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Adapting to Multinational Oil Exploration: the Mobile Pastoralists of Oman

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For centuries the highly mobile and adaptable nomadic pastoral peoples of the Middle East and North Africa have been regarded with suspicion as well as admiration by their settled and more urbane cousins. Consequently, the relationships between pastoral communities and agrarian and urban ones have not always been smooth or easy. At times they have been characterized by competition and strife, at others by symbiosis and cooperation. The ecological requirements of each of these communities were such that a crisis among one sector would trigger a reaction in the other. Often the result was turmoil that affected the whole area.

Throughout most of the 20th century, nomadic pastoral peoples in the Middle East have faced enormous pressure to change their way of life and adapt to a more modern and settled existence. During the first half of the 20th century, an ambivalent attitude towards nomadic pastoralists prevailed with various efforts at private land registration and large-scale settlement schemes being set up with varying degrees of failure. With the consolidation of state power and authority after the Second World War however, most of the nations of the Middle East and North Africa turned to their pastoral peoples with a determined view to settling them in one place. People who moved were regarded as a threat to the security of the settled. Settlement schemes, it was assumed, would assure control over pastoral people. Jordan, Iraq, Syria, Saudi Arabia and Egypt all attempted the sedentarization of these communities. Indeed the resulting disintegration of the pastoral community frequently created new problems for the nation-state.

The international development efforts of this era designed to make nomadic peoples 'modern' also largely failed resulting in a stalemate and often a national policy of benign neglect.

In this study I examine the ways in which pastoral nomadic communities in

the Middle East have been able to negotiate economic and livelihood successes out of a state of 'neglect'. I briefly describe the ways some nomadic pastoral groups (Bedouin) in Northern Arabia have been able to manipulate government 'neglect' into economic successes. I then examine the situation in Oman, where a different state policy was enacted. Determined to provide social benefits to the nomadic pastoral communities of the Central Desert without forcing them to settle, the government of Oman extended basic health, education and social services to these communities. These services, I argue, gave the isolated and remote nomadic pastoral communities in the country a breather, a space in which to catch up with the rest of the rural population. However in spite of this radical policy, it has become clear two decades later, that the nomadic community has been, in effect, neglected in comparison with the rest of the citizens of the country. It is the lack of a meaningful relationship with the oil companies whose concession areas cover their traditional tribal lands, which has highlighted the fundamental disadvantage of a significant stakeholder group. However, today, with international pressure for accountability and transparency among the multinational oil companies, the call has been heard for socially sound investment policy and concern with respecting human rights. This has given these nomadic communities a new voice and leverage in demanding sound social investment policies from the government and the oil companies for themselves and their communities in the deserts of Oman.

The nature of nomadic pastoral societies

Nomadic pastoral societies in the Middle East have a number of features in common, and it is possible to formulate some generalizations about them. The definition of pastoralism I use is *animal husbandry by natural graze and browse with some access to crop cultivation*. As no pastoral group is ever entirely self-sufficient, it must maintain reciprocal and interdependent relations with sedentary communities on the margins of its grazing areas. The pastoral adaptation to the ecological environment has always presupposed the presence of sedentary communities and access to their products. Today, with even more sophisticated technology in the form of trucks, water bowsers, metal utensils and shelter frames, bottled gas, mobile phones and other trappings of the 20th and 21st centuries, the dependence on people outside the pastoral group is particularly apparent.

The pastoral way of life is shaped by movement. The combination of sea-

sonal and regional variability in the location of pasture and water makes movement of herds from deficit to surplus areas both logical and necessary. Pastoralists have a double reliance on land in the form of pasture for graze and browse and in the form of water resources for themselves and their herds. Each discrete unit or tribe seeks to control sufficient land and water for the livestock holdings of the group. The borders between tribes have always been fluid and subject to constant reinterpretation as the relative political and physical strength of one group vis-à-vis another fluctuated or as pasture conditions became desiccated. Up until the mid-20th century, tribes were in constant competition with each other for the use of these precious resources, and the weaker units, or less ably represented ones, were often forced to give up their rights to use certain areas. In some cases this meant only minor readjustments in the allocation of resources within the tribe. In other cases it meant wholesale tribal displacement.

The nomadic pastoral tribes of the Arabian Peninsula are often referred to as Bedouin, a term derived from the Arabic word, *badw*, meaning an inhabitant of the *bādiyah* – the large stretch of semiarid land or desert that comprises nearly 80 % of the Arabian landmass (see map: Arabian Peninsula and Fertile Crescent). They have, for centuries, pushed their frontier regions into border areas of agricultural settlement and have, as often, been repulsed when central governments have had the strength to do so. This tug-of-war between agricultural and pastoral-based modes of existence often encompassed peoples that moved between both types of economic orders. When central authority was weak, the pastoral tribes conquered the land and associated agricultural villages and oases by *ghazw* (raiding) or by collecting tribute of *khūwah* (brotherhood).¹ When central authority was strong, however, the tribes were forced to make payments to the government or retreat into the *bādiyah*.

Along the northern frontiers of settlement that arc around present-day Jordan, Syria, and Iraq, elements of the nomadic pastoral tribes invariably settled in the border villages and combined agriculture with raising of small livestock and paying their taxes to the representatives of the central authority. When that authority was too weak to impose order and taxation on the border areas, these

¹ At one time, tribute (*khūwah*) was exacted from sedentary farmers generally in the form of crops in return for protection from raids (*ghazw*) by their tribe or others in the surrounding areas. This tribute-raid relationship was a simple business proposition whereby the pastoralist received a needed produce (grain) and the farmers gained a scarce service (security). In principle, it was not very different from a more widespread relationship whereby animal products were exchanged for dates or grain.

families frequently abandoned their farms and joined their kin in full-time pastoral activities.

For centuries expansions and retreats have characterized the history of the pastoral tribes of the Middle East in their special relations with central authority and have been documented in the works of Ibn Khaldūn,² Volney,³ Oppenheim,⁴ and Rafiq⁵ to mention a few. Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, these tribes continued to jostle and fight for control over large stretches of pastureland and associated agricultural villages. Sometimes they formed alliances among themselves to contest pasture rights of former supporters. As each tribe attempted to establish its hegemony over a region, the nature of the *ghazw* became almost desperate among the tribes as well as settlements in the region. The *khūwah*, which was being extorted in greater quantities from weaker tribes and farmers, no longer represented a guarantee of security as it once had.

This period of tribal unrest and disruption of both trade and communication came to an end soon after the close of the Crimean War (1867); an event that had distracted the Ottoman Empire's attention from its southern province. A period of reform of central government was initiated in the Arabian Peninsula. Ottoman military authority was restored to the border areas of agriculture, initiating a period of greater safety and economic benefit for cultivators. The nomadic pastoral tribes were encouraged to fight among themselves and an army of thirty thousand agents was actively engaged in instigating feuds between tribes. On some occasions troops were lent to one side or another with an ensuing massacre by rifle-bearing troops against sword- and lance-carrying tribesmen.⁶

Agricultural expansion was actively sponsored by the Ottoman authority at this time as a way of reasserting control over the frontier zones. Government soldiers armed with modern weaponry – Snider breech-loaders and Winchester repeaters – manned new border garrisons, giving farmers the security they needed to increase in numbers and strength.⁷ The most aggressive of the new settlers were the Circassians fleeing from the Russian occupation of the Caucasus, their homeland. The Druze communities pushed out of South-Central Lebanon

² Ibn Khaldun, *Muqqadimah*.

³ Volney, *Voyage*.

⁴ Oppenheim, *Beduinen*.

⁵ Rafiq, *Damascus*.

⁶ Nutting, *Arabs*.

⁷ By 1880 this modern weaponry, especially the Martini and Remington, was in the hands of the Bedouins as well (see Lewis, *Nomads*, 210).

establishing border settlements and maintaining themselves in the face of opposition from the nomadic pastoral tribes, such as the Ruwala, who were also claiming the area. Along the entire border, units of sheep-raising tribes returned to agricultural settlements and took up a mixed economy of farming and livestock raising. Land reforms, tax remissions, and other special privileges further pushed the balance in favour of agriculturalists, leaving the pastoral tribes to find and adapt to a new ecological reality.

At the close of the First World War, Northern Arabia, nominally an Ottoman province, was partitioned by the League of Nations. The semi-arid lands of the *bādiyah* were divided up and distributed, under ‘mandate status’, to France and Great Britain. The southern wedge alone remained in the hands of Abdul Aziz Al-Saud, the founding father of Saudi Arabia. This step, along with the subsequent establishment of British and French administrations in their respective regions, the telegraph and road infrastructure, and the introduction of mechanized transport, had a tremendous impact on the pastoral tribes of the region. Many were to prophesy that these developments spelled out the death of their way of life. Most of these changes, however, were quickly absorbed by the Bedouin and altered to meet their own highly adaptive system.

In the second half of the 20th century, as Western development aid came to be the single greatest export from Europe and the United States to the ‘Third World’, development experts came to regard nomadic pastoral peoples with scorn, if not disdain.⁸ As Dyson-Hudson discusses at length⁹ nomadic national and international experts often regard pastoral systems of livestock management as minimal – if not controversial – by national and international experts. Many of these experts regard local peoples as having a poor knowledge of animal breeding. In some cases, academic theories of the 1930s (for example, Herskovits’ cattle complex), long rejected by most scholars, are still maintained, as is the common opinion that for these pastoral peoples, the condition of the livestock is less important than the number. In addition, many ‘development’ experts assume that the pastoral people in parts of the Middle East, as in Africa are ruining their physical environment.¹⁰

Unlike Africa, however, the Middle East and North Africa has never been the focus of mass international pastoral development assistance.¹¹ Governments

⁸ Bocco, “Sédentarisation”.

⁹ Dyson-Hudson, “Pastoral Production Systems”, 219– 256.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 219.

¹¹ Dyson-Hudson reports that the African livestock development programmes of the past two decades have been aimed at increasing livestock production, raising the standard of living

of the Middle East, perhaps because they regarded their pastoral populations as signifiers of internal political problems, sought local rather than international solutions. Accordingly, government policy in the Middle East has been directed at settling these peoples either by physical force or by economic enticement. Settlement of nomadic pastoralists has been seen as the only way to control and integrate marginal and problematic populations that did not conform to the modern nation-state aspirations of the newly created republics and kingdoms of the regions.

Settlement efforts in the Middle East

In the northern part of the Arabian Peninsula and in parts of North Africa, governments have attempted to lure the nomadic pastoralists out of the deserts and arid rangelands to settlement schemes and agricultural pilot projects. These, in large measure, have failed. More forceful approaches have included revoking the traditional communal land holdings of these people. Modern private registration of land has been encouraged, particularly in the marginal areas of the desert that border the agricultural belt, the Fertile Crescent, where dry farming of cereals can be supported in years of good rain. This last approach has had some success from the government point of view. At the time of the various cadastral surveys in the 19th and early 20th centuries, many tribal and sub-tribal representatives were able to register themselves as private owners of land that tribesmen had considered to be held in common. Impoverished families who were forced to leave the pastoral way of life through loss of herds or manpower – or both – often found themselves transformed into hired shepherds or, worse, agricultural labourers for their landowning tribal leaders. Even after several generations of uneasy compromise, these families have continued to keep some livestock – generally goat and sheep – and many maintain that they would return to their former way of life if circumstances made it possible.¹²

of the human population, and improving the environment itself. The entire process could be seen as an effort towards transforming subsistence pastoralism into the beginnings of commercial livestock production (*ibid.*, 220).

¹² A study commissioned by CARDNE (Centre for Agricultural Reform and Development in the Near East) in 1995 on the growing phenomenon of hired shepherds among the Bedouin of Syria and Jordan revealed the large extent of this employment as shepherds and agricultural workers by some of the extended family helped the unit to cling on to a pastoral way of life (Chatty, *Hired Shepherds*).

In Saudi Arabia and the southern region of the Arabian Peninsula, the situation of nomadic pastoral peoples has been complicated first by the discovery of oil, and more recently, the tremendous wealth that has come into the hands of these governments. Saudi Arabia has for decades tried to settle its large nomadic pastoral peoples. Beginning as early as the 1920s, settlement schemes were built to house these people. Initially the urgency of the projects reflected the governments need to consolidate their hold over the country by controlling their far-flung and highly mobile peoples. The association of this way of life with a backward, less evolved human state, also contributed to government efforts to suppress it. In later decades settlement projects built at tremendous expense were financed locally from oil revenues. Predictably, the schemes failed (e. g. the Wadi al-Sarhan Project, the King Faysal Settlement Project). The nomadic pastoralists, discouraged by attempts to turn them into settled tillers of the soil, flitted away. Some returned to their old way of life; others turned to new endeavours more compatible with pastoralism, such as in the transport industry or in trade. Many an abandoned settlement scheme stands today as a stark reminder of how little understanding there was, and still is, for their way of life.

With the huge increase in the profit from petroleum extraction, which the Arabian Gulf States, Saudi Arabia, and the Sultanate of Oman experienced in the early 1970s, came a new approach to the ‘problem of nomadic pastoralists’. Mass settlement schemes were abandoned in favour of enticements to individual citizens. Control, in a political sense, was attempted by encouraging the individual tribesman to come forward and register himself as a citizen. In return, these governments granted various privileges. In the wealthier states, with very small settled populations, registration carried with it an entitlement to a plot of land, a house, an automobile, and a subsidy for each head of livestock. In other states, registration meant a monthly stipend – generally in the region of the local equivalent of several hundred U.S. dollars – often disguised as a salary for some form of national paramilitary service.

Nomadic pastoral adaptation in Syria: an environment of ‘benign neglect’

With the end of the Ottoman Empire and the imposition of a League of Nations Mandate, the French authorities in Syria set about to encourage the Bedouin to govern themselves, perhaps influenced by some romantic 18th and 19th centuries image of the ‘noble savage’. Bedouin tribal leaders were supported

by a special French administrative unit, the *Contrôle Bedouin*, which was outside the jurisdiction of the French civil administration. This unit encouraged traditional Bedouin law and conflict resolution to operate in the *bādiyyah*. Occasionally such skirmishes over spilled into agricultural areas governed by a separate colonial administration. As long as French interests were not affected, the Bedouin were informally allowed to operate as a de facto ‘state within a state’.

However, with the discovery of oil in the region, the French Mandate power became concerned with safeguarding the potentially important international investment. After finding that inter-tribal Bedouin raiding and skirmishing were affecting the laying and protection of oil pipelines from the interior to the Mediterranean coastline, the French reversed their original policy and vigorously pacified the area, stripping the tribes of their semi-autonomous status, and co-opted the leadership into the urban elite of Damascus, Hama and Aleppo. This was accomplished largely through grants of private ownership of large areas of the common tribal grazing areas of the *bādiyyah*, voting rights in Parliament, privileged access to foreign education for the sons of Bedouin leaders, and significant monetary compensation.¹³

The establishment of the independent nation-state in the late 1940s and 1950s saw the continuation of several decades of sustained effort to control and break down pastoral tribal organization. Much of the tribal leadership was co-opted into the elite urban political scene. Land holdings once held in common were increasingly registered in the names of tribal leaders and converted into farms. The Bedouin tribes of Syria, and Northern Arabia in general, struggled with two opposing forces: one compelling them to settle on the edges of the desert and engage in marginal agricultural production; the other forcing them to move away to seek multi-resource livelihoods and pastoral subsistence across several national borders.¹⁴ In September 1956 after several years of continuous skirmishing in the Homs, Hama and Aleppo, the government summoned all the major tribal leaders to Damascus. This was ostensibly an effort to arbitrate the conflict between the tribes and sign a ‘peace’ treaty. The occasion was also used as the first official and formally documented step in dismantling any government recognition of a people who had no fixed abode, did not receive any state services, and were not accessible to control either by police forces or security services. Failing in its efforts to entice Bedouin to

¹³ France, Ministère des Affaires Etrangères, *Rapport*.

¹⁴ See the works of Abu Jaber [et al.], “Bedouin Settlement”, Chatty, *Camel*, and Lancaster,

move out of the control and orbit of their leaders, and to settle on farms in the border areas of agriculture, the government undertook to strip the Bedouin leadership of all power and authority. In 1958, the *bādiyah* was nationalized and all tribal holdings ceased to be recognized by the state, the entire area coming under ‘state ownership’.¹⁵ With this measure, the government believed it had completed the dismantling of the Bedouin tribes, which had begun nearly fifty years earlier by the French neo-colonial administration.

The 1960s were a period of strenuous government land reform, including not only the formal seizure of all commonly-held tribal land but also the confiscation of the large tracts so recently awarded to individual Bedouin tribal leaders as private holdings. Much of these confiscated holdings were given to urban merchants, favoured politicians, and entrepreneurs for large-scale industrial development of cotton and wheat production in the less arid areas of the *bādiyah*. Following a three-year-long drought in the early 1960s, in which over two million sheep died, the government instituted a programme to alleviate the problems caused by this ecological disaster. The government set about reviving the livestock industry without also restoring authority to tribal leaders, or tribes to their traditional lands. Terms such as environmental degradation, desertification and overgrazing came to be used by technicians, diplomats and politicians alike when discussing the Bedouin and their use of the *bādiyah*. Development aid and technology transfer to Syria was aimed at taking over greater areas of the *bādiyah* and converting them into important agricultural crop producing regions. A United Nations sponsored project was set up to revitalize the pastoral sector of the Syrian economy, but not the structure of its society. Its foremost goal was to stabilize the mainly pastoral livestock population. This proved extremely difficult since the agricultural and livestock technicians running the project – mainly trained in the West – did not understand Bedouin methods of animal husbandry.¹⁶ In turn, the Bedouin had no trust in government – especially in light of the recent confiscation of grazing land, and the explosive expansion of agricultural development over nearly a third of the best rangelands of the *bādiyah*.¹⁷

Rwala Bedouin.

¹⁵ See Masti, *Tradition of Hema*, and also Rae, *Tribe and State*.

¹⁶ Bedouin animal husbandry is based on risk minimalization rather than the more common western market profit motivation. See Shoup, “Sheep Pastoralism”.

¹⁷ The Bedouin ‘dry farmed’ cereals during years of good rain, but the large scale cultivation in this arid zone had never occurred before. See Sammane, *Bedouin Population*.

Perhaps the most far-reaching development of the age was the national infrastructure, which was established during Interwar French Mandate (1920–1946). Originally intended as an aid to military control over the region, the system of roads begun by the French was to dramatically affect the pastoralists' total organization. Camels, as the major economic wealth of many pastoralists, were rendered increasingly obsolete as new systems of transportation became operative. The nomadic pastoral communities who remained in the territory attempted to adapt. In general, the viability of the pastoral economy depended upon the development of new channels of access to agricultural products. The improved network of roads permitted a greater degree of trade. In many cases, the roadways served as long market places.

Nearly thirty years ago I commenced doctoral research among two Bedouin tribes who migrated between Syria and Lebanon. One tribe, the al-Faḍl, had been studied a decade earlier by the son of the tribal Emir, in the course of completing his doctorate in Anthropology under the guidance of Professor Raymond Firth at the London School of Economics and Political Science. This text was the ideal tool to use in my own study, which set out to examine the prevailing academic and development practitioner hypothesis that pastoralist peoples resist change. My own hypothesis was that nomadic peoples did not resist change, which they perceived to be in their interest. Armed with household records and livestock numbers of the mid-1960s, I set out to measure the changes in live stock numbers, frequency of migrations, the use of local markets, and other yet to be defined spheres of activity. From my readings, I had expected to find sheep herds of generous size as well as smaller, but significant camel herds. To my surprise, I found few camels – one or two baggage animals in some households. Generally I found that the half-ton pick up truck had been universally adopted by the al-Faḍl and other tribal households in the intervening decade. I soon established that a spontaneous change had occurred throughout the region as truck transport was adopted by the Bedouin to mobilize their way of life in the face of the rapidly changing environment. No one person or government had spearheaded this move. But throughout the Bedouin community a common recognition had occurred that adopting truck transport made sense. Left alone to their own devices, officially decreed as no longer existing as a political unit, the Bedouin of Syria and Northern Arabia proceeded to make changes to their economy to mobilize themselves to take advantage of regional markets to move livestock and other goods as well as to purchase needed grains. A study of herding in Syria and Jordan in the 1990s has revealed that the 'average' monthly income expected during a good year from a herd of

300 hundred head of sheep – a middle range holding – is higher than the income which a university professor can expect to earn.¹⁸

*Pastoral nomadic adaptation in Oman: an enlightened environment
shadowed by neglect*

In the early 1980s, with basic social services rapidly and methodically extended into the rural countryside of Oman, Sultan Qaboos issued a number of decrees of vital interest to the remote nomadic pastoral communities. This component of the population was to be targeted for development. His wishes, reiterated in a number of speeches, were that the desert regions of Oman were to receive the same care and attention as the villages and towns of the rest of the country. This mandate was interpreted by the leading government ministers to mean that a way was to be found to extend the same social services to pastoral nomads without forcing them to give up their traditional way of life. Plans were drawn up to create a number of tribal administrative centres throughout the desert where the basic social functions comprising health care, education facilities and welfare services would be available.

In May of 1981, the first UNDP project aimed at the development needs of a pastoral population in the Arabian Peninsula was initiated at Haima in the central desert area of Oman. The first year of the project was devoted to conducting ‘an anthropological study of the population’ and identifying their felt needs and problems. The second and further years were focussed on recommending and implementing practical programmes that would extend basic social services to this remote and marginal nomadic pastoral community. The nomadic population associated with this region was the Harasiis tribe, a South Arabian speaking people of about 3,000 occupying a large, nearly waterless gravel and rock plain – the Jiddat-il-Harasiis – of 40,000 square kilometres (about the size of Scotland).¹⁹ Raising herds of camel and goat, mainly for the production of milk, these communities migrated across the vast arid expanse of the Jiddat. Their only water holes had been dug by the oil company in the late 1950s and 1960s as the company moved around the territory looking for oil.

¹⁸ The study of hired shepherds in Syria and Jordan revealed that the income of the middle range herders was consistently higher than the professional salaries of civil servants in government (see Chatty, *Hired Shepherds*).

¹⁹ For a full ethnographic description of the Harasiis tribe and their encounter with development planning see Chatty, *Mobile Pastoralists*.

By the mid-1970s, the Harasiis had engaged in a major technological change shifting from camels to trucks for transport. By the early 1980s every household of the 17 sampled for our study had a four-wheel drive vehicle. Such a transformation required a fundamental shift in household economic organizations. Each household had to find means of keeping these vehicles running and 'local' employment for one member of each family became a significant survival strategy.

The Harasiis had become first exposed to opportunities for wage labour as early as the late 1950s when the oil company was exploring for oil in their territory. After two decades of unskilled and poorly paid work in this sector, the Harasiis were eager to improve their opportunities. When the joint United Nations – Omani government effort to extend permanent and outreach (mobile) social services to these people commenced its work, it was met with great support and enthusiasm by the community. Their logic was that this project would be able to offer schools, which would transform their youth from potentially unskilled labourers into skilled, well-paid professionals. They saw this institution as a way out of the 'non-jobs', that were currently available to them as well guards and installation watchmen. Instead they looked to future employment with the oil company, the border police and the army. But these forms of employment required literacy in Arabic, high school diplomas and in some case English fluency.

Within two years and with the full support of the community, the joint UN-government project was able to set up a boarding school for boys – girls were admitted on a day basis –, two mobile primary health care units, a welfare office for social affairs, and a veterinary clinic with an outreach programme. School enrolment, which began with 42 boys and 3 girls in 1982, climbed yearly. By the mid-1990s the boarding school, which included a primary and a secondary school, had over 150 boys and girls in attendance. Some of the graduating boys had succeeded in getting jobs with the police, the army and in the government civil service.

The UN project attempted to involve the government in activities for the Harasiis, which went beyond basic services already provided to the settled rural and urban communities. Efforts to engage the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries in projects, which would support the nomadic pastoral way of life, were not successful. Although the Ministry was engaged in supporting local goat farming, it could not make the transformative jump of addressing nomadic animal husbandry. Local requests and plans from the Harasiis, which would

improve their animal husbandry or help develop their marketing or trade interests did not attract government interest. Instead, what government administrators did notice was the increasing number of pastoral people coming forward to request monthly welfare assistance from the government. These officials came to regard such requests as proof of increased poverty among that sector of the country's population, evidence which required solutions in order to make these people 'economically productive'.

The nomadic pastoral population of Oman has come to be increasingly classified by government administrators as a 'poor' people who are making no productive contribution to the national economy. They are seen as a drain on the country rather than as an asset. This assessment is not derived from any particular facts of technical study, but rather from the long-standing ambiguous nature of the relations between the urban, settled societies of the towns and cities and the mobile, remote, pastoral peoples of the desert interiors. Hence government 'income generating' schemes have been put forward which ignores the livestock livelihood base of these communities. Instead government focused on developing or teaching regionally acceptable craft skills (sewing, weaving, and spinning), which might result in goods for sale at annual government-sponsored cultural events. But efforts to improve the quality of the livestock or systems of animal transport to towns and cities have not been supported by the state. Government schemes for pastoralists, generally an imitation of 'community development programmes' for oasis farmers are regarded as a way to turn these 'poor' debt-ridden communities in the country into productive contributors of the country's gross-national product. Such schemes have little chance of making any long-term impact on the pastoral population of the country.

The Harasiis initiatives to persuade government – and its most visible associate, the oil company – to 'develop' their traditional homeland has been met with resistance or rejected outright. Tribal demands for road-building or, at the very least, regular road grading of tracks important to the local pastoralists have been rejected or denied on environmental grounds that road construction or grading would be contrary to the requirements of the Oryx sanctuary – a large area of the Jiddat-il-Harasiis claimed by government and recognized by international conservation agencies (International Union for the Conservation of nature [IUCN], World Wide Fund for Nature [WWF]) for the reintroduction of the Arabian Oryx in the Sultanate of Oman.²⁰ Tribal requests for government

²⁰ In 1972 the Oryx was declared extinct in Oman, the result of over-hunting by elites from Arabia and the Gulf. The relatively richest part of the desert, the northeastern quadrangle of the Jiddat-il-Harasiis, was identified by specialists for the IUCN (International Union for

support of a system of water distribution which would rotate and change as households shifted their campsites around the desert were denied in favour of creating a system of 'fixed' facilities around brackish water wells where permanent water purification plants would be set up. Local Harasiis pastoral efforts to grow fodder in the desert and to introduce salt resistant plants were met with disinterest by Ministry of Agriculture personnel who continued to subsidize fodder farming and improved water spreading systems in the agricultural regions of the country.

The Harasiis have been changed by these experiences. Their expectations of government have grown and their political consciousness also has been raised as they experience and compare their lot to that of their settled neighbours in the north and the south. Their natural pragmatism and self-reliance is probably still not affected. Their continuous adaptation to an exceedingly harsh and unpredictable environment and their firm belief in a strong, just and beneficent deity presupposes an unshakable independence of spirit and mind. They have taken in the past, and perhaps will always take, every opportunity to plead their case, to ask for assistance, to request help from the large society on the fringe of their universe. Their pragmatic position has been that sometimes they succeed and sometimes they don't. Although some of their material expectations – mainly centred on their acceptance of the motor vehicle and the way it has transformed daily life – have grown, their cultural integrity remains.

For the Harasiis, subsistence animal husbandry livestock remains the central focus of their lives. A short study completed in 2001 has revealed that over the past two decades household herds have remained remarkable stable with 100 head of goats and 25 head of camel remaining an average figure.²¹ Employment of at least one male member of each household remains crucial for the well being of the group. What has changed, is the development of a growing sense of frustration at the kinds of employment available. Having engaged wholeheartedly with the government effort to provide education to them, the Harasiis now ask why they see so little return. They question why the oil company and

the Conservation of Nature) as the site for an Oryx reintroduction project. This was approved by government without consultation with the Harasiis whose land this was. The restrictions on infrastructural and other development in the nature reserve has meant significant hardship and exclusion for the indigenous pastoral community. For more details see Chatty and Colchester, *Conservation*.

²¹ Household figures for livestock numbers derived from 1981–1982 and 1991–1992 (Chatty, *Mobile Pastoralists*, 94–100) are generally comparable with figures derived from a social impact assessment which was carried out for the national oil company in the region in August 2001 (see Rae, *Social Impact Assessment*).

its sub-contractors still employ so many unskilled labourers from abroad, when they themselves seek employment and they are puzzled as to why so few of their educated youth seem to be able to manage to gain training and employment in the oil sector. There is a perceptible sense of being 'left behind', of not benefiting from the wealth which oil – extracted from their own tribal land – has generated for the rest of the country's citizens.

As oil production increasingly focuses on fields in this central desert area, the questions the Harasiis ask come to have national significance. In an age where multinational oil companies are increasingly being held accountable and pressure for transparency grows, the neglect of a significant stakeholder group becomes problematic. The national oil consortium (including Shell International) holds concessions over a large portion of the Jiddat-il-Harasiis. International calls for socially sound investment policy have meant that the oil companies feel obliged to engage in a meaningful manner with this community. This effort to develop a relationship with the Harasiis comes at a time when news of disturbances in other parts of the country regarding multi-national companies, local employment and social investment policy are reaching the remotest corners of the country.²² The Harasiis are now making their concerns over their past exclusion and lack of voice or representation known.

How the individual tribes people will adapt to the recent developments in the middle of the Jiddat-il-Harasiis is problematic. Here are a people caught in the modern post-colonial world of development and planning. In spite of the remoteness, the marginality and the isolation that characterizes the Harasiis and their tribal lands, they are now beginning to face problems similar to the nomadic pastoral tribes of the rest in Arabia. Their lands have been, in a sense, confiscated as in the rest of the Middle East and are controlled *de facto* and *de jure* by the nation-state. Recent infrastructural growth has meant that they have access to and are affected by development hundreds of kilometres away. Motor transport and motorized water pumping facilities have revolutionized their lives, as have telecommunications. Some have had the opportunity to leave and take up new lives. But many have chosen to remain.

²² A large gas liquification project in the Sharqiyyah region of Oman recently ran into trouble over the terms which the local community had been offered in compensation for loss of land holdings, and fishing rights. The gas company social investment package of 1.5 % of the profits, which was under discussion has become common knowledge throughout the interior of Oman. Harasiis tribal elders have begun to lobby for a similar package for the Harasiis – of 1–1.5 % of company profits – to be ploughed into a carefully designed and controlled social investment package for the Jiddat-il-Harasiis.

Although each country in the Arabian Peninsula has to face different sets of economic, political and social factors, a feature that is found in common throughout is the plight of the subsistence nomadic pastoralist. Without exception, their territorial usufruct is no longer recognized by the central government; their struggle to subsist has required that they acquire modern forms of transport that can only be supported by wage labour. This, in turn, often means the household head spending long periods of time away from the pastoral household, leaving the management of herds to other, often younger and less experienced, members of the family. By accident, mismanagement, and force of circumstances, these peoples have been – by and large – left to find their own solutions. Their dependence upon government or outside agencies has remained superficial, and these communities continue to adjust and adapt to changes in their environment; ever searching for a meaningful and viable existence for themselves and their family herds. What remains to be seen is whether international pressure for accountability and transparency among the multinational oil companies will continue to hold weight. Current indicators point to a movement in the direction of recognizing, as significant stakeholder groups, the pastoral communities, which populate the concession areas of the major international oil and natural gas companies. How effective that recognition becomes depends by-and-large on the continuing demand internationally for company accountability and transparency. In the remote and largely arid lands inhabited by nomadic pastoralists sound investment policies by multinational oil companies will depend upon continuing global efforts for accountability, transparency, sound social investment and local partnerships. Without such external efforts and impetus, it is unlikely that the pastoral nomadic to community could leverage support for its wishes to see investment in their territory take on the shape which they, themselves, feel would benefit them.

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