

# The Significance of Traditional Societies Practices in Archaeological Investigations

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**Abstract:** *The practices of traditional societies have been verified to be useful in the clarification and interpretation of ancient practices carried out by prehistoric groups. Therefore, this paper presents illustrative examples of some practices of the traditional societies to evidentially show that the extent to which traditional ways and methods can be useful in archaeological explanation. They serve as an interpretation that removes obstacles to understanding. To this end, three examples of traditional practices were selected from the Sudan and the Sultanate of Oman to illustrate the significance of traditional societies in archaeological investigations. The examples represent the following traditional societies' practices: Catching the lungfish in southern Sudan. The Sudanese Baggara Humur tribe: meat preserving methods. The Omani Bedouins snaring of the spiny tailed lizard.*

**Keywords:** *Traditional Societies, prehistoric activities, lungfish, Bedouins, Humr, Oman, .*

## Introduction

Prehistoric groups and traditional societies have long been an attention and a relevance for some archaeological researchers. Researching and scrutinizing the practices of both groups prove to be useful and worthwhile. Generally, and in most cases, studying such groups is believed to be helpful in improving and promoting our understanding of prehistory.

This paper presents some examples of the possible role of the traditional societies' practices in archaeological investigations. Comprehending the proficiency and the skillfulness of these societies is imperative. It is unequivocal that their knowledge and command of fundamentals in the environment proved to be an entry to understanding prehistory. For this reason, it is vital to verify the value and the implications of traditional societies' practices in enhancing archaeological investigations. The ways and methods of

traditional societies facilitate and empower archaeological investigations stepping back in time. Indeed, studying and documenting the adaptation and dealings of traditional societies would improve our perception of prehistory. Indeed, the customary ways and methods of the traditional societies can possibly enhance our understanding of prehistoric groups.

Therefore, this paper considers examples from two different geographical regions, namely the Sultanate of Oman and the Republic of Sudan. Some of the ways and methods of the following three traditional societies will be discussed:

1. The Humr tribe in western Sudan.
2. The Bedouins (goat herders) in Oman
3. The Nilotic tribes in southern Sudan.

Examples of some of the ways and methods of these traditional societies can possibly illustrate how prehistoric groups could have

had carried out certain actions. Additionally, traditional societies' practices can illustrate the special relationship the prehistoric groups had with their environment which made them an affiliated part with all-over ecosystem. Therefore, it would be useful to explore the traditional societies and discuss some of the ways and methods of these societies before proceeding with this attempt.

In the Sultanate of Oman, traditional nomadic pastoralists consist of families and each one is composed of a man, a woman and few children. They are either engaged in transhumant seasonal movements or cyclic movements. The environmental conditions often outline their ways and methods and culture.

The traditional societies discussed in this paper are commonly known for their adaptation and economy, where the family and occupation are a merged common line of responsibility for all members of each family. The division of labour that organizes the business of every family is based on gender and age. Moreover, what characterizes these societies is that they do not use modern technology or energy. Evidently, it is their beliefs, traditions, indigenous knowledge and customs that would give direction, shape and govern their life. In fact, the adaptation of these societies is a permanent cultural process of keeping a balance between the population and the natural resources in their environment (ElMahi 2011, 2013).

The economy of the traditional societies discussed in this paper is founded on traditional subsistence strategies. Such type of economy is mainly based on production and distribution, which are carried out at the local community level, primarily for local consumption (cf. Bodely 1997: 33).

In reality, traditional societies discussed

in this paper can be hunters, gatherers, pastoralists or farmers. Examples of the ways and methods carried out by pastoralists can easily indicate the potential implications of the traditional societies on archaeological research. Accordingly, it is plausible that pastoralism is a scheme and a way of life adopted by these livestock owners. The pastoralists move with their animals across a recognized tribal territory. The ability and adaptive system of these pastoralists is a cultural characteristic that enhances a successful adaptation by regulating decision making process and the flow of information, (cf. Bodley 1997: 295). In Oman, their life is based on transhumant movements and a daily cyclic movement to enable the animal grazing according to the potential of the seasons (ElMahi, 2011, 2013). In fact, during their movements, they exploit a range of natural resources. Consequently, it is an adaptive success, which is an enduring survival of the pastoralists cultural system in a given environment. The successful adaptation of the pastoralists is the result of their indigenous knowledge, which is a combination of the experience of their forefathers and what they have learnt from their own experiences.

### **Ethnoarchaeology**

At all times, the archaeological evidence does not seem to sufficiently explain the cultural material of prehistoric groups. Hence, a general awareness has emerged emphasizing that ethnography can aid archaeology by studying traditional societies' ways, methods and culture. In the sixties of the last century, such enquiries formed ethnoarchaeology as a subdiscipline of archaeology and began to advance archaeological investigations (cf. London 2000 and David and Kramer 2001).

Archaeologists have always searched for answers related to the nature of prehistoric

artefacts, their function and purpose. It is the prehistoric ways of doing something, especially systematic ways; that imply orderly logical arrangements. Thus, ethnoarchaeology targets traditional societies through studying their ways, methods and cultural practices. Indeed, studying the ways and methods of traditional societies reveal some practices and some of their customary ways of operation and behaviour. This can be significant since the archaeological material does not necessarily reveal the ways and behaviour of the prehistoric groups. Therefore, the customary ways of practices and behavior of the traditional societies can possibly provide and furnish a reasonable analogy between the contemporary traditions and the ancient ones.

Ethnoarchaeology is essential, since archaeologists frequently find themselves unaware of the ways and methods of the traditional societies, let alone the prehistoric groups. Therefore, ethnoarchaeology is crucially beneficial and required.

David and Kramer (2001) emphasized that ethnoarchaeology is the ethnographic study of groups, which assists archaeological investigations to a large extent. On the other hand, it was recognized that general anthropological studies do not fulfil or justify the objectives of archaeological investigations. Accordingly, the ethnoarchaeological approach is crucially needed in fulfilling the objectives of the archaeological research (cf. London *ibid.*). Undoubtedly, ethnoarchaeology proved to be one of the illuminating methods employed in archaeological research.

On the other hand, quite often archaeological evidence fell short to explain or indicate the practices and ways of prehistoric groups. Simply, because the archaeological material evidence does not explain everything. Therefore, the practices of traditional societies

can possibly present parallels to prehistoric ways and methods.

Indeed, the following can possibly be achieved:

- First, the traditional present-day ways and methods enable archaeologists to establish a reasonable analogy between the contemporary and the antique.
- Second, some of the ways and methods of the traditional societies can possibly explain the archaeological evidence. Indisputably, traditional practices present similarity of function and characteristics as analogous to the prehistoric one.

This can establish a reasonable analogy, especially with the prehistoric practices, which did not leave behind any substantial revealing evidence. Without such analogies, considerable archaeological evidence and prehistoric characteristic or habitual practices would have remained unexplained or unknown.

Moreover, the analogy reached by ethnoarchaeological inquiry can be a related-noticed activity to ancient happenings and actions. Thus, it is necessary to notice that the analogies reached by ethnoarchaeological investigations are not evidence, but rather parallels between traditional and ancient cultural practices in similar environments. The analogies provided by ethnoarchaeology enable archaeologists to understand the nature and the cultural ways of prehistoric groups.

Consequently, ethnoarchaeologists research traditional groups for understanding the archaeology of prehistoric groups through their material culture. Furthermore, studying the ways and methods of contemporary groups; enabled ethnoarchaeology to offer reasonable analogies that can explain how prehistoric people adapted to certain or similar environmental

conditions. However, it must be noticed that what ethnoarchaeology offers to archaeology is not evidence, but rather explanations and insights into how prehistoric groups could have had managed their life through adaptation and techniques. Furthermore, several studies demonstrated this situation (cf. London 2000; Deal 1998; Kramer 1997; Dietler and Herbich 1998; Hayden 1987; Herbich 1987; ElMahi 2011, 2010, 2002, 2001, 2000 and 1988).

Certainly, ethnoarchaeology proved beyond doubt that it is very advantageous in assisting archaeological investigations. In a sense, it promotes the general understanding of prehistoric people and their ways. It elucidates what often the archaeological material evidence fails to provide. Decidedly, studying the ways and methods and cultural practices of traditional societies proved to be a useful branch of knowledge and useful in archaeological investigations.

### Subsistence preparation

Archaeological investigations have indicated that during the Mesolithic and Neolithic periods, hunting groups were frequent and very common in many landmasses. These prehistoric groups must have had hunted large-sized animals such as giraffes, elands, hartebeests, buffalos, etc. Numbers of individuals in prehistoric hunter-gather and pastoralist groups must have been smaller similar to the traditional groups such as the contemporary Hadza in Tanzania and the African pastoralists. Searching the possible economic arrangements adopted by man during prehistoric times, lead to a crucial question as to how the prehistoric foragers or pastoralists dealt with the surplus meat from a hunted big animal. In other words, what did they do with the remaining meat after everyone got their share?

The customs and practices of the traditional

societies can possibly provide an answer to this question. Pastoralists in the Sudan and African countries handle the meat of large animals whether wild or domestic in an accustomed way of their subsistence preparations.

Cunninson (1980: 49-60) studied the Humr pastoralists in western Sudan. He presents the way they handle the meat of a hunted large size animal such as a giraffe. Humr horse riders hunt giraffes by chasing them with long spears. When a giraffe fell down, men and women would start to cut it into long strips (plate 1 below). Then, the giraffe meat strips are carried on cows back to be hanged and dried in the sun inside the group camp (biltong) (plate 2 below).

In the camp, the giraffe meat is then cut into small strips of 15-30 cm. in length and hanged on a cord (a line made of twisted fibers) tied between two trees to dry out in the sun. After the meat strips are dried, it is well-preserved biltong. Then, it can be handled in the following two ways:

1. The strips of meat are kept for a long time as they are well-kept and preserved. Later



Plate 1: Men and women of the Humr tribe cutting a giraffe. (After Cunninson 1980: 55).



**Plate 2: strips of giraffe meat hanged in the sun to dry.**  
(After Cunnison 1980:56)

on, they can be cooked after they are cut into small pieces. In plate (2) the Humr hanging the strips of meat, which they can carry in their movements.

2. The dried meat is pounded in a wooden mortar. This action makes the dried meat semi-powdered and it can be carried, preserved and cooked whenever it is needed.

Both actions make the meat preserved for a long period. And the intentions in the process can be summarized in the following:

1. It is known that the spoilage in meat is initiated by the attack of bacteria and breakdown of muscle proteins by proteolytic enzymes. The bacteria and proteolytic enzymes require for their activity a suitable temperature, availability of oxygen, and optimum moisture content. Accordingly, the preservation of the meat is actually completed by controlling the bacteria and enzymes by reducing their essentially needed requirement (moisture). The strips of the meat (biltong) are dried by depriving it of its natural qualities and change the nature of

the muscle proteins, which is accomplished by reducing the water-holding capacity of the meat to a very low level. This process enables the preservation of meat for much longer periods of time.

2. Now, the dried meat strips are a portable substance that can easily be transported from one place to another when necessary. By doing this, the surplus of meat is transferred into (biltong) and carried in their nomadic and transhumant movements.

This is a clear manifestation of a subsistence economy practiced by traditional communities in which production and distribution are conducted and managed at the community level and mainly for local utilization (cf. Bodley 1997: 33). Moreover, these traditional societies preserved the meat of large animals by this traditional way and made it small in size and light in weight. By doing this, they can easily take it in their movements. Elderly informants from the Humr tribe stressed that this is a long-established practice, which they learned from their grandfathers. Therefore, the Humr pastoralists' economic strategies do not necessitate the storage of sustenance. They are mobile and continuously moving and this is a clear means to possess and to save the meat of large sized animals for considerable time.

Usually, the Humr like all traditional pastoral groups do not slaughter their animals for food. They take animals from the herd only in for special occasions, such as marriage and other important celebrations. For them, the herd is the principal capital of their life and economy. Therefore, they are fully dependent on the herd for their survival. Nevertheless, they use secondary resources such as wild animals, etc. for their nutrition.

The practices of the Humr and other traditional pastoral societies in the Sudan and

other African countries present a reasonable analogy that can cast light on the possible ways and methods probably adopted by prehistoric groups. In such an environment, it is reasonable to assume that there seems to be no other way to preserve the extra meat for later periods than cutting the animals' meat into strips and drying it in the sun. Consequently, this assumption stands as a sensible analogical parallel for the possible ways and customs of the prehistoric groups. Substantially, this is a sensible explanation that can describe the practices of the prehistoric groups.

### The lungfish *Protopterus* sp.

El Zakiab site in Central Sudan is located 18 kilometers North of the capital Khartoum. The site is on the eastern bank of the river Nile and around 5 kilometers from the Nile main course. The material unearthed by the excavations of the site reveals that it was Neolithic. The site is dated to 5660±80 B.P. (T-3050 MASCA calibrated 4525±65 B.C.) and 5350±90 B.P. (T-2818 MASCA calibrated 4225± 155 B.C.) (ElMahi 1981: 60).

The excavation of the site uncovered faunal osteological material, which included several fish species such as lungfish (*Protopterus* sp.), Tilapia (*Tilapia* sp.), catfish (*Clarias* sp.), Lates niloticus (*L. niloticus*), thick skinned fish (*Heteratis* sp.) etc.

Interestingly, the remains of the lungfish (*Protopterus* sp.) represent (72 %) of the whole fish remains discovered in the site (Plate 3). This fish is known for its capability to aestivation during dry seasons, when river water resides. In such conditions, it digs a burrow or a sleeping nest with a small opening in it to allow the fish to breath (Plate 4). Indeed, the fish aestivate in burrows or sleeping nests, dug into the mud, for the duration of the dry season. In the rainy seasons and when the river water level rises, the



Plate 3: The lungfish *Protopterus* sp.

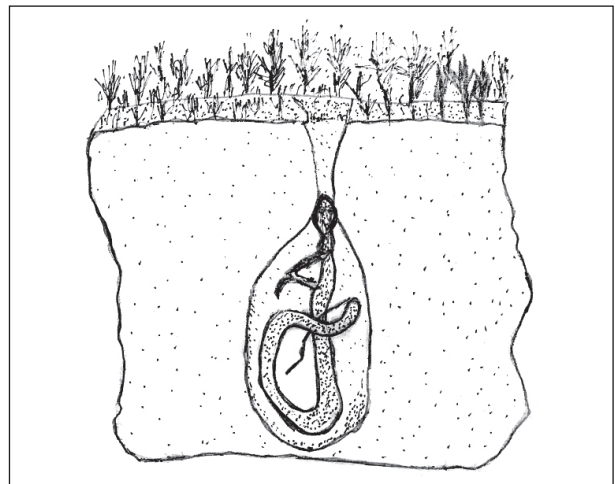


Plate 4: The lungfish digs a burrow or a sleeping nest with a small opening in it to allow it to breath.

lungfish ends its state of aestivation and returns to its normal activities. It should be understood that aestivation is not part of the annual cycle of the lungfish, but it is only to avoid lack of water.

ElMahi (1981:60-65) stressed that the high percentage of the lungfish (*Protopterus* sp.) does not represent the preference of the inhabitants of El Zakiab site for certain fish species to the other.

The statistical representation of the lungfish by (72 %) of the whole fish remains discovered in the site, raises a question. ElMahi (1981:60-65) made tests and estimation with inferential statistics, which showed that the presence of the lungfish in the recovered material cannot occur or take place by chance or accidentally. However, it should be noted that this high percentage of the remains of the lungfish cannot be explained in terms of the preference of the inhabitants of the site for certain fish species.

ElMahi (*ibid.*) explored the practices of traditional societies in southern Sudan and West Africa. This research verified that those men, women and children of these traditional societies would search the river banks for the burrows or the sleeping nests of the lungfish. To catch the fish, they would simply dig the burrow in the river bank. Obviously, it is a summer activity when the river water is low. This is an unhurried effort, which is capable of accepting delay with equanimity. Moreover, it does not need any tools or skills and it is beyond the tribal division of labour regulations.

Therefore, the ways and methods of the traditional societies in southern Sudan and west Africa would explain the high presence of the lungfish remains in the Neolithic site of Al Zakiab in central Sudan. Apparently, it is the ways and methods of these traditional societies that can cast light on prehistoric activities and explain what the osteo-archeological material could not define.

### Snaring the spiny-tailed lizard

Traditional societies such as the Bedouins in the desert of Oman snare the spiny-tailed lizard *Uromastix a. microlepis* (Plate 5). The Bedouins in Oman catch this lizard, which comes as a part of their occasional diet. ElMahi (2002:31-46) studied the methods of the Bedouins in snaring and consuming this lizard in Oman. He (*ibid.*) concluded that the spiny-tailed lizard *Uromastix a. microlepis* is a dietary constituent in the occasional diet of the Bedouins of Central Oman.

The field investigations by ElMahi (*ibid.*) documented two methods used by the Bedouins to catch this type of lizards:

- (A) The Bedouins would dig the burrow of the lizard to catch it.
- (B) The Bedouins would set a snare in the

entrance of the lizard burrow (Plate 6).

These are the traditional methods used by the Bedouins to snare the spiny tailed lizard. This reptile comes as an occasional diet in their food. It is part of their occasional diet, which is neither a staple diet nor a seasonal one. They do not eat the lizard every day, it comes occasionally backing their staple and seasonal diets.

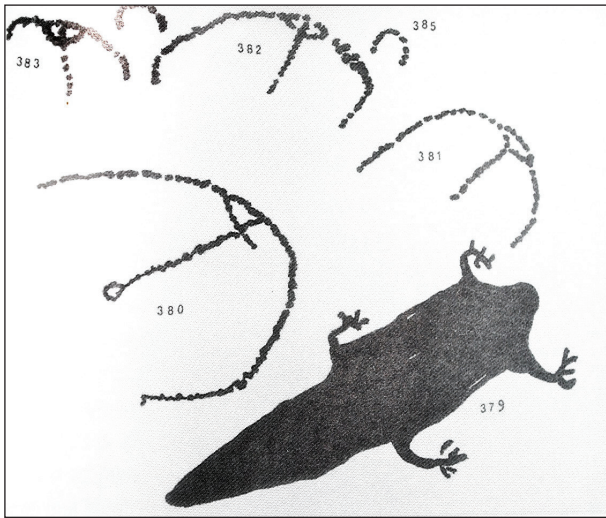
The rock scenes of Wadi Damm, in the north-west of the city of Tabuk in north-western Saudi Arabia (cf. Anati 1972 & 1974 and Khan, 1993) present interesting scenes. These rock scenes were dated to c.2500-1500 BC in the Bronze/Iron Age (Khan 1993: 122, plates 50-53, 70). These rock scenes contain images of the lizard associated with unidentified figures



Plate 5: The spiny-tailed lizard *Uromastix a. microlepis*



Plate 6: A snare set at the entrance of the burrow.



**Plate 7: The spiny-tailed lizard in the rock art of Wadi Damm, Saudi Arabia (After Khan 1991: pl. 52).**



**Plate 8: Compare the figures in the rock art scene of Wadi Damm in Saudi Arabia and the snare set by the Bedouins in Oman.**

(Plate 7). Khan (1993: 130) correctly identified the reptile in these scenes as “zabb” or “dab”, which is caught and eaten by the Bedouins in Saudi Arabia. However, Anati (*ibid.*) considers in the figures with the lizard as unidentified. On the other hand, Khan (1993: 122) identifies these figures as bows associated with a lizard.

ElMahi (*ibid.*) discussed these scenes and concluded that when the details of these rock scenes are assessed, a clear similarity would emerge between the figures in the rock art scene from Saudi Arabia and the traditional snare used by the Bedouins in Oman (Plate 8).

The comparison of the prehistoric scenes (the lizard and bow-shaped) and the traditional snares set by the Bedouins clearly illustrate the resemblance and sameness of the two (Plate 8).

Consequently, these figures in the rock scenes are unmistakably snares. Hence, the ways and methods of the traditional societies could have been generated in prehistoric Arabia. These rock scenes of the spiny-tailed-lizard remained in the rock art records of Saudi Arabia as unidentified figures (cf. Anati 1972 and 1974) and/or bows (cf. Khan 1993), until ElMahi (2002: 31-46) offered an acceptable identification based on acquaintance with the lizard-trapping and the knowhow and skill of the Bedouins in Oman.

### Conclusion

The ways and methods of the traditional societies evidently present possible parallels of the prehistoric activities. Therefore, exploring the indigenous knowledge of the contemporary traditional societies can enable archaeologists to establish a reasonable analogy between the contemporary and the antique. Moreover, some of the ways and methods of the traditional societies can possibly explain the archaeological evidence.

Furthermore, as we have seen, the special relationship, for instance, what the Sudanese and Dhofari pastoral groups have to their environment would make them an affiliated part with allover ecosystem. Subsequently, it is reasonable to argue that their ancestors, the prehistoric pastoralists had an analogous relationship to their environment and were well adapted to the ecological conditions.

Indeed, the examples discussed indicated clearly the significance of the ways and methods of traditional societies in archaeological investigations. Therefore, such parallels are



quite practicable and advantageous, since the archaeologists have no access to the knowledge and empirical experience of the prehistoric groups. This would indeed be very significant to archaeologists who frequently find themselves unaware about the ways and methods of traditional societies, let alone the prehistoric ones. Therefore, studying and documenting the ways and methods of traditional societies is

indeed a necessity for saving their knowledge being a cultural heritage and to validate ethnoarchaeological approach in research.

In conclusion, it must be stated that the experience and knowledge of traditional societies is an invaluable lore that can easily vanish, unless certain measures are taken to protect and document it.

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**ملخص:** أثبتت ممارسات المجتمعات التقليدية نجاحها في إيضاح وتفسير ممارسات مجموعات ما قبل التاريخ. وعليه يقدم هذا البحث أمثلة توضح بعض من ممارسات المجتمعات التقليدية التي توضح وتبين أنها ذات نفع في التقصي والبحث الأثري. وعليه سيتم اختيار ثلاثة أمثلة من بعض المجتمعات التقليدية، لتوضيح كيف إن ممارساتهم وطرقهم قد تكون مماثلة للممارسات مجموعات ما قبل التاريخ وتفيد في فهم ومعرفة مقاصدها. والامثلة المختارة من السودان وعمان توضح دور ممارسات المجتمعات التقليدية في تسليط الضوء على التشابه بين ما هو تقليدي معاصر وما تم قبل التاريخ، وبهذا تفعيل وتقديم في البحث الأثري. وامثلة ممارسات المجتمعات التقليدية يمكن حصرها في صيد سمك (The lungfish) في السودان، وكذلك ممارسات قبيلة الحمر بالسودان بتجفيف اللحوم، وأسلوب صيد الضب من قبل بعض البدو في عُمان.

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