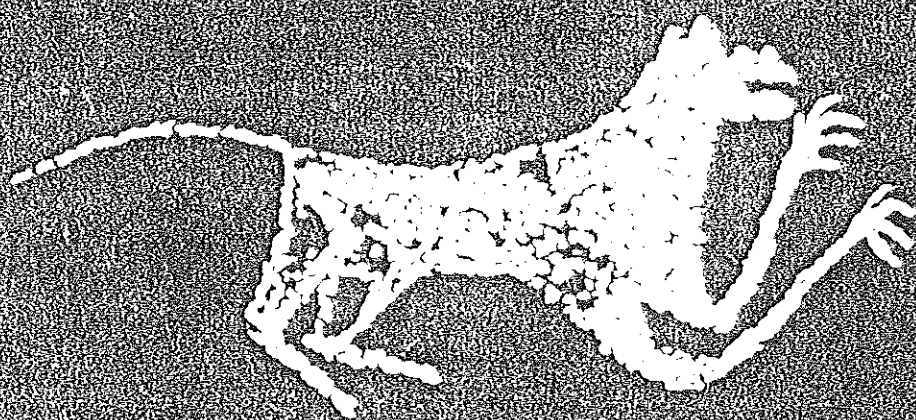


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The Bedouin of Central Oman

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The Bedouin of Central Oman can be characterized as loosely associated mobile kin groups who share a harsh and difficult terrain. The primary economic activity of these people was, and to an extent still is, animal husbandry by natural graze of mainly camel and goat. This way of life, called pastoral nomadism, has been in existence in the Middle East for at least three millennia. Developed over centuries of adjustment to a peculiar and harsh environment, it has been an integral and dynamic part of the general culture prevailing in the Middle East. This general culture can be described as a delicately balanced and complicated cultural adaptation to the land, often called the 'ecological trilogy' (English 1966: 54). This is a system consisting of three mutually dependent types of communities: urban, rural and pastoral, each with a distinctive life mode, operating in a different setting, and contributing to the support of the other two sectors and thereby the maintenance of the total society.

In the past two decades, tremendous changes have taken place in each sector of the 'ecological trilogy' of the Middle East. Change in one sector inevitably has affected the other sectors of the trilogy and Oman is no exception. The changes in the urban and rural sector have been obvious and dramatic. In the pastoral sector, changes, mainly as the result of contact with oil exploration teams, have also been significant. The aim of this paper is to examine those changes.

An analysis will be attempted to determine what impact the inevitable contact with western legal, economic and bureaucratic forces – as represented by the oil companies – had on these pastoral people. Was there a dynamic process of

adaptation to the changed environment or did these pastoral nomadic tribes allow themselves to be moulded into the categories which best suited the modern apparatus?

Oman has, like so many of the States of the Middle East from early recorded time, been inhabited by and been continuously subjected to successive waves of Semitic and non-Semitic peoples. Settlement in Oman from the desert fringe came in two directions; one along the southern coast of Arabia and the other through the northern gateway of al-Buraymī.

The legendary ancestry of all Arab tribes is traced back to the northern Qais and the southern Yemen (or Adnān and Qaḥṭān), the two mythical brothers believed to have founded the Arab race. The groups entering Greater Oman along the borderlands of the settled regions of southern Arabia were generally Qaḥṭāni, while those entering through the northern migration route of al-Buraymī were Adnāni. Though the tales concerning the earliest migrations are semi-legendary, the bulk of the evidence suggests that they took place during the first and second century AD (Wilkinson 1970: 67–73).

The first to enter Greater Oman was a Qaḥṭāni group, the Mālik ibn Fahm, along with some Mahra groups. These groups spread along the southern coastal region and began to settle in the Ja'lān and along the western side of the Jabal al-Akhḍar mountain range (1966: 71). The migration of these groups from the southern route continued for probably four to five centuries until early Islamic times. The Tay tribe appears to have been the only other major group to arrive in Oman by this route. All the other Arab groups appear to have arrived in Oman from the north.

The last major northern group to arrive in Oman was the Azd Shanu'a. Their arrival seems to have coincided with a period of weak Persian rule along the Bāṭina coast, and they were able to penetrate into the very heartland of Mazūn – Persian Oman in the Bāṭina (1966: 72–73). As a result of their settlement in the Persian controlled area of Oman they were directly subject to the Persians and in return, the Persians recognized their leading or sheikhly section as 'kings of the Arabs'. With the support of the Persians, they were eventually able to exercise a loose control over the majority of the Arab groups in Greater Oman. With the rise of Islam, the Persian ruling groups were removed from Oman and power transferred to the Arabs. For the next hundred years until the first Ibādī Imamate was formed shortly after 720 AD, the country was left entirely in the hands of the Arab sheikhly sections and subjected to a form of Bedouin tribal rule.

The tribal structure of Oman has undergone deep changes over the centuries. Many nomadic tribes have sedentarized and moved far from their original tribal territory. Other Bedouin tribes, adapting to the changing rhythm of history, have established settled as well as pastoral branches. Yet all these groups have been affected by the flow of historical developments in the struggle to control this corner of Arabia.

At the core of pastoral nomadism is migration determined by a combination of seasonal and areal variability in the location of pasture and water. Because water and grass can be in short supply in a particular area at the same time that it is abundant elsewhere, survival of both herds and herders makes movement from deficit to surplus areas both logical and necessary. Pasture and water are seldom found randomly scattered about in a given region, but generally are distributed in a regular fashion in accordance with a particular seasonal pattern of climate. It is not only the orderly succession of well-known seasons which serves to regularize the pastoral nomad's yearly movements, but also his sense of territoriality. Each group seeks to control a sphere that contains sufficient resources to sustain communal life. Each has a definite zone with well-understood, though often, variable

limits, and has certain rights of usufruct denied others at the price of war. Only in an emergency does a pastoral tribe attempt to graze its herds outside of its traditional area. Thus the regular sequence of climatic seasons and the sense of territoriality combine to place the normal pastoral cycle beyond the realm of the haphazard.

Tremendous flexibility is demanded from the pastoral nomadic social organization in order to permit adjustments to be made to local variations in the seasonal availability of pasture and water. Traditionally conflicts between tribes or sub-tribal groups centre around water and pasture rights or usufruct over them. Disputes concerning access to these natural resources tend to increase during times of scarcity and decrease in times of plenty.

The basic features of the pastoralists' territory include winter pasture, permanent watering places for summer and access to an urban market. The relatively stable dominance over a period of time of such territory by a group of genealogically related agnatic segments, identifies a pastoral nomadic tribe.

The pivotal position in pastoral nomadic tribal organization is that of the paramount sheikh. He is the central leader and traditionally enjoys a vast and ill-defined field of privileges and commands. He regularly exercises authority over:

- (i) allotting pastures;
- (ii) settling disputes that are brought to him;
- (iii) representing the tribe or any of its members in politically important dealings with sedentary people or with central authority.

The first function is basically one calling for the co-ordination of migration. How it is handled depends very much on certain aspects of the physical environment. The more rugged the terrain or the more complex the migration pattern the more formal is the administrative apparatus at the sheikh's disposal and vice versa.

The second function, settling disputes, is generally achieved informally, being governed by custom and compromise and regulated by diffuse sanctions. It is only when disputes cannot be settled informally that recourse is made to the

sheikh to act as arbitrator. His opinion is usually derived from his own astute reading of the majority opinion. He generally has no power to enforce a decision, and must therefore rely on his moral authority as well as the concurrence of the community with his point of view.

The third function, perhaps the most important today, is the settling of conflicts with sedentary communities. Even here the sheikh is advised by a council of elders, whose opinions are informal. Implementation of such decisions again depends upon the sheikh's personal influence and moral authority. This touches on a very fundamental problem in the relations of the three sections of the ecological trilogy. As the pastoral nomad must move for the sake of his herd and the agriculturalist must remain stationary, contact between the two cannot be maintained for long. A workable mechanism for regulating social relations by means other than violence can only be achieved by channelling conflicts through administrative superstructures which bridge the difference by transforming interests to a point where they are comparable.

It is in the sheikh's interest to maintain stable and peaceful relations with the centres of power in sedentary society. While the individual nomad's relations with the sedentary society are mostly transient and unstable, the sheikh's become co-terminous with the governing elite. The office of the sheikh thus develops into a culturally adapted mechanism by which the nomad's interests are mediated *vis-à-vis* the often formidable and confusing urban organizations that border on his environment.

In summary, the centralized political organization of the office of sheikh is characteristic of a pastoral nomadic tribe. Although ultimate authority rests with the sheikh, it is based upon meticulous evaluation of tribal sentiment. Too frequent disregard of tribal consensus could result in a gradual shift in authority and influence to another tribesman of a sheikhly family. Given this flexibility, a sheikh can best be described as 'one among equals' – albeit more equal – rather than as an absolute ruler.

Of the numerous nomadic tribes in Oman, four, in particular, have been profoundly affected

by political and legal events in Oman over the last hundred years. The responses of these four tribes, the Wahiba, the Durū', the Jenabā and the Ḥarāsīs pastoral nomadic tribes, are a key to an understanding of the adaptation process that has affected pastoral tribes not only in Oman, but in all the oil producing states of the Arabian peninsula.

The Wahiba occupy an area between Sufra-al-Dawḥ and the southern coast of Oman. They are bounded on the west by Wādī Ḥalfayn and on the east by the settled areas of the Sharqiya. They are also found interspersed with the Jenabā 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 wādī Ḥalfayn, Wādī 'Andām, and the Wādī Ithlī provide pasture. The Wahiba are primarily pastoral people. In winter they migrate within their desert territory in search of grazing for their livestock. In summer they move to the edge of the Sharqiya where the tribe owns numerous date gardens in places like Barzamān, 'Aiyūn and Sināw. These are the main Wahiba summer quarters, and they speak of Sināw as the 'Wahiba capital'. Fishing is an important activity among the Wahiba coastal population. In summer, when the monsoon winds make this pursuit less attractive, families from the coast tend to migrate to the Wahiba settlements on the fringe of the Sharqiya for the date harvest.

The Durū' tribe is spread over a large area from Wādī Ṣafā and the sands in the west and north-west right across the semi-arid plain almost to the Wādī Ḥalfayn. It is a widely spread tribe divided into a number of sections each living in a fairly well-defined area. The Durū' engage in pastoral nomadism, raising goats, sheep and camels. They are nomadic in autumn, winter and spring but as the heat increases and the dates ripen they come in from the desert and settle outside various towns. Tan'am is their summer capital and they have regular summer visiting rights at Subaikha, 'Ibrī, Adam, Ma'mur, Bisya and even Nizwa. They own all the date groves in Tan'am and about one third of the gardens in 'Ibrī. The system in 'Ibrī is that the garden is run by a town-dweller who takes half the produce and delivers

the other half to the Bedouin owner. The Durū' – as with most of the other pastoral nomadic tribes – never actually live in the towns but put up palm frond huts nearby during the summer. The flocks are pastured close at hand and are watered daily. The move out to the desert begins as the date season comes to an end, usually in the month of September.

Although a pastoral nomadic tribe, the Durū' appear to be taking an increasing interest in agriculture. They have long owned gardens in 'Ibrī and Tan'am, but the area under cultivation has been extended over the last two decades. Increasing use is made of diesel pumps both there and in the Wādī Aswad where new gardens have been established. While in the 'Ibrī gardens the tribesmen have traditionally relied on members of the settled community to cultivate for them, outside of 'Ibrī today some of the tribe appear to be undertaking cultivation themselves.

The Jenabā tribe is a widely dispersed group comprising several sections. Between 'Izz and 'Afar and further down Wādī Halfayn they practice pastoral nomadism. They also form a substantial part of the population of Šūr and the Ja'lān and have historically had sea-faring interests up the Gulf, to India and to East Africa. Along the southern coast of Oman they are fishermen. They predominate on Mašīra and between Duqm and Dhofar. In the summer when the southwest monsoon winds interfere with fishing, many families from the south coast migrate to settlements such as Adam, 'Izz, and Al-Habī for the date harvest. Throughout the year fish from the south coast is traded for dates from the interior.

The Ḥarāsīs appear to have been originally a Dhofari tribe and they continue to speak a Mahri related language. A study by Bertram Thomas deduces a relation between Ḥarsūsī and Mahri that is, to some extent, supported by the tribe's likely Dhofari origin. According to Ḥarsūsī tradition, the original section of the tribe was Bayt Afari – living somewhere between Šalāla and the Ḥaḍramūt. There are still Ḥarāsīs living there and their rights in the area are recognized by the present inhabitants (Thomas 1937: facsimile). They are found widely scattered within Oman,

and their main concentrations are on the Jiddat-al-Ḥarāsīs, in the Wādī Halfayn, and at Watā. They can also be found as far north as Nizwa, particularly in the summer months.

The Ḥarāsīs raise camel and goat. The present population in the Jidda proper – a bare waterless stone and gravel plain with occasional limestone outcrops – is very sparse in number, though probably close to the saturation point that the terrain can support.

This brief geographical and ecological description relevant to each of the four tribes underscores the basic character of all pastoral groups. None is entirely self-sufficient. Each is tied to some degree in relations of interdependence and reciprocity to sedentary communities in adjacent areas. The pastoral adaptation presupposes the presence of sedentary communities and access to their agricultural products. In Oman, this is generally to coastal fishing settlements or to the string of villages along the Sharqiya foothills where dates are cultivated.

As a pastoral economy cannot stand alone, it must have access to agricultural products in order to remain viable. Several means have been traditionally utilized by pastoralists to guarantee that grain, dates and other sedentary products are accessible to them. A community could, if its tribal land was close enough to or within margins of rain-fed irrigated cultivation, sow and harvest crops. More commonly though, a community collects rental payments from tenants on its oases or agricultural land in the form of crops.

The northern entrance to Oman which so many Bedouin tribes had passed through in earlier times was still heavily exploited during the nineteenth century. Whereas previously it was a gateway for tribes emigrating into Greater Oman, in the nineteenth century, it was the route which the Wahabi warriors of the Nejd followed. From the beginning of the nineteenth century, Wahabi incursions had been ravaging Oman. In the middle of the nineteenth century there was a sudden renewal of Wahabī depredations. The Sultan reacted by trying to buy off the 'invaders' with presents and promises of tribute. This action, coupled with his conclusion of a convention with the British government in October 1845

which imposed a total ban upon the exportation of slaves from East Africa, was regarded by the pastoral tribes as threatening to their political and economic well-being. For the next two decades these tribes were actively involved in the power struggle taking place between the reigning Sultan in Muscat and the Ibādī Imam in the Interior. Politically the Wahabī invasions threatened the tribes' very existence as independent units, particularly the Wahība and the Durū' tribes. Economically the ban on exportation of slaves threatened to greatly reduce one of the Jenabā tribe's primary source of income. The Jenabā were the principal sea-faring tribe of eastern Oman. And their neighbouring tribe, the Banī Bū 'Alī, were the foremost smugglers of slaves from Zanzibar.

By the 1870s the Jenabā, the Wahība and the Durū' were fully embroiled in the endemic power struggle within Omani sedentary society and had thrown their support behind Turkī bin Qais in his bid for the Sultanate. Turkī's victory did not bring an end to tribal unrest and rebellion. Their successful involvement in the political warfare at the seat of sedentary society seems to have whetted their appetite for more. Turkī, and later his son Fayṣal, continued to rule with only fluctuating support from the tribes whose loyalty was bought by a policy of alternating bribery with coercion (Kelly 1970: 116).

In 1895, discontent with Fayṣal's rule broke out into open rebellion. As with past rebellions, the uprising had a number of conflicting origins. Some tribal leaders were angered by the recent defaulting on their subsidies. Others were drawn by the 'gift of arms and money' which the Sultan of Zanzibar was giving to the malcontents, in an effort to recreate a united Sultanate. Still others were enthused by the fomenting of Ṣāliḥ bin 'Alī, who suspected the Sultan in Muscat of trying to unseat him as the paramount leader of the Ḥirth tribe of the Sharqiya. Fayṣal survived the various threats by promising substantial subsidies and by buying off Ṣāliḥ bin 'Alī with what funds remained in his threadbare treasury (1970: 117).

By the 1920s and 1930s real power in the Jabal al-Akhḍar, the Sharqiya and over a number of

pastoral tribes was wielded by 'Isa ibn Ṣāliḥ (al-Ḥarthī). Even the Imam 'Abdallāh al-Khalīlī had been his own nominee. The Jenabā in the west, whose sheikh resided at 'Izz, followed the Imam, as did the Wahība and the Durū'. The Jenabā in the Ja'lān with closer and more regular contacts with foreign elements rejected the Imam's authority as well as 'Isa ibn Ṣāliḥ's, preferring to side with Sulaymān al-Nabhani of the Bānī Riyām. So enlarged was the Jenabā sheikh's idea of his own importance, that in 1920, he attempted to secure British recognition of himself as an autonomous Emir of the Ja'lān (1970: 124).

After the Second World War two developments, one with political implications, the other with economic ones roused the pastoral nomadic tribes from the placid attitude they had sunk into over the past few decades. The resumption of oil exploration and the resurgence of Saudi activity in the region after a long lapse had vital economic and political implications not only on the pastoral tribes, but on Greater Oman as a whole.

Two or three years after World War Two oil exploration parties began to survey in the area around al-Buraymī. The Imam let it be known that he would not tolerate any Christian – and therefore any member of the oil exploration team – in his domain. This Thesiger discovered in 1949 and again when he returned a year later. Determined to travel through the Imam's domain, he was met by Sulaymān bin Ḥimyar, now one of the chief politicians of Inner Oman, who wanted Thesiger to request that the Political Resident in the Gulf grant him a treaty status equivalent to that of the trucial sheikhs. The underlying assumption was that he (Sulaymān bin Ḥimyar) would be more amenable to oil surveying in the region.

In 1949 Saudi Arabia put forward a claim to the frontier with Abu Dhabi which extended to al-Buraymī Oasis. The Saudi Government let it be known that it considered the lands beyond al-Buraymī to be populated by Saudi Arabian pastoral tribes. In 1952 the Saudi sent an armed party to occupy part of al-Buraymī oasis and an Emir to resume benevolent supervision of the tribes in the Ḍahira which it had been forced to relinquish some eighty years earlier (1970: 126). In

response, Sultan Sa'īd bin Taimūr assembled a force of several thousand men at Ṣuḥar. Meanwhile, the Imam Khalīlī declared a *jihād* against the Saudis and in co-operation with Sultan Sa'īd bin Taimūr, prepared to attack the Saudi position at al-Buraymī. With the intervention of the British Government and the U.S. Ambassador at Jiddah, Sa'īd bin Taimūr was deterred from this physical course of action and the Saudi Government extricated itself from a difficult situation without violence. From the point of view of the Sultan's interests it was an unhappy decision. Breaking up the expedition without ever firing a shot carried with it a loss of face which was responsible for many of his subsequent troubles.

In 1954 an exploration party of P.D.O. made its way from the southern coast of Oman at Duqm into the central Oman steppes. There contact was made with the sheikhs of the Durū', who agreed to allow the party into their territory. The death of the Imam al-Khalīlī in May 1954 had removed one opposition force facing the oil survey teams. However, Ṭālib, the brother of the newly elected Imam Ghālib bin 'Alī, decided to intervene. Ṭālib was determined that should oil be found in this part of Inner Oman, it should be exploited by P.D.O. not for the benefit of Sultan Sa'īd bin Taimūr, but for the benefit of his brother the Imam and his followers. To this end, Ṭālib sent an armed force to seize the Durū' date plantations at 'Ibrī, which were an important source of income for this pastoral tribe. The Durū' responded by travelling to Duqm and leading back the P.D.O. surveying party and an escort of Muscat troops. Eventually in October, 1954, the Muscat troops and the Durū' moved on 'Ibrī and expelled Ṭālib's men from the town (1970: 129). This already explosive internal confrontation quickly gathered international dimensions drawing Saudi Arabia, Great Britain, the Arab League, as well as a special United Nations Investigative Committee into the fray.

In the last twenty years, there has been a steady consolidation of Al bū Sa'īd rule in Greater Oman. Where tribal power is still dominant (e.g. the Sharqiya, the Durū' Steppes, the Ja'lān) the paramount sheikhs of the leading tribes retain an element of authority and enjoy some independ-

ence. Elsewhere walis are being appointed to carry out the Sultan's orders directly. The political future of the pastoral nomadic tribes has been profoundly affected by this recent imposition of central bureaucratic and legal control.

With the entry of active P.D.O. exploration in 1954, the fortunes of the pastoral nomadic tribes of Oman fell increasingly out of their own control. When the Durū' tribal leaders agreed to allow the P.D.O. to prospect in their territory, they suddenly found themselves pawns in a traditional power struggle between the Imam's forces and the Sultan's. Once that battle had been successfully overcome, and the P.D.O. surveying party in Jabal Fahūd commenced with its work, problems of an entirely new nature presented themselves.

The Durū' tribe is spread over a large area. The leadership of this tribe was almost entirely in the hands of one section, the Muhamīd sheikhly section. All the sheikhs of the Durū' are of this section and, because leadership is vested in them, the Muhamīd are spread over the whole territory. The most important leader to emerge with P.D.O.'s entry into Durū' territory was 'Alī bin Hilāl.

The early stages of P.D.O. relations with this tribe were difficult as can be expected considering the problems as yet unsolved with the Saudis and the Imam. P.D.O. needed to establish a system of labour recruitment and labour supervision in order to effectively exploit the oil promise in the area. Such requests, however, were completely foreign to the world of the Durū'. Though the tribal leaders were accustomed to acting as political mediators on behalf of their tribesmen, P.D.O.'s mixed political and economic needs were novel to them. Initially, internal jealousies divided the sheikhly Muhamīd section and each sub-unit leader claimed the exclusive right to furnish labour for P.D.O.. In their 'Ibrī report of May 30th, 1957, the P.D.O. representative wrote 'Alī bin Hilāl's authority was unacceptable to most of the sheikhs and before any action could be taken it was necessary to hold a series of the most wearisome meetings and persuade them one by one. The normal jealousies of the sheikhs were aggravated by their desire to stand well

with . . . the Company and to profit from it'. It is not surprising, given the past experience of the tribal leaders whereby the paramount sheikh merely arbitrated disputes that were actually brought to *him*, that internal dissension was great. The report continues to state that 'it was not until some time had elapsed and other disturbing factors had been cleared away that we were able to settle the Muḥamīd's internal quarrels. The only remaining cause of jealousy is the ambition of some of the junior sheikhs to serve as labour supervisors at Fahūd'.

Within three years of oil company activity in Durū' territory, the leaders had adapted themselves to the needs of P.D.O. and later 'Ibrī reports describe how 'the walī of 'Ibrī and the Company (P.D.O.) do all their business through 'Alī (bin Hilāl). He is very helpful and co-operative and has not failed in controlling labour or even mobilising armed men when needed'.

Something more than good will must have been involved, as the Durū', in particular, had a very successful economic relationship with the sedentary communities in the Ṣahira prior to the advent of P.D.O. Whereas in the past slave trade was an important source of income, in the 1950s the sale of charcoal, livestock and dates to Dubai in return for consumer goods like cloth and kerosene was important especially as the border post was easily and commonly bypassed by the Durū'. In fact, the sheikh's control over the tribal labour had, to a large extent, economic rather than traditionally political overtones. The sheikhs, aside from their yearly government subsidies, were receiving salaries and gifts in cash and kind from P.D.O. One rough estimate prepared in 1966 by the P.D.O. representative at 'Ibrī reported seasonal gifts of clothing totalling 1,733 rupees, miscellaneous aid totalling 6,000 rupees as well as cash handouts of approximately 5,500 rupees to Durū' sheikhs over a twelve month period. This economic largesse coupled with the relative permanence of their P.D.O. appointments only whetted the sheikhs' appetites and it wasn't long before they began to charge a fee from their tribesmen for providing them with oil company jobs. (5 rupees = 1 U.S. \$.)

In early 1971, a complaint was lodged in Izkī

over a Durū' ruling that no one from Izkī would in the future be permitted to work in Durū' territory. Enquiries revealed that several months earlier a townsman had applied to one of the Durū' sheikhs for a job and he had paid the requisite fee of 40 rupees. When nothing came of it after two months of waiting he complained personally to the Minister of Interior who then issued him with a letter to the sheikh in question which demanded the return of his money. On receipt of the letter the Durū' sheikhs reacted strongly and decided not to conduct their labour recruiting fee-paying service except among their own tribesmen.

In the twenty years of association between the Durū' and the oil company, the traditional tribal organization had been dangerously and irreparably harmed. By dealing solely with particular individuals from the sheikhly section and by providing in exchange a previously unknown economic security to them, the oil company was instrumental in altering the traditional tribesmen – sheikh relationship. Where the sheikhs once acted primarily in the political interests of their tribesmen, they had come to the point where they were more concerned with their own economic welfare.

The Wahība tribe's first serious contact with P.D.O. did not occur until 1956, when a gravity party carried out a programme in their area. However, their contact with the urban and sedentary communities of the Sharqiya and the coast had long historical roots. At the turn of the century, they were used by 'Isa bin Ṣāliḥ (al-Ḥarthī) against the Sultanate in the political events at that time. This special relationship with the Ḥirth was still in existence when P.D.O. began to work in Wahība territory. As the Ḥarthī sheikhs had represented Wahība interests *vis-à-vis* the government in the past, it was only natural to continue that relationship with P.D.O. Unlike the Durū' situation, the Company did not try to impose its own concept of an all powerful paramount sheikh or leader. Using the offices of the Ḥarthī sheikh, P.D.O. was able to carry out the majority of its activities without great delay. The tribal political organization with its numerous sub-units and tribal elders continued to

function and the concept of an overall, tribal leader was not successfully imposed on them. Though the Wahiba were influenced by the leader of the Hirth, he had no absolute authority and was forced to impose his rule by the 'usual mixture of cunning, force, bribes, threats, intrigue, marriage – the whole gamut of rule by *siasi*' (P.D.O./Watt 1957).

During the 1960s as the influence of sheikh Ahmed bin Mohammed al-Harthi increased to a remarkable extent, the Wahiba fortunes enjoyed a similar advance. In P.D.O. operations, the tribe gained employment rights – some through favourable boundary settlements – in areas that only a few years before they would scarcely have dreamt of claiming. From the P.D.O. point of view, the Wahiba allegiance to sheikh Ahmed meant more peaceful industrial relations and in general better security.

However boundary disputes and therefore labour recruitment questions were constant concerns. In early 1964, for example, a body of Wahiba laid claim to the Durū' awarded al-Ghubbar. As they had lived and grazed their animals in these regions from time immemorial, they claimed ownership of the area. Their resentment stemmed from the fact that they had never been consulted when the government had decided that it was Durū' territory. The Company called in the Harthi sheikh and instructed him to use his influence with the Wahiba to end their continuous interference in P.D.O. operations. The sheikh was also to advise the Wahiba to refer their boundary complaints to the government. Yet even he could do little. These people had developed their own highly detailed boundaries that suited their fluid and changing needs. The tribal map available in 1964 was not acceptable since the tribes maintained that they had not been consulted nor had they been instructed as to the lines of demarcation. The course open to the government would have required a bridging of two entirely different concepts of spatial limits – the fluid tribal one and the static Company one. The task, in fact, was not tackled and ten years later the same issue was raised – to set up a commission to investigate the abolition of all tribal boundaries – only to be

aborted just as it got under way.

Throughout the 1960s, sheikh Ahmed used his influence to assist the Wahiba in their numerous boundary disputes. In September 1966, following a Wahiba claim to a rig site in the area of Wādī Halfayn, the Minister of Interior asked sheikh Ahmed to investigate the situation. This, not surprisingly, led to the rig site being awarded to the Wahiba. By the end of the 1960s, sheikh Ahmed was able to arrange to have Wahiba employed by P.D.O. in the Sharqiya and in the disputed areas south of Adam along with the Jenabā. P.D.O. reports that their relations with the Wahiba were generally smooth could be largely attributed to Harthi control. Sheikh Ahmed, no doubt, realized that trouble-free operations under his leadership would be contrasted favourably with disputes and thefts in other tribal areas, thus enhancing his standing with the Sultan and the Company, and further extending his sphere of influence. That this policy succeeded was demonstrated by the 1968 extension of the Jenabā/Wahiba shared labour area northwards from Haushi to Adam; an area previously regarded as entirely Jenabā.

Within the Wahiba tribe, Mohammed bin Hamad of the al-Ghafailā section was titular sheikh in 1955. As a traditional tribal arbitrator, he was effective, but in the capacity which P.D.O. wished to use him, he was not. In late 1970, for example, a quarrel broke out between the al-Ghafailā section and the Jahafi section of the Wahiba, who objected to what they regarded as a Ghafailā attempt to make them subordinate. In the traditional tribal system, they claimed, they were equal. The Jahahif did not question that sheikh Mohammed bin Hamad was paramount Wahiba sheikh. But they claimed that he was not entitled to interfere in Jahafi internal affairs, by recruiting labour from elsewhere for work in Jahafi territory (P.D.O. 1970).

With the accession of H.M. Sultan Qaboos in 1970, and sheikh Ahmed's fall from grace, P.D.O. wrote that 'we do not know with whom to deal in order to recruit Wahiba in Wahiba territory now that sheikh Ahmed has been relieved of that responsibility' (P.D.O. 1970). Thereafter, Wahiba territorial interests were curtailed and the

Company's relations with the tribe were conducted directly, and at times, with the assistance of a representative from the Ministry of Interior. In many ways the intermediary role of sheikh Aḥmed helped to relieve the Wahība from the understandable stress which a traditional society faced when it came into contact with the modern bureaucratic and legal system of the nation-state. Perhaps the buffer effect of sheikh Aḥmed is what helped the Wahība to come to an economic and political compromise between their traditional system and the modern system represented by P.D.O. and the Government.

The situation of the Jenabā tribe resembles that of the Wahība during the early years of contact with P.D.O. In the mid 1950s they appear to have had a close association with the Bānī Riyām tribe who occupied parts of the Jabal al-Akhḍar. The Jenabā relationship with Sulaymān bin Ḥimyar, the principal Bānī Riyām sheikh served, for a few years, to counter-balance the advantage enjoyed by the Wahība through sheikh Aḥmed bin Moḥammed al-Ḥarthī. When, however, Sulaymān bin Ḥimyar, who had joined Ghālib's revolt, fled the country in 1959, the Jenabā lost their influential patron. Over the next decade the Jenabā found themselves progressively squeezed territorially between the Durū' whose influence was growing with the discovery of oil in their territory and the Wahība under the aegis of the powerful sheikh Aḥmed. Moreover, the very nature of the Jenabā tribal organization prejudiced their interests even further. As a tribe, they have always been notably lacking in cohesion which may in part be due to their dispersal over so wide an area. Their leaders and mediators tend to be drawn from the al-Maj'ali section of the tribe. But none had the influence or force of character to represent the tribe *vis-à-vis* the Company or the Government the way sheikh Aḥmed bin Moḥammed al-Ḥarthī represented the Āl Wahība.

The Jenabā were the first tribe with whom the Company came into contact upon landing at Duqm in February 1954. Their relations with P.D.O. have varied according to time, place and type of pressure exerted on their society. In general, the southern area between Duqm and

Dhofar has been the most problematic. In the summer of 1958, a P.D.O. party experienced difficulty with the local population there. Each family in the area was claiming its own territory and with it the right to exclusive employment in it. After two months effort on the part of a Jenabā sheikh and a representative from the Ministry of Interior to reach a compromise, the P.D.O. party found it necessary to give up and withdraw from the camp escorted by a detachment of Trucial Oman Scouts. In the Duqm area a series of incidents took place prior to the withdrawal of the Company in 1960. First a P.D.O. Land Rover was fired at by attackers. Four days later, several Jenabā men raided Duqm camp wounding two expatriate P.D.O. senior staff and making off with the P.D.O. pay packets for labour.

Upon the death of sheikh Yasīr in 1963, sheikh Khamīs became principal sheikh and link with P.D.O. He was not, in the opinion of P.D.O., an enthusiastic representative of the Jenabā. However as the Jenabā were being so effectively dominated by the Wahība under the patronage of sheikh Aḥmed, any conclusion reached by the government was bound to be to the detriment of the tribe. His ineffectiveness was to a large extent a response to circumstances.

By 1966, the dwindling tribal fortunes came to be regarded by Jenabā tribesmen as sheikh Khamīs' fault. Under traditional circumstances, such criticism would eventually have led to the gradual replacement of sheikh Khamīs by a more effective individual. In 1971 sheikh Khamīs again faced tribal opposition. Now however, he held sufficient backing from P.D.O. and the Government as the officially recognized leading sheikh. His opposition collapsed when some of their numbers were imprisoned, after having travelled to Muscat to complain against his leadership and his system of Company labour recruitment.

A further example of meddling and interfering in the traditional tribal political system is the case of Sa'ad, the younger brother of sheikh Khamīs. In 1967, Sultan Sa'id bin Taymūr nominated him to be the person through whom the Company's relations with the southern Jenabā were to be conducted. It seems likely that when Sultan Sa'id bin Taymūr nominated sheikh Sa'ad, he meant

Sa'id bin Musallim and not Sa'ad the brother of sheikh Khamīs. Sa'id bin Musallim had been the Sultan's guide in the area a number of years earlier. Nevertheless, sheikh Sa'ad accepted the appointment with reluctance as a sort of 'duty sheikh' under his brother Khamīs, the labour supervisor. With this appointment he assumed charge of the Jenabī share of recruitment for geophysical parties in Dhofar and in Wahība/Jenabā disputed areas. But he also aroused a great deal of jealousy among his fellow junior sheikhs.

Such wilful neglect of the traditionally elastic and highly fluid system of political leadership among the Jenabā could do little to help an already troubled society. From the great economic and political heights of a century or two ago, they are now the least cohesive community in Oman. And with the loss of their Bānī Riyām political buffer, their sheikhly system has come under repeated jolts from the modern legal system developing in Muscat – unlike the Wahība who were protected, in a manner, by sheikh Aḥmed bin Moḥammed al-Ḥarthī.

The Ḥarāsīs tribe is the only one of the four who was not involved in the political struggles of the last century between the Sultan and the Imam. Originally a Dhofari tribe, their dwindling numbers are found very widely scattered over a bare waterless stone and gravel plain. Despite the poverty of this area, called Jiddat-al-Ḥarāsīs, their ownership, but not usufruct rights to it are challenged by the Jenabā who claim that the 'harām' of the Ḥarāsīs only came to them in the mid 1930s as a result of a decree issued by Sultan Sa'id bin Taymūr and the wazīr Burton (P.D.O. 1972). This Jenabā claim was precipitated as the Ḥarāsīs filtered in from Dhofar and settled in the Jidda. Since the country was bare and waterless the Jenabā whose land it was made no objection. In the 1920s Betram Thomas travelled in the region and wrote that the Ḥarāsīs 'roam the Jiddat-al-Ḥarāsīs, which in theory is Jenabā territory' (Thomas 1929: 201). Even in 1967, Sultan Sa'id bin Taymūr was adamant that the Ḥarāsīs had no claim to any tribal territory in Oman. The Jiddat-al-Ḥarāsīs was so named he felt because it was the area through which the nomadic Ḥarāsīs travelled. The Sultan stressed

nevertheless, that the Ḥarāsīs had no claim to that particular territory as a right (P.D.O. 1968: 5). The Jenabī claim that the Sultan was persuaded by trickery to grant the Jiddat-al-Ḥarāsīs to the Ḥarāsīs tribe in the 1930s is mere fancy. There does, however, seem to be a certain amount of truth in the special relationship suggested between Sultan Sa'id bin Taymūr and the Ḥarāsīs.

The sheikhly family of the Ḥarāsīs included Sharqi bin 'Akis, the senior sheikh and his nephew. The two lived in the Wādī Ḥalfayn, rarely visiting the Jidda. The senior man in the Jidda was Sālim bin Huweila, who termed himself a sheikh, but in fact was not. These individuals and other members of the tribe travelled frequently to Ṣalāla and their contact with the Sultan was perhaps slightly more frequent than that of other sheikhs.

When in 1958, P.D.O. began to prepare for a new drilling location at Ḥaymā, concern was raised over possible labour and liaison problems. Ḥaymā, normally populated by the Ḥarāsīs could also be claimed by the Jenabā. P.D.O., after consultation with Sultan Sa'id bin Taymūr, decided to search for a labour supervisor from the Ḥarāsīs. Sālim bin Huweila was appointed but within three months he called for a general strike and threatened to cause further trouble. P.D.O. then resorted to summoning sheikh Sharqi to assist them. It was only when P.D.O. threatened to report him to Muscat that Sālim backed down. Both Sālim and sheikh Sharqi then travelled to Ṣalāla to visit the Sultan.

For the next six months, P.D.O. operated at Ḥaymā without a sheikh or a labour supervisor. Finally on May 10th, 1959 P.D.O. was forced to re-appoint the troublesome Sālim because of renewed labour troubles.

In the course of the following few months, Sālim succeeded in ingratiating himself with P.D.O., settling one dispute after another in favour of the Company. By mid-summer of 1959, Sheikh Sharqi had become seriously concerned with Sālim's attitude, and demanded that the unjust treatment of his people at Ḥaymā be stopped. He asked that:

- a. the Company mend its ways.
- b. one of his relatives be sent to Ḥaymā to oversee the first demand.
- c. the labourers recently fired be re-instated.
- d. six drums of water per day be given to the inhabitants of the Jidda instead of the five drums every five weeks at present.

P.D.O.'s written reponse was to wonder over these people's confusion between Company and Government. The report goes on to remark about the difficulty of convincing them (the Ḥarāsīs tribe) that the Government had no right to make promises on behalf of the Company without first consulting them. P.D.O. officials agreed to sheikh Sharqi's points 'a' and 'c' but privately they commented that 'they will not be carried out' (P.D.O. 1959).

Although Sālim made no effort to mediate the Ḥarāsīs interests *vis-à-vis* the Company, and was constantly being reproached by sheikh Sharqi for selling his people short, the tribe's welfare was well looked after in a manner by Sultan Sa'īd bin Taymūr. In 1967, during discussions between himself and the General Manager of P.D.O., the subject of tribal labour in southern Oman was discussed. The Sultan emphasized that he did not wish sheikh Aḥmed al-Ḥarthī to spread his influence or to assume, under any circumstance, that he had the right to control the Ḥarāsīs or the Jenabā tribe. He emphasized that south of Duqm, sheikh Aḥmed had *no* authority at all (P.D.O. 1968: 5). The Sultan's interest to stop the spread of sheikh Aḥmed's authority was in itself a spur for Ḥarāsīs growth in the region.

During a later meeting, the General Manager requested that P.D.O., which was having a great deal of trouble again from Sālim, deal with sheikh Sharqi for Jidda labour. The Sultan agreed, stressing again that on no account would sheikh Aḥmed bin Moḥammed al-Ḥarthī have any authority in the area. However when sheikh Sharqi was approached by P.D.O., he refused to accept the appointment. When news of Sharqi's rebuff reached the Sultan, he removed Sharqi from office and appointed Sālim bin Huweila as sheikh of the Ḥarāsīs (P.D.O. 1974: 3). This worked well for the Company but was never acceptable

to the tribesmen nor, of course, to sheikh Sharqi who bided his time. Had sheikh Sharqi simply been summoned to Ṣalāla, and another member of the sheikhly section had grown into the position, the tribal resentment would not have been so strong and the traditional political system would have continued to operate. As it was, the tribesmen waited for the return of sheikh Sharqi and he waited for the right moment. In 1972 sheikh Sharqi was re-instated by Sultan Qaboos and in the following year when Sālim was in particular difficulties, Sharqi moved in. Although the appointment of the non-sheikhly Sālim was never accepted by the Ḥarāsīs, P.D.O. was highly disturbed at the loss of his services. The Company recommended that 'Sālim himself needs a boost from the Government, something . . . which would help him regain much of his former authority'. The response to that comment from top P.D.O. officials was that Sālim had already received a boost in 1971, but perhaps one was due (P.D.O. 1974).

Sharqi's steps to regain his traditionally rightful role were regarded by P.D.O. as 'mainly avaricious and . . . recommended that this influence of his might be excluded from the Jidda without too much fuss by the following possible methods:

- a. monetary compensation from the government
- b. re-affirmation by the government of Sālim's authority in the Jidda' (P.D.O. 1974).

This obstructiveness and interference in tribal political organization on the part of the Company could only bring about a loss of confidence in those very authority figures. Economically the Ḥarāsīs benefited from their – at times – total employment by P.D.O. But politically, their already fragile system was only undermined by the strong bureaucratic and legal interference from Muscat and Ṣalāla.

CONCLUSION

The change in government in 1970 brought with it a refreshing interval of reassessment on the part

of P.D.O. Everywhere the spirit was for change and modernization. P.D.O., little realizing how much change it had brought with its entry into Central Oman, prepared a number of papers, among them one on *Tribal Affairs* and one on *Tribal Employment*. Both of these papers regarded their activities and influence over the past ten years as 'traditional' and sought guidelines to proceed with the modern enlightened decade before them.

In its *Tribal Affairs* paper, P.D.O. re-iterated that it was 'not the desire of the Company to interfere in any arrangements made by the government for control of the tribes . . . (however) the Company should have knowledge of such arrangements if Company operations are to run smoothly' (P.D.O. 1970). The position is understandable. Given the withdrawal of sheikh Ahmed bin Mohammed al-Harthi's responsibility in the Interior, P.D.O. was no longer confident of whom to deal with in order to recruit some of their Wahiba, Jenaba and Harasis labourers. The situation among the Duru' was more difficult. Had the stand of P.D.O. simply been one of requesting clarification, the situation could have been easily handled. But it wasn't. P.D.O., having established its own system of regulating its affairs in the Interior by supporting individuals who co-operated with its bureaucratic system and undermining those who continued to represent their tribe, did not want to see all that effort lost. When for example, they argued that they needed clarification over the re-instatement of sheikh Sharqi, their actual position was that his re-instatement was undermining the authority of Salim bin Huweila who worked hard for the Company's interests. Sheikh Sharqi, in their opinion 'the former agent of sheikh Ahmed bin Mohammed al-Harthi', was negatively affecting Company arrangements not only in the Harasis areas but in Dhofar as well. Whereas since Salim's appointment, relations between the Harasis and the Jenaba had been amicable and had led to co-operation helpful to Company operations in Oman and Dhofar.

The P.D.O. paper concludes with a plea. The Company has learned that the new government wishes to abolish the tribal system as it now exists

and replace it with an extension of central authority working through appointed representatives in the tribal areas. The paper commends the idea of supplanting the tribal system by a more modern arrangement. But it cautions that until these new measures have been studied and put into effect, there is only the system of duty sheikhs and labour supervisors elaborately developed by P.D.O. over the last decade and a half. Such a paper is not requesting guidelines, but is trying, and not very subtly, to influence future government policy in a direction that is in the interest of the Company.

The second P.D.O. paper concerning *Tribal Employment* is perhaps more of a request for clarification, but it also suggests particular courses of action that are more in line with the past needs of the Company than with the future of a new government. Tribal employment had always been a difficult area. What had evolved was that the Company employed members of a tribe for work in their own tribal areas. These arrangements were carried out through the sheikh or sheikhs of a tribe recognized by the Sultan. The only exception to this policy was in regards to the skilled (Omani and expatriate) workers. Use of 'outside' artisans had been limited by the Company's understanding with the sheikhs that if they could furnish an artisan from their tribe then this man would be employed. This arrangement had worked well in the past. But with the change in government, a significant number of skilled tribal Omani artisans returned from abroad asking for work without reference to the sheikh. The Company now badly needed clarification. They naturally wanted to employ a number of these men. This newly returned work force did not see why they should refer to the sheikhs. The sheikhs, on the other hand, had come to feel that their authority would be undermined if men who belonged to their tribes were not required to refer to them. Such a role, however, was not part of the traditional mediating function of tribal leaders prior to the entry of P.D.O. into Central Oman.

A struggle was in the making. The tribal leaders, in an attempt to cope with the bureaucratic system introduced by P.D.O., had

developed a fairly rigid and secure retainer system. They were no longer simply political links, but economic ones as well for their tribesmen and they took to exacting a substantial payment from each man they assigned to work for the Company. The possibility that this revenue would be affected if men were hired directly caused anxiety among the sheikhs. The Company did not pay the sheikhs anything. They were paid by the Government. Its promise (in Sultan Qaboos' accession speech) that the tribal sheikhs would continue to be paid their traditional stipends was an astute interim measure. However the problem of the newly returned skilled tribal workers was more complex. The nature of the problem derived less from traditional associations than from those created by modern systems. Its solution would require greater flexibility and compromise than had been exhibited by P.D.O. in the past.

The initial concern expressed by P.D.O. and various tribal sheikhs in 1970 died down after a few years. By the mid 1970s, a more relaxed adaptable attitude characterized relations between this western Company and the traditional tribal society of Central Oman. In the summer of 1974, the Company learned that a commission was being organized to examine tribal boundaries and to consider the question of abolishing them altogether. The Company wisely advised caution, suggesting that the present system was satisfactory. Both the Company and the Sultan's adviser on the issue agreed that it would be unwise to try and establish 'boundaries where before oil company operations began, fixed, rigid boundaries did not exist – not in the modern legal or bureaucratic sense' (P.D.O. 1974: 4). Whether or not the Company had finally come to realize that some realms of modern administration could not be translated to fit the traditional tribal society is a question still not answered. What did come about from its almost two decades of experience in Oman was that compromise and good government representation was the key to success in Central Oman.

Derek Hopwood, in his introduction to the *Arabian Peninsula: Society and Politics*, regards the

conflict of tradition versus modernity as one which is more sharply expressed in the Arabian Peninsula 'because resistance to change has been more prolonged than in other parts of the Arab World and because change has come only recently and swiftly' (Hopwood ed. 1970: 14). The Bedouin of Central Oman in their sudden confrontation with the twentieth century appear to have reacted to this recent, swift change in the only way open to them. Economically they exhibited an adaptability that was anything but resistant to change. Taking full advantage of the new cash income from employment opportunities offered by the Company, they rapidly moved into fields associated with their traditional way of life. Unlike most upwardly mobile communities, little was spent on domestic material possessions or the construction of shelters. As the Bedouin discovered long ago, shelter in the desert was not achieved with closed walls but rather was derived from shade – be that under a tent, a tree or under a Bedford truck. What developed and expanded was transport and commerce with the Gulf States that had always been on the margin of their universe. Over the past decade it became common to see Bedouin in Toyota, Datsun and Bedford trucks crossing the arid land from one settlement to another with pastoral or agricultural goods for sale or with recently purchased Western commodities. Diesel powered water pumps in the bedouin date gardens at 'Ibrī, Adam and Sināw have also become common. Even petrol stations are coming under franchise to some of the more wealthy Bedouin, like the Ḥarsūsī station at Ḥaymā. Perhaps this economic adaptability sprang from the total novelty of the opportunities that were offered. With no frame of reference, no traditional pattern to disturb, the world was wide open to those who wished to take advantage of it.

On the political side, however, a different situation prevailed until very recently. The oil company, and after 1970 the Government, entered Central Oman with two major interests having a bearing on the pastoral nomadic tribes. First, the Company had to establish fixed, stable boundaries so as to fit labour recruitment pat-

terns into its own legal and bureaucratic system. Second, it had to select, or in some cases have selected for it, permanent, reliable individuals from each tribe to manage the hiring of labourers.

A conflict of large proportions was inevitable when it came to establishing definitive boundaries. The pastoral nomadic tribe's territory is one, which, because of the very nature of that way of life, is flexible. That territory is also liable to changes that reflect the tribe's relationship with other tribes and the climatic cycle. Usufruct and ownership are very often the same thing to the bedouin. However, with the entry of P.D.O. into the region, the bedouin tribes found that only a static and rigid interpretation of terrain could be of any use. Their usual flexibility and adaptability was of no avail. And they found themselves locked to one interpretation, whatever the climatic cycle or intertribal relations.

The selection of the tribal elders who managed the hiring needs of the Oil Company should not have been as difficult as the history of the past two decades suggests that it was. Had the Company been willing to adapt itself to the political fortunes of the tribal leaders, to utilize only those leaders in authority, and for as long as they maintained that authority, many of the Company's difficulties might have been overcome. However, P.D.O. had neither the time nor the resources to accurately gauge the fluid and constantly changing political careers of the various tribal elders. Once they had 'adopted' an individual, P.D.O. attempted to keep him in a position of authority by whatever means it had at its disposal. This need on the part of the Company to maintain long-term relations with their duty sheikhs and labour supervisors adversely affected tribal political organization, and once flexible associations rapidly became frozen and rigid.

What are the implications for the future? Is there hope that these peoples will continue to adapt their highly flexible and malleable pastoral nomadic universe to the demands placed on it by forces external to its system? Or has the web of modern economic and political forces drawn

them inextricably into the inevitable components of modern sedentary society? Will the factors of low cost housing and low wage labour eventually lure and crowd them into urban centres thus swelling the ranks of the displaced, landless poor? There is hope that with enlightened planning, innovative adaptations will be encouraged which best suit their perceptions of their needs for such items as mobile health services, mobile educational facilities, and welfare opportunities.

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