

## INTRODUCTION

Mehri is spoken by many thousands of speakers both in Dhofar, in the high desert plateau area called Nagd by Arabs and Mehris (and Fagr by Jibbalis), and in the adjacent area of South Yemen, as far to the south-west as Mukalla, the port on the Indian Ocean. In Mukalla itself the Mehris have lost their native language and speak only Arabic. Many Mukalla Mehri families, however, have, or had, a great deal of political influence in Mehri lands. The dialect of this south-western area was the one studied by the Austrian South Arabian Expedition (SAE). It is different from the dialect of Nagd (NM) principally in that NM preserves many features of phonology, morphology and lexicon lost in SM. In some of the dialects (such as that of Ghayḍa) it is possible to find in the SAE texts certain phonological features closer to NM. On the whole, however, the SAE publications are concerned mainly with the dialects further to the South West. The material while much better transcribed and analysed than that for Jībālī (Škhawri) is still rather deficient in many ways, as will be seen from the comparative material cited. Comparative dialect material for the south-western area is given from the fairly limited texts I have recorded in Dubai (SM) and from Jahn's word-list in SAE (Jahn). It is possible that the speech of the Za'benōt of the strip of coast immediately adjacent to S. Yemen is of the south-western type, and it is likely that the Bedouin Mahrah in that part of S. Yemen bordering on Nagd speak a dialect very like NM.

Beside Mehri proper there are many languages or dialects closely related to it spoken within this area. A small number of people on both sides of the border speak Hobyot. Hobyot appears to be most closely related to Mehri but certain aspects of phonology and many lexical items can only be related to Jībālī. It is not, however, a mixed language, such as that in which the Jibbalis usually compose their poetry. The few comparative items appearing in the body of this book are all from the field-notes of Mrs. Miranda Morris.

Baḥḥari, which is spoken mainly in Shuwaimiyya on the coast to the east of Salala, is the speech of a community dispossessed by the Mahrah at the time of the great tribal invasions of Dhofar and re-settling on the coast as cave-dwelling fisherfolk and acquiring the language of their conquerors. Formerly in client status to the Mahrah they are now fairly prosperous and aggressive in their social attitudes towards their former overlords. Although I collected forty or fifty Baḥḥari words in Shuwaimiyya and Sharbithāt, most of the comparative material cited comes from the field-notes of Mrs. Miranda Morris.

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Johnstone, T. M.

Mehri lexicon and English-Mehri word list.

1. Mehri language—Dictionaries—English

2. English language—Dictionaries—Mehri

I. Title II. Smith, G. R. (Gerald Rex)

492'.9      PJ7113

ISBN 0-7286-0137-0