

Beja terms used:

Silif: customary law that regulates all Beja groups

Diwab: lineage

## 1. Description

1.1 Name(s) of society, language, and language family:

Name of society: Beja, Bedawi (2)

Language: Bedawiyet (1)

Language Family: Cushitic (1)

1.2 ISO code (3 letter code from ethnologue.com): bej (1)

1.3 Location (latitude/longitude): Red Sea, Kassaia States, Southeast River Nile, Egypt, Eritrea (1)

1.4 Brief history:

“The Beja are traditionally nomadic shepherds who migrate annually with their herds. In the north, small groups of nomads herd flocks of sheep, goats, camels, and cattle” (2). They live scattered across the desert regions of Sudan, Egypt and Eritrea (2). The Beja are native Africans who have lived in their current homelands for more than 4,000 years, and (in Sudan) are divided into four tribes: the Hadendowa, the Amrarar, the Abadba, and the Beni Amer (2).

The Beja are traditionally nomadic, so they live in portable tents that are curved in shape and are made from woven palm fronds (2).

1.5 Influence of missionaries/schools/governments/powerful neighbors:

The Beja have never been conquered by a foreign power (2).

1.6 Ecology (natural environment):

Ecosystem type: Savanna (6)

Geological type: Riverine and Plains (6)

1.7 Population size, mean village size, home range size, density:

Beja live in clans, and are named after their ancestors. Clans vary from one to twelve families has it's own pastures and water sites that others may use, but with permission. The Beja always show kindness to other clans, but are not necessarily friendly to foreigners (2).

## 2. Economy

2.1 Main carbohydrate staple(s): some grain (2)

2.2 Main protein-lipid sources: Dairy products (especially camel's milk) and beef (2).

2.3 Weapons: Bow and arrow, blowguns?: not found

2.4 Food storage: not found

2.5 Sexual division of production:

In *Aspects of Labor in an Agro-Pastoral Economy*, John Morton gives an overview of the sexual division of labor and production:

“Married women are seen as obliged to perform basic household tasks assisted by young girls. Women and girls as young as four may do some of

the work of herding the small livestock, not too far from the house. Girls and older women are occasionally seen at the wells, where any male will draw water for them, and also collect firewood from nearby perhaps every other day (McEwan 1988:9).

“Women are responsible for the physical upkeep and periodic rebuilding of the house and shelters and for home crafts, although increasingly household objects are brought in from Port Sudan (ibid.:9)...

One very marked aspect of the division of labour is the prohibition on women milking. No Beja female may milk an animal, although Beja are aware that Arabic-speaking women will.

For men, a distinction between those who need to labour and those who do not (because they have others to labour for them), largely replaces a rigorous division of labour by age. Obviously there are starting ages for the various male activities. Boys give assistance with smallstock from a very young age, and boys of eight or nine may go out looking for camels. During adolescence they will start to help with cultivation, and may become full-time shepherds. In late adolescence they might begin serious camel-herding. At the other end of the age scale there are fewer such distinctions. Men in late middle age will do weeding or other agricultural work, or manual work such as digging out wells if it is necessary, ie if they do not have sons or hired labour to do it for them.

A man’s tasks are the heavier work connected with herding, and all work connected with camel herding... Drawing water is mainly a male activity, and certainly from the deep wells around Sufayya.... Although there is relatively free visiting by the men of a village or camp to each other’s houses, the well does function as a male meeting place, and though older men will leave the drawing and carrying of water to their sons and/or other dependents if possible, they will still come to the well to talk” (3, p2-3)

#### 2.6 Land tenure:

Men tend to the land, but within the males there is division of labor by age (3, p2). Men in late middle age do weeding or other agricultural work or manual work such as digging out wells, while boys give assistance with smallstock from a very young age (3, p2). During adolescence, they will start to help with cultivation and may even become full-time shepherds (3, p2).

#### 2.7 Ceramics: none found

#### 2.8 Specified (prescribed or proscribed) sharing patterns: none found

#### 2.9 Food taboos: none found

#### 2.10 Canoes/watercraft?: none found

### **3. Anthropometry**

#### 3.1 Mean adult height (m and f): none found

#### 3.2 Mean adult weight (m and f): none found

Although no information was found on the Beja mean adult height and weight, Joshuaproject.com noted their general physical appearance, “[The Beja] are an aggressive people with small, strong, wiry frames; long noses; and oval faces” (2). Due to their physical appearance, according to the *People and Language Detail Report* from 1993 found on Joshuaproject.com, The Beja may have derived from early Egyptians (2).

#### **4. Life History, mating, marriage**

4.1 Age at menarche (f): not found

4.2 Age at first birth (m and f): not found

4.3 Completed family size (m and f): not found

4.4 Inter-birth-interval (f): not found

4.5 Age first marriage (m and f):

In Sudan, women marry around age 19 or 20, but in the more rural regions and poorer societies, the age is younger. There is also usually a significant age difference between husband and wife (5).

4.6 Proportion of marriages ending in divorce:

Divorce is more common now than in the past, but it is still considered shameful (5).

4.7 Percent marriages polygynous, percent males married polygynously:

Only the wealthiest Beja have more than one wife (2).

4.8 Bride purchase (price), bride service, dowry?:

Once a marriage contract has been made (preferably cross-cousin), a large gift of livestock, clothing and other goods are given to the bride’s family (2).

4.9 Inheritance patterns:

Patrilineal, but, according to Pantuliano (p4), “Although men own and inherit land individually, they aggregate the different portions within a ‘structure of segmentary patrilineal descent.’ As a result, land is spoken of as collectively belonging to a specific diwab (lineage). All lineage members have open access to pasture and water sources available on that land, and people are identified by their own lineage territory. Rights to grazing land and wells belong to the diwab as a unit.”

4.10 Parent-offspring interactions and conflict: none found

4.11 Homosexual activities, social attitudes towards homosexuals: none found

4.12 Pattern of exogamy (endogamy): endogamy

4.13 What is the belief of the role of males in conception; is paternity partible? Are these “other fathers” recognized?: none found

4.14 What is the belief of the mother’s role in procreation exactly? (e.g., “receptacle in which fetus grows”): none found

4.15 Is conception believed to be an incremental process (i.e., semen builds up over time)?: not found

4.16 Occurrence of sexual coercion, rape: not found

4.17 Preferential category for spouse (e.g., cross cousin):

The preferred marriages are cross-cousin marriages (2).

4.18 Do females enjoy sexual freedoms?: not found

- 4.19 Evidence of giving gifts to extramarital partners or extramarital offspring: none found
- 4.20 If mother dies, whose raises children?: not found
- 4.21 Adult sex ratio: number of adult males divided by number of (reproductive) females: not found
- 4.22 Evidence for couvades: not found
- 4.23 Different distinctions for potential fathers (e.g., lesser/younger vs. major/older): not found
- 4.24 Kin avoidance and respect?:  
Boys and girls are raised separately (5).
- 4.24 Joking relationships?: not found
- 4.25 Patterns of descent (e.g., bilateral, matrilineal) for certain rights, names or associations  
Their line of descent is traced through the males (2).
- 4.26 Incest avoidance rules:  
The preferred marriage is cross-cousin (2).
- 4.27 Is there a formal marriage ceremony?  
There was no information found on formal marriage ceremonies, but (6) does make mention of both marriage and engagement being a rite of passage.
- 4.28 In what way(s) does one get a name, change their name, and obtain another name?: not found
- 4.29 Is marriage usually (or preferred to be) within community or outside community? (m/f difference?)  
For both male and female, marriage is preferred to be within the community and is preferred to be family members (preferably cousins) (5).
- 4.30 Are marriages arranged? Who arranges (e.g., parents, close kin)?:  
The parents of the couple arrange the marriage, and it is common for a bride and groom have never seen each other before the wedding (5).
- 4.31 Evidence for conflict of interest over who marries who: not found

### **Warfare/homicide**

- 4.14 Percent adult (male) deaths due to warfare: not found
- 4.15 Outgroup vs ingroup cause of violent death: not found
- 4.16 Reported causes of in-group and out-group killing: not found
- 4.17 Number, diversity and relationship with neighboring societies (external relations):  
The Beja always show kindness to other clans, but are not necessarily friendly to foreigners (2).
- 4.18 Cannibalism?: not found

### **5. Socio-Political organization and interaction**

- 5.1 Mean local residential (village) group size: Clans vary from one to twelve families (2).
- 5.2 Mobility pattern: (seasonality):  
“Because of the unpredictability of rainfall, they do not have any very regular pattern, relying instead on hearing accurate news of rain” (3, p7). The

pastoral movements are usually short-distance by small groups of households, single households, or men on their own (3, p7). There are difficulties in having this mobility pattern and according to Morton (p7), "...They must also be able to act on [mobility]. This was raised in a discussion on why some people are poorer than others; they may be lazy, doubt the accuracy of the news, hope for rain in their own areas, or be tied by family members who cannot move, or by jobs. Perhaps most importantly, they may lack the labor-power to take best advantage of rain by sending different herd species in different directions. Optimally a household will have both its sheep and its camels herded separately, and will itself move with its goats, but many families herd sheep and goats together." Because their mobility pattern is based on rainfall, if there is no rain the family may remain in their home areas (3, p8).

### 5.3 Political system: (chiefs, clans etc, wealth or status classes):

Between clans disputes are settled by traditional Beja law, but most every day affairs managed by the heads of the families.

In Sara Pantaloon's *Sustaining Livelihoods Across the Rural-Urban Divide*, she explains the customary laws of the Beja people:

The Beja groups are regulated by silif (customary law). Silif guides access to resources for different people, is used for conflict resolution and major social events, and regulates access and control reciprocal use of environmental resources. The silif rules are flexible, and are negotiated between Beja alliances and agreements within or between different groups, clans, or lineages (4, p4).

An example of silif: "While it would not be appropriate to cut a green tree for wood, it would be acceptable to pollard a green tree for fodder" (4, p4). These rules are there to protect the environmental against over-exploitation (4, p4).

Silif is also applied to women's roles and position in the community. According to silif rules, women cannot participate in public decision-making and politics, and also cannot normally have access to land and livestock. If a woman does gain access to land and livestock, they are not allowed to exercise any control over them (4, p5).

### 5.4 Post marital residence:

The new couple moves in with the wife's family, at least for a short time (5).

### 5.5 Territoriality? (defined boundaries, active defense): not found

### 5.6 Social interaction divisions ? (age and sex): not found

### 5.7 Special friendships/joking relationships: not found

### 5.8 Village and house organization:

The more nomadic Beja groups do not have permanent homes, they live in hemispherical or rectangular tents made of straw mats laid over a wooden frame (6).

- The more sedentary Beja groups build mud-walled houses with more furnishings (6).
- 5.9 Specialized village structures (mens' houses):  
Unmarried men sleep in the open at the edge of camp (6).
- 5.10 Sleep in hammocks or on ground or elsewhere?  
All members of the family sleep in one large bed made of straw mats and woolen rugs on a wooden frame (6).
- 5.11 Social organization, clans, moieties, lineages, etc:  
"Divisions and major sub-divisions consist of a group of patrilineally organize clans. Clans are divided into large lineages and sublineages" (6).
- 5.12 Trade: Their trade partners include the Cushites and Arabs (6)
- 5.13 Indications of social hierarchies?: none found

## **6. Ritual/Ceremony/Religion (RCR)**

- 6.0 Time allocation to RCR: none found
- 6.1 Specialization (shamans and medicine): There are no priests or clergy in Islam (6).
- 6.2 Stimulants: none found
- 6.3 Passage rituals (birth, death, puberty, seasonal):  
Rites of passage are at birth, circumcision (of males), engagement, marriage, death and remembrance or a second funeral (6)
- 6.4 Other rituals: none found
- 6.5 Myths (Creation): none found
- 6.6 Cultural material (art, music, games): none found
- 6.7 Sex differences in RCR: none found
- 6.8 Missionary effect: none found
- 6.9 RCR revival: none found
- 6.10 Death and afterlife beliefs:  
Muslims believe in the afterlife (6)
- 6.11 Taboo of naming dead people?: none found
- 6.12 Is there teknonymy?: none found
- 6.13 Briefly describe religion (animism, ancestor worship, deism, magic, totems etc.):

The majority of Beja are Muslim, but the Islam they observe is far from orthodox (4, p5). They practice what is known as "folk Islam" (2).

According to Joshua Project, a missionary organization, "Their beliefs are interwoven with a rich variety of traditional superstitions. For example, they believe that men have the power to curse others by giving them the 'evil eye.' They also believe in wicked jinnis (spirits capable of taking on animal forms) and other invisible spirits. They believe that evil spirits can cause sickness, madness, and accidents" (2). In terms of their connection to Islam, Joshua Project reports that while they have adopted many Islamic practices such as repeating prayers, these prayers are not largely understood (2).

## **7. Adornment**

7.1 Body paint: none found

7.2 Piercings: none found

7.3 Haircut: none found

7.4 Scarification: none found

7.5 Adornment (beads, feathers, lip plates, etc.): none found

7.6 Ceremonial/Ritual adornment:

In the case of death, female relatives of the deceased wear black for several months and sometimes up to a year or more after the death and widows often dress in mourning for the rest of their lives (6).

7.7 Sex differences in adornment: none found

7.8 Missionary effect: none found

7.9 Cultural revival in adornment: none found

## **8. Kinship systems**

8.1 Sibling classification system: none found

8.2 Sororate, levirate: none found

8.3 Other notable kinship typology, especially cross-cousin (MBD/FZD) typology (Crow/Hawaiian/Omaha etc.): none found

## **9. Other interesting cultural features (list them):**

1. The pace of cultural change among the Beja is slow (6).
2. It is very interesting that the Beja have never been conquered by a former power, nor have missionaries had any luck converting them to Christianity. According to Joshua Project, the Beja are not particularly fond of neighbors outside of Beja community and are not very welcoming. This may be the reason that missionaries have had such a hard time contacting them.

## **Numbered references**

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2. *Joshua Project: Beja, Bedawi of Sudan Ethnic People Profile*. U.S. Center for World Mission. Online Version: <http://www.joshuaproject.net/people-profile.php?peo3=10766&rog3=SU>
3. Morton, J. *Aspects of Labour In An Agro-Pastoral Economy: The Northern Beja of Sudan*.
4. Pantuliano, S (2002) *Sustaining Livelihoods Across the Rural-Urban Divide: Changes and Challenges Facing the Beja Pastoralists of North Eastern Sudan*.
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6. Jenkins, B. (2009) *The Beja People of Sudan, Eritrea and Egypt*. Online version: <http://orvillejenkins.com/profiles/beja.html>.