Baskets to Semitic ram gods: lessons of the desert

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For my blogpost 'Sheep of the sands', which covers aspects of my work in Tataouine in May 2023 and the goals and outcomes of this work, see (Sheep of the sands). This blogpost focuses more on the personal impact of my Laidlaw second year Leadership in Action project and the many lessons it taught me. Some of them were simple, others more complex, and in this blogpost, I discuss some of those lessons that I believe are most important to share with the Scholarship network and anyone outside of it who stumbles upon this post. This blogpost will be a tad more informal and more conversational than my last one, as it is more personal to me. So please treat it like a conversation between me and you and if you'd like to follow it up by discussing it a bit more with me, please feel free to reach out and we'll converse to greater lengths.

One of our last interviews was on a Sunday and we trekked far into the hills away from everything to interview some shepherds sheering their flocks. When I say it was away from everything, I mean that, see image 1. You could spot nothing but sand covered hills for miles and

Image 1: Just off the hill where we conducted this set of interviews. The desert went on for miles, it was peaceful and serene. Coming from a place where noise is constant, it was like I was on another planet. Image taken by author.

miles, it was stepping onto another planet. We only knew about the place because we'd met this man at a crafts centre in downtown Tataouine earlier that week who at the time was making traditional baskets and he offered to take us to his family during one of their annual shearing festivals. Interestingly, the basket weaving of the Tataouine shepherd is done by the menfolk as they find themselves out in the wadis with their flocks, they use local reeds to weave together these beautiful baskets (some of the baskets looked quite like old Iron Age pottery interestingly enough). Seeing this man weave his baskets with reeds he picked himself, a technique he learned from his father - it's important to share this information because oftentimes Western thought can convince people that in the past gender roles were this "men do tough roles, women do soft roles" which very often is not the case. Learning that a gender role in shepherd communities in southern Tunisia is for men to weave baskets was a small eye opener during my work and an important lesson when considering gender roles in our world.

When we did arrive at the shearing site, there were about a dozen family members all at work shearing their sheep. They shear sheep differently depending on the sheep itself but use manual

shears for all their flock – they say manual shears is better for the animal and a more personal connection between man and beast. The ewes were shorn bare whereas the rams would be sung to, and they would force feed a mixture of syrup, sugar, dates, and flour to it while swinging smoke and incense infront of the animal. This practice, they told us, of calming and venerating the ram during shearing they believe to date back to a time of a pre-Islamic deity which was the semitic ram god. They even mentioned a verse in the Qur'an that talks of a coin with a man on it who wears ram horns. Much later after this interview, I realized this coin they mentioned could be that of an Eastern Roman Emperor donning the ancient fashion of Alexander the Great which was mentioned in the Qur'an! All this, while exciting and interesting in its own right, has a lesson within it as well. Its often said "we live in a new world – one of globalism [and so on]" but globalism, at least the spread of ideas across vast stretches of land and peoples, is no new thing to our world. This story as well sheds light onto the fact that OUR world, it's very foundations, is built on multiculturalism. It was the semitic ram deity that Alexander fashioned his coins to bear, then the Eastern Romans who adopted this tradition in their own coinage, and the Qur'an which pays homage to it and all this multiculturalism survives today in a remote location, far into the deserts of Tunisia, still practiced by a humble community of shepherds in how they shear their rams.

Lastly, the third lesson here is not to judge a book by its cover. Yes, I know everyone has heard this thousands of times before, but seriously as much as we've heard it, it's one of the easiest things to overlook. For instance, when I met this man weaving his baskets in a craft centre, I didn't even consider how he could provide so much information on something like sheep and wool and semitic ram gods. I judged him by his cover: by his baskets, his trade, which, as knowledgeable and wise he was with his wealth of information on local vegetation and traditional use of plants, there was much more beneath the surface. He was a man who kindly took us to his family event when he heard we were interviewing shepherds and this event provided us with so much information on local traditions and practices. From this one story then, there are three lessons. What does this have to do with ethical leadership and global citizenship? Simple: this experience reinforced and really taught things that ought to be the foundation to any leadership. As a leader, you must consider many things – people's perceptions and abilities and potential etc. – but also be able to listen. You will not consider what you don't understand, and you won't understand unless you listen. From all my listening and recording, I understood that these fascinating stories and people and their lifestyle hangs in the balance. The changing climate in the region, less rainfall, more people, more sheep, over consumption, it has many effects. One such effect is the decreasing amount of natural vegetation. Vegetation like those reeds the man used to make his traditional baskets. This is not a matter of simple baskets, but of tradition. He learned it from his father, who in turn learned it from his and so on. Recall how I said earlier that those baskets looked a tad like iron age pottery. This basket tradition could go back centuries and as Laidlaw scholars, and any ordinary person, we cannot let traditions like these die out.

Lastly, it should be considered how we continue to build ethical leaders of tomorrow. This experience in Tunisia was very productive, in my other blog I touch on how the results may impact the region's stakeholders but in this blog it's more personal. This project was productive personally and I hope I've demonstrated how the lessons I learned now influence my thought. But, how will similar experiences be sustained for future students like me in years to come? For me to actually be in Tataouine, I had to fly from Newcastle to Paris, Paris to Djerba, then drive hours to Tataouine. Some other projects that my wonderful colleagues have undertaken,

wonderful though they are, take them even further afield to places like Fiji or Peru. Aren't those flights causing Fiji to drown? Aren't my flights contributing to a changing climate and the rains to shift away from Tataouine which then causes the very droughts and hardship that drove me to interview everyone and record their stories? The answers are naturally complicated, but I feel safe in saying that yes, we do contribute some sort of negative global impact, even if the net global impact is positive. But more than just our transits, our everyday activities influence the world. Seeing how many people I interviewed must alter their lives around water scarcity, trash disposal, and managing to feed their animals when options run scarce, it made me consider how I live my life and how we all can alter ours even just a little bit, having less of a carbon footprint, to try and help make others' lives so much better. If you don't agree with me that's alright too, maybe just fly over to Tataouine and see for yourself the beautiful cultures and livelihoods at risk, then we'll talk.