

Profile: *Beit Sha'ar* – Nomad's Home

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I've been asked to write the "inside story" of making my documentary, *Beit Sha'ar* - Nomad's Home. I welcomed the idea, because I feel there's a precious lesson to be learnt from the story of making *Beit Sha'ar*, a lesson that's particularly useful nowadays when it is becoming more and more difficult to be honest to one's own voice and vision.

I remember very well when the idea of making *Beit Sha'ar* first came to me. Six years ago, in March 2004, I travelled to the Sinai desert to mourn the loss of someone I cared for deeply. I decided to go to the desert to mourn in silence. Without any guide, I walked alone for days weeping, laughing and meditating on my life. This is when I decided to make a film about Sinai, a place I've called home since I was sixteen. Sinai is a place of deserts, a place marked by bleak stones, extraordinarily beautiful skies and Bedouins, who, despite a history of antagonism with Egyptians, embraced me as a daughter. During this period of intense mourning and reflection, I would return home to my eco-lodge to find freshly baked bread with cheese and organic tomatoes waiting for me. I would listen to Bedouin men talking. Women were hidden away and, whenever I tried to sneak out to meet them, the men stopped me. It was taboo to wander into the women's area, I was told, so I realised that to getting to know Bedouin women would require great care, patience and sensitivity. At the same time I was confident that this was nonetheless possible, and that I would be able to get to know them, eventually. Years later, I've learnt that patience and sensitivity can be very hard lessons for documentary filmmakers to learn.

At night the Bedouins offered to accommodate me in one of their guest rooms, but I insisted on sleeping under the stars. In the middle of the night, I would wake up and listen to the murmurs of Bedouins watching over me.

They never let me out of their sight for a second.

I started making notes on my film at Al Karm Ecolodge, a Bedouin owned facility beautifully situated near Sheikh Awaad and Naqb el Hawa, the old pilgrims route to the monastery of St Katherine. The owner of the lodge, aptly named Gamil, the Beautiful One, is the father of seven children. He and his family befriended me, and he was one of the first Bedouin men to place trust in me, and in my film project. He was also the only one to allow me to film the women in his house.

When I returned to Germany, my camera woman and editor asked me why I hadn't taken photos of my time in Sinai. The following year I took hundreds of photos that we transformed into a trailer for *Beit Sha'ar*. We then started what was to be a prolonged journey to find funding to make the film.

To begin with, I wanted to write a fictional story based in Sinai. Then I started getting interested in the different communities who live there - Bedouins as well as foreigners who've settled in Sinai: Jews who live by the Red Sea, Arab workers from Jordan, and Sudanese workers, whose music and laughter have filtered in to the cultures of the region. I decided that what I really wanted was to make a film about this kaleidoscope of communities. It wasn't until much later that I decided to focus on Bedouin women. How this happened is a story in itself.

Just about every tourist to Sinai meets Bedouin women and girls selling beads. Selema, head of a handcraft project in St. Catherine, was key to me getting to "know" Bedouin women better. We clicked immediately. So much so, that she insisted that I visit her house and meet her mother on the very first day we met. She was determined to introduce me to Bedouin women living in remote areas, where she travelled every week for business. Consequently, it was through Selema that my love affair with Bedouin women began. I would sit with women listening to their stories. Women take care of their homes, children and livestock while their men are away in the mountains for days. Men are either in the mountains or working as labourers in neighbouring Arab countries. On occasion they're simply sitting around with other unemployed men drinking and smoking. Women's work is hard. They walk miles collecting water, and carrying gas canisters home.

Gradually, they started accepting me.

To get to Sinai you have to travel past checkpoints and through a highly militarised zone. Before I started making my film, I was once hauled off a

bus at a checkpoint and interrogated by three officers, who wanted to know what a single woman was doing alone in Sinai. I told them the truth: that I was a tourist, based overseas and since I was visiting my family, I was on vacation in Sinai. I wasn't so honest when we started filming *Beit Sha'ar* in 2008. I invented a story that I was a professor researching birds of Sinai. I even carried letters of recommendation vouching that I was researching the song of a bird called *Om Ghreira*, a small black bird with a white crown on its head. I needed a cover story because any filming in a military zone such as Sinai is strictly prohibited.

To this day I'm astonished that nobody caught us with our equipment. Moreover, we were able to bring everything back to Germany with us. We worked with a small Canon camera no bigger than my hand and my cinematographer, Ute's tripod. That's all we had. With these minimalist tools we brought our footage back home and then transformed it into a film with the help of voice over, sound, music, drama and editing. Little by little sequences of film began to emerge, like the brushstrokes of a painter working on canvas.

When I returned to Germany with the film, my long term collaborator and editor, Klaudia Begic, wasn't able to work with me because she was pregnant. I therefore worked with another editor. We worked well together but somehow the film itself wasn't working. At this point I fell ill for almost a year and couldn't work at all. When I got better, I started looking for more post production financing, my team of long-term collaborators resumed work, and we went back to the drawing board.

The most difficult part of the next phase of editing the film was to insert my own story and reflections in the documentary. This was a struggle for me and I kept asking myself how much of my own story I should tell. Was it right to do so? And if I did, how would it affect the balance of relationships with the main protagonist of the film, Selema? How could we insert my story, given the material we already had? Voice over is a powerful tool in cinema. It is also a delicate tool. It can stifle a film or create a state of reflection. I decided to seek balance. My vision for *Beit Sha'ar* was to create poetic cinema for the big screen using documentary material.

In many ways what's interesting about *Beit Sha'ar* is what we weren't able to put in: great gaps and silences about the difficulties of living in a militarised zone, the agony of individual lives caught up in the viciousness of politics,

severe drought, and other manifestations of crisis. I hope that everyone who watches the film is able to sense something more than the images and sounds emanating from the screen. At FESPACO in Ouagadougou, where we showed an English version of the film to French-speaking audiences, I introduced it by telling the audience to go on their own nomadic tour; to travel with their imaginations. Surprisingly, they did. Indeed, some people approached me after the screening and said that even though they didn't understand everything, they appreciated the film's power and mood.

Perhaps the best analogy to describe the process of making *Beit Sha'ar* is the art of writing Japanese *Haiku* – as this requires many hours of waiting and reflection. It's almost as if six years of my life has crystallised in the images of this one film. We spent hours waiting for permission to film Bedouin women, hours waiting for agreement from the women themselves, hours just being in the desert landscape. I kept on asking myself how far I should go. Should I film their faces? For instance, Selema's mother once said to me: 'My dear, I love you so much that I'd like to give you everything I have, even my soul. But as for my face, never!' I've learnt that for a Bedouin, beholding the face of a woman is like entering a sacred space. I discovered at a screening in Berlin that the audience felt great respect for the women in the film.

I remember nights on location when I would lie awake in agony. We had come so far; we'd spent years in preparation. We had Selema's permission to film and yet because filming is such a strange process for Bedouins, it felt as if, every time the camera came out, we were starting from scratch. It was a bit like going in with the tide, pushing through one minute, then slowing receding as we waited for a sign from the women that we could film them. Once, I actually found Ute, my camerawoman, weeping. I asked her what the matter was. She told me that she'd been invited to film a woman she was close to. However the woman and those with her covered their faces in black and for the first time in her life, Ute was forced to film women without seeing their eyes or their emotions. She felt it was like filming in the dark.

As a documentary filmmaker this raises deep, ethical questions. How do you maintain a respectful distance when in some cultures, like Bedouin culture, the very act of taking a picture is to break a taboo? I felt I was walking through a mine field. The audience can't see this inner struggle on screen, so I asked my composer to underscore this heightened sense of danger in the film's soundtrack.

The process of filming, then creating a film out of the filmed materials, is a long journey, which remains as mysterious to me as ever. I sometimes find myself wishing that I was a poet, sitting alone in a studio and writing. Poetry seems more of an intimate discipline than filming, and yet I feel that elements of intimacy have found their way into this film.

One morning, towards the end of editing, I woke up with a clear idea of what I'd envisaged at the start of the journey. I felt I'd come full circle and that what I'd had in mind was now a reality. It was time to let go of the film and allow it to find its place in the world.