

Oman's Diverse Society: Southern Oman

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Dhufar, the southern region of the Sultanate of Oman, displays a tremendous diversity in its social structure, rather surprising for an area so small. While the people of the coastal plain and the inland Najd are Arabic-speaking, the mountain highlands of the region are home to various non-Arabic speaking communities. Brief descriptions of these communities are provided, as well as of other non-Arabic-speaking groups that seem to have originated in Dhufar but have moved into the northeastern deserts. Unlike the case in northern Oman, the principal boundaries of Dhufar's ethnic groups lie in language but, as social change accelerates, this distinction may well disappear in the not-too-distant future. The Dhufar War of the 1960s and 1970s, as well as Oman's socioeconomic change since 1970, have increased physical and social mobility and blurred traditional social distinctions.

The modern Sultanate of Oman is a union between the historical Oman of the north and the southern region of Dhufar, with the two areas separated by hundreds of kilometers of gravel-plain desert. Although there have always been connections between the two parts, historically their cultural orientations and trading links have followed different courses. Oman has looked to India and Africa, as well as to the Gulf, while Dhufar's relations have been closest with the Mahra and Hadramawt regions of what is now Yemen, and have included trade with East Africa. As a consequence, Dhufar is nearly as distinct culturally from northern Oman as it is geographically.¹

Despite being relatively small, about the same size as Wales or West Virginia (and slightly smaller than the emirate of Abu Dhabi in the nearby United Arab Emirates [UAE]), the Dhufar region, officially known as the Southern Governorate (*al-*

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1. A discussion of the ethnic communities of northern Oman appeared in the previous issue of the *Middle East Journal*, as J.E. Peterson, "Oman's Diverse Society: Northern Oman," *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 51, No. 1 (Winter 2004), pp.32-51.

muhafiza al-janubiyya), exhibits an astonishing variety in its geography. Its population is homogeneously Arab and Muslim, even more so than in northern Oman. Unlike the case in the latter, where roughly half of the people belong to the Ibadi sect, Dhufaris are entirely Sunni.² Nevertheless, the native inhabitants of Dhufar display a wealth of diversity in languages and social differentiation surprising in such a small geographic area.

THE SETTING

The province is sparsely populated with the total number of inhabitants determined to be 175,000 in the early 1990s. More than half, and perhaps as many as three-fourths, have gravitated to the capital at Salala.³ The rest were either residents of a few coastal towns, principally Mirbat and Taqa (to the east of Salala), or herdsmen in the mountains and Najd. Much of the population of Salala and the surrounding coastal plain is drawn from clans of the widespread Arab tribe of Al Kathir, but there are also large elements of *khuddam* (sing., *khadim*), descendants of former slaves and others of African descent, and *bahharah* (sing., *bahhar*), fishermen of mixed origin. In addition, Salala is home to other families outside these communities, such as al-Hawashim and al-Ghassani/al-Sayl. The mountain highlands behind the plain, however, are occupied by various non-Arabic speaking communities, as described below. The following descriptions also include other non-Arabic speaking groups that seem to have originated in Dhufar but have moved into the deserts northeast of Dhufar.⁴

The distinctiveness of Dhufar's people has been determined by the region's complex geography, its history, and its relatively recent connection to Oman. In many ways, Dhufar resembles an island. It is bordered by the Arabian Sea to the south and by the Jiddat al-Harasis and Rub' al-Khali deserts to the north. The Mahra and Hadramawt regions of Yemen form a natural continuation to the west, although land communications are hampered by the rough terrain of western Dhufar and eastern Yemen. The Arabian Sea curves around the east of Dhufar and, in combination with a mountainous coast, prevents access from the northeast by land. Salala Plain sits at the heart of Dhufar, fronting the Arabian Sea and is about thirty miles long and ten miles

2. Furthermore, nearly all Dhufaris adhere to the Shafi'i school of Sunni jurisprudence (a few in Salala are Hanbali). The Al Kathir belong to the Ghafiri tribal confederation of Oman while al-Qara and al-Mahra are Hinawi – but the distinction is not of much importance in Dhufar, unlike in northern Oman. Interviews in Dhufar.

3. The population of Dhufar was given as 175,000 in Oman's 1993 census, although expatriates constituted as much as 25% to 33% of that figure. By 1999, the government had projected an increase in growth to 208,000, of whom 147,000 were thought to be Omanis. Of the total population, some 151,000 (73%) were thought to be residing in Salala. Sultanate of Oman, *Statistical Yearbook 1999* (Muscat, August 2000), p. 50. The country's second census was carried out in December 2003 but results were not available at the time of publication.

4. Much of the information on the peoples of Dhufar presented here was collected during various visits to the region between 1975 and 1998. Since some of the observations and conclusions in this article undoubtedly will be regarded as sensitive in Oman, I have not identified the sources of non-

wide. It contains the province's capital, Salala, once a collection of distinct villages scattered through the coconut plantations but now a single city of well over 100,000 inhabitants.⁵ The small town of Taqa sits on the coast a few miles east of Salala while the picturesque old town of Mirbat lies at the eastern end of the plain. Fishing villages dot the far east (Sudh and Hasik) and lie along the western shore (Rakhut and Dalkut [or Dhulkut]). Fishing, herding, and the cultivation of coconuts, papayas, bananas, and cereals were the principal occupations in Dhufar until recently.

Salala Plain is half encircled by Jabal Dhufar, three inter-linked mountain ranges which rise from the plain (or directly from the sea in places) in abrupt escarpments: Jabal al-Qara overlooks Salala at the center, while the remote and largely inaccessible Jabal Samhan dominates the east, and the equally forbidding and barren Jabal Qamar commands the west. Behind the mountains lies the Najd, a stony plateau that gradually gives way to the great sand desert of al-Rub' al-Khali (the Empty Quarter). The presence of only a few scattered wells restricts the Najd's population to relatively small numbers of camel-herding nomads.

One of Dhufar's most distinctive features is the summer monsoon (*kharif*) which touches nowhere else in Arabia. From May to September, a thick mist carpets the seaward side of the mountains, particularly Jabal al-Qara. On top, the rolling hills are covered by lush grasslands, but in the deep wadis, which cut their way south to the

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published information. Among the more authoritative published sources are Salim Bakhit al-Tabuki, "Tribal Structures in South Oman," *Arabian Studies*, Vol. 6 (1982), pp. 51-56; Jörg Janzen, *Nomads in the Sultanate of Oman: Tradition and Development in Dhofar* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1986); and Walter Dostal, "Two South Arabian Tribes: al-Qara and al-Harasis," *Arabian Studies*, Vol. 2 (1975), pp. 33-41. The British explorer Bertram S. Thomas, erstwhile Financial Adviser to the Omani government and the first European to cross the Rub' al-Khali, wrote extensively on Dhufar in the following: *Arabia Felix: Across the Empty Quarter* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1932); "Among Some Unknown Tribes of South Arabia," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, Vol. 59, No. 1 (1929), pp. 97-111; "Four Strange Tongues from South Arabia – the Hadara Group," *Proceedings of the British Academy*, Vol. 23 (1937); and "Anthropological Observations in South Arabia," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, Vol. 62 (January-June 1932), pp. 83-103. In addition, much information is contained in J.G. Lorimer, comp., *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf, 'Omân, and Central Arabia* (Calcutta: Superintendent, Government Printing, Vol. 1: 1915; Vol. 2: 1908; reprinted by various publishers in 1970, 1989, and 1998), Vol. 2, pp. 442-453, "Dhufar"; and in "The Arab Tribes of Dhufar," an undated mimeographed study produced by Petroleum Development (Oman) Ltd. in the late 1960s. An overview of the region and its history is given by Miranda Morris, "Dhofar – What Made It Different?" in B.R. Pridham, ed., *Oman: Economic, Social and Strategic Developments* (London: Croom Helm, 1987), pp. 51-78. A Dhufari view of the region is contained in 'Ali Ahmad 'Ali Mahash al-Shahri, *Kayf ibtidina wa-kayf irtiqina bil-hadara al-insaniyya min shibh al-jazira al-'arabiyya: zufar, kitabatuha wa-nuqshuha al-qadima* ["How We Began and Raised Human Civilization in the Arabian Peninsula: Dhufar, Ancient Inscriptions and Drawings"] (Dubai, privately published, 1994). As none of the South Arabian languages discussed in this article are written, the transliteration of words from these languages used herein is based on their approximation to modern Arabic.

5. The present city of Salala is a conglomeration of the town of Salala proper and the villages of al-Hisn, al-Hafa, Dahariz, al-Balid, and al-Rabat. After 1970, government offices clustered around al-Hisn, which received its name from the Sultan's palace there, but they have since expanded throughout the metropolitan area. Only the extensive coconut groves separate the various areas.

plain or sea, the scrub is dense and makes travel extremely difficult. A gentle east-west ridgeline known as al-Qatn marks the watershed division of Jabal al-Qara and is also the furthest inland penetration of the monsoon.

The monsoon does not touch the Najd or Jabal Samhan (except for the seaward escarpment) to the east and the latter's Salawt coastal plain. As a consequence, the central mountains contain the highest density of population, with a transhumant society of cattle and goat herders, in contrast to the smaller populations found in the other two ranges. The *kharif* also impacts the narrow strip beneath the escarpment along the far western coast of the region.

Dhufar has had a checkered and largely isolated history. It was known in ancient times as being the source of the frankincense trade, and the ruins of a Himyari settlement and port can be seen at Khawr Rawri, east of Taqa. Ruins of the medieval city of Dhufar (known today by the local name of al-Balid) lie within Salala. The region was first annexed by the Al Bu Sa'id rulers of Muscat when Sa'id b. Sultan annexed the province in 1829 following the death of a local ruler and freebooter.⁶ However, the Sultanate's control was extremely loose and, for the next half century, each village generally remained independent in internal affairs. In 1879, an Omani expedition successfully retook Salala, and the province has, with a few brief exceptions, remained under Sultanate control ever since.

Although Sultans Faysal b. Turki (r. 1888-1913) and Taymur b. Faysal (r. 1913-1931) visited Dhufar from time to time to enjoy its relatively mild climate, Sultan Sa'id b. Taymur (r. 1932-1970) evinced the most interest in the region. He spent much of the Second World War period there and, as a frequent visitor between 1945 and 1955, was responsible for extending his authority throughout Salala Plain and into the mountains, as well as making improvements to the Salala palace of al-Hisn and establishing several private estates outside the town. From 1958, Sa'id took up permanent residence in Salala and never saw his capital at Muscat again.

Sultan Sa'id married a daughter of one of the shaykhs of the *jabbali* (mountain) Bayt al-Ma'shani tribe, who bore him a daughter (Umayma, d. 2002), and, after her death, married her cousin (Mayzun, d. late 1990s), who bore him a son.⁷ That son,

6. Almost the only substantial histories of Dhufar are contained in Lorimer, *Gazetteer*, Vol. 1, Pt. 1, pp. 589-601; British Library, India Office and Oriental Collection, R/15/3/182, "History of Dhufar," by R.E.L. Wingate (intended to serve as a continuation of Lorimer's *Gazetteer* from 1906 to 1923); and S.B. Miles, *The Countries and Tribes of the Persian Gulf* (2nd ed.; London: Frank Cass, 1966), pp. 498-514. An account of a visit by two nineteenth-century visitors is contained in J. Theodore and Mabel V. Bent, *Southern Arabia* (London: Smith, Elder, 1900). On Sayyid Muhammad b. 'Aqil, the 19th century ruler, his possibly American lieutenant, and later Dhufari rulers, see Hermann F. Eilts, "Sayyid Muhammad bin 'Aqil of Dhufar: Malevolent or Maligned?" *Essex Institute Historical Collections*, Vol. 109, No. 3 (July 1973); Sultan b. Muhammad al-Qasimi, *The White Shaikh* (Sharjah, privately printed, November 1996); J.B. Kelly, *Britain and the Persian Gulf, 1795-1880* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), pp. 772-775; and Sa'id b. 'Umar Al 'Umar, "Imarat Fadl b. 'Alawi fi Dhufar" ["The Emirate of Fadl b. 'Alawi in Dhufar"] *Majallat al-jam'iyya al-tarikhiyya al-sa'udiyya*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (January 2000), pp. 103-130.

7. His first child was another daughter by a concubine, but this daughter died before 1970. Interviews in Oman.

Qabus, overthrew his father in 1970 and dedicated himself to ending a long civil war in Dhufar and integrating the region into the Sultanate. Despite the considerable progress achieved since then in incorporating Dhufar into Oman, it should be remembered that Qabus b. Sa'id is the only member of the Al Bu Sa'id family with direct personal ties to Dhufar. While Dhufaris exhibit a strong personal loyalty to this sultan, it remains to be seen how strong their loyalty will be to the Sultanate.

The attitude of Sultan Sa'id b. Taymur in Dhufar, which he seemed to regard as his private property, distinct from the rest of his Sultanate, was clearly unsuited to the requirements of the twentieth century. As a consequence, Dhufaris (like many of his other subjects in the north) in search of work or education were forced to leave the area clandestinely for destinations in the Gulf or farther afield. The experiences and ideological transformation of these Dhufaris provided the backbone of the resistance to the Sultanate, even well after Sultan Qabus overthrew his father and many ordinary Dhufaris had joined the government's side.

Armed rebellion in Dhufar began with disaffected members of the Bayt Kathir tribe, who received some aid from Saudi Arabia and carried out a series of minor raids during 1963 and 1964.⁸ These tribesmen were soon joined by other Dhufaris and the rebellion assumed a more systematic form with the appearance and then the merger of organized groups. An attack against a government patrol provided the official date for the beginning of the revolution – June 9, 1965. The independence of neighboring South Yemen in late 1967 was important in facilitating the radicalization

8. The war in Dhufar has produced a significant body of literature, much of which consists of memoirs and short accounts of British soldiers fighting for the Sultanate. The most extensive treatment of the war is to be found in my *Defending Oman: A History of the Sultan's Armed Forces* (forthcoming). Other secondary accounts are to be found in, *inter alia*, Tony Geraghty, *Who Dares Wins: The Story of the Special Air Service, 1950-1980* (London: Arms and Armour Press, 1980); Fred Halliday, *Arabia Without Sultans* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1975); J.B. Kelly, "Hadramaut, Oman, Dhufar: The Experience of Revolution," *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (May 1976), pp. 213-230; John H. McKeown, "Britain and Oman: The Dhofar War and Its Significance" (unpublished M.Phil. thesis, University of Cambridge, 1981); S. Monick, "Victory in Hades: The Forgotten Wars of the Oman, 1957-1959 and 1970-1976," *Militaria*, No. 3 (1982), pp. 1-24, No. 4 (1982), pp. 1-26, and No. 1 (1983), pp. 1-15; K. Perkins, "Oman 1975: The Year of Decision," *Journal of the Royal United Service Institution*, Vol. 124, No. 1 (March 1979), pp. 38-45; J.E. Peterson, "Guerrilla Warfare and Ideological Confrontation: The Rebellion in Dhufar," *World Affairs*, Vol. 139, No. 4 (1977), pp. 278-295; David Lynn Price, *Oman: Insurgency and Development* (London: Institute for the Study of Conflict, January 1975. *Conflict Studies*, No. 53); and John Townsend, *Oman: The Making of a Modern State* (London: Croom Helm; New York: St. Martin's Press, 1977). Among the more substantial personal accounts are John Akehurst, *We Won a War: The Campaign in Oman, 1965-1975* (London: Michael Russell, 1983); David C. Arkless, *The Secret War: Dhofar 1971/1972* (London: William Kimber, 1988); Peter de la Billière, *Looking for Trouble: An Autobiography – from the SAS to the Gulf* (London: HarperCollins, 1994); Ranulph Fiennes, *Where Soldiers Fear to Tread* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1975); Tony Jeapes, *SAS: Operation Oman* (London: William Kimber, 1980); Michael Paul Kennedy, *Soldier 'T': SAS* (London: Bloomsbury, 1989); Ken Perkins, *A Fortunate Soldier* (London: Brassey's Defence Publishers, 1988); Corran Purdon, *List the Bugle: Reminiscences of an Irish Soldier* (Antrim, UK: Greystone Books, 1993); and Peter Thwaites, completed by Simon Sloane, *Muscat Command* (London: Leo Cooper, 1995).

of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Oman (PFLO),⁹ and in providing a place of refuge and a conduit for supplies. By 1970, the writ of the Sultanate had been reduced to little more than Salala Plain and the Najd and the deteriorating situation was cited as a major factor in the coup against Sultan Sa‘id in July of that year. Under Sultan Qabus, a product of Sandhurst, Sultanate military efforts saw an expansion in personnel and equipment, as well as vital assistance from Britain, Iran, and Jordan. By 1972, the government had re-established itself in the mountains, a full-scale attack by the Popular Front against Mirbat had failed, and increasing numbers of insurgents were surrendering to Sultanate forces and formed into tribal militias to defend their own territories. A determined final push in western Dhufar brought the war effectively to an end in late 1975, although the last incident took place in 1980.

THE ELEMENTS OF DHUFARI SOCIETY

The distinctive groups forming the complex mosaic of Dhufari society differ in fundamental ways from those of northern Oman.¹⁰ The minority ethnic groups of the north are set apart from the Arab, Ibadi/Sunni, tribal majority by one or more factors of external origin, language, and/or religion. Most are seen as, and often regard themselves as, immigrants to Oman with lingering cultural and sometimes even familial ties to areas outside Oman. With a few exceptions, most of the Dhufari groups are not regarded as ethnically separate (although they are distinct) and they all share the same religion. Dhufari society does not easily divide into a dominant ethnicity with excluded minorities. Nearly all communities are situated within the overall tribal framework, either as tribes themselves or through close connections with other tribes. Apart from the communities of Salala, ethnic boundaries in Dhufar are defined by territory, as well as culture, to a greater degree than in the north. Class is represented to a certain degree in that certain groups are regarded as inferior or subjugated and occupation creates a certain dissimilarity between the transhumant and nomadic groups of the mountains and Najd on the one hand, and the settled Arab population of Salala Plain.

The principal boundary, however, lies in language. Language is often seen as a “primordial” factor in the creation of a sense of shared community and “Languages thus appear rooted beyond almost anything else in contemporary societies.”¹¹ But, as

9. Before 1968, the organization was known as the Dhufar Liberation Front and was essentially an Arab nationalist movement. In 1968, the name was changed to the Popular Front for the Liberation of Oman and the Arabian Gulf and later to the Popular Front for the Liberation of the Occupied Arabian Gulf, reflecting its transformation into a Marxist group incorporating similar groups from elsewhere in the Gulf. The name was truncated to the Popular Front for the Liberation of Oman (PFLO) in the later stages of the war.

10. The discussion in this paragraph draws on Fredrik Barth, “Introduction,” in Fredrik Barth, ed., *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1969; reprinted Prospect Hts., IL: Waveland Press, 1998), pp. 9-38, and Thomas Hylland Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism* (2nd ed.; London: Pluto Press, 2002).

11. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (rev. ed.; London: Verso, 1991), pp. 144-145.

social change accelerates in Dhufar, this essential distinction may well disappear in the not-too-distant future. The ramifications of the loss of language on identity and culture are likely to be enormous and undoubtedly will transform Dhufari society significantly.¹²

Al Kathir

The Al Kathir tribe is widespread throughout eastern and southern Arabia. A Kathiri Sultanate existed in the Eastern Aden Protectorate prior to South Yemen's independence and Kathiri sections are scattered throughout northern Oman. The tribe is prominent in Dhufar, especially in the capital Salala where three clans provide the principal population. These are the Bayt al-Rawwas or Al Rawwas (sing., Rawwas or Rawwasi), al-Shanafir (sing., Shanfari), and Bayt Marhun or al-Marahin (sing., Marhun). The clans have been represented in the Omani government by former Minister of Information 'Abd al-'Aziz b. Muhammad al-Rawwas and former Minister of Oil Sa'id b. Ahmad al-Shanfari.¹³

Both the Bayt al-Rawwas and Bayt Marhun traditionally inhabited the village of Salala at the heart of what is now a large metropolitan area. Al-Shanafir, however, were concentrated in the village of al-Hafa and appear to have arrived in Salala later than the other clans, giving rise to some doubt over their claim to be Kathiri. In recent decades, some Shanfaris have claimed to be from al-'Awamir, perhaps because of disputes with other Kathiri clans.¹⁴ Although the Kathiri sections in Salala were and are Arabic-speaking, many of them also spoke *jabbali* in the past because of their close relations and trade with the mountain tribes.

Another section of the tribe, the al-Kathiri, live on Jabal Qara in a narrow belt of territory running between the Najd and Mughsayl on the coast and share a social life, customs, and law with the neighboring al-Qara. Although *jabbali* speakers, they are so closely aligned with the Bayt al-Rawwas that they are sometimes considered to be the *jabbali* section of Bayt al-Rawwas.¹⁵

The principal inhabitants of the Najd are drawn from Al Kathir nomadic sections, collectively known as the Bayt Kathir and often regarded as the largest tribe in Dhufar. Some tribesmen from one of these sections, the Bayt al-Masaliha, under the

12. For a discussion of the debate over whether language is the essence of culture, see Tim Ingold, ed., *Key Debates in Anthropology* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 147-198.

13. Other prominent Omanis with Kathiri blood through their mothers include Shaykh Burayk b. Hamud al-Ghafiri, the late *wali* (governor) of Dhufar and close confidant of Sultan Qabus, whose father, *wali* of Dhufar for Sultan Sa'id b. Taymur, married a woman from Bayt al-Rawwas, and Muhammad b. Zubayr b. 'Ali, a former minister and presently the Sultan's Adviser for Economic Planning Affairs and President of Sultan Qabus University, whose mother is a Shanfariyya. Interviews in Oman.

14. It is suggested that the claim to be of al-'Awamir (sing. 'Amiri) origin was because the 'Awamir constitute an even more widespread tribe throughout Arabia and are well established in Kuwait, Qatar, and Abu Dhabi. It was common when Kathiris from Salala or *jabbalis* began to seek work in the Gulf in the 1950s and 1960s to identify themselves as 'Amiri. (Interviews in Dhufar).

15. Al-Tabuki, "Tribal Structures in South Oman," pp. 54-55; interviews in Dhufar.

leadership of one Musallim b. Nufal, were the first Dhufaris to oppose Sultan Sa'id in the early 1960s, bringing weapons they had received from Saudi Arabia and the old Imamate of Oman movement into the region overland by vehicle through al-Rub' al-Khali. Several Bayt Kathir sections were permitted to migrate across the border from Yemen several decades ago and to settle in the western Najd.¹⁶

In addition to the Kathiri clans, al-Hawashim, and al-Bahhara, Salala and the other coastal towns contain a small community from the Yafa'i tribe of southern Yemen, who were originally brought in as *'askaris* (guards) for Sultan Taymur b. Faysal.¹⁷ Another family of uncertain origin is that of al-Ghassani, who claim descent from the Bani Ghassan of pre-Islamic days. Detractors claim that they derive from an orphaned Shahri boy who was washed down from the mountains in a flood, thus resulting in the alternate family name of al-Sayl; he was said to be taken in by a merchant and did well in business. Prominent family members have included Hafiz b. Salim al-Ghassani, Press Adviser to the Sultan, and Muhammad b. Ahmad al-Ghassani, the former head of the Popular Front.¹⁸

Al-Qara

Members of the largest group living on Jabal Dhufar are commonly called *jabbalis*, or mountain people. More properly, however, they form the nation of al-Qara whose origins are unknown but they are believed to have immigrated to Dhufar some five to seven centuries ago, possibly from Yemen. European observers have made much of their physical resemblance to Somalis or Ethiopians, but there is no historical evidence of any connection. They speak a South Arabian language, akin to the languages of the ancient Yemeni kingdoms of Himyar, Ma'an, and Saba' and not mutually intelligible to speakers of modern Arabic (which is of North Arabian origin).

They are organized into about a dozen tribes occupying narrow contiguous strips of territories arranged perpendicular to the coast and extending from al-Qatn and the mountain highlands down onto the coastal plain. Several have close associations with towns of Salala Plain, such as the Bayt al-Ma'shani tribe with Taqa and the Bayt al-'Amri with Mirbat. These two are probably the largest of the *jabbali* tribes and were most prominent among the *firqat* (sing., *firqa*; militias) established during the Dhufar War.¹⁹ As mentioned above, former Sultan Sa'id b. Taymur married into

16. Interviews in Dhufar.

17. Interviews in Dhufar.

18. Interviews in Dhufar.

19. Other tribes and their territories include the Bayt Ja'bub (behind Arzat and Salala), Bayt Kashawb, Bayt Qatn (Jabal Qara along al-Qatn), Bayt Tabuk (Jabal Qara along al-Qatn), Bayt Sa'id (behind Raysut and Salala and west of Salala-Muscat highway), Bani 'Umar, Bayt Hardan (behind Rakhyut), Bayt Shammas (Rakhyut and vicinity), Bayt 'Ak'ak (behind Rakhyut), and Bayt Buki. Al-Tabuki, "Tribal Structures in South Oman," p. 53; interviews in Dhufar. See also the annual compilations of "The Tribes of Oman" prepared by the British Consul-General in Muscat and Foreign Office officials in London between 1951 and 1961 in United Kingdom, National Archives, Public Record Office, Foreign Office Records, FO/371/91262, FO/371/149153, and FO/371/156820.

the Bayt al-Ma'shani. A brother of Sa'id's wife, al-Mustahayl b. Ahmad al-Ma'shani, served as Minister of Social Affairs and Labor before becoming an Adviser of State; his son Salim was appointed as an adviser at the Diwan of Royal Court.

Al-Qara traditionally were transhumants, establishing bases at small settlements with mud-and-stone roundhouses but roaming through their individual tribal territories with their herds of goats and small, hardy, mountain cattle. The cattle are raised for milk (which traditionally it was anathema to sell) and ghee, which was traded with the people of the coastal plain in exchange for dried sardines on which the cattle were fed. Cattle were not slaughtered for meat until they had outgrown their useful lives. With increasing prosperity after the Dhufar War, herds of *jabbali* cattle and goats have grown in numbers to a point of threatening the mountains' delicate ecology.

Al-Shahra

Non-tribal in organization, the Shahra are interspersed throughout Qarawi territory and are regarded as socially inferior and *da'if* (weak), *i.e.* traditionally forbidden to carry arms or for their men to marry into al-Qara. They are believed to be the original inhabitants of the mountains and to have been subjugated by the invading Qara who adopted their language, Shahri (an Arabization of the Shahri adjectival form of "mountain," from whence comes the more common description of *jabbali*, the adjective for "mountain" in Arabic), and their practices of cattle-rearing and frankincense-gathering. Individual sections have fallen under the control of various Qarawi, Mahri, and Kathiri tribes, who traditionally employed them as herdsmen and laborers.²⁰ The inhabitants of the Kuria Muria Islands (now officially termed al-Hallaniyat by the Omani government) also claim to be Shahri.²¹

Al-Mahra

The Mahra of Dhufar are far fewer than the Qara, but the majority of the Mahra nation is to be found across the border in Yemen. The northern Mahra of Dhufar speak a dialect of the Mahri language, also from the South Arabian family, which is distinct from the southern Mahri of Yemen but mutually intelligible.²² Traditionally, the Dhufari Mahra were nomadic camel herders inhabiting the northern desert behind the mountains, although a few reside along the eastern reaches of the Dhufar seacoast.

20. Al-Tabuki, "Tribal Structures in South Oman," pp. 52-53; interviews in Dhufar.

21. Miranda Morris points out that even though the islanders, found today only on the main island of al-Hallaniya, speak Shahri, the islands' long history as a stopping place and fishing area for many different communities around the Arabian Sea make it likely that the inhabitants are of mixed racial and social origins. "Dhofar – What Made It Different?" p. 65.

22. Al-Tabuki, "Tribal Structures in South Oman," pp. 53-54; 'Ali b. Muhsin Al Hafiz, *Min lahjat "mahra" wa-adabiha* ("On the Mahri Language and Its Literature") (N.p., n.d. [Muscat? 1989?]); interviews in Dhufar.

The tribes of northeastern Dhufar have no specific memory of their arrival in Dhufar whereas those to the west, more closely related to Mahris of Yemen, have either always straddled the present border or moved into Dhufar after the leftist government took power in South Yemen after 1967.²³ During the Dhufar War, the Sultanate organized some of the Mahra of western Dhufar into *firqat* and even sponsored some military forays into Mahri areas of South Yemen. The war also enabled some camel-breeding Mahri tribes – as well as Kathiri goat- and camel-herding tribes – to move up into the mountains and occupy territory from which the Qarawi tribes have been unable to dislodge them because of a government prohibition on tribal fighting.

Habyuti (or Hobyot or Wehobyot) is spoken by various tribal sections in the border area between Dhufar and Yemen. While there is some belief that Habyuti is a separate language (rather than simply a Mahri dialect, as it is not comprehensible to Mahri speakers), most Mahri and Habyuti speakers claim it is a mixture of Shahri and Mahri.²⁴

Al-Mashayikh

Contrary to what the name suggests (*mashayikh* is a plural of *shaykh*), the Mashayikh of Jabal Dhufar are a *da'if* people, at least in part, essentially non-tribal and living in small groups around the mountains. They are higher in status than the Shakra but inferior to the Qarawi tribesmen. Although it is purely speculative, it may be that the Mashayikh once performed the religious and mediatory functions now belonging to the Sada (the descendants of the Prophet Muhammad) but for unknown reasons lost influence and status. They are still said to serve as mediators in the mountains and to care for some shrines and mosques. Al-Mashayikh today are very sensitive to being regarded as *da'if*, particularly as their ranks include university faculty, army officers, and ambassadors.²⁵

Al-Bara'ima

This is another small *da'if* group of the mountains, occupying roughly the same social level as the Mashayikh. But the Bara'ima (sing., Bar'ami) form a tribe with their own territory (unusually running east-west at the northern end of Bayt Qatn territory) and are thought to be a branch of the Hikman (see below) that moved into Dhufar – or alternatively, the Hikman form a branch of al-Bara'ima that left Dhufar. Traditionally, the Bara'ima spoke Shahri but the tribe appears in recent years to be seeking to move up in social terms and to replace the use of Shahri in the home with



23. By Omani historical tradition, the Mahra tribes came to Dhufar with Malik b. Fahm, *i.e.* at the beginning of the immigration of Arab tribes into Oman. See John C. Wilkinson, *The Imamate Tradition of Oman* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 75-76.

24. Morris, "Dhofar – What Made It Different?" p. 65; interviews in Dhufar; Miranda Morris, personal communication.

25. Morris, "Dhofar – What Made It Different?", pp. 71-72; interviews in Dhufar.

Arabic. Tribal members have attained senior positions in the Army and government, including ambassador and under-secretary.²⁶

Al-Batahira

The Batahira consist of a small tribe of nomads and fishermen occupying the barren territory around al-Shuwaymiyya and Sharbithat (northeast of Dhufar and adjoining the Arabian Sea). They speak their own Bathari language that is said to be related to Mahri. Dhufari tradition holds that the Mahra entering Dhufar in the past pushed the Batahira out of northern Dhufar and occupied their grazing lands.²⁷ They also have had a reputation as “negotiators” like the Mashayikh. Furthermore, it is believed that at sometime during this process the Batahira adopted the language of their Mahri conquerors (as opposed to the Shakra whose language was adopted by their Qarawi conquerors); the subsequent geographical separation of the Batahira eventually resulted in a distinct language. Never large in numbers, the tribe seems to be dying out with the language also under threat from modern education solely in Arabic.²⁸

Al-Harasis

There is similarity in activities, presumed origin, and language between al-Batahira and al-Harasis (sing. Harsusi). The latter are also a small tribe located in a part of the inland desert midway between northern Oman and Dhufar known as Jiddat al-Harasis. Like al-Batahira, the Harsusi language is closely related to Mahri (*i.e.* Harsusi is intelligible to Mahri speakers) and the Harsusi tribe continues to be close to the Mahra of northeastern Dhufar. A nomadic tribe, the Harasis have benefitted from employment by oil companies and the Omani and Abu Dhabi governments and in recent years have served as rangers for the conservation project of the re-introduced oryx herd.²⁹ The even smaller ‘Ifar group is closely related and said

26. Interviews in Dhufar.

27. Al-Tabuki, “Tribal Structures in South Oman,” pp. 54-55, places this upheaval at about 300 years ago. Morris, “Dhofar – What Made It Different?” p. 64, notes that the Batahira are *da’if* unlike al-Harasis and of Shakra extraction.

28. Interviews in Dhufar.

29. Dawn Chatty has described the Harasis and their relations with the government and United Nations development agencies in *Mobile Pastoralists: Development Planning and Social Change in Oman* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996). The language has been examined in T.M. Johnstone, *A Harsusi Lexicon* (London: Oxford University Press, 1976). Al-Tabuki, p. 55, estimates the Harsusi population at about 500 and the ‘Ifar at about 70. This figure may derive from an older practice of counting only arms-bearing males. For example, the British Consul-General in Muscat, F.C.L. Chauncy, reported in 1951 that al-Harasis contained “only a few hundred males” (FO/371/9162, EA1017/11), and in 1954 that the tribe consisted of “perhaps no more than 500” (FO/371/109808, EA1016/5). Chatty believes there are about 2500 al-Harasis, of whom about 2000 are found on the Jiddat al-Harasis at any one time. “Petroleum Exploitation and the Displacement of Pastoral Nomadic Households in Oman,” in S. Shami, ed., *Population Displacement and Resettlement: Development and Conflict in the Middle East* (New York: Center for Migration Studies, 1994), p. 96.

to speak Harsusi.³⁰

Al-Hikman and Din

The Hikman are another small nomadic tribe of *da'if* status. They occupy the territory adjoining the Arabian Sea between the Batahira in the southwest and Barr al-Hikman, opposite Masira Island, in the northeast. A few are said to live at Ra's al-Suwaydi and Barka on northern Oman's al-Batina coast. Like the Bara'ima, to whom they appear to be related, the Hikman are considered to be the descendants of the ancient and nearly disappeared Din tribe. A few dozen Din still live in their tribe's old territory of Qisays al-Din behind the eastern range of the Dhufari mountains and speak Shahri. Dhufari tradition holds that the Din were once a large and powerful tribe but were driven out of prime areas of Jabal Dhufar by the invading Qara and a feud is still held to exist with the Bayt al-'Amri tribe of al-Qara. Unlike al-Bara'ima and the Din, the Hikman speak their own language that is endangered because of the dwindling numbers of the tribe.³¹

Al-Hawashim

Another term for the *sada* or *ashraf* (descendants of the Prophet Muhammad), the Hawashim (sing. Hashimi) consist of a small number of families who emigrated some centuries ago to Dhufar from the Wadi Hadramawt in neighboring Yemen. The Hawashim have served as religious leaders in Dhufar and continue to keep connections with the religious centers of Hadramawt. The first Hashimi family is said to have settled in Mirbat, a town at the eastern edge of Salala's coastal plain, and several tombs of Hashimi "saints" are preserved in and around the town. Local tradition holds that the supposed progenitor of all the sada of Dhufar, Hadramawt, and Indonesia was buried a thousand years ago in Mirbat and his original house is still standing and cared for by the family of servants that have tended his tomb throughout the centuries. Oman's long-serving Minister Responsible for Foreign Affairs, Yusuf b. 'Alawi b. 'Abdullah, is a Dhufari Hashimi and the Al Hafiz family is also prominent in the coastal town of Taqa. Some Hashimi families continued their migration along the coast to Sur where they continue to reside while retaining links with Dhufar. The prominent Hashimi family of al-Ghazzali in Sur has provided several ministers in the Sultanate government.³²

30. The distinctiveness of the 'Ifar from al-Harasis is uncertain. Dawn Chatty notes that al-Harasis are a "refuge" tribe and posits that the "Ifarri" lineage within al-Harasis and the 'Ifar may be the same. Personal communication.

31. Interviews in Dhufar; Miranda Morris, personal communication. A report for Petroleum Development Oman claimed that al-Hikman were clients of al-Wahibah, one of Oman's three large and widespread *badu* tribes, and in the process of being absorbed into al-Wahibah. J.P. Bannerman, "Southern Oman," typescript dated March 29, 1960.

32. Interviews in Dhufar and northern Oman.

African Slaves and al-Bahhara

Slavery was common in Dhufar in the past, as in northern Oman, and there is a sizeable African population in Salala, some of whom originated as slaves in the palace of the Sultan. Other Dhufaris traditionally looked down on the Africans, who were used even in the mountains to do herding. Even before the outbreak of hostilities in Dhufar in the 1960s, there were indications of anti-government organization by Dhufari blacks and suspicion of the community, one of the largest in Salala, continues today, mixed with some resentment over the sometimes over-bearing attitude of the former Sultan's retainers. The bottom of the social ladder, however, was occupied by the Bahhara (sing., Bahhar), an Arabic term meaning fishermen but referring in Salala to an indeterminate group distinct in race from the Africans (who will not allow their women to take Bahhari husbands). Because of their poor social standing, a disproportionate percentage of the most Marxist and diehard leaders of the Popular Front which fought the Sultanate government during the 1970s came from these two groups.³³

CHANGING CIRCUMSTANCES

A major consequence of the war and the socioeconomic change in the subsequent decades has been to blur traditional social distinctions. Such categories as *da'if*, for example, are no longer officially tolerated and are showing some signs of fading. In some respects, the roots of social change can be traced back to the emigration of Dhufari men to jobs in the oilfields and security forces of a number of Gulf countries as early as the 1940s.³⁴ In later years, a number of Dhufaris acquired nationality in these countries and brought their families to live there.

The Dhufar War and the ideological tenets of the Popular Front introduced a number of changes. The Front, while militantly anti-Islamic (which cost it considerable popular support), was also more egalitarian than traditional society. The *da'if* *Shahra* were allowed to marry whoever they wanted and Bahhara rose to high positions within the organization. Not only were multiple marriages banned but women were given jobs and also fought in combat. Many of these social innovations were rolled back in the post-war period. Many *jabbali* children were removed from the mountains during the war and placed in schools in Jadhīb and Hawf, the Front's main bases just across the Yemen border, and as far away as Aden. Since the war, the Omani government has established schools throughout the province and instituted universal education.

Tribal identity remains extremely important in Dhufar but the ability of the

33. Interviews in Dhufar. Petroleum Development (Oman), "The Arab Tribes of Dhufar," cites a local tradition that al-Bahhara came from Hadramawt under the protection of al-Shanafira.

34. Dhufaris did not just stay in the Gulf, either. In July 1958, two Dhufaris living in London wrote to the Foreign Office asking for help in arranging a meeting with Sultan Sa'id b. Taymur who was visiting the UK at the time. FO/371/132903; EA1944/31.

tribe to protect its members and territory has diminished. As part of its “hearts and minds” campaign during the war, the Sultanate government established civil centers throughout Jabal Dhufar and built mosques, schools, and shops in them. It also drilled wells to provide secure sources of water for *jabbali* livestock but was careful to site these wells at the junctions of tribal boundaries in order to prevent any single tribe from claiming ownership of the well.

An unforeseen consequence of that policy has been the movement of certain tribes, particularly Kathiri goat- and camel-herders from the west and Mahri camel-herders from the Najd, onto the mountains where they utilize the wells and the surrounding land for forage. A government ban on tribal feuds and declaration that common land belongs to the government and not to tribes prevent the *jabbali* tribes from taking action against the intruders and there have been instances where interlopers have built houses near wells. Strict application of the prohibition of tribal feuds has had other effects as well. When two Mahri tribes became entangled in a series of tit-for-tat killings, two members of one tribe were arrested by the government for the murder of a member of the second tribe, in revenge for an earlier killing. The two were tried and executed and their tribe was assessed a fine of 50,000 Omani riyals (\$134,000); the tribe was forced to obtain a bank loan to pay the fine.³⁵

As in northern Oman, social distinctions are becoming blurred as physical mobility, education, and government employment grow more ubiquitous. After the end of the war, the government chose to retain the concept of the *firqat* while transforming it into two different entities. Some of the *jabbali* fighters were organized into a regular military unit known as the Firqat Forces where they serve under the same terms and conditions as the army at a base at the foot of the mountains on Salala Plain. At the same time, many of the individual *firqat*, each organized around a single tribe, were retained as a type of irregular home guard, each *firqat* being based in and having responsibility in its own tribal territory. As the war years grew more distant, the practical purpose of such *firqat* disappeared, particularly as the Royal Oman Police began to operate on Jabal Dhufar. But the *firqat* were maintained primarily to assure the loyalty of their members and as a way of injecting income into the rural economy: *firqat* members would come together at their forts only on paydays to socialize and to receive their salaries. Shortly after the war ended, the Sultan’s Special Force was created to provide a local counterpart to Britain’s Special Air Service or the United States’ Delta Force. It was headquartered on Jabal Dhufar and initially recruited only Dhufaris and mainly *jabbalis*.

From the 1970s on, the government became directly responsible for providing for the welfare of the great majority of Dhufaris. For many years after the war, as much as 40% of government expenditure went to Dhufar, despite the fact that Dhufaris consisted of only 10-25% of the country’s total indigenous population. In addition to



35. Interviews in Dhufar. Earlier during the Dhufar War, the effectiveness of the tribal *firqat* paradoxically diminished as mushrooming defections from the Front increased the numbers and strengths of individual *firqat*. The killing of a Front member by a *firqat* member from another tribe would instigate a tribal feud and thus the *firqat* were loathe to engage in combat in the latter stages of the war.

the thousands of Dhufaris employed in the security forces, many more held jobs with the civil government. It can be roughly estimated that more than half – and perhaps as many as two-thirds – of all Dhufaris are dependent on government salaries, either directly or as family dependents. The resultant burst of prosperity can be seen in the growth of Salala as a metropolitan area, since those Dhufaris who can afford it often maintain a second house in Salala, and in an expansion in the size of herds on the mountains.

Increasing wealth on the mountains has created an over-abundance of livestock – goats, camels, and the unique Dhufari cattle – with adverse consequences for water usage and over-grazing. The abundant grasses of the mountain, which used to reach nearly six feet high immediately after the *khariif* (the summer monsoon), have less and less chance to seed and fodder must be imported to feed the herds.³⁶ Another concern has been safety on the modern network of roads, especially during the *khariif* when constant fog and drizzle make it extremely difficult to see the road ahead and wandering livestock. Many *jabbalis* have become content to rely on South Asians to tend the herds.³⁷

Changing circumstances have placed nearly all of the non-Arabic languages under threat. Traditionally, most Dhufari men whose mother language was not Arabic spoke at least some Arabic. There are few older male Dhufaris who have not worked abroad in such institutions as ARAMCO, the Trucial Oman Scouts, the Qatar police, or spent time in South Yemen with the Front during the Dhufar War, and in recent years nearly all men and quite a few women either work for the Oman government or spend a considerable amount of time in Salala. As a result, the use of Arabic is becoming more predominant throughout the region. The extension of elementary education throughout Dhufar has resulted in many children learning Arabic from northern Arab teachers and thus losing facility in their own languages or dialects.³⁸

Most Dhufaris prefer to stay in Dhufar but the demands of government and army employment have resulted in more Dhufaris, particularly those in more senior

36. Saudi trucks carrying fodder being brought from the kingdom are a common sight along the road connecting northern Oman with Dhufar. It might be noted that the grasses continue to flourish, as they used to in Dhufar, across the border in the ecologically similar region around Hawf in Yemen. Miranda Morris, personal communication.

37. For more detail on this subject, see Jörg Janzen, “The Destruction of Resources among the Mountain Nomads of Dhufar,” in Martha Mundy and Basim Musallam, eds., *The Transformation of Nomadic Society in the Arab East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 160-175.

38. A personal illustration of the disappearing languages was provided during a tour made of the Arabian Sea coast a few years ago with several friends. Just northwest of Dhufar, our car was surrounded by a group of Bathari children. The eldest, a young woman probably in her late teens, initially responded yes when asked if she spoke Bathari. But when prodded to say something in the language, she confessed that she did not know Bathari but added rather vaguely that her grandfather could speak it. Dawn Chatty also notes the importance of a “critical mass” that sustains a language, as well as, in the case of al-Harasis, a preference to not send children to school until the age of nine (the age of reason, they say, and also the age at which they know their culture). As a consequence, many young Harasis still speak Harsusi, it is the language of preference within the tribe, and many Harsusi women still do not speak very good Arabic. Personal communication.

positions, living in the north and some northern Omanis spending time in the south. Nevertheless, some friction still exists between the two populations, due in part perhaps to cultural differences (for example, Dhufaris are more direct and forthright in their words and manner). On occasion, northern Omanis will refer to the office maintained in Muscat by the *muhafiz* (governor) of Dhufar as the Dhufar embassy.³⁹

Social change is also being accelerated by newly introduced forms and patterns of communication. Mobile telephones are ubiquitous. Oman television broadcasts reach even remote areas of Dhufar and satellite television is growing in popularity; this is, of course, in addition to Omani and foreign radio transmissions. Dhufari singers and musicians appear on Omani television and radio and their recordings, as well as of other Arab artists, can be found throughout Dhufar on audio cassettes. Magazines and books follow the path of literacy and the Internet is well established for the computer literate. Such developments not only facilitate the exchange of information and changes within networks but also erode boundaries between groups, as well as serving both to further integration into a wider society and polity and to encourage the emergence of alternative views.⁴⁰

Social change has been a significant feature of life in Dhufar for more than three decades, spurred perhaps in equal parts by the impact of the Dhufar War, the effective integration of Dhufar into the Sultanate of Oman, and the socioeconomic impact of oil income and government policies. While change seems to have affected nearly all strata of Dhufari society, its impact necessarily has been most profound on the smaller and more marginal sectors. Although the situation has not reached the point of assimilation, the unique characteristics of many of these groups are clearly being extinguished.

39. Among other functions, this office provides air tickets and financial assistance to Dhufaris needing to travel abroad for medical assistance. Northern Omanis point to this as one example why Dhufaris receive better attention than Omanis. They also point to the near-impossibility of acquiring government grants of land for residences and business in Dhufar while Dhufaris are more likely to receive land in the north. Interviews in Muscat.

40. For extended discussion of the impact of new forms of communications and media, see Dale F. Eickelman and Jon W. Anderson, eds., *New Media in the Muslim World: The Emerging Public Sphere* (2nd ed.; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003).