VERSTEHEN/EINFÜHLEN IN ARABIAN SANDS

Wilfred Thesiger as Traveler and Anthropologist

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Abstract

Using Geertz's *Verstehen/Einfühlen* distinction, this article begins with an overview of the travel writing and anthropological work about Oman, concentrating on the southern region of Dhofar. The article then situates Wilfred Thesiger's classic *Arabian Sands* ([1959] 1991) within these two genres as an example of a writer who is able to show understanding for and empathy with his Bedu traveling companions. Thesiger's *Verstehen* is demonstrated through comparing the details he gives of Bedu culture with current manifestations. His *Einfühlen* is shown through his overarching concern for his companions and his respectful descriptions of their life, avoiding the typical Victorian condescension toward "natives" and the self-absorbed gushing of many modern travel writers. Based on seven years of studying the culture of southern Oman, the article argues that Thesiger's writing shows a rare combination of accuracy and empathy, which elevates his book to a model of both anthropological and travel writing.

Keywords: Bedu, Dhofar, *Einfühlen*, Ghibali, Oman, Wilfred Thesiger, *Verstehen*

I was sitting by a campfire, eating a dinner of rice, freshly caught fish, and dates with a group of Ghibalis¹ and Westerners. When one of the men passed me the bag of dates, I pulled out a few and set them in front of me on the sheet of plastic. One Ghibali man, Said, leaned over and, of all things, started to count the dates. As Ghibalis are very generous, I could not believe he would care how much I ate, yet he was clearly interested in knowing exactly how many I had. Then he put his hand in the bag and set another date by my small pile. "1, 3, 5, 7, like that," he said. Oh. You have to eat dates in groups of odd numbers.

I thought of Geertz's (1974: 222) question: "What happens to *Verstehen* when *Einfühlen* disappears?" I often wonder how does one ever get to *Verstehen*: *Einfühlen* seems a much easier task.² It was easy, delightful in fact, to spend time with Gibalis, but *Verstehen*, even after living in the Dhofar region for seven years, seems impossible. Learning a foreign culture reminds me of the end of the Narnia series:

When you looked down you found that this hill was much higher than you had thought: it sank down with shining cliffs, thousands of feet below them and trees in that lower world looked no bigger than grains of green salt ...

"I see," she said at last, thoughtfully. "I see now. This garden is like the Stable. It is far bigger inside than it was outside."

"Yes," said Mr. Tumnus, "like an onion: except that as you continue to go in and in, each circle is larger than the last." (Lewis 1956: 180)

But there is one person who managed to produce a work illustrating both *Verstehen* and *Einfühlen* of the people who lived in southern Oman: Wilfred Thesiger and his *Arabian Sands* ([1959] 1991).

Travel Writing about Southern Oman

Travel writing in Oman is represented by at least one author from each major genre within the field. In the southern region, the earliest example is Ibn al-Mujawir (1204/2008) who traveled in approximately 624–627 (1226–1230 CE). There is a brief mention of the Dhofar region in Ibn Battuta's *Travels in Asia and Africa*, describing his long journey through the Middle East, Africa, China, and Russia in the mid-1300s. Dhofar then turns up again, also briefly, in the narrative of two Spanish Jesuit priests on their way from India to Ethiopia who were kidnapped by pirates on 14 February 1590 (Beckingham and Sarjeant 1950). Daniel Saunders (1792) describes his ordeal of being shipwrecked on the Dhofari coast.

The first English explorers in the Dhofar region are Captain Haines (1839, 1845) and his crew from the Indian Navy who surveyed and explored the Dhofar coast in the Brig "Palinurus" in 1834, 1835, and 1836. Commander

Saunders (1846), with the same ship, and some of the same crew, continued this surveying work in 1844–1846. John Anderson in his “A Sketch of the Physical Features of the Coast of South-East Arabia” (1896) briefly reviews some of the articles published by Haines, Saunders, and various officers. For example, Charles Cruttenden walked along part of the Dhofar coast and wrote a “Journal of an Excursion from Morbat to Dyreez, the Principal Town of Dhofar” (1838). Henry Carter recorded his survey of “The Ruins of El Balad” (1846), an archeological site in what is now Salalah, the main town in the Dhofar region.

The purpose of these missions was *Verstehen*, only so far as to figure out how the lands investigated might be of use to the British government and merchant class, as when Haines (1845) tells Sultan Omar that “to carry on steam-communication between India and England, a depot under British control was requisite.” Haines, therefore, wanted to buy the island of Socotra from the sultan.

James and Mabel Bent (1895, 1900), who traveled along the coast and into some of the mountains of the southern region in the late 1800s, had the same purpose. Quintessential Victorian travelers, they viewed all landscapes through the perspective of how the land might be useful to the Empire: “If this tract of country comes into the hands of a civilizing nation, it will be capable of great and useful development ... and a health resort for the inhabitants [i.e., British inhabitants] of the burnt-up centers of Arabian commerce, Aden and Maskat” (Bent and Bent [1900] 2005: 274).

For imperialist travelers, there are moments of *Verstehen* but none of *Einfühlen*. The Gibalis traveling with the Bents, however, gave as good as they got, calling Mrs. Bent “Mabel” and informing the Bents that “they did not wish us to give them orders of any kind as they were sheikhs”; the Gibalis stated bluntly “We are gentleman” ([1900] 2005: 266).

Bertram Thomas’s famous first crossing of the Empty Quarter started from Salalah, the main city of the Dhofar region, is described in *Arabia Felix: Across the Empty Quarter of Arabia* (1932). Although he traveled more as an equal with his companions than the Bents, he ate and slept separately. His dedication to science shows that *Verstehen* is still much more important than *Einfühlen*. For example, when buying a snake for his scientific collection, “I was much exercised lest the man [who was selling the snake and might be bitten] should die and the tragedy put an end to further hunting in the mountains, and even prejudice my larger schemes” (Thomas 1932: 93).

Thomas and Thesiger are divided by World War II. Thesiger traveled through present day Oman, Yemen, and the United Arab Emirates between 1946 and 1950. In addition to *Arabian Sands* ([1959] 1991), he published many articles on his travels in Southern Arabia.

Five years after Thesiger left, Jan Morris's drove with Sultan Said bin Taymur's entourage from Salalah to the north of Oman as described in *Sultan in Oman* ([1957] 2008). But whereas Dhofaris are always discussed with accuracy and respect by Thesiger, Morris lets loose with insults as demeaning as the Bents. She describes Gibalis as

tribes of strange non-Arab people ... with their poor clothes, their indigo-stained faces, their immemorial prejudices. [In the monsoon season] the plain was full of these queer Stone Age figures, lean and handsome, and they wandered like fauns through the little marketplaces of Salala ... [they are] a troublesome, fractious kind of people. (Morris [1957] 2008: 22, 24)

In the same tone, the Duchess of St Albans in *Where Time Stood Still* (1980: 25) says of Gibalis that "certain freakish customs still linger on among the more primitive tribes" and gives "witchcraft murders" as an example. The Jibalis are "wild savages" who "refuse to be absorbed, disciplined or even understood" (Ibid.: 153). Her account of the Dhofar War (1965–1975) is bizarrely slanted against the rebels and shows sympathy only for the British soldiers who fought on the side of the government.

The soldiers themselves who were in the war show more understanding and respect toward the rebels and their reasons for fighting than St Albans does. Firsthand accounts of the Dhofar War include Tony Jeapes's *SAS: Operation Oman* (1980), John Akehurst's *We Won a War* (1982), David Arkless's *The Secret War: Dhofar 1971/1972* (1988), Ian Gardiner's *In the Service of the Sultan* (2007), Bryan Ray's *Dangerous Frontiers* (2008), Andrew Higgins's *With the S.A.S. and Other Animals* (2011), and Paul Sibley's *A Monk in the SAS* (2011).³

All the authors agreed that training Dhofaris could be difficult as "discipline ... cannot possibly be achieved when everyone in the army thinks he has just as much right to decide what is to be done as his leaders, and if he dislikes their decision feels free to take no part in the outcome" (Jeapes 1980: 51). However, all the soldiers agreed that "Omanis were wonderful people to

live with. They were superbly honest ... They were generous to a fault and...they didn't take themselves too seriously ... [they] wished to be at peace with any man who was ready to be at peace with them" (Gardiner 2010: 58).

Another sub-genre of travel writing about Oman is travel guides such as Walker and Owen's *Off-Road in the Sultanate of Oman* (2007), the *Lonely Planet Guide* (Walker et al. 2010), and Thomas's *The Rough Guide to Oman* (2011). There are also many examples of the sub-genre of travel writing combined with an academic/scientific field in Dhofar.⁴ T. M. Johnstone (1982, 1987) and Stroomer (1999) traveled through the Dhofar region collecting and analyzing the vocabulary, grammar, and poetry of the Mehri and Jibali languages. Miller, Morris, and Stuart-Smith produced *Plants of Dhofar, the Southern Region of Oman* (1988), an encyclopedic book that includes a wealth of folklore with the descriptions of plant usage. Janzen (1986) has written about the impact of modernity on the traditional lifestyles and animal husbandry practices of mountain dwellers. Clapp (1999) and Zarins (2001) have written about the archeological discoveries in Dhofar. In 1991, Ali Ahmed Al-Shehri—a native of the Dhofar region—has published several essays about pre-modern grave sites and cave paintings. The war and scientific writing is, as with pre-modern travel writing, focused on *Verstehen* but now for the benefit of knowledge in general, not simply British imperial concerns. *Einfühlen* does not factor in.

There are also a few books by authors who relocated to Oman and then recalled their experiences, including Allen's *Oman: Under Arabian Skies* (2010) and Heines's *My Year in Oman* (2005) and *Another Year in Oman* (2008). In these books, it is the authors' emotions that are most important. *Einfühlen* takes over as the author highlights his perceived connection to the people:

There is a sense of lawlessness [with the Bedu of Sharqiyah] ... this anarchy gives one a sense of freedom and of a being without constraint. Rousseau's "Noble Savage" comes to mind when looking at these Bedu, and they are noble and have not lost that primitive force inside. In Jungian terms their primitive psyche remains intact, that primeval power and urge that makes the Bedu so strong, so essential, individual, intuitive and spontaneous and above all it makes him so vital and impossible to control or rein in. This makes him the free spirit that down deep we all want to be. (Allen 2010: 61)

Anthropology in Oman

Like travel writing, anthropology is always fixated on the “just vanishing, dusk-shrouded other whose shape can be discerned at the moment it slips forever from sight” (Gilsenan 1989: 232). Most of the anthropological research done in Oman has been in the north. The best example is Wikan’s *Behind the Veil in Arabia: Women in Oman* (1982). Recounting and examining her eight months of fieldwork in Oman, Wikan writes, “I harbored a dream to meet the real, authentic Arabia” (1982: 3). However, Wikan notes that the women’s “calm, quiet, self-control, that mute self-assured poise, was to prove the major obstacle all the way through to getting to know, really to know, the Soharis” (Ibid.: 10). In the introduction and appendix, Wikan makes it clear that she finally understood after leaving Oman that this “gracious facade” was the fundamental truth, “what matters is how the other acts, not what he or she ‘really’ thinks”; it is “an axiom of Omani culture that persons are endowed with different natures which determine the way they behave. It is for others to acknowledge and accept this” (Ibid.: 13, 238).

Eickelman, who also did fieldwork in Oman, echoes Wikan’s comments: “The most striking characteristic of daily life in Oman, in contrast to many other Middle Eastern and Mediterranean societies, is the lack of open conflict and pervasive civility and tact that mark all social conduct” (1984: 112). Specifically, she discusses the “extreme care everyone takes to avoid open conflict within the family cluster and in the community, and the mixture of tact, civility, and circumspection with which family members neutralize their meetings with persons outside the family” (Ibid.: 93). Thus, after their long periods socializing with women, Wikan and Eickelman both show *Verstehen* and *Einfühlen*, as does Chatty (1997) who has done extensive research with the Harasiis, a tribe whose land is located to the north of the Dhofar region.

An outstanding example of *Verstehen* and *Einfühlen* is the auto-ethnography, *Tribal Practices and Folklore of Dhofar*, by Salim Bakhit Tabook (1997). His text is extensively researched and covers all aspects of life in the Dhofar region, from geography to “tribal stratification,” birth/circumcision/marriage/death, folk medicine/stories/tales/songs, traditional crafts, and economic structure. The work is a careful balance of explaining what Tabook has himself seen and careful research, for example

There are perhaps two reasons why, in the opinion of the researcher, people believed in Saints more than Prophets; the first was the deep ignorance of the people of their religion, the second is that those tribes and families who managed to convince the local inhabitants to believe in them, did whatever they could to promote their manipulative sanctity at the expense of the true values of Islam. Similar examples can be found in many countries, such as Hadramawt, Egypt, and Morocco. (1997: 168)

He describes local traditions that are still in evidence. The shrines he mentions are still kept up and visited; the food he describes is still cooked in the same manner for Eids; the dances are still performed and the book makes clear the continuing preference of Omani men for working in the army.

Thesiger

Tabook, as a member to the community he describes, can be expected to demonstrate *Verstehen* and *Einfühlen*. It is harder to understand how Thesiger, as an outsider, also managed to display both understanding and empathy. Thesiger also had an ability to reflect on the why he traveled and what the possible effect of his travels would be:

for me, exploration was a personal venture. I did not go to the Arabian desert to collect plants nor make a map: such things were incidental. At heart I knew that to write or even talk of my travels was to tarnish the achievement. I went there to find peace in the hardship of desert travel and the company of desert people ... the harder the way the more worth the journey ... I felt instinctively that it was better to fail on Everest without oxygen than attain the summit with its use. If climbers used oxygen, why should they not have their supplies dropped to them from aeroplanes, or landed by helicopter? ([1959] 1991: 278)

Before the first crossing of the Empty Quarter, an old man comes to his encampment “to see the Christian” (Ibid.: 82). His eyes are “bleary” and Thesiger’s companions mock him, but he

wondered fancifully if he had seen more clearly than they did, had sensed the threat which my presence implied—the approaching disin-

tegration of his society and the destruction of his beliefs. Here especially it seemed that the evil that comes with sudden change would far outweigh the good. While I was with the Arabs I wished only to live as they lived and, now that I have left them, I would gladly think that nothing in their lives was altered by my coming. Regretfully, however, I realize that the maps I made helped others, with more material aims, to visit and corrupt a people whose spirit once lit the desert like a flame. (Ibid.)

It is clear that Thesiger's most important attribute is his appreciation of and attempts to comprehend the people he was traveling with. "Above all however his life there is [*sic*] a measure of the love that he bears to the people among whom he traveled, without which he never would have been able to do what he has done" (Rennell 1948: 21). In his obituary, Maitland (2004: 93) quotes Thesiger as saying "Ever since then [serving in the Sudan Political Service] it has been people that have mattered to me, rather than places."⁵ In the *Guardian Weekly's* obituary, Asher (2003: 22) writes that "Few other explorers in the last century have tried so genuinely to see the world through the eyes of foreign people."

That Thesiger thought the local people were the essential part of a journey is clear from his obituary for Bertram Thomas. Thesiger praises Thomas by highlighting the people, not the place: "the measure of his achievement is that he won the confidence of these proud and difficult tribesmen, and with no authority behind him, persuaded them by patience and fair dealing to take him across the Empty Quarter" (1951: 199). Of his own travels, he says "My achievement was to win their [his tribal companions'] confidence" (Glancey 2002).

But beyond the personal connection and mutual respect—that is *Einfühlen*—Thesiger's books are also praised as "invaluable as anthropology" (Woodward 2007). It is his *Verstehen*, the ability to explain the different cultural features he encountered in a way that makes sense to readers, few of whom have ever been to this part of the world, which makes his book both a classic and valuable text. Of course, the main caveat often mentioned is that he has no information on women or settled habitations, but if one takes the book strictly within the terms of "male Bedu traveling through the mountains surrounding Salalah, Yemen and in the desert" Thesiger illuminates life on an almost epic-scale including food, clothing, religion, sickness, death, war, animals, plants, weather, and the importance of family and

tribe connections. As someone who has lived in Salalah for seven years, what is most impressive is that after fifty-three years, Thesiger's book is still an accurate guide to the region's culture today.

A good anthropologist explains not just the surface appearance of the culture, but the bedrock structure that changes slowly if at all. Southern Omanis I know from my academic life, friends, and my colleagues (all male) in my research group are fluent in modern technology; they have university degrees, work in the mechanical and computer engineering fields, and travel widely. Yet, time and again, an example of Thesiger's *Verstehen* presents itself when I am with them.

When greeting people, the news is always "good" and one has to ask several times, or simply wait awhile, to learn what is actually going on. Thesiger's description of how to eat is a perfect description of how many Dhofaris eat dinner. It is still true that "Bedu have no desire for variety in their meals" ([1959] 1991: 113). It is often mentioned that while camping someone should not relieve himself under a tree (where someone might sit for shade) or on a path. I have heard people swear on the divorce oath.

Often, when driving with the men in my research group, they point toward a road or animal that is "right there, so close" that I cannot see and I think of Thesiger not seeing camels or oryx. Several times while driving through a wadi at night, a colleague would say to me "go that way." When I would reply I cannot see his hand to know which way he was pointing, I was answered in lines similar to Thesiger's companions who told him that "you would have sat there, without seeing them until they came to cut your throat" ([1959] 1991: 233).

Even the remarks I found hard to believe or disliked have come true. At one point, Thesiger asks the Rashid men about crossing the Empty Quarter and Mohammed answers, "We are your men. We will go where you go. It is for you to decide" ([1959] 1991: 219). When I first read this, it seemed a fantastic, wildly romantic overstatement. Then one day I asked the men in my research group where they wanted to drive to on the weekend, and one said, without irony, "You decide and we follow you." Another time, in trying to decide where to go, one informant said to me, "I am a box," meaning a package to be picked up and carried. These were older, married, educated Ghibali men and they certainly did not mean that I had any control of their lives, but in the specific point of traveling on a certain day they were happy to leave the choice of destination up to me.

I also thought that Thesiger was too tetchy about progress: “I resented modern inventions; they made the road too easy” ([1959] 1991: 278). Then I went camping with a group of Westerners. As usual, I pulled out a sleeping pad, pillow, blanket, knapsack with clothes, small bag of food, a small cooler, and set up in about ten minutes. One of the man took over an hour to erect a mini-Waldorf Astoria complete with three mats, dining table, chairs, food prep table, stove, two mattresses, sheets, blanket, and bed cover. When he pulled out a small box full of condiments, three kinds of ketchup, three kinds of mustard, brown sauce, soy sauce, and so on, I had to stifle a groan.

Interconnectedness

To take an extended example of the depth of Thesiger’s understanding of the men he traveled with I would like to explore the concept of interconnectedness. Thomas understands the “corporate consciousness on the part of the tribesmen by which the acts done by or to any member of his tribe are virtually acts done by or to himself, with all the consequences that involves” (1932: 67). But the reality is that the interlocked/interdependent tribal system goes farther than acts to include, for example, possessions. Nanda and Warms explain that “The idea of scarcity is a fundamental assumption of Western microeconomic theory. Economists assume that human wants are unlimited but the means of achieving them are not” (2002: 170). This is not the underlying assumption among Bedu and Ghibalis. The actuality of scarcity is not perceived as long as someone in one’s social circle has X object. If a brother, cousin, or close friend has X, then access to X is assumed.

This can be a little shocking from a Western point of view. I once offered a flashlight to a man in my research group and he took it saying, “I know that everything you have is mine.” Cash flew from hand to hand; whoever had it was obligated to share with those who needed it, even sums as large as several thousand dollars. Cars could be borrowed for weeks or months. The only two items I found that had to be returned quickly were a *khanjar* (traditional dagger) and guns that were borrowed to attend wedding parties.

Repeatedly, Thesiger explains this point from the simple, “no one ever smoked without sharing his pipe with the others” to “Bedu will never take

advantage over a companion by feeding while he was absent" ([1959] 1991: 60, 65). He writes "I have never heard a man grumble that he has received less than his share" and how his companions praised a man who had ruined himself by excessive generosity (Ibid.: 86, 71).

What is refreshing about Thesiger is he makes it clear that this cultural necessity was grating: "In my more bitter moments I thought that Bedu life was one long round of cadging and being cadged from" ([1959] 1991: 64). Twice Thesiger complains about bin Kabina giving away his clothes because someone has asked for them. It is possible, therefore, to see both how the culture is organized and Thesiger's reaction to that organization.

When, at the end of the book, Thesiger ([1959] 1991: 329) describes the men he traveled with as men "who possessed, in so much greater measure than I, generosity and courage, endurance, patience, and light-hearted gallantry," it is clear this is not meaningless praise or hyperbole. He saw, recorded, and reacted to their generosity. The Bedu insistence on sharing comes through as one of the key components of the culture but this is not described in a simplistic, formulaic cliché. Thesiger shows the unrelenting requests he was subjected to and the inability of the Bedu to refuse a request even if they did not want to agree. He shows himself as the one who gives and the one who takes advantage of the laws of hospitality—that is *Verstehen* and *Einfühlen*. During his first crossing, he accepts milk from camel herders in the desert: "I drank again, knowing even as I did so that they would go hungry and thirsty that night, for they had nothing else, no other food and no water" (Ibid.: 136).

Thesiger from the Omani Point of View

Although most academics would agree with the need to describe the culture with respect, there is a debate within the field about the necessity of communicating the locals' point of view by using terms that make sense to both the reader and the people described. Thesiger was clearly on the side of living and describing events from the local point of view: "whoever lives with the Bedu must accept Bedu conventions, and conform to Bedu standards" ([1959] 1991: 52). His method agrees with Geertz's as explained by Abu-Lughod: "[Geertz's] ethnography consists in interpreting people's actions in terms of the interpretations with which they themselves work" (1989: 272).

Agreeing with him are, for example, Michrina and Richards who write in their standard anthropology textbook, “it becomes the anthropologist’s task to give sense to the reader of what it feels like for a native live in his or her culture” (1996: 130). Further, Marcus and Cushman assert that it is imperative that the “ethnographer’s conceptual and descriptive language make (common) sense to his readers within their own cultural framework, but it must communicate meanings to these same readers which they are persuaded would make (again, common) sense to the ethnographer’s subjects” (1982: 46). The simplest way to check if this common sense has been applied is to give the finished work to members of the culture and ask them to comment.

In the interest of gathering this insight, I asked a group of informants (working with me on a different project) who had read Thesiger’s book in Arabic to discuss their opinions. The three men are Gibali while Thesiger’s Dhofari travel companions were from the Bait Kathir (Gibali and Bedu) and Rashid (Bedu) tribes. Gibali and Bedu cultures are seen as quite similar by outsiders; both communities place a great deal of emphasis on courtesy to guests, self-control, and self-reliance. For example, after researching Southern Omani culture for several years, it is easy for me as a teacher to differentiate students as being from Salalah, from other parts of Oman, or Gibali/Bedu, but I cannot immediately tell the difference between Gibali and Bedu students. Thus, although my informants were not from the tribes described by Thesiger, they are culturally close enough to the culture to tell if his descriptions are correct.

Their first reaction was straightforward and positive: “what he describes is accurate” and Thesiger “was understanding the culture.” When I asked for more details, I was told “I like his hunger,” meaning my informant respected Thesiger’s willingness to live the same life as the men with whom he was traveling.⁶ Another informant told me that he is “wide” like Bedu and Gibalis, in the sense of being patient, able to accept difficult situations. Conversely, one informant’s reaction to reading Thomas’s book was “I didn’t hate it.”

The two negative reactions were perceptions that Thesiger was a government spy and that he was homosexual. No one I have talked to believes he was traveling because of locusts.⁷ Neither did they believe my argument that “some people like to travel, he just wanted to see something new.” I was told, “His real job was not looking for locusts . . . he was traveling to

know the people and lands and the strengths of the tribes to make maps to make the way for oil.”

There was also uneasiness about his sexuality. Thesiger, like T. E. Lawrence, addresses the issue directly, but says that it was not part of the Bedu's life: “during all the time I was with them I saw no sign of it” ([1959] 1991: 125). The men I spoke to about the book were ready to believe that was true of the Bedu, but not of Thesiger himself. I was asked directly several times if he was gay, based on his careful descriptions of the men, the close-up photos of the men, and caring for bin Kabina when he was sick, an extreme example of *Einfühlen*: “The others crowded round and discussed the chances of his dying until I could scarcely stand it; and then someone asked where we were going tomorrow and I said that there would be no tomorrow if bin Kabina died” ([1959] 1991: 189).

Conclusion

Thesiger's praise of the Bedu seems at times a desire to keep their lifeways intact for his benefit. He could return to British settlements when his “mind was taut with the strain of living too long among Arabs,” but for the Bedu to similarly cross cultures would mean their ruin ([1959] 1991: 266). This is his most important *Verstehen*, not simply *Einfühlen*, for this contradiction is experienced by all of the Omanis I have met—not simply nostalgia for the past or childhood, but a sense that modernization has brought both benefits and drawbacks. To most Westerners, especially Westerners I have talked to in Salalah, modernization is only positive. In discussing the changes in Oman⁸ over the past forty years, informants have told me that life is much better, but they are also reconstructing a more traditional way of life. One man with a technical job decided to start sleeping outside for months at a time. He would camp, wash himself in one of the open showering rooms⁹ and then go to work, which involved communicating with satellites. Another man, whose father practices transhumance taking care of camels, has an older brother who, after a successful career, now assists the father.

Travel writers roughly divide into *Verstehen*, with the focus on accurate reportage of language, distances, flora, fauna, and closely observed behaviors, and *Einfühlen*, in which the author's emotional connections to the place are foregrounded. Peter Mayne's *The Alleys of Marrakesh* (1953), has

and is expected to have, a quite different description of a Moroccan *suq* than Clifford Geertz's "Suq: The Bazaar Economy in Sefrou" (1979). Thesiger is one of the few writers about southern Oman who has managed to manifest an appreciation of and respect for the local population, as well as convey their beliefs and habits accurately.

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Notes

1. Gibali/ Jibali is a non-written, South Arabian language spoken in the mountain and seaside towns in the Dhofar region of Southern Oman. "Gibali" is used as a noun for the language and a collective noun to describe the linguistic/cultural group, as well as an adjective. Gibali comes from the Arabic word *jebel*, meaning mountain.
2. *Verstehen* means understanding in German; *Einfühlen* means literally to feel with—that is to sympathize with or have the same emotions as another. *Verstehen* used by Clifford Geertz means the idea within the field of anthropology that actions and beliefs should be understood and explained from the local's/ native's point of view.
3. Ranulph Fiennes's books about the Dhofar War, *Where Soldiers Fear to Tread* (1975) and *The Feathermen* (1991), include statements that contradict all the other writing about the war and my seven years of observations, thus I am not inclined to include his writing in non-fiction texts.
4. The *Journal of Oman Studies* publishes articles on a wide variety of topics such as architecture, poetry, archeology, settlement patterns, flora, and fauna surveys.
5. Another way to realize the relative importance of people is that *Arabian Sands* has a short list of "Arabic and Botanical Names of Plants" and three pages of "A List of the Chief Characters on the Various Journeys," which carefully records the name and tribe of each companion for each of the major sections of each trip. The Bents' *Southern Arabia*, Thomas's *Arabia Felix*, and Philby's *Empty Quarter* do not include such a list of people although all three books have various appendices including lists of plants, shells, zoological notes, location of waterholes, birds, butterflies, land altitudes, and so on. Philby also includes "Divisions of the Murra tribe" with the names of chief sheikhs, sheikhs, and notables but not the names of the men with whom he traveled.

6. For an example of a traveler with Bedu who insists that he is a “blood brother” of the tribe in times of plenty but demands food as a person with “guest” status in a time of famine, see Raswan (1935).
7. Thesiger traveled to Oman after being hired by the Desert Locust Specialist of the Food and Agriculture Organization. That locusts were a great problem in the deserts of Arabia is testified by Raswan (1935) but Thesiger says explicitly that he “was not really interested in locust”; they were important only as the “golden key to Arabia” ([1959] 1991: 41).
8. This article’s references are not intended to be a complete bibliography of Omani or Dhofari travel writing or anthropology. Chatty, Johnstone, and Wikan, among others, have written several articles that are not included here for the sake of brevity. Other anthropologists who have also written about Oman include Fredrik Barth’s *Sohar: Culture and Society in an Omani Town* and Mandana Limbert’s *In the Time of Oil: Piety, Memory and Social Life in an Omani Town*. For a more complete list of British travelers, see Hilal Al-Hajri’s 2006 “British travelers in Oman from 1627–1970” (in *Modern Oman: Studies in Politics, Economy, Environment and Culture of the Sultanate*, edited by Andrzej Kapiszewski, Abdulrahman al Salimi, and Andrej Pikulski). Three other useful books are Robin Bidwell’s *Travellers in Arabia* (1994); Alastair Hamilton’s *An Arabian Utopia: The Western Discovery of Oman* (2012); and Philip Ward’s *Travels in Oman: On the Track of the Early Explorers* (1987).
9. These showering rooms—shoulder-high, fifteen-foot cement squares with spigots—were intended for men only to wash off for prayers and after fishing or swimming.

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