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## **THE UPROOTING: EDUCATION VOID OF INDIGENOUS "LOCATION-SPECIFIC" KNOWLEDGE AMONG NEGEV BEDOUIN ARABS IN SOUTHERN ISRAEL**

In the government-coerced process of transforming the 'Bedouin phenomenon' into an 'urban proletariat within two generations,' Moshe Dayan (in 1963) envisioned Bedouin children going to school "with their hair properly combed" (Ha'Aretz, 1963) Today, of the Bedouin students who go to school, many slick their combed hair with thick amounts of gel, and smoke Marlboros in between learning Zionist history and Bible Studies in rusty, overcrowded trailer classrooms. Alienation is high—and drop-out rates in the Bedouin sector reach 40%. Israel's tightly-controlled, state-sponsored curriculum does not include the option of auxiliary coursework to strengthen yields of traditional agriculture; or enhance the profitability of livestock rearing. Once this ancient "location-specific" knowledge is lost, most Bedouin will be assimilated into the periphery of Israeli society, landless, and disenfranchised. A minority of exceptional Bedouin graduates from high school will secure the select number of slots to work in the city, largely

but not exclusively in the service sector. The rest will remain in their villages and townships, unemployed. A fresh approach to education is the only tool powerful enough to counteract the process of cultural and political uprooting, and inspire self-reliance, economic empowerment and community cohesion.

### **The Uprooting**

Historical accounts in Israel's textbooks explicate the process of Jews redeeming their ancestral land. Bedouin are almost entirely absent from Zionism's "official story" and to this day half the sector remains literally 'unrecognized,' not appearing on any map or census of the country. The Bedouin are defined as rootless 'nomads,' endlessly roaming the barren desert "in an empty space that awaits Jewish liberation, where a nomadic culture awaits civilization." (Shamir, 1996:235)

So, Israel has brought "civilization" to the Middle East with the Compulsory Education Law (1949) mandating the right of every Israeli child to 12 years of free education, and the State Education Law (1953). Israel also has instituted provisions under the Principle of Equality, the Special Education Law (1988), and the Pupils' Rights Law (2000). Further, Israel has signed a host of international laws and treaties guaranteeing the universally recognized right to education, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989; Ministry of Justice and Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2001), Israel's Basic Law: Human Dignity and Liberty (1992), and the Convention against Discrimination in Education (1961) requiring that if Israel has separate educational systems for Jews and Palestinian Arabs, the two systems must maintain the same standard of education. According to Human Rights Watch, (2001) Israel's Ministry of Education is in violation of many of these laws and treaties in its inability to protect Israel's Palestinian Arab children from discrimination in education (Adalah Report, 2003).

### **Alarming Statistics**

This paper calls for a rethinking of the underlying nature and purpose

of education in the Bedouin sector. Research indicates that substantial problems of curriculum, infrastructure and staffing point to a crisis in government-run schools, resulting with a crisis: an inability to retain and educate Negev Bedouin Arab students (Abu-Rubiyya, 1996; Abu-Saad, 1996, 1997, 2003, 2005; Human Rights Watch, 2001) While Bedouin illiteracy has been dramatically reduced in the past generation, a mere 6-10% of Bedouin students pass the matriculation exams (the lowest % in the country). There are 52 schools serving the entire Bedouin population of nearly 150,000 citizens (Abu-Saad, 2004). Perhaps most significant, dropout rates in the Bedouin community are 6 times higher than that of their Jewish counterparts: 65% of Negev Bedouin children drop out compared with some 10% in the Jewish sector. The unrecognized villages and the seven government planned Bedouin townships in the Negev have the highest drop-out rates in the country. The Katz Report (Katz *et al*, 1998) "The Investigatory Committee on the Bedouin Educational System," confirmed there are grossly inadequate educational services and facilities in Bedouin villages and townships. Furthermore, government funding in general is not proportionately allocated to non-Jewish schools (see Jabareen and Golan-Agnon in this volume).

#### **Alienation – An Irrelevant Curriculum**

As explicitly stated in the 1953 Law of State Education, the fundamental aims are to base education on the values of Jewish culture, ...on love of homeland, loyalty to the state and the Jewish people...(Mari, 1978, p. 50)." The Ministry of Education (MOE) requires Jewish heritage classes as part of the state-sponsored curriculum. In Hebrew language class, students study Bible and Talmud to pass the matriculation exams (HRW, 2001). This curriculum is found to be alienating for much of the 23% of students that are not Jewish. It is well documented that wholly disregarding the Palestinian Arab narrative in Israel's standard curriculum lessens the relevance of the educational experience for Arabs. As logic would follow, when studies are irrelevant and alienating, this hoists drop-out rates (Abu-Saad, 2001; Al-Haj, 1995; Brown, 1986; Mar'i, 1978). According to Abu-Saad, Arab students are conditioned to identify with Jewish values, and to further hegemonic Zionist aspirations at the expense of developing their own national awareness and sense of

belonging (see Abu-Saad in this volume). Moreover, most of the skills Bedouin youth learn in school will never be of real use to them. Bedouin learn from books written by people who have never set foot in their villages or townships, who know nothing about where to find the herb *ba'iytaran*, or how to grow fruit trees without much water under most unfertile conditions. It seems education is not one of MK Limor Livnat's stated goals as head of the Ministry of Education. Despite extensive High Court rulings, reports from the State Comptroller, media exposés, and the continuous work of NGO pressure groups, Israel has failed to change its ethnocratic educational system.

### Drop-Out – Policies and Perceptions

An 11-year-old Bedouin child from Abde travels a 2-hour commute to/from school each day. She is one of 56 children in her dilapidated classroom. Her desk is broken, it wobbles every time she writes. All day she is harassed for being one of the only girls in class. She returns home after an unbearably hot day where the air didn't move at all in class. She helps her family with a host of chores until it's late and she sits down for her homework. She must use a flashlight as the family generator is already finished for the night. Face pressed against her old and rumpled biology textbook, her grandmother awakens her the next morning but she has missed the bus to school, again.

WHY do Bedouin students, (particularly *girls*), opt-out of school six times more than Jewish students? Truant officers confront irregular attendance, academics point to social conditions and political variables to explain the drop-out rate. Some indicate this stems from an inherent clash between the binaries of *traditional Bedouin values* (i.e. segregation for girls), and *modern coeducation*. Others indicate discrimination from an ethnocratic regime toward its minority factions is to blame for drop-out. Much blame is being divied out, but meanwhile, what proactive tools are transmitted in the schools or the after-school programs to tangibly reduce drop-out?

Before institutionalized education tornadoed through the Bedouin sector, Bedouin education was not formalized or technical--rather it was experiential, non-competitive, and acquired in intimate relationship

with the ecosystem (Jamali, 1934). Knowledge passed between the generations was location-specific: how to weave tents for shelter; multiple uses for the wool of sheep, how to build houses using accessible and affordable materials: mud and stone. None of this knowledge is provided in the modern school - a place designed to move beyond "primitive," "inferior" ways and learn to be efficient and productive in a westernized society (Norberg-Hodge, 1996). Traditional forms of education were severely disrupted (Abu-Saad, 2000, 2005) once land holdings were confiscated and Bedouin villagers were contained into townships as part of the country's project to cloak Jewish hegemony over the landscape and public institutions.

### **Manufacturing an Urban Proletariat**

We should transform the Bedouin into an urban proletariat in industry, services, construction, and agriculture. 88% of the Israeli population are not farmers; let the Bedouin be like them. Indeed, this will be a radical move, which means that the Bedouin would not live on his land with his herds, but would become an urban person who comes home in the afternoon and puts his slippers on... This would be a revolution, and it may be fixed within two generations. Without coercion, but with overt direction... this phenomenon of the Bedouin will disappear. (Dayan, 1963)

Israel has declared small-scale Bedouin agriculture and herding anachronistic through a series of legal maneuverings, and through the exclusion of these subjects in the state-sponsored curriculum.

Half the Negev Arab population has been urbanized, and modernized. Despite strict land laws, discriminatory water allocation policies, and fierce competition from subsidized ranchers, agri-businesses, and large-scale monoculture farming in the kibbutzim, some 76,000 Negev Arabs still resist relinquishing their land for the tempting State offer of public utilities. Many shepherds and farmers from the Unrecognized Villages object to being cramped into Planned Townships--herding their livestock underneath concrete apartments, and growing lentils from a window sill on the 3rd floor. They continue to pursue small-scale subsistence farming and animal husbandry.

To improve the effectiveness of Israel's educational system in Negev schools

and make it accessible for today's youth, an empowering curriculum that is both useful and relevant must be taught, beyond manufacturing proud patriots with basic clerical skills, out of once-agrarian Bedouin.

### **Toward a Supplementary Educational Component: Field Studies**

In addition to vying for solutions presented elsewhere (e.g., requiring the Ministries to rectify budget constraints and distribute allocated resources in the Bedouin sector; and pressuring the Courts to pass legally binding decisions to address systemic discrimination), I suggest expanding learning options to include supplementary curricula in the form of heritage studies.

An alternative mindset among the educators is needed, a fresh, comprehensive approach to learning. What is relevant to surviving in a rural village or newly urbanized township? What kind of education is needed to bring resources back into the community in both the villages and townships? How does a marginalized community come to believe their traditional knowledge is relevant, and their active involvement can effectively challenge the systematic control of education? Status quo will only be changed when the community re-appropriates agency in a collaborative process of developing curricula.

Numerous acts have been initiated to remedy the alienation of indigenous students worldwide, promoting the belief that rediscovering and revitalizing collective traditions through education is a strong pillar for empowerment. Many progressive indigenous leaders challenge curriculum as developed by the ethnic majority, and promote adopting traditional principles utilized by their ancestors for thousands of years into the standard curricula (Jain et. al, 2003). Renowned Native American educator, Dr. Gregory Cajete, 1994, challenges key cultural assumptions underlying the educational system and promotes self-determination through a more holistic, ecological approach to education. Indigenous Filipinos have founded the Schools of Indigenous Knowledge and Traditions and promote the notion that only by imparting traditional wisdom will empowerment be regained by communities and will indigenous youth reach the national and global community with dignity. A leading politician in Australia's settler society advocates for Aboriginal

empowerment, Dr. Kemp, Minister for Education, Training and Youth Affairs has stated, "Schools must be inclusive places where indigenous students want to be, and want to learn." (Kemp, 2000). In stark contrast, MK Livnat, threatens draconian budget cuts for already meagerly funded Arab schools resistant to institutionalizing Jewish Nationalist reforms.

Inspired by the traditions of school reformers such as Alinsky, Waldorf, and Montessori who believed public education is a system that promotes a link with community affairs, I emphasize the need to establish a culturally-appropriate curriculum to meet the needs of alienated, disenfranchised youth, and to help weave new colors into the traditional fabric of the community. This would require developing a team of Bedouin educators to create challenging curricula designed to preserve Bedouin heritage—whereby reclaiming the power from a neo-colonialist educational system and choosing what dose of modernity is suitable for their needs. It seems there is a need for education to teach field knowledge: how to improve livestock rearing, and strengthen seasonal yields. Both are avenues toward self-reliance and community empowerment--avenues that can stimulate a viable local economy, and stem dependence on welfare. Were Bedouin education to include a supplementary component of field studies, and experiential heritage classes to preserve traditional building, planting techniques, explore environmental education, teach the history of Bedouin law, or offer courses in appropriate technology and harnessing renewable energy, this could be particularly valuable for youth living in villages off-the-grid.

When the organization I founded, Bustan, proposed building a medical clinic using traditional Arab *Baika* building techniques, the first response all over the region was, "Why mud and not cement? How will the building survive through the rainy season?" Traditional knowledge is stigmatized and has largely been lost. When several hundred Bedouin students joined a Bustan community-building camp to construct the medical clinic in 2003, there was intrigue with learning traditional skills through experience.

I promote challenging the process of *uprooting* and modernizing *unprepared* cultures by *rooting*, and *preparing* youth to cling steadfast to their history, land, and traditions, through a relevant education. If Bedouin education instills a sense of continuity with the past, it can

serve to inspire a socially and economically viable future. Revitalizing location-specific knowledge and incorporating it into the educational system should be given top priority. Adding relevance to the educational experience may prove to reduce drop-out rates, which in turn would create a more healthy, pluralist Israel. Either empowered Bedouin youth become designers of their own curriculum, custodians of their own resources, and transmitters of indigenous knowledge, or in the future Bedouin will take family trips to the Joe Allon museum to pay Jewish museum management to learn about their 'orientalized' heritage, and then, the Israeli government will have achieved its objective of uprooting this exoticized "Bedouin phenomenon" a fifth-column posing a threat to Israel's hegemony over State Lands.

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