

## **CHAPTER 11**

# **BOARDING SCHOOLS FOR MOBILE PEOPLES: THE HARASIIS IN THE SULTANATE OF OMAN**

*Dawn Chatty*

## **Introduction**

**M**odern, Western-style education for people who move or have no fixed abode has always been problematic. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, as in earlier times, formal efforts to provide education for migratory or mobile peoples has been difficult to plan, implement and sustain (see Krätli with Dyer, this volume; Sandford, 1978; Swift *et al.*, 1990; Bonfiglioli, 1992; Lambert, 1999; Semali, 1993; Dyer and Choksi, 1997). Recent reports in Africa, the Middle East and South Asia are replete with projects that have failed (e.g. Rybinski [Algeria], 1981; Hendershot [Iran], 1965; Udoh [Nigeria], 1982) while studies highlighting success have been sparse. In Iran experiments with boarding schools and tent schools going back as far as the 1920s have had some limited successes (Varlet and Massumian, 1975; Shahshahani, 1995). In Mongolia where the majority of the population are nomadic pastoralists and where education has been compulsory for every child between eight and eighteen since 1940, dormitory schools are reported to be only a qualified success (Demberel and Penn, this volume).

For the most part, educating children of marginalised and mobile communities has proved difficult due to three principal political, economic and structural factors. The locally perceived purpose of state education is recognised as unsympathetic to mobile communities. Its underlying aim is often to establish political hegemony over a disparate set of communities, and to integrate and assimilate minority groups (see Krätli with Dyer, this volume). Political leaders often use education systems to inculcate certain ideas such as the acceptance of a state identity and citizenship as well as the duties of the individual to the state. Many governments 'use schools as a

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vehicle for creating a strong national identity, and deny children from ethnic minorities the opportunity to learn about and to value their own culture' (Ogadhoh and Molteno, 1998: 30). With mobile peoples, the unwillingness to be so drawn in, 'modernised', settled or transformed is often expressed by moving away and keeping out of reach of the state's long arm.

School curricula often reflect the mainstream government's vision of life and cultural aspirations. The issue of cultural relevance often only emerges in times of crisis. When real life pressures overwhelm a community through complex political emergency, or natural disaster, then children and their parents dismiss school learning which does not relate to their way of life. With mobile peoples, such rejection of an 'irrelevant' curriculum which denigrates and undermines the mobile way of life is also prevalent and is usually expressed by high primary school dropout rates and by the physical moving away of the family and community from the reaches of government and school authority (see also Carr-Hill, this volume).

A simple economic factor is often also at the heart of mobile communities' initial willingness to keep their children in school. This is the hope that such education will provide the youth with the tools and skills required to get well-paid jobs in industry (often petroleum and other large-scale extractive industries) and businesses of the surrounding areas (Abu-Saad *et al.*, 1998). This hope is generally dashed as the national curriculum is nearly always geared toward the sedentarisation and modernisation of the mobile community through an urban or agrarian based 'liberal arts' secondary education. The mobile peoples' desire for education which allows new knowledges and technologies to become part of their learned skills is rarely available.

Finally, the administrative and infrastructural demands of setting up school facilities in remote parts of a state are often overwhelming and many such efforts begun with a blaze of publicity become neglected and are often abandoned shortly thereafter. Not only is there difficulty in keeping such units staffed by state-educated teachers, but linguistically, there is often the problem of language. Many mobile and pastoral communities have a mother tongue which differs from the national language. For the most part, the latter is required throughout state education. Certainly in secondary and higher education, the sole way for a child of a mobile or pastoral community to progress in life is through learning to communicate in the national language. But in the earlier years, the child's mother tongue is a more successful conduit for learning to read than a second language (Ogadhoh and Molteno, 1998: 34). The unwillingness of most state education systems to recognise or use local languages in the early years of education contributes significantly to the high numbers of children from marginal and mobile communities who drop out of state-run education (but see Edwards and Underwood, this volume).

The case study presented in this chapter highlights why, as much through design as by accident and serendipity, a boarding school in the middle of a vast extensive tribal area succeeded in the face of the kinds of problems which so

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often spell defeat. Here the political underpinning of the 30-year-old state education was clearly evident in the state's messages about Omani citizenship and the duties and obligations of its people. A lack of relevance of the urban and agrarian based state curriculum for the desert-based communities of Oman was equally evident, but this was balanced by a desire on the part of the local community to take advantage of all that was on offer. Last, but not least, the government's determination to make the desert school a 'flagship' and model for other future efforts in similar regions meant that some commitment to move beyond the normal level of support for a government school was implemented.

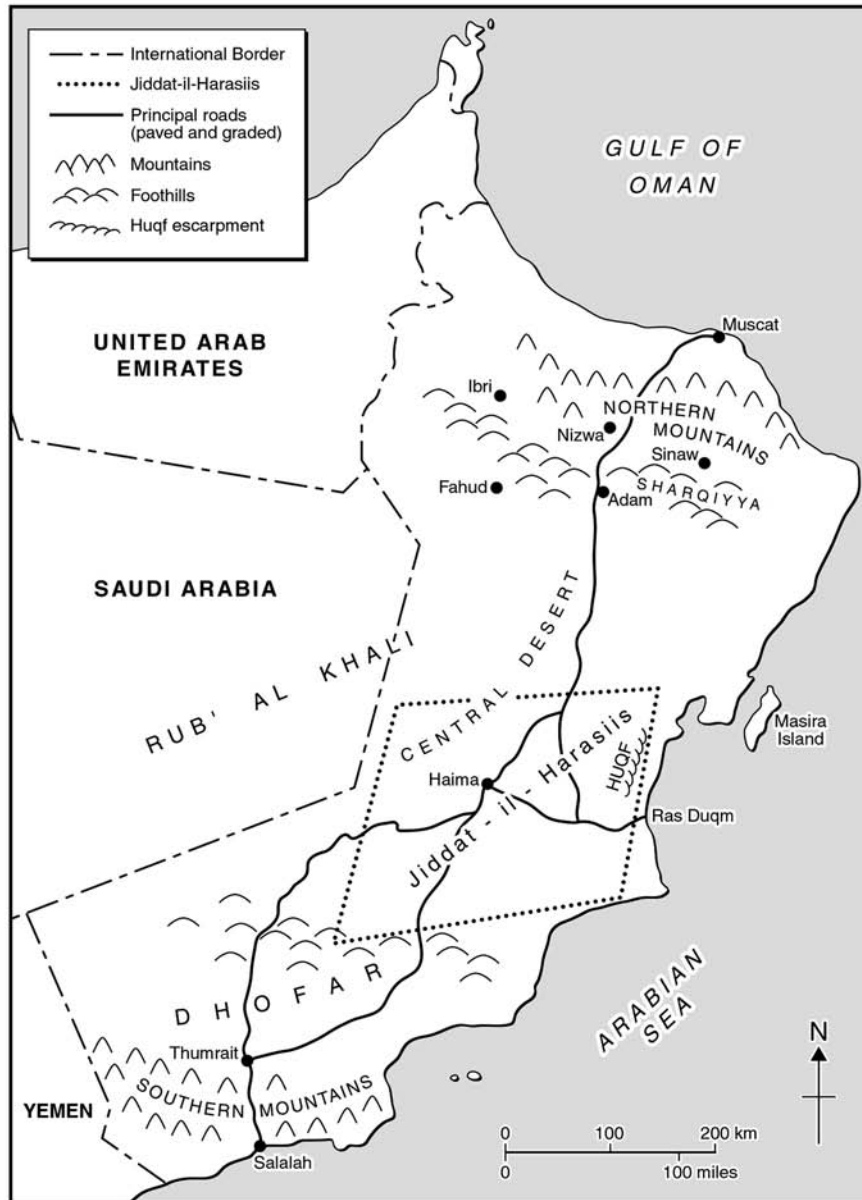
### **Boarding Schools for the Pastoral Nomads of Oman**

Late in the 1970s, the young ruler of Oman, Sultan Qaboos bin Said, embarked on an innovative and ambitious plan to bring government social services to the remote, central regions of the country. Less than a decade into his reign, he had already revolutionised governance in Oman. Taking over from his ultra-conservative father in 1970, he set out to modernise the state as rapidly as possible. Working concurrently outwards from the capital of Muscat and the southern lead city of Salalah, he rapidly set up primary and secondary schools, clinics and hospitals, where before there had been none. He built roads, ports, created a physical infrastructure, and extended electricity and sewerage. He also set about establishing a modern institution of governance to replace the semi-feudal system that had operated before 1970 under his father's reign. In 1979, he decided the time had come to extend these services to the central desert areas of Oman, home to nomadic camel and goat raising tribes. His directive was to extend services to these mobile communities, without forcing them to become settled.

### **Background**

The Harasiis is a small mobile community of about 3,000 people inhabiting the edge of the Empty Quarter in south-eastern Arabia. Organised along kinship lines, each tribal section is made up of extended family groups. The male members of a household own and manage the far-ranging camel herds and female members own and look after the more close-ranging herds of goat, and occasionally, sheep. Their recognised tribal territory is called the Jiddat-il-Harasiis (referred to here as the Jiddat), a largely flat, plain of rock and gravel which extends across the middle of Oman from the Empty Quarter to edge of the escarpment which drops down to the Arabian Sea. This remote territory of approximately 40,000 square kilometres effectively separates north Oman from the southern region, Dhofar. It is in the middle of this tribal territory that the first experiment in delivering government services was to take place (see Fig. 11.1).

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**Figure 11.1** *Jiddat-il-Harasiis.*

The ministries of Social Affairs and Labour, Education, Health, Interior and the Border Police Force all worked together to create a development plan for tribal community centres. These were built upon the then popular development paradigm of comprehensive community centres. Such units

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had already been set up in remote areas of Dhofar for transhumance pastoral communities. These centres served as magnets drawing the adjacent population to them in the search for health care, schooling and other government services. In the mountains of Dhofar, the population spent most of the year in remote village settlements moving cattle down into the plains for only three or four months before returning to their villages. In the central desert of Oman, there were no villages, a reality government administrators found – and still find – hard to accept. Notwithstanding this very different population base, the government commissioned the first of six desert centres to be built, each at one of the few existing wells. By 1980 Haima, previously only a water well, was a vast construction site with an emerging office complex for the local governor, the *Wali*, which included four rooms for a school, two rooms for a health clinic, and a reception room to receive visiting tribesmen. Also under construction were a mosque, a petrol station, a reverse osmosis water plant, a border patrol police station, and six villas to house the future government employees.

In order to support this building programme and encourage the local community to make use of this modern complex, a team of social workers from the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour and from the Ministry of Education set out late in 1980 to interview the local community. After a long and arduous journey across the Jiddat looking for families to interview, the team returned to Muscat and prepared a report. This study showed that most of those interviewed wished to use the government facilities, and in support of this finding, the names of 127 boys and 25 girls had been registered as potential school pupils. September 1981 was set as the official date for opening the school, but this deadline came and went without any sign of teachers or pupils.

## Research Methodology

In 1981 I began a two-year action-oriented study of the needs and problems of the Harasiis tribe funded by the Voluntary Fund for the Decade of Women, the precursor of UNIFEM. This project, run by the UNDP, had been designed with a two-fold objective: to collect anthropological data on the needs and aspirations of the Harasiis tribe; and to design practical programmes in collaboration with the local community which addressed their needs without forcing them to settle in order to access government services (Chatty, 1984). After selecting a representative sample of extended families, I began intensive anthropological fieldwork with the help of two field assistants and two local guides. A purposive sample of 17 extended families out of a total population of about 250 households was selected, on the basis of the size and age structure of the unit, the family livestock holdings as well as their location across the various grazing and browsing areas available that year on the Jiddat-il-Harasiis.

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Week after week, we visited and camped with these families, collecting socio-demographic data, conducting semi-formal interviews, group interviews, focused topic discussions, and participant observation. Once we had developed a clear idea of the services the community envisaged, we reviewed the services the government intended to extend to this population. It soon became clear that the provision of education services would be the most problematic. Community members could be expected to travel to the government centre occasionally for curative and preventative health services, but they would be unable to make the journey on a daily basis which schooling as envisaged by the government would entail. With only the one tarmacked road running from north to south and connecting Muscat to Salalah, every journey to Haima for the local inhabitants was across open rock and gravel desert. Journeys of two, three or four hours were not unusual, but were not undertaken lightly. Only medical emergency, a dispute over water, a requirement for petrol or some other supplies, might be sufficient cause to make the long and costly trip to Haima.

### **The Administrative and Infrastructural Problem**

The government plan had been to open a primary school of mixed classes. It had set aside four rooms for the school, three of which were intended to be classrooms. Consideration had also been given to the housing requirement of the teachers who would have to be imported from abroad. The few Omani teachers with the requisite training were not prepared to serve in such a remote area. No adequate consideration, however, had been given to how the Harasiis children would be able to get to the school. The planners in the Ministry of Education were unable to conceptualise that communities of no fixed abode existed in Oman. Hence their plan had been to organise a fleet of busses to collect children in the morning and return them to their homes each evening.

Within three months of commencing the study, we were able to map out the trends of the ever fluid household locations as families and herds were moved to make best use of available graze and browse. A superficial analysis of our findings regarding camp locations over the past five years revealed an erratic, but predictable, pattern of movement. Although families could be found camped in all of the major valleys (*wadi*) of the Jiddat, the density of family groups always followed the rainfall. Good precipitation in one year would mean that a large number of families would set up their camps in that location over the next four to six months. On average, families tended to move major distances three or four times a year, and short distances to access natural graze for their herds every few weeks. Every family had access to a four-wheeled drive vehicle. The half-ton truck had rapidly replaced the camel as the beast of burden and contemporary pastoral life depended upon the increased mobility which motor vehicles offered.

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The tribal centre at Haima had been built on a salt flat (*sabkha*). There could never be any grazing in the vicinity, and hence families could not camp near Haima. At the time of our study the closest family groups were camped in a small depression or *wadi* 75 kilometres from Haima, a drive across rocky terrain that often took two hours or more. Many others were camped three or four hours drive away. We realised that over a number of years, Harasiis family groups tended to cluster in one *wadi* or another depending upon the previous few years rainfall or lack of it. This constant short-term and long-term unpredictability in location within the vast tribal territory did not seem a very promising point from which to organise the bussing of students to a permanent school at Haima.

### **Alternative Solutions**

Through our interview and discussion group work, a number of alternative suggestions emerged from the community. Some families wanted teachers who would move around with them in vehicles and tents. Others wanted an intense, four-month-a-year school which operated in a fixed location during the very hot summer months. And a small number wanted a permanent school built near a known source of sweet water several hundred kilometres south of Haima in an area that had year-round browsing, if not grazing, for their livestock. These alternative solutions took on a life of their own and the community elders began to campaign to have their way accepted by the whole. Traditionally, community disputes were settled in council meetings attended by the elders of the tribe. Discussions often raged for days and weeks until finally unanimity or exhaustion prevailed and one lone position was accepted by all. This was followed by discussion of the organisation and details of the schooling, which were conducted in the same fashion.

One group, made up of the more mobile herders with large camel numbers that required quite substantial migrations each year, strongly supported the idea of seasonal schools. This suggestion – never fully developed – appealed to many because it supported the Harasiis notion of migration and mobility. The government would be asked to supply a number of teachers, provide them with four-wheel drive vehicles and tents and send them off to camp wherever a concentration of families could be found. During many of the late night discussions which were held to discuss schooling, I gently tried to interject a sense of the difficulties that such a solution would create. Where, for example, would the Ministry be able to recruit teachers who were prepared to live such a peripatetic existence? How would they move the required books, papers and other teaching materials around? The model that some Harasiis had in mind was that of their traditional religious teachers, the *shuyukh*, who were occasionally hired by a family to accompany them on their migrations and to teach their children to read the Koran. In such cases, there was only the one book to take and most of the learning was by rote memorisation.

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Another group, mainly made up of the 20 percent of the population who owned date gardens several hundred kilometres to the north of the Jiddat at the foothills bordering the agricultural communities of northern Oman, had other ideas. This group argued for an intense, four-month-long school which would operate in a pre-planned, fixed location during the very hot summer months. Such an idea grew out of what they were convinced was an intractable problem; finding teachers who would be prepared to move around the Jiddat. The Harasiis appreciated that their way of life, with its constant movement, and scarce water resources, would be difficult for others. They themselves regarded, with great pride, their ability to go days without drinking water – managing to keep their thirst controlled by taking long, deep draughts of camel or goats milk in the early morning or evening before or after a long day's work. Many members of these families generally spent the four hottest months of the year, when temperatures regularly ranged between 45 and 50°C, in their date gardens to the north in the villages surrounding Adam – the last major market town on the border with the central desert of Oman. During these months the family members helped with the date harvest, which took place during the *Qaidh*, the hottest season of the year when the dates are traditionally said to ripen. The Harasiis and other pastoral tribes with date holdings in the area construct palm frond huts in which to live during this season. These temporary huts encircle the date gardens and the permanent mud houses and protective walls of the indigenous townsfolk.

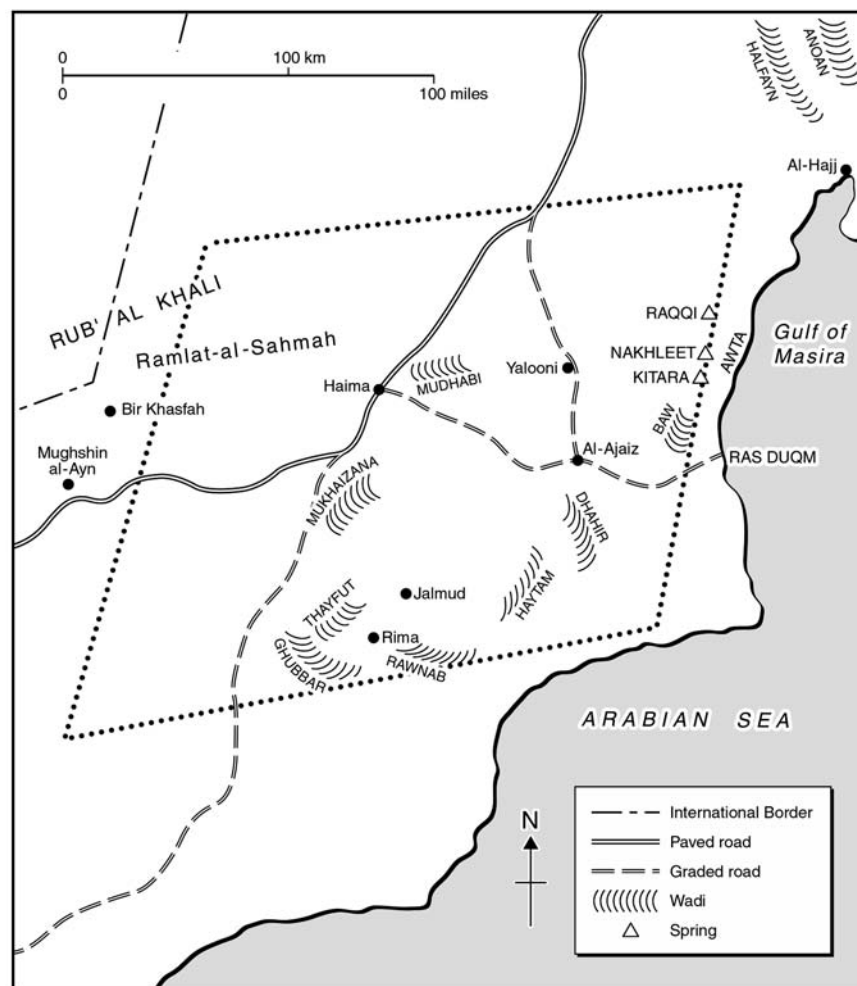
Increasingly over the past decade, various units of government services had used this season, the *Qaidh*, to reach out to the Harasiis and other nomadic pastoral people. In some years, a carnival atmosphere prevailed with government social workers trying to spread various social and health messages, such as the importance of nursing infants instead of bottle feeding them, or the benefit of vaccination. Often these promotional campaigns were accompanied by the handing out of gifts, tooth brushes, soaps and other accoutrements of modern western life. The Harasiis were genuinely puzzled by these government handouts. They did, however, recognise that there were great differences in their appreciation of desert life and by those who had never lived it. Since they could recognise how an urban-raised teacher might not find the constant moving around in the desert appealing, they suggested a special intensive period of schooling during the *Qaidh* in the date gardens. A teacher, they argued, could be found who would remain in the date gardens during the period of their residence, teaching their children at a time of the year when there was little else to distract them.

Yet another small faction of the Harasiis, representing a small but outspoken lineage, wanted a permanent school to be built, not at Haima, but several hundred kilometres south near a source of sweet water. The push for this alternative was orchestrated by an influential and outspoken Harasiis man who had strong vested interests in the area. Already hired as the 'liaison' officer to mediate disputes between the national oil company operating in the



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area and local tribesmen, he saw his future very much tied to a narrow circle of movement at the oil camp of Rima (see Fig. 11.2). He knew that over the coming years – for as long as he held on to his job – he would not be able to move his family far. Paid employment at Rima would be more important than the subsistence income which his and his wife's herds provided. In all the discussions in which he took part, he would consistently push his solution. Unlike the etiquette of consensus over most tribal affairs, he could not be dissuaded, even though his was the lone voice supporting such a proposal. The Ministry of Education did eventually agree to his request and a number of years later (in the late 1980s) supplied two teachers and two portacabins to his extended family unit near Rima to set up a temporary school.



**Figure 11.2** *The Area of Movement Around the Oil Camp of Rima.*

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## Negotiating a Compromise

By the early winter months of 1982, the Ministry of Health, as well as the other interested agencies began to feel some concern about the apparent lukewarm welcome the tribal centre seemed to be receiving. The Health Centre was hardly used, the school was not functioning, and other official offices had few visitors. The issue of the school was being handled directly by the office of the Minister of Education. This immediate access gave my team the opportunity to put forward the alternative solutions which the Harasiis were considering. The Harasiis elders – many of them prospective parents – were petitioning the Ministry of Education through the offices of the *Wali* at Haima. Occasionally when other business brought them into Nizwa, the regional office for the Ministry of Education, or Muscat, Harasiis tribesman would visit the Ministry's office and lobby for their views.

In due course we were able to draft several papers representing the various alternatives the Harasiis were considering. My own preference was for a semi-mobile school – as in a portable cabin – which could be moved to different locations as the population density shifted from one valley to another with changes in rainfall. This opinion was partially derived from my cautionary interpretation of the limited successes of residential schooling for the children of nomads in Israel (Meir, 1990: 771); Abu-Saad *et al.*, 1998), Iran (Barker, 1981), India (Rao, 1987) and other parts of the world. Either the schools ultimately failed, or the students became totally alienated from their parents, culture and eventually left nomadic life. I did not want to see the same story repeated in Oman.

Although the Ministry was prepared to listen to our arguments in support of a mobile school, it soon became clear that our starting point had to be the existing four rooms in the *Wali*'s offices earmarked as a school for the Harasiis. The interesting proposal for a seasonal school during the hottest summer months, which was also supported by the *Wali* of Haima, had to be put aside, as did our proposal for a portable school. With the existing structure at Haima accepted as the physical base for schooling, we began to negotiate how to meet the needs of the Harasiis people and the requirements of the Ministry of Education. The Ministry gracefully accepted that bussing the students to the school daily was not a feasible option. Reluctantly we found ourselves arguing for the construction of a residence for the students at Haima.

All of the Harasiis elders accepted the Ministry's decision to construct a residence for the prospective students. Another round of discussions was held with the tribal elders, and a new set of concerns were raised. It was understood by the Harasiis that the Ministry expected children as young as seven to attend the school. By law this was the official nationwide age for beginning primary education. For the Harasiis this was too young. Their own understanding of the process of socialisation put nine years of age as one when full rational cultural understanding could be expected. Few

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parents were prepared to consider letting their children live away from them before this age. Their concern was that the children were in danger of being culturally alienated. One Harasiis mother told me: 'How can we let our children go before they know their language (Harsuusi) and they understand the desert'. After looking at a number of alternatives, the elders of the tribe decided that they would have to select a few of their own number to camp out near the tribal centre to supervise the young boys and girls and thus act as cultural guardians. Respected older Harasiis men and women were approached and asked to take on this task at least until the Harasiis children were well settled in the school.

A further expression of this concern was raised in the guise of an administrative issue. No family wanted its children to be away from home for months at a time. The Harasiis knew of the one other boarding school run by the Ministry of Education in the Jebel Akhdar (Birkat il Mooz) in northern Oman and understood that its dormitory was run on a termly basis, children spending only a few months away from home at any one stretch of time. The Harasiis wanted to see their children more regularly, ostensibly in order to have the boys and girls help out with the herding of livestock and the regular collection of water for the family. Initially arguing for a very short school week of four days, they eventually reached a more realistic compromise of a five day, Saturday to Wednesday school schedule. The Ministry of Education accepted this suggestion as it fitted quite neatly with the *de facto* five-day work-week of many government employees, despite an official six-day work week in government. Such a schedule, ministry officials felt, would make the task of recruiting teachers to take up such a remote post a little more attractive.

Cultural issues continued to dominate the concerns of the Harasiis households. The Harasiis wanted to know what food that the children would be eating. The worry was that the students would no longer have access to camel and goat milk and would end up being served a permanent diet of Indian curry with rice. The concern was easy to understand since nearly all the eating establishments in the interior of Oman were run by Indian expatriate workers. This issue was never resolved adequately and other seemingly more pressing concerns emerged. The Harasiis parents learned that the students would not remain at school all day. The standard period of schooling per day varied in Oman from four to six hours. What would the students do after school hours, the parents wanted to know? Would there be any supervision of the students in the afternoons and at night? Would there be any organised sports activity? Already the border police officers regularly played soccer with the local government workers running the water purification plant. Would something similar be developed for the boys? These issues were taken up and presented to the Ministry of Education, where all efforts were being made to establish what would be a 'flagship' school – indeed a model for further schools in the desert interior.

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**Figure 11.3** *The Wali, and community elders visiting classroom at the boarding school.*

After nearly a year of petitioning and negotiations, the Ministry of Education agreed to open a residential school at Haima for the Harasiis. It agreed to run the school on a five-day week, to hire one Harasiis elder at a time to look after the welfare and cultural concerns of the students, to set up catering which would not be dominated by an expatriate cuisine, to recruit a sports coach to keep the students busy after the regular hours of instruction and to set up some civic organisations like a boy scout troupe. However, girls would not be permitted to be resident.

### **The Compromise: Residential School for Boys, Day Schooling for Girls**

The Haima School opened in December 1992 with forty boys and two girls. The boys were temporarily accommodated in an abandoned army barracks on the edge of Haima until the dormitory building could be completed. Tribal elders, taking their shepherding roles to heart, drove the boys the short distance of perhaps 500 metres from the barracks to the school each morning and afternoon, remaining with them in the afternoons and evenings. The girls were daughters of Harasiis tribesmen employed by the *Wali* as guards and thus they remained with their fathers out of school hours and returned to their campsites each night. They took an active part in all the school-time activities, and were not discriminated against in any way – and generally outshone the boys in their eagerness to learn.

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**Figure 11.4** Harasiis boys use truck to travel to weekly boarding school.

The first two teachers were Egyptian nationals hired by the Ministry of Education under a bilateral agreement which resulted in the import of nearly 5,000 Egyptian schoolteachers each year into Oman. Most of these Egyptians were from the Delta or oases settlements along the Nile. Being posted to Haima, a desert outpost in the middle of the country, when they were expecting the charms of the cosmopolitan urban centres in the Arabian Gulf, caused problems. Their didactic teaching style was reminiscent of the small primary schools of Egypt described so poignantly by Taha Hussein in his *Al Ayam*. Straightforward rote memorisation of the alphabet and verses of the Koran were the order of the day. For children whose mother tongue was not Arabic, but rather *Harsuusi* (a South Arabian language which predated Arabic in origin), this was a gruelling introduction to modern Western-style education.

Harasiis parents began to arrive in Haima regularly on Wednesdays to run their errands, visit the various government offices and collect their children from the school. Wednesday afternoons quickly took on a holiday atmosphere as tribesmen gathered around the petrol station, Harasiis mothers congregated outside the health centre and children milled about waiting for their parents or kinsmen to make the drive across the desert to their campsite.

Within a few months, complaints about the cultural divide between the Egyptian teachers and the Harasiis boys surfaced. These complaints were serious enough for the Ministry to consider carefully the future placement of teachers in Haima when their current two-year contracts ended. In 1984,

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the Ministry appointed a Jordanian as head teacher. This was a very popular decision as he showed himself to have significant understanding of nomadic pastoral culture, being of Bedouin origin himself. He was able to flag areas which the Ministry needed to consider with care – issues such as curriculum relevance, personal and group hygiene, and sleep and study arrangements.

Girls continued to attend, but only as day students. They were never separated from boys in class, and often shared the same two-seater benches with them. But when their fathers moved on to other jobs or their mothers' homesteads were moved too far away, they would be pulled out of school. After a few years, the only girls at the school were those of the local *Wali*, and the Sudanese veterinary doctor. Their urban Arab parents, unlike the Harasiis, were not comfortable with the lack of segregation between boys and girls in the school and put significant pressure on the Ministry of Education to have girls separated from boys, at least as they got into the intermediate levels of education. A number of the Egyptian teachers eventually became uncomfortable instructing the young adolescent girls in mixed classes and succeeded in having the girls withdrawn from late primary school. Instead, the Ministry of Education offered the older girls 'adult literacy classes' – taught by the same Egyptian teachers – in the afternoons at their mothers' campsites near Haima.

The most dramatic clash to emerge in the early years of the school's history was superficially about food. On one level it was a tribal statement concerning their cultural integrity, but at another deeper level it was about control and empowerment and the violation of the compromises negotiated



*Figure 11.5 Harasiis girls and boys together in classroom.*

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with the state. A few years after the school opened, the kitchen of the dormitory came under non-violent 'protest'. Most of the schoolboys had grown up drinking litres of camel and goats milk supplemented with bread and rice. They refused to eat the daily diet of rice and curry served up by the Indian catering staff, which was increasingly perceived as unpalatable, and took instead to using their R.O. 20 (about £30) monthly allowance from the Ministry of Education to buy snacks of crisps, chocolates, soft drinks and sweets each day. Some boys put on significant weight, enough to alarm a visiting dietician who was conducting another study in the region. Particularly worrying was the weight gain of the one polio victim Harasiis student, who had previously managed on wooden crutches, but had to be provided with a wheelchair and finally a motorised tricycle.

In spite of these teething pains, the school continued to grow and by the end of the 1980s, it had nearly 100 students. In 1990 the school's first intake of boys received their intermediate school diploma (grade nine). Four decided to leave school and join the border police. They were accepted at the Police Academy and later returned as junior officers serving in the desert regions. All the parents had wanted to keep the boys in school until they completed their secondary schooling, but this original group resisted with good reason. In 1982, these boys had entered school with a mean age closer to 12 than to 7. Hence their age upon reaching grade nine was probably more like 20 or 21 instead of the normal age of 16 or 17. These young bearded youths were no longer able to bear being treated like children in classroom and they took what education they had acquired and converted it into the first skilled job training of any generation of Harasiis.



**Figure 11.6** Harasiis boys studying at the boarding school.

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By 1994 the Haima school had 120 boys and 22 girls enrolled. The sudden climb in female enrolment was due to the efforts of the women who, having grown tired of petitioning year after year for a residence for girls, took matters into their own hands and set up a system of boarding girls in a makeshift dormitory in the sand on the edge of Haima (see Chatty, 1996: 158-63 for a full discussion). Plans had been drawn up several years earlier to build a separate school and dormitory for girls in the nearby *Wadi bu Mudhabi*. This girls school was up and running in 1994, but few regular female students at Haima shifted to it. The Harasiis did not consider it necessary to segregate the girls from the boys: such ideas came from the Egyptian schoolteachers and government officials who were uncomfortable with older adolescent girls attending classes with boys.

Also in 1994, the first high school graduates, seven young men, took their high school diplomas and became eligible for recruitment into the Army and the national oil company as skilled workers. For the Harasiis this was a major achievement. At last their youth could compete for the higher paid jobs that had until then always gone to rival tribesmen. Having been the most remote and most difficult to reach community in Oman, the Harasiis had been the last to have access to education and other government services. Whereas rival tribesmen had acquired access to education in the 1970s, the Harasiis had had to wait until the 1980s. By the end of the 1990s a few boys were graduating with high school degrees each year. Some were succeeding in winning government scholarships to go on to higher education and especially technical training relevant to the oil and gas industry. In 2000, two young Harasiis youths graduated from Haima High School and took qualifying exams to enter the prestigious technical training college in Muscat run by the national oil company. In 2002, these young men were enrolled in the technical training college in Muscat and others were awaiting their opportunity to benefit from this specialised training as a road into employment in the gas and oil industry.

## Conclusion

The Haima School has continued to function and, despite a continued high dropout rate in the first two to three years of attendance, its overall enrolment has continued to increase. It has brought formal, state education into the heart of the desert, providing girls with basic numeracy and reading skills, and boys with some of the necessary tools to seek skilled employment. The aspirations and wishes of many of the elder generation of Harasiis, who could only find work as watchmen, trackers, or well guards, have come true. The Haima School, by providing education from primary level to secondary level, has become an instrument for limited success, providing a select few youths with potential access to well-paid and skilled jobs in the desert. For the households these youths belong to, family livelihood security is improved by increasing its potential for economic differentiation.



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Conventional educational measures of evaluation might not regard the Haima School as a success. Only a small percentage of the total population of Harasiis children are selected by their parents to attend school. The dropout rate remains high, indicating that universal literacy, a state goal, is unlikely to be achieved. However the school continues to operate. The question needs to be asked why this educational experiment has been allowed to continue in the face of limited success. How was it that a top-down decision by government to build a 'flagship' school in the middle of a salt flat, inaccessible to the nomadic pastoralists' livestock and hence to family units, turned into such an ongoing and partially successful venture?

My interpretation of the data revolves around three major themes: political goals, cultural hegemony, and economic opportunity. The school at Haima was established with the backing of the Minister of Education himself. It represented the government's determination to reach out to the most remote and marginal segments of Oman's population and hence draw the community into the national 'fold'. The realisation of this political goal required considerable negotiation and, in some cases, compromise with the local Harasiis community. The Harasiis parents and elders wanted a school and were prepared to accept whatever the government would provide. The fact that the school was built without any consultation in an unsuitable location gave the Harasiis a strong bargaining point. If the Ministry wished them to use the physical premises they had already built, they would have to help the Harasiis children to get there. Hence the compromise over the school hours and days of attendance, over the welfare of the resident students, over the supervision of the students out of school hours and over the admission of girls into the school. The protracted period of negotiations meant that multiple voices were heard. These included our own regular reports and suggestions, those coming from the Ministry of Interior through the office of the local *Wali*, and the direct intervention of Harasiis elders when they were in Muscat.

The state's desire to integrate the Harasiis into the Omani state as citizens and its effort to inculcate a national cultural hegemony among the student body was only partially successful and hence acted to keep Harasiis parents interested in taking the risk of sending their select youth to the school. The combination of deliberate holding back by local parents of children from entry into the school until they were considered 'reasonable' and well aware of their own culture – about nine or ten years of age – as well as the inability of the Ministry of Education to persuade any Omani teachers to accept assignments at the Haima school, meant that there was no one overarching cultural identity dominating the school community. It also meant that the pastoral way of life, although inevitably denigrated by the foreign teachers, was not seriously undermined by those Omanis who mattered.

With the school representing no particular cultural threat, Harasiis families came to regard the institution as providing a special economic

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opportunity for a select few. Families with large numbers of children – five or six – were able carefully to choose those to support and encourage to remain in school. Sometimes this was the oldest son, but as often it was the child identified as the ‘brightest’ or ‘cleverest’ in a family. There was never any idea of universal education among the Harasiis. That would not have been possible as the labour of children was, and still is, required to manage the family’s herds of camel and goat. A well-established family with half a dozen children would typically select one or two to send to school. The rest would remain at the campsite or in the desert helping with the family herds. Nevertheless, this generation has options the parents never had: to remain in the desert as subsistence herders or to go into other professions in the Army, Police or oil and gas industry while keeping herding as a secondary economic and cultural activity. This power of choice has meant that, for some pastoral families, a greater multi-resource base is now possible because of the way in which state formal education provision has been taken on and adapted by the local community. A few select pastoral households with youth who have succeeded in completing the education offered by the state are now able to tap into links with wider society through the employment potential of their young. Throughout the world, pastoralists strive to develop multi-resource household economics. In the Jiddat-il-Harasiis formal state education has made that aspiration a reality for a select set of households.

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