



## Arab Hospitality as a Rite of Incorporation

## The Case of the Rashaayda Bedouin of Eastern Sudan

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**Abstract.** — Arab hospitality has long been viewed as an expression of the high value placed by Arabs on generosity, while the spatial separation between female hosts and male guests has been held to express an Arab "honor and shame" value complex. These views obscure the use of hospitality for incorporating a guest into the hosts' household and also lead us to overlook the role of Arab women in hospitality. This analysis treats hospitality as a ritual which instantiates a mediated opposition between the senior woman of a household who gives food and shelter and a guest who receives it. [*Eastern Sudan, Rashaayda Bedouin, ritual, hospitality, household structure, cross-cultural comparison, reciprocity, Arab gender*]

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Hospitality is a ubiquitous component of life in the Arab societies of the Middle East. Its importance for social relations has been well documented for every region in the Arab world.<sup>1</sup> The Rashaayda Bedouin of Sudan<sup>2</sup> are no exception. Among the Rashaayda guests are greeted, fed, and entertained in accordance with a detailed and elaborate set of rules. Generous hospitality is highly valued and the quality of a household's hospitality contributes to its reputation and social standing.

Three aspects of Rashiidi<sup>3</sup> hospitality, however, are unexpected and puzzling. First, among the Rashaayda a household cannot make a complete offering of hospitality unless the senior woman of that household is present. If visitors approach a tent whose female household head is absent,

1 For descriptions of hospitality among the Al Murra Bedouin of Saudi Arabia, see Cole (1975: 49 f., 66-68); for the Rwala Bedouin of Saudi Arabia, see Lancaster (1981: 82 f.); for northwestern Arabia generally, see Doughty (1979/1: 287) and Sowayan (1985: 41); for agriculturalists in Jordan, see Antoun (1972: 110, 112, 136); for Syrian agriculturalists, see Sweet (1960: 128-132); for Palestinian agriculturalists, see Rosenfeld (1974); for agriculturalists in Asir, see Dostal's comments on the reception room (1983: 82); for Yemen, see Dorsky (1986: 68-71) and Meneley (1996); for Oman, see Eickelman (1984: 67-79); for Iraq, see Fernea (1969: 116-125); for Egyptian Bedouin, see Abou-Zeid (1966) and Abu-Lughod (1986: 13, 15, 46, 49, 66, 92, 111, 116); for urban Egypt, see Lane (1871: 13, 183) and Berque (1957: 48 f., 63, 68); for Tunisia, see Demeerseman (1944a, 1944b, 1944c) and Lanfry (1938); for the Bedouin of Algeria, see Naphegyi (1868: 127, 132, 138-140); for the Arabs of Chad and Darfur in the nineteenth century, see Nachtigal (1971: 11 f., 116, 245, 251-253, 362).

2 Fieldwork was carried out among the Rashaayda Bedouin in northeastern Sudan from January 1978 to December 1980.

3 The adjective "Rashiidi" and the name of the Rashaayda itself are derived from the name of the Rashaayda's eponymous ancestor, *rashiid*. "Rashaayda" is the plural form of *rashiid*. I have omitted the underscore for /sh/ when I write the Rashaayda's name to simplify the spelling for comparative ethnographers. Other writers have spelled the name differently: Rashaïda, Rashāyda, etc.