

# ON THE ANIMAL WORLD OF OMANI PROVERBS

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“يا ريتني بقرة لاتدلل وأكل سمكة”  
(Proverb from Dhofar, South Oman)

## 0 Introduction

The study of Omani proverbs has been a quite neglected field until recently when al-Ḥumaydī started to publish his collection (al-Ḥumaydī 1986-94). In this work, he expresses his hope that the collection will inspire future studies. The present article wishes to answer this “call for papers” in one specific point, *i.e.* in the presentation of the animal world as reflected by these proverbs. This investigation aims to be a semantic analysis of those proverbs that mention animals<sup>1</sup>.

## 1 The sources

There exist two significant collections of Omani proverbs. The first (Jayakar 1904a) contains 320 proverbs<sup>2</sup>. Already the collector of these proverbs has observed “the extensive use the ‘Omānees make of proverbial sayings in their conversation, and ... the facility with which they adapt them to the circumstances calling for their use” (Jayakar 1904a:436). So it is no wonder that the second collection, the one mentioned in the introduction — which appeared more than 80 years later — contains 2749 proverbs, and a supplementary volume is being prepared. The author of the second collection has supplemented the proverbs with sayings that also reflect the moral principles and *Weltanschauung* of the Omani people<sup>3</sup>. Needless to say,

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<sup>1</sup> This article forms part of a larger project examining the living and material environment in Arabic proverbs. This research is supported by OTKA/T 018582.

<sup>2</sup> Reinhardt had previously published two hundred Omani proverbs as a supplement to his grammar in which he described the dialect of one Omani tribe (Reinhardt 1894:396-418). These collections were supplemented by Brockett (1986:35-38) with 26 proverbs collected by him from the Bāṭina region of Oman.

<sup>3</sup> The material was collected from a great variety of informants who represent all the tribes and regions of Oman. Written sources were also made use of. For the list of informants and other sources see al-Ḥumaydī 1986-94 IV, 216-221. Since the collector does not mention the exact provenance of the proverbs, it would be misleading to present them here in transliteration considering the great differences in pronunciation from one Omani region to another.

these proverbs and proverbial sayings are a treasure-trove for all kinds of purposes. Our aim here, however, is confined to the presentation and analysis of the animal world.

## 2 The animal proverbs

### 2.1 The proportion of animal proverbs

More than a third of the 2749 proverbs mention the surrounding fauna, flora and material world. From these references we get a glimpse of what have been determinant factors of Omani life. Many of these proverbs contain references to plants or objects which are present in the entire Arab world<sup>4</sup>. Some others, however, mention things which are peculiar to the Omani society, like, for example, the stick which is used by Omani men, the names of several local tribes, or the references to the special watering system, the *falağ*.

These proverbs include references (in decreasing frequency) to:

- the date palm and its fruit (57)
- Omani villages and towns (50)
- different trees and edible plants (33)
- the sea (26)
- bread and food (21)
- the stick (used by Omani men) (16)
- different dishes (16)
- different types of boats (14)
- the onion and garlic (12)
- several Omani tribes (12)
- the water(course) (10)
- the desert and salt marshes (9)
- the *falağ* (6), etc.

More than a third of the proverbs which refer to the surrounding world — altogether 348 proverbs — contain the name(s) of animals or refer to animals without mentioning their names. The number of these references is 381, since some proverbs speak about two or three animals.

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<sup>4</sup> As has been noted by Goitein (1952:170-171), it is extremely difficult to determine in a certain collection the percentage of proverbs that belong to a common stock found almost all over the Arab world. It is especially so, because sometimes the same proverb appears in entirely distinct forms. This difficulty is also true of the collection made by al-Ḥumaydi. Sometimes, however, the special Omani features are easy to recognize. This is so, for example, in case of proverbs that mention different types of fish, as will be seen later.

## 2.2 The animals

The animals mentioned in the proverbs — in decreasing order of frequency — are as follows:

- birds (طير) and their different species (51), in decreasing frequency
  - طير (generic, 15)
  - غراب (raven, 9)
  - مارخيم / رخمة (vulture, 6)
  - حمام (pigeon, 5)
  - صقر (falcon, 4)
  - عصفور (sparrow, 2)
  - بعير (small bird<sup>5</sup>, 2)
  - حبارى (bustard, 1)
  - ضاضوة (Indian roller, 1)
  - مطيوطو (lapwing, 1)
  - عنقا (griffon, 1)
  - صفر د (quail, 1)
  - بومة (owl, 1)
  - بوباغية (1)
  - قلق (stork, 1)
- sheep and goats<sup>6</sup> (counted together they precede the camel) (47)
  - جاعدة (جعد) (ewe, 12)
  - شاة (goat; never sheep or ewe, 11)
  - غنم (flock, 8)
  - تيس (billy-goat, 7)
  - كباش (ram, 5)
  - هوش (flock, 1)
  - سخلة (young goat, 1)
  - عنز (female goat, 1)
  - جلجا (hornless goat, 1)
- camels (under the following names, in decreasing frequency) (39)
  - جمل (male, 14)
  - ناقة (female, 11)
  - بوش (generic, 7)
  - فاطر (female which has recently given birth, 2)

<sup>5</sup> Dozy (1881 I, 100) explains *ba'ir* as either *plongeon* (diver, little grebe) or *graculus* (jackdaw). The meaning of the proverb where this word occurs and al-Ḥumaydi's explanation ("a bird smaller than the sparrow") make these meanings unlikely here (see al-Ḥumaydi 1986-94 IV, 203, esp. fn. 1).

<sup>6</sup> For the terms denoting these animals cf. Landberg 1901-13 II/2, 712-715. These animals were counted together since *غنم* and *هوش*, meaning 'flock', are used both for goats and sheep.

- بعير (mature male camel, 2)  
 قعود (young male fit for riding, 1)  
 جميلو (diminutive of جمل, 1)  
 مغرب (name of a certain camel, 1)
- dogs (كلب) (31)
  - donkeys (حمار) (26)  
 Donkeys are referred to as *ḥimār* in al-Ḥumaydī's collection, whereas Jayakar (1904a) uses exclusively the word *maṣrī* (*maṣārā*).
  - poultry (25) are represented, in decreasing frequency, by
    - ديك (cock, 11)
    - دجاجة (hen, chicken, 10)
    - فرخ (duckling, chick, 3) and
    - بط (duck, 1)
  - cattle (23) appear, in decreasing frequency, in the forms of
    - ثور (bull)
    - بقرة (cow) and
    - عجل (calf)
  - fish (سمك) (22)  
 Fish occupy only the eighth place in frequency, but besides the generic name (سمك 7) they appear in several varieties, from the different types of sardines (برية 1, جيمة 1, عومة 7), through types of tuna (جيدرة 1) to the biggest fish of Omani waters (جرام 8 2). Next to marine fish we find a small type (صدفة 2) which lives in the *aflāḡ* and other sweet waters. Mention is also made of different types of dried and salted fish (عوالة 2, سحناة 1, قاشع 1, مالحة 1). Next to the fish, crabs (شنجوب 2) also appear in the proverbs as another type of animals that live in water. The great variety of fish mentioned in the proverbs reflect well the importance fishing occupies in the maritime settlements along the coastline of Oman, especially in the Bātina region.
  - cats (سنور) (20)
  - wolves (ذيب) (13)
  - mice (فار) (11)
  - gazelles (غزالة 5, ظبي 3) (8)
  - horses (حصان 1, خيل 7) (8)

<sup>7</sup> For this word see Brockett 1985:164, no. 1142.

<sup>8</sup> From ḥarsūsī *grm*: *yerām* "whale", see Johnstone 1977:41.

<sup>9</sup> The dried and salted flesh of shark (*ḡarḡūr*, also called in some parts of Oman *lḥam* (literary Arabic *luḥm*)). Cf. al-Ḥumaydī 1986-94 II, 184, 350. See also Jayakar 1904b:268; Rhodokanakis 1908-1911 II, 53; and Jayakar 1889:866.

- snakes (حية 1, غول 6) (7)
- foxes (7)
- حصيني<sup>10</sup> (2); حصينية (2); ثعلب (2) and also عوس<sup>11</sup> (1)
- locusts (دبا 1, جراد 6) (7)
- scorpions (عقرب) (6)

The other members of the animal kingdom which are mentioned in the proverbs appear six times or less, and include lions (أسد, 5) and cubs (شبل 1), flies (ذباب 5), ants (جعروف<sup>12</sup> 2, ذرة 1, نمل 1), monkeys (female: سبالة<sup>13</sup> 2, and male: شاذي<sup>14</sup> 1), frogs (قرا 3), dung beetles (خنفسانة 1, بوجعل 1), worms (دود 1), stinging insects (صيفرو دبي hornet, 1) and قط also كت<sup>15</sup> (flea, 1)), lice (قملة 1), mountain goats (وعل 1), rabbits (أرنب 1), and the جوبا (1)<sup>16</sup>.

Domestic animals appear more frequently than wild ones (219:162). It is also interesting to note that while the circle of domestic animals seems to be complete, and a great variety of birds and fish appear, a number of species that live in Oman lack from among the wild animals<sup>17</sup>. A conspicuous lack is that of the hyena, one of the three animals of the enchanters<sup>18</sup>.

The percentage and number of animals in Omani proverbs is presented graphically in Diagram 1.

### 3 Types of meaning and reference

The proverbs featuring animal names can be divided into five groups on the basis of their references. These types are as follows:

- a) The characterization of human behaviour in connection with animals
  - i) Positively evaluated habitual actions
  - ii) Acts condemned by customs or considered unreasonable

<sup>10</sup> For this name see Brockett 1985:82, no. 324.

<sup>11</sup> For this name see Brockett 1985:163, no. 1135.

<sup>12</sup> For this name see Brockett 1985:74, no. 248.

<sup>13</sup> For this name see Brockett 1985:121, no. 712.

<sup>14</sup> From Baluchi *šādō* (cf. Collett 1983:146). For the Persian origin of this word see Steingass 1892:722, where: *šādī* "an ape".

<sup>15</sup> For this form, see Jayakar 1889:838.

<sup>16</sup> al-Ḥumaydī (1986-94 IV, 167, fn. 9) mentions only that *šūbā* is a kind of animal. In a personal communication he further clarified that it is a kind of donkey now extinct.

<sup>17</sup> For a survey of the wild animals in Oman see Harrison 1981.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Jayakar 1904a:436, 481. This animal is rare in other collections as well. It has been found in only one proverb by Al Sudāis (1993: No 9 and also p. 226).

The percentage and number of animals in Omani proverbs

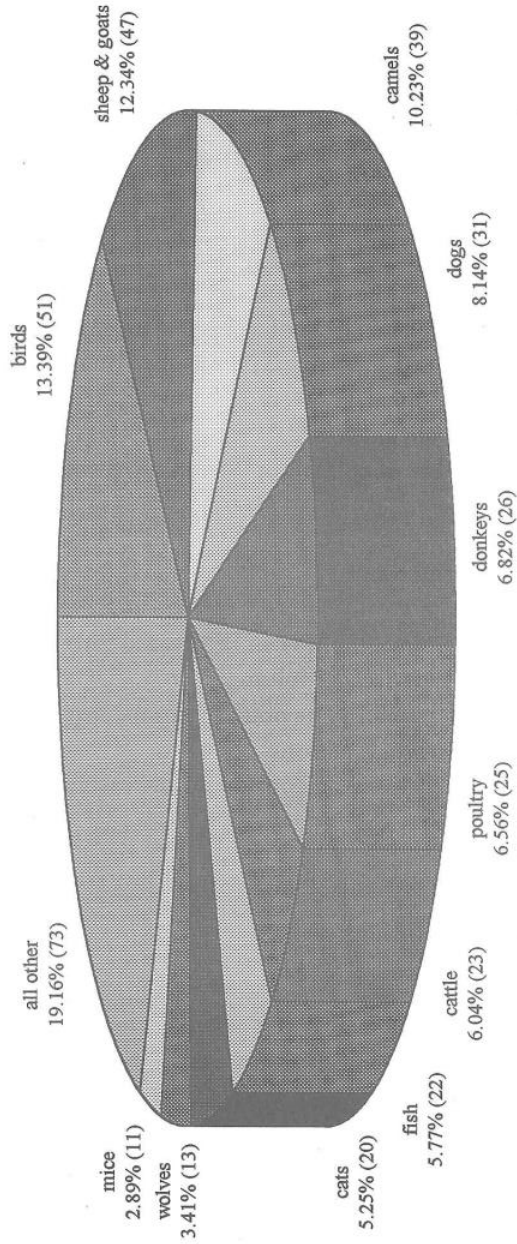


Diagram 1

- iii) Extreme, usually imaginary acts used for the characterization of people's behaviour
- b) The interrelationship of people and animals
  - i) Speaking about people
  - ii) Speaking about animals
- c) Reference to a specific animal or event connected to an animal
- d) The observation, comparison and evaluation of animals
  - i) Characterization of animals
  - ii) Relationship of animals
  - iii) Relationship of animals and plants

An additional type is made up of one proverb where the name of the animal is only chosen for linguistic purposes: *جمل وأنت تقول جبل أنا أقول* (*i.e.* there is a misunderstanding between us)<sup>19</sup>.

The limited space of an article does not permit to list all the proverbs classified according to the above criteria. Following, however, are a few examples chosen to provide a representative selection for each category.

### 3.1 The characterization of human behaviour in connection with animals

The proverbs in this category represent the activities of Omani people which are connected to animals. We get glimpses from the life of shepherds herding mainly sheep and goats (1014). We learn about the importance of certain animals, like the cow (2607) which is used both for its meat and milk, and about the traditionally high position which is occupied by the camel (2749). The long coastline of the country provides ample opportunity for fishing. Consequently, a considerable number of proverbs refer to fishing and the different types of fish, shedding light on a characteristic occupation of many Omanis.

#### 3.1.1 Positively evaluated habitual actions

No. 1057 (II, 287) كل شاه تعلق من عرقوبها  
Every goat is hanged up by its hamstring (*i.e.* everything must be done as is usual).

No. 770 (II, 136) الطيب يخرج الغول من سربه  
Good deeds or kindness bring out the snake from its den.

No. 772 (II, 137) الطير يحط علقب ما علقب  
Birds come for seeds, not the stick.

<sup>19</sup> See al-Ḥumaydi 1986-94 I, 99; also Jayakar 1904a:444, no. 27.

No. 2619 (IV, 167) يُرْوِغَهُ كَمَا يُرْوِغُ الْجُوبَا  
 He beats it away as the *ǧūbā*<sup>20</sup>.

No. 1438 (III, 81) لَوْ مَا اللهُ وَالسَّمَكُ مَا سَاحَ الْمَائِي عَلَى الْحَنَكِ  
 If there was no God and fish, the water could not go down the throat<sup>21</sup>.

### 3.1.2 Acts condemned by customs or considered unreasonable

No. 589 (II, 43) سَنْتُورَةَ مَا يُعَشِّيَهَا  
 No. 1883 (III, 222) = مَا يُعَشِّي سَنْتُورَهُ  
 He does not even feed a cat.

No. 1014 (II, 269) كَثْرَةَ الرَّعِيَانِ تَسَيِّبُ الْعَنَمَ  
 Too many shepherds will disperse the herd.

No. 2219 (III, 323) مِنْ كَثْرَةِ الصِّيَّادِينَ فَلَّ السَّمَكُ  
 If there are too many fishermen the fish will flee.

No. 1135 (II, 323) كَمَا بُو مُسَخَّنٌ/يُسَخَّنُ مَالِحَهُ  
 Like he who heats up the [dried] salted fish.

No. 1196 (II, 350) كَمَا عَجُوزٌ تَلُوجُ عَوَالَهُ  
 Like an old woman who turns the dried fish in her mouth.

No. 2509 (IV, 117) يَا سَارِقُ الدِّيَكِ فَوْقَ رَاسِكَ رِيْشٌ  
 Oh you stealer of the cock, there is a feather on your head (*i.e.* your crime is apparent).

No. 2607 (IV, 162) يَذْبَحُ الْبَقْرَةَ عَزَاءَ الشَّاهِ  
 He slaughters the cow mourning the goat.

<sup>20</sup> The proverb is also current with *ǧālab* according to one of my informants. See also fn. 14.

<sup>21</sup> This proverb is current in the coastal areas of Oman where fish is the staple diet. It is used when drinking during meals.



No. 1741 (III, 91) اللِّي دَلِيلَه غُرَابٌ يُطِيحُ فِي الْحِفْرِ  
 Whose guide is a raven will fall to a pit. (Cf. No. 2438)

### 3.2.2 Speaking about animals

In these proverbs people are affected by the animals or are likened to them, whether they appear in the sayings or not.

No. 1843 (III, 212) مَا يَدْخُلُ قُبَيْتَكَ فَارِ إِلَّا مِنْ عَدَاوَةِ الْأَهْلِ وَالْجَارِ  
 Mice do not enter your house except if there is enmity between its inhabitants and their neighbours.

No. 1093 (II, 304) كَلَابٌ وَمَلْبَسَهُ ثِيَابٌ  
 Dogs but dressed in clothes.

No. 1098 (II, 306) الْكَلْبُ كَلْبٌ وَلَوْ طَوَّقْتَهُ الذَّهَبَ  
 Dogs are dogs even if you put a golden collar on them. (Cf. No. 1093)

No. 1105 (II, 310) الْكَلْبَةُ الدَّغْمَا سَارِقَةٌ مَا سَارِقَهُ اللَّصَّةُ هَيْئَةً  
 The black bitch, whether steals or not, is the thief (*i.e.* people are prejudiced and hate those against whom they are prejudiced).

No. 745 (II, 123) طَائِحَه فِيهِ ذُبَابَه  
 A fly has dropped in it (*i.e.* in a dish, so nobody would wish to eat it.)

To this category belongs the opposite of this proverb as well:

No. 1731 (III, 177) مَا طَائِحَه فِيهِ ذُبَابَه  
 No fly has dropped in it (*i.e.* in a dish, so it is desirable).<sup>25</sup>

No. 892 (II, 204) لِغُرَابٍ مَا يَدْرِلُ إِلَّا عَلَى أَرْضِ لِحْرَابٍ  
 The raven leads to destitution<sup>26</sup>.

<sup>25</sup> These last two proverbs (No. 745 and 1731) are used in a wider sense to express desirability or undesirability.

<sup>26</sup> Though the wording is different, the meaning is that of No. 1741 quoted above.

## 3.3 Reference to a specific animal or event connected to an animal

No. 2272 (III, 340) مَوْعَلْتُمْكَ بِالْقِسْمَةِ .. قَالَ اللَّيُّ فَوَجَّهَ الذَّيْبُ  
 What has made you learn how to divide? He answered: what [I saw] in the face of  
 the wolf<sup>27</sup>.

No. 902 (II, 209) غُولُ حَنَابِشَةَ  
 The serpent of the Hanabša [Omani tribe]<sup>28</sup>

No. 1183 (II, 343) كَمَا سَنُورُ آدَمَ شَلَّيْتَهُ مَنَ حَطَّيْتَهُ / وَدَرَّتَهُ مَنَ  
 Like the cat of Adam, you can lift it or put it down, its weight is always one *man*  
 (4 kgs)<sup>29</sup>.

No. 1625 (III, 142) مَا أَبْغَى غَيْرَ مِِنَ قَبَاضِ الْعَيْنِ  
 He did not accept [the help to stop the bull] save from al-<sup>c</sup>Ayn<sup>30</sup>.

## 3.4 The observation, comparison and evaluation of animals

Approximately half of the animal proverbs belong to this category, which, in its turn, can be divided into the following sub-categories:

## 3.4.1 Characterization of animals

## 3.4.1.1 As expressed by a complete sentence

No. 973 (II, 248) الْقَرَّةُ مَا تَنْفُقُ الْغَيْلَ  
 A frog cannot exhaust the running water of the wadi (*i.e.* it is too weak to exert any influence).

<sup>27</sup> The background story of this proverb is well-known throughout the Arab world. It is the story of the lion, the fox and the wolf hunting together and how the fox learnt to divide the prey after the misfortune of the wolf when he had devided the prey in a way not accepted by the lion.

<sup>28</sup> The story runs that the seven members of this tribe were one by one bitten by a serpent. This was only possible because they were ashamed of having been bitten and hid it from the others, so they all fell victim to this serpent.

<sup>29</sup> The proverb refers to reliable, steady people. From our point of view, however, its importance lies in mentioning a specific area of Oman. Adam is said to be as famous for its cats as is another area, Heel, for its billy-goat (see the corresponding proverb no 285).

<sup>30</sup> Though no animal is mentioned in this proverb, it becomes apparent from the accompanying story that the events centred around a bull and his owner. The story is as follows: There was a man in the town of 'Ibrī who had a bull which escaped one day. The people were frightened and offered their help to the man to stop the running bull, but he refused their help until finally, they arrived at the distant village of al-<sup>c</sup>Ayn, where the bull was stopped with the help of the local people. Cf. al-Ḥumaydi 1986-94 III, 142.



## 3.4.2 Relationship of animals

The observation of the animal worlds extends to the comparison of different species. Next to proverbs describing well-known pairs, like the cat and the mouse (e.g. Nos 886, 2429 and 2709), more unusual pairs can also be found. Here belong the animals of the following examples:

No. 912 (II, 217) فَبِطْنُ الْغُورِ وَلَا فَبِطْنُ الْقِرَّةِ  
 Rather inside a snake than a frog (*i.e.* the snake symbolises strength, while the frog weakness).

No. 776 (II, 142) الظَّبْيَا تَقُودُهَا غَيْرَ لَانِهَا  
 The gazelles are lead by their offsprings (*i.e.* it is the opposite what should be, since the old should lead the young).

No. 597 (II, 49) الشَّاذِي فَعَيْنُ أُمَّهُ غَيْرَالُ  
 The monkey is a gazelle in the eyes of his mother (*i.e.* (motherly) love is blind).

No. 642 (II, 68) شَنْجُوبٌ مُسَيِّحٌ جُرَامُ  
 A crab draws a whale ashore.

No. 643 (II, 68) شَنْجُوبٌ مُفَرِّقٌ جَمَلُ  
 A crab drowns a camel.

These last two proverbs reflect encouragement for the weak to challenge the big and strong, and also warn the latter not to undervalue or disdain the potentials of the seemingly weak and small.

## 3.4.3 Relationship of animals and plants

No. 679 (II, 89) الصَّدُّ مِنْ قِصَاصِهِ السَّعْتَرُ  
 The wild thyme becomes the small fish (that live in the *falag*)<sup>33</sup>.

No. 891 (II, 204) غُرَابٌ فَوْقَ يَاسْمِينِهِ  
 Raven on a jasmine (*i.e.* lack of harmony)<sup>34</sup>.

<sup>33</sup> The proverb refers to harmony by the example of the strong smelling fish and the wild thyme which when cooked with the fish takes away its strong odour.

<sup>34</sup> This proverb is the opposite of No. 679 by the portrayal of the black raven on a bush white jasmine.

No. 767 (II, 133) الطُّوْلُ طَوَّلٌ نَخْلُهُ وَالْعَقِيلُ عَقِيلٌ سَخْلُهُ  
 The length is that of a palm-tree, but the brain is that of a young goat (*i.e.* appearances can be deceptive).

No. 2737 (IV, 210) يَوْمَ النَّاسِ طَوَّتْ دَعْوَنُهَا جَالِغِرَابٌ يَسْطَعُ  
 The day people fold their palm leaves [on which the dates were spread out to dry], there comes the raven to unfold them<sup>35</sup>.

#### 4 The morale of the proverbs

The morale of the proverbs would need a study in its own right. It can, however, be observed that the same morale may be expressed by several proverbs<sup>36</sup>. In this respect, it can be stated that several animal proverbs also share one idea. Perhaps the most remarkable example is provided by the bunch of proverbs that describe restless, fidgety people.

No. 1195 (II, 350) كَمَا عَجِيلٌ مَا مَلْحُوسٌ  
 Like an unlicked calf (*i.e.* it has not yet been licked by its mother after its birth, so it became restless and disturbed)

No. 2560 (IV, 140) يَتَهَامِشُ كَمَا لَحْمُ الْعَجِيلِ  
 Shakes like the meat of the [freshly slaughtered] calf.

No. 2553 (IV, 138) يَتَبَتَبُ كَمَا كَبِيشُ لِحَنَاضِلِ  
 Jumps like the ram of the Handalites. (This proverb is connected to a ram of this tribe which was famous for its constant merry jumping).

No. 1133 (II, 322) كَمَا بُو مَجْنَابِيَّةٌ جَرَادٌ  
 Like whose [mother] was a locust collector (*i.e.* according to local belief the child whose mother had collected locust while pregnant will be as restless as a locust)

No. 1162 (II, 335) كَمَا جَرَادٌ فِعْدَلٌ  
 Like locust in a saddle-bag (*i.e.* these locust keep moving continuously).

To these animal proverbs can be added a proverb from the surrounding material world expressing the same idea:

<sup>35</sup> This proverb is used to express misdemeanour. The raven, once again, embodies negative values, as was seen already in proverbs 891, 892 and 1741 quoted above.

<sup>36</sup> It is also very common that one proverb is used to express different morales.

No. 1170 (II, 338)

كَمَا حَلَوَاهُ فَتَدَسَّتْ

Like [hot and fluid] sweet in a vessel (*i.e.* it flutters).

## 5 Conclusion

A comparative analysis of animal proverbs would merit some attention. It can, however, be said at this point that although several proverbs most certainly belong to a common Arabic stock of proverbs<sup>37</sup>, there are several others that cannot be found outside Oman<sup>38</sup>. From these two groups a picture of Omani life can be drawn as is seen by the local people.

Though the detailed comparison of the representation of animals in different proverb collections is outside the scope of the present investigation, eight animals (or animal groups<sup>39</sup>) were chosen and their relative occurrences are presented in Diagrams 2 and 3 on the basis of three proverb collections, those of al-Ḥumaydī, Al Sudaīs and the collection of Classical Arabic proverbs by al-Maydānī<sup>40</sup>. These animals, selected on the basis of their frequency in Omani proverbs, are as follows: sheep and goats, camels, dogs, cats, cattle, fish, donkeys, and wolves. Diagram 2 presents the frequency of the selected animals within the entire collections, whereas diagram 3 presents their frequency within the animal proverbs of each collection. From the 6000 proverbs collected by al-Maydānī 1100 contain references to animals (18%), this ratio is 22% in the collection of Al Sudaīs (263 proverbs from 1100), whereas it is only 12.66% in case of the Omani proverbs (348 proverbs from 2749). This, in itself, reflects the difference in the societies where the proverbs were collected.

It is apparent from Diagram 2 that the proverbs reflect the environment, the lifestyle and cultural attitudes of the people from whom the proverbs were collected. The cultural attitudes especially dominate the Classical proverbs where the ratio of different animals reflects, on the one hand, the urban environment where these proverbs were collected, and, on the other hand, the Bedouin cultural heritage which was the cradle of a significant number of proverbs. The prominent position of the camel in the Classical proverbs can easily be explained by its being the symbol of the

<sup>37</sup> A good example is No. 767 (II, 133) – quoted above – which can also be found in *e.g.* Mubayyid 1986:189.

<sup>38</sup> An excellent example for Omani proverbs with special local flavour is provided by the many proverbs which mention fish.

<sup>39</sup> Sheep and goats were treated as one group, and animals were not differentiated according to their sex.

<sup>40</sup> In connection with al-Maydānī's collection one should mention the series of articles written by T. Fahd where he collected and analysed the animal proverbs of that collection (Fahd 1971-78).

The percentage of selected animals in three collections

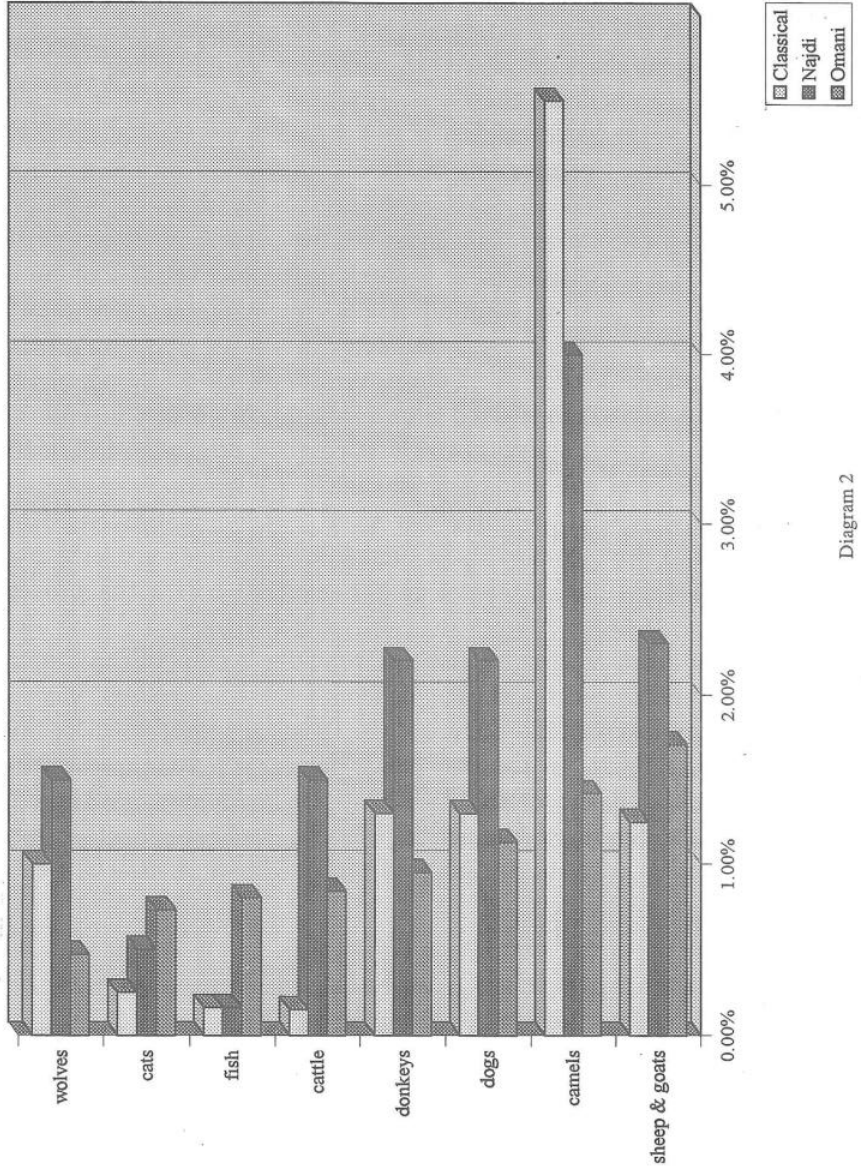


Diagram 2

The percentage of selected animals within the animal proverbs of three collections

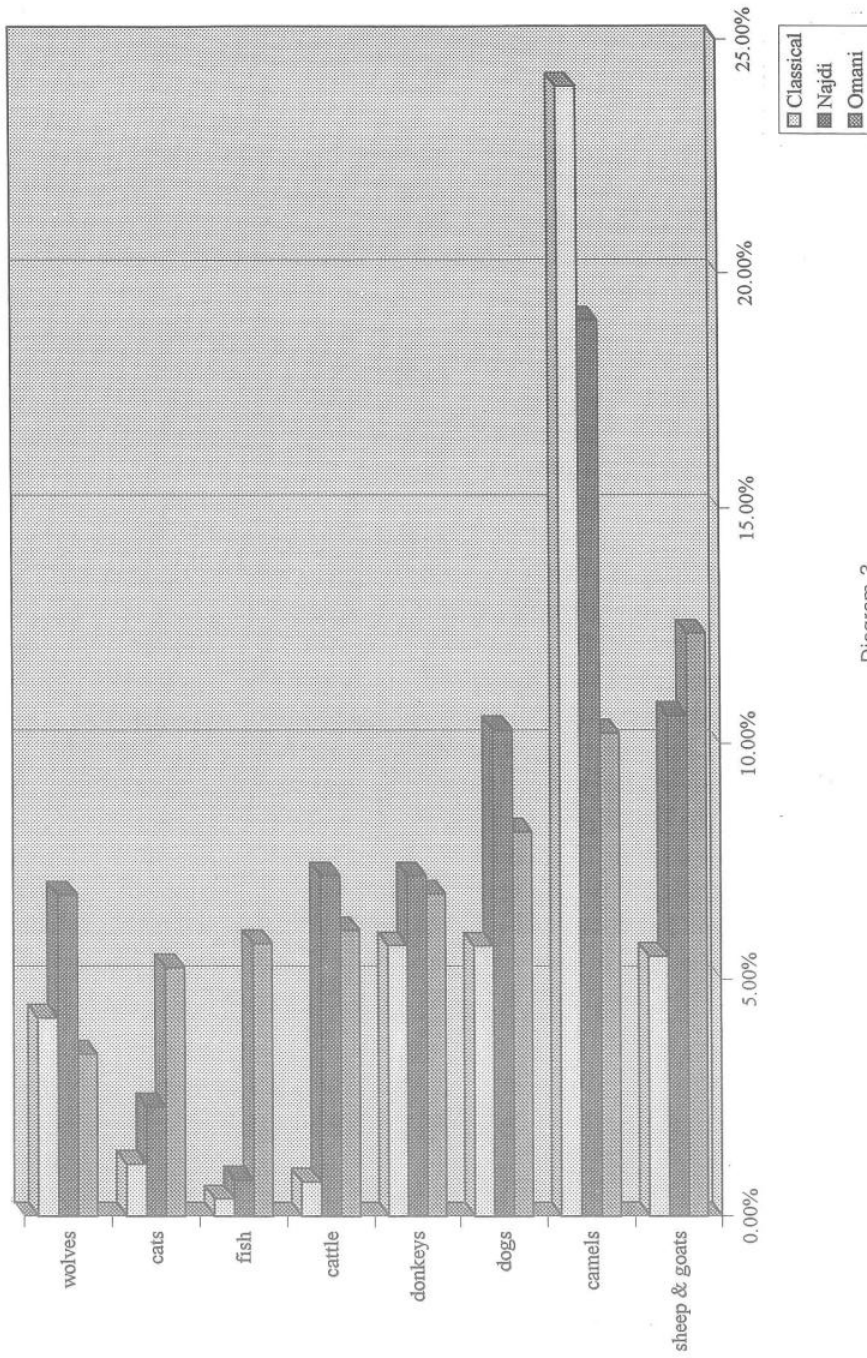


Diagram 3

highly esteemed Bedouin culture, whereas the relatively elevated position of the wolf – as compared to, for example, the cattle – can be understood if we think of the position this animal fills in the poetry of an extended period of Arabic literature<sup>41</sup>. The negligible number of cattle and other representative of animal husbandry proves that proverbs were not collected from rural communities and there was a general despise and disregard for agriculture. Though the comparison of different present day dialectal proverb collections to the Classical collection of al-Maydānī may yield interesting results, present day collections – so, for example, the proverbs of Najd and Oman – can more primarily be compared. It is especially so, since when al-Maydānī collected the Classical proverbs he did not concentrate upon his age or a certain territory, but span across centuries and various territories. In this respect, the less sedentary nature of Najdi society is apparent from the relative frequency of the selected animals<sup>42</sup>. In spite of the diversity of Omani landscape, the society in its majority can be considered sedentary, and the largest nomadic territory being the desert of Ġaddat al-Harāsīs which area did not belong to the areas of collection, a fact easily understandable knowing how scarcely populated this large area is, and how difficult the access to the different tribes is.

Animal proverbs reflect the environment in which they are collected. This is best apparent from the frequency of proverbs mentioning fish. The long coastline of Oman and the traditional fishing industry explain why the number of Omani proverbs containing references to fish is nine times more than those of Najd. Wild, semi-wild animals (wolves, dogs) appear more frequently in Najdi proverbs. This ratio is also true for the camel, and we should not forget that Najd is the home of camel breeding nomads. Whereas the more rural and semi-nomadic characteristic of Oman is well expressed by the higher frequency of sheep and goats. The sedentary nature of Omani society is also well represented by the cat which occurs about three times more than in the Najdi proverbs.

The content analysis of animal proverbs of Oman has shown that although these proverbs amount only to one seventh of the whole collection, the minute observation of animal life and its vivid representation in the animal proverbs confirm that they are indispensable to our understanding of Omani way of life and thinking.

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<sup>41</sup> In connection with the place of the wolf in Arabic literature, cf. Ullmann 1981.

<sup>42</sup> For the scope of the collection see Al Sudaīs 1993:vii.

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