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# Nomadic Peoples

**Commission on Nomadic Peoples,  
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# BEDOUIN ECONOMICS AND THE MODERN WAGE MARKET: THE CASE OF THE HARASIIS OF OMAN

*Dawn Chatty*

## Introduction

The Bedouin of Arabia, the nomadic and now mainly seasonally mobile livestock herders of the peninsula have, over the last fifty years, adapted to and adopted many modern technological innovations. These adaptations can be regarded as attempts to keep up with, if not survive, the rapid transformations of the second half of the twentieth century. Despite such efforts, the Bedouin in much of Arabia have been unable to keep up with the rapidity of change and have ended up, at the close of the twentieth century, economically and politically marginalised, unable to accumulate the power needed to represent their community interests within the State. Basic government improvements in health, education and infrastructure for Bedouin communities have lagged far behind that for most other populations in the State meaning that, as individuals and as groups, the Bedouin remain a greatly disadvantaged population. The Sultanate of Oman, however, presents a different picture: political and economic change has been such that the nomadic pastoral communities have been able to access government services. The increasingly less nomadic, but nonetheless mobile, pastoralists of Oman have begun to accumulate the power needed to represent their interests and to ensure that opportunities for wage labour and trade remain open to individual members of the community. In this special case, where government has, for decades, 'benignly' neglected its livestock herders and tolerated their political structures, and extended limited services to the community, the innovative and entrepreneurial members of the community have pressed forward with adaptations and technological adoptions which best suited the region.

In this paper I briefly highlight the transformation of the Bedouin economy in Arabia, in general, before going on to describe one nomadic pastoral tribe in the Sultanate of Oman, the Harasiis. I first came across it in 1981 and followed the changes that took place over the next fifteen years, as this community has tried to adjust to its sudden and unexpected confrontation with the global economy at the close of the twentieth century. I show that Harasiis society has been able to successfully tap into aspects of global economic and political systems. This has been achieved by giving close attention to and demanding Western education and certification for its youth.

The Bedouin have, for decades, maintained a close link with town and village markets in order to sell their surplus animals and animal products. By the mid-1960s and onwards, mechanised transport to move animals and goods between

grazing land and market had become widespread (Chatty 1986; Lancaster and Lancaster 1990; Shoup 1990). Numerous motorised pumps were installed at deep wells, to meet the watering requirements of various herds. By the end of the century various implements and labour-saving devices of a global nature had been adopted, such as gas cylinders for cooking, electric generators to run televisions, radios and air conditioners. These products supported a way of life, at times mobile and at others times fixed to one place, with animal husbandry at the core of its economic and cultural base. Throughout most of Arabia these changes were accompanied by an increasing usurpation by central authority and private enterprise of the extensive land base upon which the Bedouin way of life depends. Many communities lost control over their traditional territories, and were faced with few alternatives but to gravitate to the edges of rural and urban settlements. There they eked out a multi-resource economy, which permitted them to maintain some livestock on limited pastures. In the main, the skills which these communities possessed, could not be translated into single, viable income-producing activities. Those that sought paid employment were limited to only the lowest income jobs. While some persons manifested an entrepreneurial spirit, the community was unable to accumulate the power needed for proper representation of their interests: the improvement of basic services and infrastructure for the development of commercial initiatives.

Early in the twentieth century, the Bedouin communities of Arabia came face-to-face with the rapidly transformative administration of the League of Nations mandates over the former Ottoman provinces of Mesopotamia, Syria and Palestine. Great swathes of this territory was semi-arid land, locally called the *badia* (desert), inhabited by numerous nomadic pastoralists organised into tribes. The previous two centuries had witnessed much conflict among these groups; they competed for rights to water and grazing areas (Oppenheim 1939; Rafiq 1966). As the League of Nations mandate divided up the region between British and French administrations, Bedouin tribes came increasingly under surveillance, their movements were recorded and their 'politico-economic' inter-tribal disputes monitored. The European administrations tired of the constant tussling between tribes, which often terrorised adjacent village settlements, and disturbed the European oil exploration and extraction activities in the region. They enacted a series of tribal peace accords, bestowing upon one tribe or another the rights to certain territories. Hence, for example, between 1925 and 1935, the French Mandate authorities organised a series of peace agreements between the Sbaa', Fed'aan and the Rwala in Palmyra (France, Ministère des Affaires Etrangères 1923–1938; Müller 1931; Montagne 1947). In return, the tribal leadership was accorded a role in the nascent parliamentary system being set up under mandatory supervision and the administration of the *badia* was shifted to a special unit, the *Contrôle Bédouin*, to run it as a 'state within a state'. In the British mandated territories, administration of Bedouin affairs was not as 'separate', but nonetheless special, with Bedouin tribes supporting the British created 'monarchs' of Transjordan and Iraq (Glubb

1942). The economic affairs of the tribes were, as was the case in Syria, left very much to adapt to the market demands of the region, something they had successfully managed over the centuries (Lancaster and Lancaster 1990, 1995).

By the middle of the century, the British and French mandates had ended – some more violently than others. The emergent states of Jordan, Israel, Syria and Iraq worked to consolidate their political hold over their majority populations, often to the detriment of the livestock-producing tribes of the interior of the country (Bocco 1993). In some cases, the need for land for agricultural development on a massive scale – in Israel, Jordan and Syria – meant the dispossession of Bedouin from territory they had controlled for a century or more. These were ‘Tennessee Valley Authority’ type projects for cotton plantations, orange and fruit orchards and other large-scale mechanised agricultural works. In other cases, the mobility of the Bedouin was perceived as ‘backward’ and primitive, a throwback to an earlier less ‘civilised’ age, and government efforts were directed at settling the Bedouin and transforming them from mobile, hard-to-control livestock herders into malleable, easy-to-reach settled farmers (Chatty 1995; Rae et al. 1997).

These combined political and economic moves to undermine and reshape Bedouin society were resisted with varying degrees of success. In Israel, very few Bedouin continue to move even seasonally, but their every displacement is carefully monitored by the State (Marx 1967; Abu-Rabia 1994). In Jordan, Iraq and even more so in Syria, most Bedouin have settled seasonally along a string of villages on the edge of cultivation, combining some crop cultivation with the seasonal movement of herds. A few hundred thousand families maintain a fully mobile existence – having successfully negotiated the mine-field of government bans on movement, land use; as well as the encroachment of private ‘ownership’ upon the extensive tracts of commonly acknowledged tribal grazing lands.

For these households and the more numerous seasonally mobile pastoral units, the challenge of the last fifty years has been to succeed economically in the face of political defeat. Thus the rapidity with which motor vehicles have replaced camels as beasts of burden speaks to an economic genius rather than to a political mind set. Cars, trucks and water bowser<sup>s</sup> have meant that some livestock herders can overcome the greater distances which government confiscation of the adjacent ‘fertile’ desert areas has made necessary. It has also meant that although the use of many water holes was contested, the Bedouin could move their livestock further afield and shelter them in a wider selection of sites – the life-supporting water and feed brought out to them by trucks, which later transported the animals to favourable markets.

Not all Bedouin have succeeded in overcoming the hurdles which the state has imposed. Some herder families have surrendered to these pressures, and given up the Bedouin way of life. Others, impoverished and unable to purchase the necessary technology, have joined the ranks of the ‘indentured’, hiring themselves out to the wealthier herders in their midst (Chatty 1995).

The Sultanate of Oman offers us a unique testing ground to examine the impact of government and big business on the economy of livestock herding. It also offers us an opportunity to examine the significance of employment and, conversely, unemployment in the context of the political and economic climate of the Sultanate in general. This affords us an opportunity to come to some conclusions concerning the significance of wage labour in supporting a seasonally mobile livestock raising community's continued well-being. It may be that the continuation of such multi-resource pastoral systems requires only minimal capital input. Any more (i.e., wage labour for all, or employment for all in a fixed permanent settlement of the sort desired by government) would destroy this way of life. Political voice, however, is distinct from economic opportunity. Such voice can never be gained as an outcome of 'agitation' in the Middle East. Only government 'will' or acceptance of the human and cultural rights of such minority groups will give them political voice. In Jordan, for example, Bedouin tribal identity is closely linked with the family of the ruling monarch. This identity has been translated into some economic and political power. This strength, however, has not come about from any significant role in the labour market or contribution to the national economy.

Improving the employment situation of its members may not be in the interest of all Bedouin groups. A multi-resource economy, partially devoted to subsistence, does not require full employment and certainly not jobs for 'unskilled labourers'. Better education, leading to improved employment opportunities for all are not open political agendas of government. Bedouin have little access or scope in this arena. At an international and national level, intellectual battles may be fought to provide Bedouin, as minority groups and disadvantaged populations facing cultural death, with better education opportunities, and later even, affirmative action opportunities. However, without the political will of government, there is little chance of such an agenda developing in the Middle East and the Bedouin will continue to adapt as best they can in a rapidly changing world.

## Oman

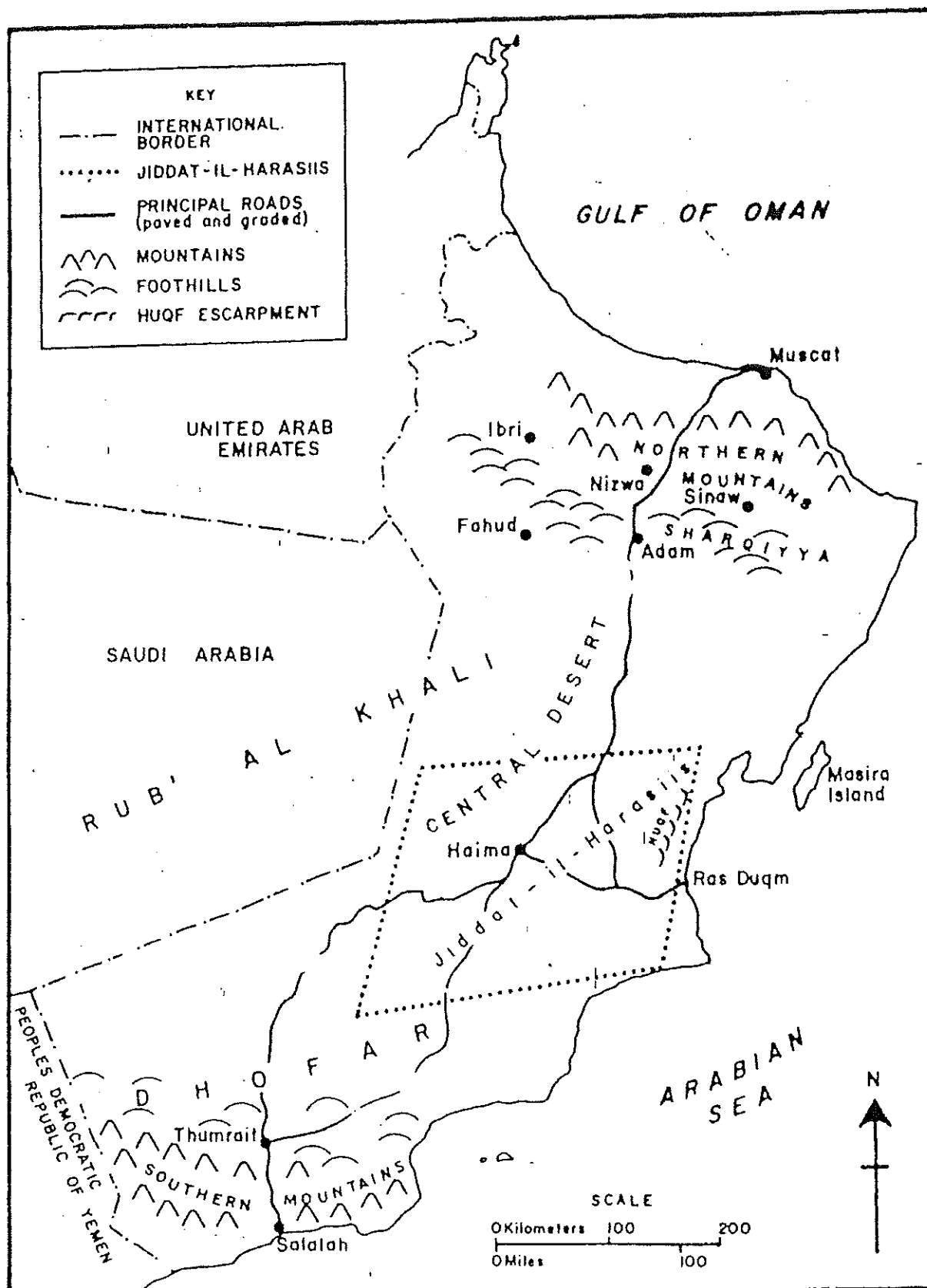
The nomadic pastoral community of Oman makes up between 6-7 per cent of the total population of a country of about two million nationals and expatriate labourers, in a total land area of 309,500 square kilometres. Unlike northern Arabia, the pastoralists of Oman have rarely been in conflict with farmers over the use of land for agricultural production or grazing by livestock. The extreme environment of the Sultanate has meant that, for most of the twentieth century, farming has been small-scale, often consisting of terraced fields on mountainous plateaus. Where farming has moved out of the mainly oasis cultivation into the desert plains, it has been led by massive capital investment for water extraction and water spreading systems. Such agricultural practices, either supported by

government or by big business (the national oil company, bilateral government ventures), have not required confiscation of land or the removal of livestock herders from their traditional territory. The vast size of Oman's desert, not the limited size of its livestock herding population, has meant that few conflicts over land use have emerged. Those that have arisen reflect a political agenda of a different nature to that faced by the Bedouin of northern Arabia where population size, proximity to agricultural settlement and contested ownership were paramount.<sup>1</sup>

The Harasiis tribe of camel and goat herders inhabits the central desert of Oman bordering on the *Rub' al-Khali* (Empty Quarter) of Arabia. At any one time between 2,000 and 2,500 Harasiis inhabit this territory known as the Jiddat al-Harasiis, or more simply, the Jiddat, an area of approximately 40,000 square kilometres (see figure 1). A number of extended families regularly spend long periods way to the north in Wadi Halfayn and even further afield in the United Arab Emirates. The Jiddat has come to be associated exclusively with the Harasiis tribe, a south Arabian language speaking group, who have alternately been pushed or drifted into this inhospitable and bleak landscape, by stronger, more powerful groups such as the Mahra and Beit Kathir tribes of Dhofar. In this gradual push north and east, the Harasiis have been blocked from moving into the better watered and generally more productive wadis controlled by other larger and more powerful, Arabic-speaking tribes like the Wahiba and the Duru'. Along the eastern edge of the Jiddat, the Harasiis have maintained an uneasy truce with the Jeneba tribe, a large and particularly influential group with strong commercial, and hence, strong political links with the merchant elite of the capital, Muscat. For decades the Harasiis and the Jeneba rivalry has simmered with occasional outbursts of violence. In 1968 a government-brokered peace took effect and relations between the two groups became civil, at least on the surface.<sup>2</sup>

For about 150 years, until the middle of the twentieth century, the Harasiis occupied the Jiddat during the cooler winter months, moving their herds of camels and goats every few days (and sometimes weeks) from one patch of grazing and browsing to another. However, as the Jiddat had no water sources whatsoever, the tribe sought to escape the high summer temperatures. During this season it dispersed into the escarpment, which ran along its eastern border with the Jeneba tribe, or further north into the Wadi Halfayn, which it shared with the Wahiba tribe. It sometimes moved even further north along the string of border oases where members could harvest their small date orchards.

Oil exploration gained momentum in the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>3</sup> At each exploratory dig, water wells were sunk to support the exploration process. The general policy of the oil company was to cap the water wells before moving on. However, a vociferous campaign by the Harasiis tribal leader, Sheikh Shergi, to the Sultan Sa'id, resulted in the oil company being ordered to leave open and maintain two wells, those at Al-Ajaiz and at Haima. Shortly afterwards, a third well was also left open and maintained at Rima, near the southern border of the Jiddat.



Map 1 *Sultanate of Oman*



For the next two decades, the Harasiis benefited from three uncontested water wells. Their territory, about the size of Scotland, suddenly came to be used differently and their migration patterns changed dramatically. With water now available, most families – mainly those 75 per cent who had no date gardens – began to remain on the Jiddat all year round. Instead of fleeing the scorching heat of the six summer months, Harasiis households tended to camp within a few hours' distance of one or another of the water wells opened and operated by the oil company. Their year round presence on the Jiddat invalidated Jeneba claims to the territory and strengthened their claims to it as their *dar* (tribal territory).

Moving their herds every few weeks, the Harasiis, for the first time in their history found themselves observers to, and occasionally labourers in, a search for oil in a territory never before contested in such a fashion. British and Dutch Shell, IPC, Elf and Total had all been granted concessions to search for oil in Oman. Their exploration areas cut across the Jiddat, and during this period Harasiis youths found paid employment on one or another seismic crew. Many derived great pleasure from the teamwork required for this activity and the use of various mechanical instruments and explosives. But these jobs were all of a short-term nature. A few of the more promising youths, those that picked up English with some ease, were taken on and trained for longer-term work either in safety or in transport.

Older and more mature tribesmen tended to find employment as night guards or watchmen. These solitary jobs were mindlessly boring, requiring nothing more than a mere physical presence – awake or asleep. Few Harasiis stayed in these posts for longer than a couple of months, though they could have remained in them permanently, since the Sultan had imposed upon the oil exploration companies the hiring of a quota of indigenous tribespeople. The Harasiis men's unwillingness or inability to remain in isolated posts for long periods of time with no task other than to be physically present, supported the oil companies' personal services' stereotypic impression of Bedouin as "lazy, undependable and unpredictable". It was only much later, as educated youths were able to move into skilled work that some European managers began to realise that "Give the Harasiis a job to do and they will do it well. But pay them to do nothing, and they soon get bored and go AWOL" (Mick Moroney, explosives expert, PDO [acronym of the national oil company], personal communication 1982).

Throughout this early period of oil exploration and later oil extraction, the Harasiis came to be exposed to, and naturally fascinated by, the equipment which these large multi-national companies brought with them. A few Harasiis had unobtrusively observed the motorised convoy of Sultan Sa'id's 1,000 kilometre drive from Salalah to Muscat in 1956, which cut a path straight across the Jiddat. Most Harasiis, however, considered the oil exploration convoy which landed at Duqm and moved across to Fahud as their first exposure to automobiles. Although the European chroniclers of that journey recorded that the Jiddat was totally devoid of people (McLeod 1987), their progress across this territory was well

recorded in oral tradition. The sounds which these engines made as they traversed the gravel and rock plain were rapidly integrated into the storytelling repertoire of those who were there, taking their place with stories of jinn, beasts, recovered camels and other marvels.

A few Harasiis managed to sign on as labourers with these exploration parties. Those who quickly mastered Arabic and some basic elements of English were later to play an important role in future negotiations over land-use and infrastructure development. Salim bin Huweila, and his lineage associate, Ibrahim bin Saghur, for example, had both been present at the Duqm landing of the oil exploration party. Salim was to take on a major role in hiring labourers from the Harasiis tribe, much to the chagrin of the tribal leader, Sheikh Shergi. Ibrahim was to become a close associate of the British expatriate advisor on the environment, at that time an oil company liaison officer. He would, two decades later, act as guide to the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and World Wildlife Fund (WWF) exploratory party which searched for a base for the oryx reintroduction project. Without any consultation or tribal authority, he was to lead the Western conservation experts to Wadi Yalouni, the greenest part of the Jiddat, which the Harasiis regarded as their special reserve in times of drought.

Exposure to modern technology had, perhaps, the most profound impact during this period (1960–1980) on the Harasiis and other pastoral tribes in Oman. Although vehicle importation was rigidly controlled by the Sultan and restricted to the oil industry and a few government offices, the Harasiis were fascinated by motor vehicles and their potential use in the mobile subsistence economy of the community. Within ten years of the lifting of the ban on the importation of motor vehicles by Sultan Qaboos – in 1970 – most Harasiis extended families were operating a four-wheel drive vehicle.<sup>4</sup> The first car appeared on the Jiddat in 1976; it belonged to a Harasiis employed in the United Arab Emirates army. This machine was rapidly joined by many others. Some men purchased cars after selling off a number of camels in markets in Salalah and elsewhere. They took advantage of the aggressive 'package deals' based on monthly payment plans set up by the major car dealers who were at last permitted to operate in Oman (Toyota, Nissan, Isuzu, Suzuki and Land Rover).

At the risk of simplifying a far more complex interaction, I argue that the spontaneous adaptation of motor vehicles required that the Harasiis create a regular source of monetary income in order to maintain and run their new beasts of burden. Such employment was ideally sought within the Harasiis territory or the Jiddat itself. In other words, employment and wage labour for the Harasiis was incidental to car ownership. The money from such activity supported the motor vehicle, rather than the household unit. Livelihood and subsistence was grounded in animal husbandry, while paid employment was an extra, non-essential aspect of pastoral life in the Jiddat.

When I first encountered the Harasiis in 1980, they operated a mainly subsistence economy. The average camping unit consisted of an extended kin

\* group of between 10–15 people focused upon a nuclear family of parents, siblings and children. Such a group would keep about 100 goats and a few sheep and 25 or 30 camels. Raising the animals mainly for milk, the Harasiis would cull the young male goats at between 8–12 weeks. These would be taken to Sálalah, Adam, Sinaw or Nizwa – three or four hundred kilometres north or south for sale or barter. Because the nanny goats were not separated from the breeding rams, kids were born throughout the year. There was no one season for ‘kidding’. Hence at any one time the Harasiis had some of their goats in milk. Camels, with an eleven month-long gestation period and an equally long lactation period, were more carefully managed to ensure at all times that a quarter of the herd was either lactating or pregnant.

The Harasiis prided themselves on their robustness, their independence and their ability to survive with little water. I was often told “We only need water for our animals. The animals provide us with all we need”. Before the advent of oil exploration in the late 1950s and 1960s, the Harasiis maintained they drank only milk from their herds. What little water they had was generally obtained by labouriously wringing out the moisture from their blankets after a night of heavy condensation.<sup>5</sup> Alternatively a household might decide to send a youth out on a camel journey of several weeks duration to fill goatskin bags with water for household consumption.

Household expenditure was generally limited to what income the unit could raise from the sale of unwanted male kids, and the leather and palm frond items generally made by women during the hot summer months. These months were spent sheltering in the escarpment at the edge of the Jiddat, or in the date oases along the northern edge of the desert. Arriving in the market towns after several weeks journey, a Harasiis would sell the livestock and handicrafts and receive the negotiated value in Maria-Theresa Thalers or Indian Rupees. He would then proceed to purchase up to this value in flour, rice, sugar, tea, coffee, cardamon and dates. Occasionally he would negotiate a credit, but this was always very limited, as the Harasiis were known universally to be ‘poor’ and to have few resources. Hence credit extended to them was always considered a great risk. Furthermore, the 300–400 kilometres of open desert gravel plain which separated them from these border towns did not contribute to a sense of security for repayment. Only in towns where a few Harasiis had date gardens, in Manah and near Adam, was credit easily negotiated.

Although the Harasiis maintained a largely subsistence economy before 1980, disposable income was evident in the jewellery with which women and children were adorned and in the few trappings of ‘global’ culture like Bulgarian enamel tea kettles, portable radios and acrylic blankets. These items were evidence of a common feature of Harasiis culture – the informal ‘rite of passage’ of male youths into mature men. Many of the Harasiis youths had travelled long distances, for adventure, experience and income. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s and earlier, Harasiis men had travelled to the Trucial Coast (present-day United Arab

Emirates), some joining the British-run Trucial Scouts in Sharjah, others working in the fledgling oil industry. Some travelled to Saudi Arabia to find employment and, surely, some adventure, in the National Guard and in the national oil company, Aramco. Others reached even Beirut. Those who generally succeeded in amassing some wealth were the 'linguistically' talented men, who quickly mastered Arabic and a smattering, if not total fluency, of English. They were much like the guides and interpreters of Asia Minor, the Dragomans, men who were able to secure employment with European travellers and adventurers moving through the region, because of their ability to negotiate in Arabic, Turkish and Persian, or a significant number of the many other languages found in the region.

Two Harasiis in Sharjah became anthropological 'key informants' to the Austrian anthropologist, Walter Dostal. Closer to home, men found adventure in the standing army of Sultan Sa'id, which was run by seconded British officers. Two of these young men assisted in the capture of the last oryx in the wild, for the 'World Herd' project.<sup>6</sup> Others found work in the police force, as drivers and desert guides for visiting dignitaries, and in the oil company headquarters. After a number of years away (ranging between seven and seventeen years), these men returned to the Jiddat, married (if they had not already entered into a bride service agreement), began to raise their families, and took up full-time animal husbandry in partnership with their wives. The men managed and owned the camel herds, and the women owned and looked after the flocks of goat and sheep. A few men were able to invest in the limited, but nonetheless expanding, commercial opportunities of the 1970s and 1980s. One leased the first, and for nearly ten years the only, petrol station for six hundred kilometres of road. Another opened a 'cold store'. Yet another opened a garage and tyre repair centre while investing in a small fleet of water bowsers for lease to one of the many sub-contractors in the area working for the national oil company.

Between 1981 and 1983, I lived and worked with the Harasiis on the Jiddat along with two assistants, an American Peace corps couple on loan to me from the Ministry of Education. The three of us, along with our Harasiis guide and driver, travelled and camped with the Harasiis covering the width and breadth of the Jiddat every few months. The Harasiis easily identified our two-vehicle convoy of Land Rovers, as only the police and the oil company used such vehicles. The Harasiis had opted for more reasonably priced Japanese half-ton trucks, for themselves. In the five years it had taken for most Harasiis to buy or borrow a vehicle, the matter of their running costs had become an issue of immense concern.

These same five years had also seen a veritable explosion in work opportunities on the Jiddat itself. The Police, in association with the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Education, and the Ministry of Social Affairs had cooperated to construct a tribal centre at the water well at Haima. This was the major border patrol station for the Police Force as well as the government's first effort to extend social services to the pastoral communities of the desert.<sup>7</sup> The crucial point to keep in mind was that opportunities to move into a market economy were accompanied

by a sudden explosion of paid work opportunities in the Jiddat itself, and not a 1,000 kilometres away. Jobs, as guards and watchmen were available with the Police, the oil company and its sub-contractors, with the Ministry of Interior and with the separate ministries constructing offices at Haima. In addition, the IUCN/WWF approved project to reintroduce the oryx back to Oman was sited nearby. This project required men to track the oryx and to keep daily records of their movement and behaviour. Although the Harasiis had not been involved in any of the planning for this project and had not been consulted when the conservation advisors decided to take over part of their traditional territory, they were employed by the project as trackers, since they were the only people in possession of the specific skills required to take on such work in the Jiddat. These jobs – graded as skilled tasks by the civil service – were well paid in comparison with other jobs, such as well guards and watchmen.

Throughout the 1980s and well into the 1990s, almost every Harasiis household had one male employed 'locally', that is, within the 40,000 square kilometres of the Jiddat. A number of households had two male members in employment. Most men preferred local employment, as it permitted them to return at regular intervals to visit their family and to check on the livestock. Those who held jobs further afield, in the United Arab Emirates or Saudi Arabia, were only back home once a year for their annual leave of forty-five days. The latter group gradually began to sponsor and import Asian labourers to look after their camel herds during their long absences.

In a very short time, the Harasiis focus of finding work shifted. Local jobs existed, but their concern became to find skilled work opportunities. Much of the work that was available was temporary or mindlessly boring and poorly paid. The Harasiis began to question why they were not getting the permanent, more skilled work as were their rival tribesmen, the Jeneba. This questioning took them to the heart of the issue: formal education and qualifications.

Access to education for Omani nationals has had a chequered past. In the 1950s and 1960s, those families wishing to educate their children beyond the rudiments of the Koran, which could be developed in the Islamic *kuttab* (a community level school for learning to read and write though the rote memorisation of the Koran)

Table 1: *Salaries 1981–1982 in R.O.\**

Well Operator	100
Company Guard	100
Sheikh	100
Well Guard	120
Oryx Ranger	200
Internal Security	265
Oil Company (skilled worker)	400

\* 1 R.O. (Rial Omani) = U.S. \$ 2.58

Adapted from Chatty 1996



had to consider smuggling their children out of the country, or emigrating as a whole. The reigning monarch, Sultan Sa'id, tightly controlled access to education and personally selected the one hundred children he permitted to enter school in Muscat each year. All others had to find education through whatever means available. Many families sent their sons to schools in India, Kuwait and Bahrain, others put whole families on boats to East Africa and elsewhere, spending a decade or more abroad in exile. When Sultan Sa'id was overthrown by his son Qaboos, these families and their children were encouraged to return to Oman. They formed the elite cadre of educated nationals who provided the manpower to successfully set up a government civil service and private business community. The elimination of illiteracy and creation of a new generation of educated nationals became a priority for the government. Hundreds of schools were opened and thousands of primary school teachers were imported, the majority of whom were from Egypt and the Sudan. Schools sprang up in the capital areas of Muscat and Salalah and in the heavily populated settled coastal towns. By the mid-1970s schools could be found servicing nearly every village in the country; only the desert areas were not covered. In the Musandam and in Jebel Akhdar, a boarding school was set up to service the very remote mountain villages. Tribes with close links to agricultural settlements or with extensive date garden holdings, such as the Duru', Wahiba and Jeneba began to send select students to these village schools.

By the early 1980s, the government of Sultan Qaboos sought to extend its services to the desert dwellers of the country. The Haima tribal centre was planned for them. Integral to its conception was the creation of a school for the pastoral tribes of the region. As the rival Jeneba tribe already had a school at Duqm, the Haima unit became almost exclusively a Harasiis venture. With the full support of the community, who took on roles as supervisors and guardians, a boarding school for boys – with girls permitted to attend on a day-school basis – was opened in 1982. Over the next decade its enrolment grew, as did the number of teachers assigned to it from the Ministry offices in Muscat. All the teachers were expatriates, mainly from Egypt, the Sudan and Jordan. The original intake was only a few dozen boys and girls. Many of the boys were already eleven or twelve years old. Later intakes were generally restricted to seven or eight-year-old children. Hence it was not surprising that, nine years later, the first intake of boys reaching the age of twenty or twenty-one, and near the end of their physical growth, no longer wished to sit in classrooms with boys much younger than they were. By 1991, nine Harasiis youths, part of the first intake, left the school with a 'preparatory' certificate (*i'dadi*, equivalent to ninth grade) and sought employment with the Police Force, which was known to accept this certificate as the basis for further training in skilled work with the Force. Three of these youths succeeded in passing the Police Examinations criteria and entered the Police Academy in Nizwa as cadets. They became the first of their tribe to gain skilled, long-term employment with the Police Force. Many of their fathers had found work with the Police as trackers in the gazelle border patrol units. Still these young men are

nearly a decade behind members of rival tribes whose opportunities to enter the Police through education came earlier.

In 1994 the first set of high school graduates emerged from the Haima High School. There were six young men with high school certificates, and for the first time since the presence of the oil company or the creation of a civil service, Harasiis youths were eligible for recruitment into skilled training programmes and into the government civil service. Just before their graduation ceremony, I talked with the senior recruitment officer at PDO. My purpose was to remind him of the existence of this school and to see it put on the list of regional schools from which the company recruited their permanent staff. The oil company had for a number of years actively sought out high school graduates from the remoter regions, in an effort to balance the composition of their workforce. "These are just the young men we want to consider" I was told, as they would be more likely to cope well with long-term assignments in remote and distant fields, certainly more likely than the boys born and bred in the city.

For the Harasiis, and the other pastoral tribes in Oman, the key to their successful integration into the state has lain in the continual emphasis on education. Despite their grumbling about the poor quality of the instruction, the inappropriateness of the curriculum, and the 'bad habits' which students learn, school attendance remains high. The Haima school began with 42 students in 1982, and by 1994 had over 140. It took the Harasiis nearly a quarter of a century to gain equal access to the locally most sought after types of skilled employment in government, big business and in the military. It was education and not work *per se* that held the key to Harasiis integration into the State.

Education alone, however, without the political interest and 'will' by central government, would not be enough to support a community in its drive to develop and adapt to a rapidly changing world, while still maintaining its fundamental attachment to land and herds. In the case of Oman, land is not in shortage, people are. Hence the government makes no effort to expropriate or confiscate land holdings<sup>8</sup> and mobile communities, like the Harasiis with their highly extensive land use system, are encouraged to become equal partners with other communities in the State. The entry to such partnership leads through education into government posts, and jobs in big business and other entrepreneurial enterprises. The Harasiis, following in the footsteps of other livestock keeping communities, are making good progress toward such integration.

A successful programme of education, as with any other government service, clearly attests to a political will and interest by central authority. To give such communities of mobile desert dwellers agency requires careful political consideration and planning. Otherwise mobile pastoralists in the arid lands of the Middle East are increasingly in danger of becoming an urban proletariat driven from its lands by various development schemes, for the creation of new roads, new towns and wildlife conservation programmes. No amount of 'job' creation can overcome government ill will, fear or worse.

## Notes

1. In an effort to participate in global conservation concerns and activities, the government of Oman requested the assistance of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) to identify land for a project to reintroduce the oryx back into the country. An important wadi in the Jiddat al-Harasiis was identified and the government project was set up in this relatively fertile area. Some Harasiis were passively integrated into the project as animal trackers, but in the main, the community was advised to stay away from the area. The Harasiis resisted this order, as they did the ban on infrastructure development in the area recommended by the expatriate advisors on the environment.
2. As early as the 1930s, Bertram Thomas, a British political agent closely associated with the reigning Sultan, noted that the Jeneba were contesting the Harasiis claim to the Jiddat. They claimed it was Jeneba territory, though they freely admitted they were loath to live in such a 'God-forsaken' land (Thomas 1929).
3. The first exploration party of Shell, later known as PDO, the national oil company, landed at Duqm in 1954. This was Jeneba territory. The exploration party hired a few Jeneba and one Harasiis as guides and moved across the Jiddat to finally set up camp, and later strike oil, in Fahud.
4. Sultan Qaboos took over from his father in an almost bloodless palace coup in 1970. One of his first acts was to lift the ban on importation of motor vehicles, flashlights, sunglasses and other assorted paraphernalia of 'modern' Western culture, which his father had so feared would destroy Omani society if introduced too rapidly.
5. Between March and October, occult precipitation, found in other similar deserts like Namibia's skeleton coast and the Red Sea coast, is common. During this period, and particularly in March, April and September, air temperatures are moderate and fogs are common.
6. In the early 1970s, Operation Oryx was launched to capture the last few remaining oryx in the wild and put them in zoos around the world. The idea was to breed captive animals until such a time as they could be safely returned to the wild. One animal was captured in the Jiddat al-Harasiis and several others in the Aden protectorate. For more details see Grimwood 1988.
7. For details of this United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) project to extend government services to the mobile communities of the Jiddat al-Harasiis see Chatty 1996: 33–37.
8. The oryx reintroduction project was based not so much on the concept of land confiscation, but rather upon land preservation necessitating significant restrictions on infrastructure development and use.

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## Résumé

L'article montre brièvement la transformation de l'économie des Bédouins en Arabie, en général, avant de discuter la condition des Harasiis, une tribu nomade pastorale du Sultanat d'Oman. Il analyse les changements qui prirent place durant les années 1981–1995, quand cette communauté essayait de s'adapter à la confrontation soudaine avec la globalisation économique de la fin du vingtième siècle.

## Resumen

El artículo ilustra brevemente la transformación de la economía Beduina de Arabia en general, para pasar a una discusión acerca de los Harasiis, una tribu nómada pastoral en el Emirato de Oman. Se analizan los cambios que se produjeron entre 1981 y 1995, cuando esta comunidad intentó ajustarse a la repentina e inesperada confrontación con la economía global de fines de siglo XX.