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# The Spoken Omani Arabic of 'Ibrī : A “Crossing Point” in Gulf Dialects

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# The Spoken Omani Arabic of 'Ibrī : A "Crossing Point" in Gulf Dialects

Letizia Lombezi

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## 1. Oman: Territory and Geography

- 1 Oman covers a wide territory, from the Arab Gulf to the inner desert of the Arab Peninsula. The natural environment is characterized by the sea, the mountains and the desert. The sea and the desert are separated by a mountain chain that makes harder the free circulation of people and goods across the east-west axis. A second axis, the north-south one, is characterized by the prevailing presence of the desert and sand fringes that arrive to the doors of the main cities. For this reasons, the best and safest route runs through the foothills of the Jebel Akhdar and reaches the coastal cities of Şūr and Ras el-Ḥadd. In between the mountains and the sea lays a fertile strip of land, dedicated to agriculture and cultivation. Agriculture is practiced in the inner part of the country too, by farmers of rural villages.
- 2 The sea and the coastal strip represent the easiest path for communication and travelling. The cities of the coast play a key-role in the fishing activities and commerce, which require to manage relations with some bedouin tribes in charge of trafficking goods to and from the desert. Another very important route for communication is the one that connects Buraymi with Masqat, and 'Ibrī is placed in the middle. Buraymi is the twin city of Al-'Ayn in the Emirates, and linguistically they share some common traits. The path from Buraymi to 'Ibrī conveys many elements of Emirati Arabic into the local Omani variety. More, 'Ibrī borders with the inner desert, thing that explains the contamination with Gulf Arabic, to be intended here as macro-category or *badawiyy* (B) of the Peninsula. This definition is opposed to *ḥaḍariyy* (H), which means sedentary of the cities. In this regard, Holes offered a well-known partition of H and B into subgroups, so obtaining four classifications:  $H_1$  and  $H_2$ ,  $B_1$  and  $B_2$ .
- 3 In brief,  $H_1$  is the spoken variety of the main inner cities, while  $B_1$  is the variety of the desert areas of the north.  $B_2$  is spoken in the southern part of the country and shares

some characteristics, for examples the syllabic structure, with  $H_1$ .  $H_2$  is a "rural *ḥaḍariyy*", found for example in Rustāq.  $B_1$ , bedouin and nomadic of the north, is also found in the coastal city of Ṣūr and Ras el-Ḥadd. In fact, for the reason hinted at before, some nomadic groups followed the route from the Jebel to the sea, and established there because of their business activities. For a similar reason, the inner  $B_2$  variety is found in Suwair: its speakers moved to the coast and brought their Arabic with them.

- 4 I offer below a table with the synthetic description of the four families, as Holes provided it.

Table 1. "Omani dialect types" (Holes 1989: 453-454)

TYPE B1	TYPE H1
/g/ < OA /q/ (some affrication to /j/ in front vowel environments)	/q/ < OA /q/ /
/k/ < OA /k/ (some affrication to /c/ in front vowel environments)	k/ < OA /k/
/y/ < OA /j/	/g/ or /l/ or /j/ < OA /j/
CCvCv(C) varies with CvC(v)Cv(C)	CvC(v)Cv(C) forms only
ghawa-type forms vary with gahwa-type	qahwa only
/c/ not /s/ for 2nd. fem. sing. Pronoun	/s/ only for 2nd f. s. pronoun suffix
TYPE B2	TYPE H2
/g/ < OA /q/	/k/ < OA /q/
/k/ < OA /k/	/c/ < OA /k/ (unconditionally in all environments)
/y/ < OA /j/	/j/ < /j/
CCvCv(C) varies with CvC(v)Cv(C)	CvC(v)Cv(C) forms only
gahwa only	kahwa only
/s/ only for 2nd f. s. pronoun suffix	/S/ only for 2nd f. s. pronoun suffix

## 2. Oman: Tribes and Ties

- 5 In general, it is observed that the sharp contrast between the two categories of "sedentary and nomadic" is well reduced in Oman, as the economic and social differences among groups are not very significant. In practice there is more homogeneity among Omani inhabitants and the *badawiyy* or *ḥaḍariyy* life is not fully demarcated like in the Fertile Crescent. Many of the *ḥaḍariyy* citizens of Oman are *ex-badawiyy*, just recently settled. By the way, the structure of the society attests a minimal influence from the cities toward the vast bedouin and desert area while spoken varieties, albeit originally sedentary, contain a lot of bedouin features. Additionally, there are several on-going processes of accommodation among different Gulf accents (Holes 2001), which are in daily contact inside the Peninsula.
- 6 It is crucial to have in mind the name and collocation of some main tribes, in order to understand how the specific social composition of Oman affects the language. I proceed now associating tribes to cities (Eades 2008), and I also try to motivate the presence of a

social group in a certain area. It is important to recall that inner Oman offers two main settings: mountains (H) and desert (B), in the middle of which we find many rural areas and inhabitants.

- 7 The members of the Šawāwī tribe live in the mountains that extend from Musandam to Ras el-Ḥadd. They are nomads and move for grazing their herd and selling their products. Their specificity is that they move across short distances and camp for very long periods in the same location. They are a sort of "settled nomads" of the rural area, thing that justifies the presence of many H elements in their speech. A huge community of Šawāwīs lives in Izki, their elected homeland.
- 8 Al-Darīz is the city where the Ḥarītī tribe's members live. They are a settled community, sedentary of the mountains, but surrounded by a Bedouin environment to which they accommodate their speech. The inhabitants of Al-Darīz came from the southern part of the city of Ibrā', with which they maintain close contacts. This tight connection with a sedentary environment explains the persistence of many sedentary features in the speech of Al-Darīz, although placed in a numerically prevailing nomadic environment. This group adopts a precise marriage politic, which welcomes weddings with internal members and a limited selection of external elements that live in the surrounding cities. This way, the Ḥarītī tribe keeps a stronger traditional network, thus accommodating less to external factors, language included. Differently, Al Mintirib stays on the border with the Wahiba Sands and is the capital city of the Ḥaḡiriyyin sedentary tribe, whose speech has been heavily affected by B elements. In fact, this city is relatively far from any other sedentary environment and does not receive any support from settled neighbours. This weakness has led the Ḥaḡiriyyin to react with an attitude of openness toward the bedouin tribe of the Āl-Wahība, as reflected linguistically too.

### 3. The Key Concept of "Transitional Dialect"

- 9 The fact of being a country that has only recently undergone a political unification with a central Government, has kept intact the social fragmentation of Oman into several local entities. These have been self-regulated for a long time, and they have directly decided how to conduct their daily politics and business. The examples of cities and tribes given above clearly explain this point. Establishing or not alliances with bedouin neighbours, welcoming external marriages or posing obstacles to any local interlinkage is something that has exclusively depended on the tribe choices without interference from any external actor. The only factor that may have determined the tribe's attitude toward "the other" is the natural environment, not very friendly in Oman.
- 10 In fact, living close to the sea, the mountain or in the desert puts different constraints to one's style of life. Effectively, it has been proved that the coastal cities, Masqat included, have been exposed to many influxes from outside that have caused daily changes in the society and in the local speech. The maritime vocation of the coastal cities prevailed over any other matter, so the degree of interaction and contamination, linguistic or not, became higher.
- 11 Instead, in the inner areas appeared a "gap to fill", which was left between the nomadic environment of the desert and the sedentary realities of the cities: the rural villages.
- 12 Many nomads settled close to the rural areas, and give birth to new born villages or cities where different speeches came in contact. This contact meant some linguistic

implications, in particular resulted in a process of accommodation of the different varieties of the language. Every group reacted differently to this accommodation, which not always was reciprocal between two communities. In different words, the direction of the accommodation process was driven by social factors and elements pertaining the political and economic spheres. If *badawiyy*-s were numerically preponderant, then a nomadic variety was adopted; if the ties of the sedentary tribe were stronger, more *ḥadāriyy* features have been retained in the local speech. Although with differences in the degree of accommodation, Oman shows that no clear demarcation exists in between the traditional H and B categories of Arabic. Any place and any speaker in Oman manifest to some extent a mixed variety, influenced by other Omani elements or by Gulf macro-traits. In fact, many Omani speakers perform a transitional dialect to be defined as a mixture of urban, rural, and bedouin characteristics, sometimes arriving from other cities of the Gulf outside Oman.

- 13 Here are a couple of examples of accommodation that testify the transition from a totally sedentary city dialect, to one containing also *badawiyy* markers (Eades 2008)
- 14 al-Darīz  
 - /q/ > /q/  
 - /ğ/ > /y/ approximant palatal, from influx of B
- 15 al-Mintirib  
 - /q/ > /g/ as typical Gulf pronunciation  
 - *gahawa* (or *ghawa*) syndrome  
 - ik in the place of -iš

## 4. Main General Characteristics of the Omani Arabic

- 16 According to the description provided by eminent scholars (Reinhardt 1894[1972], Holes 1984 and 2013, Brockett 1995) I quickly list some of the main features of Omani Arabic, to be compared later on with the variety of 'Ibrī, which remains the target of this article.

### 4.1 Phonology

- 17 - /q/ > /q/ or /k/ if rural (both are voiceless, as typical for *ḥadāriyy*)  
 - /q/ > /g/ in a limited number of lexems (Gulf pronunciation)  
 - /k/ > /k/ ; /š/ if stands for the suffix 2nd fem.sing.  
 - /ğ/ > /g/ ; /ğ/ if rural

### 4.2 Morphology

- 18 Suffixes that mark the fem. plural are retained  
 - *-k* > *-š* suffix 2nd fem.sing.  
 - (*-kunna*) > *-kan*  
 - (*-hunna*) > *-henna*
- 19 Verb endings that mark the fem.plural are retained  
 - (*-tunna*) > *-tan*  
 - (*-na*) > *-an*
- 20 Prefix *yo-* for some weak verbs > *yokul*

- 21 The direct object marked by *-inn* that works as a subordinating particle in between the verb and its direct object.
- 22 The internal or apophonic passive persists in Omani Arabic, H or B, and it is not substituted by any analytic construction or periphrasis. The only exception to this regularity, as expected, comes from the coastal cities where the level of exposure to different varieties increases so leading to the loss of this passive, which is retained only in proverbial expressions.

## 5. The city and the variety of 'Ibrī

- 23 'Ibrī is located in the Dhahira region and its *wilāyat* has over 100,000 inhabitants. The city itself is home to 40,00 citizens. 'Ibrī occupies a strategic position between Oman and the other cities of the Gulf: for example it is equally far from Muscat, Dubai and Abu Dhabi, between 220 and 250 km. Nizwa and Soḥar, on the Omani Gulf coast, are less than two hours' drive from 'Ibrī. This geographic collocation motivates the meaning of its name: "crossing point" or "point of transit". Historically too the city has played a crucial role to trade routes, and its *sūq* was one of the most important in the region for ready-made goods and livestock.
- 24 The economy of 'Ibrī is based on herding and farming, which developed exploiting an ancient irrigation technique by the *aflāḡ*, special canals.
- 25 The spoken variety of 'Ibrī contains a mixture of both rural and urban features. In addition to this, it shows some bedouin characteristics too, varying from speaker to speaker. This, in the general frame of the influx received from the Gulf accent, as macro-category.
- 26 We also find track of the *gahawa* syndrome, as De Jong described it (cfr. De Jong 2007 in EALL, s.v. *gahawa syndrome*):
- 27 "In many dialects hamza initial forms lose the hamza together with the vowel [...]", so that the entire syllable is dropped. This seems to be well exemplified by the typical greeting "*hala wa ghala*", where *hala* has replaced *'ahlan*.
- 28 It is also noted a sort of overuse of the final /h/ specifically in the personal pronouns, some interrogatives, some imperative endings, and some adverbs.
- 29 Hypothetically the final /h/ may replace the loss of the initial *hamza*, as in the case of pronouns and imperatives, but what about interrogatives and adverbs? In general the final /h/ plays an emphatic role in the spoken varieties and it is found in many other accents too, as marker of the pausal form. Data from Yemen and adjacent areas, collected by Behnstedt (Behnstedt 2016, *infra*), show that this /h/ is quite regularly found at the end of personal pronouns, interrogatives and demonstratives: *'inti(h)*, "you"; *hiyyeh*, "she"; *ḍah*, "this" (masculine) *tah*, "this" (feminine); *māh*, "what"; *lēh* or *lamūh* or *'awēh*, "why". By the way, the same final /h/ can be found in not pausal forms as in *mahūhḍa'*, "who is this?". Considering that some Saudi accents show the same feature, this /h/ can be considered both a marker of emphasis and a typical Gulf trait.
- 30 More data are needed to my investigation in order to better understand the use and scope of this final /h/ in the variety of 'Ibrī. I describe below some characteristic of the spoken Arabic of 'Ibrī, as it resulted from my collection of data.

## 5.1 Phonology

### 31 Consonants

32 The *hamza* is *sāmīta*, like in : *ši* "thing", *ṭāira* "airplane", *bīr* "well", *may* "water", *bra* "needle", *umūr* "affairs".

33 The interdentals are retained, like in: *ḍāk* "that" (masculine), *ḍīk* "that" (feminine), *ḍīlāk* "those" and in *ḍā* "this" (masculine), *ḍī* "this" (feminine), *ḍōl* "these".

34 The /q/ results in /q/ or /g/ in a limited number of lexemes and expressions (bedouin or Gulf pronunciation): *gāl* "to say", *gesəṁ* "piece", *galam* "pen". Anyway in many cases /q/ is retained as such or the two realization are found side by side: *š-gadd ahəbb əl-qahwal*, "how much I love coffee!".

35 The /q/ is fronted in /k/ in sedentary rural variants: *fōq* > *fōk*, "above".

36 The /k/ gives /-š/ in the suffix for the second person feminine singular

37 The /ğ/ mostly results in /g/: *gayyəd* "good", *wāqīd* "a lot", *šāgara* "tree", *yagīb* "it is necessary", *yaḥruḡ* "he goes out".

### 38 Vowels

39 /i/ replaces /a/ with anterior consonants: *kabīr* > *kibīr*, "big" and *man* > *min*, "who".

40 The past tense is always *maftūḥ*: *daras* "he studied", *katab* "he wrote".

41 The present tense follow this pattern, respectively on the three prefix, the first and second root consonants: *maksūr+sākin+ maftūḥ* : *yidris* "he studies", *yiktib* "he writes".

42 Diphthongs: *aw* > *ō ay* > *ē*, included *kayf* > *kēf*, "how"

## 5.2 Morphology

### 43 Suffixes

-k > -š for the 2nd fem.sing.

(-kunna) > -kan

(-hunna) > -henna

### 44 Verb endings

(-tunna) > -tan

(-na) > -an

-yo as initial prefix for some weak verbs > *yokul*

### 45 The direct object

-*inn* works as a subordinating particle in between the verb and its direct object:

*Duktūr, bāḡ-inn-ek t-šūf ḍa-d-ḍars*, "Doctor, I want you to see this tooth".

### 46 Personal pronouns

47 *ana, ntāh, ntīh*

*huwwah, hiyyah*

(*nə*)*hnaḥ*

*ntūh, ntan*

*hummaḥ, hennaḥ*

### 48 Interrogatives

*mūh* < *mu ḥaḍa*, "what?"

*ḥmuh* < *ḥāl mu*, "why?"

*mtah* < *mata*, "when?"

- 49 Some imperative endings

-āh/-ih/-ūh/-annah

*Rābāh!*, "look!" (2nd m.s)

*rābīh!*, "look!" (2nd f.s)

*rābūh!*, "look!" (3rd m.pl.)

*rābannah!*, "look!" (3rd f.pl.)

- 50 In conclusion, the Arabic of 'Ibrī can be considered a transitional dialect and in any case it contains mixed features, as the table below sums up

Table 2. "The Arabic of 'Ibrī"

	/ğ/	/q/	/k/	Syllable structure	Gahawa syndrome
'Ibrī	/g/	mostly /q/ , /k/ possible /g/	/k/ and /š/ if suffix 2ndfs	CCvC(C)	Cfr. <i>Hala wa gala</i>
<i>ḥaḍariyy urban</i>	/g/	/q/	/k/	mostly CvCvC	<i>qahwa</i>
<i>ḥaḍariyy rural</i>	/ğ/	/k/	/č/	mostly CvCvC	<i>kahwa</i>
<i>badawīyy</i> or Gulf	mostly /y/	/g/	/k/ and /č/ with front vowels	CCvC(C)	<i>gahawa</i> or <i>ghawa</i>

## 6. A Text from 'Ibrī : "Fi maḥall"

- 51 Fatima: ḥayyā-š 'uḥt-ī Salīma

Salima: Allah yi-ḥayyi-š wa yi-bārek fi-š Fattūm

Maryam: ḍa al-maḥall wāgid fihi 'agrāḍ

Fatima: ḥnā dōm-nā n-qūl ka-ḍak, n-rūḥ l-ho n-šūf ši gadīd fihi

Salima : Bass ya-<sup>ʔ</sup>tamid 'ala nō<sup>ʔ</sup>iyya al-'agrāḍ, kull mā kān al-maḥall 'agrāḍ 'ašliyya kān 'aḥsan wa ha-ni-tbaḍḍa<sup>ʔ</sup> 'ala raḥōt-nā

Maryam: Ḥalā n-rūḥ gesōm an-na<sup>ʔ</sup>lān, 'ašūf 'aškāl wāgid ḥəlwa

Fatima: Qūman 'asa 'as<sup>ʔ</sup>ār-henna mā ḡāliyya

Salima : Bāyya 'ašriyy ḥāl 'amt-īyy lisah, ha-rūḥ 'an-kan māḷ ʔl-malābis

Maryam: šabr-ī šīwayyōt ha-giyy ma<sup>ʔ</sup>aš

Salima: T-ḥarrak-ī 'ād nōss ʔl-lēl



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## APPENDIXES

### Notes

/k/ > /š/ 2<sup>nd</sup> person feminine singular.

(ha)ḍa > ḍa , interdental is generally retained.

yi-ḥayyi-š wa yi-bārek, the suffix of the present tense is preferably *maksur*.

wāgid, /ğ/ > /g/ is ḥaḍariyy of the city vs. /ğ/ > /z/ ḥaḍariyy of the countryside.

/q/ > /q/ pronounced as an uvular occl. in ḥaḍariyy urban variants and velar occl. in ḥaḍariyy rural variants. Speakers of 'Ibrī may perform both. Additionally, /q/ > /g/ may be found, but resulting as a loan from bedouin or Gulf variants: *agsam*, *šgadd*.

-aw > ō nōḥiyya.

Ha- works as marker for the future tense (cfr. rāh in Buraimi , sār elsewhere).

nī-t-baḍḍaḥ, the suffix of the present tense is preferably *maksur*.

/q/ > /g/

*gesəm* When found in 'Ibrī , it derives from contact with *badawiyy* variants (cfr. Holes B1 and B2) and it is used for a limited number of words. Feminine pl. markers are retained:

-an, feminine marker for the imperative mood, 2<sup>nd</sup> feminine plural;

-henna, suffix (adj.) for the 3rd person feminine plural.

bāya feminine of bāy, «desiring».

ḥāl, preposition ("for") or genitive marker.

-kan, suffix (adj.) for the 2nd person feminine plural Feminine pl. markers are retained.

T-ḥarrak-ī, syllable structure CCvC(C) from contact with *badawiyy* variants vs. CvCvC, mostly found in the *ḥaḍariyy* variety.

### Translation

Fatima: Hello my sister Salīma!

Salima: Hello to you and may God benedict you, Faṭṭūm.

Maryam: In this shop there are many goods.

Fatima: We always say like this: we go there and see it has something new.

Salima: But it depends on the kind of goods, every time the shop has original goods it is better and we do shopping in peace.

Maryam: Let's go to the shoes section, I see very beautiful models.

Fatima: Let's go quickly, their price is not expensive.

Salima: I want to buy a turban for my aunt I leave you and go to the dress section.

Maryam: Wait a moment, I come with you.

Salima: Hurry up, it's about midnight!

## ABSTRACTS

'Ibri is located half-way in between Mascat and Dubai, and is very close to the Emirates border. This proximity facilitates young male citizens that look for job opportunities in the rich Emirates. Effectively, it is easy to find an occupation beyond the border: in Dubai, for the business sector; in Buraymi or Al-'Ain for administration or health sector related professions (health sector for female nurses too); in various locations across the Emirates if serving as military or police staff (airport and border police includes female staff too).

'Ibri speakers, the majority of whom come back home after work, have daily contacts with their Gulf neighbours. This style of life makes the speech of 'Ibri inhabitants critical for developing two levels of analysis:

1-features of the 'Ibri Spoken Arabic, in the general frame of Omani Arabic;

2-tracks of contamination among Gulf variants, due to both recent and historically motivated 'contacts and changes.'

Several pairs of variables must be taken into account: social, referring to *badawiyy* or *ḥaḍariyy*; geographical, referring to the inner part of the country, or to west/east and north/south sides.

In principle, the area of 'Ibri should be "*ḥaḍariyy* of the north". Nevertheless, we find elements that go beyond this classification. Phonology, for example, shows a series of combinatorial possibilities that hardly fit a schematic and annotated classification; then, we may also find the *gahwah* syndrome in occasional 'Ibri speeches.

According to what emerged from my collection of data in the city, I offer here a general morpho-phonological description of the local register. I also provide unpublished Omani texts, composed by teachers of "dialect", with examples of syntax and lexicon.

I intend to demonstrate how strong is the mismatching between political and linguistic borders in the Gulf area.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** Oman, Arabic, transitional dialect, Gulf, ḥaḍariyy, badawiyy

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