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# HERITAGE POLICIES, TOURISM AND PASTORAL GROUPS IN THE SULTANATE OF OMAN

*Dawn Chatty*

## Abstract

Although heritage and its preservation has been at the forefront of Omani policy for several decades, tourism to the country has been restricted, until recently, to small elite tour groups either taking advantage of the sun and sand or, in Dhofar, the cool and humid post monsoon landscapes. Pastoralist communities in the desert interior have been largely excluded from heritage tourism and tourist ventures with the exception of Disneyfied ‘Arabian nights’ camps on the edges of the most northerly desert sands of the Wahiba. Authenticity, and possession of intangible cultural heritage, for the most part have not been a part of tourism or, for that matter, heritage policies. The growing popularity of desert tours, camel racing and sand dune ‘bashing’ programmes in the neighbouring United Arab Emirates, is, however, changing perceptions and practices in Oman. The desert landscape and its intangible heritage are belatedly receiving some national and international attention. By focusing on notions of cosmopolitanism and tangible and intangible heritage, this paper will address the challenges that are emerging with regard to tourism, heritage and authenticity of the pastoral groups in the Sultanate of Oman. It endeavours to frame the heritage debates and national policies of exclusion of pastoral groups within the context of international demands for increased and accessible tangible and intangible heritage tourism.

**KEYWORDS:** heritage, intangible cultural heritage, tourism, pastoralism, Oman

## Introduction

Heritage policies and tourism are often synchronised; the one feeds off the other and the two generally both benefit. Heritage sites and public spaces (tangible culture) in many states, particularly in the Arabian Gulf need to be viewed in the context of the political priorities of the ruling elite in these nations. Here the rapidly developing and modernising Gulf States face a critical junction in terms of tourism aspirations. Should the development of heritage sites and public spaces celebrate the rapid development and modernisation of the nation – serving the political goals of the state and the elites – or should heritage

policies celebrate the broader cultural reality of the unique and often intangible traditions of the state and its peoples? The former emphasises the cosmopolitan and homogenising tendency of the Gulf States, while the latter celebrates the multi-cultural histories and unique traditions and customs found there. This is particularly critical for Oman, a country which has a sizeable multicultural 'indigenous' population. After first briefly discussing Gulf heritage tendencies to celebrate the modern and cosmopolitan alongside the (re)created traditions for tourism, this paper will examine the heritage debates in Oman, which until recently focused exclusively on tangible culture and excluded pastoral groups from consideration. Using a case study of the Harasiis pastoral nomads of the central desert of Oman, this paper will reflect on how these people whose authenticity was formerly rejected by both the government and multinational players are gradually being reintegrated into the 'body-heritage', and are coming to be seen as part and parcel of the unique cultural heritage of the country. As interest in intangible culture for heritage tourism in Oman grows, so too does interest increase in its desert pastoral peoples and their uniquely authentic rather than (re)created traditions.

### Neo-cosmopolitanism, heritage tourism and the state

Observers of the Arab Gulf states have frequently commented on how rapidly the landscape has been Disneyfied through oil money, with mega projects such as the world's largest artificially created harbour and port, the self-proclaimed seven-star hotel in the Burj al Arab, the artificial residential island called The World and the constructed snow and ice filled spaces of Ski Dubai. All these monumental projects suggest that the Gulf States are tied into a globalising, international, and perhaps even cosmopolitan, world. These showpieces are, on the one hand, assumed to draw tourists to see and experience 7\* accommodation, and to marvel at the rapid development of the region. One could argue further that the ski slopes of Ski Dubai also contain a discreet but important political message, that having snow and skiing on demand in a hot, desert environment is the result of the inspired leadership of the Maktoum family, which has been able to use its wealth to overcome the environmental limitations imposed by nature. These projects convey an even more important political message, which the state is in control, that it can impose its will on the population and that it can create / construct a reality that puts it on an equal footing with the most developed nations of the world. In so doing, it constructs a new memory that may not factually reflect on the past, but certainly aspires to project a sense of the future.

The term ‘cosmopolitanism’ is a complicated and much contested concept, especially in terms of how it relates to political identity and meanings. The basic definition of cosmopolitanism draws from the etymology of the term, in Greek, *cosmos* meaning ‘world’ or universe’ and ‘polis’ meaning city. In its most recent – late twentieth century – incarnation, it has taken on a more complex and contested idea of either a positive extension of globalisation or a kind of universality of outlook or identity. It has nearly always been regarded as the opposite of localism and parochialism. In the Levant, the concept of local cosmopolitanism or conviviality (see Chatty 2010, Hannerz 1990, Rabo 2008, Zubaida 1999) has been used to understand the willingness of the many ethno-religious minorities to live together or side-by-side and tolerate their different cultural and linguistic heritages. This phenomenon is believed by some to be a remnant of the Ottoman millet system where multi-culturalism was not only tolerated but, at times, also celebrated (Chatty 2010, Rabo 2008). In the context of the Gulf States, what seems to be emerging is a partial engagement of the states with the most developed nations of the world (globalisation) and a celebration of the ability to overcome environmental constraints to create astonishingly expensive international playing fields and rest stops for elite tourism. I have termed this neo-cosmopolitanism, as the message is not just of a universal tolerance of the ‘Other’, but also of a significant but nuanced political message that the state makes – suggesting the region is able to control its development and modernisation projects and thus its citizens. It is a message and an image of the Gulf region as one free from extremism and thus deserving to belong to the comity of nations (the Developed World) and a safe place in which to vacation and make merry.

### *Heritage sites and the (re)construction of tradition*

The tangible sites of heritage in the Gulf and elsewhere usually perform a role in contributing to or strengthening national historical narratives of shared cultural and social bonds. A sense of national purpose is often articulated in these heritage structures. For some, the very rapidity of modernisation and the often bland homogenisation of new skyscraper structures and city skylines contrast sharply with the (re)created low-lying heritage sites of permanent exhibitions (generally labelled museums), forts, castles, and market places. For others, heritage and the physical sites encapsulate express nostalgia for the past and for traditions which seem to be vanishing overnight. Many of the heritage sites in the Arab Gulf are markers of these lost or ignored traditions. This nostalgia for a rapidly disappearing world is what Miriam Cooke identifies as the driving force behind the renewal of interest in and (re)imagining of heritage throughout the region both among states and local social groups (Cooke 2014). It is also why states

have given considerable attention and funding to heritage projects, the renewal of recently abandoned old urban quarters or isolated villages, and attempts to protect local craftsmanship and cultural knowledge. In some cases, traditions are created where there were none. Doha's market place in the 1940s consisted 'of mean fly-infested hovels, the roads were dusty tracks, there was no electricity, and the people had to fetch their water from skins and cans from wells two or three miles outside the town' (Fromherz 2012: 1, in Cooke 2014: 94). The newly (re)created market place (souq) gleams and sparkles with clean brickwork, air-conditioning and colonnaded passageways for the pleasure of heritage tourists rather than local buyers. In other cases, the upscaling is more nuanced, such as the reviving of the centuries-old Nizwa market in Oman, which was torn down in the early 1990s and refabricated as a modern heritage site both for local users and tourists alike. Tangible heritage sites attract tourists and present them with constructed cultural experience which can be seen and felt. This is the very core of tourism: the site is the product and the tourist, as the buyer, is transported to the product. This means that the tangible heritage sites are critical as vehicles that transport tourist into the symbol-defined place. Monolithic sites such as forts and castles are usually integral to tourists' search for the 'authentic' or for the tourists' imagination of what authenticity actually is. The tourist 'gaze' routinely takes place in public spaces – tangible heritage sites (Silver 1993: 302–319).

Returning to the earlier discussion of the political 'homogenising' goals of the Gulf elite, one needs to keep in mind that the Arab Gulf states all became modern nation-states in the 1970s and have struggled to create discrete identities for themselves. They all have extensive histories of interaction with other cultures and have adopted cultural practices from afar – particularly from the East African Coast and the Indian sub-continent – none more so than Oman. Some of these aspects are openly celebrated by the ruling elite and provide a contrast to the neo-cosmopolitan messaging of the large monolithic tangible heritage public spaces discussed earlier. In the Gulf, and in particular in Oman, foreign, Orientalist forms of representation of the region are accepted and integrated into heritage museums, particularly those which celebrate the intra-Gulf trade, and wider linkages with the Muslim world and with Africa and South Asia. Thus, tourists to the main market in Mutrah, just outside of Muscat, are often surprised to see the extent to which South Asian [intangible] culture is an integral part of the trading community's identity.

### *The growing significance of 'intangible' cultural heritage in Oman*

Early in the twenty-first century, 'intangible' cultural heritage became a term promoted by United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as a counterpart of the term 'culture' which is tangible or touchable.

Intangible culture was regarded as including song, music, drama, skills, cuisine, crafts, annual festivals and other part of culture that could be recorded but could not be touched. This was a heritage transmitted from generation to generation, constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history. Intangible culture provided people with a sense of identity and continuity. Intangible cultural heritage was associated with social groups and communities as much as with actual physical spaces. It was the intersection of the two that created the social places where the intangible heritage could be expressed. It was the peoples and their practices and traditions that carried the intangible culture. The territory was the localised scene where such culture was expressed.

In October 2003, UNESCO adopted the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. The term 'intangible cultural heritage' was defined in the Conventions as the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills as well as instruments, objects, artefacts and associated cultural space. This heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, was recognised as being constantly recreated in response to the environment and provided these groups with a sense of identity and continuity. The Convention specified that 'intangible cultural heritage' was manifested [inter alia] in the following domains: oral traditions, including language; performing arts; social practices and rituals; knowledge and practices concerning nature.

In 2005, Oman and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) ratified the Convention followed by Jordan in 2006 and Qatar in 2008. It is instructive to review some of the manifestations of 'intangible cultural heritage' approved by UNESCO. In 2008 Jordan entered the cultural space of the Bedouin in Petra and Wadi Rum for safeguarding. In 2010 the Al Bar'ah Dhofari music dance tradition was inscribed. In 2011, the UAE entered the Al-Sadu Bedouin traditional weaving for safeguarding. In 2012 Oman inscribed the Al-Azi procession march and poetry recitation of Northern Oman and the Al-Taghrooda Bedouin poetry competition of Oman and the UAE. In 2014 the Al-Ayyala poetry recitation and drum dance performances of Oman and the UAE were recognised. These UNESCO-recognised manifestations of intangible culture not only draw on coastal traditions of the social groups along Oman's northern Coast and the Gulf, but also encompass Omani pastoral desert culture with its emphasis on oral tradition, song, camel husbandry and traditional environmental knowledge of the sand seas and dunes. Slowly at first, but now gaining momentum, this desert culture and its intangible heritage has begun to compete with tangible images of forts and castles on tourist brochures advertising the charms of Oman and the Gulf states.

In 2014, the Sultan of Oman commissioned a study of Oman's intangible cultural heritage. Clearly the past decade's arbitrary and casual selection of

manifestations to put forward for inscription by UNESCO under its Convention for Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage had hit a concerned palace administration. The Sultan, long-renowned for his sense of order and aesthetic sensibilities, had decided to better manage Oman's contribution to the UNESCO Convention. I was asked to prepare a report on intangible cultural heritage in Oman's Central Mountains. Not clearly defined, I decided to interpret the region as one significant to desert pastoralists as well as adjacent coastal fishing and goat herding social groups. With permission granted to continue this focus, I centred my entry for the collection on the escarpment of the Jiddat il-Harasiis where the desert interior of the Harasiis pastoral communities drops off dramatically down to the coastal area of Jeneba tribal coastal fishing communities along the Indian Ocean (general known as the Huqf) . I wrote:

In this region, broad shared aesthetic displays occur, each social group carrying its cultural meanings with them: the Harasiis camel and goat pastoralists bring their traditions born of centuries of life on the rock and gravel plain of the Jiddat al-Harasiis, as well as a linguistic tradition which underscores the reality of their northern migrations over past centuries carrying with them Harsusi, one of the Modern South Arabian languages. The Harasiis share with other once similarly mobile pastoral groups: the Batahira, the Mahra, the people of Soqatra, and the tribes that speak Jibbali (or Shahri). The other Modern South Arabian languages are Mahri, Bathari, Hobyot, Soqotri and Jabbali (or Shahri). The Arabic speaking Jeneba, on the other hand, bring a different migration history with them – one rooted in myths of origin with the Arab tribes of the North. Their mixed fishing and goat herding traditions mean that their oral traditions, their songs, poetry and prose emerge from different experiences associated with coastal, as opposed to desert, attachments. Items of cultural repertoire are produced and performed in these areas, in the localities of each group. When each group talks about these locales, they speak of it with nostalgia and with enjoyment, as the place and the time when they celebrate, exchange gifts, hold weddings and circumcision ceremonies, dance and drum. Not all occasions for dancing and drumming are special celebrations. Often they are spontaneous, just because there is a social gathering.

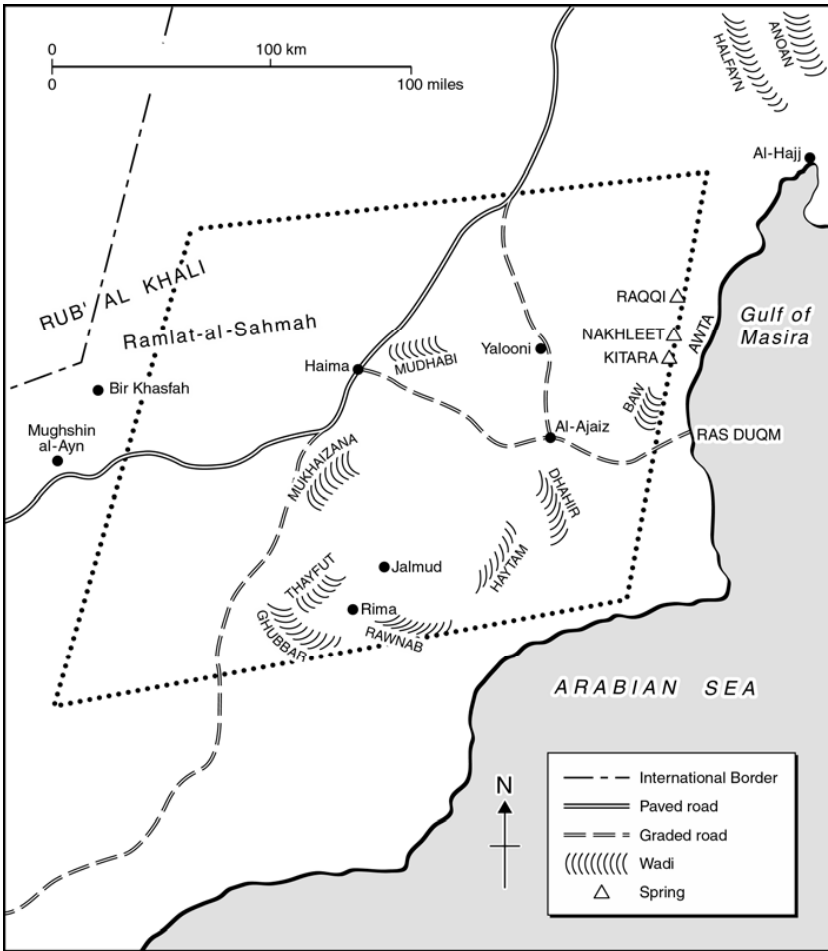
My intent was to lay out the broad elements of the manifestations of intangible cultural heritage in this region in the hope that some of these desert intangible cultural elements would be submitted to UNESCO for inscription. Along the way, I assumed that these manifestations of intangible cultural heritage would make the pastoral communities of the deserts of Oman more visible internationally and thus pique the interests of elite tour operators and tourists to Oman.



## Authenticity and intangible cultural heritage: A case study of the Harasiis tribe

The Harasiis tribe along with the Wahiba, the Duru and the Jeneba are the four main nomadic pastoral tribes in the central desert of Oman. The Wahiba tribe of about 7,000 people occupy the southern coast of Oman and the desert interior known as the Wahiba Sands. To the West of the Wahiba Sands are the Duru camel-raising tribe, numbering about 9,000. Spread out along much of Oman's southern coast and adjacent interior are the Jeneba, a large and widely dispersed tribe; their numbers are easily in excess of 12,000. To the south of the Duru and Wahiba are the Harasiis tribe. Moving over what was – until the 1950s – a vast, waterless plain of more than 42,000 square kilometres, the Harasiis are a 'refuge' tribe. They are people, largely of Dhofari origin who have been pushed into this most inhospitable core area of the central desert of Oman. They are the most remote and isolated of already marginal peoples. The region they inhabit separates north Oman from Dhofar and is the backwater of both regions. As such, the region has attracted individuals and groups expelled from their own tribe as punishment for major infractions of traditional codes of conduct and honour. The Harasiis tribe speaks a southern Arabian language related to Mahri, an indicator of their lack of contact and relative isolation certainly in the past few centuries (Johnstone 1977). The tribe's usufruct or rights to access graze and browse found in the Jiddat il-Harasiis were established in the 1930s when the Sultan and his political advisor, Bertram Thomas, decided to confer the name Jiddat- il-Harasiis upon the territory which had fallen to them as much by occupancy as by the lack of desire of any other tribe to be there (Thomas 1938).

The tribe is small, numbering about 5,000 people. Although their claim to the Jiddat has been, on occasion, contested by other groups, no other tribe has actually attempted to move into this most desolate of landscapes with little, if any, seasonal grasses, no natural water sources, and unfit for human habitation during the scorching summer months. It was only with the oil activity of the 1950s that the fortunes of the Harasiis and their grazing lands on the Jiddat were transformed. In 1958 an exploratory party came to a point called Haima in the middle of the Jiddat il-Harasiis and sank a water well there to support its oil activity. Another well was sunk at a point seventy kilometres towards the coast, called al-Ajaiz. These two wells were the first water sources on the Jiddat il-Harasiis, an area approximately the size of Scotland. Al-Ajaiz became something of a magnet, attracting pastoral families to its well and its seasonal browse. The Haima well was also used, but not to the same extent as that at Al Ajaiz, as the area surrounding Haima was a salt flat with very little graze or browse for the herds of camels and goats.



**Map I.** Jiddat il-Harasiis, Oman

The traditional economy of the Harasiis is based on the raising of camels and goats by natural graze for the production of milk rather than meat. At the core of the household is the nuclear family of husband, wife and children. Generally two or three adults, of one degree of kinship or another, make up the rest of the household. On average a household keeps 100 goats, which are owned by and the responsibility of women and older girls. The average household also has 25 camels, of which five or six are generally kept near the homestead – these are the heavily pregnant or lactating ones. The remainder of the camels are left

free to graze in the open desert. The whereabouts of these animals is very carefully monitored and an elaborate camel information exchange system operates among all the tribesmen. When they meet, tribesmen first exchange news about the conditions of pastures, then the whereabouts of various loose camels and finally news items of various family members. Homesteads are generally moved a significant distance three or four times a year.

### *Contested authenticity*

In the early months of 1980, shortly after my arrival in the Sultanate of Oman, I was offered an opportunity to join a small convoy of vehicles across the desert of Oman. The trip was to take a week and would start in Salalah, the capital of Dhofar, the southern region of Oman, to cross the deserts of Oman and end up in Muscat. The purpose of the journey was partially to permit a medical team to trace several lapsed tuberculosis patients from tribes in the Dhofari interior and, at the same time, to provide immunisation vaccines to the children of these communities. Half way through our journey we came across a small group of pastoral Harasiis families preparing for a wedding. We took the opportunity to stop and to seek their permission to begin the course of immunisation against some of the six WHO targeted childhood diseases (Poliomyelitis, Diphtheria, Tetanus, Measles and Rubella). We were asked, with some incredulity, why we were going to this trouble. Our answer was that, of course, it was a government service provided by the Sultan of Oman for all nationals. What we learned, however, was that this community in the desert had no sense of belonging to the Omani nation. They felt very much apart. Perhaps rather than being purposefully excluded, the notion of Omani citizenship and the sense of belonging to one nation had not yet reached these parts.

In the following year (1981), I began a fourteen-year close association with this small pastoral tribe. My role was to assist the government in extending social services to this remote community. A Royal Decree had been issued indicating that government services were to be extended into the interior desert in such a way as not to force its inhabitants to give up their traditional migratory way of life. A policy had been formulated which needed to move through a hierarchy of bureaucracy and emerge as a set of discretionary decisions made locally and on the ground. Sultan Qaboos had encouraged the government ministries to push 'development' forward into the remote interior of the country, to offer its people the same services which the government had extended to the settled folk in the rest of the country during the first ten years of his reign. His perception of the desert landscape as a 'created' physical, social and cultural environment inhabited by nomadic pastoralists, was undoubtedly informed by his own mother's origins as a Qara tribeswoman in Dhofar. It

was not, unfortunately, shared by the mid-level government bureaucracy who pushed forward policy into practice at the local level.

Over a two-year period, as a 'Technical Assistance Expert' with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and with the help of two Peace Corps volunteers, I was allowed by the Minister of Health and the Minister of Education to set up both mobile and sedentary health services as well as a weekly boarding school for boys with day-enrolment for girls (Dyer 2006). Other government services with a relevance to these mobile pastoralists were more difficult to organise. Here the government bureaucratic hierarchy took the 'hilltop' policy formulations of the Sultan, re-interpreted them in order to create a landscape in the desert which reproduce the settled, 'civilised' landscapes they were familiar with in the coastal and mountain valley settlements. For example, opening government offices in the remote tribal centre of Haima generally meant borrowing all the rules and regulations of a civil service developed around hadari, settled, needs. Thus government welfare benefits became possible for unmarried, widowed and divorced women, the handicapped and disabled. But elderly widowers or bachelors with no family to support them were excluded from government support. Harasiis concepts of welfare and aid extended to elderly men and women alike. There was local recognition that in the extreme environment of the Jiddat il-Harasiis, generation was as important as gender in determining need. But this was not shared by government officials.

Housing and shelter were particularly problematic, as government officials and ministers could not conceive of the desert being occupied in any other way than in permanent village settlements. The urban concepts of settled space ruled supreme. Thus the outsider's view of the desert landscape became more powerful than that of the insider inhabitant. The reality of the widespread dispersal of small household camps over the 40,000 square kilometres of the Jiddat was inconceivable to government bureaucrats, whatever the Royal Decrees might have suggested. Hence our 1982 highly-successful UNDP programme of canvas tent distribution among the Harasiis households met with obstruction and eventually failure when we tried to set it up as a recurrent government programme. In an interview with the Minister of Housing in Muscat in 1984 to plead for a continuation of the tent distribution programme, I was told that the Ministry had to be seen to be doing something useful in the interior and tents were not progressive. He needed permanent 'mortar and cement' and thus government modern cement housing would have to be built – units of twenty to thirty British-designed two-storey town houses; no matter that the architectural space was more suitable to an English suburb than an Arabian desert. The units were built in 1985 and stood empty for more than a decade, except when they were used to shelter Harasiis goat herds, or hired out to expatriate labourers imported by local traders and oil company sub-contractor.

For decades the oil company was perceived locally as the government in the desert. Its exploration activities had resulted in three water wells being left open and maintained for the use of the local Harasiis, a service that was widely appreciated. As the major employer in the region – albeit generally for unskilled and short-term work contracts – it had a grasp of the social makeup and organisation of these nomadic pastoralists. Thus, when the international demand for greater social corporate responsibility resulted in the requirement that environmental and social impact assessments be conducted prior to any further oil extraction in the Central Desert of Oman, much was expected. However, many local and expatriate petroleum engineers' view was that the desert was a landscape full of promising mineral resources [gas and oil] and devoid of people; people, the company engineers maintained, only emerged from other regions opportunistically when the oil company set up camp. This particular representation of the desert was mirrored in the expert reports commissioned by the oil companies regarding social impact assessments. Overall, the major oil companies in the central desert of Oman take the view that these concession areas are *terra nullius*, or empty land (Gilbert 2007). They lay their pipelines across important tribal migration routes, causing disruption if not obstruction for Harasiis herders trying to transport or move their herd from one grazing area to another. A slow and gradual process of dislocation followed by displacement is occurring (Chatty 1994). The pastoralists of these desert areas face extraordinary pressure to settle, despite the Royal Decree of 1980. And their authenticity (belonging) to the desert is challenged by the extractive industries' view that the lands these mobile pastoralists have inhabited for centuries are in fact empty of people. Furthermore, conservationists – both national and international – have regarded the central desert of Oman as their own back yard, ignoring the presence and authenticity of its local human inhabitants. Conservationists view the desert as a landscape as well, but one shaped by plants and animals, not people. Their concern is to restore a balance to this landscape by returning to it animals that had been hunted to extinction in the 1970s. Planned in the late 1970s, the international flagship conservation effort, the Arabian Oryx Re-introduction Project, was set up and put into effect in the Jiddat il-Harasiis. Between 1980 and 1996, 450 Arabian Oryx were returned to or born in 'the wild' of the Jiddat il-Harasiis. In 1994 Oman succeeded in getting this conservation project recognised formally as the UNESCO World Heritage Arabian Oryx Sanctuary. But ongoing and constant friction between the Western managers of the conservation project, local Harasiis tribesmen regarding their 'rights' to graze their domestic herds, and oil exploration activities resulted in serious problems. In 2007, The Arabian Oryx Sanctuary became the first World Heritage site ever to be deleted from the UNESCO list of World Heritage Sites. The justification for this unprecedented step was the rapid decline in Oryx number (from 450 to 65) and the supposed degradation of its grazing

area. The reality was much more complex and included the conservationists' /government's unwillingness to recognise or use local pastoral knowledge of the environment sufficiently. The desert tribes were marginalised and prevented from active participation in a key national and international effort.

*Addressing the challenges to authenticity and intangible cultural heritage in the desert*

The authenticity of the Harasiis and other nomadic pastoral tribes has been challenged by national government and multi-national bodies which have their own views on the landscapes of Oman and the region broadly. Recognising the tensions that exist between the traditional and modern, as well as the *bedu* (desert dweller) and the *hadar* (urban dweller), has meant that representations of landscapes are subject to the power of the hegemonic. Space and place are not resolved in a singular representation that encapsulates the political fiction of a unified state. There is no one absolute landscape, but rather a series of related and also contradictory perspectives. Omani policy formulations recognise elements of the authenticity of the Harasiis vision of their desert landscapes. But bureaucratic hierarchy prioritises and puts into practice landscape perspectives quite contrary: hadar landscapes imposed upon bedu territories; multinational extractive industry's perspectives of landscapes without human imprint, but replete with natural resources under the surface; and conservation landscapes of pristine import momentarily unbalanced by humans' disregard for the equilibrium of flora and fauna. These visions explain the lack of interest in the authenticity of Harasiis desert culture, or the 'intangible cultural heritage' that it has to offer.

For the first three decades of Oman's modern nation-building history (from 1970 to the present) a truly integrationist approach seemed to hold, where all Omanis from whatever background were called upon to work together to build a new 'modern' nation. Now, however, with much of the building in place, an assimilationist outlook and approach seems to have taken hold which is curiously out of step with global trends. Oman, in its recent failures to recognise the authenticity of its minority tribes, seems to have replaced an open-minded, ahead-of-its-time, integrationist vision of the development of the modern state with a backward-looking assimilationist perspective, at the expense of the country's unique largely intangible desert bedu heritage.

These challenges to the authenticity of Harasiis tribe and their desert landscapes are being address in different ways. Attachment to place and space is difficult to transform. Disassociation is even harder. Some families are settling part of the extended group in government housing, and hiring shepherds from Baluchistan and the Indian Sub-Continent to look after their mobile herds of goat and camel. Others are picking themselves up and moving their families to

the United Arab Emirates where the national perception of the desert landscape and the place of the bedu in it are mirrored by their own vision. Two bedu settlements – made up of low lying and spread out bungalows – have been built near the Abu Dhabi / Saudi border by the Emirati government, which effectively address local perceptions of bedu culture, ideas of appropriate shelter and desert landscapes. Some Harasiis as well as other pastoral tribal elements from Oman, Saudi Arabia and Qatar have moved their families to these settlements. But these moves are not permanent; nor are the settlements static. The Harasiis continue to move back and forth across borders. However the sense of ‘being bedu’ is reinforced by the other tribal elements also moving into these created desert landscapes in Abu Dhabi. Furthermore, mass education and mass communications (Eickelman 1992) also reinforce their sense of authenticity. The United Arab Emirates national identity is closely tied with both the bedu in the interior and the hadar merchants in the coastal towns. Here several representations of landscapes encapsulate the imagined state, including that of the hadar and that of the bedu. As with the Kingdom of Jordan (see Layne 1994, Shryock 1995) bedu culture and its role in the development of the notion of a plural national identity is important in the UAE.

Unfortunately this has not been the case in Oman. There seems in Oman to be, as yet, little recognition that assimilating traditional or minority people who resist such policy is not the way to build a strong country (Blackburn 2007). Recognition of the tribes and their authenticity in the desert landscapes of southeast Arabia would not radically pluralise Oman nor negatively impact on state-building processes. But it might contribute to increasing elite heritage tourism interested in experiencing the intangible cultural heritage that the desert tribes have to offer.

## Conclusion

Nationalism and identity are two concepts at the heart of the processes described above. The Sultanate of Oman had its modern ‘birth’ in 1970 after a ‘near-bloodless’ palace coup brought the Sultan Qaboos to the throne. From that moment the Sultan and his advisors have struggled to create an imagined political community of a unified nation (see Anderson 1983). The first few decades after the birth of this new nation saw campaigns to attract educated and professional Omanis in exile to return to create the modern state (Peterson 1978). This followed a careful drive to attract elite tourism to its significant tangible cultural heritage, both traditional and (re)created in the shape of forts, castles and modern monolithic public spaces (Chatty 2009). This paper posits that, once these outsiders and expatriates had integrated and

transformed themselves into ‘insiders’, they set about creating an ‘imagined’ nation which was homogenous and modern. Thus the authentic inhabitants in background landscapes such as the deserts (Hirsch and O’Hanlon 1995) became the ‘outsiders’ and their cultural practices (intangible heritage) were regarded as irrelevant to the modern state. However, the perceived growing importance of elite tourism has resulted in a tension between the largely intangible cultural heritage of desert ‘outsiders’ and new ‘insider’ tangible cultural ‘modernities’. The officially sanctioned cultural representation of Oman has for several decades encapsulated the political and cultural fiction of a unified, homogenous nation at the expense of the alternative ‘bedu’ cultural traditions of the interior deserts. The decades long rejection of bedu claims to authenticity is slowly shifting, as the value of the strong intangible cultural heritage in the desertscapes of Oman is increasingly being perceived as potentially significant in attracting greater elite heritage tourism to the country.

The greater the competition for heritage tourism in the Arabian Gulf, the more Oman will need to develop and differentiate itself to promote both its own unique tangible heritage and as its intangible heritage, which is also derived from its desert dwelling social groups. While the Emirates creates a tradition of modern camel breeding and racing on a scale to match European horse racing, Oman can tap into the centuries-old intangible cultures of its numerous South Arabian and Arabic speaking desert tribes and inscribe their manifestations in camel husbandry, environmental knowledge, song, dance and performance with UNESCO’s Convention on the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage. Creating tidy ‘Disneyfied’ desert camps run by south Indian staff and owned by urban businessmen from Matrah may be attractive to some heritage tourists. But eventually the artificiality of these ventures will become stale and boring and will be challenged by authentic ventures launched by bedu entrepreneurs. Discerning eco-tourists and elite travellers – just the type of tourists the Omani government seeks to attract – search for the authentic and original in their voyaging. They readily recognise the artificiality of what is currently offered. For example, the ‘dune bashing’ options, driving four-wheel vehicles up and down sand dunes, that are currently offered in Oman and the other Gulf states are increasingly being rejected by these elite tourists as both inauthentic and damaging to the environment. As such, they will soon start to press for more exposure to Oman’s authentic ‘intangible cultural heritage’ in its deserts. It is fortuitous that this coincides with Oman’s pastoral groups’ struggle for recognition of their authenticity in the desert landscapes of the Sultanate.



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