

BOOK REVIEWS

Kobi Peled

Words Like Daggers: The Political Poetry of the Negev Bedouin.

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Words Like Daggers is a curated and annotated collection of the work of Negev Bedouin poets (*sha'ir*) and rhymesters (*badda*) by Kobi Peled. This compendium sets out these Bedouin's political expression of dissent, resilience and resistance to occupation, forced settlement and exile through oral poetry collected between the late nineteenth century and the late twentieth century.

The editor of this volume is a Jewish Israeli seeking a 'poetic encounter' with Bedouin society in the Negev. This society, he maintains, is largely an oral one, whose 'lives were conducted in verse' (p. 11). Peled uses poetry as a tool to understand changing worldviews, cultural patterns, mentalities and moods (p. 20) as well as shifting gender roles (p. 219) within a context where systematic colonial settlement is a key political-economic and historical feature. This work is of great value, as an important collection of not only the nitty gritty aspects of daily life, but also long-term settler-practices and colonial influences (Ottoman and British) which are still relevant to the region today.

Peled recognises that poetry, as an interpretative method, is a 'window' to 'gaze on a culture' (p. 7), even if it remains a 'blurred and imperfect picture of the world' (p. 8). In terms of this collection, for example, most of the poetry was collected initially by Sasson Bar-Zvi, a Jewish Arab from Basra (the family name was originally Basrawi) who spoke Ladino, Hebrew and Arabic at home. Bar-Zvi served in the Haganah, the main Jewish militia of Mandatory Palestine, and was part of its elite force, the Palmach. Like other Sephardic Jews, he was recruited into the Haganah's Intelligence service and was assigned to a kibbutz in the southernmost Jewish settlement of Palestine. There, his work involved cultivating ties with the Bedouin who lived in the area. His intelligence work in the Negev before and during the 1948 war led him to join the military government imposed on the Negev Bedouin after independence. By 1963, Bar-Zvi had advanced up the military hierarchy, becoming Military Governor of the Negev. Though a military professional, Bar-Zvi, engaged with poetry as a hobby. In selecting poems to include in this anthology, Peled assumes some elements of reflexivity. He attempts to understand what the positionality of Bar-Zvi meant in terms of the poems to which he was exposed. For example, Peled understands that Bar-Zvi's position in the military

influenced the types of politically-sensitive poems he was able to collect. His role in military intelligence and as governor would have been well known and contributed to some elements of self-selection among the Bedouin poets and later reciters. This includes elements of Bedouin culture which the poets did not wish to share with Bar-Zvi, and which were therefore not recited to him, leaving us with a partial understanding of Bedouin transformation under Israeli military occupation. Also, Peled explains to the reader, Bar-Zvi's limited contact with women meant that an important corpus of women's poetry was systematically kept from him by the Bedouin.

Notwithstanding the various interviewer-biases that Peled identifies in this collection, it is also clear that Bar-Zvi was able to enter the inner space where the Bedouin voiced dissent. This is a sign that Bar-Zvi had succeeded in building some ties and trust over forty years in the region. The collection of this poetry 'served as a weapon' for the Bedouin (p. 78). Peled argues persuasively that this work should be recognised as an important contribution to how the world appeared to the Bedouin from the late nineteenth to the late twentieth century.

Words Like Daggers is divided into five parts, set out chronologically. The first chapter focuses on poems recording the tribal wars of the late nineteenth century in the Negev and the clashes of the Bedouin with the villagers of the southern Hebron Mountain region at the turn of the twentieth century. Chapter two focuses on poems written early in the twentieth century during the late Ottoman period and the British mandate, which began in 1920, where poems focus particularly on remonstrations against land sales to the Jewish Agency. Chapter three examines how the 1948 war was perceived and experienced in encampments, by Bedouin refugees in the Negev, reciting and commemorating the Nakba (Palestinian Catastrophe) of 1948 where as many as 750,000 Palestinians faced eviction from Palestine. Chapter four explores the trauma of expulsion and forced transfer during the period of the military government imposed on the Palestinian Arabs after the 1948 declaration of the State of Israel. Finally, chapter five focuses on the resulting changes in terms of social cohesion, shifting gender roles and power dynamics through poetry written in the fifteen years between the 1967 war and the 1982 war that Israel waged in Lebanon.

Two poems in this collection are particularly outstanding in exploring the depth and emotion of loss, betrayal and moral and social decline at specific 'moments' in the Bedouin, Palestinian and Israeli history that accelerated social unravelling, livelihood losses and other socio-economic change.

The first poem 'The Move from Tent to Shed' (p. 3), by Sliman Ibn Edesdan,

expresses the Bedouin sadness at the altered landscape under British and then Israeli military occupation, the transition of many Bedouin to a more sedentary way of life, and the accompanying loss of cultural tradition, particularly the diminished hospitality (*karam*) that had once been arguably a most significant pillar of Bedouin heritage. This is explored through the transformations in the architecture of the abodes of lives no longer lived in a moveable tent but rather a semi-permanent ring of used barrels, tin and cement structures. The poem is presented in Arabic and English:

*If you build yourself a shed,
You save a loaf of bread.*

*We wish to say:
If the house is of barrels made,
Then go straight away, don't hesitate.
For dinner – chicken.
The light- a lamp.
And the car's ready to fly off.*

Without interpretation, the meaning concerning the loss of Bedouin hospitality would be obscured. Peled writes that Sliman is recounting how recently settled Bedouin living in lockable sheds can no longer offer the proper hospitality that open tents can. This the 'concrete expression of moral bankruptcy and the antithesis of the Bedouin abode – the tent' (p. 4). The reader is urged to just go away if the house is made of barrels. If you remain you would be offered chicken (an insult to a guest who should be offered meat) and you will be rushed out (the car representing haste compared to the camel or horse), rather than receiving proper hospitality.

The second selected poem 'On Sellers of Land to Jews' (p. 122), by the Azazme Bedouin poet Ayyad Ibn Edesan, describes the moral consequences of speculative thinking and land sales by the Bedouin to the Jewish Agency, the Palestinian-based operational arm of the Zionist project.

*Oh rider on the fastest in journeys,
She has tasted the whip, frantically pouncing.
Oh rider, if you wish to ride on her back far away,
Don't loosen your grip on the ropes, so I say.
Head to the sheikhs, those fearless men,
In the assembly of men they are level-headed and grave.*

*Tell them: Yesterday my heart was in pain,
They do not know what lies in my soul.
I'm sick of seeing their despicable beards,
They roam about in the market as if they were lost.*

*They're told: If you have a plot – sell it!
Hurry up, as long as the prices are high!*

*This sale will spell your disaster,
From south to north like strangers you'll wander.*

*Sell now! Why should you want camels and she-camels
If you've sold pastureland and livelihood?*

*You will be hard-pressed after living in plenty,
Distress everywhere, from sea to mountains.*

*Consider Ibn Sa'id and Ibn Rbe'ah
They built large beautiful houses.
They took the daughters of the scavengers,
Abandoning the daughters of the coffee seasoners.*

*She stands before him in paper-thin outfits,
Winning him over with freshly baked bread and fried food.*

*Even al-Zirbawi was frightened and fled,
Got himself completely covered with shit.*

This poem articulates the Bedouin's disappointment in their leadership; many *Shaykhs* [*Shuyukh*] (Ibn Sa'id and Ibn Rbe'ah) 'sold off' common pasture lands – with the support of the real-estate broker (al-Zirbawi) 'who was neither chieftain nor a noble Bedouin' (p. 122). Lured by visions of Western ideas of wealth – large houses and motor vehicles – the poem laments the loss of moral and cultural ideals – pastureland, camel herds and honourable women.

Although, the collection is arguably a partial understanding of Bedouin culture, curated and selected by the poets themselves, it is a work of enormous effort that includes a detailed, sensitive and insightful annotation and interpretation of the poems in English. The value of this book is not just in presenting the collection of fifty poems, of which twenty are by anonymous poets, but also in the in-depth anthropological analysis useful in historical research. Peled contextualises reflections with a careful selection of photographs and relevant literature exploring poetry and politics, orality, the history of the region and pastoral livelihoods. This book is of particular interest to those whose research focuses on war studies (polemology), Nabati (Bedouin) poetry,

Bedouin, Palestinian and Israeli territorial history, social memory and the politics of remembering, and refugee studies.¹

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1 For more of Kobi Peled's research on Bedouin poetry, see Kobi Peled, 'Bedouin poetry as an art of memory. The dialogue between the present and the past in the political poetry of the Negev Bedouin', *Nomadic Peoples* **28** (1) (2024): 72–94. <https://doi.org/10.3828/whpnp.63837646691044>