

## Chapter 8

# Negotiating Authenticity and Translocality in Oman: The “Desertscares” of the Harasiis Tribe

Dawn Chatty

### 8.1 Introduction

The Harasiis nomadic pastoral tribe have been for centuries the sole human inhabitants of the central desert of Oman, which the reigning sovereign in the 1930s named the Jiddat il-Harasiis. This remote tribe, organized around a subsistence economy based on raising camels and goats, has a wide presence not only in Oman but also in the present-day United Arab Emirates (UAE). Mobility over a vast and largely inhospitable rock and gravel plain – the Jiddat il-Harasiis – has been the principle feature of their resilient livelihood focussed on camel transport and more recently on trucks. The authenticity of their attachment to this translocal region is intimately tied to the traditional distinction in Islamic historiography between *bedu* in the deserts and *hadar* in the towns and cities. Recent decades in the Sultanate of Oman, however, have seen increasing pressure by government, international conservation agencies and multinational extractive industries to contest these peoples’ claims of “translocal” desert belonging. This paper examines these processes, both national and regional, and explores the ways the Harasiis make their claims of authenticity and translocal belonging transparent.

### 8.2 Mobility, Translocality and Dislocation

History is written from the perspective of the settled. Those who move are generally regarded as threatening or at least unsettling to the sedentist order of affairs. Pastoral nomadic groups have, for centuries, been regarded as a threat to the

---

D. Chatty (✉)

Refugee Studies Centre, Oxford Department of International Development,  
Queen Elizabeth House, University of Oxford, 3 Mansfield Road, Oxford, OX1 3TB, UK

St Cross College, St. Giles, Oxford, OX1 3LZ, UK

e-mail: dawn.chatty@stx.ox.ac.uk; dawn.chatty@qeh.ox.ac.uk

margins of settled agriculture, or so Oriental and Occidental historiography tells us. However, the facts on the ground suggest a symbiotic system largely independent of settled society, but contributing to its effective workings by guaranteeing safe passage across deserts for wide-ranging East to West trade networks and religious pilgrimage. The pastoral nomadic tribes of the Arabian peninsula – in many regards marginal to settled life – have largely escaped the strictures of central authority and have established systems of mobility for livelihood risk reduction and resilience (cf. Gellner 1983; Scott 2009). These pastoral systems required extensive areas of low-resource desert and semi-desert land to survive. Negotiated movement of people and herds of livestock from deficit to surplus areas across these expanses was the foundational principle of life. The movement was not “nomadic”, it was informed and deliberated among similar units from the same tribe; occasionally prolonged deficit in one area and surplus in another area outside of a particular tribe’s traditional territory (*dar*) would be negotiated inter-tribally. Wide expanses of desert might go for years without people or herds, and other areas might experience constant use over many years, depending on unpredictable and unreliable rainfall or other forms of precipitation.

With the establishment of the modern nation-state in the twentieth century, many nomadic pastoral groups found their traditional territory suddenly “located” in several nation states. This translocality was more than mere physical emplacement; it was also a reality shaped by the movement of cultural, social and political ideas across spaces and localities (Appadurai 1996; also Bromber, in this volume; Jong 1999). The practice of movement of people and herds as risk management was unchanged. Yet over recent decades government officials and international civil servants came to see these movements across localities as threatening to the concept of the nation-state (Wilkinson 1983). Border crossings came to be partially patrolled and regularized, leaving many desert dwellers in difficulties. Their movements and thus their translocality came under threat.

At the same time, encroachment of these deserts by multinational oil companies and biodiversity conservation NGOs meant that some spaces and locations were removed from the orbit of movements of these desert dwellers. Instead of being dispossessed entirely from their traditional lands, they were slowly being “dislocated” from important sites, generally the richest spaces with tree cover (e.g. Yalooni in the Jiddat il-Harasiis) or depressions where oil and, in association with it, water were found. These dislocations on a small scale could be absorbed into the highly resilient pastoral land management system. But on a larger scale, the dislocation undermined the ability of the desert tribes to recover, renegotiate and identify sufficient localities for survival. In this paper, I understand translocality as

the sum of phenomena which results from a multitude of circulations and transfers. It designates the outcome of concrete moments of people, goods, ideas and symbols which span spatial distances and cross boundaries, be they geographical, cultural or political (Freitag and von Oppen 2010: 5).

When these circulations are circumscribed, the people and cultures that conducted them are impoverished and their cultural survival is threatened.

### 8.3 Authenticity, Landscape and Identity

The desert-dwelling inhabitants of Oman, organized in kin-based “segmentary” groups of tribes are recognized as *bedu*, while tribes and extended families in the mountain and coastal settlements of the country are regarded as *hadar*.<sup>1</sup> This *bedu/hadar* distinction has deep roots in Muslim history and historiography (cf. Ibn Khaldūn 1958). From the perspective of the settled urban historian, the pinnacle of civilization was the city with its government, places of worship, schools and markets. The city and town dweller was *hadari*. The other extreme, the *badia* (desert), was defined by its lack of *hadar* or civilization and was represented by the social category of *badawi* or *bedu*. The latter were mainly the desert dwellers, with nomadic pastoral camel and sheep herding but also other livelihoods, such as bee-keeping. The different landscapes of the *bedu* and *hadar* had important cultural and social dimensions in the understanding of human activity.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, though the term *hadar/hadari* is hardly used any longer, the term *bedu* remains in contemporary use. For the *bedu*, such self-identification is a statement of tribal or ethnic identity and solidarity as well as attachment to the desert landscape, which is a physical background and social and cultural foreground constantly shaped and reshaped by social processes and interactions with the physical environment (Hirsch and O’Hanlon 1995). However, when non-*bedu* use the term, particularly contemporary government officials, it is often a statement of contempt, highlighting the presumed backwardness and primitiveness of this social category with no reference to the desert landscape.

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 paper posits that once these outsiders and expatriates had integrated and transformed themselves into “insiders”, they set about creating an “imagined” nation that was homogenous and modern. The authentic inhabitants in background and translocal landscapes such as the deserts (Hirsch and O’Hanlon 1995) thus became the “outsiders”. The tension between the

<sup>1</sup>The French term “*bedouin*” derives from the Arabic *badia*, meaning the semi-arid steppe or desert. Those who live in the *badia* are described as *bedu*.

<sup>2</sup>Landscapes are complex phenomena. In addition to the physical features that geographers have focussed on until the last 30 years or so, is a widely accepted contemporary understanding that landscapes reflect human activity and are imbued with cultural values. Landscapes combine notions of time and space as well as political and social constructs. They evolve over time, are changed through human activity, and acquire many layers of sometimes contested meanings and versions of reality. Connections with landscapes form part of cultural and political identity; people feel they belong to certain places or regions (Aplin 2007; Jackson 1984).

outsider “traditions” and new insider “modernities” appears to be resolved in a representation that encapsulates the political and cultural fiction of a unified nation at the expense of the *bedu* tribes of the interior deserts; *bedu* claims to authenticity in the desertscapes are thus increasingly rejected.

## 8.4 Historical Background

Like so many states of the Middle East, Oman has been inhabited by successive waves of peoples. Settlement in Oman from the desert fringe came from two directions: one along the southern coast of Arabia from Yemen and the other through the northern gateway of al-Buraymi. The pastoral tribes in the middle of the country are the most remote and marginal peoples in Oman physically; culturally they form distinct, heterogeneous groups seemingly at odds with contemporary government efforts to create a unified state. Other migrations into Oman include the Baluch and Persian from Southwest Asia, African and Zanzibari from the east coast of Africa, and Hyderabadis from the Indian subcontinent. The latter have settled in the coastal regions and the mountain valleys mainly of the north of the country (for greater detail on ethnic composition, see Peterson 2004a, b) (Fig. 8.1).

Until 1970, the Sultanate of Oman could justifiably be described as the “Tibet of Arabia” (Eickelman 1989), so complete was its isolation from the rest of the world. This remoteness and sense of separateness of the state was largely created during the long reign of Sultan Said Al Said (1932–1970). It was a time when many urban Omanis fled the country seeking education and livelihood opportunities. During this period the tribes of the desert interior maintained their largely subsistence livelihoods, including local trade and barter with coastal settlements. What little transformation was taking place along the coastal and mountain settlements in the north of the country had little, if any impact, on the desert tribes.

Oil exploration commenced in Oman during the 1930s and a number of oil companies began making small payments to the Sultan to maintain their rights to exploration. In the central desert of Oman, both the Harasiis and the Jeneba nomadic pastoral tribes were affected by these activities. The Jeneba tribe, closely watching oil exploration in the area, laid claim to the Jiddat il-Harasiis, maintaining it was their land that they merely permitted the Harasiis to occupy. Sultan Said dismissed the Jeneba claim. Wilkinson, moreover, suggests that the Sultan’s true motive in coming down on the side of the Harasiis was his confidence that the Harasiis had no relationship with his rival, the Ibadi Imam, and were thus potentially allies in his claim to future oil rights in the central desert interior (Wilkinson 1987).

Oil activity in Oman stopped during World War II and resumed in the early 1950s. Pastoral tribes in the north of the country bordering on areas under the control of the Ibadi Imam were increasingly drawn into the political fray, and armed conflict between the Sultan on the coast and the Ibadi Imam in the interior grew more frequent. For example, at Ibri, the pastoral Duru tribe, concerned to protect their “capital” and date gardens to the south of the town at Tan’am, entered into

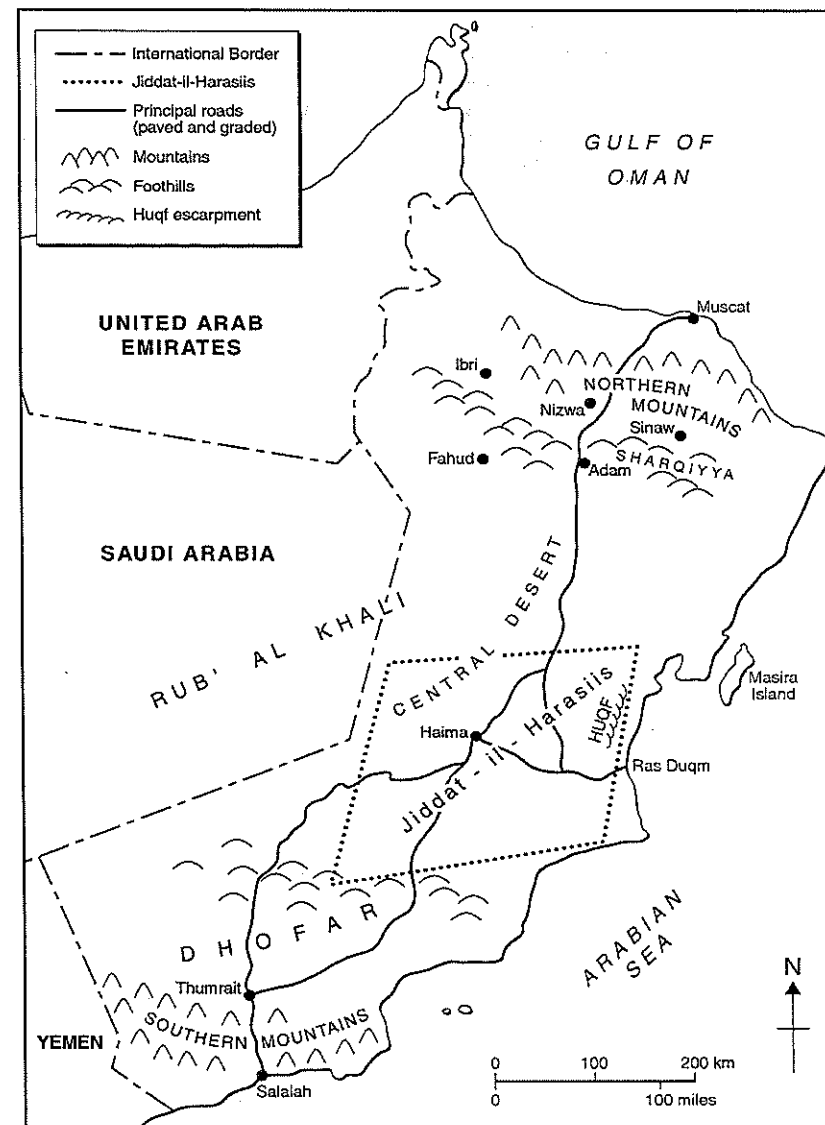


Fig. 8.1 Map Sultanate of Oman

negotiations with the Sultan to throw their support behind him as long as he protected them and their gardens from the forces of the Ibadi Imam.<sup>3</sup>

In 1952 the Imam led a rebellion that spilled over into a contestation over ownership of any oil finds by oil company exploration teams. In 1959 a combined assault by the Sultan's and British forces on the Jabal Akhdar ended with the permanent defeat and retreat of the Ibadi Imam and his rebels. The success of the 1959 campaign heralded a period of uncontested and genuinely close cooperation with British authorities.

Ever fearful that "his people" were not ready to move into the twentieth century, Sultan Said prohibited the importation of cars and severely restricted the enrolment of boys in schools. He took a direct interest in all matters regarding changes to long-held traditions. He banned sunglasses and torches and insisted that the gates of the capital of Muscat be closed at sunset. Those stuck outside had to wait until the next morning to enter the town. He permitted only three schools to operate in the entire country, admitting 100 boys a year whom he personally chose. Yet Sultan Said himself was cultured and cosmopolitan. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s he made annual trips to the United Kingdom, generally in the summer.

In 1964, oil was discovered in the central desert of Oman and, by 1967, it began to be exported. Projected revenues jumped dramatically, but Sultan Said was cautious about spending money he did not yet have. Thus, although he commissioned plans for a new port at Muscat and a hospital in Ibri, among other projects, he took his time giving the go-ahead to implement these works, waiting first to accumulate the cash reserves to pay for these activities.

Omanis had been fleeing the country for decades during his rule (1932–1970) due to economic hardship, political oppression and lack of educational opportunities. By the summer of 1970, British forces quietly instigated and supported a coup d'état led by his son, Qaboos. After the palace coup, the new Sultan prioritized the modernization and development of his country. Qaboos embraced "progress" wholeheartedly and set about commissioning schools, clinics, hospitals, roads and other infrastructural development. Unlike that of many of the states of the Gulf, Oman's indigenous population was relatively large and markedly heterogeneous. In the north of the country it included an elite urban merchant class with strong cultural ties and trade links with India and the coast of East Africa. Along the coast, subsistence fishing settlements were common, and in the mountains and intervening valleys, terraced farming communities survived by maintaining ancient systems of water collection and distribution (Wilkinson 1977). The towns of the interior of the country were the centres of local and regional trade as well as of religious learning. These settlements mirrored Oman's long history of successful colonial empire and incorporated East African, Baluchi, Persian and Indian elements into the dominant culture.

<sup>3</sup>The long political and military struggle between Sultan Said and the Ibadi Imam over control of the interior of the country in the 1950s is studied in great detail by both Wilkinson (1987) and Peterson (2007).

Once he had established his reign, Sultan Qaboos reached out to all Omanis living abroad and encouraged them to return to the country as quickly as possible. This they did in large numbers from Bombay, Mombasa, Liverpool and other Western centres. Along with this returning "citizenry" came skilled European, particularly British, and South Asian expatriate workers to help build a government infrastructure nearly from scratch. The armed forces, the police force, the internal security service, the civil service and government ministries of health, education, social affairs and labour, agriculture and fisheries, water and electricity, communications and roads and other agencies were rapidly set up. The trappings of a modern state were put into place almost overnight. Thousands of miles of roads were tar-macked, and for the first time a modern road network connected Muscat to Salalah. The social and economic transformation of the coastal areas and the mountains behind in both the north and the south of the country, funded mainly by petroleum wealth, was enormous. The same was not true of the interior desert areas of the country or its nomadic pastoral peoples.

## 8.5 The Harasiis Tribe in Contemporary Oman

The Harasiis 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 is 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 km<sup>2</sup>, the Harasiis are a "refugee" 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 tribes 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 its 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<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup>The Jeneba tribe, it seems, protested that this territory was its own and the Harasiis were simply being accommodated there because they had no land of their own. However the Sultan decided that if the Jeneba wanted to go and live in the region it could be renamed "Jiddat il-Jeneba", but as long as the Harasiis were the sole occupiers of the Jiddat, it would bear their name (Thomas 1938).

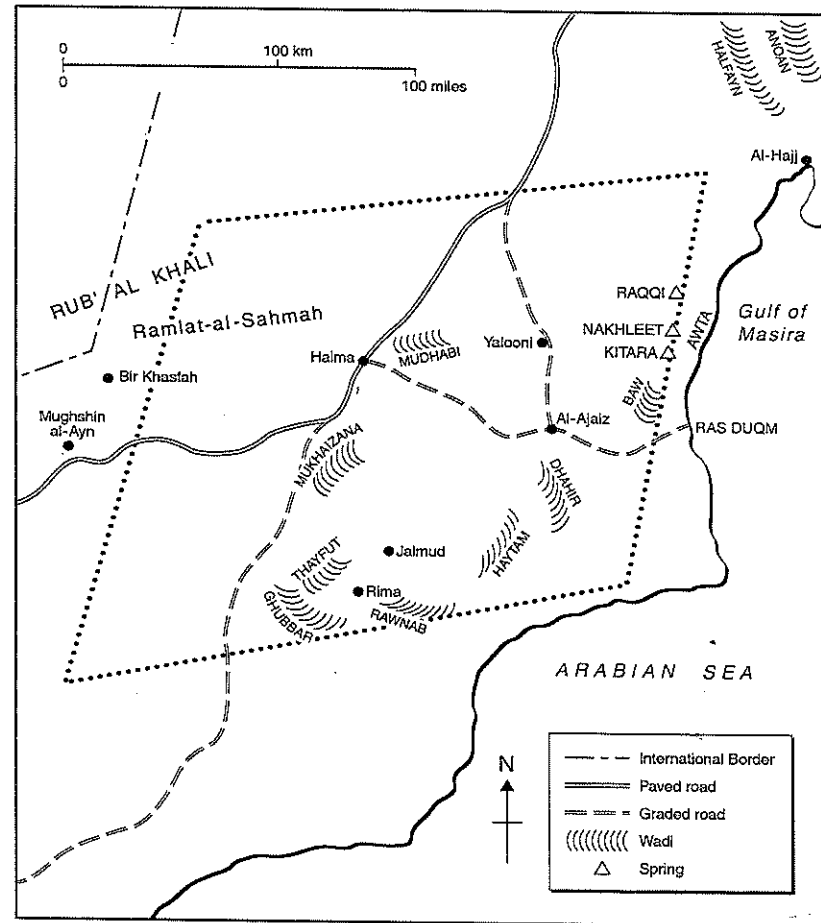


Fig. 8.2 Map of Jiddat il-Harasiis, Oman

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) (Fig. 8.2).

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, which has little if any seasonal grasses, no natural water sources and is 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 70 km 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 grazing for the herds of camels and goats.

The traditional economy of the Harasiis was based on raising camels and goats by natural grazing for the production of milk, rather than meat. At the core of their way of life was migration determined by a combination of seasonal and ecological variables in the location of pasture and water. Survival of both herds and herders vitally demanded movement from deficit to surplus areas. Households were and are still generally extended family units, the average family being composed of nine members.

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 5 or 6 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 are 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.<sup>5</sup>

Basic to the organization of all pastoral people is the existence of sedentary communities in adjacent areas and access to their agricultural products. The trading towns important to the Harasiis tribe have been along the northern desert foothills of the Sharqiyya, particularly Adam and Sinaw. The cash economy of the village was reinforced by the continual influx of “capital on the hoof”. Transactions were completed and money exchanged hands. Significantly though, when the final purchases were made, the bulk of the money had simply moved from one end of the market to another – from the animal buyer’s pocket to the merchants till. For the Harasiis, the relationship with the villages reinforced not a cash, but a subsistence economy. Until the late 1970s, this economic interaction was unchanged among the Harasiis and extended no further than these border desert villages and towns.

<sup>5</sup>In 1980 the Omani government cooperated with the United Nations to implement a 2-year anthropological study and needs assessment of the Harasiis tribe. I led this project and as a result was able to promote the opening of a boarding school in 1982 for boys and later a special day school for girls. Increasingly over the past two decades, Harasiis families have either camped near Haima or have taken up residence in “low-cost” housing units on the edge of the centre while the schools are in session.

## 8.6 Transforming and Contesting 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. It was not quite the retracing of the steps of the English explorers Bertram Thomas in the 1930s and Wilfred Thesiger in the 1940s, but it felt like it. 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 immunization vaccines to the children of these communities. Halfway through our journey we came across a small group of nomadic pastoral Harasiis families preparing for a wedding. We took the opportunity to stop and to seek their permission to begin the course of immunization against some of the six WHO-targeted childhood diseases (poliomyelitis, diphtheria, tetanus, measles and rubella). "Why," we were asked, "do you want to do this?" Our answer was, "The Sultan of Oman wishes to see all Omanis immunized against these diseases." "Why," they continued, "should he want to do this for us?" We were initially lost for an answer, having assumed that the notion of Omani citizenship and the sense of belonging to one nation had reached these parts. They had not yet.

In 1981, I began a 14-year close association with this small nomadic pastoral tribe. My role was to assist the government in extending social services to this remote community. A Royal Decree had been issued that government services were to be extended into the interior desert in a way that would not force its inhabitants to give up their traditional migratory way of life. A policy had been formulated that needed to move through a bureaucratic hierarchy and emerge as a set of discretionary decisions made locally and on the ground.<sup>6</sup> 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 that the government had extended to the settled folk in the rest of the country during the first 10 years of his reign. His perception of the desert landscape as a "created" physical, social and cultural environment inhabited by nomadic pastoral, was undoubtedly informed by his own mother's origins as a Qara tribeswoman in Dhofar.

Over a 2-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 relevant to these mobile pastoralists were more difficult to organize. Here the policy landscape saw the "hilltop" policy formulations of the Sultan, re-interpreted by the bureaucratic hierarchy

<sup>6</sup>Allen Rew has described the constraints on policy and practice in development as a pyramid landscape. There is the hilltop where policy is formulated; then the plateau where bureaucratic hierarchy prevails and at the base a broad expanse of discretionary practice and local coping strategies (Rew et al. 2000).

to create a landscape in the desert that attempted to reproduce the settled, "civilized" landscapes they were familiar with in the coastal and mountain valley settlement. 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 recognition that in the extreme environment of the Jiddat il-Harasiis, generation was as important as gender in determining need.

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 reigned 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 km<sup>2</sup> of the Jiddat was inconceivable to government bureaucrats, whatever the Royal Decrees might have suggested. Hence our highly successful 1982 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 20–30 British-designed two-story town houses; no matter that this mode of architectural space was more suitable to an English suburb than an Arabian desert.<sup>7</sup> 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 subcontractors.

The distribution of potable water was another area of critical concern to the Harasiis tribe, but not fully understood by government, whose rules of auctioning time for agricultural irrigation were well established (see Wilkinson 1977). The tribal elders petitioned the government to finance a carefully constructed decentralized plan to distribute water to households spread out over the Jiddat il-Harasiis based on a horizontal organization in which all seven of the tribe's lineages were involved. The mid-level government bureaucrats, however, found it easier and more in line with the way Oman's towns and villages were organized to hand over the keys to the water bowser trucks to the tribal leaders recognized by the government and the oil company. For many years thereafter, water distribution rested in the hands of a few powerful individuals rather than with a syndicate as the tribal elders had hoped for.

Even the request for agricultural extension – a national programme widespread along the coast and in the interior towns of the country and well funded by various international agencies such as USAID and the oil company – failed to be granted to

<sup>7</sup>Interview with Minister of Housing, Ahmed Al Ghazali (1984).

the desert interior. Despite numerous requests for assistance from Harasiis tribal elders to improve breeding stock and to experiment in growing salt-resistant fodder, government ignorance of and disinterest in tribal subsistence and its potential for marketing meant that all livestock extension programmes were restricted to the coast and interior towns.<sup>8</sup>

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 organization 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 (i.e. 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.<sup>9</sup> This particular representation of the desert was mirrored in the expert social impact assessments commissioned by the oil companies. As late as 2006, Occidental carried out a preliminary environment impact assessment of one of the most important Harasiis grazing areas, Wadi Mukhaizana (Fucik 2006). The "findings" of this report were that the area was devoid of people – at the time of the 2-week study – and thus no social impact assessment would be necessary. It was empty of people at the time of the brief visit of the European consultant. But the absence of people and herds at that moment was related more to the lack of rain in that season than to an absence of tribal use rights to the wadi. Only 5 years earlier, the largest oil company in Oman had commissioned a social impact assessment of the same wadi and found significant numbers of authentic local Harasiis there (Rae and Chatty 2001). Notwithstanding this earlier impact assessment, Occidental has since developed a spaghetti junction of oil and gas infrastructure in the wadi, devastating the grazing area for a large number of Harasiis families. Harasiis rights to this land have been denied and no adequate compensation or restitution has been considered. 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.<sup>10</sup> A slow and gradual process of dislocation followed by displacement is occurring (Chatty 1994).

Furthermore, conservationists – both national and international – have regarded the central desert of Oman as their own backyard, ignoring the presence and authenticity of its local human inhabitants. Conservationists viewed the desert as a landscape as well, but one shaped by plants and animals, not people. Their concern was 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 "the wild" in the Jiddat il-Harasiis and Harsusi males were hired to track these animals. In 1994 Oman succeeded in getting this conservation project recognized formally as the UNESCO World Heritage Arabian Oryx Sanctuary. But ongoing and constant friction between the Western managers of the conservation project and the local Harasiis tribesmen regarding their "rights" to graze their domestic herds in large parts of their territory – now officially a UNESCO nature reserve – eventually led the Harasiis to distance themselves from the project and resulted in a lack or diminution of any sense of ownership or use rights.

Two representations of the desert landscape came to a head: a Western conservationist vision of a pristine landscape of plants and animals and the local tribal vision of a landscape with sets of cultural and historical concepts relating people and domestic animals to desert spaces and places. When between 1996 and 1998 poaching and illegal capture of the oryx by rival tribes resulted in the loss of more than 350 animals, the Harasiis could do little to stop this downward spiral. Other tribes were actively acting out their disaffection. The Harasiis youth had become alienated, and the elders were no longer interested in the transformed landscape in the part of their traditional territory from which they had been dislocated. In 2007, The Arabian Oryx Sanctuary became the first World Heritage site to ever be deleted from the UNESCO list of World Heritage Sites. The justification for this unprecedented step was the rapid decline in oryx numbers (from 450 to 65) and the supposed degradation of its grazing area.

## 8.7 Responding to Increasing Dislocation

The Harasiis tribe has for centuries occupied the central desert of Oman as well as other remote and generally inaccessible regions when lack of precipitation or other weather or political extremes so demanded. Mobility among Harasiis households

<sup>8</sup>The Sultan asked the oil company to set up an experimental farm using artesian water in the desert to show how the "desert could bloom". Rahab Farm was successfully set up near Marmul in the southern province of Oman and proceeded to sell its alfalfa and other grasses locally. But its goat-breeding programme, which fascinated the local tribes, was closed down without any effort made to introduce these animals to local herds.

<sup>9</sup>These views are common globally in the dispute over petroleum exploration in areas of human habitation. In the Amazonian belt where tribes have sought to remain in isolation, efforts to stop petroleum exploration have resulted in the denial of their existence. Recently the president of Peru, Alan Garcia, was quoted as saying "the figure of the jungle native" is a ruse to prevent oil exploration. Daniel Saba, the former head of the state oil company in Peru, added more scornfully, "It is absurd to say there are uncontacted people when no one has seen them. So, who are these uncontacted tribes people are talking about?" (Carroll 2009: 27).

<sup>10</sup>For a brief period of time in the early 1990s, one oil company did agree to bury any new pipelines at 5 km intervals across the desert to facilitate the requirement of the Harasiis and other nomadic pastoral tribes to move themselves and their animals around the desert floor.



has seen them split their family groups into satellite camps as they search out the best grazing land for their camels and their goats. Certainly, in the earlier parts of the twentieth century their presence across the wide desert region of southeast Arabia up to the borders to the Trucial Coast (currently the UAE) were well documented. The lack of definitive elaboration of borders between the Sultanate, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia has meant that these tribesmen have moved across "borders" since their "creation" in the twentieth century. Goods, people and ideas flowed across these regions and the Harasiis and other pastoral communities took advantage of differentials across these newly established modern states. One example highlighting the early openness of movement that has since been shut down is that of Hamad, a Harasiis camel herder and expert tracker and guide to hunting parties. Hamad worked for the government of Oman for over 25 years and recently retired with a state pension. For most of his life he has moved freely across the desertscapes of Oman, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. With family and herds spread out between the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Oman, he has long maintained camps and – more recently – residences in the central desert of Oman and along the UAE-Saudi borderland. His vehicles have both UAE and Oman registration plates, and his family avails itself of health and education services in both locations. Several decades ago he applied for and received two passports, one Omani and the other from the UAE, to facilitate his movements across this translocality. In 2002, motivated by petty local jealousy among non-local oil company staff, he was reported to the local governor and told to turn in one of his two passports; dual-nationality was supposedly no longer permitted to Oman citizens. Unwilling to challenge this demand, he has returned his Omani passport, but continues his cross-regional or translocal movements for the health of his family and his herds. His family spends much of the year in the UAE, several of his sons work for the UAE police force and his camels remain in Oman and are herded by Baluchi and Sindhi hired herds. He collects his pension from the local governor's office in the Omani central desert. His identity is as a Harasiis tribesman. Which passport he holds means little to him, as crossing the borders between Oman and the UAE is relatively easy, with little or no restriction.

The question "Why should he [the Sultan] want to do this for us?" that I was asked in 1981 when attempting to immunize Harasiis children, comes to mind here. The notion of Omani citizenship and sense of belonging to one nation cannot be comfortably squared with the translocality of Harasiis identity and belonging to the desertscapes of southeast Arabia.

## 8.8 Conclusion

The authenticity of the Harasiis and other nomadic pastoral tribes has been challenged by national governmental and multi-national bodies that have their own views on the landscapes of Oman and the wider region. Recognizing the tensions that exist between the traditional and modern and between the *bedu* and the

*hadar* has meant that representations of landscapes are subject to hegemonic power. Space and place are not resolved in a singular representation that encapsulates the political fiction of a united state. There is no one absolute landscape, but rather a series of related and also contradictory perspectives. Omani policy formulations recognize elements of the authenticity of the Harasiis' vision of their desert landscapes. But bureaucratic hierarchy prioritizes and puts into practice landscape perspectives quite contrary: *hadar* landscapes imposed upon *bedu* territories; multinational extractive industry's perspectives of landscapes of no 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. And in addition, settled perspectives make the translocal irregular or illegal. These visions explain the lack of interest in the authenticity of Harasiis culture, in the lack of government interest in developing or promoting Harasiis livestock raising economy and the oil companies lack of interest in Harasiis claims to spaces and places they have inhabited at one time or another for centuries. At the same time, Harasiis claims of mobile and translocal identities are denied.

The Harasiis are increasingly becoming dislocated by the current prospecting and extractive activity of the oil and gas industry. Their restricted access to areas adjacent to the former Arabian Oryx Sanctuary has also impacted heavily on their sense of mobility and grazing rights. Contemporary government unwillingness to recognize the importance of mobility in their way of life is threatening their freedom of movement, as families are increasingly finding themselves tied to government centres to access education, health and welfare for the vulnerable weak, the young and the old.

For the first four decades of Oman's modern nation-building history (from 1970 to the present), a truly integrationist approach seemed to hold in which 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 that is curiously out of step with global trends. Oman, in its recent failures to recognize the authenticity and translocality 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 *bedu* heritage.

These challenges to the authenticity of Harasiis tribe and their desert landscapes are being addressed 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 subcontinent 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 reflect their own vision. The Emirate government has built two *bedu* settlements made up of low-lying and spread-out bungalows near the Abu Dhabi/Saudi border that 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.

The move is not permanent; nor is the settlement 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. Mass education and mass communications (Eickelman 1992) also reinforces their sense of authenticity.<sup>11</sup> 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 in the Kingdom of Jordan (see Layne 1994; Shryock 1995), *bedu* culture and its role in the development of the notion of national identity is important in the UAE. Unfortunately this is not the case of Oman. There seems to be in Oman no recognition yet 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 pluralize Oman nor negatively impact on state-building processes.

## References

- Al Ghazali, A. (1984). *Interview*. Muscat: Ministry of Housing.
- Anderson, B. (1983). *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. London: Verso.
- Aplin, G. (2007). World heritage cultural landscapes. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 13(6), 427–446.
- Appadurai, A. (1996). *Modernity at large: Cultural dimensions of globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Blackburn, C. (2007). Producing legitimacy: Reconciliation and the negotiation of aboriginal rights in Canada. *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 13, 621–638.
- Carroll, R. (2009, July 4). Rumble in the Jungle. *The Guardian Weekend*, pp. 23–27.
- Chatty, D. (1994). Petroleum exploitation and the displacement of pastoral nomadic households in Oman. In S. Shami (Ed.), *Population displacement and resettlement: Development and conflict in the Middle East* (pp. 89–106). New York: Center for Migration Studies.
- de Jong, F. (1999). The production of translocality. Initiation in the sacred grove in Southern Senegal. In R. Richard, W. van Binsbergen, & R. van Dijk (Eds.), *Modernity on a shoestring. Dimensions of globalization, consumption and development in Africa and beyond* (pp. 315–340). Leiden/London: EIDOS.
- Dyer, C. (Ed.). (2006). *The education of nomadic peoples: Current issues, future prospects*. Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- Eickelman, D. (1989). *The Middle East: An anthropological approach*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall.

- Eickelman, D. (1992). Mass higher education and the religious imagination in contemporary Arab societies. *American Ethnologist*, 19, 643–655.
- Freitag, U., & von Oppen, A. (2010). Introduction: Translocality: An approach to connection and transfer in area studies. In U. Freitag & A. von Oppen (Eds.), *Translocality: The study of globalising processes from a Southern perspective* (pp. 1–24). Leiden: Brill.
- Fucik, K. (2006). *Environmental impact assessment in Wadi Mukhaizana*. Muscat: Occidental Oil.
- Gellner, E. (1983). *Nations and nationalism*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Gilbert, J. (2007). Nomadic territories: A human rights approach to nomadic peoples' land rights. *Human Rights Law Review*, 7(4), 681–716.
- Hirsch, E., & O'Hanlon, M. (Eds.). (1995). *The anthropology of landscape: Perspectives on place and space*. Oxford: Clarendon.
- Jackson, J. (1984). *Discovering the vernacular landscape*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Johnstone, T. M. (1977). *Harsusi lexicon*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Khaldūn, I. (1958). *The Muqaddimah: An introduction to history* (F. Rosenthal, Trans.). Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Layne, L. (1994). *Home and homeland: The dialogics of tribal and national identities in Jordan*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Peterson, J. (1978). *Oman in the twentieth century*. New York/London: Croom Helm.
- Peterson, J. (2004a). Oman's diverse society: Northern Oman. *Middle East Journal*, 58(1), 32–51.
- Peterson, J. (2004b). Oman's diverse society: Southern Oman. *Middle East Journal*, 58(2), 255–269.
- Peterson, J. (2007). *Oman's insurgencies: The sultanate's struggle for supremacy*. London: Saqi.
- Rae, J., & Chatty, D. (2001). *Participatory project appraisal for the Mukhaizana field development: A social impact study*. Muscat: Petroleum Development Oman LLC.
- Rew, A., Fischer, E., & Pandey, B. (2000). *Addressing policy constraints and improving outcomes in development-induced displacement and resettlement projects*. Oxford: Refugee Studies Centre, University of Oxford.
- Scott, J. (2009). *The art of not being governed: An anarchist history of Southeast Asia*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Shryock, A. (1995). Popular genealogical nationalism: History writing and identity among the Balqa Tribes of Jordan. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 37(2), 325–357.
- Thomas, B. (1938). *Arabia Felix: Across the empty quarter*. London: Reader's Union.
- Wilkinson, J. (1977). *Water and tribal settlement in South-East Arabia: A study of the Aflaj of Oman*. Oxford: Oxford Clarendon Press.
- Wilkinson, J. (1983). Traditional concepts of territory in South East Arabia. *The Geographical Journal*, 149(3), 201–315.
- Wilkinson, J. (1987). *The Imamate tradition of Oman*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>11</sup> Although the lack of continuous sources of electricity limits the use of the Internet and computers, the early and widespread use of mobile phones and satellite phones suggests that the Harasiis and other desert dwellers continue to maintain a greater affinity with the spoken than with the written word.