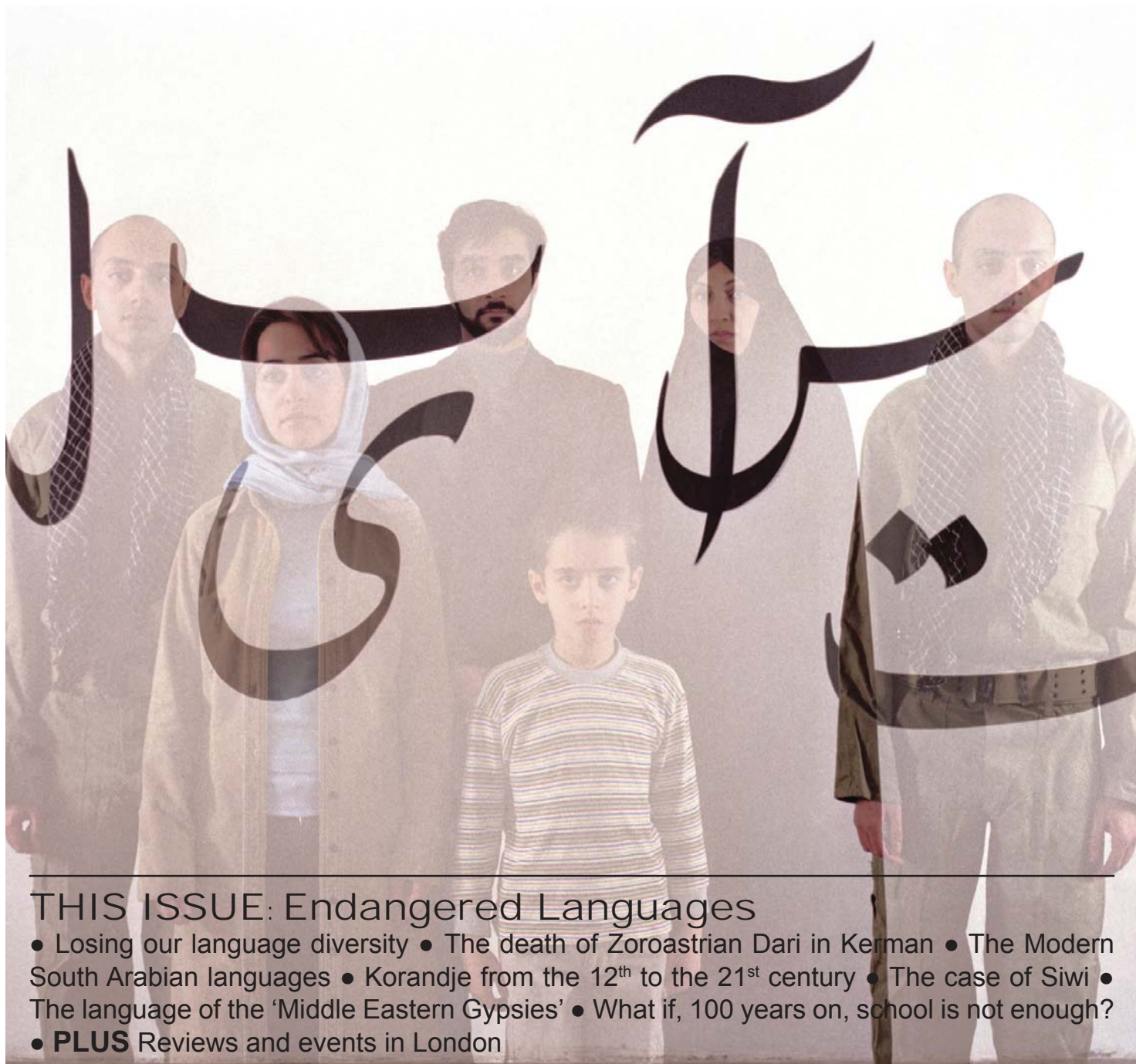


# The Middle East in London

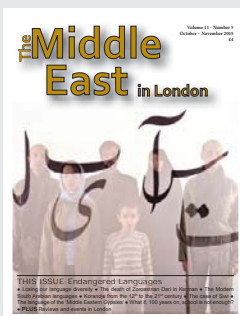
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## THIS ISSUE: Endangered Languages

- Losing our language diversity • The death of Zoroastrian Dari in Kerman • The Modern South Arabian languages • Korandje from the 12<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup> century • The case of Siwi • The language of the 'Middle Eastern Gypsies' • What if, 100 years on, school is not enough?
- **PLUS** Reviews and events in London



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# The Middle East in London

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**Janet Watson and Miranda Morris** work with native speakers to document and preserve the MSAL

# The Modern South Arabian languages



Miranda Morris and Ali al-Mahri in Raysut, Dhofar

The Modern South Arabian languages are six endangered Semitic languages spoken in the southern extremities of the Arabian Peninsula: eastern Yemen, southern Oman, Jiddat al-Harasis, the island of Soqatra and southern and eastern portions of Saudi Arabia. These are: Mehri, spoken over the largest area, spanning eastern Yemen, southern Oman and reaching into southern and eastern Saudi Arabia; Shahri (also known as Jibbali), spoken in the mountains and coastal regions of Dhofar; Hobyot, spoken in a small area spanning the Yemen–Oman border; Harsusi, spoken in Jiddat al-Harasis; the few Bathari speakers based around the coast of eastern Dhofar; and Soqotri, spoken on the island of Soqatra. Mehri, Soqotri, Hobyot and Shahri/Jibbali exhibit a number of distinct dialects.

Traditionally, the Mahrah and Harasis were nomadic camel and goat herders; the mountain and coastal-based Jibbali/Shahri speakers led a more settled existence, built temporary shelters and herded cows and goats in the mountains, and fished on the

coast; the Batahirah kept goats and camels and lived predominantly from fishing; Hobyot speakers on the coast practised fishing and in the mountains herded cows, camels and goats. Multilingualism between the communities has always been common, at least in terms of comprehension. This is particularly so among Hobyot speakers, who understand Mehri and Jibbali/Shahri. The languages vary in endangerment from critical to moderate. In terms of speaker numbers they range from 12 to 20 for Bathari to c. 180,000 for Mehri. The precise number of speakers is, however, impossible to ascertain: there are no census figures relating to MSAL speakers specifically, and many members of the language communities no longer speak the languages fluently or at all.

The languages have no traditional script, which means any script-based education or communication is conducted through Arabic. Since the 1970s, the spread of Arabic has meant that the MSAL have increasingly fallen into disuse. This has been hastened by rapid social change and the collapse

of traditional cultural activities. Until the 1970s, there were no schools or hospitals in the region, transport was by foot, water was collected by foot from natural sources, and people lived in caves and brushwood or stone huts they constructed themselves. Today the region enjoys all the trappings of the modern age. Younger generations no longer require, have or understand the extensive knowledge and practical skills of their elders and much earlier expertise has been lost or is disregarded, with imported alternatives replacing locally manufactured items. Traditional methods of natural resource and water management are no longer passed to the next generation, and significant degradation of the environment has occurred, with overgrazing and mismanagement of increasingly scarce water supplies accompanied by severe overfishing. One result is that plants and animals that once played a significant role in everyday life are now extinct or rare. Language and culture are intrinsically linked, and this loss of traditional knowledge, skills and habitat is one of the key factors in language endangerment in the region, particularly, but not exclusively, in the lexicon.

The MSAL are thus threatened by intense social, economic, cultural and

*Language and culture are intrinsically linked, and the loss of traditional knowledge, skills and habitat is one of the key factors in language endangerment in the region*



## *The project aims to promote language revitalisation by encouraging speakers to speak their language and to write it*

environmental change. In a push to document and revive interest in the languages, we are conducting a community-based project funded by the Leverhulme Trust 2013-2016. The principal aim is to provide audio, audio-visual, photographic and textual documentation of five of the six endangered Modern South Arabian languages (MSAL) spoken in Oman and mainland Yemen: Mehri, Shahri/Jibbali, Harsusi, Hobyot and Bathari. In our plans to document and revitalise the MSAL, we recognise that success can only occur with the direct contribution and interest of community members. The UK investigators see themselves as part of a catalyst, decreasing their direct involvement as community members become more involved. To date the project has recruited over 100 speakers, several data collectors according to language and dialect, local transcribers and translators for work into Arabic, data interpreters, and a principal local researcher who has been part of the project since its inception.

### **Training**

The majority of our older data collectors and speakers have had very little, if any, formal schooling. Nevertheless we have trained several community members to explain the purpose of the project to their communities, to obtain informed ethical consent from speakers, to record with digital recorders, label recordings, save and backup data and upload material into Dropbox folders. Community participants now train others in the use of digital recorders. The project has also developed a new Arabic-based script for the languages, which is being used by community members associated with the project. The local research assistant, Saeed al-Mahri, trains data collectors in ethical methods and use of digital recorders and trains community members to transcribe in the new script and translate from the languages into Arabic. He is also developing his own research profile and has also produced an article on water in Dhofar.

### **Language revitalisation**

The project aims to promote language revitalisation by encouraging speakers to speak their language and to write it, with

the hopes that they, in turn, will encourage their children to speak their own language as well as Arabic and will teach them to write it. The aim is to raise the profile and status of the languages not only amongst speakers themselves but also in the wider Arab community.

This attempt to raise the status of the languages has already had a marked effect on the small Bathari community. A formerly disadvantaged people of low status, with feelings of shame about their former poverty and lowly position, they had been quick to embrace Arabic and adopt new skills. The small number of men and women who still speak Bathari, all illiterate and elderly, were initially unenthusiastic about the project, and early recordings were stiff and lacking in fluency. However over a period of two years, this attitude has changed markedly. They now speak with some pride of how they managed in earlier times, and younger family members are increasingly present at recording sessions, interested in learning something of their past and to wonder at the ingenuity and survival skills of their forebears. The enthusiasm of the Bathari data collector for this language continues to grow, and to date over 2,000 sound files have been recorded of ever increasing fluency and interest.

### **Community-based dissemination**

The project has delivered over 20 presentations about the project to academic

institutions, schools and public groups. Several have been presented with one or more community members, including lectures and workshops held in Paris, Erlangen, Frankfurt, Muscat, Salford, Jeddah, Newcastle, Roehampton, Leeds and London. Presentations with community members raise the value of the project in the eyes of both audiences and local participants. This initiative has led to our co-presenters discussing the project with community members throughout Dhofar and with academics and interested people outside Oman, and gaining respect and academic credibility.

Details of the project are available at [http://www.leeds.ac.uk/arts/homepage/462/modern\\_south\\_arabian\\_languages](http://www.leeds.ac.uk/arts/homepage/462/modern_south_arabian_languages)

*Janet Watson studied Arabic and Islamic Studies at the University of Exeter, and completed a PhD on Yemeni Arabic dialects at SOAS, London. She has worked at the universities of Edinburgh, Durham, Salford and Leeds, and currently holds the Leadership Chair of Language at Leeds. She was elected Fellow of the British Academy in 2013; Miranda Morris, St Andrew's University, has worked on many projects in southern Arabia, and has published and carried out research on the ethnography and non-Arabic languages of the area.*

**Zakat auction in Dhahbun, Dhofar**



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