

Ulrich Loock

Goter, Representation of the Unrecognized

Goter is a word foreign to the Arabic language, a word that is extraneous to the idiom of Palestinians of Bedouin descent that Ahlam Shibli was brought up with in the village Arab al-Shibli, in Galilee. It is a term, however, commonly used by the Palestinians of Bedouin descent in al-Naqab (Negev) when asking someone to go somewhere. According to local people, it originates from the command: ‘Go there!’ which the Palestinian Bedouin, moving from one place to another, would hear from soldiers during the British Mandate (1917–1948). The use of the expression *goter* is an example of the appropriation of the language of foreign rule to which the Palestinian Bedouin were subjected; it attests to a history of being controlled, directed, displaced.

The photographs that form the work *Goter* were taken between October 2002 and February 2003 on Shibli’s frequent and extended visits to various locations in the Beer Sheba region in al-Naqab. They show landscapes with clusters of dwellings, villages, houses, inhabited spaces, interiors and exteriors, graveyards, places for the living and places for the dead, occasionally people at those places — mostly children — and only very rarely close-ups of individuals or portraits.

There is no apparent photographic method governing Shibli’s recording of what is there. The appearance of the *ça a été* (Roland Barthes) is not subjected to a preconceived aesthetics, not even an aesthetics of explicit neutrality. It is not style that unites these photographs, but subject matter. For Shibli, the mechanical nature of photography makes it a medium that enables an encountered situation to manifest itself. Encountering a situation is what is at stake. Shibli’s photographs are taken to show others — in an exhibition or in a book — what one individual has seen; at the same time, picture taking is a way to see what is there.

The photographs testify to an encounter with something unrecognized, something excluded from society’s awareness, but that can be seen by anyone who decides to open his or her eyes and go to the place where the photograph was taken — as each of Shibli’s photographs is accompanied by the name of the place where it was taken. A person who would go there would not see the same thing Shibli saw when she took the photograph, but he or she would see something that is not essentially different. In that sense, the work’s title, *Goter*, might be understood as addressing the viewer. Through the photograph, the viewer relates to the situation depicted: his or her

reading of the picture will be a re-enactment of the photographer's reading of the situation.

Excluded from Shibli's choice of photographs for exhibition or publication are pictures informed by her specific, personal relation to what she depicts, which would make her presence felt or, more precisely, record a situation that would depend on her presence. Excluded are photographs that trace her particular view — a view of the sort that theorists often connect to the notion of authorship. Similarly absent are pictures of extraordinary situations, unique or exemplary instances and events, moments of surprise. Her photographs are based on an intimate knowledge of the places she visits and returns to (often to retake a picture she is dissatisfied with) and on her close contacts with the people who live there. The photographs she chooses to exhibit, then, are of regular situations, circumstances that are never out of the ordinary. The encounter each picture traces is an encounter that may have occurred before in a similar fashion and may occur again. Thus, Shibli's photographs are informed by the randomness of a fleeting moment and at the same time by the similarity of that moment to others that have preceded and will follow it.

Unavoidably, the photographer has to make certain decisions about how to photograph what is there in order for it to manifest itself. Her authorial presence is required in order to ensure the absence of the author. Concerning the relation of the one who sees to what she sees, Shibli's most important decision is to take pictures of situations. Webster's English Dictionary defines situation as 'the way something is placed in relation to its surroundings'. This is exactly what Ahlam Shibli is tracing in her work: the relation of a village or a house to the landscape; the relation of man-made facilities — such as a road, a fence, or a playground — to the land; the relation of buildings, shelters and the material make-up of those structures to each other; the relation of objects to rooms and spaces; and, finally, the relation of individuals to the localities where they live. More specifically, the situations Shibli photographs can be defined as places to be in and the being of people in those places. Although in each photograph the relations that inform a particular place and people's use of that place are clearly defined, they are not usually put into focus; the rendering of any given situation extends across the entire picture plane, creating a sense of its connection to a larger context.

The fundamental decision to take pictures of situations and not, for instance, of isolated objects or sublime expanses of nature, in many cases dictates a specific distance from the things depicted. In the case of interiors or other narrow spaces, Shibli often uses a wide-angle lens. This results in stretches of empty space in the foreground of the picture — what is to be shown is pushed away from the viewer from the fore to the back. Empty spaces separating the viewer from what he or she is looking at also characterize her photographs of larger-scale situations. Usually, no devices are used to frame a view; usually there is nothing to guide the gaze step-by-step into the space of the picture. What in some cases could be considered the result of technical necessity also functions as an indicator of a certain remoteness, a certain inaccessibility of the seen. This observation is confirmed by a number of photographs of dense urban structures that virtually close the space of the picture. In Shibli's pictures, there is either a gap or a wall in front of the spectator.

Additional measures are taken to ensure the photographer's separation from her subject matter: the frequent use of frontal views of architectural structures and, in the case of spaces, a central perspective. Most often, the photographer's position — and for that matter, also the viewer's position — is 'in front of' and not 'in the middle of'. The viewer is not invited to these places, but excluded from them. The photographer's (and viewer's) position is that of an outsider. There is no place for empathy, but rather a place for recording what is there from a distance. By introducing this distance into the visual construction of her photographs, Shibli acknowledges photography's nature — to objectify what it records, even if this object is a situation — while, at the same time, making that which is to be seen available for critical reading.

The subject matter of Ahlam Shibli's photographs is places where the Palestinian Bedouin live in the south of the State of Israel. The Palestinian Bedouin are an indigenous people who have lived in al-Naqab since the fifth century A.D. Until well into the middle of the nineteenth century, they were nomads and semi-nomads that made a life moving their flocks across the desert according to the availability of feed, taking them in times of drought as far north as the area of Jaffa and even Haifa, engaging in seasonal agriculture, controlling the trade routes across al-Naqab. From the second half of the nineteenth century, the Ottoman administration stepped up its efforts to control the movements of the Palestinian Bedouin, not the least by founding

Beer Sheba in 1903. From 1917, the British continued the policy of their predecessors. Consequently the Palestinian Bedouin started to live in 'spontaneous settlements'.

The semi-nomadic way of life was still common among the Palestinian Bedouin when the State of Israel was founded. Until that time the 65,000 Palestinian Bedouin living in al-Naqab were organized in ninety-five tribes each having the right to use specific pieces of land. Traditional land rights had neither been challenged by the Ottomans nor by the British, even though the Palestinian Bedouin usually did not have their lands legally registered, and they were strictly respected among the different tribes. Land rights, the connection of a family group to clearly defined parts of the land, were not only an indispensable condition for housing, agriculture and raising livestock, for livelihood and social prestige, but also specifically for building and maintaining the very sense of identity.

When al-Naqab came under the control of Israel, the vast majority of Palestinian Bedouin fled the country or were forced to leave. Successively, the remaining people were either relocated or confined to a Restricted Area to the north and east of Beer Sheba, where they were placed under military administration until 1966. In 1953, 11,000 Palestinian Bedouin were living there, being denied the right to leave the Area, which covered only 10% of the traditional Palestinian Bedouin lands. Since the 1950s, 95% of Palestinian Bedouin lands in al-Naqab were declared state land on the grounds of Ottoman legislation from the nineteenth century. The Palestinian Bedouin were obliged to lease land from the state. A lease, however, would be granted only for short periods of time, thus making any long-term planning and development impossible. Increasingly, the Palestinian Bedouin were forced to seek a livelihood as wage labourers for the rapidly growing Jewish population.

In an interview to the newspaper Ha'aretz in 1963, Moshe Dayan said, 'We should transform the Bedouin into an urban proletariat in industry, services, construction and agriculture. 88% of the Israeli population are not farmers, let the Bedouin be like them. Indeed, this will be a radical move which means that the Bedouin would not live on his land with his herds, but would become an urban person who comes home in the afternoon and puts his slippers on (...). The children would go to school with their hair properly combed. This would be a revolution, but it may be fixed within two generations. Without

coercion but with government direction, this phenomenon of the Bedouin will disappear.'

At the end of the 1960s, the Israeli government started a policy of concentrating the population of Bedouin descent in seven townships (Tal al-Saba'a, Rahat, 'Ar'arat al-Naqab, Ksseifa, Segev Shalom, Hura and Laqiyya) that were planned largely without consulting the people concerned, and consequently, were considered by many of these as ill-adapted to their specific cultural and economic needs. Currently, more than half of the approximately 130,000 Palestinian Bedouin in al-Naqab live in these townships. According to official statistics, they are among the poorest communities in Israel, lacking sufficient public services and plagued by high rates of unemployment and crime.

The remainder of the Bedouin population of al-Naqab has, thus far, refused to move to those townships, so as to avoid losing their lands and being subjected to living conditions that they consider culturally adverse and socially degrading. They live in forty-five 'unrecognized' villages not marked on official maps, and where they are prohibited to build permanent structures, where families are evicted from their living places and houses are demolished on the basis of Israeli land laws, where the inhabitants have no public access to electricity, running water, health services, sanitation and education above the primary level. The people in these 'unrecognized' villages are requesting that their land claims be settled, demanding an end to the government policy of demolition and access to basic infrastructures, and asking for the opportunity to form agricultural communities and to be allowed to live in a way which they deem culturally and economically appropriate.

Ahlam Shibli's photographs were taken both in Palestinian Bedouin 'unrecognized' villages and in 'recognized' townships. They are explicit about what they intend to show, but they also require a certain amount of reading skills: someone who is not familiar with the specific circumstances may get stuck with a general understanding or completely miss the point. House construction, the use of different materials and the signature of impermanence are the subject of several pictures. There is, for instance, the photograph of Dhayya, an 'unrecognized' village in a barren landscape of gently sloping hills [p. 106 bottom]. The roofs of the buildings are made of tin sheets, asbestos or wood: tin gets extremely hot in summer and is noisy when it rains, asbestos is a health hazard and wood is not sufficiently weather

resistant. These materials are used because they are cheap and do not represent a big financial loss should the house be demolished. Tin sheets are also used to create enclosures around the houses in order to ensure women's privacy [p. 115 bottom]. For the same reason, a piece of cloth is hung in front of the entrance — high enough for the people inside to tell by the feet if an approaching person is a man or a woman [p. 109]. A stylish table with curved legs and two pseudo-designer chairs are placed in the enclosed zone around the house, completely out of context; the owner of the house, who fabricates this kind of furniture, doesn't know what to do with it in his own home [p. 113]. Inversely, another picture shows how a garage is used to create a traditional guestroom on a day when visitors are expected [p. 112].

Ahlam Shibli has formulated a hypothesis that she examines in her photographs: where there is a home, there is no house; where there is a house, there is no home. The issue in most of these works is the use of materials ill-fitting for the construction of decent housing, insecurity about how to integrate objects from different cultures, and destruction and neglect in pictures of more urbane situations — not just signs of poverty but, more specifically, signs of uprooting, of not being 'at home'. Homelessness in one's house is indicated by the way people are depicted. Most often, they are seen from a distance, turning their back to the camera, dark silhouettes with little detail, barely individualized. In one of the rare pictures that depicts a group of people from close range, a young woman, whose face is mostly in the shadow, holds up a piece of paper in such a way that her neighbour's face is completely obscured [p. 118 bottom]. Where faces could be seen, they are hidden. Apparently, it is impossible to show individual subjects at these places of living — as if it is impossible to record the constitution of a subject under those conditions, as if it is impossible to show the traces of living conditions on these subjects' bodies and faces, as if a presentation of these subjects as victims must be prevented, as if a pictorial victimization of these subjects must be avoided.

At this point, a disquieting dialectic has to be addressed: in a situation wherein people are denied the fundamental rights that would empower them to constitute themselves as autonomous subjects, it seems that, in order not to constitute them as victims of their adverse living conditions, they must be denied the right to their own photograph. There is one exception, however: a photograph of a couple

and their young daughter sitting together in a posture of confidence and proximity on a sofa that is just big enough to hold their three bodies [p. 121]. A distinctive feature of the room's arrangement is curtains that are pulled back in a decorative manner, letting light in through the windows. The man, who is shown together with his wife and child in his house in an 'unrecognized' village, is the head of a community organization resisting eviction. In the face of the threat of demolition, this family seems to have made its house a home — which may have made it possible for Shibli to depict them as subjects where they live.

Finally, there is something in Shibli's photographs that has yet to be properly appreciated: a line of houses in the middle of the desert appears to be harmoniously integrated into a landscape of sloping hills [p. 106 bottom]; in a photo that was taken to show a stack of used asbestos sheets ready to be re-used for building, a piece of paper on the street, the pulled-up jacket of a man standing next to a wall and a carpet in the trees on the other side of the wall form a rhythm that animates the entire picture [p. 119]; shacks, scrub and trees are distributed across the picture plane to create a sense of completeness [p. 117 bottom]; the unbelievably elegant gesture of a boy pulls together the disparate movements of his peers [p. 100]. These are instances of beauty, and they are of the photographer's making; they are a matter of the photograph and not of the things depicted. It would not be appropriate to argue that the beauty of these photographs aestheticizes, and therefore prepares for consumption, the sights of unbearable hardship. Rather, the creation of beauty should be understood as an act of resistance against the overwhelming power of the forces of destruction. This remark may also serve as an answer to the question of what makes these photographs, informed by the documentary, works of art.

Author's note

This is the complete version of the essay I wrote for Ahlam Shibli's catalogue *Goter*, published in April 2003 by the Nathan Gottesdiener Foundation to accompany Shibli's exhibition at the Tel Aviv Museum. Full-length publication was prohibited due to museum policies.

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Ahlam Shibli

Go there, Eat the mountain, Write the past

The Valley
Arab al-Sbaih
Goter

Essays by Mahmoud Abu Hashhash,
Ulrich Loock and Sarah A. Rogers