

Commission on Nomadic Peoples

“The Al Wahiba: Bedouin Values in an Oil Economy”

Roger Webster

Nomadic Peoples, Number 28, 1991

The Commission on Nomadic Peoples of the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences (IUAES) is collaborating with the Ford Foundation to digitize, preserve and extend access to the journal of *Nomadic Peoples*. For more information regarding the journal *Nomadic Peoples* visit the Commission on Nomadic Peoples website at www.nomadicpeoples.info and the Berghahn Books website at www.berghahnbooks.com

The Al Wahiba: Bedouin values in an oil economy

Roger Webster

Oil production in Oman is of modest proportions, yet still accounts for around 50% of GDP and 80% of government income. As much as half of the population is rurally based and engaged in agriculture, fisheries and pastoralism, albeit often on a part time basis. These rural industries remain semi-traditional, characterised by a small scale of operations and low productivity. Bedouin life in Oman, which differs in many respects from the better known traditions of Central and Northern Arabia, is illustrated in reference to the Al Wahiba, a bedouin tribe of north eastern Oman. The semi-nomadic herding life continues to be followed by many of these bedouin, yet this apparent stability conceals a conflict whereby national prosperity derived from oil is undermining both the pastoral economy and the cultural goals and values associated with it. The paper argues that pastoral nomadism as a form of economy cannot be adequately understood, in either its earlier or modern forms, in isolation from a cultural dimension.

The Context

The Sultanate of Oman is a modest oil producer in Gulf terms and a late starter on the road of development. Oil production began in Oman in 1967 but the policy of isolation and extreme conservatism pursued by the then sultan ensured that the impact of oil on the economic and social life of the country was minimal. It was not until after the change of government in 1970, brought about by a palace coup, that oil revenues were directed into comprehensive plans for development.

Production in the 1970s averaged 300,000 bpd. In 1983 it increased to 400,000 and in 1986 peaked at 600,000 bpd before being cut back in sympathy with the quota system introduced by OPEC, of which Oman is not a member. Since then production has again risen to record levels. Oil revenues in the late 1980s accounted for at least 80% of government income. Oil has funded the provision and continuing expansion of health and educational services, communications, electricity and other infrastructure which was almost wholly lacking before 1970. Development is hampered both by the late start and by the difficulty of the mountainous terrain over much of the most densely

populated northern half of the country, where the Hajar range rises to 3,000 metres.

About half of the total estimated population of one million is engaged, full or part time, in agriculture, fishing and pastoralism. These together contributed 3.5% of GDP in the late 1980s as against nearly 50% contributed by the oil sector. The low productivity of the rural industries reflects the limitations of a generally arid, desert environment and the predominance of small scale, semi-traditional methods. Old established farms are often ill-equipped to meet changing consumer demands in the face of competition from imported foodstuffs, while new opportunities for employment in a burgeoning state service sector are a drain on rural labour. Farming depends on irrigation which is traditionally supplied by *falaj* systems (similar to the *qanat* of Iran) or animal powered wells. Today pumps have replaced animal power and many new wells and farms have been established but the *falaj* remains the principal source of water for most older farms. Livestock are kept both on irrigated farms and by seminomadic peoples of the hinterland: the shawawi mountain shepherds of the north, the bedouin of the central desert, and the Jibbali hill tribes of the southern region. In the 1980s fisheries were

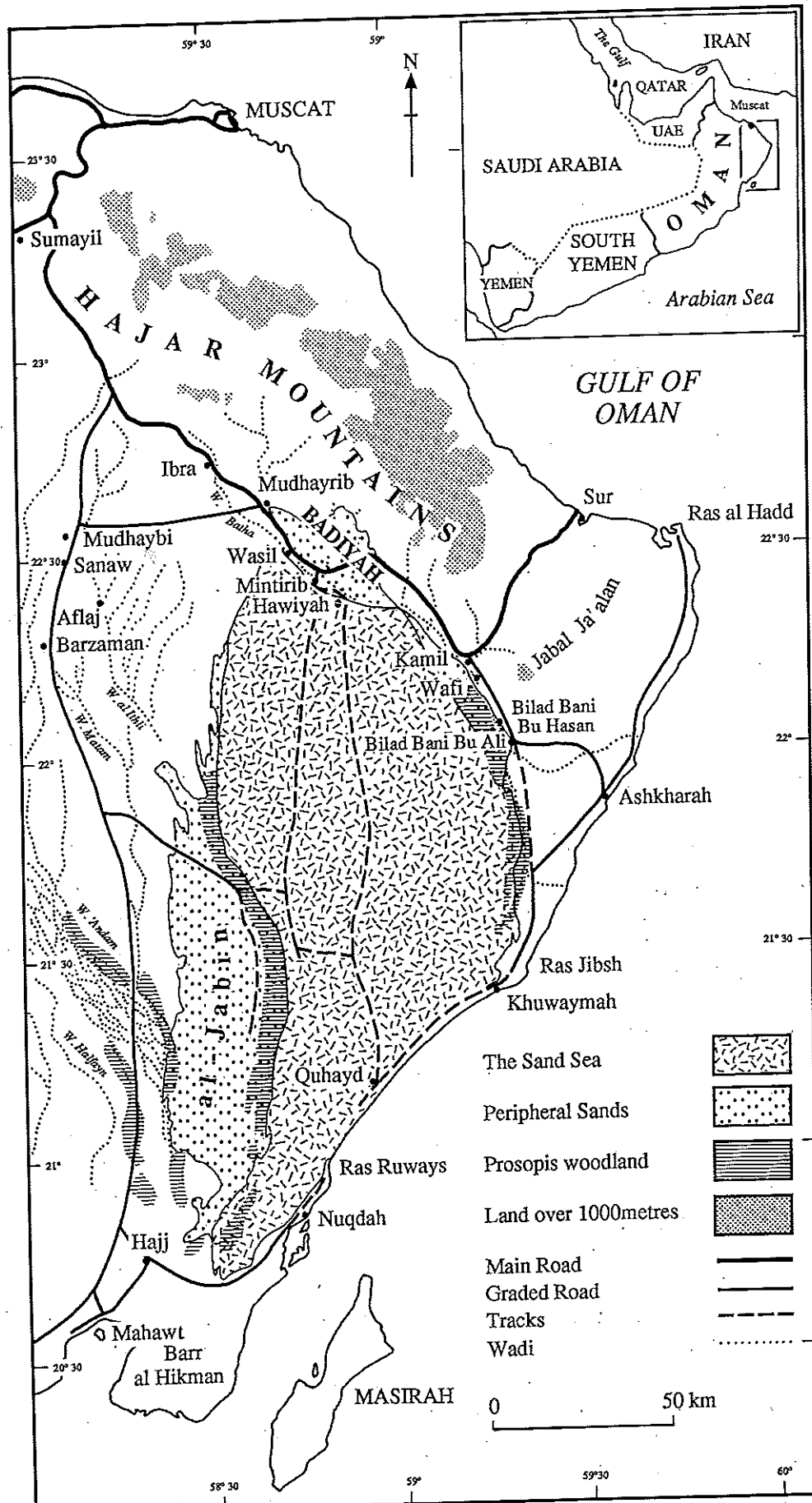


Figure 1. Location map. The Wahiba Sands, their margins and the eastern part of Oman.

identified as a sector capable of considerable commercial expansion. The national catch in 1987 amounted to 115,010 tons, of which 104,055 tons was provided by the small scale, artisanal fishermen and the remainder by mechanised trawling.

The Al Wahiba

The Al Wahiba are a bedouin tribe of the Sharqiya, the easternmost division of inner Oman stretching down from the mountain foothills in the north, where the falaj oases are situated, to the coast of the Arabian Sea opposite Masira Island in the south. Their tribal territory (*dar, dira* or *haram*) is bounded on the west by the Wadi Halfayn, and on the east it extends to include most of the sand desert marked on maps as the Wahiba Sands, although the Al Wahiba themselves do not use or readily understand this name. The tribe is estimated to number about four thousand individuals but no accurate figures are available. About 150 families, or 900 individuals, of the tribe regularly inhabit the Sands while an equal or perhaps greater number dwell on the gravel plains to the west. The remainder are divided between the coast of the mainland and Masira Island, where they practise fishing, and the oasis villages to the north and north west of the Sands. Fishing is a traditional occupation of long standing for some bedouin groups in Oman whereas settlement in the oases is, for the Al Wahiba, mainly a recent phenomenon.

No exploitable oil deposits have yet been discovered in the Sharqiya. Until the RGS expedition of 1985-86 the Wahiba Sands had been visited only by a handful of adventurers, some prospectors for oil and water, and by occasional patrols of the security forces. The northern villages of the Sharqiya have benefitted from the spread of graded tracks and surfaced roads, including the highway from the Capital to Sur which passes through Ibra and Badiya, and from the provision of clinics, hospitals, schools and electricity networks. These continue to percolate southwards via the more accessible fringes of the Sands to the smaller centres of more or

less permanent habitation at Hayy and Mahawt. The island of Masira, occupied by branches of most tribes of the region including the Wahiba, is a special case due to its use as a military base which has brought trappings of development far in excess of those on the nearby mainland.

Even if very few outsiders penetrate into the Wahiba Sands, the bedouin who live there have in recent years all acquired four wheel drive pickups with which they are able to make regular excursions to the settlements and beyond, having rapidly developed driving skills to match the difficulty and grandeur of the terrain. The dunes form parallel ridges with intervening valleys, blocked at intervals by walls of sand. In the north the ridges rise two hundred feet above the valley floors, diminishing gradually towards the south. Towards the east and south there are also large areas of more irregular dunes to which vehicle access is very difficult and dangerous to the inexperienced. With the aid of powerful new technology, and with the benefits of an expanding State welfare system, the bedouin are now more secure, as individuals, than they ever were in the past when in addition to the rigours of an extremely harsh environment they also had to contend with a state of continuous warfare with their equally impoverished neighbours. But although prospects for personal survival have taken a turn for the better, can bedouinism itself survive in the new climate of oil-based prosperity - can the Al Wahiba survive as bedouin?

Some Definitions

It should first be stated with some precision what is meant by "bedouin", and what it means to people like the Al Wahiba to be bedouin. It has been said that:

An attempt to understand the nature and extent of tribalism in Omani society must struggle with the double impediment of too little knowledge (of everyday tribal life) and too many preconceptions (of the origins and structure of tribal groups). (Barth 1987:23)

If this is true of tribalism, it is equally true of

bedouinism (the two are by no means the same thing). Western literary sources describe in some detail the bedouin of northern Arabia and pastoral peoples outside the Peninsula who claim an Arabian origin, but comparable sources are much fewer for southern and southeastern Arabia, where the ethnographic picture of tribal life remains very sketchy.

The divide between the culture areas of North and South Arabia is well known. It has entered Arabic historical literature and historical mythology in various guises, with a gradual loss of the original geographical content of the dichotomy. Ethnographic accounts indicate that there are differences of social organisation and cultural expression between northern and southern Arabia, still in a geographic sense, which are not reducible to ecological factors. These include some differences in what is understood by the term *badu*. The extent of this variation awaits further exploration, but some of its better known manifestations include the use of black tents and rigid frame saddles in the north and their absence from the south; the practice of hunting with falcons and dogs in the north but not in the south; differences in the values accorded to various livestock species (camels, sheep, goats, cattle) and the uses made of them; differences in the status of women and the importance of gender distinctions, roles and seclusion, to the extent that some writers have thought to detect evidence of matrilinearity or even matriarchy in southern Arabia (Robertson Smith 1885; Dostal 1967). Some of these discrepancies may appear trivial in themselves, yet it is often these very features (black tents, exclusive camel herding, falconry, patrilinearity, seclusion of women) which are taken as emblematic symbols of bedouinism in the areas where they occur.

General typologies of nomadism often seek to place nomadic groups at some point on a sliding scale between "pure nomadism" and full sedentism, using criteria such as the length and duration of displacements, and degrees of involvement or non-involvement in agriculture. The Al Wahiba and most bedouin groups of Oman and Southern Arabia are traditionally semi-nomadic,

practising mixed herding of small stock and camels, and in some cases cattle, with some involvement in agriculture, fishing and transport. The limitations of the typological approach, which often conceals more than it reveals, are now widely accepted. Cultural variation between the bedouin of north and south can better be understood in terms of a historical divergence, due to which southern groups were isolated from later developments of the pastoral technocomplex, particularly as regards the uses of camels (Bulliet 1975; Caskel 1954; Dostal 1967). It is worth drawing attention to these differences lest an overly geographical and economic-productive perspective on the bedouin should obscure the richness of local cultural diversity which must also have some bearing on the shape of the future.

Notwithstanding the differences between bedouin groups in north and south Arabia, there are equally striking similarities. If the differences can be traced to a historical divergence, the qualitative similarity, one might say the common flavour, is due in some measure to subsequent cross contact but also to an evolutionary convergence in which not only the physical environment (the desert) but also the common Arab Islamic cultural environment have played a part. Beneath the material and surface dissimilarities there is a common psychological and moral stance which is characteristically *badu*. Tribes, sections of tribes, individuals or particular actions and ideas are bedouin as opposed to *hadhar* in a given context. Although "bedouin" might adequately be defined as "pastoral nomads of Arab descent and culture", the term implies more than this; it indicates too certain codes of behaviour, beliefs and values that are associated particularly with the nomads of the Arabian desert.

At the root of this designation is the ideal of the independent pastoralist, isolated in the desert, unconcerned with material wealth beyond the satisfaction of the immediate needs of his animals and then himself, and fully capable of fending for himself. Needless to say this "pure nomad" does not exist, but

by keeping animals, by living in isolation in the desert, and by avoiding the accumulation of immovable possessions it is possible to get close enough to vindicate and perpetuate the ideal. The self-sufficiency of the ideal "pure nomad" is as much an ability to go without the trappings and luxuries of settled life as it is a capacity to produce independently; his geographical, economic, political and cultural isolation is therefore never complete but open-ended. This open-endedness makes it difficult to formulate generalised models and definitions of nomadism, as well as forcing real life nomads to compromise.

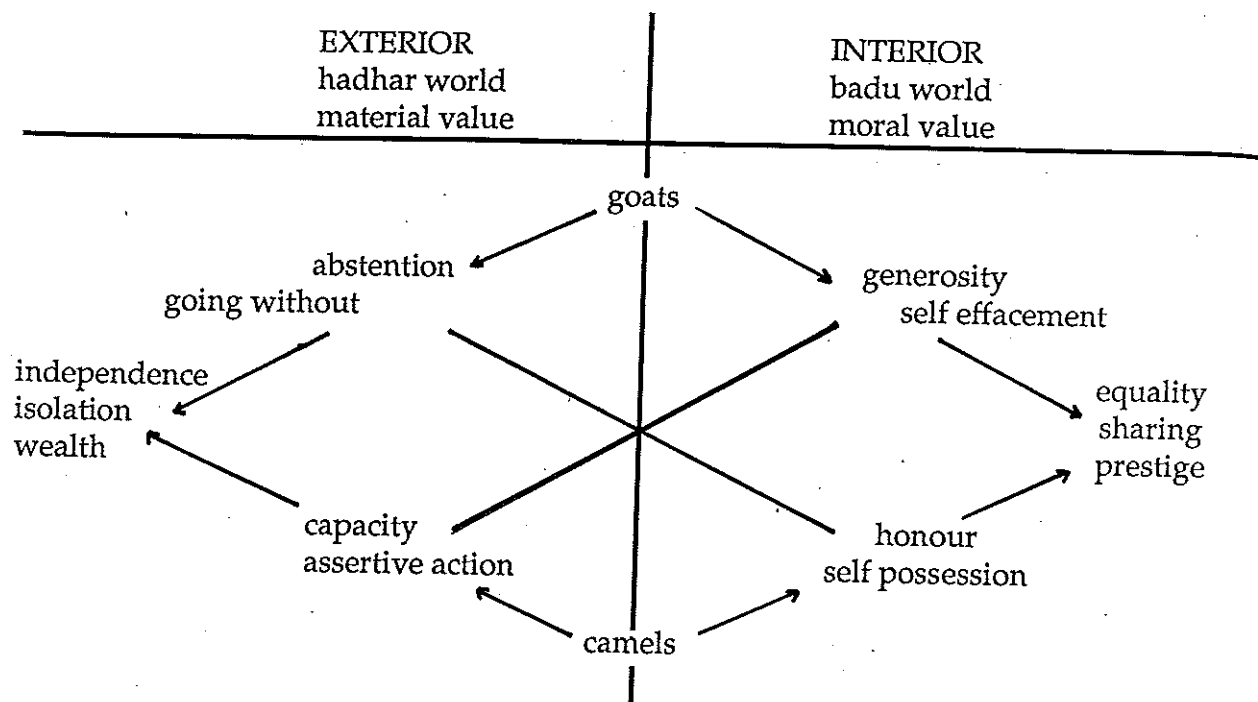
At the other extreme from the ideal, it is possible to argue that Omani society as whole is bedouin (Wilkinson 1987), but why stop there? Why not Arabian or Arab society in its entirety? The myth that all Omani tribes, or all Arabs, are former bedouin is simply the corollary of the assumption that bedouin are those who have not yet settled. In reducing the nomad/settler dichotomy to a highly questionable notion of stages of development, these assumptions ignore the often expressed and observable differences not only of economic behaviour but also of outlook, values and goals. More useful is a return to the centrality of herding, for not only does common sense suggest that herein lies the specificity of bedouinism in an economic, productive sense, but it is also the herding life of the desert that is both cause and effect of the characteristic social forms, political systems, symbols and values of the bedouin. Admittedly for many rural peoples of the Middle East the reality is an unresolved oscillation between conflicting sets of values rather than a starkly coherent choice or specialisation.

Bedouin Values

The productive base of desert pastoralism gives rise to the isolation of small herding groups, the vulnerability of domestic resources (herds), and the instability of material and personal attachments. The corresponding social structural and symbolic principles - kin solidarity, tribal cohesion for

defensive and aggressive purposes, and the spirit of heroic self-reliance - contain the dangers of such a precarious existence while reinforcing its benefits and giving meaning to the whole. The two sets of principles, economic/productive and social/symbolic, underpin a moral economy to which the bedouin are committed, and whose values shape their identity as *badu* in contrast to the *hadhar*. This dual economy can be represented in a diagram (Figure 2). The headings Exterior and Interior refer on one level to the structural opposition *hadhar/badu*, and on another level to the opposition material wealth/symbolic wealth. Bedouin identity consists both of a form of specialisation within the regional economy, and of adherence to a characteristic system of values. In the opposition *badu/hadhar*, *badu* refers to the two principles of "the ability to go without", and a "capacity for assertive action". Together these confer independence on the (ideal) bedouin who is able to distance himself from settled society and its luxuries or to obtain what he needs from it by independent aggressive action. In his internal relations with fellow tribesmen and to some extent other *badu* (those who are playing the same game by the same rules), "going without" is reflected as the ethic of generosity, and the capacity for assertive action as self-possession, dignity and personal honour. In the reflected image there is an inversion, represented by the diagonal lines in the diagram. Capacity (assertive action) towards the exterior (the non-*badu* world, or its material wealth) provides the means for generosity towards the interior (hospitality to fellow tribesmen and guests, and the acquisition of prestige). The strength and competence to go without confers self possession and dignity. This in turn contributes to the effectiveness of assertive action. Generosity and honour are the foundations of the relations of equality and sharing that permeate internal relations with other tribesmen.

Figure 2. The Bedouin Moral Economy



All members of the tribe are assumed to be descendants of a common ancestor so all are equal. The tribe is internally divided into segmented lineages in which jural responsibility in obtaining or providing redress for misdemeanors is equally shared. For the Wahiba, the segments are headed by elected spokesmen (*rashid*, pl *rushada*) whose job is to see that collective responsibilities are carried out and to collect and hand over fines. Pastures, wells and many daily tasks are shared among members of the tribe, in practice among much smaller herding associations which are not commensurate with the jural segments. In daily life the principle of equality comes out in the casual lending, borrowing and visiting among and between households, and especially in the formal and highly ritualised context of larger social gatherings.

Livestock have a value on both sides of the economy, material and symbolic, and are a medium of conversion between the two. Livestock, principally goats, are the means of realising the nomadic life of going without, and livestock, principally camels, are the means and often also the object of assertive action in trading and raiding, and now in

raiding, the life of "venturing abroad" (Meeker 1979). Both have a cash value and are sold and bought in the regional markets. Domestic livestock are essential to the correct entertainment of visitors upon which a reputation for generosity is built. A host who is able to provide only meat from a shop, or chicken or dried fish, is extremely apologetic at producing only an "ordinary" meal, or a "women's meal" rather than fresh meat slaughtered by the host from his own herd. Slaughtering is the preserve of men, who also usually do the cooking for male guests. Possession of fine camels brings prestige, and as symbols of individual and tribal honour their names are proclaimed in warcries (*nakhwa*, 'izwa) which are commonly used as expletives to express resolve. For grand feasts at weddings and especially funerals, one or several camels are slaughtered.

The Response to Economic Change

How does this material and moral economy work for the pastoralists of the Wahiba Sands, and how is the system responding to

economic change?

The Al Wahiba place much importance on their occupancy of the desert as a mark of their identity as bedouin: they are *ahl al-badiya* (people of the desert) in contrast to the *ahl al-bilad* (people of the town). The view of their own origins as expressed by informants to whom the question was put is distinctly ahistorical: "We have always been here and we have always been *badu*". The Al Wahiba claim that, had they been interested in settling, they could long ago have overrun the oases on the northern fringes of their territory, or occupied them peacefully during one of the periods of depopulation which the villages have experienced. Instead they preferred to leave the restoration of the *aflaj* and gardens to others such as the Hajriyin, the dominant settled tribe of Badiya, who are said to have migrated from Yemen and revived these settlements, the largest of which today is al Mintirib, meaning "buried". While leaving productive exploitation of the oases to others, the Wahiba were able to benefit from their presence both directly in trading their pastoral products for the agricultural and manufactured goods produced or imported by the villages, and indirectly by dominating the caravan trade between the oases. According to the bedouin, no townsman could show his face outside the walls without a bedouin escort. The predatory energies of the bedouin were also enlisted by the settlers in their regional conflicts. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Omani politics took shape around the opposition of two tribal confederations, the Hinawi and Ghafiri, into which every tribe of the area, settled or nomad, was drawn. An alliance of the Wahiba bedouin with the Harthi shaykhs of the Qabil oasis provided the nucleus of Hinawi power for much of this period.

Fishing and fish trading have made a contribution to the traditional economy of the Sharqiya that is pervasive and distinctive. Fishing takes place all along the barren and isolated coast. The catch is either exported by sea to the larger ports, or landed on the beach and carried overland, formerly by camel and now by truck, to the markets of the interior.

In addition to constituting a staple in the diet of both settlers and nomads, fish is fed to livestock and used as a crop fertiliser. Once salted and dried, fish is readily stored and transported, while the adoption of pickup trucks with insulated ice boxes has opened up large and profitable markets for fresh fish. The bedouin participate in the industry not only as traders and consumers but also as producers, for the fishermen on this stretch of coast are, with very few exceptions, members of the same bedouin tribes as are found inland - the Wahiba, 'Amr, Janaba, Al Bu 'Isa and Hikman. Fishing is a full-time occupation rather than an occasional or seasonal supplement to herding, and the fishermen keep few livestock. The fishermen are drawn from most if not all of the subdivisions of the tribes rather than comprising a discrete unit in each, and they share with the herders the same forms of speech, dress and custom by which the bedouin are easily distinguished from villagers in this part of Oman. Yet local accounts deny that the fishermen are simply recently converted herders, or that they are an outside group who have been absorbed into the tribal structure as trade partners or clients. The close partnership of fish and camel - an unlikely combination on the face of it - is a further characteristic of southern Arabia from the Hadhramaut (Dostal 1967:37) to the UAE (Wilkinson 1977). The Wahiba themselves apparently feel no need for a historical explanation, but it has been suggested (Bulliet 1975) that it was the maritime peoples of ancient south Arabia who first domesticated the camel and so were able to launch themselves into the arid interior by means of this "ship of the desert". Not even the pastoral bedouin, after all, refer to ships as "camels of the sea".

The herds of the pastoral Wahiba are made up of both goats and camels (*hawsh wa bawsh*). Some families, mainly in the north, also keep a few sheep among their goats. While the goats are the basis of domestic production and subsistence (the root H.W.Sh signifies enclosure), camels are the key to the life of aggressive action (B.W.Sh signifies bellowing,

a noisy rabble) which formerly consisted in raiding and trading and now in camel racing. Goats are kept in herds of 20 to 80 head. They provide milk and processed dairy products, meat for entertaining visitors, hair for weaving, and hides, now little used. They graze in herds under the supervision of women and children who also take charge of milking. Camels are kept in very much smaller numbers, usually in the range of two to eight per household. They are in the charge of the men who devote much time to each animal individually, hand feeding them in the evening, going to inspect them as they graze, and searching for them when they stray. Both male and female camels continue to play a very limited role in local transport but this function has been largely usurped by motor cars. As riding mounts the females are more elegant and swift and it is these that are trained for racing. Camels milk is very highly regarded but the output of such small herds is too low to provide more than an occasional luxury. Individual milk yields of the lightly built breeds favoured in this area are also very low in comparison to the heavier beasts, known in Oman as *hazmi* (in Saudi Arabia, *mijhim*), bred as dairy animals and kept in large herds by bedouin elsewhere in Arabia. The Omani breeds are renowned throughout Arabia as riding animals. In addition to the *hawsh wa bawsh*, most families today have some chickens and a few have one or two cows. Domestic cats and rabbits are kept as children's pets. The donkeys which were formerly used for working wells have been turned loose.

Patterns of Migration

The seasonal rhythms of pastoralism in the Wahiba Sands have apparently changed little. Camps are found thinly scattered throughout the Sands, but for nine months of the year the greatest concentrations are close to the western edge of the sand mass, where belts of prosopis trees (prosopis cinneraria, ghaf) occur in association with several species of large shrub. These trees form an intermittent chain of groves and spinneys, nearly all of

which have names (even some individual trees are named), and which together are sometimes called Wadi Al Wahiba, or Widyan (pl.) Al Wahiba. There is no spate channel such as is commonly understood as a wadi, indeed the trees very often grow on sand hills (*qarha*) which are the favourite camp sites. Nevertheless the trees are understood by the bedouin to indicate subsurface water and this district contains many shallow and brackish wells. Any clump of trees is referred to by the Wahiba as a wadi. After rain, which generally occurs in the spring (*sayf*, corresponding roughly to March/April), the camps are moved out to fresh pastures either in the Sands to the east or the sandy plains to the west, according to the distribution of rainfall and fresh herbage. They generally remain there for one or two months, sometimes making one or two additional short moves in response to successive rains or depletion of the pastures before returning to their original base at the onset of summer (*qayz*).

The seasonal oscillation makes use of the different resources of the wadis and the open sands. The wadis provide water, shade, wood for fuel and building, and perennial browse plants that remain green except in the severest droughts. The spring pastures are dominated by smaller plants that put out fresh growth only for a limited period after rain. A similar pattern is followed by other Wahiba groups based in the Wadi Matam, Wadi 'Andam and Wadi Halfayn complexes outside the Sands, which are active wadis in the usual sense. Some families remain throughout the year in the treeless central sands, where migratory movements are more random but make some use of the different properties of the high dunes, with their sparse covering of large, deep-rooted shrubs, and the intervening valleys supporting denser but less drought-resistant vegetation. Observation in 1985 and 1986 indicated that the maximum displacement of camps was about 90 km, while the majority made moves in the order of 15 to 25 km. Some moved only 5 km and others did not move at all, both in areas that had received rain and those that had not.

The annual cycle does not include any period spent in or close to a village, except of course for those groups based in the northern wadis (eg Wadi Batha) where the villages also are situated. The influx of bedouin into the oases at the time of the summer date harvest concerns not the pastoralists but the fishermen. At this season, monsoon winds make fishing dangerous and life on the coast extremely uncomfortable so the fishing communities repair to the oases en masse. One-day fairs are held at harvest time in each of the major market towns in succession. Both bedouin and villagers try to make bulk purchases of dates, other staple foods and clothing to last through the year. Some members of both herding and fishing families take up seasonal employment as date harvesters, while garden owners also allow them to glean fallen and spoilt fruit for their animals free of charge, but today most prefer to obtain their dates by straightforward purchase.

Both the short duration (in distance and in time) of the annual migratory cycle and its general pattern as described here (and in more detail in Webster 1989a) are at variance with previous accounts. It has usually been suggested that the bedouin of Oman in general (Wilkinson 1977:52, 53) including the Wahiba (Scholz 1981:195-202, Karte 1) observe a pulsatory pattern of migration between summer quarters in the piedmont zone, close to the settlements, and winter pastures in the outer desert, following more or less the routes of the wadi systems. For the Wahiba groups studied, the pattern was rather one of lateral movement out of the wadis in winter and a return to wells scattered along the length of the wadis in summer. In addition to, but quite separate from, these pastoral migrations are the movements of the transhumant fishing communities and the fish traders and carriers.

It might be concluded that the migration pattern has been radically curtailed during the last ten years or so. The Al Wahiba consistently deny that this is the case, and three reasons can be advanced for accepting their word: first, had the pattern been subject

to a recent and rapid change, one would expect to find a few "old fashioned" groups still observing the traditional practice, but this was not so. Second is the evidence of local toponymy: the Wahiba use a very detailed set of place-names within the comparatively small area in which they spend the greater part of every year (their *watan*), but are much hazier about place names in other districts that they seldom visit but where equally detailed names are in use by other groups. Third is the considerable localised variation in the forms of dwelling. This applies particularly to the materials in use which are predominantly date palm fronds in the north (supplemented by plywood, corrugated aluminium and canvas), and in the south a variable mixture of brushwood, prosopis branches, wild palm leaf matting, home made goat hair cloth, home-made and imported blankets, and canvas tarpaulin. The basic form also varies, from the collection of square and A-frame structures in the north, each with a distinct function (sleeping, cooking, day-time sitting) to the simpler and more uniform designs of the south where dwellings take the form of a square or rectangular cabin, open on one side and covered by a curving vaulted roof giving a more tent-like appearance. These structures are cool and comfortable, but they are not readily portable and all demand a great deal of wood in their construction. When moving to spring camps, much of the original structure is left behind for re-use or else discarded. A simple wind break is erected at the new site, or en route, until the new cabin can be constructed which may take several days. Each of these types of structure can be recognised in Thesiger's description of 1949:

We spent the following day at Ali's tent. This was only about twelve feet long, woven of black goat's-hair and pitched like a wind-break under a small tree... There were several Wahiba camped here, some in tents, others in shelters made from tree-trunks and branches. (Thesiger 1971:293-4).

Recently some bedouin have adopted welded steel frames in place of wood. These can be dismantled into flat panels for loading onto a truck and are covered in the same mixture of

home-made and purchased materials.

It has commonly been supposed that the bedouin of Oman are an originally nomadic people undergoing a very gradual process of sedentarization, and that modern development will greatly accelerate this process (Wilkinson 1977; Scholz 1981; Cordes 1980). For the Al Wahiba one has rather the opposite impression, of a rural people engaged in a multiple resource economy associated with a peripatetic way of life in which pastoralism plays a central stabilising role, but among whom the techniques and technology of nomadism have not been fully developed or standardised. With the adoption of some of the products of an alien technology, and with the novel conditions of peace and security, it is not altogether fanciful to suppose that some at least of the Al Wahiba may become more rather than less nomadic. Other forces within the new climate of development are more likely to check and reverse any such tendency. Furthermore, if the thesis of incomplete "bedouinisation" has any truth, then the reverse process of sedentarization, if it were adopted, might proceed all the more quickly since the social infrastructure of settled life is already in place, albeit a little rusty. Two contemporary issues in particular offer a challenge to the efficacy of the cultural ideals of going without and assertive action, and may result in a reorientation towards sedentism. These are the monetisation of the economy, including both pastoralism and the non-pastoral options to which *bedu* ?? have recourse, and the handicap suffered by the bedouin in access to services provided by the state, which accentuates inequalities between *badu* and *hadhar*, and between *badu* groups, and so threatens social cohesion.

The Economic Base

A brief survey of bedouin households in the Wahiba Sands found that about 50 percent claimed to have no source of income other than their livestock (Webster 1989b). Detailed information was collected from only twenty families and it is likely that the real proportion

is less. For the Al Wahiba who comprised only eight of the twenty this figure may be about right, for they generally had larger herds than others and were more mobile, and in fact four of these eight claimed to have no other income. Goats are sold through the markets of Sanaw and Mintirib or else to dealers (*jallab*) who may take them further afield. One family claimed to make fairly regular monthly sales but the majority reported only sporadic selling of four to six animals a year, timed according to the need for cash or when prices were favourable. In the local markets goats are sold through a professional auctioneer (*dallal*) who receives a small commission. Like many good salesmen, the *dallal* is an accomplished actor and clown. The serious business of profit and loss becomes a theatrical farce as the audience laughs at his antics. Moral value is transformed into cash in the private pocket of the seller, waiting on the side, while buyers are provoked by the *dallal* to acts of public assertion as they outbid each other.

With prices ranging from RO 20 (at the time of the study one Omani Riyal was equivalent to just over two pounds sterling) for a small kid up to about RO 50 for an adult nanny it is difficult to see how these sales could yield an annual income of more than RO 200 to 300. This can be supplemented by sales of animal manure at RO 1 or 2 per sack, and by the occasional disposal of a male camel calf for slaughter. Many Wahiba women are skillful weavers who produce rugs and items of camel saddlery for their own family use and for sale, usually on a private commission basis. Those women who are able to devote several hours each day to this work, as some do, might bring in a further RO 300 to 400. The ideal of "going without" means that the bedouin are able to keep their expenses to a minimum; they are not interested in buying fancy clothes (their "best" are often home made), and they eat little and simply. Still, the expense of running cars and water pumps, let alone acquiring them, is considerable given the difficulty of the terrain and the cost of petrol. In addition there is the expense of feeding the animals

for much of the year when dates, dried sardines, grain and alfalfa are given as supplements. The conclusion drawn from the survey was that pastoral families are able to subsist on their herds for limited periods of a few months or perhaps a year or so. The families who denied having any extra income were in all cases small ones of less than the average of six members, often young couples with no or few children or elderly people living alone. At irregular intervals, and as families grow, larger injections of cash are required. These are provided by outside employment or by camels.

Opportunities for outside employment in the Sharqiya are limited. Transport and casual trading is now dominated by specialists. Many bedouin are now engaged in the lucrative long distance fish trade, transporting fresh fish to markets as distant as Saudi Arabia and even Jordan (Christie 1989a; 1989b). Traffic in locally produced commodities between the villages is swamped by imports of foodstuffs and consumer goods. The wholesale distribution and retail of these goods employs some bedouin and villagers, but also a great many non-national migrant workers. Some bedouin are able to find work as drivers and watchmen in the Capital. Opportunities are much greater in the U.A.E., where the rulers of the coastal towns have traditionally sought alliances with the bedouin tribes of the interior as a source of additional manpower with which to compete economically and militarily with their neighbours. Prior to about 1985, illiteracy had been an obstacle to employment in the military and police services at home in Oman. Since then recruitment policy has changed. The Omani forces, no longer facing the immediate threat of insurrection, have been able to develop a role as providers of basic education and training to the rural population, rather than stipulating these as a precondition of enrollment. The disparity in military wages which additionally favoured employment in the U.A.E. has also narrowed in recent years.

The U.A.E. is also the hub of the camel racing industry which now provides the main

economic rationale of camel breeding for the Wahiba and other bedouin in southeastern Arabia (in contrast to Central and Northern Arabia, where groups such as the Al Murra breed camels for dairy purposes and have little interest in racing except as an occasional, amateur sport on festive occasions). Some men from the Al Wahiba are employed full-time in the princely racing stables of the Emirates. Others earn a living as independent trainers and dealers in racing camels. They are based in the oases outside the Sands where the animals can be stabled and fed special diets. The dealers buy suitable young camels from the bedouin to be trained, built up and tried out, and eventually the best are sold on to wealthy magnates who can afford the huge investment of money and time required to produce a champion.

The few camels kept by ordinary herding families in the Sands contribute but little to day by day subsistence. Most male and some female calves are sold at a few months and raise just enough to cover the costs of their keep, about RO 200 to 300, the owners having meanwhile profited only from the milk. Females that show some promise as racers are kept for longer and tried out at local meetings where the dealers keep an eye on the form. If successful, the family can hope to gain a few thousand riyals, a trifle in comparison to the vast sums commanded by top animals. Prices for racing camels are normally quoted in U.A.E. currency. It is often said also of a particularly fine animal that "she will fetch a Range-Rover", in reference to the prizes doled out to winners at the big race meetings in the U.A.E. An irony engendered by the new role of camels is that it is now not uncommon to find the occasional brown cow grazing among the sand dunes, or more often chewing alfalfa in a pen, whose chief purpose is to provide a rich milk diet for the pampered racing camels.

Wider access to outside employment is in future likely to depend on the acquisition of some basic education. At present this is just one of the new state provided services that the great majority of bedouin in the Sands go without. A few can commute daily to jobs or

school in a nearby village. Some have settled in houses within or very close to a village. The settlers usually give as their motive the desire to provide an education for their children. Livestock are penned and fed with alfalfa grown on well-irrigated farms outside the falaj land, or else they are left in the care of relatives further out in the Sands to whom consignments of alfalfa are trucked in part payment for their services. The oases of Badiya are now ringed by these bedouin suburbs and outlying gardens.

The scattered camps of the Sands are remote from these developments, but the more densely occupied parts of the wadis are themselves taking on some of the appearance of villages whose dispersed homesteads are linked by well worn motor tracks and shared water points. Some are visited by mobile clinics. Many benefit from the assistance of the Rural Water Supply Programme which covers the costs of trucking in sweet drinking water and provides tanks for its storage, but others fend for themselves because they are too remote or scattered. Some who might qualify for assistance do not apply because they are reluctant to compromise their independence of action and movement by participating in a joint scheme with government involvement. Many new wells (*tawi*) have been dug in the wadis. They are in some not very clearly defined sense private property, and are called by the name of their owner (Tawi Fulan). Although dug and operated at private expense the water is freely available to all. Many are used to irrigate small gardens of alfalfa, with a few palm trees and onions, in a fenced enclosure.

The amount of land enclosed in this way is very small, but the consequences of enclosure may be far reaching. Even a small fodder garden may allow its owner to sustain larger numbers of goats through droughts. Those with gardens may therefore be able to intensify their use of the unenclosed common land, and have an advantage over those without. The inequality could be redressed only by the construction of more gardens and yet more intensive grazing. The bedouin do not seem to be aware of the potential

dangers and so far no disquiet or local opposition to enclosure has been publicly expressed. Perhaps this is because the actual area of rough pasture lost to cultivation is negligible, while the provision of new watering points for livestock appears to benefit everyone equally. This appearance may prove deceptive.

The Challenge to Bedouin Values

The bedouin say they would like more schools and permanent clinics to be established within their *dar*, and access improved via graded roads. It is most improbable that every little district and isolated camp can be provided with its own full set of modern facilities, yet this is precisely what the bedouin demand. They are very reluctant to commute to larger centres for their needs, or to admit of the emerging settlement hierarchy in which their own camps are consigned to the bottom of the heap. "Why should our children go to 'their' school?", or "People in Mintirib already have a hospital, so why shouldn't we have our own clinic?" are common protests. Do they really expect that this object can be achieved, or that it could be reconciled with the mobility that pastoralism requires? Or are these demands better understood as the expression of a general feeling of dissatisfaction that their former elective stance of going without has been transformed to one of involuntary exclusion from the mainstream, and that within their own society the principle of equality is under threat?

The bedouin frequently discuss these issues around their coffee fires, but it is very difficult for a consensus or a coherent policy to emerge out of the partial analyses of particular local problems by scattered individuals. Shaykhs and rashids are no better equipped to resolve these conflicts than are ordinary tribesmen, and they have no means of imposing their views on others. They are as much caught up in a dilemma as anyone else. As rulers over a local petty chiefdom, their powers have been taken over by the appointed representatives of central government to whom ordinary tribesmen

have direct access, although the mediation of a shaykh as a person known to both sides is still often preferred and in some instances necessary, as in application for a passport. Their role as tribal spokesmen remains, but a *badu* tribe as a political constituency no longer carries the weight it once enjoyed in national affairs. The role of settling internal feuds and intratribal disputes is now largely confined to the arrangement of compensation for accidental damage, especially that arising from car accidents. Some tribesmen feel that the traditional rules governing collective responsibility for murder and raiding should not be applied to these cases and have seceded from their jural groups to found breakaway segments under rival rashids.

The disarray of tribal opinion and tribal institutions is attributed by the bedouin to *hasad* (envy, greed), which is to say the triumph of a material economy favouring social differentiation and rivalry over the moral economy favouring equality and sharing. One social consequence of this monetisation has been the inflation of the bride price demanded for women. Reports of the bedouin themselves maintain that, formerly, marriages were contracted freely across segmentary lines with little regard to any prescriptive or preferential formula. Bridewealth was negligible unless some significant political union was intended by the arrangement. Friendship between neighbours and the desire to produce children were paramount, to the extent that importunate questions about where the children came from (in the cases of women whose husbands were frequently away from home, or of recently married girls who produced very premature but remarkably healthy offspring) were not asked. Women had a good deal of freedom in arranging their own marriage or divorce and were all the more respected for it. Today marriage choices are more governed by strategies to protect and increase the material family patrimony, while at the same time making more of a show of conformity with official (*hadhari*) ideas of propriety. High bride prices deter all but the wealthiest suitors with whom an

advantageous deal may be struck. For close relatives including the *ibn 'amm*, with whom material interests are already shared, the price is dropped to a symbolic figure. The close-knit extended family, operating also as a business cartel, replaces the more open structure of camp communities co-operating in production and consumption across formal segmentary divisions. Such is the analysis offered by Wahibi informants. It is interesting in that it reverses totally the prevalent notion of preferential cousin marriage as a bedouin trait, and may well contain more than a grain of objective truth.

The pastoral economy is only partially monetised and livestock continue to mediate between the material and symbolic systems. People maintain "uneconomic" herds of goats because they have an intrinsic value in sustaining the bedouin way of life and its moral economy. Goats are necessary to the proper conduct of social relations. Camels no longer have much practical use in everyday subsistence terms, but they have an enduring value which can be expressed in large numbers of U.A.E. dirhams or in "Range Rovers", while also being a source of immense pleasure and pride. Funeral feasts, for a time suppressed by the authorities as wasteful and perhaps "unislamic", are said to be undergoing a quiet revival. Pastoralism in the Wahiba Sands has been able to survive little altered despite the contradictions brought out by rapid economic change. However, the growing disharmony between the material and moral systems raises a further practical difficulty which may deal a crushing blow to the bedouin in the near future; this is the danger of overgrazing, a downward spiral created by the juxtaposition of modern technology and modernisation as an idea with traditional goals and values. The door is open for overexploitation that is both self-justifying and self-destructive.

Policies and the Future

It has been said that nomads do not have a "government policy" whereas governments may have a "nomad policy" (Asad 1973). The

bedouin have neither the conceptual framework to comprehend the problems whose effects they all feel, nor the institutions through which to achieve collective solutions. There is as yet little evidence of a "nomad policy" in the Wahiba Sands where, as of 1985, a common complaint was that "the government does not know that we exist". The crisis of the bedouin in Oman is repeated in other oil producing states of the Arabian Peninsula with a significant pastoral population. Traditional values of hardiness and self-reliance are increasingly at odds with the realities of consumerism and state welfare dependence. While urban elites sentimentalise bedouin life as a timeless facet of the national heritage, to be idealised in museums and glossy books, the bedouin themselves are marginalised. Acceptance of state assistance in the form of subsidised housing, urban employment, schooling, or even subsidised livestock fodder relieves some immediate needs but has the cumulative effect of further undermining both the pastoral economy and pastoral values. Those who hold out by clinging to the desert, the herds, and traditional ways are in danger of appearing no longer heroic but foolish.

During the last decade or so the Government of Oman has pursued the necessary and laudable object of extending more evenly through the regions of the country the basic infrastructure on which economic development rests. Perhaps now the time has come to address more specific local and sectoral needs, such as those of the bedouin. Growing awareness amongst regional governments of the need for environmental protection and management, including rangeland management, is to be welcomed, but the problems are immense. Decisions need to be made about the place of extensive, low-output pastoralism in the light of other realistic alternatives for the land and its people. In the case of the Wahiba Sands and similar desert areas these appear to be few, but might embrace some form of tourism and wildlife conservation (Munton 1988). There is no doubt that grazing, woodcutting, building and other forms of land use will

have to be more closely regulated if any of these is to succeed. Some traditional practices might well be incorporated into an environmental and economic plan, but new ideas and initiatives will also be needed. Should the dispersed bedouin be encouraged to congregate in permanent villages where modern amenities can be provided, or should mobility be encouraged as part of a rotational grazing regime? Can the two be combined, given that the existing pattern of movement is relatively predictable?

These are questions for which local solutions must be sought, drawing on the administrative and technical skills of specialists as well as the abundant goodwill and intelligence of the bedouin themselves. Anthropology can help by filling in the large gaps still extant in our knowledge of everyday tribal life. The bedouin who participate in planned development in the future will not be the independent freebooters of old. That life is already only a memory, but if a viable desert based pastoralism can be sustained, then the bedouin will at least have a chance to retain the economic, social and cultural core of their identity.

References

- Asad, T 1973, "The bedouin as a military force. Notes on some aspects of power relations between nomads and sedentaries in historical perspective", in C Nelson (ed), *The desert and the sown. Nomads in the wider society*. Berkeley (=University of California Research Series, Vol. 21).
- Barth, F 1987, "Complications of geography, ethnology and tribalism", in B Pridham (ed), *Oman. Economic, social and strategic developments*. London: Croom Helm.
- Bulliet, R 1975, *The camel and the wheel*. Cambridge (Mass.) and London: Harvard University Press.
- Caskel, W 1954, "The bedouinization of Arabia", *American Anthropologist*, 56:36-46.
- Christie, A 1989a, "Economic aspects of the regional fisheries", *Journal of Oman Studies Special Report No.3: The scientific results of the Royal Geographical Society's Oman Wahiba Sands Project 1985-1987*:495-500.

- 1989b, "Markets and marketing: interdependence and change in the local economy", *Journal of Oman Studies Special Report No.3: The scientific results of the Royal Geographical Society's Oman Wahiba Sands Project 1985-1987*:523-38.
- Cordes, R and Scholz, F 1980, *Bedouins, wealth and change. A study of rural development in the United Arab Emirates and the Sultanate of Oman*. Tokyo: United Nations University.
- Dostal, W 1967, *Die Beduinen in Suedarabien. Eine ethnologische Studie zur Entwicklung der Kamelhirtenkultur in Arabien*. Wien (=Wiener Beitrage zur Kulturgeschichte und Linguistik, 16).
- Meeker, M 1979, *Literature and violence in north Arabia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Munton, P 1989, "A system for evaluation and management of the Wahiba Sands", *Journal of Oman Studies Special Report No.3: The scientific results of the Royal Geographical Society's Oman Wahiba Sands Project 1985-1987*:565-72.
- Robertson Smith, W 1885, *Kinship and marriage in early Arabia*. London: Black.
- Scholz, F 1981, "Beduinen in Inner-Oman und ihre "Teilnahme" am gesamtgesellschaftlichen Entwicklungsprozess des Sultanats seit Beginn der Erdoelwirtschaft", in F Scholz (ed), *Beduinen im Zeichen des Erdoels: Studien zur Entwicklung im beduinischen Lebensraum Suedost-Arabiens*. Wiesbaden. (=Beihefte zum Tuebinger Atlas des Vorderen Orients. Reihe B, Geisteswissenschaften, 45).

Webster: *The Al Wahiba: Bedouin Values in an oil economy*

- Thesiger, W 1971, *Arabian sands*. London: Book Club Associates. (Originally published 1959).
- Webster, R 1989a, "The bedouin of the Wahiba Sands: pastoral ecology and management", *Journal of Oman Studies Special Report No.3: The scientific results of the Royal Geographical Society's Oman Wahiba Sands Project 1985-1987*:443-52.
- 1989b, "The bedouin of the Wahiba Sands: pastoral economy and society", *Journal of Oman Studies Special Report No.3: The scientific results of the Royal Geographical Society's Oman Wahiba Sands Project 1985-1987*:461-72.
- Wilkinson, J C 1977, *Water and tribal settlement in South-East Arabia: a study of the aflaj of Oman*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- 1987, *The Imamate tradition of Oman*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Acknowledgements

This essay is based on field work carried out between 1985-1987 as part of the Oman Wahiba Sands Project. The author is indebted to the Royal Geographical Society, the Diwan of Royal Court, and the corporate patrons of the project for making the research possible.

Roger Webster is an Arabist by training and has undertaken several periods of anthropological research among bedouin groups of Saudi Arabia and Oman since 1978, as well as academic and applied studies of other aspects of rural development in the Arabian Peninsula. He is now a research fellow in the Centre for Arab Gulf Studies at the University of Exeter.