Nomadic fishermen of Ja'alan, Oman

William Lancaster and Fidelity Lancaster

The area of southeast Oman studied is Ja'alan with the town of Ras al Hadd on the most southeasterly point of the Arabian peninsula. Ras al Hadd takes in the coastline between Shiyya and Daffa, and includes the lagoons and harbours of Khôr Jerâmâ and al Hadd as well as beaches between rocky cliffs. The rocky cliffs are the ends of mountain outcrops, between which are sand and gravel plains covered with scrub and, where there is groundwater, permanent trees. These plains are referred to as the wudîyân or drainage systems, the mountains and cliffs as jibal, the lagoons as khôr, and the beaches as saihil. Within the area of Ras al Hadd there are a variety of resources, both on land and sea, which change over the seasons. None of these resource areas by themselves provide for permanent subsistence throughout the year in the views of the inhabitants. They therefore practise a multiresource economy of herding, fishing and date cultivation, which necessitates mobility over the year. The three aspects of the economy are integrated internally through exchange of goods and labour as well as by trade, and trade further integrates the area with the regional economy of Oman, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf (see Fig. 1 on the following page).

The local population is from a number of small tribes (each of which has members elsewhere), all of whom have been in the area for a long time, and who see themselves as bedu. By this they mean that they manage the resources of the area within particular moral premises, and through particular social processes without the need for an administrative infrastructure provided by a central government. Tribal identity gives access to these social processes of access to and management of resources (Lancaster and Lancaster 1992b). Each tribal group is small and describes its relationships with others in conflicting and ambiguous terms, but every description of the groups using the area ends with the statement "but we are all one jâmâ'a (community)". The jâmâ'a is "the people who live, work and marry here." People "live" where they have developed resources. Resources, in the sense of the means of production - the fish in the sea, grazing, water, shellfish - come from God, and are available to all and cannot be owned. The tools of production - domestic animals, wells, nets, hooks and lines, boats, gardens - are the means of developing natural resources and are owned.

The different tribes are described as concentrating on different productive strategies; some herd, some fish, some concentrate on transporting or trading, whether by land or by sea. The tribes also "live" in particular locations, but they all "use" others in the management of seasonal resources (Lancaster and Lancaster 1992a). An example of a Benî 'Amr family movement follows; about May, they left Ras al Junayz which they had been using for fishing and went to al Hadd, where they lived, and remained there fishing till August, when they moved to live in Bilâd Benî bu Hassan for the date
harvest; in October, they came back to live and fish in al Hadd, and in November they moved again to use Ras al Junayz. These movements were explained as depending on seasonally prevailing winds and fish habits.

As tribe is the only stable identifier of any individual or group, descriptions of "where people live" and "what they do" must be in terms of tribe as if these groups were exclusive, solid and bounded, whereas speakers know that any grouping is in fact partial and flexible. The jamā' a is an informal network or community of individual tribesmen and their families, linked through women,
who actively participate in the management of resources of a locality. Marriage brings some groups within a patrilineal descent group closer and distances others. Men marry within their tribal section, or within their tribe, and each tribal section has a few marriage links to other tribes. Women are the active but invisible participants as allowing for a more profitable enterprise through the inputs of both sides (Lancaster and Lancaster 1995: 106-7). For Ja‘aln fishing, the owner provides the jani or offshore boat, the crew provide labour; within this, there can be a multiplicity of intermeshings of shares in the necessary equipment. Increasing output by using imported hired labour is banned by the Omani government.

Access to the seas and to the beaches is open to all provided that locally acceptable techniques and practices are followed; as these vary along the coastline, disputes may occur between local fishermen and those from outside. The disputes centre on the insistence of local fishermen that there must be sufficient fish left to provide for the future, rather than the taking of whole shoals of fish for immediate profit. Techniques that enable the taking of complete shoals are discussed in highly moral terms of individual greed and selfishness rather than long-term community maintenance. Fishing, like the other productive enterprises in bedu areas, is seen by its participants to be as much a social and moral activity with relevant and necessary economic aspects, rather than one of pure economics.
Nomadic Peoples 36/37: 1995

William Lancaster and Fidelity Lancaster: Nomadic fishermen of Ja‘alān, Oman

Nets are made either by netting the whole net or, more usually, from buying lengths of imported net and infilling between the two lengths so as to make a cone; this is then edged with heavier thread and weights are attached. Throw-nets are used especially for sardine fishing from the beaches on the coasts, and for sardine fishing from hūris in the lagoons; these same nets are also used in the same places to catch other small fish for daily food. Throw-nets with a larger mesh are used further down the coast to catch squid, a recent development triggered by Muscat and towns in the Emirates. Fishermen at Ras al Hadd explained the making of these other throw-nets by saying that if they learnt of a new market for a particular fish, and saw that they could be caught by adapting an existing technique, then they would do so if they thought it worthwhile. As the beaches in the Ras al Hadd area are separated by rocky headlands, they caught squid in tangle nets around the rocks; further south, the coast has no rocky headlands so throw-netting would be more effective.

Most fishermen have some wire traps, gargūr, bought in Sūr and made there or imported from the Emirates. Some have up to thirty, others ten or so, some none. Although a boat is needed to put the traps down and to check and empty them, some own traps but use a boat belonging to a brother, cousin or other relative, or that of a member of the jamā‘a. Gargūr are laid around the rocky headlands during the winter months, when high winds and rough seas may be expected. They do not provide the most desirable commercial species, but reliably provide smaller fish for the market and for daily food.

Hand-lines and hooks are owned by every fisherman and his sons, and by many not involved in full-time fishing. People fish from the rocks, especially in the sardine season, when other fish follow the sardine shoals in close to the shore and the rocks. This type of hand-line fishing is for daily food, with the chance of selling a finer bigger fish to a trader. Hand-lines are used from wood canoes or hūris in the lagoon at Khūr Jarāma daily food. Hand-lines on the dinghies and lanjies are used for commercial fishing for kingfish and for yellowfin and longtail tuna; different hooks are used for kingfish and tuna. On the dinghies, hand-lines for kingfish are attached to a pole tied across the centre of the boat, while for the tuna the lines are handheld.

Nets are of two main types. The smaller are the green tangle nets, with a mesh of one and a half inches, used around rocks for the smaller fish of which the milkfish, biyāḥ, is the most valuable, and for spiny lobsters. These nets are laid with quite long ropes from the floats to the weighted nets, so that the nets reach the rocky areas growing seaweeds on which biyāh live. The larger nets are Gill nets of forty metres in length and one fathom (c.2 metres) deep, with a mesh of six to seven centimetres. These are used mostly for fishing in the surface layer of the sea, with floats, attached to the top and weights along the bottom, and anchored in place. The nets are checked and emptied every day by the man who owns them, or who put them down if borrowed. The desired catches are of kingfish and yellowfin and longtail tuna, but many other species are caught and sold or shared among the jamā‘a. Most nets are black, but a few are green or blue and said by some to be more suited to catching tuna. Occasionally, nets are weighted more heavily and set for bottom fish, such as sand sharks and rays which are usually dried and used for bait in the traps. Further south along the coast of the Wahiba Sands gill nets are more frequently set for bottom fishing. Monofilament net is never seen at Ras al Hadd, while further south it is sometimes seen as tangle net from hūris for sandshark.

The boats are of three main types. The smallest and cheapest are the hūris or canoes. Traditionally these were made from one piece of wood, and varied in length from around two and a half metres to four metres. The larger ones often had a mast and sail, and were called tarad. Some are in use, and it is possible to have a new one made in the boat-building yards at Sūr, Ayga and al Ashkarah, although many people now buy fibreglass canoes. Hūris are crewed by one or at the most two men. These are used in the lagoon at Khūr Jarāma, and off the beaches for fishing for the family, using hand-lines, tangle nets and by a few, small Gill nets. The next size up are the aluminium and fibreglass dinghies; the aluminium ones (also hūris) are about three metres, the fibreglass (fishūr) are in two sizes at three and a half metres, and at four and a half metres. The larger fibreglass dinghies are concentrated at al Hadd, where they are used as tenders to the wooden lanjies and for inshore fishing. The smaller dinghies are used off the beaches, and like the larger fibreglass dinghies rarely go out of sight of land, or are away from a beach for longer than eight hours. The lanjies are used offshore, coming back after an overnight trip, or an all day trip, but primarily fish for a month to six weeks at a time between Abu Dhabi and the Jāzir coast south of Masrah Island, most of their trips are down to Masrah.

The methods of using lines, traps and nets are similar whether the fishing is from a one man hūri or from a lanj with a crew of six. The decision of where to set the net or trap is taken by the owner of the trap or net, and it is his responsibility to check and empty it. It is common courtesy not to put nets or traps so close to those of others that access is difficult, or that the nets, floats and anchors may become entangled. It is also necessary to leave gaps between the nets, which are
always laid parallel to the shore; the markers for the nets delineate a wider space than the nets actually occupy. There tend to be two or three groupings of nets off any beach, with wide spaces for boats, turtles and fish in between (these beaches are used by turtles for egg-laying; the turtles are protected by the Omani Ministry for Agriculture and Fisheries, and liked by the local population). The crew of a dinghy are often partners with each other, or with a third party who is often an older family member; crews are fairly, but not invariably, stable. Each crew member may own his own traps, lines or nets, though they will generally be considered to be held in common; this is particularly so where the boat is owned by an older family member and crewed by his sons or a son and a nephew. Crews that are partners in owning the boat may hold their nets individually, or together. Crews where one member owns the boat, and the second is the crew, hold their equipment individually. Arrangements about net-mending, anchors, petrol for outboards, and repairs are flexible, although net-mending tends to be done by the older men of the crew members for those nets.

The same arrangements hold for the lanjes, where the six-man crew comes from the household in its widest sense, some of whom will own nets and/or have contributed to the financing of the boat and the engine. Essentially, the crew are partners for that particular fishing trip, with the decisions being made jointly around the ideas of the owner. The owner must share decision making with his crew, because of the ethics of the jamda where all are equal in the eyes of God and responsible for their own actions.

Herders may own throw-nets, lines and nets, and may spend a season fishing from a beach using a relative’s dinghy, or as a crew member on a lanj for a season.

Daily inshore fishing by hari and dinghy starts shortly after dawn examining nets. Each net takes up to an hour or an hour and a half to check, and to get the fish into the boat. Large fish are often cut out of the nets. Damaged or very tangled nets are brought into the beach, anchored in the surf and disentangled, then dragged up the beach by the crew and those on the beach. Tangle nets around the rocks take less time to clear. Traps are cleared every three to four days, and it takes about fifteen minutes to raise the trap, clear and rebait it, and then replace it. Occasionally in bad weather it is not possible to check nets and traps; when the weather clears, dead fish are taken from nets and traps and brought to the beach for disposal by drying and then burning.

The catch for sharing is open to view in the middle of the dinghy, that for trading is concealed at front and back. The fish for sharing is handed out to those on the beach, including herders, from the jamda; tourists are expected to pay for undamaged lobsters, tuna and kingfish. Fish is kept for resident families, and if the fish are few, then it is divided into equal shares. If, as occasionally happens, there is no catch, women come down to the rocky coves and collect shellfish.

Traders arrive on the beach around two hours after dawn; hand signals are made between crews in the boats and traders on the shore about size and quality of catches. Crews nearly always sell to traders from the jamda, with outside opportunistic traders only being sold fish if no jamda traders are present – for which the usual reason is that there had been a very good catch on the previous day and jamda traders had not returned from taking it to Kamil, Muscat or further. Some crews take their fish, if the catch is big enough, directly to Sur or Bilad Beni Bu 'Ali to trade it themselves. Traders cooperate among themselves and the fishing crews in making up loads to take to Bilad Beni Bu 'Ali or Kamil where the larger traders are, if catches are of mixed species and the number of each type is small. Traders either pay immediate cash, or note down the catch and promise to pay later after it has been sold at auction in Kamil, Sur, or Muscat; this happens mostly with fish from tangle nets or traps, where the prices are not so well known.

If there are signs of kingfish or tuna, some dinghies may hand-line for a while but it is more usual for a clean and mended net to be reset, the boat to be washed, and the crew to go home. Crews appear on the beaches again after two, when nets are examined or relaid, and hand-lining is then common. The decision to hand-line or not appears to follow what other boats from other beaches are doing, bird and fish behaviour, or the pressure of other work. If kingfish are thought to be around, poles are tied across the dinghy, to which the hand-lines are attached, each line having a triple hook, and a metal fish shaped spinner to attract the fish. The dinghies go some way out and then drive fast, parallel to the coast in the current. Hand-lining for tuna uses fresh sardines as bait, and uses a line with single hooks on wires at right angles to the line; these lines are handheld, the fishermen having wrapped their hands in rags. The boats for tuna drift slowly. This kind of fishing is described as exciting and can be dangerous if the caught fish are large as they often are. Sailfish and swordfish are also caught in this way. It is young men who hand-line; older men regard it with a degree of amusement, and say netting is a more profitable way of catching kingfish and tuna. Traders often come to the beaches in the afternoons. The dinghies from the beaches use Gillnets on moonless nights.

Throw-netting for sardines from the beaches takes place during daytime when shoals are sighted close to the shore. The sight of shoals arouses real excitement, understandable given the importance of sardines in the local economy, and as indicators of kingfish and tuna. Fresh sardines are eaten, or used as bait. Most sardines are laid out to dry in the sun and wind, turned and returned, then thrown into heaps and finally bagged. These are used to feed the household goats, cows and camels, but most are sold to herders from the wadis who come down to the beaches. The herders buy them for their own animals, and to sell in the markets at Bilad Beni Bu 'Ali and Bilad Beni Bu Hassan.

Lanjes focus on offshore fishing around Masirah Island and the Jazir coast for kingfish and tuna. The lanjes also fish for these off al Hadd itself, going out at night; they also fish for lobsters and other trap species. Lanjes have a crew of six, a mechanic, a steersman, three crewmen and the owner. The way in which Gillnets are used is different. A lanj has up to twenty nets, each 100 fathoms or ba' long (i.e. about 180m) and made with a twelve centimetre (five ba'a) mesh. The lanjes go up to 20 kilometres out from land. The nets, joined together in a long line, are put out on an anchor and the other end remains on the boat, which then stops for the night. As dawn is breaking, the men start to haul the nets in and remove the fish. The nets are stored on deck, never left down or replaced in the same spot. When fishing off al Hadd, the fish are sold to traders in al Hadd or taken to Sur. At Masirah, the boats sell to traders who come around the boats, or take the catch to Masirah Island.
Fibreglass and aluminium dinghies do not need much maintenance, but the wooden ṣṭiris and ṭanjes do. The ṭanjes are brought in to natural harbours like al Hadd every two months and beached on the tidal creek beaches. The hull needs cleaning and whitening five or six times a year, and at the same time the wood above the water line is oiled with shark oil. The whitening is for waterproofing, and for deterring marine worms; fishermen claim it is more efficient than anti-fouling paint. The whitening or a year, and at the same time the wood hull also needs recaulking or made from burnt limestone, either purified or sterilised for deterring marine worms; fishermen use fish oil. The whitening is for waterproofing, and for deterring marine worms; fishermen claim it is more efficient than anti-fouling paint. The whitening or a year, and at the same time the wood hull also needs recaulking or made from burnt limestone, either purified or sterilised for deterring marine worms; fishermen use fish oil. The whitening is for waterproofing, and for deterring marine worms; fishermen claim it is more efficient than anti-fouling paint.

Fishermen pointed out that while fish species generally arrive in due season, announced by the stars, each season is different in the precise way fish species use the area. An extended period of northerly winds in December 1988 was said to result both in a lack of kingfish near the coast because the wind lowered coastal surface sea temperatures too much for kingfish, and in making access to the sea difficult for dinghy fishermen. A number of ṭanjes stayed fishing around al Hadd using traps and nets for tuna and sailfish rather than go to Masiráh for kingfish. 1987-88 was described by local fishermen as being relatively poor for sardines, but good for other species, while 1988-89 was exceptionally good for sardines and poor in the others. It was this second period that had the lengthy period of northerly winds. Generally people said fishing was better on moonless nights, and when the sea was not too calm. These views were generally corroborated by observations of fish catches.

All fishermen maintained that success in fishing came from God, not from individual skill. The fish were in the sea, but it was from God that the fish went into the net, trap or hook. This attitude reflects the religious view that the means of livelihood are from God, who is generous, and that all men are equal before Him, but also a moral view where all are entitled to livelihood. This contrasts with the ideas of ‘luck’ in North Atlantic fishing crews from Shetland and Newfoundland (Byron 1989), and Palsson’s (1989) discussion of Icelandic views on the difference in catches, where skippers have “fishing moods”. The Omani religious concept also holds for short-term subsistence, where no-one would be denied water, the collection of shellfish, the use of a throw-net or hand-line, or grazing for household animals. But “living” is for subsistence and for surplus for a market, and access to resources for surplus is restricted to those who “own” the area – or who “own” assets somewhere else and therefore are temporary users, just as the “owners” of the area also “use” other areas. Fishermen who have houses in Khör Jerāmah fish from Masiráh, and fishermen from al Ashkarah or Bandar Jadīda or Sūr fish off al Hadd or Ras al Junayz. Partly the acceptance comes from the reciprocity of access, but more from a common attitude to resource management, in which the aim is to have a reasonable livelihood and to maintain the certainty of a livelihood for one’s children rather than to make the greatest profits. There is a real feeling that profit (or excess profit) should be sought outside an economy based on seasonal natural resources. The disputes between the fishermen of Ras al Hadd and Sūr, and between those of Ras Madraka and Korean trawlers (to be discussed later) are both based on this premise.

Access to the means of fishing is not difficult and is open to all. Every man and boy has at least one throw-net. Although these are now bought, it is possible to make them from natural materials as was done in the past. Boys start fishing with throw nets and hand-lines, and then make or buy tangle nets; by helping to haul nets and boats up the beach, cleaning boats and carrying out errands, they can ‘earn’ a seat in a dinghy to set their net or trap. Later, they become a crew member in a dinghy, and with their share of the catch or the proceeds of their own catches buy traps or a net or share of a net, or they might be given a net or traps by an elderly relative. Fishing is a skill available to all if people observe the sea and coasts, and the birds, fish and dolphins on the one hand, and the practices of fishermen on the other.

The financing of more expensive items such as large nets, boats, and traders’ pick-up trucks is from profits from the various enterprises of members of the wider domestic network. Various figures were given for the costs of a ᵷtyj, engine and nets from about 10,000 Omani Reals (c. £20,000 at 1989 exchange rates) to 20,000 Omani Reals; a ᵷtyj on its own was considered cheaper than buying a new GMC pickup for fish-trading. People emphasised that the money was raised inside ‘the family’ (i.e. in its widest sense), and was paid off within two to four years. The various contributions came from profits in fishing, fish trading, herding, date gardens, construction entreprises in urban areas, employment in the Omani civil service or in the armed services of the U.A.E. As fishing is held to be profitable, it is easy to attract investment by family members. Those investing money have shares in the enterprise, and these shares either last for the period of the enterprise, or are paid back relatively quickly so that ownership is in the hands of those actively running the fishing. Which pattern is taken tends to depend on the degree of closeness between the active and general partners. Two examples were given; in the first, 50% of the catch or its value, went to the owners of the boat who were responsible for the boat’s expenses, and the other 50% was divided equally between the crew: in the second, when fishing off al Hadd and returning each day, the owner took half of the net profits, and the other half divided equally among the crew; if fishing off Masiráh, each crew member got one and a half shares and the owner got a quarter of the profits. Fishermen estimated that the average profit of a crew member on a ᵷtyj in a season was 1,000 ORs.

The main concern of participants is that all should gain a livelihood in proportion to their need and in relation to their investment in capital or labour. Each participant also has alternative sources of income open to him, and people switch occupation. The great majority of men fish for sardines in season, and the value of a man’s catches in an exceptional season may reach 750 ORs. Inshore fishermen have at least one fish trader close to them; the change in the value of fish on the beach and at the markets in the Emirates or Saudi Arabia is between six to eightfold. With a fish trader in the family, the profits from fishing stay closer to the fishermen while money belongs to the man who has produced it, it is also available to other family members for necessary expenditures and for investment opportunities. Also, fish traders fish, and fishermen become traders (see Lancaster and Christie 1989 for the different situation in the Wahiba Sands coast). In addition, most have date gardens or trees, and at least a household herd; most families have at least one member who receives a pension from the government, and another who has an interest in trade or transport.

Local explanations of the changes between the past and the present focused on technological introductions, and the development in markets for fresh fish that these new technologies allowed, together with an appreciation that these were financed by oil wealth in the region.
Since these had taken place in Oman mostly from the 1970s, they are associated with the reign of Sultan Qabus and contrasted to that of his father, although this is not altogether accurate since oil exploration and development had started under the reign of the former Sultan. It is said now that fishing for the fresh fish trade to Saudi Arabia and the Gulf is more profitable than the earlier trading from Ja‘alan to India and East Africa.

The trading used the monsoon winds with the wooden lanjes and bad’ans. Bad’ans are now obsolete; as they were more lightly built than the lanjes, they shook to pieces when engines were installed in the 1940s. Bad’ans were built on the beaches, with the wood being pit-sawn on the shore; and they had sails and paddles. Old men still spoke with feeling of paddling back from East Africa if the monsoon winds were weak. Three Beni ‘Amr brothers at Khūr Jarāma owned a trading lanje, which made the journey to Basra for eating dates, back to Khūr Jarāma where they sold the eating dates and took on fodder dates as well as salted and dried fish, and sailed the three days to Gwadar, and on to Karachi, Bombay and Calicut, selling the dates and fish where they could and buying wood, textiles, rice, spices and anything they thought would sell, and returned to Khūr Jarāma. They unloaded some of the Indian goods for trade to the Omani interior, and picked up more fish and dates and then went along the Omani, Yemeni and Somali coast buying and selling as they went until they arrived in Mombasa or Zanzibar where they bought wood and spices. This trade is very like that described by Villiers (1940) for the 1930s. People said that this sea trading came to an end during the 1970s, when the fresh fish trade to the Gulf and Saudi Arabia became possible and was more profitable. From this date, lanjes continued

fishing throughout the monsoon period although fishing from the dinghies at this season did not take place as the sea was too rough for these boats and the fish were further out from the coast than the dinghies go. It is also the time of the date harvest, and many people go to their gardens in Bilād Beni bu Hassan, Bilād Beni bu ‘Ali or al Ain.

The older men who had taken part in this trade pointed out that the amount of fishing that could be done in the past was limited in several ways. Lanjes and bad’ans were used for fishing, but their real purpose was trading. Fishing was done from hāris and tarads, which were sailed or paddled, and therefore took longer. Not all fishermen had boats, many used inflated skins on which they swam out a kilometre or so to set 15m long nets of cotton, hemp or palm fibre made by themselves. Traps were made out of wood and palm fibre. Metal hooks were said to be in short supply locally, and men brought them back when returning from working in Kuwait as guards or labourers in the 1950s. The limited coastal water supplies were regarded as restricting the development of fishing. There were shallow wells, as there is a shallow fresh water table; but these were quickly exhausted. Better supplies of water were to be found in some of the wadis, but this meant fishermen had to walk some kilometres to the beaches, carrying water, before fishing could be undertaken.

The impression is given that before the development of the fresh fish market, the local exchange – of fishermen selling sardines to herders, herders selling animal dung and sardines to the oases for the date gardens, and date producers selling dates to herders and fishermen, with herders transporting by land and fishermen by sea – was as important to the economy as the long-distance trading to India and East Africa. Both were essentially for subsistence, in an economy concerned with maintenance rather than the accumulation of wealth even though both used shares, credit and futures, and were backed by contracts, guarantees and restitution.

A market in fresh fish needs large numbers of buyers in concentrated groups who can afford the product, fishermen who can produce the desired species, and traders who get the fish to the buyers before spoilage occurs. This requires modern transport and an infrastructure of roads, ice plants, and petrol stations. Fishermen need the means of increasing catches, partly by increasing the size of nets and modern boats with engines, partly by being able to buy nets and boats rather than having to spend time making them, but also by being able to live on the coast for longer. Local people say that the crucial factor was the provision from oil revenues by Sultan Qabus of desalination plants at various points, the relevant ones being at al Hadd, Sūr, and ar Ruwais. Fishermen could then live on the coast all year round if they wished. The urban markets with purchasing power for fresh fish came from employment in the oil industry and in all the other employment opportunities oil wealth created in the rapidly growing towns of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf, together with those of Oman itself. Thus all the conditions were backed by oil wealth in Oman itself and in the wider region.

What has been the results of these changes? People say they are more prosperous, and point to new houses, pickups and cars, dinghies and canoes, and new gardens. They have water, schools, hospitals, roads, and electricity. The educated have opportunities for employment in the ministries, local government, and the armed services. There is a thriving economy fueled by oil money. Local people in Ja‘alan give the Sultan credit for bringing this about, as he promulgated in his development plan for the Omani nation in 1971 in which he promised to ‘build a society in which all may live in peace and security and earn an economic livelihood’ (Janzen 1986:182). They also see themselves as benefiting from these changes by their own efforts, not only in adapting to new opportunities but also by using traditional political processes to enhance or to ameliorate particular proposed local developments. On the other hand, they see themselves as working harder to keep their families in the now greatly increased material goods, and are not wholly convinced that the end results are any better than with their former lack of worldly possessions.

The aim of rule expressed by Sultan Qabus is compatible with that of the bedouin fishermen and herders of Ja‘alan, but the state perception of access to resources by all Omani citizens causes problems. The position of the jamāʿa is that resource access for a livelihood is limited to those who live in the area, who have developed the resources to be more productive, and who, by living there, have a concern for the long term sustainability of resources. This is seen as not a concern of those who move in from outside to use the area, as they live somewhere else where they would wish to safeguard assets for the future. All disputes seen between jamāʿa members and those from outside concerned this point.

Two examples of fishing disputes follow, one from Ras al Hadd and the other from outside. The dispute from Ras al Hadd concerned fishermen from Sūr who used what appeared to be a purse seine net for sardines off the coast at Ras al Junayz, where a series of whole shoals of sardines were taken. This is contrary to jamāʿa practice which has strict rules about sardine fishing – only from a beach and by throw-netting – because of the
Nomadic Peoples 36/37: 1995

William Lancaster and Fidelity Lancaster: Nomadic fishermen of Ja’alan, Oman

place of sardines in the food chain of kingfish and tuna. They know that on the Batinah coast sardines are caught by long nets that enclose a whole shoal, but say that sardines spend a long period at the Batinah coast whereas they are in passage at Ras al Hadd. A corollary to this was that Sūr fishermen have access to the waters off Ras al Hadd only if they use jumā’a techniques; otherwise, they would fish off the Sūr coast. The Sūr fishermen defended themselves by including Ras al Hadd in the wiliyat or province of Sūr, and that therefore their preferred techniques for sardine fishing were appropriate. The leading men of the Ras al Hadd fishermen went to the Wāli of Sūr, and to the local Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, but got little satisfaction, even though they had a document from the Ministry of the Interior saying that for fishing, Ras al Hadd was not part of the wiliyat. They then went to the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries in Muscat, and at the same time involved the shaikh of the Harth tribe, with whom they had traditional political ties and who has a national reputation; this was relatively successful. The other dispute involved Korean fishing boats, accused by local fishermen at Ras Madraka of trawling at night for lobsters, and of throwing back into the sea any fish caught that were not commercially valuable. The lobster trawling was contrary to the agreement between the governments of Oman and Korea, and the disposal in the sea of dead fish was against local practice. Complaints to local officials and to the ministry in Muscat had not resulted in any satisfaction to the local fishermen. Lobsters are a valuable catch in that area, and local fishermen are allowed to catch them only in traps as a way of conserving stocks. They accepted this limitation, but saw no reason why foreign crews should not abide by the terms of their contracts, which in the view of locals, did not include fishing for lobsters at all, let alone by trawling.

The point at issue in these questions of access to and management of resources between local fishermen and those from outside is essentially one of symmetry. It was said earlier that fishermen were not limited to fishing off their coastal beaches, but moved following fish stocks. Sūr boats did fish off Ras al Junayz, lanjes from ar Kuwais, Bandar Jadaid and al Askarah used al Hadd, lanjes from Khōr Jerāma and al Hadd fished from Abu Dhabi to Masirah and the Jāzir, dinghies from ar Kuwais trapped lobsters off Ras Madraka, and those from Daffa fished off Ras al Junayz and al Hadd and vice versa; but in all cases there was an acceptance of common practices, a symmetry. In a similarly symmetrical fashion, each family has a link/s through women to a family of a distant tribe, and these links are used to get access where it would otherwise be difficult. Access is sometimes for herding, fishing or trading if conditions in the normal range are difficult, or may be used in political matters. One example is where the leading man of Ras al Junayz used a link of this type to get better access to the Wāli of Sūr in a recurrence of the fishing dispute mentioned above. These links are symmetrical, and while an individual may use them for his advantage, he can be used by those to whom he has links for theirs.

This symmetry of relationships is seen as lacking in the modern bureaucracy of government, whose guarantee of access to all nationals is said to permit the use of areas such as Ja’alan by those who have no commitment to its future but only to their own profit or pleasure. The modern system can be mitigated somewhat as officials are also tribesmen. The fishermen of Ras al Hadd work actively towards maintaining management of fishing off their coasts in accordance with their belief in the necessity for such practices for a viable future. They adopt new technology and methods where they see they are consistent with their longer term aims, but reject those that are not. For example, aluminium and fibreglass dinghies are part of fishing practice, as are nylon nets and lines; but monofilament nets, seine nets and very small meshes are not. Ras al Hadd fishermen did adopt seine nets that reached across the whole beach at Ras al Junayz in the early seventies, but found to their dismay that fish stocks dwindled rapidly and abandoned the technique. Some lanjes in al Askarah had wonches fitted for raising nets, but found that it was difficult to adjust the rate to fit with removing the fish by hand, and took the winches off. Imported anti-fouling paint was tried on the lanjes but found to be more expensive and less effective than the traditional method of mixed burnt lime and fat.

Local fishermen know about government initiatives to develop fishing production through the development of large national companies, and bank loans for larger boats, but they see no reason to participate. They wish to keep their fishing production within the capability of the wider family for funding, labour and maintenance and so perpetuate long standing social patterns based on moral premises that give identity. The production achieved by the Ras al Hadd fishermen and distributed through their traders is a valuable and sustainable contribution to both the local and the national economies.

Acknowledgements

This paper draws on fieldwork carried out in 1987/88 and 1988/89. We are grateful to Dr. ‘Ali Shanfari, the Director of the Department of Antiquities of the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage of Oman for permission to work in Oman; to the directors of the Ras al Hadd/Ras al Junayz Joint Project; Dr. Julian Reade of the British Museum, Dr. Serge Cleuziou of CNRS and Dr. Maurizio Tosi of ISMEO for inviting us to participate; and above all to the people of Ras al Hadd who were so generous with their time and knowledge.

Appendix

Fish species caught:
agām, ‘agāb – barracuda
‘andaq – jobfish
baḥār – bonefish
bashkel – queenfish
biks – golden trevally
biyāḥ, biyār, baḥār – milkfish
dīq – big eye
fāntāt – ray
ghthār – squid
hamār – snappers
jafār – shark
khulāir – red spot emperor
mekh – swordfish, sailfish
nagrār – grunters
qanad – kingfish
saftiyā – rabbitfish
 Çalış – yellowfin tuna
shurīkh – lobster
sigilā – rainbow runner
soğhdān – bonito
umma – sardine
yidr – longtail tuna

The English names are taken from the card "Fishes of the Souk" published by the Friends of the Oman Aquarium. Species for which we have no English names are ghiba, wukhbāq, sthir and bu’gūba; these are all small fish caught in traps or by hand-lines.

Fish when dried changes its name; for example, dried shark in Ras al Hadd is
Fishermen said that before they entered the fresh fish market, they used more local names for different species. They said this had remained for shellfish, as they still have a purely local consumption. However, many fish have a variety of local names.

References


