

DESERT EMOTIONS | AFFECT, ENDURANCE, AND MORAL ECOLOGY IN PRE-OIL ARABIA

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Abstract

This article will look at affect and emotional regulation in pre-oil central Arabia, attending to emotion as a social practice for dealing with uncertainty rather than an individual affect or response to ecological difficulty. It focuses on the Najd and what daily emotional life there was prior to oil: irregular rainfall, limited mobility, limited access to water, and moral aspects of hosting. Based on affect theory, the anthropology of temporality, the environmental humanities, and ordinary ethics, it creates the notion of a moral ecology of affect, an environment in which practices of patience, composure, restraint, and generosity were intertwined with aspects of everyday social life. In the article, the historical-anthropological analysis is used in conjunction with the micro-historical scene reading. Najdi chronicles are reviewed, and travel stories of Charles Doughty and H. St J. B. Philby. The scarcity in the environment is not solely material is asserted in this article. Instead, anticipatory, enduring, delaying, and reciprocative social, temporal, and affective structures emerged from ecological uncertainty. Rainfall, wells, hospitality, and caravan travelling are not only environmental phenomena but also affective infrastructures, in which processes of emotional behaviour are regulated and publicly managed. The article also suggests that emotional regulation was a social knowledge that was active rather than passive in pre-oil Arabia. The article highlighted the affective dimensions of ecological precarity in order to join broader debates on historical anthropology, temporality studies, and environmental humanities, and provided a new interpretation of everyday life in pre-oil Arabia.

Keywords: Affect; Temporality; Moral Ecology; Pre-Oil Arabia; Najd; Emotional Regulation; Hospitality; Ecological Uncertainty.

INTRODUCTION

In pre-oil Arabia, radical uncertainty prevailed in everyday life in the center of the peninsula. Movement, delay, and conflict were influenced by irregular rainfall and the lack of wells. Caravans were not usually a straight line, and households operated on a waiting, improvisation basis. In this world, controlling one's emotions was crucial.

This article suggests that pre-oil Arabian society evolved unique emotional abilities that had to go hand in hand with ecology: restraint, patience, foresight, generosity of grievance, and modesty of complaining. Not a romance of endurance, but the moral and material requirements of desert life impacted it.

This study's intent is straightforward: emotional management in pre-oil Najd was a practical know-how that helped the people get through unpredictable rainfall and skewed availability of water, unreliable mobility, and a cultural expectation of hospitality. Although this rule was not reducible to any kind of doctrine, it had moral weight from religious notions such as sabr, nor was it purely a question of psychology because it entailed social, environmental, and temporal components.

These emotions were linked to wells, rumours, clouds, and caravans, influenced by the presence of guests, the handling of goods, the lack of a husband or caravan, and relief doubts. Therefore, desert emotions also formed part of the desert's moral ecology that was constituted by the routine exercise of discipline, care, and anticipation in order to provide the feeling and environment.

This argument means that the study of Arabian history is warranted in its own right. Pre-oil Arab history has been much interested in state formation, reformist religion, tribal politics, and oil's transition to modernity, histories that may also tend to overlook another, more muted aspect: the affective labor of everyday life.

On this register, the archive appears as follows. Rain is more than just weather; it's a way of life, a relief, a disappointment, a prayer, a rumour. Well-placed wells are no longer just infrastructure but have become a bottleneck, waiting rooms, and stress scenes. Hospitality is made into a technology of affective stabilization of an uncertain environment, not a cultural adornment.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The focus of this article is on four themes.

The first theme is related to temporality. Long since, anthropologists have theorised that human beings do not live in timeless calendars, but in distinct temporal orders of the social system which serve as structurally organised waiting and anticipation, and which constitute a meaningful social experience in their own right (Bryant and Knight, 2019; Sharma, 2014). These insights shed light on Arabia and the repetitive material nature of waiting as a result of uncertainty.

The second theme is based on affect theory, where feelings are not stable states of the interior of the self, but give texture to commonplace experiences, attitude, and mood in ways that spread socially and are not fully known (Stewart 2007; Ahmed 2010; Berlant 2011). Particularly helpful for Arabian material, where introspective self-confession is rarely heard, and ritual calmness, haste, silence, and moralisation are constantly witnessed.

Environmental humanities give rise to the third theme. Recent research has noted that environmental factors have an influence on social life, not only at the level of what is possible, but also through their contribution to language, memory, perception, and ethics (Rose et al., 2012; Chao, 2022; Hecht, 2023). It has been further explored in more recent work that details climate affect and environmental uncertainty, such as how unstable ecologies impact emotionally charged sensations and temporal experience (Pihkala, 2024; Yusoff, 2024; Anderson, 2025). They have some importance in pre-oil central Arabia, where rainfall, livestock, and water availability dictated the way people lived.

The fourth theme is based on ordinary ethics. Instead of the formal doctrine, it is about routine judgments and controls of self (Lambek, 2010; Das, 2012). The ethical domain

comprises patience at the well, measured generosity with strangers, minimum grumblings during times of drought, and patience with repetitive domestic work.

These strands are brought together to construct the framework of this article: emotional management within the moral ecology. Emotional regulation is not the current therapeutic regulation of the self, but rather the historically located regulation of feeling within a framework of social norms, ecological pressure, and practical expectation, and moral ecology is the way in which emotional expectations are constituted and exhibit effects in relation to climate, movement, kinship, reputation, and subsistence.

In pre-oil Arabia, this worldview implies that affect encompasses emotions as well as what sort of emotions could be expressed, controlled, deflected, or acknowledged in an ambiguous setting.

SOURCES AND METHOD

Four types of material are included in this article: Najdi chronicles, especially those of Ibn Bishr and of Ibn ʿĪsā; Travel stories, of Charles Doughty and H. St J. B. Philby; contemporary historical scholarship; and the larger archival ecology, which makes cross-reading possible.

There are several important institutions related to the study, such as Dārah and King Fahad National Library in Saudi Arabia, the British Library's India Office collection, and Qatar Digital Library. They have added to the accessibility of important digitally-saved libraries about Arabia and the Gulf.

The method used in the article is micro-historical scene reading. Chronicle stories and travel stories are not viewed as "transparent" records. Instead, small scenes are explored that have a crossover between emotional and environmental elements: pouring out water, disagreements about springs, pouring coffee, waiting at wells, watering animals, or discussing the rain. The use of this methodology should be done with caution. Male narrators are written by Ibn Bishr and Ibn ʿĪsā; they are concise, and they have clear priorities. Doughty and Philby are very rich observers, but they are outsiders with imperial period genre-fying agendas and personal styles. Nor is it their intention to alleviate these disparities but to make them work in a positive way.

Silence is another principle of reading. The archive is inadequate in describing the emotional labour of women. Instead, it is a hint or nuance about the endurance of the house, water control, kitchening, caring, and time absence control. Thus, instead of being completely recoverable social histories, gendered temporalities in this article continue to be careful reconstructions.

Rainfall and the Emotional Life of Uncertainty

Even in pre-oil Arabia, rainfall was never thought of as meteorological. Instead, it molded hope and dialogue and action and righteousness.

Doughty is one of the best at making a scene condensed. He says that when he went near a group of tents near the Jebel, "the Arab very earnestly questioned us, 'What of the

rain?” (Doughty 1921, 1:575–576). The urgency in the question was important – it indicated that rain was not ‘background knowledge’. It identified mobility, pasture, and household stability. The question of the rain indicated a social action for emotion management.

Companion, described above, dug into sand “to sound the depth of the late fallen rain,” since “till another autumn . . . were there no other moisture to be relied upon” (Doughty 1921 1:575). Here, uncertainty is made flesh as the individual subjectively experiences relief. Rain puts hope and anxiety in the landscape.

Philby returned an identical structure in a different register after a generation. According to him, the caravan was preparing itself for the difficult crossing of the desert, but it delayed its departure until water for the animals was prepared. “We possessed our souls in such patience as we could muster” (Philby 1922, 1:41), he said. Here, patience is not a “cool-off” but is something that is born as a response to delay, stress, and fatigue.

Virtue is not an innate ability, but must be worked out and disciplined.

So it not only affects movement and subsistence, but it also restricts them emotionally.

Wells, Waiting, and Public Feeling

Rin the fall brought uncertainty into the lives of all, but wells illustrate the endeavours of the public to control it.

In dry regions, it takes time to get access to water. As a result, people are forced to wait in line, negotiate, and exercise restraint, as it is scarce. The wells were made public places in which emotions such as exhaustion, urgency, observation, and politeness were publicly dealt with.

Philby’s journey to Abu Jifan presents various lessons. After travelling for over one hundred hours without water, they consider wells as the “object of what they had talked and dreamed about so much” (Philby 1922, 1:55). Here, water is not simply described as a utility, but it is also stated that it is something that people dream about. So, relief first becomes emotional, before material.

Here is the coexistence of relief and tension at the well, as thirsty animals push against each other to get water, while men desperately draw water. This indicates that an individual not only comes to a water source, but also to a socially rich environment, whose existence is reliant on water.

The hard side of the same ecology is illustrated in the chronicles. The best version of the narration of Ibn Bishr indicates that the centre of warfare during the initial period in Diriyah is a water spring called “springs of water in Wadi Hanifa”. But the winning side names the event using moralised public discourses. Water helps not only to subsist in life, but also to help to add to memory and collective emotions, as well as rivalry.

Emotions ranged from restrained to aggressive, depending on the situation depicted. However, in both scenarios, it stayed connected to the social life dependent on water.

Hospitality as Affective Infrastructure

Even though it is romanticised in the Arab world, the significance of hospitality can be given an anthropological importance because of its emergence in uncertain environments.

Despite the lack of certainty for the future supplies, risking material and emotional, the Arabs were very accommodating to travellers. So hospitality was not a provision of plenty, but one of limited generosity, under the stress of the environment.

Doughty states time and time again that, although they had very little of it themselves, travelers were given dates, camel milk, and coffee as soon as they arrived at a Shammar (Doughty 1921, 1:574–575). It would be hard to say that these scenes portray easy bounty, but rather that hospitality is a moral act of persons in an endangered ecosystem.

Emotions were controlled through the use of coffee, dates, and milk by making the stranger comfortable, calming the host, and resocializing after risky movements. Affect here served as an infrastructure of generosity.

Hospitality transformed exposure into a relationship.

Gendered Endurance and Domestic Time

The changing economy of people and goods is referred to by Philby, who mentions two women riding with a caravan from 'Uqair (Philby 1922, 1:40–41). This is a brief but important observation as it demonstrates that there was mobility not just for the men, but also for women, and that women were also key participants in the temporal dimension of caravan life.

Also, as mentioned, household endurance was heavily reliant on work that elite male sources didn't often go into much detail about, including caring for the house, managing absence, repairs, preparing food, storing food, and caring for the family.

It is possible to cautiously deduce from these bits that women were able to establish the repetition of time necessary for their lives. Although their labour was not in the archives, a story of adventures or of politics, it nonetheless played an important role in stabilizing both.

Beyond Scarcity Alone

One reviewer's objection to this may be that the emotional practices described herein are just "the poor's response to a difficult situation. Why is this a distinctive emotional structure and not deprivation?

Though it was scarce, it couldn't alone account for the social organization of feeling.

But in most poor societies, the same emotional skills are not produced. Uncertainty in Arabia was the primary concern, and this was punctuated by patterns. Rainfall was irregular, and a hierarchy and sequential use of wells were enforced. Watering was used as a factor to gauge the socially timed moves of the caravans. An exposure was redistributed through hospitality. Ecological risk was relational, so reputation was crucial.

The conditions not only engender the distress, but also provide an obvious way to deal with the distress.

So, patience, composure, restraint, and calculated giving were not inadvertent side effects of poverty. Instead, they put in a process of social reproduction through ecological instability.

DISCUSSION

Based on these materials, it is possible to argue that pre-oil Arabian society gave birth to a unique set of emotional regulation, which is shaped by uncertainty, social responsibility, and ecological uncertainty.

Not to push this argument too hard. There was no “Arabian emotion” and no “desert psychology”. There continues to be an inconsistent archive, internally diverse region, and highly mediated genres. But the sources do make a more modest and valuable claim that was the site of an ongoing socialization of affect in pre-oil Arabia because of ecological uncertainty.

There are two reasons why this is important.

For one, it expands the anthropology of the history of Arabia. Frequently, the territory is part of a theory related to empire, oil, religion, or tribal politics, with few accounts for ordinary affective life. But that environmental uncertainty was in fact lived out, as material risk is lived, but also as moral practice, as demonstrated by the historical texture of these sources.

Secondly, the Arabian discourse contributes to the broader debates around affect and temporality. One of the key ways by which societies survive having uncertain futures may be through emotional regulation. In uncertainty is style: How one waits, asks, hosts, withholds, endures.

The affective atmosphere of ecological uncertainty, waiting, and social endurance that determined routine life in pre-oil Najd is depicted in Figure 1.



Figure 1: Waiting, Water, and Emotional Life in Pre-Oil Arabia

CONCLUSION

The article does not take up ecology as the place where emotions could be experienced, but rather sets out that regulating emotions was the way of socially living in ecology.

Feeling was developed not only by such indeterminate means as rainfalls, domestic repetition, but by hospitality itself.

Pre-oil Arabia involved practical emotional regulation, controlled kindness, knowing how to be tough, and patience: all part of the mix. Affect was another one of the quiet technologies that permitted subsistence until petroleum was promised to offer speed, control, and abundance.

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