

Contents

Acknowledgments	ix
Introduction	x
Prelude	1
PART I: Our Introduction to ‘Arabdom’	13
TRANSITION 1: Visualizing and Planning the Journey	19
PART II: Onward to Libya	27
TRANSITION 2: A Libyan Way of Life at Risk	97
PART III: Out with the King—In with a Colonel	101
TRANSITION 3: From Student of Desert Peoples to Teacher	113
PART IV: A Time of Trial in the Land of the Pharaohs	125
TRANSITION 4: Leaving Cairo and Taking Some Diver- sions into Iran, Libyan Prehistory, and Arab Cultural Meanings	153
PART V: Return to Libya and Life on the Edge	163
TRANSITION 5: Onto Life as a Consultant	193
PART VI: A Narrower Window on the Middle East	203
TRANSITION 6: Moving Back to a ‘Safe Haven’	239
PART VII: Reconsidering Life as an Anthropologist in a Conflictive Middle East	251
Final Thoughts	257
Postscript	267
Selected Middle East and Related Publications by the Author	271

Part I

Our Introduction to 'Arabdom'

1967, the year before I began my fieldwork, the Israelis and Arabs had engaged in war, the Six Day War; that war is important for some of our accounts because of the negative feeling that war left with many Arabs; it ended with Israel occupying the Sinai Peninsula, Golan Heights, Gaza Strip, and the West Bank. 1968, when I started my fieldwork, was itself a tumultuous period in both American and world history. The U.S. was in a war of our own in Viet Nam and it wasn't going well. Many American college students had vigorously protested the expansion of the war in 1965 because it caused death to many young fellow-Americans as well as to others in faraway Asia.

President Johnson rejected renomination to the presidency, civil rights leader Martin Luther King was assassinated in Memphis and Robert Kennedy was shot and mortally wounded in Los Angeles. The Soviet Union had invaded Czechoslovakia to crush its liberal regime. My wife, Nancy, and I'd be leaving a constant barrage on U.S. media of bad news to go to a land where it took an effort just to hear or read any news at all. Furthermore, once in Libya it seemed as though we were always hearing about some tragic event in the world, often days after it had happened. That was both 'good news' and 'bad news': good because we weren't constantly exposed to it and bad because it left us feeling a little out of the loop.

Left-Handed in an Islamic World

Nancy's and my journey to the Desert, which I've conflated to the notion of 'Arabdom' — the Arab World or Arab Peoples, imagined in a slightly romanticized way — has an important personal context. I am left-handed, as the title of the book denotes. The Muslim

Arab world is basically right-handed — or at least it has been biased heavily in that direction. Being left-handed in a right-handed Islamic world was, for me, a metaphor for the much larger challenge that I was taking on, learning about Arab people, their culture, religion, and language. It wasn't just that I happened to be left-handed but that I had to learn how to negotiate personally and professionally in a world that was completely new and different from my own. And, as only seemed fitting, most people I encountered in the Islamic Middle East over more than four decades were right handers.

Right-handedness is exalted in the Qur'an, it generally being reserved for food handling and ceremonial purposes. One hadith or saying of the Prophet notes that Mohammed reserved his right hand for purification and his left for such 'lowly acts as when using the bathroom.' The left hand is thus used for 'necessary but unclean purposes,' including cleaning the private parts after toilet-use. Eating with the right hand, on the Islamic continuum of dos and don'ts, is defined as part of *sunnah*, which is the record of the Prophet's teachings, deeds and sayings. As *sunnah*, eating with the right hand is preferred, and receives a blessing, though the failure to do so isn't considered a sin.

Another distinction in Islam about handedness is that dwellers of Paradise are referred to in the Quran as 'companions of the right hand,' while dwellers of Hell take on the contrary label of 'companions of the left hand.' In its extreme, left-handedness among Muslims was associated with demonic forces, such as *shaytan*, the Arabic word for a demon, Satan or the Devil. The Prophet was known to have said, based on hadith that Muslims should only use their right hand for eating, since *shaytan* eats with his left. I trusted that I wasn't associated by my friends and acquaintances with that negative image. After all, my left-handedness was a matter of my heredity, over which I exerted little control.

Stories abound in the Arab World of children being born left-handed being forced at a young age to use their right hands. This isn't so different from the U.S., where there are many cases of left-handers being forced to change hands due to religious or other motives. Fortunately, today in both the Arab and much of the rest of the world, people in general are more tolerant of lefties.

I don't wish to exaggerate the place of left-handedness in Islam, nor to suggest that it denotes some egregious human flaw. To the contrary, personally being left-handed wasn't stigmatizing for me nor was I ever judged negatively because of it. Furthermore, most Arabs pay little attention to someone who is left-handed. It was only through prolonged interaction with people in the Oasis who had become my friends, then, that they came to notice that I was a lefty. In that case they made light of it in chatting, including a bit of friendly chiding or teasing. It was simply part of a process of our getting to know each other and, hence, social bonding.

A broader view than encompassed by culture and religion suggests there are some factual distinctions about left-handedness. Left handers comprise on average over many years a consistent 10-12% of the world population. It may be that handedness is decided in the womb. We don't exactly know. In addition, we lefties have been around for a while, evidenced in stone-age archaeological sites from which it's possible to determine handedness from the way stone flakes were chipped. Going back many thousands of years, evidence from stone tools suggests that a full one-third of stone chippers were lefties. Admittedly this is a limited sample as it excludes a portion of the population which didn't chip tools, namely young children and, perhaps, women. Persistence of left handedness over time suggests to evolutionary biologists that this trait has an evolutionary significance, but one which is presently not fully understood.

In Arab countries that percentage is much lower because of the religious-cultural bias and undercounting. On a lighter side, perhaps Islamic as well as many other societies didn't know what they were missing by once suppressing left-handers. According to some research, being a lefty stresses use of the right side of the brain. The benefit of that is that the right hemisphere of the brain is associated with a holistic orientation to thinking or big-picture thinking. That just happens to be the kind of thinking that anthropologists use in piecing together all the seemingly different parts of the human puzzle. In contrast, the left hemisphere used by right-handers is linked to a linear thinking mode or moving logically from point (a) to point (b) and onward in figuring things out. Regardless of

handedness of course we all rely on both of these types of thinking—big-picture and linear.

Being left handed in the Arab world had its amusing moments. In the beginning of my fieldwork in the Oasis, for example, as a reminder to myself to eat only with my right hand during meals, I'd try to hide my left hand. As I ate with a family or friends seated on a carpet around a communal bowl, I'd subtly slip the 'offending, unclean' hand under my rear end. Another amusement involved my friends in the Oasis watching me write with my left hand curled over my notepaper to avoid smearing ink across the page. (President Obama has perhaps one of the most contorted looking left-handed writing styles, curling his hand nearly upside down as if he is in pain as he signs bills into law.) My friends would wonder aloud how I was able to crook my hand like that, thinking that it would be painful. I assured them I wasn't in pain and explained the ink-smearing rationale. They would nod their heads and wryly smile.

Long after my stay in the Oasis, it suddenly dawned on me one day that the rationale for handedness in writing English was reversed for Arabic, which is written from right to left. Left-handedness would give an advantage to writing Arabic, namely that of not smudging ink as the hand moves across the page. I thought to myself, "now, how ironic is that?" How did the Arabs produce all of the beautiful calligraphy with their right hand without smearing ink across the page? They perhaps did the same thing as I did, namely curling their right hand, then turning it practically upside down to produce some of the most beautiful script the world has ever known. Is that the way the calligraphers did it?

My left-handedness as a way of underscoring some of the complexities of learning to live with Arabs probably doesn't rate the importance accorded to the subject of handedness typified in a trendy title on the subject: *Left Is Right: The Survival Guide for Living Lefty in a Right-Handed World* (Rae Lindsay, 1996.) Such books have their place as self-help, human interest stories, but the science needs to go a lot further before we fully understand handedness.

Plunging into the Arab world as a westerner is a shock regardless of one's handedness. As an anthropologist, the distinctiveness

became just that more emphatic given my lefty predisposition. Whichever brain I'm in, my journey into Arabdom has been both challenging and rewarding.



Map 1: North Africa. Libya is the place of my initial contact with the Islamic Middle East, though I also did short pieces of fieldwork in Tunisia and Algeria; later in Morocco, I spent considerable time as a consultant.

Transition 1

Visualizing and Planning the Journey

Choosing a Desert Place

First efforts at finding a place to live with and study Desert Arabs ended up a bit off the purely Arab path. I had proposed a study of the pastoral nomadic Tuaregs, whose ancestral stock is indigenous to northern Africa. The Tuaregs are partially Arabized Muslim Berbers who historically had occupied a vast swath of the Sahara. They were known as 'the People of the Veil,' but it was the men who sported the veil, not the women. Tall and thin, Tuareg men were also called 'the Blue People' because the indigo blue dye of their robes and veils would rub off on their skin.

The Tuaregs were a confederation of tribes in which women had a social status equal to and, in many respects, higher than the men. Women owned property outright. Along with all the other Berber groupings across North Africa, Tuareg practices contrasted with those of the Arab tribes, especially in the prestige accorded women. Arab women in many societies were traditionally prescribed a more private versus public role than Tuareg women. Tuareg tribesmen fit my interests and passion in that they are perceived as mysterious, elusive and difficult to track down in the vast Sahara. The particular Tuareg tribe I had in mind to study was located in the West African country of Mali.

My plan was to live with a Tuareg sub-clan for a year as it moved across the Desert, in and out of oasis communities. I planned to research their various relations with settled people. Questions I had about them were: Did the Tuareg rule over settled folk in the nomad-sedentary relationship? What did they trade? How did they

gain access to water? Did they intermarry with outsiders? Did they exchange property with other ethnic groupings? Just how did this complex system in a sparse physical habitat work? These questions would require months to answer and I had hoped to be the one asking them.

Planning the research of the Tuaregs required several steps. First, I prepared a budget for a proposal to submit to the Ford Foundation; this meant getting down to logistical and financial details quickly. The planning included logistics for a nomadic life in the Desert. Required was the purchase of a small herd of camels, goats, maybe some sheep, hiring herders, helpers, and setting up camp alongside the Tuaregs. The proposal had to present the research in specific and concrete terms. In short, the vehicle for the research had to be a self-sustaining pastoral-nomad enterprise. The bottom line for a life with the Tuaregs was that there would be no free ride for me and lots of work.

When I presented my proposal to the Ford Foundation, in 1967, political problems had just begun to arise in Mali. The Tuaregs were seen by the State as too independent because of their control of trade and commerce in that part of the Sahara. As a result, they were in constant conflict with the central authorities. In the midst of this conflict, the Tuaregs who I wanted to join up with for my research suddenly showed new muscle, resulting in what Desert folk call "rolling heads." The Tuaregs were knocking off their enemies in Bamako, the capital of Mali. Because of the Mali government's suspicion of all Tuaregs, Ford communicated to me that my proposal at that time was politically and security-wise unfeasible. I was disappointed, and ironically, as it turned out, much of my future research in the Middle East would be carried out in very similar conflicting political contexts, even including war.

Planning for Libya

My plan to research the Tuareg nomads would've involved a huge effort, physical and intellectual, but in 'good nomadic fashion' I somewhat sadly determined to move on. Not long after the work on the Tuareg proposal, another opportunity that would also take me to the Sahara popped up. This time it was a settled Berber peo-

ple living in a Libyan oasis named Augila in Cyrenaica, the eastern region of the country. These Berbers had been heavily influenced by Arab culture and Islam for about 1,200 years. When I looked at the maps, this Oasis was a mere speck on the map of the Sahara. That was perfect.

South of the Jebel al-Akhdar, the Green Mountains of northern Cyrenaica, the topography falls away very gradually towards a zone of true desert vegetation that includes several desert oases lying along the 29^o line of northern latitude. Augila is one of these. It lies in a depression, one of a series of north Libyan Desert depressions paralleling the 29^o line. Its precise coordinates are 29^o 7' 30" north latitude and 21^o 17' 38" east longitude. Its elevation is approximately sea level. The main characteristic of this and other oases is that they are found in depressions where underground water lies close to the surface. The proximity of water allows certain, limited forms of vegetation, which in turn permit human habitation. Thus, dispersed over the Oasis are one main village and four hamlets as well as over a hundred small vegetable plots and thousands of date palm trees.

Augila Oasis is found in a compact north-south basin about ten miles long by a half-mile wide at its broadest point. It's slightly crescent-shaped and is sharply contoured all around by ridges rising as high as one-hundred feet. The entire oasis is bisected north-south by the dried river bed, Wadi Nashoof. In the northern part of Augila underlying water comes to the surface as artesian springs, where it evaporates in the heat of the desert sun, leaving a residual crust called a *sebkha*. The entire oasis is surrounded by a vast, stony and mostly level plain, known as a *sarir*. Looking for the entire world like a vast sandbox, this plain spreads from the rim of the Oasis in all directions. Water in the southern part of Augila doesn't so readily rise to the surface, but rather has to be reached by deep wells, some more than 200-300 feet in depth. Traditionally these wells were all manually operated, though when I was there all of them were pumped by diesel engines. I'd help some of the farmers in that part of the Oasis by carrying their water barrels in the University Beetle to their homes.

The Sahara—which in Arabic literally means 'the Desert'—has been usefully described by a contemporary (2015) Libyan proactive Berber website and chat room called *Temehu*:

The awesome Sahara is the largest desert on the planet earth, with an estimated size of between seven and nine million square kilometres (9,000,000 sq km). Its shortest distance from north to south is about 1000 miles. To imagine the scale of this gigantic size, the Sahara occupies a third of Africa and is as large as the continent of Europe. It's made of a number of smaller deserts including the Libyan desert in Libya and Egypt, the Central Sahara in Libya and Algeria (including the Ahoggar Mountains, the Tibesti Mountains, the Air Mountains, and Tenere), and the Western Sahara; stretching across the whole of North Africa, from the Red Sea to the Atlantic Ocean and from the Mediterranean to Chad and the Sudan; with Tibesti's Emi Koussi being its highest peak (3,415 meters/ 11,200 feet).

Augila was located right near the daunting *Calanscio* or *Great Sand Sea* that bridged western Egypt and eastern Libya. It's an area of endless sand and some of the most awe-inspiring dunes in the Sahara. This general area clearly qualified itself as the Desert space I was yearning for. Against the larger Sahara, even the Great Sand Sea needs to be brought down to earth. It's an area that measures about 400 miles east-to-west and 200 miles north-to-south. It was this Desert space that had swallowed up the American bomber aircraft, the 'Lady be Good,' during World War II in 1943. On their flight back to eastern Libya from a bombing mission over Naples, the plane's pilots lost their way in a sandstorm. They veered way off course, heading far to the south of their Libyan base. It's thought the pilots may have believed they were still over the Mediterranean Sea. By then, running out of fuel, the crew bailed out.

Some ten years later, in 1953, the skeletal remains of all but one of the nine crew members were discovered by a shepherd boy on the windblown surface of the sand, along with an intact diary. The officers had bailed out over the Libyan Sand Sea and over several days, trekked only a miniscule portion of that space. That was their only recourse in attempting to escape the furnace they were in. They were unfortunately nowhere close to finding their way out.

My good luck in selecting Augila Oasis in the Libyan Desert as the place for my fieldwork was due to a connection between the uni-

versity where I was doing my Ph.D work and a former student of that program. Abdul Mola Daghman had completed his M.A. degree at Boston University's African Studies Center. As a student in his thirties, he'd studied there a few years ahead of me so we didn't meet in Boston. My professors were well aware of my interest in North Africa and they put me in touch with Abdul Mola in winter of 1967. He was by then President of the University of Libya, Benghazi. We were using snail mail at that time when I wrote him about my interest in doing fieldwork in Augila Oasis. Almost without hesitation—despite the pace of international mail—Abdul Mola replied, inviting me to do my fieldwork and join the Faculty of Arts at the University as a lecturer in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology.

So it was Augila Oasis in the Libyan Desert where I'd go, still following my dream. It was the Sahara, after all. Initially my knee-jerk reaction was that shifting my focus from nomadic to sedentary peoples was a 'come-down.' This reaction merely reflected a commonly-held nomad prejudice, captured in nomad talk, that "we lord it over our sedentary brethren, knowing ourselves to be superior to settled folk." This perception was based on a certain reality given the rapid mobility with which nomads could enter conflict and just as quickly extract themselves from its risks. But, rather than wait for what might be a more perfect world that included Desert nomads, I opted for the settled people of Augila. That choice turned out to be very rewarding: it was a place in the Sahara that I'd come to love and where I felt very much at home.

By 1968, my wife Nancy and I had prepared for our impending new life in Libya. I'd studied Cyrenaican colloquial Arabic, read what little was available on the Libyan Kingdom, and met with academics who knew something, though in fact very little, about the country. Established as an independent state in 1951, Libya was one of the poorest nations in the world. However, in the intervening years between 1951 and our arrival there, the country had struck oil and the benefits of that had begun to be felt. Education was high on the list of the Kingdom, university campuses having sprung up in Benghazi and Tripoli. It was the Benghazi campus to which I was to be linked through my agreement with the University and my connection with Abdul Mola Daghman. I was to split my time

between fieldwork in the Desert and a light, sporadic teaching load at the Benghazi campus.

Nancy and I had been married slightly more than a year before we decided to head off to Libya. She had known for a long time that because I was an anthropologist enamored of Arabs and the Desert that we would most likely be heading out somewhere into their part of the world. As we both look back on those early days, we gratefully recall that neither her parents nor mine had reservations about our decision to go and live in such a faraway place. We never heard a word such as, “why are you heading off to this distant part of the world?” Or “why are you taking our daughter so far away from us?” Nancy and I never knew whether our well-educated parents understood exactly what a social anthropologist did for work, much less a paycheck.

In fact, Nancy’s parents were more interested than we’d initially imagined. They accepted our invitation to join us in Libya for several days early into our second year there, in 1969, so they got to see firsthand where we were living and what our life was like. I even managed to take my father-in-law out to Augila. To the end of his days, he never forgot his short visit in the Desert and the Oasis. Sitting one evening with my friends and me on a small sand dune on the outskirts of the Oasis, he’d become an Augili, an honorary member of the community, for a fleeting moment in his life. He was Greek by descent and ‘looked the part’ of someone who belonged to the Mediterranean part of the world. Charlie, as I called him, became the focus of conversation as the newest foreign arrival. I translated for him as he answered my friends’ questions about the States and his life. He got along famously with them. My own parents came to understand what I was doing from a distance—through many postcards and my early writings about life in Libya.

Nancy inherited her features through her Greek dad’s DNA in contrast to that of her New England Yankee mom. Overseas, many people who met her thought she might be Italian, Lebanese, or maybe Greek. This didn’t mean that her appearance would allow her to ‘pass’ as Arab. Since most Libyan women covered their heads or faces, it was difficult to know what they looked like anyway. Nevertheless, Nancy ultimately adapted to life in the traditional, conservative society of Libya. Life as a foreign woman in Benghazi

meant that she would have to follow a modest dress code in public. At the time mini-skirts were all the fashion in the USA. When she walked through Benghazi to go to work or to shop it had to be in modest, long-sleeved dress and with a sense of purpose, in contrast to dallying and perhaps becoming an object of attention.

When I accompanied Nancy in the streets of Benghazi, I'd occasionally pick up some curse in Arabic directed at her by a Libyan man. Such remarks originated in negative stereotypes about western women and a presumption that as foreigners we wouldn't understand their meaning. As my Arabic got better, however, I understood their meaning and without antagonism but in defense of Nancy I'd respond with a comment about the offender's 'shameful remark.' The offender would get the point quickly, then vanish. Gratefully, those occasions were uncommon. Nancy also adapted to her new life by keeping a balance between working and living among Libyans and taking an active part in the international community that resided in Libya.

Nancy's Mediterranean bearing contrasted with mine. I am mostly Irish-English, very light skinned and highly susceptible to the burning sun. While Nancy's skin would darken in the sun mine would only redden. And yet it was I who was heading into the Saharan sun. In the same way that Nancy and I are physical contrasts, so too are we contrasts in personality. We fit the truism that 'opposites attract.' Among several differences, Nancy is naturally spontaneous while I am more deliberate. Thankfully, personality traits are adaptable according to different situations, since as I began to find out about life in the Desert, spontaneity became a valued trait.

A Fitting Omen

We were off then to the Desert, the Libyan Desert comprising modern-day Libya. In 1968, this country was a Kingdom. En route to the Kingdom, Nancy and I passed through Rome, almost as if this were a chance for a brief second honeymoon only a year after we'd been married. In this last moment in a more or less familiar land, we could live it up before committing to life in a traditional, conservative Arab society. Accordingly we decided to brave the streets of Rome on a motor scooter. Not knowing those streets, much less the reputation of Italian drivers, we romped off on our little Vespa.

A portent of the next stage of our life in Libya loomed before us, as we careened up and down Roman streets on our scooter. We searched out sacred sites and good restaurants. It was as if in transiting to a more austere lifestyle, we needed one last fling. Though Rome was considered the 'rock on which the Christian Church had been built,' for us it was closer to Bacchanalia. Relatively speaking, we were headed from there to Austerity.

As we approached a major traffic circle in downtown Rome on our little scooter we were directed by a traffic policeman in a dazzling white uniform, standing on his little platform way off in mid-circle. He blew his whistle and gestured for us to move but I must have misread his signal. As we weaved in and out of a whirlwind of traffic that only Italians can create, the policeman looked straight at us, his face contorted in a mock state of fear. He then raised his arms upward as if to say "mama mia" as we passed in front of him. Our last view of him as we sped out of the circle was to see him make the unmistakable sign of the cross as if wishing us "good luck, you crazies."

We laughed nervously, thinking perhaps we'd come too close for comfort to a crash. In a more pensive moment, the policeman's sign of the cross seemed significant in a wholly different way: we were leaving the spiritual capital of Christendom heading for a place where Islam prevailed and in which we would be hard put even to find a church, much less a policeman crossing himself.