

2. Bedouin Non-Islamic Practices

Bedouins are not the only human beings—Muslim or otherwise—who resort to unorthodox beliefs and practices as psycho-spiritual aids in coping with the hardships and unpredictability of life. Yet, their extreme exposure to the desert's harsh environment and their scant recourse to help in the event of adversity, have made their quest for the means with which to attenuate their fears particularly strong. In frequent years of drought they watch the ewes and the camels become barren, their lambs and calves die for lack of milk, and finally the entire livestock wane for lack of pasture. Flash-floods in the desert *wādī* often take their toll of flocks and herds, as well as people and property. Chill desert nights and cold winter days reap their toll in high infant mortality and pulmonary diseases that find no cure. Finally, encounters with wolves, snakes, and scorpions often prove fatal, not only to the bedouins' livestock, but to themselves as well.

The primitive medicine practised by the bedouins, while not entirely ineffective, is insufficient to deal with the many infirmities to which they are subject. Occasionally they are aided by a *ḥāwī*, who is skilled at sucking the poison out of scorpion stings and mild snake-bites. Cauterization (*kayy*), a rudimentary form of acupuncture, is often used in attempting to cure rheumatic and arthritic pains, and even, eye cataracts.¹⁷ The bedouins also utilize desert plants with medicinal and narcotic properties to treat light maladies such as headache, head cold, toothache, bee-sting, purulent sores, and intestinal cramps.¹⁸

If, however, such primitive remedies do not work, there exist few, if any other recourses to aid. Even when modern medicine is theoretically available, poor communications place it beyond the bedouins' reach. Similarly, when drought occurs over a wide area, most bedouins must sit by and suffer, their ability to migrate being very limited. The resultant decimation of a bedouin's livestock will leave him nothing to sell and consequently nothing with which to buy sufficient food for his family, sufficient clothing to keep them warm, and even enough goat-hair with which to weave a water-proof and warm tent. The bedouin thus lives in constant fear of the recurrent afflictions of nature, afflictions over which he has no control.

It is not surprising, therefore, that in order to retain peace of mind, he adheres to beliefs and practices that give him the feeling of exercising at least a degree of such control. Although these various devices do not form a single

¹⁷ Communication from Sālim 'Owdah Sālim aṭ-Ṭimṭāwī of the 'Azāzmah 'Aṣīyāt, who showed the author cauterization marks on his left temple made when he was a child to check an incipient cataract (*shahbiḥ*; lit., "greyness"—a reference to the grey film that covers the eye). According to the bedouins *shahbiḥ* begins with the appearance in one eye of a small grey dot with a black tail, called *um ḍayliḥ*, "the tailed one." Cauterization for cataract is also applied to the underside of the upper eyelid.

¹⁸ Bailey and Danin, in their study of 300 desert plants (1981), found 50 plants that were utilized for medicinal purposes.