raised according to wholly different norms ('in Bedouin schools there was a lot of violence') she felt no sense of belonging, nor did she find a social place for herself in Bedouin society ('I didn't go to anyone's home').

To cope with these feelings she returned to the Israeli world, which she now felt closer to:

I asked the principal at the school I had studied in if I could teach, so in the afternoons I taught Arabic at the Jewish school.

However, at the same time, she felt she could not totally dissociate herself mentally from Bedouin society:

I could not leave the Bedouin world. I stayed attached to it for almost seven years.

Her conflict was also expressed in her social life after school:

I used to go to the Jewish city with my Jewish women friends, sitting in the cafeteria, library, mixing here and there.

Again her relatives pushed her, this time to stop teaching in the Bedouin school, where she was the only female. As complying with the norms eased her feelings of alienation among the Bedouin, Tamara moved to a school run by relatives in her neighbourhood where there were other women teachers and where she could remain under their controlling supervision. Although she was the only Bedouin woman there she did not feel like a stranger:

There were about five other [non-Bedouin] women teachers. I studied in a Jewish atmosphere so for me it was not a change [to be around non-Bedouin women].

Her last sentence suggests that her model of belonging was to the Israeli Jewish milieu in which she grew up and studied.

*Coping with estrangement at home*

Upon returning to Bedouin society the First Women developed methods of coping with their new feelings of alienation in their home culture as they once again felt like strangers at home. However in contrast to their successful adjustment and the feeling of 'home' they had developed in the non-Bedouin culture in which they had studied, they could not adjust to their home culture and felt that they no longer belonged.

To ease the discomfort of the feeling of not belonging upon return to their villages, some First Women adopted the coping mechanism of 'passive resemblance'; that is, appearing and acting as Bedouin society expected them to do. In Tamara's case this also caused her to revert: *rojoa'ia*, to be 'primitive', as she called it. She described a painful situation of adhering to Bedouin school norms that she found unacceptable:

I taught one year and I started to hit [the students], just like [the other teachers]. I got used to it. I started to see things and be like them. I became them.

This return to a 'primitive' mentality was 'imposed' on her by the supervision mechanisms of her society that seemed to control her almost against her will, without her even being aware of it:

I feel like every Bedouin watches you wherever you go and wherever you come from and it has affected me a lot. I feel like I only teach and go back home. At first it was enough for me. I started to revert with them, to go back to their norms. . . . [silence] It was not the life I had lived in high school or among the Jews. . . . [speaks slowly with pauses]. Life has changed and it affects a person without one noticing it. I never used to cover my head. I never used to wear traditional dress. Now I started to pray. I never prayed before. I always wore pants [trousers].

Tamara's sense of belonging to her society turned her into a passive individual. As a painful strategy for coping with its controlling mechanisms, Tamara adopted the 'religious' self accepted in Bedouin society as a woman's 'honourable' self.

Another coping method developed by First Women was the creation of 'conditional belonging', that is, belonging to their society on their own terms, as in Asma's story. On returning to her village Asma built her own society and positioned herself within it, inside internal borders distanced from Bedouin society. When asked by the author 'Where do you feel you belong?' she replied: 'I see myself in my world'.

She was then asked 'What is your world?' Asma responded:

The world I live in. It's my mother, my father, my brothers and sisters and that's it. This is my society.

However, when she was asked 'Do you feel part of your society?' she answered:

Bedouin society? No. I don't define myself as Bedouin. I am Asma and this is how I define myself. No more and no less.

As her terms for belonging were not approved by Bedouin society, Asma felt a lack of belonging and this exacted a price:

In my parents' house I am not a guest, [but] I am a guest in my surroundings. I am one of you but I am not similar to you. This means that everyone should stay in one's own borders. My uncles never interfered in our lives, never. Our home was our own society. I always felt that my home is my society. What happens outside my home does not belong to me, I am not part of it.

Asma's words reflect the dual alienation that the first educated Bedouin women developed, not only as strangers in the new culture in which they studied, but also on their return to their home culture, as their new, educated selves began questioning its patterns and no longer considered it the behavioural reference of their lives.

### **The second group: experiencing dual worlds**

#### *Encountering Israeli culture*

The second group of First Women went to study in academic institutions located in the nearby Arab-Jewish city of Beersheba. This engendered feelings of simultaneously living in two cultures: Bedouin and Israeli. In the tribal sphere of the 1970s and 1980s public appearances and exposure to other Bedouin tribes was rare. In sharp contrast the Israeli university sphere, with its mixture of genders, nationalities (Jews and Arabs) and various Bedouin tribes, exposed Bedouin women to new contacts.

Unlike the first group of First Women, this second group experienced identity crisis every day, both when they attended the Israeli university and when they went home. These women had constantly to change 'masks' in order not to deviate from their home culture and its expectations, yet at the same time provide themselves with access to the world of Israeli culture.

Tova's narrative shows a prime example of the conflict that arose as a result of a female Bedouin student's encounter with Israeli culture. One consequence of this encounter was re-examination of gender relations and reinforcement of gender prohibition consciousness, which is present throughout the encounter with both Arab and Jewish, both male and

female students. Tova's story is an example of a Bedouin student's raised consciousness through the encounter with Israeli culture. Although she had her father's permission to live in the dorms and come back home every weekend, this arrangement created considerable difficulties for Tova:

I remember one day I left my [dormitory] room with my head exposed [without a scarf], wearing pants and a short-sleeved shirt. Suddenly I saw a Jewish boy sitting over there. 'Oh!' I yelled and ran back to my room. Then I sat with my Jewish roommates and explained to them that for my father to give me permission to study at the university had involved a long process of convincing him. If, God forbid, an Arab man who works here, or an Arab student sees a boy here, he will ask 'What is he doing here?' 'What brings *him* here?' They will start to gossip and bad rumours will bring an end to my studying or could even cause my death.

Najah described the identity crisis she experienced at the beginning of her university studies:

You have not seen anything else. You did not know any other thing in the world. You see new things at the university which block you from 100 per cent belonging.

Khulod's university attendance was accompanied by a deep-seated fear that Bedouin men would interpret her appearance in public as violating gender norms:

I was always living in terror. I was afraid that if someone saw me speaking to a man, he would tell my parents.

Social pressure prevented these women from experiencing typical student life, as Khulod attested:

I did not enjoy university life. I was always anxious about when I should go home, what would happen if I were late, if I missed the bus – terror, real terror.

The daily encounter with Jewish university students often created dilemmas for the Bedouin women, as it led them to compare what was permitted by Jewish cultural norms to what was forbidden by Bedouin norms. Tova stated:

I was very surprised when I first came to university. For me it was the Western world, my first exposure to this world. I felt like I was living in two colliding cultures that I must make into a whole. I always compared myself to the female Jewish students. I always thought about what I was lacking. I used to ask myself, 'Why does she behave this way and I don't?' 'Why do they go wherever they want and I don't?'

The Bedouin women were also confused by the experience of co-education on campus and the opportunity for self-disclosure during studies, as Khulod stated:

In our classes we had a lot of group dynamics where you could speak about yourself and express yourself, express your opinions.

As this experience was lacking in her parents' home, it created a conflict in her life:

I always knew where I came from, what my background is and what I am permitted or forbidden. No argument on that. Nevertheless this exposure did create conflict in my life. I had many internal and external conflicts – a daily conflict with my parents, with [Bedouin] society and with myself. Why it was permitted for her and forbidden for me?

This exposure to two cultures at the same time produced a dual identification and a loyalty divided between the old and new orders. This process is analysed by W. E. B. DuBois (Stonequist, 1935, p. 6), who created the term 'double consciousness', meaning 'a sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others'. When the 'self' and the 'other' clash, the individual develops a crisis defined as an awareness of the cultural conflict that ends in confusion.

#### *Coping with cultural duality*

One coping strategy that was adopted by this second group was 'dual behaviour' according to the two cultural models in which they lived, or as Khulod expressed it, 'living on a dangerous border line'. In her words:

Educated Bedouin women are really a population at risk. Why? Because on the one hand they have studied and progressed in their lives but on the other hand they return to a traditional society that tells them, 'Who are you? Stop! You sit and we decide for you'.

In other words, Bedouin society does not recognise the value of a Bedouin woman's education and continues to treat her solely by examining whether her feminine codes contradict the expected cultural codes.

Most Bedouin women preferred to live in harmony with the two worlds by adopting cultural codes suitable for both. This strategy was aimed at helping them reach their goals, as Safa described:

When I got married I was asked to exchange my pants for the *jilbab* [religious dress] and cover my head with the *mendeel* [scarf], so that I would be honoured according to their perceptions. So I pretended to surrender to their demands, to deceive them. I thought that the *jilbab* and the *mendeel* would not be an obstacle for my advancement in life. Would this piece of cloth be an

obstacle for my development? If this is what is going to please them, I would put this cloth on my head. They felt that I surrendered to them and they behaved favourably towards me and I could enter from this place.

From Safa's perspective, it was not only surrender but also a strategy and an act that would help her gain continued access to education and employment.

On living in two worlds Manal said:

Sometimes I say that every Bedouin woman, especially the educated Bedouin woman, lives with two faces, a real split personality. In a certain situation you have to behave like this and in another you have to behave like that. I brought a picture to my home, a picture of two faces, a happy face and a sad face, and two hands at the bottom hold these faces. I see Bedouin women's situation through this picture, especially educated Bedouin women. On the one hand she is happy and wants to develop and break barriers but on the other, she is very sad, because society stresses her. The hands are society.

It is not very easy to live like this, on the edge. Safa describes the difficulty of playing roles in the two realities:

You are a Bedouin woman who lives in two cultures – the very traditional male Bedouin culture and modern Israeli culture. I lived these two cultures and I felt the difficulty. I felt myself putting one leg here and one leg there. At the same time you want to preserve the norms you were raised by but you believe as an educated woman that they are wrong yet because society considers them true you have to follow them. I felt myself to be living two personalities. I am the educated Safa and the traditionalist Safa. I forced myself to adjust to these two cultures. I forced myself to behave as a traditional Bedouin woman so that Bedouin society would respect me and at the same time to live the life I believe in.

The encounter with new cultural values creates dilemmas for the women regarding which values to adopt and which to abandon, positioning them between their desire to fulfil their autonomous choices and the cultural demands that forbid them. In response they developed a hybrid identity (Bhabha, 1994). This process characterises the 'marginal man' (Park, 1928) who is a 'cultural hybrid on the verge of two different patterns of group life, not knowing to which of them he belongs' (Schuetz, 1944, p. 507). Acquiring a hybrid identity is a consequence of integration between the two worlds in which they live; a self that contains different contradictions, feelings of pain and life in a 'border zone'. Pioneer Bedouin women consider adoption of a hybrid identity essential as a strategy for acceptance in their new role as educated women who are different from the common female self that prevails in Bedouin society.

## Coping with internal immigration and acculturation

### *The first group of First Women: coping with cultural immigration*

Immigration literature (Taft, 1997) claims that when immigrants sense a gap between their culture of origin and their new culture it is harder for them to make the transition. Culture shock occurs not only when immigrants find themselves in unfamiliar surroundings but also when they feel rejected by their new culture. Feelings of alienation, isolation and failing to belong may be evoked, along with a sense of inability to cope with the new culture (Berger, 1997).

Not unlike the methods employed by immigrants, the first group of First Women developed strategies of coping with the new cultural norms involving gender that they were exposed to (such as kissing women friends on the cheek when meeting) by emphasising their respect for their own Bedouin gender norms. Laila, for example, developed what Shamay (2003), in his study on Russian immigrants to Israel, called 'adjustment through cognition', namely, the ability of the newcomers to explain their difficulties and analyse them cognitively and rationally. Exposed to the Jewish Israeli norm of having a boyfriend, Laila explained to herself why that norm was not part of her own cultural script and therefore not something that she would act upon. She turned this perception into a source of pride.

The process that these First Women experienced, of studying in the Jewish Israeli world and then returning to Bedouin society, is similar to that of transient immigrants who spend some time in another culture and then return to their culture of origin (Segal, 1986; Brislin, 1990). However several features distinguish the present case from other experiences of immigration discussed in the literature (Berry, 1990; Phinney, 1990; Berger, 1997).

It is reasonable to assume that immigrants usually experience culture shock upon entering a new culture (Taft, 1997) and long to return to their culture of origin. The Bedouin women indeed experienced such shock but their return to their original culture was even more jarring as the 'new' culture was no longer strange to them and, in fact, served as their ideal in life. At this point Bedouin society became unfamiliar and non-Bedouin society, where they studied and lived, became their source of a sense of belonging. Thus, while adjustment to a new cultural life was a formidable challenge for them, readjusting to and accepting their original cultural environment was all the more daunting.

Another difference between the experience of the first group of First Women and immigrants is that most immigration literature deals with ethnic groups and families and how they cope with new cultures, whereas the Bedouin women in this study 'immigrated' to the new culture independently, even though their families metaphorically existed in their minds as a model for absorbing values and legacies. Even if their original reason for attending university was only to attain higher education, they adopted, consciously or otherwise, norms, values and customs of a culture very different to their own. As such they returned to their original culture as 'others', who differed from their peers in several respects. First, their status was higher on their return. They left as girls in their late teens and returned as educated women with their own preferences and intentions. Second, their attitude towards their original society differed, as they had been educated in a culture that places greater emphasis on individualism and free choice, accords options to women and grants them public exposure. Moreover they were no longer 'First Women', as they had witnessed many other models of educated, working women.

Thus, on returning home, they were surprised when they recognised that they could not express free will in Bedouin society, particularly in expressing their autonomous gender identity. This made them feel both rejected by society and rejecting of it at the same time. This disconnect was reflected in their words:

I am not a Bedouin, I am only me.  
My society is my father and mother.

Such statements suggest that these women were unwilling to affiliate with their ethnic identity, with its components of a collective ideal and inequality and where women cannot fulfil their own wishes.

How then do they cope and adjust? Berry *et al.* (1992) suggested four adjusting styles adopted by immigrants upon encountering their new culture:

1. Assimilation: where immigrants experience cultural shift but identify only with the new culture and detach themselves from the culture of origin.
2. Separation: where they identify only with their own ethnic group and separate themselves from the new culture.
3. Integration: where immigrants are willing to continue their relationship with both their culture of origin and the new culture.

4. Marginalisation: where they do not identify with either culture (usually as a result of ethnic discrimination).

It is hard to fit the first group of First Women into any one of the above categories, as their coping strategies are complex. Moreover, they adopted certain strategies to cope in their encounter with the new culture and other strategies upon returning to Bedouin society. Upon exiting their Bedouin community they entered into the new culture without denying their own culture; they attempted to integrate the two while maintaining and even strengthening Bedouin gender norms. Yet, upon their return to their Bedouin culture, the situation changed. Instead of relating to local norms as a source of pride, they rejected them but at the same time did not adopt the strangers' norms of the new culture in which they had lived.

The result was the adoption of two coping strategies: separation and integration. These strategies took on a different form among the Bedouin women that was culture dependent. Separation defines the Bedouin women's method of adjustment as immigrants in their own culture. In this context Bedouin culture became the new culture and the culture that they lived in during their studies became their culture of origin, against which they compared every norm in Bedouin society. Asma, who felt frustrated by Bedouin norms she perceived as strange, secluded herself from Bedouin culture by building a metaphorical wall, where her society comprised only her parents.

As for integration into the new (Bedouin) culture, which Berry *et al.* (1992) defined as the aspiration to assimilate, the First Women did not willingly adjust, as Bedouin culture had become strange and alienating to them. This situation of unwilling integration was reflected in Tamara's story, as she passively adopted Bedouin norms without any desire to be assimilated. It can be assumed that if Tamara had chosen another style of adjustment, such as separation or rebellion, she would have been ostracised in her community, especially as the only support system she possessed comprised her father and brother.

#### *The second group of First Women: coping with acculturation*

The second group of First Women, those who were simultaneously exposed to both cultures during their studies, developed different coping styles from the first group. Dual exposure is defined in the literature as acculturation (Berry, 1990). This term represents a process in which individuals experience change in their behaviour, values and perceptions as a result of contact with other cultures. However acculturation also

depends on changes in society including changes in social structure (Berry *et al.*, 1992).

In this case, any norm taken from Israeli culture that might damage the Bedouin social order was rejected by Bedouin culture. This included Bedouin women's entry into Israeli universities.

To cope with this limitation this second group of First Women studied at the university in the morning and returned home at the end of the day (or week if they resided in the dormitories). They maintained Bedouin rules even when within Israeli culture, thus transforming the threatening Israeli sphere into a safe place in the Bedouin community's eyes.

According to Berry's model, individuals who are exposed simultaneously to two cultures adjust by adopting one of two styles: choosing one cultural identity over the other or engendering a bi-cultural identity. Yet the behaviour of the Bedouin women fitted neither of these categories. They adopted bi-cultural behaviour only as a façade. Although they behaved according to the ethnic Bedouin code required of them in their own cultural sphere and on the Israeli campus, they did so only as a strategy to enable them continued access to their studies. This strategy was like wearing a mask in both cultures. Although they declared their identification with their own culture, in reality they put on an act as a strategy that provided them with access to the public sphere. Therefore this behaviour did not engender actual adjustment.

This pseudo-adjustment was reinforced by the fact that the integration of Bedouin women was different from that in the literature, in that Bedouin women cannot express their actual cultural identification. If they had wished to identify with only the hegemonic culture they would have been ostracised by their communities and might have had to withdraw from higher education. With no real integration they experienced ongoing tension and personal crisis. This is evident in the feelings of acculturative stress that are expressed by the First Women such as depression, identity confusion, lack of confidence, hostility, alienation and feelings of marginality.

In contrast to the first group of First Women, who were unfamiliar with the new culture's expectations, women in the second group were familiar with Bedouin expectations, which explains why they did not appear to separate themselves from that culture. The gap between their behaviour and true feelings highlights the disintegration of components of their gender/ethnic identity. Their behaviour can be seen as a tactic and a strategy used in order to survive their studies and fulfil their personal desires.

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