

## **Harasiis Marriage, Divorce and Companionship**

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Men and women among the Harasiis tribe in the central desert of Oman face the same difficulties in their relationships to each other as anywhere else in the Muslim world. Marriages are often arranged to link families together and weddings between first and second cousins, are very common. The primary aim of such arrangements is child-raising and companionship. Such links bring together not only the individual man and woman, but also their entire families. The individual thus has the support of an extended kin group in times of crisis, discord, and strife. Their solutions to conflict, breakup, and reconciliation are totally in keeping with the barriers and limitations which the physical environment they inhabit imposes upon them: flexibility and adaptation, individuality and compromise.

For most of the 1980s and early 1990s, I lived and worked among the Harasiis, a nomadic pastoral tribe of about 3,000 people inhabiting the Jiddat-il-Harasiis, the central desert of Oman which borders the great *Rub'-al-Khali* (Empty Quarter) of Arabia (for more detail see Chatty, 1996). The Harasiis survive in this desolate land by raising herds of camel and goat, and relying on the herds' milk for most of their sustenance. Men own and look after the herds of camels, and women own and manage the herds of goats. Only men are permitted to milk camels though men and women do milk the goat herds. Occasionally a woman inherits a camel or two from her father, or other male relative which she then gives to a man to herd and look after for her.

For two years between 1981 and 1983, I had as my assistants a young Peace Corps couple, and the three of us, along with our Harasiis guide and driver moved continuously visiting one family campsite or another in the vast 40,000 square kilometre rock and gravel plain. We often tried to camp on our own a short distance from a family, but these efforts were firmly repulsed time and time again and we would be brought into the campsite and shown where to

set down our sleeping bags close to the campfire. Within a few months of this routine, we knew our families well and moved about with an ease that belied our discomfort at the vastness and emptiness of the land the Harasiis called home.

One late afternoon as our convoy of two four-wheel drive vehicles approached the campsite of Merzooq, one of the most respected Harasiis elders, we came upon Samgha the young wife of Merzooq's son, Luwayhi. She was with her small herd of 40 goats. It was an odd time to be taking goats out to graze. Most Harasiis would be calling the goats to come back to the campsites for water and some feed supplements at this time of day. We stopped and asked her how she was and where she was going. "Home", she said. "To my father's home". A bit surprised by this short terse statement, we didn't ask any more and bid her a safe journey. It was bound to be a walk of several hours, if she was lucky. We carried on slowly to the campsite she had just walked out of. On arrival we turned off our engines, set down our sleeping kit and then joined the few adults sitting in the shade of a parked vehicle. A subdued family awaited our news.

Merzooq and Luwayhi greeted us, as did Luwayhi's mother. Had we passed by Samgha, they asked? Had Samgha told us anything? We recounted the events of the past half hour and asked them to tell us what was going on. Why was Samgha walking her goats away from the campsite at a time when she should be bringing them in? Did she make any explanations before she set out on what was going to be a walk of several hours? Merzooq's wife explained to us that she was leaving her husband. She was initiating a divorce proceeding. By taking her goats and walking back home she was signalling her wish to end the marriage. It was now up to Luwayhi and his father and to try to persuade her to come back. If they did nothing they would be signalling their agreement for the divorce to be final. However, if in a few days time, they set out to visit Samgha and her father, Mohammed, at their home then a reconciliation process might be set into effect. Merzooq, was not only Samgha's father-in-law. He was also her uncle. Merzooq and Mohammed were brothers and they had married their children to each other.

Labelled parallel-cousin marriage in the West, this '*bint amm*' (daughter of uncle) arrangement is very popular in the Middle East, in general, and among nomadic pastoral

tribes in particular (see Barth 1973; Kressel, 1986; Murphy, 1956). When asked why such marriage is preferred a number of explanations are generally given by the Harasiis: to keep property and capital within the patrilineal family; to know what kind of person your family was taking on; and to provide better security for the bride as her father-in-law would also be her uncle. In the case of Samgha and Luwayhi, they were first cousins who had known each other their entire life. Their fathers had kept moving campsites with an eye to staying close together whenever possible. They helped each other out looking after their herds of camels and their wives and children worked the goat herds together. Often they were less than ten kilometres apart when grazing was plentiful and all their herds could be feed from one general grazing area. Occasionally though, in recent years, with four-wheeled drive vehicles making their appearance on the Jiddat in the mid-1970s, they were quite some distance apart in their search for natural graze for their livestock. Fortunately for Samgha, her decision to leave with her goats and return to her father was made at a time when both campsites were a half hours' drive across the Jiddat or several hours walk.

Merzooq waited a few days before visiting his brother Mohammed to discuss a reconciliation between Samgha and Luwayhi. These two young people had only been married a few months and had no children, nor was Samgha pregnant or so it seemed. Before setting out to attempt to heal this rift, I asked Merzooq what he thought were his chances of success. "Not good", he said. "Not good, because she has not stayed long enough with Luwayhi to come to know him and feel contented with him. They are cousins, they know each other well, but only on the outside. The deeper knowledge has not yet been made". Merzooq spent a week with his brother and with Samgha. He spoke with her and listened to what she had to say. He spoke with his brother and heard him out, as well. And at the end of the week he returned to his home alone. Samgha had refused to return. She did not wish to be Luwayhi's wife any longer.

We often visited Merzooq's campsite and saw Luwayhi there too. As the oldest son, he was the most physically able and was always busy bringing water in tankers to the campsite, looking after the herds of camels, gathering up goat manure to sell in the desert border towns. He was his father's right-hand man. And, for months, he remained hopeful that Samgha would change her mind and return to him.

When we visited Mohammed's campsite we would also sit and talk with Samgha in the evenings when she had returned from herding her goats and those of her mother. Samgha was not adverse to talking about her cousin. He was a nice enough person, she said, but she didn't want to live with him. She made no effort to cast any doubts upon his character, or to tell any tales of abuse. It did seem that we, the outsiders, were more interested in finding a reason for why she had returned home. Her own family accepted her return with equanimity and got one with its business. One day, when she was ready, they all said, she would marry again and have children.

For the first few months after her return there was the quiet expectation in both homestead that she might be pregnant and her action in returning to her natal home was somehow related to a 'confusion' she may have felt in such a state. But once it was established that she was not expecting a child, and her period of waiting (in Islam, a waiting period of four months is expected of a divorcee or widow before remarrying) had lapsed, her actions were totally accepted. She was not chided, nor was there any sense that she was somehow a used commodity.

Within a year she married again, this time more successfully. She remained in her father's home for the first three years of this new marriage, before moving into her husband's family's homestead. There, she had children. Once they were old enough to start helping with some of the herding tasks, Samgha and her second husband set up their own household, which moved location in close association to her husband's extended family group.

Samgha's marriages reflect two very common patterns among the Harasiis: cousin marriage and delayed separation from natal households. One common feature of marriage to the very young bride - among the Harasiis girls are often engaged, given a face mask, and married at puberty, which often occurs at about age 14 - is a form of 'bride service'. With very young brides, the family often insists that the bride remains in her natal family, with the groom coming to visit and provide services to the family regularly, helping to look after the family's herds, providing it with water, or bringing vital supplies from the distant towns. Such 'bride service' often lasts for four or five years, after which time the young wife is expected to

become pregnant with her first child. During the 1980s, I only once came across an incident where a young bride had become pregnant before it was socially considered appropriate. This was talked about at numerous evening campfires throughout the Jiddat-il-Harasiis with a certain amount of sniggering by the older generation. The mature husband who was taking this young girl as his second wife - a very rare occurrence among the Harasiis - was considered to have acted inappropriately, showing undue impatience and lack of respect.

The Harasiis maintain that an extended period of 'bride service' is very important to make the bride feel confident and to give her time to learn all the additional skills she will need to run her own home. At the same time, the Harasiis are protecting the interests of the young bride vis-a-vis the groom. While the couple learns to interact and live together, the bride has her own family around her to help her through any difficulties and to give her the support she might need. Only as the new family begins to raise children and they, in turn, begin to provide some help in the daily chores, does the new nuclear family consider splitting off and either joining the husband's extended family or setting up on its own with another elderly relative. Once she has left to join her husband's family or to set up on her own, the Harasiis wife needs to be totally self-sufficient and confident that she can cope with all the demands which a young family, a growing herd of goat and an inhospitable and harsh physical environment may demand of her.

Cousin marriage, bride service, and delayed separation from the natal home are all common features of Harasiis society. These institutions serve to help men and women establish long-lasting relationships within which to raise their families, and live out their lives. They provide the young bride with the protection, support and companionship she requires until she is able to do so for others younger or less experienced than her. They guide the young groom into his role as husband, father and companion. In the vast, wide-open spaces of the Jiddat, living within a large extended family with assorted visitors and kinsmen is an important survival strategy. Such an existence requires tolerance, adaptability and flexibility in order to reduce conflict and make reconciliation a significant goal of all misunderstandings.

Polygyny, or several wives at one time, is permitted in Islam, but rarely practiced among the Harasiis. It is a matter of survival rather than any religious or ethical consideration that keeps the Harasiis to one spouse at a time or serial monogamy. The only case of polygyny that I recorded in the early period of my fieldwork was one where the first wife was barren, or had been unable to conceive. A second wife was taken who conceived a number of children. The first wife remained within the household and created an area of specialization for herself as a herbalist. She provided the family with medicinal treatments and soon became renowned throughout the area as a healer. In more recent years, a few older, wealthy Harasiis men have begun to take much younger, second wives. For the most part, they are establishing separate family units and they hire labourers to help each unit manage in the difficult environment of the Jiddat.

The solitary individual cannot survive on his or her own in the Jiddat-il-Harasiis. Hence the separated, divorced or widowed is quickly assisted in finding new conjugal arrangements, or in joining an existing extended family. Divorced or widowed men and women rarely remain on their own. Remarriage, or cohabitation is the rule rather than the exception. It happens that occasionally an unlucky man or woman will have had three or four spouses in succession in his or her lifetime. In cases where children are born to these serial marriages, the mother's name becomes an important part of the appellation of the children. For example, the Salim bin Hamad, (Salim the son of Hamad - the father's name) would also be known as Salim bin Huweila (Salim the son of Huweila -the mother's name). This devise, quite common in the Jiddat-il-Harasiis, is an indicator of the flexibility and adaptability of conjugal relations among the Harasiis. It is also a testimony to the extreme harshness of the physical environment and the often all-too-short adult life expectancy of the Harasiis adult.

We discovered, when trying to make out the kinship ties which bound homesteads together, that extended family groups in the Jiddat often included 'long-term, unrelated visitors'. Most of these visitors were older men, who had either never married, or whose offsprings had emigrated out of the country or had died untimely. The local gold dealer was one such guest we got to know well. He was staying with a family we were visiting and we noticed him because he couldn't be parted from the pink acrylic blanket that he kept beside him at all time in his special place by the camp fire. It was filled with gold we were told. He made the

circuit, our host informed us, travelling slowly around the Harasiis campsites either delivering gold ordered on previous trips or taking orders and payment for future purchases. He was never sure where he would be going next or how long it would take him as his transportation depended entirely upon the movements of others. Over the year he would move among various Harasiis households, make a trip to the gold suqs of Dubai and then return to continue his slow amble among families living in the Jiddat.

Occasionally we came across other old men, many very weak and hardly able to move. One man was a mute who had never married and had spent his entire life looking after the camel herds of his brothers. Now he moved from one household to another as a guest rather than a family member. Another was a widower whose two sons had emigrated to the United Arab Emirates. He didn't want to join them there and so he moved from one family to another staying a few months or until transportation could be arranged to carry him to another willing host.

Only once did we come across a very old woman staying at a campsite made up of people unrelated to her. She had married, and had raised two children, but they had died and she was now on her own, too feeble to look after herself or her herd of goats. Her vision was very limited and she wore glasses which magnified her eyes and made it impossible to wear a face mask. She was perhaps the only unmasked woman on the Jiddat (for more detail on the importance of face masking see Chatty, 1997). She stayed with families for as long as they would have her before being moved on. Her survival depended upon such hospitality.

## Conclusion

Harasiis men and women face the same problems of existence as any other society in the Muslim world. This small population of about 250 extended family units spread out over an area the size of Scotland (Delaware?? 40,000 square kilometres) has learned, however, to modify and adapt institutions in order to survive in the extreme, harsh and hostile physical environment of the Jiddat-il-Harasiis. Cooperation, support and flexibility are the key to understanding the ways in which the Harasiis manage their marriages, divorces, and needs for companionship. Relations between men and women, nurtured and strengthened by various

institutions among them cousin marriage, bride service, delayed separation from natal family, help explain the ways in which living units are formed, structured and recreated to accommodate the births and deaths of new members of their society

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