
The Tribal Society of the UAE and its Traditional Economy

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Introduction

Hundreds of millions of years ago a source of wealth was trapped several thousand metres under the territory of the UAE. Before this oil and gas was discovered and exploited, there was precious little to be found on the surface which could be called 'natural wealth'. Yet, the scant resources were sufficient to sustain the inhabitants of this area throughout the centuries. They had developed the means to make all aspects of their seemingly inhospitable environment work for them. Management of these economic resources was harmonized with an age-old social structure producing unique socio-economic responses to the rigours of life in the eastern corner of the Arabian Peninsula.

The local population of the present day UAE is tribal in origin. Does that mean that every person in the UAE who wears a white *thob* is descended from the bedouin of the Arabian desert and would once have lived as a nomad? What does the word 'tribal' encompass? To shed some light on such questions and to be able to understand why these concepts are central to the structure of the traditional society of the UAE, it is necessary to know how this society supported itself economically in the past.

The Tribe as Society's Genealogical Building Block

Most national householders can quote a tribal name, which forms rightfully part of his own name. This name could be a generic name (*nisbah*) such as 'Ameri (plural 'Awamir) used as the last part of a name after his father's name and possibly his paternal grandfather's (e.g. Muhammad bin [=son of] Khalifah bin Muhammad Al 'Ameri). It could also be the name of a forebear of countless generations back, who is considered the 'patron' or eponym of the many groups of families, which see themselves as his offspring.¹ Such a tribal name is Al Rashidi or Bani Yas or Ahl 'Ali (family of 'Ali). A link can be established with the two famous ancestors of all the tribes of Arabia, Qahtan or Adnan², through this *jadd*, whose historical existence need not always be verifiable with chronological precision. Thus, a person's individual existence is embedded in his group, which is committed to him because of their common descent. The members of this group of common descent have a corporate responsibility to

provide support and protection. In practical terms a tribe is often too widely dispersed to be able to rally around one individual except in cases of general warfare, which might in earlier times even have been the result of one man's action leading to a blood feud.

Within the fold of the tribe, the individual head of the family (himself, wife and children) is traditionally bound by inescapable obligations of mutual assistance and a concept of joined honour to his immediate blood relatives – father, brothers, paternal uncles, cousins. Part of this particular relationship is the strong preference for marriages between the son and his paternal uncle's daughter (*bint 'amm*). If this arrangement cannot be made because of age difference or for other reasons, marriage with a first cousin on the mother's side, or with a more distant cousin, is the norm in this society. Marriage outside the extended family is the exception, but does also occur, such as between families who are neighbours, or as a political move, as when a sheikh marries the daughter of another tribal leader.

A woman's place is clearly defined in this society. On marriage she keeps her father's name and remains emotionally most closely attached to her own family, to which she can return in case of a divorce. The bride moves into the house of her husband's family, where separate accommodation is prepared for the young couple and, if at all possible, for the families of all the other sons. Because her own family is losing a worker, the groom must give compensation to that family in money or kind. At the time of the marriage contract he also has to give the bride the means to support herself in case he were to divorce her later. This *mahr* remains her own property and is managed separately from the rest of the household.

The woman's role in the traditional economy was pivotal because, as will be seen later, the need to alternate between various economic activities placed great responsibilities on the women during the long periods of time that men were obliged to be away from home. Her contribution earned her a high status in society, and a husband's reputation and honour rested on the conduct of his wife and daughters. Although it was permissible to have more than one wife, in practice few men could afford more than the one household; but because many women died in childbirth, it was not uncommon for a man to have several wives in succession.

It may be noticed that not every man uses the name of his tribe (*nisbah*) as the last part of his name (e.g. Al Mansuri, Al Dhahiri, Al Za'abi). Considering the size of some of the tribes, this could lead to confusion, even if everyone were to include his grandfather's name. Many of the last names of local families in the UAE today are derived from one of the several possible sub-divisions of the tribe (*qabilah*). These horizontal divisions are kinship groups ('*ayal*³) and the sub-tribes (*fakhdh* pl. *afkhadh*), which are likewise perceived in genealogical terms. In the graphical rendering of the tree-like relationship between a man and his tribal eponym, these divisions figure as the extension of the extended family.⁴ Thus, many members of the Bani Yas tribe of Abu Dhabi and Dubai have family names like Al Mazrui, Al Qubaisi or Al Hamili, referring to the sub-tribe to which they belong.

The Political Aspect of Tribal Cohesion

The boundaries between tribe and sub-tribe are not clear for several reasons. A tribe could be a confederation of tribes which have decided, for political or economic reasons, to follow the leadership of one of the constituent tribes' sheikhs, as is the case with the Bani Yas, where

Yas figures as a common eponym to signify the tribal cohesion. There could also be an alliance between two tribes to form one. In other cases a sub-tribe may assert itself over time or become remote from the main tribe, and its members may eventually adopt the name of the subdivision as their tribal name – as is now the case with the Al Bu Shamis, whose relationship with the Na'im⁵ is well known in local understanding, but who were nevertheless listed separately in the population census of Abu Dhabi of 1968. Whether a group deems it more useful to be identified as the smallest unit (*fakhdh*) which often also lives together in the same locality, or as part of a bigger unit, may also vary from one community to another, and from one political situation to another.⁶ Individuals may have different views on the matter, depending on their current status and, if questioned, on the view of the inquirer. The relationship of tribes and their constituent parts is not static – it has always been the result of regional politics and remains a matter of tribal dynamics.

The Population of the Trucial States

Therefore neither the names and numbers of the tribes which make up the local society, nor their sizes, can be stated with precision. Considering the above mentioned tribal dynamics, assessments of numbers are bound to vary over time. The first such statements with regard to the whole country, which was then called the Trucial States,⁷ were possible after a concerted effort was made by J.G. Lorimer, the author of an official publication on behalf of the government of India. During a visit to Sharjah in 1904 he collected detailed information and also enlisted the help of other government officials, who undertook several journeys to supplement these findings.⁸ At this time 44 tribes were listed, with some having main subdivisions and a number of further subsections. Lorimer remarks that 'indeed, the country is tribally one of the most composite and perplexing'.⁹ The word 'country' is used here as a geographical term; the government of India considered each emirate as a separate political entity, headed by a ruler who attracted or commanded the loyalty of some or many of these tribes or tribal sections.

The political affiliations of these 44 tribes were listed by Lorimer as being divided between only five 'principalities', whose territorial extent is, however, approximately that of the UAE of today. The tribes comprised an estimated 80,000 people.¹⁰ One tenth of them were then considered bedouin and would not necessarily have spent all the year within the territory of the Trucial States. The Bani Qitab and the Bani Yas had the largest bedouin contingent; their way of life will be discussed later. In 1968 the Trucial States Council organized the first population census for Dubai and the five northern emirates, and in Abu Dhabi the Department of Planning carried out a census simultaneously. The population of Dubai had reached 58,971, the five northern emirates were together 74,880, and that of Abu Dhabi was 46,375.¹¹ The number of people who gave the information that they belonged to one of the local tribes was 44,668 for the five northern emirates and 17,750 for Abu Dhabi.¹² In Abu Dhabi a further 2600 were listed as nationals, but were not reported to belong to any particular tribe; they are most likely the descendants of people who came into the Trucial States at the height of the pearling industry's boom. There seemed to have developed a fragmentation among the tribes as well as a greater awareness of a tribesman's own place in his society, because by 1968 the number of separately listed tribes reached 67. Compared to the first decade of this century all the

additional names are, however, not new names, but those which figured as names of sub-tribes in the past. For the people of this region – settled or bedouin – the tribe is the principal building block for the structure of their society. For the individual, this tribal ‘belonging’ is far more reassuring than the comforts of ‘home’ and the sense of security, which is paramount for people whose social structures are associated with the land they live on.

Origins of the Arab Tribes and their Dispersal throughout the Region

The ancestors of this tribal population have not always lived in the region. They took possession of this land during successive waves of population movement, which brought Arab tribes from Yemen by way of Oman as well as by way of central and northern Arabia. They would have found people already settled in the economically viable locations¹³ and there were probably some nomadic groups here as well, combining herding, hunting and fishing. The descendants of this original population were probably absorbed, although some were for a long time identifiable as separate communities, particularly in the mountains of Oman. Coming from the tribally structured, highly organized culture of Yemen, where a sophisticated edifice such as the Marib dam was built and maintained, the new arrivals retained their tribal structures and their community-building genealogies and legends. Thus they also retained their strong kinship ties with the people elsewhere on the Arabian Peninsula, and their sense of belonging to the Arab *ummah*. That sense of nationhood could be maintained throughout such a vast and inhospitable region because they all shared Arabic as their common language – a language which was to become the language of their common religion.

Although there is evidence of linguistic links between northern Oman and the UAE and the Old South Arabian culture going back at least to the middle of the first millennium BC, larger numbers of Arab tribal groups started to arrive here in successive waves only since the second century AD. They moved to areas such as Taw’am (Tuwwam), the old name for the twin oases of Al Ain and Al Buraimi, and to other areas in the mountains, the mountain foreland and Inner Oman, where people had lived since at least the sixth millennium BC.¹⁴ Those who came later had to find other opportunities to make their living in the less well-watered parts of the country, which required them to adapt to a more rigorous environment. Over time there developed a great diversity of economic pursuits, while the unity in the social structure was retained, both of which were the hallmark of the traditional society of the UAE. The result of a long process of adaptation to the rigours of a land with limited resources can be seen in the traditional economy of the country, an economy which entered a new phase only 40 years ago.

Life in the Sandy Desert

A tribe’s quest for water

The general climatic conditions of the UAE are much the same throughout, with summer temperatures reaching close to 50°C and unpredictable, localized rains mostly in winter. The landscape of the UAE varies considerably and so, therefore, does the usage which people have learnt to make of what the land can offer them. The availability of water dictates this



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Aerial view of the ruler of Abu Dhabi's Palace (March 1962).

usage and has been the key to the economic life and to much of the social structure of this country's past. The country can be broadly divided into three geographically, and therefore economically, different regions: firstly, the coasts and islands, secondly, the Hajar mountain range with its valleys (wadis) and adjacent gravel plains and, thirdly, the sandy desert.

On the face of it, the desert seems to offer the least resources. How could people live there throughout the year, finding enough water to drink during the summer months? Yet the largest tribe of the UAE, the Bani Yas, has for several centuries inhabited the vast spaces of aeolian sands which cover most of the country's territory, and almost all of the emirates of Abu Dhabi and Dubai.¹⁵ Other tribes, too, such as the Awamir, Manasir and others, have shared this challenging habitat for countless generations. The sandy desert begins behind a stretch of coastal salt flats, called *sabkha*, with little white dune ripples rising as one goes south – eventually forming large orange-red dunes. Within this vast desert, which stretches to beyond Abu Dhabi's southern border, some of the highest dunes in all of the Empty Quarter are found, about 100 km distant from the coast. Some tower up to 200 m above the desert floor, catching some of the precipitation, fog and dew, which, although often heavy at the coast, diminishes considerably further inland in the desert.

In the distant past the ancestors of the bedouin, who made this region their home, discovered that they could find water in the dunes, which was adequately plentiful and often also relatively

sweet. In many of the hollows between the dunes they created date gardens and built themselves houses using the branches of the date palms, eventually forming about 40 settlements,¹⁶ some of which were inhabited all the year round. This half moon arc of villages called Liwa, spanning about 70 km from east to west, has been the centre for the economic and social life of the Bani Yas at least since the sixteenth century.¹⁷ A varying number of subsections¹⁸ have acknowledged the leadership of the sheikh of one particular subtribe – the Al Bu Falah – for at least ten recorded generations. Under their leadership their undisputed grazing area, their *dar*, included the Liwa, the intervening territory between it and the coast, called Al Dhafrah, the area called Khatam stretching eastwards as far as the foreland of the Hajar Mountains and, in the west, the land known as Baynuna and the Sabkha Matti and the area up to the Qatar peninsula.¹⁹ Other tribes' participation in the grazing was usually acceptable on the basis of mutuality.

During the summer months many tribes retreated from the sandy desert to the savannah-like outwash plains at the foot of the mountains, whereas the Bani Yas and their associates adapted to the rigorous desert environment and made it their home. The patterns of their economic exploitation varied over time, but all the subtribes and clans were accustomed to wander great distances over long periods of time with their camels in search of grazing, moving as entire family units, seeking the precious gifts which the desert had to offer for those who knew how to make use of them. Almost all Bani Yas families, with the exception of fishing groups like the Al Rumaihat, returned to a home in one of the Liwa settlements at certain times of the year.

The thicker the sand cover or the higher the dunes, the better the chance there is of finding a good source of water. The seasonal rainfall and quite frequent heavy dew rapidly sinks into the absorbing sand, which also acts as insulation against evaporation. The water which is thus trapped in the dunes frequently does not escape downwards, because there is a fairly level, impermeable rock formation below the dunes and the intervening depressions. However, the water which rains down on the sand and is collected in shallow wells at the bottom of high dunes is not potable everywhere in this desert. Depending on the composition of the sand, the water may dissolve chemicals during its passage through the dune and then be too brackish for human consumption. It may even be unusable for animals or plants.²⁰ The inhabitants of the Liwa developed the knowledge of where best to dig for good water and often did not have to go down much more than 3 m to find some. Out in the sands some wells have been established for centuries, and the right to draw water from one of those has been of the greatest significance in tribal politics.

The date palm – a wonder of the desert

Wherever it is found and whatever its quality, the water in the sandy desert never flows and extensive agriculture could not be developed there. But one tree, which combines many wonderful properties, is ideally suited to grow even at the foot of a huge sand dune in the middle of the desert: *Phoenix dactylifera*, the date palm. It can tolerate very high salinity and thrives even in intense heat.²¹ As a cultivated fruit tree, the date palm is not propagated from the date stone, but from side shoots which grow at the foot of a mature tree. These are separated and planted when they are already 100–150 cm high and have a good nest of roots. The newly-planted saplings need to be watered regularly. In the desert the water is carried from the well – one leather bagful at a time. After months, or even years, the young bushy plant's roots will reach the water table and be self-sufficient. However, its rate of growth and eventual yield of

dates is significantly influenced by the amount and quality of the water available.²² Care for the date tree does not end when watering by hand ceases. The bushy plant grows branches at ground level and thereby increases its volume; eventually the outer branches are trimmed and every year as it grows these branches are cut higher up, and thus eventually the trunk is formed. The stumpy ends of the cut-off branches serve as footholds for the cultivator when he needs to climb into the crown of the tree. After three or more years, depending on the amount of available water, the tree begins to flower in spring; then the caretaker must be there to pollinate with the panicles from a male tree, of which only very few are planted. He has to climb every tree and carefully distribute the pollen to all the little waxen flowers. The harvest of the dates takes place during the hottest period of the year, between late June and early October, depending on the type of date tree. The harvest involves climbing the tree and cutting the heavy bunches, which are either carried down or thrown to helpers below.

In this country people like to eat dates fresh when only half the fruit is soft and brown. The harvested dates were essential for the survival of the inhabitants in the desert. The ripe dates are lightly boiled and compressed into a congealed substance called *tamr* which can be kept almost indefinitely, because the high sugar content kills germs which might settle on it. The dried palm fronds are plaited into containers, in which the nourishing, vitamin-rich staple diet can be taken on journeys through the desert, into the mountains, or out to sea. The date tree, which grows so well in the desert where water is available, is like an anchor for the existence of the Arabs in this environment. The yield from the small palm groves which were established in the sandy desert was, however, insufficient for entire families to live off throughout the year.

The camel – God’s gift to the bedouin

The bedouin like to say that God has been fair because He gave them the ideal tree for their desert, but that He has shown His bounty by giving them the camel as well. This animal is not only as superbly suited to the desert environment as the date palm, but it also provides for almost all the further needs of its owner. The camel gives the local tribesman his mobility. The camel is his mount as well as his beast of burden. He can ride it to war, to his date garden, to a distant market, to a port – or for fun, such as in the traditional races. He can load his camels and take them in a caravan across terrain where no other transport could pass. Often camel milk and the products derived from it were almost the only source of protein for the entire family for months on end; then one day there would be a feast to celebrate a wedding or the arrival of a guest and a he-camel would be slaughtered to provide the meat. Camel hide was used to make bags and other useful utensils, while some of the finest mens’ outer garments (*bisht*) were woven from the hair.

The camels bred in the desert of Eastern Arabia were renowned for their endurance and speed. Throughout generations, to sell or barter them was the principal means of obtaining goods, which could not otherwise be obtained from within the extended clan. The possession of camels constituted great wealth and caring for them had a high priority. In the winter their owners or caretakers would wander for weeks in an area where sufficient rain had made the dormant vegetation of the desert sprout. If there was no water well nearby, the milk from the camels was enough for the people to drink. When the camels have good grazing, they do not need any water themselves in the winter.²³ But in the heat of the summer, when the grazing is dry, the camels are kept close to a well and they return daily by themselves. Each camel



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Hunting falcon outside the ruler of Abu Dhabi's palace, 1954.

requires about 40–50 litres of water, which meant hauling maybe more than ten leather bags of water up from the well and emptying them into the *hawd*, a leather trough slung over a wooden frame. The camel owners were fortunate if there was enough summer grazing close to where they owned date trees, because in this way they could participate in the harvest and make use of the water wells which supplied the communities occupying their palm frond homes (known as '*arishah* or *khaimh*') in the Liwa.

Life on the Coast of the Gulf

Fishing

The territory, which had over time become the exclusive *dar* of the Bani Yas tribes, is bordered by 600 km of coast. As can be expected, the inhabitants of the hinterland made every possible use of the resources which this area of beaches, sand banks, creeks and inshore islands offered. They also colonized the many more distant islands. The extensive tidal shallows, which are characteristic of most of this coast, are ideal for fishing with traps. These were intricately constructed fences, placed to shape a letter V, where the fish were caught when the water receded. Another method involved stretching two nets at right angles to the tidal creek from

a central pole; the use of a small dugout and working in a team of two or three fishermen was essential in some locations. But there were also methods by which one man alone could secure a good catch as, for instance, by stalking a shoal of small fish in the shallow water and casting over it a circular net weighted with stones.²⁴ Fish which was not consumed fresh was hung up in the sun to dry, or treated with salt, and taken to the inland settlements where this additional protein was very welcome. Some of the small fish was dried and used as camel fodder or as fertilizer for the gardens, but, as for the fresh fish, the fishermen on the coast of Abu Dhabi were a long way from markets. There is archaeological evidence that on most of Abu Dhabi's numerous islands, tribespeople came to fish in the winter and even brought their camels over in boats. They used rainwater, stored in cisterns, or caught in horizontally placed sails. But the coast between Dubai and Khaur al-Odaid, at the foot of the Qatar peninsula, was not suitable for the establishment of larger, permanent settlements, because of the lack of reliable supplies of drinking water.

This was to change dramatically after the end of the eighteenth century, when it was discovered that a dune belt at the northern end of Abu Dhabi island yielded some fresh water, (which, being lighter, floats in lenses above the salty water table). The water was drawn from shallow wells, which, when brackish water intruded, were abandoned and new ones were dug. In around 1760, several of the Bani Yas tribal groups built themselves palm frond houses on the island near its northern shore. By the early 1790s, the town of Abu Dhabi had already become so important a centre of activity that the political leader of all the Bani Yas groups transferred his residence there from the Liwa. After 1793, Sheikh Shakhbut constructed the fort, which still stands today near the centre of the city. Soon, the supply of such limited amounts of sweet water did not suffice for the rapidly growing population; additional drinking water was brought in bitumen-lined containers by boat from Dubai, Ra's al-Khaimah or even Dalma Island.

Pearling

The reason for this increase in the population of Abu Dhabi was a resource which had played a role for the Arabs of this area since antiquity: the *lulu* (locally called *qamashah*), the pearl. These timeless items of adornment, which grow inside some of the local oysters,²⁵ have probably always been collected by wading fishermen, who would have kept their finds until an opportunity arose to barter them. The oysters accumulate in larger quantities on oyster beds (*fasht*) in water about 30–40 m deep, off the Arab shores of the Gulf. To bring enough of them up to make a living from selling the pearls and mother-of-pearl required a big communal effort, as well as sea-going vessels and people who could dive that deep. When, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the market for pearls grew rapidly in prospering India, pearling became an ever more important industry for the inhabitants of the Arabian coast and the hinterland.

By the turn of the twentieth century about 1200 boats were based in ports on the Trucial Coast, manned by some 22,000 men, mostly tribesmen, but with extra hands brought in from Baluchistan and elsewhere to augment the work force. The pearling industry had transformed the traditional economy of the tribal population. Many families moved to live permanently in one of the coastal settlements, increasing, in particular, the size and importance of Abu Dhabi and Dubai.²⁶ Sharjah, Ra's al-Khaimah and the intervening coastal villages were already long-established as ports of the tribal Arabs and they, too, participated in this industry.

During its modest beginnings, pearling constituted just another means of exploiting all the resources available to the tribal people. They cared for their camels and tended the date palms – often in locations which were many days’ travelling apart – and then, as pearling flourished, an increasing number of the able-bodied men participated in the dive (*ghaus*) during four months in the summer. Many of the Liwa-based sub-tribes of the Bani Yas formed co-operatives, which jointly owned a boat²⁷ and shared the proceeds of the sale of the pearls according to an established arrangement, giving the biggest share to the captain, a larger share to the divers than the haulers and leaving some money aside to finance the preparations for the following year. It was due to pearling that, over several generations, some tribes became more specialized in one economic activity or another and became tied to particular locations. Thus, the Rumaithat and the Qubaisat favoured the maritime activities and became attached to the coastal settlements and the islands, eventually giving up many of the date gardens they had in the Liwa. Other tribal groups such as the Mazari’ remained dedicated to the desert. The Manasir went pearling, but did not own any boats.

Social changes due to the pearling boom

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the pearling industry became increasingly the domain of individual entrepreneurs in the now flourishing ports throughout the Gulf. Some of the merchants, who were involved in the trade in pearls or imported consumer goods from India, accumulated enough capital to buy a boat, for which the wood had to be imported too, and to equip it with provisions for the 120 days of the diving season. In good years, the owner of a boat made a handsome profit by selling the pearls directly or through a local merchant (*tajir*) to one of the Indian traders, who came seasonally from Bombay, chiefly to Bahrain or Dubai. But storms, epidemics or other adversities could mean that the season’s proceeds were insufficient to finance the next season and the owner would, in such circumstances, be forced to take an advance on the next year’s catch. Because neither the captain (*nakhudah*) nor the rest of the crew were paid a salary, but instead obtained an agreed share of the profit, a bad year could spell disaster for years to come for all those who were locked into a system of financial interdependence. The divers were particularly vulnerable. They were no longer part of the multi-faceted tribal economy, but had settled in ports and lived from the money they earned during the third of the year they worked on a pearling boat. They needed advances from the captain to pay for their families’ upkeep during their absence at sea. If the season’s income was not as much as the advance, the debt was carried over into the next year and thus the diver became compelled to work for a particular captain year after year.²⁸

Life in the Oases

The cash (resulting almost exclusively from the pearling industry) which flowed ever more freely into the Trucial States, had a great impact on the entire society, and also brought important changes to the hinterland. For the bedouin family, who had managed to wrest from the sandy desert the means to survive, a date garden watered by a flowing stream was the height of luxury. Thus, when individual families had accumulated surplus wealth, they turned



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Water running through the irrigation channels of a luxuriant oasis where date palms and associated plants flourish.

their attention to the villages in the Al Ain area, the nearest oasis, where several *aflaj*²⁹ brought underground water from springs near the mountains to the fertile soil in the plain. This oasis is already mentioned by the name of Taw'am in the early days of Islam, and prehistoric finds from the area point to it having been a centre of settled civilization for at least five thousand years.

In the nineteenth century many of the Bani Yas bought date gardens in this area, and members of the ruling family also established new date gardens and associated settlements there. There was a resident labour force of descendants of earlier inhabitants which did not belong to the tribal society, the *bidar*; they were accustomed to look after the gardens of absentee landlords and bedouin owners for reward in kind. The tribal population, which had lived in and around the oasis for generations, resisted the inroads of the Bani Yas. Eventually,

however, the dominant tribe of Dhawahir and some of the Shawamis preferred an amicable coexistence with, and the benefits of political protection by, the powerful Al Bu Falah leaders of the Bani Yas, who were much closer to home as compared to the distant overlordship of the Sultan of Muscat and Oman.

The availability of water made the nine villages of the Al Ain and Al Buraimi area a very desirable place. The economy of all such oases in the region differs a great deal from that of the sandy desert. The Hajar Mountains, which run from the Musandam peninsula in the north at the entrance to the Gulf through the UAE and Oman, form the spine of the land dividing the eastern coast areas from the desert region in the west. These mountains rise to just over 1000 m in the UAE, but reach 2000 m near the Straits of Hormuz and 3000 m in the Jebel Akhdhar region of Oman. Although the mountains consist of barren, friable rock devoid of topsoil, in the valleys (wadis) and the outwash plains on either side, fertile soil can be found in many places. The unpredictable, in some years prolific, winter rains run off the rocks quickly, but much of the water collects in the thick layers of gravel in the wadi beds and the plains.

The communal effort which is required to put these aquifers to good use is the hallmark of the tribes which live in and near the mountains.³⁰

The most efficient system is the *falaj* (pl. *afraj*), initially a tunnel reaching for several miles to where the ground water table is higher than the gardens to be watered. Between the source and the gardens there are vertical shafts at regular intervals, which were needed during the time of construction and still now serve during maintenance for bringing out the spoil and admitting air to the people working in the tunnel. There is usually a village near where the *falaj* comes out of the tunnel to form an open stream. This is where the drinking water is collected by the women; downstream is the off-take for watering the camels and, below that, the communal bathing houses – one for the men and one for the women with steps down into the running water. Further down the stream again, there is a set of sluices to divert the water into various channels leading to the different gardens. Thus every date garden can get a meticulously measured time of water delivered by rivulets. A supervisor or *arif* is paid by the community to give every garden owner his allotted or acquired share; he keeps time by the stars at night and by a sundial on the ground by day. In these favourable conditions other trees besides palms can grow, such as figs, mangoes, oranges, pomegranates, grapes, bananas and, in particular, limes. Lucerne for animal fodder and a limited variety of vegetables, mostly sweet potatoes and onions, are grown inside these walled palm groves. Wheat, barley and millet are grown outside on land watered by the winter rains. Usually there are also wells in these oases to facilitate the drawing of drinking water near the houses, or to supplement the *falaj* waters in the gardens.

A *falaj* always serves many date gardens and is the focal utility for an entire village or tribal settlement area. The oldest *afraj* in this region have been dated to around 1000 BC. Possessing a *falaj* signifies a dominant role for a tribe in the social web. However, most *falaj*-irrigated oases are a melting pot for different sedentary tribal communities, of which some have older rights or more property and therefore keep the upper hand in local politics. In addition to the tribal sections, each having their sheikh, the administration of such an economically important place was often entrusted to a *wali*, the representative of the distant ruler. The bedouin of the region, often being absentee landlords, also greatly influenced life in an oasis, because they could provide the fighting force in the event of a conflict.

Life in the Mountains

The important oases, such as Masafi, or Manamah, are situated away from the confining wadi walls, where good soil on level ground lends itself to agriculture. While they were usually shared between more than one tribe, there are countless small villages and hamlets in the wadis, which belong most frequently to just one clan or even a single family. There are *falaj*-like watercourses in use, which serve these smaller communities tucked away in the wadis. Some are even constructed by just one family for a terraced garden in the mountains: the wadi is dammed where surface water can be expected to run at least occasionally. The water is channelled into an open runnel called *ghayl*, which follows the wadi at a gentle gradient – in places forming a gallery above the valley floor – until it arrives at the terraced field or date garden. Terracing was known in these mountains since prehistoric times and this technique of increasing the potential for agriculture played an important role for these small tribal communities. They built retaining stone walls and levelled the ground above with topsoil to form small fields, which could be sown before the rains, or when the *ghayl* was prolific enough. The owners did not necessarily always live nearby, but visited several such favourable locations to see to whatever needed to be done, hoping for a reasonable crop from at least some of these terraces. A home – or, in times of strife, a hideout – could be constructed fairly easily with walls of wadi stones and a roof of palm fronds or brushwood. Choosing which of these temporary abodes to use at any one time depended largely on the additional economic activity which played a role for a tribe of the mountain regions: the herding of sheep and goats. The wadi beds and plains, and even the hills themselves, offer plenty of forage for these animals during the cooler part of the year.

Domestic animals, sheep, goats and some cows, were kept by the villagers mostly for their milk; donkeys were their preferred beast of burden, but camels and bulls were also kept nearby to help with drawing water. These animals did not need to be taken out for grazing, but were hand-fed with fodder grown in the gardens or, after rains had brought the vegetation to life again, with grass and herbs which the women collected daily. Some of the mountain tribal people, called *shawawi*, were semi-nomadic pastoralists, forming part of a village community, but wandering in the mountain region with their herds of sheep and goats. They also offered their services to transport goods on their donkeys or, more rarely, on camels through the mountains.

Life on the East Coast

On the eastern flank of the Hajar Mountains the plain along the Indian Ocean is only a few kilometres wide and, in its northern part near the town of Dibba, some mountain spurs reach all the way to the sea. The communities which live on this coast have the opportunity to combine, within easy distance from their settlements, all the different resources of their environment: fishing, oasis agriculture and husbandry. The most profitable type of fish was traditionally the anchovy (*bariya*). Side by side with modern craft, wooden boats with a straight stern manned by about 20 people are still used to place a weighted net of about 100 m length

parallel to the beach. After several hours the ends of the net are pulled to the shore and the contents spread on the beach. The dried catch is sold locally and abroad as fertilizer. For large fish such as tuna or shark heavier tangle nets are now used, as well as handlines.³¹ The meat is either eaten fresh or salted and dried on wooden racks. Sharks' fins are sold to merchants, who export them to China. Individual fishermen used (and still use today) the local craft, which is typical for the entire eastern coast including the Batina in Oman. This boat, the *shashah*, is made entirely of palm sticks and filled with the buoyant cut-off lower ends of the palm branches. The boatman is partly submerged, but he paddles the boat skillfully through the surf to lay out his net or line.

The villages along this coast, which until the middle of the twentieth century were under the distant rule of Sharjah, and many of which now belong to the emirate of Fujairah, have always been able to water their extensive date gardens from wells. The run-off water from the mountains sinks into deep layers of gravel before it reaches the sea. Once underground, this extensive wedge of ground water meets the saltwater, but does not mix. Sweet water is thus forced near to the surface at the beach, making it possible to plant date trees close to the sea. When they are mature they reach the brackish water table. Further back from the beach more date gardens were established with the help of many neighbouring water wells, some of which were operated by bulls lifting the waterbags with the help of a scaffold-mounted wheel. As in the *falaj*-irrigated oases, other fruit trees and some vegetables were also produced under these favourable conditions.

The Advantageous Combination of Resources in Ra's al-Khaimah

The hydrological conditions which obtain on the East Coast, are also found on the Ra's al-Khaimah coast between the western slopes of the mountains and the Gulf. There, too, extensive date cultivation and agriculture were traditionally combined with fishing; but while only a few people from the East Coast journeyed to Sharjah or Dubai to join the pearling season in the summer, the pearling industry played a bigger role for people in and near Ra's al-Khaimah, even though the main pearl banks are located offshore from Abu Dhabi and Dubai.³²

Ra's al-Khaimah in particular, but also some other settlements along the coast to the southwest, have been favourably located for trade with distant countries. The ports of medieval Julfar (near modern Ra's al-Khaimah), Jazirat al-Hamrah, Umm al-Qaiwain, Hamriyah, Ajman, Sharjah as well as Dubai all benefit from being situated on a peninsula or a sand spit near a lagoon (*khaur*), where the local ships could shelter behind a barrage of difficult to navigate shallows and sand banks. Because the hinterland was sparsely populated and its subsistence economy supported little in the way of export or import trade before the pearling industry flourished, shipping from these ports specialized in the carrying trade. Their ships sailed up and down the Gulf, to India, East Africa and most probably at some stage to the Far East and China. Trade on that scale was much influenced by changes in the political climate of the region and beyond. During the latter half of the eighteenth century the Qawasim, the leading clan in the tribal grouping of the northern and eastern part of the country, dominated the maritime transportation and trade at the north of the Gulf. Due to the vicissitudes of history, they later lost this position to overseas competitors, not least to the steamships of British India.

Life in the Musandam Peninsula

A survey of the influence of geography on the economy and, consequently, on the social structures of the population of this area is not complete without a description of the habitat of the Shihuh and their neighbours, the Dhahuriyin – even though the land of most members of these and associated tribes belongs to Oman. Many of these people now live in the UAE or depend economically on her northern ports. The Musandam peninsula (locally called Ru'us al-Jibal) north and east of Ra's al-Khaimah consists of precipitous limestone mountains reaching the height of 2000 m within a distance of barely 20 km from the sea. In most places the wadi walls are vertical cliffs, making communication between them and across the peninsula extremely difficult, particularly since access from the fjord-like openings in the mountains at sea level is equally forbidding. Only a few of the wadis have filled up ancient bays to form an inshore delta, where the run-off water collects in the gravel. In such locations sizable settlements could be established – the biggest one being Khasab in the north of the Sultanate of Oman. The inhabitants of Musandam developed methods with which they could exploit the resources of the sea and the wadis to the full, and grow essential staple food in the mountains.

The economy of one of the two groups found in Musandam is based on the combination of agriculture and husbandry. They refer to themselves as *badu*.³³ The other group has fishing added as a third economic activity and is called *sayyadin*. This occupational differentiation cuts across the tribal divides. The agriculture consists of building, tending and sowing terraced fields in various locations, on the very top of the mountain, on a high slope, or just above the wadi bed. The crop is wheat (*burr*) or barley (*sha'ir*), which is sown after the winter rains and harvested in March or April. Fig trees are also grown on such terraces high up in the mountains. The rain which falls within the small area of the terrace would not be sufficient to sustain the crops. A network of dams and stone-lined canals has long been in place, to collect water and make it run through channels and openings in the field walls, or to cascade gently over the terraces. Thus a vast area of the rocky surrounding countryside contributes its rainwater.

Nearby are the houses of the owners. They have either a small stone-built house with a flat roof made from beams of the *sidr* tree and covered with brushwood and earth, or a *bayt al qufl*, a 'house of the key'. This type of small house is often built against a rock, with walls made from very large fashioned stones and a floor no more than one metre below ground level. Inside will be some earthenware storage vessels, which – being bigger than the low door – will have been placed there before the house was completed. The large and intricately carved lock on the heavy door gives this type of house its name. This is where the mountain bedouin store their seed grains and any surplus harvested in readiness for a lean year of drought.

Besides crop-farming, the raising of small animals is of equal importance to the economy of the *badu* of Musandam. A family might have a herd (*hawsh*) of between 80 and 130 goats and sheep, along with some donkeys.³⁴ These animals are taken to locations (which may be some distance from the fields), but where the family has another house and a pen in which to keep the animals at night. The same family may also own a date garden in a coastal oasis, such as Dibba on the East Coast or Khasab in the north, and move there for the date harvest in a group of about one to six families with their animals and few household goods. A house made of palm fronds, situated on the fringe of the oasis, awaits the family in this location.

Between visits, one member of the family may walk from the winter home in the mountains to their date garden in order to pollinate or water the trees. Depending on the geography, the different locations of their economic activities may only be half an hour's walk apart, or they may be separated by as much as a day's climbing or hiking.

The *sayyadin* constitute the larger group of inhabitants of the Musandam peninsula. Fishing is their primary source of income and they live in palm frond houses in settlements by the sea. They own nets and other fishing gear and have at least a share in a *batil*, a local type of seagoing boat. They spend between half and two thirds of the year fishing, but also move up into the mountains to sow grain and tend their fields. In yet another location they own date gardens. Their sheep and goats move with them from place to place.³⁵ Ra's al-Khaimah and Dibba were the nearest markets where the tribes of Musandam could sell surplus animals, dried fish, and occasionally rent out their donkeys or boats for the transport requirements of the local inhabitants. Therefore, some of the individual tribal groups became quite dependent on a good relationship with the rulers of neighbouring areas, particularly Ra's al-Khaimah, and eventually put themselves under their leadership.

Nomadic Versus Settled Life

In the sandy desert, as well as in the mountains or in the coastal villages, people adapted in different ways to the geographical conditions and to the availability of some resources and the lack of others. In some instances a sedentary existence in one place was not at all possible because the small amount of available water was enough only for a short stay by a small group of people and for the survival of a limited number of date palms. Faced with these conditions, it was essential to adopt a nomadic lifestyle in order to take maximum advantage of the meagre resources spread over a wide area. In other cases, as, for instance, with the fishing communities of Musandam or the owners of the marginal mini-oases in the wadis, mobility has always been required to supplement the otherwise insufficient resources available at the principal abode. In yet other situations, such as obtained for the population in the villages on the East Coast, in the Ra's al-Khaimah area and in the developing ports of the country, the possibilities to pursue a variety of occupations were all close at hand, and such people could lead a settled life.

In the original areas of population concentration, the large oases, various tribes often lived side by side and in many issues of economic or political importance this neighbourhood became the guiding factor in the society's political life. In most villages they also mixed and mingled because one instance of inter-tribal marriage was usually the beginning of further marriages between two groups. But there were also some long-established social differences relating to the ownership of land in these oases – a kind of class distinction, where often the bedouin absentee landlords were at the top of the social structure.

The Impact of Urbanization

The urbanization which set in with the accelerating pearling boom also brought a great mix of tribes into the coastal towns, where they lived in separate areas, forming tribally distinct

quarters, as was already the custom in the large oases. In the nineteenth century it was generally palm frond houses for every family – except for the rulers’ forts. During the first decades of the twentieth century an ever increasing number of families could afford to build themselves houses made of coral stone, add an upper floor and even an ornate wind tower for comfort during the hot summer months. The few Indian traders and some Persian-speakers who visited seasonally, or moved to the coastal towns during the pearling boom, remained on the fringes of local society. Some local merchants, who made good money from pearls and from the big increase in general trade, began to seek political influence on the running of their city states. The bedouin in the hinterland were still considered to hold the balance of power by providing a fighting force to the ruler of their choice. There was growing social differentiation reflected in the wealth of the individual families. When the pearling industry went into a steep decline during the 1930s, due to the world economic recession and the introduction of cultured pearls in Japan, the economic hardship hit many families so hard that they eventually decided to emigrate to seek employment in the neighbouring oil-producing countries.

Yet, whether people lived in the coastal towns, the oases, the mountains or in the desert, the families and groups were welded together by their tribal background, their common religious practices and their Arabic language; they wore the same clothes – even if some had more than one set– they ate the same food – though some had more of it than others – and they all endured the rigours of the forbidding climate. Thus, before the advent of oil, the entire population formed one homogenous society.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, after more than three decades of immigration by foreign experts and labourers have swelled the population figures, the UAE’s society as a whole is anything but homogenous. However, for the nationals, the basic structure of their tribal society has remained intact, even though for some families their changed economic circumstances have dramatically revolutionized many aspects of their lives. For others, access to modern housing, education and healthcare have made a great difference, but the basic pattern of their lives has not yet changed. Belonging to a well respected local tribe or an influential family is still of prime importance in today’s local society. In spite of the overwhelming majority of expatriates around them, local families socialize almost exclusively amongst themselves. Thus it is not surprising that the traditional local customs are still very much part of daily life. The local people greet one another with the traditional nose kiss. They are instantly recognizable by their traditional clothes, which have remained the same in style even if the materials are more varied and refined than in the past. The women in the family still have a special position and are not expected to share the routine of the men, who have always congregated in the *majlis*, the publicly accessible part of any household. In the *majlis* of the sheikh as well as of the business man or of the fisherman on the coast, matters of state and matters of general interest are discussed, while the tiny cups of unsweetened light coffee with cardamom make the round. Since the days of widespread illiteracy people have kept the memory of legends, stories and the much-loved local poetry called *nabati*, because the spoken word has always been the superior art form of the tribal people, who lacked the raw materials used elsewhere for more tangible forms of artistic expression.

For the benefit of the generations who have not grown up with them, some traditions are upheld with official backing and encouragement, such as camel racing, traditional boating and poetry competitions, while a variety of heritage villages and museums with ethnological

collections are being established. Hunting the migratory bustard (*hubara*) with falcons, which were caught in early winter and released after the season, was practised by many bedouin in the past. Now, this is a sport practised mostly by the members of the ruling families and others who can keep these rare falcons and travel abroad for the hunt. The local tribesman would not begrudge their continuing this 'sport of the kings' as it was known in medieval Europe, because his tribal leader's position should be manifestly different and be recognized as such by the outsider. Among the tribal population an individual's honour and pride is his selfless hospitality. It is an essential aspect of the egalitarian society of the Arab tribes that the hospitality afforded on behalf of the tribe in the sheikh's tent or house should be impressive and reflect the tribe's standing in the eyes of the visitor. The nationals of the UAE of today can have great pride in their country.

- ¹ See also for the following J.C. Wilkinson, *Water and Tribal Settlement in South-East Arabia. A Study of the Aflaj of Oman*, Oxford, Clarendon Press (1977) pp156ff.
- ² See S.B. Miles, *The Countries and Tribes of the Persian Gulf*, (2nd ed) London, Frank Cass (1966), (1st ed 1919) p 2: 'The tribes that now dispersed and took possession of Arabia were composed of two main stocks, derived from the fourth and fifth generation from Shem. One of the stocks was Kahtan, who identified with Joktan, son of Eber, and colonized the Yemen, or the southern half of the peninsula, while the other, Adnan, who descended from Ishmael, occupied the northern part . . . Under the one or the other of these great progenitors, Kahtan and Adnan, the whole Arabian race is comprised.'
- ³ See Wilkinson, *op. cit.*, p 158. With the tribes of the Musandam peninsula the words *batinah*, *ahliyah* or *usrah* are also in use; see W. Zimmermann, *Tradition und Integration mobiler Lebensformgruppen. Eine empirische Studie über Beduinen und Fischer in Musandam/ Sultanat Oman*, Göttingen (Dissertation 1981) p 36.
- ⁴ See the example of the tribe of Ma'awil in Fig. 28 in Wilkinson, *op. cit.*, p 163.
- ⁵ The Na'im are spread between Oman, the UAE, Qatar and Bahrain. All members of this tribe belong to one or the other of its big divisions, Al Bu Khuraiban or Al Bu Shamis, which have even adopted separate eponyms (*jadd*) called Khazraj and 'Aus. These divisions are further divided into sections, one of which, the Khawatir living mostly in Ra's al-Khaimah territory, is itself now often considered as a tribe in its own right; see also J.G. Lorimer, *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf, 'Oman and Central Arabia*, 2 vols., vol.I Historical, vol.II Geographical and Statistical, Calcutta, Superintendent Government Printing (1908–15) Geogr. pp 1301–6.
- ⁶ The members of the Za'ab tribe, half of which lived in Jazirah al-Hamrah in Ra's al-Khaimah territory, but moved to Abu Dhabi in 1970, do not use sectional names, all preferring to be known as Al Za'abi.
- ⁷ The word 'trucial' refers to the fact that the rulers of the states on the southern coast of the Gulf had since 1820 signed several treaties with the Government of India. In British documents the area is also referred to as 'Trucial Oman'. Its extent is approximately that of the UAE today.
- ⁸ See Lorimer, *op. cit.*, pp 1425ff, where a detailed account is given of the written sources and the special investigations concerning the population and the geography of what he calls 'Trucial Oman'.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p 1431.
- ¹⁰ The most populated 'principality' was Sharjah (at the time including Ra's al-Khaimah and Fujairah) with 45,000, then came Abu Dhabi with 11,000, Dubai with 10,000, Umm al-Qaiwain with 5000 and 'Ajman with 750 settled people; see *ibid.*, p 1437.
- ¹¹ See K.G. Fenelon, *The United Arab Emirates. An Economic and Social Survey*, London, Longman (1973) p 126.
- ¹² See Trucial States Council, Development Office, *Census 1968*, mimeograph. For details of the way in which tribal distribution and numbers developed between the first decade of the century and the 1968 census see Heard-Bey, F. *From Trucial States to United Arab Emirates. A Society in Transition*, London, Longman (1982) pp 72ff.
- ¹³ For the ample archaeological evidence of diverse economic activities including copper smelting see D.T. Potts, *The Arabian Gulf in Antiquity* 2 vols., Oxford, Clarendon Press (1990) vol.I, particularly pp 119ff.
- ¹⁴ See Wilkinson, *op. cit.*, pp 126ff and footnote 6.
- ¹⁵ The size of the UAE is 83,600 sq.km, of which 86.7 per cent are Abu Dhabi territory, 5 per cent are Dubai; see UAE Ministry of Planning, *Annual Statistical Abstract*, (7th ed) (1992) p 3ff.
- ¹⁶ The number given varies over time and in the different sources; see also Wilkinson, *op. cit.*, p 54.
- ¹⁷ The Bani Yas tribe is mentioned living in al-Dhafrah, of which the Liwa is a part, in the seventeenth century Omani source by ibn Razik, Salil *History of the Imams and Seyyids of 'Oman from A.D. 661–1856*, ed. and trans. into Eng. by G.B. Badger (1871) repr. London, Darf Publishers (1986) p70f. The island Sir Bani Yas figures in Balbi's list of 1580.
- ¹⁸ See Heard-Bey, *op. cit.*, pp 501f and 507–510.

- ¹⁹ See Heard-Bey, *ibid.*, map 4a p 30.
- ²⁰ The WHO recommends that people should not drink water which has more than 750ppm dissolved minerals over a long period of time. While date palms can tolerate salinity of over 6000 ppm, camels can drink water with 10,000 ppm. Wilkinson, *op. cit.*, p 58 ff and Heard-Bey, *op. cit.*, p 408. Seawater has 35–40,000 ppm.
- ²¹ See F. Heard-Bey, 'Development Anomalies in the Bedouin Oases of Al Liwa', *Asian Affairs*, vol. 61, part III, 1974, pp 272–286.
- ²² See Wilkinson, *op. cit.*, p 59 and pp 71f.
- ²³ Therefore they do not return by themselves to the well and to their minders, as they do in the summer; they have to be hobbled to prevent them from wandering away too far.
- ²⁴ See for more detail Heard-Bey, *op. cit.*, pp 172–175.
- ²⁵ Pearls and mother-of pearl are found in three types of molluscs; they are layers of nacre, which are formed around an intrusion, such as a sandcorn.
- ²⁶ Dubai being more favourably placed for water, which comes from the precipitation in the mountains, has been used by maritime communities for longer; a settlement in Jumairah dates back to the Umayyad period.
- ²⁷ Boats were made of imported wood; to pay for this and the season's provisions required a big community effort. See for further details Heard-Bey, *op. cit.*, pp 182–190 and pp 200ff.
- ²⁸ Instances have been recorded where a captain exploited the fact that a particularly good diver could not read and check the season's financial records. See also M.G. Rumaihi, 'The Mode of Production in the Arab Gulf Before the Discovery of Oil' in T. Niblock (ed), *Social and Economic Development in the Arab Gulf*, London, Croom Helm (1980) pp 49–60.
- ²⁹ See below p 17.
- ³⁰ In this case they are too numerous to list here; the reader is referred to a map of the tribal distribution in the northern area in Heard-Bey, *op. cit.*, p 71.
- ³¹ The Arabic, English and Latin names and valuable information about 200 fishes of the region are given in A. W. White, and M.A. Barwani, *Common Sea Fishes of the Arabian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman*, Dubai, Trucial States Council (1971).
- ³² See the sketch map in Wilkinson, *op. cit.*, p 21.
- ³³ See also for the following Zimmermann, *op. cit.*, pp 46ff; here in particular p 51f.
- ³⁴ See *ibid.*, p 57.
- ³⁵ For the period of the date harvest in the summer both groups leave their animals unattended in the *wadi* where they own land and a house.