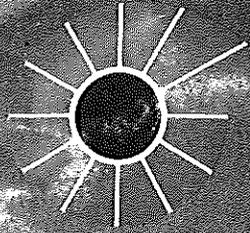


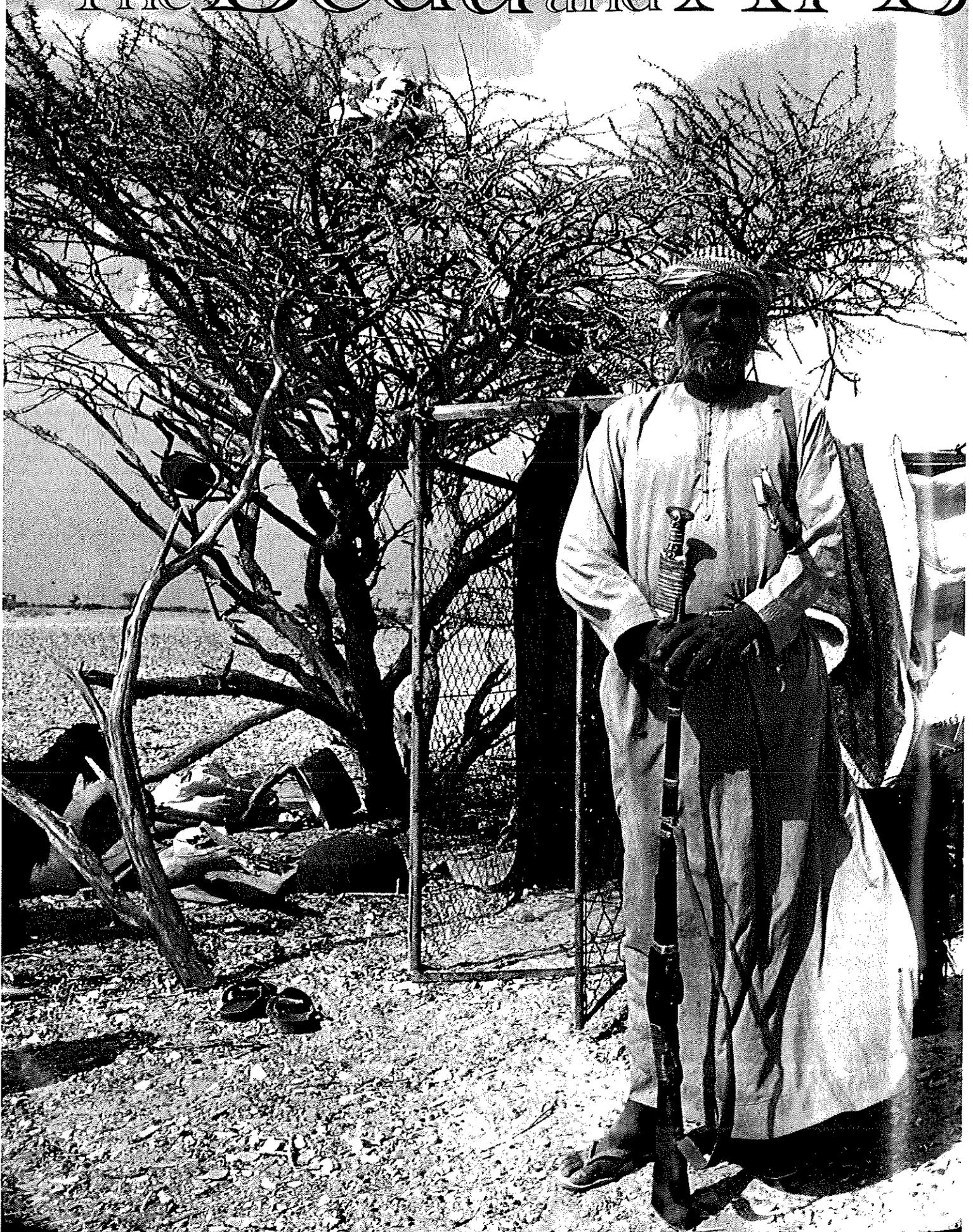
PDO NEWS

No. 1/1991



The Bedu
and Al-Badiyah
in Oman

The Bedu and Al-B



adiyah in Oman

Words by
Dawn Chatty
Pictures by
S. J. Prakash

Bedouin or bedu, in Arabic, simply means someone who lives in the badiyah — an arid or semi-arid region that cannot support rain-fed agriculture. Survival for the Bedouin is based on domesticated livestock that can exist and sometimes thrive on the natural graze and browse of the desert. The well-being of these herds depends upon their access to the widely spread out grass, tree and shrub cover that appears throughout the desert region in response to rainfall and other forms of precipitation.

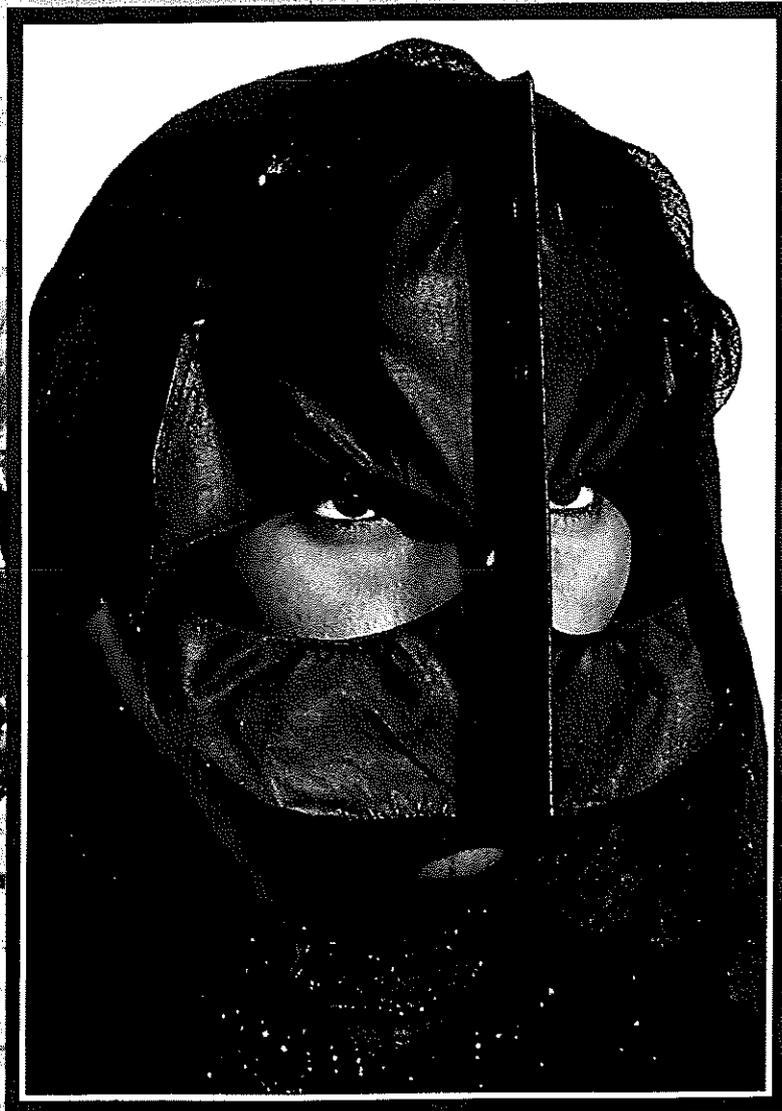
Livestock is the key to the Bedouin way of life and mobility is a basic feature in the management of the herd. Thus the term pastoral nomad or nomadic pastoralist can be used interchangeably with the term Bedouin in this article and elsewhere.

In Arabic, the term bedu has two highly coloured and, for some, emotional contexts. At times and among some segments of the local population the term

bedu is used to connote an unsophisticated, rural or simply ignorant person as opposed to a cultured urban dweller. This local usage is not unlike the English expression 'country bumpkin'.

At other times and for different segments of the local population, the term bedu is used to evoke the noble and generous Arab cultural traditions that they are said to safeguard.

Any definition of the Bedouin — or the Arab for that matter — needs to consider its genealogical history. The Bedouin specifically, and the Arab in general,



A Duru bedu standing next to his summer shelter, consisting of a tarpaulin thrown over a metal frame.

(Inset) A Bedu woman wearing the 'burqa', a face-covering traditional among the pastoral nomadic tribes of Oman.



holds the belief that the apical ancestors of them all were two brothers named Qais and Yemen.

The brothers, the founders of the Arab race, are also given other names. Sometimes they are called Adnan and Qahtan or Nizar and Qahtan. Whatever the term used, the interpretation of family and tribal genealogies — not very different from the European family tree — was meant to explain the past. In fact, they acted to rationalize or more often, to justify, present conditions or inter-tribal and inter-family strength and weakness.

The antecedents of the pastoral nomadic tribes of Arabia go back to the 3rd millennium B.C. when Assyrian records show that the camel had been domesticated. By the 5th century B.C. three great commercial centres were flourishing along the perimeters of the Arabian Peninsula. These were in the agricultural kingdoms of the Yemen, and the regions of Syria and Iraq which together made up the major portion of the Fertile Crescent.

The pastoral nomads of that period carried incense and other products from Yemen to Syria and Iraq. Their camel caravans moved up the Peninsula just inland on the interior side of the coastal mountains of Western Arabia. During this period there is no evidence that the pastoral nomads who supplied the camels actually controlled the trade or reaped its profits.

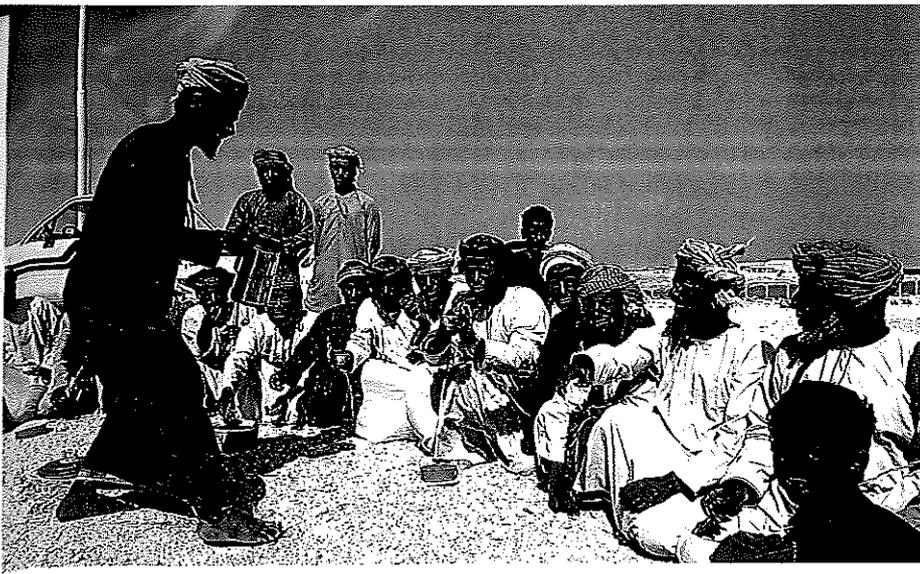
Between the 3rd and 5th century A.D., however, a complex series of technological breakthroughs gave the Bedouin the means of converting their potential mastery of the caravan trade into real control. These developments included the riding saddle as well as the metal sword and spear.

As the Bedouin gained in military and economic strength, they began to take up new routes, which crossed the Arabian Plateau in the middle and around its northern fringe. The termini of the incense route shifted from the Fertile Crescent to the Bedouin's own oasis settlements. These were then built up

into prosperous caravan cities as Petra, Jerash, and Tudmor (better known today as Palmyra).

These ventures, as well as others, led to a revolution in the transport economy of the entire region. The use of wheeled vehicles such as the ox-drawn wagon was entirely abandoned and their place was taken by the pack camel and the ass (see R. Bulliet, *The Camel and the Wheel*, Harvard University Press, 1975 for detailed description and analysis of this revolution in transport). Since the camel was exclusively a product of the pastoral economy, the Bedouin rapidly became an integral element in settled society.

The pastoral nomadic tribes of Oman divide themselves into two groups: those descended from Qahtan and those whose origins go back to Nizar (or some use the name Adnan). The major Qahtani tribes are the Mahra, the Jebena, the Beit Kathir and the Harasis. These tribes gradually moved north into Oman from Yemen and the Hadramaut.



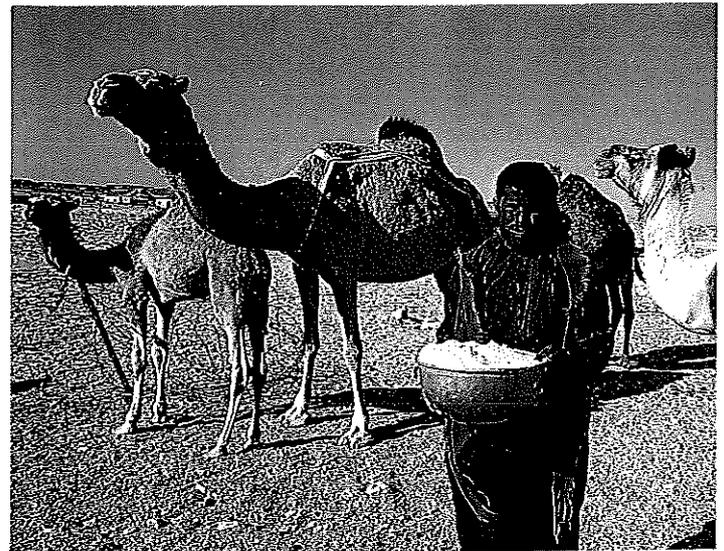
(Far left) A Jeneba bedu woman spinning wool. Spinning and weaving are traditional handicrafts still widely practised among the bedu of Oman.

(Left) Coffee is an important part of any social gathering. A Jeneba bedu serves coffee from a modern Thermos.

(Below left) In parts of the desert, small settlements have begun to form. The settlement at Demeet, a Mahra community, has a number of plywood structures.

(Below) Camel's milk is highly prized. Many Omani bedu regard it as more nutritious than goat's milk. Beit Kathiri bedu carrying milk in a modern container.

(Bottom) Harsuusi woman holding a traditional milk bowl made of woven palm fronds and leather.



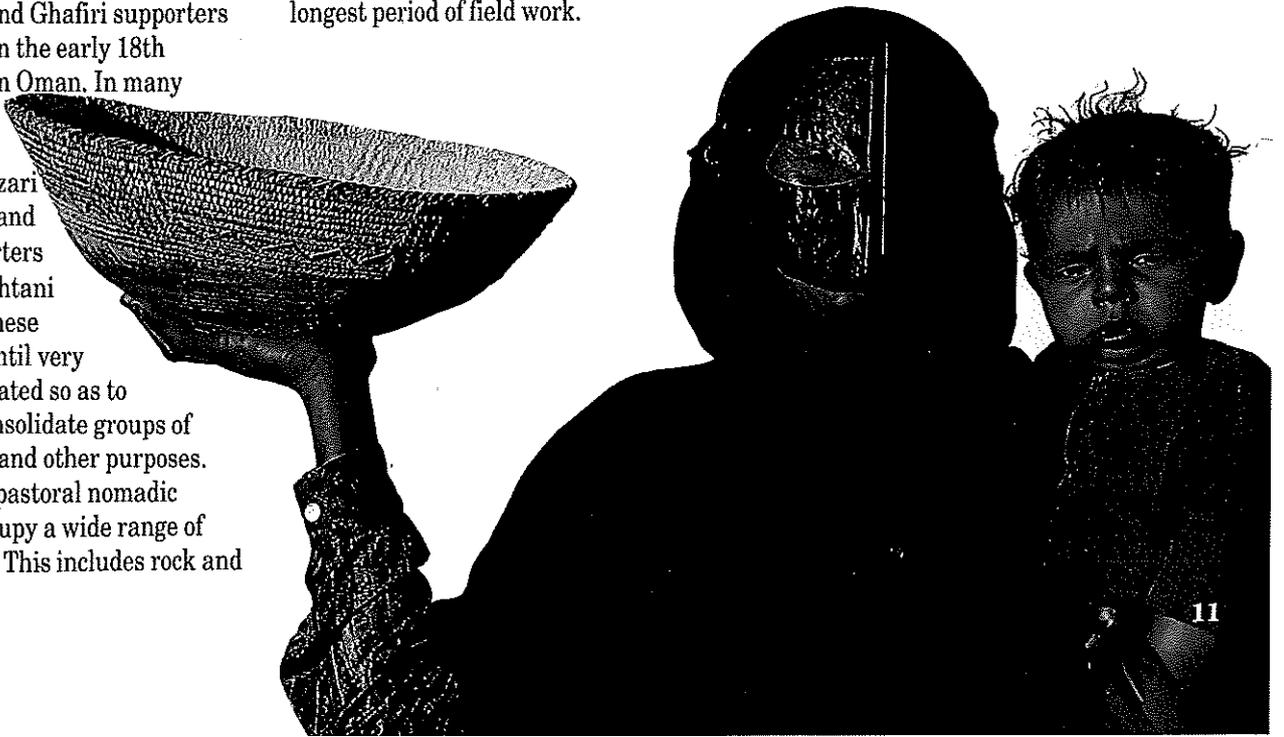
The Nizari or Adnani tribes include the Duru and the Wahiba. These tribes as well as other sedentary groups are said to have entered Oman from the north or through the Buraimi pass sometime between the 2nd and 3rd century A.D.

There are other categories by which the tribal population of Oman identified itself. These include the differentiation between Hinawi and Ghafiri supporters — the opponents in the early 18th century civil war in Oman. In many cases, the Ghafiri supporters tend to believe in their Nizari or Adnani origins and the Hinawi supporters tend to hold to Qahtani myths of origin. These categories were, until very recently, manipulated so as to differentiate or consolidate groups of tribes for political and other purposes.

The Bedouin or pastoral nomadic tribes of Oman occupy a wide range of desert landscapes. This includes rock and

gravel desert, sand, *Prosopis cineraria* woodlands, sand dunes and deep wadi beds. The article will present a few generalisations about some of the better known tribes — the Duru, the Wahiba, the Jeneba, the Mahra, the Harasis, and the Beit Kathir. Detailed examples will be drawn from one tribe in particular, the Harasis, where the author has had the longest period of field work.

Traditionally, a pastoral nomadic tribal territory or dar included well established winter and summer pasture areas, control over permanent wells or other water sources, an area of reserve for emergencies and access to an

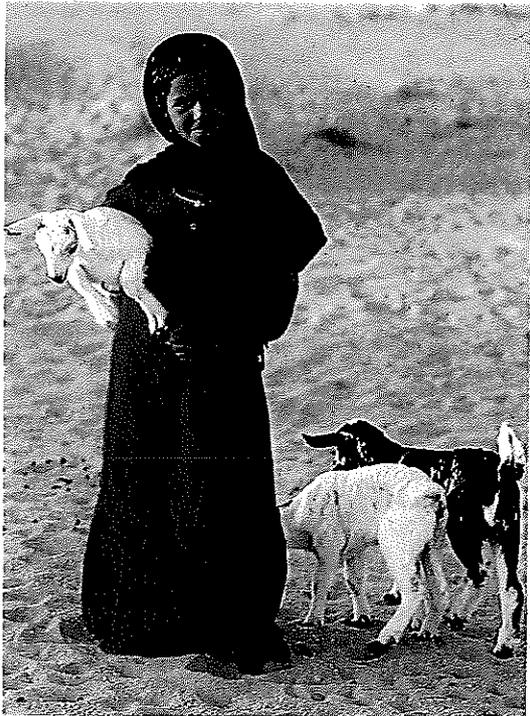


much needed agricultural produce and other supplies.

The Harasis tribe, for example, traditionally considered the Jiddat-il-Harasis their winter grazing area, the Awta and its heavily mineralized springs their summer camping area and the prosopis woodlands of Ghubra north as their reserve for emergencies.

They also maintained right-of-way through the Wadi Rawanab and the Wadi Arah as they made their way to the coast to water their camels. Today they are also found in Wadi Halfayn and in Adaba as well. These features, together with their access to the trading centres of Adam and Sinaw make up their tribal universe.

The Duru' tribal territory is spread over a large area from Wadi Safa and the sands in the west and northwest right across the semi-arid plain — Hamrat-id-Duru' — almost to the Wadi Halfayn. Tan'am is their summer capital and they have regular visiting rights at Subaikha, Ibri, Adam, Ma'mur, Bisya and Bahla.



Dawn Chattry

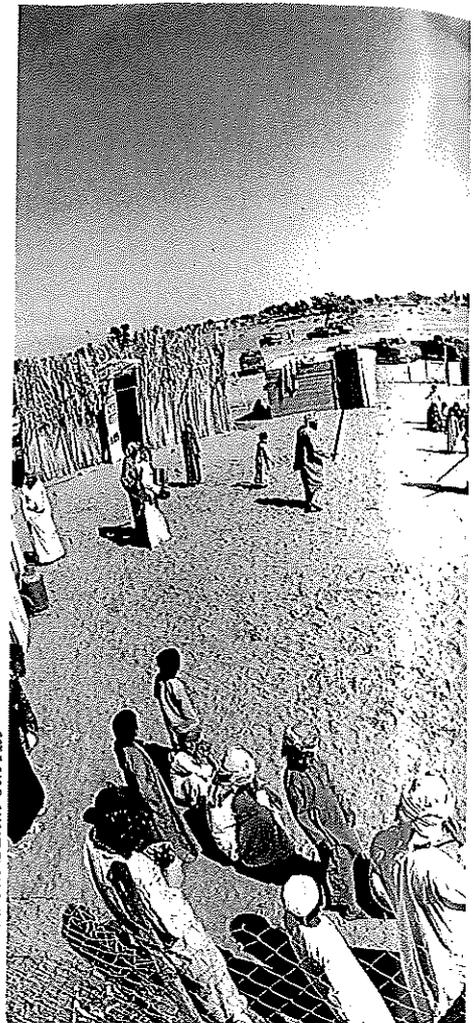
(Above) A young Harsuusi girl with young kids. Girls of similar age often have significant responsibility for the care of the family's goat and sheep.

The Jeneba is a widely dispersed and loosely organized tribal group comprising several sections engaged in a variety of subsistence activities. Between Izz and Afar and further down Wadi Halfayn they practice pastoral nomadism. They also form a substantial part of the population of Sur and Ja'laan and have historically had seafaring interests up the Gulf, to India and to East Africa. Along the eastern coast of Oman they are fishermen. The predominate on Masirah Island and between Duqm and the Jazir Coast. In the summer, when the southwest monsoon interferes with fishing, many families from the coast migrate to places like Adam, Izz and Al-Habbi for the date harvest.

The Wahiba occupy an area between Sufr-ad-Dawh and the eastern coast of Oman. They are bounded on the west by the Wadi Halfayn and on the northeast by the settled areas of the Sharqiya. They are also found interspersed with the Jeneba in the coastal area between Khaluf and Duqm. The Wahiba Sands form much of the eastern part of their area; but in the west the Wadi Halfayn, Wadi Andam and Wadi Ithli often provide good pasture. In summer they move to the edge of the Sharqiya where the tribe owns numerous date gardens in places like Barzaman, Ayn, Badiya and Sinaw.

The Mahra tribe in Oman has, in recent history, migrated from the Hadramaut (Mahra Kingdom) into the southwestern and southeastern parts of the Nejd of Dhofar. They are a highly mobile pastoral group as the few vital watering places are often located great distances from pasture. Tribal units tend to keep near Wadi Arah and neighbouring wadis for most of the year. A significant number, however, move close to Shelim during the hottest months to benefit from the cooling influence of the southwestern monsoon.

The Beit Kathir inhabit the central, northern and western parts of Dhofar. They are limited by the southern edge of the Rub-al-Khali to the north, and in the east by the Wadi Qitbit, an area of transition into the Jiddat-il-Harasis. To the south the watershed of the Dhofar mountain range forms a natural border.

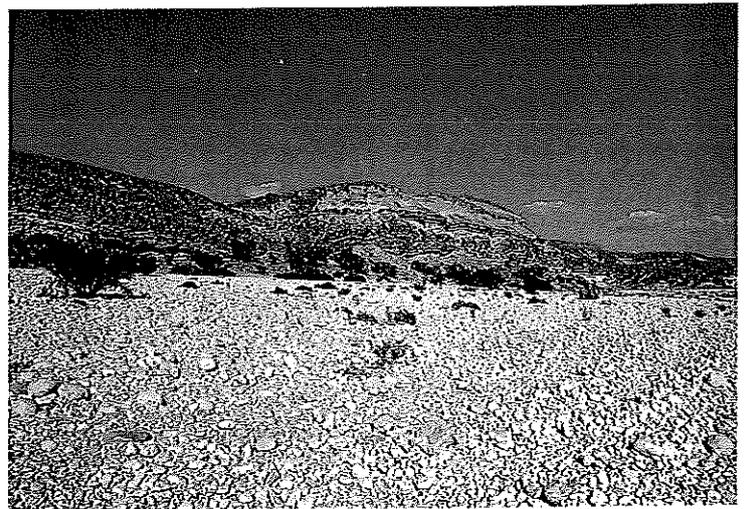
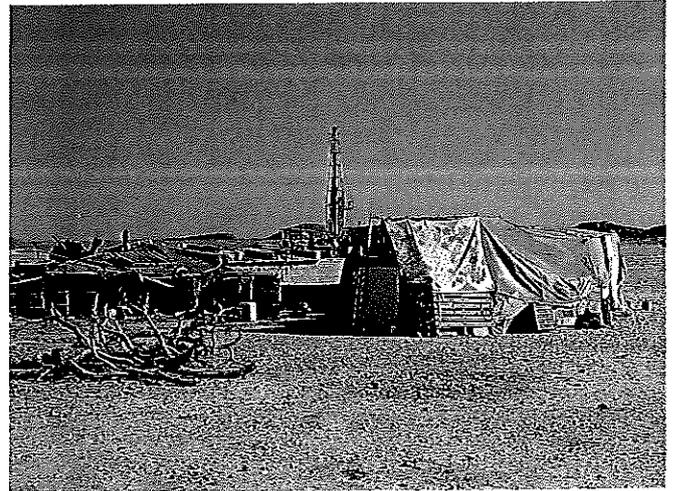


Mohammed bin Salim bin Ali

In the summer they keep to permanent watering places such as Habrut, Muday, Ayn, Ayun and Andhur and in winter they range great distances in the search for pasture for their predominantly camel herds.

The pastoral nomadic household is, on average, made up of nine people of which more than two are adults. The labour requirements for survival are such that more than two pairs of adult hands are needed to carry out the daily work. When the family is well established and there are children in their teens or older, then the unit may simply be a nuclear family. In most cases the family is an extended one and includes grandparents, adult siblings and other kinsmen.

The physical units that characterize these households come in wide variety of structures and types. The basic principle everywhere is to provide shade in summer and shelter in winter. Each tribal area has a characteristic household physical structure which is derived from the natural resources at hand as well as



its recent history of contact with the government and other modern bureaucracies.

The Harasis household, for example, until very recently, was simply a tree and

the shade that could be created by throwing blankets or tarpaulin over it. After the establishment of the Oryx project in Wadi Yalooni in 1979 and the erecting of a one kilometre by one

(Left) A Jeneba bedu wedding celebration not far from Adam.

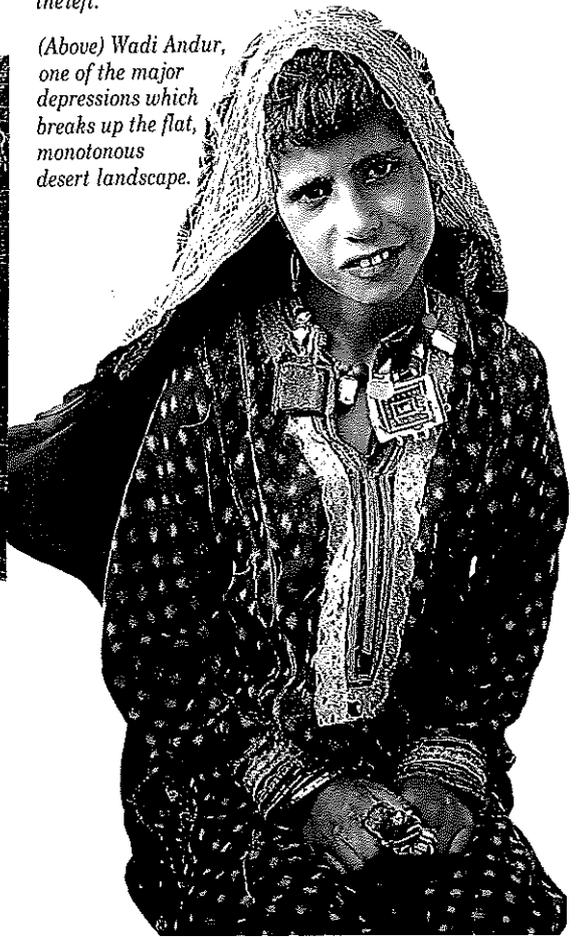
(Top) A homestead in the desert. The human shelter is on the right and the goat shelter is on the left.

(Above) Wadi Andur, one of the major depressions which breaks up the flat, monotonous desert landscape.



(Above) A bedu pastoratist in his date garden near Tan'am. The Durul tribe, in particular, is well known for the extent and size of its date gardens.

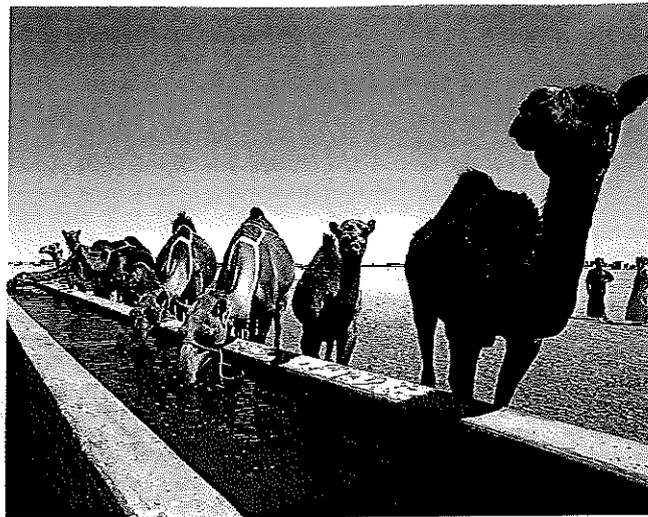
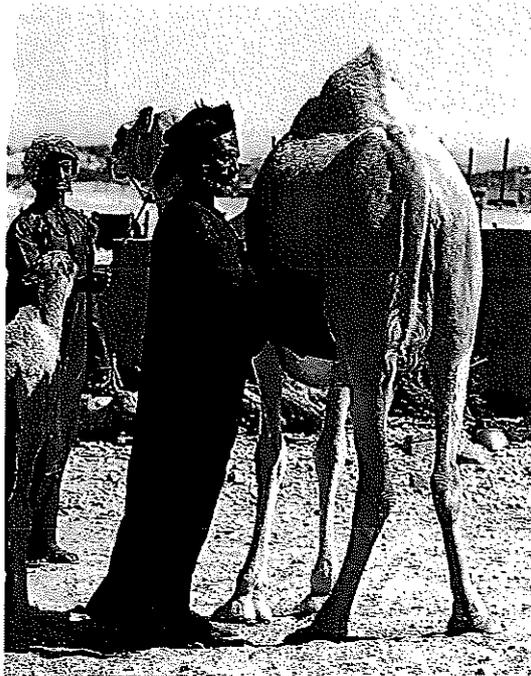
(Right) A young bedu girl wearing a traditional child's head covering now rarely seen.



(Below) A Mahra bedu milks a camel in the recently settled community of Dhahaboun. Its young is being held until it can have its turn to suckle.

(Right) Camels drinking from a modern water trough. The Ministry of Interior (as well as other government agencies) has built a number of these throughout the desert for the bedu.

(Below Right) Animal feed is frequently stored in the flat beds of pick-up trucks. Here camels are patiently waiting for some feed to supplement their normal diet.



kilometre wire enclosure with a gate to receive the Oryx from abroad, new ideas of household structures spread among the Harasis.

By 1986, the physical household tended to be a wire enclosure with a gate over which blankets and tarpaulins were thrown as required. These structures were still mobile and could be packed and move by truck when necessary. By 1990 a further development, an enclosed veranda outside the actual sleeping area, became a popular feature of the structure to keep young animals out of household possessions and allow the family an open shaded area to relax in.

The homestead among the Duru is particularly distinctive in the permanence of its structures. Many Duru' families have cement houses which they live in during the winter months. Adjacent to these permanent units are barasti or palm leaf structures which they use during the hot summer months. These settlements presuppose the existence of water wells to allow the

growing of animal fodder for the herds to eat during the months when there is no pasture within a reasonable distance from the homestead.

As oil was first discovered in Duru territory in the 1960's, their contact with the government and PDO has been of great duration. This contact is generally manifested by the greater material wealth of the Duru'.

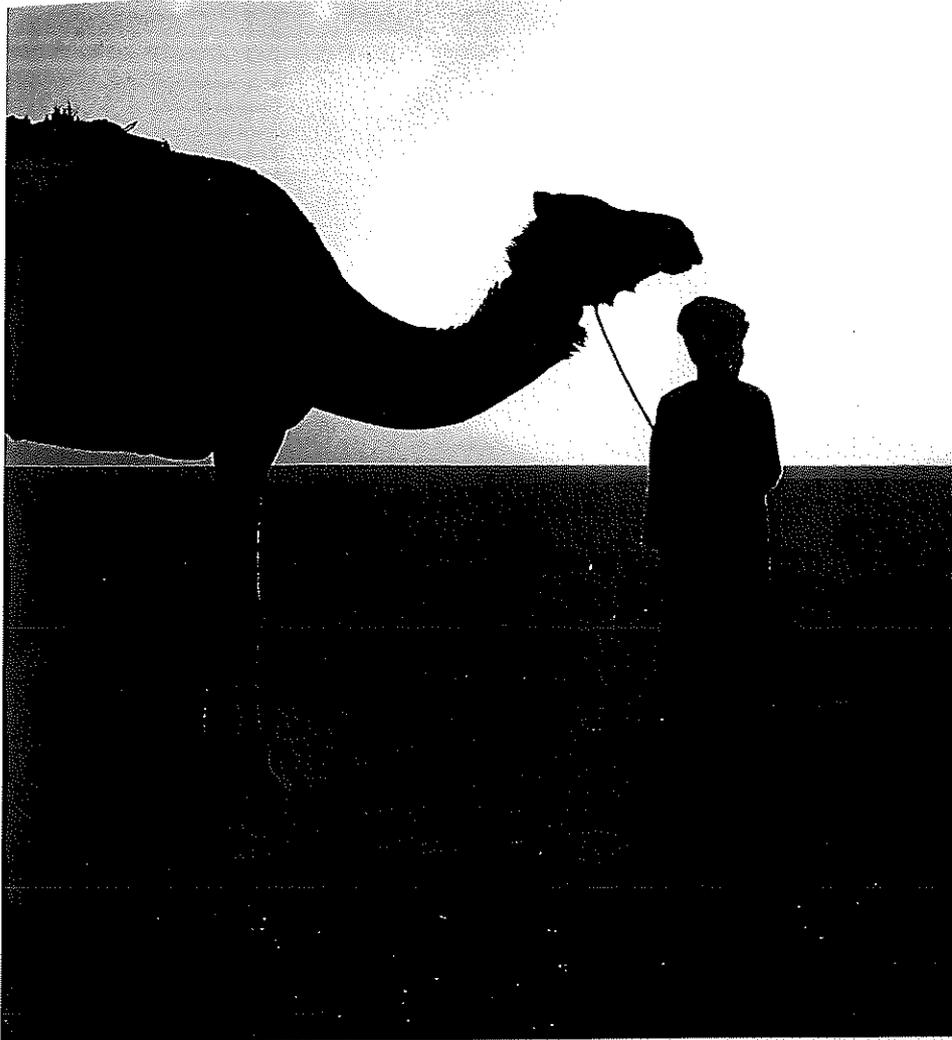
Jeneba homesteads in the Adaba region resemble those of the Harasis while those in the prosopis woodlands of, for example, the Geinat Al Bu Isa are particularly distinctive in the way in which the dead tree branches have been incorporated into the walls of their shelters.

Wahiba households reflect their proximity to the Sharqiya. In areas close to Badiya and Sinaw households are built from a variety of materials. A cement wall enclosure is not unusual. Nor is a barasti structure which incorporates sheet metal and other building materials brought in from the agricultural regions.

In prosopis woodlands areas, dead tree branches are used along with blankets and tarpaulins to create shade and shelter.

Among the Beit Kathir, one of the few Bedouin groups in Oman to use the black goat-haired tent, households today tend to have two forms of shelter. Many families have an enclosure in places like Fasad made of plywood and, at the same time, have a goat-haired tent. The plywood house is lived in during the winter months while the children are attending school, and the tent is used during the rest of the year when the family migrates with the herds in search for pasture.

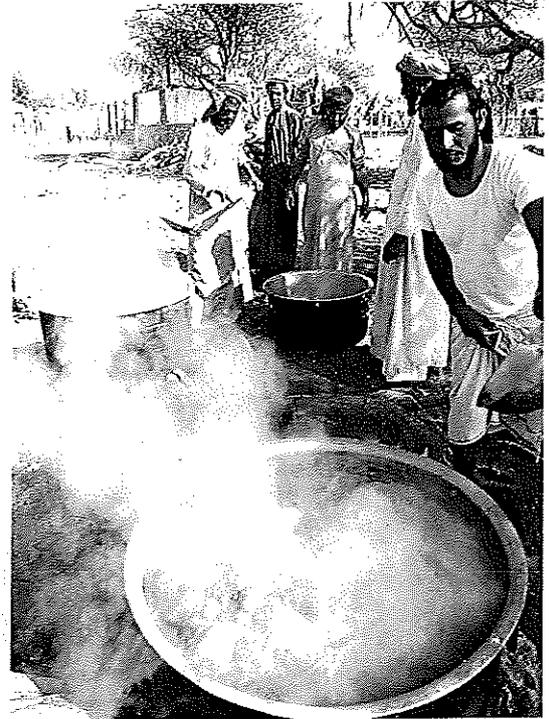
For all the Bedouin of Oman, the organizing principle of social life is livestock. The survival of the family depends upon the careful manipulation of the breeding cycle of the herds of camels, sheep and goats in order to have milk available for the family to drink year round.



(Left) A bedu and his camel at sunset. Once inseparable partners in survival, they are today forced to accommodate the pick-up truck.

(Below) Although bedu women do the daily, routine cooking, bedu men prepare food for special occasions or ceremonies.

(Bottom) A Harsuusi (a Harasis) woman milking a goat. Milking livestock is a chore clearly divided by sex. Men milk camels. Women milk goats and sheep.



The herd remains the central focus of Bedouin culture. The daily routine, the seasonal routine and their migrations are determined by the needs of the herds first (that is after schooling needs have been considered). Whether living in a cement house, a house of plywood, or one made up of dead tree branches, the organizing principle of their daily life is still livestock and the natural graze and browse on the desert floor.

Work in the household and with the herds is clearly divided by sex. Men own and manage the camels while women own and manage the goats and sheep. In the mountains of Dhofar, men own and manage the cattle while women remain in charge of the smaller domesticated animals. A woman will never milk a camel (or a cow) and a man will avoid milking a goat. At times, the family has a greater need for milk than is readily available from the herds without depriving their young. On such occasions powdered milk is mixed and hand fed to the young animals.

Cooking is also a clearly divided activity. The everyday, routine cooking of food for the family is the women's task. Food for special occasions, in particular the ritual slaughter of a goat, to honour a guest or for a celebration, or to mark an event, is men's work. Even weaving is a sex-linked work activity. Women weave

the camel straps, blankets and other trappings. But only men weave the camel udder bags which allows the men to control the times and amount of milk that a camel gives to her young.

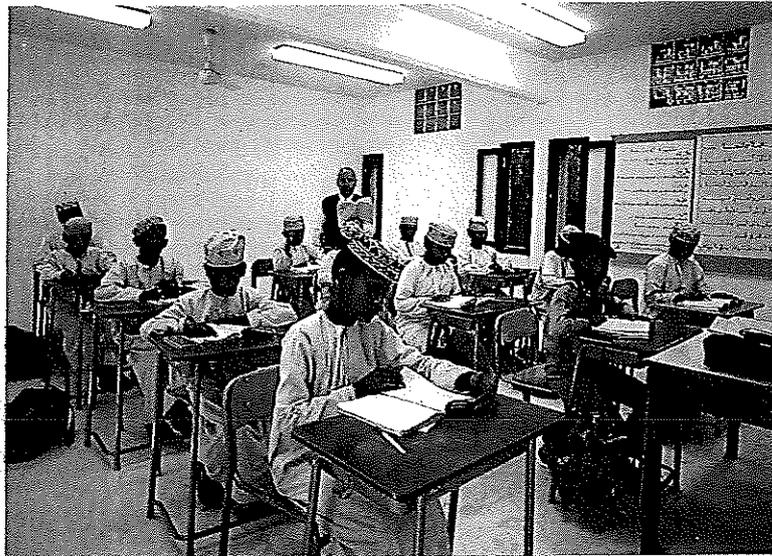
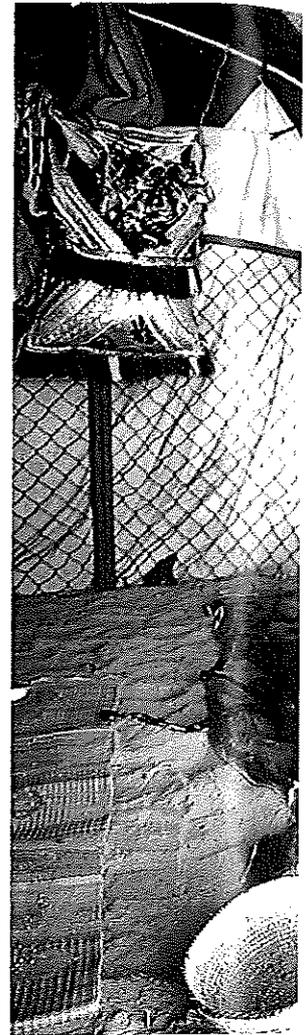
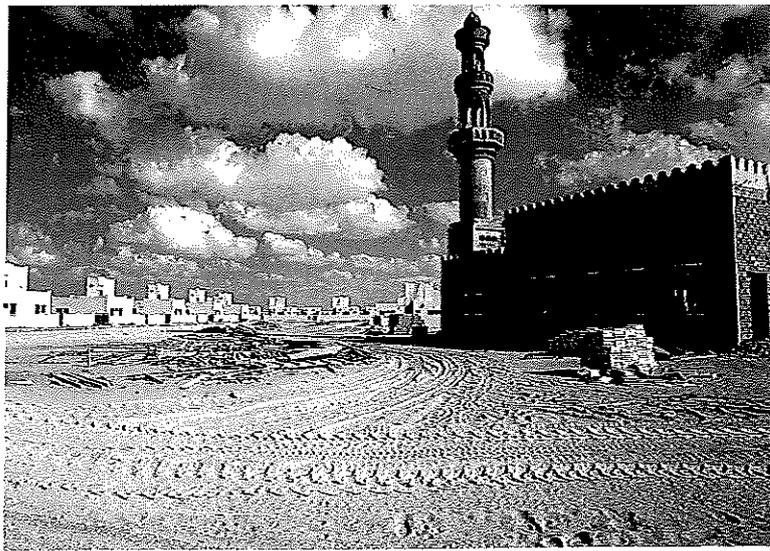
Throughout all the desert regions of Oman, life depends upon access to water.



(Below) A young Harasis girl. She will not adopt the face mask until she approaches puberty.

(Right) The new government housing scheme at Haima. Upon completion, the wali and tribal leaders will decide how it is to be apportioned.

(Below right) The government school at Haima. It is the only boarding school in the desert. First opened in 1982, it continues to grow and will begin a secondary school unit next September.



In the past, survival depended upon moving herds and households to the water source. Today, however, in most of Oman, water is moved to the herds and the household by truck.

The Harasis tribe is perhaps the most extreme case. Up until the 1960s, their territory of about 40,000 square kilometres contained no drinking water whatsoever. The only source of water available to them was found along the Awta — the lowlands of the Huqf escarpment lying just along the coast of Oman from Duqm north towards Al-Hajj.

During the winter months, these people moved along the Jiddat floor searching for pasture and browse for their herds. In the event of heavy condensation, water would be collected by spreading blankets out and later wringing the water from them into a drinking vessel. Their water consumption, however, was kept to a minimum with the family relying on their herds to provide them with enough

milk for their nutritional and physiological requirements.

During the summer, the Harasis abandoned the Jiddat plateau altogether and moved down into the Awta where their herds had access to the brackish springs of the region.

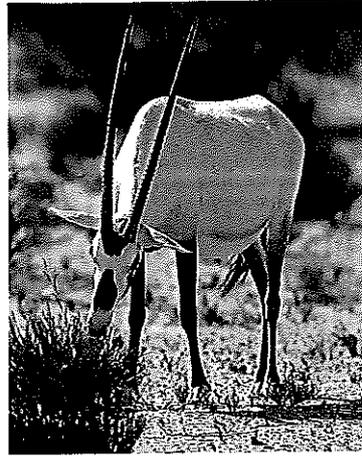
In the later 1950s Petroleum Development (Oman) arrived on the Jiddat and drilled two water wells, one at Al-Ajaiz and the other at Haima. By the mid-1960s a few families began to remain on the Jiddat during the hot summer months relying on their access to the water well and some sporadic delivery of water by water tankers under the direction of the oil company. For the Harasis tribe a revolution was in the making — as had happened earlier in other tribal areas, like the Duru'. Water wells were being sunk, animal troughs built, and water bowsers were occasionally delivering water to key households.

By the mid-1980s, there were a number of water wells in the Jiddat-

il-Harasis. Haima had developed from a poky set of wells and plywood cabins into a modern tribal administrative centre. The first reverse osmosis water plant (which treated brackish water and made it potable) was built at the centre. In addition to offices for the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Social Affairs, it had a veterinary office, a hospital, a boarding school, a petrol station and a small cold store.

By the late 1980s, the Ministry of Water and Electricity undertook the regular delivery of water to a set number of locations for the Harasis families who now remain on the Jiddat floor throughout the entire year.

Throughout the desert regions of Oman, the 1990s herald a transformation in the ways in which the Bedouin manage their subsistence herds of camels, goats and sheep. In areas where contact with the government and the oil company has been continuous and intense over three or more decades (the Duru' and Wahiba, and some Jeneba



(Centre) A bedu woman making a traditional bowl from palm frond (sa'af). Such items, once necessities, today are replaced by plastic and aluminium bowls.

(Left and below) The Arabian Oryx, once extinct, has been successfully reintroduced into the Jiddat-il-Harasis. Two oryx rangers on foot patrol. The Harasis bedu have proved to be a vital link in the success of the oryx reintroduction.

(Bottom) A camel awaiting transport to a new homestead.



tribal areas), privately-owned water wells, date and fodder gardens as well as small water bowsers are a common sight.

In areas of more recent contact with the modern world (the Mahra and Beit Kathir territory), government-dug water wells, animal troughs and storage tanks are more the rule. In the Jiddat-il-Harasiis, a border area between the region of Dhofar and northern Oman, animal troughs are still community run efforts, while water distribution is a part-government and part-private affair.

The truck and other motor vehicles have transformed the ways in which the Bedouin manage their herds and their households. With the truck, households today can remain fairly permanently in one place for some of the year and still move their herds to pasture, or bring water to them wherever they might be grazing.

But the truck and the associated expenses of petrol, tyres and spare parts are forcing the Bedouin to look beyond

their subsistence economy. Bedouin households throughout Oman are seeking additional income and, whenever possible, men are taking jobs locally. When such jobs are not available, the men are forced to migrate abroad in order to support their family, herds and vehicles.

The image of the camel and the truck — especially when the camel is in the truck — has become something of a cliché today. However, it is a strong visual statement of the values underpinning Bedouin society in Oman and the Arabian Peninsula in general: livestock and mobility.

