

Reflections from the Margins

Engaging with Mobile Peoples: the Inevitability of the Road Taken

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Abstract

Careers in anthropology are often profoundly influenced by early life experience. Ivory tower academia and practical solution-focused anthropological engagement are not necessarily exclusionary, but the attraction of one over the other is often grounded in the early life course and chosen education path which followed. There was something almost inevitable about my journey into academia and into applied / development anthropology. And like so many other anthropologists, I had an early life experience of other cultures, societies, and countries. Such experiences inevitably created a rich sense of what it is to be the “other”, the significant subject of anthropological theorizing. Along with such othering came a profound sense of shock at the social discrimination which “others” faced. It was this recognition of differences in attitudes and behaviour in other societies and social groups in early life that very much shaped the way I understood the anthropological “other”. It also impacted significantly on how I understood and addressed, in anthropological terms, the potentially different solutions to the problems of living together in groups often adjacent to other groups in unequal, power-imbalanced relationships.

I would like to thank Marco Bassi and Luca Rimoldi for inviting me to speak today and to reflect on my academic journey into applied anthropology.¹ As my title suggests, there was something nearly immanent about my journey into academia and into applied anthropology in particular. So I will be very personal in my reflections. I will start with my early life and my awakening to other people and other ways. This is the first time I trace my anthropological yearnings back to an early age. And here I should say that many, if not, most anthropologists, have had an early life experience of another culture, society, or country. Such experiences create a sense of what it is to be the “other” the significant subject of anthropological theorizing. And what such recognition of difference in societies and social groups in early life says about how the anthropological “other” is eventually understood and addressed in anthropological terms of different solutions to the problems of living tougher in groups.

¹ This is the manuscript of the Keynote I addressed to the Italian Society of applied Anthropology (SIAA) on the 16 December 2021.

My earliest years

For me, it was being born in New York City, but raised in Damascus, Syria. Much of my childhood was spent – as with any child – playing with other children. But these were a really cosmopolitan lot: Syrian, French, British, Dutch, Swedish, Austrian, Sudanese, and Brazilian. I don't recall where I met them, perhaps in the playgrounds of the American School, or in the apricot orchards that surrounded the newly developed modern quarter of the city, or at the summer resorts of Broummana (Lebanon) and Zabadani (Syria) where my mother used to take us most summers. We spoke only English at home, but outside I spoke Arabic, French, a smattering of Dutch, and Portuguese.

My mother, a very talented watercolourist, generally took me along on her painting outings. She would set up her easel on the street, or in the courtyard of the Umayyad mosque. It was my tasks to make sure that none of the bystanders, especially the young boys, pushed to close or jostled her while she worked. I had to stand guard and keep young Syrian boys away from her as she worked on her canvases. I patrolled the small circle that would gather around her as she painted, responding to the questions of the adults who were fascinated – never having seen an artist at work, and pushing the Arab boys way when they got to close. At times, she asked me to stand in the “frame” and would paint me into the picture to give perspective of size to the work. Only when she gained permission to paint two religious scholars in discussion in the Great Hall of the Umayyad Mosque, was I able to relax and sit along the raised platform near the tomb of St John the Baptist was I able to relax. No one bothered her there. And I enjoyed watching men and women in all wonderful dress enter the Hall to pray or to sit and chat with friends. I became, very early on, fascinated by what these clothes said about the people who wore them, where they came from, and what they were doing in the mosque (see Kuper 1973).

In 1951 she entered her work in the first modern art exhibition at the National Museum in Damascus. Several of her works were purchased by the museum, but she refused to sell the painting which my father adored, that of the Ottoman Tekiyeh Sulaymaniyah mosque. It was also my favorite and hangs in my home today. The painting represented an era of great ecumenical tolerance which persisted until early in the 21st century Syria (see Makdisi 2019).

My first experience of the Bedouin

I did not attend school, but spent time with my father, an eye doctor, and at certain times of the year – spring I believe - visited the goat hair, black-tented sheep-herding Bedouin on the outskirts of Damascus as well as the white tarpaulin tented Palestinian refugee encampments. At some point, perhaps when I was 5 or 6, I noticed that my father would spray DDT insecticide on the seat that his patients sat on when he had examined if they were from the black-tented sheep-herding group. But he did not do the same when a patient from the Palestinian encampment had been treated. Why, I asked him did they treat these peoples so differently? When he explained that people from the Bedouin herding group carried insects and bugs on their clothes and on their skin which he didn't want in his pro bono clinic, I had an intense recognition of how social discrimination emerged. The fear of “bugs spreading” among certain people, was like a metaphor for distasteful group association. And yet I enjoyed my time among the Bedouin far more than among the Palestinian refugees in their camps. Was it all the young lambs around their camp and exotic dress that appealed to me, or was there something else? I know that my affection for these peoples was such that my parents eventually hired a young woman from a recently

settled Bedouin tribe to act as nanny to me and my younger siblings. But I was the only one who pleaded to be allowed to go home with her on occasional weekends.

Entering Formal education

Just before reaching my 9th birthday, my mother decided it was time to start formal education back in the United States. We travelled through Italy with my younger sister and brother, spending a few weeks in Rome. When we reached the United States, I was entered into the 4th grade. But as I was hardly able to read I was sent off to an education centre to determine my “IQ”. It was decided that I needed remedial reading classes and so I spent my first summer in America in an intensive summer reading class with those with special needs. If my sense of otherness had been cultivated in Damascus, it was intensified during that summer spent with children who exhibited a wide range of special needs, most with IQ test results below the 100 average. That sense of being different, of being marginal to the majority, remained with me during these first years in elementary and middle school in Washington D.C. I had been unhappy to be pulled away from Damascus so suddenly and thrust into a culture and society that seemed from another planet. I yearned to find a way back.

Once in high school I discovered there was a subject I could study that would allow me to engage with my memories of Damascus and better understand the brilliant and vibrant cosmopolitanism I remembered of the city. I was enchanted with the discipline of Anthropology.

College and University

I was determined to study anthropology – then understood as the study of mankind - in college and sought admission to the University of California in Los Angeles (UCLA). My first challenge was to determine whether I preferred American cultural anthropology or British social anthropology. Was I more interested in the way people thought about themselves and others - American cultural anthropology – or was I more interested in the way people organized themselves and behaved with each other?² The latter was being offered at UCLA alongside “classical” cultural anthropology as taught by the great mid 20th century anthropologists such as Alfred Kroeber, himself a student of Franz Boas, one of the founding fathers of Anthropology in the United States. By a great stroke of serendipity, Hilda Kuper, one of Bronislaw Malinowski’s students had recently been hired at UCLA along with her husband, Leo Kuper, from South Africa via Great Britain. Hilda Kuper introduced social anthropology to this American campus. As I wanted to be involved in understanding social behaviour and social organization – with other ways of doing things, of “righting wrongs”, of addressing social problems – I soon learned that my attraction to this field was actually in a “side road” of the discipline. I was encouraged by Hilda Kuper and others not to engage primarily in applied anthropology. I did very well in my BA degree and was encouraged to move directly into a PhD programme at UCLA and to reconsider my interest in applied anthropology. At the time, it was considered somehow “second-rate” to do applied research, when really what was of interest to them was theoretical, ivory tower kind of thinking. Had I known the term at the time, I would have replied that actually I

² Early 20th century American anthropology was in many ways a “salvage” anthropology recording the kinship systems, linguistic and thought systems of Native Americans. See Hymes (1974: 5).

was more interested in “Critical Anthropology” and challenging what I saw as the neo-colonial encounter in the Middle East (see Asad 1973).

I decided to skirt the issue, for the time being, and instead left the United States for Europe where I could take an MA in Social Development at the Institute of Social Studies in the Hague, Netherlands. I saw “social development” as a form of applied anthropology. The Institute was housed at 27 Molenstraat, the former residence of Queen Juliana which she had lent to the Netherlands Universities Foundation for International Cooperation (NUFFIC). We were a small cohort of about 150 international students mainly from the Global South – there were only four of us from Europe and the US – and we were all accommodated in this former palace with its grand reception rooms sometimes doubling as our “common rooms” and teaching rooms. This palace has since been returned to the Dutch Royal Family and is now the Noordeinde Palace, one of their three formal residences. But life in that grand residence was a vastly superior than any interaction we, as a multi-racial student group, had on the streets, concert halls, and cafes of the town. Those two years, were, in their own way another lesson, in cultural xenophobia, ethnocentrism and racism.

For my MA degree I decided to dig deep into nomadic pastoralism and explore pastoral adaption of herding societies in southwest Asia. I was interested in Max Gluckman’s notion of change, cultural and social change and Raymond Firth’s ideas of social organization as continuous phenomenon and less taken by the structural functional school emerging in France and the UK at that time under the influence of Claude Levi Strauss.³ My thesis was based on the extensive literature available and made accessible through the Royal Library at The Hague with some further input from libraries in Leiden, Delft, and Amsterdam. With my MA in hand, I thought I could now do applied anthropology for the United Nations and along with several classmates. The notion was that we were now skilled problem solvers for societies emerging from colonial and neo-colonial rule.

I headed off for Geneva to apply for a post at the United Nations Research Institute in Social Development (UNRISD). It was my first experience of gender bias – the first which I recognized. Even with a distinction in my MA, I was only offered a job as a secretary, whereas my male classmates were offered research posts. So, I decided there was only one thing to do, get even better qualified. I decided to return to UCLA and study for a PhD.

Pursuing a PhD in social Anthropology at UCLA

Back at UCLA, I was able to persuade Professor Hilda Kuper - the renowned social anthropologist and Africanist who had been trained by Bronislaw Malinowski and put Swaziland on the map – to chair my PhD committee. Preparing for my advancement to candidacy, the step before fieldwork can be entertained, I was dismayed by the literature I was uncovering which cast Bedouin as backward, irrational, social groups unwilling to accept development planning on their behalf. It seemed to me that there was something wrong with the hypothesis of Bedouin irrationality. So, I decided to set out to critically examine this hypothesis that Bedouin were not economically engaged in the regional markets of the Middle East and were instead, backward,

³ See Gluckman (1956), as well as the work of Elizabeth Colson, Myers Fortes, Victor Turner, and Isaac Shapira. These social anthropologists and their work were extremely important in developing my understanding of how Bedouin society worked, how conflict and consensus came about and how constant adaption to political, social and environmental transformation was their key to survival.

and a throwback to an earlier era. It seemed to me then and still today, that such negative perceptions often emerge from unequal power differentials in the production of knowledge. The indigenous automatically assumed to be deficient in view of Western “scientific” paradigms.

My academic dilemma at the time was how to be an applied anthropologist and an advocate for a way of life I had observed as a child while not disappointing my PhD committee who had high hopes that I would do more “ivory tower” type of research. My solution was to address all four basic research methodologies in my PhD: Basic research where knowledge was an end in itself, and which could be addressed by looking at how pastoralists organized their herding practices within the regional markets; Applied research would address a question deemed important to society such as the questions do herders and their practices degrade the landscape; Action research which sets out to solve a problem in the community, but have been addressed with the question how can we change herding practices to improve grasslands recovery; and Formative evaluation addressing improving an intervention might have focussed on how we can better assist herding groups to create more incomes from their herds.

This approach seemed to appease my PhD committee and I took to reading everything in the library on pastoralism in Northern Arabia – mainly sheep and goat herding with small numbers of baggage camel. I saw from my readings was that there was a big divide in what was written about them by US aid agencies and other development agencies and what I had read about them for my MA degree and also from my own personal childhood experiences. The theory at the time was that herders (Bedouin) were irrational and backward *because* they did not accept development plans and schemes to turn them into settled farmers or ranchers – ranching systems of privately owned land versus their Bedouin system of common use rights to pastureland. So, for my PhD I decided to test this “theory” that Bedouin are economically irrational. I could be proved wrong or right. Either way, if I carried out the research scientifically - with rigour – then I would still be able to be awarded a PhD.

With the help of the reference librarian at UCLA’s Social Science Library, I was able to identify a tribe that had been studied 10 years earlier by the son of the Emir Faour of Al-Fadl tribe which moved between Syria and Lebanon. Sheikh Fadl, the Emir’s son, had studied under the renowned anthropologist, Raymond Firth, at the London School of Economics. His dissertation was sent to me by inter-library loan. So, I had a base line data set I needed on household size, average number of animals per household and trade patterns in the mid – 1960s. Generally, an average household had 100 sheep and goat, and 25 camels. They were largely subsistence herds back then, but they did have some contact with regional markets particularly in the Jaulan of Syria. What I needed to establish for my PhD was whether in the 10-year interval since they were last studied, the herders had remained outside the regional market or had “modernized”. I travelled to Nevada to learn how to count sheep and goat quickly – I took some counters / clickers with me, and I arrived in Lebanon to start my PhD. What I had not taken into account was that the 1967 June war had turned some of these Bedouin herders, technically into refugees as some of the Fadl tribal lineages on the Jaulan were dispossessed and moved themselves and their herds to the other side of the anti-Lebanon mountains.

Entering the Field

Entering the “field” is never straightforward or easy. In my case, I had to accept a six month wait in Beirut. It took me a few months to locate Sheikh Fadl and to meet in person. He agreed to support my research, but told me I had to get his father, the Emir’s permission. And he added, I

could not go to see his father, without my father accompanying me so that there would be an appropriate transfer of guardianship from my father to the Emir (and later, to the lineage head who hosted my fieldwork). Being very much a second wave California feminist at the time, it was personally painful to book a long-distance phone call to my father, who at the time was the World Health Organisation Resident Representative in Somalia, to ask him to come to Beirut to help me out. But this he did, and I was handed over to the Emir who then handed me over to Abu Ali, the tribal lineage head with instructions to return me after a year without a hair on my head having been displaced. Of course, the visit of the Emir to this lineage household was also cause for celebration, and in the haze of endless cups of coffee, and trays of food, I was uneasy. The camps did not look like what I imagined. I could see plenty of sheep and goats, but there were almost no camels, one or two here and there. But largely absent. In a panic I began to ask some questions. “Where are the camels?” They had all been sold for ½ ton trucks I was told! My initial reaction was shock. I feared my research was dead. I wrote to my PhD advisor telling her what I had found and had to wait for three weeks for an answer – this was the time of snail mail. Once I got over my shock at finding no camels – only sheep and goat, I began to ask further questions and to join the men in the trucks when they took their sheep to markets. I also began recording life stories – long narrative interviews and observing herding practices. Then when I knew enough to ask intelligent questions, I began informal or semi-structured interviews.

By the time my PhD advisor wrote back to me telling me I had my new PhD topic and the title for my dissertation *From Camel to Truck* (see Chatty 2013 [1986]), I also had the answer to my research questions: No, the Bedouin were not irrational economically. They simply were not interested in “planned development projects” that they did not perceive to be in their interest. Thus, they ignored the planned development projects, but they fully engaged in the regional markets buying and selling sheep and other products like cheese and wool. They had shifted their economy from camel transport to truck transport and thus were able to be more fully integrated into the regional market. Projects to forcibly settle them (sedentarisation schemes promoted by the UN) largely failed as these schemes were not regarded by the Bedouin as in their interests. Some Bedouin did of course settle, keeping the young and the very old in cement housing for most of the year, while becoming more mobile maintaining their herds on pasture lands using trucks. Many countries in the region, seeing their sedentarisation schemes fail, entered into a period of dismissal of these social groups which I labelled as “benign neglect” (Chatty, 2013 [1986]).

Early Academic Career

By the end of the 1970s, PhD firmly in hand, I had taught at the University of California, San Diego, the American University of Beirut (1975-6 during the first year of the Lebanese Civil War), and at the University of California at Santa Barbara (1977) and had won a Fulbright Teaching award to introduce Anthropology into the Graduate Study Programme at the University of Damascus (1977-1979).

I also began to work for the FAO, ILO, UNDP, and other international agencies to “help” Bedouin of Syria. No longer were these “forced settlement” projects, but rather a recognition of the significance of livestock to the national economy was resulting in government and international schemes to improve herding practices, to better manage wool sheering and washing, sheep fattening, and marketing. As settlement projects were being shelved, I became excited to be part of this new focus on sheep (and I hoped, shortly thereafter, peoples). I applied for and was ap-

pointed by the USAID as their anthropologists in Syria. I thought I was in heaven; I had found my niche in applied anthropology. The temptation to return to academia in the US was rapidly waning. But then on November 4, 1979, while on honeymoon in the Sultanate of Oman, the USAID office sent me a telegram recalling me from Syria to a new posting in Washington D. C. as, following the Shah of Iran's overthrow, the US embassy had been stormed by militant supporters of the Ayatollah Khomeini taking 90 people hostages.

Applied / Development Work

With Syria off the board, I decided to remain in Oman. Several months later, I was asked by the Diwan of the Sultan to help them out. They had been instructed, by Royal Decree, to extend government services to the pastoral herding tribes of Oman's central deserts without forcing them to settle. Without much forethought or any specialist input, the Diwan had issued orders to build a tribal centre – it was to be the first of six – right in the middle of the desert. They had done so, but it was a “white elephant”; it was empty, and no one was using it. On the very edge of the Rub' al-Khali (the Empty Quarter) it was 500 miles from Muscat in the north and 500 miles from Salalah (in the south). It was the proverbial “middle of nowhere”. I agreed to help as long as the Omani government would not object to my turning the effort into a United Nations project and thus be independent of any government pressure. They agreed and I went to New York to put the proposal before the UN Economic and Social Council.

Once funding was approved, I began my first UNDP project – which has lasted my lifetime. The first year was meant to be just anthropological research to learn what this most remote of Oman's pastoral tribes perceived as their needs, and the second, third and following years would be built around implementing programmes that the people themselves had prioritized with the support of the national government. The project was able to set up a hospital with mobile primary health care and expanded immunization programmes, a weekly boarding school for boys and a facility for girls (see Chatty 2006), a veterinary office with mobile units, a welfare office with special interest in the widowed, divorced, and disabled, income generating weaving and twining schemes for women, subsidized feed during periods of drought, and finally seasonal tarpaulin and government social housing.⁴

Over the next decade and a half, I maintained close contact with these people, the Harasiis and watch and recorded the adaptation, the opportunistic, and entrepreneurial turns those individuals in the tribe set up, some to be adopted by the entire social group and others not. Information which was powerful and passed by person to person - kin and stranger- in a carefully controlled manner, gave way to communications via satellite phones, and now mobile smart phones. In a desert that was also “inhabited” by oil companies and their temporary camps, phone masts dotted the desert making mobile phones an essential communications tool. Portable kitchens and storage units. Solar panels to recharge air conditioners in portacabins, and to keep refrigerators full of camel's milk running. I watched a way of life transformed with 4-wheel drive Land Cruisers for household heads (and smaller Suzuki X4 wheels for teenagers); the weekly boarding schools finally seeing the young Harasiis graduate with high school diplomas making jobs with the police, army, and oil companies possible.

⁴ A monograph based on this project was published, entitled *Mobile Pastoralists: Development Planning and Social Change in Oman* (Chatty 1996).

Recognizing the rights of indigenous peoples to lands declared *terra nullius*

After 15 years in Oman challenging the national oil company and the Advisor to the Sultan on the Environment's shared understanding that the desert – the Jiddat il-Harasiis - was *terra nullius*, I decided I need to do something to set the record straight in a way that would reach a wide audience. *Terra nullius* or *tabula rasa* were the two favoured concepts of the oil extraction industry as well as fortress conservationists to justify their moving into a region with little regard for indigenous peoples. All the national and international conservationists' publicity suggested that these deserts in Oman were empty of people. And the oil company European engineers were convinced there were no people in the desert as they never saw any when they went on exploratory trips. The recognition that herder societies had a very light footprint on the landscape, but still needed to maintain extensive traditional grazing lands that they did not continuously occupy was anathema to these Europeans. If there was no one there when they visited, then it was "*terra nullius*".

I decided there was only one thing to do. I needed to show that this supposed "*terra nullius*" was full of people who managed the land efficiently and were actually stewards of the desert. I set out to create a digital resource to "implant" people back into the landscape. I found funds to digitize my thousands of slides and images of the camel herding tribes of Oman which I had taken between 1978 and 2010, with special reference to the Harasiis I also wanted the Harasiis voice to be seen and heard, not mine. So, I commenced on a project to video in depth interviews for up-loading to this specialist website www.nomadsinoman.com. Each video was a product of a series of largely semi-structured interviews which could last for several hours before sitting for a recording. With my closest key informant - a man who a visiting a National Geographic photographer visiting my field site thought came "straight from central casting" – I had developed a deeply intense and personal relationship which was built on trust and shared experiences contesting international conservation biases and sub-national bureaucracy. These four interviews were really the work of two people – the researcher and informant. My most recently uploaded video was not actually shot by me, but rather by a young Harsousi who attended a recent celebration I had taken part in and had sent it to me to be uploaded on to the website.⁵

Each video uploaded to the website was the result of months of planning, purchasing the recording equipment, the tripods, the cat's tails (to cut out the noise of the wind) as well as the purchase of further equipment, sleeping bags, blankets, wash kits and food presents to take to the families involved. The distance that had to be travelled, meant that arriving empty-handed would be seen as an insult to social / survival rules of the society. We stopped in Muscat and bought multiple 20 kilo sacks of rice, gallons of bottled water, boxes of fruit for the children. Upon arrival at our predetermined meeting site, we found the Harasiis had preceded us with bags of crisps, multiple six packs of Seven-Up and Pepsi Cola, sweet biscuits, and KitKat chocolates. These were the "modern" foods being introduced at the several newly opened petrol stations in the desert.

Perhaps because I maintained close contact with the Harasiis I was increasingly aware of how both conservationists and multinational extractive industry personnel regard the territory of the Harasiis, the Jiddat il-Harasiis, as *terra nullius* (empty land, empty of people). It was a terrain which for conservationists could be protected from "local" people in order to re-introduce animals long extinct like the Arabian Oryx, or for the oil company, a landscape empty of people

⁵ www.nomadsinoman.com/films/celebration-qarn-al-alam-2018 (Accessed 20/11/2022).

with the only interest being what lay beneath the surface. I left Oman in the mid -1990s increasingly concerned with their invisibility to the two major claimants of their traditional territory - the extractive industry and the conservationists concerned with protecting animals on that land (but not people).

Returning to Academic, my Oxford Years

In 1995 I arrived in Oxford on a fellowship to Queen Elizabeth House (QEH) to complete a book about the Harasiis tribe. This became *Mobile Pastoralists: Development Planning and Social Change in Oman* (Chatty 1996). Also housed at QEH was a Refugee Studies Programme headed by Dr Barbara Harrell-Bond, the charismatic founder. She approached me one day and suggested I apply for a seven-year fellowship at the Refugee Studies Programme – the Dulverton Fellowship – she wanted to fill. When she told me what the main aim of the fellowship would be about – the setting up of an Oxford Master’s degree in the study of Forced Migration – I demurred and told her I did not “do” forced migration, I did “forced” settlement. But Barbara never took no for an answer and persuaded me that forced settlement and forced migration were really two sides of the same coin. They were all about social discrimination of marginalized people; refugees had lost the protection of their countries, while others had no country or were unrecognized by their country. I agreed to apply for the seven-year fellowship, which I was awarded, and started conducting research on refugees, but had negotiated prior to taking up the post that I would keep working on issues regarding forced settlement of mobile pastoral societies.

My Oxford years have been a balancing of research on refugee youth, critically re-examining Western assumptions particularly about the agency of youth, their adaptability, their resilience, and resistance. It has engaged with the deconstruction of assumptions of youth behaviour based on Piaget’s theories of child adolescent development based on studies of white, middle class European children. As well, I have continued my work with mobile herding societies and engaging in advocacy on their behalf. I have battled against the tendency to regard mobile peoples as invisible and their “territory” *terra nullius* for conservation agencies and the extractive industries (petroleum and mining). I have been driven to bringing mobile peoples, their knowledge, and their rights back into the core of Western-based programmes and project particularly with regard to adaptation and climate change.

Two of my major publications in the early 2000s were *Conservation and Mobile Indigenous Peoples: Displacement, Forced Migration, and Sustainable Development* (Chatty, Colchester 2002) and *Nomadic Societies in the Middle East and North Africa: Entering the 21st Century* (Chatty 2006). Both of these works address the constant “sedentism” of development policies and fortress conservation practices to force mobile peoples off nature reserves (now more than 20% of the Earth’s surface and projected to aim for 30% of the Earth’s surface by 2030); to give up what is perceived still in the West as a backward, irrational way of life to become settled farmers. The reality is that mobile herding societies are highly adaptable and sustainable in areas of low resources as well as highly reactive and responsible in the face of climate change and extreme weather. We have much to learn from mobile peoples in this regard.

In an effort to advocate more effectively for the knowledge and practices of mobile peoples, starting with conservation and sustainable development, I organized a workshop in 2002 with social scientists and natural scientists, conservation practitioners and policy makers in Wadi Dana, Jordan. Over five days we worked to draft a declaration. What emerged was *The Dana*

Declaration on Mobile Peoples and Conservation (www.danadeclaration.org) which called for a new approach to conservation: one which recognised the rights and interests of “mobile” peoples - indigenous and traditional peoples – whose livelihoods depends on extensive common property use of natural resources, and who used mobility as a management strategy and as an element of cultural identity. The Declaration was an attempt to forge a new partnership for conservationists and mobile peoples in order to ensure that future conservation policies and programmes helped maintain the earth’s ecosystems, species and genetic diversity while respecting the rights of indigenous and traditional communities which have been disregarded in the past. In September 2022 we held a *Dana+ 20* which unlike the earlier workshops was primarily attended and driven by representatives of mobile indigenous peoples.⁶

The past decade has seen my work with people forced to settle and people forced to move be tragically brought together with the Syrian refugee crisis. Those displaced from Syria are both urban middle class people who have largely found sanctuary in neighbouring countries of Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan, though in 2015 nearly a million Syrians walked to Europe and found asylum in Germany and, less covered in the media, Sweden, which has the highest percentage of Syrians in relation to its own population than any other European country. What is often overlooked is that many of the displaced Syrians are Bedouin herders. Some lost their herds during the prolonged drought in the country between 2006-2010, and moved to the outskirts of cities like Homs, Hama, and Damascus, and Der’aa and then were caught up in the armed conflicts of 2011 to the present. Others lost their herds to rampaging Islamic State (IS) fighters between 2014-2015 when they took over nearly 60% of Syria’s land mass and literally ate their way through many Bedouin herds.⁷ Other Bedouin regularly depended upon season work in Lebanon, but also Jordan and Turkey. For example, a large percentage of the 1.1 million displaced Syrians who went to Lebanon are Bedouin seasonal workers in the agricultural and construction industry of the country. Many displaced middle-class Syrians in Lebanon (and this is also true of Turkey and Jordan) have not registered as “refugees” with the international aid agencies. Hence, are “invisible”. They are not seeking humanitarian assistance for themselves, but rather are managing aid for the poorer displaced Syrians, such as the Bedouin in Lebanon, in northern Jordan, and in southern Turkey.

Here my story ends with forced settlement and forced migration coming together in the greatest humanitarian crisis of the 21st century. And here, Bedouin and Arab values such as the duty to be hospitable, and the counter-responsibility to accept generosity and return it in some fashion one day play out on Syria’s borders among Syria’s displaced once settled urban social groups and its Bedouin mobile herders. Here, too, Marcel Mauss essay on the important of the “moral economy” as an alternative to sheer capitalism also plays out (Mauss 2016).

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⁶ That new statement, Dana +20 and Action Plan, is available on <https://www.danadeclaration.org/dana-20-manifesto> (Accessed 20/11/2022).

⁷ <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2020/8/30/the-civil-war-is-threatening-an-ancient-way-of-life-in-syria> (Accessed 20/11/2022).

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