

SES no.055; Cover, contents, and others

journal or publication title	Senri Ethnological Studies
volume	55
year	2001-03-30
URL	http://hdl.handle.net/10502/932

Senri Ethnological Studies no.55

Cultural Change in the Arab World

Edited by
Tetsuo Nishio



**National Museum
of Ethnology**

Senri Expo Park, Suita, Osaka, Japan
Phone 06-6876-2151

Senri Ethnological Studies

Senri Ethnological Studies is published irregularly by the National Museum of Ethnology. The aim is to present the results of research and other activities conducted by the Museum staff, associate members, and affiliated guest scholars.

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National Museum of Ethnology, Osaka
2001

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Introduction

This collection of papers is an interdisciplinary approach to the analysis of the mechanisms of environmental adaptation made by ethnic or social groups of Arab descent through geographical (physical) or social (group-related) movement. This study is a result of a joint research in the fields of social anthropology, ethnomusicology, international relations, linguistic anthropology, folklore study, archaeology, and literature. This is because, in addition to the natural environment, the concept of environmental adaptation mentioned here also includes the social and cultural environments and covers elements such as relationships between social groups, ideologies (such as Islamic values), and the various fashions of material culture that relate to daily life as a whole. Although it is a vague way of putting it, it may be said that, in the process by which specific groups encounter new cultural environments due to a variety of causes, and adapt, or accommodate, or acculturate themselves to that environment, the characteristics of existing historical regions that exceed these specific narrow ethnic or social groups, or put humbly, group preferences, in some cases decide the process and direction of the changes, especially when there is superfluity in the direction of these changes or in the value judgment of a specific cultural phenomenon. The objective is to clarify what function is served by the characteristics of historical regions at the deep level of this type of cultural metamorphosis.

This collection of papers is made up of three parts.

- (1) A synchronic grasp of regional preference in cultural metamorphosis.
- (2) A diachronic grasp of the metamorphosis of preferences towards the material culture.
- (3) A grasp of the conceptual background and fundamental patterns of the cultural metamorphosis related to the whole Arab world beyond the borders of specific regions.

Firstly, in (1), the Mizuno paper looks at the tradition of Egyptian sound culture from the viewpoint of the link between the sounds of the natural environment and music. The Horiuchi paper looks at changes in the social structure of the nomadic Arab tribes who migrated from the Arabian Peninsula to the Sinai Peninsula, and the way in which the intrinsic group maintenance principle of the Bedouin functions in the environment of Southern Sinai. The Arai paper is about the groups who migrated from the Ḥaḍramawt district in Yemen to South-East Asia, and in particular puts the historical documents of the period of Japanese occupation into order, and looks at the change in social structure against the background of the migrants' relationship with native Muslim societies in South-East Asia.

In (2), the Kawatoko and Shindo papers look at, respectively, coins and glass

products in Egypt from an archaeological perspective, and carefully trace the changes in reception, design, and character, and the mutual relationships between Egyptian tastes and utility. The Kobayashi paper looks at the formation process of the illustrated “Old Man of the Sea” who appears in the story of Sindbad the sailor, and considers the role of illustration in the Middle East from the perspective of the mutual influence that the passing down of text and icons through generations have on each other.

In (3), the Iizuka paper looks at the issue of social advancement for women and Islam in North Africa, and analyzes the state of Islam as an ideology from the viewpoint of its links to various conditions, such as the political situation, history, and other social and economic factors that the author considers lacking in conventional approaches. The Nishio paper looks, from the perspectives of Islamic values and the language consciousness of the people, at the origins and development of linguistic nationalism in the Arabic-speaking regions that have been subjected to historical change occurring in an extra-regional direction due to the historical fact that the Koran was revealed in Arabic. The Yamanaka paper considers the ‘desert value’ in the background of the story of “Laylā and Majnūn”, a tale of disappointed love that is one of the most popular stories in the Middle East. The Oda paper, based on information obtained in the process of constructing a folktale database, looks at a computer-aided method that employs a biological metaphor to analyze the structure of folktales, and its application to an approach that attempts to determine shared regional characteristics or the mentality common to (ethnic) groups in specific regions.

This collection of papers is part of the research result of ‘Studies into the Migration of Arab Nomads and their Environmental Adaptation Mechanism’ (Research representative: Tetsuo Nishio), which was funded by a scientific research grant from the Ministry of Education, Science, Sports, and Culture in Japan (Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research: Grant No.07044005). These studies were conducted over a three-year period from 1995 to 1997. Another result of this research, a work entitled ‘A Dictionary of Arab Tribes’ that is based on the computerized database of Arab tribes, has already been published in the Asian and African Lexicon series of the Institute for the Study of Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa at the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies.

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平成13年3月30日 発行 非売品

Senri Ethnological Studies No.55

編集・発行 国立民族学博物館
〒565-8511 吹田市千里万博公園10-1
TEL 06(6876)2151(代表)

印刷 株式会社天理時報社
〒632-0083 奈良県天理市稲葉町80
TEL 0743(64)1411(代表)



ISSN 0387-6004