

# Commission on Nomadic Peoples

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## THE HARASIIS: PASTORALISTS IN A PETROLEUM EXPLOITED ENVIRONMENT<sup>1</sup>

by Dawn Chatty

As late as 1980, little work in the social sciences had been conducted in the central desert of Oman. What data existed was vague and so general as to be meaningless. One work published in 1980 stated, for example, that "Information about the way of life here and about the tribe of the Harasiis which inhabits the area is very limited although it is thought that the small nomadic groups pursue camel herding exclusively and engage in periodic movements . . . but little is known about these people" (Scholz 1980:11). A year later, I had the opportunity to conduct a twenty-four month anthropological study in just that region. My instructions from the government of Oman were to examine the felt needs and problems of that population and to design and implement practical social programmes to meet those needs. The underlying rationale was an attempt to raise the standard of living of the population "without undermining its traditional way of life" (Chatty 1984:2). The government of Oman was interested in extending the same basic services to the pastoral populations of its central desert that it had developed in most of its rural regions since the accession of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said bin Taimur in 1971. The expedient of settling these pastoral nomads was not entertained, nor, for that matter, was the idea of developing their pastoral marketing system. Over a very short period of time (1981-1984), mobile primary health care, limited curative services, educational facilities, veterinary services, as well as welfare services were instituted. The central government built a tribal centre at Haima and appointed a wali as its representative to run it. Soon Haima became the administrative focus for the tribe. The ensuing transformation of the tribe's sense of identity in the face of these administrative, economic and social measures has been profound. A once strong tribal identity has been rapidly worn away and a nascent national identity has come to insinuate itself within the population. In this paper I will briefly describe the Harasiis tribe as it once was and as it has come to be with the introduction of modern government services. I will, in this fashion, attempt to show how the Harasiis sense of identity has developed over the past decade (1975-1985) to keep pace with the changing universe in which they live.

Within the land area of the Sultanate of Oman there are three distinct geological zones: the Northern Mountains, the Southern Mountains and the Central Desert Plateau. This plateau, a flat limestone slab, is called the Jiddat-il-Harasiis. Its eastern boundary is an escarpment which is, in places, a hundred meters high and drops into the Huqf depression. To the north, the Jiddat gradually changes into the gravel fan of the Northern Mountains and, to the northwest, it comes up against the southern finger of the Rub'-al-Khali sand dunes. Its western boundary is marked by a gradual transition into the rolling plains heralding the Southern Mountains. The Jiddat itself is particularly flat with very few ridges or outcrops of more than ten meters. Its most conspicuous features are the scattered depressions, called haylats, which vary in size from one to twenty-five hectares. The surface of the Jiddat is hammada, made up of rock, pebble and coarse sand.

The climate of the Jiddat displays the extremes associated with most deserts, but its proximity to the Arabian Sea mitigates some of these extremes. June is the hottest month with an average shade maximum of 43.4°C and daily extremes of 47 to 48°C. The coolest months are December, January and

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February with monthly maximums of 26 to 27°C and an average minimum of 11.4°C in January. In addition to great changes in temperature between months, there is as much as 15 to 20°C fluctuation in temperature everyday of the year. Relative humidity can vary between less than 10% and saturation in the course of 24 hours in winter or in summer. Rain tends to fall in late winter and spring and very exceptionally in summer (Stanley Price 1987, Chapter 4:4).

Between March and October, the wind comes from due south. The predominance of this wind is due to the occurrence of a sea-breeze almost everyday in this period, causing air temperatures to drop as much as 10°C in ten minutes, while relative humidity increases rapidly. If this breeze drops to below 8 knots after midnight, the moist cool air condenses and forms a fog bank at ground level. Fogs are less common from June to September because sea breezes are stronger then, preventing the moist air mass from descending to ground level (Stanley Price 1987, Chapter 4:5).

The vegetation cover of the Jiddat is very much determined by the annual rainfall of 50 mm and the amount of water available from the fogs. For a desert, the density of trees on the Jiddat is remarkable. The most wide-spread tree is the *Acacia tortilis*. In the sandy depressions and in all haylats *Acacia ehrenbergiana* is common. In haylats with deeper sand accumulations, single trees of *Prosopis cineraria* grow, some reaching fifteen or twenty meters in height. Fog moisture is probably the main reason for the predominance of trees on the Jiddat despite the low rainfall. Even in the absence of rain, bursts of green leaf do occur at all times of the year. During March, April and September - as air temperatures are moderate and fogs most common - most perennial herbs and grasses respond to the moisture. Growth is stimulated and grasses flower. Thus the prime ecological consequence of the fog is that the Jiddat has a level of primary production twice a year even without rain (Stanley Price, Chapter 4:7).

The Jiddat's well-developed vegetation is the habitat of a diverse fauna as well as a small human population, the Harasiis tribe. These pastoralists appear to have been originally a Dhofari tribe and they continue to speak a modern south Arabian language known as Harsuusi. According to Harsuusi oral tradition, the original section of the tribe was Beit Afari living in Wadi Kadrit between Salalah and Hadramaut. Over the past few hundred years, the Harasiis have gradually pushed - and been pushed - northeast into the Jiddat. As they moved into the various wadis which mark the natural geographic borders of the Jiddat floor they have come up against other pastoral tribes - the Jenaba to the east along the Sahil-il-Jazir, and the Wahiba to the north in the Wadi Halfayn. Unable to push further, the Harasiis today are mainly concentrated on the desert plateau itself, although in the summer they are often found sharing the AwTa and Sahil-il-Jazir with the Jenaba tribe.

Their traditional economy is based on the raising of camels and goats by natural graze for the production of milk rather than meat. At the core of their way of life is migration which is determined by a combination of seasonal and ecological variables in the location of pasture and water. Survival of both herds and herders make movement from deficit to surplus areas vital. Another important factor among the Harasiis is their sense of territory. As with any pastoral group, the Harasiis seek to control a territory that contains sufficient resources to sustain communal life. They tend to live in the haylats or wadis where trees can be found under which to shelter and where graze for their animals is more plentiful. They determine their territorial frontiers loosely as running along the floor of the Wadi Rawnab to the south and east of Rima, along the middle of Wadi Haytam to the northeast, up to the general region of the Harashiif dunes to the north and across to the Ramlat-as-Sahmah to the west. They share a border with the Jenaba to the east, with the Wahiba and Duru to the north and with the Beit Kathir to the south.



These borders are in constant flux. Over the past three decades the seasonal use of pasture and water has undergone a pronounced geographic shift from southwest to northeast requiring readjustment of relations with the Mahra, Jenab and Wahiba. In the 1950's, 1960's and 1970's various texts and oral traditions placed the Harasiis territory as extending from the Jiddat-il-Harasiis westwards to Mughshin-al-Ayn and Bir Khasfah where they were said to have watering agreements with the Mahra and Bataharah. Since that time, there has been a slow move eastward, so that during the 1980's disputes have tended to focus on water rights along borders shared with the Jenaba in the Wadi Rawnab, Wadi Halfayn and Wadi Baw.

In the past, access to water for the Harasiis was extremely limited. Tribal tradition has it that they never drank water, but lived almost entirely on the consumption of camel and goat milk from their herds. Their cultural explanation quite accurately reflects a geographic truth. Until the 1960's there was no sweet water source on the Jiddat floor. The only source of water was found along the AwTa, the lowlands of the Huqf escarpment lying just along the coast of Oman from Duqm north towards al-Hajj. There, a series of springs are found (Raqqi, Nakhleet, Baw), probably a result of recent rain runoff which has percolated through the limestone. These springs are heavily mineralized yielding water that is barely potable even under extreme conditions. However, the unique feature of a heavy early morning fog frequently provided the herds with sufficient moisture for their needs. These herds then provided the human population with enough milk for their nutritional and physiological requirements.

#### Economic Character of Traditional Life<sup>2</sup>

The Harasiis tribe is made up of approximately 2,000 people. Households are 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 to three adult relatives of one degree or another make up the rest of the family unit; grandparent, in-laws, cousins. On average, a household keeps a hundred goats and a few sheep which are the responsibility of the women. The twice daily milking and regular herding are undertaken by the women and older girls. Decisions over breeding and culling are generally taken by men, though sale of goats is always a joint decision - particularly as it is the women who own the goats. The average household keeps twenty-five camels of which five or six are generally kept near the homestead. These are the heavily pregnant females or lactating ones. The remainder of the camels are left, 'mafkoob', free to graze in the open desert. Their whereabouts are very carefully monitored and an elaborate camel information exchange system operates among all the tribesmen. On meeting, tribesmen first exchange news about the condition of the pasture, then the whereabouts of various 'mafkoob' camels and finally news items of various family members. Homesteads are generally moved a significant distance three or four times a year. A serious husbandman, though, will shift his homestead a few kilometers every few weeks to ensure that the family herd of goats and sheep does not destroy what graze exists around the campsite.

#### Household Subsistence

Basic to the organization of all pastoral communities is the existence of sedentary communities in adjacent areas and access to their agricultural products. In Oman, relations of interdependence bind the pastoral nomads to the sedentary communities along the Sharqiyya foothills. The pastoralists bring animals to auction in the village market place, pots and trays for repair at the local coppersmith, sa'af palm frond mats, bowls and baskets, and ghee (clarified butter) for sale; at the same time they purchase

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<sup>2</sup> The information above is extracted from a series of surveys and interviews of a random sample of 10% of Harasiis households made in 1982 prior to setting up government services for the tribe.

the comestables necessary for their families and herds. For generations this relationship, largely uncomplicated by external factors, bound the Harasiis of Central Oman to the villages of the Sharqiyya foothills - particularly Adam and Sinaw - in an economic partnership. The cash economy of the village was reinforced by the continual influx of 'capital on the hoof'. Transactions were completed and money changed 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 merchant's till. For the Harasiis, the relationship with the villages reinforced not a cash, but a subsistence economy. For example, the individual Harasiis tribesman may have sold two goats, for forty Maria Theresa dollars, and then spent this exact amount on flour, coffee, tea, dates, sugar and clothing for his family. His long treks to the village markets were not motivated by a possible profit but by the very short supply of a basic household necessity.

### The Traditional Universe

The universe to the Harasiis was very much limited to the Jiddat floor. The long treks for supplies could take anywhere from five to fifteen days. Adam, then Sinaw and Nizwa were the primary trading centres with Salalah coming a distant second choice. On occasions, very long journeys for medical care were undertaken to other Gulf States sometimes as far away as Kuwait. One individual is recorded as having emigrated to the Trucial Coast in search of an education, returning to the Jiddat two decades later as a well-trained English speaking nurse with the rank of a Colonel in the United Arab Emirates' Air Force. But such examples are rare. To the tribesmen as a whole, the Jiddat-il-Harasiis was the world. The tribe of about four hundred 'arms bearing' men was organized into seven sub-groups or lineages called Beits (Beit Aksit, Mutaira, Barho, Sha'ala, Alob, Afarri, Katherayn). These seven lineages were divided into two main factions. One was headed by the Beit Aksit and the other by the Beit Mutaira. The leadership of the tribe, as a whole, lay with the Beit Aksit whose ancestral forebearer was acknowledged with having united the disparate units into one tribe about one hundred and fifty years ago. Each lineage generally recognizes two spokesmen who act on its behalf. These men are called Rashiid (Rushada') and represent the lineage in discussions concerning the welfare of the tribe. The pivotal position among the Rushada' is that of the sheikh. He traditionally enjoyed a vast and ill-defined field of privileges and annually journeyed to Salalah to receive a gift from the Sultan and on occasions to ask the Sultan to settle issues which the sheikh had been unable to adjudicate. Thus for the Harasiis tribe as a whole, contact with non-tribespeople was limited by and large to members of other pastoral tribes such as the Jenaba, the Wahiba, the Duru and the Mahra. The regular treks for supplies to villages along the borders to the desert were about as far as the Harsuusi individual experienced. The individual's identity as a Harsuusi tribesman was continuously reinforced by the geographic remoteness of the homeland, its inaccessibility, and the almost total political void in which the tribe functioned.

### Petroleum Exploration, Exploitation and Employment

In 1954 an exploratory party of the national oil company, Petroleum Development Oman, made its way from the southern coast of Oman at Duqm into the Central Oman Steppes. There contact was made with the sheikhs of the Duru' tribe who agreed to allow P.D.O. to prospect in their territory. The oil company needed to establish a system of labour recruitment and supervision in order to exploit effectively the oil promise in the area. Such requests, however, were completely foreign to the world of the pastoral tribes. Though tribal leaders were accustomed to acting as political mediators on behalf of their tribesmen, P.D.O.'s mixed political and economic needs were novel to them. Initially internal jealousies divided the tribal sections and sub-units or lineage leaders took to claiming the exclusive right to furnish labour for P.D.O.

In 1958, P.D.O. began to prepare for a new drilling location at Haima. There was fear that the Jenaba tribesmen might claim the region as their own, though Haima was normally used by the Harasiis and far from any disputable border. After consultation with Sultan Said bin Taimur, P.D.O. decided to search for a labour supervisor from the Harasiis. A lineage head, Salim bin Huweila, was appointed. After some labour unrest, both Salim and the traditional leader, Sheikh Shergi, were sent to Salalah to confer with the Sultan. They were to remain in Salalah for six months before being allowed to return to the Jiddat once the labour unrest had died down. Over the next decade, P.D.O. was to play one man off against the other. When Salim became too demanding or difficult, they would turn to Sheikh Shergi. When Sheikh Shergi began to make 'outrageous' requests - generally for water - they would ask that the Sultan allow them to ignore Sheikh Shergi and return to dealing with Salim. Finally in 1968, P.D.O. began having a great deal of trouble with Salim and requested that the Sultan allow them to deal with Sheikh Shergi for labour supervision. This was accepted by the Sultan, but refused by Sheikh Shergi - who sided with Salim over this particular issue. When the Sultan learned that Sheikh Shergi had refused the appointment, he angrily removed Shergi from office and appointed Salim bin Huweila as the 'new' sheikh of the Harasiis (P.D.O. 1974:3). This arrangement worked well for the company but was never acceptable to the tribesmen nor, of course, to Sheikh Shergi who bided his time.

In 1972, two years after his succession, Sultan Qaboos bin Said re-instated Sheikh Shergi, and Salim bin Huweila was removed, much to the dismay of P.D.O. where his services had come to be appreciated. The decade of P.D.O. and government interference in Harasiis tribal political organization had come to a close, but not without some loss of tribesmen's confidence in their authority figures. The Harasiis were suddenly exposed to a world far removed from their own reality, but of which they were begrudgingly a part. They were no longer simple Harsuusi pastoralists making a living in the barren and isolated Jiddat-il-Harasiis. They had become an Omani people occupying a greatly sought after territory.

After 1970, the government of Oman and the national oil company entered central Oman with two major interests bearing on the Harasiis. First, fixed and stable boundaries had to be established. Second, permanent and reliable individuals from each tribe had to be selected to manage the hiring of labourers. The already fragile tribal political system which had hardly coped with earlier government interference, disintegrated and Harsuusi tribal authority hardly existed in spite of the person of Sheikh Shergi. Still the annual trips to pay respect to the Sultan continued, but to the individual tribesman the Sheikh was no longer an effective mediator or broker of their affairs with the outside world. It was now very much each man for himself.

#### Pastoralism and Wage Labour

Economically the Harasiis tribe fared far better. From the moment oil exploration teams came ashore at Duqm in 1955, a new universe was opened up. Each of the oil company activities told of new employment opportunities and the tribesmen quickly adapted to the routine - if not always the discipline - of the company. As more and more men took jobs as guides, drivers, guards and manual labourers, their salaries became an increasingly important factor in the economic interplay between the desert and the village. In many cases, a man's salary began to replace animal revenue as the main source of purchasing power. Animal sales declined and herd size began to increase, eventually controlled only by periods of drought, disease and the low carrying capacity of the Jiddat-il-Harasiis.

The activities of the oil exploration teams, the development of camps, the setting up of rigs, the opening up of wells and later petroleum exploitation were accompanied by tremendous infrastructural changes. Tracks came to be replaced by graded roads and eventually in 1981 a tarmacked highway was opened running through the centre of the Jiddat connecting the north and south of the country for the first time. The five to fifteen day journeys across the desert by camel became a thing of the past. In 1974 the first Harsuusi owned half-ton truck appeared on the Jiddat. Within five years nearly every



Harsuusi household had one truck if not more. In our sample only one household head owned no vehicle. However his three adult sons each had a vehicle and alternated with each other in procuring water, animal feed and comestibles for their father's household and in transporting his livestock to market. Journeys to town centres were no longer measured by days, but by hours, six hours to Nizwa, eight hours to Muscat, seven hours to Salalah.

With the commencement of oil exploration and later exploitation on the margins of the Jiddat floor, the terms of reference for the Harasiis came to be quite radically altered. No longer was their concern with household subsistence, herd well-being, and pasture alone. Now wage labour came to be an important reality. The nature of employment on the Jiddat often required that the adult male household head be away from the family unit for weeks at a time. During such absences from the household, another male relative would often take over the vacant economic role, and would see to it that the household was provided with sufficient water, milk, animal feed and other necessities. Even unrelated households camped in the same haylat or close to each other tended to help each other.

It is important to note that this employment did not require men to migrate. Their jobs remained within the borders of the Jiddat and from their posts they could still keep a distant eye on their family and herd. Thus, though, traditional patterns changed to keep pace with new factors in their environment, they were not yet breaking down. For example, milking camels was strictly a male preserve. Today, when the male head of the family is away at his job, a relative or close family friend will always endeavour to milk the household camels for the family's use. When there is no male available, a woman will do the milking herself.

As early as 1982, our surveys of the Harasiis population showed that 82% of the sampled households had some form of income beyond the sale of animals. Households where men were employed full-time had, on the average, 35% fewer camels and 25% fewer goats than did households with no outside salary. These same households revealed a surprisingly low incidence of sales of livestock due perhaps to the demands of full-time employment as well as the distances between producer and market - easily 1,000 kilometers for a round trip. So, while employment might seem to have inhibited regular sales of livestock, thereby accelerating graze depletion, the effect has been the opposite. The families whose heads are employed full-time have cut back on their herds and thus employment has had a great beneficial effect.

Probably the most profoundly altered factor in the tribesman's daily life has been his access to water. Before 1955, water was only available on the AwTa. The practice of collecting water from the heavy morning fog was widespread. Water requirements had to be kept to a minimum. Four fifths of a family's camels might be left 'mafkoob', or on the loose to graze with only the pregnant or lactating camels kept at the homestead. The traditional Harasiis goat, a short-haired white animal, was particularly adapted to the region, drinking no water in wintertime and very little in summer. Then, at some time during the reign of Sultan Said bin Taimur, black long-haired goats from the north began to appear. This was probably the result of successive migrations north to Wadi Halfayn and Wadi Andam during droughts on the Jiddat. These black-haired goats, less suited to the aridity, required greater quantities of water.

Over the last few decades, moreover, the Harasiis have been pushed back from the coastal regions by the Jenaba tribe and now are restricted to the Jiddat floor itself. Fortunately their access to water has not been entirely cut off. Almost as though responding to the needs of the Harasiis, the national oil company arrived on the Jiddat in the mid-1950's and drilled water wells at Haima and Al-Ajaiz. By agreement with the government these wells were left in operation after the exploration teams moved to more promising fields. In the 1960's, Al-Ajaiz well served as a migratory magnet, as many Harsuusi families were able to move further afield to areas of better graze particularly for their more water dependent herds of black long-haired goats. Three times a week and sometimes five, the household head



would make a trip to the nearest well to bring water for his family and herds. The average family required fourteen drums of water in winter and twenty-one in summer. Using half-ton pick-up trucks which only carry four drums at a time - each with a capacity to hold 209 litres - a man bringing water for his family and herds could easily drive 500 kilometers a week for water alone.

There are several water wells located on borders which the Harasiis share with other tribes such as the well at Ghubbar southwest of Rima which is shared with the Mahra and the well at Rawnab which is shared with the Jenaba. But until 1984, an area of almost 40,000 square kilometers had only one uncontested source of sweet water and another of brackish water. Since then, fortunately, several reverse osmosis plants have been built by the government at points like Wadi Mudhabi, Wadi Haytam and Wadi Dhahir for the pastoralists to use.

Time does not allow for a full presentation of my analysis of the present economic state of Harasiis households. Basically the traditional patterns of exchange have altered dramatically since the first oil exploration teams arrived at Duqm in 1955. The new employment opportunities have meant, in many cases, the replacement of livestock for salary as the primary source of purchasing power. With the introduction of the vehicle on the Jiddat in the early 1970's, the economic pattern was upset even further. Instead of increasing the sales and turnover of goats in order to meet the new costs of operating a vehicle, the opposite appears to have happened. Camels are sold only when a major purchase, like a vehicle, must be made, or when a major expenditure like a wedding must be financed. Modern employment, which by its very nature removed the men from the household for weeks at a stretch, has decreased the opportunities for properly managing the herd. Debt management seems to have replaced herd management as the answer to new revenue requirements. While increased borrowing and lending contribute to greater social cohesion on one level, the extension of credit to the Harasiis from outsiders has been self-defeating - as Harasiis defaulters of installment scheme purchases are discovering.

The arrival of the national oil company in the Jiddat, the employment opportunities on site for the Harasiis, the road network and wells dug by the company and later by the government, the rapid introduction and acceptance of the half-ton truck for transport, all these factors and events have forced the Harsuusi to face a new reality beyond their traditional borders. That reality is the 'Hukume', the government, and the place they as a people have in the overall picture.

As little as five years ago, the term 'Hukume' and even 'Oman' meant little more to a Harsuusi tribesman than something and someplace far away, beyond their tribal lands. Today that is obviously no longer the case. The Harsuusi individual has come in contact with government services and with the concept of 'Hukume' as being an entity greater than himself or his tribe from which much assistance can be extracted. Health services, educational opportunities, water, welfare for the poor, crippled, widowed or orphaned, all are accepted and appreciated. Gradually an understanding is developing of the 'Hukume' as representing them as well as various other populations within the country. The Harasiis are coming to see themselves as not just Harasiis tribesmen but also as one of a number of peoples that make up the Sultanate of Oman. They are coming to expect that what the Omani have, they should have. Thus today, it is not unusual to find Harsuusi individuals sitting in ministerial waiting rooms with petitions for increased government services; more health care, more water, more schools, more tents, more of anything which would make life easier. The other side of the coin, service or loyalty to the nation, has not yet become part of the Harsuusi frame of reference. Still today there is the tendency to turn to the United Arab Emirates and other Gulf States when satisfaction from the 'Hukume' has not been complete. There is much to be desired from the crude political awareness the Harasiis have developed recently. But it is early days and time, only, can deepen the understanding of the individual to the multi-sided nature of national as opposed to tribal identity.

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