Democracy in the Desert? The Bedouin in the Western Desert and the National Election to the People's Assembly in 1990, Egypt

MASAYUKI AKAHORI

Senshu University

In 1990 the electorate of the governorate of Marsa Matrouh in the Western Desert of Egypt chose four members of the ruling National Democratic Party as their representatives for the People's Assembly. However, the Bedouin forming the majority of the population explained that these were Bedouin representatives, nominated in the meetings of the tribal chiefs based on the consideration of fairness among the tribal groups in the district. This paper analyses the process of selecting candidates for the national election and its public acceptance. In particular, unusual appearance of strong rival candidates among the Bedouin in 1990 revealed the difference between rhetoric and political reality, given that every candidate claimed to have obtained the unanimous agreement of all the Bedouin before the election and even before the tribal meetings. The institutionalized setting of the national election and the strategic enterprises of the main actors including the candidates are all related to the discourse of "Bedouin democracy" which they advocate as being traditional and legitimate. The political process also serves to strengthen the distinctive social identity of the contemporary Bedouin, as symbolized in the TV images of the representatives appearing in the assembly hall in their traditional Bedouin robes.

Key words: Bedouin, election, nation state, tradition, tribe.

1. CHANGING LIFE AND "TRADITION"

"Tradition" is no longer a mere analytical tool for anthropologists, it has become a concept to be analysed in its own right.

Anthropologists of today do not imagine that they can find static or purely traditional way of life as objects of study. They have realised that social change is normal, and that they must pay scrupulous attention when attempting to abstract indigenous elements from their data. An increasing number of anthropologists have taken up social change itself as the main theme of their study. One result is that anthropologists have recently avoided using the term "tradition" because it seems to oversimplify the object of their study; the term has lost its appropriateness as an analytical concept; nonetheless, tradition has still great importance in anthropological studies. This is mainly because many of the peoples studied use the notion of tradition in everyday speech. People in many societies believe that they have their own unique tradition and that it is necessary to preserve this tradition for themselves. Especially, in conflicts between national integration and ethnic revivalism, the notion of tradition has become an active social factor.

Here I present information that was collected mainly at the end of 1990, when a general election to the People's Assembly was held in Egypt.[1] I carried out fieldwork among the Bedouin in the Western Desert of Egypt between 1988 and 1991.[2] By examining political activity and discourse around the election, I try to show how the Bedouin have found a new social position in the dynamics of national-local politics and how notions of tradition have helped to secure the continuity of their collective identity from the past to the present.

2.   THE BEDOUIN OF MATROUH

Marsa Matrouh is a governorate which occupies the northern half of the Western Desert.[3] Embracing an area more than 210,000 km² (al-Jihāz al-markazī li al-ta'bi'a al-'āmma wa al-iḥṣā' 1990: 23), the population is concentrated in the narrow coastal corridor along the Mediterranean Sea. In this paper, I call this inhabited zone the Matrouh area, following the local usage of that name.

Most of the people living there used to be desert nomads. Now there are just a few people who continue the nomadic life, herding camels, sheep and goats. In 1959, the Egyptian government launched the first five-year development programme for the Western Desert, and have sent many people there from the Nile Valley. They have moved into the area in order to establish local government, to exploit natural resources, to set up bases for military forces and to construct towns for them to live in. The nomads are mostly settled, and now make their living in various ways including fig and olive cultivation, the tourist industry and commerce. In spite of these changes in residence and livelihood, however, more than three quarters of the 160,000 inhabitants of the governorate still consider themselves to be true Bedouin, and therefore different from the people of the Nile Valley (ahl wādī al-Nīl).[4]

The Bedouin in Matrouh emphasise that they share a common origin, language and many other attributes with all Arabs in the Middle East. They consider that all modern Arabs trace their ancestry to the old Arabs who conquered the vast area from Andalusia through North Africa to northwestern India in the seventh century. Here, however, the category "Arabs" does not include non-Bedouin Egyptians. The Bedouin say that the people of the Nile Valley are not of Arab origin. The Bedouin say this perhaps because they are a minority whose number is less than 1% of the whole population of Egypt. Although they form the majority of the population in the Matrouh area, the Egyptian government does not formally recognise them, and non-Bedouin Egyptians often think of them as newly integrated inferior co-nationals. By identifying themselves with the wide-spread Arab culture of the Middle East, and by excluding non-Bedouin Egyptians from their perception of this culture, the Bedouin in Matrouh try to counter their peripheral position in the structure of the nation-state.

3.   THE ELECTION OF THE PEOPLE'S ASSEMBLY

The general election of 1990 was proclaimed on October 2 in the name of President Mubarak. The election day was scheduled on November 29.

It was the sixth election in the twenty-year history of the Egyptian People's Assembly (*Majlis al-Sha'b*). Replacing the old National Assembly (*Majlis al-Umma*), the People's Assembly was established under the 1971 Constitution. It was the only parliamentary body at the level of national politics until another one, the Consultative Council (*Majlis al-Shūrā*), was created in 1980.

The election law says that members of the People's Assembly should be re-elected every five years. Actually there were three elections in the 1970s (1971, 1976, 1979) and two in the 1980s (1984, 1987). Though the two previous elections in the 1980s adopted a proportional representation system, the election of 1990 used the same personal list system as that of the 1970s' elections. The election itself was based on universal suffrage and a free vote, in which those who have registered their names on the electoral list of the district select a pair of candidates, at least one of which must be a farmer or a labourer (al-'Arabī 1987: 3–5; Moench 1987: 54–58).

The election of 1990 was held on November 29 as scheduled, and 444 representatives were elected from 222 electoral districts; the newspaper *al-Ahrām* (8/12/1990: 1) reported that among those elected, 348 or 79.6% were members of the government party, the National Democratic Party (al-Ḥizb al-Waṭanī al-Dīmūqrāṭī).[5] Independents (83 seats or 19.0%) and the National Progressive Unionist Party (Ḥizb al-Tajammuʿ al-Waṭanī al-Taqaddumī) (6 seats or 1.4%) came second and third.[6]

Since the civilian administration was introduced in Matrouh in 1962, the Bedouin in the area have experienced nine national elections: one for the National Assembly (1964), six for the People's Assembly (1971, 1976, 1979, 1984, 1987, 1990) and two for the Consultative Council (1980, 1989). As the governorate has been divided into two electoral districts for the People's Assembly, four representatives have been elected every time. All of those elected in 1990 were members of the NDP.

Al-Ahrām (2/12/1990: 3) gave one paragraph of information on the result of the election in Matrouh:

> District 1 (under the jurisdiction of the Matrouh Police): ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ʿAbd al-Jawwād (NDP, farmer) and Ruḥūma ʿAbd al-Wāḥid Ismāʿīl (NDP, not a farmer) were elected. District 2 (under the jurisdiction of the Dabʿa Police): Kāmil Muftāḥ Mutʿib Rāʿī (NDP, farmer) and ʿAbd al-Ghanī Ḥulaywa Yūnis (NDP, farmer) were elected.

I could not find any other reference in the paper to who these four successful candidates were. But I knew in the field that they were Bedouin, and sons or relatives of powerful tribal chiefs.

4. REPRESENTATIVES OF THE TRIBES

The Bedouin in the area considered these four to be first and foremost representatives of their tribes rather than members of the governing party. They regarded the official procedure of the election as just a formality, and said that the representatives should be selected in their traditional way before the election. An old tribal chief I met in Matrouh City, the capital town of the governorate, expressed it by saying:

> We have known democracy (*al-dīmūqrāṭīya*) since the old days. Only the farmers who want to be ruled by others, as is their nature, need to be taught the ways of elections by the government. You should know that we have our own way.

They explained the election as a process of selecting their representatives on the basis of fairness and the agreement of all the tribes, and said that they were sending these representatives into the national political arena so as to defend their interests and autonomy within the nation.

There are more than 60 tribes in Matrouh. Here I use a term "tribe" as an equivalent of the Arabic word "*qabīla*." A *qabīla* is a patrilineal descent group, which is ideally local and corporate in disputes.

Most of the tribes in the area are grouped into five major clusters: ʿAlī al-Abyaḍ (ʿAlī the White), ʿAlī al-Aḥmar (ʿAlī the Red), al-Sinina, al-Jumīʿāt and al-Qaṭʿān. Each cluster of tribes (*majmūʿa al-qabāʾil*) is segmented into individual tribes (*qabīla*), a tribe into sections (*ʿāʾila*), and a section into subsections (*bayt*). As unilineal descent groups are similar in shape regardless of their size, these last three terms can be used interchangeably, with respect to the actual people represented by each term, while the relative order of these terms remains fixed: *bayt*s constitute an *ʿāʾila*, and *ʿāʾila*s constitute a *qabīla*. Which term should be applied for a certain group of people is determined contextually among the parties concerned, of which I show the most general usage in this paper.

Figure 1 illustrates the entire constitution of Bedouin tribes in Matrouh. I have listed only the names of tribes that are mentioned in this paper by name, and have attached the names of candidates for the election of 1990 to the tribes to which they belong.
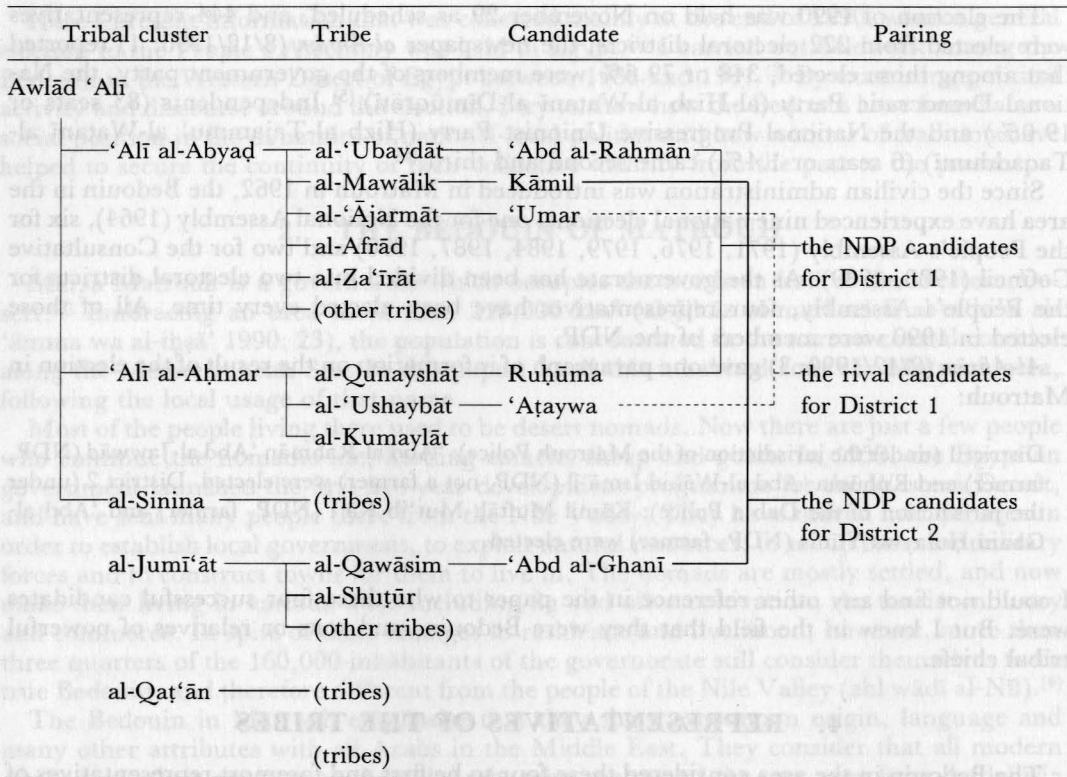
Tribal cluster	Tribe	Candidate	Pairing
Awlād 'Alī			
'Alī al-Abyaḍ	al-'Ubaydāt	'Abd al-Raḥmān	
	al-Mawālik	Kāmil	
	al-'Ajarmāt	'Umar	
	al-Afrād		the NDP candidates for District 1
	al-Za'īrāt		
	(other tribes)		
'Alī al-Aḥmar	al-Qunayshāt	Ruḥūma	the rival candidates for District 1
	al-'Ushaybāt	'Ataywa	
	al-Kumaylāt		
al-Sinina	(tribes)		the NDP candidates for District 2
al-Jumī'āt	al-Qawāsim	'Abd al-Ghanī	
	al-Shuṭūr		
	(other tribes)		
al-Qaṭ'ān	(tribes)		
	(tribes)		

Fig. 1. Constitution of tribes and names of their candidates for the election to the People's Assembly in 1990.

There is a category larger than the five clusters in the above figure. It is called Awlād 'Alī, that is to say, Sons of 'Alī. Three clusters, 'Alī al-Abyaḍ, 'Alī al-Aḥmar and al-Sinina, are said to constitute it. Their eponymous ancestors are said to be three brothers of the great ancestor, 'Alī al-Kabīr ('Alī the Great).

This is the usual explanation, but the tribal clusters which make up Awlād 'Alī can fluctuate depending on the context. Al-Sinina is occasionally excluded from Awlād 'Alī. Some people say that its founding ancestor Abū Sinina was not the son of 'Alī, but the son of his brother. Some historians suggest that Awlād 'Alī once had a dual organization of the White and the Red ('Ataywa 1982: 103–111; al-Tāyib 1985: 240–243). In other cases, particularly toward non-Bedouin outsiders, "Sons of 'Alī" is presented as the name by which the Bedouin in Matrouh in general are designated. The founding ancestors of two clusters, Jum'a for al-Jumī'āt and Raḍwān for al-Qaṭ'ān, are often said to have been related to 'Alī al-Kabīr as his maternal cousin, which means that they do not share the same ancestry but that they have genealogically close relations. These two clusters, therefore, are sometimes equated with Awlād 'Alī as a whole, and are other times equated with a cluster of it.

Many Bedouin told me that as a rule 'Alī al-Abyaḍ, the largest cluster of the five, puts forward a candidate in every election,[7] that three of the other four clusters should share the seats in the assembly, and that the remaining one cluster should await its turn on the next occasion. Within the cluster, the tribes take turns in a similar way, and within the tribe, sections do likewise. It is, they say, the only and traditional way to secure the fairness among the tribes peacefully.

To select a suitable person, the chiefs of the tribes called *'umda* and *shaykh* are said to gather and talk. The Bedouin say that every tribe has one *'umda* and one *shaykh* to arbitrate disputes within a tribe and between tribes, and that these arbitrators are elected by their

tribesmen in the traditional way as well as the parliamentary representatives. In the national elections, the chiefs should hear the opinions of the tribesmen first, and take them into account in coming to a united decision at the tribal meetings (*ijtimā' al-qabā'il*). Thus they are said to reach agreement between all the tribes before the election.

5. DISTRIBUTION OF ASSEMBLY SEATS

The explanation is very clear and systematic. But it was soon revealed that it did not accord with the actual outcome of the election of 1990.

Among the four successful candidates, 'Abd al-Raḥmān was from the 'Ubaydāt tribe ('Alī al-Abyaḍ), Ruḥūma was from al-Qunayshāt ('Alī al-Aḥmar), Kāmil was from al-Mawālik ('Alī al-Abyaḍ), and 'Abd al-Ghanī was from al-Qawāsim (al-Jumī'āt). They are usually known in Matrouh by an epithet that expresses their tribal belonging: 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-'Ubaydī, Ruḥūma al-Qunayshī, Kāmil al-Mālikī and 'Abd al-Ghanī al-Qāsimī.

Two of the four representatives were from one cluster 'Alī al-Abyaḍ, and so two clusters, al-Sinina and al-Qaṭ'ān put forward no candidates. Moreover, Ruḥūma al-Qunayshī of 'Alī al-Aḥmar was re-elected on this occasion, which means that taking turns to hold the seats also did not work at the level of tribes and their sections. There is an obvious discrepancy between the explanation given beforehand and the actual results afterwards.

It may be necessary to take into consideration the fact that the Bedouin themselves had looked upon the election of 1990 as being problematic from the beginning. It was said to be the first election in which the Bedouin failed to reach agreement on the question of candidates.

There was no problem in District 2, which includes the three eastern administrative districts of the six in the governorate. Eight other pairs of candidates stood for the election as independents in the district, among whom five were Bedouin candidates, two were non-Bedouin Egyptians and the remaining one was a combination of Bedouin and non-Bedouin. Most of the Bedouin regarded the independents as minor candidates. Their true candidates, who were at the same time candidates of the NDP, were Kāmil al-Mālikī of 'Alī al-Abyaḍ and 'Abd al-Ghanī al-Qāsimī of al-Jumī'āt. One notable point was that, in District 2, they were known as the pair of representatives of Awlād 'Alī and al-Jumī'āt, not of 'Alī al-Abyaḍ and al-Jumī'āt. It is perhaps because al-Jumī'āt is relatively dominant in the eastern district, where its population equals or exceeds that of 'Alī al-Abyaḍ in the area. They themselves prefer to call themselves an independent tribal cluster which can be contrasted with Awlād 'Alī as a whole.[8]

The problem was in the western electoral district. There, two pairs of rival candidates appeared, and the NDP candidates, 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-'Ubaydī of 'Alī al-Abyaḍ and Ruḥūma al-Qunayshī of 'Alī al-Aḥmar, had to fight a strong pair of independent candidates in the campaign.

There were eight pairs of candidates in District 1; five were Bedouin and three were non-Bedouin. Only one pair could stand against the NDP. They were known as 'Umar al-'Ajarmī of 'Alī al-Abyaḍ and 'Aṭaywa al-Ushaybī of 'Alī al-Aḥmar. They condemned the breach of the principle of equal distribution of office between the tribes, and claimed that it was their turn to be elected.

The combination of tribes to which the candidates belong is different between the two pairs. But, it is the same combination of 'Alī al-Abyaḍ and 'Alī al-Aḥmar at the level of tribal clusters. Though there were candidates from al-Sinina and al-Qaṭ'ān, they were considered to be fringe candidates supported only by the people of their village or tribal section. Most of the people of al-Sinina and al-Qaṭ'ān with whom I talked expressed their support for one of the two rival pairs of 'Alī al-Abyaḍ and 'Alī al-Aḥmar. The problem about which the Bedouin of District 1 were arguing, therefore, consisted in the selection of candidates within 'Alī al-Abyaḍ and 'Alī al-Aḥmar, and the fair distribution of seats among the five tribal clusters which they told me as a rule was left completely unquestioned.

The selection of a candidate for 'Alī al-Aḥmar was considered particularly problematic.

This tribal cluster is composed of three tribes: al-Qunayshāt, al-'Ushaybāt and al-Kumaylāt. Most of the people agreed on that it was originally the turn of a man of al-Kumaylāt to be elected but that the people of al-Kumaylāt could not find a suitable person among them. Therefore Ruḥūma al-Qunayshī decided to stand for the election again and the NDP accepted him as its candidate. His supporters, mainly men of his tribe, asserted that Ruḥūma was requested to stand by al-Kumaylāt. I do not know whether it was a fact or not. I only know that his maternal kin are from an influential family of al-Kumaylāt and that they were also giving him strong support for the election. People of al-'Ushaybāt were enraged at the NDP's endorsement of Ruḥūma's candidacy, and immediately put forward their own candidate, 'Aṭaywa al-'Ushaybī, with whom some of al-Kumaylāt also took sides. Thus the rivalry started from the dispute among the three tribes of 'Alī al-Aḥmar.

The rivalry within 'Alī al-Abyaḍ was not so clear, and it seemed to be induced by the rivalry within 'Alī al-Aḥmar. Some of the people of al-'Ājarmāt of 'Alī al-Abyaḍ clearly said to me that they were persuaded by the men of al-'Ushaybāt of 'Alī al-Aḥmar to pair with them. 'Alī al-Abyaḍ consists of more than twenty tribes, ten of which or so are much larger than the rest. Many men of 'Alī al-Abyaḍ said those ten tribes take turns at acquiring a seat in the Assembly, but few could say whose turn it was in the election of 1990. They thought there was a system, but they did not know what it was.

One point may be noted. It is that the two of the NDP candidates from 'Alī al-Abyaḍ belong to the tribes which are said to have been assimilated into Awlād 'Alī. Though al-'Ubaydāt and al-Mawālik are now powerful tribes among Awlād 'Alī, other Bedouin say privately that their ancestor is not 'Alī the Great, and that they were allowed to live in Matrouh by accepting the dominant status of Awlād 'Alī and assimilation as part of it.[9] There may be an opposition between the original Awlād 'Alī (including al-'Ājarmāt) and the assimilated members (including al-'Ubaydāt and al-Mawālik), and this may underlie the rivalry between candidates. But this suggestion was not accepted officially among the Bedouin; to point out publicly who is a member of the assimilated tribes is now carefully avoided.

Anyway, the fair distribution of seats of the People's Assembly among the five tribal clusters did not seem to have been a serious aim from the beginning. I do not think the election of 1990 is an exception on that point. Unfortunately I do not have enough information, but it is very doubtful whether the seats have ever been distributed equally by turns among the five tribal clusters and their segments.

It does not mean, however, that the equal distribution of seats was completely ignored in the election. It was fully utilised as propaganda by both sides in District 1. Throughout the campaign period, they argued that they should be accepted as the legitimate candidates for the whole of Awlād 'Alī. Both of the rival pairs raised a banner in every village on which were written slogans such as:

> Al-Ḥajj 'Aṭaywa Khālid al-'Ushaybī and al-Ustādh 'Umar Khamīs al-'Ājarmī, the true candidates of Matrouh *supported by all of Awlād 'Alī*.[10]

Both sides told the people that their own candidates had already acquired the support of all the Bedouin in the area. Whether it was a fact or not was unimportant. The point was to speak as if it was a fact, because it was effective to persuade the people to support their candidates.

6. TRIBAL MEETINGS

What about the meeting of the tribal chiefs?

Tribal meetings were certainly held many times during the period of the electoral campaign in many places. I myself attended some of them to find, however, that almost all of them took place not before but after the NDP candidates expressed their intention of standing for the Assembly on October 11 in District 1 and on October 5 in District 2. Among the seventeen tribal meetings which I know were held, only one was held before these dates,

five were held late in October and eleven others were held in November.

Usually the meetings began with a feast and ended with formal addresses by influential chiefs. An example is as follows; a meeting of November 9 held in one of the villages in District 1 started at noon in a tent pitched beside the village office. Twenty four individuals attended the meeting, among whom were two *'umda*s, six *shaykh*s and some other elders of tribes in the village. The village head appointed by the governor's office, the governor of Matrouh himself and the secretary general of the Matrouh branch of the NDP also attended. These three were not living in the village and only the governor was not Bedouin. People enjoyed a chat for a while, and then lunch in a traditional style was served by young men who were waiting near the tent. Each four or five people sat around a large bowl and ate with their right hands a heap of steamed rice, boiled lamb and tomato salad put on it. After they washed their hands and mouths, mint tea of the Bedouin style, as it is called, was served and they had a friendly chat once more. Some went to the nearby mosque for the midday prayers. About two hours had passed from the beginning, when a *shaykh* of al-Shuṭūr of al-Jumī'āt, who was the owner of that ceremonial tent, stood up and offered words of welcome to the gathering, because formally they were his guests. Then the governor gave an address on the importance of the election of that time and the need of their cooperation for its success. The third speaker was an *'umda* of al-Za'īrāt of 'Alī al-Abyaḍ. He made a speech, in which he stressed the importance of the agreement of tribes and the suitability of the NDP candidates as representatives. Other two *shaykh*s followed him giving an address in similar vein. The meeting ended without any kind of argument or voting, and the group broke up exchanging greetings.

The meeting of November 9 was a small-scale one, and the attendance of the governor of Matrouh was exceptional. He did not appear in the other sixteen meetings. In some but not all cases, villages became units for a meeting. Showing a wide variety in size and composition of attendance, the meetings seemed to me to be to back candidates rather than to select them. In District 1, meetings to support the NDP candidates and ones to support their rivals were held separately, at which chiefs only referred to the suitability of the candidates they supported in their addresses. The speeches contained no arguments, and no opposition to the candidates. Clashes of opinions were carefully avoided. In one case, one of the chiefs refrained from attending a meeting because he was agnate of one candidate and affine of his rival.

Drejer (1985: 178) says that there were no *'umda*s prior to the entry of the Coast Guard into the area of Matrouh at the end of the nineteenth century, when *'umda*s were selected from the *shaykh*s by the British and appointed as mediators between tribesmen and the government. The governor's office today has inherited this system; most of the *'umda*s live in Matrouh City and their names are registered in the governor's office. They are also members of the local assembly of the governorate. But, before the election, they never gathered to decide on candidates. There were no meetings which brought together all these *'umda*s. Each party of *'umda*s (and *shaykh*s) in Matrouh City supporting two pairs of rival candidates separately held their own meetings a few times.

Furthermore, it is not true that every tribe has a *'umda* and a *shaykh*. I found many of the smaller tribes did not have a *'umda* and that the number of *shaykh*s was different from tribe to tribe. Many of the *shaykh*s and tribesmen are dispersed over the whole area of Matrouh, and they usually do not have any opportunity to act as a corporate group. In fact, every meeting of the chiefs for the election was held independently of the others, and there was no communication among them. As a whole, the tribal meetings lacked the necessary structure to reach an agreed decision based on the will of the individual tribesmen.

It is clear that what really happened at the tribal meetings was considerably different from what the Bedouin said would happen.

7. THE BEDOUIN AS A LOCAL POLITICAL UNIT

What I have said here may give the impression that the Bedouin's explanation of the electoral process is a false account, or, more appropriately, that it is just an ideal description of

how things should be. Indeed, it is an ideal, and therefore, as an ideal, it had a certain influence on how the Bedouin behaved. The seats in the People's Assembly may not have been distributed equally between the tribal clusters, but the claim for equal distribution gave the rivals of the NDP candidates a reason to stand in the election. Even though the tribal meetings simply accepted the candidates instead of selecting them, they were actually held, and the chiefs were officially recognised as supporters of the candidates in the meetings. What actually happened may have been different from the ideal, but the reality would also have been different if it were not for the existence of that ideal.

Those who actually selected and supported the strong candidacy of the NDP members and their rivals were a small circle of individuals. They are some rich and influential people among the *'umda*s, who are at the same time important members of the NDP branch in the area. The office of the NDP in Matrouh City functions as if it were the office of the tribal chiefs. The Section of Customary Law (Maktab al-'Urf) in it, for example, arbitrates in disputes among the Bedouin, which has been traditionally the duty of the chiefs. Even the *'umda*s who supported the NDP's rival candidates were members of the NDP. This time they put forward their candidates as independents (informally backed by the Wafd Party (Ḥizb al-Wafd)), but it reflected the inner troubles of the circle of influential tribal chiefs tied with the NDP.

They are influential, but their authority is not accompanied by compelling force. So they wanted and needed to use statements that their candidates were the ones already supported by all the tribesmen in order to generate actual support. For the ordinary tribesmen, the easiest and the most apparently reasonable choice was to support the candidates whom everybody else appeared to support. That is why the rival pair of candidates did not stress their policies in the campaign, but rather their legitimacy to be the candidates of the the Bedouin of Matrouh. Here the "Bedouin of Matrouh" had become to be treated as a political entity in the discourse because it is profitable and acceptable for the Bedouin in the area.

In most cases, non-Bedouin Egyptians living in Matrouh were completely ignored. Most of them live in towns, and they were easily ignored by the Bedouin in villages as if they did not exist at all. Non-Bedouin Egyptians themselves often paid no attention to the election because they considered that they were just outsiders living in the land of the Bedouin. Some others supported the Bedouin candidates because they shared some interests with a specific faction among the Bedouin. There were also others who put forward their own non-Bedouin candidates without a hope of success. The candidates and their supporters of the NDP could also leave this minority untouched, but they never forgot to use the idiom of modern citizenship to appeal to the non-Bedouin in the area. In towns, they raised banners and distributed posters, pamphlets and cards saying that they were the legitimate candidates of the government party and that they would promote the welfare of all the people in Matrouh by new policies. Perhaps many non-Bedouin Egyptians voted for the NDP candidates only because the NDP was the government party. Thus the electoral campaign had two kinds of discourse; one particularly for the Bedouin, and the other seemingly for all the electorate but practically for the non-Bedouin Egyptians.

The existence of co-tribesmen outside Matrouh was also disregarded. Though many are living in neighboring governorates and have strong ties in everyday life with those in Matrouh, the Bedouin in Matrouh were described as if they constituted an integrated exclusive local unit in the campaign. It may be noteworthy that one of the candidates for the neighboring governorate of Alexandria was from Awlād 'Alī (al-Afrād of 'Alī al-Abyaḍ) but that he stressed his career as a competent lawyer in the campaign rather than his origin of the Bedouin.

What is in question here is not simply a gap between ideal and reality. The problem is that such a gap resulted from the formation of a new level of political activity, that is to say, the participation of the traditionally tribal people in national politics as its local members. We know the proportional distribution of pasture, water and other resources among the tribal sections has been customary (Behnke 1980: 136–157), and tribal meetings have historically been useful in settling conflicts between the sections ('Aṭaywa 1982: 247–264).

In participation in the national government, the same principle based on equal distribution within the tribal system has been extended as a guideline for individuals in this new political domain. The use of this principle at the level of tribes or tribal clusters has been rare in the history of the Bedouin (Peters 1990: 59–83), and it cannot be thoroughly applied because it is anyway an *ex posto facto* explanation for their acceptance of participation in the external political system. That explanation may ensure that such acceptance has an appearance of continuity from the past, but as a result the Bedouin of Matrouh have for the first time become a single political unit within the national political system.

8.   NEWLY CONSTRUCTED TRADITION

One day, I was watching television. The programme was a relay broadcast of a session of the People's Assembly in Cairo. An old Bedouin tribal chief was sitting beside me. He was the same person who told me about their own way of democracy. Many of the representatives on the screen were dressed in Western style and some were in a style peculiar to farmers of the Nile Valley. The scene shifted and when he saw a man wearing a white robe, a brown vest and a red felt cap just like himself on the screen, he suddenly raised a voice. "I'm proud of him! He's our representative. You can see he's wearing a robe? He's a good example for us and even for Egyptians."—The person was Ruḥūma 'Abd al-Wāḥid Ismā'īl al-Qunayshī, one of the newly elected representative of the Matrouh Governorate.

By saying that they have their own democracy and also by pointing out their formally dressed representatives on the TV screen as an example, the old Bedouin meant that what he himself thought characterized their distinctive and long-established way of life, which they themselves conceptualize by the term "*taqlīd*" and which I call "tradition" as a folk concept, was fine and had been well preserved.

But his explanation of their democracy and his impressions of the TV images contain some newly introduced elements which were not found in the past. He explained Bedouin tradition using a foreign term like "democracy" which the national government tries to promote and propagate among the nationals. He took pride in the image of a Bedouin who is, however, standing with other assembly members far away in Cairo as an example both for the Bedouin and for all the Egyptians. Differentiating the Bedouin and the Egyptians and including the Bedouin among the Egyptians at the same time, the old Bedouin also suggested to me that what is referred as "tradition" here had been newly constructed and harmonized with the new situation of the contemporary Bedouin.

Tradition claims or pretends to continue as it has been, but here it has been clearly transformed into the tradition of a local culture within the nation state. I understood, therefore, by these words of the old man which condensed the total attitude of the Bedouin toward the national election, that the tradition could not be self-evident among the Bedouin and that it had to have been restated many times so that people could persuade themselves and others of its existence in the process of the national election.

To talk about "tradition" in one's own culture or society is to objectify the reality of social life. Thus, "tradition" is some distance from reality, and seeing it as stable involves a degree of pretense. Using "tradition" as an explanation is always more effective when the continuity or the consistency of the reality is threatened, and in this case, it is used as an individualized notion which can be manipulated to influence others.

This notion of "tradition" as a folk concept can be used to understand the varied experiences of the Bedouin in the different countries of the Middle East which we know about through the reports of anthropologists and others.[11] In particular, Davis's work on Libyan politics since the Revolution of 1969 (Davis 1987) would provide an interesting comparison with which to develop the theme of this paper, because the Bedouin there are genealogically and culturally related to the tribes in Matrouh, but the image of their traditional political system has been used not just as a model for the survival of a minority, but as one of the models on which the modern state as a whole has been constructed.[12] These are not only phenomena to be found among the Bedouin. Throughout the world people value their "traditions." It is true that they believe in the continuity of "tradition," but it is also true

that they think they can use "tradition" as one means of promoting individual interests in the present situation.

NOTES

(1) An abridged version of this paper was originally read at the 92nd annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association in Washington, D. C. on November 17, 1993. I am thankful to Soraya Altorki, Jeremy S. Eades, Lane R. Hirabayashi, Ino Takeji, William W. Kelly, Ota Yoshinobu, Francisco Javier Tablero, Tanabe Akio, Tokita-Tanabe Yumiko, Yamashita Shinji and others who kindly gave me comments and advice. I owe special thanks to J. S. Eades and Ohtsuka Kazuo who also read the last version of the paper and improved it at every point. I also owe thanks for the Saito Foundation for the Islamic Studies which gave me financial support in 1994.

(2) I was a government student sent by the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture of Japan between January of 1988 and February of 1990. I express here my gratitude to everyone and to every organization which has given me help and cooperation. Particularly I am deeply grateful to the people in the field who accepted me and gave me more than warm friendship.

(3) In Arabic, that local administrative unit is called *muḥāfaẓa*, which is variously translated as "governorate," "prefecture" or "province." I have adopted the term "governorate" because it is used by the Egyptian government itself. See Ino's description (1991: 15–25) of the basic structure of local government of Egypt.

(4) The latest census (1986) gives the figure 160,567 as its population (al-Jihāz al-markazī li al-ta'bi'a al-'āmma wa al-iḥṣā' 1990: 23). The number of the Bedouin in the area does not appear in any government census, but Stein (1982: 33) estimated that the population at the end of the 1970s was over 120,000.

(5) The NDP was organized in 1978, as a new government party. It absorbed the Arab Socialist Party (al-Ḥizb al-Ishtirākī al-'Arabī) which used to be the main body of the only legal political party in Egypt between 1962 and 1976.

(6) As the three major political parties boycotted the election, their members were counted as independents. *Al-Ahrām* (2/12/1990: 1) says that among the 83 independents 14 were members of the Wafd Party (Ḥizb al-Wafd), 8 belonged to the Socialist Labour Party (Ḥizb al-'Amal al-Ishtirākī) and 1 belonged to the Liberal Party (Ḥizb al-Aḥrār).

(7) UNDP/FAO (1970) carried out preliminary research in Matrouh as part of an aid programme at the end of the 1960s, and gave the proportion of each cluster in the population of the Bedouin as follows:

'Alī al-Abyaḍ: 29%   al-Jumī'āt: 26%
'Alī al-Aḥmar: 14%   al-Qaṭ'ān: 8%
al-Sinina: 6%   other tribes: 17%

(8) Al-Jumī'āt tribesmen often say that they have been the masters of the Matrouh area for hundreds of years, and that Awlād 'Alī are guests who moved into the area from eastern Libya. See 'Aṭaywa (1982: 222–224) and Murray (1978 [1935]: 29) on the actual historical relation between the two tribal clusters, which is still not clear on many points.

(9) They are called *murābiṭūn* (tied ones). From the point of view of Awlād 'Alī, all the Bedouin living in Matrouh except the true Awlād 'Alī and a small number of men belonging to their brother tribal clusters whose main bodies are in neighboring Cyrenaica of eastern Libya are *murābiṭūn*. This category includes the tribes of al-Jumī'āt and al-Qaṭ'ān as well as the assimilated tribes in Awlād 'Alī. Previous anthropological studies of Matrouh and Cyrenaica have described *murābiṭūn* by the term "client tribes," while admitting the fact that many of them autonomous and often wealthier and more powerful than the tribes of the true Awlād 'Alī (Abu-Lughod 1986: 79–82; Drejer 1985: 130–134; Evans-Pritchard 1949: 52–53; Peters 1990: 40–58).

(10) *Al-ḥājj* and *al-ustādh* are forms of reference to a person. The former refers to a person who has performed the Meccan pilgrimage and the latter refers to a teacher or to a man not otherwise qualified for a title. As the title *al-ustādh* is rarely used among the Bedouin, borrowing this widely used term in the Nile Valley here has become to exemplify the Bedouin's acceptance of the

new political language of the nation state, on which I will argue in the conclusion.

(11) The monographs of Dresch (1989) and Lancaster (1981) are recent works of that kind. See also Barfield's work (1993) as a general review.

(12) Davis (1987: 141–153) writes on the political behavior of the tribesmen of the desert towns in elections to the popular committees in Libya.

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MASAYUKI AKAHORI: *School of Law, Senshu University, 1–1, Higashi-Mita 2, Tama-ku, Kawasaki-shi, Kanagawa 214–80, Japan.*