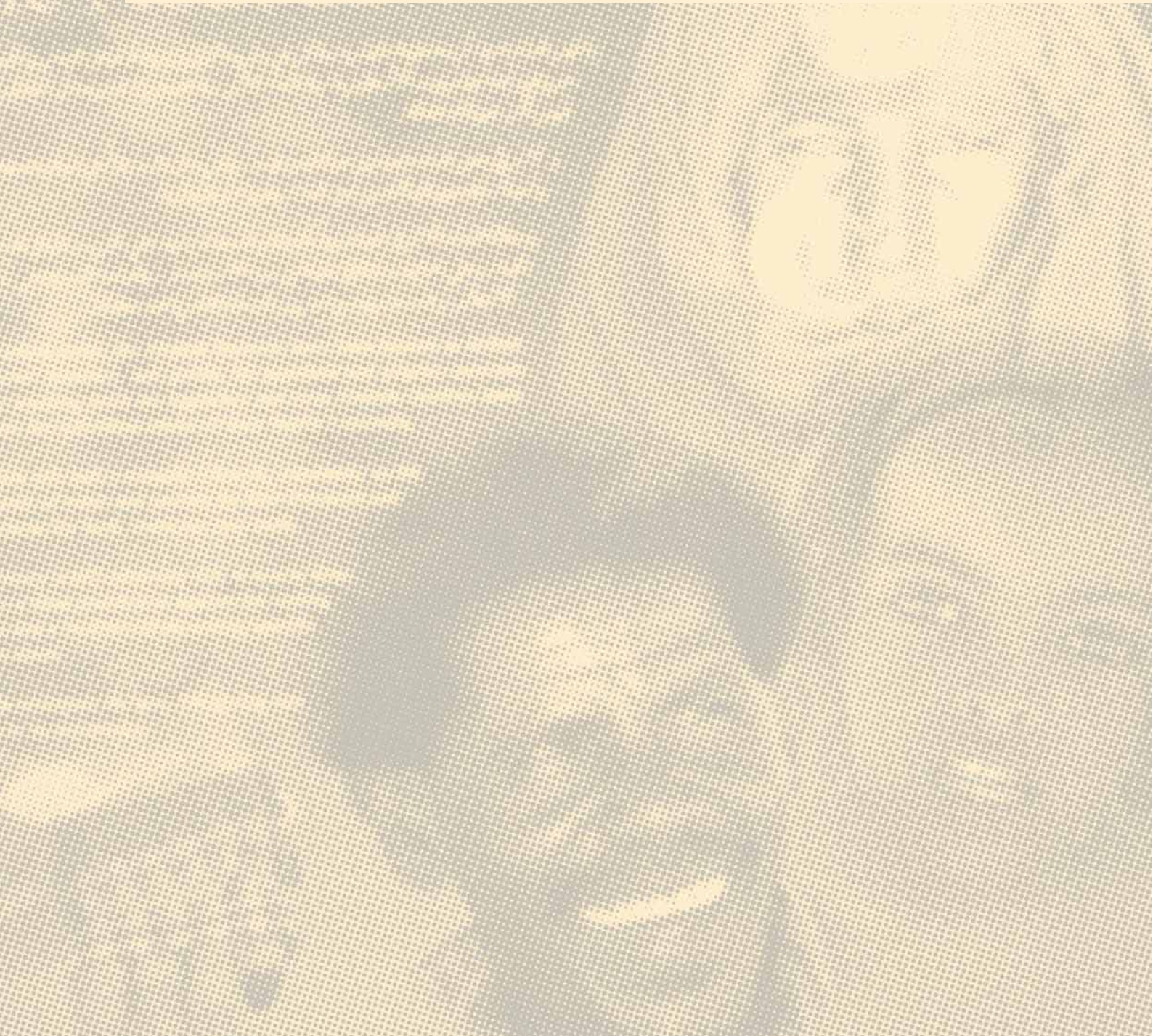


Life and Tradition of the Ababda Nomads
in the Egyptian Desert, the Junction between
Intangible and Tangible Heritage Management

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ABSTRACT

In December 2006 a Heritage Centre was opened in the Wadi el Gamal National Park in south-eastern Egypt, following a decade of research and cooperation with the local community of the area. This Centre, called *Beyt Ababda* or House of the Ababda, displays the cultural heritage of the Ababda nomads living in the Egyptian Eastern Desert (on the west shore of the Red Sea). This centre is one of the first heritage centres in Egypt to start with a holistic approach in mind, trying to reach the inhabitants of the region and the visitors of the national park and informing them on cultural as well as ecological issues. The cultural identity and intangible heritage of the Ababda will be emphasized and the desert experience of the visitor will be presented in a new manner for Egyptian cultural heritage management. In the Wadi Gamal area all initiatives, both ecological and cultural are included in order to present the visitor with a complete view of desert life, hopefully providing the Ababda community with a sustainable income and amplified cultural identity.

The history of the Ababda nomads: an introduction

In the desert area of the Red Sea mountains of Egypt, existing on the absolute minimal subsistence level, nomadic groups of the Ababda tribe herd camels, goats and sheep in the wadi (desert valley) systems. Their pastoral nomadic lifestyle is based on herding and on

trade in products such as the charcoal they produce on a small scale and the medicinal plants they collect. The Ababda tradition shows strong connections with the Beja cultures of other areas in Egypt, Sudan, Somalia and Ethiopia. The Ababda are an ancient people, indigenous to Africa as opposed to their neighbours to the south (the Rashayda), living in the border region between Egypt and

Sudan, and those to the north living in the area towards the rapidly expanding tourist resort town of Hurgada (the Ma'aza) (Hobbs 1990).

The Ma'aza and Rashayda Bedouin originated on the Arabian Peninsula and eventually migrated to Eastern Africa as did many other ethnic groups (Adams 1984). However, nomads such as the Ababda, and with similar lifestyles and traditions, have been living in the area for several thousands of years although their ethnicity and exact origin is difficult to define (Paul 1954). Even though evidence is scant, some scholars have been tempted to compare the Medja cultures known from Pharaonic times, or the Blemmyes mentioned by several sources with the Beja and Ababda culture of the same area today (Keimer 1950, 1951, 1952, 1953a, 1953b). (For more detailed notes on the textual evidence see Barnard, 2005; for the archaeological evidence on the Eastern Desert nomads, see for example the work of Hans Barnard on Eastern Desert Ware Barnard, 2002.)

Still, regarding the Ababda as simply descendents of these ancient nomads is an outmoded and somewhat simplistic view of their culture (Barnard 2005, Wendrich in press). Nowadays, the Ababda are proud of their indigenous African ancestry, but at the same time they sometimes attempt to link their culture (mostly through traditional stories of descent) to the Arabic peninsula in order to give their culture a more securely Islamic base. Although little anthropological research has been conducted on the subject, this may reflect their changing nomadic lifestyle in the past 150 years, and a wish to seek adhesion to the mainstream Egyptian culture. In this paper, however, I have used their own interpretation of their social identity and will avoid further interpretation or speculation about their cultural constitution. (For more on this subject see Dru C. Gladney, 1998 and Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983.)

The material culture of the Ababda nomads is meagre, as is often the case with migrating people, while in contrast their oral traditions and other expressions of intangible culture are vast. Nowadays, the Ababda way of life is under pressure of modern developments, notably urbanization, military activity near the Sudanese border, and the explosive development of tourism along this part of the Red Sea coast over the past decade or so. Very little of the culture of this people has been recorded thus far and their unique customs are already disappearing. Sustainable Ababda heritage preservation is needed as well as a way in which the many aspects of their culture may be presented to the world.

The heritage of the Eastern Desert

The research history of the area

From the early 1990's an international group of archaeologists visited the area to conduct archaeological research on the site of the Graeco-Roman town of Berenike, which lies Ababda land. This programme was organised as the Berenike Archaeological Project 1994 - 2002, led by Dr Willeke Wendrich of the UCLA, California with several other researchers, including the author, and members of the Ababda tribes participated in the archaeological research from 1991 to 2002.

Over the years of cooperation between the archaeologists and the Ababda, friendships and an interest in the ways and customs of these nomads was developed. It was becoming increasingly clear during those years that with the increasing tourism activity along the Red Sea shore the Ababda way of life was on the brink of changing forever. Discussion sessions were held on this subject and in 1996 several members of the Ababda tribes invited the archaeologists to their houses to discuss the possibilities of heritage preservation for the



Figure 1
The Beyt Ababda

Figure 2
Ottoman fort exhibit at Quseir



future. The Ababda asked for help in documenting their lifestyle for their children and the rest of the world. This resulted in several activities, initiated by the Ababda, to record and preserve Ababda traditions.

From 1996 to 1998 onwards the Cultural Program of the Royal Netherlands Embassy in Cairo supported a project to preserve and to stimulate the cultural identity of the Ababda through the preservation of their material culture. Termed the Eastern Desert Antiquities Preservation Project (EDAPP 1996 -1998), this was financed primarily by the Royal Netherlands Embassy in Cairo. The project started an archaeological training programme under the direction of Willeke Wendrich, and worked with the Ababda on their own instigation to create a museum on Ababda material culture. A collection was formed, the objects being described by the Ababda themselves. Part of the collection is displayed in the Ottoman fort museum of Quseir. Another part of the EDAPP collection travelled to the Netherlands where it formed part of an exhibit in the Wereldmuseum, Rotterdam named "Nomads between the Nile and the Red Sea" (2002 - 2003).

This Dutch museum houses another collection of objects from the area collected in the field by Keimer in the 1940's. With both the old and the new collection together a unique impression was given about the traditions and the material culture of the Ababda over the past 70 years. At the same time changes were emphasized as well. Keimer collected objects from the Beja representing and stressing their presumed cultural connection to the ancient inhabitants of the region. The

new EDAPP collection was organised by the Ababda themselves, displaying what they thought to be important to underline their cultural identity (Wendrich in press). We considered the manner in which this collection was formed an essential element of the process. The objects chosen do not so much emphasize strict cultural group identity, but mostly display objects used in rites the passage and other social practices like, for instance, hospitality. For this reason the EDAPP collection shows a 'loosely' formed compilation of objects found in the region of southern Egypt and Sudan, sometimes shared with different ethnic groups.

Apart from the different ideas behind the collections, what became clear from the differences between the two collections, the Dutch collection of the 1940a and the new Ababda-led collection for the EDAPP was that there has been an enormous shift in materials used by the Ababda. In one way it could be said that there has been an impoverishment in the materials used, and although this would not do justice to the pride with which these items are treated by the Ababda, it is a symptom that can not be ignored. For instance, it is very striking that over the past half century traditional pottery water carriers have been replaced first by aluminium water carriers (made from scrap aluminium found in the desert) and then by the re-use of plastic detergent and similar bottles. Such changes indicate the decreasing isolation of these people, through trade with other parts of Egypt and the sea trade with India. It possibly also illustrates a general impoverishment of their material cultural even though pride of their cultural identity and the intangible aspects

of their culture are still strong.

The value of Ababda tradition

Thus one might claim, though with some caution, that the traditional material culture is now no longer regarded as the most valuable feature of their way of life by these nomads. Or, more in line with Hobsbawm's theory on the invention of tradition, perhaps the Ababda hold on to their traditions more loosely as the idiom of their customs change, while displaying ancient values as opposed to newly invented traditions (Hobsbawm 1983). The different values ascribed to this heritage by the Ababda lie at the intangible level, for instance the knowledge and use of their surroundings, their skills in hunting, their feasts and practices of animal husbandry, their medicinal knowledge of plants as well as their craftsmanship. The Ababda are a proud people who have seen many changes in their surroundings over the centuries. It is important to note that these changes have formed their customs and traditions and will continue to do so in the future. Change is especially important as their relatively isolated culture is exposed to the outside world, creating now - as in the past - a blend of new influences, new materials and old traditions (Barnard in press).

For instance, the Ababda have converted to Islam, but hold on to their indigenous African customs as well. They are proud of their knowledge with which they maintain a frail ecological balance in the wilderness of the desert. The exhibitions previously shown in Egypt and the Netherlands were only a small attempt to preserve and document the material culture that accompanies the

heritage of these people. Even though the material culture is part of their identity, the objects are mere expressions of a huge system of socio-cultural values behind it. This became all the more clear during the time when the collections for the museums were compiled.

When asked what should be the most important category of objects, items connected to social gatherings, above all the coffee ceremony, were unanimously chosen by both men and women. While their mat houses (*beyt bursh*), for example, were regarded as one of the most characteristic aspects of their culture, it was only when a house was acquired for the museum that the complex system of care and family claims on trees and other resources in the different wadi-systems came to light. With these customs also the patrilineal and matrilineal practices, particularly the marriage celebrations and other feasts, dominating their social life became apparent. The perception of heritage differs through cultures and as some of the visitors from western countries initially focused on tangible heritage, the Ababda mean to preserve and document mainly the intangible. They need, as they themselves have put it, to preserve their way of life for their children's children, so that they will know about the traditional lifestyle of their ancestors.

The future of the nomads in the Eastern Desert

New developments at the Red Sea

With the onset of large developments in the area, the



Figure 3
Wereldmuseum Rotterdam exhibition



Figure 4
Interior design of the Beyt Ababda

Ababda are not sure what their future position will be. Land along the Red Sea shore is being sold by the government to mainly foreign entrepreneurs who are building hotels and attract tourists in very large numbers to the still undisturbed coral reefs of the southern Red Sea. Increasingly the Ababda are seeking employment as building workers or in the tourism establishments even though they remain largely unaware of western civilization and the needs of tourists. In the Ababda region many of the hotels remain largely empty because the sheer amount of new hotel accommodation being built, particularly since the opening of the latest new Red Sea coast international airport at Marsa Alam in 2001, though total tourist numbers are increasing rapidly. However, tourist attractions other than those along the shoreline are almost non-existent and the general infrastructure of the region remains bad.

Very few Ababda are profiting from the new developments in what has been their country for many hundreds of years, while at the same time very few tourists discover the true value of the culture of the nomads, since at first glance the land they visit looks empty. The Ababda have had little or no physical impact on their environment, and if the Ababda society is noticed at all by tourists, the material culture of these tribes appears primitive and poor. Thus the gap between the visitors of the area and the indigenous people could not

be bigger!

More and more Ababda are moving away from the desert. In the past few decades some have moved to the Nile region, particularly Aswan, to seek jobs. In the desert area they are settling in government built villages, using water brought to the area by the government. Transmission masts bring television nowadays and concrete or cardboard houses replace the traditional *beyt bursh*. Still, there is also a counter-movement. Some of the tribe members who initiated the program of heritage preservation are moving away from these new developments and the so-called lurking riches. They have built their *beyt bursh* elsewhere in the mountains away from the new developments. When in 2002 the archaeological excavations came to a halt, the inhabitants of the area continued to ask the international team for help. The inevitable question arose what would be the best practice for the preservation of the Ababda customs in this fast changing environment. Is preservation of these traditions at all possible? And how do we preserve the ancient traditions without being too rigid in our rejection and criticism of the new and inevitable developments in the area?

The Wadi el Gamal National Park

The fact that the natural, ecological and the social



Figure 5
Ababda describing the EDAPP collection

Figure 6
Drinking Gabana with the Ababda

Figure 7
Information about the Ababda in the Map House



structure of the desert will change strongly was not at all celebrated by everyone. In order to preserve some of the riches of the desert, in 2003 a national park was consigned by the Egyptian government: the Wadi el Gamal National Park (WGNP). (The name means 'Valley of the Camel'). This is an area of approximately 7,000 square kilometres alongside the Red Sea has been chosen as one of the most characteristic and unique locations of the southern Eastern Desert. (The approximate co-ordinates for the WGNP area are 24°51'N in the north and 24°06'N in the south; the Red Sea shoreline in the east and 34°28'E to the west. It lies approximately 275 km. north of the Sudanese border, 300 km. south of the already heavily developed resort and diving centre of Hurghada, and around 40 km. south of the new resort area and international airport of Marsa Alam.

The national park is supervised and managed by Egypt's Ministry of State for Environmental Affairs through the Egyptian Environmental Affairs Agency (MSEA : EEAA). In natural heritage conservation terms it preserves represents a distinctive transect from the sea to the mountains, with marine (especially coral reef) and sea shore habitats, islands, the coastal plain, and up to the mountains. Animal, floral species and archaeology in the area are preserved and some villages and other traditional locations of the Ababda nomads are located inside the National Park. In order to preserve traditions of nomadic populations, and spread knowledge about their lifestyle, the Park is of the utmost importance. For many intangible elements of desert life, such as hunting skills, animal husbandry and knowledge of traditional medicine can only be truly preserved if there is an ecological viable unit or nature reserve present (see for example Prott 2000).

The Wadi el Gamal National Park provides such conditions for the Ababda and their traditional culture and represents the best focal point for a new project aimed at preserving the tangible and most of all the intangible heritage of the Ababda. This was, it was judged by the international research team in consultation with the Ababda themselves, the best prospect for preserving in an integrated way all the aspects and values of the Ababda environment for the future. Here the frail balance between an ancient subsistence economy within the arid environment could easily be explained to both international and Egyptian visitors. However, there were many other questions to be considered. First, it was

necessary to consider how to bring together and express both the knowledge and (material) culture of these people? Following previous smaller and less formal meetings by 2005 with the Ababda it became clear the community, already involved in the National Park and its facilities, were advocating the establishment of some sort of a museum as a starting point within any heritage programme. A stakeholder meeting was held in the Autumn of 2005 between a delegation of the Ababda, the architect of the proposed museum, Gabriel Mikhail, and several members of the Eastern Desert Antiquities Preservation Project (EDAPP) were present. Also present were other actual and potential stakeholders, including National Park Rangers and the Director of Fustat Wadi el-Gemal eco-tourism camp. Meetings were also organised between EDAPP and the Egyptian Environmental Affairs Agency, the Tourism Development Authority and USAID (the United States government's international development aid agency), in order to ensure integration of the proposed development with the plans for other developments in the region.

It was agreed that ideally the Ababda's tangible heritage should tell the story of the intangible heritage and culture: the typical examples of the material culture, selected by the Ababda themselves, should be a means to show and enhance the customs and traditions of this group. Thus the museum would not only have to serve the traditional role of a museum: it would also play other roles. It will hopefully stimulate awareness of, and pride in, the traditional nomadic way of life. It is hoped that it would inspire that Ababda to enhance their environment, and it might ideally attract them to live in the area. The museum or heritage centre could help to educate and inform both the younger generation of Ababda as well as the tourists visiting the area. Of course there will be many challenges: in particular the Ababda community will still have to face the inevitable consequences of the explosive growth of tourism in the area. With these plans immediately other questions arose as well. What limits will the environmental conservation needs of the National Park poses on the proposed Heritage Centre, and conversely in what way could the project profit from the development of and investment in the National Park, and thus improve the facilities and value of the Centre? These questions and others are discussed in more detail the following sections of this paper.

Preserving the Ababda tradition

Beyt Ababda- the Heritage Centre

In the autumn of 2005 the Royal Netherlands Embassy in Cairo agreed to finance a further heritage project in support of the Ababda culture. The objects that had been in the travelling exhibition in The Netherlands were returned to Egypt and an initial phase of the heritage centre was built in the summer of 2006 in Wadi Gamal, which was named the Beyt Ababda, i.e. the House of the Ababda. The buildings were designed by the architect, Gabriel Mikhail, who is renowned for his work in creating traditional 'eco-architectural' styles using sustainable materials and natural resources reflecting traditional values, thus re-inventing ancient architectural styles. (For details of his work see <http://www.egyptcd.com>) In this case his design was inspired by the characteristic ancient Roman architecture found all across the Eastern Desert. Different characteristics of the surroundings have been integrated into the re-creation of the local heritage. Flat slabs of local stone are stacked firmly together, thus blending in with the surrounding terrain of the Red Sea hills. Small windows are set high in the walls and durable materials were used throughout.

The road to and setting of the Beyt Ababda are by design the minimal needed, though sufficient to accommodate and receive tourist buses. The centre has been designed in such a manner that no garbage or waste water will effect the natural ecology of the park. At the same time there were also limits in this isolated environment: very little or no electricity can be used in the heritage centre, limiting for instance the use of multimedia inside the building. In December 2006 the heritage centre opened, displaying locally again the objects the Ababda have chosen to illustrate their culture. This is however only the initial phase of the Heritage Centre, and provides one exhibition area, a restroom and some parking places. However, the building will need to be enlarged in the near future if it is to fully address all the planned purposes of the Centre and thereby meet all needs of both the Ababda people and national and international tourists, but at the moment the planned second phase still awaits additional funding.

Preserved traditions

As the Ababda gathered information about their culture, the question arose what values of their way of life should be highlighted in the museum, and in this the choice was left to Ababda themselves. From amongst the three

Ababda groups living in the Berenike area, a group of delegates was assembled. This was done on an ad hoc basis by the nomads themselves, with the help of the local sheikhs, and was based on their knowledge of the area. These groups were asked to compile the collection and tell the story behind it themselves. In this manner the tangible heritage of artefact was collected physically, while the significant aspects of their intangible heritage was similarly identified and recorded.

To achieve all this at the practical level, each group of Ababda men and women sat together, drew pictures of items they collected, described the function and associations of each object and the value and importance of these. It is planned that the Ababda will, with the help of the research team, eventually write a book about their culture. In this way the project hopes to best preserve the necessary information, though in a somewhat unorthodox method. During this process, the interface and links between the tangible and intangible heritage of the Ababda became evident. In this process they divided the objects into categories used both by men and women, those used only by women, and objects used by men. The gender-segregated lives of the people thus became very clear, and when all the discussion about the meaning of an object was finished, the discussion continued on a different level, particularly in relation to traditional handicrafts.

Out of this process three categories of objects were chosen for the Beyt Ababda exhibition, one covering both the male and the female lives, one covering male aspects, and the third the female aspects of the culture. When asked what was to be considered the most important group of items in their life, the coffee-set (*Gabana*) was the first that came to mind. It belonged to both worlds, that of men and women. Sets of rules accompany the coffee ceremony. In a world where there is no modern way of communicating and life can be extremely isolated, the information a guest brings from the outside world can be of crucial importance. Sitting down and drinking coffee while talking is both a very important ceremony of hospitality and a vital method of communication - from place to place, generation to generation and population sub-group to sub-group. The Ababda men considered that in second place were all cultural objects and activities that have to do with the camel, which is a proud symbol of the Ababda life. The camel is at the male side of the spectrum, since women are not supposed to care for these animals. In joint

Figure 8
The mangrove reserve at the Red Sea shore



second place on the female side were things relating to personal adornment and to the traditional house, the *beyt bursh*. The Ababda live in mat houses called *beyt bursh* that can be compared to other nomadic traditions in north and east Africa, such as the Tuareg and the Affar.

Examples of all these items will be included in the museum displays of the Heritage Centre which aim to tell the story of the Ababda way of life. But the major challenge to be faced in the near future is how to display what are essentially intangible traditions relating to e.g. social gathering, hospitality and feast, or a tradition of knowledge? Here it will be important to display both the tangible objects associated with the activity or tradition which at the same time explaining the intangible meaning behind it. With the limited financial means and the very restricted availability of electricity for audiovisual and similar communication in the exhibitions this will not be easy. At the same time both the Ababda and the international advisory and support team are considering ways in which the Beyt Ababda Heritage Centre can be integrated into the overall conservation, education and tourism roles of the Wadi el Hamel National Park. These issues are discussed further in the following sections.

Desert panorama

The location of the Beyt Ababda Heritage Centre

When designing the Beyt Ababda, the question of making the Centre truly meaningful to all parties was always kept in mind. The location for the Heritage Centre was chosen with extreme care. It lies close to the only asphalted road going through the area north to south, but far enough

away from this road to maintain the image of the 'isolated desert'. The Beyt Ababda itself has a great panoramic view across the landscapes of the National Park, from the foothills of the range of mountains running parallel to coast down to the seashore and beach. This is also the kind of place where traditionally the Ababda settle. It is at a crossroads of the different environments that play a key role in the Ababda life. The Heritage Centre lies close to the Information Centre on the natural environment of the National Park itself, which is also the home base of the Park Rangers. Yet the Heritage Centre offers something different in providing the visitor with what is being developed as 'the nomad experience'.

This experience is enhanced by its proximity to another important conservation and tourism initiative in the area. Just a few kilometres from the Beyt Ababda but still within the National Park is Egypt's first tented tourist resort, called Fustat Wadi el-Gemal [*sic*] has been developed (Fustat means 'Tented Camp'). This camp offers luxurious but relatively simple accommodation for both day visitors and longer stay tourists, providing them with a full experience of the desert lifestyle. A privately financed and managed Egyptian development, around 25 of the 34 employees are locally recruited. Here the traditional Ababda coffee (*Gabana*) is served by the Ababda, guests are received in tents and Ababda organise camel tours across the desert visiting the most important archaeological sites, the Roman emerald mines and wadi system of the region. At these sites the architecture which has inspired that adapted for the Heritage Centre was built can be seen in their original forms, since the Roman forts and settlements are still

preserved in the wadis. (For more details of this 'Tented Camp' initiative see <http://www.wadielgemal.com/>).

However, tourism considerations aside, in choosing the location of the Beyt Ababda, the motivation of the most important stakeholder still needs to be considered. One other important reason for locating the Beyt Ababda relates to the Ababda living inside the National Park. The Park Rangers, who are mostly Ababda and have already been trained to take care of the wildlife, can now also support and oversee the care of the Heritage Centre. The isolated location also has the advantage that it should attract more easily Ababda who wish to settle close by or to visit the area, and the off-road location will hopefully also attract nomads who would otherwise be reluctant to go to the locations with Egyptian and foreign tourists. Also, this location is close to an already existing Ababda 'village' - a location where nomadic Ababda often settle for a period of time. The Heritage Centre will, it is hoped, therefore be a stimulant to enhance their environment: in the future the inhabitants may be drawn to the Centre and will also profit from it.

Panoramic view on the desert heritage

Different values of the ecological, natural and cultural resources of the Wadi el Gamal are stressed in the National Park. Along the coastline there are rare survivals of Egypt once common coastal mangrove trees. In the wadi systems archaeological monuments are still present and preserved, for example Roman forts and settlements such as those of the archaeological area of the Sikait and can be visited by tourists. The terrestrial and marine environment of the National Park also harbours various endangered animal species, such as rare population of Sooty Falcons. Information on the wildlife is available at the WGNP Information Centre at the entrance of the park. Located on a hill at the gate of the wadi this informs visitors about the variety of the WGNP. The Gate Map House displays a map and suggestions for visiting other locations in the area. In the future it is hoped that there will be integrated information for visitors, covering the Nature Information Centre at the entrance of the WGNP, the Gate Map House, the Beyt Ababda, Fustat Wadi el Gamal, the wadi itself with the archaeology and the mangrove reserve at the seashore.

All will in the future be presented as a potential programme for a full day tour which is intended to attract more visitors to the area. The beautiful wide panoramas across the desert plain or the sea will be an

important attraction for all these places. The central theme of the tour will be the desert experience, and this will educate the visitors about the ecological aspects of the desert (perhaps even subjects such as wastewater management of the park), of all life forms in the area, and also of the fragile ecological balance that the nomads have maintained over hundreds of years. For Egypt this will be one of the very few holistic approaches to natural and cultural resource management and will hopefully serve as an example for other areas of the country and more widely. In this way the Ababda may see their culture preserved and may even profit from changes that seem inevitable.

Preserving and commodifying traditions?

Having discussed the different values and potential of the Beyt Ababda Heritage Centre for the inhabitants of the region and the tourists, the next consideration is finding ways in which the Ababda may be able to profit from all these natural and cultural resources. Beyt Ababda is intended to create understanding and respect for the culture so different from that of most Egyptians and of the foreign tourists, and how the Beyt Ababda may enhance the identity and pride of the Ababda people, preserving their traditions. But many other questions arise as well. For instance how can the sustainability of this project be ensured following the initial funding and other foreign support, particularly that of the Netherlands government? The Beyt Ababda of course needs to be maintained in the future and the Ababda community needs to be the main keeper, so members of the community need to be stimulated to be engaged in heritage preservation.

With all the explosive growth of the tourist industry in the area, an important stimulant to engage the Ababda in active heritage management would be economic profit. But how can one ensure the Ababda receive an adequate financial reward and a proper share of the extra income when their heritage becomes a tourist attraction? Is for instance commodification of the Ababda heritage acceptable and if so, how far should this be taken? What will the effect of this activity be on the lifestyle of the Ababda? Is this what the Ababda want for themselves and their culture? Will it be possible to give traditional Ababda handicrafts a new life, and either way how can these handicrafts become a significant source of income for the people living in the area, and how to trigger their inventiveness? A lot of organisational support will be

required to assure the production, the quality and the continued teaching of traditional crafts. Opinions are not surprisingly divided and such themes have yet been addressed to any great extent by the stakeholders either locally or more widely. Such questions must be addressed some time in the fairly near future, and the Beyt Ababda project will hopefully serve as a catalyst and model in such discussions.

Already there have been suggestions that the Ababda craftspeople should start producing traditional furniture and leather objects for the hotels in the region, thus providing a link with the native resources and appealing to the interest and imagination of the guests. There is already an Ababda craft market initiative, located near the shore area and the mangrove reserve, and close to the modern settlement of Q'ul Ain, selling local products to visiting tourists. The Ababda are therefore clearly willing to engage in projects of this kind, though the implications need to be more clearly defined in the near future. A negative aspect of the market places that spring up at tourist sites is the fact that not only are new handcraft items being sold: some Ababda also sell their own heritage goods to passing tourists who do not understand the value of the objects. In this manner much of the traditional material culture of the Ababda is rapidly disappearing. The Ababda need to be informed and need to have alternatives for the traditional heritage objects they are selling.

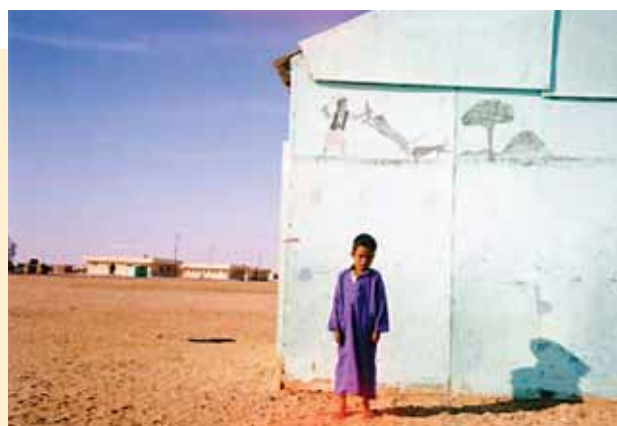
Another new initiative currently emerging, but which needs to be exploited further, is based on the traditional drawings that have been produced on the cardboard buildings where the Ababda now live. Here, young Ababda men have been drawing aspects of their culture, like for

instance animal hunts showing the pride of young hunters, on the walls of the houses. If this craft is to be exploited, this might serve multiple purposes. It reminds the Ababda of the pride of their culture, it enhances their living area and it is a suitable way of informing visitors in the area of the aspects of Ababda life. In the future this will hopefully be used in a positive manner and may serve as a means of communicating with the world outside the Eastern Desert.

The desert experience

The cultural heritage of the Ababda nomads of the Eastern Desert is not static, it is constantly under pressure and change. Therefore the vitality of heritage must be taken into account when creating a place of memory like the Beyt Ababda Centre. It influences decisions on the arrangements and presentation of the heritage. The Beyt Ababda was not only designed to inform tourists. What in the past may have been assembled as collection of material culture and presented in a museum, will now hopefully become a place where the community can express themselves, maybe even through the production of objects or art, much like a forum or place of reflection in an uncertain future. Hopefully the Beyt Ababda, with its setting and the initiative from within the Ababda community will in the future attract the inhabitants of the surrounding villages to enhance their surroundings and sustain or even revive part of their cultural identity, as a form of sustainable cultural development. The members of the Ababda community themselves are being empowered to preserve their heritage and develop it with the help of Western and Egyptian advisors. Hopefully the Ababda will find a way to

Figure 9
Paintings on a cardboard house



profit economically from the tourist attractions their land offers, as a modest form of eco-tourism in the area.

Claiming respect for a traditional way of life is one of the main objectives of this programme. Using the knowledge of the Ababda understanding of life in the desert is another. Their understanding of this environment is of extreme importance for the survival of the desert ecology. We can learn from the Ababda: the Ababda way of life shows the fragility of the desert environment and how man may act in order to preserve this balance. For centuries a balance has been maintained between the inhabitants of the region and the desert wildlife, with little or no permanent effects on the surroundings. On the other hand the visitor to Wadi Gamal is presented with temporary tourist campsites that have restricted water usage and waste management in order not to intrude on the desert ecology. How different is the impact of both cultures in the same area! Archaeology is also incorporated into the heritage programmes, and in particular fine Roman sites may be visited. While after almost two thousand years vestiges of this culture can still be seen, the nomadic population hardly leaves a trace. It is this theme that may arouse awareness and respect of the Ababda way of life and their unique adjustment to the environment, not as a sign of poverty or shortage of resources, but of unique and necessary adjustment to their surroundings.

In the Wadi el Gamal National Park a complete day tour is planned for the future, introducing tourists to all aspects of the Eastern Desert, not only showing the frail balance between men and nature, but also presenting aspects or themes of Ababda culture. The tangible and intangible heritage need to be merged in order to establish these objectives. Although the funding for such an expanded programme is not yet in place, initial plans are already being made about the way in which the heritage of the Ababda will be presented more fully in the future. The aim is that the tourist will experience an idea, an inclusive trip, in which he or she will experience several different themes of the desert life. These might include the hunt, the use of desert habitation in Ababda life in relation to pride of this people, and associated Ababda music, dance and craftsmanship. Another theme might focus on the inhospitable wilderness set against the hospitality of the Ababda, with all the informative tangible (*Gabana* objects) and intangible aspects (*Gabana* preparing and drinking) of this theme. In such themes and during the inclusive tourist excursion the

perspectives will constantly change and the imagination of the visitor will be challenged and stimulated. In this manner the Wadi Gamal both the Ababda and the international team aim to present the visitor with something that will be unique within Egypt: a new way of experiencing the living heritage of a location and its peoples from several different angles, giving a dynamic, 360 degrees, true panoramic view of the Egyptian Eastern Desert and its traditional peoples. 🇪🇬

NOTES

- The Eastern Desert Antiquities Preservation Project (EDAPP) was financed primarily by the Royal Netherlands Embassy in Cairo.
- Rough coordinates for the WGNP area are 24° 51'N in the north and 24° 06'N in the south; the Red Sea shoreline in the east and 34° 28'E to the west.
- At this meeting in the autumn of 2005 a delegation of the Ababda, the architect of the museum and several members of the EDAPP were present, as well as the other stakeholders in the WGNP like the rangers of the park and the director of Fustat Wadi el-Gemal. Also meetings were organized between EDAPP and the TDA and USAID in order to integrate the plans with other developments in the area.
- The architect of the museum, Gabriel Mikhail is renowned for his work in traditional, 'eco-architectural' styles with sustainable materials and used natural resources reflecting traditional values, thus re-inventing ancient architectural styles. For his work see www.egyptcd.com.

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