THE SAMER, THE SAINT AND THE SHAMAN:
ORDERING BEDOUIN HERITAGE IN JORDAN

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Introduction

On July 22, 2006, the ‘Al Samer Song and Dance Troupe’ stepped onto the stage of the Roman Amphitheatre in Amman, Jordan, to perform their traditional song al-Samer in a festival celebration of Jordanian cultural heritage. The troupe consists of nine men from the Ammarin Bedouin tribe, located in the Petra region of southern Jordan. The men wore the best of their newly-pressed white dresses and perfectly-ironed red and white chequered headgear, thus embodying the image of the Bedouin in Jordan. In front of the group was the leader, in the figure of the hashi, in his black coat with golden rim. He carried a swaying stick in his hand, and the eight other men followed in a slow walk behind him, forming a straight line, clapping their hands in time and singing their song. Presented alongside other cultural performances, such as the popular dabka dance by a group from Ma’an, and a Roman gladiator fight, the Ammarin tribe represented Jordanian Bedouin culture; a distinct honour in a country that persistently lauds its Bedouin roots (cf. Layne 1994; Massad 2001; Al-Mahadin 2007; Shryock 1997).

I had, however, come across a press release for the al Samer Troupe, which presented the Samer as a ‘shamanic séance’ in which the leader of the troupe, the hashi, performed the role of a shaman entering a trance. Furthermore, by living close to Petra the Ammarin take part in the heritage industry, and have established a Bedouin camp for tourists. On the webpage promoting the Bedouin camp, deceased members of the Ammarin tribe, along with their descendants, are presented to the English-speaking

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2 Literally meaning: “stamping the feet”.

3 The term Bedouin is here understood as a social identity rather than as referring to people actively practising a pastoral nomadic mode of subsistence (cf. Cole 2003; Young 1999).
tourists as having ‘shamanic abilities’. In Arabic, these people are considered *fuqara* (singl. *faqīr*), a religious figure characterised by poverty, much like a Dervish. The *fuqara* are highly esteemed by the various tribes in the area, and play important roles in the negotiation of reputation among their descendants. In much literature, figures such as the *fuqara* and related figures like the *sālih* and *derwish*, are collectively translated as saints, without insinuating any Christian conceptualisation (Bandak & Bille this volume; Eickelman 2002: 266–267; Denny 1988: 69–97; Meri 2002). Yet to the tourists and the heritage industry at large, they are not conceived of as ‘saints’ but as ‘shamans’: the same term with which the *hashi* in the *Samer* was presented. Two very different versions are thus at play. Both are oriented towards a religious figure, but saints and shamans point in very different directions.

When it comes to ordering the past, dissonance is ever lurking in the representation of tradition (Asad 1986: 17; Tunbridge & Ashworth 1996). What is intriguing about the trope of shamanism in the conceptualisation of Bedouin traditions is that shamanism appears diametrically opposed to the influence of the Islamic Revival discourse that is developing among the Ammarin themselves and in the wider Middle East, and which has been the focus of much recent literature (Hirschkind 2006; Mahmood 2005). Among the Ammarin, the practice of Islam, and the moral and pious life this cultivates, has recently taken a more scriptural turn, inspired by the Gulf and Saudi Arabia. A very immediate sign of this is that, within a five-year period from 2002 to 2007, one quarter of all female heads of household had started wearing the *niqab*; a type of veil previously unseen in this area that covers everything but the eyes with a black cloth. Shamanic séances in the press release and on the webpages, including spirit manipulation and individuals entering trances through drum playing, seem absolutely incompatible with the emerging moral ideals of the Islamic Revival, wherein the *Samer* and *fuqara* are presented as renowned cultural traditions and saints.

Taking what appears to be a traditional Bedouin oral performance as my starting point, I will show in this chapter how cultural practices and religious figures from the Bedouin past are not just cherished traditions but are framed and contested in contemporary negotiations over the past in the present at various levels of Jordanian society and extending to global narratives of spirituality and heritage. My main interest is thus to understand how multiple versions of the same figures, which may initially seem incompatible, can co-exist. These multiple versions are not just about representations of culture, but more precisely questions about shaping