

Book Review

Rohn Eloul, *Culture Change in a Bedouin Tribe: The 'Arab al Hgerat, Lower Galilee, A.D. 1790-1977*. Ann Arbor: Museum of Anthropology, University of Michigan, 2010.

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In his *Culture Change in a Bedouin Tribe*, Dr. Rohn Eloul presents us with a fascinating history of the Galilee over the past two hundred years. The book is based on ethnographic work Eloul did for his doctorate in the 1970s and follows the fortunes of the Hgerat (pronounced Hijayraat), a medium-sized Bedouin tribe (3,500 souls as of 1980), the descendants of a handful of kinsmen who fled to the Galilee from Syria in the late eighteenth century, following a violation of tribal justice. The work portrays the adjustments that the Hgerat people made for purposes of survival, during the Ottoman, British Mandatory, and Israeli periods of rule. While the book itself does not suffer from the thirty year delay in its adaptation from the doctoral dissertation (an epilogue updates significant events and dynamics that transpired during that period), readers and scholars of Israeli history, the Arab-Israel conflict, and Bedouin tribal life and politics have been deprived of a wealth of original historical detail that would otherwise have enriched their understandings.

Eloul makes masterful use of the oral historical traditions that he heard from his informants, with whom he clearly shared a relationship of trust and intimacy. He amassed a feast of detail for each of the historical periods he covers, integrating the oral materials with corroborative information from the literature, including official records, memoirs, and historical studies. Leaving no strand unexplored with seemingly insatiable intellectual curiosity, Eloul also delves deeply into the economics, demographics, societal relations and personal relations prevailing not only among the Hgerat themselves, but within their surrounding world of other tribes, neighboring societies, the country as a whole, and often the international arena, deftly tracing their significance for Hgerat developments. The result is a cogent and soundly grounded depiction of historical dynamics at every stage of the story, alongside valuable insights into intra-tribal, inter-tribal and Bedouin-governmental relations, and the workings of tribal patronage.

Eloul defines culture change as "a continuous dynamic and interactive set of processes," and demonstrates this definition unmistakably throughout his book. I might have preferred the term "adaptations" to processes, as more precisely illuminating the typically Bedouin mode of survival. Their traditional practice of adaptation outlives the actual material transitions they have undergone under the impact of modernism from animal husbandry to wage labor, tent to permanent structures, or migration to settlement. This mode of survival highlights practicality as a guide to behavior. Even when it seems that emotions may lead Bedouin on, as in the case of blood revenge, survival-induced practicality lies behind it. For the basic impetus to this inclination, one might look to the their ancestors' primordial need to get to sparse desert pasture before others did. Thus, whether Hgerat decisions were made communally or by individuals, they were the result of careful consideration. These may ultimately have been aided or thwarted by unforeseen circumstances, but thoughts either of personal, segmental, or tribal welfare—depending on the issue—are what traditionally determined the direction to take. Eloul shows how this pragmatism for the Hgerat, as with other Bedouin, however, is not relevant beyond tribal interests.

He also shows that Hgerat loyalties are not seen as pertaining to any entities beyond the tribe. Drawing upon an exhaustive collection of detail, for example, Eloul, with honest and straightforward analysis, tells the story of the Hgerat and the southern Galilee before and during the Israeli period. This is manifest in his account of how the Hgerat decided to stay in Israeli-held territory during the fighting in 1948 rather than flee, as many of their Arab neighbors did.

Although the Palestine issue was deeply in the consciousness of Arabs in the Galilee, the Hgerat vacillated so long as it was uncertain which side would prevail in the hostilities. Their wait-and-see policy differed considerably from the readiness within the neighboring Arab villages, for example, to support the Arab Salvation Army, sponsored by the Arab League. Although a few Hgerat youths joined the ASA, the "Arab cause," which attracted the enthusiastic loyalty of the villagers, proved too remote a concept for most of the Hgerat to embrace spontaneously. Their loyalties were, instead, centered on their tribe.

In particular, one tribal interest that took priority over the Arab cause and prompted the Hgerat to maintain neutrality during the 1948 fighting were the 400 acres of farmland at B'ir al-Maksur that the tribe had officially purchased in 1942, cultivated communally, and might be forced to abandon by siding with the ASA. Another was the instinctive tribal solidarity. When, for example, an ASA commander, camped near to the Hgerat, sought to arrest one of their members, who was cautioning his tribesmen to maintain their neutrality, the tribal elders threatened the ASA with a feud if any harm was caused him, a threat that reportedly impelled the ASA to move their camp away (p. 77).

Tribal interests continued to play a role even after Israel became established, especially in the case of men of the Hgerat volunteering to serve in its army and police. Thus, in the 1950s, seeing soldiers from among the Druze community and the Bedouin al-Hayb tribe—traditional and potential tribal foes—carrying weapons, they found that they could only overcome this confrontational inferiority by becoming soldiers themselves. Hence, several men of the Hgerat became Israeli army trackers, some of them serving as officers. Once conscripted, their exemplary performance was also deemed a tribal interest, among other things so that the Hgerat were assured a good reputation in government councils. One example that Eloul reports (p. 233), was on Land Day, in March 1976, during which thousands of Arabs protested Israel's expropriation of Arab land in the Galilee the previous year. At the main demonstration in the village of Sakhnin, a policeman from the Hgerat, sitting in a police jeep, was stoned by a mob of youths. He told them, that if they killed him, the Hgerat, "law or no law," would level Sakhnin. Thereupon, some people tried to calm down the crowd, which then demanded that the Hgeri exit the jeep, so they could burn it in protest. To this he defiantly replied that they could burn it with him inside, but he would not desert it, as the jeep was his trust. With the crowd now divided about what to do, the Hgeri policeman drove off.

On the basis of the Hgerat oral tradition, Eloul also goes into the effect of inter-communal and inter-tribal behavior on Hgerat attitudes toward Israel. One reason for their initial indecision about staying in Israel, for example, was their fear that the Druze community, which had already allied themselves with the Israeli army, would be free to take revenge on them for their alleged murder of a Druze notable back in 1937. Hence, prior to the Israelis major offensive in the Galilee, in 1948, the Hgerat sent people with connections with them to assess their position on such a possibility. The emissaries reported that the Israelis assured them that the law of the new state would prevent such revenge and encouraged to stay put. Eloul thus sheds light on the discussion of alleged Israeli ethnic cleansing or genocide during the 1948 war.

A reading of *Culture Change in a Bedouin Tribe* reveals Rohn Eloul as a first-class anthropologist with a keen respect for his informants and care in recording and analyzing what they had to say. The author intimates that he did not adapt his doctoral dissertation to a book—to the detriment of many scholars in the field—owing to his inability to find an academic position. I do not know how his career developed over the subsequent years, but the present book serves to confirm that something is askew with academia, if Eloul was left out. Hopefully, this book will now be translated into Hebrew, as it is a treasure of detail about Israeli history and society.

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Clinton Bailey has written extensively on Bedouin culture. His most recent book is *Bedouin law from Sinai and the Negev: justice without government*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009.