

## **My Friend is a Palestinian Bedouin:**

### **XIV. Meals and Other Celebrations**

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Celebrations are another entry to a different culture. They indicate what is important in life. I will first relate to meals, and afterward to birthdays and weddings.

#### **Stories of Friendship: First Birthday at 34**

*At my parents' home, Amsterdam, August 2009. Before Bashar woke up, I had bought a lemon cake for his 34's birthday and had put some garlands around the room and there was a present. Things looked very modest (by Dutch measures). He was surprised, and said it was the first time he had a birthday celebration. Later that night we went out for dinner to celebrate. I had ordered a place in a fancy restaurant, knowing that on that particular day they had a relatively cheap offer. It turned out that on that day they actually had one menu only, with several courses. It was French cuisine, within the first course a small but delicately prepared piece of food. We received detailed explanation about its preparation, but Bashar had a hard time finding it on his plate. The main course was a miniscule fish, which also came with explanation. Bashar looked at me and I was so embarrassed. Explanations – even if well intended - are not edible. How could I give my “desert friend” this fish as birthday dinner? We ordered bread, so that he at least got some substance. Afterwards, I took him to a snack bar and got him a croquette from a machine; something I knew he liked.*

## Meals

Meals are a kind of daily celebrations. Bashar had many meals with my family and I had many meals together with his family or with his friends. I like to eat with them. Since both food and table manners are highly dissimilar in our cultures, we needed to learn anew how to eat (in each other's cultures).

Snack bars, from which both Bashar and I liked to eat as described above, were introduced in the Netherlands long before the concept of "fast food" infested the Western world. Many Dutch snack-bars have walls of heated coin-operated hatches, with goodies, croquettes being among the most popular (White & Boucke, 2006). No snack bars in Bedouin culture. Food is homemade and always excessive. One of my favorite dishes is "maqluba", a Palestinian upside-down rice and eggplant casserole, hence the name which is literally translated as "upside-down". It is sometimes made with fried cauliflower instead of eggplant and usually includes meat, often braised lamb (Maqluba, 2011). No meal is served without bread. Bread is so central, that Bashar, like many a Bedouin, would feel that if at a meal there was no bread, something crucial was lacking. This could be compared with the experience of people from other cultures as regarding the centrality of certain ingredients in a meal, such as salt, spices, or rice.

Among the Palestinian Bedouins, hot meals are eaten between noon and midnight. Food is often served on an enormous platter. Everyone present is invited. This could also be the neighbor or the client in the garage, if the workers happen to eat at that time. There are no fixed seats and anything that can function as a table for the food will work out. For large groups, food platters

may be placed on the floor. One not necessarily starts or finishes the meal at the same time.

People eat from the main platter and diners usually do not have their own plate. People mostly take the food with their hands, though they may have a fork or a spoon. They use pieces of pita bread in a manner in which Europeans or Northern Americans would use a fork. Knives are rarely utilized. Food is usually served in one course. At the end of a meal, there may be large quantities of food left. After dinner hand brewed Bedouin coffee and/or tea will be offered

Israel has many subcultures that may relate in various ways to food and table manners, but generally, hot meals are eaten with fork and knife. Everyone has an individual plate and pots or large dishes, from which the food is served, are usually put in the middle of the table. There typically is a surplus of food. Dinner times are flexible, and coffee and tea are served afterwards.

In comparison with Bedouin meals and to some degree with Israeli meals, in the Netherlands, for the dominant culture, meals are much more regulated. Like in my family of origin, tables are set in a strict way with specific places for each of the eating utensils. In families, there are often predetermined seats for the various family members, and a guest too will be assigned a certain seat. During dinner, there is a strict behavioral code. For example, people take the fork in the left hand and the knife in the right; one does not put one's hands or individual eating utensils in the main pot. The quantity of food is measured according to the number of invited diners, and with hot meals, no bread is served. In most homes, hot meals are eaten only at night, traditionally (and in my home) at 6 PM, but with women taking a large part of the work force, nowadays this would be closer to 6.30 or 7 PM. Meals tend to have two or three courses. People start and end

their meal together. One expects all food is to be finished by the end of the meal. After dinner, coffee – usually from a percolator -and/or tea will be offered.

## **Birthdays**

The birth of a child is a great event in most cultures, and I had the opportunity to experience this in Jewish Israeli, Dutch and Bedouin cultures. Among the Bedouins when a boy is born, there is a festive meal for the extended family, served on huge platters. The traditional dish is mansaf, made of lamb cooked in a sauce of fermented dried yogurt and served with rice or groats (Mansaf, 2011). Afterwards there is Bedouin coffee. It is uncommon to bring presents. I attended the party for the birth of Bashar's youngest son, for which he himself had slaughtered the sheep. Among Israeli Jews, when a boy is born there usually is a large ceremonial party at which the boy is circumcised and presents are given. Among Dutch Jews, the party is usually more private. Nowadays parties are sometimes held for Jewish baby girls as well. In the dominant culture in the Netherlands, it is customary to visit the parents and give presents when a child is born, but there usually is no big party.

In the Netherlands, it would be out of the ordinary to skip subsequent birthdays. Birthdays tend to be celebrated from the first until the last. Even without a party, presents and birthday cards are always there. "Round" birthdays (20, 30, 40 etc.) receive more attention and often go with bigger parties. In the Netherlands, the individual is central. In contrast, for the Bedouins the birth of a person is significant for society, but the individual is of less importance and so is time. For them, there is no incentive to celebrate birthdays. Nonetheless, times do change, also for the Bedouins.

Nowadays birthday celebrations become more common. I was present at the third birthday of Bashar's eldest, with family and other children, cakes, small fireworks and many presents.

My own birthday party some years ago with a small group of mostly Bedouin friends was one of the finest I had, somewhere on a hill in the desert between Jerusalem and the Dead Sea. Until a few hours before the party, I did not know whether it would materialize or not. Bashar took care that there would be two chickens; luckily, I did not see the slaughtering. Then we went to have a haircut. Most of my Israeli friends would probably shudder of the idea that a Palestinian would put a knife on their neck - even if it were the hairdresser - but I felt rather comfortable. In fact, I invited Fouad the hairdresser, a Bedouin of Jordanian origin, to join our party. We had a barbecue under the stars and my friends put a big cake on the bonnet of my car with a huge improvised candle. In striking contrast, I received tens of Facebook messages, numerous Skype notifications, emails and mobile text messages, and a series of old-fashioned calls and messages on my answering machine from my - non-Bedouin - friends from all over the world, which was heartwarming as well.

## **Weddings**

Weddings are another story. I attended many weddings of Israeli friends and family and several of Western (mainly Dutch) family and friends. I also attended a few weddings of Palestinians and Bedouins, like the one of Abu Omar's daughter. The cultural differences are blatant.

Although from an anthropological point of view I could fill a chapter on weddings, I will relate to this point here only shortly, since their effect on our friendship was not that large. In the Netherlands, two individuals who decide to marry usually had a long time – sometimes years –

to get acquainted; they learned to get along and probably love each other. Not all people marry and if they do so this will often not be before one's late twenties. Dutch weddings are usually planned many months ahead. For Dutch standards, my family has relatively big weddings, influenced by Jewish customs. Dutch weddings may take several days with a series of activities for various groups of invitees, including a reception, an official ceremony, if it is a Jewish wedding also a religious ceremony, a meal and dancing in couples. Weddings, like other Dutch celebrations, stand on ceremony and etiquette.

In contrast, in Bedouin life, marriages are often arranged; they are a matter of the community as much as they are a choice between a man and a woman. Bedouin wedding ceremonies and festivities are usually planned not more than a few weeks ahead and they will last for several days. Before the actual wedding, both the bride and the groom will have a bachelor party, according to traditional customs. A party for the whole community is held in the open; more exactly, for the men in the community. Mansaf and Bedouin coffee will be served to all. At night there will be ritualized dancing, in large circles. The women will have a separate party. An official ceremony at which a nuptial agreement is signed will take place within the circle of the close family.

Bedouin men tend to marry their first wife by age 20. Polygamy is common practice in the Bedouin community. Bedouin men may marry up to four women, but nowadays having more than one wife seems to occur less than in previous generations. According to Bashar, the restriction of marrying not more than four women is one imposed by religion, whereas the dwindling of polygamy has to do with more democratization and limited financial resources

among the Bedouins. Bedouin men do occasionally marry outside the Bedouin community, but it is rare for Bedouin women to marry a non-Bedouin. Divorces are scarce, and thus women remain protected by their families. 19-year old Ibrahim is one of the sons of the second wife of Bashar's brother, Abu Ya'akub. Unlike many of his cousins who grew up in the Palestinian Authority, Ibrahim was raised in Israel (in an Arab neighborhood of Jerusalem). Also through his eyes, polygamy is recommended. On the first occasion in which I had any significant interaction with him – I gave him a ride – he shared that he is about to have his driving test and asked if I have a job for him. However, he was mostly concerned with marrying. He stated that he really wants to marry soon, but does not know yet whom to marry. (I suggested that he would wait some more and offered some reasons for postponing marriage.) He also informed about my marital status and mentioned that he believes that it is time for his uncle Bashar to marry a second wife. As we discussed the idea of marrying, it became clear that Ibrahim was clearly aware of other options of relationships between men and women, but he preferred the traditional attitude.

The situation in Israel as regarding the particulars of weddings rather depends on the specific socio-cultural environment. In most social circles in Israel, a marriage is something primarily between two individuals; though in the ultra-orthodox community it is often arranged. Israeli weddings tend to have a few hundred guests, usually at one large happening. Jewish Israeli weddings in almost all circles include a religious ceremony, an abundance of food, and dancing.

## **My experience of “Meals and Other Celebrations”**

I needed to learn how to eat in the Bedouin way with one's hands, while using bread to “catch” other pieces of food. This in the beginning felt weird, but the food itself I much appreciated. As for celebrations, I greatly enjoyed the collective Bedouin style. I would look forward to attending the next festivity, and participate in many of its activities, including Bedouin style dancing.

Neither Bashar, nor his Bedouin friends, would think of birthdays; not even their own. Therefore, I would remind them. I was much aware of Bashar's lack of ease with Western ways of conduct around meals and celebrations, with Western etiquette. When other Europeans, Northern Americans or Israelis were involved, this put me at times in an uncomfortable position, feeling myself responsible to solve the discrepancies.