

03.03.07 (habe die Umschrift entsprechend des allgemein üblichen Schemas angepaßt und vereinheitlicht, bitte auch im Inhaltsverzeichnis des Berichtes entsprechend abändern):

Oases of Al-Jabal Al-Akhdar (Al-Ayn – Ash-Sharayjah – Al-Qasha – Masayrat Ar-Ruwajah):

Agricultural and Socio-economic Changes and Opportunities in Future

“Al-Jabal Al-Akhdar” means in Arabic “The Green Mountain”. The name gives already some indication about the, for Omani circumstances, lush vegetation which can be found on its higher altitudes, e.g., among others, in the four oases of Al-Ayn, Ash-Sharayjah, Al-Qasha and Masayrat Ar-Ruwajah.

The excursion group met two guides next to the village of Ash-Sharayjah, a couple of meters below the rim of the plateau of Al-Jabal Al-Akhdar. The group was split into a male and a female subgroup because of thoughtfulness for the gender separation in public which is particularly important in rural areas of Oman as Al-Jabal Al-Akhdar is. The male group was led by Uta Dickhöfer, a PhD student of Prof. Schlecht. The female group was led by Dr. Katja Brinkmann, a research assistant of Prof. Bürkert. This report gives a summary of the tour of the male group led by Mrs. Dickhöfer.

The tour started at the top of the village of Ash-Sharayjah. The group went down through the narrow alleys of the village into the terraced fields which lay on a steep mountainside falling down from the Al-Jabal Al-Akhdar plateau into a deep valley. The tour continued along the narrow and steep paths downhill into the terraces and up again for approximately two hours where explanations on the agriculture and the social-economic development of the region were given. Below Ash-Sharayjah, a number of further settlements is situated on different altitudes. Each one is characterized by a particular range of agricultural crops grown in the fields. However, the tour focused only on Ash-Sharayjah and its fields since walking distances between the villages were quite long and difficult along the steep mountainside.

Around Ash-Sharayjah, garlic is the main culture. Products from the mountains such as garlic, pomegranates, limes and rosewater, but also goats are traded for higher prices in the markets of the lowlands, e.g. in Nizwa,. The reason lies in the reputation of the products: produce from Al-Jabal Al-Akhdar is considered per se as more valuable. For example, highland goats are sold in the markets of the lowlands for prices up to 150 Omani Rial (OR), which amounts approximately to 300 €, whereas goats from the lowlands cost usually only around 25 OR. However, a considerable share of the growing fruits such as limes, peaches pomegranates is not anymore harvested despite the high prices that the produce is able to realize. The main reason for this development is that people are not anymore willing to do the hard work in the difficult terrain.

The attitude particularly among the young generation towards work in the fields is changing although people tend to have less income in this remote region than the Omani average. Poor farmers may only possess 3 pomegranate trees. Nevertheless, during the last couple of years income alternatives emerged in the tourism business. The region is planned to be developed into a destination for tourists from the United Arab Emirates (U.A.E.). One local earns only about 300 OR which does not suffice to nourish a family. Fortunately, there are is a growing amount of job opportunities for sufficiently educated work force available in the area. Thus, two to three household members are able to contribute to the income. Also the families' daughters participate by working for example as secretaries for the growing number of tourism businesses. The employment of women resembles the employment of women almost everywhere

else in the world. Despite that women have to (and tend to) graduate from universities with better marks than men, their employment depends stronger on connections and they are earning lower salaries. This represents one aspect of the general change of society and life style in the region. Not only that daughters work in business outside the house, but also traditional informal social security systems are rapidly changing, e.g. the traditional system of helping each other in the village. The government is aware of this development and tries to take it into account.

Marketing cooperatives that would facilitate the sale of local produce do not (yet) exist. Nevertheless, in the course of the increasing tourism business in the area there emerge potential marketing opportunities particularly for old farmers who cannot anymore do the harvest work by themselves. Locals might sell fruits to tourists which are to be harvested from trees by those themselves. Fruits from terraces close to the village might be sold for higher prices than from farer, more remote fields. Such a scheme would increase the income of some families whose members do not possess the skills to work in tourism.

The ownership of the terraces is very heterogeneous and depends mainly on wealth. The poorer a family is the farer down from the village its terraces are located. Large parts of the field are belonging to the mosque, the falaj system, i.e., the traditional irrigation system, and the government. However, the ownership of terraces is partly not anymore known nowadays. This represents another consequence of the above mentioned change of society. Considerable parts of terraces are already abandoned since a couple of years. The falaj system is experiencing a similar fate. Because of the disinterest of young people in the traditional farming and irrigation system, this knowledge is about being lost. Already nowadays the majority of the young generation does not know anymore about it. The government does no efforts to maintain the old, extremely efficient, flexible and adapted system, but is trying to introduce new irrigation schemes.

The mentioned irrigation system, the so called falaj system, is traditionally organized and maintained by a special council which consists of one member from each family. It pays particular attention to the main falaj by which most of the water is transported to the fields of not only Ash-Sharayjah but also of the other villages. The branch aflaj (plural of the Arabic noun "falaj") are to be maintained by each farmer independently. The water arriving in the main falaj is distributed on an hourly basis according to a fixed scheme which is based on the number of inhabitants in each settlement. Thus, Al-Ayn as the largest village receives water each day for 12 hours, Al-Aqha and Al-Qasha 6 hours each. The water transport of the main falaj was measured to reach up to 14 cubic meters per hour, but also volumes of only seven to eight cubic meters occurred. Each village is headed by one sheikh and a council of elders. Communication about important issues for example regarding the irrigation is typically done on Fridays after the main prayer. In recent years, less precipitation occurred which led to water scarcity and even water theft.

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