



## Subaltern Rightful Struggles

Comparative ethnographies of the Bedouin villagers in the Naqab, and the akhdam slum dwellers in Sana'a

Bogumila Hall

Thesis submitted for assessment with a view to obtaining the degree of Doctor of Political and Social Sciences of the European University Institute

Florence, 27 May 2016



European University Institute  
**Department of Political and Social Sciences**

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**Examining Board**

Professor Donatella della Porta, EUI/SNS (Supervisor)  
Professor Asef Bayat, University of Illinois (External Supervisor)  
Professor Salwa Ismail, SOAS, University of London  
Professor Olivier Roy, European University Institute

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## **ABSTRACT:**

Liberal assumptions that the poor and the illiterate are as not likely to demand or even know their rights have been forcefully challenged by a body of scholarship in anthropology and political science that expands the field of the political and resurrects the subaltern as a political actor. These accounts point to the everyday life as a site of transgressions, and investigate mundane practices through which the subaltern enact their agency, quietly seek material entitlements, and manoeuvre to escape control and regulations.

While such a focus is important, it tends to overlook various ways of subaltern being, speaking or becoming, which are shifting and evolving, and are not necessarily circumscribed by the everyday or the local. This thesis, with ethnographic sensitivity-and against binary categories of mainstream political science- draws attention to the continuum of ways through which the marginalised deal with their multi-layered subordination. More precisely, drawing on extensive fieldwork conducted with the Bedouin villagers in the Naqab, and the akdham slum dwellers in Sana'a, the thesis sheds light on a multiplicity of sites and scales of subaltern struggles, as well as the connections between them and the different logics that drive them. The distinction between what I call the logics of practice and articulation marks roughly the boundaries between the non-political and the political, but also points to the potentiality of the political rooted in the ordinary.

Shifting away from the notion of subaltern struggles as place-bounded and parochial, the thesis argues that they need to be understood in relation to the transnational context within which they are embedded. By scrutinizing subaltern efforts to be known, intelligible and supported by global audiences, the thesis uncovers processes through which both the Bedouin and the akhdam become recognized as bearers of specific traits, on which basis their claims are justified. The questions posed here are as much about the particular groups under study, as they are about larger issues of knowledge production and the workings of the global human rights regime.



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## 1. INTRODUCTION

“What can I tell you, there is no politics here”, Ali told me while guiding me around Madinat Sa’wan, a housing project in the north-eastern part of Sana’a, inhabited largely by Yemen’s akhdam population. I had visited the place, also known as workers’ city, a few times before but this time was different. Ali, who had learnt about my research, decided to give me a tour of his neighbourhood to show me how people lived there and to explain the most pressing problems of the community. Like many others, he wanted to help me understand the issue correctly, as he put it, and so I followed. We walked around the settlement made of hundreds of identical one-storey houses, and Ali, and other random residents who joined us, recounted and recounted endless examples of the discrimination they faced daily. To my somewhat naive enquires about the ways through which the inhabitants tried to challenge what they clearly perceived as injustice, men and women shrugged, saying there were no particular efforts to challenge the status quo ‘There is nothing’ (*ma bish*), they said with resignation, confessing that they just wanted to ‘live’ and that was their main concern. The akhdam, popularly referred to as ‘the marginalized’, but also ‘Yemeni blacks’, or ‘street cleaners’ constitute the most deprived and distinct social category in Yemen. As they are widely believed to be of unknown origin the akhdam have been treated with suspicion for generations, set apart from society and restricted to the performance of menial jobs. Today in Sana’a they inhabit typically small informal settlements dispersed throughout the city, known among the Yemenis as places of filth, chaos and disorder- which according to wider Yemeni society reflect the nature of their inhabitants. Given that they endure striking poverty and live in litter-strewn settlements and makeshift homes, it is it hardly surprising that basic needs and survival constitute major concerns for this marginalized group. However, while we walked along the alleyways stopping at every sign of misery, Ali who probably sensed my disappointment, suddenly remembered that two organizations, which he believed could be of interest to me, had offices in the neighbourhood. We entered one of them, as the other one had shut down, and were welcomed by two young women from the community, Arwa and Fawzia. It was a development organization working in cooperation with international NGOs, we were told, which focused in particular on issues

relating to women and children's education. I remember listening to Arwa and thinking of the UNICEF stickers on the walls and files documenting initiatives of the organisation, with their underlined objectives and outcomes. They were for me tangible markers that the space of the office, and the work of the organization were beyond my empirical concerns. At that time I was interested in sites of protest, transgression, and subversion, and I understood the field of contentious politics and that of formal organisations, as clearly delimited, if not oppositional, fields of engagement. Arwa and Fawzia seemed to have shared my distinction, as they emphasized during our short conversation, that civil society activism, and not "riots" (*mushaghat*) was needed to uplift the marginalised. Later, while taking field notes from the day, I only briefly mentioned the encounter with the development workers, and thought of it, as well as the rest of the 'guided tour', as of having little value for my research.

Unexpectedly, several weeks later I met Arwa and Fawzia again. The two women approached me pushing their way through the crowd at a protest. It was November 2012, and the akhdam were on the streets in large numbers demanding their inclusion in the upcoming National Dialogue Conference, which had been set up to deal with the political crisis that had engulfed Yemen. When I said that I had not expected to see them at the demonstration, having in mind their dislike for 'riots', Fawzia laughed and screamed to my ear words, I later heard from others: "we are always in revolution!" (*nahnu da'iman fi al-thawra*). I remember my confusion, which accompanied me for most time of the fieldwork, when I struggled to make sense of what I perceived as the incoherencies of my research subjects. How could Arwa, Fawzia and many others reconcile the rejection of politics and dedication to development work with the conviction of being 'always in revolution'?

Very similar contradictions, awaited me in the other site of my fieldwork-the Bedouin villages in the Naqab, a desert region in the south of Israel. The Bedouin probably constitute the most forgotten element of the Palestinian national struggle. Long depicted as loyal to Israel and benefiting from their citizenship status, the Bedouin have been perceived by fellow Palestinians as traitors and distinct and exotic people. Despite their perceived loyalty to the state of Israel

the inhabitants of the Naqab have been subjected to policies aimed at erasing their past in the region and ties to the land. The concerted efforts of the state to resettle and discipline the Bedouin through coercion and punishment have turned the Arab dwellers of the Naqab into the most disadvantaged social group in Israel, with half of them living in villages threatened with demolition on a daily basis. Deprived of the most basic services, with little access to jobs, education and healthcare, the Bedouin ramshackle settlements and poor quality of life stand in striking contrast to those of their Jewish neighbours.

While I was looking for acts of defiance and practices of resistance, there too my interlocutors repeated that they did not want to be involved in politics, or resistance (*muqawamah*): the Bedouin were peaceful citizens and all they were asking for was their rights, was a common refrain. But people's words and deeds did not always seem to me consistent. For example, during one of my first encounters with Bilal and Adel<sup>1</sup>, the leaders of a Bedouin village, the two men praised the power of new social media, arguing that today almost anybody could speak out, and saying that an article written by one person could have more strength than a protest of tens of people. Bilal claimed that this reflected the new phase of the Bedouin activism: individualistic, without leadership, and played out in the realm of civil society and the Internet. I was quite surprised when, a few days later, Bilal and Adel invited me to join them in a trip to visit a family in a remote village whose house had been demolished by Israeli authorities, and which would include stops at several other Bedouin settlements to meet and talk with the residents. It was to show solidarity, I was told, and to coordinate with other villages, in order to unite the Bedouin's efforts and collectively oppose the state. Later, during the meetings Yusef addressed his audiences with evocative words: "You must remember what happens to you is not an individual case. It is part of the long history of colonialism. It targets Arabs of the Naqab as a whole, and we can stop it only if we act together, as a group, not as individuals". While this 'radical' tone was more in line with my expectations, after the event things quickly went back to normal. Bilal got an assignment from a construction company that he sometimes worked for, and Adel returned to his job with an Israeli water company, which ironically had long opposed delivering water to his village. Both men were focused on their daily duties and were too busy

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<sup>1</sup> All the names mentioned here are pseudonyms.

to engage in other activities, so I did not see them for a while. The next time I met Adel, we had a brief conversation and he suggested that I should write an article about his and Bilal's last trip, to show how the Bedouin citizens organized independently of politicians, elderly sheikhs and NGOs. He explained that it was important to show the Bedouin activism in a positive light, and to break with the assumptions that they were backward or lacking political consciousness, as the state portrayed them. While I agreed, it crossed my mind that the tour in which I participated was to some extent 'staged' for me. How does my presence interfere in what is said and done in the field sites, I wondered, but also how is it strategically used by the research participants to convey their story, as they want it to be told? What are all the displays and explanations I received, if not forms of politics of people for whom getting visibility, recognition and external support is of utmost importance?

This thesis is an attempt to come to terms with the alleged 'incoherencies' of the research participants and my own confusion. Rather than dismissing accounts recalled here, I propose to see them as illustrative of various experiences, and forms of agency and politics of subaltern actors, which play out across sites and scales. The study draws largely on ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2010 and 2013 with two groups- the Bedouin inhabitants of the Naqab in Israel, and the akhdam residents of Sana'a in Yemen. While I attempt to do justice to the specificity of each group, with their particular hopes, needs and aspirations, I also engage in a comparative reflection to go beyond the 'particular' and tell a larger story of subaltern politics. I use the term 'subaltern' here as an analytical category, or a prism that allows us to compare two very distinct cases and acknowledge their interconnectedness. This is in not an attempt however to annul the differences between the two groups or to suggest that subaltern constitute a homogenous category with particular properties and ways of being or acting.

The thesis thus, to put it simply, offers an empirical and theoretical inquiry into subalterns' multiple ways of dealing with the multi-layered subordination. It addresses a set of questions: How do the Naqab Bedouin, and the Yemeni akhdam, within their specific contexts, cope with, circumvent, and challenge the systemic marginalization? What languages, deeds and sites are

available to, or appropriated by, the subaltern actors? And what is the relationship between subaltern's different fields of engagement? What are the various struggles contingent on? What enables and constraints them? And finally, why, despite similar experiences of suffering and injustice, have the two groups, both of whom reach out to international audiences, not received the same level of recognition and support?

The objectives of the study are manifold. It is designed as an ethnographic exploration of two little known cases, but also as a reflection on the limits of some of the liberal concepts and categories that have come to dominate our thinking about politics and agency, and in particular the politics of the marginalized. Furthermore, while the study aims to shed light on the myriad of subaltern struggles often omitted in scholarly accounts, it also aims to say something about the politics of the human rights regime, and the binding relationship between the subaltern, and those who speak on their behalf.

I am cautious that an attempt to sketch an inclusive map of subaltern struggles comes with its own weaknesses. First, despite the pretence, such an endeavour remains incomplete and does not, or cannot, grasp the totality of subaltern experiences and efforts. Moreover, it risks incorporating too much and in a superficial manner, thereby deviating from ethnography, with its richness and thickness of description. While I am wary of these shortcomings, I hope nevertheless that this thesis can offer a valuable sociological account of subaltern politics, and the wider dynamics within which it is embedded. As such, I try to keep the balance between the conceptual framework that guides me, sensitivity to the fields' reality, and attention to structures and processes that are not immediately observed.

In what follows, I am going to discuss the body of literature on which my doctoral thesis draws, and from which I depart to push the analysis in new directions. While positioning myself within various academic debates, I present the main line of my argument, and end with a brief discussion on the structure of the thesis and the content of subsequent chapters.

## **1.1 Subaltern Studies and the Middle East**

The question of subaltern politics has been addressed across disciplines from various perspectives. The most explicit and path-breaking academic engagement with the subaltern, to which this thesis is indebted, goes back to India in the early 1980s, where Ranajit Guha, along with other Indian historians, initiated what became known as the Subaltern Studies project. Notwithstanding the differing approaches among its members, the aim of the collective, largely speaking, was to rewrite the national history 'from below' (in line with English Marxist historians such as E.P. Thompson and Eric Hobsbawm), to bring in the voices and agency of subaltern groups previously neglected or erased by an elite-biased Indian historiography. As Chalcraft (2008:376) summarizes, it was an endeavour to 'put into question the relations of power, subordination, and "inferior rank"'.

The term 'subaltern' derives from the writings of Antonio Gramsci (1972:52), who proposed to see subordinated groups as always subjected to the activity of the ruling classes, 'even when they rise up or rebel'. The Subaltern Studies scholars reappropriated the term as an all-encompassing category to describe a 'wide range of groups who possess a subordinate social, political, economic, and ideological position' (Cronin 2008:2). As such, 'subaltern' vaguely refers to all those whose off-centre lives are of little meaning to history, who inhabit the margins of society, and who do not generate dominant discourses. For example, in Guha's (1988:44) own words, the subaltern comprise the 'demographic difference between the total Indian population and all those whom we have described as the elite'. The lived experiences, consciousness and insurgent activities of the subordinated groups have become the central themes of the Indian collective's work, which soon went beyond the discipline of history and its initial geographical focus on India (Chakrabarty 2000, Ludden 2002). The focus on the subaltern, their political engagements, and processes of history-making outside the 'official record' has marked various sub-disciplines of the social sciences, ranging from urban studies to post-development theories to postcolonial feminism, to name just a few. While the South Asian scholars meet serious criticism for not having a coherent conceptual and theoretical framework, and Gayatri Spivak (1988) has repeatedly pointed to a general misunderstanding of the concept of subaltern, the term remains vaguely conceptualized, and is used by scholars across disciplines rather freely. In the growing body of literature, subaltern most often



translates into disenfranchised, disadvantaged and marginalized groups, and takes different empirical forms.

In my own interpretation of subalternity, I draw on the work of Coronil (1994:648) who, following on from Gramsci's work, proposes to see it as 'a relational and relative concept'. Subaltern, Coronil (ibid.) writes, is neither a 'sovereign-subject' nor a 'vassal-subject', but rather 'an agent of identity construction that participates, under determinate conditions within a field of power relations, in the organization of its multiple positionality and subjectivity'. Subalternity then, as Coronil (ibid. ,649) further explains, 'defines not the being of a subject, but a subjected state of being'. If subalternity does not, as such, define the 'being', then as Roy (2011) astutely observes, subaltern politics cannot be seen as stemming from, or reflecting, a particular identity or habitus. Rather, as Roy (2011:230) proposes, subaltern politics has to be understood as a 'heterogeneous, contradictory and performative realm of political struggle'.

Besides the particular focus on marginalized groups as political agents, and the incorporation of their perspectives and experiences rather than those of the elite, I find the field of subaltern studies insightful for my own work for another reason. Subaltern studies offer approaches which, despite their internal incoherencies and differences, problematize the process of knowledge production and representation, and question categories that may appear to be natural (Chalcraft 2008). I will elaborate further on how this impacts my own research in the methodological chapter.

In Middle Eastern studies, the question of subaltern politics has somehow been long-neglected (Webber 1997; Chalcraft 2008). The scholarship on the Middle East has traditionally focused on the state, the elites, formal institutions, civil society activism, and the role of Islam in explaining the political landscape of the region. The dominant paradigms in Middle Eastern studies have until recently dealt with questions of the region's exceptionalism, authoritarian resilience in the Arab World, and Muslims' passive submission to despotic rule. Weak civil society and fragmented opposition, Islamic culture, state-run economies and high levels of poverty and

illiteracy have all been mentioned as obstacles to democratization of the Arab World.<sup>2</sup> In 2004, a special issue of the journal *Comparative Politics* was dedicated to discussing the persistence of authoritarianism in the region, offering a variety of explanations as to why ‘the Middle East and North Africa [have] remained so singularly resistant to democratization’ (Bellin 2004:139). The authors, focusing on formal rule and institutions, gave readers little hope that a change in the region was possible in the foreseeable future.

The pessimism of scholarly accounts was accompanied by popular narratives circulating in western societies and media, which portrayed Arabs as either violent and irrational, or apolitical and apathetic (Bayat 2003). The very material risks of a culturalist reading of the Arab World and a reification of Muslims are well articulated by Mahmood Mamdani. It is worth recalling at length what Mamdani states in his famous essay from 2002, ‘Good Muslim, Bad Muslim...’

When I read of Islam in the papers these days, I often feel I am reading of museumized peoples, of peoples who are said not to make culture, except at the beginning of creation, as some extraordinary, prophetic act. After that, it seems they—we Muslims—just conform to culture. Our culture seems to have no history, no politics, and no debates. It seems to have petrified into a lifeless custom. Even more, these people seem incapable of transforming their culture, the way they seem incapable of growing their own food. The implication is that their salvation lies, as always, in philanthropy, in being saved from the outside (Mamdani 2002:767).

The predominant perceptions of the Middle East as a static entity, and of Muslims as submissive and reluctant to change, were to be challenged by the events of the so-called ‘Arab Spring’ which swept the region in 2011. The popular uprisings to some extent led to a paradigm shift, with scholars turning their focus to the dynamics of protest, often approached through the prism of social movement theories, and viewed in the light of neoliberal policies (Hanieh 2013, Chalcraft 2014, Ahcar 2013). In many new scholarly inquiries, the rise of the ‘New Arabs’ and the ‘New Middle East’ had been proclaimed. Old representations of the region and its people were now replaced with the narratives of freedom and dignity as driving forces of the Arab revolutions. Moreover, those who were previously seen as different and threatening were

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<sup>2</sup> For the critical review of the literature discussing reasons for authoritarianism in the Middle East, see: Rex Brynen, Bahgat Korany, and Paul Noble, eds., *Political Liberalization and Democratization in the Arab World* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1995).

now - at least for a short time during the social uprisings - seen as 'just like us', sharing the same values and aspirations towards democracy and human rights. This newly-discovered 'sameness' of the Arab protestors relates to the fact that, as Salwa Ismail (2013) points out, mainstream images of the uprisings focused on the educated, middle class youth, rather than subaltern actors. These particular representations of the Arab 'revolutions' circulating in media and scholarly accounts may be linked to some extent to the liberal imaginary of what counts as politics, what kinds of actors matter, and what forms and languages of protest are seen as progressive and worthy of applause. While these struggles 'make headlines', others - which may not conform to well-recognized models of collective action, and do not necessarily speak the dominant language- are often dismissively dubbed as tribal, sectarian, survival et cetera, and tend to be overlooked.

Among these dominant approaches that pay little attention to the marginalised actors, there have of course been exceptions. Those studies that carefully scrutinize the histories, lived experiences and forms of subaltern agency to a large extent have inspired my work.

Some of these works offer historical accounts: for example, Joel Beinin (2001) sheds light on the politics, daily lives and economic productions of workers and peasants across the vast geographical terrains of the Middle East and North Africa, starting from the eighteenth century onwards; and, in a similar manner, Stephanie Cronin in her monograph (2010) and edited volume (2008) gathers a variety of accounts of riots, rebellions, negotiations with the state, and other forms of popular politics in Iran and the wider Middle East as they unfolded from the sixteenth century onwards.

This thesis draws additionally, if not predominantly, on ethnographic studies that shift the gaze towards low-income households, families, street vendors, shop-owners, migrant workers, and squatters, to scrutinize their quotidian politics and informal activities within the context of the neoliberal and authoritarian state (Bayat 1997, 2000, 2010, 2015; Ismail 2006, 2013, Singerman 1995, Chalcraft 2006). For example, in her 1995 book, Diane Singerman suggests to rethink the realm of politics in the Middle East by expanding the focus to include those who lack access to formal political channels. Singerman argues that the *sha'b* (popular classes), rather than being

apathetic and submissive, are involved in 'forming alternative, informal political institutions to further their interests' (Singerman 1995:3) based on family ties and neighbourhood networks. Singerman's book is in this way a portrayal of how, in the context of the authoritarian rule, low-income communities in Cairo self-organize, reshape the public space, escape the state, and counter it, in order to realize their private interests and public needs.

In a similar vein, Asef Bayat offers other insights into the lives and practices of the urban poor. While for Singerman 'popular political activity is always taking place' (1995:4) among the subaltern, Bayat does not see them as necessarily political per se, but rather as likely to become so. He sheds light on the struggles of ordinary people in the Middle East who, he argues, trigger social change, yet cannot be grasped by mainstream social movement theories. Bayat (1997, 2010) hints at the subaltern's engagement in what he calls the 'quiet encroachment of the ordinary' - 'a silent, patient, protracted and pervasive advancement of the ordinary people on the propertied and powerful in order to survive hardships and better their lives' (Bayat 1997:7). This mundane activism of non-elite actors, according to Bayat, seeks the redistribution of social goods and autonomy from the state (1997:10), and constitutes a 'grassroots non-movement' (Bayat 2010:IV). Non-movements, unlike traditional social movements, lack organizational structures, leadership or clear ideology, and are action-oriented (rather than discourse-oriented), as they seek to acquire for themselves what is banned or not delivered to them by the state. As such, these practices are rooted in everyday settings and avoid open confrontations with authorities unless the community's gains are threatened, something which could lead to collective mobilization and articulation of claims.

Finally, in her book 'Political Life in Cairo's New Quarters', Salwa Ismail scrutinizes the politics of the informal residential area of Bulaq al-Dakrur in Cairo, in the context of neoliberal reshaping of the economy and the shift towards what she calls the 'security state'. Ismail draws a picture both of the community's everyday politics revolving around the appropriation of goods and services, and community-based governance), and of the 'everyday state' as it is encountered by the quarter's residents, through control, surveillance and disciplining practices. As such, Ismail departs from Bayat's more optimistic accounts of the subaltern's exercising of autonomy, and in a more critical manner emphasizes the unescapable bind between 'ruler and ruled'

(2006:130), and the hierarchical relations and conflicts implicit in community-based governance. Ismail (*ibid.*:xxii) follows de Certeau's conceptualization of resistance as 'subversion of the order of domination in a manner that serves the interests of subordinates'. Importantly, avoiding a priori definitions, Ismail suggests to consider 'the potential of everyday-life practices to become infrastructures of action—foundations upon which resistance in the form of collective action can be built' (2006: xxiii). This potential, Ismail argues, needs to be addressed in the particular context of those practices, namely in relation to the state's spatially grounded techniques of power and control.

## **1.2 Popular Agency and Everyday Life**

At the time when the project of re-writing Indian history was born, the focus on marginalized actors and their forms of agency started to preoccupy mainstream political and social sciences. While Middle Eastern studies had been late to incorporate subaltern perspectives, inquiries into popular agency and politics were already flourishing elsewhere in the 1970s and 1980s (see e.g. Bourdieu, 1977; de Certeau, 1984). Within these perspectives, the locus of agency was seen as being not necessarily in the sites of collective mobilization and revolutions, but rather in everyday life and its practices. The growing consensus that politics is 'not only what is openly declared' (Scott 1997:327) gave rise to a quickly expanding field of 'resistance studies'. A prominent figure in this field, James C. Scott (1985, 1990) was likely one of the first to notice that the resistance of the marginalized stems from daily practices through which the weak can undermine domination and exploitation and advance their interests without staging public dissent. Listing practices such as foot-dragging, avoidance, theft, and other predominantly individualistic and off-stage acts, Scott proposed to see them as facets of the subaltern's 'everyday resistance' (as opposed to 'public resistance') (1985, 1990). Concurrent with Scott's work, other ethnographic studies of resistance that were similar in focus started to emerge (Taussig 1980; Comaroff 1985; Ong 1987).

Scott's understanding of the politics of the weak inspired many scholars, leading to a situation where, as Brown (1969, quoted in Moore 1998:349) observes, 'resistance and hegemony [have]

come to monopolize the anthropological imagination'. The proliferation of studies classifying various phenomena as 'resistance' also provoked polemics (Mitchell 1990, Tilly 1991). Scott's dichotomic reading of resistance - where its quotidian forms seem to be opposed to its public ones - met with criticism from, among others, Asef Bayat. Bayat, as discussed earlier, instead proposed the concept of 'quiet encroachment' that would allow for taking into account not only acts that are defensive, but also those that 'move forward' (1997:56) to improve people's lives. As such, they are not only silent, but also visible and collective, and stemming from a variety of motivations, rather than mere rational calculations (ibid.).

The determination of many scholars to prove the subaltern's agency and map their dissent has often led, as Achille Mbembe (2001:5) points out, to reductionist accounts of state and power. In a similar manner, Lila Abu-Lughod (1990) criticizes accounts that romanticize subaltern resistance and fail to account for power structures in which resistance is always embedded. To view resistance as the only possible response to hegemony is to erase acts of 'collaboration, negotiation, [and] consent', through which the subaltern may contribute to or maintain their subalternity (Chalcraft 2006:8-9). It may also involve the erasure of internal divisions and differences within marginalized groups by scholars who tend to 'sanitize' subaltern politics (Ortner 1995:176).

Finally, an eminent postcolonial theorist and founder member of the Subaltern Studies collective, Partha Chatterjee (2004, 2011), argues that in light of new forms of governmentality affecting the daily lives of the marginalized, a paradigm focused on 'subaltern resistance' is no longer adequate. Chatterjee proposes instead to shift the object of analysis from insurgency to the 'negotiations that take place in political society' (2011:15). 'Political society', as distinct from bourgeois and rights-bearing members of civil society, refers to those governed as populations - landless people, refugees, day labourers and those below the poverty line. They are seen by the state as objects of welfare programs rather than political subjects, and this is the basis on which they form their claims. '[T]hey constitute themselves as groups that deserve the attention of government' Chatterjee notes (ibid.) Preoccupied with their livelihood needs, the subaltern appeal to the government's moral duty to 'look after [the] poor and underprivileged population', rather than acting as citizens demanding their rights. Moreover,

as Chatterjee argues, they do not challenge the laws that deem illegal the informal activities on which they rely, instead wanting 'the authorities to declare an exception' (2008:15) and tolerate their illegal practices rather than legalize them; something which has the effect of further excluding them from the realm of civil society.

### **1.3 Struggles of the Marginalised: Against, Despite and For the State**

Strikingly, whether one refers to 'everyday resistance' or to more nuanced notions of 'non-movements and quiet encroachment', 'informal life', 'everyday politics' or the 'politics of the governed', all of these approaches, notwithstanding the crucial theoretical and conceptual differences between them, give a similar picture of subaltern struggles. The subaltern in these accounts seek material entitlements and manoeuvre to escape control and regulations, as they are predominantly driven by the concerns of everyday life and mundane needs. Injustice here is directly acted upon, rather than challenged in an organized, collective manner. That is because subaltern struggles, as the discussed literature implies, are non-ideological, and take the form of practices rather than the articulation of claims. Thus, Julia Eckert (2015) sums them up as 'practice movements' that unfold in everyday life. Eckert argues that they need to be incorporated into social movement analysis, as they represent political engagements through which the subaltern find ways to speak. '[I]gnoring them would be to silence the subaltern once more', suggests Eckert (ibid.).

While these critiques rightly problematize readings of resistance and offer more nuanced accounts of subaltern politics, I nonetheless argue that, paradoxically, they may be falling into another trap. Namely, the effort to expand the field of politics and discover subaltern agency has led, to some extent, to the reification of both, whereby subaltern politics is today largely associated with the realm of everyday and quotidian practices. In the context of studies on Islam, Fadil and Fernando (2015) warn that the narrowed-down focus on the 'everyday' as a bounded site risks overlooking or dismissing what seems to be located outside it. Something similar, I argue, can be observed in the literature dedicated to bringing in forms of subaltern

agency, where the gaze on the everyday and its practices undermines various ways of being, speaking or becoming, that are changing, evolving, and not necessarily circumscribed by the everyday.

Moreover, understanding the everyday as a locum of oppositional subjectivities and transgressive practices of transformative potential, which are otherwise not apparent, should also be problematized in the context of the relationship between the subaltern and the state. As Jensen (2014) astutely observes, despite the fact that anthropological writings on the state have focused mainly on people's efforts to circumvent it (for example through autonomous practices and the maintenance of cultural difference), this does not always have to be the case. 'Hopes against the state', as Jensen calls them, are accompanied by equally valid 'hopes for the state'. The latter may comprise yearnings for normality, for a functioning state and for being part of it. Hence, not only 'grid evasion' but also 'grid desire' (Jensen *ibid.*, 241) deserves to be studied.

Bearing this in mind, I build on the rich literature on subaltern politics and agency while hoping to address what seems to be missing. I argue that associating subaltern aspirations with the redistribution of goods and the safeguarding of autonomy from the state to maintain their informal lives (Bayat 1997) neglects instances where the subaltern reject the position of marginality and refuse to act as the 'poor' or the 'populations'. In other words, focusing on largely non-discursive struggles that seek, through various means, material provisions and the betterment of everyday life does not reflect the more complex reality of subaltern efforts under our study. My ethnographic research shows that the marginalized aim not only to make life bearable, but also to be recognized as 'worthy' - as equal citizens and rights-bearing subjects (albeit not necessarily acting as a social movement). While Asef Bayat (1997, 2000) contends that the subaltern should not be reduced to 'quiet encroachment', as they also turn to collective action and organized contention, he and other previously-mentioned authors do not discuss further modes of subaltern politics in detail. Hence, while the discussed writings constitute a starting point of this thesis, I aim to expand the focus and pay equal attention to instances where new political identities are being forged and where historically marginalized groups articulate their claims, demanding respect, dignity, and that their material interests be



protected. This can be done through various languages and sites, as the local, as well as the domestic and the transnational, constitute terrains of subaltern struggles. Moreover, as I will show, these struggles should not be seen as exclusively oppositional or against the state, but also as expressions that call 'for' the state - for its presence, intervention or protection, rather than for autonomy (Jensen 2014).

Such a reading thus aims at mapping the various sites and modalities of subaltern politics and approaching them as a continuum, composed of different logics (on which I elaborate in the introduction to chapters 4 and 5). By integrating insights from across sub-disciplines and perspectives, I hope to avoid singular logics and binary distinctions (between the everyday versus public resistance, practice movements versus organized collective action, or even contention versus submission), and rather account for complex and often interwoven modes of agency and politics, through which subaltern struggles play out.

### ***Why struggles? Notes on conceptualization***

This thesis is organized around the idea of a 'struggle'. In the introduction to the collection of essays titled 'Social Movements and Struggles for Recognition', Hobson (2003:4) explains that the concept of a struggle is deployed, as the issues discussed throughout the book 'are not episodes of collective action, but rather unbounded expressions of protest and claims-makings'. Following a similar logic, I build this thesis around subaltern struggles, which may be understood as a variety of efforts - across sites and scales - of marginalized groups to question, escape, or simply deal with their systemic subordination. To struggle, according to dictionary definitions, is to 'make forceful or violent efforts to get free of restraint or constriction', to 'engage in conflict', to 'strive to achieve or attain something in the face of difficulty or resistance', as well as to 'have difficulty handling or coping with' or to 'make one's way with difficulty'. Taken together, these meanings reflect both the existential condition of the subaltern and the myriad of their interlocked endeavours as discussed in this thesis. The recourse to the concept of struggle functions also as a way out of the binary categories around which thinking about politics in political science is often organized, such as collective versus

individual, off-stage versus public, and informal networks versus institutional channels. While these are understood as oppositional pairs belonging to different realms of political engagements (for example formal versus informal politics), I aim to instead view them in their totality and in mutual relation (rather than in false opposition), as excluding either of them would mean excluding the lived experiences, motives, needs and aspirations of the subaltern actors involved.

Moreover, I approach struggles not only in their immediacy as they unfold, but also as vehicles of meaning and identity construction, and, by extension, as sites where politics is shaped. Here I echo Joan Scott (1999:76), who proposes to understand the politics and consciousness of the working class not as natural, but as outcomes of 'struggle and debate'. Paying attention to the latter is necessary in order to account for the complexities of identities and experiences, both individual and collective, within the history of the working class. Similarly, in this study I seek to avoid essentializing representations of the subaltern groups and their politics, revealing not only competing voices, but also how what is now 'known' about the two groups, and presented to the world as coherent representations, is itself an outcome of various struggles.

Finally, the recourse to the concept of struggle is meant as an 'opening up' to include forms of agency that are about coping, challenging, or advancing one's interests, but which may not fit neatly into well-established categories. Here I bear in mind Saba Mahmood's critique of binary readings of agency, reduced to expressions of resistance versus submission. Such a narrow understanding, Mahmood (2005:14) argues, 'elides dimensions of human action whose ethical and political status does not map onto the logic of repression and resistance'. Agency must therefore, as Mahmood reminds us, be understood within the specific contexts in which it manifests. In this, she echoes Abu-Lughod (1990:47) who, studying Egyptian Bedouin women's poetry, asks an important question: How do we recognize women's agency 'without either misattributing to them forms of consciousness or politics that are not part of their experience (...) or devaluing their practices as prepolitical, primitive, or even misguided?'

In this vein, rather than confining the analytical lens of this study to 'resistance' or 'contentious politics', I propose the theoretically less loaded and polysemic concept of 'struggle' as more

appropriate here. While the former carry the risk of reducing the complex field of subaltern politics to a priori defined phenomena and reifying the subaltern as rebellious actors, the latter, with its focus on effort rather than on particular shapes or forms of consciousness, seems more responsive to the grey areas of the field's reality. First, it forgoes black-and-white portrayals of subaltern activity, and gives us tools to account for meanings and practices that are often ambiguous, messy, divergent and not necessarily coherent. Second, it allows one to avoid deciding a priori on the political value of subaltern engagements (Ismail 2006), and to instead assess them critically in their particular contexts, as they unfold.

It is important to remember, however, that subaltern struggles, even when played out locally, are not merely a 'grassroots phenomenon', belonging to and shaped by the subaltern alone. Besides the domestic setting, with its opportunities and constraints, the seemingly parochial marginalized groups are no less embedded in the transnational realm. On the one hand, the two groups under our study, to different degrees, function as the objects of reports, research, advocacy campaigns and the work of international NGOs, which monitor and support their causes, but also define the issues and shape the language of their struggles. The struggles of both the Bedouin and the akhdam need to be understood within this structuring context. On the other hand, by appealing to human rights and its legal mechanisms, the subaltern themselves become transnational actors seeking justice through supranational institutions. The human rights frame not only gives credibility to their claims, but also helps to narrate local struggles in a universal language, and opens up new arenas to reach audiences and allies beyond the nation-state. Very often, what were once domestic issues transcend the state boundaries and become (or do not become, as the case may be) internationally recognized claims. Through this, even if for most of the time they are physically rooted in their localities, the subaltern become part of a larger movement, and are turned into objects of globally circulating knowledge and representations. What this brings to the fore is the fact that the global and the local do not necessarily represent easily separated scales, and certainly not binary ones (Goodale 2007).

In order to account for these dynamics, in the second part of the thesis I move from the local and domestic realms to explore the transnational dimension of subaltern struggles. In the final

section of this chapter, I will sketch my understanding of the transnational realm, and the subaltern's position with it.

#### **1.4 Grounding the Transnational**

It seems rather obvious that while rights can be claimed, advocated and supported across different sites and scales, it is in the capacity of the nation-state to ultimately grant and protect them. In other words, the existence of international solidarity and recognition does not necessarily translate into the realization of rights, as these are ultimately materialized within the national framework. Hannah Arendt made this clear in her influential essay 'The Origins of Totalitarianism' (1966), where she argued that human rights are based on civil rights, as only those granted national rights can enjoy humanness and, hence, human rights. Describing the situation of stateless people and refugees in the aftermath of World War II, she acutely observed that 'the world found nothing sacred in the abstract nakedness of being human' (ibid:295). This reflects what Talal Asad (2003) describes as a 'paradox of human rights' - even though they claim universality, their application is vested in the particularity of nation-state jurisdiction.

While the cosmopolitan elites often manage to bypass a state's restrictions and repression, it seems that it is the weak and the marginalized whose wellbeing is most affected by, and dependent on, the state. Abundant examples from geographical literature show, for example, how in the neoliberal order the rich can remain untouched by an authoritarian setting and the inconveniences of poorly-delivering public institutions by funding their own private security, roadways and gated spaces, and forming enclaves of 'private democracy' (Denis 2006). Denis and other contributing authors of the book 'Cairo Cosmopolitan: Politics, Culture, and Urban Space in the New Globalized Middle East' (Amar, Singerman 2006) skilfully illustrate the dissonance between the elites, who are well-travelled, cross locations and boundaries easily, and have access to goods and resources limited for others, and the localized urban poor, who compete for limited resources and public services. For the subaltern, it is often 'the street' that

bounds them - this is where they live and work, participating in what Bayat has called an 'outdoors economy' (2012:114).

If this is the case - if the subaltern's plight is determined by the goodwill, or lack thereof, of the state, and their lives are in most cases forever confined within the state's borders - why do we approach these allegedly parochial and localized actors from the perspective of transnational dynamics? And is it not a stretch to argue that those of limited mobility, the Bedouin villagers or the akhdam slum dwellers, become transnational actors themselves?

The perspective I advance here is certainly not that of Appadurai (1996), who predicts a new political order and the end of the nation state due to the emergence of global phenomena such as increased migration and new media. However, while I remain sceptical about the weakening of borders and the capacity of the subaltern to circumvent the state, I acknowledge the role of transnational processes that have transformed not only the world order, as such, but also the environment - reshaping political opportunities and introducing new languages and channels of action - for social movements and marginalized groups. Hence, I follow the call of della Porta and Tarrow (2005) to examine what they call 'complex internationalism', in order to assess both the constraints and the opportunities it brings. What I try to critically examine is how the particular historical conjuncture - where transnational activism and advocacy and the deployment of a universalized language of rights are probably more salient than ever before - shapes the emancipatory efforts of the subaltern, whose human rights are continuously violated.

This attempt to account for cross-border dynamics is rooted in a critique of methodological nationalism, which takes the nation-state as a natural and bounded social context in defining the unit of analysis (Amelina et al. 2012:2-3). The critique of such a limited approach has been undertaken by many scholars, who have pointed out that reconfigurations of states, the emergence of global capitalism, and growing interconnections between people, events and ideas necessitate the deployment of new methodologies and analytical frameworks. This suggestion has come from ethnographers, among others - Burawoy (2000), for example, proposes to study phenomena of the local scale through the lens of global forces, while Marcus

(1995) advocates for a methodology (multi-sited ethnography) that traces interconnections between transnational processes and movements. More recently, the legal anthropologist Sally Engle Merry (2006) has developed an approach of 'deterritorialized' ethnography to account for phenomena that do not belong to any particular place (such as UN conferences) and to explain transnationally circulating flows and exchanges. Importantly, these approaches do not erase the locality, but rather aim to destabilize its boundaries and approach it in a relational way as contingent on larger, historical processes.

Processes of transnationalization have been theorized across disciplines, making a strong impact in cultural studies, as well as studies of migration, citizenship, gender and cosmopolitanism. Of particular relevance for this research, the field of social movement studies has, as della Porta (2011:200) points out, been traditionally rooted in the nation-state perspective, and has been late to incorporate the transnational lens into research. The first insights into social movement theories came from international relations scholars, who hinted at the increasing role of non-governmental actors in international politics and the emergence of new normative systems (della Porta *ibid.*). In their seminal work, Keck and Sikkink (1998) analyzed the relationship between domestic and transnational activism in effecting change, through what they called a 'boomerang effect'. The authors expanded the understanding of political opportunity structure by showing how groups in unfavourable domestic settings may still exert pressure on their own governments with the help of powerful international allies. Recourse to supranational institutions and actors in struggles for domestic change, defined in social movement studies as 'externalization', was the first of three modes of a movement's transnationalization, as identified by della Porta and Tarrow (2005). The other two modes related to what had been known in the literature as 'diffusion' and 'domestication'. The concept of diffusion indicates a transfer of frames, ideas or organizational structures from one movement to another, while domestication refers to situations where protestors target the national government despite the conflictual issue having been triggered by international institutions. However, changes in the political order brought about by the collapse of the Soviet Union, followed by the expansion of the Internet, the rise of budget airlines and the widespread use of the English language, have reshaped social movements even further, enabling new forms

of collaboration and cooperation across borders among activists mobilizing for a shared goal (della Porta, Tarrow 2005, Tarrow 2005, Smith 2013). The transnational movements, as Della Porta and others (2006) show in their study of the emerging global justice movement, do not replace domestic mobilization nor represent radically new social actors. Rather, the aspects specific to them are the repertoire of action, multiple identities, and the organizational forms that reflect 'the complex interaction between local and supranational activism' (ibid.:233-235). Tarrow argues that the international institutions, while presenting challenges to the movements, nonetheless offer 'resources, opportunities and incentives', and create spaces where 'domestic actors can move, encounter others like themselves, and form coalitions that transcend their borders' (Tarrow 2005:25). Smith (2013), in an optimistic viewpoint claims that the new globalized order facilitates the emergence of transnational activism, as it lessens the importance of class and geographical difference, and enables cross-cultural understanding. In a similar manner, della Porta and Tarrow (2005) argue that actors involved in transnational collective action are more likely to look beyond class divisions and essentialist identities and form coalitions that are horizontal in structure. In fact, they describe these activists as 'rooted cosmopolitans' of 'multiple belongings' and 'flexible identities' (ibid.:237-240). While the difficulties of maintaining transnational coalitions and the challenges these movements face (Tarrow 2001; della Porta, Tarrow 2005) are well articulated in the literature, transnational contention, while not always successful, is believed to reflect the power of ordinary people in the face of a global order shaped by neoliberal policies, unregulated markets and financial institutions. In the words of della Porta and others (2006), it constitutes 'globalization from below'.

This reading of transnational processes and transnational actors, even if highly insightful and challenging to the dominant understanding of globalization as a force 'from above', nevertheless needs to be problematized in the context of the cases under our study. The accounts of social movement scholars discussed above are marked by a Eurocentric bias, not only neglecting actors from the Global South, but also lacking a critical reflection on power asymmetries and hierarchical relationships between the Global North and Global South and their consequences for transnational activism. Put simply, the transnational realm is not equally

accessible to all groups and movements, and does not offer equal opportunities for all of them. Or as Ella Shohat, a professor of Cultural Studies, reminds us in 'Talking Visions' (1998): in the context of the heavy surveillance of borders - opening up for some but impassable for others - transnational connections and collaborations cannot be taken for granted. In a similar manner, Ghassan Hage (2016:44) observes the very different possibilities of mobility and movement for different categories of people. While for some, 'largely white upper classes', the world may seem 'almost borderless', for others, 'visas, checkpoints, searches, investigations, interviews, immigration bureaucracies, refusal of permission to cross, language problems, embassy queues, cost of travel, and the like' are reminders of the salience of borders. As Hage (ibid.) concludes, '[s]ome people roam the globe like masters, others like slaves. Some are the subjects of the global order, others are its objects, often circulating strictly according to the needs of capital'.

Against this backdrop, we need to reflect on how the experiences of the earlier-mentioned 'rooted cosmopolitans', with their 'multiple belongings', resonate with those of the subaltern, whose membership of a group is assigned rather than chosen, who do not speak foreign languages, and for whom traveling abroad is neither cheap nor easy. To what extent can we talk about horizontal networks and coalitions, if those whom the subaltern meet are not 'others like themselves' (Tarrow 2005), but mainly local middle class activists or international development and human rights workers, with whom they share very little in terms of status, resources and language? And do all groups join the 'transnational' on their own terms and in their own capacity?

These rhetorical questions serve mainly as a call for a more nuanced approach to understanding both the 'transnational context' for subaltern groups and the forms of transnational politics in which they participate. In my conceptualization, I borrow from transnational feminists, who urge us to critically interrogate power asymmetries of the globalization process and see the transnational field as embedded in a system of inequalities and hierarchical relationships. In 'Scattered Hegemonies', for example, Grewal and Kaplan (1994) introduce the idea of transnational feminism as a response to global feminism which, they argue, is compromised by its Eurocentric perspective. Grewal and Kaplan specifically question the validity of the monolithic category of the 'third world woman' projected by western feminists as passive



subjects in need of liberation, and also the universalization of women's struggles with disregard to their particular contexts and realities. Instead, they propose a transnational approach, which aims to scrutinize relationships between and among differently located actors and their mutually related contexts. Such an approach is useful, in their own words, 'to problematize a purely locational politics of global-local or center-periphery in favor of the lines cutting across them' (1994:13). Even if what is discussed here is an issue of feminist practice, I consider this reading of transnationalism as translatable to other fields, and highly instructive for my own research. It is a lens that allows us to analyze subaltern practices that go beyond the local/global dichotomy, and to study particular realities in relation to larger processes that are themselves the subject of critical examination.

### **1.5 Conclusion:**

In summary, this thesis explores the complexity of subaltern politics - the materiality on which it builds, the ideals from which it stems, and the global dynamics within which it is embedded. I start off with ethnographic accounts of localized struggles, to ultimately zoom out and reflect, in a comparative way, on their transnational condition. In doing so, this thesis seeks to complicate discussions on both subaltern struggles and the global politics of human rights, and to further examine their entanglement. It also seeks to write against the scattered images of subaltern actors existing in the literature, where representations of subaltern politics seem to be relegated to disciplinary borders (for example, why are the subaltern considered to act as citizens only when addressed by citizenship scholars? And why are they considered to be embedded within the power asymmetries of the global realm only when approached by scholars of transnationalization?).

To return to the starting point of my argument, subaltern struggles do not constitute an autonomous political field, nor are they driven by a specific 'subaltern logic' or 'subaltern aspirations' - they cannot be reduced to specific properties or shared goals stemming from their marginalized condition. What I seek to demonstrate instead is how groups, who suffer from multi-layered systems of oppression, engage in a continuum of struggles played out across the settings of lived spaces, the nation-state and the transnational level. In doing so, they act not

only as the poor, or the 'populations' seeking welfare, or directly responding to daily hardship to assert for goods and services that they are deprived of; they also organize, articulate their claims and demand recognition as citizens and worthy human beings. These acts - whether played out in lived spaces, streets, courts or international fora - look beyond the materiality of everyday life and seek to challenge the dominant order and the subaltern's positioning within it.

I hope that bringing anthropological sensitivity to the meanings and practices on the ground, and a critical perspective on transnational dynamics in which the subaltern are embedded, will help to expand our understanding of subaltern politics, and as such, contribute to the scholarship on contentious politics in the Middle East.

In order to tackle the issues outlined above, the thesis proceeds as follows:

Chapter 2 discusses the issues of methodology, where, among other things, I explain my approach, choice of methods, and fieldwork dilemmas that have strongly shaped the outlook and nature of this thesis. From there, I move to Chapter 3, which serves as an introduction to the Naqab Bedouin and the Yemeni akhdam, and the specific patterns of marginalization that affect the welfare of the two groups. Besides a general overview of the subaltern's condition and its historical evolution, I also briefly discuss particular sites and actors that have been central to this study. The next two chapters constitute empirical investigations into subaltern politics and forms of agency. Chapter 4 scrutinizes what I have called the Bedouin's 'politics of place and memory,' while Chapter 5 studies the Yemeni akhdam's struggles for a 'liveable life' (Butler 2004). These two chapters are followed by a comparative reflection that brings to light the 'rightful' character of subaltern struggles, as experienced by the actors themselves. While both of these chapters concentrate on domestic and local settings, the next part of the thesis is dedicated to the subaltern's presence in the transnational realm. Chapters 6 and 7 discuss the efforts of the akhdam and the Bedouin, respectively, to present their causes to the world, in order to make themselves known, intelligible and supported. The subsequent comparative section reflects on the varying outcomes of the subaltern's global encounters, in terms of the practical gains and 'ontological consequences' (Douzinas 2007:56) they have for the two

groups. The thesis ends with a conclusion that brings the findings together and seeks to show how the analysis of the empirical cases contributes to our understanding of subaltern politics, in a way that goes beyond the specificity of the two groups under study.

## **2. Notes on Methodology**

In his thorough critique of anthropology, Michel-Rolph Trouillot (2003) raised several important issues regarding ethnographic practice and the status of the 'native voice' within it. Although the discipline seems to be most attentive to the meanings and words of research participants, Trouillot observed that anthropologists 'never give the people they study the right to be as knowledgeable or, more precisely, to have the same kind of knowledge about their own societies as ethnographers' (2003:129). Put simply, this means that the 'native', to use Trouillot's term, is rarely regarded as equal, and remains an object, rather than a partner, of research. Those under study may be rendered visible or intelligible through an ethnographic work, yet ultimately it is the voice of the anthropologist and not the subaltern that is heard. This resonates, on a more general level, with well-articulated critiques existing within postcolonial studies, pointing to the fact that while data is often extracted from the South, knowledge tends to be produced in the North (or at least it is western knowledge that gets global recognition).

Fernando (2014), reviewing Trouillot's legacy, discusses his two proposals to address the above-mentioned flaws of anthropology: 'the first entails distinguishing between one's object of study and object of observation; the second, taking seriously the epistemological status of what Trouillot called the native voice' (Fernando *ibid*: 237). What does this mean more precisely?

Trouillot (2003:122-123) takes as a starting point of his critique the dominant understanding of the ethnographic field as a contained place, defined either by the particular category of people who occupy it ('locality') or by the particular practices or phenomena that unfold there ('locales'). Such an approach, Trouillot warns, tends to reify the places and people under study, giving the impression that the totality of the field's reality 'can be captured between the table of contents and the index of a book' (ibid: 123). Trouillot proposes instead to regard places under observation as 'locations', which are never self-reliant, but instead are interconnected and embedded in larger processes, flows, exchanges, and systems of knowledge: 'One needs a map to get there, and that map necessarily points to other places without which localization is impossible' (ibid: 122). These myriad forces shape the appearance of the field sites and our perceptions of them, but also often, more fundamentally, bring into being categories of people we choose to study (Fernando ibid.). Thus, while observing the local, one should include in the analysis relations of power and domination that cannot be immediately grasped by participant observation. These may include not only forces of global economy and historical developments, but also formations of knowledge that render certain events or ways of being as marginalized, and hence unworthy of study. The distinction between what is observed in the field and the larger object of study seems crucial for Trouillot (2001:135).

Trouillot's second proposition, recounted by Fernando (ibid.), regards the earlier-mentioned 'status of the native voice'. To prevent its erasure, Trouillot urges us to undertake research that would take seriously the knowledges of people under our observation. Not by representing the subaltern, or letting the subaltern speak - propositions of which Trouillot is rightly wary - but rather, by giving the subaltern the chance to be a potential 'interlocutor' during and after the research process (2003:136).

Trouillot's remarks constitute an important basis of my own methodological reflection, even if this thesis is of an interdisciplinary, rather than purely anthropological, nature. In what follows, I discuss what the engagement with Trouillot's critique means in practice for my approach, my choices of methods, and the 'technicalities' of conducting my fieldwork, as well as my attempts to go beyond it. The first section discusses the premises of political ethnography in general, and in particular its ethics. In the second section, I go on to explain the logic of my comparative

endeavour and discuss in more detail the fieldwork with its sites, stages and methods, and the challenges accompanying them. Finally, in the last section I briefly sketch the process of departing from an ethnography of the local, to account for what may not be immediately visible in the field.

## **2.1 Political ethnography and politics/ethics of research**

This research is guided largely by an ethnographic approach that relies on 'personal interaction with the research subjects in their own setting' (Wood 2007:124) and on data gathered mainly through participant observation, formal semi-structured interviews as well as informal conversations, oral histories, and also ordinary stories, anecdotes and jokes. Between 2010 and 2013, I carried out repeated fieldworks in the two main sites of my study: the Naqab region in the south of Israel, and the capital of Yemen, Sana'a. Within each site, I visited numerous locations and selected a few places where I stayed for longer periods. During that time, I conducted in total around 50 recorded interviews, plus another 20 in which I took notes. Besides the interviews, I collected 9 oral histories, of which 6 were shared with me by the Naqab Bedouin men and women, and 3 by the akhdam in Sana'a. Nevertheless, these are personal experiences, encounters and exchanges, mediated through empathy and curiosity, and further registered in field notes that to a large extent shaped my understanding of the field, and constitute the most important source of primary data for this project.

Beyond the information gathered within the field, I additionally analyzed various materials and texts published by the two groups, ranging from manifestos and public statements to website pages, Facebook posts and promotional leaflets. Finally, I conducted interviews with NGO workers and human rights activists advocating for the Naqab Bedouin and the akhdam, and analyzed a variety of texts, documents and reports on the two groups that are produced in English and circulate within the international realm.

The reasons for choosing an ethnographic approach to conduct my study were multiple. The most pragmatic ones derive from the particular subject of the research, and the nature of the groups under study. While I discuss the two cases in detail in the following chapter, here it is

just worth mentioning that both the Bedouin in Israel and the akhdam in Yemen are regarded with suspicion, isolated from mainstream society, and discriminated against, but also are little studied. As there had been little previous research done on the matter, especially in the Yemeni case, I had to generate most of the data, rather than relying on secondary sources. Moreover, the sensitive topic and the vulnerable status of the two groups necessitated the establishment of trust relations that I hoped to achieve through my long-term, and repeated over time, presence within the communities. I considered participant observation and interviews to be the most suitable techniques, knowing that others, such as survey distribution for example, might have been technically unfeasible, given that a large proportion of my research subjects neither wrote nor read.

Beyond the level of practicalities, there were further reasons working in favour of ethnographic methods. To a large extent, the choice of methods was driven by the research questions. In order to understand how subaltern struggles are shaped not only by the complex setting in which the marginalized groups are embedded, but also by people's own understandings and interpretations of 'who they are', 'what is at stake?', 'what is possible?' and 'by which means?', investigation into the realities of everyday life, where meanings are constructed and practices play out, seemed necessary. Many scholars have acknowledged and exploited the potential of 'political ethnography' to deliver fine-grained studies of political, often barely visible processes, and the discourses, practices and actors accompanying them (Schatz 2009; Auyero 2012:121). Thus, political ethnography is most appropriate, I believe, to study both workings of power and forms of politics as they come into being and unfold in the everyday setting.

While ethnography offers tools to get closer to and better understand political dynamics, it also has its own 'politics' and ethics. As a study rooted in lived spaces, often relying on engagement and a close relationship with research subjects, it raises questions about, among other things, one's positionality, unequal power relations in the field site, potential risks and harms of research, and the representations of the 'Other' it produces. A critical and ongoing reflection on my role as a researcher and my relationship with the research subjects had several practical implications that shaped the ways my research was designed and conducted.

Being well versed in the critiques of anthropological representations of the Other (Clifford, Marcus 1986) and the discipline's complicity in the colonial endeavour (Asad 1998), I found it crucial to conduct fieldwork in a dialogic manner, relying on local knowledges and learning from the field. Viewed from this perspective, the people under study were not mere objects of knowledge production, but active participants in the process. Indeed, I relied on the research participants' sense and understanding of reality, which, after all, they knew much better than I did, not only to specify the focus of my research, but also to assess the potential risks or difficulties of the research. Consulting on my work with the people, and being challenged, corrected and questioned by them was an important process which helped me rethink my concepts and theoretical perspectives, in order to make them more grounded in the field's reality, but also simply to make the research more feasible. Through on-going conversations with research participants and repeated returns to the field sites, I came to the conclusion, to give just one example, that perhaps my initial aim of 'finding resisters' (Abu-Lughod 1990:41) was less important than finding a lens that would shed light on the complex reality of subaltern struggles, and give justice to the various lived experiences, perceptions and understandings of the actors themselves. This does not mean that I aspired to reflect the totality of the 'subaltern experience'; my perspective remained partial and limited. Yet, in its partiality, I hoped to look for meanings that were constructed (and contested) by people under the study, rather than imposing my own meanings on them (see Abu-Lughod *ibid*: 47, Mahmood 2005). Following such an approach meant that the boundaries of my research which I had initially set up quickly turned out to be artificial, and had to be reconsidered and redrawn, in the light of 'unanticipated discoveries and directions' (Amit 2000: 17).

A dialogic research is also crucial, I believe, so as not to fix vulnerable groups in their marginality. Members of both of the groups that I studied often raised complaints that they were left out of consultation processes and that different actors claiming to represent them rarely listened to their opinions and demands. As one of the Bedouin research participants sharply put it, 'people use our issue, everybody has something to say about our situation, but nobody wants to listen to us'. I therefore consciously tried to include people's voices, not only to tell my own story of them, but rather, to let them share their interpretations and

understandings in their own words. Recounting people's narratives at length and with little commentary throughout the empirical chapters was one of the strategies to do this.

Working with the disenfranchised communities, who were very welcoming and open to collaboration, I had to be particularly attentive so as not to exploit their hospitality, and avoid hierarchical relationships. In order to do so, I considered it important not to put myself in the position of power and control, and not to impose on people my academic 'professional' guidelines, but rather to adapt myself to the norms, rules and schedules of the place. In a way, having a lack of control over the field setting and research process, while often seen by ethnographers as a weakness (Pratt 1986:38), was for me an important premise of the fieldwork, even if it did not, of course, eradicate the power relations always present in the field.

## **2.2 Fieldwork: sites, methods, data collection**

If classical ethnography is most often thought of as a detailed study of a single site, how can we justify studying two radically different groups in contexts that are hardly comparable, as most would rightly argue? The rationale behind bringing the two cases together is not to point to the differences or similarities between the Bedouin and the akhdam, or between the patterns of marginalization affecting the two, as I believe this would be of limited value. In other words, the aim of the comparison is not to learn more about specific groups or forms of subordination. Rather, I bring these two particular cases together to go beyond their specificity, argue against their uniqueness, and look for patterns which in a single case study may not be spotted. I echo Bayat's (2001:153) remark that comparisons 'compel us to see hidden facts, problematize taken-for-granted observations, and ask questions that otherwise we would not have raised had we considered only a single case'. Indeed, it was the comparative reflection that allowed me to see more than what was immediately observed, and recognize, for example, the wider environment in which the two groups are similarly embedded. Thinking comparatively about the Bedouin and the akhdam forced me to reflect further and question, among other things, why certain issues enjoy global recognition and support, while others remain little known or ignored. As such, I believe comparison offers grounds for theoretical reflection, opens up the



scope of the analysis, and ultimately allows us to tell a larger story of the subaltern and their politics.

Yet, even if this thesis is not intended as a monograph of the two sites or groups, this does not mean erasing the details or specificity of the two. On the contrary, the thesis aims to do justice to the groups under study and shed light on their internal complexities, competing voices and visions, and varying lived experiences.

As was mentioned earlier, the thesis draws on fieldwork conducted in different periods and different locations between 2010 and 2013. My research in Sana'a consisted of three field trips: the first one for a month's duration in December 2010, and then two further three-month-long stays in October-December 2011 and June-August 2013. My interest in the akhdam case, however, goes back to 2008 when I spent a year studying in Sana'a, and was puzzled by this group about which my Yemeni friends seemed to know so little, largely repeating the mythical stories about the akhdam's radical difference. During my preliminary field trip in 2010, I first established contacts with several members of the group, and visited some of the informal settlements occupied by the akhdam. During the later trips, I spent most of my time in the Dar Salm slum, and paid shorter but repeated visits to three other locations: the Samsara compound, the Madinat Sa'wan housing project, and the Beni Husheish settlement on the outskirts of Sana'a. Additionally, I visited the offices of two organizations acting as representative bodies for the marginalized, and conducted interviews with their members. Besides my participant observation of the akhdam's lived spaces, I followed some of them in their workplaces, and attended demonstrations, public gatherings, and various activities of the akhdam's leaders. Since leaving the field, I have remained in contact with some of the research participants, exchanging emails and phone calls.

In a similar manner, I conducted three field trips in the Naqab: the first one in summer 2011, the next between March and May 2012, and the final one in September-October 2012. Again in this case, the first research trip was of a preliminary nature, where in order to get an overview of the situation, I visited various Bedouin towns and villages, and established contacts both with villagers and NGO workers. During the second stay, I lived in a rented apartment in Beer Sheva,

and from there commuted to a number of Bedouin villages and townships where I sometimes stayed for short periods. Besides spending time with Bedouin families, I also met and conducted interviews with Arab activists, politicians, members of regional councils, and entrepreneurs, and followed the work of two organizations advocating for the Bedouin's cause: the Negev Coexistence Forum and Adalah. I conducted interviews with staff members, but also participated in activities organized by these NGOs such as, for example, educational tours around the Naqab organized for international visitors. Additionally, during that period I attended numerous demonstrations and political and community events, and visited schools and health clinics in the Bedouin villages. Finally, during my last trip to the Naqab I stayed for six weeks in the unrecognized village of Wadi al-Na'am, where I was hosted by two families. Although I did not return to the field later, and could not witness on the ground the wave of Bedouin protests in summer 2013, I was in constant touch with a couple of the research participants, and conducted several additional interviews with Bedouin activists over Skype.

The majority of the data gathered during my fieldworks derives from participant observation, understood as 'the study of others in their space and time' (Burawoy 1998:25) and recorded in field notes. My presence in the field was rarely marked by 'discoveries' or any 'revelations'; on the contrary, I remember often being frustrated, bored and disappointed about the uneventful nature of people's everyday life. If the process of learning was probably not immediate, I believe it was incremental. It happened through a gradual cognitive opening-up to the field's reality in dialogue with research participants, but furthermore, if not mainly, once I was away from the field, through a process of reflection and writing. That is why I found scrupulously written down field notes, which allowed me to 'archive' and return later to my observations, to be of utmost importance.

While conducting participant observation, I often had to find a balance between what I chose to 'observe' and 'participate in', and what was offered and shown to me by the research participants, who left some doors open for me and others closed. The limits of my access to varying sites and settings can be explained first by the fact that my participation depended

largely on people's 'invitation', or in other words, willingness to let me in, or take me along. Being a female researcher played a role here. On the one hand, I could get access to both female and male settings and move freely between the two. As a woman, I was also treated with less suspicion, and was for example easily invited by people to their households and family events. On the other hand, coming from far away and being by myself meant that many people considered that I was fragile and needed to be looked after. While my independence was respected, I would sometimes be discouraged from going to certain places, or 'protected' from uncomfortable or overwhelming situations. Additionally, I was often dependent on 'gatekeepers', or people who introduced me to certain settings and would take the role of my guides. Although I appreciated their help, I had to constantly renegotiate what I would experience as their interference and attempts to control, for example, my interactions with other research participants.

Besides participant observation, I conducted around 70 interviews with members of the two groups, as well as activists and human rights advocates linked to them. As della Porta (2014:228) put it, '[i]nterviews are a particular type of conversation: structured and guided by the researcher with a view to stimulating certain information'. They are most insightful when one is trying to shed light on processes of meaning and identity construction, as well as the role of emotions. Some of them resemble informal conversations, and are embedded in social interactions and presence in the field. Others, the in-depth ones, are less spontaneous, with the points for discussion or the general order being prepared in advance (della Porta *ibid.*).

Conducting in-depth interviews, while particularly useful for learning about general problems, demands, political agendas or historical developments, nonetheless had certain limitations of which I was very wary. First, as I was researching vulnerable groups who sought external support for their causes, people often understandably used the situation of an interview for their own 'purposes'. This meant that in the case of both groups, my respondents relied on ready-made scripts and particular stories which they wanted to transmit to audiences. Many of

my questions were ignored or only briefly answered, as from the perspective of the research participants, they were not important. Other information was emphasized and repeated, even when I did not necessarily ask for it.<sup>3</sup> Another challenge I faced while conducting interviews and trying to record them was that people would sometimes not consider themselves as legitimate, or knowledgeable enough, to answer my questions. 'Go talk to the sheikh, he knows much better, he will tell you everything', I heard repeatedly, especially in the early stage of my fieldwork in the Yemeni slums. Some others agreed to be interviewed, but clearly found the situation stressful, and tried to cut it as short as possible. Still others would censor themselves when they were being recorded, being much more careful or moderate in their opinions than they would be during off-the-record conversations.

Experiencing all these deficiencies of formal and taped interviews, I found the less formal interviews and chats to be more fruitful. These were particularly valuable in revealing controversial issues, emotions, and personal understandings, as well as conflicts and divisions within the group. Depending on the situation and setting of the informal interviews, I either took notes while my respondents were speaking, or I would have to reconstruct them later. Similarly, in the case of endless ordinary conversations, I tried to register them in my field notes with as much precision as possible.

To protect the anonymity of my research subjects, I largely used pseudonyms; however, I kept the real names of those who explicitly asked for it, for example activists who sought public exposure rather than invisibility. I also used real names in the cases of public figures, such as politicians, lawyers or directors of organizations. A vast majority of my formal and informal interviews were conducted in Arabic, and later translated by me into English. While I always tried to clarify things that were not comprehensible for me, I am aware of the nuanced

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<sup>3</sup> What I initially regarded as a 'weakness' of the interviews, and a source of many frustrations, eventually turned into the object of my critical analysis. Having heard the same stories repeated to me and other visitors, I started to read them as one of the many ways that the subaltern speak to the world, in order to sell their causes and receive support. Thus, while in the first part of the thesis I am concerned with narratives as conveyors of meanings and collective identities, in the second part I switch the focus to their strategic role. My aim here, however, is not to suggest that while certain narratives are 'authentic', others are produced merely for international consumption, and as such are less authentic or true. Such a clear-cut division and cynical reading of subaltern self-representations would be not only simplistic but also misleading.

meanings or diverse situations whose importance I might not have recognized due to the language barriers.

### **2.3 Ethnography between the local and global**

While the ethnographic study of the Bedouin and the akhdam constitutes an important part of this thesis, not all of the answers to questions that kept arising as I was proceeding with the research could be found in the field sites. This realization forced me to expand the gaze and push the study beyond its immediate object of observation (Trouillot 2003). With my growing understanding of the 'local' as not being bounded, and actors acting across different sites and scales, but also being embedded in the workings of larger, global, forces, I opened up the scope of my analysis to include the transnational dimension of subaltern struggles. As such, the thesis departs from a classical ethnography of particular sites, to include what could be loosely referred to as an 'ethnography of the global'.

Besides the earlier-mentioned work of Trouillot (2003), such a perspective is inspired by the work of several anthropologists and sociologists who urge us to attune the ethnographic practice to processes of globalization, and question the narrow focus on bounded places and communities (Long 1996; Comaroff, Comaroff 1992; Gupta, Ferguson 1997; Marcus 1998). In their review of ethnographies engaged with globalization, Gille and Ó Riain (2002) discuss a number of studies that scrutinize how the local is reshaped from above, how social actors establish connections beyond the boundaries of the nation state, and finally how people imagine, talk about and politicize the global.

My own understanding borrows largely from the work of Michael Burawoy and others (2000), who introduce the concept of 'global ethnography'. In essence, such an approach goes beyond the 'here' and the ahistorical 'now' of mainstream ethnography, and instead takes into account the 'globalized' nature of fieldwork sites and research subjects, who are linked in myriad ways to places and people across scales. Importantly, the connection to the global, as Burawoy (ibid: 6) argues, is as much about mobility, flows and actual crossing of borders as it is about symbolic

links and imagination. In a different manner, anthropologist Sally Engle Merry (2006) deploys ethnographic methods to investigate phenomena produced by globalization which escape the boundaries of particular localities. Studying the global movement against gendered violence, Merry (ibid.) reveals how it plays out simultaneously in different locations, but also in the 'placeless' sites of UN fora and transnational activism, among others. As such, her research challenges the understanding of the ethnographic site as a bounded place, and ethnography as a study of micro-level dynamics through long-term immersion in the field, proposing instead what she calls an 'ethnography of globalization' (ibid: 28-29).

Drawing on the understanding of the local and the global as interconnected and often overlapping, during my own fieldwork I recognized the explanatory limits of an ethnographic study narrowed down to the confined spaces of a village or a slum. Thus, aiming to understand in a holistic manner the ways 'the subaltern speak', I could not stick merely to everyday life and the local. Although this was not the initial goal of the research, I started to explore how people think of themselves as connected to the global, how they try to reach it and mark their presence there, but also how they themselves are embedded in and shaped by their 'transnational condition' (Teune 2010). Here, the questions posed are less about the Naqab Bedouin or the Yemeni akhdam as such, but concern issues of knowledge production and the workings of the global human rights regime (see Introduction to chapters 7 and 8).

In order to tackle these dynamics, I relied largely on qualitative methods such as interviews and textual analysis, rather than an in-depth ethnographic study. More specifically, I conducted interviews with a small number of human rights activists and NGO workers, and analyzed reports and briefings of UN meetings and other documents and statements presented on behalf of the Bedouin and the akhdam to EU and UN fora. As such, my exploration of the 'transnational' is not exhaustive, and necessitates further research; yet, even if in a modest way, it aims to bridge the gap between the micro- and macro levels of the analysis.

### **3. People and the Setting: Background Information**

This chapter aims to introduce in detail the two cases under study, doing justice to their particular histories, specific contexts, patterns of marginalization and exclusion, and their very material manifestations. In other words, in what follows, I hope to sketch the immediate 'universes' of the Naqab Bedouin and the akhdam in Sana'a, to lay the groundwork for an understanding of their lived experiences and the hardships, hopes and aspirations unique to each case. Thus, while the thesis is not a straightforward ethnography of the two groups, but aims to tell a larger story of subaltern politics, I hope to do so without erasing the particular. This chapter thus offers the background against which the different stakes and trajectories of the struggles of the Naqab Bedouin and the Yemeni akhdam must be viewed.

### **3.1 The Naqab Bedouin**

Among the Palestinian citizens of Israel, approximately 200,000 comprise Bedouin from the Naqab southern region of the country. Some half of them live in seven government-planned towns and several villages recognized by Israel, while the other half reside in villages that the state does not recognize. This means that the latter are regarded as illegal settlements, and their residents as illegal squatters on the state's land. While throughout the thesis I focus to a large extent on residents of 'unrecognized villages' where the majority of my fieldwork was conducted, I do not claim that they are in any way separate or distinct from the Bedouin residing in the townships. Moreover, while I use the term 'Naqab Bedouin', an Arabic term that was used by my interlocutors and is often deployed by critical scholars, I nevertheless remain aware that the Bedouin from the Naqab should not be regarded as a discrete category. They are part of historical Palestinian society, and maintain strong ties with other Palestinian communities settled across Israel, the occupied territories, Jordan and Egypt (Parizot 2006; Yiftachel 2008). Bearing in mind the larger sense of belonging of the Bedouin, which I will discuss further in the empirical chapters, is important, as failing to do so means succumbing to the Israeli narrative and its 'divide and rule' policies that aim towards the fragmentation of the Palestinian people (for the discussion on representations of the Bedouin, see Chapter 8).

The 'slow execution' of the Bedouin villages, as one resident described it, which has been carried out over many years through policies of demolition and systemic deprivation, was to be finally 'completed' with the Praver-Begin Bill, first announced in 2011 and initially approved by the Knesset on 24 June 2013. The aim of the draft law was 'the regulation of the Bedouin settlement', to be achieved through a state-led resettlement project. As rights organizations warned, this meant that, depending on calculations, between 30,000 and 70,000 Bedouin were going to be forcefully displaced, and their historical villages demolished. While the Bedouin, their allies and the NGOs supporting them likened the Praver Plan to a second Nakba and the



'biggest ethnic cleansing campaign since 1948',<sup>4</sup> the authorities claimed that the new law would bring prosperity to the Bedouin community and equal opportunities to all Israeli citizens. As the text of the bill (Begin 2013) stated, the resettlement would enable the Bedouin to benefit from the development of the region and 'grant them, and particularly the younger generation the tools necessary to successfully cope with the challenges of the future' (ibid., 3), and would help the Bedouin children to 'exploit their talents and realise their natural right to happiness' (ibid., 4).<sup>5</sup>

The discussions over the Praver Plan, from the moment it was announced in 2011 until it was eventually halted in December 2013 (see Chapter 7), largely coincided with the period of my fieldwork; and as such, the resettlement was a recurring theme of people's conversations and worries. Yet, the plan was met with little surprise; my interlocutors kept repeating that while the law might have been new, it was just a continuation of the same policies that had been targeting the Bedouin since the beginning of the Israeli state. Bearing in mind the Bedouin's own perception of their current situation, I propose, in line with many others, to see it through the lens of Israel's settler colonial project (Pappe 2006, Nassasra 2015, Ratcliffe et al. 2015, Yiftachel 2008, Kedar 2006). A growing body of research in the field of Palestinian Studies departs from an understanding of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as being unique, and rather places it within the long history of settler colonialism. Drawing on Wolfe's (2006) conceptualization, settler colonialism here is understood as an 'ongoing structure' of violence, with the goal of gaining control over the invaded land and 'eliminating the native' through both physical expulsion, assimilation, and erasure of the native's historical link to the land. At the same time, the ideology of settler colonialism, as Hage (2016:41) calls it, relies on the assumed moral superiority of the colonizer, who both 'civilizes' the indigenous population and defends itself from their 'barbarity' and 'terror'.

Indeed, as the critical Israeli scholar Oren Yiftachel (1996, 1999, 2003:23) observes, Israel from the beginning adopted policies of 'territorial expansion'. This was enabled, or justified, by the

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<sup>4</sup> The campaign against the Praver Plan is discussed in Chapter 7. The quote comes from the campaign's website, available online: <https://prawerwontpass.wordpress.com/about/> accessed January 15, 2015

<sup>5</sup> The full text of the draft law, translated by Adalah, is available online: <https://www.acri.org.il/en/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Begin-Report-English-January-2013.pdf> accessed 20 November 2014

mythical notions of the Jewish 'exile' and 'return' that gave way to the Israeli conceptualization of the land as 'only Jewish'. The belief in the Jewish monopoly ownership of the land became the basic premise of building the state, where the Judaization policy, as Yiftachel (1999) calls it, was seen as not only a right, but a duty. In other words, expanding Jewish control and appropriation of the Arabs' land was framed as a mission, rather than a colonial settling process. This was accompanied by another narrative which served to deny the Arabs' historical presence on the land (Yiftachel 1999, Pappé 2006). The Zionist myth of 'a land without a people for a people without a land' was exploited in official discourse to legitimize the expansionist policies of the state (Abu-Rabia 2011:475). For example, the first Israeli national plan in 1952 mentioned that the distribution and settlement of the population around the country was an easy task 'because unlike Britain, we do not require to move existing populations, but simply settle new immigrants in the country's empty regions' (quoted in Yiftachel, Yakob 2003:680). The supposed emptiness of the land was also reflected in the Zionist rhetoric of 'making the desert bloom'. In the Naqab, the myth of the land's redemption was particularly vivid, as the region was conceived of as a 'major future settlement area' (Falah 1989:77). The desert was depicted as an infertile and wild place, both uncultivated and uninhabited. Those who did live there, the Bedouin, were presented 'as part of nature' (Shamir 1996:236): nomads without roots or ties to the land. The rhetoric thus implied that the desert should be filled with 'civilized' life and agriculture, and that in order to achieve that, the 'nomads' had to be disciplined, and eventually erased.

Viewed in this context, the above-mentioned Praver Plan aiming at an 'ultimate' resettlement of the Bedouin population is indeed not surprising, nor does it constitute a singular event, but rather it reflects Israel's systemic attitude towards the Palestinian population, both within Israel and the occupied territories. In what follows, I present a historical overview of the Bedouin presence in the Naqab and the roots of the conflict, after which I move to briefly discuss the means and languages through which the Bedouin's subordination is established and through which their past and their links to the land are denied. I end with a general description of the landscape of the unrecognized villages, to give an idea of the sites of my fieldworks. As such, this section offers a background to the empirical chapters that follow, where, among other

things, the struggles around lived spaces, memory, and the Bedouin's relationship with the land are discussed. While a detailed historical contextualization of the Bedouin's subordination is important, this is not to suggest that Israel's hegemony is all that defines the Bedouin's lives and determines their struggles as moves toward a counter-hegemony. I elaborate on these dynamics in the following empirical chapters.

### **3.1.1 Historical Background: the Naqab Bedouin under the Ottoman Empire and British Mandate**

The presence of the Bedouin-Arab agrarian and semi-nomadic tribes in the Naqab desert dates back to the fifth century (Abu-Saad 1997; Yiftachel 1997, 2002; Abu-Rabia 2002; Kedar 2004; for a polemic, see Frantzman et al: 2012). From then until 1948 and the creation of the Israeli state, they were for the most part the sole residents of the region (Kark 1981: 334–56; Shamir 2000; Abu-Ras 2006, Nasasra 2015). Some tribes lived off livestock and crop cultivation in the northern Naqab, while others led a nomadic life, herding goats, sheep and camels (Abu-Saad 2008).

Under Ottoman rule in Palestine (1516–1917), many Bedouins started to cultivate land, and used a customary system of property acquisitions to deal with land-related issues. Residents of the Naqab created their own legal mechanisms, through which potential disputes and questions of ownership, inheritance and boundary marking were solved in Bedouin courts (Shamir 1996: 235; Meir 2005). This autonomy was formally threatened in 1858 when the Ottoman Land Law was passed, requiring all landowners to register their names in the Land Registry. As most Bedouins did not register their land claims, a significant proportion of the territory on which they lived and worked became officially classified as *mawat* ('dead land'). This implied that the land was neither populated nor cultivated, and was more than one and a half miles away from the nearest inhabited area (Kram 2010:8). As such, *mawat* land was perceived as state property, which could nevertheless be legally privatized if the land was recultivated and the name of its user registered. However, the majority of Bedouins, fearing additional taxes or potential army conscription, or simply not aware of the new procedures,

rarely availed themselves of the opportunity granted by the law (Yiftachel 2003). In spite of this, the inhabitants of the Naqab retained a high degree of autonomy under the Ottoman Empire: their tribal customary system was recognized in practice by the authorities, and their rights to the land preserved (Falah 1989; Meir 2005, Nasasra 2015). As Nasasra (2015:276) argues, '[t]he fact that the Ottoman authorities collected land taxes from the Bedouin is a clear recognition of Bedouin land ownership'. Drawing on primary sources, Nasasra (ibid.) concludes that the period of Ottoman rule was characterized by tensions, and the overt resistance of the Bedouin to the Ottomans' control; this control, however, remained very limited and had little impact on the lives of the Bedouin, who de facto ruled the Naqab.

Similarly, under the British Mandate in Palestine (1917–1948), the Bedouin enjoyed a relatively high degree of self-determination and control over the land. The British respected the Bedouin customary proceedings and relied on sheikhs, as representatives of their tribes, to mediate with the Bedouin and maintain order (Nasasra 2015:268). In 1921, the Land Ordinance was passed, giving Bedouins two months to register if they wanted to claim ownership of land previously defined as *mawat* (Kedar 2001: 36). Yet again, and probably for the same reasons as some 60 years earlier, the Bedouin largely ignored the legal procedures, and the majority of them did not register in the official records (Shamir 1996:243). Despite the fact that the non-registered land was officially classified as state property, in practice, the British rulers, like the Ottomans before them, recognized Bedouin customary proceedings and their ownership of the land.

As a result, the Bedouin in the early twentieth century were free to sell, lease and inherit land, but were also obliged to pay taxes for its cultivation (Abu-Rabia 1994; Shamir 1996:235). The amount of land considered to be in Bedouin possession under the British Mandate ranged from 1.8 to 2.7 million dunams<sup>6</sup> (Falah 1989:76; Swirski and Hasson 2007). As Noa Kram (2010:12) points out, at that time 'the majority of the Bedouins were sedentarized', and the land was crucial to their existence 'as a base for settlement and agriculture'. This means, as the majority of scholars agrees, that by the time of the creation of the Israeli state, the Bedouin had largely ceased their nomadic practices, had developed 'permanent places of summer and winter

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<sup>6</sup> A dunam is a unit of land area, used historically in the region and in today's Israel, which is equal to 1000 square meters.

dwelling' (Shamir 1996:235), and lived predominantly as subsistence farmers. According to the 1931 census, almost 90% of the Naqab Bedouin lived from agriculture, and only some 10% from livestock (Maddrell 1990:5; Falah 1985:36).

### **3.1.2 From forced displacement to urbanization: dealing with 'nomads' in 'no man's land'**

Whereas during the latter stages of British rule there were between 60,000 and 90,000 Bedouins in the Naqab region, occupying 98% of its lands (Negev Coexistence Forum for Civil Equality, NCF 2006:12–13), only 11,000 remained after the creation of Israel. Some of the Bedouin had fled, fearing the new authorities, while others were expelled to Jordan, the Gaza Strip and Sinai during and after the 1948 Arab-Israeli war. This was followed by a policy of further displacements of the Bedouin community, introduced by Israel in the early 1950s (NCF 2009, Yiftachel 2003, Nasasra 2012). Using martial law, Israel relocated the Bedouin to a restricted area in the northeast of the Naqab called the 'Siyag' (a name which literally translates as 'fence'): a closed and isolated area of about 1,100 square kilometres, which they were not allowed to leave without official permission. This move reflected the expansionist mindset of the new state, which sought to remove the Palestinian population from its lands and concentrate the maximum number of people on the smallest possible space (Falah 1989:74). This led to a situation in which the Bedouin were concentrated on 10% of the land they used to occupy, and kept under control and military rule until 1966. This also meant dispossessing most of the Bedouin of their property, as the eleven tribes who had previously lived in the areas outside the Siyag were not allowed to return to their homes, and their lands were effectively expropriated by the state, and transformed into Jewish agricultural settlements (Falah 1989:78; HIC–HLRN 2010:3–6; Marx 1967; NCF 2006: 7; Nasasra 2012).

The post-war demolition of the Bedouin's habitation and the expropriation of their land was institutionalized in the 1951–1953 period through legal means. In 1950, the Absentees' Property Law was passed, giving Israel the right to expropriate the lands of any Bedouin who were 'absent' from their plots - in other words, those who had been displaced to the Siyag area,

as well as those who had fled or who had been expelled from the country. This law was complemented by the Land Acquisition Law enacted in 1953, which legitimized the previous confiscation of lands from 'absentees', and enabled the state to register in its own name lands which were 'without owners' on 1 April 1952. As by that time most Bedouin had been transferred to the Siyag area, in a period of only one year the law 'was used to expropriate some 1.2 million dunams' of land (Forman and Kedar 2004: 821).

In the mid-1960s, by the end of military rule, the policy of land expropriation was succeeded by a new strategy (Nasasra 2012). In 1965, the Planning and Building Law was passed, creating the problem of 'unrecognized villages'. The new law denied the existence of Bedouin villages, defining them instead as agricultural territories, which meant that the villages were to be omitted from all infrastructure plans, and no building permits could be granted. As a result, any construction on Bedouin land was from then on by definition illegal; and as such, people on that land could not be granted access to basic state services such as water or electricity. This same law also provided for the demolition of unlicensed buildings, and authorized the confiscation of land if it was deemed necessary for public purposes (HRW 2008:14). The consequences of the Planning and Building Law were therefore twofold: firstly, by not recognizing the Bedouin villages, it condemned their inhabitants to marginalization; secondly, it recast the dwellers of these grey zones as 'lawbreakers', 'trespassers' and 'squatters on the state lands' (Shamir 1996; Rangwala 2004). As recognition was denied them and building permits could not be acquired, the only way for Bedouins to escape this 'illegality' was to leave their ancestors' land. In 1969, Israel enacted the Land Rights Settlement Ordinance, which declared that 'lands, which at the time of the enactment of this law were classified as mawat, will be registered in the name of the State' (quoted in HIC 2010:4). Referring to the Ottoman and British laws, but ignoring the fact that the former rulers had effectively acknowledged the Bedouin's ownership of the land, the Israeli authorities began to transform the 'dead' land into state territory.

Rendering historical Bedouin villages illegal and turning their land into state property was accompanied by a policy of transferring the rural community to 'Bedouin towns', where 'they would modernise, develop new habits, and become accustomed to life in permanent houses'

(Shamir 1996:246). The first town planned for the Bedouin community, Tel Sheva, was built in 1969, followed by a second one, Rahat, in 1971. Five more settlements were constructed in the 1970s and 1980s, with the last one, Hura, being built in 1989. As such, the brutal evictions of the post-1948 period were replaced by a strategy of 'encouraged transfer', where the state offered compensation to those who agreed to forego their villages and move to the government-sponsored towns (Swirski and Hasson 2007; Yiftachel 2003). The official narrative described the settlement as necessary on the basis that the Bedouin's previous 'attempts to permanently settle in one place failed' (quoted in Shamir 1996:249); and the resettlement was seen as the only way to 'prevent illegal construction and the capturing of state lands'. However, as Falah (1989:72) remarks, the Bedouin in the Naqab had already adopted a sedentary way of life at that time, and thus the policy was 'not aimed primarily at settling a previously highly mobile population; rather, the objective was to evict this population from its lands and to resettle it elsewhere'. The Bedouin themselves, as Nasasra (2015:48) notes, referred to the process as *istitan qasri* (forced sedentarization), as they had not been consulted either on their moving to the towns or on how they were designed. While some, mainly the *fellahin* (peasants) who did not own any of the land, accepted the offer (Koensler 2015:43), other Bedouin resisted the resettlement and have remained in their villages, despite the threats of demolition.

From this perspective, the attempted urbanization of the agricultural community and the land appropriations have to be seen as two strands of the settler-colonial project, aimed at Jewish territorial expansion and removing the Bedouin from their historical lands to seclude them in a limited and controlled space (Falah 1989, Yiftachel 2003, 2006; Nasara 2012).

For the double task of the development and control of the Bedouin to be achieved, the state established local councils in the townships, and state agencies such as the Bedouin Development Authority, the Bedouin Education Authority, and Green Patrol. These bodies have solely been in charge of dealing with the Bedouin, who are thus distinguished from the rest of Israeli citizens. Among other things, they deal with issues of planning and the allocation of services, with the supposed aim of improving living conditions and modernizing the Bedouin towns. In reality, these forms of governance specific to the Bedouin population confirm their subordinate status and mean that the Bedouin have little control over decisions taken on their

behalf. The urbanization of the Bedouin, rather than bringing about development as claimed, resulted in the creation of urban ghettos that lack economic infrastructure and proper schooling. Thus, while the Bedouin have been deprived of their traditional livelihood strategies that relied heavily on agriculture, they have not been fully integrated into the labour market either, largely only having access to low-skilled and low-paid jobs (Abu-Saad 1997; Svirsky, Hasson 2007).

However, as the ongoing policy of displacement is couched in the language of 'missionary modernization' and is strengthened by legal means, it perpetuates an image of the Bedouin as both backward nomads and a delinquent community that threatens the modern state and its land. As such, the dispute between Israel and the Bedouin minority has been framed in the public discourse largely as a struggle between opposing forces: lawful owners of the land versus illegitimate usurpers; progress versus decline. In the following section, I briefly sketch how these two representations of the Bedouin play out in Israel today.

### **3.1.3 The Exotic and Threatening Other**

As Edward Said (1979: xviii) put it, orientalist discourse produces its subject as a fixed entity, where 'innumerable histories and a dizzying variety of peoples, languages, experiences, and cultures (...) are swept aside or ignored, relegated to the sand heap' (Said 1979:xviii). Therefore, orientalism serves as a lens through which to perceive reality, shaping the manner of categorizing, describing and dealing with it. According to Said, it creates a binary order which locates 'the East' on the side of passion and tradition, and 'the West' on the side of reason and progress, thereby justifying its dominant position. A similar dichotomy can be seen in Israel, where the Bedouin personify 'the Orient', and Israel the modern, western state. The framing of the Bedouin as backward nomads and the state's policies as bringing about their development is part of the Israeli public discourse, and can be found in official documents and speeches, as well as in NGO statements, media reports, the Israeli tourism industry, and some academic works.

A brief overview of the Bedouin's situation presented on the website of the Israel Land Administration (ILA) - a governmental agency responsible for managing Israel's public lands -



serves as a good illustration of the dominant discourse. As the story on the ILA website<sup>7</sup> goes, Israel 'provides its citizens with high quality public services in sanitation, health and education, and municipal services', and yet, despite its willingness, it cannot do the same for the Bedouin, who refuse permanent housing and live 'dispersed over an extensive area'. Despite the fact that 'some' of the Bedouin 'have started' to claim ownership of land, as the text puts it, Israel tries to resolve the dispute and generously offers the Bedouin settlement deals 'instead of prosecuting' them. This, the text explains, is because Israel 'has its citizens' welfare at heart, particularly the welfare of the Bedouin'. To this end, the government has invested large sums of money to expand the Bedouin towns and improve their living conditions; if the towns remain impoverished, the text informs us, it is largely due to the fact that their residents evade paying taxes. The state's goodwill is manifested not only in the building of new settlements, but also in the high compensations it offers for those who agree to 'leave their buildings in the dispersion'. Finally, the text warns that while many Bedouin agree to cooperate with the state, others 'seek to establish facts on the ground, and steal agricultural land'. As such, the text concludes, it is the Israel Land Administration's duty to protect the Bedouin's interests from these 'lawbreakers' who do harm to the whole community.

What the reader takes from this is the image of a 'friendly' state dedicated to the modernization of the Bedouin, who are in turn depicted as irrational, making illegitimate land claims, and responsible for their own deprivation. Furthermore, the text makes a distinction between the 'good' Bedouin, who are willing to move to government-sponsored localities, and the 'bad' ones, who reject the state's offer and therefore are presented as a threat both to Israel and to other Bedouin. The piece, written for an English-speaking audience, most probably a foreign one, gives the reader the impression that the assimilation of the Bedouin and their acceptance of the state's 'generous' offer is the only solution that can redeem the community. This whole narrative, however, blurs the reality, hiding some facts and inventing others. For example, contrary to what the piece asserts, the Bedouin have claimed ownership of land since their dispossession began in 1948, not only 'recently' (Nasasra 2015). However, it is only

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<sup>7</sup> All the quotes come from the text, available here: [http://www.mmi.gov.il/static/HanhalaPirsumim/Beduin\\_information.pdf](http://www.mmi.gov.il/static/HanhalaPirsumim/Beduin_information.pdf), accessed 15 October 2013

recently that the previously 'frozen' claims from the 1970s have been considered by the state. The text does not mention the names or the historical presence of the Bedouin settlements, and as such implies that what the Bedouin are meant to leave is not their land and villages, but mere 'buildings', spontaneously erected in random locations. Furthermore, while the ILA claims that the unrecognized villages are too 'dispersed' and remote to receive state services, it ignores the fact that such services are available to similarly dispersed Jewish settlements, even those that are illegal. Finally, despite their claiming as much, the planning initiatives are not consulted on or coordinated with the Bedouin population. As most scholars admit, it is rather the contrary: the Bedouin's exclusion from involvement in local projects and the ignoring of their needs are the main reasons for the 'urbanization failure' (Falah 1983:314, ACRI 2011). Most recently, the lack of consultation with the Bedouin over the Praver Plan was admitted by its author, Benny Begin, when large-scale protests in the Naqab against the proposed law led to the withdrawal of the plan in December 2013.

Another portrayal of state-Bedouin relations is given on the website of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in an archival piece from 1999 written by an Israeli academic, Doctor Yosef Ben-David.<sup>8</sup> Here again, the author neglects the historical background and Israeli discriminatory policies and laws, and proceeds to explain the 'problems' faced by the Bedouin community as stemming from their particular 'nature'. The Bedouin, in Ben-David's narrative, are a primitive 'cultural group', antithetical to the modern state, and thus have difficulty adapting to urban life. Moreover, they are presented as resentful and irrational, as they 'fail to distinguish between objective difficulties and those connected with their changing subculture', and feel an 'exaggerated sense of deprivation'. This analysis is based on the author's expert knowledge, and does not include the Bedouin perspective. This is probably because, in the author's view, the Bedouin are voiceless. Ben-David argues in his piece that the Bedouin 'have difficulty in articulating their wishes', and as such cannot be consulted, rendering the urbanization process highly difficult. The Bedouin's illiteracy and limited awareness are contrasted in the text with the expertise of the state, which, being 'well aware of the difficulties of the Bedouin', is willing

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<sup>8</sup> All quotations come from the text, available here: <http://www.mfa.gov.il/mfa/mfa-archive/1999/pages/the%20bedouin%20in%20israel.aspx>, accessed 15 October 2013

to 'solve the problems'. Ignoring the facts on the ground and the state's actual policies, Ben-David claims that 'Israel's attitude towards its Bedouin citizens has always been positive' and that even the Bedouin's illegal constructions are 'treated forgivingly'.

In these and other abundant examples, the state's exclusionary practices and discriminatory laws are not mentioned, nor is the history of the land conflict. Rather, as the narrative goes, the tensions result from the clash between opposing forces: modernity and tradition, development and decline. Reducing the Bedouin to their 'nomadic nature' and 'pre-modern' culture serves political goals, strengthening the state's claims to land ownership and justifying its policy of forced urbanization. For different reasons, the same rhetoric is heavily used in the Israeli tourism industry, which advertises the Bedouin as exotic and authentic people of the desert, living 'frozen' lives, allegedly not affected by historical developments.<sup>9</sup> While praising their survival skills and their capacities to find water in the desert and to move and build new shelters, the tourist agents casually ignore the crucial circumstances which force the Bedouin to adopt these practices. The Bedouin 'cannot afford to sit tight where water is not plentiful', one of the advertising leaflets claims, not mentioning, however, that the 'water is not plentiful' simply because it is not delivered to the Bedouin villages. Similarly, when it depicts the Bedouin shelters as practical 'large tents they could easily erect, dismantle and transport', it silences the fact that the Bedouin constructions are considered illegal, and if they are dismantled, it is mainly done by the police and the ILA bulldozers.

Alongside the orientalist narrative of the Bedouin, a 'criminalizing' discourse is also present. The mantras that the Bedouin 'take over the land', have 'illegal dwelling[s]' and represent an 'Arab invasion' are widespread in the Israeli public debate (Yiftachel 1999:364-391). These common depictions ascribe to the Bedouin characteristics of lawlessness, creating a dominant consensus that the land dispute is a struggle between 'good' and 'evil', adding a moral dimension to the conflict. Strikingly, such a framing of the Bedouin has been a relatively recent development,

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<sup>9</sup> The Bedouin are advertised as one of Israel's tourist attractions on the website of the Israeli Ministry of Tourism. [http://www.goisrael.com/Tourism\\_Eng/Tourist%20Information/Ethnic%20Groups/Bedouin/Pages/Bedouin%20Hospitality.aspx](http://www.goisrael.com/Tourism_Eng/Tourist%20Information/Ethnic%20Groups/Bedouin/Pages/Bedouin%20Hospitality.aspx), and private initiatives offer tours around the Naqab desert and the Bedouin experience. See for example: <http://www.negevjeep.co.il/english/bedouin.html>, <http://www.hanokdim.com/content.asp?p=bedouinhospitality>, accessed 20 September 2015

replacing the previous depictions of the Bedouin as exotic and in need of modernization, but 'loyal citizens' nonetheless (Dinero 2010, Ratcliffe 2009).

In 2000, the leader of the Likud Party and future prime minister Ariel Sharon wrote an article entitled 'Land as an Economic Tool for Developing Infrastructure and Significantly Reducing Social Gaps', in which he addressed the situation in the Naqab, presenting it as a 'serious problem' (quoted in Abu-Raas 2006:1). Sharon warned that 'the Bedouin are grabbing new territory. They are gnawing away at the country's land reserves', and therefore proposed that they needed to be prevented from conducting their illegal practices, while Jewish settlement in the Naqab had to be encouraged. Accordingly, in July 2000, a plan to build new Jewish settlements in the Naqab was proposed, dubbed by Ariel Sharon as a 'national necessity' because 'if we do not settle the land, someone else will do so' (quoted in HRW 2008:44). Another settlement plan, following the same argumentation, was voiced in 2003. The settling policy was rationalized in security terms, and designed with a view to 'creating a buffer between the Bedouin communities' as well as 'preventing a Bedouin takeover' (quoted in Yiftachel 2006:3). The threat of the Bedouin's 'takeover of state land' was similarly raised in 2005 by Ehud Olmert, then Deputy Prime Minister, who expressed the hope that a new 'development project'<sup>10</sup> would prevent it from happening.

Similar language is used in the right-wing media, contributing to the symbolical production of fear of the Bedouin. In a series of articles published between 2010 and 2012 on the Arutz Sheva website, Arabs from the Naqab are portrayed as violent and involved in all sorts of criminal practices, from taking over land, to theft, murder, drug trafficking, and acts of terrorism. For example, in a piece on the demolition of an unrecognized village, entitled 'Violent Bedouin Clan Evicted from Negev Lands',<sup>11</sup> the action is described as a protective one, 'against infiltrators and trespassers'. The name of the village is not mentioned in the text, and the supposedly nameless place is referred to as a '100-acre plot in the Negev that is illegally overrun', undermining the residential and permanent nature of the Bedouin habitation. Other articles describe intra-tribe

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<sup>10</sup> Gadi Golan and Zeev Klein, *Olmert: NIS 400m will prevent Bedouin takeover of state land* 24 July 2005 <http://www.globes.co.il/en/article-937407> , accessed October 3, 2013

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/140777#.T0vHiocf4nM> , accessed 5 October 2013

killings and a war taking place between Bedouin families<sup>12</sup>, or reveal that a ‘gang of Bedouin thieves’ was hired by the ‘Palestinian Authority Arabs’ to carry out thefts in the North.<sup>13</sup> Following a similar rhetoric, an opinion piece published by the Jerusalem Post<sup>14</sup> explicitly states that ‘Israel cannot continue to tolerate a state of lawlessness and anarchy like the one afflicting the Negev’.

All of these writings, inattentive to detail and missing the context of the described events, share a common thread. The Bedouin are framed here as violent, lawless, and stealing the land, which implies that any measures deployed by the state appear to be pre-emptive and just.

### **3.1.4 Unrecognized villages: sites of research**

Today there are approximately 45 unrecognized villages in the Naqab. Their situations, particular difficulties and injustices faced are described in detail in abundant reports by human rights NGOs, blogs, media and scholarly articles. Unrecognized villages have become the core object of interest for human rights organizations and activist scholars who speak out against the multiple discriminations faced by the villagers. Among other things, it is emphasized that the villages are not marked on maps, lack local representation, and are deprived of most basic rights and services, such as access to drinking water, electricity, roads, health care and education. This situation of denial, it is often argued, does not represent the state’s ‘omission’, but rather its strategic policy, with the aim of exerting pressure on the disenfranchised Bedouin in order to force them to move to the townships specifically designed for them. To add to the pressure, the Bedouin’s ‘illegally’ erected buildings and their crops are constantly being destroyed (see among others: Hasson, Svirsky 2007; Abu-Saad 1997; Yiftachel 2003; HRW 2008; NCF 2006, 2009).

The villages, although similar in status and hardship, differ in their outlooks, particular struggles, hopes, and the sense of attachment expressed by residents: some of the villages have

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<sup>12</sup> <http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/153214#.T0vKsYcf4nM> , accessed 5 October 2013

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/149678#.T0vKuYcf4nM> accessed 5 October 2013

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.jpost.com/Opinion/Editorials/The-Beduin-conundrum-333640>, accessed 3 October 2013

historical origins and predate the state, while others were set up in the 1950s during military rule, when people were moved from their lands to strictly designated areas that were to become their new homes. Some villages today comprise hundreds or thousands of people, while others are only composed of several families. Some are under constant threat of demolition, while others seem to be better tolerated. To grasp the differences, but also to go beyond the particularities of each place, I visited tens of unrecognized villages, and conducted fieldwork in several of them. The village of Wadi al-Na'am south of Be'er Sheva, where I spent 7 weeks, became the main site of my research. Historically, the area belongs to the al-Azazmah tribe, although before the decision of the military government in 1953 to relocate the Bedouin, most of the people lived on the western side of Road 40, outside the village's current location. Today, the village is still inhabited largely, but not solely, by families of the al-Azazmah tribe. The village, spreading over a vast space punctuated by buzzing electrical grids, an electricity plant, an oil terminal and barren plots of land surrounded by the Ramat Hovav industrial complex, is believed to be the largest unrecognized Bedouin settlement. The numbers are difficult to estimate, but according to residents themselves, the village is inhabited by approximately 10,000 people. Among the makeshift shacks, the village has one primary school, a health clinic, and two small grocery shops with basic alimentary products. Most of the residents have to seek employment outside the village, in surrounding *moshavim* as agricultural workers, in factories, as workers on construction sites, or as guards. Many are unemployed and rely on social welfare, to which they are entitled as Israeli citizens.

While residents of Wadi al-Na'am do not claim land ownership, and for a long time, as I will discuss in Chapter 4, did not oppose the resettlement, the situations in other villages differ. For example, in Khashem Zannah, another site of my fieldwork, villagers claim continuous and uninterrupted presence on their ancestors' land, with origins going back to Ottoman times. Here, dwellings have a more permanent character, and the place has more of an aura of a village (albeit an impoverished one) than most makeshift-looking Bedouin settlements. Inhabitants of other informal localities often refer to it as a 'historical Arab area in the Naqab', and some point to it as proof of the Bedouin's historical presence and agricultural lifestyle in the region, predating the establishment of the Israeli state.

Other villages have their own specific histories and trajectories of struggle. While in most scholarly and advocacy accounts the conflict between the Bedouin and the state is defined as a struggle of indigenous peoples for land, with clearly defined identities and goals, the reality on the ground is more complicated. Bedouin society is internally differentiated, with competing polyvalent voices and identifications. Not all Bedouin are in open struggle with the state or seek recognition of their land ownerships and cultural autonomy. Many call instead for the development of the Bedouin townships, or seek to be recognized and treated as equal citizens, just the same as the Jewish citizens. Whereas it is not possible to grasp the totality of Bedouin subjectivities, in the following chapters I attempt to convey the heterogeneity of people's hopes and motivations and, as such, avoid black-and-white representations. Yet, the focus on the unrecognized villages and struggles around lived places (Chapter 4), as well as on efforts to internationalize the Bedouin issue (Chapter 8), means that those who engage in land disputes with the state occupy the central place in the thesis.

### **3.2 Al-akhdam in Yemen**

Although no official data has been collected, it is believed that there are up to 3 million akhdam<sup>15</sup> (out of a population of 26 million) living in Yemeni villages and on the outskirts of its big cities such as Sana'a, Taiz, Aden and Hudaydah. The pariah status of the akhdam has traditionally stemmed from a specific stratification system that was officially, but not practically, abolished with the collapse of the Northern Imamate and the creation of the Republic of Yemen in 1962. The system organizes society around hierarchical ranks, where distinction is manifested by descent and occupation (Bujra 1971, Dresch 1989, Meneley 1996, Stevenson 1985), and is reproduced through endogamous marriages (de Regt 2008; 2009). Despite regional differences, a general pattern of distinction in pre-revolutionary Yemen can be traced, dividing society into five status groups. As Carapico (1996) details, at the top of the hierarchy were the religious (*sada*) elites, who claimed moral authority and prestige as

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<sup>15</sup> A number given by Noman al-Hudeithi, the leader of the National Union for the Poor, a representative body for the akhdam, which I discuss in chapter 5.

descendants of the Prophet Mohammed. The *sada* were followed by the strata of judges (*qada*), whose status derived not so much from birth as from education, and who were in charge of legal, administrative and educational matters. After the elites were the *qaba'il*, peasants belonging to tribes, who owned land and lived mainly from agriculture, herding and trading. The tribesmen defined themselves as 'true Arabs', and, unlike other groups, exercised a high level of independence. The fourth group, *mazayana*, consisted of people who had no land, and who made a living by providing various kinds of services, such as craftsmen, butchers and barbers. Finally, at the bottom of the hierarchy were the slaves (*a'bid*), and even further below them *al-akhdam* (servants). The *akhdam* could not trace back their ancestry, and performed occupations regarded as degrading by the dominant society - they worked, among other things, as domestic labourers, cleaners, porters, shoemakers, ritual healers, dancers and musicians (Adra 2006, Bujra 1971, Meneley 1996, de Regt 2008). They were believed to be of African origin and were referred to as 'black' (*aswad*), because their skin colour was supposedly darker than that of other Yemenis.

Today, as the label of *akhdam* is seen as derogatory and is official banned, the word '*muhamasheen*' ('marginalized') is more commonly used to refer to group members. This appellation was coined by foreign NGOs, probably in the early 1990s, in an attempt to erase the descent/racial difference and to merge the *akhdam* into the broader category of a Yemeni underprivileged population. As Hashem (2006:263-264) notes, the epithet '*muhamasheen*' is mostly used 'to describe poor casual labourers who seek work on a daily basis and who gather in several locations in the major cities'. But it is also treated as a synonym of the word '*akhdam*', and in popular understanding is a politically correct term serving to designate the same category of people. Most slum dwellers in Sana'a also refer to themselves as 'the marginalized', emphasizing that the difference between them and other Yemenis is not cultural or ethnic, but merely a material one, reinforced by racism. Recently, however, the label 'marginalized' has been contested by some activists, who choose to identify as '*akhdam*' instead (see Chapter 5). Throughout the text, I use the terms '*akhdam*', '*muhamasheen*' and 'the marginalized' interchangeably.



Beyond the basic facts, and the mantra repeated by the media and NGOs that the akhdam are 'black Yemenis' or people of 'African features', little is known about the group. Despite the fact that there has been an abundance of studies on social hierarchy in Yemen (as the above references reveal), there are very few studies in which the issue of the akhdam is discussed in length or detail. Among the positive exceptions, there are two doctoral theses written from the anthropological perspective. One of these is the work of Delores Walters (1987), on perceptions of social hierarchy in Yemen Arab Republic, based on fieldwork conducted in the 1980s. The other one, with a similar focus on the akhdam, discusses patterns and experiences of social domination in South Yemen, and was carried out by Huda Seif (2003) in the early 1990s. Among other scholarly accounts in which the akhdam make an appearance are Anne Meneley's (1996) book, 'Tournaments of Value: Sociability and Hierarchy in a Yemeni Town', and a study by Suzanne Dahlgren (2010) entitled 'Contesting Realities: The Public Sphere and Morality in Southern Yemen'. Both of these works engage, in different manners, with issues of morality, hierarchies and women's worlds, and include discussions on representations of the akhdam, albeit portrayed through the words and perspectives of the elites.

This thesis aims to contribute to the scarce knowledge on the akhdam by giving an insight into the group's lived experiences, survival strategies, hopes and, finally, efforts to be noticed and recognized by the international community. However, before doing so, the following section seeks to clarify what it means to be 'akhdam' in today's Yemen, and in particular scrutinizes the social and discursive formation of what often appears as a static and ontological category. I start with its historical evolution, analyzing how socioeconomic developments in Yemen have affected the position and experiences of those belonging to the akhdam group. I then move to discuss various discourses and practices of 'otherization', to show how, through the workings of race, culture and class, the akhdam's differences produced and their subordination naturalized and justified. Paying attention to the workings of racial categories affecting the akhdam seems especially important, as the issue of racialization has, by and large, been understudied in the anthropology of the Middle East, and mainly applied when dealing with groups 'understood as racial/ethnic minorities, such as Asian or sub-Saharan African migrants, Berbers, or Nubians' (Winegar, Deeb 2012:549).

The section ends with a brief description of the akhdam's lived spaces in Sana'a, which became the site of my fieldwork.

### **3.2.1 Social Organization in Yemen: From status distinctions to class divisions**

The akhdam's past in Yemen is little studied or known, but is the subject of various social myths. These narratives vary in tone, but they all confirm the akhdam's foreign nature. Even if their basis is mythical, and rejected by members of the group, they produce a common knowledge of the akhdam as neither Muslim nor Arab. They are most often depicted as the descendants of slaves or Christian Ethiopians who invaded and ruled Yemen between the fourth and sixth centuries and who, after eventually being defeated, had to become servants (Adra 2006; de Regt 2008:157; Dahlgren 2010:274). While descendants of the Persians and Ottoman Turks who once colonized Yemen have been naturalized and never subjected to similar racialization, the akhdam are still not perceived as 'real' Yemenis, or 'original Arabs', as the Yemenis often claim to be.

The actual position of the akhdam before the revolutions of the 1960s in Yemen varied across regions and communities, but by and large, dealings with the akhdam were structured by customary laws. Members of this category were not allowed to own land, intermarry with other social groups or carry arms (Bujra 1971; Adra 2006), all of which served as markers of their low status. The akhdam were believed to be the antithesis of 'respectable' people, disregarded for their alleged flaws in morality, religiosity, manners, and specific customs. Because of that 'difference', social distance was encouraged, and personal relationships with akhdam families were not maintained (Meneley 1996). The essentialization of the group was reflected, for example, in the colonial rule in the South, where the British considered appointing authorities to deal specifically with the akhdam and their issues (Dahlgren 2010:275). At the same time, despite this symbolical exclusion, the traditional tribal society offered the akhdam protection from violence, and opportunities of employment. Through the services they provided, the akhdam gained not only food and money, but also a way to socialize with otherwise distant status groups, even if only in a limited and strictly defined manner (Carapico 1996; Adra 2006). In other words, the akhdam occupied a distinct social space, in a society where boundaries

between social categories were clearly defined; however, they were not totally isolated, as many members of society, the elites included, depended on their traditional services. Such a reading of the akhdam's positionality is reflected in the anthropological work of Thomas Stevenson (1985), who perceives the various social categories in Yemen as 'interrelated institutions' and 'mutually interdependent'. This interdependence between all social ranks, and the fact that the means of production were owned by those living from agriculture and trade, meant that until the 1960s, the distinctions between various social groups were those of 'status inequalities rather than class divisions' (Carapico 1996:84).

This was to change with the major political, social and economic transformations that followed in Yemen, giving rise to a new class system where wealth, rather than status based on birth and occupation, became the main dividing force of the society (Carapico 1996, deRegt 2009, Adra 2006). New forms of hierarchy and inequalities affected all social groups in Yemen, including the akhdam. Several developments need to be addressed in order to understand the changing patterns of social dynamics, and the position of the akhdam, in Yemen.

First, in 1962, the religious imamate that had ruled North Yemen was overthrown and, after a long civil war, was replaced in 1970 by the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR). Among other changes introduced, the new republican rulers abolished slavery and implemented a new constitution that proclaimed the equality of all citizens. Status distinctions, seen as a tool by which the old religious elite maintained its privileges, were officially banned; to replace them, a new national identity was promoted (Carapico 1996). Around the same time, historical changes were also taking place in South Yemen, where, in 1967, the People's Democratic Republic (PDRY) was established, bringing an end to British rule. Despite its rather authoritarian nature, the new southern republic implemented policies aimed at reducing social inequalities, which targeted, among others, the akhdam. To do away with old distinctions, in the 1980s, the use of the word 'khadem' (singular of 'akhdam') was banned, and access to education and employment opportunities were widened (Dahlgren 2010).

A second wave of changes that were to have a dramatic effect on the whole of society, and the akhdam in particular, followed the oil boom in neighbouring Gulf countries that peaked

between 1973 and 1982. The expansion of the oil industry, with its high demand for cheap and low-skilled labour, led to an emigration of Yemeni workers, among them many akhdam, on an unprecedented scale. While at the beginning of the 1970s there were around 300,000 Yemeni workers in the Gulf, by the end of the decade there were 800,000 of them, and in the 1980s, their numbers grew to 1.3 million (Dresch 2000: 119-131; Forsythe 2011:6). The remittances sent back to Yemen by migrants became the main source of income for both the northern and southern republics, and had an impact on the internal dynamics of both. Namely, the influx of cash resulted in, on the one hand, the monetization of the economy and the enrichment of a vast segment of the population (including many from the formerly low status groups, such as the akhdam), and on the other, the impoverishment of some of the old elites. As part of this process, a new middle class was formed, one which was based on the accumulation of capital and which cut across traditional hierarchies (de Regt 2007, 2009; Carapico 2006; Adra 2006; Dresch 2000). With the money earned abroad, people enthusiastically started to open new businesses, and both consumption and competition in the market were growing (Stevenson 1985).

The influx of new money and the expansion of the market had significant consequences for the akhdam, and for the traditional stratification system in general. As Stevenson (*ibid.*) observes, the emergence of the new economy meant, among other things, that the meanings attached to occupations changed, and some which had previously been considered shameful (for example, trading) were no longer seen as such. Owning land, on the other hand, which had until then been a marker of prestige and tribal status, seemed to have lost its significance at this time. Moreover, due to modernization processes, the strict relationship between specific groups and the livelihood practices assigned to them broke down; not only the professions, but also the education system underwent a 'democratization'; and, at least in theory, jobs were now available to anybody with the required skills, regardless of their social provenance. This led to a growing access to the market for many; but at the same time, as Stevenson (*ibid.*) delineates, it led to a decrease in demand for traditional economic activities, among them those carried out by the akhdam. As many services were no longer profitable, they began to vanish, severely affecting the akhdam's livelihood strategies - an issue to which I will return later.

Importantly, then, the period of the 1970s and 1980s marks the emergence of a new stratification system. While the old social distinctions did not lose their symbolical power, they began to coexist with more material class divisions. Both the symbolic and the material now determined one's position in society. In other words, ancestry and type of profession still contributed to personal prestige and respectability; however, prestige was now measured by additional criteria. Professions generating significant incomes were held in high esteem, and it was access to wealth around which the new social inequalities were formed. The akhdam who migrated to the Gulf oil-producing countries with other Yemeni workers did not experience the same stigma there as they did back home, as their social status and origins could not be easily tracked outside the Yemeni context. They performed the same low-skilled jobs as the rest of the migrant workers, and hence could not be easily differentiated. Abroad, as many of the interviewed akhdam recalled (see Chapter 5), they were just poor Yemenis, the same as everybody else who migrated to the Gulf looking for job opportunities. At the same time, the money sent back to their families allowed some to improve their situation and afford better housing and education. Especially in socialist South Yemen, many akhdam overcame their marginalization by purchasing land or migrating to cities and finding employment in the civil service or military (Adra 2006:22).

The enrichment of many and the growth of a Yemeni economy fuelled by migrant remittances did not, however, last forever. The following decade of the 1990s saw several developments that had a serious impact on both the akhdam's and Yemen's plight.

In May 1990, the unification of YAR and PDRY took place, accompanied by a challenging attempt to integrate two social and economic systems that had been based on different ideological premises. The newly-proclaimed Republic of Yemen clearly lacked fortune, as from its very beginning it was severely affected by the Gulf crisis. Following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, Yemen opposed the American-led military attack on Iraq. The alliance with Iraq turned out to have tremendous consequences: it ended in the expulsion of up to one million Yemenis from the Gulf states, and the withdrawal from Yemen of US aid, on which the country had heavily depended (Jones 2011:404). This meant that the newly-established republic not only lost its main source of income, but also had to deal with the return of around one million

people (in what was a population of 11 million back then), for a majority of whom there was no employment available. The deepening economic crisis also aggravated political tensions, with the southern leaders accusing the northern elites of accumulating all the wealth and power. This eventually led to the outbreak of a short civil war in May 1994, which ended with the victory of the northern forces and resulted in a further weakening of Yemen's economy.

All of this brought significant changes to the lives of ordinary Yemenis and to the socioeconomic landscape of the country. First, many of the Gulf returnees, finding little employment opportunities in Yemen's rural areas, resettled in the big cities, often having no other option than to squat at their outskirts. It was in the early 1990s that the number of informal settlements in Sana'a rapidly grew. These habitations became home not only to Gulf returnees, but also to migrants from rural areas, low paid public and private sector workers, and other impoverished families who could no longer afford formal housing (Shobargi 2008). Among all these people, the akhdam constituted a major part.

The phenomenon of informal settlements was not just a temporary event; they soon became part of the urban fabric, turning into permanent homes for many. The enduring nature of these precarious habitations was a result of growing poverty and inequalities in Yemen. The process of gradual impoverishment of society and rural-urban migration that had started after the Gulf crisis was further accelerated by economic reforms introduced in 1995. The reform program was developed by, among others, the World Bank and the IMF, with the intention of freeing up the market from regulation and giving more power to the Yemeni private sector. For Yemenis, including the akhdam, in practice this meant an end to subsidies on food and fuel, cuts in public sector employment, and, as a consequence, increased costs of living and higher rates of unemployment (de Regt 2008:160). Neoliberal privatization of agriculture and what had previously been public services further contributed to the impoverishment of peasants, and limited access to healthcare and education for the poor (Seif 2003:11).

### **3.2.2 Intersections of class, race and space: new patterns of exclusion**

As social inequalities were growing, and informal mechanisms that offered material support to the poor were being replaced by market forces, the akhdam could no longer rely on the traditional protection they used to receive (Adra 2006). Both those returning from the Gulf countries and those who could no longer survive in the impoverished rural areas migrated to the cities to look for employment. The experience of Ahmed reflects these processes, and effectively describes the situation that many akhdam had, and still have, to face after moving to the towns:

We came to Sana'a some 20, 25 years ago. My family was among the first ones who occupied this place [Dar Salm slum in North Sana'a], which used to be empty back then. Others followed; some of our relatives from Anis, like us; some others returning from the Gulf. In the countryside (*rif*) it was hard for everybody - if you had no land, there was no way to make a living. We had to leave to survive (...). We came to Sana'a because all the money in the country is here. Many others also came for that reason; the neighbourhood started to expand (...). In the beginning, I got a job at the construction site, then as a porter. Now it has been many years since I could find employment anywhere; it is the same with my wife - she tried to get a job as a cleaner, but it was not possible. Now she begs, and I collect waste and sell it. My eldest son got a job as a sanitation worker. My other kids are small - they help me to collect waste or beg with my wife.

Ahmed's story is not unique, and illustrates in a nutshell the trajectory of many akhdam families who were forced to leave the countryside in order to survive, but were faced with the harsh reality of urban life. The struggles Ahmed and his wife have experienced in trying to adapt to their new setting clearly demonstrates that, while under the previous stratification system the akhdam at least had a clearly defined role in society, today they seem to be largely redundant.

Firstly, occupations traditionally reserved for them are vanishing, or have been taken over by other social groups. The experience of Ahmed's wife, who could not find employment as a cleaner, is just one example among many. Domestic labour in the past had been one of the professions designated for the akhdam; today, however, as de Regt (2007, 2008, 2009) shows, Yemeni families predominantly employ migrant domestic workers, claiming that local women cannot clean and are not clean themselves. Other professions to which they used to be assigned and for which they gained social recognition, such as assisting with ritual circumcisions, have almost disappeared due to the modernization programs launched by the Yemeni government and a subsequent decline in the demand. As the circumcisions began to be

carried out mostly by doctors in hospitals and clinics, the akhdam lost their role as ‘entertainers and healers’ (Walters 1987:360).

Secondly, not only have the akhdam lost some of the ‘undignified’ jobs available to them in the traditional economy, but they have also had problems adjusting to the demands of the new free-market economy. Lacking education and skills, but equally importantly, lacking social capital and connections, they struggle to find formal employment. Most of the akhdam perform menial, often informal jobs, such as collecting waste and selling it for recycling (see Chapter 5). Some, both men and women, find jobs in the public sector as sanitation workers, but even there they are not granted contracts, fair wages or any social benefits, and earn no more than 27,000 Yemeni riyals (around 125 US dollars) per month. As sanitation is the only public sector to which the akhdam have access, their image as ‘only street-sweepers’ is widespread among Yemenis, and their exclusion from the labour market is maintained (Seif 2003:57). However, despite the common belief that all street cleaners are from the akhdam category, the data gathered during my fieldwork in Sana’a shows that only a minority of the akhdam slum dwellers find employment in this sector. This contradicts the popular assumption that the akhdam have the monopoly on this socially-despised occupation that they used to, according to some earlier ethnographies (Seif 2003, Walters 1987). I will return to that in Chapter 5.

The socio-economic and political changes that were already starting in the 1960s, such as market-driven reforms, rural-urban migration and the general impoverishment of society, together with the official ban on status distinctions, reshaped the social hierarchy in Yemen, and the category of akhdam in particular. However, these structural changes are rarely acknowledged in relation to the akhdam, who in popular and media accounts are largely described as suffering from the traditional stratification system. Similarly, among the dominant society, ‘being akhdam’ is perceived by many as a genetic inheritance, where the characteristics of the group are fixed, and passed from one generation to the next.

*The akhdam’s ‘culture of poverty’*



Stories about the akhdam circulate widely in Yemen, and I heard them repeated with little variation by friends, taxi drivers, teachers, and others who learned about my research. People generously shared their 'expertise', dismissively opining that my research was probably of little value, as everything worth knowing about the group was already known to the Yemenis. 'We know them very well', I was told many times, after which long descriptions would usually follow. Still, others applauded my interest, expressing hopes that my work would uplift the akhdam from misery and suffering. Yet, despite the varying levels of sympathy for the group expressed by my interlocutors, the contents of their stories and explanations for the akhdam's exclusion were similar.

In the main, the stories about the *muhamasheen*, as they are most often referred to, related to the group's particular customs and behaviour, their disregard for morals and religion, and their careless nature which prevented them from saving money and planning for their future. All those traits, I was reminded, made the akhdam responsible for their own disenfranchisement. These characteristics contributed to the akhdam's unique culture, from which their choice of occupations, places and ways of life allegedly stemmed.

It is widely believed, for example, that the akhdam are not proper Muslims. I heard on numerous occasions that the akhdam rarely pray, do not fast and do not respect gender divisions, letting their women mix with men from outside the family. As the ultimate proof of their flawed religiosity, Yemenis would point to the fact that the akhdam do not bury their dead in cemeteries, but rather eat them or bury the bodies outside their houses. 'I do not know what they do with dead bodies, but not a single time in my life have I seen a khadem having a funeral in a cemetery. Nobody has seen them', was a regularly repeated script of those who distanced themselves from the 'gossips', but nevertheless communicated a similar message. Other descriptions of the akhdam paint a picture of people living carelessly from one day to another, preoccupied only with their immediate needs. My interlocutors, who never visited akhdam places of residence, but claimed to know very well how they lived, emphasized that the akhdam wanted to enjoy life, and had little respect for rules and social conventions. As I was told endlessly, in almost exactly the same words: 'When a khadem has money, he will spend it all on

*qat*,<sup>16</sup> a music player, or a phone. He will sell them the next day if all the money is gone, and buy again when he has money. He only cares about having fun - every day is his holiday (*yawm'u 'aidu*).

A thread running through these popular descriptions is the assumption that the akhdam are not part of Yemeni culture, but rather constitute people of foreign origins, who follow their own customs and traditions (*'adat wa taqalid*). From this viewpoint, the akhdam's subordination is justified and naturalized by their unique characteristics and moral flaws; it is this difference that explains why the akhdam live in shanty towns and work in menial jobs, and do not share the same aspirations as others. Depicting the akhdam as the morally inferior 'Other' in contrast to the moral 'Self' is crucial, as Seif (2003:17) has pointed out, in legitimizing relations of domination and inequality. In the view of the dominant society, the akhdam - who are not constrained by religious norms, and lack shame, modesty and other moral properties - exclude themselves from society, whose rules they are not capable of following. This also resonates with Meneley's (1996, 2000) findings on the women of the Zabidi elite, who define akhdam women as lacking in virtue on the basis of their non-conforming behaviour. The elites, who build their social worth through competitive hospitality and consumption, ignore, as Meneley argues (2000:70), the 'material distinctions', and the fact that similar practices of socialization are not affordable for akhdam women working at low-paid domestic labour.

### *Ascribing Blackness*

The portrayal of the akhdam as a minority, with their unique, inferior culture which distinguishes them from other Yemenis, can be understood as a racialization process that classifies social groups in racial terms (Omi, Winant 1994). As the language of race as a fixed, biological category has been compromised, 'contemporary racism entails the coding of race in the language of "difference" and "culture"' (Maldonado 2009:1027). Lan (2006:15), for example, in her work on migrant domestic workers in Taiwan, remarks that racialization is a

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<sup>16</sup> Qat is a plant whose leaves and tops are chewed, giving effect of mild stimulation. The practice of chewing qat is very popular in Yemen, among all social groups.

process, related to class stratification, of 'categorization and otherization', making the boundaries between groups seemingly natural and fixed. Bonilla Silva (2006) calls it 'biologization of culture', whereby inequalities are explained by reified cultural predispositions, supposedly inherent to social groups. The substitution of biological nature with culture is evident in the categorizations of the akhdam by the Yemeni dominant society. However, the process of racialization of the akhdam is more complex than this, and the language of biological race is not necessarily abandoned. Apart from the cultural essentialization described in the previous section, two other mechanisms of differentiating the akhdam can be observed, which draw on bodily features and establish a relationship between physical appearance and social position. One attributes 'blackness' to the akhdam, and the other a particular external appearance.

While Yemenis have various skin pigmentations, and many, especially those from the coastal areas, could be described as 'black', race as such is rarely mentioned, and dark skin is not seen as proof of someone's African origins or lesser worth. On the contrary, the 'Arabness' or respectability of black Yemenis identifying with tribes or middle classes is not questioned. My questions about racism in Yemen would commonly be responded to as follows: 'Some Yemenis have light skin, some have dark skin... it is normal and it doesn't matter. We are all Muslims, and Yemenis, there is no difference between us'. Or, in the words of an akhdam interviewee: 'if you are rich, you can be of whatever colour you want; nobody cares'.

While Yemenis seem to be colour-blind towards those in higher social positions, they are not so when it comes to the akhdam, who are perceived largely through the lens of race. There is a consensus among Yemenis about the akhdam's origins and features being African, a label which is brought in by ordinary people as well as journalists and human rights activists (Yemeni as well as international). In both cases, the akhdam's African identity is taken for granted and not questioned. The akhdam are unanimously identified as black (the word 'khadem' is used interchangeably with 'aswad', the word for black), even if the members of the group deny having African roots, and, being of various backgrounds and phenotypes, some can hardly be distinguished from white Yemenis. According to Seif (2003:51), the 'blackness' imposed on the akhdam 'serves to physically materialize the dominant discourse's claim that the marginal is

from a non-Arab category'. It therefore serves to confirm the akhdam's difference, rather than constituting it. The ethnographic research conducted by Walters in the PDRY in the 1980s reveals similar workings of racial identities. Walters (1987:352) points out that 'color or race is conferred on individuals as an indication of their family background - not the other way round. Therefore, physical appearance does not predetermine a person's virtue'. This means that, as Walters postulates (1987:348), if a mixed marriage between a khadem and a person belonging to a tribe produced a child who was white but who grew up among the akhdam, he or she would still be designated as belonging to the lowest status category. As Walters's (320-334) argument goes, physical distinction is 'implicitly recognized in traditional forms of categorization' and plays a role in social discrimination, yet it is the descent category that first and foremost predetermines one's position in society.

Today, over 30 years after Walters's anthropological study, while her reading of race remains valid, the system of social hierarchies in Yemen seems to be more complicated. The distinctions, I argue, cannot be explained solely by the traditional stratification system, and the racial categories seem to be embedded in class more than in one's ascribed status.

If we think about the relationship between the akhdam and the dominant society in terms of class relations, then the fact that dark skin is a marker which is activated to designate the marginalized ones regardless of their actual skin colour, but ignored in relation to people of higher status, may be less surprising. Scholars studying processes of racialization and racism agree that there is a strong correlation between one's social status and one's racial ascription: it is the poor, rather than the wealthy and the middle classes, who are more likely to be perceived as 'black' (Fassin 2011:423; Howarth 2002).

It is undeniable that lived experiences of being black/khadem in Yemen depend largely on class identification. During my fieldwork, I encountered people who traditionally belonged to the akhdam category but had managed to escape the ascription and form new identities. For example, some experiences recalled by those who had migrated to the Gulf show that the stigma attached can be relational. Several men, fondly remembering their time in Saudi Arabia, claimed that while abroad, they felt and were treated as equal among other low-skilled Yemeni

workers. Probably as their living and working conditions were the same as those of the others, and as their social provenance was not necessarily obvious, the distinction was not articulated. Another example was provided by residents of Samsara, a compound in the Bab al-Sabah market inhabited by akhdam from the Zabid region. According to the residents, the former Yemeni Minister of Finance, Sakher al-Wajih, is from their village and 'belongs to the same tribe'.<sup>17</sup> During one of our conversations, several men criticized Sakher al-Wajih, claiming that since his personal situation had changed dramatically, he did not maintain a relationship with people from the village, and neither represented them nor self-identified with the group anymore. More importantly, the former minister was not identified as akhdam by others either. His trajectory, as well as the more ordinary ones of those akhdam who had been able to find stable jobs and afford to move out of the shanty towns, reveals that on an individual level, it is possible to avoid ascriptive labelling. Certain traits associated with 'respectable' people, such as education, wealth and proper habitation, may on rare occasions invalidate their descent (and 'blackness') and turn low status akhdam into 'Yemenis', able to socialize and intermarry with other groups.<sup>18</sup>

### *Class, aesthetics and lived spaces*

Finally, the last noteworthy pattern of construction of the akhdam's difference relates to discourses that associate the akhdam with particular forms of aesthetics, most notably manifested in their lived spaces and their appearances.

The akhdam's precarious working conditions mean that a majority of them live in extreme poverty, cannot afford proper housing, and thus can find no ways to escape the urban margins. If slums are not destroyed by the authorities, or their residents evicted, the makeshift houses often become permanent ones for the Yemeni poor. Living in slums at the outskirts of the cities,

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<sup>17</sup> The akhdam are described by other Yemenis as non-tribal people (not belonging to any big tribes), yet akhdam families do group themselves in tribal formations.

<sup>18</sup> Many traditional families, especially those identifying with the religious elites, to this day check one's family background and ancestry before agreeing to a marriage. Marrying somebody of non-noble descent, such as an akhdam, is rare.

and not sharing living spaces with other Yemenis, makes the akhdam even more segregated, simply because they have very little opportunity for mundane interactions. Stories about their particular customs and practices are recounted by Yemenis who have never lived among them or even visited their dwellings. However, living in relegated areas means more than spatial exclusion; it is seen by the dominant society as a reflection of the group's habitus, and is incorporated into their definitions. In other words, their hazardous habitations - made from any available materials, lacking access to water and sewage systems, and covered with piles of rubbish - are not seen as consequences of dramatic poverty; rather, it is this landscape that explains the akhdam's 'essence'. The symbolical dirt traditionally ascribed to the akhdam now gains a material dimension: it is not only related to their morality and professions; it is the filth of their places of residence that deepens the stigma and becomes one of the defining markers of 'being akhdam'. On the one hand, the akhdam are constituted by these places; on the other, these areas become 'akhdam places', perceived by other Yemenis as alien and dangerous.

If the akhdam are defined by their settlements (*mahwa*), they are also distinguished on the basis of their appearances. This is where the other strand of racialization plays a role: it is not only race, but also simple external appearance that distinguishes the akhdam in the view of dominant society. While in the past, akhdam men were not permitted to carry *jambiyyas* (a traditional Yemeni dagger worn by men on a belt), and the women did not cover their hair (Meneley 1996), today these symbolic distinctions no longer exist. They have been replaced, however, by material distinctions, where difference is expressed in aesthetics and bodily features. In other words, the stigma is inscribed directly on the akhdam's vulnerable bodies. Poor hygiene and clothing, not going to *hammam*, and not looking after one's hair were all mentioned to me as distinctive traits of the akhdam on the basis of which they could be easily recognized.

As such an appearance is most often attributed collectively to the urban poor who occupy informal settlements in Sana'a, today the category of those seen as undesirable expands and gains new meanings. In other words, because the numbers of people who are forced to settle in shanty towns on the outskirts of big cities are growing, the category of those labelled in the social imaginary as akhdam also expands, and today is believed to represent about 3 million

people. This encompasses those who belong to the historically excluded groups, but also the new urban poor, who regularly migrate from rural areas seeking job opportunities. The boundary between the two is blurred, and almost impossible to establish from the outside. In cities where most akhdam are anonymous and their ancestry is not obvious, they are defined by what is tangible - their segregated makeshift dwellings, menial occupations and appearances are all essentialized as mere reflections of the akhdam's ontological traits.

### **3.2.3 Informal settlements in Sana'a: sites of research**

The *muhamasheen* in Sana'a at the time of my fieldwork, between 2010 and 2013, were concentrated largely around eight informal settlements in different parts of the city and its outskirts. These were: the Samsara compound in the busy market street of Bab al-Sabah; small slum pockets in the neighbourhoods of Dar Salm, Hizyaz, Hasaba and Aser; the informal settlement of Beni Husheish in Sana'a's north-eastern suburbs; and Madinat Sawan, a housing project for low-income families.

These 'relegated territories' (Wacquant 2004) vary in size, and may accommodate anywhere from 50 to around 3,000 people, although since no official registers exist, these numbers are rough estimates given by the residents. Moreover, the numbers are subject to constant change. Some settlements expand and gain new dwellers, while others shrink (when some residents decide to move to more favourable locations), or disappear (when people are forced by the authorities to resettle).

The only dwelling in Sana'a that is permanent in nature, having been continuously inhabited by the akhdam since the 1960s, is the Samsara dwelling that became one of my fieldwork sites. Previously a storage compound for traders, the building was donated as a *waqf* (religious endowment) to the akhdam community from Zabid who had been brought to Sana'a in 1964 to work in sanitation, by the Republic's new rulers of the new regime. The gated area, which is adjacent to the busy Bab al-Sabah market road, consists of a courtyard and two floors divided into tiny shacks and rooms, which are home to around 220 people. Residents of Samsara have

historically been associated with the municipality (*baladiyya*), and to this day many of them find employment as street sweepers and garbage collectors. Others have joined the military, work for local associations, or struggle with unemployment. The residents of Samsara seek to distinguish themselves from other slum dwellers: '[w]e are different from those who live in slums - we care more about education, we rent houses, we never beg, no matter how poor we are', they endlessly emphasize. However, despite the fact that the community has been living in the same location for approximately 50 years and does not share the spatial isolation of other akhdam, they are nonetheless regarded as strangers and treated with suspicion by neighbours and the market's customers. The residents of Samsara are not, for example, invited to family events by their neighbours, nor are they visited by them. Yemenis living nearby describe them as members of a historically excluded category who came to Sana'a to 'sweep the streets' and, because of their specific culture, never integrated with society or moved into other professions.

While Samsara was given to the akhdam as a religious endowment, and as such, the building cannot be taken away from them or used for other purposes, the status of other akhdam dwellings is less certain. They first appeared in Sana'a in the 1970s as a result of the first wave of rural-urban migration, and their presence intensified in the 1990s, following the return of Yemeni migrant workers from the Gulf. Most of the akhdam's informal settlements are erected around the fringes of Sana'a, encroaching on state or private land. Interviewees mentioned two common methods for appropriating 'free space'. One was to simply build shacks on available state land, and claim ownership on the basis of their occupation and domestication of a previously uninhabited location. In the words of one of the residents of the Aser slum, who moved to Sana'a in 1992, 'It was nobody's, so we made it ours'. Another practice, seen as a more lawful one, was to buy a piece of land or a house from a previous owner. In the case of settling on private land, the situation differed slightly in that the new settlers were often forced to pay a rent, proportionate to the size of the occupied space. However, as none of these areas were included in urban plans, and the constructions did not adhere to any regulations, then regardless of which way the newcomers settled, they were not considered to be legal owners by the authorities, and had no title to the land or the houses.



Two settlements, which were set up in the late 1980s and early 1990s in the Dar Salm<sup>19</sup> and Aser neighborhoods, have expanded their territories and are now the most populous slums in Sana'a. Some others, like slums of Bab al Yemen and the 45<sup>th</sup> Street Sharia' 45, were demolished and their populations resettled. A few new ones have been erected in the past few years. As slums are seen as both illegal and socially unacceptable, they are constantly under threat of demolition (Shorbagi 2008:12). Yemenis refer to these places of residence as '*mahwa*', a word which translates as 'slum', but can also refer to a place where dogs are kept<sup>20</sup>. According to one akhdam activist, this reflects the way the group is perceived by the dominant society - as 'animals rather than human beings', for whom horrific physical surroundings are natural and not harmful. Yet, living in these settlements carries various hazards. The akhdam's dwellings are characterized by an ad-hoc architecture, with shacks constructed haphazardly from any available materials such as stones, plastic, tin, bricks, mud, cardboard and old truck tires. Even those built from more solid materials, like cheap concrete blocks, have makeshift roofs of plastic tarpaulin, meaning that the houses get flooded with every heavy rain. Single-storey huts are crammed one next to another along the passageways, with privacy afforded only by hanging fabrics, and walls made of mud and rocks. To an outsider, a landscape of these living spaces looks like a garbage dump; not only are houses often built from debris, but what's more, the whole place is covered with human waste and omnipresent garbage - some of it kept by the residents, more of it disposed of by Yemenis from surrounding neighbourhoods.

Out of all these places, it is only in the previously-mentioned Madinat Sa'wan that the akhdam live in concrete houses, with drainage, sewerage and paved roads. The housing project, also known as 'Madinat al-'umal' (Workers' City), was designed for the impoverished segments of society and was completed in the early 2000s. A group of akhdam was first moved to the neighbourhood in 2005 after a fire had destroyed their previous residence in the Aser neighbourhood. Since then, many have stayed, and a few others have moved in from different locations, while others have moved out, finding the houses too small to accommodate a whole

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<sup>19</sup> The Dar Salm settlement has been the main site of my fieldwork. I discuss it in detail in Chapter 5.

<sup>20</sup> In classical Arabic, the word *mahwa* means a container, or a place where things are kept - not necessarily dogs, as akhdam activists suggest.

family<sup>21</sup> or too isolated from the city. The space is divided into several units which are occupied by the akhdam, other impoverished Yemeni families, and Somali refugees. Despite the fact that living conditions in Madinat Sawan are better than in the informal settlements, there is a similar lack of certainty; the residents are not granted ownership of their houses, and can be arbitrarily expelled.

The materiality of these places, with their hazards, deprivations, and insecurities, is of utmost importance, as it constitutes the immediate and inseparable background of the akhdam's daily experiences, and by extension, their struggles. In other words, as the immediate environment and material deprivations make a heavy mark on individual biographies with their hopes, motivations and needs, they cannot be dismissed when analyzing the political engagements of the marginalized (Auyero 2012). In the following empirical chapter, I will shed light on how the akhdam's daily worries and experiences of precarity have dominated their being, in order to explore how they go on about them both in the lived spaced, and beyond.

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<sup>21</sup> The houses are of uniform size (2 rooms), and the residents are not allowed to extend them.

## **PART 1: BETWEEN THE LOGICS OF PRACTICE AND ARTICULATION**

Sometimes we build chicken coops in places where they will be seen. They look like coops, but we don't use them; they are just empty. A lot of members of the police force come to destroy them, and we just look at them and laugh: 'You are the chickens! So many people need to come to destroy empty structures!'

Jalal, resident of Wadi al-Na'am, Naqab, 12<sup>th</sup> September 2012

All my life I've never asked for anybody's help, I've tried to manage everything myself. I make no trouble, I don't complain, I keep quiet (...). [But] when my son was shot, I just exploded, I went out to cry and shout. I wanted people to know my pain (...), [to know that] my son was killed only because he was poor.

Fatma, resident of Dar Salm, Sana'a, 4<sup>th</sup> December 2012

Jalal lives in the Bedouin village of Wadi al-Na'am in the south of Israel, which, like other Bedouin locations not recognized by the state, is under constant threat of demolition. As villagers lack building permits, all structures erected by them are viewed as illegal, and hence often end up being razed to the ground, as happened to the chicken coops described by Jalal. Jalal is a young, fierce rapper who divides his time between making music and working for an NGO called the 'Negev Coexistence Forum', advocating for rights and civil equality for all the inhabitants of the Naqab region. In his loose trousers and hoodie, he looks little like a Bedouin from the brochures distributed by the Israeli Ministry of Tourism. Jalal does not necessarily feel like a Bedouin either; or rather, he emphasizes that his other identifications - as a Muslim, Arab, Palestinian and black person, and recently a father - matter just as much to him, if not more. What's more, he is also an Israeli citizen. 'I have to fight for all [of these], nothing comes for free', Jalal told me, struggling to single out an object of his political engagements.

The second quote comes from Fatma, a widow who lives in a slum in the northern part of Sana'a, Yemen. At the time I met her, she was grieving the death of her son, who had been shot by a guard at a bank, just two minutes away from Fatma's shack. Although his killing was supposedly an accident, Fatma was convinced that her son had been murdered because the guard had seen little value in the life of a beggar belonging to the akhdam category. This is why she took to the streets to protest her son's killing. On other days, Fatma begs on those very same streets to earn money and provide for her children. 'There is not one day I can relax', Fatma confessed, complaining that her worries never end with the day.

As the examples of Jalal and Fatma demonstrate, the experiences of the subaltern condition are multi-layered, and so are their struggles, taking different forms and responding to various needs, obstacles, challenges and aspirations. I am reminded of the words of Fraser (1995, 2003), who argues that, in the face of injustices that are simultaneously cultural and socioeconomic, a single mode of politics does not suffice. In other words, if subordination is grounded in maldistribution and misrecognition, it can be challenged only if both kinds of claims are made. As Fraser puts it, 'justice today requires both redistribution and recognition' (1995:69), to address status hierarchies as well as class inequalities. It is true that, for Fatma, securing food for her family is no less important than her quest for justice when she protests her son's killing. And for Jalal, for whom 'nothing comes for free', his various struggles are strictly interlocked, and not linear. They may happen in different sites and take different forms, having as their objects material provisions and daily survival as well as rights and recognition. I mention the two largely unconnected accounts of Jalal and Fatma here because I believe that their words grasp something that is often omitted from the earlier-discussed literature on subaltern agency and politics.

As I have shown in the Introduction, scholars across different disciplines and perspectives tend to agree that there is little space for deliberative politics in the lives of the poor. Preoccupied with everyday matters and struggling with a variety of hardships, for the subaltern, gains come from what is 'done' rather than what is 'claimed'. As such, Asef Bayat, for example, defines

their efforts as largely subscribing to the 'logic of practice', whereby the subaltern 'practice what they claim' (2010:19). In other words, these struggles are action- rather than discourse-oriented. Julia Eckert (2015), drawing on work of, among others, Asef Bayat, James C. Scott and James Holston, summarizes that the various forms of 'unorganized collective action' can be defined as 'practice movements'. They manifest themselves, in Eckert's (2015:568) view, 'in practices rather than in words'. The logic of practice thus characterizes the unspoken struggles that constitute the ways in which the marginalized deal with their daily hardship, create their own spaces, and appropriate what is not delivered by the state. These struggles are, in Bayat's words, 'driven by the force of necessity' to survive and live in dignity. They may have a transformative effect, but are not intended as 'political acts' (Bayat 1997:57-58). In de Certeau's (1984) terms, they could be referred to simply as 'ways of operating'; that is, exploiting opportunities to manipulate the dominant order, but where gains are never permanent, and hence need to be constantly renewed and fought for.

What stands out in these accounts is a clear separation between practices and discourses (the articulation of claims), as if they constitute two different, autonomous realms, where only the realm of practices is within the reach of the subaltern.

Such a dichotomous reading, however, seems to me misleading. First, if the two logics - of practices and articulation - are distinct, then they can also be entwined. As Foucault (1980) argued, discourse is composed not only of speech, but just as much of practices, beliefs and ideas. It is worth remembering that practices, daily routines and behaviours - even if speechless - produce meanings and communicate them. As such, Stuart Hall (1997) calls them 'signifying practices', emphasizing their discursive aspect. Engin Isin (2009) makes a similar point when discussing struggles for rights, urging us to look at what he calls 'acts of citizenship'. It is through a variety of disruptive, often spontaneous 'deeds', Isin argues, that 'claims are articulated and claimants are produced' (2009:371). As such, these acts turn actors into subjects of rights, who can contest and transform the established meaning of citizenship and predefined orders.

The words of Jalal and Fatma recounted earlier suitably illustrate how ordinary unspoken acts can take on new meanings that are meant to be communicated to audiences, rather than remain invisible. Their acts constitute claim-making practices, not because they seize, appropriate or encroach, but because they aim to 'speak', and convey a particular message. Importantly, as Ismail (2006:xxii) drawing on Ortner (1995) observes, their meanings 'rather than being fixed, are of dynamic nature', and as such must always be understood in their particular contexts. Here, Jalal and his friends build coops not to keep chickens - as they normally would - but to provoke police reaction, in order to subsequently reveal its absurdity and mock it. It also conveys a message that the village is theirs, and that the people will continue with their daily lives no matter what the restrictions are. Similarly, when Fatma goes out to grieve in public among unknown passers-by, it is not an irrational outburst of pain; it is partly her way of transmitting the sense of injustice that people like her face because of their social status.

These two examples point to more than just the discursive aspect of mundane acts. They must be seen as part of larger efforts through which the subaltern, more than merely seeking immediate benefits, also identify injustice and engage in overt claim-making that aims to question what they see as systemic subordination. Meaningful practices are of course not the only way through which the subaltern articulate their grievances and claims. As the chapters ahead will show, both the Bedouin in Israel and the akhdam in Yemen use various means to assert their voice and turn this into a public statement - whether the language deployed is that of resistance, negotiations with the state, or desperate pleas for support or intervention. These assertions can be done in lived spaces and the streets, as in the cases of Jalal and Fatma respectively, but also through court litigations, protests, petitions or manifestos. Irrespective of the site or the medium used, these struggles seek visibility and presuppose audiences, in order to question the dominant order, demand particular goods or services from the state, or express their subjectivities and seek recognition. As such, they follow what I will here call the logic of articulation.

Thus, in the next chapters, in trying to grasp the various ways through which the subaltern challenge, circumvent and deal with the marginality imposed on them, I examine multiple

struggles that subscribe both to the logic of practice and to that of articulation. More precisely, as indicated in the introduction, I focus first on efforts that aim to improve and make bearable everyday life, both through non-discursive practices and through engagements with the state. From there, I go on to shed light on often-overlooked instances where historically marginalized groups act not only as the poor, or the 'populations' (Chatterjee 2004), but as rights-bearing subjects who demand respect and dignity as much as material entitlements. Here, I scrutinize new political identities forged by the subaltern, and vocabularies with which they articulate their grievances and the forms of recognition they seek. By doing this, I hope to map the different sites and modalities of subaltern politics (and the relationship between them) which, I will argue, reflect the continuum of people's needs, hopes and aspirations, rather than being exclusive fields of engagement.

This part of the thesis is organized around two chapters, as well as a comparative conclusion. Chapter 4 discusses the case of the Bedouin in the Naqab, and Chapter 5 moves to the case of the Yemeni akhdam. I decided to contain each case to only one chapter that would bring together the subaltern's practices, claims and visions of themselves, to give a holistic picture of their struggles. As such, both chapters attempt to provide answers to the research questions laid out earlier. How do the subaltern cope with, circumvent and challenge their systemic subordination? Or, more precisely: what are the languages, means and sites that are available to or appropriated by the subaltern to deal with their marginalization, in the different ways they experience it?

Although similar themes are tackled in both, the focus and particular issues discussed in the two chapters of course differ, demonstrating the specificity and depth of each case. Hence, while the analytical lens allows the two chapters to relate to each other, they can also be read separately. The contrast in structures of the two chapters also stems from the radically different 'state of the art' in the literature regarding the two cases. While there is a rich body of research on which one can build when writing about the Bedouin-Palestinians, with ready-made concepts to understand their forms of agency, and volumes devoted to Palestinian

history and struggle, similar resources are absent in the case of the Yemeni akhdam. Apart from several old anthropological studies and brief passages in some texts on Yemen, the akhdam have been subject to very little study. Their past, their lived experiences and their voices have not been archived or recorded, and have not been turned into objects of public reflection, or themes of poems and novels<sup>22</sup> - as the data is scarce, the challenge of accessing and 'conceptualizing' the akhdam is therefore much more difficult.

While acknowledging the specificity of each case and the differing amounts of information available, in what follows I aim to offer more than mere ethnographies of the 'particular'. Rather than seeing subaltern politics as belonging to an autonomous field, and stemming from the nature of each group, I seek to discuss it in the following chapters as emerging in dialogue with larger forces (not only those of the state's systemic oppression or neglect, but also neoliberal changes, processes of 'NGOisation', and the commodification of politics) and accommodating to the always-changing realms of the possible and beneficial. As such, in order to understand the category of 'political', I will approach the overt political engagements as much as I will the often-articulated expressions of disengagement from politics. Moreover, to avoid static representations of subaltern struggles, chapters 4 and 5 call attention to the internal divisions within each group that reflect their competing visions, self-definitions, and goals.

In order to zoom out from the 'here and now' of each case, the two empirical chapters are followed by a brief comparative reflection, in which I hope to reveal some larger patterns in the ways the subaltern, embedded in radically different contexts, regimes, and histories, talk about and deal with their marginalization. This section also reveals that similar acts may have different meanings and consequences, and as such, depending on the context and time, may bring very different results.

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<sup>22</sup> The one probable exception is a novel by the Yemeni writer and poet Ali al-Muqri, 'Black Taste, Black Smell', published in 2008. However, Muqri offers a romantic reading of the akhdam, portraying them as free, culturally distinct people who resist assimilation and do not respect the rules and values of dominant society.



While the struggles scrutinized in chapters 4 and 5 are played out across local and domestic settings, the second part of the thesis will expand the scope of the analysis by introducing the transnational dimension.

#### **4. The Naqab Bedouin's politics of place and memory**

Julie Peteet (2005) has written on the ambiguity of the Palestinian refugee camps, which, despite being places of poverty and suffering, are also sites where hope is cultivated and where creative struggles unfold. The Bedouin unrecognized villages in the Naqab evoke similar associations. Despite the state's continuous efforts to render life in these localities impossible, accompanied by the wider policies of Judaization of the land and resettlement of the Arab population, large numbers of the Bedouin, for a variety of reasons, remain in their villages and lead 'ordinary' lives.

In the following chapter, I focus on the multiplicity of struggles unfolding in and around these villages, which aim to maintain an ordinary life, but also challenge the status quo, articulate the Bedouin's discontent and demand what they are deprived of. To give insights into how the residents of the Naqab deal with the policies of systematic dispossession, exclusion and control - both past and present - the chapter splits into four sections. I begin the analysis by shedding light on the Bedouin's 'arts of living', where, driven by various motivations, the villagers deploy 'makeshift creativity' (de Certeau 1984:xv) to live normal lives despite the uncertainty and constraints imposed on them. From there, I move to the second section, where overtly staged 'politics of place' is discussed. I look at non-conventional tactics such as protest, and also symbolic spatial acts such as building and naming, through which the Bedouin articulate their land claims. Here, in contrast to the mundane practices, the aim is not to turn living conditions into outwardly 'dignified' ones, but to claim dignity, despite intolerable physical surroundings. Related to this, the succeeding section moves away from claim-making practices and on to narratives through which the Bedouin remember their past and cultivate their historical

relationship with their village. Through these discourses of indigenization, the Bedouin not only offer a reading of history that is alternative to the dominant one, but also forge a particular group identity. Finally, the last section moves beyond lived spaces, and focuses on how NGOs mediate in the Bedouin struggle and deploy legal means, with their opportunities and limits.

The practices and narratives described here, structured around place and memory, are of course not exhaustive, and focus to a large extent on the unrecognized villages, where I conducted the vast majority of my fieldwork. This does not imply that the politics of 'place and memory' is the only one in which the Bedouin engage, or that all of the Bedouin adhere to it, or articulate similar memories and relationships to the land. On the contrary, this chapter seeks to problematize the static and homogeneous representations of the 'authentic Bedouin' or the 'Bedouin's resistance'. While not attempting to cover the totality of the Bedouin's (often contradictory) aims and ways of being and speaking, I rather hope to - within my narrow focus - reveal the complex and changing natures of the Bedouin and their agency, which need to be contextualized and read in a relational manner.

#### **4.1 Arts of Living**

Everything we have in the village is thanks to people's common efforts; we've done everything with our own hands. We know that we can rely on our families, our neighbours and our friends, and not on Abu Basma regional council<sup>23</sup> or politicians. If we waited for their help, we would be still living in tents with no water or electricity.

Ahmed, a resident of Wadi al-Na'am (interviewed on 17 September 2012)

There were journalists coming here, international organizations... but nothing really brings any change. What counts is that we have patience and we are persistent. That's our way to deal with the problems. They tell us to leave, not to build, not to cultivate anything... Basically everything is forbidden. Living itself will be forbidden soon. But we don't accept the reality they

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<sup>23</sup> Between 2003 and 2012, Abu Basma served as a regional council for the 11 recognized Bedouin villages in the Naqab. In 2012, it was dissolved and replaced by two new councils.

[the state] decide for us. We make our reality ourselves (...). We've been here long before the state, and are going to remain. By the force of our own efforts.

Munir, a resident of Wadi al-Na'am (interviewed on 22 September 2012)

The above quoted words of two residents of a Bedouin village hint at a silent and unspectacular dimension to the villagers' opposition to the state's policies of displacement and control - a dimension that is seldom covered by media or scholarly debate. According to my interlocutors, it is first and foremost the people's determination, embodied in daily practices and strengthened by personal relationships, which renders futile Israel's continuous efforts to 'make the phenomenon of the Bedouin disappear'. Since the Bedouin localities, according to official records, do not (or rather should not) exist, they are denied building permits and all basic services such as electricity, running water, public transportation, and sewage systems. A female activist from al-Sirra referred to this systematic deprivation as a quiet execution of the Bedouin villages and their residents: the aim was to make life there unbearable, in order to make people seemingly freely leave their villages. Yet, many, like Ahmed and Munir quoted above, refuse to leave these spaces of denial, and instead, relying on their own efforts and creativity, turn them into living spaces. As such, they transform what could be seen as a 'state of exception' into one of 'normality'. Before going on to explore in detail these mundane practices of dealing with hardship, it is important to first reflect on their complex meanings.

Some of the Bedouins I talked to described their decision to stay in the village and maintain everyday life as acts of steadfastness, *sumud*. *Sumud* has been the symbol of Palestinian national struggle since the 1960s, and is often seen as complementary to military and other overtly political acts of resistance. Unlike the organized opposition to Israel's occupation, *sumud* is associated with daily practices through which the refusal to abandon one's land is manifested. Rajah Shahadeh, a Palestinian writer and lawyer, famously wrote in his 1982 diary titled *Third Way*: 'Between mute submission and blind hate I choose a third way. I am *samid*'. Shahadeh conceptualizes *sumud* as an effort to remain human, or to live a human life, in the face of oppression and violence. In this vein, Allen describes *sumud* as 'a nationalistically inflected form of stoicism' (Allen 2008:456) that aims to maintain an ordinary life despite the systemic disruption and distortions brought by the occupation. The symbolic and practical

importance of sumud to Palestinians has made it a favoured theme of scholarly inquiries. Volumes have been written on the topic, discussing practices as diverse as holding on to the land, cultivating Palestinian culture and tradition and narrating the past, and also, to an increasing extent, talking about affirmation of life and expressions of joy and hope (Richter-Devroe 2011:33; Khalili 2007; Peteet 1991; Junka 2006; Kelly 2008; Gren 2015). Some scholars, in order to 'translate' sumud for wider audiences, refer to Scott's concept of infrapolitics, or 'everyday resistance'. As Khalili, for example, put it (2007:217): 'steadfastness in the face of ongoing assault is a sort of infrapolitics of the powerless. It neither demands self-sacrifice, nor valorises suffering. At its core is the quiet dignity of 'hanging on', no matter how battered, assailed, and embattled one becomes'. Israel's changing policies of control and dispossession may explain why what is dubbed as 'everyday resistance' shifts, so that today, as well as passively 'holding on' to the land, more active quests for joy and fun are also seen as expressions of political agency (Hammami 2004).

Many Bedouins I talked to understood sumud in a similar way: as staying on their land, not giving up, surviving, being patient, maintaining a normal life and remaining who they were. They also often added that it was a peaceful tactic, lacking the heroism and bravado of armed resistance, in which they were not interested, or of which some were critical. A chairperson of one unrecognized village told me, for instance: 'Resistance is throwing stones. If you want to see it, you need to go to the West Bank. We are peaceful citizens; we only ask for our rights'.

Other villagers argued that their everyday life should not be seen through the prism of the political, explaining their decision to stay as a 'non-choice', or pragmatic move, rather than as stemming from any particular attachment to the land. Especially in the village of Wadi al-Na'am where I spent most of my fieldwork time, I repeatedly heard people complaining about life in the village and swearing that if they could only get the necessary financial support from the government, they would move out at any time. They refused, however, to be moved to Segev Shalom, a nearby township that the state had designed from them, arguing that it was a ghost town, with high levels of crime and no job opportunities. Being sent to worse locations without being given any choice or financial assistance, while at the same time Jewish citizens were being offered big sums of money to move to the Naqab to places of their liking, was clear evidence of

the discrimination highlighted by many residents. For example, Mariam, who emphasized to me her love and respect for Israel, in many conversations talked about her dreams of having a proper house with running water and electricity, where her children could enjoy a good quality of life. 'I want to leave this place [Wadi al-Na'am]. But how can I afford it? If the government helped me, as it helps Jewish people, I wouldn't hesitate. But they cannot just say "move there"; nobody can afford it.' When on one occasion I pointed out to Mariam, who was upset that many Bedouin did not respect the law, that to live in her own settlement in Wadi al-Na'am was, from the state's perspective, an act of breaking the law, Mariam laughed. 'No, this is not right. To say that we are here illegally, this is not law, this is nonsense (*kalam fadi*). We were born here; we are not some refugees coming from nowhere!' Thus, while Mariam perceived herself as a loyal citizen, she also recognized the state's discrimination against Arabs, and differentiated between what she perceived as good laws that should be obeyed, and bad laws that had no value.

It is worth recalling the 'pragmatic' voices of those who stay in their villages for various different reasons, in order to avoid the risk of 'romanticizing resistance' (Abu-Lughod 1990) by interpreting all mundane acts and negotiations of Palestinians as reflections of *sumud*. It is important to remember that nationalist identity, while important, is not the only force driving the Palestinian-Bedouin, whose forms of belonging, as well as aspirations, are complex. Allen (2008) makes a similar observation when she discusses the Palestinians' ways of managing, getting by, or adapting to the life under occupation, which, while they are expressions of agency and may have political consequences, do not necessarily stem from political motivations or aims. However, when Allen (ibid:460) claims that 'there is no convenient concept for describing the processes and stances that constitute neither outright confrontation nor submission, but that are still critical to political dynamics', she may be missing out.

For example, Bayat's (1997) earlier-discussed concept of 'quiet encroachment of the ordinary' deftly grasps what Allen is hinting at. Bayat pinpoints the 'complexity of motives' (1997:6) behind subaltern struggles, where often pragmatic calculations are mixed with moral justifications. These struggles are non-ideological, instead stemming from necessity; yet, even if not designed as such, their consequences may be political and transformative. To account for

the practices of the Bedouin that are rooted in daily life, in this section I also draw on insights from de Certeau's (1984) work. To this effect, I read Bedouin mundane practices as amounting to 'clever tricks, knowing how to get away with things' (de Certeau ibid.:xix). These different forms of 'make-shift creativity of groups or individuals' (ibid.:xiv-xv) together constitute 'ways of operating', through which the marginalized exploit opportunities presented to them to deal with the networks of power and control within which they are always embedded. In other words, seen from this perspective, actors act within, rather than against, the structures of power, yet find their own ways to manipulate and evade them, even if their gains are only temporary.

Returning now to the words of Ahmed and Munir at the beginning of this section, I move to shed light on a multiplicity of endeavours, often banal, in which the Bedouin engage to make life in their villages bearable despite the restrictions and constraints.

#### *Dealing with deprivations*

First, as unrecognized villages are not connected to the water systems, each village has its own locally-organized system for dealing with water deficiencies. The inhabitants of Al-Araqib, for instance, use a local well; however, as the amount of water it provides is never sufficient, they have to purchase the rest and bring it back to the village in tanks. Travelling to filling points far away from the village and then storing the water in plastic or metal containers is a common practice. Other villages, like Wadi al-Na'am, which have managed to obtain an independent connection, are covered with dense networks of thin, entangled black hosepipes. These are connected to taps and water mains that distribute the water to individual dwellings. Each connection normally covers several families. Although the pressure of the water that reaches the houses is very low, and the pipes often burst in the sun, residents consider the fact of having running water to represent a significant improvement in their living conditions. Each household has its own meter, installed by the Mekorot Water Company, to indicate how much water is consumed. Rather than bills being paid separately, a sheikh or some other appointed person is responsible for collecting the money from all the families and then paying the whole

amount to the water company. An account by Khalil al-Amour, from the village of al-Sirra, gives us some insight into one of the ways the struggle to obtain water can play out:

We didn't have water here until 1998. We struggled a lot for it (...) At the beginning, they just opened the tap and allowed us to come with our tanks and camels and donkeys and jars (...). But then we just connected pipes to the tap, by ourselves, without their authorization (...). We paid for the pipes, we paid for the diggers to install the pipes (...). They were very angry at the beginning, and were about to arrest me. They said this was illegal. I said, 'I know maybe it's illegal, but people's rights are legal. They want to drink water, and they need to drink water. And if it's illegal, I agree to be arrested if I violated the law, no problem' (...). Now, they don't say anything, they just accept our money; we pay for it every month to Mekorot, the national water company. The bill comes to my mail box in Beer Sheva (...).

Khalil's narrative reveals how the residents' persistence allowed them to get water delivered to their village. Interestingly, as their initiative to connect pipes to the tap, at first deemed to be unlawful, was presented as exercising the people's 'right to water', it was finally accepted and institutionalized, despite the 'illegal' status of the village. Moreover, the fact that the residents paid bills for the water was also used as an argument that the Bedouin were not squatters as they were commonly portrayed, but rather lawful citizens paying for delivered services, the same as anybody else.

Further evidence of acting within, rather than against, the law can be seen in the ways some Bedouin acquire electricity. Despite the fact that there are high-voltage pylons passing by most of the unrecognized localities, their residents do not illegally connect to the grids, relying instead on alternative energy sources. While in the past this would have typically meant electricity generators, due to the long-term rising prices of fuel they have been gradually replaced by solar panels. Depending exclusively on solar energy means that in the evenings, power will most probably be abruptly cut off; nevertheless, there is enough of it for basic daily use. Although each panel costs around 8-10,000 dollars, constituting a big investment for Bedouin families, most houses in the unrecognized villages have at least one panel. As they are necessary to 'continue normal life', as Khalil put it, people are prepared to pay.

Whereas solar panels are acquired by individual families by their own means, some other initiatives are shared by the whole community, which, by filling the void of non-existent state

services, facilitate life in the villages. A lot of what is done in each village is mediated through the work of 'local committees' (*al-lajna al-mahalliya*) - Bedouin independent administrative bodies. These informal organizations, composed of families' representatives, 'manage' villages that are officially deprived of local representation. They are in charge of dealing with the daily practicalities of the unrecognized localities, and serving the needs of residents. At the same time, they are in charge of defining each village's political strategies and campaigns, lobbying externally for its interests, and seeking out allies. As local committees have no budget, they rely on self-financing and the voluntarism of the members. There are no popular elections, but families appoint suitable candidates through consensus. Usually it is the most respected individuals in a village, as well as those who are most active and involved in the political struggle, who become part of a committee's board. During assemblies, members discuss the current problems of the village and decide how and by what means they can be solved. It is at these meetings that most of the activities aimed at improving living conditions in the settlements are initiated, and that decisions are taken to 'guarantee that there is no chaos in the village', as Ibrahim abu-Afash, head of the local committee in Wadi al-Na'am, put it.

Depending on the particular needs of the locality, residents undertake a wide range of collective measures, such as organizing transport to school for children, or building a network of roads that facilitates access to crucial places in a village (like the school or the clinic) or to a nearby public road. In the case of places such as Wadi al-Na'am, which extends over vast, rocky territory, road building by residents has been seen as of utmost importance for the functioning of the village. As Yusuf, an activist from Wadi al-Na'am, told me, 'before 2005 [when the first road was build], it seemed that we were much further away from each other. Today if you have a car, you can get anywhere easily. This makes us feel more like one village (...)'.

Yusuf's words reveal that while road building is about improving infrastructure and ultimately making life easier, it can also be read as a way of exercising control over space. Despite the fact that in Israel/Palestine space is tightly controlled by top-down planning and surveillance, a lot has been written about grassroots production of alternative spaces and transformations of the landscape (Yacobi 2004; Bulle 2009; Yiftachel 2009; Hamdan-Saliba 2014). Similarly here, by connecting previously isolated places to each other, remote locations become incorporated



into the village's life and mark the otherwise non-existent boundaries of Wadi al-Na'am. In this way, the villagers reshape a space which is officially under the state's hegemonic control.

### *Building and Renovating*

In fact, any acts of building in unrecognized settlements have similar effects. They bring in a sense of permanence despite the provisionality imposed by the state, and they domesticate landscape which officially cannot be domesticated. Constructing, extending and decorating houses despite the permanent threat of demolition are the most tangible examples of eluding the order enforced by the authorities. As Ayman, a young man from Wadi al-Na'am put it, these acts are crucial because they bring in a sense of normalcy, and hence are worth the risk:

Building is illegal here - every new or renovated construction risks demolition. You never know if and when they might come. But you cannot live in fear all the time; it is not possible. You just live your life and try to make it normal. Of course we build when it is necessary - we just pray to God at the same time that they won't notice and destroy it.

Ayman's account in fact reflects a sentiment that I heard expressed by many residents of the unrecognized villages. Although fear and a sense of uncertainty are common, they are also normalized, and seen as part of the everyday setting. As such, these feelings are not hidden, but are confronted and dealt with on a daily basis. Later during the same conversation, Ayman told me: 'the fact that we are afraid to lose our houses doesn't mean that we will start living in tents'. This sums up why the residents continue to build, while at the same time trying to make their construction sites as inconspicuous as possible in order to avoid demolitions.

This is exactly what Ayman did after getting married in 2011: he built a house for himself and his wife on the site of an old shed, far away from the main road. This way, the house would not be noticed from outside the village, nor would it be recognized as a new structure in the aerial photographs taken regularly by the planning authorities to monitor changes in the landscape in the unrecognized localities. 'Most people do it like this - we try to find places which are hidden and where some constructions had already existed. This is the safest strategy', Ayman explained. His house, although looking from the outside like any other ordinary makeshift shack

with a corrugated zinc roof, was a surprise on the inside. Ayman proudly showed me around the air-conditioned rooms, a living room furnished with leather sofas and a new Sony television, and the bedroom, with walls covered with mirrors. Probably noticing my surprise, Ayman explained that he had spent a lot of money on his new house, but at least it made him feel like a human, and not 'homeless or an animal'.

His situation was not unique. While external renovations are too risky to be undertaken, many villagers invest significant sums of money to furnish, repair and decorate the interiors of their dwellings. As has become clear, taking care of places of residence and carrying out building work is not only about having a shelter to survive, but also about turning that shelter into a home where one can live with dignity and a small degree of comfort. 'Living in dignity' or 'living like a human' were often invoked as rights to which anybody should be entitled. For example, Nadia, who covered her tin walls with plaster, for which she eventually received a demolition order, explained:

I am renovating this place because I want my children to have a real home, where they can relax and feel good, and not be ashamed in front of others. How is that a crime? Before, when there were bare metal walls, the heat was unbearable. Now it is much better here. I also bought cushions to decorate the living room, and as soon as I have more money I will buy curtains. Then I will finish the other rooms. I have to do it step by step, I can't afford to do it all at once (...). I may be already awaiting demolition; I have a warrant here. But I hope that they will forget us, that they will let us be. I prefer to think it won't happen and continue improving our house as much as I can.

Despite the uncertainty, villagers like Nadia, driven by 'the necessity to survive and live a dignified life' (Bayat 1997: 58), confront the risk to improve their living conditions. Even though improving the infrastructure, accessing basic services, and constructing or renovating shelters are framed by many Bedouins as 'no choice' activities to which they have a natural right, they do have political consequences: as the residents consolidate and expand rather than abandon their localities, they hinder the state's resettlement project as a result. The Bedouin's asserting their agency and acting upon their needs have led to transformations in the landscape that can be easily grasped through studying family photographs. In many villages, I was shown photographs of the place from the previous decade that showed a built environment very

different from the present one. For example, in Khashem Zannah, Atiya, who hosted me at his home for several days, showed me pictures from the early 2000s in which his house seemed to be standing in the middle of nowhere; today, not only is the house twice as big, and covered with concrete, but it is also surrounded by new constructions, most of them belonging to his family. 'We don't try to take over the Naqab as Israelis say, but with every generation there are more and more Bedouins, so, to live like humans, we have no choice but to build', Atiya commented over the photos, explicitly stating that the Bedouin do not build in an act of defiance, but to live normal lives.

The extensions of the dwellings and improvements in their construction materials, as well as the rise of solar panels, local shops and inner roads, are indeed visible across the villages. As such, residents contest the official categorization of Bedouin localities, and reshape the marginalized villages to some extent into 'free spaces' (Polletta 1999) where, despite the prevailing constraints, autonomy and alternative livelihoods are maintained. Thus, if these efforts are about improving living conditions, they are no less about dignity, bringing a sense of permanence, and refusing to be treated, to use Mbembe's words, as the 'living dead'.

#### **4.2 Staying, building and protesting: the Bedouin's claim-making**

If Mariam, who we mentioned earlier, continues to live in Wadi al-Na'am, it is not because she wishes to challenge the state. While she recognizes the discrimination against the Arab citizens of Israel, personally Mariam prefers to stay away from politics and protests, to live peacefully in the country she loves, despite all the difficulties. Similarly, Nadia, who renovates her house despite the threat of its demolition, exposes primarily agency of pragmatism and care for her children, hoping at the same time that her 'illegal' works will be ignored by the authorities. In both of these cases and many others like them, staying in the village and following daily practices aims largely at maintaining the ordinary and improving living conditions. Whether politically motivated or not, in order to be successful, such acts seek invisibility, avoid confrontation and wish to remain off-stage. In this section, I move on to examine acts which are

similarly rooted in lived spaces, but follow a logic of articulation, aiming to stake the Bedouin's claims, or simply to make a statement. As such, they could be seen as reflections of the Bedouin's place-based politics that seeks to advance the village's interests and goals, and overtly challenge the state's envisioning of the land and technocratic planning (Routledge 1996).

### *Insurgent building*

Practices which were discussed in the previous section as 'ordinary' may take an explicitly contentious form, depending on the intentions behind them. For example, Koensler (2012) observes the phenomenon of 'insurgent building', as an important aspect of the Bedouin's spatial politics deployed in the conflict with the state. Koensler (ibid.) refers to instances where the Bedouin, normally living in other locations, set up structures in the unrecognized settlements in order to claim ownership of the land, while simultaneously expecting their demolition.<sup>24</sup> In a similar manner, McKee (2014) deploys the concept of 'insurgent planting', referring to the Bedouin's acts of planting crops and trees to serve as a political strategy, articulating their opposition towards the Israeli land regime. As with the buildings, here the plants are not meant to survive and serve practical purposes, but are presented visibly to attract attention and thus, their destruction.

Al-Araqib, which has become an internationally recognized symbol of the Bedouin struggle, serves as a good illustration of how insurgent building and planting are deployed today, although differently than in the scenarios described by Koensler and McKee.

The conflict between al-Araqib, a small village located eight kilometres north of Beer Sheva, and the state goes back to 1953. As Sheikh Sayyah, the leader of the village, recounted, residents were ordered by the military authorities that year to leave the area and move towards the north, allegedly for six months only. However, when after six months the villagers asked the military court for the right to return, they were informed that they would have to pay rent for the use of the land. As paying the rent would be a de facto acceptance that the land was not

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<sup>24</sup> While Koensler rightly observes how these acts of seemingly grassroots resistance are mediated through civil society organisations and media, I leave for the moment the role of other actors aside, and return to it towards the end of the chapter, and discuss it in more detail in chapter 8.

theirs anymore but belonged to the state, the villagers rejected the offer. After years of impasse, in 1973 the Israeli Land Administration (ILA) agreed, as Sheikh Sayyah recalled, to recognize the Bedouin's ownership of the land in al-Araqib. However, in 1999, the ILA withdrew this recognition, seemingly arguing that the land's previous demarcation had been faulty, and that al-Araqib's land was historically dead (*mawat*), and not agricultural. Around that time, the Bedouin who claimed ownership of the land but lived elsewhere started to move and settle in the village. 'We understood that the state wanted to seize our land, and we needed to protect it', admitted Sheikh Sayyah, explaining how in a short period, al-Araqib changed from a place inhabited by only a few families into a village of around 300 people in the early 2000s. As their settlement was regarded as illegal, all the houses in the village were for many years under a demolition order. Eventually, al-Araqib was raided for the first time on 27 July 2010 at 4.30 a.m. by around 1,300 armed security forces, who razed to the ground all the houses and structures of the village.

Hakma, who has been living in al-Araqib with her children and husband since 1998, recalled how after the first demolition, as soon as the Israeli forces left, villagers went through the rubble trying to save anything that might not have been totally destroyed. As most of the villagers, according to Hakma, had nowhere else to go, almost straight away they started to build makeshift tents from wooden structures and cheap fabrics on the sites where their old houses had stood, refusing to leave the village. However, as further demolitions followed every time the Bedouin rebuilt their houses, normal life in the village was rendered impossible, and many families started to move out of al-Araqib. Those few who stayed, some 20 people of the abu-Madighem family and al-Turi clan, were forced to move into the cemetery area, the only space in the village where the bulldozers did not enter. While this enclosure became their living space, where they are 'protected by the dead' as the villagers like to say, residents nevertheless keep on constructing shacks and tents outside the cemetery gate.

Reconstructing the demolished structures again and again is no longer an attempt to continue normal life, but rather constitutes a symbolic act conveying a political statement. Aziz, the son of the sheikh and an important figure of the Bedouin struggle, explained the act of setting up shacks only to await their demolition as follows: 'It is to show that we are not going to abandon

our land and move out. It is a message to the state - no matter how many times you destroy, we'll keep on rebuilding.' Hence, in this case building is not just an attempt to improve living conditions in the village, but rather symbolizes the decision to stay despite the misery of the place. What is always rebuilt is the sheikh's *shiq*, a tent into which guests are invited, and where activists from inside and outside al-Araqib gather. This constantly destroyed and renewed tent serves both as the physical centre of the village's life and resistance (where the men's daily activities and political meetings take place) and as a symbol of residents' refusal to comply with the state's authority. Several other makeshift shacks spread over the hills are of no practical use; their function is to mark the Bedouin's presence and confirm their claims to the land. As nineteen-year-old Mariam, Hakma's daughter, put it, echoing the words of Aziz: 'These are important symbols. This is to say that even if now we are forced to live inside the cemetery area, our village is all around it. And we will not forget where our land is'.

### *Naming*

Symbolic spatial acts can take various forms, one further example being the erecting of signs displaying villages' historical names to mark the entrances to Bedouin localities. Acts of naming that turn an abstract space into a meaningful place are discussed in length in the geographical literature (Agnew 2002). Names are not neutral, but embedded in power relations: they are an important aspect of struggles over land, where the colonizer's imposition of names is often countered by the alternative naming of indigenous peoples, as part of their resistance strategies (Kearns and Berg 2002). Naming and renaming have undoubtedly been an important aspect of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict over land and history. In light of the Israeli 'Judaization' project, and the concerted effort to erase the Palestinians' past and their presence in the land, referring to the original Arabic names helps to preserve memories and build a counter-narrative to that crafted by the state (Amara 2015). All these aspects seem especially important in the case of the Bedouin unrecognized villages, which are commonly depicted as unnamed, spontaneously erected localities, rather than places of history and belonging. Thus, by fixing signs in the ground with the villages' names, the villagers confirm the existence of the place,

and undermine the official cartographic representation of the Naqab. They bring visibility to the marginalized settlements wiped off the map, and point to their fixed and permanent nature, rendering the state's classification of the villages as 'dispersed', and of Bedouin society as rootless, ostensibly incorrect. In Khashem Zannah, for example, their sign is an old rusty board with the name of the village stated in Arabic and Hebrew, along with its English transliteration. In Wadi al-Na'am, a new sign was put up by the residents on 30 March 2013, with the text 'Welcome to Wadi al-Na'am village', again in three languages. In al-Sirra, the green plate used for their sign was designed to copy the look of official Israeli signs. However, beneath the name written in Hebrew, Arabic and English transliteration, a subtext in Hebrew reads: 'established in the Ottoman period'. Under this sign, another one is attached: a triangle depicting a bulldozer demolishing a house. This double-marking of the village's entrance is of particular significance. First, it emphasizes the historical continuity of the village, set up before the creation of the Israeli state, and as such, confirms the legitimacy of the villagers' presence on the land. Moreover, the sign, pointing in two directions, suggests that the historical land of al-Sirra is much wider than what the village is today. The second plate with the symbol of the bulldozer graphically imitates a warning sign, and plays a similar role - it indicates and draws attention to the hazards that are not ostensibly visible to random passers-by. It exposes the practice of demolition, normally carried out in the dawn hours to avoid publicity, but it also mocks it, by imitating governmental signage and presenting acts of destruction as a feature of the village.

### *Protesting*

Marking the space with symbolic signs and buildings is not done with the aim of turning living conditions into outwardly 'dignified' ones, but rather to claim dignity, despite intolerable physical surroundings. Here, remaining on the land, putting up signs, and continuing to build are acts of conscious law-breaking which aim to draw public attention to what the community regards as the injustice of the state's policies. They are ways to voice the Bedouin's claims to the territory, and to subvert the law that labels their villages as historically uninhabited areas and denies them the right to exist. A similar role of marking presence, or articulating discontent

towards the state's policies, is played by the Bedouin's protest events. In studies of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, protest movements have been scrutinized from multiple perspectives, paying attention to, among other things, the Palestinian mobilization, political violence, gender, national movement and resistance (among many others, see: Salenson 2009; Peteet 2013; Alimi 2007, 2009; Jamal 2005; Abu-Laban, Bakan 2009). The protest activities of the Bedouin have been much less prominent, with the Bedouin being known until recently as 'loyal citizens of Israel'. This reading of the Bedouin's submission to Israel's rule has been challenged by, among others, Mansour Nasasra (2015), who gives a historical account of the Bedouin's resistance to Israel's military rule between 1948 and 1967. Nasasra (ibid.) offers detailed examples retrieved from archives, as well as coming from oral histories, of the Bedouin's refusal to cooperate with the authorities, staging of land claims, and maintaining forbidden cross-border economic and social relationships.

During the time of my fieldwork, large-scale demonstrations on a pan-Bedouin level were organized, largely by the various institutional bodies engaged in the Bedouin struggle, such as the Arab High Steering Committee and the Regional Council of Unrecognized Villages, in alliance with NGOs, Arab politicians and other members of civil society. The protest activities increased in the context of the impending Praver Plan, which mobilized a big section of not only the Bedouin, but also larger Palestinian and Israeli society. For example, Land Day - commemorating the Palestinian protest against the Israeli land expropriation which took place on 30 March 1976 - has gained prominence in recent years among the Bedouin. While in the past, 30 March was commemorated silently by individuals, because of fear of prosecution and overt association with the Palestinian struggle, today it is marked by big demonstrations in which thousands of Bedouins participate. While the event serves to commemorate the past, it is also used to stage protests against the Praver Plan and to expose the continuity of Israel's policies, the goals of which have not changed much since 1976. It is a sign, as Nuri al-Okbi, the father of the Bedouin struggle, has argued, that the people today have less fear of the authorities, have a better knowledge of their rights, and do not shy away from speaking as Palestinians. Between 2011 and 2013, the 'Praver Won't Pass Campaign' was launched, leading to several protests organised in Beer Sheva and also across other cities in the occupied



territories, Israel, and later across the globe (I discuss this campaign in Chapter 7). While the campaign constituted a concerted effort to forge a horizontal movement, not relying on traditional leadership and tribal affiliations, nonetheless a large proportion of Bedouin activism revolves around particular villages focusing on their place-specific issues.

During my fieldwork, many residents expressed their scepticism towards contentious politics. Local activists claimed, for example, that people struggling with daily hardships wanted to lead ordinary lives and were unwilling to take any risks. Others, seeing little potential benefits coming from protest, and worrying about the increased controls and harm it might cause, perceived other channels of action - such as lobbying, or using legal means - as more useful. For example, Atiya, head of the local committee in Khashem Zennah, and heavily involved in the Bedouin struggle, questioned the usefulness of protest as a strategy, unless it was coordinated with others and could count on big numbers: '(...) we have to be pragmatic too. What are the benefits of us protesting? This is a powerful state - what does it care if several of us from the village go on the streets and protest? They will ignore us'.

While in most villages demonstrations are organized sporadically, most often as a response to concrete threats posed by the state (such as receiving house demolition orders, or having an access road to a village cut off), al-Araqib provides an exception. There, the weekly protest vigil (*waqfa ihtihajiya*), organized since the first demolition in July 2010, has become a trademark of the village's struggle. The protest takes place every Sunday at 4pm, with the residents and their relatives gathering at the nearby Lehavim Junction. This location, in the proximity of the village but overlooking the highway, was chosen because of its visibility: people driving on the busy highway cannot fail to notice them. The vigil does not, however, aim to rally random passers-by, but rather aims to make them aware of the village's threatened existence, as well as its steadfastness. The idea of the protest came from Sheikh Sayyah, who publicly announced after the first demolition that people were going to protest on a weekly basis until al-Araqib received recognition. As Hakma explained, 'it was to show our power, to say that we are not afraid and will not stop until the solution comes!' In a similar manner, Aziz claimed that the symbolic protest was a message to the authorities to say that the residents were fully conscious of the state's plans towards them and therefore would stay permanently alert.

The weekly event gathers small numbers, around 50 people, largely the current and previous residents of al-Araqib, accompanied by the staff of an NGO that supports them. Despite the fact that the demonstration has been routinized and has been taking place every Sunday for over five years now, the participants' emotional engagement seems striking. In every protest in which I participated over the course of three years, women and children on one side and men on the other stood in line, chanting slogans to a rhythm beaten out on drums. Young girls and women made noise with plastic bottles filled with pebbles, and together with others shouted loudly: 'Yes to recognition, no to displacement and demolition' (*na'm li-l'tiraf, la li-tahjeer wa al-iqtil'a*), or 'We are staying, we are staying, as long as za'atar and olives remain'. Children and youths of all ages - from toddlers to college students - were probably in the majority.

The presence of the younger generations is seen as crucial, not only because of the numbers, but because, as villagers explained, their awareness of the political situation may decide the future of the Bedouin struggle. Hakma put it this way:

It is very important that our children know well what discrimination we are facing, and that they have to act against it. Because when Sheikh Sayyah can't continue fighting anymore, we will do it. But when the time comes and we can't continue either, it's them [the children] who will be there to take on the struggle after us.

Indeed, in al-Araqib children seem to be socialized into resistance from the earliest age. Ali, the youngest son of Hakma, was a newborn baby when the first demolition happened, and Sujood was not much older. Both of them took their first steps on the Sunday demonstrations, in which they have participated ever since. 'These are the first memories they are going to have when they grow up', claimed Hakma. Other parents, who left al-Araqib and moved to Rahat because of the impossible living conditions, made sure that their children did not lose their connection with the village. They brought their children for the Sunday protests, but also came to the village during weekends and holidays. 'I want them to remember (...) [that] they belong to al-Araqib and this is their real home', as one of the former residents of the village told me.

The importance placed here on 'remembering' takes us to the following section of the chapter, where the role of collective memory and its further transmission is discussed.

### 4.3 Refusing to Forget

Mahmoud Darwish, a poet of the Palestinian national struggle, refers in one of his poems to 'the conqueror's fear of memories'.<sup>25</sup> The memories of the 'conquered' reveal a history that is meant to be forgotten and erased; and as such, Darwish implies, keeping them alive poses a threat to the colonizer. Understanding Israel's policies as a manifestation of the settler colonial project, as defined by Patrick Wolfe (1999, 2006), indeed brings to the fore the importance of the Palestinians' memories and remembering. For Wolfe, settler colonialism should not be seen as a singular act of invasion, but rather as the ongoing 'structure' that aims towards the 'elimination of the native', to secure access to the land. This erasure is material, brought about by brute violence, but also takes places on a symbolic and discursive level. In other words, settler colonialism, in order to eliminate indigenous populations, not only gets rid of people, but also effaces their past and controls their present representations. Against this backdrop, both past and present become inherently linked, objects of the struggle of colonized people.

Not surprisingly then, a great deal has been written on Palestinian commemorative practices, oral histories, memories of cities and villages, and their relationships to the formation of national identity and resistance (see, among others: Peteet, 2000, 2005, Sawalha 2010; Volk 2010; Khalili 2005, 2007; Sayigh 1979, 2007; Slyomovics 1998; for an overview of 'memory studies' in the Palestinian context, see: Slyomovics 2013). These various readings pay particular attention to the Palestinian refugees who, despite their displacement or life in the camps, keep their past alive and vividly reconstruct their places of origin, narrating personal experiences together with the Palestinian history. Their attachment to their lost land, recalled through images of olive trees, stone houses, fields, and way of life, is strongly articulated in these memories.

Although the 'remembering' of the Bedouin has been much less studied, it is no less important. As Chapter 3 has discussed, the Israeli laws and dominant state discourse depict the Bedouin as

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<sup>25</sup> Mahmoud Darwish (2012) On this Earth, in: *Unfortunately, It was Paradise*

rootless nomads, and classify the Naqab as a historically dead no man's land. This implies that the Bedouin have no ties to the land and therefore cannot claim its ownership. It also transforms the residents of 'unrecognized villages' into trespassers whom the state must evict. Because the Bedouin's rootedness in the Naqab and rich history in the region are little archived and officially denied, people's memories, and their transmission, are of the utmost importance. First, they constitute the basis of an alternative reading of 'Bedouinity', challenging Israeli history-writing and knowledge production. In other words, if the aim of the Zionist state is to silence the Palestinian past, then the mere act of keeping it alive contributes to the counter-hegemony. Second, as memories of the past strengthen the sense of belonging to a place (de Certeau 1984), they are crucial for the land struggle to go on. As one resident of Khashem Zannah put it: 'The moment we forget where we come from and who we are, is the moment when we give up'. It is true that for those who engage in open battle against the state's resettlement project, such as the people of al-Araqib for example, attachment to the land and sense of ownership seem to be their driving force. That is why the Bedouin who are not involved, who live in towns and townships, or express little interest in the land and the traditional way of life, are regarded by activists as lacking political awareness, or as having been corrupted by the Israeli knowledge regime.

Safa Abu Rabia (2008), in her study of the relationship between the Naqab Bedouin's memory and resistance, observes the significant role of the land narratives in the formation of the group's identity. Abu Rabia explores how the Bedouin from the 1948 generation, like other displaced Palestinians, express emotional attachment not to their current places of living, but to their original villages, cultivating what she calls an 'identity of exile'. This attachment is manifested by, among other ways, family trips to their original land, where parents take their children to share the stories of the past, and show them where and how their ancestors lived. Turning their historical villages into objects of memory and symbolic returns and expressing a sense of detachment from their current places of living demonstrates the Bedouin's resistance to the state's policies, according to Abu Rabia. Even if this 'holding to the past' is articulated largely on the cognitive level and hence is not easily visible, Abu Rabia, following Weeden's work (1998), urges us to see it as a crucial aspect of the Bedouin's oppositional subjectivities.

During my own fieldwork, the Bedouin's sense of alienation from their current locations was not as strongly articulated by my interlocutors. Many, especially the younger generations, emphasized that their home was where they were born and lived, even if that was away from the historical family lands. The case of Wadi al-Na'am village, to where people had first been forcefully moved in the 1950s, and from where they are now threatened with eviction, is particularly interesting. For many of its inhabitants, Wadi al-Na'am is the only place to which they have a physical connection, and the only one they perceive as 'theirs'. While the elders still cultivate memories of their places of origin, the younger generation have nowhere else to refer to. De Certeau (1984) observes that the sense of belonging to a place is rooted in one's familiarity with it, gained by walking and crossing its paths, among other ways. A man in his thirties, who was born in Wadi al-Na'am and had lived there ever since, articulated a similar sentiment, with the following words:

We didn't come from nowhere; we grew up here. It doesn't matter what it [Wadi al-Na'am] looks like, it is our home. The only one we have! And you don't complain about your home (...) I know every tree and rock here, all the shortcuts, all the people. It is my place (...).

Jalal, who was in his mid-twenties, gave a similar account, telling me that he would be upset to move out of the village, as anybody else leaving their 'home' would be. Many of the youths in fact used the homeness of the place, which can be understood as a comfort zone of belonging and familiarity, as an argument against the state's resettlement plan. The village, however, had not always been perceived as a home, nor was the struggle always about remaining in Wadi al-Na'am. On the contrary, for many years the villagers, unhappy with the harmful environment to which they had been sent, fought to be relocated to another more friendly location.<sup>26</sup>

The conflict, as Labad abu Afash and his brother Ibrahim recounted to me in detail, started in 1983, when the Israel Land Administration (ILA) decided that the land assigned to the people 30 years earlier was not theirs anymore, and therefore they had no right to occupy it. In order to negotiate the move with the authorities, the two abu Afash brothers, together with a few other

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<sup>26</sup> The village of Wadi al-Na'am, as was mentioned earlier, resembles a neglected industrial island in the middle of the desert: around 10,000 people live here in close proximity to military munitions and petrochemical factories, occupying a vast space interspersed with buzzing electrical grids, an electricity plant, an oil terminal and barren plots of land. See: Chapter 3.

residents, established a local council (*majlis al-mahalli*), a body officially representing Wadi al-Na'am and its interests. In 1987, another order was issued, this time by the Ministry Of Agriculture, forbidding people to cultivate the land and live in the area. The members of the local council addressed the courts to try to solve the dispute; however, as no agreement was reached, the case was frozen until 1997. That year, as Sheikh Labad recalled, an order against the people of Wadi al-Na'am was once again issued, repeating that the whole area would have to be vacated and that its people, charged with a fine of 5,000 shekels, were to be moved elsewhere. This is when talks between the villagers and the Bedouin Development Authority began, trying to find a solution to relocation:

Since the beginning of our negotiations, we have said we wanted to leave the area, but under the condition that the new place will suit us too. We suggested a few places, but they didn't agree to any of them. At some point we said we could leave the village for any other area in the Naqab, but they didn't agree to that either! Unfortunately they still don't see any solution other than that from 1987, which is to move us to Segev Shalom [a government township nearby] (...). But that place is like another country; it is, like the other towns they built for the Bedouin, at the bottom of the social ladder, in terms of poverty, unemployment... We refuse to move there; it would bring degradation, not progress.

As the residents' suggestions and demands were continuously ignored for many years and the authorities insisted on moving people, against their will, to Segev Shalom, the members of the local council came to the conclusion that no compromise was reachable. This is when they decided that, rather than trying to be moved elsewhere, they would fight to stay in Wadi al-Na'am against all odds. 'We were moved too many times', Ibrahim abu Afash told me, arguing that the state had no right to treat them like objects and turn them into nomads by constantly moving them from one place to another. Others justifying the decision to stay emphasized that Wadi al-Na'am was inhabited by 10,000 people, and as such had to be recognized, like any Jewish settlement of that size would have been. Finally, Najeeb, who had been engaged in the Bedouin struggle for decades, rationalized the residents' refusal to move out as follows:

The government says we have to move out because it is dangerous for us. But we know that the standards in Ramat Hovav [a nearby industrial zone] have improved, and it does not pollute as

much anymore...the air doesn't smell like it used to; it is much better now. If it was so bad, they wouldn't keep their military base here (...).

These different accounts reveal how the landscape of Wadi al-Na'am has been redefined by the inhabitants over time, and transformed from a temporary hazardous space which people wanted to leave, to a home-place which they now refuse to abandon. This clearly shows that the meanings attributed to the village - and their consequent politicization - are not fixed, but rather, as Geertz (2001:76) puts it, they are 'hammered out in the flow of events', developing in relation to the state's policies and maturing through the on-going struggle.

The dynamic nature of the relationship with the place means that what is brought back from its past and seen as constitutive, and what is forgotten and silenced, varies from one village to another, often in relation to the villagers' particular struggles and the biography of the place. The situation in other villages in which I conducted fieldwork differed dramatically, as, unlike in Wadi al-Na'am, the residents in these villages were not displaced 'refugees', but claimed to be inhabiting their ancestors' land, to which they had a historic, if not organic, relationship. Thus, contrary to the examples discussed by Abu-Rabia (ibid.), in places like al-Araqib or Khashem Zannah, people did not yearn to return somewhere else, but actively fought to remain where they were.

In these villages, sites of life also become 'sites of memory' (Nora 1989), with their graveyards, fields, and olive trees serving as reminders of the Bedouin's past, and legitimizing the villagers' present claims to the land. There are a few threads that run through the memories and narratives circulating in these villages, and transmit not only to younger generations but also to external audiences.

First, there is a strong discourse of indigenization that establishes an inseparable relationship between the Bedouin and the land. The words of Atiya from Khashem Zannah, which I heard repeated on numerous occasions by others, encapsulate this well:

Our ancestors have been here since the Ottoman times (...) and since that time, we have never abandoned this place. Not even once. We don't have the right to do it (...). Land is like a daughter; who abandons his child? (...) This is our way of life; all the important things for our

family happened in this place. If we left the land, we would not be Bedouins anymore. It is like with a bird: if you put it in a cage, it dies.

According to Atiya and many others, there is a mutual relationship between the inhabitants and the place. In this vein, on one occasion Atiya explained to me: 'In the tribal system, land is crucial; if you hurt our land, you hurt us too'. What emerges from his accounts is an image of a land that belongs to the people, and people who belong to (or are shaped by) the land. This means that the place is a source of identification and an object of attachment, as this is where the family's historical roots lie. Yet, place is not a mere referent, nor is it only a reservoir of family stories. Rather, it becomes incorporated into collective self-definitions, rendering the link between the social and the spatial inseparable. In other words, the 'Bedouin-we' exists here *in* as much as *through* the place. As such, people from Khashem Zennah project themselves as an 'extension of the land' (Walker; Walker 2008:167), which in turn becomes a political statement: their rootedness in the land and the particular way of life inherent in it justifies the villagers' presence in the officially unrecognized village and legitimizes their land claims.

Similar patterns of linking a village's past with the present identity of a people can be observed in al-Araqib. Family stories rooted in the village's geography are told and transmitted, as their passing on is seen as one of the strategies of survival of this officially non-existent village. According to the residents, as long as memories of the past are kept alive, then the village, which has been demolished over 60 times already, will not be erased from the face of the earth. In Hakma's words:

When in 2010 al-Araqib disappeared from the map, they [the state] thought people would disappear along with it. In fact, however, the name can vanish, but not the place, not our memories of it.

Again in this case, the villagers refer to the historical origins of the village going back to Ottoman times, the Islamic cemetery built in 1914, everyday life before the Nakba, and their forefathers' hard labour on the land, as reflections of their belonging to the place. Apart from the stories, the past is also preserved by and speaks through photographs, old documents, maps, and the graveyard. As the people's history and identity seem to be inscribed in the place, the land cannot be negotiated. As 19-year-old Mariam evocatively put it: 'It's ours, it's holy, and



it has to be liberated'. Mariam and others portray leaving the village as an immoral act. I heard, for example, a resident suggesting that selling the land would be like 'selling the dead buried in the middle of this land', and another person rhetorically asking, 'what right do we have to get money and abandon the place which our forefathers bought and cultivated with their own hands?'

What comes to the fore here is the dual function of remembering: not only do memories serve as the basis of counter-narratives to be deployed against the state, but also, no less importantly, they are constitutive for the collective-self. Moreover, it is worth noticing that the personal stories of the Bedouin were often punctuated by references to the Nakba, the Palestinian catastrophe of 1948. As the Palestinian narrative of history is not included in Israeli textbooks, it has to be transmitted and learned within families. For example, in al-Araqib, to commemorate the people killed during the Nakba while working in the olive fields, the villagers set up a board in the cemetery with the names of the martyrs, 'so as not to forget them; and not to forget the past', as Hakma put it.

The villagers often argued that remembering the past and teaching their children about the Nakba were important in order to understand the Naqab Bedouin's current plight. 'We live here as if the Nakba has never ended' was a phrase commonly heard across the villages. Aziz from al-Araqib asserted this explicitly:

In 1948, after the Israeli invasion, 23 people were killed in al-Araqib (...). We should not forget '48 too easily here... Because what happens now is not any different. Policies of displacement, deportation, imprisonment and house demolitions... as if we were back in 1948 (...). It is very important - they [the children] must know what happened here to understand why they have to defend this land.

As such, the shared memories of the residents are transformed into narratives of the on-going suffering of the Bedouin and the injustice perpetrated by the Israeli state, but they also become a link between family stories and the larger Palestinian struggle. This framing is quite distinct from that deployed by civil society actors, to which I turn in the following final section of this chapter.

#### **4.4 Civil society organizations and legal struggles**

Besides these articulations of attachment and strategies of claim-making through building, marking space, or protesting rooted in lived space, the Bedouin also use more conventional tactics and institutional channels to project and advance their interests. The new forms of politics have been especially visible since the mid-1990s and the 'Oslo era', when human rights and other civil society organizations mushroomed in Israel and Palestine. These emerging NGOs, in order to secure the foreign funding on which they were often dependent, worked largely in the fields of 'democracy', 'development' and 'co-existence', speaking in the language of citizenship and rights (Allen 2011:75; Ratcliffe 2009). This meant that the Palestinian struggle became partially mediated through professional activists and lawyers. Within Israel, it led to a situation where Palestinian claims have been articulated less in terms of 'historical injustice' (Ratcliffe 2009:210) and more 'in terms of rights' based on Israeli citizenship, which could be sought through legal means (Sallon 2009:166).

Indeed, in Israel, the rise of rights NGOs in the 1990s, as well as the growing role of the Supreme Court and the adoption of two Basic Laws dealing with human rights in 1992, translated into an increasing judicialization of Palestinian politics (Sallon 2009; Ratcliffe 2009; Amara, Miller 2013:104; Amara 2015). Initially, the various Palestinian cases had been brought before the courts by two Jewish rights organizations – the Association for Civil Rights in Israel (ACRI) and the Legal Clinic of Tel Aviv University - until 1996, when the first Palestinian legal centre, Adalah, was created, dedicated to defending the rights of the Arab minority. These and other similar organizations that have proliferated since then have also, in addition to exploiting the legal system, been engaging in lobbying, advocacy, monitoring, writing reports, and submitting petitions, among other activities. Despite the existing criticism of their apolitical approach and their appropriation of the liberal framework of rights that serves 'to contain social protest' (Marteu 2009:203), their work is nevertheless seen as important, bringing immediate - albeit sporadic - gains, attracting media attention, and bringing the Palestinian narrative and reading of history to the courts (Sallon 2009).

The Bedouin case is no different. Since the 1990s, Jewish and Palestinian NGOs have shown a vital interest in the Bedouin struggle, with many setting up offices in the Naqab. However, this recourse to the rights framework, rather than other more radical political languages, explains why claims dealing with land ownership are rarely raised in the courts today. They are seen as 'lost causes', as until now, none of them has ever been successful. Since 1984 and the precedent-setting case of al-Hawashla, in which the Israeli Supreme Court classified the land claimed by the Bedouin as 'dead' and therefore belonging to the state (Shamir 1996:236, Kram 2013:130), residents of the unrecognized villages have lost hope that the land issue can be solved through legal appeals. As Thabet abu-Rass, director of the southern branch of Adalah, put it: 'We believe that there is no chance to win in the court land cases'. This is why the NGOs have directed their energies towards fields where gains are more plausible. Among other successes, Adalah and other organizations have on many occasions, throughout years of litigation, managed to secure access to water or health care, or the cancellation of demolition orders.

The concerted efforts of many NGOs, whose reports and statistics to a large extent shape the popular understanding of the Bedouin's struggle, have turned the issue of 'unrecognized villages' into a favoured theme of human rights activism in Israel (Ratcliffe 2009, Koenler 2015). While in 1974 there was only one Bedouin advocacy organization, the 'Association for the Support of the Bedouin' (Amara 2015:176), in 1994 there were four of them, and by 2009 their number had reached 80 (Ratcliffe 2009:216), dramatically changing the ways in which the Bedouin's claims have been staged. As Ratcliffe (2009:214) astutely observes, despite the fact that the majority of these NGOs are professional bodies that only employ Bedouin staff in lower-ranking positions, they are often regarded as representing the Bedouin, or being the community's voice. Indeed, some scholars sympathetic to the Bedouin's struggle, such as Abu-Saad (2008:16-17) and Yiftachel (2009), see the exploitation of the legal system by NGOs as expressions of 'community resistance'.

The conflation of the 'community' and the NGOs' work is probably most striking in the case of the Negev Coexistence Forum (NCF), a Jewish-Arab initiative set up in 1997 to promote the Bedouin's rights and civil equality. The NCF has played an important role, monitoring Israel's

rights violations, lobbying, issuing reports and raising awareness about the Bedouin's plight. Importantly, the NCF has established a close relationship with the residents of al-Araqib, assisting the villagers in the organization of protests and coordination with other actors, connecting them with the media, and at the same time offering services and support for the community, from photography workshops for children to human rights courses for adults. During my fieldwork, the director of the organization, Haia Noach, and other staff members were very much present in the village, participating in the weekly protest, but also bringing in solidarity activists and educational tours (which I discuss in Chapter 8). It was often difficult to distinguish if a particular activity, for example the protests sporadically taking place in Beer Sheva, was al-Araqib's or the NGO's initiative; most often it turned out to be the latter.

This 'NGOization' affected the forms of the Bedouin's organization too, giving rise to a number of associations run by the Bedouin dedicated to issues of development, youth empowerment, and women, among others. Most importantly, in 1997 the Regional Council of Unrecognized Villages (RCUV) was founded, designed as an informal municipal authority of the Bedouin unrecognized villages. Despite being an NGO and relying on external, often international funding, the council, with an office in Beer Sheva, acts as a representative body of the Bedouin. Its role is not officially recognized by the government; however, the authorities do engage in negotiations with RCUV members. In theory, the organization constitutes the chairmen of local committees from the 45 unrecognized villages, and its head is elected by the members every five years. The praxis, however, is more complicated: after initial enthusiasm, many of the members withdrew from the council, and it has been torn by internal conflicts, divisions, and accusations of incompetency and undemocratic practices. During my fieldwork in 2011 and 2012, I witnessed ongoing disputes over the leadership, and saw the representatives of some villages leaving the RCUV in order to establish their own alternative organizations. There was a general sense that, despite its initial importance, the council was now a 'dead body' which had lost its political potential by being caught up in personal conflicts and a financial struggle for survival. Nevertheless, the achievements of the council were also recognized. For example, along with other organizations, the RCUV contributed to the production of alternative maps of the Naqab, on which the unrecognized villages were marked with their historical names.

Importantly, the RCUV, together with Bimkom (Planners for Planning Rights) and Sidre, a Bedouin women's empowerment organization, also issued an Alternative Master Plan in 2012. The plan 'proposes a range of professional, feasible means for recognizing and developing' Bedouin villages (2012:5), and as such, offers an alternative solution to that proposed by the government's Praver Plan. Furthermore, in cooperation with legal NGOs, the RCUV managed to secure access to water, schools and health services in several villages, and brought about the formal recognition of a few other villages. Among other activities, the RCUV has helped to erect signs at the entrances of villages such as al-Sirra, and has written reports providing statistical data on the situation of the unrecognized villages. Significantly, the RCUV has changed the political language of the Bedouin, framing their struggle as a call for recognition, which can be understood as a 'claim for inclusive citizenship' (Ratcliffe 2009:223). On another level, it has led to a change in perceptions of the overall conflict from one of individual tribes and families challenging the state, to a collective struggle of what has become known as the 'Bedouin "community"' (Ratcliffe 2009:221).

The development of civil society organizations providing advocacy and lawyering for the Bedouin cause has brought limited but sometimes tangible gains. As such, they are viewed by the Bedouin as beneficial as and more promising than other contentious efforts. Nevertheless, the Bedouin remain disillusioned about the workings of the law and how far it can take them. Apart from some examples of small victories, many of them shared stories that pointed to the absurdities of the legal system and the malevolence of the state. The endless legal battles that took place around a school in Wadi al-Na'am, recounted to me in detail by Labad abu-Afash, serve as a telling illustration in this regard.

As the school, which had stood in the village since 1958, was akin to a provisional shack lacking in any facilities, in the late 1990s members of the local council, with the help of legal centres, started to file appeals to the Supreme Court to demand basic provisions. After some initial successes, wherein the court agreed that the school should receive a library and an electricity connection, the residents of Wadi al-Na'am filed another appeal. Complaining that the school, with a roll of over 1,500 students, was overcrowded, which was having a negative effect on the quality of teaching, the residents requested that a new school be built in the village. The

authorities argued that setting up another school was unfeasible, and instead decided to divide the old building into two parts. After the division, the two parts received their own names ('Alef' and 'Ba'), and to each were appointed a separate headmaster, secretary, and administration staff. As such, although the problem of insufficient space had not been resolved, officially, a new school had been created. As Labad described the decision, '[it] was like a mockery of the people. (...) Instead of solving the issue, they made it only bigger'.

This story, one of many related by Labad and others, clearly reveals that using institutional channels is not effortless, but rather is costly and time-consuming, with outcomes that are hard to predict. Moreover, even if litigation is successful, the victory is not necessarily irreversible. In instances where the court's verdict is seen by the state as contradictory to its own policies, it can be appealed, which often results in cases pending. In 2007 for example, with the help of Adalah, the residents of al-Sirra petitioned Kiryat Gat's Magistrate Court to cancel 51 demolition orders on villagers' homes. Four years later, in 2011, Judge Israel Pablo Axelrod announced a precedent-setting decision, stating that the demolition orders were 'disproportionate', and hence should be cancelled. The declaration was seen as a historical one, as for the first time ever, a court had opposed the destruction of an unrecognized village. Yet, the villagers did not celebrate for long - the state immediately appealed the court's decision, and since then, the case has been pending and awaiting reconsideration. This again shows that the final outcome depends not only on the independent decision of the court, but also on the state's willingness to embrace it.

#### **4.5 Conclusion:**

The state forbids us to build here, to breed, and cultivate land. They destroyed our agriculture by their regulations! For example, they raised the price of water for us by 70%. A special price only for us! They say we are here against the law. Whose law is it? Who is committing crimes, us or the government?! (...) Then, they say we are "primitive", they need to help us... But it is the state that made our land look like this! They damaged the village to damage the people! (...)

These evocative words of one of the elderly inhabitants of Wadi al-Na'am aptly reflect the Bedouin's reading of the Israeli policies. Yusuf, who was born before the establishment of the state and is one of only a few who have been living in the same place ever since, in our conversation described to me in detail the changes in the landscape of the village that he had observed over the course of his life. He talked about fruit and olive trees, scrub, and animal stock that were part of his childhood's scenery, later turned into a waste land, more reminiscent of an industrial nightmare than of 'romantic' desert life. His above-quoted words clearly reveal that what happened to the Bedouin's lifestyle and villages is not accidental, or stemming from the Bedouin's neglect, but rather is a result of Israel's policies and planning that aim to distort the Arabs' link to the land and its past. Yusuf listed the discriminatory regulations the villagers faced, such as restrictions on building and on cultivating land, and disproportionately high water prices, which he regarded as 'crimes', hidden behind the language of law and modernization. Besides pointing out the material injustices, Yusuf precisely grasps the logic of the settler colonial project.

Ghassan Hage (2016), discussing the workings of settler colonialism, makes several observations that resonate strongly with Yusuf's words. Hage (*ibid.*,40-41) notes that the colonizer, to legitimize itself, is always in the condition of a defensive war: against the 'barbarians' and 'illegals', over whom the colonizer, despite the violence deployed, retains moral superiority. Accordingly, as was discussed in Chapter 2, the dominant discourse in Israel depicts the Bedouin as pre-modern subjects who, on the one hand, are to be 'civilized', and on the other hand, can never be considered equals due to their ontological, and hence impassable, difference (Mamdani 2012:8). But the conflict is not simply one of modernity versus tradition (or progress versus decline); it is also, as was discussed, a conflict between lawful owners of the land and illegitimate usurpers, and as such, by extension, the good, versus the threatening evil.

Yusuf's brief account hints precisely at the fact that the project of 'elimination' is at once material and symbolic, whereby what is colonized is the Palestinian present, as much as the past. Against this backdrop of displacement, exclusion and epistemic erasure, this chapter has sought to shed light on a variety of means through which the Bedouin make their villages liveable, keep their past alive, and articulate their claims. Although the Bedouin's struggles

unfold on many other fronts, I have focused here on those that revolve around place - as a site of memories, and as an object of land claims, but also as an arena where everyday life unfolds. These struggles are polysemic, and stem from opposition to Israel's technocratic planning as much as from the daily necessities, pragmatic motivations, or 'aims of life' (Havel 1978) that may not necessarily be directed at the state, even if the injustice of the state is clearly acknowledged.

Depending on the motivations and goals, the Bedouin's efforts to live dignified lives and seek recognition take diverse forms, ranging from mundane and symbolic practices (such as improving living conditions, protest, symbolic building, and mapping) to narratives that commemorate the past. The latter are important, not only as counter-memories challenging Israeli history-writing and depictions of the Bedouin, but also, as we have seen, for the formation of the Bedouin collective self as a political actor. Still, other Bedouin battles take place in the field of civil society, mediated by various NGOs, where the Bedouin's claims are tailored to fit rather than to challenge the legal framework. Within this context, the Bedouin's claims have increasingly been staged as ones of recognition, mobilizing around the idioms of rights. It comes as little surprise, as Ratcliffe (2009:212) has observed, that 'the struggle for Palestinian housing rights has been more successful than have political demands for expropriated lands'.

Together, through their narratives, practices, lobbying and litigations, the residents of the Naqab engage in producing an alternative understanding of Bedouinity that is not associated with nomadism or spontaneously erected encampments. Rather, vis-à-vis the state, they project themselves as people who had been sedentarized before the establishment of Israel, and who have been inextricably connected to their villages ever since. However, the dynamic nature of the villagers' narratives and meanings attached to place reveal, importantly, that 'Bedouinity' is not a fixed category with given prerequisites, but rather a relational identity, defined and shaped here by their ongoing struggle with the state. This general frame also means that some of the voices heard in this chapter - for example, of those who do not oppose resettlement as such, but rather its terms - are less audible in scholarly accounts and NGOs' reports, as they do not fit in the framework of the Bedouin's land struggle.



However, these voices, just like the more oppositional ones, hint at the strong senses of dignity and righteousness that drive the Bedouin actors and justify their deeds. What comes to the fore through the various accounts scrutinized in this chapter is that the Bedouin perceive themselves as rights-bearing subjects, rather than as mere objects of the state's policies that decide what is desirable for them. These personal stories locate the Bedouin, and their decision to remain in the villages and the consequent transgressive acts, within the larger context of Israel's discriminatory policies and uneven development of the Naqab. Acts of non-conformism towards the order designed by the state can be seen as expressions of often non-discursive criticisms of the state's multi-layered injustice. For some, these relate to being denied rights to their lands, and for others, to being deprived of dignity, being treated as worthless people, or simply not being provided with the same support and opportunities as Jewish citizens. Thus, in light of the state's injustice and differentiated treatment, the Bedouin 'enact the right' (Speed 2008) to choose where and how to live, and appropriate by themselves what they need in order to make life possible, even if it means breaking the law. I will reflect further on the 'rights' dimension to the subaltern's struggles in the upcoming comparative section.

To finish, it has to be said that on a practical level, despite the government's efforts to render life in the Bedouin's localities unbearable, the Naqab's dwellers have managed to some extent to elude the order enforced by the authorities and to domesticate the hostile environment. Of course, as de Certeau (1984) has observed, the gains here are never permanent, and especially in the context of the uncertain future of the Praver Plan, have to be treated cautiously. In general, we should not be over-optimistic: the Bedouin's struggles may have led to an improvement in their living conditions, but there has been little change in their overall status in the country.

## **5. Al-akhdam: attempts towards a 'livable life'**

Spaces of urban marginality, and their forms of life, have been discussed at length in the literature from varying perspectives. The classical Chicago School of the 1920s and 1930s and its later followers, as discussed by Asef Bayat (2010), famously associated the urban poor with the so-called 'culture of poverty' characterized by 'fatalism, traditionalism, rootlessness, unadaptability, criminality, lack of ambition, hopelessness, and so on' (Bayat 2010:48). In Marx's writings, those inhabiting the margins of society lacked both class and political consciousness, and as such, constituted a distinct category of a degenerated 'lumpenproletariat'. Similarly, in official discourses, urban informal communities have often been designated as 'carriers of a social disease', as Imail (2006:xxi) observes in the Egyptian context. Ananya Roy (2011), reflecting on popular and scholarly representations of slum life, points to the two extremes whereby slums are projected either as places of absolute despair, destitution and passivity, or as zones of activity and busy lives, where small-scale businesses and informal economy thrive. While the first set of representations erases politics and agency from subaltern spaces, the other tends to romanticize their autonomy or 'entrepreneurial spirit' (Roy 2011:227).

More nuanced studies go beyond these binary illustrations and depict subaltern spaces as sites of negotiations with the state, encroachment, and struggles for recognition, rights and welfare (Chatterjee 2007, 2011; Bayat 1997, 2000; Ismail 2006, von Schnitzler 2013; Roy 2011; Holston 2008). Other scholars, particularly in the field of medical anthropology, have focused attention on the affective and lived dimension of exclusion, highlighting experiences of social suffering, poverty, and structural violence that generate inequality and bring harm to disadvantaged individuals (Farmer 2004, Scheper-Hughes; Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2002 ).

Bearing in mind that violence affecting the lives of the poor takes different shapes that form a continuum (Scheper-Hughes, Bourgois 2004; Auyero, de Lara 2012), I build this chapter around the idea of a 'livable life', understood in a twofold manner. First, by livable I mean, very literally, a life that can be lived: a life that is bearable and enduring, but offers not much more than the bare minimum. The strategies of 'getting by' and securing the basic necessities that make daily life possible are discussed in the first section of the chapter. This section aims to shed light on the 'real grounds of poor people's history' (Auyero 2011:434), by pointing out the material manifestations of marginalization. This task seems important, as 'materiality' is often overlooked by anthropologists in their 'fascination with metaphors, signs, and symbols' (Scheper-Hughes 1995:416), or is reduced to a set of available resources by social movement scholars. In general, the role of the material underpinnings of political engagements seems to be understudied (von Schnitzler 2013:672). Thus, the attempt here is not to erase the akhdam's agency, but rather to locate their agency in its setting, and map what shapes people's dilemmas, needs and choices. In doing so, I explore practices belonging to the realms of the everyday and livelihood, and critically assess the transformative potential of such acts. While in the Bedouin case, practices rooted in lived spaces and daily routines could turn into acts challenging the status quo, here, it is argued, the everyday is the site where subalternity is reinforced rather than undermined.

In the second part of the chapter, I go on to examine the myriad ways through which the akhdam engage with the state in order to claim what they cannot access or achieve themselves. Here, I focus largely on individual and spontaneous community-led efforts where both material

goods and the enforcement of law are at stake. I demonstrate that the akhdam do not necessarily target the state as their opponent, but rather regard it as their ultimate 'saviour'. More precisely, I argue that despite their frequent criticisms and little trust in the good intentions of political rulers, it is nevertheless the government's attention, protection and welfare that the marginalized seek.

The earlier-mentioned recourse to the concept of a 'livable life' in this chapter is not accidental, but borrows from Judith Butler's work (2004). The politics of 'livable life', in Butler's understanding, denotes struggles for recognition as 'worthy lives', and against norms that make some lives 'unlivable' – that is, not recognized as human beings with their own aspirations and needs. Butler's (2004:4) observation, 'without some recognisability I cannot live. But I may also fear that the terms by which I am recognized make life unlivable' is an apt reflection of the tension of the akhdam's position. It is the way they are recognized in society - as different, immoral, belonging to the margins - that ascribes subordination to them. If the akhdam's marginalization is to be challenged, it is this form of recognition that must also be subverted. This takes us to the third section of the chapter, where I discuss how the akhdam envisage themselves, and what forms of recognition they seek. I do so by turning to the two organizations that act as informal representatives of the akhdam, examining their various languages and strategies to overcome marginalization.

While what has been described so far largely reflects the akhdam's recourse to the state and their hopes for its intervention, there are other visions of change articulated by the akhdam actors. In the final section of the chapter, I shed light on narratives of individual agency and efforts to end marginalization while bypassing the state. I contextualize them within the process of 'NGOization' that has been unfolding in Yemen from the 1990s, and reveal how the co-optation of the akhdam issue by the civil society sector has turned it into a matter that is tackled through trainings and workshops rather than political engagements.

## **5.1 Life and livelihood strategies of 'getting by'**

As Chapter 3 has discussed, seeking to expand their opportunities, many *muhamasheen* leave the countryside and move to Yemen's biggest cities. Sana'a, given that it is believed to be - in the words of one interviewee - the place where 'all the money of Yemen' is found, has unsurprisingly become a common destination for rural migrants. But if the capital is known as a city where wealth is accumulated, it is also, according to many *akhdam*, a city built of untranscendable boundaries. Ali Abdullah, a resident of the Samsara compound in the Bab al-Sabah market, illustrated the sense of spatial segregation with the following words: 'Sana'a is like a big prison; there are walls between classes' (*tabaqat*). The lack of resources, as well as the feeling of being unwelcome among the Yemenis, are two reasons often mentioned by slum dwellers to explain why they have settled and remain at the outskirts of the city. These omnipresent 'walls' also mean that, despite their widespread belief in Sana'a's wealth, the *akhdam* see very little of it. With no education or other forms of capital, as was discussed earlier, the hopes of the marginalized to secure decent jobs and housing rarely come true. Hence, despite the fact that the *akhdam* envisioned their settling at the urban margins as only a temporary move, the majority have stayed there ever since.

#### *Living in Dar Salm*

The Dar Salm settlement located in Northern Sana'a, which according to the residents comprises up to 300 families, is one of the aforementioned urban enclaves that people settled in and never left, embracing lifestyles other than those they dreamed of. What was once an empty space, taken over some 25 years ago by a few *akhdam* squatters, is now a densely populated neighbourhood, with the slum tightly surrounded by the houses of middle class Yemenis, small grocery shops, car workshops, a private school and a mosque. Yemenis living nearby would sometimes pass through the slum, using its path as a shortcut leading to the main road, from where buses depart and where cheap restaurants abound.

The appearance of the slum is a fitting reflection of the tension embedded in its condition. On the one hand, the place is characterized by ad hoc, messy architecture, and makeshift shacks that lack drainage and are seemingly made of whatever random material is available. The landscape is dominated by narrow passages, mud pools and piles of garbage, and does not look

particularly welcoming. It rather mirrors the people's hopes - spelled out by Ali, who has been in Dar Salm on and off for over 20 years - that 'this is not our home forever'. As people consider it a short-term stop, they care little about it, and do not want to invest their money that they would rather save to eventually move out and get their own proper houses. On the other hand, with some of its residents having stayed there for more than two decades, the settlement is clearly more than just a passageway, where everyday life and its routines are suspended. Under the surface, a sense of permanence permeates Dar Salm, through its institutions, organizational patterns, community life and daily routines. Against the backdrop of the place, the limited opportunities and scarce resources, its residents bypass the obstacles, and get by. 'We're just living here, thank God' (*'aisheen 'aisheen alhamdulillah*), as Fawzia responded to my rather rhetorical question on how the residents survived in these extremely difficult conditions. Fawzia's hasty response indicated that for her and others in her position, making life possible is something which is routinized and simply 'done', as it is not a matter of choice, but of necessity (Bayat 1997, 2000).

My question about people's survival in the slums agitated Fawzia. She complained about people coming to Dar Salm, taking photographs without anybody's consent, and depicting the residents as wild people, living in a mess, and lacking rules and morals. They did not want to notice the fact, Fawzia argued, that despite the degrading environment, the akhdam lived like any other community in Yemen. During my stay in Dar Salm, I observed various organizational structures, informal rules and practices that confirmed Fawzia's words. I witnessed, for example, people coming to the sheikh to ask for advice, help or mediation in disputes between neighbours or families. The sheikh, whose role it was to make sure that there was order in the slum, was supported by two *uqqal* (pl. *aqel*)<sup>27</sup> - chiefs of their respective alleys. These men and other community members would often meet to discuss issues crucial to everyday life in the

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<sup>27</sup> Yemeni communities - of various sorts - appoint their own leaders whose role is to, among other things, mediate internal disputes and represent the group in front of authorities or other groups. In tribal custom, the most important positions are that of the *sheikh* (chief of a tribe), and the *aqel* (chief of an 'ashira', a smaller branch of a tribe), a position which in today's urban Sana'a refers most commonly to the head of an alley or neighbourhood. The *Aqel*, according to custom, deals with the daily life of the community, while more serious issues such as crime or violence are addressed by the *sheikh*. The candidates for the two positions are chosen among the people, but are approved and remunerated by the state.

settlement. They would also collect funds for repairs of shared goods (such as pipes delivering water), assist mourning families, and respond to instances of violence. When, in one of our conversations, I referred to the slum's informal council as being political, Sheikh Mojahed corrected me instantly: 'No, this is a civil initiative. We deal with small things, we keep order, but we don't do politics. We don't want politics in here; we have enough problems!'

If these collective efforts to safeguard the 'order' and sustainability of the place are typical of the life of any community in Sana'a, the context of the akhdam differs dramatically from that of other groups. The state's sanction of the sheikh and the two neighbourhood chiefs clearly signals that, while the settlement is officially deemed as illegal, in practice it is closer to what Yiftachel (2009) defines as a 'gray space'. Gray spaces, in Yiftachel's words, are 'neither integrated nor eliminated', and as such, constitute 'pseudo-permanent margins of today's urban regions' (2009:243), particularly in the Global South. Wacquant (2015) describes places of similar vulnerability suffering from uncertainty and disadvantage as 'relegated territories', pointing to the active role of the state in their production and maintenance. Similarly here, the Dar Salm slum, like other akhdam settlements, enjoys the silent approval of the municipal government, but no more than that. Put simply, this means that while its residents are not expelled, they are left to themselves in hazardous conditions, lacking basic infrastructure and services, as well as lacking certainty that the government's approval will not be withdrawn. This state of suspension makes life in the slum both possible and extremely challenging.

First, staying in the slum does not come for free. As the land comprising the squatted area of the Dar Salm neighbourhood belongs to several private owners, the residents are charged for their dwellings, according to the size of the occupied space. The average monthly rent for one shack (or 'rocks and cardboard', as one person described it) is 2000 riyals (around 10 US dollars). To avoid or postpone the payment, the akhdam engage in negotiations with the landlords. Some manage to stay for long periods without paying; others move from one place to another to avoid charges. Ali Salim, for example, laughingly described his experience of setting up new shacks in different places, always within the boundaries of the Dar Salm area. Ali, a father of 5 and married to two women, had had no regular income for most of his life. He

paid the rent when he could afford to, but there were long periods of time, he explained, when he could not. In September 2012, under a large amount of pressure from the landlord, Ali Salim decided to abandon his shack and set up a new one only a few meters away, but on land belonging to a different owner. As the slum absorbs large numbers of people, it is cramped, and new dwellings are difficult to spot; thus, Ali Salim hoped he would be left in peace. He rationalized his move with the following words:

If I could I would pay [the rent], but I can't, and somehow we have to live (...). So yes, we moved here; we're still building this place, Mojahed and Ahmed are helping me. You know, it is not very complicated [to build a shack]. It's not the first time we moved, and we may move again. Only God knows.

When I asked Ali whether he was upset to leave his old hut, he shrugged, saying 'it is normal' (*'adi*). Indeed, his experience seemed to be 'normal' and not unique, as other families dispassionately confessed to using similar strategies, as if moving to avoid the payment (or after failing to pay and being forced to leave) was an integral part of everyday life. The strategy was a successful one, as nobody, I was told, was ever expelled from the slum. At the same time, the residents were aware that their small victories in escaping the gaze of the landowners were never permanent. Ultimately, they depended largely on the goodwill, or lack thereof, of those to whom the occupied piece of land belonged.

Securing a place to live is not the only worry of the Yemeni marginalized. It is worth constantly remembering here that the poor 'do not breathe the same air, drink the same water (...) as the nonpoor do' (Auyero, Swistun 2009: 18). There are multiple risks, hazards and deficiencies that must be confronted by the slum dwellers on a daily basis. Dealing with the smell from the rotten garbage, fleas, mud and floods, protecting the shacks from damage, and obtaining water and electricity are just a few of the challenges they face. The fieldwork notes that I took during some of my first encounters with Saleh and his family, with whom I later spent a lot of time, suitably grasp their never-ending efforts to make the space habitable and their life possible. These notes turned out to be valuable, as they registered something that I soon, just like the residents, stopped noticing.



Fieldnotes November 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2012:

Saleh and his family of 8 share between themselves 2 rooms and a makeshift toilet, and use a small outside space as a cooking area. The interior of their shack doesn't show that the family has spent the last 20 years there; it looks as if they have just moved in, or were getting ready to move out. All their belongings - from clothes and blankets, to food and make-up products - are stored in plastic bags. Amal [Saleh's wife] told me it is meant as protection against the flooding that happens with every heavy rain. It also helps to save as much of the limited space as possible (...).

Saleh's shack is at the edges of the slum, adjacent to their relatives' households, but some distance away from the other residents of the slum. Amal said that people do not bother each other, but they want to keep their privacy. To guard the family's intimacy, Saleh gated their property with a fence made from metal scraps. Saleh told me that the shack was not built, but "pieced together" with what he could find. Among the materials he used were bricks, cardboard, and plastic tarpaulin. Some of them had been distributed by relief agencies, while others Saleh had appropriated from construction sites, or other places where the material seemed abandoned or not guarded. Recently, to strengthen the vulnerable structure, which is easily damaged by heavy rain, Saleh fortified the walls of the rooms with large truck tires. He laughed that the tires in the walls were meant to compensate for the missing windows (...).

Fieldnotes, November 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2012:

To acquire the electricity that is not provided to the settlement, residents connect to the grids that pass by the neighbourhood. There is no heating and the place is freezing. Water is obtained from two taps in the adjacent area, or taken from a nearby mosque. Some residents told me earlier that the taps were opened to them by the Yemeni neighbours as sadaka [act of charity], so they were not supposed to pay; according to Saleh, they use the water without anybody's permission. When I asked him whether the neighbours ever opposed what could be regarded as stealing the water or electricity, Saleh seemed surprised, and assured me that these appropriations were not only widely tolerated, but also legitimate. He said that the practice was common among all Yemenis, not only the poor. He smiled and said "This is life, what else can we do?"

These typical excerpts detailing Ali and Saleh's efforts give a sense of how the residents of the slum find their own, more or less creative, ways of overcoming uncertainty and turning their improvised makeshift arrangements into livable spaces. To make life in the slum possible

demands a lot of energy from the residents, with improvements being limited and impermanent: 'Whatever it wins, it does not keep', as de Certeau (1984:xix) observed when explaining the logic of a 'tactic'. As the examples of Ali Salim and Saleh show, their efforts - to make life possible in spaces that are not theirs, to which they bear no emotional attachments, but from where they have nowhere else to go - need to be constantly renegotiated, and their gains can never be taken for granted (Bayat 1997).

Saleh's words, 'this is life' (*hathihi al-haya*), recorded in the field notes above, resonate around the slum as an oft-repeated commentary on people's daily activities. This phrase and others like it that I repeatedly heard, such as 'what else can we do?' and 'you get used to it', express the residents' resigned acceptance of their plight and their lack of hope that it could look any different. Life in the slum is about adapting (rather than questioning), negotiating, dealing with daily burdens and finding simple daily pleasures. This does not mean that the people are miserable or the place is depressing. On the contrary, one could often see young boys, who spent their evenings playing a table football game which they had brought to the slum, laughing loudly and talking about girls and attractions on Hadda, the main commercial street in Sana'a. Their youthful joy gave a sense of normalcy to the place, as did the weddings, men's qat sessions and women's gatherings to watch soap operas. These daily routines reveal that the marginalized have normalized both their life in the slum and the daily practices that make it possible. This is unsurprising, considering that I myself soon got used to and took for granted everyday life in the slum.

This normalization is in many ways reminiscent of what Scheper-Hughes (1992:16) calls the "'normal" violence of everyday life', through which suffering undergoes routinization, and constitutes rather than disrupts the daily lives of vulnerable people. According to Scheper-Hughes (*ibid.*), this explains why the deaths of children of disenfranchised families in Brazil's shanty towns are not grieved: their deaths are seen as part of the natural, inevitable order. But also, importantly, sensitive to the context of suffering and poverty, Scheper-Hughes rejects the proposition to see the Brazilian rural poor's daily acts of adapting and living as acts of resistance. Rather, they constitute acts of 'resilience', as Scheper-Hughes calls them, which

make their existence possible (1992:553). Tactics of resilience, further discussed by Scheper-Hughes in her later essay, 'A Talent for Life' (2008), such as normalization, black humour and reframing of experiences, indeed resonate strongly with the daily tactics of the akhdam.

### *Livelihood strategies*

The akhdam, who own very little, often joked that garbage was their only asset. Rubbish in all shapes and forms is part of the landscape of the akhdam settlements; people collect it and sell it for recycling, and what is not sold will often be kept in the hope of trading it in future, or it will be turned into a utility, such as building material. As scavenging is the most important source of income for many, it is not surprising that the rubbish tends to gather, rather than be disposed of easily. Saleh explained this to me by saying that what I saw as garbage piled in front of his house was capital for him, something that could potentially earn him income. For Saleh, scavenging was a full-time job, in which his children were also engaged. For some others, it was an attempt to earn additional money, or something they would turn to if other possibilities of generating income failed. The slum dwellers collect tins, cans, bottles, and metal scraps, as well as other objects that could turn out to be valuable. A day of scavenging on average brings in between 1,000 and 2,000 Yemeni riyals (4 to 8 US dollars);<sup>28</sup> but the marginalized complained that the business was worse than it used to be.

Besides collecting waste, many slum dwellers, especially women and children, beg on the streets; this can bring in several hundred riyals extra on a good day. The women I talked to were very pragmatic about these forms of earning money: 'When people are surprised that I beg, I ask them - how else do I feed my children? (...). When you know that by the end of the day there is nothing to give to your children to eat, you have no choice (...)', I was told by Fawzia, who begged during Ramadan and Eid, when people were expected to be more generous. At other times, she would beg only sporadically, when there was a particular need for it. According to Fawzia, begging was a demanding task, brought little gains, and most importantly, was of high risk - as it was illegal, beggars were often arrested, and had to pay a fine to be released. Despite their fear, Fawzia said, many women would beg anyway, as it was

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<sup>28</sup> According to November 2015 exchange rates.

perceived as the only way to generate some income. Cleaning private houses was another possibility, but according to female residents of Dar Salm, unlike in the past, these jobs were now rare, and only available to those with connections (de Regt 2008, 2009; Chapter 3).

Men similarly complained about shrinking working opportunities, leaving them with no choice but to undertake irregular activities that had no certainty and brought in little profit. Many nostalgically reminisced about the times when the Gulf countries, especially Saudi Arabia, were an important destination for labour migration. A large number of male residents of Dar Salm had spent some time working in the Gulf and, as was previously discussed, they recalled the experience very fondly. The situation changed in the 1990s when the Gulf countries closed their borders to Yemenis, and replaced their Arab workforce with mostly Southeast Asian labourers. Most of the akhdam workers were forced to return to Yemen, having lost access to jobs in the wealthy neighbouring countries. Today, some men and women still try to enter Saudi Arabia illegally, exploiting poor controls at the borders and obtaining the help of traffickers. According to Ahmed, who was deported from Saudi Arabia in 2009 after illegally crossing the border in the Harad district, the employment opportunities in Saudi Arabia are limited, and the trip itself is dangerous, but some people take the risk and try their luck anyway.

While attempts to seek jobs abroad are an exception, most of those who have settled in Sana'a undertake any menial jobs that are available to them in the country. The striking level of corruption in Yemen is perceived by the akhdam as being one of the reasons why there is little opportunity for them to earn money. Corrupt politicians, civil servants and bureaucrats are believed to control the market, enriching their own people and excluding those without connections.

Within this context, there is a strong sense among the slum dwellers of having little choice over the jobs they can perform, and hence there is an acceptance of the occupations assigned to them. Chalcraft (2006) referred to a similar disposition in the case of Syrian migrant workers in Lebanon as a willingness to 'sweat'. 'Patience is imposed on us', Sheikh Mojahed told me, explaining that people had to continue to make a living in any possible ways, while hoping that their situation would eventually change for the better. Besides their informal strategies of

generating income - such as the earlier-mentioned garbage collecting, begging and private house cleaning, as well as working as load carriers, guards or independent taxi drivers - a large portion of the akhdam, both men and women, find employment in the public sector. As I have discussed in the previous chapter, the akhdam have traditionally been associated with undignified jobs; and by their own accounts, to this day, the only jobs granted to them by the municipality (*baladiya*) are those of sanitation workers. From the workers' perspective, the problem is not only that they are cut off from other sectors of employment, but also that as street cleaners, they are exploited and not treated the same as other employees of the state. As I will discuss in detail in the following sections, sanitation workers earn minimum wages on a day-to-day basis, and lack social security, benefits and workers' rights. The average monthly salary of 27,000 Yemeni riyals (around 120 US dollars) is arbitrarily reduced in cases of absence or insubordination. The majority of workers I talked to claimed, for example, that their actual monthly income rarely goes over 18,000 riyals. The workers had a deep understanding of the injustice of their situation, and recounted to me endless illustrations of the rights violations they faced. These ranged from the lack of contracts, insurance and days off, to not being provided with protective equipment and being forced to work with their bare hands. Working for the municipality, the workers said, could help them to secure their basic needs, but did not guarantee any more than that. One of the workers expressed it as follows: 'Yes I have a job, it is better than nothing... maybe I will not die from hunger, but I can't enjoy life'. His words articulate what many others hinted at - their municipality jobs and the other informal livelihood strategies they undertake are enough to preserve life, but not enough to live fully. This is why, as will be discussed later, many dissatisfied street cleaners turn to legal rights and trade union activism to collectively demand higher wages and dignified working conditions.

## **5.2 Claiming from the State: From petitions to protest**

The literature on everyday politics that was discussed in the Introduction to the thesis paints the 'everyday' as a zone of autonomy, off-stage subversion, individual creativity and unspectacular but persistent advancements (Scott 1985, 1990; Bayat 1997, 2000, 2010; de

Certeau 1984). There seems to be little of these present in the akhdam's endless, daily efforts to make their life livable against all odds. Even if the ordinary does happen in exceptional conditions, accounts of slum dwellers who complain that there is not much life in the slum, and that the place is for sleeping rather than living, have to be taken seriously: This is why shacks are never decorated, and personal belongings rarely removed from the plastic bags in which they are stored. This is also why many boys and men I talked to are never to be seen in the slum during the day; they leave it early in the morning and come back in the evening to finish off the day. And finally, this is why young women continually fantasize about where they would go and what they would do if they were given an opportunity to choose. 'Nobody chooses or wants to live like this', was a constantly repeated refrain, as if to say that normalcy was just an appearance, or something that could be taken away or disappear in any moment.

In their own accounts, people make clear that life in the slum 'drags you down', and there is only so much that they can gain through their mundane struggles. For example, the sheikh of Dar Salm expressed his scepticism regarding whether the marginalized were capable of meaningfully improving their lives, stating in one of our conversations that the only option the slum dwellers had was to 'continue' (*nastamir*) and be patient. Others seemed to echo him, confessing that they had little hope that anything could change for them in the foreseeable future (*ma bish amal*). The akhdam's lived experiences thus have to be read in all their ambiguity: with their moments of autonomy and self-reliance as well as their helplessness; their sense of righteousness as much as despair; and finally, their belief that they can 'continue', but their little hope that their lives can take on a different trajectory. It is true that, while their daily practices allow the marginalized to secure basic needs and live community life, they also reinforce rather than subvert the akhdam's subalternity: the marginalized are largely confined to spaces where they are tolerated, and play out roles and tasks that are assigned to them and perceived by dominant society as their defining traits (for example, sweeping streets, collecting garbage and begging). What for the marginalized constitutes their daily struggles for survival, for the Yemenis is a confirmation of the akhdam's particular culture or habitus. Hence, the everyday in this case is rarely the site of conviviality, and the invisible struggles are not manifestations of resistance, nor do they bring opportunities that could challenge the status

quo. The akhdam's agency, therefore, does not consist of heroic or transformative acts, but of getting by, coping with daily hardship and obstacles, and 'continuing' to struggle.

The pessimistic perceptions outlined above are articulated in a similar manner by many akhdam, who navigate narrowly through the spaces and roles assigned to them. However, the argument I advance here is not that of Hannah Arendt or Giorgio Agamben, for whom perishable lives exposed to violence and deprived of sovereignty can only struggle to survive, and remain outside the realm of politics (Das 2011: 319). By bringing in these accounts, I do not intend to suggest that the akhdam are passive, fatalistic or lacking agency. Neither do I mean that they live in false consciousness, having internalized their subordination. Rather, I argue, these voices indicate a pragmatic reading of the situation, and an awareness of the limited possibilities and potential achievements offered by the 'everyday'. The previously quoted remarks such as 'patience is imposed on us' need to be read against the backdrop of the deeply-rooted stigmatization of the akhdam, their disenfranchisement, and the economic exploitation they have endured. Chalcraft (2006) convincingly argues that what the subaltern can think, imagine and do goes beyond the expression of hegemony and consent, but is structured by 'horizons of the possible'. Discussing the case of Syrian migrant workers in Lebanon, Chalcraft observes that '[w]hat appears to be practical and possible to given social subjects, subsisting in determinate contexts, is defined not by God or nature, but by forms of power' (2006: 13). According to Chalcraft, this explains why the underpaid and poorly-treated Syrian labourers in Lebanon do not challenge the overall system of exploitation in the country, but use their agency in fields where they can believe they can succeed). In this case, the men's agency is channelled into earning and saving as much money as possible in order to later return and provide for their families in Syria.

Many ordinary akhdam largely narrow down their efforts to deal with hardship and oppressive materiality into ways that can guarantee them specific gains. They do so, however, not only through the daily non-discursive practices mentioned earlier, but also by calling on the state to grant them what they cannot access by themselves. Their claims, staged through sporadic protests and, more commonly, through petitions and letters to various authorities, are based

on the conviction that the state has an obligation to help its weakest citizens. For Chatterjee (2011), as was discussed in Chapter 1, these kinds of ‘negotiations’, rather than resistance or insurgency, are paradigmatic modes of engagement of the subaltern, who project themselves as objects of the state’s care. In a different vein, Auyero (2011) scrutinizes how the lives of the poor are dominated by their experiences of waiting in order to receive social benefits. Always uncertain and anticipating, the poor, Auyero argues, are treated like ‘patients’ and ‘compliant clients’ rather than as citizens of the state. This has a particular effect, as the poor who are awaiting the state’s assistance learn that in order to receive it, they must tolerate the uncertainty, patiently and passively obey the requirements, and refrain from protest.

These two perspectives of Chatterjee and Auyero are useful to understand some of the akhdam’s efforts to engage with the state. It is true that the akhdam rarely express opposition towards the state,<sup>29</sup> and do not regard it as their ‘enemy’. Rather, they routinely complain about the state’s absence, its lack of support and its neglect of those who are poorest. This despair was often expressed with remarks such as ‘there is no state’ (*ma bish dawla*) or ‘there is no law in Yemen’ (*ma bish qanun*), which explained, according to the akhdam, why they were left to themselves. In a similar manner, some commented on the messy and unregulated nature of their habitation with the expression ‘*abu Yemen*’- implying that this is how things are in Yemen - chaotic, lacking order and rules.

*‘We are writing to the authorities’*

One of the ways commonly employed by the Yemeni subaltern to address the state is the submission of collective or individual petitions and appeals. These texts are often drafted with the help of activist lawyers working for Yemeni NGOs, who encourage people to submit their claims, and often write them on behalf of the largely illiterate akhdam.

‘We have a bag full of demands’ (*andana shanta al-awamir*), the sheikh of Dar Salm told me when I asked him what the residents expected from the state. Housing was a priority, as Sheikh Mojahed, like many others, was convinced that as long as people were confined to their

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<sup>29</sup> The state (*dawla*) in the akhdam’s accounts is conflated with the government (*hukuma*), but also largely with political elites and ruling parties.



precarious shacks and isolated slums, they would continue to be labelled as ‘the akhdam’. Sheikh Mojahed claimed to have filed numerous appeals to the government, various ministries, and individual politicians, asking to be resettled and allocated proper housing. ‘We asked for a new place to stay, we presented our claims to [the] prime minister, to the president - the old and the new one. We asked on behalf of the whole slum. We haven’t received any response so far’. Mojahed complained that, despite the fact that it was the government’s obligation to make sure that all Yemenis lived in dignity, the *muhamasheen* were always ignored, more than any other group in the country. Similar complaints were voiced across the slums. The leaders of the Hasaba settlement, for example, had been repeatedly submitting requests to be relocated; and as far back as 2009, I was told, they had been promised that they would be moved to new houses. However, nothing had happened since then, and to this day the Hasaba residents remain in the same location, with their renewed requests going unanswered.

Among other requests that I learned about in Dar Salm were a petition on behalf of the Dar Salm community to open a local school, and a letter to the High Court demanding an investigation into the alleged murder of one of the residents. Others were individual cases, which were mediated through the work of NGOs. For example, Rania, a woman from Dar Salm who needed expensive hip replacement surgery and could only barely move with the aid of crutches, had her case taken up by the Yemeni Women’s Union, the biggest NGO dedicated to women’s issues in the country, with its headquarters in Sana’a. Rania kept a folder with all the medical documents stating her diagnosis, attached to copies of the requests submitted to the Ministry of Public Health and Population, along with the responses received. For Rania, these papers were of utmost value, as they certified that she was deserving of help, and as such, they could change her life. Others similarly had their own small archives with documented histories of the diseases and disabilities they suffered. They used the papers to apply for help, but also displayed them when begging on the streets.

Writing letters, petitions and appeals, however, rarely changes anybody’s life. Despite the fact that Rania’s case was well documented and her disability was not contested, after months of inquiring and waiting for the outcome, Rania lost hope that she would receive the subsidy for

the surgery she had asked for. Nevertheless, despite expressing her frustration with the government's inaction and her lack of faith in it, she kept her papers in neat order and believed there was no other way to seek help. 'What can we do?' (*esh na'mal?*), she asked in a rhetorical manner. I heard similar words from others who sought support from governmental bodies. For example, although many were desperate to move out of the slum, people rarely tried to do it by themselves, arguing that they could not afford it, and that it was the state's duty to resettle them. Even if the numerous petitions they had repeatedly submitted over many years had brought no change, residents kept writing to the authorities, arguing that the state was obliged to respond to their demands.

These appeals to the state loosely correspond with Chatterjee's (2011) observations that the subaltern seek the government's attention in order to be 'dealt with' and receive the welfare they desperately need. In Chatterjee's reading, the subaltern do not act as citizens demanding their rights, nor do they challenge the laws that deem their informal activities to be illegal. Rather, all the subaltern want, according to Chatterjee, is for the 'authorities to declare an exception' (2011:25) and grant them the bare minimum they ask for. Yet, this understanding of subaltern politics as mobilization for 'entitlements', even if insightful, cannot tell us the whole story of subaltern engagements and aspirations. Other postcolonial scholars argue against the exclusion of the urban and rural poor from the realm of citizenship struggles (Sharma 2011, Das 2011). Drawing on Chatterjee's work, Sharma (2011), for example, demonstrates how the subaltern mix the idioms of entitlements with those of rights and religio-moral claims to articulate their various demands. Studying the struggles of the poor for development, Sharma (2011) concludes that for the subaltern, rights and material provisions go together, as one means little without the other.

Similarly here, the akhdam ask for more than immediate benefits and a state of 'exception' for the grey zones they occupy. Besides goods and services, the marginalized tirelessly demand from the state the enforcement of law, an end to discrimination, and their recognition as worthy subjects and Yemeni citizens who are entitled to rights. I turn to these claims in the following pages.

### *Public Grieving*

Claims built around non-materialist idioms come up routinely in daily exchanges and conversations between people, but gain visibility through demonstrations, public statements and conferences held by the akhdam representative bodies (which will be discussed in the following section), as well as, most tellingly, during acts of public grieving. By public grieving, I mean the community's responses to violence and crime committed against akhdam individuals, which go beyond private mourning and take the form of spontaneous demonstrations to articulate both their outrage and the group's demands. In general, taking to the streets is only sporadically done by the akhdam, and they regard it as being of little benefit. Political rallies, which are easily dismissed by the public and bring no visible improvements, are especially perceived by many akhdam as a 'waste', where the costs are higher than the potential benefits. Additionally, the slum dwellers are sceptical about those who claim to represent them, complaining that the self-appointed leaders pursue their own interests and careers, and capitalize on people's suffering. For example, during several meetings I attended in November and December 2012 between the leaders of the National Union for the Marginalized and the slum dwellers, the latter did not hide their criticism, and boldly challenged the activists. 'As long as there is the Union there will be marginalized', 'Where are all the projects you've been promising us?!', or 'Why should we demonstrate so that you can profit? We never gain anything', the slum dwellers shouted, expressing their lack of faith in the organization, its members and the protest itself.

Public grieving, which has a contentious element to it but is not mediated by the representative bodies, is not necessarily conditioned by the same rational calculations. During my fieldwork in Sana'a, I encountered several instances where slum dwellers took to the streets after the death of a member of the group, turning funerals into small-scale protests. Whether individual or collective, they were direct responses to their sense of injustice and subordination, intended to signal that 'it has been enough', as one man told me.

I met the man whose words I quote above at a demonstration held on 16 November 2012 in the Hasaba neighbourhood in Sana'a. The demonstration was organized the day after a cobbler from the akhdam community in Hasaba had been killed. It was led by the residents of the slum, joined by a few activists and the heads of the Aser and Madinat Saw'an settlements. Early in the morning, tens of people blocked the main road next to the Hasaba market, carrying banners with written slogans such as 'Trial for the killer' and 'We want equal rights'. The banners were not new, but had been used at previous protests and now were brought by Rashed from the Yemeni Organization against Slavery and Discrimination.

In my fieldnotes (16 November 2012), I recorded:

The cobbler, I was told, had been killed over a trivial argument, in the middle of the day on a busy market street. An armed man, well known in the neighbourhood, shot him among crowds doing business and shopping, and despite witnesses, he walked away without being questioned by anybody. The killer was a powerful sheikh in the neighbourhood, and that, according to the protesters, granted him impunity. "He is rich and our blood is cheap", said Rashed from the Yemeni Organization against Slavery and Discrimination, explaining to me why nobody tried to stop the killer, and why the killer was not going to pay any consequences for the crime he committed. The outraged man kept repeating to me "it's been enough, enough. You have to write how they kill us!" Others seemed less moved, and stood on the street talking to friends and chewing qat, as if their sit-in was part, rather than a disruption, of a daily routine. Similarly, Yemenis who headed to or from the market walked in between the protesters without showing any interest in the event. The only ones who reacted to the protest were drivers who impatiently honked at the gathering, cursing the blockage of the road and the disruption in traffic it provoked.

After the sit-in ended and the participants moved to the sheikh's tent to converse and chew qat, I wondered out loud: What was the demonstration expected to achieve, given that clearly, just like the killing, it had attracted little attention from the passers-by? To my surprise, nobody seemed to worry that the protest did not provoke much response. Rashed, the most eager to answer my questions, said that he had not expected random people to join the sit-in or to act in any way. He claimed that what was important was the response of the authorities who, it was hoped, would interfere in this particular case, but who also more generally should start taking

the issue of the akhdam more seriously. According to Rashed, changes to the constitution and affirmative action were the only solutions to improve the plight of the *muhamasheen*. Somebody else added, in a similar vein, that the politicians had to stop turning a blind eye to the akhdam's situation, and that new protective laws were needed. These and other accounts attest to the widespread conviction among the akhdam that, while the state was to be blamed for inaction, it was also the only institution from which viable change could come. Going onto the streets and making their undeserved suffering visible was thus a way to disrupt the normalization of their subordination, signalling that the akhdam did not agree to their mistreatment. One of the protesters spelled this out to me with the following words: 'Look, we know we mean nothing in this country (...) and this must stop. We are Yemeni citizens; why do they treat us like animals? (...) Why does nobody come to us to compensate for the death?'

The 'compensation' mentioned by the protester refers to the customary proceedings in Yemen that deal with issues of crime and violence. In tribal law, the family of the killer is supposed to reach out to the family of the victim in order to start, in the presence of a mediator, the process of arbitration (*tahkeem*). In a symbolic act, the perpetrator's family brings weapons to the family of the victim, which are to be returned if the settlement is made. Most commonly, if the killer is forgiven, the victim's family is paid the 'blood money' (*diya*) as a compensation, and receives an animal for the sacrifice. The fact that the whole family or tribe apologizes to the victim's kin signifies a collective act of paying respect and apologizing for the violation of their honour. Hence, when a similar process does not take place, as in the case of the cobbler's killing, it is read by the marginalized as a sign that the akhdam are not seen as honourable, and that their death does not have the same value.

It is against these perceptions of their lives - as being of lesser worth, disposable, and hence 'not grievable' - that the akhdam protest when they call for the punishment of the killer and for the state's intervention. Interestingly, it is both their exclusion from the tribal custom and their lack of legal protection to which the akhdam refer when they make their claims.

### **5.3 What Rights and Recognition? Competing organizations and visions of the marginalized.**

The sit-in in Hasaba can be read as an instance of claim-making and a call for recognition, even if it is spontaneous, joined by few actors, and with a message that is not clearly stated, but transmitted mainly through their physical presence on the street and the slogans on their banners. During this protest and on other occasions, the marginalized listed their claims, mentioning among other things: 'being treated like others', 'being respected and integrated in society', and 'having access to jobs and rights'. These wishes, although sporadically communicated through protests and individual appeals, or passed on to journalists, NGOs and activists, nonetheless remain largely unheard by wider audiences.

These spontaneous, dispersed and vague community-led acts to articulate discontent and demand rights and recognition as worthy citizens are accompanied by more organized efforts by the organizations that act as informal representative bodies of the marginalized, namely The National Union for the Marginalized and the Trade Union of Sanitation Workers. Unlike in the previously discussed examples, the two organizations in their statements, leaflets and manifestos very precisely name the injustice, and approach the state with precise demands, through both institutional and non-institutional channels.

These two organizations, among others, challenge the stigma attached to the akhdam, and propose alternative readings of who the marginalized are. Struggles for recognition have most often been associated with struggles over identity, suggesting 'supposed links between recognition and identity' (Taylor 1992:25). Identity politics, studied in detail by cultural studies scholars, refers to the field of politics where a particular collective identity is put forward, and on its basis claims are staged. It is then, as Kruks (2001:85), puts it, a demand for 'respect for oneself as different' rather than for 'inclusion (...) on the basis of shared human attributes'. Collective rights are often claimed on the basis of the shared and distinct cultural identity of a group. For example, the most recognized theorist of liberal multiculturalism, Kymlicka (1995), argues that the 'right to culture' entitles groups to maintain their autonomy, language, religion or way of life, and to be exempted from laws of the state on the basis of the group's difference.

This is the perspective largely adopted today both by human rights organizations and activists as well as minority and indigenous groups in their struggles for collective rights.

However, the claims for recognition discussed in the following pages are not necessarily expressions of difference, or calls for autonomy and the protection of tradition. Rather, the akhdam's claims resonate with Fraser's (1995, 2003) reading, in which recognition politics is not so much about preserving a group's specific culture and identity, as about rejecting the institutionalized difference leading to 'status subordination' (2003:27). As such, these claims challenge institutions that project certain groups and individuals as being of lesser worth, preventing them from becoming 'a full member of society, capable of participating on a par with other members' (ibid). The akhdam, through various means, seek the erasure rather than maintenance of their difference, and their inclusion more than autonomy.

*The National Union for the Marginalized<sup>30</sup>: protecting the vulnerable minority*

The National Union for the Marginalized started off in 2007 with the aim of becoming 'a coordinating platform for all working for the cause of the marginalized', as one high-ranking member of the organization explained to me. The Union, although registered as an NGO and approved by the Ministry of Social Affairs, proclaimed itself to be an informal representative body of the marginalized, gathering together hundreds of activists and 70 associations (*jami'iyyat*) from all over Yemen. As the text on their website<sup>31</sup> indicates, the Union claims to be 'the voice of the voiceless', and perhaps has become that, as its members are today the main articulators of the akhdam's claims towards the state, and the most visible actors on the international fora.

While I discuss the beginnings of the Union and the context of its emergence in the final section of the chapter, here it is just worth mentioning that until recently, the Union, despite its ambitious claims, has had little visibility and has not attracted much attention from policy-makers or wider Yemeni society. The Union's activities, I was told in one of the interviews, had been consciously apolitical and confined to the fields of 'culture, human development, and

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<sup>30</sup> Also referred to as the National Union for the Poor, the National Union, or simply the Union.

<sup>31</sup> <http://www.mohammash-ye.net/content.php?id=5> (last accessed 9.12.2015)

human rights', targeting donors rather than exercising political pressure on the government. Its members did not want to be associated with politics, but rather believed that their role was to build a stronger civil society and work towards development (*tamniyah*). Between 2010 and 2012, when the large part of my fieldwork was carried out, I knew little about the activities of the Union, as they were not present in the slums in Sana'a, nor were they an object of people's discussions. Many slum dwellers in Sana'a later claimed that they had never seen members of the National Union coming to their settlements prior to 2012, and as such, they perceived their recent activism as signs of 'opportunism' and 'propaganda work'. Similarly, until 2012, very few non-akhdam Yemenis I talked to were aware of the existence of the organization, which contributed to the image of the marginalized as unorganized and lacking in leadership and political consciousness.

However, this changed with a particular political conjuncture in Yemen that not only brought the National Union for the Poor into the spotlight, but also led to a shift in the organization's strategy of bringing change. Social movement scholars have discussed at length the role of the wider environment in political mobilization. It has been widely acknowledged that the context, often referred to as 'political opportunity structure', can 'impose certain constraints on political activity or open avenues for it' (Eisinger 1973:11, quoted in McAdam 1982:40). In this vein, Tarrow (1998:20), for example, distinguishes between 'political opportunities' that are 'dimensions of the political struggle that encourage contention' and 'political constraints' that 'discourage contention'. Importantly, as Tarrow (*ibid.*) and others agree, opportunities and constraints are not necessarily structural and permanent, but rather are perceived, relational and changing. For the akhdam activists, it was the National Dialogue Conference (NDC) announced at the end of 2011 that they perceived, in their own words, as a 'historic opportunity to play politics'.

The NDC was a part of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) initiative. In November 2011, after nine months of political turmoil in Yemen, a power-sharing deal was signed in Riyadh that negotiated President Ali Abdullah Saleh's resignation from power in return for securing him domestic impunity. As a result of the agreement, new presidential elections were to be held in



February 2012, and a transitional dialogue process in Yemen was announced. The NDC was supposed to bring together all Yemeni social and political forces to draft a new constitution and, ultimately, restructure the whole political system. Its 565 seats were to be distributed among the representatives of the main political parties, as well as among the Houthis, the Southern Movement (Hiraak), youths, women, representatives of civil society, and importantly: the akhdam. While many in Yemen saw the GCC-led transition as a betrayal of the protesters' demands and a pact that served the interests of the elites, the Gulf monarchies and their western allies (Yadav, Carapico 2014; Carapico 2014), the akhdam leaders did not hide their enthusiasm.

In our conversations, they referred to the 'new Yemen' that was supposedly under way. They used similar words during their meetings with slum dwellers in November and December 2012. Abdulrahman, accompanied by two or three other members of the Union, visited various akhdam settlements in Sana'a, trying to convince the residents to join a protest demanding the akhdam's participation in the upcoming NDC as a separate issue (*qadiya*), and not merely as representatives of civil society. In every slum, Abdulrahman repeated the same mantra of the new Yemen, in which there would be no more akhdam or racism: 'If not for ourselves, we must do it for our children and grandchildren'; 'It is a unique chance for the *muhamasheen*. We can't miss it'; 'It's the first time we have been invited to speak! We must take our rights now, or we won't get the chance again!'

After some delays, the National Dialogue Conference was finally launched on 18 March 2013, and lasted until January 24, 2014. The *muhamasheen*, to the disappointment of the Union, were assigned only one seat, taken by Noman Hudeithi. Although his presence at the Conference was regarded with ambivalence by the slum dwellers, nevertheless, most seemed to agree that the participation of the akhdam's representative in a political process was an unprecedented event. Throughout the conference, Hudeithi made demands for the marginalized, including, among other things, 10% of seats in parliament and in public jobs, integration of the *muhamasheen* children in the education system, and reserved seats in military colleges which, according to Hudeithi, discriminated against the akhdam. While these

claims came as no surprise, and to a large extent reiterated what the marginalized had already been demanding for a long time, in the space of the NDC they took on a new meaning. Unlike in other previously-discussed instances of grievance articulation where the marginalized could only 'await' the state's response (Auyero 2011) or where they staged their demands to small and disinterested audiences, here, they joined the institutional setting as political actors, turning the slogans from their banners, their cried-out demands, and the statements from their seldom-read website into recorded and televised speeches. In a rare event, the akhdam actors became noticed (for example, Hudeithi was acclaimed at that time as the 'Yemeni Obama'), and their claims became part of a public debate. Indeed, many of Hudeithi's demands were met, at least in theory: the Rights and Freedom Working Group, of which Hudeithi was a member, recommended protective measures that would facilitate the akhdam's participation in society on an equal basis, and suggested the placement of an article in the constitution on positive discrimination towards the akhdam. Moreover, a national authority was to be proclaimed to ensure the integration of the *muhamasheen* into society and to guarantee them access to housing, healthcare, job opportunities and public services<sup>32</sup>.

The vision of who the akhdam are, as spelled out by Hudeithi in his speeches at the conference and shared with me in detail in conversations and interviews, is simple: 'There are three million black citizens<sup>33</sup> in Yemen. We must regain their rights'. The NDC was just the first step towards doing so; the rest of the work was to be completed by a newly-established movement called 'Akhdam Allah', which Hudeithi hoped to eventually transform into a political party.

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<sup>32</sup> The hopes brought by the participation of the marginalized in the transitional National Dialogue Conference- that was supposed to lead to a new, more just and inclusive political order- were soon undermined by the tragic developments in the country. The eruption of civil war in 2015, followed by the Saudi Arabia-led intervention and air-strikes, resulted in an escalation of chaos, instability and humanitarian catastrophe. Within this context, the issue of the akhdam is again written out the agendas of politicians, rights organizations, and international bodies, and the advancements proclaimed during the NDC cannot be materialized. The increasing prices of basic products, shortage of water and electricity, growing unemployment and insecurity in Yemen, render the daily life of the akhdam ever more difficult. Living in open-spaces and lacking protection, the akhdam are severely affected by the violence of war. In the most dramatic event, during one of the Saudi Arabia's airstrikes in July 2015, tens of the akhdam inhabitants of Madinat Sa'wan were killed and injured.

<sup>33</sup> To my inquiries about the meanings of being 'akhdam', Hudeithi responded that a 'khadem' means simply 'black' [*khdam yaani aswad*]. He used the two words interchangeably.

The use of the derogatory 'akhdam' appellation and referring to the *muhamsheen* in racial terms (which I discuss in more detail in Chapter 7) seemed surprising, as the majority of slum dwellers forcefully reject both of these identifications. In endless conversations, the marginalized refuted the idea of their being a minority, or of foreign origins, as is commonly believed. I repeatedly heard statements such as: 'We are not a minority [*aqaliyya*]. We are Yemenis and Muslim, there is no difference', and 'The only difference between us and other Yemenis is material [*maadi*]; we are poor, and they are rich'. Some pointed to the absurdity of such claims with ironic comments along the lines of 'We are from the coast [Tihama region], not Africa. What is Africa? I don't even know where Africa is'.

When in one of our conversations I mentioned to Hudeithi that people did not want to be regarded as either 'akhdam' or 'black', he responded with the following words:

We suffer because we are perceived as akhdam, whether we like it or not. It does not matter what we think, or if we say we don't have African origins (...). We don't like the name 'akhdam', but we need it for the moment, because this is the only name society knows. We use the word for now as a tribe name. We have to start here, in the reality (...) and deal with it, rather than deny it. Once we are protected and have more power and resources, we can work on changing society's mentality and culture, to abolish the term not only on paper. But first we need to act as a group; if we don't act as a group, whose rights are we fighting for?

The strategy articulated here by Hudeithi brings to mind the efforts of the Dalits in India, who, as Rao (2009) explores in detail, embraced their negative identity (being 'dalit'), and made that vulnerability the basis of their claims for recognition, in order to eventually overcome it. Hudeithi's words, echoed by other members of the Union, point to a similar discursive strategy whereby the activists demand historical recognition of the akhdam's suffering, as well as legal protection. Appropriating the appellation 'akhdam' is important, the activists argue, because it speaks of a particular form of discrimination, and hence serves as a marker for those sharing a similar experience of exclusion. The deployment of the word can thus be read as an effort to define the akhdam as a specific group ('we use the word as a tribe name', as Hudeithi put it) in order to claim collective rights.<sup>34</sup> In Abdulrahman's words, the marginalized 'were made a

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<sup>34</sup> Hudeithi, and other members of the National Union whom I talked to, often explained that the word 'marginalized' had lost its relevance, as it was a broad term and pointed mainly to economic disenfranchisement.

minority' by Yemenis, who regarded them as different, and as such, they needed 'to act as a minority', irrespective of one's personal identification. This pragmatic framing as a 'minority' probably comes as little surprise if we bear in mind that in recent years, a growing number of akhdam activists have participated in fellowships for members of minority groups or workshops on human rights advocacy and mechanisms, organized by the UN and other international bodies (I elaborate on this in Chapter 7).

Importantly, embracing the negative label and the vulnerability does not imply a passive acceptance of an identity assigned to them. Members of the Union responded to my questions asking them to specify the collective experience that distinguishes the akhdam by using evocative terms such as 'we've been silenced for 1300 years', 'we are disrespected and abused', and 'we are treated like animals'. Amer, another member of the Union, very clearly expressed the view that there was nothing positive that united the akhdam: 'We don't have anything to be proud of or to commemorate'. These words, articulating what many ordinary slum dwellers also hinted at, attest to the fact that the marginalized do not ask for rights to protect their 'essence', revive their culture, or simply thrive as the 'akhdam'. Rather, what they hope for is to stop being akhdam, demanding social equality rather than the right to difference.

*The Trade Union of Sanitation Workers:<sup>35</sup> claiming labour rights*

Speaking as certain types of subjects, or articulating particular claims to advance a group's interests, may sometimes have consequences other than those intended. For example, to return to the previously-mentioned example of the Dalits' self-liberatory efforts, Rao (2009) demonstrates how their successful strategy to recast the community and receive recognition came with its own limitations. Rao shows that granting the Dalits legal protection also gave rise to new forms of subaltern vulnerability and violence against them. The caste and discrimination have not disappeared, but rather have been strengthened by legal-bureaucratic means that claim to protect the 'exceptional subject' and as such, reproduce 'vulnerability as the condition

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They also explicitly admitted that demanding rights merely as 'the poor' was not an efficient strategy. I discuss the issues of framing in Chapter 7.

<sup>35</sup> The registered name of the Trade Union is 'National Trade Union of Municipality and Housing Workers'; however, more commonly, the organization is referred to as the 'Sanitation Workers Trade Union', or 'Trade Union of Street Cleaners', or simply Workers' Union.

of possibility for continued protection and legal recognition' (Rao 2009:26). In other words, those who had been formally recognized and entitled to rights were not necessarily acknowledged as equal citizens. Rao's findings correspond with Spivak (1987) and others, who claim that the asserting of collective identities by marginalized groups on the basis of vulnerability may in fact have a reifying effect whereby subordination, rather than being alleviated, becomes reinforced as a group's defining trait. Interestingly, similar concerns are raised among those stigmatized as the 'akhdam', and in this light, the recent efforts of the National Union to demand collective rights and recognition as vulnerable citizens have been met with criticism, in particular from the Sanitation Workers Trade Union.

After one of Hudeithi's speeches during the NDC - when the activist appeared before the audience wearing a green uniform commonly associated with street cleaners, and spoke about the plight of sanitation workers - the head of the Workers' Union, Mohamed Marzouqi, protested. Marzouqi publicly criticized the chair of the National Union, accusing him of appropriating the workers' issue for his own purposes and causing damage to their struggle. Speaking to me, Marzouqi explained his reaction as follows: 'I was upset with him [Noman Hudeithi] because he does not represent us! He only talks about the "akhdam", and we refuse to be called that. We are not a minority in this country, and we do not want any special rights. We just want rights as citizens and workers'. Marzouqi further complained that Hudeithi used labels such as 'akhdam' and 'muhamasheen' as buzzwords to receive support and funding, and defined his approach as 'begging for sympathy'.<sup>36</sup> The head of the Sanitation Workers referred to Hudeithi's international activism and participation in human rights conferences and symposia, arguing that it made him distant from his own constituency, to whom he no longer listened. For Marzouqi, there was no doubt that the problem of marginalization existed in Yemen, but he regarded the National Union's diagnoses of the situation and the framing deployed not only as misleading, but also potentially harmful.

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<sup>36</sup> Another syndicalist argued that Hudeithi's deployment of the word 'akhdam' was shameful, as it 'speaks the language of racism, rather than speaking against it'. In general, members of the Trade Union believe that the derogatory label of 'akhdam' must be banned, rather than appropriated by people, as it reinforces the stigma and marginalization.

The informal beginnings of the Sanitation Workers Union go back to 1991, but it was only on 21 July 2007 that their activities were formalized and the 'National Trade Union of Municipality and Housing Workers' was established. The Workers' Union has been led from the very beginning by Mohamed Ali al-Marzouqi, an activist who originally comes from the Zabid region, and who is tightly connected to the residents of the Samsara compound in Sana'a. In Marzouqi's own words, the union functions as a 'labour rights organization' and 'represents sanitation and municipality workers across Yemen'. However, as the majority of workers in this sector traditionally come from the akhdam category, and as the word *muhamasheen* is often seen as a synonym of 'street sweepers' or 'municipality workers', the Workers' Union is known as representing the interests of the marginalized.

Sanitation workers have historically been a rare example of an 'organized movement among the akhdam' (Walters 1987:258). Walters, who conducted anthropological fieldwork in Yemen between 1982 and 1984, concluded that the majority of the akhdam at that time were either 'pre-political' or 'a-political', and did little to overtly challenge their subordinate position. Sanitation workers who managed to collectively mobilize to demand higher wages were an exception, Walters argued. Similarly today, the level of mobilization of street cleaners organized around the trade union is higher than that of other akhdam. This can be partially explained by the fact that while in general, the grievances of the urban poor are easily dismissed, sanitation workers, who provide services crucial to the functioning of the country, have more bargaining power. Ironically then, if garbage is the curse of sanitation workers (for the stigma it carries) it is also, in the words of one of the union members, their 'weapon'.<sup>37</sup> Heidar Sweid explained this to me with the following words: 'Cleaning streets is an important task; when we stop, cities flood with garbage and are paralyzed; nothing functions normally. This is our advantage'. Moreover, acting as a trade union, the workers enjoy the support of other labour organizations. For example, the Yemeni General Labour Union on many occasions expressed their concern for the street cleaners' plight, and during the nationwide strike in May 2010, they demanded, among other things, the recognition of sanitation workers' full rights.

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<sup>37</sup> Quoted in A. Alwazir, 'Garbage Collectors and the Struggle for Workers' Rights in Yemen', <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/5788/garbage-collectors-and-the-struggle-for-workers-ri> June 1st, 2012 last accessed 10 December 2014

The denial of rights to sanitation workers has two interlinked root causes, according to the trade union. First, as Marzouqi put it, '[t]here is institutional discrimination against street cleaners, whether they are white or black'. Others who engage in menial occupations such as garbage collection suffer from the same stigma. Working in dirty conditions is seen as undignified, and those who carry it out enjoy little respect in society. The stigma then, contrary to Hudeithi's interpretation, in this case belongs to the occupation rather than the race. Furthermore, the trade unionists trace back the persistent marginalization of the street sweepers to neoliberal changes in the Yemeni economy, and more precisely to the process of deregulation that has, they claim, been affecting municipality workers continuously since 1993. As street cleaners are perceived as being of lesser worth, Marzouqi claimed, these harmful reforms have been implemented in the sanitation sector without any limits, stripping the workers of both protection and dignity. Despite the fact that the workers are employed by the State, they have no contracts, and work on a daily wage basis (*al-ajr al-yawmi*). This means, among other things, that they lack security, have no insurance, are granted only one day off per week, and can be arbitrarily fired or have their salaries cut.

While the National Union for the Poor speaks on behalf of a vulnerable minority, the workers' claims are narrowed down to calls for labour rights. What they ask for is not necessarily access to other jobs, but rather the removal of the stigma from their occupation, and the recognition of its worth. As Sweid put it: 'The government must appreciate us as workers, and let us do our jobs with dignity. We must be offered fair treatment, protection, and an increase in wages and overtime payments (...)'. Another member of the union told me: 'We don't want charity (*sadaqa*), we just want our rights', inferring that 'charity' was what Hudeithi and others expected by articulating their claims as the 'akhdam'.

This particular framing of sanitation workers and the mantra of rights also serves another purpose: it sends a message that workers' claims are not political and do not target the overall political system. While depoliticisation is often discussed in the literature as a consequence and condition of rights-based claims (Harvey 2009, Douzinas 2007), here 'depoliticisation' of the issue is strategically deployed. For example, during the popular protests in 2011, the workers

were highly visible on the streets, but were not necessarily joining with the opposition. As the workers recall, they were both in Tahrir Square where pro-regime supporters gathered, and in University Square, which was occupied by the youth and other forces calling for the regime's change. In Marzouqi's own account of those days, the sanitation workers cleaned both squares to show that they served the country, and were willing to cooperate with both the opposition and the regime, as theirs were not political demands: 'We are in revolution all the time. It is not for regime change (...) we only ask for our rights'.

Street cleaners, coordinated on the national level since 1993, have deployed various means - from issuing public statements to strikes - to demand, among other things, fixed, full-time contracts (*tathbeet*), health benefits, and days off. Between 2010 and 2012, street cleaners engaged in a series of country-wide strikes, joining the larger efforts of labour activism in Yemen.<sup>38</sup> As in the National Union's case, the hopes and opportunities given by the transitional period encouraged workers to exercise increased pressure on the authorities, with the peak of their mobilization unfolding between February and April 2012. As a result of their prolonged efforts, on 12 April 2012, Prime Minister Mohammed Basindawa passed a decree granting sanitation workers permanent contracts and employment rights, health benefits, and days off. This success should of course be read with caution. On the one hand, Marzouqi claimed that even if the implementation of the decree was slow, it did happen: according to him, the majority of workers have benefited from new medical coverage, and so far (up to August 2013), 3,200 workers had received permanent contracts. On the other hand, this mild optimism was not shared by the street cleaners in Sana'a with whom I talked in summer 2013. While my survey was not in any way exhaustive, the workers unanimously claimed that besides receiving one day off per week (something that had already been granted before Basindawa's recent declaration), they had not witnessed any other changes in their working conditions. Among the total of thirty workers I talked to, none of them received medical insurance, benefits or regular employment.

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<sup>38</sup> Atiaf Alwazir, 2012, *ibid*.



#### 5.4 Displacing the political: Civil society activism

The earlier-quoted declaration by Marzouqi that the workers' struggle is not political, and the firm assurance by the sheikh of Dar Salm that there is nothing political about the activities in the slum, are in fact oft-repeated statements by the marginalized who distance themselves from politics. My research participants assured me that politics belonged to corrupt elites and political parties, and served only their interests. Even if changes or reforms were carried out, their profits were limited to narrow circles of the powerful, while the poor did not benefit from them. The slum dwellers also complained that they would be regularly approached before elections by politicians who promised to advocate for their cause or improve their housing situation. The marginalized referred to these promises as '*kalam fadi*' - empty words, with which politicians hoped to buy the akhdam's votes, without ever delivering on any of them. 'We don't like politics. We are peaceful citizens and we don't like troubles. We just want our rights', many activists, slum dwellers and sanitation workers argued, implying that they only asked for what was theirs ('our rights'), and that there was nothing contentious about their demands.

How people understand and experience politics, and what hopes or scepticism they assign to it, is shaped in particular cultural contexts where meanings are produced, maintained and contested (Weeden 2002, Bourdieu 1977). The akhdam's understanding of politics as belonging to the elites and not to them could probably be seen as the result of a closed-off political system to which only established actors and political parties had access. However, this reading should be revisited in light of the allegedly 'transformative events' (McAdam, Sewell 2001) of 2011 that challenged the long-established political order in Yemen and brought to the fore the power of ordinary people. Thousands of Yemenis from all backgrounds, sects and classes took to the streets in January 2011 to protest against the economic hardship, and eventually to demand an end to President Ali Abdullah Saleh's rule. Like in others countries of the so-called Arab Spring, the moment was described as historic, revealing - for western audiences - the agency of Arabs, and refuting the idea of their passive consent to the authoritarian rule. Ordinary people, at least for the short moment of the protests, believed that they had a saying in shaping the future of their own country, and that their acts could be as powerful as those of

the elites. In the end it was their pressure that resulted in Saleh's stepping down. Why then, despite this substantial wave of mobilization of vast segments of society, were the akhdam in Sana'a less enthused about the developments in Yemen and rarely joined the protests? Eckert (2015) rightly remarks that the urban poor often keep their distance from social movements, as they do not wish to be limited by the movements' political worldviews. In the context of the Arab Spring, Achilli (2014) also poses questions about the political disengagement of Palestinian refugees inhabiting the al-Wihadat camp in Jordan. In order to explain their lack of political participation, Achilli draws on Carl Schmitt's definition of the political as manifested through a 'friend/enemy distinction' ('we' vs 'they'). According to Achilli, the refugees who are loyal to the Palestinian nationalist struggle, but who also as citizens seek integration into Jordanian society and its economy, avoid expressing oppositional subjectivities and negotiate their complex positionality as both refugees and citizens through the pursuit of ordinary lives.

While these observations are insightful, here I seek to advance another explanation. When I talked with the slum dwellers about the so-called Arab Spring in winter 2012, many retrospectively mentioned the violence on the streets, the ambiguity of claims, and their fear of chaos as reasons for their being - as Ali Abdullah, a youth activist from the Samsara compound put it - 'for change, but not for revolution'. In an informal conversation that we had in December 2012, activists from Samsara speculated that the main reason for people's reluctance towards the protest events was probably the fact that many akhdam were loyal to President Ali Abdullah Saleh, and some were affiliated with al-Mu'tamar (the General People's Congress), which back then was the ruling party. Furthermore, the National Union for the Poor was largely funded by the Mu'tamar party, and did not want to risk losing what it saw as its valuable ally and sponsor. Indeed, the majority of my research participants would express sympathy for the ex-president, and several others admitted that they were openly discouraged from participating in the demonstrations by the sheikhs or members of the National Union. *Aqel* Salim, the oldest resident of the Samsara compound, observed that the akhdam had always been kept at the margins of political processes, and hence, whether they engaged in the revolution or not was of little importance. Salim referred to the historic events of the 1960s, when the akhdam joined the republican forces to fight against the imam. Despite their heroic

sacrifices, the akhdam's role had never been officially acknowledged or mentioned in history books, something which, according to the *aqel*, taught the people a lesson to stay away from the fights and battles of others.

When I asked how it might be possible to change the plight of the marginalized, if neither protests nor politics worked in their favour, Ali Abdullah responded: 'What we can do is to start with us (...) improve ourselves, get education, get empowered. Only then will change come for us'. Ali, a 'lawyer and civil society activist', as he presented himself, wearing a suit and speaking literary Arabic, went on to explain to me how he envisaged change. 'We're part of the problem, so we must be part of the solution', Ali said, arguing that it was up to the marginalized to change their attitudes and their image in society. Others nodded in agreement. Aqel Salim, for example, stated that the change was already under way through the work of organizations like his own NGO, *Omr wa Oqbi*, which focused on education and youth projects. Salim proudly declared that Samsara residents distinguished themselves from other akhdam communities as 'the most active members of civil society', and he went on to describe in detail the achievements of *Omr wa Oqbi* that had brought improvements to the community's life. For a moment, these men gathered in a small room seemed to have forgotten about the structural obstacles that the akhdam faced, the fact that Sana'a was 'built of walls' as Ali Abdullah had told me earlier, or that the akhdam struggled to get jobs other than menial ones. The vision spelled out by them was clear: it was development and self-empowerment, not 'dirty politics', that offered a solution to the poverty and stigmatization of the *muhamasheen*.

This perspective, in which transformative power is assigned to individuals, is very different from that of the top-down change discussed in previous sections, where the akhdam, neglected by the state, plead to be noticed and governed. While it may seem difficult to reconcile the two, in reality they may be perceived as complementary: it is up to the state to protect the akhdam's rights and end their marginalization; but in light of the state's weakness, corruption and malevolence, the akhdam need to resort to the opportunities provided by civil society, and through self-development, empowerment and education become 'part of the solution', as Ali Abdullah described it.

### *NGOization of Yemen*

The narrative of individual agency and bypassing the failed state is not unique to the marginalized, but rather is an oft-repeated mantra in Yemen. In fact, it can be seen as paradigmatic of two parallel processes that have unfolded in the Middle East, including in Yemen among others, since the 1980s.

The first process, headed by international financial institutions, sought to reshape the previously state-centred Arab economies. Guided by strict instructions from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, Arab governments started to gradually embrace the neoliberal ideology, introducing 'cutbacks to social spending, privatisation of land and other state assets, labour market deregulation, financial and trade liberalisation, and so forth' (Hanieh 2015). The role of the state was no longer to provide employment opportunities and social welfare, but rather to protect the unrestricted flow of capital and the growth of the private sector. Many scholars of the Middle East describe in detail how cuts in public employment and spending, and expanding privatization, led to a growth in unemployment and an informalization of labour (Bayat 2012, Ismail 2006). For ordinary people in Yemen, like elsewhere, economic reforms often meant an end to subsidies on food and fuel, higher costs of living, and limited access to healthcare and education (de Regt 2008:160, Seif 2003). Unsurprisingly then, the economic transformation of the Arab world most harshly affected the poor and the vulnerable, while simultaneously giving rise to new wealthy elites.

The economic restructuring of the region as described above was accompanied by an influx of funding to the realm of civil society, as part of the joint efforts of the United States and other Western governments and NGOs to spread democracy in the Middle East (Massad 2015, Chandler 2001, Spivak 2004, Abu Lughod 2013). Besides military interventions, this also encompassed human rights and development organizations that were designated as agents of social change on the ground, dedicated to 'promoting democracy' through various projects and workshops (Carapico 2002). Both domestic and international organizations, which had been proliferating in the region on a massive scale since the 1990s, took up many of the

responsibilities of the shrinking state (Bayat 2012). For example, the redistribution of goods, healthcare and education have often been provided by civil society organizations, offering citizens what the state cannot. While some argue that civil society organizations in the Middle East have created spaces of dissent and expression independent of the authoritarian state, other scholars offer more critical accounts. Some of the issues most often raised are the problem of depoliticization, weakening of social movements, elitism, and accountability towards donors rather than local communities (Challand 2006;, Allen 2013; Massad 2007; Carapico 2014; Abdelrahman 2004). For example, drawing on research in Egypt and Palestine, Sheila Carapico, a renowned scholar of civic activism in the Middle East, observes that civil society programs do not influence either national politics or local grassroots activism, but rather are confined to the 'level of elite advocacy' (2014:163). Criticisms of the politics of NGOs of course go beyond the Middle East region. James Petras (1999) argues that NGOs working in the Global South and linked to the western capital have become vehicles for well-paid careers and self-realization for individuals. The politics they promote is that of 'survival strategies', rather than contentious politics calling for radical change. In a similar vein, Arundhati Roy coined the famous term 'NGOization of resistance', referring to the process whereby NGOs accountable to western governments and donors depoliticize grassroots activism and turn it into 'a well-mannered, reasonable, salaried, 9-to-5 job' (2004:46).

Since the 1990s, Yemen has witnessed an ever-growing number of NGOs working in the fields of charity, development, human rights, women's empowerment and social work (Bonney and Poirier 2009:11). While in 2008 there were approximately 5,000 NGOs registered with the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour (Bonney and Poirier *ibid.*), in 2013 their number exceeded 13,000, with the most significant growth having occurred since 2011.<sup>39</sup> These non-governmental organizations undertake responsibilities and provide services previously associated with the state, contributing to the widely held perception in Yemen that the state is weak, inefficient and unreliable. In light of the state's systemic neglect of the *akhdam*, their issue has unsurprisingly been co-opted by the civil society sector. According to Noman Hudeithi,

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<sup>39</sup> Ali Ibrahim al-Moshki, 'World Bank approves \$8 million grant to civil society organizations', [http://www.yementimes.com/en/1761/news/3562/World-Bank-approves-\\$8-million-grant-to-civil-society-organizations.htm](http://www.yementimes.com/en/1761/news/3562/World-Bank-approves-$8-million-grant-to-civil-society-organizations.htm) (6 March 2014) *Yemen Times*. Last accessed 29.10.2015

the vast majority of the 13,000 NGOs registered in Yemen have the *muhamasheen* on their agendas.

### *Self-empowerment and its limits*

In addition to the work of others, the *muhamasheen* form their own associations, ranging from advocacy organizations combatting discrimination and racism to youth and women's empowerment initiatives. Strikingly, these are the NGOs run by the marginalized (like the National Union for the Poor or the All Youth Network, discussed in Chapter 7) rather than social movements or political parties that represent the group and claim rights on its behalf.

Many akhdam repeated to me that building civil society in Yemen was the only way to weaken the tribal structures that are unfavourable to them, and uplift the country from what they regarded as its 'backwardness' (*takhaluf*). My interlocutors understood 'civil society' (*mujtama' al-madani*) as an apolitical field of citizens' activism, articulated mainly through NGOs, that served all Yemenis, independent of their background and political affiliations. Noman Hudeithi argued that in order to build a truly democratic system, civil society was needed to replace the tribal and sectarian order prevalent in Yemen, where political parties only protected those of 'their own kin'. Hudeithi claimed that the akhdam were by their nature a major force of civil society, as according to him, they were more open-minded than other Yemenis, did not share their tribal thinking, and were not exclusive, but rather were willing to collaborate with everyone. 'We're more like Europeans', Hudeithi liked to say.

For many of my research participants, civil society is a rare field where funds are potentially available to them, and where they can pursue careers other than those offered by the municipality. But this is also the realm, as many emphasized, where very visible improvements can be sought. Unlike politics, regarded by them as distant and bringing little change, the civil society sector, with its pragmatic approach addressing concrete needs, is a realm of activism whose impact is both tangible and measureable. Organizations such as Omr wa Oqbi deliver material improvements to the akhdam's lives, and also teach skills, raise awareness, and

develop new habits and attitudes. Members of Omr wa Oqbi described their achievements in detail, claiming for example that due to their efforts, the number of akhdam students enrolled in Sana'a University had increased, and the number of children dropping out of school early had gone down.

However, the akhdam's non-governmental organizations function in a fragile environment, heavily dependent on allies, donors and the funds which they manage - or fail, as the case may be - to secure. This is why, during my fieldwork, some of the NGOs had their offices shut; others existed largely on paper, or spent their time applying for funding. There was a shared sense among the activists I talked to that money was difficult to access, and in order to be successful, the knowledge of procedures and particular framing was crucial (as Ali Abdullah put it, 'You need to know the password'). Because of their reliance on more powerful and resourceful actors, the akhdam activists made sure to remain apolitical and narrow down their quests for justice to consensual issues. The trajectory of 'Omr wa Oqbi provides a good illustration of the ambiguous relationship between the akhdam NGOs and their donors.

The beginnings of the organization go back to early 1990s when, as its founder Ali Abdullah Said recalled, the words 'development' and 'empowerment' were on everybody's lips, and foreign organizations were eager to fund civil society projects. It was at this time that Ali, with the financial assistance of Oxfam, carried out a project in two villages - Omr and Oqbi - in his home region of Zabid. Encouraged by its success, and with an awareness of the new opportunities offered by the influx of foreign money, Ali registered the association with the Ministry of Labour in 1996. It was the first organization for the marginalized in Yemen, after which many have followed. While for many years Omr wa Oqbi was successful in attracting money for its initiatives, the activists complained that in recent years donors had either withdrawn from Yemen or switched their interests to other causes. To illustrate the problem, Ali pointed to the unfinished renovation works in the Samsara compound. Throughout the decade of the 2000s, the organization received funding from foreign embassies and international organizations to renovate the buildings and improve the living conditions. Collapsing ceilings were repaired, and nine new toilets were built. Residents also renovated rooms, and bought a shared washing

machine and refrigerators. For a while, the improvements were praised as a ‘successful model’, proving that the marginalized could take care of their own places of residence if given the support. A short film documenting the works and life in Samsara was shot and circulated on YouTube, revealing the people’s self-reliance and determination. In recent years, however, the story lost its resonance, and activists did not manage to secure the further funding necessary to finish the works. Because of the organization’s financial constraints, although members of Omr wa Oqbi remained active, they had turned to other forms of engagements: Ali, for example, had been involved in trade union activism, and Ali Abdullah hoped to become a lawyer.

This account reveals that the akhdam’s turn towards development projects and away from politics is not ahistorical or stemming from subaltern habitus, but rather is attuned to the wider context. This becomes clear in the case of the previously discussed National Union for the Poor, born, like other organizations, out of the ‘NGOization’ process. The Union, which today deploys overtly political language and tactics, had until recently distanced itself from politics, focusing on ‘integration’, ‘sustainable development’ and fighting illiteracy, in cooperation with ‘local, regional and international partners’.<sup>40</sup> The Union was established with the generous financial assistance of the World Bank, and since then, Hudeithi told me, numerous activities of the organization have been funded by the United Nations Development Programme, international NGOs, and foreign embassies (in addition to the General People’s Congress party). When I met an activist from the Union for the first time in 2010, I was told that the organization was designed as an apolitical body, and was not interested in politics that was unlikely to empower the akhdam. The recent attempts to join institutional politics should not be read as a reflection of the activists’ metamorphosis, but rather as a pragmatic response to developments in Yemen that allowed for an expansion of their repertoire of action.<sup>41</sup> As Hudeithi, responding to my question about the changes in the National Union’s strategy, put it: ‘we haven’t changed, but Yemen is changing’.

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<sup>40</sup> For the whole ‘manifesto’ of the Union, see: <http://www.mohammash-ye.net/content.php?id=5> (last accessed 9.12.2015)

<sup>41</sup> In the interview conducted on 24 July 2013, Hudeithi explained in detail that the National Union was not planning to abandon its previous activities, but intended to continue working towards the development and expansion of civil society in Yemen with the help of international partners such as UNDP.



## 5.5 Conclusion

The 'continuum of violence' (Scheper-Hughes, Bourgois 2004) that marks the lives of the akhdam in Sana'a (ranging from cultural stigmatization to material dispossession and bodily suffering) translates into a continuum of struggles. Whether through quotidian practices of getting by, engagements with the state through various means, or the NGOs' strategies of 'empowerment' and 'self-improvement', the Yemeni marginalized tirelessly seek a more 'livable life'. As their efforts stem forcefully from the needs of life, they should not be judged against the spectrum of contention/compliance (Mahmood 2005).

The thread that seems to be running through the various examples - from daily struggles to individual petitions, collective protests, or finally efforts to join institutional politics - is the akhdam's striking sense of having been abandoned, and hence allowed to suffer. This is clearly epitomized by the slum dwellers whose deaths are not mourned, and others who seem to be forgotten in their relegated spaces, but also by the activists who ask for labour rights, or - as in the case of the National Union for the Poor - for protective measures and recognition of the group's historical suffering. Notwithstanding some differences, they all call on the state to 'intervene' (whether through welfare programs or through new legislation) so that the marginalized are no longer left to themselves. Thus, the state emerges here not so much as an opponent, but rather as a saviour, whose attention, protection and succour the subaltern seek.

Parallel to these efforts are the engagements of the marginalized in the civil society sector in Yemen, where the vision of change is articulated through the language of individual agency, self-empowerment and development. Seeking tangible solutions and the attention of donors (rather than that of the state), this form of activism feeds into the belief that the problem of marginalization can be solved through entrepreneurial initiatives and a set of professional programs and trainings.

In the extensive literature on the political landscape of the Middle East, studies on popular politics and 'civil society' rarely speak to each other (for a positive exception, see Carapico

2007). For example, the recent examinations of waves of protest and subaltern mobilization (Ismail 2013; Chalcraft 2014; Achcar 2012) stand in clear opposition to the previously dominant approach whereby the democratization process has been viewed through the prism of formal institutions and organized civil society actors. Looking from these two perspectives, the realms of civil society organizations and popular mobilizations seem to be occupied by different actors, driven by different logics and goals.

The case of the akhdam reveals, however, that the various arenas of activism are neither strictly separated nor conflicting. The National Union for the Marginalized, for example, provides a good illustration of how the boundaries between them are porous and not fixed, and turning to one or the other is highly contingent on opportunities. In other words, akhdam actors navigate between different fields of engagements, or move from one to another, not necessarily because of competing ideological stances, but rather depending on their perceptions of what is possible and beneficial. And these, as the chapter has attempted to show, do not exist beyond time and context, but constantly evolve, responding to internal debates as much as external developments. It is important then, as social movement scholars have suggested, to include the dimension of time and temporality in the study of collective action. Authors in the field of contentious politics have shown, for example, that the goals and framing of movements, as well as their perceptions of opportunities and constraints, change in time (McAdam, Sewell 2001; Bosi 2006; Kurzman 2012). Small 'vagaries of the moment' (Kurzman 2012) as well as big 'transformative events', whose potential lies in 'disrupting, altering, or violating the taken-for-granted assumption governing routine political and social relations' (McAdam, Sewell 2001:110), are all important elements of the analysis. Such a perspective can help to explain, for example, the tendency of the akhdam to stay away from politics in favour of exploiting opportunities given by the space and money of the civil society sector, but also their recent attempts to join the mainstream political process.

## **6. Righteous Actors/ Rightful Struggles: Comparative reflection**

The two empirical chapters have shed light on the struggles of subaltern actors, who in the face of systemic marginalisation undertake concerted efforts to live dignified lives. Whether they deal silently with daily hardships, or decry injustice and publicly express grievances and claims, their polysemic struggles cannot be easily reduced to dichotomous readings of consent versus resistance, or individual versus collective action. Rather the two logics guiding subaltern engagements- that of practices and articulation- reveal the continuum of subalterns' needs, motives and aspirations, which exist in mutual relation and not in false opposition. This analytical distinction is not an attempt to introduce another pair of binary categories, but rather aims to open up space for various forms of subaltern expression and politics that are otherwise ambiguous and often written out of scholarly accounts. By doing so, I hope to do justice to the complexity of subaltern efforts, but also importantly to various experiences of vulnerability, which are both symbolic and material, shaping subaltern's 'conditions of life' (Das,

Randeria 2015: S4). As chapters 4 and 5 have shown, paying attention to life trajectories, context, and time is necessary if we are to understand subaltern politics, its possibilities and limits. Such a perspective allows us to acknowledge, for example, how, from the perspective of the subaltern, the various fields of engagements- civil society, formal politics or protest- are not necessarily exclusive or conflicting. Rather, as we have seen, the marginalized navigate between their permeable boundaries, each time assessing the opportunities and calculating the possible gains. Being attuned to and responding to the changing environment in which they are embedded, the subaltern actors are far from being passive, and their engagements are not in any way static.

On the surface, the struggles of the Bedouin in Israel and the akhdam in Yemen, have very little in common. In many aspects their respective hopes and goals stand at opposite sides of the spectrum. For example, while many Bedouin articulate their 'sense of place' (Agnew 1987), as being rooted in villages where they wish to remain, the akhdam typically express a sense of detachment from their habitations that they hope to leave. While the Bedouin seek autonomy from the state, claiming their right to choose places of residence and lifestyle, the akhdam express the sense of being neglected and ask for the state's support and protection. Unlike the Naqab Bedouin who seek to be recognised as 'different', and maintain their particular culture, the akhdam in Yemen fight for distinctions to be erased, and to be recognised as part of Yemeni society and culture. While many Bedouin complain about the state's control and surveillance, the akhdam typically complain about the state's absence. And while the Bedouin cultivate their memories and narrate the past, the akhdam confess they have little to 'be proud of or to commemorate', as one of my interlocutors put it.

The very different concerns of the subaltern in the two cases come as little surprise if we bear in mind the specificity of both groups, who are subjected to different forms of vulnerability. It is worth recalling that the variation in visions, goals and tactics, is also contingent on different contexts and histories of respective struggles, laying the ground for particular conditions of possibility for the two groups. The Bedouin issue has been an object of political debate in Israel for decades, and has been on the agenda of NGOs and the Israeli-left since the early 1990's. The Naqab Bedouin have also been embedded in the larger Palestinian movement, especially in

recent years, and this gave impetus to their efforts and gave rise to new self-representations. While for many villagers their struggles are part of the everyday, and constitute pragmatic or affective moves to improve their lives, rather than intentionally political ones, there is a large number of grassroots activists, as well as scholars, organic intellectuals and politicians who have taken the Bedouin's efforts to a more overtly political level. For example, the recent 'Prayer Will Not Pass' Campaign, which is discussed in the second part of this thesis, sparked a large-scale mobilisation that united diverse actors, from within and outside the Bedouin community.

The akhdam in Yemen are rarely perceived as political actors, or people who know what they need or make decisions for themselves. Their plight is largely neglected by the state, and political parties have only shown an interest in the marginalised in the periods preceding elections. Co-opted by civil society, the akhdam are treated as objects of charity, who passively accept, if not choose, their own plight. Lacking friendly allies, and living in the most precarious conditions and extreme poverty renders the mobilization of the akhdam additionally challenging. The marginalised are well aware that their acts afford them little leverage, and that few hear their claims or responded to them. As many of my research participants have pointed out, it is not the repression but the silence surrounding them that render their efforts to speak out futile.

As I have sought to show in chapters 4 and 5, the generalisations about the two groups and their aims, should be problematized and not taken for granted. As Nancy Fraser (2000:112) has argued, playing on homogenized identities disguises power relations and divisions within a group, does not allow for articulations of difference, dissent or other possible belongings. I have therefore tried to shed light on competing narratives circulating within the groups, to critically reflect on voices and representations that come to the fore, as well as those that are silenced, or ignored. The Bedouin's claims, for example, are most audible when articulated through the cultural rights framework, and other ways of speaking are often deemed as non-authentic or backward (often by the Bedouin activists themselves). Similarly in the case of the akhdam, there are multiple visions and hopes that cannot be reduced to one singular 'akhdam voice'. I return to these issues in the second part of the thesis, when I explore larger dynamics that

render certain representations more resonant than others, and assign to subaltern groups particular traits as their essence.

However, even if we take into account not only the striking differences between the Bedouin and the akhdam, but also the lines cutting across the two groups, there is something that brings subaltern actors and their struggles together. What emerges clearly from the accounts recounted throughout the two chapters, is the fact that the marginalised are in no way blinded to the injustices they face but also to the dubious motives of those who speak on their behalf, or seek to empower them. Both the Bedouin and the akhdam know the reasons for their subordination, and the state's plans for them. They are sceptical of politicians who exploit their cause for their own interests; of NGOs and activists and the change they can bring; and of their own representative bodies, who easily forget about their social base. These critical perspectives have to be seen as more than displays of resentment of the poor, or envy towards those who manage better. Rather they attest to the subaltern's clear and nuanced reading of the structural violence that affects their lives, whether through systemic neglect, exploitation, dispossession, cultural stigmatization or any other form. It is on that basis that the subaltern project their various struggles as legitimate, or righteous and rightful as I call them here.

O'Brien (1996) deploys the term 'rightful resistance' to describe protesters' strategic deployment of the state's laws and rhetoric as a means of legitimizing their claims and framing them as coherent with, rather than in opposition to, dominant values. 'Rightful resisters' do not challenge the legitimacy of the political order; they act within the existing legal and normative framework and call on the rulers to deliver what they officially claim to represent and promote. The exploitation of law by the urban poor to advance or protect their interests has been documented in the literature. Studies of James Holston (2008), or Julia Eckert (2006) illustrate how those who live informal lives or engage in illegal activities often turn to formal legal means and claim official rights. Similarly, the subaltern, in particular in the case of the Bedouin, use the opportunities afforded by the legal system, and with the help of NGO's submit petitions or appeal to courts. However, what interests me, beyond the tactical deployment of rights, are their affective and discursive dimensions. In my view these refer first to the sense of righteousness that the subaltern articulate, and second to the recourse to the rights-talk.

The akhdam and the Bedouin, who are neglected, discriminated against, or deprived of amenities that others take for granted, often project their multiple struggles to make life possible as the 'right thing to do'. The poor engaged in mundane practices to better their lives—whether in the form of illegal appropriations or self-help initiatives—perceive them as practical and legitimate, and the only available responses to the conditions they are forced to live in. This resonates strongly with Bayat's (2000:547) observation that the 'necessity', from which the subaltern actions stem 'justifies their often unlawful acts as moral and even "natural" ways to maintain a life with dignity'. The words of the Sana'a slum dwellers - 'this is life', and 'what can we do?' - point to this forcefully. These expressions normalise people's quotidian practices as non-choice activities, to which life pushes them and to which they are entitled in the face of their misery and deprivation. People explained it as follows: 'everybody needs housing, water and electricity to live. If you don't get it, you must arrange it yourself...', or 'if you were in our situation you would be the same'. Statements like these express the sense of righteousness of people whose needs and rights are not protected, and hence who have no choice but to deal with daily burdens themselves. The very similar words echoed across the Bedouin villages, valorising people's efforts to make their places habitable, as normal (*'adi*) and necessary to maintain normal lives.

However there is more to the subaltern's sense of righteousness than the mere 'necessity' that drives and explains their mundane acts. There is also a shared sense among the akhdam and the Bedouin that they have a 'right' to violate unfair rules and regulations to meet their daily needs because they are treated differently than other citizens, and because their own rights are violated. Thus, despite the fact that some of the subaltern's acts and appropriations could be regarded as illegal, the residents claimed that thinking in terms of law-breaking was not appropriate to describe their practices.

For example, the akhdam argued that in Yemen law was an empty category not respected by any segments of society, especially the rich. But it is not only the dismissal of the law that justified their activities. On the contrary, many of my research participants referred to the constitution and their citizenship status as a means of emphasizing that they were being deprived of what the law guaranteed to them. Acquiring water, or stealing building materials,

were not about excess, or leading extravagant lives, but about access to basics to which they were entitled as Yemeni citizens, and simply human beings, argued the slum dwellers. As such these daily transgressions were, from the akhdam's perspective, little controversial- they were rather, it could be argued, simple enactments of rights.

Similarly, the Bedouin from unrecognised villages translated their grievances into rights violations, which led to 'sense of entitlement' (Cornwell and Molyneux 2006:1189). Many referred to the state's laws that depicted them as illegal squatters and trespassers on state's land as 'nonsense' (*kalam fadi*). According to the villagers it was the state that acted unlawfully, for example in not delivering basic services, and did not provide the Bedouin with what was given unconditionally to everybody else. 'We only do what is allowed to others', said those who illegally, according to the authorities, built or expanded their houses. Many explicitly used the idiom of rights to justify their appropriations, such as Khalil from al-Sirra who recalled his efforts to obtain water for the village: 'I know maybe it's illegal, but people's rights are legal. They want to drink water, and they need to drink water. And if this is illegal I agree to be arrested (...). Shanon Speed (2008) writing about the Zapatistas struggles, describes their appropriation of rights through practice rather than legal framework as moments of 'exercising rights'. By creating their autonomous municipalities, and not seeking the state's recognition of them, the Zapatistas subvert the understanding of the state as the ultimate guarantor and provider of rights. To some extent this resonates with the experiences of the Bedouin who through their daily efforts maintain their settlements and lifestyle, caring little if they have the state's approval or not. In the face of the state's injustice and differentiated treatment, the Bedouin built, renovated their houses, accessed services and chose local governing bodies, and as such 'exercised the right' to choose where and how to live.

However, in the cases under study here, the subaltern not only act out their rights through daily practices, but also demand rights from the state through articulation of claims. 'We just want our rights' (*Bydna huquqna wa bas*), repeated the Bedouin; while the akhdam protesting after the killing of one of them cried out 'where are our rights?!' (*wein al-huquq haqqana?!*) Whether through protests, litigation, strikes, public statements or petitions, the subaltern ask, with different degrees of precision, for their rights to be delivered. These range from tangible rights



such as the right to water, adequate housing, and education, for example, to land rights, as in the case of the Bedouin for example, or the right to live free from discrimination, as the akhdam demanded. The idiom of rights was often deployed both by the Bedouin and the akhdam to emphasize that their struggle was legitimate, and not political or contentious.

In these instances of claim-making it comes to the fore that the subaltern act not only as the poor or, in Chatterjee's (2011) words 'populations', but as rights-bearing subjects: they aim to make life bearable, as much as they demand to be recognized as equal and worthy. Thus, from the perspective of the subaltern, their struggles are not so much about needs, special entitlements, exception or toleration, but about rights, which they simply enact through their practices, or urge the state, through different means, to deliver. The recourse to rights-talk annuls the liberal assumptions that the uneducated poor are not likely to ask for or even know their rights. For example the 2005 Arab Human Development Report prepared by the UNDP to evaluate the condition of women throughout the Arab world states explicitly that those lacking education can neither 'express themselves', nor have 'heard of their human rights'. This lack of knowledge, as the report concludes, 'erodes their very human status' (UNDP 2005: 119, quoted in Abu-Lughod, 2009: 88). Against these findings, the subaltern in this study, who are in the majority illiterate and have scant formal education, do 'express themselves', and deploy the language of rights to justify both their daily acts and to make claims on the state.

Of course, this is not the only way the subaltern speak, and idioms of religion, morality or more abstracts articulations of justice, are also deployed to justify people's claims or illustrate the wrongs of their current situation. I focus here on the idiom of rights however because of the wider implications it has for the subaltern struggles. Gaining rights consciousness and claiming rights are not hazardous developments taking place in a social vacuum. Among others, legal anthropologist Sally Engle Merry (2006, 2009) reveals how spreading rights talk and rights consciousness is mediated through the work of transnational networks, NGO's and middle class activists. Turning towards the language of rights is thus a result of larger processes, mediated and facilitated by, international institutions, human rights activists, NGOs, and a globally circulating set of values, which open up spaces for subaltern contestations and introduce new forms of political imaginations. I explore these dynamics in the chapters that follow.

## **PART II SUBALTERN GLOBAL ENCOUNTERS**

‘But how do we know it is genocide? Because we are told it is. This is why the battle for naming turns out to be all-important: Once Darfur is named as the site of genocide, people recognize something they have already seen elsewhere and conclude that what they know is enough to call for action.’ (Mamdani 2009:3)

Knowledge, as the words quoted above suggest, is socially constructed. The case of Darfur makes this evident, argues Mahmood Mamdani, showing how a place that was otherwise distant, little known and probably of little interest to the international public made its way into

the global consciousness as a site of 'genocide'. Recognized as such, the violence in Darfur triggered a mass solidarity movement (the Save Darfur Coalition) on an unprecedented scale, and an almost unanimous consensus around the international intervention. The war, presented largely as a battle between clearly defined sides of 'good' and 'bad', or perpetrators and victims, provoked the outrage of global citizens and political actors, ranging from ordinary people to Hollywood celebrities and politicians such as Hillary Clinton and George W. Bush. The words of George Clooney, one of several famous actors engaged in the movement, aptly encapsulate why an alliance to end the violence in Darfur gathered almost 200 organisations, and 'hundreds of thousands of activists'<sup>42</sup> worldwide: 'It is not a political issue. There is only right or wrong'.<sup>43</sup> Global solidarity is not, therefore, with Darfur as a lived place with a long history and messy politics, but with Darfur as we have come to know it - a site of genocide perpetrated by evil. Framed in this way, Darfur brings to mind certain images and the moral certainty of the indispensable 'rescue mission' (Mamdani 2009:67), turning it into a priority issue around which millions are obliged to mobilize. The politics of naming is therefore, as Mamdani argues, of vital importance.

Thinking along these lines, I aim to apply Mamdani's reasoning to the context of subaltern politics. While the first part of the thesis focused on subaltern struggles played out across local and domestic levels, in what follows I analyze subaltern efforts to tell their story to the world,<sup>44</sup> in order to become known, intelligible and recognized as deserving subjects. In other words, I look at how the akhdam in Yemen, and the Naqab Bedouin in Israel - both embedded in their specific histories and complicated political contexts, with limited mobility and scarce resources - seek to transform their grievances into internationally recognized issues worthy of support. More precisely, I ask:

How do the subaltern groups under our study reach transnational publics with a view to gaining

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<sup>42</sup> <http://savedarfur.org/about/history/> accessed 20 December 2015

<sup>43</sup> Quoted in Rachman, G. 'The aid crusade and Bono's Brigade', <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/7ebbdea0-8637-11dc-b00e-0000779fd2ac.html#axzz3qhKpyg56>, Financial Times (30 October 2007) accessed 20 December 2015

<sup>44</sup> During the fieldwork I realised that I was often perceived by my research subjects as a potential 'intermediary' between them and the outside world. Many explicitly expressed their hopes that I would transmit their stories, experiences and claims further afield. As such, I see myself as partially belonging to the 'international audiences', and regard particular narratives that were shared with me precisely as attempts to reach those wider audiences.

external backing and putting pressure on their respective governments? Through which idioms and representations, but moreover through which avenues and legal mechanisms, do they bring their causes before the world's eyes?

As I will show in the following chapters, despite similar strategies and languages deployed by the Bedouin and the akhdam, the two groups have received very different levels of attention and solidarity. While the Bedouin case has recently sparked the mobilization of activists around the globe, the akhdam remain largely unnoticed and ignored. Thinking comparatively then, it is worth asking, why do the 'human rights' of some deserve protection, while abuses in other cases provoke less outrage and little reaction?

Clifford Bob (2002;2005; 2009), asking a similar question, astutely observes that vulnerable groups are forced to compete for the world's 'attention, sympathy and money'; and, while some become internationally recognized, others, although no less worthy, remain invisible to larger publics. 'Global civil society', to whom groups and movements come with their struggles and causes, is not an 'open forum marked by altruism, but a harsh, Darwinian marketplace', according to Bob (2002). Thus, to 'sell' their causes, groups need to reframe their claims and turn seemingly parochial struggles into issues of global interest. In order to do so, they first need to make their causes noticed, but moreover must articulate their claims in broad terms, to resonate with those not familiar with their particular characteristics (Bob 2005;Tarrow 2005).

Especially in the case of subaltern actors from contexts little known to the wider public, the effort to bring their experiences and claims to the international scene necessitates a certain degree of 'translation'. The marginalized must engage in what Stuart Hall (1982) calls the 'politics of signification', through which they define their situation in a meaningful way, explain their cause, and show clearly what is at stake, to provoke the desired responses. This process of meaning construction has been thoroughly scrutinized by social movement scholars interested in the issue of framing (Gamson et al 1982;; Snow et al 1986; Snow and Benford 1988, 2000). Frames may be understood, following the work of Goffman, as 'schemata of interpretation' that 'render events or occurrences meaningful and thereby function to organize experience and guide action' (Snow and Benford 2000:614). They are directed not only at movement

supporters to mobilize them, but also at opponents and the general public who in this way are made aware of the relevance of the cause (Snow and Benford 1988). The ideas, slogans, and imageries, as well as tactics and practices, often spread across movements and are adopted in different contexts. Diffusion, as scholars observe, can happen either directly, through communication and interaction (della Porta; Diani 1999), or indirectly through, for example, powerful images circulating in media and on the Internet (Diani 2001). The adopted frames must then be readjusted to either local or global contexts, depending on the target audience. While the traditional literature on social movements has seen the national level as the primary context for contentious politics, more recent research has acknowledged the importance of the transnational setting and forms of activism cutting across borders (Tarrow 2005; della Porta, Tarrow 2004; Della Porta et al 2006). Here, social movement actors not only speak to their domestic supporters and opponents, but also reach out to 'external targets' (Tarrow 2005) for whom they must re-frame their claims in order to make them appealing and relevant. To be noticed by their potential external allies, they also need, as Tarrow points out, to actively seek their attention through raising awareness campaigns and the use of institutional channels. Tarrow (2005:143-161) defines these multiple efforts as 'externalization of claims'. Bob (2007) refers to a similar process of 'internationalization' of claims, often done when groups reframe their domestic grievances into global human rights issues.

While I am interested in the ways that the subaltern mark their presence in the transnational field of activism and human rights, and make their causes 'known' to new audiences, I am equally interested in how knowledge about them is produced, often not according to their own scripts. I remain aware that the subaltern's self-representations are not freely chosen, nor free-floating, and that, as many scholars observe, global understanding of critical issues is mostly mediated through the work of international governmental and non-governmental organizations, as well as transnational advocacy networks (Keck and Sikkink 1998; Sikkink 2011). How they want to be known, and how they come to be known may differ. Social movement scholars have additionally noted that the 'power of narratives' (Polletta et al. 2011:111) is not equally given to all, and not every group can get their message across (Polletta, Chen 2012). Moreover, as Bob (2009) warns, leaders of groups seeking to receive the world's

approval may be forced to depart from their initial claims and grassroots basis, and silence dissenting voices within the group. Building on this, in the following pages I shed light on the tangled nature of the subaltern presence within the transnational setting. To that effect, I describe how they speak and act to attract the attention of international audiences, and also how they are shaped by the workings of this transnational space - of which, as I will elaborate in the chapters, they are simultaneously wary and hopeful.

Transnational space is of course a vague concept and hence of little meaning - encompassing all sorts of cross-borders relations and a wide range of actors. Rather than examining in general how forces of globalization, the weakening of nation-state borders, or the spread of new social media affect subaltern emancipatory efforts, I narrow down my focus to the 'transnational human rights regime'. By 'human rights', I do not mean a set of declarations or a body of international law. In my conceptualization, I borrow from the legal anthropologist Mark Goodale, who defines a human rights regime as comprising 'human rights activists, international institutions acting across boundaries of nation-states, and human rights victims themselves, who increasingly look for ways to press claims outside the boundaries of national and international legal framework' (Goodale 2007:35). I am also inspired by the work of Lori Allen, who defines the 'human rights industry' as 'the complex of activities and institutions that function under the label human rights, including the professionals who work within those organizations, the formulas they have learned in order to write reports and grant applications, and the funding streams that this industry generates and depends upon' (2013:4).

Drawing on these insights, I propose to see human rights as a particular, loosely delimited transnational arena united by its underpinning logic and goals - broadly understood as 'reducing human suffering'. It is composed of people, institutions, and the whole infrastructure around them that speak of, claim, defend, and fund - in various different ways - 'human rights'. As such, it is an empowering venue for groups seeking justice beyond the nation-state to have their voices heard, but also a disciplinary one, which determines the language of speech. Studying the relationship between subaltern activism and human rights as they are broadly understood seems important. Kate Nash (2015), for example, argues that more work should be done on the mutual relationship between human rights and social movements, which is a vital but

understudied issue. Nash (*ibid.*, 750-751) finishes her article with the following words:

We know something about the difficulties of forming transnational social movements (Tarrow 2001; Della Porta and Tarrow 2005). What we know less about are emerging forms of transnational activism that involve the grassroots mobilizations outside institutions that are typically associated with social movements and that at the same time address global elites through INGOs .

The following chapters seek to improve the state of the art by choosing these ‘emerging forms of transnational activism’ as the object of their analysis.

## **Chapter 7. The akhdam and the transnational**

This chapter discusses the akhdam’s efforts to transform their little-known and culturally-loaded cause into an issue of global resonance. I start by drawing attention to the idioms and imageries through which the akhdam spell out their plight and seek the attention of the world community, to bring an end to their marginalization. Through these self-representations, the akhdam’s cause transcends the borders of the Yemeni state and becomes embedded in a larger, universalized context.

The narratives I have chosen to analyze do not cover the whole spectrum of the ways the akhdam speak, portray their issues and make themselves understood. As I have argued throughout the thesis, the akhdam are internally differentiated and divided over competing

visions of who they are, what the source of their marginalization is, and the ways to battle it. While they bear many characteristics of a social class, it reminds one of, to use Marx's terms, a 'class in itself' rather than a 'class for itself'. Hence, generalizations of their claims and representations may seem problematic; or, at least, they are always by definition incomplete and exclusive. In the following pages, I focus on two sets of narratives - those of victim subjects and of black minorities suffering from racism - not because they are the only ones deployed, but because they were the most striking to me, and illustrative of the strategic potential of storytelling (Polletta 2006, 2011).

After scrutinizing these particular self-representations and the understanding of the group they convey to global audiences, I go on to more precisely examine the akhdam's 'international agenda'. I analyze the ways by which the akhdam exploit the transnational setting for their own cause - through which measures, with whose help and under which auspices. This section aims to identify not only how the akhdam present their cause to the publics, but also how their representations are informed by the specific framework of human rights.

## **7.1 Bodies and places that speak: the mobilization of pity**

When, one afternoon in November 2012, I visited the Dar Salm slum with an American photographer for whom I was supposed to translate, sheikh Mojahed's '*diwan*'<sup>45</sup> was crowded as usual. The room was full of men, friends and family of the sheikh, his regular guests with whom he would spend afternoons chewing *qat*, smoking cigarettes, talking, and discussing the daily issues of life in the slum, such as weddings and funerals, but also works that needed to be done, or arguments between residents that had to be solved.

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<sup>45</sup> Diwan in Yemen refers to a sitting room where guests are received and family occasions are celebrated. Normally it is a rectangular space, with cushions for sitting along all four walls, and a carpet in the center. Here, the diwan is the shack's only room, with no windows, and with cardboard and blankets to sit on.



Before the photographer had asked any questions, sheikh Mojahed started off with a litany of grievances that I had heard repeated on so many occasions - that the *muhamasheen* are discriminated against because they are black and poor; that they are despised and demonized by Yemenis; that their children are bullied in schools and women harassed with impunity; and that many suffer from malaria and hunger. He finished by addressing the American photographer: 'It has been like this for centuries. What can we do? In Yemen, nobody listens to the poor. It is only people like you who can make a change. We need your voice (...)'.

Speaking fast and listing off the issues with little emotional engagement, sheikh Mojahed clearly knew his speech by heart. When he had finished his uninterrupted monologue and the photographer began to ask other questions, the sheikh, clearly wanting to return to his routine, exclaimed to me impatiently:

He is a photographer; tell him to walk around, see things with his own eyes and take pictures, and show these pictures in America. Images say more than my words. If you see images of poverty and oppression [*thulm*], you don't need any explanation.

This vignette highlights one of the ways through which the akhdam bring and explain their story to the world. Their narratives are built around various idioms which are often contradictory and, taken as a whole, do not necessarily build a coherent discourse; rather, they are relational; they take different forms and paint different images of the group, depending on the audiences and the specific goals.<sup>46</sup> In this section, I focus on the akhdam's stories of victimhood, through which the slum dwellers display their suffering and the inhumane conditions in which they are forced to live; emphasize their helplessness; and appeal to the sensitivities of the international community to speak and act on their behalf. As the akhdam lack the resources, tools and connections to 'be heard', they often rely on intermediaries - journalists, researchers, aid workers or random tourists - to transmit their message, help them gain visibility and provoke

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<sup>46</sup> Whilst what I describe here are narratives of victimhood, others may project a very different self-image of the group. For example, as was described in an earlier chapter, some - particularly those who collaborate with foreign aid NGOs - emphasize that the akhdam, unlike the rest of the Yemenis, are democratic, they believe in civil society rather than tribes, and their women have more freedom. Because of this, they often argue that they are 'more European than other Yemenis'. They also claim that the solution to their problems must come from within, through education, empowerment and development.

outrage and reaction - be it financial support, development projects or political pressure on the Yemeni government. The daily violence to which the akhdam are exposed, their lack of protection, and their neglect and discrimination are narrated to audiences not only through the stories of rape, beatings and killings, but also through non-mediated images: of appalling housing conditions, children in poor clothing, certificates of diseases, and lists of medicines that should be bought but are not affordable.

Not surprisingly then, I - as a researcher spending a lot of time with the community - was seen as a potential spokesperson to translate the akhdam's grievances to the world. 'You're our ambassador', 'you need to be our voice', I heard on many occasions.

Especially during the early stages of the fieldwork, I constantly encountered displays of misery, poverty and suffering that were brought to my attention to help me better understand the lived reality of the akhdam and the nature of their marginalization, as the slum dwellers would have it.<sup>47</sup> Alia, as did most of the residents of Dar Salm, frequently narrated to me the problems her family had to face. Alia was a mother of six who, when we first met, worked at cleaning the houses of 'wealthy people', as she called them, and occasionally begged, to add to her husband's modest income. During conversations about daily life in the slum, Alia would show me what her family struggled with: leaking roofs, damp mattresses, poor diet and sick children were among the items on her list. Alia often complained that the *muhamasheen* in Yemen were not treated like humans, and said that only 'people with good hearts' could change this:

People with good hearts must see what we are going through; I believe that if they could see how we live, they would care. It is not possible to live like this. We are treated like dogs, but we are not animals! I just want people to see that (...) Not Yemenis! People in the West, they are sensitive... I saw it with the foreigners who were coming here; they were shocked and saddened (...).

Her view was voiced by many others in a similar manner. Her husband, Salim, believed that as the akhdam were perceived by Yemenis as beggars and street cleaners, nobody would listen to them and their claims. 'I really don't think we can change anything by ourselves. We are

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<sup>47</sup> These scenes of suffering and hardship were of course not carefully selected or difficult to find. As I have highlighted in the previous chapters, the impoverishment and precarious conditions of the akhdam's habitation are striking.

Yemenis, but where are our rights? There are none, zero', he lamented on one occasion. Ahmed, their neighbour, encouraged me to visit different families in the slum so that I could see how the children and elderly people lived. According to him, they - being vulnerable and innocent - were the most telling examples of the injustice the *muhamasheen* faced. 'They are just babies', he said, pointing to his toddler daughter; 'they don't deserve to grow up like this'. Ahmed emphasized the view that echoed loudly in the slum: that their struggle was not political, but about basic rights and dignity. 'We are just people, and we want to live like people, with dignity. We don't ask for more than that', I was told repeatedly.

These accounts speak both to the humanity ('we are not animals'; 'we are just people') of the akhdam and to the inhumane conditions imposed on them. They draw attention to the depressing materiality of the slum life, human rights violations, and the helplessness of the akhdam in the face of their systemic marginalization. Considering that the akhdam's life is full of hardship, and providing for the family is a daily struggle, the grim tone of their complaints may seem only natural. Yet, the tragic stories that reduce the akhdam's existence to suffering, emptied of other details of daily life and any signs of agency, struck me. Why is it that images of sociability, acts of self-help and other practices to make life more bearable - as discussed in the earlier chapter - do not make it into people's narratives about everyday life? Why does Alia not mention the jobs she undertakes, or the afternoons she spends with her female friends watching Turkish soap operas, as important aspects of her daily reality? Why do the stories and representations that Alia and others exhibit to their audiences have the combined effect that the word 'akhdam' conjures up only images of misery? While the recounted hardship is central to the akhdam's everyday life, narrating the pain is not merely about giving realistic accounts of their lives. Crafting these particular representations also serves strategic purposes; they aim to mobilize pity and sympathy, and, as a consequence, support for the akhdam's cause. They form what I call here the akhdam's politics of victimization.

The politics of victim subjects has been discussed in the literature at length, offering parallels with the akhdam's case. Lori Allen (2009, 2013) reveals how for the Palestinians living under the Occupation, especially since the Second Intifada, political discourses and self-representations are couched in the lexicon of suffering. These are the internationally circulating dramatic

images of Palestinian 'bodies and the blood, guts and flesh' (2009:162) that illustrate Palestinian victimization and, as such, justify their claims for recognition, give them credibility and confirm their righteous nature. Rights are claimed here on the basis of the Palestinians' humanity rather than their political status, as Allen observes, linking this to the workings of the human rights regime. The object of human rights work in Palestine is a 'sympathy-deserving suffering human' (2009:162), whose right to live in dignity is violated by the Israeli state. Laleh Khalili (2007) makes a similar observation, describing how the heroic self-representations of Palestinians living in refugee camps in Lebanon are accompanied by tragic ones - those of passive victims, whose suffering solely determines the worthiness of their claims. Khalili, like Allen, situates these tragic narratives as part and parcel of the human rights discourse that enables Palestinian refugees to 'compete against other disadvantaged and dispossessed communities for the attention of international human rights institutions'. The visceral images of suffering and pain are also displayed by development and humanitarian organizations. They use them in order to arouse pity and galvanize support, as Boltanski argues (1999); but additionally, because of the 'saleability' of suffering, they are used by some organizations in fundraising campaigns (Kennedy 2007). Many scholars observe that it is in fact the human rights system itself that seeks and produces the 'authentic victim subject' (Kapur 2002) - a category of people (Muslim women being the most prominent example) who supposedly lack agency and need others to represent and empower them (Abu-Lughod 2013; Massad 2007, 2015; Spivak 2004). It is their misery that attracts sympathy and moves others to act on their behalf. Understood in this way, human rights serve vulnerable subjects rather than radical political actors. Hence, as Fassin observes, common acts of transnational solidarity with the liberation movements in the 1960s have been replaced by the logic of saving, and 'it is now humanitarian workers who take care of victims of conflict' (2008:532).

The akhdam slum dwellers seem to strategically exploit the power of the language of victimhood. They guide their audiences around the tangible markers of injustice, and tell the story of the group's marginalization through individual histories of suffering. In a context where the akhdam do not claim the need for a shared past to be commemorated or a particular identity and culture to be respected and revived, instead it is embodied and lived tragedy

around which they build their claims. As such, suffering becomes a particular type of resource; something which can be repackaged for presentation to the world in order to gain its sympathy, provoke intervention, attract aid, mobilize support, and strengthen political demands. The akhdam's encounters with aid workers, as discussed in the previous chapter, serve as a good example here. In order to receive support, slum dwellers need to prove that they are deserving subjects; in other words, that they are hungry and desperate enough. Hence, in the competition for scarce resources, in this case food products, misery turns out to be one's only asset. 'If you don't look miserable, they will go somewhere else', as one of the interviewees put it.

It is only after some time, when I pieced these narratives together, that I started to understand the implicit politics of victimhood narratives. When one day - after having been in the field for a couple of weeks, and having again received from Sheikh Mojahed the same 'official data' on the injustice faced by the akhdam - I asked with frustration, 'is there not more to you than marginalization?!', Mojahed seemed confused. He responded that the *muhamasheen* were normal people like anybody else, and had no hidden secrets or agenda. When I explained further what I meant - that he and others often would not listen to or answer my questions, but rather would continue to repeat the same stories and examples to prove their marginalization - Mojahed was no less surprised. He said that 'marginalization' was the problem and had to be solved, and that was the only thing that mattered. At some point in the discussion, he noted that 'this is what foreigners and journalists are interested in, so this is what I talk about'; and then laughed that he wouldn't know what else to talk about.

This exchange, and the accounts recalled earlier, reveal how the akhdam's self-representations reduce them to bare 'suffering bodies' (Tiktink 2006) - as if the only things needed to understand the marginalized are the material signs of their marginalization; and as if the only things they feel are pain and despair. The akhdam deploy this imagery, as they acknowledge, because this is what is expected from them, and what others want to know. But suffering is not only a passive experience; it can also form, as Khalili (2007) observes, the basis of claim-making. This is precisely how the akhdam, by referencing their humanity ('we are just people', 'we are treated like dogs but we are not animals'), state and justify their claims.

In this specific set of imageries, there is no space for stories of people's efforts to challenge the status quo, or their ways of coping with the daily hardship; rather, they paint a grim picture of humans forced to live under inhumane conditions. These discursive performances are 'staged' for the viewer; not in the sense of being fictional or exaggerated, but in how they are intentionally displayed and translated to convey a particular understanding of the group. Such a simplified self-image, painted in such broad strokes, is meant to resonate with the sensitivities of the international community. Through crafting these representations, members of the akhdam group seek relief: they aim to tell the story of the injustices they face, to 'make the world see' and take action.

## **7.2 Globalizing the Local**

The akhdam's story of victimhood, which translates their experiences to the world, relies on images of generic 'suffering bodies' (Tiktin 2006; Butt 2002), discounting the particularity of the akhdam and the context of their marginalization. This is understandable, because groups reaching out to international audiences must present simplified representations of their complicated issues, but must also present them in universalistic terms (Bob 2005; Tarrow 2005). This parallels Ernesto Laclau's (1995) argument that marginalized groups, while arguing for the 'particular', rely on universalist claims and values, such as the rights to health, education and a dignified life. A vast body of literature demonstrates how moving from the local to the global setting means excluding 'local contexts, values, symbols and historical knowledge' (Neumayer, Raffl, 2008:9). As I have shown in an earlier chapter, the nature of the akhdam's marginalization is complex and cannot be reduced to a one-dimensional explanation. Descent, as well as class, and place of residence - and, built on top of that, racial categories - all interplay in defining the akhdam subjects. Clearly, these details complicate understanding of the issue, and make it sound like a unique, Yemen-specific case, difficult to classify. Hence, erasing here the specificity of the akhdam and reducing them to mere victims turns their tale into a universal one, of vulnerable humanity seeking dignity.

The process of transforming the 'particular' to the universal, or globally recognized, may take different forms, with the abstract victim figure being just one of them. It is often done, as Khalili observes, through mediation of transnationally circulating discourses and images. Khalili (2007:12) mentions, for example, the symbolic power of icons such as Che Guevara, or an image of a starving African child, to 'translate world-historical events into recognizable daily struggles'. Building rapport with global symbols is defined by Tarrow as 'global framing', through which not only do a movement's parochial claims become generalizable, but also activists may cultivate the sense that there are others 'beyond the horizon who share their grievances and support their causes' (Tarrow 2005:76).

Such globally-familiar symbols, images and idioms play a role in the self-representations the akhdam construct for their publics - well aware that their plight and the nature of their discrimination are little known to wider audiences, the akhdam rely on parallels with other groups to explain what is at stake and urge the world to intervene. Notably, in order to persuade the world community that their suffering is neither unique, nor can be battled by the akhdam alone, group members invoke the historical struggles of black people and their iconic figures as also being illustrative of their own situation. This imagery is used to build what Alexander (2004) calls 'bridging metaphors' - analogies between present-day suffering and globally recognized traumatic events of the past, that sensitize the broader audience to the group's experience and touch upon the world's moral responsibility to react. Through these particular comparisons drawn by the akhdam, the abstract bodies of victims gain the 'flesh' of other people, and stories of violence and disenfranchisement gain an explanation. Their experiences become rooted in the long history of racism and discrimination faced by black people globally. Casual references to historical discrimination against black people in the United States and anti-apartheid Africa are common, both in conversations among the ordinary slum dwellers and in the official speeches of their representatives. The spatial segregation, lack of intermarriages, and economic deprivation faced by black people in different contexts are often invoked in abstract terms by the akhdam, who argue that what is happening to them has a name and a history, and should be recognized as such. As one man put it, 'We know that there is racism (*unsuriyah*) everywhere, and that we are not the only ones to suffer from it'.

The visit of an American photographer to Dar Salm slum, as mentioned in the opening of this chapter, stirred a heated debate in Sheikh Mojahed's diwan. The guests later argued about the situation of black people in the US today - while some claimed that racism still existed, others gave idealized accounts of improvements following President Obama's coming to power. According to some of the men, since America was ruled by a black president, black Americans were being granted benefits, free housing and job opportunities. One man departed from this to share a romantic story he had heard - that of a poor black man in America who married a rich and beautiful white woman, and was fully welcomed by the bride's family, making him feel as if there was no difference between them. The story was taken to be emblematic of how, in the United States, the long battle against racial discrimination had finished. It was relevant for the akhdam in Yemen, because it set an example and could give them some hope. After all, not so long ago, black people in America lived just like black people in Yemen, many akhdam suggested. The men further agreed that Obama was the leader of black people globally, and hence it was his duty to advocate for Yemeni black people, as they were part of the same struggle. Their concern, however, was that Obama and other powerful actors were simply not aware of racism in Yemen; hence their neglect. One of the slum residents voiced what many hoped with the following words: 'I wish Obama would come to Yemen, see how we live, and help us'. Another person, also referencing the American president, stated that the *muhamasheen* needed their 'own Obama'.

These conversations took place several months before the National Dialogue Conference (NDC) - the transitional dialogue process discussed in a previous chapter - during which the *muhamasheen's* sole representative, Noman Hudeithi, was indeed acclaimed by many as the 'Obama of Yemen'.<sup>48</sup> In his applauded speech in April 2013, Hudeithi evocatively stated that his people had not 'spoken for 1300 years' - referring to the silencing of the akhdam through Yemen's history - and that it was time to reclaim their rights. When I interviewed Hudeithi in July 2013, during one of the NDC sessions taking place in Mövenpick Hotel in Sana'a, the leader of the akhdam claimed that a comparison with Nelson Mandela was more accurate. Hudeithi

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<sup>48</sup> Michael Peel, 'Mixed views as talks open on Yemen future', Financial Times ( 3 April 2013) <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/cc06ccc8-9b9a-11e2-8485-00144feabdc0.html#axzz3pxnm1bj6> accessed 22 December 2015



argued that the situation of the akhdam in Yemen resonated with that of the black population in apartheid South Africa. Asked how he would explain the specificity of the akhdam issue to foreign audiences not familiar with the topic, he responded:

I ask them, do you know what the difference between Yemen and South Africa is? Nelson Mandela was imprisoned for 25 years. I am 40 years old and have been imprisoned for all these 40 years. It is true, I can move around freely, but it is a real prison I live in.

According to Hudeithi, the difference was that, whereas in South Africa the discrimination was embedded in a legal framework, in Yemen racism was part of the society's culture, and as such, was less explicit (*taht al-tawle*) and presumably invisible to the international community, and therefore more difficult to tackle. The actual situation, however, in Hudeithi's view, was very similar - in Yemen, just like during the apartheid regime in South Africa, they 'are like two peoples in one country'. Hudeithi articulated what many others also vocalized: that the world needed to recognize their circumstance by its proper name - racial discrimination. At the time of the NDC when hopes were high, at least for the akhdam representatives, comparisons to the fight against the apartheid regime in South Africa were often drawn. Abdulrahman, from the National Union for the Marginalized, commented to me on the establishment of the akhdam's new movement, 'Akhdam Allah' (which was meant to transform into a political party when the time was right), with the following words: 'this is a historical moment; we hope to be like a movement in South Africa under Nelson Mandela's leadership'.

These casual parallels drawn by the akhdam are simplified, and do not pay much heed to nuances or historical facts - either those of the struggles of black people, or of the akhdam's position within Yemeni society. But the imagery brought up by the akhdam - composed of figures such as Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela and Barack Obama, as well as stories of the everyday lives and struggles of ordinary black people in the United States - is also striking for another reason. In these narratives, the akhdam clearly appropriate their 'blackness', and present their own issue as being an example and part of the 'black struggle'. This happens despite the fact that, as was discussed earlier, most slum dwellers reject being classified as being of different ethnicity or origin. Moreover, as discussions recounted in previous chapters have shown, many do not regard racism as being the root cause of their discrimination, arguing

that it is mainly economic deprivation that determines their social position.

Their appropriation of race here resonates with examples from the literature on black politics in the United States, which reveal how self-racialization is deployed by groups for strategic purposes: they assert the black identities that are ascribed to them, and act as 'black people', even if their aim is the erasure of racial differentiation (Roediger 1991). Joan Scott (1996) argues that this is, in fact, a shared condition of minority struggles - the marginalized need to acknowledge and articulate the difference imposed on them, in order to reject it. A somewhat similar process is described by Frantz Fanon, who recalls how, after having been pointed out as a 'Negro', he recognized his blackness and turned it into a radical identity. 'Since I was not satisfied to be racialized, by a lucky turn of fate I was humanized. I joined the Jew, my brother in misery', writes Fanon in 'Black Skin, White Masks' (1968:122). In this context, as Fassin (2011:424) astutely concludes, '[r]ecognizing oneself as Black means resisting racial ascription'. As has been discussed in previous chapters, the akhdam turn to self-racialization, or, in Spivak's (1987) words, 'strategic essentialism', precisely to gain political leverage and articulate their claims as a collective. Race, then, serves here both as a marker of the group and as an object of their struggle - an ascription that the akhdam seek to erase.

Through this rhetoric, the 'humanitarian' victim discussed earlier turns here into a victim of racism. This set of representations relies on different languages and brings to mind different associations - not those of passivity and helplessness, but rather of holding on to dignity, active struggle, and transnational black consciousness.

Yet, the connection to other black struggles seems, in the akhdam's case, to be merely strategic, and does not go beyond discursive performances. Speaking as black people and seeking the solidarity of other black people (here personified by Barack Obama), as well as the understanding and support of the international community, does not simply mean that the akhdam embrace the 'black identity' and choose to act as 'black people'. Nor are their casual references to black rights movements materialized in actual acts of joint mobilization or efforts to build transnational alliances and seek collaboration with others in similar circumstances. As has been shown in a previous chapter, the akhdam representative bodies have no relationship

with black movements worldwide, and a majority of akhdam slum dwellers strongly deny their African origins and any ethnic difference between them and the dominant Yemeni society.

Hence, the casually drawn parallels with the oppression of black people in South Africa and the United States do not necessarily exemplify the akhdam's identity politics, despite how it may look on the surface. Rather, they exemplify a framing strategy that gives meaning to the akhdam's plight, and a lens (here: racism) through which their audiences can read the injustice they face. To put it differently, the resonances with historical cases of black subordination serve in this case as a rhetorical device of translation, through which the akhdam make the domestic intelligible for the wider public, and deserving of solidarity and support. Moreover, casting themselves as victims of racial discrimination allows the akhdam to translate their experiences of marginalization into a human rights issue, supposedly more likely to provoke international outrage and acts of solidarity.

### **7.3 Objects and subjects of human rights**

The stories of the akhdam - either those relying on images of helpless victims, or of black people suffering racism, or any other designed to illustrate the group's plight - mean little if they do not reach the audiences that they are supposed to 'move'. Many of them are simply recounted to visiting individuals in the hope that they will later circulate them in the media, or among activists or politicians. Here, the effort to internationalize their cause is undertaken by ordinary akhdam without them ever leaving their places of residence. Other efforts, however, involve the akhdam - or at least a very few of them - themselves reaching out to those whom they see as potential external allies and supporters. In doing this, they make use of the new transnational arenas available to them, mainly the broadly understood human rights system, and seek justice from supranational institutions.

The akhdam, as has been discussed in a previous chapter, often complain about the human rights and international organizations that are working on their cause. The criticism - having as its object different types of international organizations and institutions, ranging from charity groups to the EU and the UN - focuses on several issues. The recurring themes touched on by

akhdam actors revolve around the patronizing and arrogant character of western activists, diplomats and NGO workers; organizations working for their own profits rather than for those of the akhdam; and the problem of their issue being reduced to 'the distribution of rice and blankets'. Noman Hudeithi expressed his disappointment with a vaguely understood human rights industry using a play on words: 'these are not human rights (*huquq al-insan*), these are thieves of rights (*lisan al-huquq*)'. According to Hudeithi, those who advocate for human rights have no interest in the akhdam, and, despite their rhetoric, have done little or nothing to challenge the status quo. Others, he claimed, have profited from the akhdam's issues, using their suffering to apply for grants and funding, or to make a name for themselves, but not delivering anything to the community.<sup>49</sup>

Despite this openly voiced scepticism, Noman Hudeithi has himself participated in a number of international human rights workshops, conferences and training events, has applied for grants from different bodies, including the EU, and has been trying to establish cooperation with aid and development organizations.<sup>50</sup> Other members of the National Union for the Marginalized agreed that these foreign organizations have helped many people gain rights consciousness, and they were hopeful that the institutional channels offered by the EU and the UN can propagate their cause. Ordinary slum dwellers, in turn, appreciated the material assistance and distributed aid, even if they acknowledged that it was marginal and would not bring a long-term solution to their problems.

This seemingly contradictory view on human rights and the potential of international advocacy and aid should not be dismissed as incoherent; rather, it says something about the complicated nature of the human rights regime itself. Lori Allen (2013) refers to similar attitudes among the

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<sup>49</sup> In fact, the criticism towards the human rights system is not specific to the akhdam, but to Yemeni society at large, across the political spectrum. In particular, the recent bombing of Yemen led by Saudi Arabia and backed by the Gulf and Western coalition gave rise to an eruption of voices of young Yemenis expressing their anger, frustration and disillusionment with the human rights framework. Statements posted on new social media sites, such as Facebook and Twitter, are often written in English, as they seek to reach foreign, mainly western, audiences. One post by an educated Yemeni man, who had previously worked in the tourism industry, aptly illustrated the various expressions of discontent with human rights: 'I don't believe in UN and human right/The blinded UN, human right/The Deaf UN, human right/Why there is not Eye to see the Suffering of Yemeni kids?/You just see the Saudi money And you keep silent and supporting saudi'.

<sup>50</sup> This is also part of the critique of Noman Hudeithi and the National Union by ordinary slum dwellers - they are perceived as part of the elites, profiting from the cause, and working in their own interest.

Palestinians living under Israeli occupation as 'cynicism' towards human rights. Despite the unfulfilled promises and disappointments they bring, according to Allen (2013:27), they also stimulate hope and open up opportunities. As such, the human rights system is constantly contested and criticized, but not necessarily rejected. Likewise, in the Yemeni context, disillusionment towards the aid industry, civil society NGOs and human rights advocates is accompanied by a sense that there is little elsewhere to turn. It is in this field, viewed by many as corrupted, depoliticizing and elitist, where resources, potential allies and funds can be found. One of the representatives of the pragmatically oriented National Union for the Marginalized explained to me that, since the akhdam were not armed and had no money or support within Yemen, they had to rely on those who were willing to help, whoever they may be.

The multiple stigmas associated with the akhdam, as well as their economic and political disenfranchisement, contribute to the fact that their voice is little heard in Yemen. The previously discussed demonstrations by the akhdam - which occur either as direct responses to incidents of violence against members of the group, or with the aim of articulating the group's political claims - are rarely reported in the media, and go unnoticed by the larger Yemeni population. For example, when several hundred people gathered in Sana'a in December 2012 - the biggest mobilization of the akhdam to date, according to the activists - to demand the akhdam's participation in the upcoming National Dialogue Conference, it provoked little reaction. Despite the numbers, the demonstrations did not stir a debate, and nobody among the authorities felt the need to respond, to take a stance, or even to disperse the akhdam from the streets. In this case, it is the public's silence which pushes the akhdam's mobilization into a void, and renders their voice meaningless (Eckert 2015).

In such a context of unfavourable domestic conditions, as the rich literature on social movements documents, activists tend to reach out to international allies, in the hope of mobilizing external pressure on the government. Keck and Sikkink describe this process, which they associate with human rights work, as the 'boomerang effect'. Indeed, externalizing the cause to seek support from the outside, and framing it in a human rights lexicon, are often the only tools available to the weak. The empowering role of human rights has been recognized, for example, by global feminists, whereby women from repressive and patriarchal states resort to

international organizations and law to advance their claims (Grewal 1999). Keck and Sikkink (1998), among others, reveal how, from the late 1980s, the articulating of women's struggles as a human rights issue broadened the basis of the women's movement, attracted new allies, opened up new arenas for women to speak, and bridged the cultural divide between women from the Global South and North. More critical voices, however, recognize the limits attendant upon such a universalist framing, that bestow on claimants particular types of narratives and make them act as particular, essentialized subjects (Grewal 1999, Kapur 2002). Tanya Li (2001:653), an anthropologist working on indigenous struggles in Indonesia, astutely remarks that 'Those who demand that their rights be acknowledged must fill the places of recognition that others provide, using dominant languages and demanding a voice in bureaucratic and other power-saturated encounters, even as they seek to stretch, reshape, or even invert the meanings implied'.

The akhdam activists agree that since Yemen is bound by the international treaties it has ratified, in particular the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD) in 1989, there is some space to exploit the human rights framework for the cause of the Yemeni marginalized. Engagement in various forms with the UN is perceived as one way to do it. As the state is obliged, but fails, to protect its citizens from racial discrimination and to guarantee that all Yemenis enjoy equal rights, the akhdam seek to persuade the UN to enforce in Yemen what it stands for globally. It seems obvious, as Abdulrahman from the National Union put it, that 'the government is more likely to listen to the UN's recommendations than ours'.

The first efforts to internationalize the akhdam issue go back to the early 1990s, when an NGO, 'Alternative World: Partnership for Equitable Development', started to research and advocate for the akhdam cause. The organisation was led by Huda Seif, an anthropologist and activist, who was engaged in long-term research in Yemen and who later, in 2003, defended her PhD thesis on practices of social categorization and exclusion in Yemen. It was only in the 2000s, however, that the issue of the akhdam started to gain international visibility and, according to Seif, 'reached [the] watchful attention of international human rights organizations and advocacy groups'. In March 2006, the akhkam case was discussed at the UN Sub-Commission

on Human Rights with the Special Rapporteurs on Discrimination based on Work and Descent. This event, in Seif's words, 'brought together national and international NGOs and activists working against discrimination, experts from the UN's human rights mechanisms, Special Rapporteurs on human rights, the ILO, the World Bank and solidarity groups from around the world' (2006:4).

In July 2006, Alternative World, together with International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN), submitted the first Alternative Report to the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination,<sup>51</sup> as a response to the joint 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> Periodic Report submitted by the Yemeni state. The report, prepared by Dr. Huda Seif, describes in detail the persecuted 'ethnic minority' in Yemen, and explains their marginalization in terms of 'caste-like discrimination' and 'ethnic/descent-based persecution' (Seif 2006:4) that are 'centuries old' (Seif 2006:7). These particular forms of discrimination, the report establishes, conform to the broader pattern of 'racial discrimination' as articulated in Article 1 of the ICERD. As such, the issue of the akhdam, which previously had been addressed by some UN Committees in general terms of vulnerability and marginalization,<sup>52</sup> is now turned into a human rights issue, and 'socio-cultural persecution' becomes 'human rights abuses' or, elsewhere in the text, 'crimes against humanity'. Defined in this way, the akhdam's suffering is no longer specific to the Yemeni cultural landscape, but rather exemplifies a global phenomenon of vital importance to the UN Human Rights Committee.

Since 2006, three alternative reports have been submitted jointly by the International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN), based in Copenhagen, and the All Youth Network for Community Development from Taiz, Yemen. In May 2011, an alternative report was prepared for the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; in February 2012, a further report was submitted to the UN Committee on Civil and Political Rights; and finally, in June 2013, the two organisations jointly submitted a report for the Universal Periodic Review of Yemen, scheduled

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<sup>51</sup> [http://idsn.org/wp-content/uploads/user\\_folder/pdf/Old\\_files/un/pdf/Alternative\\_World\\_Yemen.pdf](http://idsn.org/wp-content/uploads/user_folder/pdf/Old_files/un/pdf/Alternative_World_Yemen.pdf)

<sup>52</sup> This was the first time that the issue of the akhdam was addressed by the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. Before that, it had been addressed by the Committee on the Rights of Child (in 1996, 1999, 2005, and most recently in 2014), and once in 2003 by the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. <http://idsn.org/un-2/treaty-bodies/t-yemen/> accessed 10 December 2015

for January 2014.

In all three reports, whose contents rely largely on the initial report written by Huda Seif, the akhdam are classified as an 'ethnic minority', but more outspokenly than in the first report, they are also referred to as 'untouchable outcastes', 'untouchable ethnic outcaste' and 'untouchable servant caste'. This is not surprising, given that the IDSN works 'globally to end caste-based discrimination' and pushes for internationalization of caste discrimination as 'a critical human rights issue', as their website states.<sup>53</sup> The IDSN argues that caste is not specific to India, but is played out in different countries across regions, and that 260 million people around the globe, among them the Yemeni akhdam, are affected by caste discrimination. By relocating the issue of caste beyond India, with which it is commonly associated, 'activists hoped both to underline the problem's scope and to attract broader support from international actors', according to Bob (2007:191), who has analyzed the IDSN's advocacy work for the Indian Dalits.

The All Youth Network for Community Development (AYNCD) based in Taiz is an NGO working in the field of development and human rights, although in the alternative report of 2013 they are more narrowly presented as an organisation working 'for the elimination of caste discrimination and forms of discrimination based on descent'.<sup>54</sup> The network is composed mainly of young akhdam activists, and was set up in 2008 through engagement with the UN's International Volunteer Day (IVD). The AYNCD's role in submitting the alternative reports to the UN is mainly symbolic - their name lends credibility to the reports, but they do not contribute to writing the text, nor have they extensive ties or other forms of collaboration with the IDSN. As the Executive Director of the IDSN admitted in an interview, the organisation does not have a relationship with their partners in Yemen, has not been conducting research on the ground, and does not claim expertise on Yemen or the akhdam issue. The cause was brought to the IDSN through the work of the aforementioned Huda Seif, and since the nature of the akhdam's marginalization seemed illustrative of the work and of descent-based discrimination, it was

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<sup>53</sup> <http://idsn.org/about-us/> accessed 9 December 2015

<sup>54</sup> [http://idsn.org/wp-content/uploads/user\\_folder/pdf/New\\_files/Yemen/UPR\\_joint\\_submission\\_IDSN\\_AYN\\_June\\_2013FINAL.pdf](http://idsn.org/wp-content/uploads/user_folder/pdf/New_files/Yemen/UPR_joint_submission_IDSN_AYN_June_2013FINAL.pdf) accessed 9 December 2015



picked up by the Dalit Solidarity Network. The lack of actual research, and moreover, the particular purpose of the submitted reports - that is, to raise awareness, cause alarm, and provoke the UN to react - may explain the type of knowledge produced through these texts.

The reports give a reified image of the group and of social reality in Yemen - not mentioning the official ban on status distinctions, or discussing changes in patterns of exclusion, it instead lists a myriad of abusive practices and prejudices against the akhdam, painting a gruesome picture of the akhdam's lives in absolute and fixed terms. The akhdam, according to the reports, work in menial and degrading jobs; they are not allowed to live among other Yemenis or own land; their men are not allowed to carry the traditional Yemeni dagger (*jambiyya*); their women are publicly harassed; their children are denied access to schools. The reports ignores internal differences between the akhdam themselves and their particular situations, and the fact that many of the described discriminatory practices have ended or have evolved into other forms (for example, contrary to what is claimed, akhdam men do wear the *jambiyya*, and are allowed to buy land, notwithstanding that they can rarely afford it). Just like in the akhdam's own portrayals of their suffering as discussed earlier, here again the akhdam appear not as real people, but as mere victims - living in total exclusion and isolation, denied any sort of agency or capacity to act and live. These representations do indeed reflect the trajectories of certain akhdam, but they do not shed light on other biographies which do not conform to the script. They do not include, for example, biographies such as those of the akhdam activists from the AYNCD, who are educated, integrated into mainstream society, and working in fields other than street cleaning. Instead, they strongly confirm that human rights and narratives of victimization and suffering go hand in hand.

In addition to presenting the akhdam case to the UN through the alternative reports, in November 2014, Sami Naggar, an activist from the All Youth Network, was invited to give an oral intervention during the seventh session of the Forum on Minority Issues, dedicated to 'Preventing and addressing violence and atrocity crimes targeted against minorities'. In his speech, Naggar characterized the akhdam as an ethnic group, distinguished by black skin and African origins. After evocatively describing the discrimination faced by the group, he offered a list of recommendations to the Yemeni government - calling on the state, among others, to

undertake an affirmative action policy to empower the marginalized.<sup>55</sup>

Lastly, the issue of the akhdam is also brought to the attention of supranational institutions by those few akhdam who get the opportunity to participate in international workshops, trainings and conferences. Through these encounters, the akhdam activists not only lobby for their cause, but more significantly, they also get familiar with the human rights language, mechanisms, and arenas available to them. A five-week Minority Fellowship Program held in Geneva and sponsored by the UN, to which several members of the group were invited, is just one example of initiatives where the subaltern actors are trained to become human rights activists. The fellowship was initiated by the UN Human Rights Office in 2005, and as stated on its website, it offers members of minority groups ‘an opportunity to gain knowledge on the UN system and mechanisms dealing with international human rights in general and minority rights in particular’.<sup>56</sup> The majority of ordinary akhdam with whom I spoke were not aware of this or similar programs, while others complained that these programs were elitist, and that one needed to have connections to enter such trainings. While I did not find anybody in the slums of Sana’a who had been granted the fellowship, the testimonies of two akhdam participants can be found on the website of the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. One of the akhdam participants is quoted as saying that the akhdam ‘don’t know about freedom’, and that his aim is to teach the akhdam about their rights, to help them in ‘reaching a free and dignified life’.<sup>57</sup> The other participant professed in a similar tone that her goal after the fellowship was to help the akhdam to enjoy ‘their rights to a decent life’.<sup>58</sup> Hence, as laid out in the fellowship’s objectives, the akhdam participants who completed the training were to become leaders and educators in their own communities, richer for their knowledge of human rights mechanisms and instruments, but also for the new partnerships and networks built during their stay in Geneva.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> [http://idsn.org/wp-content/uploads/user\\_folder/pdf/New\\_files/UN/SP/Sami\\_Al-Naggar\\_All\\_Youth\\_Network\\_for\\_Community\\_Development\\_in\\_Yemen\\_Statement\\_-\\_UN\\_Minority\\_Forum\\_2014.pdf](http://idsn.org/wp-content/uploads/user_folder/pdf/New_files/UN/SP/Sami_Al-Naggar_All_Youth_Network_for_Community_Development_in_Yemen_Statement_-_UN_Minority_Forum_2014.pdf) accessed 4 January 2016

<sup>56</sup> <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Minorities/Pages/Fellowship.aspx> accessed 4 January 2016

<sup>57</sup> <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/FuadAhmedAl-Selwi.aspx> accessed 4 January 2016

<sup>58</sup> <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/MinorityFellowMahaRashed.aspx> accessed 4 January 2016

<sup>59</sup> <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Minorities/Pages/Fellowship.aspx> accessed 4 January 2016

Many members of the group expressed scepticism about the usefulness of such programs, claiming that they were vehicles for personal advancement but brought no prospects of change for ordinary people. Others, especially those connected with the National Union and other civil associations, claimed that the skills and knowledge acquired were important. Noman Hudeithi - who himself completed a training program on mechanisms of human rights advocacy in the United States in March 2015 - argued that it was only by raising awareness and consciousness of their rights that the situation of the akhdam could eventually improve. Those who are trained become 'the voice of the voiceless', as Hudeithi put it.

#### **7.4 Conclusion:**

Spivak (2004), among others, raises the concern that as the subaltern do not have access to dominant knowledges and languages, they cannot speak or be understood, and hence remain 'off the radar'. Spivak (2004) observes the disparity between the language of the rural poor and that of grant proposals, which inevitably must appeal to 'the taste of the North' (2004:257). As this kind of semantic knowledge is foreign to all those lacking the appropriate education, the aid from 'the North' is beyond their access. The moment, however, when the subaltern acquires the capacity to speak and be heard, or establishes what Spivak (1999:310) calls 'a line of communication', signals the move out of subalternity and an alignment with dominant forces.

The case of the akhdam reveals this complexity. Even if the language and mechanisms of human rights are little known to the majority of slum dwellers, the activists and leaders of the group, through their 'global encounters' - with international activists, researchers, and development workers, but also within trainings, conferences and the UN fora - are exposed to new arenas of action and new languages of protest. This is where they learn to navigate through the system, and to speak in a way which can be heard. In this sense, they gain tools and venues that enable them to reach international audiences, get more powerful actors to learn about their cause, and hopefully exert pressure. Whether by making direct use of the

human rights mechanisms available to them, or by crafting representations of themselves as suffering victims, and drawing parallels with historical black struggles, the akhdam bring their story to the world, and transform their domestic grievances into an issue of a global concern.

At the same time, in need of coherent narratives, the akhdam and those who advocate on their behalf often present a homogeneous image of the group to international audiences; one with fixed origins, clear-cut boundaries and a shared identity. The previously mentioned example of an akhdam youth activist is very telling: invited to speak at the Minority Forum session, he presented the akhdam as an ethnic group distinguished by their black skin colour and origins going back to Ethiopian invaders of Yemen. Through this and similar representations, what is widely believed to be a myth turns into history, and what is otherwise rejected by the akhdam - as was discussed in earlier chapters - serves here as an explanation of the akhdam's distinctiveness. In these narratives, moreover, there is no space for nuance or alternative articulations; and hence, for example, the earlier discussed voices of sanitation workers, and their vision of themselves, are excluded.

Bringing the akhdam's issue to the international scene has delivered some, albeit limited, success. According to the Executive Director of the IDSN, the issue has gained more visibility and is regularly discussed at UN fora. For example, the plight of the akhdam has been debated four times at the UN Forum on Minority Issues in Geneva, and the various UN treaty bodies have condemned descent-based discriminatory practices in Yemen, and issued recommendations to the Yemeni government. Among other things, the government has been urged to recognize the akhdam as an ethnic minority, provide this vulnerable group with protection, and take steps to end discrimination against them.

Yet, despite the acknowledgment of the akhdam's suffering and the condemnation of the Yemeni government, no concrete measures have been undertaken, and we have not observed the emergence of advocacy campaigns or transnational solidarity networks. Besides the IDSN, none of the main international human rights organisations, such as Amnesty International or Human Rights Watch, have expressed any interest in the akhdam cause so far.

While the IDSN's Executive Director believed that there had been progress on the issue, and

that the akhdam were internationally more visible than ever before, Noman Hudeithi did not share this optimism. According to him, the world was losing rather than gaining interest in the cause. He and other activists claimed that it was 'Yemeni women' who were on the international agenda, and that even those organisations who had previously worked with the akhdam had now turned away from them. Many expressed their disillusionment with the international community and its will to support their cause in terms such as the following: 'I don't think the world cares about us. They have other issues more important for them'; or, as another activist put it, 'They keep on talking about child marriage, that it is a human rights violation. What about our women and children who are the most vulnerable ones?' Noman Hudeithi, who became the 'international face' of the akhdam and spends a lot of his time lobbying for the cause outside Yemen, expressed the pessimism of the group probably most evocatively:

I don't understand why they [EU, UN] treat us like this. We are doing everything they ask for, each time they change our names, one time we are this, then something else (...) We are trying peaceful methods. But I think they don't listen to peaceful citizens. Maybe we will need to use violence and kidnappings so the world becomes interested in us.

## **Chapter 8. The Bedouin and the transnational**

The limits of what can be achieved by the Naqab Bedouin in Israel are clearly recognized by those involved in the struggle. I repeatedly heard it said by disillusioned ordinary villagers that the legal system in Israel was there to serve only Jewish and not Arab citizens. Similarly, human

rights activists claimed that although small achievements were possible and did happen, they were undoubtedly circumscribed. While, for example, access to basic services could sometimes be won through the appeals of NGOs, matters of land, on the other hand, were 'always a lost cause', as it was put by the director of Adalah, the most prominent NGO dedicated to Palestinian rights, in explaining why such issues were no longer being taken to the courts. Against this setting, the Bedouin and their allies have turned to the international community and supranational bodies in search of sympathy, recognition and, most importantly, external pressure on the Israeli government. As in the previous chapter, I therefore ask: how do the Bedouin reach audiences beyond the borders of the state, and transform their struggle into one of global resonance? Through what means, arenas and vocabularies do they carry this out, and to what effect?

To answer these questions, the chapter splits into three sections. The first part addresses questions of knowledge production, showing how representations of the Bedouin have for a long time been in the hands of the state's officials, experts and scholars, shaping the perceptions of who the Bedouin are and what their needs are. Apart from sketching the dominant paradigms through which the Bedouin have been approached and understood, I look in more detail at the work of the NGOs that have brought the Bedouin cause most forcefully to the transnational setting.

While the first section explores the ways in which the Bedouin become intelligible to outsiders largely through the work of others (or with their own contribution being mostly symbolic), the second section discusses the strategies of political tours and tourism, where the Bedouin themselves gain access to international audiences. Here, I demonstrate how through personal encounters and non-mediated images, the villagers explain their cause to visitors. Building on that, the third section of the chapter moves from what is displayed to what is narrated, focusing on the self-representations that the Bedouin share with their publics. Khalili (2005, 2007), in her study of commemorative narratives of the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, accurately shows how what is exhibited to audiences borrows from transnational discourses and local meanings, and evolves in time and in particular political settings. This is because, as Sayigh (2007) notes in reviewing Khalili's work, 'different audiences and contexts' give rise to

‘different representations’. Similarly here, the Bedouin’s representations change over time, adapting to the domestic setting as well as to the powerful global and scholarly discourses with which they are permanently confronted, and which the Bedouin sometimes appropriate to tell their own story. While I am well aware of the dynamic nature of the Bedouin’s self-representations, it is beyond the scope of this chapter to trace in detail and explain their historical shifts. Thus, the accounts I describe here belong, I believe, to a particular historical moment marked by the then-imminent threat of the Praver Plan, which envisaged a state-led resettlement of the Bedouin remaining in the unrecognized villages. My fieldwork in the Naqab conducted between 2011 and 2013 was very clearly marked by the shadow of the state’s new project.<sup>60</sup> The Praver Plan was at that time the subject of daily exchanges between people, and the object of campaigns by various NGOs, and it eventually gave rise to an unprecedented mobilization of the Bedouin and their allies, who moved to the streets and social media to speak out against it. The international ‘Praver Won’t Pass Campaign’, or more specifically its framing, is addressed next to individual narratives in the final section of the chapter.

### **8.1 Academia and rights advocacy: who speaks for the Bedouin?**

In August 2011, the Special Rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples, James Anaya, submitted a report<sup>61</sup> to the Human Rights Council in which he addressed, among other cases, the situation of the Bedouin unrecognized villages in Israel. Anaya stated that the Bedouin shared ‘characteristics of indigenous peoples worldwide, including a connection to lands and the maintenance of cultural traditions that are distinct from those of majority populations’, and as such, he urged Israel to respect Bedouin rights to land and resources in the Naqab region. Anaya’s stance was followed in 2012 by a wave of criticisms of the Praver Plan from within the UN and the European Parliament. It was unanimously said that the plan was discriminatory towards the indigenous population, and its implementation would amount to policies of dispossession and displacement. The firm position of the international community, recognizing

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<sup>60</sup> The Praver Plan (see Chapter 2) was announced in September 2011, and suspended in December 2013; thus, its lifespan very much coincided with the timeframe of my fieldwork.

<sup>61</sup> James Anaya, Annual Follow-up Report, Doc. A/HRC/18/35/Add.1, 22 August 2011, pp.24-31  
[http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/IPeoples/SR/A-HRC-18-35-Add-1\\_en.pdf](http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/IPeoples/SR/A-HRC-18-35-Add-1_en.pdf) accessed 3 February 2016

the Bedouin's indigenous status and opposing the legislation of the Praver Plan, was heartily received by advocates of the Bedouin cause, whose longtime lobbying on the supranational level was clearly bearing fruit. Ordinary villagers, however, seemed less enthused. During my fieldwork in the village of Wadi al-Na'am in 2012, many residents were unaware of the stances of the UN and EU; and those who were aware, even if they acknowledged the symbolic importance, had little hope that they would be capable of changing the situation on the ground. For example, my host Nadia, a single mother of five, disarmingly told me in one of our conversations: 'You know, politics is just a game [*al-siyase l'aba*] (...). My house is awaiting demolition, no matter what the United Nations say'. Her words illustrated a belief that others also hinted at: that decisions on the international level were taken behind people's backs, and had little impact on what was happening in everyday life.

This scepticism, or sense of detachment, towards statements and decisions taken in the abstract spaces of the UN and EU may be less surprising if we consider that for decades, the Bedouin have been named, spoken for, and represented by others, while having little control over how they were depicted and approached. Thus, before discussing how the Bedouin struggle moves from a remote desert in the south of Israel to the transnational arena as an issue of global concern, it is first worth briefly sketching 'how' the Bedouin had previously been known, by whom that knowledge was produced, and how their representations have been evolving.

*From the Bedouin of the Negev to the Palestinian-Bedouin in the Naqab*



The Naqab region and the Bedouin have, since the establishment of Israel in 1948,<sup>62</sup> been of considerable importance and interest to both policy-makers and Israeli scholars, and also, later, international researchers and human rights advocates. As Chapter 3 has shown in detail, the lens through which the Bedouin have been perceived by the state has changed dramatically over time. Here it is worth remembering that traditionally, the Bedouin had been portrayed in Israel as 'loyal citizens', allegedly with a unique culture that made them distinct from other Palestinians (Parizot 2001). It is only since the 1990s that these representations have shifted towards discourses of criminalization that portrayed the Bedouin as a 'security threat', with the popular media foreseeing a 'Bedouin intifada'.<sup>63</sup>

Besides the representations of the Bedouin that have been crafted in the Israeli public and political discourse, the residents of the Naqab have been objectified through similarly evolving scholarly accounts. In a recently published volume, Ratcliffe et al. (2015) give an overview of the scholarship on the Bedouin, and distinguish three main approaches in these studies. The first approach, dominant in the 1950s and 1960s, was taken by Israeli anthropologists who focused on the Bedouin's nomadism, culture and tribal life, often leading to orientalist portrayals of the community. The later 'modernist' approach, which developed in the 1970s and 1980s and is still deployed by some today, shifted the interest towards the transformations of the Bedouin caught in the process of sedentarization. As Yiftachel (2008:2) observes, within this approach, the issue of urban settlement, as well as social, political, economic and family changes have been scrutinized in detail. Here, the Bedouin (referred to commonly as the 'Negev Bedouin') have been portrayed as a 'coherent entity, identified with a piece of territory' (Ratcliffe et al. *ibid.*:9). Such a reading undermined the group's ties with other Bedouin communities that were displaced beyond the borders of the state, or with other Palestinians inhabiting the occupied territories, and portrayed the community as isolated and distinct. A similar process, as Parizot details (2001), took place in the official discourses and Israeli legal

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<sup>62</sup> The Bedouin of the Naqab have been the object of knowledge production continuously since the late Ottoman period (see: Ratcliffe et al. 2015). Here, however, I focus only on the post-1948 period.

<sup>63</sup> Amnon Barzilai, The Bedouin Intifada: It's Not If, but When <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/business/the-bedouin-intifada-it-s-not-if-but-when-1.123473>, May 25, 2004. Accessed 14 November 2015

system that differentiated the Bedouin from other groups, and subsequently led to the Bedouin's 'ethnicization'.<sup>64</sup>

These paradigms were to be questioned from the 1990s onward, when more critical approaches emerged, emphasizing both patterns of the Bedouin's marginalization and the group's earlier-dismissed agency (Ratcliffe et al. *ibid*:10; Yiftachel *ibid*:2). Indeed, in recent years, the Bedouin have attracted the attention of international and local scholars across disciplines, often challenging essentialist representations of the group, and pointing to their dynamic and shifting self-identifications. Significantly, among these scholars have been several Bedouin academics who, as some would argue, are reclaiming the voice of the Bedouin community that had been silenced before. The Bedouin scholars have brought with them, among other things, gender perspectives and critical re-readings of the Bedouin's past and present (see: Nasasra 2012, 2014, 2015; Abu-Rabia 2011, 2015; Abu-Rabia-Queder 2007a, 2007b, 2009, 2015; Abu-Saad 2010). Despite the importance of this development, it nonetheless has to be acknowledged that the position and number of these 'indigenous scholars', as they are often referred to, is marginal, up to the present time.

In his previously quoted 2008 article, Oren Yiftachel, a political geographer and activist, called for a new paradigm to study the Bedouin of the Naqab. Having summarized the 'state of the art' of the scholarship on the Bedouin, Yiftachel proposed a perspective that would acknowledge the Bedouin as indigenous people, existing in 'gray spaces' of the settler colonial state. This focus on the indigeneity of the Bedouin and the settler-colonial nature of Israel was path-breaking, as they had rarely been studied before in the Bedouin context in a systematic manner.<sup>65</sup> Indeed, whether as a result of Yiftachel's call or not, in recent years a large body of

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<sup>64</sup> As Parizot observes, such a top-down categorization of the Bedouin had an impact on the self-representations of the Bedouin themselves, who internalized the ethnic label of 'Bedouin' (*bedu*), and rarely spoke as 'Arabs' or 'Palestinians'. I discuss how this has recently changed later in the chapter.

<sup>65</sup> Israeli scholars (Frantzman, Yahel, Kark 2012) who reject the depictions of the Bedouin as 'indigenous peoples' trace back the usage of the concept in scholarship on the Naqab, arguing that the term only appeared in the late 1990s in the texts of individual scholars (Abu-Saad 1997), and came to be used more systematically in the 2000s by scholar-activists such as Yiftachel and Kedar. Frantzman et al. argue that the recourse to the concept of 'indigenous people' has no historical validity, and merely reflects a political strategy deployed by certain academics involved in the Bedouin struggle against the state. In addition to the article, Professor Kark, an Israeli historian, gave an 'expert opinion' in the Israeli District Court in 2010, where she argued that the Bedouin had been nomads until 1921, thereby undermining the validity of the al-Ukbi family's land claims.

literature on the Bedouin has emerged within the field of 'Palestinian studies', using the lens of settler-colonialism and the threats it poses to the indigenous population, as conceptualized by Wolfe (2006). This approach, which aims to re-write the previous readings of the Bedouin's history and culture, was accompanied by a shift in naming. 'Negev' in the writings of many scholars has been replaced by its Arabic name 'Naqab', and the Bedouin have begun to be referred to as the 'Palestinian Bedouin' or 'indigenous Bedouin', among other terms.

The growing importance of the field of critical Bedouin studies has been marked by three international conferences on the Naqab Bedouin organized by the same network of scholars, first held in February 2010 at the University of Exeter, followed by April 2015 at Columbia University, and lastly in October 2015 again in Exeter<sup>66</sup>. As a result of the first two-day conference held in 2010, a volume quoted extensively in this section, 'The Naqab Bedouin and Colonialism. New Perspectives', edited by Ratcliffe and others, was published in 2015. The book critically assesses the previous paradigms and modes of knowledge production on the Bedouin, exposing their orientalist, modernist and developmental biases. The aim of the contributors, as explained in the introduction, is to locate the Bedouin within the workings of the settler colonial project, while at the same time going beyond static representations of the community, to show that the Bedouin's 'identity, claim-making and frames of agency' are 'multiple ambiguous, and complex' (Ratcliffe et al. *ibid*:14). As such, the authors distance themselves both from the previous colonial representations of the Bedouin as well as the knowledge produced by the NGOs that is shaped, to a large extent, by the grammar of advocacy and its specific logic.

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<sup>66</sup> I presented my work in the third workshop held in Exeter on 4 October 2015, 'Subaltern Agency and Resistance in Settler Colonial Contexts: The Case of the Naqab Bedouin'. Being sympathetic to the new wave of 'decolonizing' scholarship on the Bedouin, I also adhere to the Arabic naming of places (hence Naqab, instead of Negev).

### *Human Rights Advocacy*

Indeed, as Ratcliffe (2015) and others observe, the knowledge of the Bedouin has been increasingly mediated through the work of NGOs, which have mushroomed in Israel in particular in the post-Oslo period since 1993 (see Chapter 4). Amara (2015:180) additionally documents how in this field the framing of the Bedouin and their struggle has shifted from neutral depictions such as ‘the Bedouin’ and ‘the Negev’, to the deployment of terms that emphasize the Palestinian identity of the community. As such, in the texts and other published materials of NGOs in the 2000s, Hebrew names were often replaced with their Arabic equivalents or mixed versions (Beer el-Sebe, Naqab; or Negev/Naqab), and the label ‘Bedouin’ was accompanied by adjectives such as Arab, Palestinian and indigenous.

International advocacy for the Bedouin cause has been undertaken largely by two domestic NGOs: the Negev Coexistence Forum For Civic Equality (NCF), set up in 1997 as a Jewish-Arab initiative dedicated exclusively to the struggle of the Bedouin and their quest for civil equality and rights; and Adalah, an Arab organization established in 1996 to promote and defend the rights of Palestinians in Israel. Their turn towards the supranational arena stemmed from a lack of faith in the domestic legal system, and was additionally enabled by the fact that Israel had ratified a number of international human rights conventions in the early 1990s (Amara 2015:176).

The internationalization of the Bedouin struggle gained impetus in the mid-2000s, when both the NCF and Adalah brought the issue to various UN bodies, highlighting the indigenous status of the Bedouin population. For example, in an unprecedented move, in July 2005 the NCF presented a report to the UN Working Group on Indigenous Populations, and ultimately submitted a formal request for the recognition of the Bedouin as an indigenous people. The report, titled ‘Bedouins and the Rights of Indigenous People’, had been prepared by Israeli academics and activists, and was presented at the working group by a Bedouin woman.<sup>67</sup> The

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<sup>67</sup> While the reports are prepared by NGO members and are consulted on, most often with Israeli scholars and experts, it is the members of the Bedouin community themselves that usually present them in person at the UN and other fora. For example, Khalil al-Amour, a Bedouin activist working for the NCF and Adalah acknowledged that he had been ‘touring’ around the world teaching international audiences, as he put it, about the plight of

report,<sup>68</sup> like others that would follow later, emphasizes that the Bedouin's goals are to 'attain equality and full rights as citizens of a democratic state', and to 'preserve their culture and traditional way of life'. The indigenous status of the Bedouin is established here by listing the traditional traits that the community has preserved - their language ('Bedouin dialect'), their religion and their 'social, cultural, economic and political characteristics' - and also by proclaiming their distinction both from the dominant Jewish society and from the Palestinian minority in Israel (NCF 2006:8-9). In light of this representation, the Bedouin's demands as articulated in the report are largely narrowed down to the maintenance of their 'indigenous culture' and the recognition of the Bedouin villages so that their traditional and rural lifestyle can be preserved (NCF *ibid*: 29-30).

Since 2005, submitting shadow reports to the various UN committees and working groups and sending representatives to attend the UN sessions have been the dominant strategies of the NCF to gain support from abroad for the Bedouin struggle. In an act of symbolic recognition of the NCF's work, in 2013 the organization was granted a Special Consultative Status with the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). Similar efforts have been undertaken by Adalah, which has been, in parallel to and sometimes in collaboration with the NCF, submitting their own reports and briefings to UN committees. Both organizations have also been targeting the EU, taking part in various seminars held in the European Parliament, and testifying regarding the Praver Plan, among other issues, before the EU Parliament subcommittee on human rights. In addition, in July 2012, Adalah launched a social media campaign against the Praver Plan using the slogan 'I am invisible because you refuse to see me', which attracted the coverage of international media.

Unsurprisingly, the growing presence of the Bedouin in the global arena - as a result of the concerted efforts of domestic NGOs along with their Bedouin partners - has also brought the issue to the attention of international human rights groups. In March 2008 for example, Human Rights Watch (HRW) issued a report entitled 'Off the Map', documenting in detail the violations

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'indigenous peoples in Israel'. In one of our conversations, al-Amour claimed that the Bedouin were sent to speak in the transnational arena for reasons of credibility and authenticity.

<sup>68</sup> The full text of the report is available online:

<http://weblaw.haifa.ac.il/he/Faculty/Kedar/lecdb/landregime/118.pdf> accessed 12 January 2016

of the Bedouin's land and housing rights committed by Israel. The report, meticulous and rich in data, has become an important source of knowledge, referenced in many academic works. Besides the report, HRW and Amnesty International alike have issued a number of press releases condemning the demolition of Bedouin houses and other discriminatory policies carried out by Israel. Both organizations forcefully opposed the Praver Plan, warning against the dispossession and displacement it would bring, and calling on the state to halt its implementation.<sup>69</sup> Due to the active campaigning of these groups as well as the domestic NGOs mentioned earlier, the plight of the Bedouin community and the threats they face - transmitted through reports, briefings, press releases and recommendations - today seems to have indeed reached the global consciousness, going beyond the circles of politicians and rights activists.<sup>70</sup>

## **8.2 Bedouin Tours and Hospitality: 'You need to see the real life'**

'This is Israel's logic. If they care so much about nature, why did they uproot not only people but also 4500 olive trees belonging to this land?' With these words, pointing to the bare ground where olive trees used to grow, Aziz, an activist and son of the sheikh of al-Araqib, explained the JNF's forestation project to a group of French engineers visiting the village one day in May 2012. The project, sold to the public as 'ensuring environmental soundness',<sup>71</sup> aims to plant what is called the 'Ambassador's Forest' on the land of Al-Araqib. The removal of the olive trees was clear proof, Aziz emphasized, that Israel's real goal was to keep the Bedouin off the land, and not to protect the environment. To further illustrate the destruction carried out by the state, Aziz took the foreign group around the almost empty village, pointing out remnants of the life that had been there before the cycle of demolitions started in July 2010: fragments of a house foundation, broken pipes sticking out of the ground, and sprouts of olive trees that, after

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<sup>69</sup> For example: HRW issued a press release on 30 August 2013, *Israel: Bedouin Facing Mass Evictions From Their Land*. Available online: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2013/08/30/israel-bedouin-facing-mass-evictions-their-land>; Amnesty International issued, among other things, a briefing on 20 April 2013, *Israel: Knesset urged not to pass law that would forcibly evict tens of thousands of Negev/Naqab Bedouin*. Available online: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/MDE15/008/2013/en/> accessed 7 February 2016

<sup>70</sup> For example, a large number of British musicians, actors and public figures signed the petition against the Praver Plan, circulating on the Guardian among other places.

<sup>71</sup> <http://www.jnf.org/work-we-do/our-projects/forestry-ecology/>

being razed, had started to regrow. Finally, Aziz took the French visitors to the cemetery that now marked the centre of the village. The cemetery had been built in 1914, and the dates on the gravestones showed that people had been buried there ever since, said Aziz. All this tangible evidence was presented to the group to let them see that the people of al-Araqib had a historical and continuous relationship with the place, contrary to the state's claims.

The scene described here is not unique; every year, hundreds of people come to al-Araqib and other Bedouin villages to see the effects of the state's policies on the ground, and to learn from the residents about their struggle and their everyday lives. Unlike in the previous section, where knowledge on the Bedouin's plight has been produced and transmitted to the world through the work of academia, NGOs, human rights reports and experts' statements, here, the knowledge appears to be given to visitors in a direct, non-mediated way. In other words, through an encounter, audiences are offered entry to the lived realities of people rather than their representations (Clarke 2000). The visitors learn not only about the Bedouin's struggle, but also about the meanings, experiences and consequences it carries for the residents of the Naqab. Allen describes similar efforts that attempt to 'give access to an authentic experience and truth' (2009:16) in her study of Palestinians' political deployment of images of pain and suffering. Drawing on the work of Mazzarella (2006), Allen refers to these representations as the 'politics of immediation'. While it is 'real life' that is exposed, it is often human rights NGOs that facilitate this exposure. As Allen writes, these are the NGOs that 'host journalists and foreign delegations (...)' and offer them 'tours to give them [a] firsthand, eyewitness understanding of life under occupation' (2009:165). In this section, I thus depart from what is written and recorded by scholars and rights advocates, to what is told and staged by the Bedouin themselves.

Politicized tours that aim to show Israel/Palestine in ways that do not conform to, or that challenge, the dominant Zionist narrative are indeed common today. They are organized by individuals (Clarke 2000) or, more often, by NGOs and social enterprises that turn to what Buda (2015) calls 'affective tourism'. In the Naqab, groups have recently been brought to the Bedouin settlements largely by NGOs advocating for the Bedouin cause (namely the previously-mentioned NCF or Adalah), and also through a private initiative of Bedouin and Israeli activists

called 'Bedouin Hospitality'. Due to these efforts, the Bedouin villages - or at least some of them - are recipients of large numbers of domestic and international groups of journalists, students, diplomats and tourists.<sup>72</sup> During their stay, usually lasting between a couple of hours and a couple of days, visitors learn from the residents about their history and current situation, walk around the land, take photographs, and taste Bedouin food and coffee. Through these encounters, the visitors learn about both the problems faced by the Bedouin and the potential solutions, and with their newly-gained knowledge and exposure to the disturbing reality, they are expected to become mobilized, in their own terms, for the Bedouin struggle.

The developments in Israel in a way parallel the recent global trend of 'poverty tourism' that has turned impoverished or conflict-torn parts of cities of the Global South into tourist attractions. Often arranged by travel agencies and accompanied by guides, tourists visit slums, townships and favelas, with the promise of being exposed to 'real or authentic experience' (Rolfes 2009: 422). Rolfes (2009, 2010) observes that the focus of such tours is not necessarily on poverty and hardship, but rather on people's capacity to deal with them through creativity, commercial endeavours and informal economic activities. Nevertheless, it is the marginalization of these places and their residents that is exploited in order to sell them as travel destinations. Yet, trips to remote or troubled locations cannot be seen only as the outcome of a marketing success that capitalizes on others' suffering. Witnessing and joining people's struggles in distant parts of the world are also manifestations of what Moynagh (2008:3-4) calls 'political tourism', which contributes to 'anti-imperial activism'. Indeed, as Koensler (2012:10) observes, '[t]he bodily experience of travelling, 'observing through one's own eyes' and 'being there' are important elements for solidarity activism'. Palestine has become probably one of the most prominent places where international solidarity activism plays out, with activists from around the globe joining Palestinian protests, monitoring checkpoints and helping to rebuild demolished houses, among other things.

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<sup>72</sup> For example, in 2012 alone, Adalah organized 78 'educational study tours' around the Naqab, bringing 1500 people to the villages. Visitors, as the annual report states, 'included donors, international organizations and networks, journalists, the UK Task Force, embassy representatives, local and international university students, and faith-based groups'. See the full text: <http://www.adalah.org/uploads/oldfiles/Public/files/English/Publications/Annual%20Report/Annual-Report-Adalah-2012.pdf>



### *Displaying 'authenticity'*

Tours around the Bedouin settlements by and large follow a similar script. A visit to a village normally starts in a *shieq* (the central tent and meeting place) or in one of the houses, where guests are welcomed and offered coffee. After a brief introduction, either the sheikh of a village or some local activists go on to present an overview of the conflict between the Bedouin and the state, and the premises of the Praver Plan. The visitors are later guided around the village's grounds, and the general information is enriched by personal narratives of the people's history in the land, their memories, and accounts of villagers' particular sorrows and struggles. Some tours are dedicated to only a single village, where guests spend a couple of hours or an afternoon; other tours take visitors around the Naqab, and are punctuated by short visits to different locations. Many of the tours end with a meal shared between the villagers and the guests, where typically bread, *labneh* and *maqluba*<sup>73</sup> are served as 'traditional Bedouin food'. Besides these purely educational tours for those who wish to learn about the Bedouin struggle, the Negev Coexistence Forum additionally organizes, on special occasions - often marked by a recent or impending demolition - what are dubbed as 'solidarity visits' of domestic and international activists. During these events, visitors witness residents' testimonies, and often join them in symbolic acts of planting olive trees (Koenlsler 2012, McKee 2013) and setting up new shacks, or stay in places that are under threat of demolition or forced transfer. Despite the appearance of conviviality, communication between the international activists and the villagers is usually limited, and is mediated through the NGO staff members due to the language barrier: the Bedouin speak in Hebrew and are translated by NGO members or any Israeli activists present. That is why for most, solidarity visits are once-off events, rather than moments where personal relationships are forged or strengthened.

While the organization of tours relies largely on the NGOs, the villagers who collaborate with them agree that it is an important strategy to gain visibility, and make people aware of the challenges that the Bedouin face. 'Anybody who comes does a service [*khidma*] to us', as Aziz

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<sup>73</sup> A casserole of rice, meat and vegetables.

from al-Araqib put it. Aziz, often in charge of guiding visitors, argued that international pressure was necessary to alter Israeli policies; and with the growing number of people learning about the Bedouin's situation, it was more likely that this would happen. Aziz admitted that al-Araqib, more than other villages, recognized the power of 'PR' and thus made sure, not only through welcoming visitors but also through a strong media presence and cooperation with more powerful actors, that the world would know that 'what is happening in Gaza also happens here'. Others emphasized that, on the top of the political aspect, it was also important to show outsiders the 'human face' of the Bedouin: to make the international community aware of their lifestyle and needs, and undo the negative perceptions of them as criminals, squatters and uncivilized people. Atiya, head of the local committee of Khashem Zannah and a proponent of Bedouin tourism, expressed this as follows: 'If people come [and] see the real Bedouin life, they will understand why we don't agree to move (...) For sure, [then] they will change their minds'.

It is for precisely these reasons that Atiya was among the founders of the 'Bedouin Hospitality' initiative, a project which has been running since 2012, with the aim of introducing tourists to the 'Bedouin culture and way of life', and simultaneously, to expose the state's discrimination and the existential threat it carries for the traditional lifestyle. The initiative started off as the idea of a few Bedouin and Israeli activists, and was later taken up by several Bedouin households across different villages. Unlike the tours run by NGOs, the project not only has educational merits, but also functions as a social enterprise; for, while it reveals 'the truth about Bedouin', it is also a 'way to earn money' for the Bedouin who otherwise find little income opportunities, as Atiya explained to me. The website of 'Bedouin Hospitality' explicitly states that the enterprise seeks to 'bridge the need for marketing for the indigenous Bedouin tourist businesses',<sup>74</sup> and this is why a wide range of 'authentic Bedouin tourist attractions' are offered.

Atiya's house in Khashem Zannah is one of the places to which visitors can come and spend several days with a Bedouin family and get closer to life in the desert. Apart from taking part in intimate family life for a short period, eating Bedouin food and listening to family stories,

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<sup>74</sup> <http://www.bedouinhospitality.com/> accessed 20 January 2016

visitors can also take camel rides, and go on trips to attraction sites around the Naqab. Among these are, for example, *Sidreh*, the women's weaving project in the Bedouin township of Lakiya, which offers tourists insights into the art of weaving as performed by 'traditional Bedouin women'. Through this experience, tourists can learn about Bedouin crafts and culture, and engage in 'open dialogue with local women to learn about their lives, dreams and motivation', as the website advertises. Another recommended spot is the Desert Daughter company in Tel Sheva, which produces herbal products based on formulas taken from traditional Bedouin medicine and healing. The marketing material of the brand tells the story of Mariam, who runs the company using the knowledge of herbs and natural ingredients (such as camel's milk and black cumin) that she acquired as a girl while living in the desert with her grandmother. Having carefully preserved this indigenous knowledge, today Mariam's goal is to produce 'authentic Bedouin cosmetics', 'in the spirit of the Bedouin tradition'<sup>75</sup>. In these and other cases, the tours bring potential customers to Bedouin small businesses, but they also aim to display traditional Bedouin culture, crafts and skills, and show them as preserved and living, rather than belonging to the past.

In the context of tourism, MacCannell (1973) labels efforts to reveal the allegedly real and intimate spaces normally inaccessible to outsiders (1973:595) as 'staged authenticity'. This does not imply that the images and settings are necessarily fake, but rather that they are deliberately crafted and presented to convey a real, original and pure culture, or way of life, in line with tourists' expectations. 'What is taken to be real might, in fact, be a show that is based on the structure of reality', argues MacCannell (1973:593). In these representations staged for tourists, orientalist tropes play an important role. Especially in the context of the so-called Arab World, holiday trips and expeditions are advertised as being an entry into an exotic and authentic culture, often relying on 'images of native people(s) engaged in traditional practices' (Feighery 2012:271), but also on pictures of the desert, camels, and mysterious veiled women. Among all this, images of Bedouins are often present. As Eickelman notes (1998:39), the Bedouin have traditionally been a favoured object of the western-orientalist gaze. From popular literature to anthropology, photographic exhibitions and museum displays, the Bedouin have been

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<sup>75</sup> <http://www.isralexporter.com/desert-daughter> accessed 20 January 2016

presented as desert people, primitive and wild, but also moral, honourable and romantic (Eickelman 1998, Hawker 2002). Similarly, in the Naqab context, the Bedouin have been portrayed as 'noble savages' as far back as the early XXth century literature of European travellers, traders, writers and missionaries, as well as later in the texts of colonial administrators (Ratcliffe et al 2014:4-5).

Interestingly, in the above-discussed encounters between the local populations and the largely international visitors, the Bedouin themselves deploy these orientalist representations (particularly in the Bedouin Hospitality initiative, but also, to lesser extent, in the NGOs' 'activist' tours). In their constant references to the 'real', 'authentic' and 'traditional' Bedouin (and their lifestyle), the villagers project themselves as being 'living history'.<sup>76</sup> They often paint an image of the community as pure, existing outside the processes of urbanization and modernization, and living the lives of their ancestors, attuned to nature and the desert, capable of enduring the most difficult conditions. The words of Atiya, who guided me around Khashem Zennah, grasp these reifications well: 'This is our way of life, our freedom, our values. It has been like this for centuries; we haven't changed much'.

### *Challenging the dominant representations of the Bedouin villages and life*

While creating an image of the Bedouin's culture as static and bounded, the villagers partially replicate the orientalist representations that the Israeli state has crafted for them: as timeless, exotic and gritty people, endlessly drinking tea and coffee, and offering exceptional hospitality to visitors (see Chapter 3). While this may on the surface appear to be self-orientalism, it does not mean, however, that the Bedouin have internalized the state's script and simply reproduced its rhetoric. Rather, these simplified and reifying depictions seem to play, among other things, a role of 'strategic essentialism',<sup>77</sup> defined by Spivak as a pragmatic recourse to

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<sup>76</sup> This expression comes from Bedouin Hospitality's website:

<http://www.bedouinhospitality.com/#!attractions/cbrp> accessed 10 January 2016

<sup>77</sup> Similar dynamics have been observed in Chapter 4, where the Bedouin's construction of place-identity has been discussed. Hence, I do not claim that the representations described here are crafted and deployed merely for international consumption.

essentialist categories by the subaltern to advance their political interests. If anthropology has long ago abandoned an understanding of culture as coherent and circumscribed, many indigenous and marginalized groups nonetheless construct their 'essence' as a tool in struggles for recognition and survival (Warren, Jackson 2003:9).<sup>78</sup> Here, emphasizing the Bedouin's authenticity and unique way of life in the desert serves, I suggest, to convey a particular clear-cut image of the group and, in a nutshell, to give an indication of the threats posed by the state's policies. Through these black-and-white representations of an indigenous, traditional community, the Bedouin not only gain the sympathy of audiences not familiar with the larger political context, but also attract tourists seeking originality, simplicity, ethnic difference, and adventure. In fact, processes of commodification of culture and ethnicity have been discussed in length in the literature, showing how the exploitation of tourism opportunities has in some instances contributed to indigenous groups' survival or self-affirmation, or to new, more positive representations of them (Willett 2007:18-19).

Even more importantly, however, the Bedouin's welcoming visitors into their villages offers much more than just the essentialist accounts. The actual encounters provide an alternative to mainstream Israeli tourism, which promotes the Bedouin as the country's exotic attraction, while silencing the political dimension of their current condition. While Israeli tourism plays on romanticized images and shows the Bedouin as living freely in the desert, the Bedouin actors show how little freedom they enjoy, and how many state-imposed constraints they have to endure. Importantly, these accounts are presented not only during organized tours, but also to individuals who, for different reasons, on different occasions, happen to visit the Bedouin villages. These visitors, in all their variety, are seen as potential 'ambassadors', as many put it, for the Bedouin cause, and are often filled with facts and images which they are expected to transmit further. This was true in my own case too, where my initial entry into different villages or my first encounters with people were always marked by informal 'tours', where the particularities and history of the place were explained. At an early stage of the fieldwork, my status as a researcher was no different than that of a 'tourist' coming for a few hours' visit, and

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<sup>78</sup> Coming from another perspective, anthropologist David Scott (2003:101) poses an important question that is worth reflecting on: 'For whom is culture partial, unbounded, heterogeneous, hybrid, and so on, the anthropologist or the native?'

hence I was approached in a very similar manner: with information and stories, many of which I later heard repeated to different audiences. This is why what I recall here is based both on my participant observation in the organized events, and on my own 'tourist' experiences.

So what do the tourists see when they tour around the Bedouin locations? First, on a more general level, while showing people around the Naqab, the 'guides' try to sensitize audiences to the salient discrepancy between the Jewish and Arab settlements. Two neighbouring towns - the impoverished Bedouin Tel Sheva, and the prosperous Jewish Omer - are often invoked as visible examples of the discrimination against Arab citizens. In this vein, Nasser, who one day offered me a car ride from his village, al-Sirra, back to Beer Sheva, continually pointed at the landscape, as the best illustration of the Bedouin's plight:

You see the green irrigated fields on the right side? They are Jewish. You see the dry soil on the left? It hasn't seen a drop of water since the last rain. These dead fields belong to Arabs. Why can the state deliver unlimited amounts of water on one side of the road, and not on the other?

Beyond the general comparisons, in each village the particular threats and obstacles are explained by the villagers. For example, in al-Araqib, life before and after the demolitions - as mentioned in the opening of this section - takes a central place in the residents' accounts. Aziz and the others guide their visitors around the tangible marks of the state's harmful policies, and expose traces of previous life, preserved in small details (such as the newly emerging sprouts of razed olive trees), but also through old photographs of the village, showing concrete houses and a lively, inhabited place. While doing so, they point to the deficiencies the residents have to deal with today, but they also show how, beyond the material losses, the demolitions have taken away 'normal' village life. In Wadi al-Na'am, another of the unrecognized villages, the stories shared with the guests, researchers and journalists revolve around the hazardousness of the area. Visitors are taken to the electricity plant situated in the middle of the village, and hear about the neighbouring petrochemical factories, the military munitions factory and the oil terminal, as well as the high voltage pylons and telephone lines crossing through the village but

not serving the residents (see Chapter 4).<sup>79</sup> Or finally, in al-Sirra, guests listen to Noura describing in detail her own experience of having her house demolished, to learn - as Khalil al-Amour, one of the organizers of the tours explained - how people in the unrecognized villages 'live in fear and trauma'. Other villages that welcome visitors have their own landmarks and stories.

What comes to the fore in all these accounts is a focus on the different kinds of hardships that the Bedouin experience on daily basis: the visible evidence of discrimination as well as the mundane experiences of injustice, threats and fears. International visitors get to witness Bedouin life first-hand and listen to their stories, in both cases very different from the state's accounts. But just as importantly, through the Bedouin's representations, the everyday and personal are placed in the larger context, and in a historical perspective: they are explained through references to, among other things, the Nakba, the Prawer Plan, and the Bedouin's exclusion from the labour market.

I elaborate further on this in the following section, where I shed light on how the Bedouin not only display, but also seek to contextualize their current dispossession for the outside world. In doing so, they present themselves as a particular type of subject, pointing to the multiplicity of their self-identifications and self-definitions. While these representations are clearly multi-layered, and differ depending on who is talking, and to whom, and in which context, I want to shed light on some recurrent themes that are deployed by the Bedouin in their efforts to make themselves understood by the international public, especially in the context of mobilization against the Prawer Plan.

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<sup>79</sup> Having experienced such a 'tour' myself from one of the local committee members, I later learned that human rights activists and journalists were regularly taken to the same spots, and had the same anecdotes recounted to them.

### 8.3 The Prayer Won't Pass! Seizing 'permission to narrate'

In one of our conversations, Hakma, a charismatic woman from al-Araqib, whose persona has attracted a lot of attention from international journalists, complained about the severe bodily pain she suffered from. Usually vibrant and joking, that evening Hakma soberly sat in front of the tent, looking exhausted. She believed that the pain was a result of the permanent stress with which she lived: uncertain about the village's future, worrying for her children, and feeling abandoned by her family, who rarely visited al-Araqib, preferring their stable life in Rahat. Showing her aching back and legs, she reminded me of a Palestinian woman from Allen's (2009) writing, who exposes her suffering body as an allegory of the Palestinian plight, as if the physical pain of an individual illustrated the pain of the whole nation. However, when I suggested to Hakma that she should probably get some rest and be less active for a few days, Hakma smiled, saying that she did not want people to know about her pain. 'We need to show that we are strong, not weak', said Hakma, alluding to her family members from Rahat, who were afraid to support the struggle in al-Araqib, and hence were seen by her as 'weak'.

Her words very clearly reveal that how the Bedouin speak and present themselves to others is not merely accidental and spontaneous. Just as scenes in the Bedouin villages are strategically displayed, so too are only certain aspects of people's subjectivities highlighted in their 'performances' in front of the audiences. For example, in Hakma's case, she wants the people of al-Araqib, and the Bedouin in general, to be seen as 'strong, not weak'. Similarly, other Bedouin who guide the foreign groups around their villages, despite pointing out the destruction, loss, and pain, rarely present themselves as passive victims. Rather, the images of rough living conditions and demolished houses are juxtaposed with narratives of *sumud* (steadfastness) - how people endure, bypass obstacles and continue with their lives, against all odds (see Chapter 4). That is why Hakma would regularly be heard to say that she was not going to leave the village, even if it meant living in a grave. She and the others who still live in the village on a daily basis present their mere presence in al-Araqib as acts of steadfastness: 'We are steadfast, we are steadfast, as long as there is thyme and olives', as the popular anthem of al-Araqib goes. Showing steadfastness is also why in al-Sirra, Khalil usually takes guests around



the village to show them the residents' creative ways of dealing with the lack of infrastructure and services. These are signs, in Khalil's own words, that the 'Bedouin people don't give up'.<sup>80</sup> These various articulations of *sumud* are not meant as a static representation of the Bedouin's unique characteristics and capacity to live in harsh conditions, but rather, they constitute a political narrative of resistance, where attachment to the land makes people remain steadfast against all odds. While *sumud*, as discussed earlier, is practiced, it is also, as the examples of Hakma and others reveal, a discourse that is staged to convey a particular image and understanding of the group, countering the dominant narrative.<sup>81</sup> By narrating *sumud*, the villagers reveal their actual strength, humanity and refusal to succumb (Sayigh 1994), evoking images of non-violent resistance. Even more importantly, they also point to the Bedouin's self-identification with the larger Palestinian nation and cause (as *sumud* is seen as a typically Palestinian repertoire of action), and as such, undermine what is often perceived as the Bedouin's alleged 'uniqueness' and separation from the Palestinian struggle. 'We are Palestinian Arabs, we haven't denied our nationality (...)', as Sheikh Sayyah tirelessly repeated to those listening. In this context, he and others illustrated the predicament of the Bedouin in the Naqab with references to the 'ongoing Nakba', comparing their situation to that of the Palestinians in the occupied territories, as Chapter 4 has also shown.<sup>82</sup>

Of course, 'Palestinian steadfastness' is not the only idiom through which the Bedouin decipher the particularity of their plight for international audiences. Well aware that their case is little known, the villagers, who speak as 'Palestinian Arabs', deploy, often in the same breath, other vocabularies through which they locate themselves in a wider, global context. Najib, who liked to call himself a 'spokesperson of Wadi al-Na'am', expressed the sense of being misunderstood by the outside world with the following words: 'People don't know our history, some don't

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<sup>80</sup> The wi-fi routers and satellite dishes belonging to the villagers were also proof, according to Khalil, that the Bedouin were not premodern people of the desert, as the state depicted them, but like anybody else sought development of their villages.

<sup>81</sup> Khalili (2007:103) describes *sumud* as also being 'a mode of commemorating past events'.

<sup>82</sup> The 'Palestinian' framing of the issue is of course not crafted for international audiences, but reflects the politicization of the Bedouin community and its shifting identifications (Parizot 2001, Ratcliffe et al. 2015) Here, however, I am interested in how this self-representation is played out at the transnational setting. In other words, while Chapter 4 discusses what could be seen as 'narrative constructions of the self', here the focus is on narratives 'in the contexts of their telling' (Polletta et.al 2011:110).

think we are Palestinians, some are surprised that we are Israeli citizens (...) there have been so many fabrications (...)'.

This is why, in order to become intelligible the villagers often spoke in terms of indigeneity, and drew parallels between themselves and other colonized peoples. Activists collaborating with the NGOs in particular compared their plight to that of Native Americans. For example, Sheikh Sayyah sounded like he could have been referring to Native Americans when he complained that the state's resettlement project had made some Bedouin in the townships '(...) addicted to cigarettes, alcohol and sugar'. Similarly, Khalil from al-Sirra tirelessly repeated to visiting groups that the source of the Bedouin's misery was colonialism, 'which takes the indigenous people's land and ignore[s] their rights'. While some activists deployed the concept of 'indigenous peoples' as defined by the UN and the International Labour Organization (ILO) the majority of the villagers, not being familiar with this framework, casually referred to themselves as 'native' or 'original' (*asliyun*) residents of the land, emphasizing their emotional bond with the place. This is precisely the 'lesson' that Atiya from Khashem Zannah told me she was giving to the visitors:

I explain to them that Khashem Zannah has a long history (...) Our situation is different to that of many Bedouins who are refugees; they are not on their land. Our ancestors have been here since the Ottoman times (...) and since that time, we have never abandoned this place. Not even once. We don't have the right to do it (...). Land is like a daughter; who abandons his child? (...) This is our way of life; all the important things in our family happened in this place. If we left the land, we would not be Bedouins anymore. It is like with a bird: if you put it in a cage, it dies.

In this quote, the discourse of indigenization is spelled out, not to explain Israel's measures of dispossession, but to illustrate the people's own historical relationship with the land, which is fixed and independent of the state's changing policies. Still, on other occasions, the villagers explained their subordination in more general terms, for example by comparing it to the plight of minorities globally, or by detailing violations of their civil rights: being deprived of everything that Jewish citizens took for granted. Invoking their citizenship status and how little it meant was a recurrent theme in many narratives. The words of Hakma, who complained about the 'trouble' of being an Arab citizen in Israel, illustrate this well. In one of our conversations,

Hakma argued that the fact of their being Israeli meant that nobody liked the Bedouin: neither the Israelis, nor the Palestinians in the occupied territories, nor Arabs in general. 'If we go to Hebron, they think we must have a lot of money because we're coming from Israel. In Jordan it is the same, people don't trust us. They think we profit from being Israeli citizens (...)'.

To demonstrate the absurdity of these accusations, she pointed laughingly to her make-shift tent and to the razed earth of the village, whose appearance and living conditions clearly refuted the idea of the Bedouin's citizenship giving them a privileged status. To dismantle this distrust of the Bedouin, Hakma, like others, tried to show that al-Araqib's residents, and more generally the Bedouin of the Naqab, were affected daily by Israel's policies in a similar manner to that of the Palestinians from the occupied territories. But these narratives were also making another point: that the Bedouin for better or worse were Israeli citizens, and demanded to be treated as such. This is the reason that these stories were often summed up in terms such as, 'we only want rights that are granted to others', or 'we are citizens, not an enemy'.

This assemblage of images and idioms that the Bedouin deploy to present themselves is not only visible in the encounters between villagers and their visitors. In the last section of this chapter, I would like to look in more detail at how they come to the fore in the recent organized efforts to reach international audiences through the 'Prayer Won't Pass Campaign'. Here, unlike in the situation of personal contact, the Bedouin could not rely on the non-mediated visibility of the place, which often speaks for itself. How, then, did the Bedouin provoke, affect and garner the sympathy of remote audiences that could not see the situation on the ground for themselves, and could not be moved by witnessing first-hand individual tragedies and suffering? How did the Bedouin *narrate* their plight? Or, in other words, what story of themselves did the Bedouin tell?

*'Al-Naqab is Palestinian, Arab and free' - internationalizing campaign against the Prayer Plan*

The aspect of narration is particularly important here. In his influential essay, 'Permission to Narrate' (1984), Edward Said argues that the Palestinians have been denied the opportunity to communicate their story to the world. Despite the fact that Israel's crimes are well documented

and that the Palestinians' suffering and loss are the objects of reports and resolutions, Palestinians are never there in their historicity (as 'Palestinian people') or in their actual lived present. Writing after Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982, Said urged his fellow Palestinians to write down their experiences, or what he called the 'narrative evidence'. According to Said, the power of a narrative lies in its capacity to represent people's own identities and history, and therefore to act as a form of discursive resistance that has the potential to alter the unshaken perception of Israel as 'a civilized, democratic country constitutively incapable of barbaric practices against Palestinians' (1984:28). The UN resolutions, no matter how important, cannot play the same function, as they do not build up a narrative. 'Facts do not at all speak for themselves, but require a socially acceptable narrative to absorb, sustain and circulate them', argues Said (1984:34). Against this backdrop, the struggle of the Palestinians is of course a struggle over land, but also over a narrative.

That 'sometimes gaining acceptance for the story *is* winning' (Polletta, Gardner 2015:534) is well documented in the literature on social movements. The importance of narratives for movements is crucial, both as a tool of mobilization for activists, and as a device to reach the wider public, gain support for the movement's claims, and eventually persuade decision-makers. To move, provoke reactions or change opinions, activists' stories may work better than listing abstract figures and numbers (Polletta 2006; Polletta, Chen 2012). Unsurprisingly then, not only movements but also subaltern actors with limited resources and channels of action often rely on story-telling to attract attention, to make themselves understood or to make their claims resonate. For the narratives to work, they need to be presented within certain 'frames': they need to make use of words and evoke images that potentially have a deep resonance with listeners. In order to move audiences, scholars argue, frames must, among other things, be coherent, clearly name the injustice, and draw lines between those who are affected by it and those who perpetrate it (Gamson 1992; Polletta, Gardner 2015).

As was shown in the first section, the Naqab Bedouin have until recently been given little space to share their narratives with the outside world, having most of the time been spoken for, misrepresented and mistrusted (even by fellow Palestinians). While the symbolic presence of the Palestinian cause in the global imagination is strong today, with actors ranging from social

movements to popular celebrities expressing their support, the Bedouin have largely been written out of this struggle. In popular understandings, the Bedouin have often been regarded as a separate ethnic group, with a unique culture and loyal attitudes towards the Israeli state. These perceptions, shaped among other things by Israeli divide and rule policies and scholarly work, have been taken up to some extent by the Bedouin themselves, who, afraid of the consequences, staged their claims as 'Bedouins from the Negev' rather than Palestinians. Even if after the First Intifada some Bedouins started to speak in public as Israeli Palestinians, in the late 1990s the term 'Negev Arabs' was the one most commonly deployed by the Bedouin in negotiations with the state (Parizot 2001; Sa'idi 1992).

Against this backdrop, the 2013 campaign by the Bedouin youth against the Praver Plan reveals interesting dynamics. Here, rather than scrutinizing its repertoire of action, organizational structures or members' profiles, I approach it as a particular moment of seizing the 'permission to narrate', and thus focus on its discursive dimension and its deployed frames. During the mobilization, which lasted from March 2013 until the suspension of the Praver Plan in December 2013, the Naqab Bedouin were able to collectively build their own representations (shifting from the previous ones) and to communicate them successfully to the outside world, which resulted in their unprecedented visibility in the international media, and solidarity events across the globe.

The main goal of the Praver Plan (as discussed in detail in Chapter 3) was to resettle the Bedouin remaining in unrecognized villages into governmental townships, a measure which, according to the calculations of NGOs, would affect up to 70,000 people. This forced urbanization would not only have relocated the Bedouin to overcrowded and impoverished towns against their will, but it would also, as Khalil believed, lead to a situation where in '5, 10 years after, you wouldn't see any Bedouins', as their distinct way of life would be lost in the urban setting. The widespread opposition to the Praver Plan among the Arab residents of the Naqab led to the organized efforts of the Naqab youth movement (*al-hirak al-shababi*) - in alliance with local committees from across the villages, and institutional bodies such as the National Steering Committee of the Arabs of the Negev - determined to prevent Israel's resettlement scheme from happening. While the campaign was initially played out in the

domestic setting, after two successful demonstrations that took place across historic Palestine on 15 July and 1 August 2013, the youth leaders decided to internationalize the cause and spread the protest beyond the borders of Palestine/Israel. Activists launched a Facebook page (which up to today has received over 5,000 'likes') and a website, both in English, to explain the Bedouin struggle to external audiences, gain supporters and mobilize them. There, among other things, the activists announced a third 'Day of Rage' (borrowing from the language of the Arab Spring) scheduled for 30 November 2013. The 'call for action' was further translated into 20 languages and disseminated widely in social media.

The call for action and the 'manifesto' of the Praver Won't Pass Campaign, written in English with an international public in mind, very clearly articulate who the Bedouin are, what is at stake in their struggle, and how the catastrophe ('another Nakba') can be prevented with the help of others. These texts from the group's website and other statements posted on social media together build a coherent narrative consisting of recurring idioms.<sup>83</sup>

First, in their self-representations the activists powerfully communicate an intrinsic relationship between the Bedouin and the bigger Palestinian cause. As a post on the group's Facebook page clearly stated: 'The rights of Palestinians everywhere [are] part and parcel and inseparable from the struggle in Al-Naqab'. The relationship is not only one of shared struggle, but also, more importantly, of people belonging to the same nation and enjoying the same collective identity. This is very clearly articulated in the passages where activists explain who they are, with words such as: 'Al-Naqab is Palestinian, Arab and free. Al-Naqab is part and parcel of our identity as a Palestinian collective'.<sup>84</sup> This shows that what the activists oppose is not Bedouin-specific discrimination, but 'ongoing injustices against Palestinian people'. There are no references in these texts to the 'Bedouin', but always to 'Palestinians' or 'Bedouin-Palestinians'.

Moreover, what is shared between residents of the Naqab and other Palestinians is not only a collective identity, but also a similarity in existential condition. It is clearly stated that despite

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<sup>83</sup> The call for action and a 'manifesto' of the Praver Won't Pass Campaign can be found here: <https://praverwontpass.wordpress.com/>. I additionally analyze statements posted on the campaign's Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/prawershallnotpass/?fref=ts> accessed 17 December 2015

<sup>84</sup> All the quotes come from the website of the Praver Won't Pass Campaign, unless stated otherwise.

differing legal systems, the Israeli objectives 'of confining Palestinian presence' are the same, whether within Israel, or in the West Bank, or in East Jerusalem; thus, the people across all these locations face the same threats and share similar experiences. With this in mind, the activists illustrate the enormous threat posed by the Praver Plan with references to the iconic events of 1948 (Nakba) which are probably the most prominent object of Palestinian commemoration, and a symbol of their plight (Khalili 2005). In an evocative comparison, the present-day resettlement plan is described as the biggest 'ethnic cleansing campaign' since 1948. It is precisely this framing of the state's plan as the 'prospect of another Nakba in al-Naqab' that, according to activists, made their campaign resonate strongly with various groups and individuals.

However, besides inscribing the Bedouin within the larger history of the Palestinians' suffering and struggle, the texts addressing external audiences also deploy discourses of indigenization, and underline the intrinsic relationship between the people and the land. The activists emphasize here that although their rights as indigenous people are violated, they will not and cannot be 'forsaken' because of the 'rooted, absolute and non-negotiable' bond between the people and the land of the Naqab.

Interestingly, while these rights are perceived as 'natural', stemming from the residents' organic and historical relationship with the place, they are also confirmed by the letter of international law. The activists refer, among other things, to the charter of the United Nations and the statements of the UN special rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples, which recognize the Bedouin (but not Palestinians as a whole) as an indigenous people. Other human rights violations committed by Israel in contravention of international law are also mentioned, and are further accompanied by examples of 'constitutional rights violations' that disrespect the Bedouin's rights as Israeli citizens. Relying heavily on the vocabularies and symbols of Palestinian nationalism (which can be seen in references to the Nakba, 'ethnic cleansing', and holding on to their land), but also referring to their indigenous status and the human rights violations perpetrated by the Israeli state, the Bedouin's claims resonate with Palestinians and with Palestinian supporters around the globe, and also with the broader global justice

movement. It is simultaneously a struggle of Palestinians, of indigenous peoples, and - although less emphasized here - of Arab citizens of Israel.

The 'Palestinian' frame seems especially crucial, as it meant that the call to join the struggle was transmitted first and foremost through the networks of the well-established Palestinian and pro-Palestinian movements. Although the youth activists built their own communication channels, they relied to a large degree on the networks of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement (BDS) and the International Solidarity Movement (ISM). Embracing the campaign against the Praver Plan, these and other movements gave credibility to the Bedouin struggle, legitimizing their claims and attracting new sympathizers, many of whom would previously have been unfamiliar with the Bedouin cause. As Fadi al-'Obra - one of the youth organizers of the campaign - acknowledged, the coordination with activists and the enthusiastic responses around the globe were possible largely because of the involvement of the BDS and the ISM in spreading the call. This is how the campaign started to take on a 'life of its own', as Fadi put it.

The results of the campaign indeed surpassed the expectations of the organizers. On the global level, the campaign sparked solidarity events across the globe, and the story of the Bedouin people fighting against their forced resettlement was covered widely in the international media. The 'Day of Rage' protests on 30 November 2013 took place in 24 countries and hundreds of cities, with thousands of participants. The immense international and domestic pressure eventually led to the suspension of the Praver Plan by the Knesset in December 2013. 'They [Israel] cannot ignore us anymore. They finally see us speaking out, and the whole world is with us. This is very powerful', one of the activists, who had been engaged in the Bedouin struggle for decades, told me in a phone conversation. At an academic conference in Exeter in October 2015, another prominent female activist from the Naqab, Amal Sana al-Hujooj, commented on the transformative power of the recent events for the Bedouin themselves: 'For the first time people say "we are Bedu al-Naqab", and they are proud of it!'

Undoubtedly, the Bedouin's recent mobilization is a successful example of the subaltern's efforts to internationalize their cause, communicate their story in their own words, and garner



the interest and sympathy of the global public. Nevertheless, its power to alter Israeli objectives in regard to the Naqab's residents should not be overestimated. Firstly, the Praver Plan was only halted, rather than cancelled; hence, its future remains unclear. Secondly, even more importantly, the Bedouin and their various allies seemed well aware that the resettlement project did not need to be 'legalized' in order to happen. During my fieldwork, when the Praver Plan was being intensively discussed, ordinary villagers, activists and NGO workers alike had little doubt that whether it was in the form of law or not, the policies of the Praver Plan would be carried out anyway.

#### **8.4 Conclusion:**

Since 2011 (Nasasra 2012:82) and especially during 2013, the Bedouin have been more and more visible in the transnational realm, with their cause being discussed by politicians and activists, and within UN and EU fora. This chapter has sought to show how, both through personal encounters and through informal channels of social media and networks of friendly movements, the Bedouin 'repackage their concerns and identities for access to wider audiences' (Warren, Jackson 2003:29). They do so, among other things, by relying on polyvalent frames through which they speak simultaneously as Palestinians, indigenous/native people, a minority, and Israeli citizens. At the same time, I have tried to demonstrate that the subaltern's strategies to become recognized, understood and supported may not be as much their own as they seem to be. Bob (2005) rightly observes that insurgent and marginalized groups often need to reframe their causes in order to fit in with the agendas and interests of their potential allies and donors. Nevertheless, Bob paints a picture of autonomous movements strategically adapting their vocabularies and representations to the liking of those whom they choose to approach in search of support. In this vision, it is the 'savviest' ones who become noticed, while others, although no less worthy, remain ignored. Without trying to undermine the Bedouin's 'savvy' (or agency), I have rather attempted to contextualize the Bedouin's representations, highlighting the extensive 'field' of knowledge production on the Bedouin to which the group have until recently had very limited entry. Thus, it is argued that the Bedouin's own shifting

representations cannot be seen in isolation from those created by state officials, scholars, and NGOs, who have made them known as exotic nomads, as a marginalized group struggling with sedentarization, and more recently, as indigenous peoples.

Clearly, vocabularies and claims are contingent on their contexts, which render some ways of speaking more audible than others. While, for example, in the supranational level of the EU and UN fora, the Bedouin have been largely asking for recognition of their rights to land and culture on the basis of their being 'indigenous peoples', the recent international campaign against the Praver Plan has pointed to the multiplicity of the Bedouin's self-definitions and identifications.

Strikingly, this anti-essentialist framing by the youth activists managed to garner the sympathy of not only the international public, but also the local community, among them those who did not hide their scepticism of how the NGOs and the Bedouin tourism initiatives had been 'selling' the Bedouin cause. During my fieldwork, many of my interlocutors complained about portrayals of the Bedouin as people who are willing to live the life of their ancestors in the desert. Staging claims within this narrow framework of cultural rights meant excluding those who did not necessarily express their bond with the land, or who did not want to live the traditional life (see Koensler 2012). Some argued that economic exclusion and lack of development were the biggest challenges that the Bedouin had to face. Others contended, for example, that the problem for the Bedouin was not townships as such (or urbanization in general), but rather their disastrous conditions compared to the Jewish settlements. Frustration with the reifying representations that did not acknowledge the complexity of Bedouin society was often expressed,<sup>85</sup> most frequently by those who inhabited towns rather than unrecognized villages. Lina, a female in her late twenties, who lived in the township of Lakiyah and worked for a youths' social center in another town, summarized this frustration well. In one of our discussions on the work of the NCF and their role in supporting al-Araqib's resistance, Lina was highly critical, arguing that the organization was hypocritical in preaching for Arab

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<sup>85</sup> Koensler (2012) addresses in depth the problematics of human rights language and claims, and their exclusive and reifying character in the context of Bedouin advocacy.

people to 'coexist', or saying that the Bedouin wanted to live in the desert.<sup>86</sup> At one point, Lina exclaimed in English:

Khalas, bikaffi [Stop it, that is enough!] These places like al-Araqib, I have nothing to do with them (...). When I marry, I want to live in Omer [the Jewish town in the area]. What does it mean, I am not Palestinian or Bedouin? Because I want a modern life?

Rather than assessing the validity of these accusations, or seeing them as expressions of people's internalization of the Israeli hegemonic project, I suggest that the sense of being forced to be 'something' that fits into the agendas of NGOs or the UN framework, as hinted at by Lina (and as discussed by, among others, Clifford Bob), is worth reflecting on. I address this question in the following comparative conclusion, where I bring together the findings from both cases in an attempt to sum up the ambiguous process of the subaltern's 'becoming' in the transnational arena.

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<sup>86</sup> This is of course Lina's personal impression; I personally have not witnessed these kinds of arguments from NCF members.

## **9. Politics of Becoming: comparative reflection**

'All the world is not, of course, a stage, but the crucial ways in which it isn't are not easy to specify', wrote Goffman (1959:72), studying the dramaturgical aspects of social life, namely the ways we are 'before others' (1959:15). The metaphor of a theatre may indeed be useful when thinking about the subaltern's attempts to present themselves to the world and transform their little-known grievances into global issues worthy of support. The two chapters sought to discuss in detail how - through what means, vocabularies, and channels - the Bedouin from the Naqab and the Yemeni akhdam tell their stories to the world, seeking recognition, sympathy and support. The 'transnational' lens was chosen in order to, among other things, challenge the dominant reading of subaltern struggles and actors as localized, place-bound and parochial. In what follows, I first briefly summarize the findings, and then discuss in more detail the transformative aspects of subaltern global encounters, through which the marginalized actors gain (or proclaim) new statuses.

The fact that groups and movements who face repressive governments, or have little bargaining power within their nation-states, transcend their boundaries and turn to international audiences is of course well documented in social movement studies. This literature offers us analytical tools to understand how transnational alliances are built, how claims are externalized, and how pressure from outside is sought. Undoubtedly, the spread of

the Internet, global media, and international NGOs has enabled marginalized groups to think of their subordination as not being unique, and their struggles as not isolated, and to look for 'remedies' that lie beyond the boundaries of the state (della Porta, Tarrow 2005; Tarrow 2005; Bob 2005; Smith 2013).

Bringing this thinking into the realm of subaltern politics, chapters 6 and 7 have largely shed light on two intertwined subaltern strategies of reaching international publics: first, by entering the transnational space of UN fora, conferences, sessions et cetera;<sup>87</sup> and second, by bringing the global to the local, through what was referred to as the 'politics of immediation'. Let me start with the latter.

By 'politics of immediation' (borrowing from Mazzarella 2006, Allen 2009), I mean instances where the international community - personified by journalists, researchers, students, diplomatic delegations, activists, or simply tourists - are given access to the 'local', to witness the transparent reality first-hand, as it unfolds before their eyes. Moved and enriched by this empirical knowledge, the visitors are expected, at the least, to transmit the 'story' further.

While in the case of the Yemeni slum dwellers these visits are infrequent, rarely organized, and mainly reduced to the sporadic presence of international journalists and photographers, the Naqab context reveals very different dynamics. There, hundreds of visitors come to the Bedouin villages every year, arriving through a tourist initiative called 'Bedouin Hospitality' as well as on tours organized by NGOs active in the region. The prominent role of NGOs such as the NCF and Adalah in organizing, promoting and facilitating the communication between visitors and villagers shows very well that 'elaborate systems of mediation [are] to be deployed in the pursuit of immediation' (Mazzarella 2006:500).

These encounters do not only focus on the visibility of the place. The images are accompanied by personal stories that aim to illustrate, explain or contextualize the group's plight. The narratives, although crafted to convey a particular understanding of what is at stake, are mixed, dynamic and not always coherent. Some general patterns can, however, be sketched. The

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<sup>87</sup> I have also briefly discussed the Bedouin's international campaign against the Praver Plan in 2013 that led to solidarity events across the globe, marking a new phase of Bedouin activism.

Yemeni akhdam, as was shown, seek the world's sympathy largely speaking as 'victims', highlighting their suffering and misery for foreign audiences, as if these were their only characteristics worthy of recognition. The slum dwellers also engage in a process of strategic racialization, presenting themselves as part and parcel of the global struggle against racism. For example, Noman Hudeithi, head of the National Union for the Marginalized, routinely compared himself to Nelson Mandela (drawing parallels between the present situation in Yemen and the past apartheid regime in South Africa), and many ordinary slum dwellers perceived Barack Obama as a symbolic leader of the black struggle who accordingly, some believed, should advocate for the akhdam's cause.

The Bedouin narratives discussed in Chapter 8 are built around different idioms. First, in contrast to the akhdam's highlighting of their 'weakness', the Bedouin present themselves as the 'steadfast' ones: strong, stubborn, and not giving up against all odds. The emphasis put on these particular characteristics reveals, it is argued, that while *sumud* is a practice, it is also a discourse through which the Bedouin choose to be known. The Bedouin's self-presentations are multi-layered, interestingly relying on orientalist as well as anti-essentialist tropes. Hence, while references to the Bedouin's unchanging nature and 'lived history' are common, the same villagers spell out their polyvalent self-identifications and self-definitions: as Palestinians, indigenous people, a minority group, and citizens of Israel. These articulations probably became most audible in the 2013 international campaign against the Praver Plan when, for the first time in history, the Bedouin's voices made their way into the mainstream media and led to solidarity events across the globe.

In both cases, it can be argued, the narratives shared with audiences are dynamic, with their different elements being freely added or ignored, depending, among other things, on who is speaking, and to whom. Thus, even if they follow a general script, they are to some extent unique, being made and remade while they are told. However, this is not always the case. The subaltern's stories are additionally, if not predominantly, brought to the world through UN and other supranational fora and conferences, where they are fixed in written reports, short statements and recommendations, and as such, they demand a more rigid syntax.

As was shown, both the Naqab Bedouin and the Yemeni akhdam exploit the transnational arena available to marginalized groups in order to speak out, give testimonies of their plight, and provoke external pressure from the more powerful actors. Although the human rights regime is often regarded sceptically by the subaltern, there is a common understanding that this is where the 'political horizons' end (Harvey 2009), leaving few alternatives to which one can turn. As human rights are perceived today as the 'last utopia', to use Moyn's (2012) words, it is unsurprising that marginalized groups, largely through the channels of the NGOs that support them, direct their energies at this transnational realm.

Importantly, the visibility of the two groups, the ease with which they reach the global setting, and the reactions they receive differ dramatically. In the Bedouin's case, a wide range of domestic and international NGOs represent the group, monitor and archive the human rights violations they endure, and often speak on the Bedouin's behalf. Furthermore, how the Bedouin are perceived is also mediated through a vast body of knowledge that has been continuously produced on the Arab residents of the Naqab by travellers, policy-makers, scholars, and more recently by members of the Bedouin community themselves. This is clearly not the case with the Yemeni akhdam, who remain the *terra incognita* of research and human rights activism, rarely coming under the gaze of the external publics. At the moment, there is only one international NGO, the International Dalit Solidarity Network that has been advocating for the akhdam's cause, presenting it to the world as a manifestation of caste-like discrimination. However, being excluded from the agendas of the most prominent human rights organizations (such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch), which often act as gatekeepers for groups seeking recognition as worthy causes (Bob 2007), the akhdam have thus far attracted little attention and stirred little debate in global circles.

The different receptions afforded to the two groups clearly show that not all narratives have the same power to be heard, and the virtue of suffering is not in itself enough to be deemed as deserving. While the Bedouin and their allies have managed to mobilize support across borders and turn their issue into one of world concern, the akhdam's efforts to do likewise have not yet had the same effect. Can the difference in 'marketing' of the two causes, then, be explained solely by the more and less successful framing strategies deployed, as Bob (2005) would have

it? In other words, is the way the subaltern speak (recasting their struggles to match the interests of others) enough to explain the different levels of visibility and support received in the global human rights regime?

I would like to rephrase Bob's argument here, and suggest that the subaltern's chances of being noticed and assisted are determined not necessarily by how they speak, but more importantly, as whom they speak. Such a reading implies that 'worth' is not inherent in issues, but rather belongs to particular categories of people. This may seem less controversial if we consider - to give the most striking example - that tragedies and atrocities committed against certain people sweep across the media, and are followed by public mourning, marches, and minutes of silence; while other no less outrageous events do not provoke the same mobilizations and collective expressions of grief. This selectivity, as Judith Butler (2004, 2009) eloquently put it, points to the fact that not all bodies are equal, or 'grievable' to the same extent.

Thus, in search of 'redemption', as Talal Asad (2003:154) observed, '[p]eople are pushed, seduced, coerced, or persuaded into trying to change themselves into something else (...)'. This is no different for the Bedouin and the akhdam who, in order to be audible in the transnational human rights arena, rather than speaking as mere humans, are compelled to reinvent themselves as particular types of subjects. The concerted efforts of many to become 'redeemable' by fitting into the transnational framework of claims-making are well documented in the literature, probably most notably in the field of legal anthropology. Lauren Leve (2007, 2011), among others, describes what she calls the 'identity machine' put in motion by human rights and, more generally, by neoliberal democracies. Leve illustrates her argument with the example of the Nepalese Buddhists who appropriate human rights discourse in order to be able to freely exercise their religion, but at the same time are pushed to frame their claims as owners of particular properties which they otherwise reject. The vision of human beings inherent to human rights stands in sharp contrast to the Buddhist notion of 'non-self'; yet, in order to gain political leverage, the Nepalese activists have no choice but to project themselves as 'possessive individualist[s]' (Leve 2011:520-521). In a different context, Shannon Speed (2007), drawing on Hale's (2002) work, describes a process of 'a self-regulatory policing of identities' whereby groups find themselves under pressure to constantly prove their



'authenticity' in order to legitimate their claims. These scholars and others leave little doubt that 'the contours and content of claims and even identities' are not freely chosen, but rather prescribed by the global rights regime (Cowan et al. 2001:11).

Against this backdrop, it is worth reflecting on who the Bedouin and the akhdam try to 'become' in the transnational arena. Or to put it differently, how (or 'as whom') does the world get to know them? And what consequences does this bring for the subaltern actors themselves?

As we have seen throughout the chapters, building essentialized cultural/ethnic representations and projecting the group as a particular type of subject is part and parcel of the Bedouin and the akhdam's efforts to become recognized in the transnational human rights setting. Speaking as the poor or the marginalized, as my akhdam interlocutors clearly articulated, does not have the same currency as speaking as a black minority, or a caste-like group. 'We need to act as [a] minority', I was told by activists like Sami Naggar who, when speaking for example at the UN Forum on Minority Issues, presented the akhdam as an ethnic group distinguished by African origins. This clearly visible racialization of marginalization carried out by the akhdam activists and the IDSN is paralleled by the political strategy of the Bedouin and their allies to stage their claims as indigenous peoples. Their struggle, as reports submitted to the UN by the NCF describe it, is for the preservation of the culture and life of a people who are 'isolated or separated from other segments of the country's population', and 'have preserved the customs and traditions of their ancestors'.<sup>88</sup>

Deploying these self-representations means becoming a 'collectivity' that is intelligible to others, and with which the international community knows how to deal. To this effect, in other words, when entering the transnational setting, the two subaltern groups must forgo their ambiguities, nuances, internal differences, and multiple subjectivities. This is probably why Appiah (1992, in Cowan et. al 2001:18) equated quests for recognition with 'politics of compulsion'.

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<sup>88</sup>*The Indigenous Bedouins of the Naqab-Negev Desert in Israel*, Report Submitted to the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (2006:7) <http://weblaw.haifa.ac.il/he/Faculty/Kedar/lecdb/landregime/118.pdf> accessed 20 January 2016

Through these clear-cut representations, the subaltern's struggles, as we get to know them, belong to the Bedouin who aspire to live the life of their ancestors, or the black Yemenis who demand protection as a minority or outcast group. Claims, hopes and aspirations (or even ways of life, as in the Bedouin case) that do not conform to this framework are deemed to be inauthentic, backward or lacking political consciousness, establishing clear hierarchies between members of the groups and their claims. This particular scripting to some extent reflects the fact that in the current context, claims for recognition of cultural/ethnic difference seem to find more resonance than claims for redistribution (Appadurai 1996; Fraser 1997, 2000). Having said that, my point is not to question the validity of these representations or to suggest that they do not speak truth to the group's actual origins, identity or needs.<sup>89</sup> Rather, what I am interested in is the 'epistemological status' (Leve 2011:514) of these categories, through which groups previously known as the poor, the nomads, or the marginalized now become recognized as bearers of specific characteristics, on which basis their political claims are staged.

If belonging to intelligible categories of being/vulnerability is crucial, as I argue, it may help us explain the very different levels of internationalization of the Bedouin and the akhdam causes. Besides the earlier-mentioned significant disparities in the engaged advocacy and infrastructures of knowledge production behind the two groups, and the general 'peripheral' position of Yemen in the global agenda compared to the central place occupied by Israel/Palestine, the different 'statuses' of the Bedouin and the akhdam arguably play a role as well. Despite the similar languages and channels utilized, the two groups have not received the same levels of recognition of their self-representations in the transnational realm. In other words, while there seems to be international consensus over the Bedouin's indigenous status, the akhdam's attempts to reformulate their marginalization have not been fully acknowledged.

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<sup>89</sup> My argument here is not about the subaltern's 'invention of tradition'; rather, it aims to grasp what Clifford (2001:473) calls the 'articulated sites of indigeneity' that build 'consensus, exclusion, alliance, and antagonism'. Clifford, talking specifically about claim-making as indigenous peoples, rejects the binary explanations of indigeneity, understood as either belonging to primordial ties and unchanging tradition, or reduced to the tactical discourse of identity politics.

As their issue is complex and defies easy classifications, it is still perceived by many<sup>90</sup> as a ‘poverty’ or ‘development’ problem, and probably for this reason has not attracted much attention from international human rights groups like AI or HRW that are otherwise active in Yemen. Hence, it may be, among other things, the undefined status of the akhdam, who have not yet ‘become’ a neatly-fitting group in well-established human rights categories, that hinders the internationalization of their cause and struggle.

Differences aside, embracing new subjectivities signals the process of ‘becoming’ which, being both enabling and constraining, sheds light on interesting dynamics of subaltern politics. Put simply, what the two chapters forcefully illustrate is how the subaltern articulate new self-definitions to become something other than the poor, or the dispossessed, or the ‘populations’, to use Chatterjee’s term. Read in this light, the collectivities presented to the world (of indigenous people, or an ethnic minority) have to be seen as brought into being through the subaltern’s concerted efforts to refashion the self, rather than being points of departure. This demonstrates clearly that subaltern politics is neither static (allegedly stemming from subaltern habitus) nor necessarily place-bound, but rather is evolving in, and in dialogue with, the transnational setting and discourses.

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<sup>90</sup> This is my impression (requiring further research), which stems from numerous conversations with human rights activists working in Yemen. The lack of a shared understanding of who the akhdam are was also mentioned to me by Rikke Nöhrind, Executive Director of the International Dalit Solidarity Network (interview conducted on 24 August 2015). The lack of consensus on the akhdam’s ‘essence’ and the reasons for their marginalization is also visible within the group itself, where different visions and self-definitions compete, as Chapter 5 has shown. Importantly, the akhdam workers centred around the Sanitation Workers Trade Union strongly reject being represented as a separate ethnic group or a minority.

## 10. CONCLUSION

There is a growing body of literature that resurrects the subaltern as a political actor, and the everyday as site of creativity and transgression, rather than passivity and routine. Subaltern politics, in many of these accounts, seems to be manifested through unorganized, yet persistent efforts and practices rather than claim-making (Bayat 1997, 2010, 2013; de Certeau 1984). It is off-stage rather than confrontational (Scott 1985, 1990), and focuses on welfare and material provisions more than rights (Chatterjee 2004). According to other scholars, the marginalized form a unique political domain (Chakrabarty 2002) and one that is autonomous from elites (Guha 1982, 1999).

Yet, as this thesis has demonstrated, subaltern struggles take on multiple forms, across sites and scales, often blurring the boundaries between the realms of contentious and institutional, informal and formal. Drawing on the cases of the Bedouin residents of Israel's southern desert region, and the akhdam in Sana'a in Yemen we have seen how the subaltern engage in struggles both *against* and *for* the state in their quest for dignified lives and recognition. Furthermore, a wide range of struggles unfold *despite* the state (meaning, state is not the object of these struggles), or *beyond* it, through attempts to reach international fora and audiences. These varying modes of engagements should not be seen as conflicting or exclusive, but rather complementary and often overlapping or connected.

Despite dissimilar settings of the two groups under study, some similar dynamics of their struggles can be sketched. Both the akhdam and the Bedouin need to constantly calculate and

carefully calibrate their efforts, in order to seize or create opportunities and make life dignified, or simply possible. Through these multiple acts the subaltern assert their agency, sometimes to protest, but more often to, maintain ordinary lives, build, 'get by', make claims on the state, negotiate, or collectively commemorate the past, to name just a few. The various sites and modes of the subaltern engagements reveal forcefully that struggles for welfare and redistribution of goods, viewed by Chatterjee (2007, 2011) as paradigmatic of subaltern politics, while important, only represent one side of the story. They are accompanied by other instances when the subaltern reject their position of marginality, identify injustice and articulate specific claims, using both institutional and non-institutional channels. These acts of articulation cannot be separated from the politics of the ordinary, as they too stem from lived realities, ideals about the place (the Bedouin), or their role in society (the akhdam). Paying attention to how the claims are phrased and staged is important because the dominant reading of the subaltern struggles as non-discursive risks reproducing the image of the marginalized as 'less articulate' actors. Such an assumption is misleading, as the subaltern have a deep understanding of the injustice of their condition, and express it through both words and deeds. Being distinguished from the rest of citizens and treated unfairly, the subaltern justify their various transgressive acts as necessary (Bayat 1997) and righteous, but also rightful- as acts of exercising rights of which they are deprived. Besides the quotidian practices, both the Bedouin and the akhdam engage in overt claim-making, often articulated in the language of rights. As such, the subaltern translate their various efforts into instances of exercising, or demanding their rights, and thus to use Isin's words (2009:371), "constitute themselves as those with 'the right to claim rights'". It is precisely the subalterns' sense of worth, dignity and righteousness- in contrast to their treatment as disposable - that unites various modes of engagement. Seeing these struggles in totality and in mutual relation is crucial, since to exclude either of them would mean to exclude the lived experiences, motives, needs and aspirations of the subaltern actors involved.

Importantly, the attempts of the marginalized to improve their plight are not confined to the local and domestic setting. Both the Naqab Bedouin, and the Yemeni akhdam, with the help of others, try to reach the transnational level in an effort to 'sell' their causes to the world, in order to become known, intelligible and supported. They do so firstly by externalizing their

claims (Tarrow 2005), and secondly by bringing the 'global to the local' to display or narrate their plight to others through personal encounters. In these self-representations the two groups often rely on internationally familiar idioms and imageries and comparisons with well-known examples of oppressed groups, such as the black population of South Africa under apartheid (the akhdam), or other colonized peoples (the Bedouin).

In order to become noticed and internationally recognized the subaltern make also use of the mechanisms and fora offered by the human rights system. A lot has been written on the creative exploitation of human rights by the marginalized in their emancipatory struggles (An-Naim 1995; Grewal 1998; Merry 2003, 2006; Merry, Goodale 2007). There is also an abundance of literature offering a critique of the human rights discourse. It has been criticised as: being Eurocentric, and dismissing the lived realities of different cultures (Spivak 2004) or reifying and condemning them (Abu-Lughod 2013); having a depoliticizing effect (Kapoor 2013); reducing people to 'victims' (Fassin 2008); and reproducing rather than challenging the dominant neoliberal order and Western domination (Abu-Lughod 2013, Brown 2004, Kapur 2006).

This thesis has offered another reading of the human rights regime, filtered through the perspective of subaltern actors and their hopes, doubts, and concerns. The human rights regime has provided an empowering venue for groups seeking justice on the international stage, but it has also determined the language and 'essence' of the claimants, who are compelled to reinvent themselves as particular types of subjects. From a comparative perspective, it becomes clear that the virtue of suffering is not in itself enough to attract attention and support. The Bedouin's plight has attained a degree of global consciousness - their indigenous status is internationally recognized, their issue is widely discussed and studied, and their struggle mobilizes support across borders. The akhdam's efforts to do likewise have not yet had the same impact. The akhdam have not become objects of advocacy campaigns, and no transnational solidarity networks have emerged to exert pressure on the Yemeni government. These findings invite us to ask questions that necessitate further research. The human rights regime picks up some issues and neglects others, so what role does it play in rendering some struggles visible and 'worthy' and keeping others out of the headlines? How

does it contribute to the production of knowledge of what is at stake, whose suffering counts (Butler 2004) and what kind of politics matters?

Pointing to the interconnectedness between the language and grammar of the Bedouin's and the akhdam's struggles, is not to suggest that the subaltern constitute a homogenous category, or that a uniform model of subaltern politics can be proposed. On the contrary, the various responses to particular needs, desires and hopes discussed in the thesis, point forcefully to the co-existing, ambiguous forms of subaltern agency and multiplicity of their engagements. As subalternity is always relational (Coronil 1994) so are the manifestations of subaltern struggles, which thus need to be understood against actors' life trajectories, contexts and time. What does it mean more precisely?

First, the deeds, claims and visions of the subaltern cannot be easily pieced together, as many of the engagements are contingent on singular events and historical conjunctures, with the opportunities they bring. The subaltern are well attuned to changes in their environments, and accordingly navigate between various fields that open up for them, and move further when these close off. These shifts are pragmatic rather than ideological, and related to the subaltern's reading of what avenues are available to them and potentially beneficial. To avoid static representations and account for the dynamic evolution of the subaltern's engagements- how they evolve, shift, but also adjust to audiences and sometimes respond to 'vagaries of the moment' (Kurzman 2012)- time and temporality need to be considered.

Moreover, subaltern efforts need to be analysed against the intersecting experiences of material and symbolic marginalization that deeply mark people's lives. Their stark poverty, hazardous settlements, precarious dwellings, and limited access to healthcare, jobs and education, but also institutionalized misrecognition (Fraser 1995), all need to be taken into account in order to understand subaltern choices, strategies, and conditions of possibility. In other words, the routinized vulnerability of the subaltern plays a crucial role in shaping people's needs and desires, as well as horizons of what can be thought and done (Chalcraft 2006). Against this backdrop, the seemingly banal struggles for basic goods are of no less importance than the ones demanding rights and recognition, and cannot be fully separated from them.

Last but not least, subaltern lives do not unfold in isolation, even if they may seem confined to limited and remote spaces. As we have seen, the subaltern are under scrutiny of a wide range of actors and institutions: from the authorities who control, discipline, repress or silence them, to those who provide the marginalized with assistance, document their suffering, represent them, advocate for their causes or transmit them further to the world. Clearly, there is a variety of forces, both translocal and transnational, that play a role in shaping subaltern's 'political horizons' (Harvey 2013) but also setting limits to potential gains and transformative effects of subaltern politics. Acknowledging them allows us to challenge perceptions of subaltern politics as place-bounded and parochial, and to complicate understanding of the 'local' as such. But also, importantly, reading the various forms of subaltern agency against the contexts within which they are asserted, is necessary to avoid romanticized accounts of subaltern efforts and their potential to improve lives of the marginalized. In this vein, it worth noticing that both the akhdam's and the Bedouin's engagements have been affected by the processes of commodification of politics brought by the expansion of civil society sector in Israel/Palestine and Yemen. The industry of civil society organizations, often sponsored by foreign money and serving the goal of 'promoting democracy' or 'peace' (Carapico 2014) plays out differently in the two countries, yet share some common characteristics. In both Yemen and Israel/Palestine, the field of civil society has opened up space for negotiations with the state in a particular, non-contentious form. Many scholars of the Middle East have argued that externally backed proliferation of civil society organizations in the region was meant to replace collective mobilization and protest with 'change' brought by, and managed by professionals and experts. Looking at the cases under our study, to a large extent, this proves to be true. The akhdam today often distance themselves from politics, and their issue is widely perceived, by the marginalized and others, as one to be tackled through development, education and individual efforts of getting out of poverty. The Bedouin struggle in turn has been dominated by the work of NGOs who exploit venues and opportunities afforded by the Israeli legal system. This means that although small gains are possible, the fundamental issues of land and belonging are always doomed to fail.



Reflecting on issues of knowledge production and representation, Gayatri Spivak (1990, 1999, 2000), argued that scholarly engagements with the subaltern require a process of 'unlearning one's privileges', or as she later called it, 'learning to learn from below'. Such an endeavour is conditioned, among others, by a researcher's eagerness to question her own authority, to reconsider her knowledge and assumptions, and to create a space for dialogue with the subaltern actors. 'I need to learn from you what you practice', as Spivak put it (2000:16). The notion of unlearning and learning again, I believe, reflects aptly the long process of researching and writing of this thesis, forgoing my expectations and rethinking concepts, with which I first came to the field. It was largely through conversations with my research participants that the focus of my study has shifted, expanded and crystalized. My greatest gratitude goes to them.

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