



The Rashaida: Gypsies of the Red Sea



On the border between Sudan and Eritrea, where the land meets the Red Sea. The Rashaida are nomadic, moving from place to place in search of grass for their camels. They live in Sudan, Saudi Arabia, Eritrea, and Egypt. The biggest migration takes place around Port Sudan in the summertime.



When the Rashaida arrived in Africa from Saudi Arabia in the mid-19th century, they did not have access to regular water sources so they became nomadic camel pastoralists, learning the ins and outs of the desert.



“We came from Saudi Arabia 120 years ago to fish on the African coast. When we noticed that there was agriculture and better weather, we stayed.” Other reports say that they were expelled due to tribal warfare!



Massawa, Eritrea. When I first planned to visit the Rashaida, no taxi driver agreed to take me to their villages in the nearby desert. "They will rob you and they will steal my taxi," they all told me. After tough negotiations, one driver finally agreed to drop me off 200 meters from a camp. Sure enough, as soon as the kids saw me, they ran towards me and began to search my pockets for money. The adults arrived and with one word made the kids go away.



Salam Swalim Muhammed is the chief of the Massawa Rashaida village in Eritrea. "We do not want television because the television shows sickness and disasters," he says. "Instead of buying sickness with your money, it is better to live happily, peacefully, and freely."



Solidarity is a key in the tribe: “If a man wants to get married but isn’t rich enough to afford the wife, then the Rashaida from from Libya, Sudan, and Saudi Arabia contribute so the groom can afford it. When we travel, we will be welcomed everywhere by other Rashaida”



Massawa, Eritrea. All the Rashaida women wear a veil which covers their nose (a very sexual facial feature in their culture) and their mouth, but not their hair - this is rather surprising for the Muslim culture. With long hair, some of them have an amazing style with their hair going out.



Kassala, Sudan. Women can choose the color of their clothes. This year the fashion is black. On the mask they wear, they like to write messages or name brands, like the name of the mobile phone company.



Koranic school in Suakin, Sudan. The Rashaida are muslim, they follow Saudi sharia law.



Kids learn the Koran in school. The luckiest have a wood board. The poorest just write in the sand. Kassala, Sudan.



Port Sudan. As more and more Rashaida have enough money to make the Hadj in Mecca, they come back with new precept from Saudi Arabia and ask their women to cover the hair.



Rashaidas choose their wives from the ages of 6 to 13. Marriages are mostly still arranged.



A woman must get married before 16 otherwise it is too late. The man must pay up to 50,000 Euros to the bride-to-be's mother.



“I have never been to Kassala,” an old woman in Sudan told me. “I always stay in the village. When my friends go to the town, a man always goes with them, you ‘ll never see a Rashaida woman alone in a public place, this is our culture”.



In Eritrea, the Rashaida are the only citizens to avoid the mandatory military service that can last many years since the regime is a dictatorship.



Mohamed, 10 from Kassala, Sudan. "I prefer to live in the desert," he says, "but I have to stay in school in town for most of the year."



Al Ain market, Emirates. The Rashaida men are famous across the whole Arabic peninsula for their camels that the richest Emirati people buy for races and breeding. Many Rashaida men leave the desert to go to Dubai and work, taking care of the most expensive camels on the market.



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Al Ain, 50km from Dubai, has one of the most famous camel markets in the world. I know I can find some Rashaida men here. They are paid by the rich Emirati to breed and care for the race camels that can cost hundreds of thousands of Euros. As soon as I arrive, Pakistani workers come and warn me, "Do not try to meet them, do not talk to them, they are crazy!"



A Rashaida from Eritrea said, "We have sold 150 camels to Saudi Arabia for 100,000 Riyadh each (20,000 euros)".



“Where do you keep your money when you sell camels for thousands of euros?” I ask.

“It’s none of your business,” he answers.



Eritrean woman in Keren. Due to oppression and poverty, many Eritreans attempt to flee in Eritrea as refugees to countries like Sudan. Many rely on human smugglers to help them escape. Some Rashaida are part of this this lucrative business. The UN reports that some of these Rashaida abuse and hold these refugees for ransom.



Bus in Asmara, Eritrea. The Rashaida may also kidnap people trying to flee Eritrea without their help (hijacked a bus in one case) and it has also been reported that they have kidnapped and ransomed people who had no intention of leaving the country.



Eritrean women in Kassala, Sudan. In the refugee camps around Kassala, Eritrean people are kidnapped by the Rashaida.

Once they kidnap an Eritrean, the victim will be asked to talk to his relatives (abroad or in Eritrea) to transfer ransom money to the kidnappers. If there is any delay in transferring the money, the victim will be physically abused. The more the money transfer is delayed, the more the victim is tortured.



The Rashaida smugglers have immunity from both the Sudanese and the Eritrean governments. Since they are rich, they can bribe practically any officials. In Eritrea, the black market that has become the mainstay of the economy depends heavily on the Rashaida.

