

Re-Reading Elizabeth Fernea's Guests of The Sheikh in An Era of ChatGPT

Elizabeth BISHOP* 

The American University of Iraq - Baghdad (AUIB), Iraq
elizabeth.bishop@auib.edu.iq

Received: 15/10/2024

Accepted: 04/12/2024

Published: 31/12/2024

**Corresponding author*

Citation :

BISHOP, E. (2024). Re-Reading Elizabeth Fernea's Guests of The Sheikh in An Era of ChatGPT. *Turath*, 2(2), 82-88.

ABSTRACT: *For some readers, Elizabeth Fernea's Guests of the Sheikh: An Ethnography of an Iraqi Village (Doubleday, 1965), is contextualized by her personal history, including marriage to Robert Fernea during 1956 as the basis for their decision to move to Iraq as he completed fieldwork a PhD in anthropology required (Zuhur, 2006, p. 43). In the village identified as "al-Nahra", near al-Diwaniyah in southeastern Iraq, Fernea (1927-2008) became a woman in the Middle East (Cohen, 1994, p. 157). For some readers, her initial reluctance to wear an abayah (which yielded to an eventual decision to don the clothing worn by women in al-Nahra) is an important point in her transition from wife to ethnographer (Holden, 2012, p. 154). Finally, readers respond to Fernea's growing awareness that women of al-Nahra did not envy her but felt sorry for her as skinny, with short hair, no children, no mother, and no gold to have been a crucial moment in her transformation into a feminist (Meneley, 2016, p. 113). Recently arriving in Iraq for an appointment in academic administration, in an era of ChatGPT, I am re-reading Fernea's Guests of the Sheikh for examples of visual analysis, references to architectural space as an index to human communities, and finally references to changes in subjectivity (i.e., "learning").*

KEYWORDS: AI, ChatGPT, "deep humanism", feminist ethnography, fieldwork.

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Centre of Research in Social and
Cultural Anthropology (CRASC),
Algeria.



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Relire le roman de "Guests of the Sheikh" d'Elizabeth Fernea à l'ère du ChatGPT

RÉSUMÉ : Pour certains lecteurs, *Le roman de Elizabeth Fernea « Guests of the Sheikh : An Ethnography of an Iraqi Village »* (Doubleday, 1965), est contextualisé par son histoire personnelle, notamment son mariage avec Robert Fernea en 1956, qui a motivé leur décision de s'installer en Irak alors qu'il achevait le travail de terrain qu'exigeait un doctorat en anthropologie (Zuhur, 2006, p. 43). Dans le village identifié comme "al-Nahra", près d'al-Diwaniyah dans le sud-est de l'Irak, Fernea (1927-2008) est devenue une femme au Moyen-Orient (Cohen, 1994, p. 157). Pour certains lecteurs, sa réticence initiale à porter une abayah (qui s'est transformée en une décision de porter les vêtements portés par les femmes à al-Nahra) est un point important dans sa transition d'épouse à ethnographe (Holden, 2012, p. 154). Enfin, les lecteurs réagissent à la prise de conscience de Fernea que les femmes d'al-Nahra ne l'enviaient pas mais la plaignaient parce qu'elle était maigre, avait les cheveux courts, n'avait pas d'enfants, n'avait pas de mère et n'avait pas d'or, ce qui a été un moment crucial dans sa transformation en féministe (Meneley, 2016, p. 113). Récemment arrivée en Irak pour un poste dans l'administration universitaire, à l'ère du ChatGPT, je relis *Guests of the Sheikh* de Fernea pour y trouver des exemples d'analyse visuelle, des références à l'espace architectural en tant qu'indice des communautés humaines et, enfin, des références aux changements de subjectivité (c'est-à-dire à "l'apprentissage").

MOTS-CLÉS : Intelligence artificielle, ChatGPT, "humanisme profond", ethnographie féministe, travail de terrain.

إعادة قراءة رواية ضيوف الشيخ لإليزابيث فرنيا في عصرشات جي بي تي

المخلص : يرى بعض القراء أن كتاب إليزابيث فرنيا "ضيوف الشيخ": إثنوغرافيا لقرية عراقية (دوبليداي، 1965)، عبارة عن سرد لسيرتها الذاتية، والتي تروي قصة زواجها من "روبرت فرنيا" في سنة 1956، حينها قرّرا الانتقال إلى العراق من أجل القيام بالدراسة الميدانية في إطار التحضير لرسالة الدكتوراه في الأنثروبولوجيا (زهور، 2006، ص. 43)، وهكذا انتقلا إلى القرية التي عرفت باسم "النهرة"، بالقرب من الديوانية في جنوب شرق العراق، لتصبح السيدة فرنيا (1927-2008) امرأة في الشرق الأوسط (كوهين، 1994، ص. 157). ويرى بعض القراء أن ترددها في البداية في ارتداء العباءة (الذي أفضى في نهاية المطاف إلى قرارها بارتداء الملابس التي ترتديها النساء في "النهرة") هو نقطة مهمة في تحولها من زوجة إلى عالمة إثنوغرافية (هولدن، 2012، ص. 154). أخيرًا، يبدو أن فرنيا أدركت بأن نساء أهل النهرة لم يحسدها بل شعرن بالأسف عليها كونها كانت نحيفة، وذات شعر قصير، وليس لديها أطفال ولا أم، كما أنها لا تملك ذهبًا على غرار النساء، وأدّت هذه الأسباب في لحظة حاسمة إلى تحولها من دعاة "النسوية" (مينلي، 2016، ص. 113). بعد وصولها مؤخرًا إلى العراق للتعيين في الإدارة الأكاديمية، في عصر الشات جي بي تي، ChatGPT أعدت قراءة كتاب "ضيوف الشيخ" لفرنيا، وهذا من أجل البحث عن أمثلة للتحليل البصري، وكذا الإشارات إلى الفضاء المعماري بوصفه مؤشرًا للمجتمعات البشرية، وأخيرًا الإشارات إلى التغيرات في الذاتية (أي "التعلم").

الكلمات المفتاحية : الذكاء الاصطناعي، ChatGPT، "الإنسانية العميقة"، الإثنوغرافيا النسوية، العمل الميداني.

Introduction

For some readers, *Elizabeth Fernea's Guests of the Sheikh: An Ethnography of an Iraqi Village* (Doubleday, 1965), is contextualized by her personal history, including marriage to Robert Fernea during 1956 as the basis for their decision to move to Iraq as he completed fieldwork a PhD in anthropology required (*Sherifa Zuhur, Iraq, Women's Empowerment, and Public Policy*, 2006, p. 43). In the village identified as "al-Nahra," near al-Diwaniyah in southeastern Iraq, Fernea (1927-2008) became a woman in the Middle East (*David Cohen, Law, Sexuality, and Society: The Enforcement of Morals in Classical Athens*, 1994, p. 157). For some readers, her initial reluctance to wear an abayah (which yielded to an eventual decision to don the clothing worn by women in al-Nahra) is an important point in her transition from wife to ethnographer (Stacy E. Holden, *A Documentary History of Modern Iraq*, 2012, p. 154). Finally, readers respond to Fernea's growing awareness that women of al-Nahra did not envy her but felt sorry for her as skinny, with short hair, no children, no mother, and no gold to have been a crucial moment in her transformation into a feminist (*Anne Meneley, Tournaments of Value: Sociability and Hierarchy in a Yemeni Town*, 2016, p. 113). Even though, as Fernea stated in the introduction to her book, she was not an anthropologist, her *Guests of the Sheikh* (which is still in print with Penguin Random House) retains enduring value.

I remember the text as full of existentialist references ("if they can't take me as I am--if we have to make artificial gestures to prove we are human beings too what's the point?" on p. 6). Recently arriving in Iraq for an appointment in academic administration, in an era of ChatGPT, I am re-reading Fernea's *Guests of the Sheikh*. From the windows in the apartment where I live, an internet-based map tells me that I can see six government offices and a military base. Furthermore, the map does not identify al-Nahra in Iraq. I always suspected that just as it is a convention among field researchers to change the names of research participants or use pseudonyms to protect their identity, Fernea changed the name of the rural community where she and her husband "Bob" carried out fieldwork for similar ethical reasons, to protect the identities of her research participants.

Online, too, I read that "a fascinating innovation in ethnographic investigation and visual analysis has been the advent of ChatGPT-4. Developed by OpenAI, ChatGPT-4 is a highly advanced artificial intelligence language model that can read, interpret, and respond to human text-based interactions" (Michael Weibel, "Enhancing Ethnographic Research with ChatGPT: Exploring Pictorial and Visual Analysis," DevsetAI, 3 November 2023). Another website informs, "GPT-4 is the latest milestone in OpenAI's effort in scaling up deep learning" ("GPT-4 is OpenAI's most advanced system, producing safer and more useful responses", OpenAI [n.d.]).

Visual analysis? Scaling up? Deep learning? I return to Fernea for myself, to re-read her *Guests of the Sheikh* for examples of visual analysis, references to architectural space as an index to human communities, and finally references to changes in subjectivity (i.e., "learning").

Visual

Visual elements are central to a key passage in this ethnography, the "introduction to site of field work." Fernea narrated: "Clouds hung low and dark in the bit of sky I could see between the buildings and the townspeople and the tribesmen, carriages, cars, and donkey carts that moved more and more quickly past the train window. The winter night was coming fast, and as we left the Tigris River behind, the lights were on in all the hotels along its banks the Semiramis, the Zia, the Sindbad. We passed rows of mud-and-mat *serifa* huts with kerosene lanterns

flickering in their doorways, a series of smoking brick kilns, a mosque with a lighted minaret, more serifa huts, and then there was nothing to see but the dark horizon and a few date palms and the wide, empty plain" (Guests, p. 4).

As she and her husband "Bob" arrive to their residence, she encountered the limits of her ability to see, as she took "a stroll in the garden," among the sodden patches of grass, the vegetable garden, and fruit trees. In the course of this "stroll," she encountered the limits of the language she was accustomed to use to describe daily activities, as well as architectural limits on her ability to perceive the world around her visually.

"In the farthest corner stood the outhouse and in the opposite corner some tangled rosebushes were blooming. Here, although I stood on tiptoe, I could see nothing but the cloudy sky and the tops of the palm trees in neighboring gardens. The sheikh's beautiful young wife, for whom this house had been built, had been well protected from prying eyes, I thought, and intruders would have had an uncomfortable time getting in over the prickly camel-thorn that was arranged like barbed wire, six inches high, all around the top of the wall" (p. 16).

Surprisingly, throughout the subsequent narrative, the wall which encloses the house and its garden fails to place an external limit on Fernea's ability to understand the world in which she lives. Indeed, within the space of her home, her skills of perception grow throughout the period of the narrative. By the end of the narrative, Fernea has learned as much about the surrounding community from conversations with women in her home as "Bob" has from his conversations with men outside their home.

Architectural Space

During her "stroll in the garden," Fernea looks back on the text's most significant architectural space, the home she shared in privacy with her husband "Bob." The social expectations of guest and host do not censor her description of the property, including its shortcomings:

"From my corner of the garden I looked back at the house, mud-colored, rectangular, flat-roofed. Its two wooden doors, one for each room, had once been painted blue, the color to ward off the Evil Eye. The shutters, banging open in the wind, had once been blue too. A crack zigzagged down the wall from one window to the ground where the plaster of mud and straw was washing away from the baked-brick sides. The roof beams, jutting out at regular intervals like square eaves, were covered with a thatch of mud and reed mats that looked quite inadequate to keep out the rain" (p.16)

The tribal guest house or mudhif balances the home she shared with her husband "Bob" in their status as "guests of the sheikh" in this text. *The mudhif* was public space, an area in which men met, a space created from nature; the home was private space, an area which could accommodate women's sociability, a space that showed signs of the human capacity to transform nature. Fernea describes the mudhif as emerging from the natural landscape, its lushness contrasting with the arid surroundings: "Ahead was a clearing, at the edge of which earth had been built up to form a large square platform. On this stood the sheikh's guest house or *mudhif*, framed by a grove of date palms, green and lustrous in the dun-colored landscape." Accustomed to the intimate scale of the dwelling, Fernea expressed surprise at the architectural scale of the *mudhif*:

"I had not expected the guest house to be so big; the tribesmen near the entrance were dwarfed by the thirty-foot arch of the mudhif, which looked like an enormous Quonset hut open

at both ends. Great bundles of swamp reeds, arched over and anchored in the ground, formed the ribs of the structure which stretched at least 150 feet (45 meters) back toward the palm grove. Only in the entrance arch was the bunching visible for overlapping reed mats covered the sides and roof" (p. 26).

This point in the narrative introduces one of this text's few references to academic knowledge, which in this case provides affirmation and depth to the narrator's personal experience: "we heard afterward from archeologist friends that the plan and structure of the *mudhif* have origins in antiquity and that some of the earliest Sumerian temples may have been of just this shape" (p. 26).

Eventually, Fernea and her husband "Bob" learned that their dwelling with its blue shutters and camel-thorn fence was not in "the fashionable, the 'right' side of the canal," where homes were built from fired brick, with tile floors and carefully cultivated gardens; they lived in the tribal settlement, within the tribal community centered on its *mudhif*. "Why on earth didn't Bob and I, foreigners and not destitute, live on the right side of the canal, I was asked by the women schoolteachers, the mayor's wife, the engineer's sister and the doctor's wife, the handful of middle-class ladies in the town who entertained me at lunch and tea, polite, pleasant, and quite puzzled as to our presence in this remote village and our house among those of the tribal *fellahin*" (p. 51).

Learning

A common online dictionary provides two, complementary yet contradictory definitions of the English-language verb "to learn." On the one hand, "to learn" is active, in that it means to: "gain or acquire knowledge of or skill in (something) by study, experience, or being taught;" on the other hand, "to learn" is passive to the knowledge of others "commit to memory." Of the two definitions of "to learn," both appear in Fernea's ethnography.

"Learning" is embodied in the female schoolteachers who were Fernea's informants. Possibly named for Queen Aliyah (wife of King Ghazi I), who the year after the Anglo-Iraqi war returned her brother to power as Regent for King Faysal II founded a post-secondary college for women in the capital city. Linguistically the name was equally appropriate to a female ruler of an independent state and an educator (Arabic, meaning "sublime" or "high"). According to Fernea, the schoolteacher Aliyah was a woman, "who had come to al-Nahra thirteen years before when the girls' school opened and had remained there ever since, teaching, in loneliness and obscurity, the girls of this remote area." The schoolteacher narrated her own arc of accomplishment as if it mirrored the twentieth century's significant metanarratives: exercise of agency, triumph over adversity. Fernea wrote:

"At first, she told me, only a few girls, daughters of merchants and effendis, had come to school; Aliyah had not been discouraged. She visited the village families, not just once, but many times, until they became used to her presence and were no longer suspicious. She pointed out the importance of women learning to read, not only the Koran (the woman mullahs were available to teach them that), but books about Islamic history, about sewing and cooking" (p. 53).

The female schoolteacher's persistence paid off when she encountered the right patron, the right way, at the right time:

"When Sheik Hamid married Selma, Aliya went to visit her and was welcomed warmly; they had mutual acquaintances among the teachers in Diwaniya. Gradually the tribal girls began to

attend the school. First only one came from each of the wealthier families, then the poorer girls, and finally more and more of the villagers. The school had grown slowly, but it had 175 girls now, and only three teachers. Inspectors from the Ministry of Education had expressed several times to Aliya herself their amazement at the large enrollment in such a conservative area, but knowing Aliyah and the high personal respect she enjoyed in al-Nahra, I was not surprised" (p. 53).

A substantial portion of the narrative engages those changes in subjectivity associated with learning. At one point, a deputy minister offered Fernea employment in Diwaniya teaching her native language at a boys' secondary school, "after all, boys need to learn English more than girls" (p. 54). Her husband "Bob" struggles with the idea that other men expect to live in dignity: "for a long time after Mohammed had gone, Bob sat at the kitchen table; I poured some coffee and we drank it slowly... finally he said, a little wryly, that he wished he could have paid the money minus the personal embarrassment to learn what he had learned" (p. 276).

Conclusion

Online, I learn: "A fascinating innovation in ethnographic investigation and visual analysis has been the advent of ChatGPT-4. Developed by OpenAI, ChatGPT-4 is a highly advanced artificial intelligence language model that can read, interpret, and respond to human text-based interactions" (Michael Weibel, "Enhancing Ethnographic Research with ChatGPT: Exploring Pictorial and Visual Analysis," DevsetAI, 3 November 2023). Sharpened from re-reading Fernea's *Guest of the Sheikh*, the two words "fascinating innovation" stand out. Not an "important innovation," not a "welcome innovation;" I carry out a full-text search to identify other uses for this jarring phrase.

John Cayley uses it in the introduction to his *Grammalepsy: Essays in Digital Language Art* (2018), in the context of *aurature* (defined as "linguistic work valued for lasting artistic merit that has been expressed in the support media of aurality") "represents the results of an engagement with experimental aesthetic practice... Tumbling within the breaking waves of constant, self-consciously disruptive, and unprecedentedly powerful technological innovation" (p. 12). It's a commonly-accepted principle that the cortex expands and subsequently folds as the human brain develops; consequently, I am alert to the number of times Fernea's ethnography doubled back on itself, exceeding the "three or more layers" which is used to define "deep learning."

Trained on an extensive amount of text, ChatGPT predicts the next best word in a sentence based on the previous words; by definition, it cannot give rise to innovation ("fascinating," or otherwise). Another website informs, "GPT-4 is the latest milestone in OpenAI's effort in scaling up deep learning," prompting me to seek a definition for "deep learning." I learn that "deep learning" is "a subset of machine learning that utilizes multilayered neural networks, known as deep neural networks, to simulate the complex decision-making processes of the human brain," and that, "unlike traditional machine learning models that use simple neural networks with one or two layers, deep learning models employ three or more layers." In an era of ChatGPT, I return to this text as a manifesto for what could be called "deep humanism."

Online, I learn this is not a "fascinating innovation." Richard J. Bernstein used this to describe philosopher Richard Rorty (1931-2007) as writing: "as if anyone who even thought there was a proper philosophical way to speak about truth, objectivity, and 'getting things right' was guilty of idolatry, bowing down before an external authority" (Richard J. Bernstein, "Richard Rorty's Deep Humanism," *New Literary History*, vol. 39, no. 1, Winter 2008, pp. 13-27). Rorty

and Fernea were near-contemporaries; re-reading *Guests of the Sheikh* with Bernstein's equivalence between "a proper philosophical way to speak about truth, objectivity, and "getting things right" and "idolatry" (in the sense of "cultism," "idol-worship", and "sacrilege", all words word that a full-text search of *Guests* indicates is missing) recalls Fernea's prose as much as it does Rorty's.

As a historian, I repeatedly return to this text: Fernea carried out field work during a crucial moment in the history of Iraq's Hashemite monarchy, between the Suez War during 1956 and the 14 July revolution during 1958 (the eventual publication includes a brief yet tantalizing reference to an informant's statement "when revolution comes, men like this must go" on p. 86). As an active reader and educator, I plan to continue a series of returns to this text as a model of "deep humanism" the very antithesis to "deep learning" and "fascinating innovation" in an era of ChatGPT.

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