Introduction

The aim of this paper is to examine and explain the socio-economic situation in which pastoral nomads, the Bedouin, find themselves in present-day Saudi Arabia. To do so requires a brief description of the main characteristics of the mode of production operative in the interior parts of Arabia prior to the creation of the modern state known as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1932, the subsequent emergence of the oil industry there following the discovery of oil by Americans at Dhaharan in 1938, and the economic boom that has been occurring in Saudi Arabia since the increase of oil prices during and following the Ramadan (October) War of 1973 AD, to the effects of which special importance should be given.

The works of Ibn Khaldun (1958), Samir Amin (1976), Talal Asad (1973), my own ethnography of a highly traditional section of the Al Murrah Bedouin (Cole 1971; 1975), and a sociological survey of four groups of Bedouin by Saad Eddin Ibrahim and myself (Ibrahim and Cole 1978) have been drawn upon to describe the basic features of the particular mode of production characteristic of pre-modern Arabia.

The paper, however, is not mainly concerned with the traditional socio-economic-political structure of the area. Saudi Arabia—within a very brief period—has experienced a revolution in the structure of its economy. This is common knowledge, but the basic structural features of the newly-emerging economic system have been little studied and there has been almost no systematic analysis of the present-day mode of production that is emerging there. In order to raise this as an issue for scientific discussion, I have relied mainly on statements published by the Saudi Arabian government in The Second Development Plan for 1395-1400 AH—1975-1980 AD (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Ministry of Planning 1976) and a draft statement by the Saudi Arabian Ministry of Planning (1978) on The Strategies for the Third Development Plan for 1400-1405 AH—1980-1985 AD. I have also relied on personal observations and conversations with a wide range of Saudi Arabian government officials during the course of visits to the Kingdom during 1977 and 1978.
Concrete evidence on the present-day socio-economic position of the Bedouin in Saudi Arabia is drawn mainly from the already mentioned sociological survey conducted by Professor Saad Eddin Ibrahim and myself in 1977 on a sample of 208 Bedouin males from four major tribal groupings in four different regions of the country—the Al Murrah in the Eastern Province, the Dawasir in southern Najd, the Beni Zayed in the Qunfudah region of the Tihama, and the Harb near Madinah (Ibrahim and Cole 1978). The other major source of data is an unpublished anthropological survey I conducted during the summers of 1977 and 1978 in the Arabian Shield-South, an area of some 202,000 square kilometers in the inland part of southwestern Saudi Arabia, where the major Bedouin tribes are the Subay’, the Qahtan, the Shahran, and the Bani Yam.

The Traditional Mode of Production and Nomadic Pastoralism in Arabia

The mode of production under which traditional Bedouin society operated is well described by Ibn Khaldun in a chapter of the *Muqaddimah*, entitled “Bedouin Civilization, Savage Nations and Tribes and their Conditions (of Life)”. He accurately notes at the beginning of the chapter that

> It should be known that the differences of condition among people are the result of the different ways in which they make their living. Social organization enables them to co-operate toward that end and to start with the simple necessities of life, before they get to conveniences and luxuries (II: 249).

He points out correctly that Bedouin social organization is intimately interrelated with economics. As we will observe later on, his concept of the evolution of simple, basic societies (e.g. the Bedouin) into more complex ones enjoying a higher standard of living is not automatic as he sometimes seems to imply. Indeed, as I shall argue, the mode of production under which the Bedouin operate does not allow them to evolve into more complex societies.

Ibn Khaldun goes on to state that

> Some people adopt agriculture...Others adopt animal husbandry, the use of sheep, cattle, goats, bees, and silkworms, for breeding and for their products. Those who live by agriculture or animal husbandry cannot avoid the call of the desert, because it alone offers the wide fields, acres, pastures for animals, and other things that the settled areas do not offer...Their social organization and co-operation for the needs of life and civilization, such as food, shelter, and warmth do not take them beyond the bare subsistence level, because of their inability (to provide) for anything beyond those (things). Subsequent improvement of their conditions and acquisition of more wealth and comfort than they need, cause them to rest and take it easy (II: 249).

He juxtaposes the conditions under which the Bedouin live and work with those of the “sedentary people” who take pride in the finer things of life, luxuries such as fine cuisine, splendid clothes, and fine houses. The sedentary people according to him are

> the inhabitants of cities and countries, some of whom adopt the crafts as their way of making a living, while others adopt commerce. They earn more and live more comfortably than Bedouins, because they live beyond the level of (bare) necessity, and their way of making a living corresponds to their wealth (I: 250).