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HOSPITALITY, WATER SHARING, AND ENVIRONMENTAL GOVERNANCE IN NAJDI SOCIETY (1700–1900): A CULTURAL–HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF MORAL ECONOMY IN ARID ENVIRONMENTS

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ABSTRACT

This article examines hospitality and water-sharing practices in Najdi society between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as core components of a moral economy shaped by environmental scarcity. Moving beyond romanticized portrayals of generosity, the study conceptualizes hospitality as a socially embedded institution through which communities managed risk, regulated access to critical resources, and maintained social cohesion in an arid environment. Drawing on anthropological theory, historical accounts, and comparative desert studies, the article argues that hospitality in Najd functioned not as an optional virtue but as a normative system linking ethics, survival, and informal authority. By analyzing hospitality, water access, guest protection, and reputational obligation as interrelated practices, the study demonstrates how moral norms substituted for formal governance in regulating scarcity. Comparative reflections with arid societies in the Sahara and Central Asia further situate the Najdi case within broader patterns of non-state social regulation. The article contributes to debates on moral economy, environmental adaptation, and social order by advancing a culturally grounded model of resilience under conditions of chronic resource uncertainty.

KEYWORDS: hospitality; moral economy; Najd; water scarcity; social ethics; environmental anthropology

1. INTRODUCTION

Hospitality has long been regarded as one of the defining ethical characteristics of Najdi society. Historical narratives, travel accounts, and ethnographic descriptions frequently portray generosity toward guests as a central cultural virtue associated with honor, reputation, and social identity. While such interpretations capture the symbolic importance of hospitality, they often overlook the environmental and structural conditions under which these practices emerged.

This article proposes a different interpretation. It argues that hospitality in Najdi society between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries functioned not merely as a cultural value but as an adaptive social institution shaped by environmental scarcity. In a region characterized by limited water resources, unpredictable rainfall, and hazardous mobility across desert landscapes, hospitality became a practical mechanism for regulating access to essential resources and ensuring social cooperation.

Rather than viewing generosity as a form of cultural excess, the article conceptualizes hospitality as a form of informal governance embedded in everyday life. The provision of water, shelter, and protection to strangers was not simply a moral preference but a socially enforced expectation. In the absence of centralized political authority, these ethical obligations structured patterns of mobility, mediated access to scarce resources, and contributed to the maintenance of social stability.

The analysis situates Najdi hospitality within the analytical framework of **moral economy**, which examines how ethical norms regulate resource distribution under conditions of scarcity. Scholars such as Thompson (1971) and Scott (1976) have demonstrated that moral economies emerge where survival depends on cooperation and shared expectations of fairness. In such contexts, economic behavior becomes embedded within social obligations rather than governed solely by markets or formal institutions.

Methodologically, the research adopts a historical-anthropological approach that integrates travel narratives, historical accounts, and comparative scholarship on arid societies. By examining practices of water sharing, guest protection, and reputational obligation, the article demonstrates how hospitality functioned as a social infrastructure of survival.

To support this analysis, the study draws upon three main categories of sources. First, it relies on historical travel narratives written by European and regional observers who documented social practices in central Arabia, including the works of Philby

(1922) and Doughty (1888). These accounts provide valuable descriptions of water access, desert mobility, and local norms governing hospitality.

Second, the analysis engages with anthropological scholarship on gift exchange, moral economy, and desert societies. This theoretical literature enables the interpretation of hospitality not only as a cultural practice but also as a system of social regulation shaped by environmental constraints.

Third, the article employs a comparative perspective by referencing studies of arid societies in the Sahara and Central Asia. These comparisons are used analytically to highlight broader patterns of environmental adaptation rather than to suggest direct historical connections.

Through this combined approach, hospitality is interpreted as a social institution that mediated relations between environment, ethics, and governance in pre-modern Najdi society. By reframing hospitality as adaptive governance rather than symbolic generosity, the study contributes to broader debates in environmental history and social anthropology, highlighting how ethical systems can function as mechanisms of regulation and resilience in environments characterized by chronic ecological uncertainty.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: HOSPITALITY BEYOND VIRTUE

Scholarship on hospitality has long emphasized its moral and symbolic dimensions, often framing generosity toward guests as an expression of honor, identity, or cultural distinction. Classical anthropological treatments have highlighted hospitality as a key element of social cohesion, particularly in small-scale or kin-based societies (Pitt-Rivers, 1977; Mauss, 1990). These perspectives have been invaluable in illuminating the ethical language through which hospitality is articulated and valued.

At the same time, such approaches have tended to privilege symbolic meaning over material function. By focusing on hospitality as a cultural ideal or moral virtue, they risk underestimating the extent to which practices of generosity are shaped by structural conditions, particularly in environments characterized by chronic scarcity. Recent anthropological and historical scholarship has increasingly called for greater attention to the material and ecological contexts within which ethical systems operate (Polanyi, 1957; Graeber, 2011; Sillitoe, 2022).

The concept of moral economy provides a productive bridge between ethical meaning and material necessity. As articulated by Thompson (1971) and further developed by Scott (1976), moral

economy refers to shared expectations regarding fairness, obligation, and entitlement that regulate access to essential resources. Importantly, moral economy does not oppose economic rationality; rather, it embeds economic behavior within moral norms that reflect collective survival priorities. In contexts where formal institutions are weak or absent, such norms often function as primary mechanisms of regulation.

Within this framework, hospitality may be understood not merely as an expression of generosity but as a socially embedded institution governing access, mobility, and protection. In arid environments, where water scarcity and environmental risk shape everyday life, hospitality acquires particular significance. Providing shelter, water, and safety to travelers is not simply an ethical preference but a response to shared vulnerability. Refusal of hospitality under such conditions carries consequences that extend beyond individual morality, potentially undermining trust, reputation, and future cooperation.

Anthropological studies of arid and semi-arid societies suggest that hospitality often operates through systems of delayed reciprocity and reputational accountability rather than immediate exchange (Sahlins, 1972; Graeber, 2011). These systems transform uncertainty into stability by ensuring that acts of generosity generate social credit rather than quantifiable debt. The indeterminacy of repayment is not accidental; it prevents the commodification of obligation and maintains the moral character of exchange.

Importantly, hospitality also intersects with questions of power and authority. Control over critical resources—particularly water—frequently places certain households or groups in positions of ethical expectation. Their status depends not on coercive capacity but on continued adherence to norms of generosity and protection. Authority thus remains embedded and conditional, continually renegotiated through moral performance rather than formal enforcement (Bourdieu, 1977).

This study builds on these insights by situating hospitality in Najdi society within a moral-ecological framework. Rather than rejecting earlier symbolic interpretations, it complements them by foregrounding function alongside meaning. Hospitality is treated as an adaptive moral institution through which communities managed environmental risk, regulated access to resources, and maintained social order in the absence of centralized governance. By doing so, the article contributes to a more integrated understanding of

how ethics, environment, and social organization intersect in resource-scarce settings.

3. WATER, HOSPITALITY, AND ETHICAL AUTHORITY: INFORMAL HIERARCHIES AND MORAL SURVEILLANCE

In Najdi society, hospitality and water sharing did not operate within a flat moral landscape. While ethical obligations were widely shared, their enactment was structured by informal hierarchies that conferred differential authority upon specific households and individuals. These hierarchies were not codified through legal status or institutional office, but emerged through proximity to critical resources—most notably water—and through sustained moral performance. Authority, in this context, was ethical rather than coercive, grounded in expectation rather than enforcement.

Control over reliable water sources such as wells or oases positioned certain families at the center of local social life. This positionality did not translate into absolute power; instead, it generated heightened ethical responsibility. Households associated with water access were subject to intensified moral scrutiny and were expected to enact hospitality with consistency and visibility. Their authority derived not from the capacity to exclude, but from the obligation to include. Failure to fulfill these expectations risked reputational damage and social sanction, underscoring the conditional nature of ethical authority.

This form of authority may be understood as embedded and performative. It existed only insofar as it was enacted through everyday practice. Unlike formal hierarchies, which rely on institutional permanence, ethical authority in Najd required continual reaffirmation. Hospitality thus functioned as a public performance through which authority was reproduced or undermined. The moral standing of a household was never fixed; it was continuously negotiated through observable behavior.

Within this system, moral surveillance played a crucial regulatory role. Social monitoring was neither centralized nor punitive in a formal sense, yet it was pervasive. Acts of hospitality—or their absence—were widely known, discussed, and evaluated within the community. Reputation operated as a collective assessment of ethical reliability, shaping future interactions and determining access to cooperation and support. As a result, moral behavior was subject to ongoing communal evaluation, rendering ethical norms self-enforcing.

Importantly, this surveillance did not function through fear alone but through anticipation. Individuals and households acted with an awareness

of how their behavior would be interpreted within a shared moral framework. This anticipatory dimension transformed hospitality into a proactive strategy rather than a reactive obligation. By conforming to ethical expectations, actors secured their position within the social order and mitigated future risk. Moral surveillance thus operated as a form of distributed governance, aligning individual conduct with collective survival.

The relationship between authority and surveillance was mutually constitutive. Ethical authority depended on visibility, while surveillance derived its force from recognized hierarchies of expectation. Those in positions of moral prominence were more closely observed, but they also exercised greater influence through example. Their conduct established normative benchmarks against which others were judged. In this way, informal hierarchies structured the moral field without crystallizing into rigid stratification.

This system challenges assumptions that scarcity necessarily produces coercive power or rigid inequality. In Najd, environmental constraint fostered a form of governance that prioritized ethical performance over material dominance. Authority remained provisional and contingent, continuously subject to communal evaluation. Hospitality, far from being a symbolic virtue, operated as a mechanism through which power was exercised, limited, and legitimized.

By conceptualizing hospitality as a site of ethical authority and moral surveillance, this section reframes Najdi social order as a dynamic system of governance grounded in everyday practice. Water scarcity did not merely shape material life; it structured moral hierarchies that regulated access, mobility, and survival. In the absence of centralized institutions, ethics became the medium through which authority was both produced and restrained.

Historical travel accounts provide concrete evidence of how water access in Najdi settlements was regulated through customary norms rather than exclusive ownership. Philby (1922), for example, observed that wells in oasis settlements such as Ushaiger functioned as shared resources whose use was governed by expectations of hospitality toward

passing travelers and caravans. Refusal to provide water to strangers was widely condemned within local moral discourse and could result in reputational damage for the host household. Access to water was thus mediated not through formal authority but through socially enforced ethical obligation, reinforcing the conditional nature of moral authority associated with resource control.

4. HOSPITALITY, TIME, AND MORAL DEBT

Hospitality in Najdi society cannot be fully understood through spatial or material analysis alone; it must also be situated within a temporal framework that structured obligation, reciprocity, and ethical expectation. Unlike market exchange, which operates through immediate equivalence, Najdi hospitality functioned through delayed reciprocity, transforming generosity into a form of moral debt extended across time. This temporal logic was central to the operation of moral economy under conditions of environmental scarcity.

In an arid environment where future need was always possible, immediate repayment was neither expected nor desired. Acts of hospitality—providing water, shelter, and protection—generated obligations that were intentionally left open-ended. This indeterminacy prevented the commodification of generosity and preserved its ethical character. As anthropological studies of gift economies have shown, moral systems of exchange derive their power precisely from the absence of fixed equivalence (Mauss, 1990; Sahlins, 1972; Graeber, 2011).

Time, in this context, functioned as a regulatory medium. Moral debt accumulated gradually through repeated acts of generosity and could only be redeemed under conditions of genuine need. The longer the temporal horizon, the greater the stabilizing effect of ethical obligation. Hospitality thus operated as a long-term investment in social security, embedding survival within extended networks of trust and reputation rather than short-term calculation. An example of communal water access in Najdi desert settlements is shown in Figure 1.



Figure 1: Communal water access in a Najdi desert well, illustrating the role of shared water resources and hospitality networks in regulating survival and mobility in arid environments.

This temporal structure also shaped the rhythm of social life. Hospitality was most visible and socially consequential during moments of heightened vulnerability—periods of drought, long-distance travel, or seasonal hardship. The memory of past generosity informed present interaction, creating a moral archive through which individuals and households were evaluated. Reputation, therefore, was not static but cumulative, built over time through consistent ethical performance.

Importantly, delayed reciprocity redistributed risk across the community. By extending obligation into the future, society mitigated the impact of environmental unpredictability. Individuals who gave generously in times of relative abundance increased their chances of receiving support when conditions deteriorated. This logic aligns with Polanyi's concept of embedded economy, in which economic behavior is subordinated to social relations and moral norms (Polanyi, 1957).

The temporal dimension of hospitality further reinforced informal hierarchies. Households with a long history of generosity possessed deeper reservoirs of moral credit, granting them greater influence during moments of collective decision-making. Yet this influence remained contingent. Moral debt could be depleted through ethical failure, underscoring the dynamic nature of authority within the Najdi moral economy.

Crucially, the system did not seek to eliminate uncertainty; rather, it absorbed uncertainty into social structure. By refusing to close the temporal gap between giving and receiving, Najdi society preserved flexibility and avoided rigid dependency. Hospitality thus functioned not as episodic charity but as a temporal technology of governance,

regulating behavior across time rather than through immediate sanction.

This analysis complicates interpretations that frame hospitality solely as generosity or honor. Instead, it reveals a sophisticated temporal logic through which ethical obligation, reputation, and survival were integrated. Time was not merely a backdrop to hospitality; it was an active component that enabled moral economy to function as an adaptive system under conditions of chronic scarcity.

Evidence from nineteenth-century travel narratives further suggests that seasonal mobility across Najd depended on networks of hospitality linking dispersed settlements. Doughty (1888) documented how long-distance caravan movement relied on the willingness of local households to provide temporary access to water, shelter, and protection, particularly during periods of environmental stress. These interactions were structured by expectations of delayed reciprocity rather than immediate exchange, indicating that hospitality functioned as a temporal mechanism through which risk associated with mobility was collectively managed in an arid environment.

5. HOSPITALITY AS GOVERNANCE: ETHICS, SCARCITY, AND NON-STATE SOCIAL ORDER

This section advances the central theoretical claim of the article: hospitality in Najdi society functioned as a system of governance. Rather than operating at the margins of social order, hospitality constituted a core regulatory mechanism through which access, authority, and survival were organized in the absence of centralized state institutions. Ethics, in this framework, did not merely guide behavior; they structured social coordination. Scarcity, far from

undermining order, provided the conditions under which such governance emerged and stabilized.

5.1 Hospitality as a System of Governance

Governance is often analytically reserved for formal institutions, legal authority, and state-administered regulation. However, a growing body of anthropological and historical scholarship has demonstrated that social order may be effectively produced through non-state mechanisms grounded in norms, reputation, and moral obligation (Scott, 1976; Bourdieu, 1977; Ostrom, 1990). Within this perspective, hospitality in Najd can be understood as a governing institution—one that regulated mobility, mediated access to resources, and enforced compliance through ethical expectation rather than coercion.

Hospitality governed who could move safely across territory, who could access water and shelter, and under what conditions protection was guaranteed. These decisions were not arbitrary acts of kindness; they followed widely recognized norms whose violation carried social consequences. In regulating movement and access, hospitality performed functions commonly associated with governance: boundary management, risk distribution, and conflict mitigation.

Crucially, this system operated without bureaucratic infrastructure. Regulation was enacted through everyday practice, public visibility, and communal evaluation. As such, hospitality exemplifies what may be termed governance through ethics—a mode of social ordering in which normative obligation substitutes for institutional enforcement (Scott, 1976; Ostrom, 1990).

5.2 Ethics as Organizational Infrastructure

Within Najdi society, ethics did not exist as abstract values detached from practice. They constituted an organizational infrastructure that coordinated behavior across households and generations. Norms of hospitality, water sharing, and guest protection structured expectations and aligned individual conduct with collective survival.

Ethical obligation functioned as a binding force precisely because it was socially embedded and continuously enacted. Moral norms were learned through participation, reinforced through observation, and maintained through reputation. This process created a dense web of mutual accountability that reduced the need for external enforcement. As Polanyi (1957) observed in his analysis of embedded economies, social integration often relies on moral regulation rather than market or

state mechanisms. Najdi hospitality exemplifies this principle in an arid context.

Importantly, ethics organized inequality without eliminating it. Households associated with water access or strategic location occupied positions of ethical prominence, yet their authority remained contingent upon moral performance. Ethics thus structured hierarchy while simultaneously constraining it, preventing the consolidation of unchecked power. Authority was legitimate only insofar as it was ethically enacted. This form of regulation closely aligns with broader discussions of governance beyond the state, in which social order is maintained through norms, reputation, and collective monitoring rather than formal institutions (Scott, 1976; Ostrom, 1990).

5.3 Scarcity as a Productive Condition of Order

Contrary to assumptions that scarcity erodes social cohesion, the Najdi case suggests that chronic scarcity can function as a productive condition for social order. Environmental constraint heightened interdependence, rendering cooperation not optional but necessary. Under such conditions, ethical systems gained practical urgency, transforming moral norms into instruments of survival.

Scarcity intensified the stakes of ethical failure. Denial of hospitality or water threatened not only individual lives but the integrity of the social system itself. This heightened risk reinforced compliance and elevated the moral significance of everyday actions. Scarcity, therefore, did not merely test the system; it generated the conditions under which governance through ethics became viable and durable.

Comparative studies of arid societies support this interpretation. In environments characterized by resource uncertainty, social systems frequently prioritize inclusion, delayed reciprocity, and moral accountability over exclusionary control (Sahlins, 1972; Graeber, 2011). Najd conforms to this broader pattern, demonstrating how scarcity can catalyze governance forms that are flexible, distributive, and resilient.

Accounts of drought conditions in central Arabia further illustrate how environmental scarcity intensified reliance on reciprocal hospitality. Facey (1997) notes that periods of prolonged rainfall failure increased the social significance of water sharing and guest protection, as households became more dependent on reputational networks of assistance. Under such circumstances, refusal of hospitality risked not only immediate social sanction but also exclusion from future support during times of need. Scarcity thus reinforced ethical norms as practical

instruments of survival, embedding governance within everyday social relations.

5.4 Visibility, Practice, and the Reproduction of Order

Governance through hospitality relied on visibility. Ethical conduct was publicly observable, discussed, and remembered. Everyday practices—hosting guests, sharing water, providing

protection—served as performances through which social order was reproduced. Reputation functioned as the evaluative mechanism linking individual behavior to collective judgment. The interaction between environmental constraints, hospitality practices, and informal ethical regulation is summarized in the conceptual framework presented in **Figure 2**.



Figure 2: Conceptual model of hospitality as adaptive governance in Najdi society. Environmental constraints (water scarcity and desert mobility) interact with social mechanisms (reputation and guest protection) through hospitality practices, generating informal ethical regulation that contributes to social order and collective resilience in arid environments.

Through such practices, governance was enacted continuously rather than episodically. Order did not depend on formal sanctions but on the anticipation of social evaluation. This anticipatory dimension rendered ethical norms self-reinforcing, aligning personal interest with collective stability.

5.5 Theoretical Implications

By conceptualizing hospitality as governance, this study challenges analytical frameworks that separate ethics from power or treat morality as secondary to material organization. In Najd, ethics constituted the medium through which power operated, resources were regulated, and order was maintained. Scarcity did not undermine this system; it made it necessary.

This reconceptualization has implications beyond the Najdi case. It suggests that in contexts of limited institutional capacity, moral systems may function as primary infrastructures of governance. Recognizing this dynamic expands the analytical vocabulary of social history and environmental anthropology,

offering tools for understanding how societies organize survival without states.

6. CONCLUSION: RETHINKING HOSPITALITY, SCARCITY, AND SOCIAL ORDER

This study has demonstrated that hospitality in Najdi society functioned as more than a cultural expression of generosity. Under conditions of chronic environmental scarcity, hospitality operated as a practical system of social regulation that governed access to water, enabled safe mobility across desert landscapes, and reinforced networks of cooperation.

By integrating ethical obligation with resource management, Najdi communities developed a form of governance embedded within everyday social practices. Hospitality, water sharing, and reputational accountability collectively formed a moral economy that regulated behavior in the absence of centralized political authority.

The Najdi case illustrates how environmental constraints can stimulate the development of

adaptive social institutions rather than social breakdown. Scarcity intensified interdependence and reinforced ethical norms that structured access to resources and mediated social relations.

Comparative evidence from other arid societies suggests that such systems are not unique to Arabia but represent a broader pattern of environmental adaptation. In many desert environments, hospitality functions as a mechanism for redistributing risk and ensuring survival across dispersed communities.

Understanding hospitality as a form of social governance therefore expands the analytical framework through which historians and anthropologists interpret desert societies. Rather than viewing hospitality as symbolic generosity, it should be recognized as a sophisticated social technology that transformed ecological vulnerability into collective resilience.

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