

**In This Issue**

Oman

A Village

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Oman was once as isolated and (undeveloped in a Middle East context as Tibet in Southeast Asia. Camels and donkeys still provided much of the transport in the interior, hospitals, roads and schools were virtually nonexistent, visitors were rare and life in the ordinary Omani village had changed little in generations.

With the discovery of petroleum, of course, change was inevitable, and in cities and towns is instantly visible: spanking new roads, schools, clinics and hospitals. But in hundreds of villages the impact is far more subtle and less easily discerned. It is, however, equally profound.

One such village is Wadi Ghul, a cluster of some 40 households and 250 inhabitants in a narrow canyon 14 kilometers (8.6 miles) from al-Hamra, a small provincial town in Oman's interior and the area's administrative center. With two other small settlements nearby, the total population is no more than 900, all members of the Ibriyin tribe, one of the major tribes of the interior.

As late as 1978, travel between Wadi Ghul and al-Hamra was by foot or by donkey, and Saif Sa'id, now a soldier with the Omani army, told me that he, like other villagers, used to measure distance in time not in kilometers - and that al-Hamra was four hours by donkey.

Like many Omani villages, Wadi Ghul was built near the ruins of an older settlement, its size limited by the scarcity of water and of agricultural land. High on the side of its narrow canyon are the remains of fortified watchtowers - some of them hundreds of years old - from which the entire canyon and its approaches could be guarded. One of these was situated so that defenders could lower buckets into a fairly reliable underground water supply without leaving the watchtower (See page 24).

In those early days, villagers used to live in Wadi Ghul only when their presence was required for planting and harvesting; the rest of the year they lived in one of the larger nearby villages - a precaution against raiders. Gradually, though, more permanent houses were constructed, the first ones at a higher, more easily defended location, the present ones closer to the irrigated fields and orchards.

Even today, houses in Wadi Ghul are grouped in kinship clusters. One of these is the *Awlad Srur*; the children of Srur, three elderly brothers who, with their married sons, constitute 14 separate households that collectively maintain a small guest house and share the expenses of entertaining visitors.

Although each household manages its own living expenses, meals are communally prepared and women ordinarily work together carrying water, cooking, tending children, sewing and helping with various herding and agricultural chores.

Because Omanis normally marry cousins, the bonds of kinship and marriage in Wadi Ghul are extremely complex: each villager can be related to the others in multiple ways. In fact, with the sole exception of one woman originally from a village two kilometers away (1.2 miles), marriage for most women of Wadi Ghul has usually meant little more than a move of several hundred yards from the homes of their father to those of their husbands, and few women can imagine marrying a "stranger."

The intense communal life of Wadi Ghul is also reflected in the community's approach to land and water. Though some rights to land and water are occasionally sold to buyers from al-Hamra for needed cash, most of the minute parcels of land, some no more than two meters long and one wide (5 by 2.5 feet), are locally owned and bought and sold only within the community.

Rainfall is sparse and irregular and must be channeled into underground conduits of water called *aflaj* - gently sloping, stone tunnels and canals which conduct water by gravity flow to lands suitable for cultivation (See page 28). As the *aflaj* system is the backbone of agriculture, every Omani village is formed around at least one system - a few have more than one - and the rights and obligations surrounding their usage is a vital aspect of community life.

Every household in the village earns some income from agriculture and herding. Dates and limes are the principal crops, with some vegetables - onions, radishes, garlic, cucumbers, cantaloupes, watermelons and tomatoes - grown in the shade of the date palms. Of all this produce, only limes and dates are exported for sale in local markets, and when water is scarce or yields poor, the villagers of Wadi Ghul are compelled to consume even these themselves.

Like agriculture, herding too is largely dependent on fluctuating seasonal conditions, the well-being of livestock subject to bad weather, insufficient forage or disease, any of which could suddenly decimate herds.

Until recently, another source of income for the villagers was weaving - especially Omani rugs woven in patterns of either brown and white, from natural wool, or red and black, the red thread dyed with madder, a rich coloring from India.

The villagers obtained the wool for weaving by shearing sheep and goats and then spinning it into yarn - a slow process done by the shepherds, women and older children whenever they had spare time. Each ball of yarn, called a *kubba*, took about four days to complete, and nine balls of yarn were needed for a complete rug.

Making the rug itself was an exclusively masculine activity and was done on a simple, two-beam wooden loom which could be set up on the ground and easily carried from place to place. Relatives passed on the craft to each other, and households that engaged in rug-making used to make 10 to 15 rugs annually. But now, as young men begin to leave the village to seek education, join the army or work in the cities, traditional village crafts, such as weaving, are dying out.

Many traditional village food products too have been replaced by imported equivalents - wheat, for example, once grown in significant quantities in interior villages, is now imported and former wheat fields lie idle. Also, with increased opportunities to invest in trade rather than livestock, herding too has tapered off, even though, paradoxically, improved roads give herders and farmers access to more distant markets and better prices.

This paradoxical pattern of change is not unusual in villages like Wadi Ghul. On the one hand, there are the new horizons brought about by economic growth; on the other, there is the strong pull of tradition. What will the result be?

To find an answer to that question, I asked a group of about 10 young soldiers - on home leave in Wadi Ghul - to tell me what they thought the future would be. Their answers were instructive.

They are aware, they said, that they can never expect to live on agriculture and herding alone, and understand the reluctance of their sons and younger brothers to engage in these activities. Furthermore, they realize that abandonment of traditional agriculture, herding and related crafts will become even more pronounced once schools reach the village.

But when it does, they said, it will not result in abandonment of village life. For decades, the men of Wadi Ghul had to emigrate to East Africa or Gulf states for part of their working lives to support their families, so increased employment opportunities in Oman itself actually mean that many men will spend more time at home. Instead of seasonal migrations or long absences, men now work in Oman or neighboring states and return for monthly or even weekly visits to their village. Approximately 50 men from Wadi Ghul, for instance, ranging in age from their late teens to early 30's, work elsewhere in the country and return home frequently. To them, the increased opportunities for work in Oman itself have given their village a new lease on life - since they cannot yet conceive of living in a place in which their neighbors are not their kin. This strong sense of family and community, therefore, is likely to keep communities such as Wadi Ghul intact for a long time, even if herding and farming become marginal activities.

Most villagers have confirmed their enthusiasm for rural life by investing in new housing for their families, and in pickup trucks to facilitate travel between work and village. Other money has been fed back into agriculture: farmers are fencing more land, digging new wells, or starting small shops and businesses.

Indeed, the principal impact of oil on Wadi Ghul has so far been to free the villagers from the economic insecurity of the past. Oil revenues have financed substantial improvements in their standard of living, and the economic and educational changes are seen as improvements in the quality of living, not as inducements to abandon their villages.

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