Of Living Traces and Revived Legacies: Unfolding Futures in the Sultanate of Oman

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ABSTRACT

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Since its inception as a modern nation state in 1970, the Sultanate of Oman has actively pursued a policy of national integration and modernization, smoothing over the region's political cleavages through the practices of heritage. Oman's expanding heritage industry and market for heritage crafts and sites is exemplified by the boom in museums, exhibitions, cultural festivals and the restoration of more than a hundred forts, castles and citadels. The material forms of national heritage provide the context within which the very foundations of the nation take shape. But the construction of the heritage project in modern Oman has also necessitated the formulation of the public domains of history and Islam as seemingly separate and autonomous, erasing any awareness of the socio-political and ethical relationships that once characterized Ibadi Imamate rule (1913-1958) in the region. This dissertation is a study of how forms of history, the re-configuration of temporality and the institutionalization of material heritage (*turāth*) recalibrate the Islamic tradition to requirements of modern political and moral order in Oman. Based primarily on 16 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Muscat, the capital and Nizwa, once the administrative and juridical centre of the Ibadi Imamate, it explores the different ways in which the Oman's past inhabits the present, sustaining an active effect on the configuration of religion and community in the nation state.

This study explores the temporal logics embodied in the concept of 'tradition,' through following concrete practices of making and reflecting on the past, and the material objects and texts that make these practices possible. Chapter 1 discusses the past as sanctioned by the Nizwa fort in its role as *sharī'a* adjudicator, as well as popular written and aural histories during the Imamate. Primarily moral in nature, oriented towards God and salvation and grounded in Ibadi doctrine and practice, the function of history held that the heterogeneity of every-day life's interactions and relationships facilitated by objects and texts could be assessed on the basis of past authoritative and exemplary forms of justice and morality, as embodied by the lives of virtuous forbears such as former Imams as well as the Prophet and his companions. Chapter 2 discusses how cleaving through the temporal assumptions of *sharī'a* time, heritage and conservation practices of the secular modern state, reconfigure religion through adopting a temporal engagement with a past that entails a changing teleological future rather than one continuous with an exemplary history. The materiality of objects and sites - including mosques and *shari'a* manuscripts - once embedded in ethically grounded social practices assumes an iterable and

pedagogical mode of representation that cultivates every-day civic virtues, new forms of religiosity and forms of marking time, defining the ethical actions necessary to become an Omani modern through the framework of tradition. In chapter 3, even as the national narrative conditions the way people ethically work on themselves through evoking such forms of heritage as the Nizwa fort, its old *suq* or the *dalla* (coffee pot) by way of example, it also generates anxieties and emotional sensibilities that seek to address the erasures and occlusions of the past through deploying alternative temporal logics assuming a dynamic perceptual edge. In chapter 4, an unacknowledged slave legacy, a residue of the *sharī'a* past, continues to create unofficial tribal hierarchies through state juridical regulation of marriage and divorce, legally endorsing 'customary' marriage practices between 'pure' tribal Arabs vs. those descended from slaves or client tribes even as a national past sanctifies civil and political equality. Chapter 5 highlights the active re-configuration of historical memory by a non-Ibadi, non-Arab group, the Lawati, to fit into the national template through a process of Arab tribalization.

This dissertation argues that "inhabiting" heritage forms the nexus of competing modes of engagement with material objects and landscapes in Oman even as it mobilizes the very different anxieties that this history offers. Material forms produce a unique register for the exploration of the embodiment of multiple temporalities - destabilizing the modernist notion of time and its ties to global conservation practice - the practices and sensibilities that they foster and the ways in which they refigure new modes of relationships between religion and politics, creating new spaces and categories that have transformed the ways that Omanis perceive and organize historical experiences.

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NOTES ON TRANSLITERATION

For the transliteration of Arabic terms or technical terms common to Modern Standard Arabic, I have used the standards established by the *International Journal of Middle East Studies.* In transcribing from written texts, I have continued to maintain the spellings and pronounciations of Modern Standard Arabic. For those words found in English texts, I have used the common English spellings such as sheikh, souq or wadi. Most people's names have been changed – per their request – except for political leaders, government officials and scholars. All translations from Arabic to English are my own throughout this work.

INTRODUCTION

Heritage and its Alterity

On the 9th of August 1970, The Sultanate of Oman was officially recognized as a territorially bounded and unitary nation state,[1] heralding the advent of an era that, according to most scholars of the region, delineated a fundamental temporal shift from tradition to modernity. Historiography of the period[2] has portrayed Oman prior to 1970 as one characterized by backwardness and isolationism that with the succession of Sultan Qaboos bin Said marked the beginnings of a 'rebirth' from a medieval slumber towards a thriving and modern nation state. Titles such as *Oman and its Renaissance*[3] and *The Reborn Land*[4] encapsulate familiar narrative frameworks, both official and unofficial, that work as a shorthand within which Western discourse represents Oman's 20th century. In this formulation, Oman's is understood to have taken its first steps towards mature development and progress, indicating productive movement towards Western forms of state formation, global oil production and its concomitant infrastructure, as well as mass consumerism from 1970 onwards. In a comparison with the pre-1970 era, the two epochs are conceived through the lens of a series of binaries: darkness/light, religious fanaticism/toleration, tribal primacy/centralized state, strife/stability, ignorance/enlightenment, xenophobia/cosmopolitanism.[5] Its late 19th century is generally

[1] Its former name, the "Sultanate of Oman and Muscat", was considered to still resonate with the divisions of the sultanate vs. the imamate that had once characterized the region. On the 9th of August 1970, the region was renamed the "Sultanate of Oman" in order to give weight to the unification of the region under one centralized sovereignty.

[2] Even as it elucidates the complexities of the social and political history of 20th century in Oman, much of the literature in political science as well as histories of the period frame their thinking along the lines of a pre-modern/tradition vs. a modern period. This would include such works as those of J.E. Peterson (1978), Calvin Allen and W. Lynn Rigsbee (2000), Carole Riphenburg (1998) and John Townsend (1977). There are however a number of historians, such as Rabi (2006) or Marc Valeri (2009), who argue for lines of continuity between the reigns of Sultan Said bin Taimur (1932-70) and his son, Sultan Qaboos bin Said (1970-present), but this claim is still grounded in a discursive bedrock premised on a modernity/tradition dichotomy. It argues that even before Oman's modernization, Sultan Said's reign showed signs of development in laying the groundwork for certain modern enterprises. Collectively, however, these works assume the naturalness of a vision of Oman moving in a progressive fashion towards a known end: the institutionalization of centralized state building, civil infrastructure and a global industrial network based primarily on oil. The only point of contention here is whether this was the result of the socio-political dynamics of a post-1970 era or not.

[3] Donald Hawley, *Oman and its Renaissance* (London: Stacey International, 1987).

[4] F.A. Clements, *Oman, the Reborn Land* (London: Longman, 1980).

[5] This dichotomy strongly imbues John Townsend's words on the differences in Oman prior to 1970 and a later visit in 1976. Townsend, an economic advisor in Oman from 1972-75 writes, "Any foreigner who had visited the country prior to 1970 and then not again until 1976 would be astonished by the differences. His first journey would have involved a perilous landing on a small airstrip surrounded by craggy mountain peaks; his trips around the country would be in a Land Rover on dusty and rough natural surface roads; his accommodation would have been as a guest in a private house. In 1976, he would have landed at a well designed and modern international airport; he would have been driven in an air-conditioned car on a well made dual-carriageway to a modern first-class hotel. Before 1970, the traveller would have seen no sign of economic activity other than pitiful archaic agriculture. In 1976, especially in the Muscat area and Salalah, he would be forgiven for thinking he found himself in the middle of a builders' yard, such is the level of construction activity going on all sides. In his first visit, the traveller would have

understood to be evidentiary of earlier developmental stages that – with the passing of its East African Empire with the loss of Zanzibar – had stalled as a result of a failed but stubborn policy of isolation and fear of foreigners, a state of affairs that is thought to have continued until 1970.

Despite these critical concerns regarding the representative scholarly literature on 20th century Oman one cannot simply negate its valuable contributions in elucidating and analyzing the impact of emerging socio-political conditions that have characterized the post-1970 era. More than a mere discursive construction of time, the notion of the *nahda* (awakening/renaissance) forged the underlying basis for establishing the material substance of a state whose institutional networks and political organization have exerted a substantive force in forging nation-wide modern educational institutions,[6] a far-reaching programme for local health centres and clinics,[7] a seemingly inexhaustible supply of jobs in government bureaucracy and security forces (army, police and intelligence), the construction of civil and urban planning infrastructure (including roads, public buildings, ministries) and the organization of a private sector effectively creating a centralized, far-reaching entity that has fundamentally reconfigured people's daily lives, subjectivity, and relationships. This has constructed a world that appears to consist not of a series of intersecting and complex social practices so much as of an institutionalized and abstract binary order that stands apart, enframing modern Omani sociality through such dichotomies as state/society, official/unofficial, public/private; these binaries generate new resources of power in their reproduction through visible everyday forms that include the new language of the law, currency control and distribution, the architecture of public buildings, the aesthetics of the city scape, the wearing of military uniforms, or the marking and policing of borders. These seemingly mundane arrangements – inconceivable even ten years before the establishment of the Sultanate of Oman in 1970 – have facilitated the construction of the almost transcendent form of the modern nation state.

And yet, as recently as eleven years prior to the advent of the *nahda* period, at the end of 1958 and the beginning of 1959, British forces of the S.A.S. (Special Air Service) and Lifeguards, supported by the R.A.F. (Royal Air Force) as well as local sultanate forces, launched a full-scale attack on the Jabal al-Akhdar, where the remainder of the Ibadi Imamate forces – numbering 180 men and 700 supporters – were lodged. This battle officially ended any possibility of the resurrection of the Ibadi Imamate, which had ruled the interior from 1913 to 1955[8] and included the territory of the southern parts of the Hajar mountain range from 'Ibri to the Sharqiyya

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observed great poverty and need everywhere. In 1976, he sees only affluence" (Townsend, as cited by Ward 1987: 61).

[6] This was primarily a school building programme and an adult literacy campaign. Official figures note that 200 new schools were built between 1970 and 1976, among which 23 preparatory secondary schools served 65,000 pupils. Over the 1993-2003 period women's illiteracy was reduced from 54% to 24% and men's from 29% to 11.8% (Valeri 2009: 85).

[7] Dr. Asim al-Jamali was appointed Minister of Health in 1970. Less than five years later, twelve hospitals and 32 clinics were at work. In 2009, the Ministry of Health was operating 59 hospitals and 159 health centres all over the territory.

[8] The imamate forces were able to take back the imamate for a brief period in the summer of 1957 with the support of arms and training in Saudi Arabia. The Arab bloc joined Saudi Arabia in denouncing British support of the Sultan. In August 1957, Nizwa fell once more to the Anglo-Omani forces, resulting in the retreat of imamate rebels into the immense Jabal al-Akhdar region of the interior.

province as well as the Jabal al-Akhdar area in the hinterland, which included the important towns of Rustaq, Samail and Nakhl.[9] My inquiries about life in the imamate led one informer, a gentleman in his 70s who had lived through those days, to recall a visitor, an '*alam*, from Saudi Arabia who, on seeing the imam at the Nizwa fort, seated and in consultation (*shura*) with his retinue of tribal elders, fellow *'ulama* and judges, had exclaimed that this was indeed how it must have been during the days of the Prophet. Yet, imamate authority over territory did not extend beyond that inhabited by tribes who recognized the imamate as the legitimate source of learning, religion and piety, at the head of which was the elected imam in opposition to the dynastic power of the sultanate on the coast.

This was a polity whose administration was primarily conducted through the *qadi* (judge) and the *wali* (governor) who implemented justice and governance on behalf of the imam. These two primary officials ensured a proper judiciary as well as stability and security through maintaining a military force of armed retainers (*'askarīn*) who garrisoned the main fortresses and ensured that taxes were collected and distributed (Wilkinson 1987: 177-199; Valeri 2009). These officials were not only trained as *'ulama* but were members of important tribes that formed the backbone of the imamate. There is some uncertainty as to whether formal judicial records were kept. Administration may simply have involved instructions written by a secretary and signed by the imam or his *wali.* As Wilkinson states, "the real guardian of the legal code has always been the *hifz* (memorization) of the ulema" as an integral element of the oral transmission of learning in the madrasa system (Wilkinson 1987: 180).

The imamate's finances (*bayt al-māl*) were primarily based on 1) *zakat* (alms tax) from mercantile revenues and agricultural revenues, and 2) the landed property of the state, some of whose revenues were meant for the poor as well as for the benefit of the *umma* as a whole. One third of these monies were ideally given to those who were poor and handicapped, and the rest constituted stipends for the imam, his officials, and the maintenance of security and prisons. The imam had no standing army, on the principle that every Muslim who supported the just imam would ally with him against the community's enemies. This was a check against the possibility of the rising of a despotic power. The imam was only as strong as the most powerful of his tribal alliances, creating a non-centralized polity. Nevertheless, he was able to raise an army in times of need among his followers – through his network of tribal relationships – who upheld the imamate as its legitimate religio-political authority.

But the fundamentally contrasting nature of the two dominant polities that prevailed over Oman before its founding as a modern centralized nation state has left a residue of too many historical tensions, irresolvable contradictions, and tragic past episodes to be neatly packaged into a before-and-after conceptual framework: the violent and turbulent nature of the final overthrow of the imamate through the pivotal support of a colonizing power; its bitter aftermath that resulted in the imprisonment of senior '*ulamā'* and judges who were once the representatives of the community; the still markedly visible signs of the imamate in the region – an Islamic sectarian tradition predominating in the area for more than a thousand years – that range from the great fortresses, citadels, watchtowers and walled residential quarters that dot the landscape to once mundane everyday objects such as the *dalla* (coffee pot) whose form and function facilitated the

[9] The sultan's territories, which overlapped with British maritime strategic interests, were primarily Muscat and the coastal areas of the Batinah province.

socio-ethical practices that embodied Ibadi *sharī'a* in sedimenting the everyday modes of neighbourliness, reciprocity and sociability that defined the community. Instead of the simplistic dichotomies in temporality and rationality that unquestioningly assume modernity rather than examining its rationale and implications, there is an alternative approach. It may well be asked how ways of reasoning about the past are institutionalized and systematized through knowledge and practice becoming the means towards cultivating distinctive sensibilities and forms of rationale.

The way scholarly literature has framed Omani history has usually enabled the continuation of a certain *nahda* logic that collapses and obscures the complexity of the dissolution of the Ibadi Imamate in the interior of Oman and contributes to the perpetuation of a perception of the imamate as backward, fanatical and unremittingly dark. Asserting such a sharp split between the 'traditional' imamate and 'modern' developments does not take into account the complexities and nuances of breaks, continuities and changes that enframe conceptions of the past and the ways in which it authoritatively infuses the present as a mode of reasoning, a logic of historicity, a way of life, or a form of social experience that invites exploration and understanding. The contemporary present of Oman in this dissertation is therefore conceived as one made up of multiple ways of experiencing and conceptualizing time rather than assuming the naturalness of modern sensibilities, desires and freedoms, as enfolded within a linear and teleological temporality.

The question is seldom posed as to why people have adopted a modern life. Instead, the issue turns to how its forms and standards are lived and measured in accordance with the Western yardstick of modernization and secularization against which Oman's modernity is assessed and calibrated. This takes as given Oman's categorization within the rubric of interlinked principles that define modernity – its political arrangements, technologies and ways of knowing – and, in the process, mitigates the fundamental violence performed by the structures of modernity in the forms it assumes, the ways of life it transforms, the affects and desires that it not only imbues but cultivates in its ambitions towards comprehensive social and political reform.

While scholarship has examined the impact of modernity in contemporary Muslim societies in the realms of education, law and the media (Starrett 1998; Messick 1993; Eickelman and Piscatori 1996), this dissertation is a study of how forms of history, the reconfiguration of temporality and the institutionalization of material heritage (*turāth*) have recalibrated the Islamic tradition to the requirements of modern political and moral order in the Sultanate of Oman. Based primarily on more than sixteen months of ethnographic fieldwork in Muscat, the capital, and Nizwa, once the administrative and juridical centre of the Ibadi Imamate, this project explores the different ways in which the Sultanate of Oman's past inhabits the present, sustaining an active effect on the configuration of religion and community in the nation state. Progress, here, is therefore seen as an effort to wrest persons from the specificity of their social worlds in order to cast them – or entire communities – into secular modernity and all that this entails in being thrust into the general flow of a universal history.

At this juncture certain key questions need to be posed: How do the concrete practices and social forms of heritage in contemporary Oman relate to the ways in which history was conceptualized and the role it played in the Ibadi Imamate during the course of early to mid-twentieth century? How has modern Oman reconciled itself to the history of the imamate as the cornerstone of

Ibadism, given that it is still the official form of Islam in Oman now a dynastic nation state? How have ideas of the past, its proper form and practice, content and suitable objects of inquiry produced the categories of "history" and "religion" in Oman today? How have these transformations shaped lived experiences and people's relations with the past, generating new perceptions and dispositions?

Visual Permeation of Heritage

The issues at stake in addressing these questions confront one directly on arrival in Muscat: travelling from the airport or from one of Oman's major cities (Nizwa, Salalah, Sur) into Muscat proper, one necessarily approaches the towering columned contours of the *burj al-ṣaḥwa* (the
'Tower of the Renaissance/Awakening'), one of the most recognizable icons of the capital, rising against the skyline on one of Muscat's major traffic roundabouts. Just above its clock face, its square façade is surmounted by the familiar crenelated outlines that resonate with the ubiquitous presence of Oman's traditional defensive architecture – the forts and castles of old that dot the landscape. At its base are a series of similarly turreted modelesque watch towers. Against their white stone walls, on the inner and outer sides, a series of large and colourful mosaics immediately arrest the eye. Here, as part of a collage effect, one sees the intimate juxtaposition of what were once everyday objects and scenes (the *dalla* (coffee pot), *khanjar* (dagger), the *halqat al-'ilm* (the study circles for the Quran or other religious branches of knowledge), dhows or trading ships sailing the waves, hulking outlines of old mosques, forts and castles, local design motifs and silver jewellery) with those more directly associated with modern Omani life (scenes of construction with heavy machinery, factory assembly lines, oil refineries and water reservoirs).

This is a visual embodiment of modernity as conceived in Oman: the preservation of local tradition as heritage with technical and economic modernization to create a "harmony" (*insijām)* as an integral dimension towards fostering a unitary national culture.[10] Since its inception as a nation state in 1970, Oman's expanding heritage industry and market for heritage crafts and sites – exemplified by the boom in museums, exhibitions, cultural festivals and the restoration of more than a hundred forts, castles and citadels – has fashioned a distinctly territorial landscape and polity. Material forms – ranging from old mosques and *shari'a* manuscripts to restored forts now museumified, old living settlements, national symbols such as the coffee pot or the dagger (*khanjar)* and archaeological landscapes – saturate the landscape and have become increasingly ubiquitous as part of a visual public memorialization of the past.
The materiality of these objects and sites, whose function is induced by their form, which once embedded them in social practices and their ethico-political implications, now assume an iterable mode of representation that makes them simultaneously significant and mundane at the same time. As urban geography through mosaics on street roundabouts; as residential and government architectural facades or park landscapes; as ubiquitous icons in the widespread distribution of educational, print and audio-visual media; as national emblems in the systemic circulation of

[10] In a widely cited interview, a journalist asked the sultan how he had been able to achieve the unification of a widely diverse society. Sultan Qaboos stated that this success was due to his dual policy of combining "our heritage with modernization, and I believe that the Omani policy has succeeded with this combination" (Ahmad al-Jarallah, "His Majesty the Sultan in a wide ranging interview to Kuwait's *al Siyasa Daily*", 2006, as cited by Khalid al Azri 2013: 50).

currency or postage stamps as well as popular design motifs for kitsch items such as key chains, stationary, posters or ornaments, these objects of heritage have become a wall of visual continuity that inundate mass-mediated public spaces as well as the domestic sphere, becoming enfolded into the everyday. In constructing a pedagogical public space, these visual commemorations of historical memory incorporate time, history and tradition, providing the context in which the very foundations of the nation take shape.

This prevalence of heritage icons in full public view stands in stark contrast to an incident I recall from my first visit to Nizwa Fort, the administrative capital of the 20th century Ibadi Imamate. This incident questions the widespread assumption that the tumultuous end of the imamate also effectively marginalized the memories of the great campaign of occupation and its long-term repercussions. While waiting for my ticket to be handed over by the custodian of the fort in the great vestibule of the fort entrance, I chanced to look down and saw a black and white photograph under the glass of his desk. It showed a number of British military officers in uniform standing in front of an army jeep at the side of which were turbaned Omani men against a rocky outcrop in the distance. The photograph immediately caught my interest, and without thinking I inquired as to whether it was related to the Jabal al-Akhdar War. The young custodian hastily answered in the affirmative but then hurriedly covered up the photograph with the open newspaper lying nearby and refused to answer any more of my questions. It was fairly obvious that the custodian still had an on-going relationship with an event that is only conspicuous in Oman for the public silence and paucity of comment and observation on it. And yet when questioned he felt it necessary to cover it up, thereby avoiding the airing of any issues or topics that had been officially removed from public memory.

The first claim I make about collective history and memory as part of modern state building in Oman is therefore that heritage as a recurrent mode of representation and an institutionalized form of modern power establishes authoritative time through practices of progressive historicity and its concomitant production of the national citizen-subject versed in the particular norms – ethical, political and religious – of secularism. These regulatory norms, underwritten by a temporal rubric, diagram an orientation towards the past, through heritage practices as part of everyday life. This history and its temporal framework in the norms they instil hammer in a set of social stakes that interpellate all those who encounter them – even those who seek to critique and challenge them – making them impossible to avoid in the ways that they organize the past and its legacy.

But related to this idea is the second claim: institutionalized history-making transforms the discourse and practice of Ibadi Islam itself by reconfiguring its socio-political and ethical fabric of communal relationships, rendering them more amenable to modern state-building efforts. Heritage practices play an integral role in configuring, establishing and maintaining the public domains of history and Islam as seemingly separate and autonomous, erasing any awareness of the social-political and ethical relationships that once characterized Ibadi Islamic rule (1913-1958) in the region. The result is the transformation of a *shari'a* society and its grounding in the Quran, the Prophetic *sunna* (words and deeds of the Prophet) and exemplary history of the early Islamic state to that of a secular imaginary and its grounding in teleological time. This temporal undertaking re-figures the modality of the relationship between politics and religion, enabling new and different ways of perceiving and organizing historical experience. The past thus

becomes an object of continual intervention and management, forging the necessary categories of religion, tradition and history and the underlying concepts, assumptions and sensibilities of these.

As a result, Oman presents an extremely interesting set of ambiguities that places it at the centre of fundamental questions about the nature of authoritative secular time and its constitution of forms of historicity, religion and nationhood. Oman's official religion remains Ibadi Islam. And yet the feature that doctrinally distinguishes Ibadism from other Islamic sects – the memories of an elected imam selected on the basis of his notions of justice, piety and learning – has been effectively excised, giving way to a national secular sultanate. Religious knowledge as disseminated by mass education has promoted new forms of religiosity and public forms of discourse that espouse a generic form of Islam that is de-politicized even as it is rendered into private belief, moving in a liberal direction (Eickelman 1992: 643-54). Oman's further claim to nationhood rests on the figuration of a mode of history whose material form delineates a sovereign and territorial nation state through archaeological landscapes, museumified forts and castles, architectural forms and urban aesthetics creating an evidentiary terrain that naturalizes historical depth and space. And yet, prior to 1970, Oman's sovereignty was premised on the capacity to establish alliances and relations with people not territory, tribal allegiances not land resources. A person's tribal lineage is stated on various government documentations, including identity papers and birth certificates; however, even as a national past sanctifies civil and political equality through purging any mention of tribal histories and relations, these ties continue to play a pivotal role under the management of the modern state creating genealogical hierarchies still crucially informed by the past.

No doubt there are many nation-states that are considered paradigmatic in constructing a national space through heritage practices. A list of these would be long and include not only other Gulf nations such as Kuwait or the U.A.E. but also those in the West, including Britain and France. Yet the tensions and conflicts inherent in instantiating a history and historicity that fits with the imperatives of nation state-building efforts do more than merely bring out the specificities of the Omani historical experience; they also register a deeper similarity in provoking thought as to how the modern secular state's active definition, intervention and regulation of the past seeks to successfully establish a set of norms (ethical, political, religious), and in so doing brings about wider – and at times wholly unexpected – social implications in the process of cultivating forms of reasoning, styles of objectification, distinctive sensibilities and desires. Thus, one of the primary arguments of this dissertation is that heritage practices serve as the lynchpin for enabling the state's growing sovereign capacity to regulate more intimate domains of social life. Connected to this argument is that which holds that heritage, in carving out a public domain constitutively premised on history and tradition also reconfigures centralized religious authority. In delineating the domain of the historical as foundational to defining the public sphere, the state also determines what counts as religion, authorizing the scope of its possibilities in social life.

This becomes more than merely a question of the integral role of the past in shaping a specific form of modernity – it also opens up into questions of secularism. The specificities of Omani history and its refiguration along secular national lines also entangles authoritative time and modes of historicity into the question of religion and politics as it has fundamentally disrupted the assumptions underlying the nature of the relationship between the past and its shaping of the

quotidian life-world that was constitutive of the Ibadi Imamate. The effective result is the redefinition of religion and the transformation of the Ibadi community by political and legal practice through the emergence of new arrangements in religion and politics with its concomitant citizen-subject, now versed in a number of secular norms including the juridical, historical, cultural and ethical in accordance with the requirements of modern political and moral order in Oman.

This does not mean that the state is entirely successful in its attempt to exert control and define its sociality. Even as the state's regulatory capacity of time and historicity instil a normative set of categories by which to inhabit the past, it may also generate the space for contestation and critique that are internal to it. These sites and objects of heritage become integral in inhabiting alternative temporal worlds generating a political terrain of tensions and contestations. It might be tempting to argue in such cases that modernity is incomplete, has failed or is facing a resistance, thereby assessing it according to criteria that have been provided by its own self-descriptive normative understanding, i.e. in accordance with criteria that places it within the category of modernity. However, as mentioned earlier, the central role that the notion of tradition plays in Omani modern life begs forth an alternative analytic stance that privileges a different range of questions in order to draw out the specificity of Oman's institutional relationship to its past and the wider implications of this. These issues include how the temporal logic (relations between past, present and future) underlying modern secular governance is defined and established; how it delineates what it is possible to say or do in relating the past to the present; the kinds of questions or issues that arise that become legible and answerable primarily due to underlying assumptions of historicity and time; the stakes that these issues establish as part of modern social life that interpellate the subject making them impossible to avoid; and the kind of work they actually does in shaping a social reality.

The instabilities that ensue cannot be understood as being mistakes, wrong or just mere setbacks in the march onward and upward towards progress. Instead, they are the very basis by which a normative understanding of the past is honed and inculcated: through the gaps, fissures, contradictions and inconsistencies that condition the very possibilities of history making itself in its exercise of a unifying progressive historicity and history as a modality of secular power. In other words, that which makes heritage practices increasingly productive in their bid to unmake and remake differences to forge a common national grammar of history and tradition also makes these categories and concepts increasingly unstable as they marginalize alternative understandings of the past, subsuming those ways of life and authority that are considered incompatible with the imperatives of modern secular governance. Heritage therefore produces a certain intractability that manifests itself not only in the normativity of the categories it produces but also in the precariousness it instigates in practice.

These instabilities are effects powerfully shaped by the continually-felt gap between the national historical narratives and the aspirations and civic values that are intimately associated with them. These are claims to the continued historical presence of social solidarity, generosity, toleration and consultation, values that are made the recurrent object of representation through their iterable presence in narrative form via mass media networks and educational forums as well as their repetitive visual embodiment in icons such as the dhow, incense burner, coffee pot, architectural features etc. that inundate public spaces. This gap continually ignites tensions and anxieties,

opening up a space for political critique that generates a dynamic perceptual relationship between the past and the present. The third primary aim of this dissertation is thus to flesh out the conditions that structure and sustain this gap and the consequences of the continually-felt anxieties and tensions it generates.

Heritage as a Problem

One of the rather ambiguous but fraught standards by which Arab Gulf nations have been assessed has been the role of heritage in nation building in the region. Their heritage projects are often lambasted for being built around, what is considered, an artificial rubric that is the product of state manipulation, a function of political interests and international market branding that, through the creation of an idealized national vision, emphasizes the resilience of the past over the centuries when in fact the imagery and idioms invoked and deployed are of quite recent origins, a means of sanctioning uniquely modern socio-polities. A version of the "invention of tradition" popularized by Eric Hobshawm and Terrance Ranger (1983), a number of scholars have used this idea to propagate the notion of tradition working as a mask to obscure a more complex and conflictual history that lies beneath the modern infrastructure with its multi-storied buildings and residential villas, hyper-supermarkets, five-star hotels and the pervasive and almost mundane sense of serenity and calm (Fromherz 2012; Valeri 2009; Davis 1990). Infrastructure, linked to history-making, is therefore considered to be a superficial effect of modernity, striking to the visitor but an enterprise that is superfluous to the realities of Gulf societies (Fromherz 2012: 13).

However, this approach is based on a serious problem. It hinges on a binary way of thinking in examining the role of heritage practices produced through such contrasts as "mask" and reality, "falsity" and "truth", "inauthenticity" and "authenticity", entrenching a perspective that declares that such public acts as visiting a museum, being taught about the civic values laden in studying the Sohar Fort and its history, the construction and display of a giant *dalla* (coffee pot) in front of the Muscat Municipality should be interpreted as rhetorical performances that should either be taken literally, i.e. embraced as an integral part of the national past, or with a strong sense of improbability – as purely ideological. Heritage practices and their underlying sense of time and conception of the past thus become something one agrees or disagrees with, supports or disassociates from. There are several problematic assumptions that underlie such a stance in its notion of knowledge, meaning and personhood. These both obscure pivotal ethical and political dimensions of heritage practices and diminish our understanding of their engagements with living authority. From such a perspective, understandings of the past only refer to the world and relay facts about it. Those subject to these history-making practices as part of their normative everyday lives are assumed to be self-constituted and autonomous human beings who are not so much shaped by these conceptions of the past as placed in the position of either tacitly supporting or disagreeing with their presence.[11]

[11] In his exploration of the impact of authoritative discourse, texts and rituals in the former Soviet Union, Alexei Yurchak (2006: 16-18) makes a similar argument in critiquing the ways in which scholarly literature has approached authoritarian intervention in people's everyday lives, reducing it down to a binary division in the recognition or misrecognition of ideology at work. As Yurchak goes on to explain, this assumes that language itself as discourse is something that only refers to the world rather than producing knowledge, thereby shaping it.

"True" historical knowledge, or rather "critical" history is considered to exist prior to the process of selectivity, manipulation and dissemination that make up popular state discourse. With such a set of presuppositions, the very act of selection under the aegis of the Gulf state becomes a political and psychological problem to be understood and resolved. The concept of history itself is at stake here as it becomes the yardstick for assessing a state's modernity. For Fromherz the self-realization that the citizens of Qatar acquire "when they start assessing their own history critically and not according to the agenda of nation and Emir" leads to a psychological catharsis that paves the way towards a "fully experienced modernity" (2013: 16-17) that is assumed to be a given. Any form of selection or manipulation is considered to be something more than simply erroneous; conceded as a failure of modernity; it is understood as a potential deception which, when unmasked and exposed, will lead to the recognition of the self, a sign of a full modernity where complexities and conflicts prevail. Although Fromherz uses the word "critical", there is an underlying assumption that this alternative "more objective" mode of history is something that lies unscathed since it is not the object of state regulation and is therefore better able to convey the problems of modern life to the Qatari citizen who has thus far been cushioned from its full effects by the state bulwark and its capacity to regulate history and tradition as a condition of daily living. There is a supposition that within this alternative mode of history, one conceived as closer to that pervasive in the modern West, there lies the means to truly grasp the "paradoxes of living in the now" (Fromherz 2013: 15-16). And yet this understanding begs the question whether there is any history that is not by its very constitution selective. Fromherz's normative assumption that there is a "more objectively detached" history is never put into conversation with a scholarly literature that has problematized the very notion of the historical fact.

Archival documents, excavated objects, or the material accoutrements of past daily life – these materials provide the evidentiary sources for constructing a history. But in order to fall into such a rubric in the first place, they are necessarily weighed down by underlying modes of understanding and frames of inquiry. It is on the basis of translation and interpretation, processes that necessarily involve configuration in order to include certain aspects and excise others, that historical data is categorized as evidence in the first place and thus rendered significant. These processes of filtering and arrangement enable the formulation of historical narrations shaped in accordance with the work they are put to, and premised on larger institutional interventions (academic, political, scientific) that are historically and culturally grounded (Hirschkind 1997: 16-17). The very nature of any type of history would thus necessarily be one that is undergirded and conditioned along certain lines of underlying assumptions and thought.

There is also another issue at stake: an underlying understanding in Fromherz (2013), among other Gulf scholars that a history which acquires a political character through tradition and heritage is taking up a form that, in accordance with a certain modernist and secularist normative logic, can no longer be considered authentic since it is no longer objective and a-political. It is only on the basis of a history that has been rendered irrelevant with no political stakes that some of the tenets by which the past has been reconstituted and re-interpreted into a national truth and ethos may be challenged. This relies on the assumption that the relevance of a history may be measured according to the extent to which it has been politicized. A detached and critical history is conceived as one that stays within its own separate domain, effectively de-politicized and therefore increasingly irrelevant within social and political life. At the same time, its very detachment is understood as making it all the more potent in creating the conditions for the experiencing of a truth alternative to that adopted by the state.

Once politicized, it is deemed problematic and dubious, with the result that it is no longer labelled an objective truth – not subject to interference or intervention – but a tool that has taken shape for political reasons. And yet historical consciousness by virtue of its bid to attain coherence, connection and significance will always be subject to a relationship with law, political and social authority and the modern state of which the subjects of history are citizen subjects (White 1987: 14). In other words, history is fundamentally political inasmuch as the selection of material would necessarily interfere with history in order to render it coherent in accordance with the circumstances of a particular time and place (Arendt 1961: 48-49; De Certeau 1988).[12] It would be impossible for an event to achieve meaning independent of the forms of life it is used in. Narrative representation offers particular means for the production of meaning "by which individuals can be taught to live a distinctly imaginary relation to other real conditions of existence, that is to say a meaningful relation to the social formation in which they are indentured to live out their lives and realize their destines as social subjects" (1987: x). In other words, when narration is used in elucidating history, it is not only a way of producing socially intelligible meaning; it also has a particular discursive force that creates the conditions for the experiencing of truth.

The work of heritage as historical narration and representation should not be confused with either its reference or the intention behind it. Reducing the truth claims of history to that of political agendas or hidden motives downgrades its productive possibilities as a moral, socio-political and ethical force that represents the "real". The past, by virtue of its form, is always bound up in a relationship with *authority*. This does not imply that history will always be subservient to the claims of the state, but that even the nature and forms of its opposition will be shaped by the contours of state memory practices. This is especially the case given that historical consciousness is subject to the regulation of modern secular power and it is through its continual politicization, as it is defined and allocated into a social space as an object of continual management, that it is de-politicized and rendered banal in order to assume the proper efficacious form.

A number of scholars have explored how historical consciousness has been profoundly shaped by the discursive and material ways by which the modern nation-state has been imagined and constructed (Anderson 1983; Chatterjee 1993; Chakrabarty 2000). It therefore becomes increasingly puzzling as to how a *selective* history can become a standard for assessing whether a state and its citizens are fully modern or not. Consider the two countries Great Britain and France. Both are considered to be the embodiments of a full modernity. In both cases, there are centralized states that actively delineate a textualized memory through museumifying former lives, working practices and the values attached to them. These enterprises have ranged from the restoration of old urban centres to the preservation of landscapes and villages and the vestiges of early 19th century agriculture and industry. English Heritage, the primary state body responsible for preserving historical buildings, is now charged with the restoration and maintenance of an entire town Wirksworth, in the lead-mining district of Derbyshire. In France, the Commission for the Ethnological Heritage promotes studies on life in the boats on the canals of the Midi. The notion of *la patrimoine* extends to songs, dialects, and good local wines (Connerton 2006: 316).

[12] Even academic writing, supposedly detached and neutral, is deeply informed by relations of power, authority and the polity as it seeks to destabilize, enrich and rectify the national history and collective memory.

In both countries, relations with the past lie at the heart of how national practice and discourse mediate and regulate cultural diversity of those who are not of the majority in the trajectory of their life-worlds and histories (Pakistanis in Britain and North Africans in France). The styles of reasoning and the practical basis by which these minorities are co-opted into a national past therefore has larger social and political implications, generating the anxieties and tensions that constitute public life and that often figure in national headlines in both states.

And yet despite the ethnic and religious strife that results from its grounding in a practical relation with the past, neither country is accused of bearing citizens who are not distinctly modern. Instead, state regulation of history and memory are considered integral conditions for experiencing modernity in both cases. Inasmuch as the Gulf States, including Oman, share certain modalities of this project of modernity – in this instance, primarily a nation-political structuration and assumptions of modern historicity – why are similar efforts to cultivate a unitary national ethos and history in the Gulf States considered to be symptoms of an incomplete modernity?

When viewed within a framework of modern failures or aberrations, instead of styles of reasoning and the cultivation of a distinctive set of ethics and sensibilities, the practices of history-making and the norms it establishes about modern historicity, autonomous subjecthood, distinctions between the political and a-political, modern rationality and tradition do not engage with the question of how the emergence of modern history as national secular doctrine opens up the possibilities for alternative ways of living. Instead of reducing the role of history and heritage to that of ideology, in which tradition merely serves to mask its anchorage in new political and class interests, this study delineates the concrete transformations the work of heritage brings about in reconfiguring ways of life, reason and experience.

Problematizing the Concept of 'Tradition' and its Temporal Assumptions

One of the primary scholarly approaches to the concept of tradition has been to view it within the following dichotomous framework: if modernity is associated with creativity, choice, and adaptability to change, tradition is conceived as holding contrastive values characterized by a static repetition of habits handed down from the past and inflexible to conscious modification. In this understanding, the two concepts appear to be co-constitutive of each other, sustaining the contours of a bifurcated set of normative assumptions where the definition and deployment of modernity is predicated on the notion of tradition's opposition to it. But these framing assumptions also run the danger of becoming the very criteria used to analyse and describe the ways in which time past authoritatively defines present practices. Normative understandings of tradition vs. modernity may collapse into analytic ones holding us bounded within the confines of their own opposing imagery and thereby prevent the possibilities of thinking through modalities of power that articulate temporal relationships outside of this framework.

One of the most pivotal theoretical conceptions of tradition in the scholarship that has harnessed this paradigm has been the idea of the "invented tradition" popularized by Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983). In this view, tradition emerges as a means of organizing modes of authority and practice as part of the process of modernization. The past within such a rendition becomes a reservoir of symbols, idioms and languages that "seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition which automatically implies continuity with the past" (Hobshawm 1983: 1). This recourse to the past is used to authorize political and social projects that are in fact fairly recent products. A number of scholars of Arab-Islamic societies, including Eickelman and Piscatori (1996: 22-33), have used versions of the "invention of tradition" argument to elucidate how modern changes in law, family life, endowments (*awqāf*) or the nation state have been championed and progressive development facilitated by clothing them in the guise of traditionality as part of a set of strategic cultural authenticating moves that lack any socio-historical antecedents in actuality. Tradition here only seems to become substantively meaningful in its calculation of the utility involved in facilitating change and is effectively debunked when examined closely:[13]

> Although it has been argued that Islam does not aid the process of modernization, to construct a claim that changes are Islamic is to render them legitimate and acceptable. By defending changes as in keeping with the "essence" of Islam, reformers deflate criticism that their changes run counter to the basic values of society. (1996: 25-26)

Eickelman and Piscatori attempt to bring the two seemingly incompatible notions of tradition and modernity together, by arguing for the positive uses in getting people to accept transformative changes under the pretext of adopting something that is part of their tradition, when it is not. But this assumption is rather problematic given that it strongly implies the idea of an almost uniform manipulation, even in cases when evidence might not support such a form of reasoning. Additionally, this approach introduces a form of deliberative rationalism into describing a whole range of relationships where such a notion may in fact be unconcerned, socially, politically and ethically, with such a motive. If, according to Eickelman and Piscatori, Islam is considered a form of tradition – continuity recast as change – it is undergirded by a contrastive way of thinking whereby tradition, even though "invented" as a product of modernity, conceptualizes the past as one of invariable repetition in opposition to a modernity that is premised on the notion of continual change. It is critical to inquire here as to whether it is even possible to recognize only a single all-encompassing temporal logic, in defining the content of the category of tradition and affixing it outside of the socio-political and ethical conditions within which such practices acquire their substance and meaning. Is this the only basis by which the notions of experience, event or practice may be conceivably defined by the concept of tradition?

[13] There have been criticisms of the notion of "invention of tradition" since it seems to imply that there might be something that can be termed "genuine" tradition as opposed to "invented". This perspective however raises the question as to how to distinguish between those considered as instant formalizations whose traces can be traced to recent modern conditions versus those that are noted for longevity, ingrained custom and unconscious habit. This binary is premised on the assumption that in fact any type of tradition may be conceived as invented, at least in its beginnings, to be continually transformed, reformulated and sedimented given changing historical conditions, over time.

A concept of tradition, one characterized by an invariability, only appears to exist in order to naturalize the Western modernist conception of homogenous time and its internal temporal structure – one that accepts the inevitability of ceaselessly changing future against any sense of continuity or sameness – into that of an unquestioned given (Agrama 2012: 13-14).[14] In the common approach to modernity, the future is posited as one of continual innovation and difference. It is on the basis of naturalizing this plausibility that the past comes increasingly to be conceived of as a problem. This assumption prescribes to tradition a timeless and static quality that is ultimately seen as a burden, incompatible with a fundamentally changing future that is constantly evolving new situations. As Chakrabarty (2000) suggests, the narrative of progress, in its deployment, constructs certain kinds of difference that become anachronisms. Even as progress lies at the heart of projects of modernity, the persistence of the past – as traditions, objects or languages – can pose challenges to the agency of the living who cannot refer to a settled past. Within the framework of this progressive temporal narrative, the past has either to be left behind, in being deemed a burden incommensurable with the future, to the point of no return; or if it persists, be properly "calibrated" in order to fit into the imperatives of secular rule along progressive lines, thereby opening up horizons for its planning and inhabitation as part of a future that is irreducibly different (Koselleck 2002: 115-131).

Rather than the overt emphasis on the mechanical repetition of the past, generally considered to be a necessary quality of tradition, there might then be an alternative set of analytic questions that privilege another way of thinking about tradition. This would involve a closer examination of the perception of continuity and its underlying reasoning: the frame, through which the relevance of the past to the present is interpreted, the modes within which it is translated, and the underlying grammatical bases that delineate both the possibilities and limits of what are sayable or doable about the past. Perceptions of continuity or the idea of the persistence of the past become integral to ideas of disintegration and transformation and the trajectories of the future that they make possible. Such an approach moves beyond the idea of "invention of tradition" to privilege the notion that the concept of tradition itself is modern in the manner in which the present authoritatively invokes the past through the reiteration and interpretation of memorialized histories.

This becomes a means of elucidating the ways in which questions of the past may be configured in modernity where certain claims are made through the notion of tradition, a form of referencing the past as a substantive value that has never existed before. In other words, the modernist notion of tradition itself, as one premised on a repetitive cosmology, may be ethically and socio-politically encoded with specific stakes, opening up the possibility of facilitating specific modalities of power and enabling the mobilization of distinctive styles of reasoning and practice. Such issues of temporal consciousness bring specific types of questions to the fore, such as what kind of authority is at stake when established forms of time are formulated or contested and the institutional forms within which they are embodied in order to be put into action. In exploring approaches that study the emergence of tradition as a space of modern possibility as well as a

[14] Some scholars do argue that conservation efforts are the child of modernity, their ideological other. The underlying assumptions of a inexorably changing future allows modernity to develop in accordance with the laws of progress even while "preserving" the age value of monuments as symbolic vestiges of a superseded past (Reigl 1989: 220; Lowenthal 1985).

problem to be resolved, three recent seminal works, that analyse tradition in different ways, even as they take issue with its presence as an integral aspect of modernity, call for consideration.

The first is Lata Mani's work entitled *Contentious Traditions*: *The Debate on Sati in Colonial India.*[15] In her examination of the representations of *sati* and the debates over its prohibition among colonial officials, missionaries and the Indian elite of Bengal (1780-1833), Mani emphasizes how the debate was shaped by a colonial discourse centred on the notion of tradition specifically, the privileging of the Brahminic scriptures. The colonial assumption of a mechanical and timeless adherence to scripture in turn informed the forms of reasoning and styles of argumentation of both advocates and opponents of *sati.* As Mani notes, "both sides, even those representing themselves as the champions of tradition, were in fact elaborating their visions of modernity" (1998: 47). In presuming that the variety of local practices of *sati* were derived from scripture, the British aim to enforce its voluntary status through codifying it as law in accordance with texts was considered to be simply an enforcement of the truths of an indigenous tradition, not its transformation.

The locus of the debate was therefore not a conflict between tradition and modernity as much as a conflict between competing understandings of modernity. These understandings, according to Mani, were made possible by a concept of tradition defined as that of an on-going past that in its timeless and invariable state mechanically dictated everyday lives. This notion emerged as a mode of the constitution and organization of modern colonial authority and law facilitating the refiguration of the past along lines more amenable to that of "modern" governance and the narrative of progressive modernization (1987: 120). This analytic approach to the conception of tradition as part of modern secular governance on confronts head on the distinction between past as a burden or a productive force pregnant with possibilities for amending the future.

In Michael Herzfeld's work (2004) the craft artisan of Crete, something of a heroic anomaly in a modern world, is increasingly felt to be an anachronism. They "face a chilling choice of accepting their role as the picturesque bearers of an obsolescent tradition, becoming merchants in a rat race that most of them are destined to lose, or joining an international labour force in which the price of modernity is to lose one's identity as a skilled and individual personality" (2003: 60). The complex social interactions of a small artisan community is explored as it is affected by both the dynamics of on-going "traditional" production as well as the nation state and international standards of "desirability" and "culture" that determine and inform what Greek tradition should be as a set of rules and aesthetics that the artisan must produce, reproduce and modify, willingly or not. These tensions have in turn been shaped by a fundamental relationship with the past from the 1830s onwards (Greece's post-independence era) characterized by a historical/cultural ethos generated by a Teutonic neo-classical Hellenism, at the cost of excising anything declaimed by the West as being "oriental", which includes the complex heritage of Byzantium and the Ottoman Empire. Even as local artisan culture and the body of the citizen is scorned and marginalized as the embodiment of Turkish/Romaic stereotypes by state civilizing agents, the craftsmen defend themselves as "free", "independent" and "dominant males", effectively creating a Zorba-the-Greek type rawness, which is exactly what a national iconology exploits.

[15] Lata Mani., *Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India*, University of California Press, 1998.

Both works, act as representative examples of claims to tradition that are invoked not simply to recognize historical continuity but to mark the type of authority that an authentic precedence from the past may carry as part of a modernizing context. As Agrama has noted (2010), undergirded by the assumption of a future in flux, tradition becomes a notion linked with creativity, revival, renewal and adaptation even as there is an emphasis on conservation, preservation and continuance (*taqlīd*) of testimonies to the past carried out in the direction of the future. As historic restoration projects reify traditional building practices, the conservation logic in Sana'a, Yemen, according to Lamprakos's work (2005), becomes a matter not simply of restoration – the act of preserving timeless custom that is premised on the assumption of the inevitability of change – but of modernization through the introduction of modern amenities and civic infrastructure such as modern plumbing and electricity as part of the process of adapting to a transforming urban landscape and its modernist ethos. This approach to conservation formulates the material and social forms of *turāth* (heritage) that are validated and maintained even as they are objectified to assume a very different set of meanings as the old city comes increasingly to be rendered into a national and global humanist legacy, its goals determined in a foreign boardroom (Lamprakos 2005: 24). For the Western-trained conservator hired by UNESCO, these physical transformations become examples of a traditional creativity – where tradition is produced, reproduced and modified as continuity and permanence are celebrated and reconciled to the perception of continual change that characterizes the "movement" of modernity.

It could be argued that all three works are representative examples of a broad trend towards the "invention of tradition" approach, where political motivation or economic interests come to be considered the primary basis for understanding the phenomena of tradition in modernity. In fact, these works are far less reductionist, and more nuanced in giving a sense of the rationale and reasoning of the agents involved. At the same time, the content of the concepts of "tradition" vs. "modernity" remains within the framework of modern master narratives of modernization, development and progress, where tradition conceived as "difference" from the present is consistently characterized as the unchanging substance of regularity that must either be excised or whose effects must be reformulated in order to fit into the progressive telos of modernity in addressing the imperatives of colonial or modern state governance, global heritage as a humanist good, or capitalist consumer demands. The notion of the past, in other words, remains grounded in the assumption of necessary change as it is stigmatized as the mark of irreconcilable difference: that of continuity and permanence in the face of continual novelty (Lowenthal 1985: xxv). This assumption assimilates the past into a single monologue of "repetition" and action that is considered as following a certain standardized pattern; it therefore implicitly concedes the enframing master paradigm of modernization, which measures and defines what modernization does in accordance with its own normative criteria for the "past" vs. the "present" and "future" that irrevocably fall into the binary categories of "continuity" and "transformation". In the process this dualism of concepts and their cognates are continually reconstituted in simplifying the complex temporal structures within the concept of tradition. The categories that buttress modernity's own categories of temporal logic and time become the homogenous basis by which to analyse the relationship between past and present, without teasing out alternative ways of thinking about temporality outside of the possibilities informed by this framework and the functioning of the modalities of power it enables.

Sundering the simple opposition between "tradition" and "modernity" and its binary oppositions, MacIntyre's study of tradition emphasizes how the past as part of an on-going, living relationship with the present may be of particular value in opening up a set of future possibilities (MacIntyre 1984: 223). With this approach, a living tradition is part of a "historically extended, social embodied argument concerning the pursuit of goods" (1984: 222) that constitutively define what is "proper" and "good" within the context of a particular community in delineating how an Aristotelian tradition of the exercises of the virtues enter into the quotidian practices of work-a-day lives. MacIntyre's inquiry into this notion of tradition brings to the fore several ideas that call attention to this understanding of a living past as part of an ethical way of living. This approach emphasizes the underlying assumptions, continuities and accountabilities, in their socially embodied and historical context, that ground an on-going argument into the moral and epistemological work of pursuing established ideas of the "good" and the set of embodied practices through which these understandings and their histories are enacted in the securing of such a telos (1984: 190).

These assumptions, with their determinately situated standards and forms of authority, delineate what counts as truth and how that truth may become the focus of debate, contestation, refutation, criticism and even transformation from within as part of an on-going set of arguments that reflects continuity even as it may simultaneously be productive of conceptual and material changes internal to the exercise of that tradition (1984: 194). The practices they deploy become the basis not only for entering into the conceptual framework and "its contemporary practitioners but also with those who have preceded us in the practice, particularly those whose achievements extended the reach of the practice to its present point" (1984: 194). In MacIntyre's approach, the past is no longer considered an unchanging substance so much as a distinctive way of imagining the past in relation to the present that makes possible specific types of practices, styles of argumentation, deliberation and critique. As these ideas about the relationship to the past change, it opens up to alternative possibilities of how to structure and live a life – issues that raise questions about its form of authority, practice and interpretation.

Rather than arguing for a wholesale "invention", this approach offers the idea that the concept of tradition and the complex temporal relations it embodies opens up a space for moving entirely away from the idea of the past as mechanical reproduction towards one that contemplates it as a dimension of social life. Attuned to the specificity of connections between past-present and future, one may examine how the logic they embody may authorize heterogeneous temporal styles of reasoning, practices and processes outside of the all too familiar tradition/modernity binary. This approach goes beyond a mere exploration of how the institutional discursive and material practices of history-making are enacted and subverted towards studying how particular temporal logics are lived, inhabited and reached for (Pocock 1989: 233-272); each of these may link a specific understanding of the past and its relationship to the future that make possible distinctive forms of reasoning and practice that constitute the very substance by which the self is cultivated and interiorized, enabling different modes of sensibilities and ethics that are considered appropriate (in this case, to being a good Omani), but also setting the limits within which it is possible to work in the logic of a tradition. The modernist temporal logic is only one such possibility, but one that has become so inculcated as to make its temporal assumptions and understanding of time the only privileged possibility allowed.

What I attempt to draw attention to are the ways in which modernity has given time a new historical quality whose temporal assumptions are now so naturalized as to be a given even in scholarship on tradition and heritage. This temporal rationale has been constituted by the "modernity project' (Asad 2003), a facet of colonialism that has played an integral role in imposing a new vocabulary of concepts such as progress, history, civilization, rationality and democracy, all of which bear the burden of Euro-American modernity and its construction of historicity. Chakrabarty claims that Europe's claims to universality in its stake on time have provided a strong foundation that has not only deeply informed the construction of modernities outside the Euro-American sphere but also the studies of its diverse manifestations and critiques of its oppressionist and exclusionist implications (Chakrabarty 2000: 16). The differential determination between past and future – i.e. the pervasive assumption of a rift between them that characterizes modernist authoritative time – is a difference that has its own history (Koselleck 2004: 9-11; 114). Even as it becomes suitable to temporalize historical time on that basis, it may also become productive to problematize its universality by delineating the historical and cultural specificity embodied by temporal logics that give tradition its force in enabling specific modes of being, efficacy and responsibility.

Rather than assuming a modernist temporal norm, this dissertation explores the multiple ways of experiencing and conceptualizing time and the tensions that may arise due to diversified conceptions of the past that not only take place within history but through which historical experience and events becomes meaningful. I therefore argue that tradition should be understood in terms of the modality of the relations between past, present and future internal to its temporal structure and the ways they animate different conceptions of experience, motive and practice, thereby enabling different ways of living (Asad 2003: 222). This would involve examining the systemic ways in which specific rationales of time are cultivated and disseminated, the type of subjectivity these presuppose (in terms of ethical formation, sensibilities, emotion, reason), and the forms of authority on which certain temporal relationships and practices rely. This would make it possible to think about alternative temporal life-worlds that facilitate the consideration of different modes of engaging with the past; ones that go beyond the modernist idea that the juxtaposition of different times makes it difficult to draw conclusions from past precedents about the present; ones that problematize the giveness of what seemingly appears to be the only set of normative dualistic possibilities: that of either being stuck in the past or configuring its "difference" in the face of an incessantly evolving future. An alternative way of thinking about time would be to postulate a temporal logic *whose locus of authority does not lie in the future but in the past and the ways that it brings it to bear on the present and future.* These would necessarily involve radically different temporal logics, whose discursive and affective engagements with history enable effective and conscious action in the present.

By way of example, in Nizwa, during the imamate as well as the on-going *nahda* period, the importance of history often was – and still is – upheld as the necessary means by which ethical virtues (such as neighbourliness, reciprocity, solidarity, consultation) are acquired as part of the practicalities of social life and its on-going articulation of the desired goals of eschatological salvation as part of the Ibadi Islamic tradition (see chapter 1). The authority of Islamic tradition takes the idea of regularity and continuity as intrinsic to an alternative mode of historical consciousness, one that involves the use of exempla that juxtaposes the present with past precedents, thereby providing parallels with which to assess and guide the here and now. Like

the work of the German artist Altdorfer (c. 1480-1538), who depicted the ancient battle of Issus (B.C 333), fought by Alexander the Great, in a contemporary Renaissance mould, the past and present are cast within the same temporal unity and dimension of sameness in historical experience (Koselleck 2004: 10-24). The authority of the past here lives on in *imitation,* but joins together the *no longer* and the *still there* in incorporating the myriad of experiences and "novel" circumstances that characterize mundane everyday life into a yardstick, for assessment against that of the unique exemplary history (that of the Prophet and his Companions, their life events and words) whose precedence places one on an ethical path towards the future – one of cultivating the "goods" proper to being a virtuous Muslim – even while it is anchored to a modular past. These virtues become the sedimented disposition that for many Ibadis, even today, underlie and inform a mode of reasoning that is manifested in such key concepts as *'adl* (justice) or *athār* (trace or influence).

In other words, an ineluctable connection is drawn between the past (*sunna* – ways – of the Prophet as well as early histories) and virtuous norms (reciprocity) such that history, rather than being merely an abstract concept of knowledge as information, detached from social structure, emotion and interest, becomes the necessary means through which virtuous norms are not only cultivated (and vices warded off) but also expressed; as an embodied disposition, the past becomes knowledge that is read, recited, argued about, or used as cautionary tales in the course of conversation as daily practical and perceptual conditions enable a different relationship to the past to take root, one that cultivates and amends disposition, thought and action on the basis of exempla from the past (Hirschkind 1996: 18). The creation of the nation state, far from putting an end to these pedagogical techniques, references to hadith literature and early Islamic histories, is reconfigured; chapter 2 takes up the examination of how everyday objects and texts whose form and function enabled and facilitated social practices grounded in the ethical thought and action of an Ibadi *sharī'a* society become reconfigured as part of new contexts, which allow them to acquire new features and assume another set of inferences as the basis for exercising a new form of authority.

Both the Ibadi *sharī'a* society of the early 20th century as well as its later structuration into a centralized Omani national polity from 1970 onwards emphasize and institutionalize the idea of a repetitive iterability and exemplarity in the ways that they contemplate the past, thus respecting its legacy and its productive force without subverting it. At the same time, in my bid to demonstrate the contingent character of the modernist rationale of history and tradition, I examine how each polity takes up the question of the past within broader conceptual and ideological rubrics. These forms of history – that are in themselves two distinctive socio-historical forms of life and modes of power – articulate patterns of continuity out of which arise a constant discussion and re-definition of relating past experience and its mode of authority to the present. But they also mark the difference in the imamate *sharī'a* and the modern state's use of these tropes: the institutionalization of two different temporal relations between subjective pasts and unfolding futures that are at work, in their engagement with repetition, opening up the possibilities of distinct sets of practices and dispositions in cultivating a particular *habitus*; a difference that becomes part of specific conceptions of virtues and complexes of values, grounded in two different temporal orientations and reasoning. These understandings are harnessed to very different temporal styles of reasoning and therefore entangled with radically different political, religious and ethical implications as the discontinuity that marks the break

between the imamate and the nation-state on the one hand attempts to weave itself into the continuities of tradition on the other.

It is only after the recognition of this difference and the unpacking of the underlying assumptions of these two different logics of history that we can begin to delineate the meanings, the politics and the possible effects of national heritage practices. Specifically, it is only then that we can grapple with the social and political implications of the truth created from the dynamism of heritage practice and knowledge. As a result an entire series of questions as to how the modern social concepts and assumptions of history and historicity are changed, reasoned and secured are raised. How does the naturalization of national borders relate to older life-worlds that were enframed in terms of history, religion and ethical values? How does it reconfigure the authority of religious traditions? How does its relationship to modern state regulation and constraint carve out and maintain forms of sociality and community in circumstances that privilege difference?

The approach I adopt differs significantly from various other studies of heritage. Specifically, it deviates from works that reduce heritage sites and objects as symbolically embodying a "redemptive formula" that is a "myth of redemption and return" as a means of reclaiming "lost pasts", "Golden Ages" and to re-engage with "roots" and "origins". Such a position sees the past unequivocally as a resource for metaphysical renewal and refuge, a quarry of ideas and ideals as exemplified by the canonization and rebuilding of the Alexandrian Mouseion library (Butler 2003; Walsh 1992). It also emphatically does not follow along the lines of those who argue that heritage is a form of secular religion, whose "civilizing rituals" and "theological languages" mark the displacement of religion in modernity's experience of secularization (MacCannell 1989; Horne 1984; Duncan 1995). Such an approach does not inquire as to why certain elements of religion were picked out over others, nor does it closely examine the discursive and material roles these elements play within specific conditions that lead in turn to a substantive understanding of history and religion. This emphasis follows Talal Asad's (2003: 189) attempt to problematize the assumptions of finding immediate parallels between religion and national political life. Not only does such an approach assume a religious transcendental essence, but it also fails to consider the specificity of socio-cultural patterns and historical grammar that give concepts and practices their substantive meanings and social implications.

My approach, which privileges argumentation, styles of reasoning and cultivated practice, differs from those heritage and museological critiques that are placed within the broader context of the Frankfurt School's critique of modernity, i.e. the Enlightenment project as one of deception with its complicity in the linked ideologies of "progress", "modernization", "humanism/universalism" or "objectivity". Rather, I examine how these changes in the understanding of experience, practice and intention affect and create spaces in which the objects and texts that were once an integral part of the concepts and practices of everyday sociality of a *sharī'a* society could be reasoned with and engaged in opening up alternative spaces that constitute different life-ways and categories, fundamentally transforming authoritative notions of history, tradition and religion in the process. These spaces and categories not only changed how these once mundane objects and historical texts were authorized but also how they could exert that authority. These modes of inhabiting modern time resituate the Omani past in a modernist framework driven by the notion of ceaseless social change and become a focus for examining its potential to not simply instilling ideologies but for shaping the perceptual habits, affects and sensibilities of its audience.

Ethnographic Possibilities

It would be rather duplicitous at this juncture to speak of the expressions of history and forms of memory of institutional bodies, various Omani residents, Western tourists, British travellers of old without interrogating at the very least my own sense of time or acknowledging certain nostalgic desires. If there is one thing that anthropology has constantly reaffirmed over the past thirty years, it is that there is no such thing as "objectivity" and that we observers carry the load of our personal experiences and training with us. These are not so much burdens, biting into our backs, as much as lenses that inform our capacity to perceive and absorb an alternative point of view. This observation now seems as mundane as to be rendered trivial, and yet this is the moment when I am expected to disgorge the entirely academic reasons for embarking on a study on the underlying assumptions and implications of institutionalized forms of history and memory in the Sultanate of Oman. I could for example note that that I am tracking the multiple globalizing processes of memory practices and heritage formation in what has been until recently a secluded and remote corner of the Arabian Peninsula as an example of how they come to life in the "friction" generated by the practicalities of material encounters, as has been explored by Anna Tsing (2005). However, I am thinking in terms counter to those of movements, flows and networks that have made the traveller, merchant or businessman the intrepid hero in popular and academic conceptions of globalization as modular examples for the movement of free exchange and connection. Rather, my emphasis lies closer to that of Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett (2006) who argues that the global does not flow, forging a series of connections between contiguous spaces; it isolates, restricts, invades, intervenes, thereby connecting even while excluding (both with equal efficiency and energy). My work therefore hones in on the ways in which this specific form of globalization produces barriers, excisions, obstructions and stoppages and the social implications of these.

I could further allude to the fact that my field research has taken me to two sites, Muscat and Nizwa, both of which were focal points of conflict and contestation between the sultanate and the Ibadi Imamate from the early to mid-20th century. I could further explain that the rise of the last imamate was the direct result of military and economic colonial intervention in a territory that was "benignly" colonized as part of the informal British Empire from the early 19th century until the "official" withdrawal of British troops from the region in the early 1970s. I could reaffirm, as I mentioned previously, that after a brief but violent series of conflicts and air assaults from the mid to late 1950s, the imamate came to an end and the region was re-named the Sultanate of Oman and Muscat; that it was 1968 when the Sultanate first began to receive a regular oil income and the coup that ousted the reigning sultan, Said bin Taimur, in favour of his son, Sultan Qaboos in 1970 also spelled the beginnings of the *nahda* ("the awakening") which witnessed the material integration of the interior of Oman, including Nizwa, with the capital city Muscat through the centralized civic infrastructure of modernization and nation state building for the first time. I could add that this period therefore saw a movement of reverse migration whereby the thousands who had left the region for South Asia, East Africa or other parts of the Gulf, in search of gainful employment, better economic prospects and educational opportunities in the 1950s and 1960s returned after long absences with their families to make up a new bureaucratic class of professionals and civil servants that served the new ministries, many of who were members of merchant communities whose ancestors had settled in the Muscat/Mutrah coast

region and who were genealogically neither Arab nor Ibadi but who became Omani in citizenship. With the core of its nation building efforts on heritage, I could add that Oman's was an exceptionally interesting case study of a country that inundates its landscape and public media with material forms of memorialized history and visual memory; and I could further add that the make-up of the country's population makes it especially intriguing to explore how these conceptions of the past are navigated, appropriated and contested as part of the everyday. I could argue in summary then that Oman becomes a pivotal means of examining how material forms produce a unique register for the exploration of the embodiment of multiple temporalities – destabilizing the modernist notion of time and its ties to global conservation practice – the practices and sensibilities that they foster and the ways in which they refigure new modes of relationships between religion and politics, creating new spaces and categories that have transformed the ways that Omanis perceive and organize historical experiences. None of this, however, would quite answer the question as to what drew me to Oman in the beginning.

This project and its many conundrums had its inception in another Gulf country, Kuwait. Growing up in a society whose great oil wealth had generated its modern prosperity, I was not only sharply aware of living in a country where foreign resident and migrant workers greatly outnumbered its citizens, but also that a ubiquitous but unspoken hierarchy was deeply imbricated in the everyday rhythms of living and working there. This hierarchy was based on socio-political status linked to occupation on the one hand and ethno-nationalism on the other. A South Asian, by way of example, was made aware of of his/her place within that hierarchy through the infusing of incipient sensibilities, awareness and practices into the folds of everyday relationships and activities, whose scale was established on the notion of Arabness as an integral element of Kuwaiti nationality.

Later, in university, my work on the Indian Ocean trade networks of the 17th and 18th centuries made me sharply aware of a different set of geo-historical and maritime factors that have deeply informed the contours Oman's political and economic landscape. As a region one of whose primary sources of subsistence and trade was the sea, communities of traders and seamen from Gujarat, Sind, Baluchistan, Iran and the Kutch region had settled along the coast, retaining a series of connections and relationships with the homeland while participating in the creation of new diasporic societies, new ports and even new peoples in settlements along the Omani coastline and its major trading centres. Given Oman's status as an Arab Gulf nation state, one of the more intriguing questions that informed my fieldwork throughout was how the idea of being Arab and an Omani national was negotiated amongst these longstanding diasporic communities who even as they had embarked on wide networks of exchange with the interior of the region also lived in insulated enclaves, while pursuing endogamous marriage practices until the early 1970s. I also became interested in how the World Heritage status of several ancient sites, including the Frankincense trees of Wadi Dawkah in the south and the ancient archaeological sites of Bat, al-Khutm and al-Ain were shaping people's historical consciousness and sense of time, especially given their inhabitation of an alternative time scale right into the 1970s, one shaped by the ethical and historic discourse of Ibadi Islam. Beneath these academic interests, however, lay a sedimented set of inchoate engagements with my own past and its relationship to Oman as place. Growing up in Kuwait while being a Pakistani citizen had left me, like many others, dislocated and displaced, straddling a widening gap between two life-worlds, each of which have drawn distinctive borders in defining their members. Perhaps I thought that Oman,

with its proud exposition of a rich maritime trading history and its resultant diverse community, would help me connect to a place and form lasting ties. To admit this would of course be to acknowledge that, in many ways, my seeking out Oman was to indulge in orientalist imaginings myself. Nevertheless, these very nostalgic longings, however repressed and amorphous, have also generated and influenced the anthropological endeavour (Bissell 2005). It is certainly in part shaped by motives for choosing Oman as the site of my fieldwork.

Previous preliminary survey research at Sultan Qaboos University, Muscat in 2006, as well as an internship at the Ministry of Heritage and Culture, Muscat in 2007, had led me to a growing realization that the state demarcated the contours of history and heritage as part of the public domain and the scope it could have in social life. If I did want to situate myself in the midst of national heritage, I would somehow need official permission to go through institutional channels in order to get a sense of the assumptions on which policies were based and the ways they were deployed. In December 2009, I finally got my research visa to enter the country as a Fulbright scholar under the sponsorship of the Ministry of Tourism. In addition to accompanying ministry advisors and personnel around some of the major forts such as al-Hazm and al-Rustaq as they were being readied for the visiting public, making copies of pertinent files and publications, I was also establishing the basis of my involvement with other institutions and projects involved in the heritage enterprise. These ranged from analysing historic preservation, handicraft and museum projects to conducting extensive interviews with state heritage officials and festival organizers, academics/official experts and craft artisans. Printed, mass media and educational materials were also examined in Muscat.

It was one of the Ministry of Tourism's personnel who informed me of a family in the vicinity of Nizwa who would be willing to host me for the duration of my fieldwork. Although it seemed a distinct possibility that there would be social costs incurred to being so closely associated with the state heritage and tourism bodies, the extraordinary opportunity to live among one of the older families of one of the oldest residential quarters of Nizwa was only made possible through my affiliation with the ministry and its networks. Between September 2010 and May 2011, I lived on the outskirts of the old Ghantaq quarter of Nizwa and was enthusiastically and hospitably taken in by the family who would not only be my hosts but would adopt me as "kin". It was on their behest that I was introduced into the world of the surrounding neighbourhoods, its regular routines of household activity, visits with the larger kin network and regular meals in each other's houses. This mutual goodwill was extensively shaped by larger political regional forces, as my being a Pakistani and a Muslim greatly facilitated the easy acceptance of my long-term residence and the ease with which I was enfolded into the daily activities of my host family. Living with them and sharing their lives also gave me a better sense of how a city of thousands could still seem so local and intimate, as longstanding networks and relationships created a face-to-face community that was continually reaffirmed through repetitive visits on the basis of reciprocal obligations, on the occasion of a new birth, removal to a new home or to convey condolences. It continually amazed me how so many in Nizwa, especially from from the old tribal families, knew each other – if not in person, then at the very least by reputation and name. These networks became the basis by which I was able to track the everyday practices and interactions between local residents and state officials in studying how local memories and histories (textual and oral) play out with forms of national imaginaries and global tourist narratives, specifically in Nizwa. This involved moving outwardly from its historic centre with

its nexus at the fort towards the long-established families and tribes of the old residential quarters (*hārāt*) and market areas as well as those of the religious scholarly elite (‘*ulamā*) who had once governed the region as part of the imamate. Many of the members of these families were now in the upper echelons of government ministries or in state-sponsored higher education.

Outline of Dissertation

This dissertation is thus the result of my peripatetic search for forms of history, their selectivity and their social and ethical implications in narratives and meanings.

Chapter 1 examines how the Nizwa Fort during the Ibadi Imamate sanctioned a past that, in its role as *sharī’a* adjudicator, was primarily moral in nature, oriented towards God and salvation and grounded in Ibadi doctrine and practice. The function of history held that the heterogeneity of everyday life’s interactions and relationships facilitated by the form and function of daily objects and *sharī’a* texts could be assessed on the basis of past authoritative and exemplary forms of justice and morality, as embodied by the lives of virtuous forbears such as former imams as well as the Prophet and his companions. Everyday virtues such as reciprocity, generosity or forbearance were considered the on-going articulation of disciplined practices each of which was premised on continual exercise as well as moral criticism based on time-honoured discursive models.

Chapter 2 explores how, in cleaving through the temporal assumptions of *sharī’a* time and its relations with the past, the concerted intervention of heritage and conservation practices of modern nation state building reconfigure religion through adopting a temporal engagement with a past that entails a changing teleological future rather than one continuous with an exemplary history. The cadences of progressive historicity in Oman have made the past a fundamental feature of what it means to be modern; even while they draw a sharp boundary between then and now, moderns in Oman also reaffirm the timelessness of that past as a transcendental model that is meant to survive its time through a language rooted in and resonant with a territorially grounded history and tradition. The materiality of objects and sites – including mosques and *shari’a* manuscripts – once embedded in morally-premised religious social practices, now assume an iterable and pedagogical mode of representation through which historical-national claims, histories and heritage objects come about; these material effects in turn cultivate everyday national civic virtues, new forms of religiosity and forms of punctuating time, defining the ethical actions necessary to become a modern Omani citizen through the framework of tradition that is directed along a temporal grid of linear time and is refigured accordingly. New temporal sensibilities therefore come to be conceived as fundamental to the pedagogical structuring of the self that moves beyond the liberal notion of conditioning “one’s true interiority” toward specifying a manner of living as determined by but not reduced to a globally determined notion of heritage and tradition compatible with citizenship, modern education and professional life.

In chapter 3, while modernity has transformed the terrain on which the past is constantly being summoned, its continual deployment in the present is also subject to indeterminacy as it discloses a structure of desire and emulation that repetition seeks to bring to fruition while managing only to arouse greater anxiety. Even as the national narrative conditions the way

people ethically work on themselves through evoking such forms of heritage as the Nizwa fort (for example, its old *suq* or the *dalla* (coffee pot)), it has also generated new anxieties and emotional sensibilities that seek to address the erasures and occlusions of the past through deploying alternative temporal logics and new ways of inhabiting history counter to those of nationalist efforts. Objects, landscapes and architecture endowed with sedimented past are harnessed to different forms of perceptual modes of memory even as they are enabled by the active intervention of heritage practices. Invoking the past through historically and culturally grounded forms of nostalgia results in casting the sociality of the imamate in opposition to the modern life that marks the sultanate, a mode of social memory that has acquired a critical and political perceptual dynamic. These alternate temporal engagements and struggles are being produced over a changing political economy, socio-political transformation and rising unemployment and are becoming a commentary on rupture and discontinuity, countering efforts to portray Nizwa as a product of continuous collective memory and history. This notion of disruption was one of the principle factors propelling the mobilization efforts of the Arab Spring protests in Oman in early 2011.

In chapter 4, an unacknowledged slave legacy, an inerasable residue of the *sharī'a* past, continues to create unofficial tribal hierarchies through state juridical regulation of marriage and divorce, legally endorsing 'customary' marriage practices between 'pure' tribal Arabs vs. those descended from slaves or client tribes, even as a national past sanctifies civil and political equality. This paradoxical state of affairs has been enabled by active management of tribal hierarchies and their differential relationships under the rubric of the State. These contemporary problematics have opened up a space of contestation between two broad movements, each of whose members ground him/her within a specific approach to Islamic tradition, sanctioned by Prophetic history. Those in favour of human rights discourse evacuate history and memory altogether, leaving subjecthood in the hands of the nation state and its civic emphasis on "political and social equality". This perspective is authorized by a reflection of the "spirit of Islam" within which authoritative accounts of the Prophet and his companions are narrated both in a juridical setting and as part of daily discourse that corresponds to the national ethos. On the other hand, the majority of those in Nizwa, if not in Oman, consider the history and memories of *sharī'a* society as integral to the daily interactions and social relationships with neighbours and kin that locate the self. These historically sedimented ties sanction the notion of *kafā'a* (social 'equivalence' in marriage, a legal principle that has survived into modern *sharī'a* law – now personal status law – in Oman) in managing the fraught social and ethical implications of marriage. Sanctioned by the material corpus of centuries of writings on Ibadi doctrinal debates and prophetic accounts on *kafā'a* that are brought to bear on the issue, the idea of differential status becomes an unavoidable facet that defines the living body of the community in Oman even as it is considered a threat to the values of equality guaranteed by the principles of citizenship and their actualization in the sultanate.

Chapter 5 highlights the active reconfiguration of historical memory by a non-Ibadi, non-Arab minority group, the Al Lawati, as they are integrated into the national template through a process of Arab tribalization. The past lays bare a terrain not only of shared historical assumptions but also debate and contestation as members find themselves articulating or defending themselves from discursive constructions of imperialism and the nation state and the realities they have created. Based primarily in the port city of Muttrah (now more or less a district of Muscat), the borders of this community of merchants and retailers, once called Hyderabadis (Sind), have

shifted over the course of the 20th century from being an enclave of Shi'a trading families subject to sultanic/British rule to becoming Omani national citizens from 1970 onwards. In sifting through the tangle of narratives, practices and visions that have conditioned their political and social imaginaries, I argue that the Al Lawati have formed and reformed their community through a selective recourse to the past, creating a pluralist space consonant with the national grammar of "Arab" and "Islam". At the same time the "difference" that defines the Al Lawati has become a site of contemporary political and ethical struggle as conflictual understandings of history and its links to the wider social networks and power structures of the Indian Ocean trade network of the 19th and 20th centuries are brought to bear on contemporary lives.

CHAPTER ONE

Reform and Revolt through the Pen and the Sword

Today the Christians' (British) war on us is a Calamity
And every one of us is heedless and oblivious
For they take our land through Treachery
And that is stronger than Canons.

Sheikh Nur al Din al-Salmi as cited in the *Nahḍat al-A'yān bi ḥurriyat 'Umān* by Abdullah bin Humayd

Oman, in fact has been passing through the same stages of evolution as took place in the kingdoms of the Eastern and Western Franks during the Middle Ages. The history of Clovis could have been written about a modern Arab potentate. By treachery or battle he soon destroyed all his kinsmen who were or might be rulers.

Official Records of Oman (India Office Records) 1865-1947

In May 1913, after almost fifty years in abeyance, Salim B. Rashid al-Kharusi was elected as Imam of the Omani interior, leading to the establishment of the last Ibadi Imamate (1913-1955). This effectively created two governing territorial entities: the Imamate in inner Oman, with its capital in Nizwa, and the Sultanate along the coastal regions with its centre in Muscat, wholly supported and enabled by the British. This state of affairs was understood by both the British and the Ibadis to be the result of a culmination of a series of active policies, including 1) the regulation and blockade of trade in slaves and arms into the region, which as the Ibadis saw it was permitted in Islam, even as it prohibited the import of tobacco and alcohol, which the British guaranteed; 2) the presence of British troops and naval squadrons in Oman; 3) the general economic circumstances, already exacerbated by the First World War, characterized by a blockade imposed on all goods into the interior, as well as the enforced duties paid by all ships passing via Muscat, as part of the economic pressure Britain was imposing on the rebels; and, most importantly, 4) the increasingly strident protests against what was widely considered the increasingly arbitrary and "corrupt" regime of a sultan propped up by the British, on whom he was increasingly dependent to secure the continuing rule of the Al Bu Said dynasty. As a British political agent in Muscat himself conceded, "his government is so bad that to continue to support it in its existing condition is nothing short of immoral" (Major L.B.H. Haworth, 9th May 1917, I.O.L/P & S/10/427, part 3 as cited by Wilkinson 1987: 250). A great deal of scholarly literature has examined the wider historical and political circumstances that catalyzed the creation of the Ibadi Imamate in Oman.[16] These issues have generally been explored through a universal utilitarian mode of reason and translated into a functionalist political-economic set of interests cast into the narrative mould of a naked power struggle between competing French and British imperial spheres of influence or as the means of strategically safeguarding the lines of communication to the British Raj, the Jewel in the Crown. In this form of reasoning, an action is

[16] These works include Wilkinson's seminal study on the *Imamate Tradition of Oman* (1987) as well as political-economy oriented works that focus on the transformations of Oman as a socio-political entity over the course of the 20th century. Some of the most noteworthy are Robert Landen's (1967) *Oman since 1856: Disruptive Modernization in a Traditional Arab Society*, J.E. Peterson's (1978) *Oman in the 20th Century: Political Foundations of an Emerging Arab State* and John Townsend's (1977) *Oman: The Making of the Modern State.*

co-opted into a narration of events and actions, reduced to the binaries of profit/loss, dominance/submission, repression/resistance that is ascribed to a whole variety of acts, desires and discourses whose nature and consequences might move well beyond that of an ahistorical calculating rationale. According to these models, Britain's moral humanistic stance as a proponent of universal civilization and progress was a "mask", an elaborate deception that hid a more complex socio-political set of needs and desires. This approach however also rests on certain implicit assumptions about personhood, knowledge, significance and time. From this perspective, it is assumed that an act can be stripped to its basic essence, one that is purely that of an atemporal coherent calculating political subject, whose intentionality and actions can be mapped onto a universal rationale of domination and exploitation, competition or desires, irrespective of time and space. The actions and words of such a self-constituted trans-historical subject would reflect history rather than be produced by it, effectively de-politicizing the narratives of time. Such a ready-made subject would, in short, be considered immune to the forces of historicity and temporality. I argue that there is a politics inherent in the very nature of time and its divisions that undergird the historical consciousness of periodization and temporal experiences, giving rise to and transforming modalities of action and forms of being. In the process, an entire complex of conceptual categories is generated, enabling life practices that ground a certain socio-political order along temporal lines.

There is no doubt that socio-political conditions did play a constitutive role in the forging of informal British governance of the Arab-Persian Gulf region. However, this chapter argues that a relationship to history and an understanding of the past not only undergirded these political and economic endeavours but were also incorporated in thought and action to condition a living relationship, generating a confrontation of cultures with different modes of ethical reason, agency and value. Through this lens, I explore: 1) how assumptions about time materially generated – as well as constrained – the broader projects, policies and actions of the British and the Ibadis that led to the establishment of the 20th century Ibadi Imamate against the British bid to create sultanic absolutism in order to suppress local revolts; 2) how these assumptions fed upon a certain set of attitudes and understandings of Islam on both sides; 3) their implementation and desired or unintended effects; 4) how Ibadi Muslims were affected by these colonial forays. This provides the basis for exploring the specificity of the political and ethical circumstances by which the 1913 Ibadi revolt acquired its specific salience as well as the lasting impact of the Imamate – and the objects, places and deeds it carved out – on the future Sultanate of Oman.

Absorbing Oman into a narrative of universal history, the British, whether in their travelogues or official reports and correspondence, viewed the Arabs of the Oman region through the matrix of a set of core antitheses: between civilization and barbarity, Christianity and Islam, modernity and an ahistorical cyclical pattern, characterized as 'traditional' and conceived as being one of "constant fighting and trouble especially when one imam or Sultan died and another was elected" (Major L.B.H. Haworth, to the acting Political Resident, Baghdad, 5th March 1919, IOR/15/6/204). Tribal chaos and infighting was a fundamental assumption that became a habitual way of thinking about the region, spurring a declaration by the British in 1895 of unequivocal support of the sultan (whoever he may be) in power, through the use of naval force in the ports, against any tribal sheikh who threatened the stability of the coastal zones, the primary region of interest (Bailey, Records of Oman, vol. III 1992: 326). As Haworth went on to assert, the possibility of allowing the "principle of self-determination" for the tribes of Oman

could only be "based on some signs of movement towards progress on the part of the country governed and the interest of civilization must be the deciding factor" (Major L.B.H. Haworth to the acting Political Resident, Baghdad, 5th March 1919, IOR/15/6/204). Oman's past, which was also its present, did not align itself with the expectations underlying a certain notion of progress. As a people relegated to the category of "backwardness", there was a need for a power to institute the necessary reforms to bring about an alignment with progress in accordance with the new understanding of homogenous, unilinear time.

In this case, civilization, as the culmination of the teleology of progress and modernization, was integral to a tacit understanding of the desirability of a centralized state, in the modern sense. It would be one divorced from its emotive and social particulars, guaranteeing stability and security through entrenched institutions of law and order and stable sources of finance that could stand apart from its rulers, thus existing as a distinct and enduring entity and not being subject to the "arbitrary" actions of any one individual or group (L.B.H. Haworth to the acting Political Resident, Baghdad, September 24th 1919 IOR/15/6/204). This involved the transformation of a state whose subjects were related to the sovereign through social and material obligations and rights, historic alliances and tribal ties of support and protection into an increasingly abstract governing entity that set itself apart from both rulers and ruled, seeking thereby to endure beyond allegiance toward any one ruler even while subjecting all to the power of the State as embodied in the person of the sultan. However, a state's attainment of "self-determination" could only be possible through "a period of tutelage under more advanced nations" (IOR 15/6/204; IOR/15/6/40): political self-determination could only come about through the reform and modification of an archaic past in order to make it conform to a more universal modernity. The pursuance of such a goal in Oman, Haworth wrote, "would make it impossible for us to leave the Sultan to his own devices since the result would not be in the interests of progress or civilization" (IOR 15/6/204). Britain's policy and actions in Oman were thus caught in a paradoxical position: Even as it took steps towards assuring Oman's "self-determination" – through reorganizing *zakat* and custom revenues in order to secure a stable financial base[17] as well as recruiting and training a levy corps[18] as a standing army loyal to the state/sultan) – their continuing support and active military engagements for the sake of enforcing and entrenching that rule also had the consequence of generating a persistent revolutionary challenge.

[17] With the loss of her East African empire, Oman underwent a general economic collapse in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The inability to maintain a strong administrative presence in the interior led to further losses in *zakat* taxes. Eventually, the sultans became increasingly ensnared in debt to Indian merchants, subjects of the British crown, as these loans and British subsidies increasingly became the only basis of state finances and way to pay off incurred debts. As a result, the British Raj/Government of India came to play an increasingly prominent role in re-organizing Oman's finances in an attempt to create a more stable and independent financial footing through refiguring the administration and creating new types of customs and dues. By the mid-1950s, these had become one of the largest sources of indigenous income for state expenditure (Peterson 1978; Townsend 1978).

[18] The defences of the Sultanate were traditionally manned by "*askaris* or guards who garrisoned the forts throughout the territories of the ruler. Often, mercenaries were used as part of Omani politics as they were the one force whose loyalties to the ruler could be assured. Most of these were recruited from among non-Omanis. However, for campaigns, the ruler, whether an imam or sultan, largely depended on the armed assistance of allied tribes. At the turn of the 20th century, this traditional form of military support and assistance was growing increasingly tenuous, with no guarantee that tribesmen of the interior would come to the aid of the sultan or even the capital if it came under attack. The necessity of stationing Indian troops near Muscat in 1913 at the time of the Imamate revolt in the

When British officers claimed that late 19th and early 20th century Oman was "divisive", "uncivilized", "piratical" and "backwards", they were describing the effects of socio-political and economic conditions that were largely due to their own exploitative governance of the region. Although Oman was not a formal colony it was within a sphere of influence that encompassed the entire Arab-Persian Gulf region. With the most powerful coercive force in the region, the Gulf Squadron of the Indian and later Royal Navy, the British Political Resident presided over the Gulf as over a British lake, with no real rivals in the region.[19] The implementation of their policies was easier, as they saw it, with a few malleable key rulers in tow, rather than needing to deal with a variety of different tribal groupings and their sheikhs. It was considered preferable for the Resident to recognize and protect these rulers, ensuring their enforcement of certain measures – anti-slave traffic, anti-piracy, regulation of the traffic of arms and armaments – over the increasingly embittered complaints of their subjects, and holding them directly responsible for any transgressions on the part of their subjects, rather than directly enforcing the treaties themselves (Peterson 1997; Landen 1967). This was integral to an overall policy of indirect influence and considered an "improvement" over direct rule, inasmuch as "a country is improved by the advice and development of its own internal powers rather than by its absorption and by its direct management" (Major L.B.H. Haworth Political Agent and H.B.M.'s Consul to the acting Political Resident, Baghdad R/15/6/204). However, their "independent" status notwithstanding, these regions were as fully integrated into British imperial rule as formal colonies. Internal "self-development" involved heavy-handed imperial intervention on the coastlines that in consequence led to the forcible transformations of the everyday social, political and economic lives of inhabitants on the coast and the interior regions of Oman. These alterations were the direct consequence of a series of defined imperial interests that sought to modernize the Gulf through Britain's position there. These included: 1) the economic and technological modernization of the Arab-Persian Gulf region, 2) the banning of the slave trade, and 3) the regulation of the arms trade and gunrunning.

After eradicating the French threat in the 19th century, Britain's primary interest in the early 20th century in the Gulf region was primarily strategic, namely to safeguard telegraph lines built along Gulf coast lines in the 1860s, thus facilitating fast communication with India as well as the safety of British shipping lanes between Persia, Iraq, Muscat and India. These were the primary routes for steamers run by the British India Steam Navigation Company (BI) from the late 19th century onwards that incorporated major Gulf ports, including Basra, Qatif, Manamah, Muscat,

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interior to prevent the military overthrow of the Sultanate led to the unprecedented step of recruiting a levy corps from the Makran coast of Baluchistan (now in Pakistan), trained and commanded by British officers, as a permanent standing army that could guarantee the safety of the coast and its ports under the sultan/British (Peterson 1978; Townsend 1978). The dissolution of these new troops was one of the conditions laid down by Shaikh Isa bin Salih al Harthy, one of the two primary leaders of the tribal confederacy who led the Imamate revolt, in his petition to the British. In his own words, he notes, "Although such things are the custom of the Turkish government according to our views they are not in accordance with *sharī'a* law. None of the sultan's ancestors had a *nizam* or band (army) and the Sultan is forbidden by his religion to allow such things" (15th September 1915, R/15/6/46).

[19] It was only from the 1950s onwards, with the discovery of oil in the Arabian Peninsula, that the British re-directed their attention from the coastal regions to the interior. Prior to that, despite the fact that British policies and treaties severely circumscribed the actions of the rulers under her 'tutelage', the relations between these coastal rulers and their hinterland were not her primary concern as long as they did not impinge on her interests on the coast.

and Dubai on their way to and from Bombay. The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, which cut shipping times from months to weeks, also played a significant role in British overall policy for ensuring the safety of the British Raj, as the stability of surrounding regions such as the Arabian Peninsula assumed paramount importance in strategic planning. Once a necessary commercial port of call/central entrepôt in the Gulf trade networks, the importance of Muscat waned with the introduction of steam power. This was part of the imposition of an imperial trading and communication regime that was highly favourable to British strategic and development interests as competition from the steam ships reduced the profitability of Oman's local shipping fleet. Oman became increasingly dependent on the outside world for such staples as rice, sugar, tea, coffee, textiles, wood for boats, and kerosene. However, trade at this point was almost wholly facilitated by British subjects (resident Indian merchants who now had a virtual monopoly), transported on European steamers and primarily conducted with the British Raj.[20] By the beginning of the 20th century, even such staples as cotton cloth worn by a tribesman in the interior was being imported, manufactured in Lancashire and brought in via steamships (Landen 1967: 80).

The division of Oman from Zanzibar,[21] creating two Sultanates, also destroyed a once powerful and integrated economy, leaving Oman dependent on its own resources, which were now effectively separated from the success of Zanzibar's clove plantations and industry, and the prosperity which it had once brought. With less than 5% of its land under agriculture, producing dates and fruits, the region had little to export except for dates, dried fish and certain fruits such as pomegranates and dried limes. Oman was increasingly coming to exist solely through the categories and actions that emerged through her relationship with Great Britain, whose support was pivotal to the continuity of the Al Bu Said dynasty. The destruction of local shipping and or mercantile interests and practices became integral to the entry of steam as a crucial mode of modern power and technology in the development of the Gulf region. The loss of local prosperity and ensuing stagnation, especially among the Arabs, led in turn to a rapid decline in population in the country's port cities, many of whose inhabitants either returned to home villages in the interior migrated in increasing numbers to Zanzibar from the 1870s onwards.

[20] This is neatly summed up by the rather matter-of-fact tones adopted by Major L.B.H. Haworth, writing to Mr A.H. Grant (CSI, Foreign Secretary to the Government of India in the Foreign and Political Department, Simla, May 17th 1917, R/15/6/204), who notes that "the life of Oman depends upon the external world. The rice and grain it imports, the clothes it wears and the wood from which it makes its boats are imported from India while the dates, pomegranates and limes it exports are sold to British subjects and despatched to British ports. It would only be necessary to declare a blockade, a blockade which would not need a ship to enforce it beyond the Sultan's own vessel, to bring the tribes to their senses."

[21] Once the leaders of a maritime empire, the sultans of Oman for the better part of the 19th century also held territories in East Africa (Zanzibar) and on the Indian coast. The death of Sayyid Sa'id bin Sultan in 1856 led to a conflict between two of his sons, which ended in 1861 with a division of territory. In an agreement "mediated" by the British, territory was divided into two parts, Oman and Zanzibar, which in turn led to the collapse of Oman's imperial economy. Sultan Thuwaini of Oman was compensated for this arrangement by an annual grant of $ MT 40,000 (Rs. 86,400), called the Canning Award, which was from 1883 onward paid through the Government of India (Records of Oman, vol. III: 318). This in turn led to a greater dependence on subsidies and loans, making the sultan of Oman increasingly dependent on British military support.

Many Omanis turned to either subsistence agriculture, primarily date plantations and fishing or seized local opportunities for engaging in the lucrative but illicit trade of guns and slaves, which became one of the primary activities of the coastal economy. The Omani economy, which had once been an imperial mercantile and shipbuilding enterprise at the heart of the Indian Ocean Trade networks, had in the span of a century become increasingly agrarian and localized. However, the economic life of the interior still depended to a large extent on the export of agricultural produce – as well as the increasingly illegal trades in slaves and arms. Through middlemen and dealers, both Arab and Indian, these products had to make their way to the coastal ports in order to be collected and re-distributed for export, and were therefore subject to a number of taxes and dues, which were a basic source of revenue for the State. Many of these new customs and dues were considered innovations by the leaders of the Imamate revolt and not in keeping with *sharī'a.* These became stigmatized as the marks of tyranny, especially when used as a form of leverage to manipulate Imamate affairs, as was the case in 1920 when disputes with the Sultan – with the support of the British – led to the imposition of a penal *zakat* that raised export taxes on all produce (from 5% to 25% on all dates and 50% for pomegranates) brought in from the interior when it came down to the coast for export (Bailey, Records of Oman III 1988: 17-18).

Generated by evangelical and humanitarian fervour, the British drive to abolish the slave trade throughout their dominions was enacted through a series of treaties reluctantly signed by the ruler of the Omani empire in order to limit slavery in the Omani dominions (1822, 1839 and 1845). In 1872, Sir Bartle Frere, a leading abolitionist, persuaded Sultan Turki (r. 1871-1888) to sign a treaty that not only outlawed the very lucrative slave trade (but not the ownership of slaves) altogether, but also public and private sales. The loss of customs revenues and private income effectively increased the financial reliance of the Omani Sultan on Britain.[22] The year 1873 saw both the Muscati and Zanzibari states proclaim the illegality of the slave trade (import and export), in consequence driving the practice underground into illegal smuggling operations.[23] This intervention was particularly outrageous to the Ibadi opposition, since slavery was conceived as a legitimate institution integral to tribal society and in accordance with *sharī'a*. From the 1860s onwards, British naval cruisers along the Omani coast effectively strangled the slave trade, although small boatloads of slaves could still slip through.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Muscat had become a major entrepôt for a lucrative traffic in arms (Lorimer 1908: 2556-2588; Peterson 1978; Landen 1967: 388-429). Various munitions, including modern rifles, were imported from Europe into Muscat via steamers, 95% of which were re-exported, or rather smuggled into other parts of the Gulf and South Asia (Gwadur, Oman/British Baluchistan and Bandar Abbas, Southern Iran), where they were reaching the Afghan troops at Herat, who were at war with the British, as well as the Indian

[22] The reason that Sultan Turki signed the anti-slavery proclamation was because of financial need. His signing the treaty paved the way to his receiving $ 60,000 Maria Theresa Dollars, monies that were needed to strengthen a crumbling rule (Lorimer vol. 1 908: 2475-2516; Landen 1967; Townsend 1977: 42-46). This became part of an overall annual subsidy (the Canning Award) granted by the British to the sultan that formed a vital part of the sultan's annual revenues, ultimately becoming a means for the British to maintain a form of control over a ruler's actions. At this point, customs revenues were growing smaller due to the dearth of trade.

[23] Lorimer vol. X (1908), 2475-2516: LP&S/18/B400.

North West Frontier. Tribal uprisings from 1897 onwards on the Indo-Afghan frontier suddenly brought the issues of the Gulf arms trade to the fore (Lorimer vol. 1 1908: 2560). At a time of economic uncertainty, traffic in arms bolstered the economy, accounting for a quarter of Muscat's import income in the 1890s and early 20th century (Landen 1967: 152-153). These profits declined precipitously when in 1910-1911 the British imposed a naval blockade to halt the arms trade and collapsed altogether when the British 'induced' the sultan to establish an arms warehouse in 1912 and to strictly monitor the business. To make up for the massive losses incurred in customs revenue, the British increased the sultan's annual subsidy by Rs. 100,000 (£6,666). These actions were considered direct strikes on the economic prosperity of the interior and were one of the primary reasons for the eruption of a series of rebellions from 1874 to 1915, fuelled by the anger against what was perceived as an interdependent relationship between the British and the sultan that was not only leading to a collapsing economy but was making it impossible to maintain internal law and order due to the limited availability of ready arms and ammunition. By this time, customs revenues were merely trickling in as a result of an overall dearth in trade. The consequence was great poverty and active hostility among the tribes of Oman on the coast and the interior. The resulting 1913 revolt was one of the most significant in that it instigated the establishment of Oman's last Imamate, with its white flag raised in revolt against the sultan.

The ideas concerning "traditional" Omani society, as one characterized by an ahistorical repetitive cycle of suppression followed by tribal strife and unrest, was rather a response to new circumstances: the many members of mercantile and shipping communities who had been pushed either deeper into the hinterland or into emigration, struggling to find a viable livelihood, did not become 'traditional' tribesmen by choice. "Development" and "progress" for the Arab-Persian Gulf region, as a set of deployed actions, involved political and economic reconfiguration of arrangements that were effectively inclusionary and exclusionary in their effects, engendering a deeply hierarchical set of relationships that defined what Oman was vis-à-vis the West. The project of Western development of the Arab-Persian Gulf region was therefore effectively one of generating difference that allocated Oman into the category of "backwardness" and "tradition" that needed to be undone. Oman became a subordinate region, wholly dependent on British largesse and military support, disempowered and conceived of as a locale that needed constant propping up against the ever-present threat of tribal anarchy and chaos. Although some British observers recognized the British role in these developments, particularly the repercussions of the introduction of steam power and the outlawing of slave traffic, many others considered it, in a more depoliticized manner, as a fundamental aspect of the character of an Arab-Islamic society, and that this was primarily responsible for the region's backwardness. In this latter view, British development of the area was the region's best hope for progress and enlightenment.

The Ibadi Perspective

> *In a letter dated 5th Shaban 1333 (19th June 1915) sent by Sheikh Abdullah bin Rashid al Hashim, a Qadi of the Imam to the British Political Agency and Consulate, the following was stated after compliments –*

Sheikh Humaid bin Sa'id al Falaiti brought a message (to us) from you (the British) to the effect that you desire to negotiate for peace and prevent bloodshed and do good for all men and in reply I inform you that a Mussalman will never agree to be lead astray from the ***Path of the Prophet****. If the message which Humaid brought us is correct, then it behoves us to ask you for certain a condition both of a religious and a worldly nature. You Christians are well aware that the Islamic religion allows certain things and forbids others –*

I. *You Christians have stopped us from dealing in slaves. This is injurious to us Muslims. Owing to lack of harmony among Muslims you have gained strength. Were this not so, the benefits derived from our slaves would not have been lost.*

II. *You have taken possession of the sea and pretend that it belongs to you. The sea is common to all.*

III. *You interfere in the affairs of the Sultans of Oman and support them in matters which are unlawful and contrary to their own religion and they have acted against their religion.*

IV. *The prices of foodstuffs and cloth have been increasing. Food is necessary to live and cloth is necessary to clothe the body which God bids us to cover.*

V. *You have also stopped the trade in arms and ammunition. Arms are very necessary to maintain peace. And you allow wine to be drunk and tobacco to be used, while both these are contrary to our Sharī'a. Whenever a slave comes to you, you free him, although he belongs to his master. You allow things which are forbidden by God and disallow things which are allowed by God. You must give up doing injustice. You must allow lawful things and put a stop to unlawful things….*

Records of Oman Vol. III: Historical Affairs, 1867-1947, p. 11-12.:

To characterize the affronts committed by the British to a disruption of political-economic institutional values and the subsequent subordination of the Omani economy to British imperial interests is certainly one aspect of an understanding of the factors behind the rise of the Ibadi Imamate in 1913. However, relying entirely on this approach would also fundamentally circumscribe scholarship within the limited vocabulary of power struggles and desires as motivations for action. Adopting such an approach would moreover protect a certain secularized historical narrative by establishing the normatively of certain cultural and political categories. As a result, the ethico-religious dimension of Ibadi reasoning underwritten by the role of God and the Prophet, as may be noted in the above quotation, is entirely obscured. There appears to be no place for it as a non-secular logic of resistance, thus resulting in an inability to make legible the nature of the Ibadi sense of loss and outrage. Little attention has been paid to how one may reflect on the specificity of the impact of British intervention and transformation of this life-world as it was being subordinated to the demands of global modernization and capital. An important measure in redressing this lack is a consideration of what type of ethical, communicative and political practices would illuminate such a historical injury.

The specificity of the Ibadis – as a *madhab* (sect) and a school of *sharī'a* interpretation – centred on a certain conception of history and time. Reading and listening practices (see chapter 3) cultivated the past as an ethico-political stance out of which the present was lived and the future was anticipated. These ethical performances sedimented a capacity to appraise history, through eliciting a certain affective-volitional receptiveness that in turn habituated the listener and reader to embodying an Ibadi ethical mode of being. Through the process of ingraining knowledge in the hearts of listeners and readers, a certain way of relating to and interpreting the past bound itself to the appropriate object, so as to align members of the community towards a more pious

comportment, one in accordance with the Ibadi School of *sharī'a* practice.[24] These disciplinary practices, which structured a way of "seeing" and "inhabiting" the world, coalesced around one of the most seminal Ibadi historical works of the 20th century, one that lies at the heart of the 1913 revolt: *Tuhfat al-'Ayān fi sirat ahl 'Umān* (1911),[25] written by Abdullah bin Humaid al-Salimi (1865-1914), also known by his honorific, Nur al Din al-Salimi.

A towering intellect, al-Salimi was renowned for his prolific and substantive scholarly output, including works on *fiqh* (jurisprudence), doctrine, *hadith* studies, juridical and moral treatises and compendiums (many of which were written in poetic form in order to facilitate memorization), as well as compilations of his *fatāwā* (juridical opinions). He was also a dynamic judge, teacher, speaker and a formidable participant in the politics of his day. His influence was not restricted to his scholarly works, letters and *fatāwā*, but was also embodied in the lives of his students, who numbered among the most famous tribal leaders, jurists and '*ulamā* of the 20th century, including the two imams who presided over the last Imamate. His work on an Ibadi history, one of the few historical texts available for a sect that is more renowned for its legal literature,[26] is generally considered to have been written with a view to reviving the Imamate in Oman, in light of the "chaos and wars that he witnessed between tribes, and the growing debility literature,[27] is generally considered to have been written with a view to reviving the Imamate in Oman, in light of the "chaos and wars that he witnessed between tribes, and the growing debility of the Sultan in the wake of British control" (al-Hashmi 2007: 59-60). This paramount aim is reflected in his works overall, where his elaborations, explanations, criticisms and compilations were part of a general bid to reform society and to implement justice (*'adl*) through the

[24] I am indebted to Charles Hirschkind for this interpretation. See *The Ethical Landscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics* (2006).

[25] Despite the active and much publicized efforts by the Ministry of Heritage and Culture to print and make accessible all Ibadi literature ranging from *fiqh* encyclopaedias to legal works, to theological works (*'ilm al-kalām*), treatises and manuals, this particular historical work has been banned, and it is virtually impossible to obtain this history through official channels. This might be due to al-Salmi's perspective on the Al Bu Said Dynasty and his overt aim to revive the Ibadi Imamate, a possibility that has never quite disappeared in Oman. However, the importance of *tuhfat al-'ayān* and its wide fame (almost every Omani knows of this history and many have private copies that circulate) has made it possible to obtain photocopies of the work privately from individuals or through alternative means outside Oman.

[26] Modern Ibadi historians generally agree that history writing was not an active field of endeavour among Ibadi '*ulamā'* (al-Kalbani 2003: 142-143). The primary fields of literature among the Ibadi '*ulamā'* were in the domains of Quran and hadith exegesis as well as the development of Ibadi jurisprudence. The overriding aims over the course of centuries among the Ibadi was establishing the basis for justice as well as developing the religious sciences. As a result, histories and biographical literature are considered to be few and far between. Nur al Din al-Salmi's work was, and remains, of especial value since it is a unique scholarly history that comprehensively chronicles Oman's past from the Jahiliyya/pre-Islamic period to the first decade of the 20th century.

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confrontation of "tyranny" (*ẓulm*). The goals of writing a history of the Omani people are elucidated in the introduction of his work:

> "It is well known to the discerning that a knowledge of history inclines (one) towards the emulation of the virtuous and guides (one) on the path of truth (*ṭariqa al-mutqīn*) inasmuch as it recollects (*dhkara*) past acts of devoutness and depravity. For when the judicious hear about such wickedness, he becomes wary of such a course and it may see him instead, following the tracks/impressions (*athar*) of the piety minded and keep away from evil circumstances (*ahwal min ṭalḥ*) in order to exert (*yujāhid*) himself to fulfil his rightful obligations towards *jihad."* (Al- Salmi 1989: 4)

For al-Salmi, the act of absorbing the past – through reading or listening – was a mode of moral training whereby history was conceived of as a reservoir of multiple experiences that in turn oriented its audience, by providing modes of guidance and exemplary behaviour of the virtuous, towards acts of piety and virtue for the future. Undergirded by the Quran and the *sunna* of the Prophet and his companions, the past was perceived as embodying experiential continuity, which allowed histories to be perceived and appraised as exemplars for life's teachings. An assumption of a continuity of circumstances assured the relevance of past experiences to bind expectations. The past, in other words, held sway over the present and future by providing a temporal coherence, authority and instruction that determined future action. Following the tracks or impressions (*iqtidā' bil athār*) of virtuous forbears (*ahl al-faḍl*) and attuning oneself to the advice and admonitions deduced from their lives was part of the daily pedagogy of the self. This form of spiritual progress was in contrast to a more earth-grounded future, no longer related to the next world and premised on continuous advancement and difference. It was thus markedly different from the British understanding of a temporality specific to modernity that singularized past phenomena into unique events that were conspicuously distinct from the future and therefore did not hold exemplary force.

For al-Salmi, laying out the foundations of justice, sincerity (*istiqāma*) and virtue by way of a chronicle that ethically delineated the important events and personalities of a region's past was a fundamental means of political and religious reform in the region (Salih Nasir 2003; al-Hashmi 2007). As a chronicle, in two volumes, each stage of his history is demarcated by a new chapter or *bāb*, and a new topic is delineated at each of these. Sheikh al-Salmi begins his work with a brief introduction to Oman and its physical features through descriptions given by such luminaries of history and travel writing of the medieval Muslim World as Ibn Khaldun and Mas'udi. The first chapter focuses on the virtues of the people of the region, as extolled by the companions of the Prophet at the time the first delegation was sent to Oman and as embodied in the lives and acts of contemporary and later leaders, commanders and scholars. Each subsequent chapter describes pivotal events and personalities chronologically, as a chain of events, beginning with the migration of the Azdi Arab tribal confederation from the Yemen to Oman with the destruction of the Ma'arib dam and its political consequences in the pre-Islamic period. Other topics treated are the expulsion of the Persians from the region; the subsequent adoption of Islam among the inhabitants, its reverberations and the ensuing developments that not only shaped the course of the Umayyad and Abbasid empires but also determined the oppositional doctrinal and political bases of the Ibadi Imamate over the course of centuries; the specificities of its doctrine; its rulers and leaders, and their noble actions and misdeeds as defined by Ibadi doctrinal tenets; and the pivotal events that characterized the virtuous and ignoble lives of the

intellectual and political forbears that made Ibadism the predominant Islamic tradition and school of law in the region.

Throughout the two volumes, there is posited a continuous identity of an entity called "Oman", a region largely defined by its geographical frontiers, historical experiences (specifically the domination of Arab tribes), as well as the de facto emergence and prevalence of the Ibadi Islamic tradition in Oman. This was primarily characterized by the region's governance, which for the most part comprised a succession of Ibadi imams with the support of notable *ulamā* and tribal elders. Grounded in Ibadi doctrine, these rulers were noted for both their vices and virtues. The first imams of the Ya'ariba dynasty (1624-1744), for example, are described in terms of their piety and learning, their legitimate succession to the Imamate and their efforts and successes in uniting the region by defeating the Portuguese in the 17th century. Subsequent imams – who had become hereditary rulers who treated the region as a dominion (*milkīya*) to be fought over rather than as the elected Imamate revealed by God – are lamented for the weaknesses that led in turn to tribal divisions and fragmentation, resulting ultimately in foreign intervention and domination by the Persians. Their misdeeds, al-Salmi narrates, led to God turning away from them and bestowing his favours on others (al-Salmi nd vol. 2: 168). History as an ethical performance, in other words, was inseparable from the act of worshipping God, whose will is an active agent working through *shar'īa* in order to ensure that those who have submitted to him walked on the "right path" (*jāddat al-mustaqīm*) in accordance with Ibadi doctrinal interpretation of legitimate succession and rule. A recurring trope in al-Salmi's work is the illegitimacy of rulers who deviate from the Quran and Prophetic *Sunna* through their arbitrary hold on power, inasmuch as they immerse themselves in struggles for domination and the exploitation of their subjects. Their bid to create factionalism and strife leads in turn to God turning from them and removing their dominion from their hands (al-Salmi nd vol. 1: 352-353). By way of example, in critiquing the Nabahina dynasty (1406-1624) – rulers representing non-Imamate rule – al-Salmi stigmatizes them as the embodiments of arbitrariness (*istibdād*) in power and the forceful rule of people by tyranny – *qahr al-nās bal jabarīya* (al-Salmi nd vol. 2: 125). This in turn leads to the familiar outcome of tribal factionalism and foreign occupation by the Portuguese.[28] This fragmentation, according to al-Salmi, recurs once more as one of the major causes for the downfall of the Imamate with the entrenchment of the Al Bu Said dynasty from the mid-19th century onwards as ambitious hereditary rulers. Oman is seen as being united once more under the new Imam, Ahmed ibn Said Al Bu Saidi (1744-1778), the founder of the still ruling Al Bu Said dynasty, who had ousted Persian occupiers and been elected legitimately. The illegitimate succession of subsequent rulers and their actions, however, result in foreign intervention and control, this time by the British, thereby weakening the people as a whole. The chronicle ends in 1910 with the details of this turn of events.

[28] This by no means implies that al-Salmi assumes an apolitical cyclical regularity in the rise and fall of dynasties, divorced from larger socio-political circumstances or context. Instead, his understanding of Oman's past might be better conceived as ascribing contingent circumstances to pre-existent structures whose bases were determined by moral standards set by the Quran and the *sunna* of the Prophet. These structures set forms of behaviour and modes of action into certain repeatable experiential types whose significance was in turn determined by Ibadi categories of moral and political thought. There was thus a certain repeatable constellation of experiences, but one type did not lead inevitably to the other as part of a recurrent cyclical ahistorical motion. However, there was a fundamental assumption that whatever unfolded in Oman was structurally iterable, since it had been experienced before.

By cultivating a certain analytic mode of didactic appraisal throughout his chronicled history, al-Salmi aimed to engender a certain ethical orientation among his readers, one premised on Ibadi interpretation of *sharī'a*, even while it grounded its mode of knowledge in a perspective rooted in the lived realities of its readers. By orienting his readers' (and listeners') perceptions and sensibilities through the overarching narrative structure of Ibadi history and its ethical import, al-Salmi aimed to instil in people the desire to revive the Imamate while addressing the dangers of factionalism and fragmentation in the process (al-Sailmi nd, vol. 1: 91). An Ibadi who had attained the proper ethical and affective mode of active awareness and reason through being made conscious of his history was also aware of the consequences of his actions and the fear that came from the knowledge of an impending Day of Judgement. Such a reader/listener would, in al-Salmi's view, became the core unit for generating a decisive confrontation (*jihād*) with the corruption, oppression and tribal factionalism that characterized the Sultanate, subsuming tribal interests and thereby forging a foundation for the re-unification of the region. The rooting of this knowledge would in turn also generate the basis for replacing such poisonous circumstances with those of righteousness and piety, paving the way for a revival of the Imamate, in which people could be guided once more to salvation through the right leadership who would direct them to live in accord with *sharī'a*, the path to salvation. The overriding aims of writing *tuhfat al-'*ayan was not simply to facilitate but to transform the reader's (listener's) perception of reality by binding an understanding of history to the very real object of reform and revolution.

Humility vs. arrogance, consultation vs. tyranny (*jabābira*), justice vs. arbitrariness (*ahwā*), piety vs. hypocrisy, *sharī'a* vs. force – these become some of the constitutive categories of morality by which an overall Ibadi historical narrative was conceptually structured and navigated. Fundamental principles of right and wrong, the basis of how human morality and the foundation of a just social order were undergirded by the Quran and the moral perfection of the Prophet embodied in the *Sunna.* The discursive figures of moral and political archetypes that served to categorize and theorize ethic-political and moral experiences were sufficient for interpretations to be drawn for the future from past exemplary acts: in this case the nature of the threat and consequences of British domination.

The basis for Ibadi *sharī'a* authority was also premised on a third precedent that institutionalized a specific perspective on the issue of legitimate rule. With primary criteria based on Quranic standards of piety and moral rectitude, as well as Prophetic *sunna*, legitimate rule was also based on a variation of historical time, a golden age centred on the original Muslim community at the time of the Prophet and his companions and the early Islamic caliphates of the *al-Rāshidūn*, Abu Bakr and 'Umar. According to Ibadi doctrine, piety and morality are seen in their perfect expression only under the leadership of the Prophet, followed by the caliphates of Abu Bakr and 'Umar. The actions of the virtuous and just imams of the Ibadi tradition continued to provide exemplary models in the processes of sedimenting and institutionalizing the criteria of morality, justice and learning that sanctioned the Imamate. These criteria in turn navigated the idealized paradigms of the Ibadi *imāma* to finally coalesce into the histories of the *tuhfat al-'ayān.*

This time period became a type of evaluative category whose interpretation, image and knowledge establish an exemplary view of history, one that formed the foundation that generated and institutionalized the Ibadi school of *sharī'a.* Association (*wilāya*) and disassociation (*barā'a*) from the authority of an Ibadi imam was often directly linked to the actions of the Prophet and

the *Rāshidun*, based on whether or not they fulfilled the model criteria of religious piety (*war'*), asceticism (*zuhd*) and justice (*'adl*) that legitimated the authority of the Ibadi imams (Gaiser 2010; Wilkinson 1987). Those who did not adhere to God's decree in commanding what was right and forbidding the wrong (*amr al-ma'rūf wa nahy al-mūnkar*) were portrayed as unjust (*ẓālim*) rulers comparable to the actions of 'Uthman and 'Ali, the last two caliphs of the *Rāshidūn* who become the prototypes of the sinning imams whose actions justified their removal from power.

As exemplary models, these historical figures had become objectified, available for interpretation, and were the media for reasoned evaluation. And yet the process of reading (or listening to) narratives about their lives and actions was not merely a communicative one but involved practices of assimilation and absorption through which the Ibadi subject could generate the substrate through which to cultivate an ethical disposition. Both experiences and expectations took up the same authoritative character types, inasmuch as the past and the present were not sharply distinguished but were considered in continuity with each other. In other words, there was a stable authoritative basis for not only addressing change but also determining its relevance and significance. Revolution wasn't seen as a break from the past but a way of living in accord with it.

The lives of the Prophet and his companions did not end with their deaths but extended to "futures past", to events and acts that were still unfolding in the future but already lay in the past for interpreters. The Prophetic, early Medinan Caliphate eras are not only acknowledged as predecessors of the Ibadi, but the figures of the Prophet, Abu Bakr, 'Umar, and early Kharijite personalities are considered as those from whom the Ibadi inherited the "true religion", thus becoming the objects of assimilative attachments. The Golden Age of the Muslim community as an ideal type became the critical basis for debate, argumentation and even conflict in order to rationalize practices and justify differing points of view on what it meant to live in accordance with *sharī'a* and to approximate the ideals of the Golden Age as embodied in the Prophetic *sunna*. These could set standards for stabilizing the actions of an ethic-social everyday life, in even its most mundane minutiae, as well as provoke political reforms and conflicts.

In its authoritative and institutionalized form, this history generated the microcosm of a larger set of debates that structured the Islamic world in terms of authority and the body-politic. These debates centred on the question of criteria for legitimate rule after the Prophet's death. Its legal-theological doctrines were based not only on pious forbears such as the earliest caliphs of the Islamic *umma* but also on formative experiences of study gatherings, scholarly movements and missionary activities in Basra as well as textualized memories of the early *khawārij* movement that had emerged at the Battle of Siffin (656) between Mu'awiya and the caliph, Ali ibn Abi Talib.[29] The Ibadi tradition considers its imams to represent an unbroken line of successors to the Prophet Muhammad, thus securing a line of continuity across swathes of time. The relatively unknown Ibadi school of *sharī'a* interpretation had periodically re-established the Imamate, over the course of 1,200 years, uniting the peoples of south-east Arabia into a body-politic led by an

[29] The first *khawārij* were known as the *Muḥakkima* after their slogan, or *taḥkim, "lā ḥukm illa li-lāh"* ("No judgement but God's") which made its appearance in opposition to the arbitration agreement between Ali and Mu'awiya and Ali's acceptance of it. The *taḥkim* is generally considered to hold a complex perspective on the limits of human judgement in relation to divine authority.

imam. The predominance of Ibadism in the region rendered Oman a distinct entity. North Africa (in particular the Mzab region of Algeria) was the only other primary locale where Ibadism predominated. Unlike the prevalent Shi'a tradition, whose Imamate tradition is rooted in the progeny of the Prophet's family, Ibadi doctrine was founded on the idea of an elected imam and any notion of a hereditary Imamate was excluded. The ideal imam was chosen on the basis of personal qualities that included,

> Being a mature male of outstanding intelligence, not blind, deaf, senile nor lacking limbs which would prevent him from taking part in the obligation of *jihad*, nor should he be a eunuch or emasculated. He must not be mad, nor feeble minded, nor should he be envious, cowardly, mean, a liar, nor a man who fails to keep promises and agreements, nor possess any characteristic that causes concern. He must be a man of great learning for without learning how can he carry out his duties and interpret the laws aright and ensure that his subordinates do so. (Salim b. Said al-Sa'ighi, from the 18th century *bāb al-'imāma* of his *Kanz al-'adīb*, as cited by Wilkinson 1987: 170)

In the Ibadi interpretation of leadership, the Quran's emphasis on the principles of right and wrong provided the foundation for equating leadership with piety (*taqwa*) and morality. Piety and a moral character as criteria of excellence were also considered to be a fundamental aspect of Muhammad's Prophethood, leading to the doctrinal equation of political leadership with high moral qualities in doctrine. It was the emphasis on qualities of piety that distinguished the Ibadi from other Muslim groups; it also underscored the importance of the performance of the obligations inherent in being a Muslim as well as being morally aware in the performance of those duties.

So long as the imam governed in accordance with Ibadi doctrinal obligations and rights linked to notions of justice and morality, he was supported (*wilāya*) by the community. Theoretically, if he transgressed, and was unjust, he could be deposed through *bara'a*, rejection of his authority. The *imam 'ādil* (just imam) was the one who "obeys God, and His messenger and acts by the Book of God and the *sunna* of the Prophet" (Al Kudami as cited by Gaiser 2010: 44). The trait of justice was considered sufficiently fundamental that Ibadi scholars even allowed that a non-Ibadi ruler could be tolerated as imam as long as he was just. The basic relationship between the imam and the community was that of a mutual contract ('*aqd*) based on adherence to *sharī'a.*

Being one among the '*ulemā'*, the imam was among the scholars of the community, notably in jurisprudence. The belief that divinely inspired knowledge was one of the personal attributes of the Prophet also set precedents on the possession of knowledge being one of the key qualities for leaders. After the Prophet's death, the companions of the Prophet, including the *Rāshidun*, were considered especially well versed in *'ilm* (divinely inspired knowledge that was specifically disciplinary, relating to theology and jurisprudence, rather than *ma'rifa* or ordinary knowledge) due to their proximity to the Prophet. The Ibadis institutionalized the possession of such knowledge, like that of *taqwa*, into a requirement for the legitimate authority of an imam (Gaiser 2010: 52-56). Inasmuch as the foundations of *sharī'a* were the Quran and the Prophetic *sunna*, the imam was not considered the generator of the law but its enforcer and administrator. Justice was implemented in consultation with the '*ulemā'*, which were considered the guardians of the *sharī'a* and thus the protector and representatives of the people. In such a role, they embodied the community in choosing the imam, monitoring his actions, and finally deposing him. It was

based on their consensus that what was *ma'ruf*, or 'right', was accepted, consolidated and then institutionalized over generations.

The imam in turn was charged with administration, ensuring that justice did develop through consensus *(ijma')*. As an *'alim* (scholar) himself his views were of great importance, but not paramount and could be overruled by the judgement of others. The communal aspects of authority in the Ibadi tradition is manifest particularly clearly in the requirement that a council (*ahl al hal wal 'aqd*) of leading *'ulamā'* be appointed to select an imam. The size of this council varied, but six was the preferred number, in emulation of the council that was established by Caliph 'Umar to select his successor. *Shūrā*, or consultation, was an essential aspect of Ibadi juridical and scholarly institutions and was considered to have been encouraged and practiced by the Prophet Muhammad as a basis for sharing authority with the community at large. The accessibility of the imam to all was considered ideal, as imparted in the description of the first North African Ibadi imam, 'Abd al-Rahman b. Rustum, as the just (*adil*) imam who would sit and talk with ordinary people on the mosque steps (al-Salmi 1998: 201).

The authority of the community was also performatively acknowledged through the pledge (*bay'a*) given to the imam at the time that he was affirmed as one. The leading Ibadi sheikhs took the imam's right hand, stating their fealty to him provided that he showed "obedience to God and to His Prophet Muhammad, judge by His Book and by the *sunna* of his Prophet and provided you command what is good (*m'arūf*) and prohibit the forbidden (*munkar*)" (Gaiser 2010: 134-135; Wilkinson 1987: 197). The followers of the imam therefore reserved the right to disobey him if he failed to rule in accordance with *sharī'a.* Hence, even given the acknowledgement of his authority through the *bay'a*, there were limits to how far the imam could go in his administration, at least on a theoretical level.

The Ibadi Imamate was not only an idealized theoretical model but also existed in practice. As such, its more pragmatic side divided the Imamate into four flexible imam-types depending on a socio-political situation in flux. The *imām al-ẓuhūr* denoted a fully functional and independent imamate, with a leader capable of fulfilling his duties. The institution of *imām al-kitmān* ("the imam of secrecy") occurred when the community could not openly proclaim an Imamate and was considered more hypothetical, reflecting times when local dynastic rulers or foreign powers were prevalent and the survival of the community was threatened. At such times, the Ibadis adopted a state similar to the Shi'a *taqiya*, and suspended the requirements of the imamate, turning to the scholars of the community for leadership and guidance. *Imām al-shārī* was primarily a commander who fought to establish the Ibadi state. As an imam, he had full powers and was considered to have all the necessary qualities of leadership, but he was primarily a military leader. The institutional features of *imam al-mudāfi'* ("imam of defense") were organized around an emphasis on defense. Considered a weaker (*dā'if*) entity, in terms of '*ilm*, the imam in this state would be required to consult with the '*ulemā'* and contracted to hold the office only for a certain period of time. The ideal Ibadi imam was therefore an interpreter, administrator and a commander, but his role was subsumed within the larger Ibadi community through a network of obligations and rights that shaped the form of his authority and nature of his legitimacy.

Inasmuch as the imam fulfilled the moral and performative injunctions that accorded with Ibadi *sharī'a*, it would be through his governing practices and rule that a certain life-world would be created, one conducive to the cultivation of the pious self. That relationship of dependency was grounded in the disposition to develop a certain ethical capacity, a habitués oriented towards virtue and piety. Sultanic injunctions with the active assistance of British military support necessitated an action that was internal to the logic of relations, ethical practices and the temporal experience of inhabiting Ibadi *sharī'a*: revolt. In the face of changing socio-economic and political conditions, shifting experiences found a way of living with tradition understood as a kind of continuity even as it was part of a changing landscape. Juxtaposing the actions of the sultan with politico-religious categories established through engagements with Islamic authoritative sources was part of a process of ignoring the differences that separated the times to underwrite the utility that lay at the core of exempla. Inasmuch as the sultan's actions were assimilated into that of a narrative perception of an "unjust" and "arbitrary despot" whose governance was subject to that of an occupying Christian power, rather than the '*ulemā'*, the upholders of the *sharī'a*, the action demanded was one of outright revolution aided by the will of God as interpreted by Ibadi *sharī'a* and its rooting in a distinctive historical imagination. This perspective by no means exhausts the many motivations behind the Ibadi uprising against the Sultan which certainly cannot be explained in terms of a single causal narrative. What it does do however is to critically destabilize the underlying epistemological and ontological assumptions that frame the normative secular narrations of cause and effect in current scholarship in order to make way for a rationale that is specific to the life-world of the Ibadi Imamate that has been increasingly subsumed beneath a capitalist imperial worldview.

The Ibadi Revolt through British Eyes

> ***Undiluted*** *Muhammandanism has not anywhere in the world shown itself capable of efficient rule. The end all and be all of the Imam, the support which he receives is due to his religious position. Extreme orthodoxy flourishes on ignorance especially in Muhammadanism and to promote the role of bigots is to condemn the country to a point of uncivilization commensurate with the bigotry of its priests. It raises the savages to a fixed point and then condemns all further advances as infidelity until it comes into enforced contact with advanced nations.*
>
> Major L.B.H. Haworth I.A. to the Acting Political Resident, Baghdad, 5th March 1919, No. 27-e of 1919, R/15/6/204).

For the British, the rise of the Imamate generated a conflict that was conceived in a secular language pulsating with a myriad of images and archetypes that resonate with political struggles today, especially those pertaining to religious violence. These descriptions were set in terms of a dichotomy between religious fanaticism, bigotry, an uncivilized and intolerant way of life vs. tolerance, knowledge, civilization and modernity. Such a dichotomous perspective was underwritten by a set of rather problematic evaluations, premised on certain normative conceptions of religion, time, politics and the subject. The underlying force behind these evaluations was a prior understanding as to what the proper role of religion, particularly what the relations between religion and politics, should be in a modernizing world. This notion of religion was rooted in a world forged by an alternative sense of temporality and of history that was transcultural and univocal in its nature, and constructed as part of a unilinear teleological development oriented towards Europe and modernity. It was on the basis of such a universal understanding of history that the European medieval past, specifically that of the Merovingian

Kings (as may be noted in the opening quotes of the chapter), could be directly compared to Oman's contemporary as signifying an earlier stage of development, one that Oman needed to go through in order to mature along the lines of universal progressivism. A local European history had become a global category of time. According to this scenario, the world was moving in unison along the same teleological matrix. Other histories and their assumptions were subordinated and ingested into this universal history and the consequence of the process was the radical reconfiguration of Oman's socio-political and religious spaces, particularly from 1970 onwards when systemic institutionalization set in. Oman's alignment with the "Middle Ages" had transformed it into the 'not yet' category, since it had not quite been nudged or rather pushed into modernity.

In the meanwhile, defined by its "backwardness", the Imamate was castigated in its immutable alterity as a region that did not imbibe in the historically sanctioned guidance for the betterment of the world through a forceful decoupling of religion and politics. Nor did it follow its Sunni counterparts in espousing a more "diluted" Islam, in accepting the de facto power and administration of a temporal ruler, with the *'ulemā'* as intermediaries between the rulers and ruled. Instead there was an overt assumption amongst the British imperial bureaucratic networks that the Ibadi *undiluted* practice of Islam embodied a theocracy that was a major threat to the principle of toleration, a requirement of liberal governance. There was an easy secular equation between intolerance and religion. As Major Haworth, Political Agent and H.B.M.'s Consul, Muscat put it, "the rule of pure religion is short. It is personal and selfish and based on no consideration of public policy. And in Muslim countries at least the more powerful the religious leaders become, the more intolerant does their rule become and the more they alienate the people who suffer from their unyielding attitude" (to the acting Political Resident in the Persian Gulf, Baghdad, 5th March 1919, R/15/6/204). Such sentiments seem rather anachronistic given the Imamate's history as an empire in its own right and its active relations, living arrangements and ties with African, Indian and even Far Eastern peoples over the course of centuries through territorial acquisitions, the settlement of merchant communities as well as trading ties and networks. There would surely have had to be, out of sheer necessity, certain moral and political bases by which to forge a certain ethic and practice of toleration in these social entities.

And yet this equation draws attention to the ways in which religion and its proper place in modernity has been underwritten and solidified by the unilinear master narrative of progress as part of secular liberal thinking. This has entailed the articulation of two primary principles: 1) that of the separation of religion and politics, and 2) the privatization of religion as part of rendering it non-political. These principles and their implementation were intrinsically tied to the notion of liberty, and the freedom of a public sphere. Paradoxically, however, it was a "liberty" to be won only as part of the tutelage presided over by the West to facilitate the betterment of those colonized lands still in the "infant" stages of their improvement (Van der Veer 2001: 16-21). Allocating a place for religion in society thus entailed the active process of regulating and re-configuring doctrines, practices and beliefs in order to fit them into the pre-assigned category of normative religion (Asad 2003: 205-256). Remarks on the strain of "purity" of Islam practiced by the Imamate were premised on assessing and calculating their measure from the vantage point of this teleological yardstick, and the Imamate was found sadly wanting – the relationship between religion and politics was too intermeshed, leading to a form of tyranny, irrationality and domination. This was not simply because of a lack of education, as far as the British were

concerned, but because of civilization deficiencies that could only be ameliorated through contact with 'advanced nations', thus licensing increasingly interventionist policies, especially in the wake of oil prospecting in the interior from the 1950s onwards and the accompanying desire for the modern infrastructure necessary for oil production and transport.

From the Ibadi point of view, on the other hand, Britain's role in Oman had also led to radical transformations in the religion-political domain. These had arisen in the opposition to the colonizing state as embodied in the revival of the Imamate with its avowed adherence to *sharī'a* in the pursuit of true justice. British informal rule of the Oman region had laid the basis for the formulation and confrontation of two very different epistemological foundations, each of which was conceptually and practically grounded in a temporal logic. Both approaches fashioned different forms of critique that underwrote their understanding of religion, paving the way in turn for a series of actions that finally culminated in the official demise of the Imamate with the capture of Nizwa, the administrative capital, on December 15th, 1955 by the British and the sultan's forces. The Sultanate had once again become a unitary entity: from 1970 onwards it would officially be proclaimed as the Sultanate of Oman.

The concept of *athār* captures the very different ways in which Oman was in the grip of the past during the Ibadi Imamate compared to the current "heritage crusade" of the contemporary era (Lowenthal 1996). Moreover, it opens up the possibilities of alternative relations with the past, ones that are foundational to modernity, even as they fail to map onto the universal contours of Benedict Anderson's (1991) homogenous empty time. Centred on regimes of historicity, temporal relations themselves come to be conceived in terms of authoritative and regulatory mechanisms that underwrite narrative histories, imagery and iconic forms, seeking to engage with the past in order to establish a historical unity that articulates a spatial regime, its parameters and borders. As will be noted in the following chapters, the notion of tradition might still be an integral part of a modern present but its implications have shifted over the course of the 20th century from the intangible to the material, from the religion-ethical to the civic-ethical, from the theological to the national, from material causality to the abstract, from the recent to the remote.

The significance of the idea of *athār*, as the impressions or traces left behind by virtuous forbears as models their spiritual descendants could emulate, was primarily moral in nature, grounded in the foundations of Islamic religious authority. This relationship of similitude was undergirded by a horizon of recurrence where an unfolding future course of actions and events could be deduced from past authoritative and exemplary forms of justice and morality. Underlying this 'exemplary' view was the assumption that the past took up a space of experience that was continuous with the present and future. The interpretation of what was ethical was grounded in Ibadi doctrine and practice, embodied in past acts and deeds and assumed to be constant and valid across time. It was the aim of engaging, ingesting and approximating the virtues and pious accounts of the exemplarity of the Prophet and his companions that suspended temporal difference. The past was simultaneously dead and living, evocative and didactic for the present and future.

In modern Oman the notion of *athār* has achieved a particular salience as heritage (*thurāth*) with the emergence of nation state building, civic morality and its consequent politics. Time, in other

words, has acquired a new quality in assuming a secular logic. *Athār* has come to be construed as a memorialized past, grounded in the physical, as material or physical traces of buildings or objects that stand in as testimonies to the glories of Oman paving the way for restoration programmes that require that specific features be recognized and deemed worthy of preservation. Old forts, watchtowers, *sablas* (council/meeting halls) and certain material objects such as the Omani dagger *khanjar* were no doubt constantly maintained and restored during the Imamate, but this was not due to an awareness of a past as much as their embeddedness in a religion-political world, where their forms and roles induced causality, enabling social and ethical practices, responses and roles that were part and parcel of daily life.

This distinct shift in the significance of the concept however also reflects a transformation in temporality as part of the modern experience, one which embraces the notion of change over time. It presupposes the idea that the past is radically qualitatively different from the present and thus deserves to be preserved for the future before it vanishes in the face of inevitable change. The proper task would then be to ensure that it is not forgotten but brought to attention. But it was only from 1970 onwards that the view of the past as a foreign country became institutionally established in Oman.

It is important to note that these two temporal modes of experience of adjusting to change are not mutually exclusive. As the modern state has extended its prerogative over the periodization of time and temporal relationships, the past continues to be authoritatively co-opted into the present, becoming an imminent part of it, through reiteration, invocation and interpretation. This is not the result of its emergence as a form of resistance to modernity as much as being an integral condition for the possibilities of becoming modern. Modernity generally conceives a mechanical repetition of the past as an extremely improper relation to foster but this perhaps raises a wider range of questions as to the frame through which the relevance of the past and its connections to the present and the future have come to be articulated, interpreted and argued about in the Sultanate. Is modernity in Oman forging new relations with the past? How do the tropes of repetition and exemplarity figure into these engagements? In its logic, the lived perception of changing time in the Sultanate of Oman, centred on the notion of tradition, articulates the co-existence of continuities and discontinuities, conjunctions and disjunctions between the Imamate and the Sultanate of Oman even as these tropes are marked by the difference between these two regimes. That which has been left outside the authoritative time frame returns to it in the form of ruptures and conflicts within traditions. The issues at stake are then to delve into how the Sultanate of Oman, as a modern nation state, has mediated the particularities of the Imamate and it's lived histories.

Changing regimes of historicity have also led to the reconfiguration of the conceptual and performative practices that were integral to the narrations and roles of history over the course of the 20th century in Oman. These practices were closely tied to the idea of religion and its relations with politics. As the modern nation state has extended its sway over history making and the temporal relationships between past, present and future, it has fashioned a territorially-defined entity that spatializes time and reduces the inevitable alterations of collective lives into a singular, unitary narrative. In the process, the perception and practice of Ibadi Islam has become radically reconfigured, fostered by a different time frame and temporal rationality as part of rendering it more amenable to modern state regulation and nation building.

CHAPTER TWO

Territoriality and Teleology: Official Practices of History Making

"There is no *evolution without roots."*

HM Sultan Qaboos bin Said, 18/11/1994

> *"Renewing our heritage means acknowledging our historical presence, our cultural inheritance and awakening those civilizational accomplishments and cultural artefacts. They not only renew our identity and civilizational character but clarify our historical place to the world and help us embody all that is useful and majestic, representing all the lofty and high values in our present life, and transforming them into the core of our contemporary culture, life styles and present learning."*
>
> Mubarak bin Saif al-Hashmi, College of Education, Sultan Qaboos University, Muscat, First Conference on Heritage, Sultanate of Oman, 2002.[30]

Over the course of the 20th century, Britain's informal empire in the Arab-Persian Gulf changed the nature of sovereignty in the Sultanate. In their overseeing maritime protection and strategic access to Oman's port cities, Britain guaranteed the personalized sovereignty of Sultan Said bin Taimur (r. 1932-1970). However, new impetus towards centralized governance of the region, in the wake of oil prospecting and discoveries from 1930s onwards, profoundly affected the shape and everyday lives of communities in the region, making them sharply discontinuous from their pre-British forms. The sultan's rule shaped a region that had once been defined by shifting frontiers rather than modern borders. These frontiers were embodiments of a series of material relationships and practices that bound the sultan and the tribal sheikhs to each other. Boundaries were undergirded by a series of obligations and rights whereby the ruler would arbitrate and settle disputes, making himself accessible to the region's sheikhs while recognizing their suzerainty over a certain area. Personal hospitality and generosity were of importance in shaping these interactions, especially considering that the sultan paid the tribal sheikhs a regular allowance to maintain order. In turn, the responsibilities of the tribal sheikhs entailed the collection of tax (*zakat*) or a tribute (R/15/6/40).

However, frontiers constantly shifted since boundaries were based on the areas that the tribe presided over rather than the abstract demarcation of the land (R/15/6/250). In short, boundaries were sedimented and de-stabilized by shifting tribal relationships and alliances rather than demarcating spatially partitioned units that formed visually recognizable domains on a map. This was made especially evident when the prospect of rich oil fields led to competing claims of territorial access by Saudi Arabia and Abu Dhabi, who wooed the allegiance of border tribes. New British-sponsored efforts to create a centralized and territorially modern nation state in Oman reconfigured the notion of community, transformed frontier zones into sharply defined borders and heralded new practices of history making, creating the foundations for new forms of

[30] See Ibrahim Bakhar and Hassan Malakh (eds.), *The First Intellectual Conference on Heritage, Sultanate of Oman, Ancient and Modern* (University ãl-Bayt Publications, 2002).

knowledge, institutional pedagogies, and in effect establishing the socio-ethical basis for a new type of personhood in Oman: the citizen of the newly established Sultanate of Oman from 1970 onwards when the new and still reigning Sultan Qaboos bin Said came to power[31]

The Nahda (The Awakening)

> *"I was born in Salalah and lived through the Omani experience (*tajriba*) before the nahda and after it. Recording this lifetime in all its aspects would require hundreds of pages. In retrospect, those years have become part of the memory (*dhākira*) of Omani history, for better or for worse, but they continue to be a part of the past of the country and its life path (*sīra*). Those dark (*hālika*) circumstances were due to the enforced isolation of the country and the impact of a civil war[32] which ruined the country in a disastrous manner for a number of years. The three years before the nahda were the hardest time for Omanis to live through. This may have been the result of the accumulation of years of hardship in terms of livelihood and for society. Reading newspapers at that time or even obtaining them, required cunning (*mihāl*), assuming a cautious/wary dreams. A lot of the time, what truly tempted us towards this forbidden dream was the programme "sawt al-arab"[33] which was always on and within earshot every morning. We would therefore long to read these newspapers. I remember towards the end of the 1960s, when I first began to perceive the impact of the events of the world and the issues at stake, acquiring a strong sense of Arab consciousness, I was with some friends and by accident we discovered al-Hajj Salim. He would wrap up the sweets he sold to customers in some of the remnants of old Arab newspapers. And it seemed like the newspaper, "al-Ahrām" was among these old newspaper clippings. We were extremely surprised to find these newspapers in the beginning but we didn't dare ask al-Hajj Salim as to where he got these old newspapers from. To ask those type of questions in those days would have been irresponsible (*tahawwur*). Before 1970, before Sultan Qaboos, perhaps because of an accumulative bad situation, most people, I believe thought that there would be no redemption (*fikāk*) from this painful situation except through the payment of an enormous and painful price. Half of the Omani population was outside the country and the civil war was intensifying. The domestic circumstances in the interior were becoming increasingly dangerous (*tatafāqum*) and I know of many friends who were in the flower of their youth (*zahrat 'amārhum*) who died of drowning in the sea when they*

[31] Sultan Qaboos bin Said (r. 1970- present) replaced his father in a coup d'état, supported by the British, in 1970. His accession to the throne was characterized by steps that increased the centralization of the national government, through the incorporation of tribal factions especially in the territory of the former Ibadi Imamate, as well as the institutionalization of government bureaucracy and the implementation of modern nation state building. The defeat of the last Ibadi Imamate (1913-1958), with the help of the British by the sultan in the interior in the late 1950s, marked the onset of an era in which Muscat (Sultanate territory, which was primarily coastal) and Oman (Imamate territory, which was the interior) were united under the banner of "the Sultanate of Oman and Muscat". The ascendancy of Sultan Qaboos to the throne in 1970 was marked by the declaration of a new modern nation state, "the Sultanate of Oman".

[32] In 1964, around the time that oil exports from Oman began, the southern province of Dhufar witnessed the rise of an armed rebellion against Sultan Said bin Taimur and his British supporters, which later developed into a socialist revolution and civil war aided by the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, China, the Soviet Union and Iraq. This war did spread northward. However, the conflict was finally put down by Omani forces under the new Sultan, Qaboos bin Said, in 1974, with the help of Iranian forces and Britain's SAS (Special Aid Service) contingents.

[33] The double edged sword that is a constitutive part of the practices of 'development' only came about from the time of Sultan Qaboos onwards (1970-). It was kept at bay as part of the deliberate policy of Sultan Said bin Taimur. However, an increasing awareness of the outside world did filter in, especially through the use of a small number of transistor radios, which were tuned into Cairo's *"ṣawt al-Arab"* as well as the increasing number of Omani Arabs who migrated for opportunities of better employment and prospects of a better future from working in other more affluent Gulf states as well as Saudi Arabia.

*had wanted to travel abroad and travel was completely forbidden. This was included in the long list of forbidden acts that the Omani people were weighed (*razaha*) down by at that time."*

During the first month of my stay in Oman, Dr 'Isa invited me to meet his family at his home. He was an administrator at the Minister of Higher Education and was soon to leave for Nizwa to assume a new post with the chancellor's office at the University of Nizwa, where I had been planning on doing my fieldwork. Surrounded by low plush sofas in the sitting room, his daughters, sister and wife sat around me on the low pile carpet, a plastic sheet in front of us with a tall metallic thermos of coffee, a short stack of small coffee cups, a dish of dates and piles of fruit. This would be the first of many times I would find myself surrounded by women in a chattering circle, where, at the very least, dates and coffee would be served as part of the rites of hospitality. This particular visit was rather striking, in that Dr al-Salmi came in later amongst the women to recount his life story, and personal experiences of the *nahda*, when Sultan Qaboos first introduced his massive infrastructural projects of building modern roads, hospitals and schools as well as institutionalizing state bureaucracy.[34] While he patiently talked of the transformations enacted by the *nahda*, and its break with the past, objects of heritage formed a striking but silent decorative juxtaposition, as a parallel discourse and an alternative understanding of historical time. Set against a small oriental carpet and brightly coloured cushions, a large black and brass studded *mandoos*[35] stood against the wall. A large metal incense burner, a rose water sprinkler and a *dalla* (coffee pot) completed the visual montage (Fig. 2.0). It took me less than a month to realize that these objects were iconic of Oman and its past as a whole.

Figure 2.0 Heritage as decoration in an upper middle class residential home

In the following months, the transformative effect of the *nahda* was often described to me as a time, in the words of one friendly and loquacious taxi driver, when "the Sultan broke the chains of ignorance and freed Omanis from division (*shatāt*), fragmentation (*tamazuq*) and tyranny

[34] According to often cited statistics (Limbert 2010: 5-6), while in 1970 there had been three schools (non-Quranic), in 1980 there were 363 schools of mass education; while in 1970 there was one hospital, by 1980, 28 had been established. In 1970, there were just six kilometres of asphalt road; by 1980, there were 12,000.

[35] The *mandoos*, a wooden chest usually decorated with metal, was considered to be a necessary part of a woman's trousseau and dowry given to her on her marriage as one of her wedding gifts. It was used by women as part of the household furnishings, to store her clothes, jewellery and valuable items. Now considered an icon of Omani heritage, it is thought to be a fine exemplar of Omani craftsmanship and the "traditional" life. It is usually made of hardwood and decorated with brass sheets and nails in highly detailed geometric star burst patterns.

(*istibdād*)". Government officials, shopkeepers, old men sitting on stoops in market areas reiterated a description, which in 2010/2011 was one of celebration, since it marked the 40th anniversary of the sultan's coming to power: "the *nahda* is the time when the new Sultan began the period of development and growth that has transformed Oman from a poor and isolated country to a modern and progressive nation that could be respected by everyone in the world." The question I began asking, though, was why was this period of modernity in Oman is termed the *nahda* (the Awakening)? In reply, Omanis in Muscat and Nizwa often drew on local histories and memories as well as official accounts to explain that the time from Sultan Qaboos bin Said's coup d'état in 1970 to the present is officially called the *nahda*, the "awakening" or the "renaissance". It is a time exemplified by the fact that the sultan has been working towards a future that recalls the past of the country once renowned for its fame and strength. The *nahda* indicates "a return *(i'āda*) to our past again in order to occupy a significant (*marmūq*) place in the Arab world once more". As one official at the Ministry of Heritage and Culture further elucidated,

> the *nahda* marks a return of an Omani civilizational consciousness which has been absent in the years of ignorance (*jahl)* and disunion (*furqa*). Prior to 1970, before Sultan Qaboos bin Said, Omani society had been isolated from human civilization for many decades. In addition to the complications of internal dissensions (*fitan),* regional wars and the absence of a consciousness of leadership (*al-qiyāda al-wā'iya)* Omanis lost their most basic skills and practical qualifications in this dark period (*al fatra al-hālika).* There were no schools to qualify to be a teacher and there were no Omani doctors or engineers. Our dreams, hopes and desires could only be filled by packing bags and leaving to find simple manual labouring jobs which didn't need the intellectual qualifications and skills which the Omani had lost in that dark time.

The *nahda*, the present era of Oman's timeline, pivots around the miraculous rule of the present sultan. However it was also rather obvious from peoples' accounts that the term *nahda* was synonymous with the trappings of material modernity and corresponded with notions of "progress" and the discourse of "development". "Before the *nahda*" (*qablu an-nahda*) became convenient shorthand to explain or describe a social or political state of "lack" or "want" in people's life circumstances. The very basis of this period was assessed and calculated from the point of view of a teleological matrix, and it is in terms of this yardstick that pre-1970 Oman, "the Dark Age", was characterized in terms of "a lack" and given a sense of "inadequacy". This epoch was also represented as a time that blocked the possibility of a past that was moving along the path of progress. The task of the *nahda*, admittedly, centred on the person of the sultan, returned Oman to its true "authenticity". If foreign powers, which were only alluded to obliquely, had produced an epoch of dispossession, then the task of the *nahda* was to "restore" Oman to its original trajectory onward and upward.

Britain's informal governance of the Gulf region, its pivotal role in the rise and fall of the Ibadi Imamate (1913-1958) that had divided Oman into two semi-autonomous polities, and the establishment of modern Oman were not emphasized in people's personal narratives, and these factors have been almost entirely excised from the official account. The politics and conflicts over oil prospecting that were constitutive of Oman's territorial borders and the nature of its new political regime from the early 20th century onwards are entirely absent from public culture, creating an official state of amnesia. A pivotal question consequent on this is thus: What is the criterion of historical time that defines Oman's modernity or the *nahda*? A rather apolitical

narrative emerges in which these diverse and complex pasts are passed through a homogenizing narrative whereby Oman's history gets mapped onto a series of binaries: rule of law vs. past conflict and division, modern vs. despotic rule, tribalism and fragmentation vs. the centralized state. The very understanding of the past embedded in the everyday conversations I had with people from all walks of life about their perspectives and experiences of the *nahda* assumed that Oman's path from the past into the present and future was a teleological one. The "Dark Times", which characterizes the historical circumstances of oppression and conflict of the early 20th century, are considered an anomaly that could be exposed through rational critique and corrected in due teleological time.

British informal governance and influence also shaped the conception of historical development in Oman. The term "medieval fiefdom" was often used by American and European travellers, journalists and British political administrators to describe the region prior to 1970, where such amenities as bicycles and radios, or even fripperies such as sunglasses and umbrellas, were banned and Sultan Said bin Taimur was considered no more than a feudal lord who governed his domain through tribal relations and personal advisors rather than a modern bureaucracy. These tropes and categories shaped the way Omanis speak about the period of the *nahda* as one of "rupture" as well as one of historical continuity. On the one hand, the *nahda* is seen as a break from the immediate past that undergirds the foundation of the modern nation state of Oman. In order to create a new beginning, a new end had to be marked down and defined, which necessitates a distancing from what had come immediately before. The onset of modernity in Oman marks itself out as something entirely different and better than what had preceded it. Like the narrative of Renaissance Europe's recovery from the "barbaric past", Oman too is thought to have fallen into dark times after its great past as a maritime empire in East Africa (until the late 19th century). The Middle Ages is generally considered as a "time of darkness" into which Europe had collapsed after the glories of the Roman Empire and the intellectual brilliance of ancient Greece. Oman's Middle Ages are separated from its modernity through a selective process of sorting where interdependent elements are sifted out in order to generate a specific spatio-temporal and homogenous baseline. This period is generally described, officially and unofficially, as one when Omanis fell into the depths of ignorance and superstition in their isolation from the world at large. It is only in retrospect and as a sign of the modernity that Omanis have entered into with the onset of the *nahda* that they could see this period for what it was. As part of a grander narrative of historical development towards progress, Oman's Middle Ages is posited as an anomaly/a time of "backwardness" (*takhaluf*) in relation to other periods and societies.

The Notion of Harmony

Inasmuch as there is an emphasis on a "break" in separating the past from the present and future, one prominent commonality among accounts from people working within state institutions, whether at the history department at Sultan Qaboos University, ministry officials at the Ministry of Heritage and Culture or *Awqaf* or museum curators: the idea of forging a **harmonious** society (*mujtami' munsajim*). This implied a community that, as one ministry official stated, "is firmly rooted (*muta'aṣṣal*) in its civilization and reconciles (*mutaṣāliḥ*) itself with its renewal (*tajdid*)." The importance of the past to Oman's modernity was further illuminated by one of the scholars

and advisors of the Diwan of the Royal Court in charge of cultural policy, who, while offering dates and pouring out small cups of coffee in his office, explained during our meeting that

> Heritage (*turath*) in Oman is one of the basic factors in the development of a nation and its progress. It's a term that indicates the deep rootedness (*'arāqa*) of the past, the authenticity (*aṣāla*) of the present and a view (*naẓra*) of the future. The human experience of the past becomes the new experience in the present and continues into the future. This is one of the most important elements of development (*taṭawwur*)…. this isn't a process of copying (*taqlid*) the past or going back, but renewing consciousness with heritage and its authenticity as a useful recourse for the development of the present and its renewal.
>
> When I requested an elaboration as to why this was the case, he chuckled and replied: Amal, the Arab-Muslim World whether in the Arab-Persian Gulf or in other Arab countries is facing a culture invasion after sustaining other kinds of military invasion. The need to renew our heritage is a result of momentous interwoven ties with peoples and nations in the modern age. The strength and centrality of these networks are especially shaped by the Western invasion and its impact on forms of human society, especially in the Arab-Islamic world through different ways in the aim towards creating a single culture. This is accompanied by a clear retreat (*tarāju'*) of the specificities and values of our Arab-Islamic societies leading in turn to a sense of loss (*faqdān*) and a large gap (*fajwa*) between past and present.
>
> When I asked him if by this he meant a sense of a loss of personal identity, in line with the perspective that most scholars of the Arab-Persian Gulf have taken up to address the issues of Westernization (Davis 1990) in the region, he replied: renewing heritage is the foundation (*asās*) of our activities in the modern age. Its loss means the disavowal (*ankar*) of self, the lack of acknowledgement of our existence and weakening (*'ajz*) the creativity of works which implement preparing heritage for the coming generations…. Heritage is not just the accumulation of past learning and experiences but represents the specificity of the *umma*, and its material and spiritual (*rūhi*) civilizational attributes as part of the future and as a basis for renewal. Heritage is thus understood as **an active energy and instigator** (*taqa fa'al wa fa''āla*) in motivating the activity of society. It is from this that we learn the importance of heritage and its mediation (*athar*) between authenticity and renewal."

This perspective on heritage became clearer in the light of an editorial published in the Arabic government daily newspaper, *Oman* on the 20th of March 1994. The article delves into the problematic issues facing the youth in modern Oman, in the midst of global consumer culture and national heritage:

> Youth are moving in the direction of the future in different fields and diversifying in different social ways. They are the strength on which society is based, the means by which security is maintained; progress is increased as well as advanced. But we can also perceive them as a "double edged sword" (*silāḥ dhū hadayn*). They have the ability to create a strong and active society around which the *umma* would revolve in a number of intellectual and social fields which would give Omani society a place among nations. At the same time, they also have the ability to weaken society and render it helpless, one which cannot answer for itself even on the simplest matter that might threaten it.
>
> There is therefore a great fear of Oman becoming a completely consumerist (*mustahalik*) society rather than a productive one, dependent on copying the innovations of those other than itself. In copying the West, there will be a loss in innovative energy. This could have a negative rather than

> a positive mark on them (youth) and lead to their transformation from innovators and exemplars to that of being the oppressed of the powers of occupation. Secondly, they could lose the innovative energy – the aim is to generate a creative and innovative youth. Despite all the efforts exerted by these thinkers, scholars and policy makers, there will be no quality result unless through the consciousness of the youth themselves…. In general, it is the weakness of the *umma* and their location in the claws of occupation which shakes self-esteem. The youth are therefore affected by it. If some sense of pride returns to them, then a sense of pride can achieve a victory.
>
> There have usually been two responses to the fall of a civilization, meaning that there have been two approaches to colonialism and occupation: reject the West and assume a model of the past of our ancestors, or copy the West blindly in terms of their **material emphasis vs. spiritual values and religious morals**. The first would lead to a withdrawal into oneself (*taqauqa'a*) and a hardening (*iltazamat*). The second would not lead to a true civilization but would be a copy instead. This would in turn lead to a state of chaos in society and there would be no place for the different spiritual values inherited from our forefathers.
>
> The solution is to preserve the past as a means of guidance for future generations. The past is not the end of everything but bears witness. By urging our youth to preserve our Arab-Islamic character, we create a future not in terms of blind imitation, but a future that is harmonious (*yalāu'm*) with this past and the forging of a character built on history. By knowing the ways/manner which our ancestors followed/prescribed to – what did the first ones do in this field – we can work on its development and innovation, in order to get back a sense of confidence and esteem of ourselves. (bin Karim al-Belushi 1994)

The article does not resolve the ambiguity of the notion of "harmony". As a result, a series of questions beg to be addressed: What are the forms of the "rooted" past that are considered as amenable to Oman's *nahda* and its corresponding notion of progress? On what basis is the notion of a "return" to the past – implicit in the idea of "*a renaissance/an awakening"* – intelligible to Oman's rationale towards development? These questions underpin my overall exploration, in this chapter, of how the past and a notion of *tradition* underpin a certain narrative of modernity that is an integral part of the Omani sense of national belonging and development. As may be deduced from the accounts above, Oman's conception of the past does not fall into the normative Western narrative where humans, once shackled by rigid traditions and binding customs, became modern once they realize true human potentiality and a sense of self-will. Tradition is not so much anachronistic as a means of creating "harmony". The past becomes the necessary means by which the nation tries to re-appropriate the state from global capitalist and authoritarian forces in order to fully manifest its own specificity. Practices of history making become part of a process of enabling and generating an ethos, a way of being, through detachment from concrete contexts, abstraction and the revaluation of everyday material objects and buildings.

This process of secularizing the past has in effect made the Omani the centre of history as time not only provides the measure of assessing human events but also the means of transforming and refiguring them as a means to provide direction. The acts of God (those events not due to human agency) as part of the Islamic eschatological domain become increasingly remote in shaping the conception of history and an ethical way of life. Instead, from 1970 onwards, a series of performances have involved a process of reframing the past that restructures time, within which the nation is inscribed as a historical truth. Even as Oman declares itself as having an eternal

presence sanctioned by its historicity, the national subject declares itself through the process of performing history within a variety of institutional settings. This temporal ambivalence accords with Homi Bhabha's notion of "double time" (1990: 300), where the nation state is both validated by modern territoriality and represented as an a-priori historical fact. The production of heritage in and of itself re-formulates existing geographical, historical political and epistemological realities. In focusing on its work, I examine the practices and contexts through which forms of knowledge shape the national imagination, creating a new material culture and inscribing a landscape with the concrete embodiments of particular types of histories and historicise. In Oman it is clear that regulating the nature of the past and producing "heritage" is considered necessary for the formation of an autonomous and creative personhood, not spontaneously, but through purposeful educational work. In the process, this "translation" of the relations between past and present becomes the basis through which struggles are waged in the present day. Inasmuch as the past is conceived as different or the same to modern Omanis, 40 years on from the beginnings of the *nahda*, how does it acquire meaning or resonance through its rendering in the present and what are its consequences in the world? This question is addressed through the exploration of three major institutional forms of knowledge and the facts they generate: circulating official publications, national museums and school textbooks.

Official Publications

The forging of a consciousness of a nation state, the effects of mass education and print technology as a nexus of interlocking institutions have produced a singular phenomenon in the form of lavishly photographed publications produced by the Ministry of Information as well as state and closely regulated private publishing houses and newspaper groups. These have widespread circulation in Oman and are part of the public domain. Distributed in government buildings, bookshops, supermarkets and schools and often free of charge, these books offer a synopsis of the history of Oman, the regional diversity and specificity of its provinces in terms of natural landmarks and habitats, architectural monuments, historical sites, infrastructural development and economic growth. This type of literature assumes an increasingly predictable, ubiquitous and standardized form and content in forging a certain type of historical account. Excerpts from the sultan's speeches are de-contextualized from their original spatio-temporal setting and are re-animated as vital tropes in establishing the framework for these texts. To elaborate on one such typical example, the publishing and distribution of *masirat al-khayr* (The Great March) in 2005 was part of the 35th year anniversary celebrations of the *nahda*. Its introduction is set by the following words from the sultan: "It is the human element that produces civilizations and generates growth and progress. Therefore we are sparing no efforts – nor shall we spare any effort – to provide everything that can help create the conditions for the development and training of our human resources, and for offering them opportunities to acquire an education."[36]

[36] Excerpt from a speech before the opening session of the Council of Oman on 11th November 2008, as cited in *Masirat al Khayr* (Ministry of Information, 1995).

This process of training begins with a narration that extols the archaeological discoveries[37] made in different parts of the country, presupposing the identity of a unified political entity, Oman and its rootedness to a past that goes back 4,000 years. Modern national borders in turn are articulated in terms of the discoveries of human settlements from the tip of Musandam in the north to the Qara Mountains in the south. As the text notes, "stone seals and ceramics, necklaces of shell, and archaeological sites in general are distributed throughout the Sultanate…. history corporealized (*tajasud*) on every inch of our land that penetrates deeply into the heart of ancient civilizations" (2005: 3). Following, Nadia Abu El-Haj's argument (2001), the work of archaeology has produced facts through which historical-national claims have been made; the process of generating artefacts, maps, landscapes and a historical vision transforms the territory into a national-cultural idiom. Even as each region of Oman is rendered specific through the cataloguing and enumeration of important artefacts and excavation sites, it reveals its constitution of being "Oman" as a unity rather than by being analyzed through dissolving it into many heterogeneous parts. The governorate of Dhofar in the south is considered especially important in the ancient world as the Arabian Peninsula's "Land of Frankincense" and the "gateway to the Indian Ocean" and the caravan routes of southern Arabia.

The narrative then takes its readers beyond the boundaries of Oman to emphasize the strong ties that were created with other civilizations through the Indian Ocean maritime trade network as well as the East-West silk route throughout its history in the ancient world, as well as its Middle Ages (from the advent and embrace of Islam). Omani merchants and sailors become major actors here, facilitating peaceful contact and the exchange of ideas and goods such as copper and frankincense; in the process they are credited with promoting links with peoples and civilizations across the Eastern Mediterranean, China, the Indo-Pakistan sub-continent and East Africa. In the spirit of Kant's *Perpetual Peace* (1795), Omanis are considered the conduits for the creation of an earlier cosmopolitan citizenry that goes beyond the realms of nation state. Even though there is an emphasis on supra-national frameworks such as trade routes, the assumptions undergirding this construction of Oman as a conduit of peace are still generated within a nationalist idiom.

It is important to note that *progress* in this account is considered in terms of national unity and economy. Despite acknowledging different periods, the narrative emphatically argues that the "common thread that links Oman's history through different eras and connects it to the *nahda* (its latest renaissance) is the ability of its leadership to establish unity and cohesiveness based on security, stability and a strong economy" (2005: 4). In cataloguing and enumerating the long list of rulers that have governed Oman since the coming of Islam, the 20th century remains within the domain of the Al Bu Said Dynasty. No mention is made of indirect British influence and informal rule nor of the last Ibadi Imamate, and these are virtually absent from official historical accounts.

[37] Archaeological excavations in Oman, dating from the 1950s onwards, have largely been undertaken by research expeditions from Denmark, United States, Germany, Italy and France. It has therefore largely been a foreign enterprise, although a number of these projects have received logistical and financial support from the Omani government (Al-Belushi 2008). However, the way in which these artefacts are embedded within specific historical paradigms and assumptions about the past is not homogenous. Their co-option and selective relevance in national historical narrations or public museums in Oman would be radically different from the presuppositions animating forms of inquiry and the rationales behind the excavating techniques undertaken by the scholarly teams of researchers from these countries.

They are only obliquely alluded to in the agreement that "the path of prosperity has not always run smoothly. There have been periods of weakness, isolation and internal conflict which have led the country to turn in on itself and become isolated" (2005: 5). This is duly noted as having been the case when the Portuguese conquered large swathes of the coastline in A.D. 1507. However, the Omanis prevailed and the Ya'ariba Imamate, "providing national resistance through support from the hinterland", expelled the Portuguese in A.D. 1624. This heralds the rise of Omani forces that play a pivotal role in expelling the Portuguese from the coasts of India and East Africa. This recurring pattern of internal conflict/foreign invaders vs. the resistance of united forces and a prosperous economy is reiterated in noting that the Imam Ahmad bin Said Albu Saidi united the country after internal conflicts and invasion by the Persians in A.D. 1744. This moment of unity once again forms the basis for the construction of a large naval force as well as a merchant fleet that revives Oman's trading ties and networks as well as its political role in the region of East Africa and South Asia. The period before the *nahda* is also characterized as chaos (*fitna*) and civil war. These tropes become synonymous with the last Imamate period of the 20th century, whose historically contingent circumstances, the powers that have produced and shaped it and its political dynamics virtually disappear from the official annals of history displaced and represented instead by a series of ambiguous terms that set up a series of oppositions that undergird the official narratives of the modern history of Oman: despotic/rule of law, chaos (*fitna*)/unity of government, lack/plenitude, tribalism/centralized and cohesive government, backwardness (*takhaluf*)/progress, medieval/modernity.

Progress in the Omani normative historic narrative is conceived as part of a cyclical pattern of regression, decline or decay. These are however of short duration and progress in general remains constant on the condition that national strength remains an underlying possibility. What is significant here is that notions of "progress" or "decline" are no longer related to the construction of an ethos or an exemplary mode of virtuous conduct for this world, on the one hand, or oriented towards preparing for next world/Day of Judgement on the other, as may be noted in the Imamate Period. Instead, progress becomes a goal to be striven for firmly in this world, in being part of a world historical force not only in the industrial and technological sense of the term but also as part of the socio-political potency considered inherent in the form of the modern state.

Rather than being considered a foreign force of oppression that, like the Portuguese and Persians displaced territorial unity, the narration emphasizes that Islam was a source of unification and that Oman was one of the first countries to embrace the religion voluntarily. Even though coming in as an outside force, Islam is not considered a foreign entity. Instead, it assumes the form of a force of unity and cohesion that enables Oman to expand on its trading activities, especially in East Africa in the 19th century where it is introduced and propagated along the East African coast and in Central Africa through peaceful means and through example. Omani merchants and sailors become the heroes as the intrepid travellers of this enterprise who in their peaceful trading activities and settlements introduce Islam as far as China and the ports around south and South East Asia.

The account elaborates on this perspective in adding that historical sources have transmitted a *khutba* given by the caliph, Abu Bakr Al-Sadiq (A.D. 632-634) in which he lauds the excellent

moral character of Omanis, their honour, the fidelity of their faith and the steadfastness in the right. The narration continues by noting that Islam was admirably suited to the Omanis, since the faith was propagating values and principles that were already part of the Omani character. Islam itself then assumes a nationalist cast, since its being embraced by Omanis is predicated on its compatibility with a basic national character. This is a character moreover not enabled by a theologically defined *umma* but an *umma* of a people who are conceived as having directed their energies in mastering the powers of nature of a specific region, adapting themselves to and mastering its varied environments. In the process the pillars of civilization that they develop as part of their everyday lives form the roots (*juẓūr*) of their spiritual values (1995: 6) that span the different ages of history. According to this account it is these values that form the foundation of the *nahda* today and are the basis for cultivating the youth of tomorrow.

Throughout this narration, social conflict, subordination and marginalization are placed within a certain terrain of assumptions – that of nationhood and an organic conception of culture and history tied to the mastering of the land and given a sense of inevitability. These form the basis of a singular vision of history. A political analysis or perspective for social and military disparities of power becomes depoliticized and non-conflictual in the process of becoming acculturated and naturalized. Conflict becomes rooted in an ontologically basic conceived as a natural sense of hostility between essentialized groups of religious and cultural differences (Brown 2006: 1-25). Through the process of depoliticization, the political phenomenon of wars and invasions, European colonialism and empires, fortifications and policies – barriers which would not only have prevented the free movement of ideas and peoples but would have shaped them – are eschewed. In other words, the relations between the historical emergence of modern Oman and the powers that have constituted and conditioned it are rendered apolitical in their representation. In their place is posited an ontological naturalness or essentialism that forges that sense of "difference" that is Oman. Questions now arising now pivot around the building blocks set by a national terrain and forged on the basis of a teleological matrix: What are the set of assumptions internal to Omani nationalist narratives about the nature and forms of culture? Islam? What are the criteria of inclusion and exclusion that forge these understandings? How are conceptions of the past linked to the domains generated by normative understandings of "culture" and "religion"? And on what basis do they render ethical claims intelligible? In addressing these questions I turn to the institutionalization of museums as a key part of pedagogical practices.

Museums and the Nation

Established in 1974, the Museum of Omani Heritage/Omani Museum assumed a new form of public accessibility that was part of the civic technologies directed towards the population at large especially in terms of mass schooling and the creation of a citizenry. Objects and even events that had once been (and are still) enmeshed into the fabric of people's everyday lives were now extracted from their concrete contexts, and then collected, categorized and displayed within a space for contemplation and self-reflection not only of the objects on display but the larger narratives within which these objects were now embedded. The relationship of the past with the present in modern Oman has therefore entailed a semiotic ideology premised on the nature of representation or the division between the material and the conceptual.

What precisely do flint tools, a necklace ornamented with Maria Therese thalers,[38] an Omani dagger (*khanjar*) and a reconstructed *majlis* have in common? On arriving at the museum for the first time, a personable young woman, dressed in the usual black *abaya* and a sombrely coloured *hijab*, introduced herself as the official museum guide. After explaining my own circumstances as a curious researcher, she offered to take me around the museum exhibits, answering my unspoken question with the following words by way of introducing the exhibits:

> The museum is a basis for transmitting knowledge and works for educating young people. In general, the museum gives visitors an idea of heritage of Oman and its discoveries, the age of Omani lands, the lives of Omanis as well as Omani ties with other countries through the maritime trade network over time. All this gives us an idea of where we started and where we have arrived. It protects us, from factors of weakness or disintegration (*inḥilāl*), centred as it is on the teachings of Islam, the values of society and valuable traditions.

Ambling through the museum exhibits, I asked for further clarification of the basis of the idea of disintegration, and the notion of harmony came up once more, in the light of two terms, consolidation (*istiqrār*) and balance (*tawāzun*). She argued that inasmuch as the museum forms the basis for building the character of Omani society, its emphasis on the past is a way of preventing too many social changes from leading to unrest/upheaval (*qalāqil*). Of course, one of the most important ways to ensure this stability and balance was through educating the consciousness (*wa'y*) of members of society. When I inquired as to how the museum contributed to educating the consciousness, she replied that in fact, this consciousness was being renewed through an emphasis on the *continuity of adhering to civilizational heritage, as well as Arab and Islamic values and principles.*

At the Omani Museum, time and its differentiation are carefully orchestrated to engender objectivity through two interwoven conceptions of the past as 1) evolution and 2) "tradition". The walking route through the museum follows a teleological arrangement, with each chamber being designed to chart certain transformative points onto a map of progress, developing into both a cognitive and bodily performance. Cognitively, the visitor grasps a certain understanding of the notion of time that undergirds the exhibition floor. At the same time, the visitor's bodily movements are closely micromanaged through the regulation of space, i.e. pathways and passages designated by walls and signage subjecting the visitor to a certain conception of history and culture.

Following a chronological sequence around the main reception area on the ground floor, the exhibits start with the Early History Hall. Flanked by large panels displaying texts and photographs of early rock art, models of archaeological sites such as the beehive tombs dated to 3,000 B.C. and portrayals of early Omani settlers "drilling a stone bead with a flint tipped hand drill" – a technique thought to have been developed in the New Stone Age – this chamber centres on large glass cases that exhibit stone tools, examples of copper ware as well as pottery ceramics, evidence of human settlement and civilization in Oman. In an inner section, emphasis is placed on Oman's strategic location on the ancient trade routes as well as the later Indian Ocean trade

[38] The Maria Theresa Thaler (MTT) was a silver bullion coin that was a standard form of currency in large parts of Africa, India and the Arab World, including Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and Oman in the 19th and 20th centuries until after World War II.

network as a rich source of commodities such as copper, diorite and frankincense. There are also displays of weights, the variety of spices that were traded over time (such as dried lemons and cardamom) and instruments such as compasses and astrolabes that were used in maritime navigation. A series of photographic panels depict and summarize the development of Oman's trading entrepôts, Sohar and Qalhat, from the 9th century until the coming of the Portuguese in the 15th century.

An antechamber is dedicated to Seafaring and Ships. Surrounded by textual and visual panels set in blue as well as maps that display Oman's strategic location, this room centres on the display of models of "traditional" ships. Seafaring is emphasized as one of the major national activities that have continued to the present day. The Omani seaman, in this narrative, is the protagonist of heroic enterprises, including his undertaking the "longest sea-route in the medieval world, from the Gulf to Canton, China." Changes that have occurred in shipbuilding are assimilated into the narrative of progress, as the traditional ships made of planks of wood sewn by coconut fibre gave way, after the defeat of the Portuguese in A.D. 1506, to modern European techniques such as using nails, among other innovations.

In the chamber that follows, Lands and its People, the Sultanate is presented as a land of varied environments and habitats and "one of the greenest parts of Arabia". Its variety of terrains has enabled the adaptation of a number of "subsistence operations that have continued for five thousand years into the 21st century including fishing, agriculture, animal husbandry, and dyeing." A number of open exhibits display these activities materially. The display of fishing is represented by a small wooden fishing boat, nets, woven baskets and traps, and paddles set against an old enlarged black and white photographic backdrop of a sandy beach with fishing boats moored along the shore line on the border of an urban settlement (Fig. 2.1).

Figure 2.1 An exhibit of traditional fishing techniques, Omani Museum, Muscat

Its large label reads:

> Even now in the 21st century, fishing plays a vital role in the economy of Oman. The industry is still primarily practiced by traditional fishermen, operating in small-scale usually family units. They use nets, hooks and lines and operate from small boats that were formerly made of wood

> and palm fronds and propelled by rowing and are now made of fibreglass and equipped with outboard motors.

Another exhibit displays a loom with the different coloured dyes that are used for sheep wool which is woven and made into accoutrements for camel saddles and belts. This is set against an enlarged wall-sized black and white photographic background of grazing camels. The emphasis is on the continuity of pastoral occupations as a way of life entirely involved with living with animals.

Agriculture and craft activities are also thematized and emphasized in terms of 1) the continuity of their importance to the Omani economy into the present day and 2) their variety and adaptation to "the many regional features relating to local traditions materials and technologies." Against a variety of photographic depictions of "traditional livelihoods" each region of Oman is portrayed in terms of the particularities of its famous products or prevailing livelihoods. Agriculture as "tradition" is encapsulated by large colour visuals and photographs displaying terraced farming in the *Jebel Akhdar* region in the interior, the harvesting of dates and wheat, and the use of old irrigation methods such as the *zaygra*[39] and the *aflaj* system.[40] The label for craft industries goes on to add that, "The art of transforming raw materials into useful tools and equipment in daily life was an indispensable pre-requisite that enabled the people of Oman to rise to the challenges posed by their harsh environment." Even though this large thematic label describes past practices, it is in the present tense. For example, set adjacent to a display of necklaces, headdresses, *khanjars*, coffeepots and rings, the label reads:

> Silver and gold workmanship of high quality is a feature of Omani craftsmanship. Jewellery is worn by women and girls, although there are some items such as kohl holders, manicure instruments only used by grown-ups. Gun powder horns and belt buckles are also used by men and boys. Most jewellery is in silver, although in the Batinah and the Dhofar gold is popular. Nizwa and Rustaq are important centres of this craft.

These objects are placed in a context where they assume a metonymic role in standing in a contiguous relationship to a more comprehensive but absent whole (Kirschenblatt-Gimblett 1998: 18-21). Placed in context through visual and textual panels and an array of other objects, these artefacts attest to a sense of "realness" of the worldview being generated. It became clear as we walked through the museum exhibits that the objects embodied not so much discrete meanings but complex chains of significations. However, these objects did not act like the linguistic sign as described by Saussure: where as symbols they have a relationship that is entirely based on social convention and have merely an arbitrary relationship to their referent. Instead these was a sense that as "witnesses" these objects become indexical in that they have a relationship of contiguity where their material form stand in as testimonials to what is considered as an actually existing reality, one which involved a certain relationship with the past.

[39] These are wells that are based on a pulley system powered by animals

[40] Used in most of Oman, and prevalent especially in the interior, the *aflaj* system involves a series of both surface and underground water canals that are thought to date back 2,000-2,500 years and are used for irrigation and a water supply. They tap into the underground water table.

If a Western historical museum works through a process of cataloguing, separating and displacing customs and traditions thought to stand in the way of modernization through transforming them into historical representations of themselves (Chakrabarty 1992; Bennett 2006), the Omani museum takes up an oppositional stance. Even as objects, here are preserved to stand in as "historical evidence" their contemporaneity is not denied. The past here, in all its ambiguity is never assigned to a specified period in calendrical time and therefore the "traditional" or the "historical" is never completely severed from the "modern". Instead they feed off each other, as the past assumes a new purpose and role in generating and shaping civic attributes needed for a modern citizenry in order to accord with contemporary life. Oman's past comes to be read as inextricably linked to a national present that, in turn, assumes a niche as part of a longer history of "progress" and "civilization" (Chakrabarty 1992). Simultaneously, the past is embodied through a mechanism by which a range of visual knowledge is articulated through what Mitchell terms "representational logic" (Mitchell 1989).

This would involve a process of estrangement where objects would be extracted from their concrete context of social relationships and ties and objectified, distancing themselves from the "real thing" surrounding the observing gaze and yet excluding it at the same time, as a portrayal of an alternative or further reality. As Mitchell argues (1988, 1989), even as the mind is set apart from the reality it observes, representations stand apart from the political reality they portray, rendering its reality as an object. At the same time, they also imply a relationship of "standing for" that reality, generating an ontology wherein the world is construed in terms of a model and reality, a map and a city, a panorama and the actual landscape.
As I mentioned previously, as part of the incipient experience of modernity in Oman, the museum visitor would be asked to perform the cognitive exercise of separating himself from the entanglements of the objects that make up his social world and see them instead as part of a reality that set apart, where these objects and pictures are referential and communicative, vehicles of information that in and of itself stands apart from both people and their actions. It is the museum's role to help people decode these objects and extract the information that they signified as part of the representation of a new understanding of histories in Oman. What is crucial to acknowledge here is that inasmuch as the information conveyed by these objects and images is conceived of as independent of social networks, relationships, actions and actors – where museum exhibition strategies render them invisible – the "objective truth" they represent claims to place them outside the realms of history and temporality. In other words, even as the process of objectification is considered as part of the effects of power (Keane 2007), the discourse of nation-building claims to be producing an "objective truth" that stands outside and is *external* to the machinations of human action.

Entering the museum from the quiet back streets of Muscat outside provides a means of linking the Omani present to a Western global framework of civilizational roots. The Euro-American meta-narratives of progress and evolution are not so much emulated as used to structure a distinctive sense of history, culture and ethos that is bound to a territorial logic. This may well be the assimilation of a Euro-American institution with its cultural practices of representation and display, but the museum in Oman is established on the basis of three major elements: nationhood, cultural anti-imperialism and a secularized sense of the past that forges the ground that defines the spheres of culture and religion. Time in the evolutionary schema is modelled on that of natural history. It echoes Fabian's understanding of *typological time* (2002: 22-25), where

time is assessed not in terms of abstract units on a linear scale but in terms of socio-cultural significant events, e.g. hunting and gathering vs. agriculture, subsistence vs. trade, traditional vs. modern. These are however placed within a specific territorial schema.

In interacting with the museum narrative and its linear progressive space, the visitor is interpellated by the construction of an ethos that is defined in terms of being "Omani", part of an imaginary community that, despite transformations and changes across time and space, still stands as an enduring substratum that outlasts finite biological life. This organic power appears to stem from indelible linkages to the land. Culture in this context becomes a process whereby taming the land and domesticating the land becomes part of dynamism of spontaneous and purposive becoming (Màrkus 1993). Man's ability to master his environment generates the ability for him to become a being that is able to shape his natural self as well as his external conditions. In this sense its basic meaning would be metaphorically resonant with that of cultivating and tilling the soil, resulting in the ethical and intellectual development of mind or soul. The mastery of each stage of development through rational endeavour – agriculture, mining, trade, art and crafts – in this unilinear paradigm would form the foundation for transforming the self towards furthering full maturity, through development of inner capabilities. In this imagery there is an underlying assumption of Oman as a unitary entity. Despite the variety of livelihoods adapted to different habitats, its underlying essence is assumed to have stamped and generated similar processes working and transforming the self – the Omani – who in essence is distilled from the same underlying substance, despite the superficial variations.

The museum narrative begins with Palaeolithic carve dwellers and their enterprise in making pottery, stone tools and rock art. Scattered settlements throughout are bundled together where adaptations to a variety of terrain from desert to mountains and coastal plains are imprinted by spiritual and rational activities, ranging from the construction of the *aflaj* canal system for agriculture and mining activities for copper to the flourishing of sea trade networks, which lead in turn to the development of city, state and empire. These developments lift the Omani beyond survival to mastering nature towards the rational but open ends of progress. These inheritable works and accomplishments are translated into the realm of the spirit where they are able to transcend the acknowledged material differences of the ages as well as the experiences of individual mortals. This is something higher and more inward. The objects on display tracing these developments become the embodiments of these progressive ideals, independent of the contingent circumstances in which they have been created and preserved. The spiritual or rational activity that they attest to is now considered to be part of the world of an objectified mind, imprinted by the accumulated wisdom of civilizations in the region, which have evolved from one another and which continue to act as a deterrent against incursions from the outside, through carving out a stable and autonomous path.

It is on the basis of the spirit that the past is carried into the present, which in the case of the museum world assume the form of material objects and words, embodiments of past civilizations and accomplishments that are able to re-inspirit the generations of the *nahda* with the normative ideals of the nation state. These objects and textual labels on display, when conceived as forms of action rather than reflection, become portals into a certain understanding of culture. They aim to stimulate this formative or spiritual activity in their beholders, not so much as external objects but as part of an ongoing process of formation, spiritualization and stability. Although the forms

of these concrete objects and images act as testimonies to and are considered indexical of the "reality" of glories of the ages, it is the spirit to which they are linked that is thought to endure and enable, and it is on the basis of that spirit that values and principles are forged.

It is on this terrain that tradition is considered an integral part of the modernity of Oman. This was made obvious as the official guide and I visited the first floor, which had in 2004 been renovated as part of the construction of a new exhibit, *daurat al hayat* (the cycle of life). Following a chronological pattern, the exhibit gallery takes the visitor through the everyday "traditional" way of life of an Omani man and woman through a series of dioramas with a large textual panel set against the background. Each exhibit case focuses on one particular theme, which includes: the birth of a child, marriage ceremonies, the home, furnishing and decoration, domestic crafts and industries, cooking, and the rituals of hospitality. The textual supplements, like those on the subsistence activities and arts and crafts in the exhibitions downstairs, are given in the present tense. The figures on display, though of European build and colouring, are dressed in clothing that signifies "tradition". The women wear garments that predate the *nahda* and are now considered to be national dress and those that have been available since 1970 as imported mass consumer items, a token to Oman's modernity. These however are also considered to be part of *adat wa taqalid* – customs and traditions (as will be explained further in chapter 3). The male figures in turn are dressed in what is considered to be the standard national garb.[41] These sculpted models are placed in proto-typical positions in order to facilitate the reconstruction of a generic scene. Alongside these figures are a series of objects that re-enact a particular tradition. For example, a bridal figure dressed in red and gold sits outside the gaily coloured canopy of the *ḥajala*, associated with the henna night of the wedding celebrations (Fig. 2.2).

[41] Although Omani men generally wear the national dress when out in public, those who work in government buildings or offices are required to wear it, i.e. the *disdasha* (long loose garment with no collar that is usually in dark colours or white) and the *masar* (piece of cotton fabric that is wrapped around the head to create a turban) for their heads. The *disdasha* itself is specified and takes on a standard national form, by which tailors, usually Indian, are required to abide, in order to differentiate it from other Gulf nations. Although largely plain, it is characterized by a narrow embroidered panel along the front and a tassel attached to the neckline, which may be perfumed. There are no government regulations with regard to women's wear. However, as mentioned above, women generally wear the *abaya* (the long loose black robe that is worn like a coat) and the *hijab.*

Figure 2.2 A diorama exhibit of traditional wedding customs, encompassing both past and present

Beside her is an example of the type of women who would take part in the wedding entourage (*zaffa*). Alongside these models are a variety of incense burners, including some decorated with mirror work, gold embroidered green cloth and small rosewater sprinklers as part of the bridal procession and ceremonies.

Similarly, the hospitality rituals as part of everyday traditional life are exemplified by three men kneeling on a Bedouin woven carpet, a palm woven *shatt* used to cover food (in this case, hospitality would usually entail dates). On the side, by another woven palm mat, slippers are set by a boiling kettle with coffee in it waiting to be poured (Fig. 2.3).

Figure 2.3 A dioramic reconstruction of the traditional majlis/sabla

The label states:

> The hospitality of the Omani people is legendary. However, in the past it was also essential for survival. Generosity and mutual responsibility has evolved over centuries and was necessary as part of a survival strategy in the harsh, natural and tribal environment of the Arabian Peninsula.

> Today's guest in an Omani home, whether a family member, friend, or neighbour, is received with utmost generosity. Hospitality traditions include an exchange of news and information after which the guest is served fruits, Omani coffee and dates….

Taken in its entirety, the gallery presents de-contextualized "traditional" ways of life, where ordinary mundane things become exceptional and generic, while at the same time becoming the basis of an abstraction that essentializes the Omani way of life. These exhibits are situated in the ethnographic present, where dynamics of change are not acknowledged and no historical context is given. The museum guide emphasized continuity, whereby the past and present are conjoined in noting how the rituals of hospitality are examples of some of the tangible facets of behaviour of members of Omani society to each other. "Hospitality increases cooperation," she noted, as well as the "exchange of beneficial interests. The men meet with each other on most days whether they are undertaking work or during prayer times during the day or sitting at gatherings *(jalsat*) at the *majalis*." She also explained the traditional *majlis* as a basic institution of social life where both strangers and neighbours meet with each other and where issues are resolved while drinking cups of coffee. Echoing the texts on the wall, she stated that traditional handicrafts reflect the innovation and skills of craftsmen today, agrarian activities provide examples of hard work and productive lives, and trade and sailing exemplify entrepreneurship and the adventurous spirit. Each set of objects are in turn translated into abstract values set outside the spatio-temporal dimension and become constitutive of the ideal and distinctive Omani character. In Western ethnographic museums, dioramas displaying ethnic culture is such a fixed and unchanging manner have been accused of being at best ahistorical and at worst Orientalist in displaying the Other in terms of a lack of innovation and dynamism, in interpreting a culture as a homogenous entity and perpetuating mechanical habits that are bound by custom and tradition into an unthinking slavishness (Kirschblatt-Gimblett 1998; Witz 2006). But what does it mean when a non-Western national museum follows the same framework of knowledge?

As was summarized by a museum pamphlet given to me later, "the geographical, historical and economic circumstances that encompass Omani society since the early beginnings of its history have inculcated (*ḥatamat*) it with a love for noble work and effort in the inclination behind acquiring a worthy source of livelihood to become in turn one of the basic components (*muqawwamat*) of the Omani character" (Ministry of Heritage and Culture 2000). In imagining history at the museum, the visitor is therefore involved in something of a double recognition. On the one hand, the museum is fostering a teleological narrative whose "positive facets" have been culled in order to inculcate an ethical character amenable to a national imaginary and the power of a modern state. On the other hand, the Omani is proclaimed to be no stranger to the required qualities. The languages of hospitality, toleration, innovation and discipline become the basis by which the past is known as "tradition" but also where the imagined but idealized future lies. It is a past that needs to be rekindled through the mediation of such institutions as the museum. With a teleological timescale as a given, one cannot go back to the past materially since that is conceived as a step towards "disorder" and "backwardness" in its association with a blind, habitual way of living. Instead, the spirit of the past that transcends the material experience may be imbibed in order to thrust forward towards change, creativity and innovation, the only

direction possible.[42] These objects have been collected and displayed not for the sake of history but for the sake of modernity.

Islam

Set in glass display cases, old manuscripts of Ibadi jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and doctrine (*'aqīda),* documents and letters create the focus of interest in the Islamic section of the museum. The Islamic room of the museum echoes the official publications and the walled texts in emphasizing the voluntary embrace of Islam by the Omanis, an act that "enriched Oman's ancient culture and opened up new horizons for its people" (Ministry of Heritage and Culture 2002). When I inquired about the importance of noting Oman's voluntary submission to Islam, my guide replied that Oman did not need a sword or a stone to answer the call because their civilizational heritage did not oppose the principles of a religion based on justice, equality and peace. Once again, the fact that the concrete basis and material activities by which the Omanis have produced a material civilization lifts them beyond mere animal existence to transcend and develop is emphasized. This in turn (as both my guide and the museum publication pointed out) moved the Prophet so deeply that he declared, "God bless the people of Ghubaira (Oman), they have believed in me without seeing me" (Ibid.). She then showed me a letter on display, which is thought to be from the Prophet to Oman's kings, 'Abd and Jaifar, the sons of Al-Julanda, inviting them to embrace Islam. A further text panel notes that embracing Islam became the basis for opening up new horizons of knowledge and enlightenment as well as the flourishing of new trade networks, even strengthening the relations between the interior of Oman and her coastal cities.

However, rendering these displays as "Islamic" also makes them external to the specificities of time and place, as there is minimal labelling of their historical context. Instead, they are displayed and objectified for either aesthetic display or rather as the embodiment or symbol of a set of values that span across lands, languages, cultures and peoples and that have endured. Of course, it is rather ironic in light of the Orientalist implications in this designation, "Islamic". But the notion of "harmony" in Oman, the process of making the past, present and future amenable to each other, is part of a double aspiration to be autonomous and to be rooted while not compromising either on the "project of modernity" (Asad 2003) or a native past. It constitutes a demand, in other words, to develop a personhood that is innovative and self-governing in ways that are deemed consonant with tradition. The contours of tradition are in turn mobilized through the idiom of the spirit, a spirit that moreover transcends the concrete and can still be productive in translating into continuous abstract guidelines.

[42] This emphasis of a continuity in spirit is especially prominent in a letter cited in *adat wa taqlid* by Saud bin Salem al-'Unsi, published by the Ministry of National Heritage and Culture, which was written by one of the readers of the national newspaper, *'Uman*, which in turn published it. It is mentioned by the author as an example of some of the virtues possessed by previous generations of Omanis and one which should be instilled in the souls (*nafsīyat*) of the youth today. The letter reads, "the life of our people was different from the way it is now, it is different in terms of time and place and in terms of its nature and environment … society then was a shanty in which the family took refuge but it was surrounded by affection (*wudd*) and ties between family members. The seeds (*buzūr*) of this hut are of longstanding and its woven palm leaves cohere together. These represent the ties of truth and cohesiveness like clasped hands, one onto the other much like the kinship ties between members of a family" (Al-'Unsi 1991: 151).

Meaningfulness at the museum thus does not dependent on the material object as much as it does on what it signifies, i.e. the values and principles it engenders and the moral principles it formulates. This leads to an emphasis on the dematerialization of religion, which, like culture, gives way to an enduring series of principles and values that are transmitted across the past, present and future, transcending finitude to that which becomes the foundation of "enlightened progress". To promote Omani nationalism at the same time, an underlying and essential affinity between Islam and Omani civilization is harnessed that then ties in with identification with the Omani nation state. Islamic collections at a museum in Oman do have rather transformative implications. Religion itself as a category is thus forged on the terrain of culture and civilization. Religious manuscripts, once the foundation for materializing the practices of law, history and ethics that defined the nature of the Ibadi Imamate, are now a means of learning about the nation state, a polity whose claim to legitimacy entails a secular past that stretches beyond the advent of Islam and is entrenched in the land itself. Islam is considered one of the many key factors or dimensions assimilated into the nationalist teleological narrative that has enabled Oman's progress through the ages.

Museums in the West have produced the representation of the custom-bound Other as a counterfoil against which self-reflection might lead to self-development and individuality. A Western liberal perspective of culture would take issue with the idea of customary ways, including something considered habitual or of traditional usage. Culture in this sense would instigate a critique that would seek to extricate the individual from immersing him/herself in its unthinking mandate (Brown 2006: 166-169), in order to produce moral and intellectual autonomy. In the Omani Museum, custom and tradition are not superseded. The *nahda* does enjoin innovation and change but through the process of being harnessed and enabled by a past, one conceived as being imprinted by the "positive facets" inherited through the purposive vitality of transforming nature into constructed products and institutions that may be assimilated into the teleology of the nation.[43] But these activities are in turn de-materialized, as what defines the good in Oman is marked by the transformation and tempering of past material practices into strategic values and principles, ones that are selectively able to propel history forward to the exclusion of other less desirable aspects. This type of abstract reasoning facilitates the conceptualization of such imaginary entities as the nation state, making it possible for the citizen to relate his/her interests to it and act accordingly. The past as an idiom of culture becomes the basis for generating a consciousness of the future, one that assures an autonomous freedom that is specifically Omani but that is also concomitant with a global neo-colonial narrative and its set of values.

[43] A new national museum is being constructed that is being publicized as a major landmark especially in light of its being sited in a symbolically pivotal location: opposite the Al Alam Palace, the official and ceremonial residence of the sultan in Muscat. It is due to open by the end of 2013 and will share some of the basic exhibition structures as the Omani Museum. According to its new museum director, this would include an even more systematic and comprehensive perspective of Omani history compared to its much smaller counterpart. Its themes will include 1) a teleology beginning from pre-history to the Islamic periods, its height as a maritime empire from the 16th and the 19th centuries, especially in East Africa; 2) evolution of the environment and adaptation to the land as part of the process of creating different ecological niches and living habitats; 3) craftsmanship as part of the "aesthetic principles of daily life"; 4) "Splendours of Islam", which will explore Islam's influence on various aspects of life in Oman as part of Oman's contribution in various fields of "human endeavour"; and 5) tradition as "inspiration and a source of strength" for various modern ventures and contemporary cultures in Oman today.

The Silk Road

In 1988, UNESCO launched several major projects under the title of "the Integral Study of the Silk Roads: Roads of Dialogue".[44] An ensemble of seminars, expeditions, publications, exhibitions and documentary films, this enterprise has had global reach, with its impact extending well beyond its sources. Providing an impetus to an interest that that has long been part of popular and media discourses in Oman,[45] the Silk Roads project has been a significant facilitator in linking a form of historical imagination to ideas of modernity with an implicit moralistic thrust to it. Today, the Silk Road is metonymic of a past that evokes Oman's role as a maritime power and empire on the Silk and Spice Routes as well as a pioneer in navigation and seafaring. Efforts have ranged from actively aiding the UNESCO project[46] to hosting conferences and seminars, constructing museum exhibits,[47] preparing lesson units in school textbooks and publishing widely on the topic.[48] It has become, in other words, a way of entering into a universal historical narrative. As a global enterprise, the Silk Roads project is based on the conception of a dynamic history forged on a terrain of movements and inter-cultural exchanges. The goals of the Silk Roads project were:

> To shed light on the common heritage, both material and spiritual linked to the people of Eurasia. To generate awareness of the different civilizations' shared roots and to foster the concept of a plural world heritage that embraces the masterpieces of nature and culture in all countries…. to encourage openness and tolerance, so necessary in an essentially interdependent world. The fundamental issue at stake in a "roads of culture" project is to highlight the significance of pluralism in culture. (UNESCO 2008:1)

How is a certain conception of the past mobilized to facilitate ideas of pluralism and tolerance? Moreover, given that Oman's national institutions appear to focus on a self-generating cultural and historical specificity, how does a universal global conception of history fit in and how is it interpreted? The emphasis on the Silk Roads casts in relief how relations with the past emerge as

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[44] Please see http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0015/001591/159189E.pdf (last viewed on July 29th 2012) for a discussion of the overall project and its goals.

[45] This is especially evident in the publicity surrounding his support of a project by a British scholar and traveller, Tim Severin, who retraced the voyage of Sinbad – thought to be from Oman – from the port city of Sur, on the north-eastern coast of Oman to Canton, China on a ship modelled after "traditional" Omani vessels.

[46] The sultan had dedicated the royal yacht *Fulk al Salama* to the project as a platform where scientists from different parts of the world could undertake projects and organize conferences and exhibitions. The journey of the yacht started from Venice, Italy, in October 1990 and ended in Osaka, Japan, in 1991.

[47] Not only do the smaller museums in Muscat mention the importance of Oman on the Silk Route(s) but the main museum in Salalah, capital of the southern governorate of Dhofar, known as the Land of Frankincense, centres its exhibit narrative on trade routes that were based on incense and that are celebrated as coalescing into a network of socio-political and economic ties between Oman and the ancient world from the Neolithic period onwards into the late Islamic periods.

[48] These would include publications by the Ministry of Heritage and Culture including Malallah bin Ali bin Habib Allawati, *UNESCO'S Project to Study the Silk Routes: Papers Submitted at the International Seminar on the Silk Roads* at Sultan Qaboos University, Muscat, Oman, 20-21 November 1990 (Muscat: Ministry of Heritage and Culture, 1992) and Allawati, *Outline of the History of Oman: UNESCO's Silk Road Project* (Muscat: Mazoon Press, 1984).

part of the unpredictable effects of unequal global encounters, contingent historical circumstances and authoritative global discursive formations. In this case, it would be an understanding of the past across difference that informs and institutionalizes a certain conception of culture that has more to do with liberal political claims to diversity, inter-cultural dialogue and mutual recognition. This is a cultural-concept that marks a universal political domain characterized by fluidity, hybridism, heterogeneity and openness. In this view, there is a conjunction between "culture" and "pluralism". Culture is construed less as a historically conditioned and bounded whole than a Deleuzian sort of "smooth space" (1980) where the metaphor of the "trade network" becomes a terrain with no determining organizational principles. Instead, culture spreads like water, taking up any available space, trickling downward through fissures and gaps as it assumes the form of anything detachable and portable that travels whether in the form of material goods, ideas, beliefs or forms of knowledge and technology, some of which might be embodied in the form of the intrepid traveller (UNESCO 2008: 2-3). If there are interruptions or movements on this surface they are temporary and leave no trace. Assuming forms of "rhizomatic growth" (Deleuze and Guattari 1980), these cultural units "ceaselessly establish connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles" (1980: 7).

However, as far as UNESCO is concerned, this continuous movement of attraction and mutual influence is constitutive of a single epistemological trajectory: promoting a "culture of peace and tolerance through an awareness of inter-cultural dialogue and mutual ties" (2008: 4). Inasmuch as the Silk Roads project's call for cultural diversity directs our attention to historical forces that are seen to have fundamentally shaped even the most basic elements undergirding the everyday lives of people in Eurasia, it does so as part of a set of assumptions that are tacitly grounded in a liberal ethos of democratic pluralism, part of the legacy of the post-Cold War era where the world is thought to be safe for "differences". What matters here is not whether this concept of tradition is warranted or not as much as the progressivism assumptions that this account smuggles in. As part of a universal authoritative project, UNESCO aims to institutionalize a certain understanding of the past that dovetails with a number of shared assumptions internal to liberal discourses on democracy and toleration. This perspective of the past sees it as something that is fundamentally contingent and therefore prone to transformation and change. From this perspective, the assumption of the fundamental separateness and boundedness of cultures gives way to a celebration of "construction" and "contingency" of dominant constellations of identities where "differences" can be re-negotiated and interchanged as part of defining an essence or common nature of humanity that underlies cultural plurality.

However, the link between the notion of the "difference" and history under the auspices of UNESCO's Silk Roads project is also one of depoliticization. There is an occlusion of any sense of determining forces or structures of power. In other words, if culture does undergird a domain that is considered inherently up for negotiation and interaction, then on what basis would any meaning, assumption, discourse or a response to a new material acquire force, become authoritative, and in so doing remake or refashion the space, thus encompassing other sedimented traditions and normative ways of life, de-stabilizing them and thus enabling new possibilities? Inequality, subordination, social conflict (i.e. the space of the political), as an integral part of culture, is not merely marginalized but actively naturalized. The peoples who travelled these routes would not merely have been monks, traders, pilgrims and artists, each bent

on their own individual or personal goals, as the UNESCO account details (2008: 7), but rulers and their armies, marauding bandits, governing administrators such as tax collectors and inspectors, and explorers and scholars with the might of colonial power behind their scholarly enterprises of acquiring knowledge. Surely these institutions representing the state, the political-economy, colonialism and class stratification would depend on enforcement? In effect, this process of depoliticization entails removing a political phenomenon from an explicit sense of its own historical emergence and an acknowledgement of the powers that have produced and shaped it an ontological naturalness is ascribed, in the universal propagation of a depoliticized authoritative discourse that espouses a moral ethos, tethering its warranty to a tolerance of difference and a peaceful co-existence.

The Silk Roads project is an example of a universalism of a past that becomes mobile and travels, charging and changing the historical and cultural specificity of, in this case, Oman as it generates new meanings and significances that undergird the forms of histories that Omanis inhabit. It becomes the basis for an important language that links an ethical code with history, drawing its vocabulary and imagery from Omani heritage and its succour from the historical narratives of the modern nation state, generating a norm-producing function. Archaeological sites dating from the pre-Islamic era[49] and those which flourished after the advent of Islam,[50] varieties of frankincense, metal ware, inscriptions, old manuscripts, and traditional ships in Oman are explicitly linked with discoveries at archaeological excavations that "testify to Oman's contact with East Arabia, Gulf region, India and the Mediterranean" (Office of the Advisor to HM the Sultan for Cultural Affairs 2007). Roman amphoerae, ceramic shards from China and items from India assume the form of representations that move Oman beyond a national narrative towards being set within a supra-regional account of trade routes and diverse societies as part of a meta-cultural account. Translated into heritage, these objects are collected, defined, documented and brought forth as testament that the role played by maritime navigation in Oman is as old as the nation state from the Neolithic into the Islamic era and up to the late 19th century creating a unique heritage.

Trade in these official accounts assumes the form of global flows, where, "the ambulant merchant carries, along with his commodities, his beliefs, thoughts and traditions, to spread wherever he goes and then returns home with thoughts, beliefs and traditions which have taken root in him from that country" (Ministry of Heritage and Culture, 1990). The merchant or sailor as the itinerant traveller articulates the celebratory nature of the Silk Road metaphor in acting as the conduit or bearer for the interchange of ideas and the toleration of difference. This unbounded exchange can only lead to one end: "As a result the minds of the Omani people are enlightened, their horizons widened and their abilities strengthened. These are the characteristics

[49] Located in the southern governorate of Dhofar, these three archaeological sites are now on the World Heritage list. Their importance is based on their historic role in the frankincense trade network, which is thought to stretch from the Mediterranean regions to China.

[50] There are major archaeological sites that were considered important as the location of flourishing trading ports and emporia during Oman's medieval period (i.e. after the advent of Islam). These would include Sohar, during the 9th to the 13th centuries, which is still a major coastal city, located 200km north of Muscat. Qalhat, now mostly in ruins, is another coastal site in north eastern Oman, and Muscat itself, which flourished as a trading entrepot from the mid-17th century onwards.

which enable the contemporary Omani to step forward towards achieving the goals of the auspicious renaissance" (Ibid.).

These concrete objects, excavation sites, and ruins are extracted from the material circumstances and cultural and historical specificities of time and place to be translated into lending support for a particular sense of history. The multiple local histories that these objects may have passed through ultimately become commensurable with each other through the notion of continuity in spirit, creating a unified narrative linked with nationalism and progress. This spirit attests to the craftsmanship of Oman's ship builders, the enlightenment of its merchants and the courage and skills of its sailors (Ministry of Heritage and Culture 1990:12), assuming the form of a series of abstract traits. These characteristics become valorised as products of "traditional" ways of life that deserve not only be to be preserved but to be regenerated. Rather than being boxed up as belonging to a past separate from the contemporary, they are instead conceived as propelling progress and modernity in terms of fostering a peaceful co-existence through cultural interchange, a moral ethos now taken on as part of a nationalist paradigm of the past rather than an abstract universalized liberal ideal. Both official publications and school textbooks[51] adopt the perspective that the conquest by the Portuguese of large swathes of coastal areas in Oman forged a basis not only for their defeat and expulsion at the hands of the Ya'ariba Imamate (A.D. 1624-1741) but was followed by the construction of a modern navy, through buying ships from the Dutch as well as adopting many of the techniques of European ship builders and their fire power in the use of canons and later gunships.

The subsequent conquests, settlements and Omani empire in East Africa – as well as South Asia (the Makran region of what is now south western Pakistan) – are set within a storyline where Omani merchants and sailors are pivotal actors in spreading the Arabic language, as indicated by the presence of numerous words and phrases in Swahili and Urdu, transferring knowledge of mathematics, medicine, the sciences and the arts from India to the Islamic World, as well as being peaceful missionaries in spreading the Islamic *da'wa* through their trading networks and relationships, marriages, and by the examples they set as members of peaceful merchant communities on the coasts. Slavery is omitted from these accounts and representations. In defining the citizen, these narratives focus on the generation of oneself as an individual who embraces tradition, through the inculcation and cultivation of a certain set of normative values developed by one's forebears through their relationship with the land and the sea. This claim to an authentic core does not necessarily indicate a rejection of new ideas and practices. As may be noted in the example of the official representation of the Portuguese conquest, these new ideas become indigenized, inasmuch as they are assimilated into a larger national narrative that claims autonomous development on its own terms. The power of these narratives as stories of the past and its lasting consequences also assumes the form of moral separations. Omanis are classed as those who inhabit the values of peaceful co-existence, equality and who have facilitated cultural diversity and exchange as an integral part of their history, thereby justifying the claim to being enlightened through carving out a niche set within a universal authoritative language of rights, equality, history and their significance. Through being Omani, on these terms, they also vindicate their status of being humans on a global scale.

[51] Relations between East Africa and Oman and the conquest of the Ya'ariba Dynasty and the expulsion of Portuguese is most clearly elucidated in the *9th Grade Social Studies Textbook*, Part II (2007), 45-49.

The history of these Silk Road/Spice Route sites as one of wars and empires, tribal rivalries and piracy, political tensions and military bids for control, first from the Islamic caliphates and later from European colonial rule, are certainly mentioned in brief but are effectively marginalized. These are considered largely superficial circumstances and events that do not have a structurally constitutive or a deeply transformative effect. If they do, as in the case of the Portuguese, they are assimilated into a broad narrative of teleological development. Overall, the representations of these events and phenomena are depoliticized, occluding the role of power and history and leaving an ontological naturalism of spirit that forges Oman – past, present and future – intact as a self-generative essentialism that assumes a central role in heritage as a concept and set of authoritative practices through which relations with the past are created and history secured as part of wider changes in the modern landscape of power and knowledge. Despite not having any juridical bite or legal regulative power, The Silk Roads project's espousal of an abstract form of life becomes part of a process of cultural transformation and regulation linked to a certain vision of humanity and assuming a force and meaning through the nation state. The very process of abstraction itself enables transcendence beyond social and material entanglements, enabling the forging of a terrain where past, present and future are rendered commensurable with each other. This terrain is publicly recognized as the spirit that maintains and regenerates the linkages between past and future.

School Textbooks and the Nation: Civilization, Culture and Religion

Quranic verses and chunks of the sultan's speeches lose their immediate contextual specificity and become freely circulating and portable chunks (Silverstein and Urban 1996), becoming re-anchored when reinserted into the new context of social studies textbooks, a compulsory subject in the Omani mass educational system. Part of a wider network of civic technologies directed towards youth, the introduction of each textbook states that, "In the face of a society in rapid development, the ministry has developed a curriculum that reconciles/harmonizes (*yatala'um*) these developments with deference (*murā□āh*) to the specificity of society and its cultural identity." Questions therefore revolve around how ideas of the past, its proper form and content, have become part of a visual and discursive pedagogy working to transform individuals from students to young citizens, stripped – at least officially – from tribal affiliations, clan networks, marital identity and family ancestry. How does the past define "culture and "civilization"? How is civic fashioning transforming the conception and practices of Islam and its relationship to culture? As mentioned to me by one of the members of the curriculum board for the social sciences at the Ministry of Education, the textbooks have recently been revised and were newly issued for distribution in 2005. The textbooks that I was perusing in 2008 were therefore fairly new.

During the interview she further elucidated the aims of teaching social studies in Oman. The subject is based on three major components: history, geography and civics. She explained that the emphasis on history has now changed. In following this decision, she explained that,

> I believe that what students need from history, is that which is appropriate to understanding reality and taking pride in oneself through Oman's accomplishments. But if we give the students just wars, wars and more wars, where is the success? A student of thirteen years of age needs to consider that his ancestors lived in a time that was also great and had noted accomplishments rather than just wars and being on the battle front…. We are trying to create a generation that is

> conscious (*ya'ī*) of the requirements of the age which they are in, which adheres to their religion, their civilization and its reality.

In the name of authenticity and morality, the subject of social studies becomes the basis for creating that "harmony" that would involve being disciplined to produce a self-reflexive formation of the citizen, where he/she embodies the desired balance between authenticity and progress, culture and modernity, the past and the future. Rather than being a comprehensive survey of the topics covered by the textbooks, this section will focus on those thematic topics that are standardized, systematized and reiterated throughout these textbooks whatever the grade level and which shed light on the questions addressed above.

Reiterating the overall framework of official publications and museums, the texts[52] focus on the linkages between the land and human development. Oman is rendered distinctive in these texts for its strategic location in being open to the outside world as well as having been a transit point for world trade since ancient times. This in turn is noted to have enabled it to acquire a specific geographical/civilizational character. The texts explain that despite the extreme climatic conditions and the varieties of terrain, the number of settlements to be found in Oman indicates the adaptability of Omanis to the nature of these regions and to their taking to the seas. These assumptions become pivotal in defining the categories of "culture" and "civilization". In defining the concept of civilization, the seventh grade textbook begins[53] by noting that,

> God honoured man and distinguished him from his remaining creations, in a number of ways, one of the most important being his potential to think and use his hands. Man exploited his abilities to satisfy his basic needs for food, clothing and living from the environment around him. He obtained his nutrition from the fruits of trees and wore the skins of animals and lived in caves and caverns. Man advanced by degrees in social life which was organized by clan. He hunted animals and made tools and after he was able to till the soil, raise animals and invent writing, moving from the life of a nomad to a sedentary one. With the development of society, the needs of man increased and he could no long fulfil all his needs by himself. By cooperating with others, people began producing necessities for each other and social relations developed as people learned from each other.

This becomes the basis for the development of man through a series of stages where the Omani is assimilated into a universal teleological narrative beginning with the Stone and Bronze Ages, and the growing impetus of sedentary civilization and trading networks with the ancient world, including Egypt, the Gulf and Yemen. Imagery of cave paintings, stone tools, and frankincense are used either to complement the text or to elucidate the very material differences between modern Oman and ancient times. Illustrating the smelting of copper, the honing of stone tools or the making of fire becomes part of signifying practices, assuming the form of vehicles of meaning and becoming cognizable as objectified accounts of history and geography with moral and political consequences. Images of archaeological sites and artefacts become testimonials to this abstract history, in affirming that, "these archaeological discoveries indeed reflect the fact that Omani man has struck deep roots into human civilization."[54]

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[52] Although elements of these topics are mentioned for every grade, they appear in greater and more complex detail in the *7th Grade Social Studies Textbook*, Part I (2007), 10-15 as well as the 11th grade text (2006), 20-24.

[53] *7th Grade Social Studies Textbook*, Part I (2007), 12.

[54] Ibid., 23.

These texts emphasize that by developing through these stages, man has undergone different experiences, enabling him to understand his environment and adapt accordingly, learning by degrees.[55] Rather than assuming a rather mechanistic understanding of the role of civilization, as that which constrains man to assume a puppet role, civilization as part of the past of humanity generally and Oman specifically, in these textbooks, is conceived as the tools of cultivation by which man in the process of adapting to the land acquires a series of institutions and skills by which to progress. Texts explain how Oman's strategic location between important civilized regions such as Ancient Egypt, Iraq, Fars (Iran) and India, has been pivotal in enabling Oman's progress (*taqadum*) and has led to its merchants and sailors playing a mediating role in transferring their accomplishments to other civilizations. The very topography and geology of Oman's territory as well as its climate are elucidated as having formed the basis for the adaptative capabilities that have created the Omani man as a purposive actor who is adept at shaping nature in accordance with his needs. This autonomous effort, according to the seventh and eleventh grade textbooks, in turn causes him to transform and improve his own nature through his rationalistic efforts in adapting to and exploiting his environment, creating a specific type of personality that is uniquely Omani across the ages:

> Omanis are known across their long history for a spirit of adventure and for bearing hardship. They have embarked in small groups across the Indian Ocean to transport commodities and products to far-away places and to export goods to regions which need them as well. The Omanis have long forged a wide and lively field of activity for their communities which have continued until the modern period. All these developments have contributed in the formation of the identity of this society. And this identity in turn is the biggest spur for the Omani towards his continuing to undertake his civilizational role in different aspects of life.[56]

This character (*shakhṣīya*) becomes the foundation for a number of textual units that aim at expanding the parameters of the Omani man to that of understanding "the nature of Omani society and its formation" and giving "an explanation of the factors which have changed Omani society and those elements which have defined it".[57] These units come under the chapter heading, "Authenticity and Contemporary Society".

Those factors that are considered to define the uniqueness of Omani society and its consolidation (*istiqrār*) over time while transcending temporal-spatial dimensions are enumerated as follows: 1) Islam; 2) the Arabic language; 3) a civilizational inheritance; 4) one nation in which all cooperate under the rubric of equality in entrenching national unity, which contributes to preserving Omani society and its stability; 5) customs and traditions (*'adāt wa taqālid*) and authentic values (Ibid.). These are considered the essence of Oman, making it unique and differentiating it from the rest of the world. The 11th grade textbook explores these factors in more detail under a sub-heading "Foremost Features of General Behaviour (*sulūk*)". This section emphasizes that despite the variety of regional habitats and livelihoods followed by Omanis, there are certain fundamentals in social behaviour and culture that they share that form a

[55] *7th Grade Social Studies Textbook*, Part II (2007), 10-14.

[56] *7th Grade Social Studies Textbook*, Part I (2007), 23; these explanations are repeated in greater detail in the *11th Grade Social Studies Textbook* (2006), 66.

[57] *11th Grade Social Studies Textbook* (2006), 64-86.

common denominator. This is influenced by a social life characterized by its specificity in geographic, historical and civilization dimensions, both material and spiritual. The past accomplishments of the Omani are heralded as having imprinted itself in the ideal forms of everyday social habits involved with food, clothing and work. These habits and traditions assume continuity in time manifested, as the text elucidates, in the flint instruments, rock paintings and weaponry from the ancient past and extending to that stamped by Arabic, the values and morals of Islam and everyday customs and traditions. The paragraph goes on to conclude that, "all these ways of life have contributed across the ages in transferring a version (*ṣūra*) of the Omani personality, in its know-how, habits and traditions, values, convictions, beliefs and behaviour" (Ibid.: 67).

This text is accompanied by a number of photographic images that signify tradition writ large. The first depicts venerable old men in the standardized traditional national garb sitting amongst date palms in a garden. A second image depicts a men's folk line dance and a third a series of Omani men, again dressed in "traditional" national dress, against the backdrop of a towering fort. All three images depict a past that is considered as typical of pre-*nahda* and yet their portrayal of tradition is too ambiguous to assign it a definite time and place. This very ambiguity, however, designates a realm for the ongoing role of the past in the present. However, because they are not tethered to any specific material or practical discipline or practice, they have no lasting historical or political consequence. Instead, tradition is encompassed as part of an acculturated set of differences that render Oman unique. This is exemplified especially clearly in the following words from the same textbook:

> These past forms are adaptations of the Omani personality, the circumstances which have worked towards achieving its civilizational accomplishments and formulating the general traits of Omani society. These (traits) are tied to the past and strengthen its majesty, civilizational heritage, its consciousness of the nature of the challenges which it has faced and the obstacles in growth that it has overcome, in its drive towards accomplishing the goals of the *nahda*.
>
> Omani society is strengthened by its customs and traditions in the authentic values inherited from various aspects of life. Benefitting from national heritage enables the entrenchment of the correct foundations of values through following these customs and traditions and taking what is useful of the accomplishments of the age. On this basis, there would be a blending (*mazj*) of the authentic with the contemporary.

Culture and civilization in pedagogical practice thus designate a realm where these material forms and visual images, ranging from flint tools, date cultivation, national dress, and wearing the *khanjar* to folk dances, are objectified as part of a reality or a life independent of contingent circumstances of their production and use. These become part of a paradigm of semiotic representation in which they are tethered to immaterial meanings, sensibilities and moral evaluations that undergird the cultivation of a national citizen. Like the representations of the national museum, these everyday semiotic forms come to embody an ideal abstract past, whose very translation into an immaterial set of meanings enable it to transcend the historicity of material relationships and contexts to become part of an ambiguity that travels between past, present and future, building up the basic characteristics of the Omani personality across time and space. The fact that the narratives describing them are, like the museum exhibits and an official publication, in the present tense denotes their ongoing significance.

A series of basic traits that characterize the Omani personality are expounded on in the 9th and 11th grade textbooks. These assume the form of a number of abstract qualities and sensibilities commensurate with national unity, such as adherence, stability and balance vs. division and fissures, respect of society in terms of growth and development, respect of the equality of all as the basis for communal obligation, persistence in challenging difficulties and adapting to the circumstances of one's environment in order to adopt an honourable life, adherence to the principles and values of society and Islam, and strength in conceding the importance of work and productivity.

These ideal principles become objectified as customs and traditions and embodied in material semiotic forms and images. Their widespread dissemination, propagation and ubiquity as part of pedagogical strategies transform them into portals admitting the individual subject into a reality where nationhood forms an integral part in constituting the concepts of civilization and culture. At the same time, entering into the domains carved out by these concepts also involves a process of transcending human finitude, as these inherited accomplishments and works of previous generations endure beyond the concrete life span of any one mortal, thereby becoming, as was the case of other heritage institutions, part of a process of spiritualization. The past, as a constitutive part of these concepts, may be understood in terms of performative reiterations (Butler 1993) that aim to re-inspirit it as part of a comprehensive life curriculum. The province of the spirit, in the form of values and principles, becomes objectified through discourse, images and objects, forging normative categories of citizenship, nationhood and humanity. Religious festivals, social customs specific to hospitality, clothing, jewellery, handicrafts, and even pastimes and sports such as horse and camel races become embodiments of what is history, guided and driven by the self-determining character of Omani logic and rationality. Images of the Omani *sabla*/*majlis* – or its reconstruction in exhibits – is juxtaposed with a narrative that emphasizes that the custom of the *majlis* is one that is considered one of the most prominent social forms of "hospitality, neighbourliness, cooperation, harmony, counselling and education imparted across generations to each other".[58] In this narrative, the *sabla* itself becomes metonymic of Oman as an institution that increasingly connects and guarantees the relations between individual members and society, as a basis for the development of education in inculcating the virtues (*faḍā'il*) of society through its customs and traditions, thereby transferring a life-world to the next generation: the *aflaj* canal system becomes a tangible index of the innovative spirit of the Omani character, and handicrafts become representative of the transfer and continuity of expertise, as well as intellectual and technical skills of the Omani.

This continuity in spirit is not considered as adverse to change. The 12th social studies textbook elaborates on a concept of culture that resonates with E.B. Tylor's understanding of a complex whole that includes forms of communication, habits and traditions, values, moral principles and the arts.[59] The concept itself, as the text explains, expounds on the notion of harmony (*insijām*) since its origin in the root *thaqf* carries the connotations of revision, refinement and preparation. The text goes on to elucidate that culture is therefore a process of "continuous consideration (*ri'āya*) and preparation (*i'dād*) of the human mind and spirit" (Ibid: 100). In contrasting cultures that change with those that are frozen (*jāmida*), the cultures considered ready for the future are

[58] *11th Grade Social Studies Textbook* (2006), 71.
[59] *12th Grade Social Studies Textbook* (2009), 99.

those that plan and delineate goals on the basis of opening themselves up for mutual influence with other cultures rather than retreating and isolating themselves. At the same time, these changes are considered under the rubric of the term of purification/sifting (*tanqiya*), where culture is considered part of a process in which "civilized" roots meet the requirements of the present and the horizons of the future" (Ibid.: 103).

Transforming the past into heritage, a museal order of things set within a semiotic paradigm of representation becomes the primary means by which to render past, present and future commensurable with each other as part of the same plane. Material forms come to signify more fundamental and enduring values, morals and principles that outlast the superficialities of time. In this form, they escape historical and social consequences. Simultaneously, however, heritage is also construed by educators as a tool kit for the transformation of youth into Omani citizens, through domesticating the past into a specific logic and moral ethos that in the process of being interiorized also becomes a foundation for a future endowed with creativity and autonomy that is wholly Omani and yet conceived as responsive to the universal demands for a productive future. In effect, it has reformulated political, epistemological historical and geographical truths in carving out a nationalist terrain. It mediates both the dangers and promises of global modernity in becoming part of a process of assimilation without the dangers of global exploitation and Western imperialism. These points are driven home in the textbook by an excerpt from one of the sultan's speeches at the beginning of the chapter entitled "Oman … World Heritage", in which he declares that cultural heritage in its many forms and in its material as well as spiritual content has a special importance, a concern that is distinctive in playing a tangible role in reviving (*nuhūḍ*) intellectual and artistic life, creativity and innovation (Ibid.: 192).

Islam in Social Studies Textbooks

Strewn with Quran ayats, Prophetic *hadith*, illustrations and texts, social studies textbooks do not seek simply to acquaint students with Islamic history. The educational curriculum wants Islam in this context to play a crucial role in shaping everyday life practices, as history lessons are distilled to impart moral qualities, values and ethical orientations. Islam, as mentioned in the previous section, is considered one of the foundations (*mūrtakazāt*) of the Omani character and, as such, historical personalities and their life-circumstances are subsumed under a process of decontexualization, abstract interpretation and representation as part of the shaping of subjective experience of inner belief in religion. In this case religion becomes part of the process of imagining and manifesting the abstract entity of national culture and civilization, which mediates its understanding and practice by fleshing it out in the child's everyday life.

For example, in the early grades (3rd and 4th), social studies textbooks include short historical tales of major Muslim personalities such as Sa'ad bin Abi Waqasin. He is considered to be one of the youngest to have converted to Islam during the Prophet's time in Mecca before the Hijra (A.D. 622). The narrative emphasizes that his mother wanted Sa'ad to renounce Islam since he was in opposition to the religion of his people, so she fasted and denied herself food and drink until he renounced Islam. Sa'ad however refused and told her that he will not renounce but will remain dutiful (*bārran*) to her as his religion has taught him. He was also considered skilful with bow and arrow, a practice that is sanctified at the end of this account by a Prophetic *hadith* that encourages the Muslim soldier to learn the use of the bow. Sa'ad is then characterized as an

exemplar of courage, wisdom and knowledge, exerting himself (*jāhid*) on the path of God through battles with the Sassanians in Iraq as well as later becoming a governor of the province where he exemplified the wise and just ruler.[60] Quranic verses chosen as reflecting the sentiments of the lesson become part of the activities to further explain the lesson and its morals.

Khalid bin Walid is described as an important personality who converted to Islam six years after the Hijra and an innovative military commander who became famous for his successful military campaigns and skills in combat. This is also accompanied by a Prophetic *hadith*, where the Prophet calls Khalid bin Walid the "Drawn Sword of Allah" (*saif Allah al-maslūl*). He is considered a great warrior who fought many battles against the "enemies of Islam".

The Ibadi sect as part of Oman's national history flows seamlessly into these accounts as its specificity is diluted and accounts of its imams are elucidated in terms of their contributions to Islam as a global ecumene. Imam Jabir bin Zaid's biography emphasizes his studies in Basra where he became renowned for his knowledge and learning. The narrative emphasizes his contribution to Islamic civilization, in being one of the first to write down Prophetic *hadith.* Imam Rabi'a bin Habib was also educated in Oman. In the early stages and travels to Basra where he resides, receiving instruction in the Islamic branches of knowledge of *hadith*, *tafsir* and *fiqh* at the feet of senior *ulama*. He is also emphasized in the textual narrative as being a scholar of Prophetic *hadith* who wrote a number of famous books and who trained a new generation of students who became noted scholars in turn. Imam al-Julanda bin Mas'ud is described as having been renowned for his learning and piety. His Imamate was distinguished for its support and zeal in spreading Islam and his rule was characterized by justice and amity. Quranic verses and Prophetic *hadith* thus assume a semantic load where, fixed to a singular set of meanings, they yield moral and political lessons. Sectarian differences as a mode of living religion and as part of hierarchical relationships embedded within unequal relations of power, is simply neutralized in these texts, transformed into the notion of "diversity" in constituting the realm of Islamic culture and civilization. Sectarian matters are simply rendered as alternative religious communities that are separate but equal, the product of the vicissitudes of history.

Islam as part of Oman's interpretation of its past becomes a matter not of ritual practices or material disciplines but of a series of abstracted and generative values and principles (Asad 1993). This resonates with Asad's claim that the universal understanding of religion in the ideology of modernity shifts focus from power and material practices to inner beliefs or sets of propositions. In Oman, the *nahda* as part of the process of modernization and nation building also witnesses a shift in the common assumptions about religion internal to the discursive formations of culture and civilization. This kind of religion is conceived in terms of a series of principles or values that have become rather abstracted in the process of being elevated and lifted away from the distinctive aspects – the concrete contexts and material relationships – that would articulate a mode of living Ibadi Islam. These are considered as the foundation of a new culture that calls for contemplation and reflection and which in turn has produced intellectual and spiritual works. For example, in a lesson entitled "Social Work",[61] Islam is considered a foundation for cohesion (*tamāsuk*) and solidarity (*takāful*) where people interacting and living together is a source for doing good and a disavowal of evil. This principle is further sanctioned

[60] *3rd Grade Social Studies Textbook* (2007), 12-15.
[61] *5th Grade Social Studies Textbook* (2003), 89-106.

by Quranic verses and is explained as the basis for a series of social practices heralded as part of Omani heritage, such as date harvesting, the celebration of weddings, regular visitation and its embodiment in the institution of the *sabla/majlis* where men especially congregate daily as well as for celebratory occasions.

The 11th grade textbook states that Islam and its underlying basis establishes a series of institutions in Oman such as the *katateeb* that taught children to read, write and memorize the Quran: mosques are conceived as being not only for worship but also for study, writing, copying and publishing books, madrasas, libraries and the social institution of the *majlis* – or its more local term, *sabla* – which is still used for exchanging news and opinions, for consultations as well as an informal educational setting for planting (*ghars*) the "values of society and its principles in tandem with modes of behaviour and good morals."[62] The development of these cultural institutions are in turn thought to have conditioned the appearance of a prominent number of Omani *ulama*, writers and intellectuals who influenced the nature and spread of an Islamic culture. Their contributions are detailed as having left a marked impact on the development of language, literature, branches of *sharī'a* law, medicine, astronomy as well as art and architecture.

The role of Omanis in the spread of Islamic civilization is also emphasized as one that is carried out beyond Oman to South East Asia and East Africa through trading activities, missionary work where merchants also often assumed the role of *ulama* in propagating Islam, mosque construction, and settled merchant communities. These merchants are characterized as models of the principles of equality, toleration, amity and hospitality to local communities, having embodied the principles of Islam as part of their everyday working worlds and therefore influencing those around them by their ideas and cultures, creating strong ties and relationships with the residents and eventually causing many in these regions to convert to Islam.[63] In such accounts, Ibadi Islam is inscribed into the global assumptions of authoritative liberal discourse and its primary values. The distinctive historical character of Ibadi Islam itself has been lost in these teachings for the sake of emphasizing a more general, humanist and de-sectarian form of Islam.

The second volume of the 11th grade textbook explains Islamic culture and civilization as forged on a foundation (*uṣūl*) derived from the Arabic language and the Islamic religion. This foundation, it continues, was established on a series of principles on the basis of which the Arabs launched their conquests. The book emphasizes that it is on the basis of these principles that Islam becomes a political and social system, organizing the relations between peoples in an Islamic society and instigating them towards communication and cooperation. Islam also refuses tribal conflict (*ta'aṣṣub*) and any movements or ideas towards that end. Islam is a religion that embodies the spirit of toleration, justice and equality and this is the premise by which people enter Islam and which has enabled the Arabs to forge an Arab-Islamic civilization. The narrative's explanations of the development of states on the coast of East Africa, of plantation life in the shadow of Arab-Islamic kingdoms and emirates, agricultural and productive activities,

[62] *11th Grade Social Studies Textbook* (2006), 119.

[63] Articles on the Omani impact on the areas bordering the Indian Ocean, especially East Africa, do not only appear in school textbooks. Similar understandings of the role of merchants and mercantile trade networks in spreading Islam circulate almost verbatim in official newspaper accounts.

intellectual thought, language arts and architecture all become outward expressions of two fundamental phenomena: 1) the spread of "Islamic culture" and its foundational values, and 2) the tangible contribution that Omani maritime activities made on the coasts of the Indian Ocean in spreading Islam and its institutions through the building of an Afro-Asian empire.

As an integral part of pedagogical institutional learning, textual images and narratives become, in their mode as objective semiotic forms, vehicles of meaning and an intimate part of subjective experience and its cognition. The foundational texts of Islam – Quran and the *sunna of the Prophet* – are now offering themselves to reflection within a space defined, ordered and regulated by the modern nation state. In other words, religion is entering into a space already built on secular assumptions erected on the foundation of the "Omani personality" – naturalized and acculturated as part of teleological History – rather than the theologically defined premise of being oriented towards God, where daily life is defined as the living and practicing of *sirat al mustaqim* (the right path) as part of preparing for the joys or sorrows of the next world. The *nahda* has thus become part of a past in which man in his purposive activity dominates nature, generating a temporal order subject to natural laws (i.e. laws of evolutionary development that define a life-world), whose embodiment in signifying practices becomes a source of moral and political anxiety demanding active intervention. Religion itself becomes part of the natural order of things, given the same status as one among a number of other social components that have been the foundational building blocks in the construction of the distinctive nature and culture of the "Omani personality".

At the same time these semiotic forms are considered the outward form of rather abstract and invisible meanings – such as the values and principles of Islam or social solidarity, tolerance, equality – which cannot be pinned down to constituting anything institutionally or materially specific. As ideals rather than political practices they are construed as embodying the "Spirit of Islam" and therefore escape political and social consequences by inhabiting a transcendent terrain that connects the past with the present and future as an abstract plane of unchanging values rather than the narrow and specified confines of historically specific practices and periods. Culture and civilization as categories of thought are insulated from power structures and material practice, therefore effectively becoming domesticated as depoliticized realms in official Omani thought and practice. Simultaneously, however, even as abstract values these ideals do have political consequences in their material embodiment, since they lend themselves to a depoliticization that naturalizes the history in which they are embedded. Set within a larger semiotic framework of material forms of knowledge and practice, these ideals assume a certain arrangement of temporal continuities and differences, inclusions and exclusions within an idealized unified narrative. As principles that animate, direct and unify the nation state, they bring into sharp focus the pedagogical practices of knowing the past as part of Oman's modernity, where the categories of culture, civilization and religion become political and social questions whose mode of habitation and causal consequences depend on their embodiment and circulation in material forms. It is on the basis of their material forms that these abstract values thus re-enter a historical and political dimension.

Changing Perception by Transforming a Landscape

For Nadia Abu El-Haj the very act of excavating the land in Israel as part of an institutional and community enterprise produces a material culture that carves out a landscape with the concrete signs of a particular historical vision and aesthetic (2001). In Oman, constructing heritage is not simply about the process of creating narratives of the past. Rather, translating everyday objects into heritage becomes part of a mode of producing histories and historicises that is essentially "museological in character" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2006: 35-45). In being collected, documented, preserved, presented and interpreted, material objects move beyond the institutional settings of museum settings, school textbooks and colourful publications to establish the facticity of an organic history where the Omani is fashioned through a connection with the land. Representations of Oman become widely disseminated, circulated, ubiquitous and standardized in form, creating urban landscapes (street montages, sculptures, and even stained glass windows (Figs. 2.4, 2.5), architectural forms, exhibitions, consumer items (ornaments, key chains, stickers, postcards etc.), not to mention television documentaries and broadcasts.

Figure 2.4 Street Montage of a dalla in action

Figure 2.5 Incense Burner at a Street Roundabout

In the process they make place, through defining territorial boundaries and claims and mapping them onto a historical re-enactment of uninterrupted presence and a historical "essence" that is Oman, through material signs. The very nature of museological methods comes to act as an intervention in materializing and entrenching these historical "facts" onto the landscape, tying

them inextricably to each other in concretely transforming the terrain itself, substantiating Oman's identity and cultivating a territorial and moral ethos.

For Timothy Mitchell (1988 and 1989), the process of objectification, where an object is estranged from its material context, distantiated and put on display to be investigated and experienced, is part of an epistemology claiming to truth that is closely intertwined with Western power and the proliferation of a certain way of thinking as part of the global project of modernity. The "World as Exhibition" (1989) develops the argument that representation as a mode of knowing and experiencing reality becomes a form of intervention and transformation of the colonized world in accordance with the ways in which Europeans themselves saw their history as part of a "narrative of modernity" (Keane 2007: 9-13). In the West, this narrative is articulated through these distancing effects and becomes closely linked to a form of liberation through which new forms of individuality are forged. Representational practices as part of this process are conceived as enabling the individual to extricate him/herself from blind immersion to custom, tradition and habit, instigating a process of self-critique and self-development through standing apart, all of which forms the basis for cultivating new forms of being as a matter of choice rather than through enforcement or unconscious habit (Brown 2006: 166-171; Mahmood 2009). On the basis of this rationale, semiotic systems caught up in this logic of representation are concomitant with liberal notions of individual autonomy and choice. For the colonized world, however, Mitchell goes to another extreme, in seeing this process as one that assumes rather negative connotations in being a source of oppression and alienation (1988). However, authoritative practices of representation in Oman make it possible to see the modern nation state brought into view through an alternative set of relationships between the modalities of knowing the past, object creation and ethical formation, thus problematizing this rather dichotomous perspective.

These relationships were increasingly brought to the fore in a series of articles on heritage published in the primary daily newspapers throughout the year when Oman celebrated the 40th anniversary of the onset of the *nahda*, in 2011, while I was in the field. One of these general responses was expressed in an article in the *Oman* daily newspaper, on the 9th of March 2011, which expands on the nature and importance of the circulation and reiteration of certain iconic objects and images, such as the fort, the *dalla*, the *dhow*, and the *khanjar*, among others, as part of the heritage landscape in which they assume a more than simply communicative function:

> …civilization heritage is still the epitome of that authenticity in which Omani Man has witnessed the importance of the past which creates strong ties with the present insuring the strength of a linkage between them for a present without a past does not have any real value that would qualify (*tu'ahhil*) his sons to build the nation by preserving its primacy; for the past is the *foundation* of the present and all that it contains as the basis by which people live. Its principles and beliefs emanate from a deep rooted civilization and continue to the present day. These embody the strength of belonging and the strength of feeling in ourselves and become part of blending the **spirit** of authenticity with the character of the contemporary. They become part of a call (*da'wa*) for Omani youth to summon (*istihdār*) this inheritance and work towards utilizing it (*taskhir*) to serve the present and construct the future.
>
> Among the components of heritage are those forts and castles which seem to occupy almost inch of the land and are not simply examples of architectural and engineering arts but express the desire of people struggling to preserve them. They embody determination, forbearance and strength. When we want to take in the majesty of these forts and castles, we must not merely

> absorb the lofty buildings and the impregnable walls but we must also account for the thoughts of Omani Man hundreds of years ago in his creative ability, his artistic style and the needs which led to his establishing these forts and castles….this would include the *aflaj* which deserve study and which are unique to Oman and reflect the genius (*'abqarīya*) of Omanis.
>
> Omani heritage is also exemplified by its great maritime history which is recorded (*sajalat*) by Omani ships and their plying the blue waters in the course of spreading Islam and learning and establishing international relations with countries allied with Islam. Among the components of Omani heritage is the *khanjar*, decorated with beautiful engravings donned by Omanis and which speaks of the rootedness of the Omani people and the authenticity of the *umma.* Heritage would also include those habits and traditions which have been inherited from the forefathers whether pertaining to private or public life such as those of authentic hospitality that is part of the structure of the Omani *sabla* where people meet and study that which is useful to the group on the whole cementing ties between family, the neighbourhood or *hara*….[64]

These objects become affixed to a series of abstract qualities embodying an essence, whose specificity cannot be determined. And yet their very ambiguity in relating a past to abstract traits embodied in these material forms and images gives them a malleability that is "maximally symbolic even when they seem to be minimally determinate" (Povinelli 2002: 58). In short, the donning of the *khanjar*, traditional *dhows* plying the waves, a fort in the interior region, etc. all become assimilated into a temporally and spatially amorphous realm encapsulated as the "Spirit of the Age" where the notion of tradition itself has to pass through national historical narratives in order to be cognizable as part of a habitable world. It becomes part of a germinal essence from which both present and future unfold to manifest themselves materially as part of everyday life.

The past as heritage and tradition become familiar categories through which the urban landscape comes to be understood, as surfaces of representation and performative re-presentation. The category of national heritage is materialized and institutionalized through reiterations of these normative categories (Butler 1993). This would entail not only circulating discursive practices such as official publications, school textbooks, and museum exhibits but material articulation where the entire urban landscape[65] is defined and made substantive in accordance with the repetition of certain standardized traditional motifs that come to embody the "spirit" of the past working "in harmony" with the contemporary demands for progress and development for forging a certain aesthetic that produces the specificity of Oman. These include not only the presence of street montages, sculptures, and tiled imagery, but the crenulated outlines of the forts and castle are also widely disseminated as part of a modern Omani architectural aesthetic and characterize the parapets and roofs of private residences, apartment buildings and private companies as well as public offices such a government ministries, police stations and general shopping areas. These practices of consolidating a certain understanding of the past also extend to the body of the citizen-subject, as all Omani men usually wear "traditional" national dress, *disdāsha* – whose form and general appearance is closely monitored by the state in order to conform to a national type – and the *kumma* (an embroidered cap) *or musar* (cloth turban). Although it is only in government jobs that the Omani *disdāsha* and the *musar* are compulsory by royal decree, it was clear in talking to Omanis of different age groups that even though there was no specific law,

[64] See Nasir al-Yahmadi, "How Do We Harmonize Our Heritage with the Spirit of the Age?" *Oman* Daily Newspaper (Arabic), 9th of March, 2011.

[65] This is especially the case with the national capital, Muscat, and it is also a prevalent phenomenon, although to a lesser degree, in major regional capitals such as Sohar, Nizwa or Salalah.

they would have been greatly embarrassed or even ashamed to go out in public or attend a formal occasion, especially around their own neighbourhoods, wearing anything but the national dress (to be discussed in chapter 3). The bodies of the modern nation state, therefore, have also had to habituate themselves to embodying tradition as part of a now standard national dress.

Heritage thus becomes a matrix of material representational practices that circulate, demarcate and differentiate, producing the Sultanate of Oman in the process as part of its productive power, regulating and defining a conception of the past and its relationship to the present through the reiteration of norms (Butler 1993). This matrix of historicises and historical visions defines the boundaries within which the citizen-subject is produced. The materialises of the past produced through reiterations of normative thinking are closely linked to these portable and circulating semiotic forms that not only play a crucial role in enabling the formation of certain subjective experiences but also effectively exclude others.

But this is also a nation that defines its basis not so much in terms of a mystical quality one characterized by rational purposive activity. As one official from the Ministry of Heritage and Culture explained when talking about heritage, "the values of the *nahda* are derived from Oman's civilizational fabric with its live values and traditions. This is what gives this region its distinctiveness in being open to other countries of the world. Whenever Oman entered into periods of weakness in her history, she did not hesitate to go back to the roots of those values in order to rise again, stronger than before." Sitting in his spacious office at the ministry, on leather sofas opposite a large portrait of the sultan, his language seemed littered with official jargon, a type of masking strategy (Yurchak 2006) misrepresenting a more complex reality. However, his words do correlate with the logic internal to the circulation of discourse and objects as part of Oman's authoritative practices on history. As such, these circuits would have logical implications and causal consequences in shaping a very real relationship between heritage, object formation and ethical norms. Considering that the values communicated in material forms are closely related to a moral work that is continuously in action as part of authoritative pedagogical practices, national culture as understood by this official would be iterable and changeless in cultivating a conception of tradition, symptomatic of a continuity connecting the past to the future, the practical, didactic embodiment of an eternal order. But this work of a museal order also produces tangible results, in creating forms of knowledge that are constitutive of circuits of power, determining spaces of possibility of what must be or should be done in order to meet with a "normative" understanding of the past. In the process, the social categories of "tradition", "culture" and "civilization" claim an Omani terrain of belonging and habitation, sedimenting historical norms that move beyond the realms of cognitive identity to a form of being.

As mentioned before, the relationship between these material signs and abstract virtues are not considered as arbitrary acts of human interpretation but as part of very real connections, indexing intimate links with a past in perpetual motion. They may have been established by convention, fixed in place through the formative power of authoritative discourse as part of the nation-building process, but the materiality of these semiotic forms is considered as a binding, necessary link to qualities that embody the polity itself as part of a logic and experience of remembering invoking a sense of attachment and affect. Heritage in Oman was considered as part of a process of "renewing consciousness" or as a "source of pride, honour and a sense of belonging", as various public officials repeatedly informed me. These objects and images assume a useful

metonymic role in embodying visual media that act as cues, habituating the eye and enabling the emotional attachments and ethical qualities to which they are tethered to sink into people's experiences given the wide dissemination and ubiquity of these forms as part of their everyday lives and travels. The associations these material forms evoke are not simply abstract statements or principles to be "read" as codes that need to be verified and that one could simply tuck into the back of the mind in a dispassionate rational manner but are oriented towards invoking affective attachments and a sense of purpose that aims to cultivate a certain ethical disposition grounded in a modality of history as part of inhabiting the ordinary.

Ethical Dispositions and Aims

Progress in Oman does not deny the past so much as cultivate it in order to "harmonize" it with a present and future. The development horizons that forge an ethical impetus and moral direction is one that is undergirded by a sense of how the past itself may shape people's desires, hopes and habits in the pursuit of modernity. Promoted through state cultural policies, museums, schools, television broadcasting, publications etc., its impact registers itself not only in terms of a material transformation, but also in terms of a dramatic transformation of peoples' relationships and conduct with each other as a result of a real fear that rapid Westernization and consumerism would, as one professor at Sultan Qaboos University, Muscat, explained to me, produce cracks and fissures between generations as youth especially moved away from their roots and origin. This would result, he claimed, in a spiritual gap between the generations and unbalanced emotions due to a lack of "harmony" with those values that had once rooted Omani society and were now in danger of being left behind. Modernity in contemporary Oman becomes a matter not simply of material but moral aspiration, where heritage assumes the role of working upon the self, an endeavour that not only collects works on and displays material but also aspirations, habits and fears in a bid to forge the "harmonious" citizen.

Heritage becomes constitutive of a semiotically mediated construction of defining and fostering the citizen, its nature and its capacities. The everyday semiotic institutional practices and things that have developed to define the past provide the concrete ways through which to inhabit the norm of Omani citizenship. A central aspect of citizenship in Oman is the notion of "harmony" as the basis on which past, present and future exceed their contingent, particular configurations in order to provide a level plane for articulating a particular ethos. In opposition to a liberal framework, where agency is exerted against the confines of tradition or anything that is considered external to the individual, culture and history in this context are considered as enabling self-creation and autonomy. These categories and the practices they deploy form the necessary conditions for the formation of a self that not only embodies those virtues considered amenable to modernity and the nation, but constitute the bedrock on which individual autonomy can occur in a world that is viewed as more or less conditioned by unequal relations of power, a product of the post-imperial age that is all encompassing in the global political-economic field. The modern subject in Oman, in other words, is not the liberal individual who is shorn of its material and social entanglements and elevated to an abstract level beyond but one who is only able to exert any kind of autonomy and faculty to reason on his own terms through the internalization and introspection of a national past. This past, in its specificity, is defined in terms of the cultivation of a series of abstract principles and values that exceed the material confinement of historical contingency to forge tradition as an agent that guides the effort to

determine how the citizen – charged by a certain kind of past – will facilitate transition into the projected future. Habits and traditions (*'adāt wa taqālid*) thus move away from simple cognition towards becoming an integral form of living cultivated through inhabiting certain virtuous ideals and capacities that are viewed as having passed down through the generations as part of an organic development.

This continuity, however, assumes the form of the *spiritual*, a form amenable to a teleological timeline, in facilitating material changes towards progress; rather than the past in another guise that persists materially, therefore implying a step backwards, in becoming blind mimicry rather than a spring-board towards tangible creativity and innovation. Even those objects whose materiality is objectified to become indexical to a great past are translated into the spiritual realm, pointing to abstract values such as "social solidarity", "equality", or "respect for work", where they remain in a transcendent mode, moving between past, present and future. It is on this basis that they exert their productive force as constitutive of heritage and as mediators for forms of ethical conduct, moral action and their consequences. It is through this transcendental spiritual realm, that culture, civilization and religion become ideologically depoliticized, even though they may have very real political consequences in their material fabrication of the nation state.

This self-realization that heritage cultivates is a necessary condition for achieving autonomy, but the word *freedom* does not seem to register as part of this social collective. The virtues that are propagated are those that are remaking the social and political imagination and its potentialities through the work of museumification. This is undergirded by a past conceived as part of a collective normative process by which the individual transforms himself and his reality by submitting to purposive forms and practices to become the embodiment of the ideal citizen in action. It is only through the internalization of this abstract past in continuity that the individual, fragmented by modern life, will be able to attain a sense of self-consciousness and self-development as part of a collective national imaginary of the good. This conception of the past undergirds culture and religion as categorical ways of thinking and being; and is put to work towards creativity and innovation as part of the realization of progressive modernity in Oman, rather than a passive and imitative "backwardness".

The question then turns to something that is really quite simple: If this semiotically mediated and idealized past is the basis for a whole set of tools by which everyday life is assessed, calibrated and scrutinized, are Omanis living the way they ought to be? After all, the relationships to the everyday material objects now elevated to the category of "heritage" cannot be understood solely in terms of the techniques of social disciplines for the inculcation and administration of life – notably those of schooling. In order to get a sense of how practices of the past are deployed, one would need to carefully examine the complex ties and relationships between nationalist discourses and the forms of community and associational life within which they are set to work.

CHAPTER THREE

Material Mnemonics of Nizwa

> *"Without the basis and foundation of tradition and culture, a modern structure is vulnerable and its fragility is exposed. The strength of the present and future must be derived from the achievements of the past."*
>
> H.H Faisal bin Ali Al Said, Minister of National Heritage and Culture, interview with the journal, *Pride: In the Year of Omani Heritage*, 1994.

> *AMAL: But don't you hold daily majlises anymore?*
> *'ISA: Not any more. We are no longer the people of the* sabla.
>
> from my field notes, Nizwa, Oman 2010.

In a 1901 account published in the *Geographic Journal*, S.B. Miles, British political agent and consul in Muscat from 1872-1886, describes his entry into the city of Nizwa:

> As we passed the outlying watch-towers commanding the various approaches, the guards therein fired their matchlocks to give warning, which was soon responded to by the thunder of the guns of the great fort. The great fortress I was surprised to find, does not occupy an elevated position, but is situated in a thickly peopled quarter, and is hemmed in on all sides by dwelling houses. It may be described as consisting of a large quadrangular enclosure, called the Hisn, at one angle of which stands the Kilaa, or citadel a huge circular tower of solid stone masonry without window, loophole, or embrasure, but rising sheer, smooth and unbroken to the roof on which stand several parapet guns. Its unquestionably massive structure is manifest at once and its fame throughout Oman for its impregnability is intelligible enough.

Today, the guns and cannons are silent and no guards man the crenelated contours of the great fort. The Nizwa castle and gunnery tower still stands as an imposing 17th century edifice surmounted by an Omani flag flying from a high flag post. Restored in the late 1980s, its stone and earth works, adjacent to the congregational mosque and opposite the old souks, now tower over a straggly line of tourist craft shops, bookstores, cafes and a large car park primarily for visitors who come to meander through Nizwa's newly renovated and expanded souk areas. The residential quarter (*hara*) that flanks it, the *harat al-aqr*, the oldest and largest in Nizwa, is now increasingly characterized by crumbling watchtowers, abandoned mud brick homes with broken shutters and the tumble down walls of old houses, majlises and mosques (Fig. 3.0).

Figure 3.0 Crumbling ruins of houses and watch towers in the oldest residential quarter of the city, harat al aqr

Two old canons flank its large entryway leading in turn to a vaulted passage at the end of which is a raised platform bearing a large desk. The three custodians and guides, two of whose family members had once been guardsmen (‘*askariyeen*) at the fort during the Imamate period (1913-1957), could often be found sitting there, greeting visitors and handling ticket sales. A variety of handicraft items, such as palm fans, textile weavings, old swords and *khanajar* (daggers) decorate the walls. The fort, once a centre of military, political and administrative power, has like many other forts and castles in Oman been transformed into a museum.[66] As a repository of tradition, it is now the embodiment of a certain perceptual and sensorial experience of the past and its assimilation in film, a guided tour through the buildings and collections of objects in exhibit halls generating an archive of images around which collective memory coalesces and organizes awareness. My aim here is not to establish whether or not these accounts are accurate, but to understand the ways in which contemporary practices of public history are perpetuating even while reorganizing specific understandings of history, religion, culture and time. I want to explore how public historical practices and projects are socially felicitous today, not simply in their capacity to instil ideologies but in their potential to shape the perceptual habits, affects and sensibilities of its audience.

A side room on the raised dais in the fort’s entryway invites visitors to watch a film (in Arabic/English), in order to obtain their first sense of the importance of the Nizwa fort, considered the heart of the city. Through a series of images juxtaposing men’s dances with crowded souk areas, handicrafts, cattle auctions and historical mosque architecture and decoration, a film narrative places Nizwa and its fort in a context in which they become a metonym, standing in a contiguous relationship to a more comprehensive but absent whole, that of Oman itself. Objects and images assume the role of “historical witnesses” to a past that, despite a brief note on the date of the fort (the first half of the 17th century), is rather ambiguous

[66] According to official publications and my own travels in Oman, there are over 1,000 forts, castles and watchtowers in the country. Many are in ruins and some are in private hands. Of these, 23 have been renovated and restored by the Ministry of Heritage and Culture and then handed over to the Ministry of Tourism for museumification and the construction of visitor infrastructure. Nizwa’s importance as an old Imamate capital and the beauty of its fort, as well as its short distance from Muscat, ensures that it is regularly visited.

inasmuch as the images displayed and the buildings mentioned as part of Nizwa's traditional fabric are never assigned to a specified period in calendar time. Instead, the 17th century fort is transposed and linked to 7th century mosques and late 20th century souk areas and auction blocks, generating a sense of a past that is neither distant nor entirely separate but immanent to the present, moving in a continual stream. This sense of a stream of temporal continuity is significantly strengthened by the shifting back and forth between the past and present tense.

On the one hand, Nizwa's past is presented as inextricably linked to a national present that in turn takes up a position within a longer teleological history of "progress" and "civilization" when the Ya'riba Imamate (A.D. 1624-1744) of Oman became a significant naval power, freeing Oman from the Portuguese in 1650 and in turn establishing a powerful empire in East Africa through the control of the Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean trade routes. This history is attested to by the building of the Nizwa fort, its engineering and defensive system, the fortification of the city, its walled souk, cattle auction area and the decorative programme of its historic mosques. Except for the Nizwa fort, which was strengthened and expanded during the Ya'ariba period, many of the other buildings and visuals displayed belonged to different epochs and were part of varied socio-political contexts. Together, in their immediate association with each other, these images of architectural landmarks and material objects serve to signify an abstract "authenticity" and "tradition" that is acknowledged to be an integral part of Oman's modernity even while rendered distinct from it. As the film affirms in the end, "these are live testimonials (*shawāhid ḥayya*) to Nizwa as a centre of culture, spiritual enlightenment and learning that has produced and attracted many jurists (*fuqahā*), religious scholars (*'ulamā*), poets and men of literature since the very beginning of the Islamic era."[67] Without going into the details of the historical and cultural specificity of the fort's past, its structure becomes associated with a historical outline, drawn in broad strokes, of a monumental structural type that has played a pivotal role as a point of convergence for political, social and religious interaction and as a centre of learning and administration, generating a certain way of life as the focal point of community activity.

As the material character of Nizwa as a city-scape and its forms have entered into new institutional contexts of territorial nation building, teleological rationale and touristic enterprise, new purposes have been found for them, affording new forms of action centred on the presumption that these material forms are texts on which an account of the history of the nation has been inscribed. In other words, there is an assumption that there is history in these objects that is an inherent part of their substance. In this valuation, they have acquired features and significances that were unintended by previous users (Keane 2003, 2008). Popular mass media techniques and commoditisation has resulted in the circulation and repetition of these material forms across social contexts, where they usually serve as evidence for something immaterial such as "traditional" values, principles or concepts. In such a role, they act as the external materials for experience and reflection as well as the sources for pedagogical practices in the cultivation of a right-minded citizenry through weaving together a narrative about the past. Shorn

[67] On a significant note, Nizwa's immediate history (i.e. its 20th-century history as the administrative capital of the Ibadi Imamate (1913-1957)) that witnessed the accession of three imams who ruled over the interior or the Dhakhiliyah region as an autonomous entity separate from the Sultanate, is usually marginalized. This history is assimilated into official accounts through the observation that "before 1970, Nizwa – as was the case in the rest of Oman – was steeped in a life of ignorance, poverty and illness that prevailed over all parts of the country" (Literary Council in Nizwa 2001: 193).

of their immediate social contexts and concrete circumstances, these objects are distilled into an abstract and spiritual atemporal space that make interchangeable the past, present and future through liberating them from material causality and social entanglements. Following a teleological logic, the mainstay of modern historicity, these material forms, as anchors for emotional attachments and civic virtues, are conceived as the foundation for co-opting a distinctive past into a national march towards national "progress", "creativity" and "innovation" without the dangerous possibility of moving "backwards" and becoming increasingly irrelevant through repetition.

At the same time, one should bear in mind the concrete circumstances for their signification and the open possibilities of their vulnerability to social circumstances, contingency and causal consequences without reducing them to the status of ahistorical signage through considering their changing forms, practical capacities and qualities. This chapter focuses on the transformation of forms of history and sociability produced through a specific set of material forms and the concrete ways in which they have been framed and valued as part of an inhabited world over the course of the 20th and 21st centuries. These include the fort of Nizwa and its environs (including the old souks and its oldest residential quarter, the *harat al-aqr*), the *dalla* (coffee pot) and the *khanjar* (Omani dagger). This chapter thus explores how temporalities are expressed within a material tradition, the ways in which they are mediated and co-exist with each other, the range of skills they elicit and the type of selves they valorize. The valuation that people and institutions place on these material forms and structures obviously assumes that the past does matter. The question turns to how they experience and understand them, since their very continuity and the forms they assume could also become a potential source of moral or political trouble and anxiety for the future.

The Production of History through the Nizwa Fort Complex

Yusuf, my guide and one of the fort's custodians, took me around the fort on my first visit there, emphasizing the cunning of the defence mechanisms and architectural layout as "living witnesses" of the depth of Oman's civilization and manifest history. Its ingenious traps, "murder holes" that preceded each main doorway and narrow zigzagging passageways to throw the enemy off guard were all elaborated on as examples of the knowledge and innovation in the fields of architecture, craftsmanship and engineering.

Labelling was minimal, but some efforts had been made to demarcate the function of each room through the laying out of a variety of furnishings, none of which were part of the castle but had merely been brought to convey a generic understanding of "tradition". These included old matchlocks and swords mounted on the wall, palm mats, carpets and cushions on the floors of the reception rooms as well as the *barza*, or judgement hall. Shelved arched niches set into the wall of these rooms held a variety of metalwork, ceramics and old books. These indicated the residential, administrative and judicial quarters of the fort complex, since the imam (and in his absence the governor or *wali*) not only resided in the fort but also administered Oman from the

city's fortress, which had served as the capital intermittently from the 8th century onwards.[68] These material tropes were meant to serve as a means towards mediating the past and present, through evoking an imaginative engagement as part of developing a historic understanding. Seeing the imprints of past lives, despite the absence of an actual presence, the present was meant to collapse, thus enabling an affective engagement with the past. However, considering that the props used to evoke this past presence at the fort were also objects present throughout Nizwa, whether in the form of street montages or as part of the wares displayed in a plethora of handicraft and tourist shops outside the fort complex and beyond, it was difficult to imagine entering into another world altogether. Instead, the gaps marked by the absence of the living were filled with the presence of a past that is still a ubiquitous part of the present. Even the matchlocks mounted on the walls are still being sold in the souk complex, most of whose customers are Omanis.

As I walked with Yusuf, he explained that the Omani habits and traditions represented in the castle have been influenced by a number of environmental, political and cultural factors over the course of centuries, entrenching themselves in the mental attitudes of Omanis as reflected in their behaviour and ways of life today. By way of example, he pointed out a reconstruction of an Omani '*arish* or hut as a *sabla* or men's *majlis* in the outer courtyard of the castle (Fig. 3.1). A small platform open on all sides and covered with a light ceiling of palm fronds, it was elucidated as one of the fundamental social institution in Omani traditional daily life, and an exemplar of harmonious interaction and mutual cooperation between members of Omani society, reminiscent of a small school where different generations, grandfathers, fathers and sons can exchange information and knowledge on the values and principles of society, including hospitality, good morals, respect for elders, and other topics. The *sabla* may refer to a forum for debate or the place where regular meetings and daily discussions take place.

Figure 3.1 Inside the Nizwa fort. The palm constructed 'arish may be seen on the far side by the exhibit area, formerly the old prison

He pointed out the *barza*, the official council chambers where the imam or in his absence the governor (*wali*) would undertake the role of judicial arbiter of quarrels, addressing supplications

[68] Although Nizwa was the capital of the 20th century Imamate, this fact is not mentioned officially in any of the labels or wall panels that are present in the fort. Instead, Nizwa is mentioned as an Imamate capital from the mid-8th to 12th centuries only.

and complaints by ordinary people – an example of social cooperation (*at-ta'āwun al-ijtimā'ī*), consultation (*shura*) and close affinity between governors and governed, marked by their direct face-to-face interaction (*al-taqārub al-mubāshar fi al-'alāqa bayna al-hākam wa al-mahkum*), far from feelings of domination (*al-tasalluṭ*) and misunderstanding (*'adam al-fahm*). This, as Yusuf pointed out, was a political equalizer in nourishing relations of affection (*muḥabba*), amity (*wudd*), mutual respect and solidarity (*al-takātuf wa al-ihtirām al-mutabādal*).

Although Yusuf did not mention this, official publications and newspaper articles that I continued to peruse[69] throughout my stay, including the yearly updates on Oman published by the Ministry of Information (2009/2010), consider today's government councils, made up of governors, judges (*qūdāt*), sheikhs, leading personalities (*al-a'yān*) and experts as working along the same lines as the *barza* of old in embodying the core concept of *shura* (consultation) in their tasks of discussing debates and resolving key issues (al- 'Unsi 1991: 108-109). Similarly, the sultan's Yearly Rounds around the country, a topic that figures in all official publications, is also portrayed as an example of *shura* in its "simplicity, spontaneity, and directness". These tours are characterized as an "open parliament" where "annual meetings and discussions with ordinary citizens allow Sultan Qaboos to hear their views and observe their daily lives first hand – whether they live in the mountains, plains or the wadis" (Ministry of Information 2009: 56-57). This is perceived as part of the process of investing in (*tauẓīf*) and entrenching (*tarsikh*) authentic Omani habits and traditions even while Oman continues "along the path towards comprehensive growth" (al- 'Unsi 1991: 108-109). The authentic and the contemporary, modernity and tradition become embodied in core concepts and abstract values that are considered as crucial in reviving (*iḥyā'*) and adhering to key social virtues. In their "historical authenticity" (*al-asāla al-tarikhiya*), these virtues are conceived as the generative basis for inhabiting a history that performatively maintains an ongoing past, present and future as part of a continuing process to buffer change and adapt to difference even while facilitating innovation and creativity.

The former prison with its maze of cells has been transformed into a small exhibit area that moves along two temporal axes: 1) The time corridor is a teleological time space made up of a series of elongated colourful panels that follow a linear history of Oman beginning with Palaeolithic cave dwellers and their enterprise in making pottery, stone tools and rock art. Scattered settlements throughout the region are summarized as adaptations to a variety of terrain from desert to mountains and coastal plains that are inscribed by spiritual and rational activities, ranging from the construction of the *aflaj* canal system for agriculture and mining activities for copper to the gradual flourishing of sea trade networks that led in turn to the development of city, state and empire. These socio-economic activities are assimilated into the story of ecological adaptation to the land, specifically Oman, its topographical features, its potentialities and constraints. 2) Exhibits of 'traditional' ways of life and their products that involve the harnessing of natural resources through labour and daily practices of livelihood, such as indigo dyeing,

[69] These include a newspaper article in the Arab daily paper, *Oman* (23rd July 2010) entitled, "The Story of Democracy …. in Oman". In this article, written by a press advisor to His Majesty, the sultan's councils with his ministers and advisors, the Yearly Rounds of the sultan to different parts of the country are equated with the imamic institution of the *barza* through conceiving them as the concrete manifestations through the ages of the abstract notion of *shura*, a "basic principle" (*al-mabda al-asāsi*) that springs from the core (*samīm*) of Omani reality in accordance with prevailing values and traditions."

copper and silverwork, weaponry, locks and keys, date cultivation and palm basketry. These craft activities, inasmuch as they represent 'tradition', are also elucidated in wall panels and textual materials written in the present tense. Large scale backlit colour photographs that act as backdrops to craft objects such as basketwork or silver jewellery are ambiguous in that there is no way of specifying when they were taken. This very vagueness, however, bridges the spatial and temporal distance between yesteryear and today. The glass cases based on each craft activity include the tools related to the craft techniques as well as its products. There is no mention of changes or transformation due to different circumstances. Silverwork, for example, is described as,

> … capturing the spirit of Nizwa's artisanship. It can be forged, drawn, cast and wrought extensively. As the metal of the Prophet, silver also carries the connotation of purity, and is often engraved with verses from the Holy Quran.
>
> Nizwa silverwork finds its ultimate expression in articles for personal adornment. For Omani men such articles are typically coupled with a practical purpose and include silver embellished weaponry…. Women on the other hand adorn themselves from head to toe with a fabulous array including headdresses, hair and ear ornaments, nose rings, necklaces…. Silver jewellery is traditionally given to a woman by her husband's family as part of her wedding dowry, which represents her personal wealth and security.

Silverwork in this exhibit is considered to be not only an integral part of Nizwa's character as a city but a clear outward manifestation of Islamic practice. However, visits with a number of women over the course of my field stay in Nizwa as well as shop owners of antique silver jewellery revealed a more complex set of factors at work. From 1970 onwards, with the influx of revenues from oil export, government bureaucratization, the introduction of modern infrastructure as well as foreign investment, employment rocketed, with a resulting rise in income. As a result, gold, which was formerly considered too expensive, became increasingly prized over silver for dowries, to the point that gold is now the norm for personal adornment and for the *mahr* (dowry). Today, Nizwa's city centre is dotted with gold jewellery shops manned by Indian and Pakistani shopkeepers who are part of a wide-ranging international retail network for the import of gold and silver jewellery. Old silverwork, now relegated to the category 'traditional' in disparaging contrast to 'modern', is considered too heavy and antiquated by many Omanis to be worn today. Many women have ended up selling old family pieces since the style is no longer considered practical for the exigencies of modern life. As heritage, these objects are bought and sold – as part of new regimes of value buttressed by the global market and the type of consumers they generate – as either touristic souvenirs or potential long-term monetary investments.

In embodying heritage, these objects become artefacts, subject to visuality and the "invasive quality of the disembodied gaze" (Hallam and Street 2000: 8). But the very terms that convert them to a truth to the naked eye also prove conducive toward transforming them into the abstract values presumed by commodity production. Abstracted from their socially binding relationships, kinship obligations and customary ties, these objects now stand apart, their relationships determined by state institutional settings and emerging socio-economic communities of practice. The relationship now assumes one of signification wherein the object indexes a relationship with the past, transmitting high ideals and virtues such as social affinity, mutual respect and tradition against the backdrop of Omani nation building. As material witnesses to something very 'real',

they carve out a landscape, draw out a historical vision and produce a political geographical unit. But in their abstraction, these objects also facilitate circulation in mass mediated commodified forms. Even as these objects embody social virtues that are considered integral to the nation and therefore as something beyond price, they have also taken up a powerful niche in the marketplace as part of an expanded tourism and handicraft sector – the focus of careful government regulation and some private investment, that emerged in the mid- to late 1990s. In addition to their museumification, these objects may be seen throughout the castle, the Heritage Gallery Boutique or the fort gift shop as well as open workshops by the exhibits area, where copper and silversmiths may be seen working with traditional hand techniques making many of the objects on sale. This paradox frames the display and dissemination of Omani heritage and culture but also limits the extent to which they can be treated as mere commodities.

In a recent article, Andrew Shryock (2004) relates 'traditional' coffee paraphernalia to the creation of a national public space in Jordan. The mass mediated form of the coffee pot and its miniaturization into the widely disseminated symbol of *karam* (hospitality and generosity) becomes part of a national past that is "strategically removed" (Shryock 2004: 42) from the present, effectively throwing into sharp relief the sense of a divide between more 'authentic' Maussian displays of *karam* at home, as part of the domestic sphere, and those linked with commercialism or tourism and therefore condemned as more superficial and spurious manifestations. In Oman, even as these objects become transformed into heritage and commodified into handicrafts, their very objectness forges the basis for imagining an enduring past that is not so much removed from as co-existing with a future as part of a multi-temporal present, outside of the limits of an encroaching universal modernization and its accompanying values. Despite becoming moribund as use value due to drastic changes in material modernization, these objects re-order social life by assuming an indexical function in objectifying a tangible connection with a past that is being reconfigured into a new moral landscape.

Even as government offices, public areas, shopping districts, and restaurants – not to mention the mass media – are filled with images, motifs and miniatures of craft production as part of a public culture throughout Oman, these officially embody authenticity in that they are perceived as the products of the creative process. Seeing handicrafts as part of the process of using materials and techniques that have developed as part of adaptations to the land itself, the final products are conceived in a rather Heideggerrian fashion as the results of Oman's particular ecological conditions and adaptive requirements within which artistic production has achieved its unique character. The uniqueness and creativity exemplified by these works, its preservation in museum exhibits and its regeneration through the fostering of a new generation of craftsmen means rejuvenating these values and cultivating them in the consciousness of the community as a continuity and immediacy of the past in the present.

It is on this foundation of materiality that new substantives either enter the currency of public discourse in Oman or becoming linked to older ones. These include history, tradition, creativity progress, culture and modernity itself. As vehicles of high ideals to live by and doctrines to recommend and inhabit, a plethora of handicrafts, as well as miniatures of the fort, as a generic fortified and crenellated architectural type, are reproduced and widely disseminated, in a vast assortment of commodified forms, as images in the mass media as well as textual and visual

representations in pedagogical materials, including school textbooks (as mentioned in chapter 2). As Susan Stewart (1993: 48) elucidates, these miniatures capture a world that offers a sense of containment the instant that they are frozen. Their very objectness conveys a world that is both specific and general: they are specific in that they capture and eternalize a certain instant, but they do so in accordance with a certain set of general assumptions as to the nature and form of the past within which the object will assume a place as content.

The fort as well as its environs (including the souk complex) – as a site of visitation and museumification – becomes metonymic of a wider set of social relations to the past outside its boundaries. The Omani, brought up to experience him/herself as the subject of history through mass media images, museum and architectural re-constructions as well as a wide array of pedagogical material, relates 'traditional' objects to a history characterized by a set of abstract and high minded ideals and principles. The Omani public - whether in the form of a school excursion or a weekend outing - experience of the fort is a mediated and re-constructed one, but an experience nonetheless of how Omani nation building relates to, processes and consumes history. Through an immersion with a particular depoliticized formulation of history as representation, the Nizwa fort and its integral relationship with an extremely problematic 20th century Ibadi Imamate is mainstreamed into a specific political realm that presupposes a teleological narration of territoriality and history, perpetual, self-contained and uncontaminated, with its own complex arrangements of moral practice and political authority as part of the practices of nation building. The fort, through partaking in this series of institutional networks, not only indexes a causal link to a certain conception of the past but derives its full power from the sedimentation process that transforms it into an icon, where its form is immediately associated with Oman's national character. The histories it embodies, as a type, give substance to the qualities that characterize the socio-political abstraction that is the Sultanate of Oman. The very stadium that was the theatre for the 40th anniversary National Day celebrations was lavishly decorated with a reconstruction of the fort as an iconic type.

The thrust of transforming the fort into a museum involves the work of "purification" (Latour 1991), of effecting separations between material forms and the concrete ties and relationships that bind them to the world, effectively transforming them into texts to be read as abstract concepts, ideas and ideals, thereby de-materializing the type of work they do in the world. This process of 'liberation' opens up a space for the material of old to be reconfigured, serving as an obligatory passage for regarding Oman as a distinctive national entity. As part of a secular history grounded in the land, God is eliminated from the public sphere and modern virtues are fostered as part of a normalizing moral force directed towards good citizenship for an entire population. History as a political technology creates the cognitive conditions and perceptual practices for an emerging ethno-political world. But in the process of transforming materiality into signs, religion – or rather Ibadi Islam –is itself transfigured, institutionally and epistemologically, in the fields of history, ethics and aesthetics in order to render it amenable to modern governance.

In the end, the efforts to create a living tangible past in the fort may not recreate a setting that represents an "authentic" way of life, and perhaps it could be argued that the very fact that the fort has been transformed into a generic and essentialist still life portrayal might reduce its capacity for inducing affect. But what the museumification the fort has done is that of engaging

the Omani public emotionally and mnemonically in producing what Walter Benjamin termed a dialectical image (1968: 255-66), in which a new perception of the past emerges in the clash between received ideas about the past and the sense of radical difference from the present moment. The history the fort produces is not one recognized by many in Nizwa's present. Insofar as the fort and the exhibits within it, as part of a highly visible heritage industry, generate a conception of the past, it has also played a role in the creation of indeterminacies that are not reducible to the temporal normatively authorized by the modern state and the types of skills and selves it valorizes. This is the moment when, according to Benjamin, critique is possible.

The Imamate at Work in Living Memory

A more explicit understanding of Ibadi Islam in concordance with the fort's overall historical representation may be found in a small chamber that forms part of the exhibit hall. A series of colourful panels divide the topic into two sets of themes: Islam and Ibadism and Omani imams. Oman's voluntary early embrace of Islam before the death of the Prophet is emphasized in the first set of panels as reflecting the age old affinities that Omanis as a nation had with the message of the Prophet. Ibadism, still the official religious s of Oman, is defined as one of the oldest of the Islamic sects, which was founded on "the true principles of Islam" through embracing the principles of an elected leadership. This rather dangerous note, especially given the present dynastic rule, is mitigated in several ways. A list of imams figures on the panels, in chronological order, and this does mention the last three imams who ruled the interior in the 20th century. However, no socio-political or historically specific details are given. Instead, the list is structured within a general framework of a history that encapsulates almost 1,300 years and characterizes the imam as a proto-typical figure who, "As the name implies, was always a spiritual leader, bound to lead the people in the Friday prayers, and the final judge of appeal on all religious matters. To the extent that he could impose his will he also administered the secular government and imposed taxation." Referring to the imamate as a "past" institution also establishes a definite distance from the present, rendering it distinctive by creating a clearly divided temporal plane. Simultaneously, the imam himself becomes part of an understanding of religion that is more indebted to a normative liberal secular set of principles where religious sensibilities are understood as part of a clear cut dichotomy allocated as public vs. private, materiality vs. spirituality, religion vs. state, naturalizing the modern state's current understanding of the place of religion as being confined to its own sphere of interior belief, defined by the law even as it generates a set of modern ethics concomitant with state religiosity the "embodiment of memory in certain sites (or objects) where a sense of historical continuity persists" (7).

While making inquiries as to the presence of any old records or local works of the Nizwa fort at the small library attached to the *jāmi'*, or congregational mosque adjacent to it, I made the acquaintance of a school teacher and religious scholar, Abdul Rahman, a quiet but friendly middle-aged (late 30s early 40s) man with a neatly and civic virtue.[70] What is clear about

[70] For a study on the relationship between the propagation of a 'neutral' Islam as part of state religiosity in the Sultanate of Oman and its cultivation of personal comportment and individual morality as civic virtues and good citizenship, please see Mandana Limbert's analysis of school textbooks (2007) and Eickelman's work on the impact of mass education and nationalism on the conception of Ibadi Islam (1989).

religion during the imamate period, however, is that it was an integral part of the state, and it is therefore strange to claim that the imam was a spiritual leader who may or may not have had an influence on politics or law or taxation. The label does seem to intimate that, by influencing politics or taxation, the imam would have been considered as quitting his "natural" sphere and interfering beyond his domain. Religion during the imamate period, which only ended officially in 1958, would however have been part of a fundamentally different grammatical understanding, one which made it the necessary basis for the everyday sociality and functioning of the Imamate as a polity. It was constitutive of the imamate itself in enabling and regulating the possibilities of its existence. This differential basis by which religion was conceived and existed as part of the imamate is something that I could only grapple with through peoples' memories of life in the fort and a gradual understanding of the very different kind of role that history played as part of it.

Shaped by the narratives and *lieux de mėmoire* brought to bear by the perceptual regimes of heritage and the national virtues it has generated, these memories are a symptom of and a response to a rupture, a lack or an absence. The specificities of the thing that is absent and how it has come to be experienced as no longer present and no longer being "on hand" are part of what characterizes and distinguishes individual and collective memories, as are the components that are emphasized and honed in on (Zemon Davis and Starn 1989: 3). Pierre Nora points out this active nature of the construction of memory when articulating the notion of "acts of memory" (Nora 1989: 19), which fixate on turning points when there is a "consciousness of a break with the past" in a manner that problematizes trimmed beard – in accordance with Prophetic tradition, as I was repeatedly told later - who I later found out was a scion of one of the most prominent families in Nizwa. As a city renowned for scholarship, the fame and leading qualities of many of these families was premised on their having acquired a character of Islamic learning over generations, not to mention figuring a large number of scholars and judges among their numbers over time, especially during the last Imamate, a standing they have maintained until the present day. In the post-1970 era, their social position and prominent place in Nizwa society has not been forgotten and many are now subsumed into government as high ranking bureaucrats and advisors at the Ministries of Higher Education, Ministry of Awqaf, local universities and colleges such as the University of Nizwa or the College of Applied Sciences, as well as the more middling bureaucratic ranks. In fact, an *alam* in Oman today needs to have been educated in one of the state sponsored religious institutes, if not abroad, and eventually becomes co-opted into a government position. It is difficult to think of them as little more than government bureaucrats. As one old *qadi* from Nizwa's office of legal affairs said, Oman is now "institutionalized" (*(ta'sīsiya*). However the senior members of these families are also treated with great reverence and respect, often used as informal mediators for local disputes, and a number of them have been popularly elected into the *Majlis ash-Shura* (Consultative Council) of the State for the Nizwa region. At the same time, it was Abdul Rahman who first made me realize the fundamental role that the *ulama* once played in presiding over Nizwa's everyday life in the early 20th century.

On hearing about my first explorations of the fort's historical circumstances in the early 20th century, Abdul Rahman invited me to join him with an acquaintance at a table amongst the library stacks, where they had been taking notes on their own project. I had barely mentioned my inquiries on the Nizwa fort when Abdullah began discussing the role of the *ulama* and their role in establishing their efforts in learning and scholarship, setting up schools and ordering the copying of major works in order to disseminate them among the learned and the inquiring. He

emphasized that this role was not limited to education, but was a socio-political one as well, in that they were constituent of the *ahl al hal wal aqd*, those who are amongst the most influential, in terms of knowledge *(‘ilm*), creation of justice (*a’-ta□dil*) and power, in decision making in the imamate and were part of the council for the selection of the candidate of imam and the implementation of that decision in the ceremony or ‘*’aqd*, or contract. They were his counsellors and ministers. Society, he noted, looked to the *ulama* as *qudwa ‘amma*, the general exemplars to follow. Stating this, he quoted a verse from the Quran – (58:11), “Rise up to (suitable) ranks (and degrees), those of you who believe and who have been granted knowledge” – as a way of reaffirming his point. When I inquired about the idea of being an exemplar, he retorted that “the *ulama* were fundamental source of learning and knowledge in the Imamate (*maṣdar min maṣādar al-‘ilm wal ma’rifa*). They emulated (*iqtadu*) the worthy/righteous predecessor (*salaf al-ṣalih*) in acquiring learning, teaching others and maintaining an ethical standard of behaviour (*ta□addub*).

Visits and conversations with other peoples ranging from shopkeepers to the fort custodians and members of other leading families would often engender talk of the *halqāt al-‘ilm* (study circles) that were the fundamental basis by which learning was spread during the imamate in most cities and villages, taking place primarily in neighbourhood mosques or in the *katātīb* – schools for both boys and girls, usually from five or six years of age, for memorizing the Quran as well as learning rudimentary grammar, reading and writing – that adjoined them, or even under the shade of a large tree. A number of scholars (Messick 1993; Starrett 1998; Eickelman 1985) have studied the widespread role of memorization and recitation as key embodied forms of learning, especially of the Quran which characterized the acquisition of an aural form of knowledge in many Muslim societies prior to modern nation state building. These became the fundamental generative basis for the formulation and sedimentation of an ethical form of being oriented towards developing virtues (in relation to oneself as well as others) as part of attaining salvation in a Quranic worldview. Similarly, Colonel Miles (1901: 467) mentions visiting schools in the environs of Nizwa where,

> Children imbibe instructions in the usual Muslim style, repeating aloud sentences of the Quran or rules of grammar read out loud by the Mullah. They attend in the morning and may be seen at an early hour hurrying to school, boys and girls together, some with a mirfa or wooden Koran stand on their heads, some with a painted board or camel shoulder blade, on which they learn to write, under their arm. The instruction given is of a very elementary character – reading, writing, Arabic grammar, the Koran, and a little arithmetic being the only subjects. But the boys of the learned and wealthy are often educated at home by a molar and advanced further.

As I was repeatedly informed, this was the first step towards learning, which involved memorization and recitation of the Quran, writing, praying correctly while being mindful of maintaining ritual purity and being told the stories of the Prophet as well as subsequent pious and virtuous predecessors (*al-salaf al-ṣalih*). After this stage, when children were approximately twelve or thirteen years of age, those who had the resources and were not required to work to help support their families – an admittedly small group – would go on to the larger neighbourhood and congregational mosques to continue their studies of Arabic language,

grammar, rhetoric, and *fiqh*.[71] The *jāmi'* or the main congregational mosque of Nizwa as well as Nizwa's fort was the locus of higher learning, characterized by a number of *halqat al ilm* , each dedicated to a particular field of knowledge, in Ibadi jurisprudence and its foundational texts or Arabic grammar. It was here that students trained to become jurists, scholars, judges and teachers. Others of lesser calibre would end up as scribes of the obligations and rights of land deeds, marriage contracts or finals wills, as imams and teachers of local mosques, administrators of Awqaf (endowments) or collectors of *zakat* and other types of taxes as well as taking up a variety of positions that required a modicum of knowledge and training for the managing of day-to-day life. Depending on their capabilities and talents, students would also move on to smaller circles of learning each time moving to higher levels of difficulties, depth and detail with more renowned specialists of each field. This could be in Nizwa or the students may have had to travel to other cities in the region in order to seek out a famous scholar or the author of a particular work.

The best students however finally reached the fort and circles of the imam, for he was also a *mu'alam* (teacher). While staying at the fort, they were trained under his tutelage to become *ulama*, judges and governors of the Imamate. The *ghurfat al-ṣalat* (prayer room), which had been allocated and fixed to such a role on the tour of the fort, had, according to some of the older men, once been a multi-purpose room where the imam would often teach through readings and discussions of *fiqh*, doctrine, interpretation (*tafsīr*) and biographical accounts of the Prophet and his companions (*sirat al-nabawi wa al-ṣahaba*) to students of higher learning as well as senior *ulama* and *qadi*s, especially in the evenings between *salat al-'asr* (late afternoon) and *salat al-maghreb* (early evening) or from *al-maghreb* (early evening) to *al-'ashā* prayer (into the night), creating in effect a daily *majlis al-'ilm* (learning). In such a role, the fort was considered an adjunct to the main *jami'* or congregational mosque adjacent to it. The *barza*, as I was repeatedly told by many throughout my stay in Nizwa, was also an open court of judgement and the forum where governors and governed came into direct contact for the dispensation of justice and the hearing of complaints in the mornings until *salat al-ḍuhr* (afternoon) and from *salat al-'asr* (late afternoon) to *salat al-maghreb (early evening/dusk*). One old scholar, the retired keeper of the archives for the Ministry of the Interior, whose father had been a *qadi* and advisor to the sultan, was one among a number who reminisced about the speed with which disputes and complaints were resolved on a daily basis back then:

> Life was simple. The *qadi*'s court at the fort would go over between twelve to twenty issues in a very short period of time (*al-fatra al*-wajīza) since the presentation of supplications was fluid (*salis*) and condensed (*mukhtasar*). The supplicant would present his request in two minutes or three; the defendant would take perhaps three minutes or so. Mediation would take no more than ten to fifteen minutes only. This is very different from today's bureaucracy and red tape.

[71] I was also told that after *salat al-fajr* (morning prayer) most men would sit and read the Quran in their local mosque. This was primarily because, since making copies of the Quran was prohibitively expensive (before mass printing and production), many had to learn it by heart, whether they had gone to a Quranic school or not, in order to refresh their memories or as a means of internalizing the precepts of religion. Memorization of the Quran as part of a social group was another element of contrast for people to conceive the difference between the past and the present day, with its mass printings of the Quran and its availability through computer technology. It was also another basis by which a certain sociality was forged, as the Quran was read out loud to be explained or absorbed by others for an hour before they went out to the fields or the *sabla.*

As the centre for the administration of justice, the fort as mentioned previously was also the locale for the prison and the headquarters of the official guardsmen of the region (usually about 30 or 40).[72] The imam (and in his absence the *wali*) and his *qadi*s would deal with complaints and supplications in the *barza*, not only discussing judicial cases but imparting lessons to students of *fiqh* (jurisprudence) during periods of respite from arbitration or judgements. It thus also became a forum for the reading and discussion of legal and historical works, as well as a forum for testing the student's abilities and judgement as part of the process of advancement to a position of authority.

Dr Sheikh Ibrahim al-Kindi is a renowned *alam* and scholar especially of grammar and language in Nizwa, having achieved a degree of renown thanks to his national television broadcasts. His tribe, the al-Kindi, is virtually synonymous with learning, generating a well-known but tongue in cheek saying around Nizwa that observes, "If I asked an *alam*, who you are? He would say I am al-Kindi." Born around 1945, he grew up during the transition period, when the last Imamate finally collapsed in 1957, as a result of their opposition to the prospect of oil exploration teams surveying the interior under the authorization of the Sultan of Muscat. British military armed force and firepower from the air led to a series of battles, where the fort of Nizwa also came under attack, culminating finally in the exile of the last Imam Ghalib in 1959 to Saudi Arabia and the unification of Oman (the interior) and the Muscat region into a single state. Through the course of the 1960s, the fort continued to be the headquarters of the *wali* and his *'askarīn* (guards) and the *qadi* of the region as representatives of the sultan in *sharī'a* administration. In the process of forming a modern state, these powers were reconfigured and reallocated into the hands of the police who now maintained law and order and a transformed judiciary – following the precedents set by the modern Egyptian legal system – under the auspices of a secularized Ministry of Justice and its court systems. But I was told by people of the area that, throughout the 1970s, for one day every month there would be a *barza* presided over by the *wali* of Nizwa even after the office was transferred to a new government building on the outskirts of the city in 1974, as a commemoration of what the fort had once been.

Now almost sixty-five years old, Dr Ibrahim accepted my request to meet with him after *Salat al-'Asr* (late afternoon). In recounting his memories of the old days in Nizwa before 1970, Dr Ibrahim also sketched out his life story. His father was a teacher of the Quran, an ascetic and a man of religion. His grandfather on his mother's side had once been a great *qadi* and she herself has learnt the Quran by heart, as had the entire family.[73] His father died when he was seven years of age and he became blind at two and a half. He was brought up by his brother, who was a senior *qadi* from the early 1950s onwards. His schooling, fairly conventional, followed along the lines mentioned above and he spent the days of his youth in the *jāmi'* studying, through the

[72] I was told by one of the advisors of the Ministry of Higher Education, whose family was also renowned for its association with religious learning and jurisprudence over the ages – among other factors – that the fort during the time of Imam al-Khalili also received the sick for treatment. It was also a refuge for the needy, since the Imam regularly distributed *sadqa*, from the Bait al-Mal (public treasury) for which a number of taxes, including the *zakat* tax, was collected.

[73] Another member of the al-Kindi family had actually proudly informed me that even before 1970, the family – well known for their learning and scholarship – had a 100% literacy rate among men, and some women could also read and write. All women, I was informed, knew the Quran, even though some were more or less illiterate.

process of "reading" or rather reciting books and acquiring an understanding through explanations and discussions with his teachers even while memorizing the basic sections (*mutūn*) of doctrine (*'aqīda*), *fiqh* compendiums, their commentaries and their lines of 'credible witnesses' (*shawāhid*), as well as Prophetic *hadith* from Ibadi traditional sources such as those of Imam al-Rabi' in addition to Bukhari and Muslim. In order to facilitate memorization, many of the basic texts of these authoritative and popular instruction volumes were set to rhyme and poetry. Versification was considered an important mnemonic technique conducive to memorizing. As Messick notes (1993), this emphasis on memorization and recitation was part of a larger civilization type of literacy where even authoritative s*harī'a* manuals were recalled from memory when referenced or debated on, leading to the assumption that *sharī'a* was not so much textualized as a written form as much as embodied in the lives of scholars, 'living texts' to be transmitted and interpreted (43). This, as he emphatically informed me, was a time of *fiqh* development.

But ten years before the *nahda*, and the coming of Sultan Qaboos in 1970, in the aftermath of the Jabal al-Akhdar war in the late 1950s and '60s, most of the senior *ulama* and judges, especially those specializing in *fiqh*, were imprisoned for more than a decade in the Jalali fort in Muscat. When I inquired about the reason, he replied simply that Sultan Said bin Taimur, the father of the present sultan and his predecessor, probably realized that the *ulama* would be heavily critical of most of his policies, given his dependency on the British and his subsequent isolationist stance towards the rest of the world. This purge prevented the doctor from continuing with his education in Nizwa or in broader Oman, and while he studied as much he could and became a teacher in the Sharqiyah region of Oman in his late teens, he had to travel to Saudi Arabia to continue his education as a religious scholar. There, since he had not been part of a modern mass educational system, he had to enrol in high school and ended up studying at the Mecca Institute of Islamic Studies in Jeddah in order to get the requisite diploma to go to a college of *sharī'a* law.

Later, towards the end of my fieldwork, I discovered that one of the most venerated members of the Kindi family, the brother, Sheikh Saud, that Dr Ibrahim had mentioned, who was a senior *qadi* during the reign of the Imam Muhammad bin Abd Allah al-Khalili (r. 1920-1954), was in fact still alive. He is (or was) now more than 103 years old. Once the *qadi* of Bahla, Izki, Ibri and Nizwa, as well a close advisor to Imam al-Khalili on problematic judicial questions, he had been one of the *ulama* who had been imprisoned for eleven years after the overthrow of the Imamate by the sultan. Released in 1968, he was offered the post of *qadi* again under Sultan Qaboos in 1970. Traumatized and ill, he refused to return to the judiciary, but pressures to support his family, his households and wives forced him to return as a judge once more in the 1970s. While meeting with other members of the Kindi tribe, including a *qadi* of *sharī'a* law (now reconfigured into personal status law as part of the new judicial system), I was offered the chance to finally meet with Sheikh Saud and ask him about the ways in which judicial matters were arbitrated through the intercession of one his sons, who would translate his soft whisperings and weak tones. Unfortunately, he was too sickly for such a conversation, and I was thus only able to look at him while he slept. At first, this seemed rather awkward, especially as it struck me as rather reminiscent of the "ethnographic gaze" whereby the old *qadi* became an object of a clinical inquiry, perceived through the lens of the inquiring mind. This may well have been the case; however, in recalling the way in which his two grand-nephews were gazing affectionately

at his tiny, wizened body lying in a corner on a palm reed mat while speaking in low monotones to me about how he still loved to be read to whenever there was a scholarly book on hand, even while they and their uncles were partaking of the afternoon social ritual of *taqahwa* (literally 'to do coffee'), coffee and dates, I realized that not only was he the object of much affection for them but that he was also the embodiment of a world that had disappeared.

This was a world centred on the fort, where its military capabilities and defensive fortifications delineated, enabled and authorized the nexus of administrative, judicial and scholastic roles that constitutively defined the Ibadi Imamate as *al-wizara* (administration), *al-minbar* (the mosque and its functions) and *al-ta'dil* (the creation of justice).[74] The past that was the generative engine of all three features was not the same as the linear history the nation building laid claim to; it was a history whose form was based on a different set of temporal registers and premised on the idea of the exemplar. Founded on a Quranic worldview of "commanding the right and forbidding the wrong" (*amr bil-ma'ruf wa nahy 'an al-munkar*), a phrase often on people's lips as well as in Ibadi scholarship, it emerges from the collection of *hadith* (words and deeds of the Prophet) that stands as one of the two fundamental sources of Islam and *sharī'a* and is oriented towards following the life of the righteous as part of a theological world view centred around God. These two sources however were also entrenched within a certain conception of the past that was foundational to subsequent political and theological debates among the faithful. This conception of history focused on certain key issues, namely: Who had the authority to guide the *umma* after the Prophet's death, and on what basis? These questions were predicated on distinctive forms of ethic-political being and doing.

In the introduction to his historical work, *tuhfat al-ayan*, the famous late 19th and early 20th century *alam* or scholar Sheikh Nur al Din al-Salmi, remarking on the paucity of noteworthy historical works among the Ibadis, stated that,

> History is a form of knowledge for emulating the lives of the virtuous (*iqtidā al-ṣālihīn*) and guiding one towards the path of greater righteousness (*ṭarīqat mutqīn*). Since history consists of the recollection of all that passed among good and evil peoples, **hearing** about the judicious and wise (*'āqil*) as part of knowledge on the righteous which manifests itself into a longing to follow their trace/impressed presence (*iqtidā athār*). Hearing information concerning the deeds of evil doers, however, resolves into an apprehension and an eager anxiety to follow those who have been virtuous and to shun (*tajanab*) the circumstances that have led to evil. One is therefore always on a path of striving or struggle (*jihad*).

When asked about the relationship between history and the practices of Ibadi jurisprudence, an old *qadi* who now acted as an official mediator of local disputes and a legal consultant in the office of the *wali* replied that history itself is part of the development of *fiqh* (jurisprudence) in the first place, since it is part of a process to document what previous imams undertook in prior ages. Subsequent *ulama* would have been interested in the rationales and policies implemented by the Imamate in former times and how they adapted to the needs of the *sharī'a*. The *sharī'a* itself included some lofty goals (*ahdāf al-samīya*), which meant undertaking a form of governance (*iqāmat al-hukm*) that was based on *sharī'a* itself. This is why the imam, when

[74] The characterization of the Ibadi Imamate on the basis of these three features has been taken from Ibn Baraka al-Bahlawi, a 10th/early 11th century Ibadi scholar cited by Wilkinson (1987: 177).

elected, was selected on the basis of possessing certain qualifications, since his duty was to administer justice that was determined on the basis of consensus (*ijma'*) in order to conform (*taṭ bīq*) to *sharī'a*. Based on this understanding, *sharī'a* for this *qadi* becomes both a divine source of law and administration as well as an aspiration to follow, in living in accordance with God's will as manifested in the Quran and the *sunna* of the Prophet and as interpreted by the Ibadi *ulama*. Their exemplary words, actions and decisions forged an impressed presence of their lives (*athār*) that in turn formulated one of the main bases for generating new understandings of how to develop *fiqh* (jurisprudence) as part of an interpretive elaboration of the basic sources.

The *sirat al nabawi* (biography of the Prophet), accounts of his companions (*sahaba*) and important aspects of the lives and actions (*athar/tracks*) of the Ibadi imams were an integral and necessary part of *fiqh* (jurisprudence) compendiums. Pivotal multi-volume legal references such as the *Bayān al-Sharh* (11th century), the *Musannaf* (12th century) and the *Qamus al-Sharī'a* (18th century) – that were often mentioned by people from all walks of life in Nizwa as relevant references to life during the Imamate – were core sources for the 20th century Imamate and its *qadis* (Wilkinson 1987: 355). They included such accounts in order to explain the rationale for certain concepts, rulings, and ideas that defined Ibadi legal scholarship and sanctioned its ethic-political rubric.[75] These were texts that, although introduced in only a simplified form and story-like narrative in the *katātīb* for children, became the object of more advanced study as part of exegetical literature (*tafsir*) in the higher realms of learning. In short, these accounts accompanied the student throughout all stages of education and beyond. The constant process of recitation and, at times, memorization of past exemplary accounts was one key means of internalizing these narratives and events slowly and ruminatively. These techniques became part of the process of domestication and incorporation in working on one's very body and soul (Carruthers 1990: 210). Meditating on past acts of piety of the virtuous and the good as well as those of sin through these oral and aural techniques became crucial in embodying and cultivating a habitual familiarity that sedimented the practical and perceptual conditions of knowledge formation and an ethical form of being (Hirschkind 2006). In the case of training Ibadi *ulama* through intensive study and discussion, these forms of disciplinary practice honed ethic-political and legal forms of discrimination that in turn structured the very perceptual basis within which specific legal and academic issues could be debated and resolved.[76] The past as a source of law as well as an object of contemplation conditioned the very basis by which the moral status of any act could be assessed and measured, as one that could either lead to the path of salvation or impede it. This created a legal classification of obligations and rights that defined and informed social relationships, rather than merely remaining in the abstract.

For Muslim sects, including the Ibadis, the Quran, the *sunna* of the Prophet and his model behaviour as well as the idea of a "golden age" defined by the first generation of Muslims was conceptualized in political as well as ethical terms. This authoritative past provided the basis for encounters, reformulations, contestations and, as detailed in chapter 1, revolution among the

[75] These legal texts however were also embedded within the fabric of power struggles of different schools of thought. At different times and places in Oman, certain legal encyclopaedias and reference works would have been more important than others as the result of wider socio-political networks and relationships.

[76] Charles Hirshckind (2006) carries out a parallel study on the impact of the audio cassette sermon in urban Cairo as part of the Piety Movement and its effect of disciplining the ears through cultivating a sense of moral form in the listener as part of shaping the ethical self.

Ibadis. The conflict with the sultan/British that undergirded the 20th century Ibadi Imamate was addressed through an ongoing dialogical and dialectical interaction with this early history in order to address grievances, overthrow the rule of the unjust (*ahl al-baghi*) and that of tyrannical rulers (*jababira*) who had come to power unlawfully. All authority derived from this foundation and bound almost every act back to the sacred beginning of Islamic history.

In the case of the Ibadis, this was premised on a "Golden Age" defined by them as the rule of the first two caliphs, Abu Bakr and Umar ibn al Khattab, since they were considered the most pious and learned men of their time. It is on the basis of their merit in the form of piety, and not descent, that they become the true imams of guidance and legitimate successors to the Prophet for the Ibadis, unlike Uthman and Ali who had violated God's law and therefore forfeited their rights as caliphs and members of the Muslim community (Crone 2004; Gaiser 2010; Wilkinson 1987). The whole weight of the past, shaped by a different view of legitimate succession after the Prophet's death, was embodied in these precedents and the deeds of "rightly guided" imams whose actions were divinely sanctioned by the Quran and *sunna* and who followed the examples of the first two caliphs in epitomizing the just and righteous leader (*al imam al-'adil*). These became the yardsticks by which the concrete affairs of men and women were to be assessed, judged and finally guided (Crone 2004: 56-57; Wilkinson 1987; Gaiser 2010).

Religion in this context was necessarily tied to a conception of the past. For the most part, it was inconceivable to act without referring to the Quran, the *sunna* and time-honoured models and standards of behaviour. An interpretation of Islamic history structured an orientation towards a shared way of life within which individuals were educated as moral as well as political subjects through systemizing the assumed basis behind the early caliphate (Abu Bakr and 'Umar) in Medina. But being moral also involved a type of active consciousness where people became fully aware of their actions and how they conduct themselves as part of true *taqwa* (Mahmood 2005). *Sharī'a* therefore also undergirded the ethical normative modes of conduct, thought and behaviour that entered into the ways in which people related to each other socially and that conditioned the very terms by which they became aware of themselves and their duty (Messick 1993: 152; Asad 2003: 205-256). Fundamentally, in Ibadism, embodied *sharī'a* governed proper behaviour as well as relations between the faithful along the lines of the admittedly much debated criteria set out by the notions of *wilaya* – the person who is supportive and calls one to the 'true' Islam, as opposed to *bara'a*, those who have sinned or are ignorant and are disassociated from the 'true Islam' (Wilkinson 1987: 163-168; Ennami 1972: 289-90). Such values as "respect", "cooperation", "neighbourliness" and "generosity" that have taken on abstract symbolic connotations in both heritage formation and Islamic education in modern Oman as part of fostering civic ideals were historically necessary links to a practical set of politico-ethical obligations, expectations and rights for the cultivation of moral virtues that presupposed an authoritative model centred on the Prophet. These notions were integral to the processes of cultivating relationships and to establish a coherence determined by the legal and ethical norms of Ibadi *fiqh* in order to shape a certain type of sociality, centred on the notion of the 'true community' and made up of the *ahl al-faḍl* (the people of favour) – those who followed the elected Ibadi imam as against those under the sultan (supported by the British) who were subject to the whims of an illegitimate ruler (*jabbār*).

The past as the embodiment of an ethic-political world was therefore not conceived as symbolic but rather as causative in undergirding institutional power and disciplinary practices, where merit in the form of piety in commanding right and forbidding wrong became institutionalized in developing normative modalities of action for proper daily guidance in the interpretation and deployment of jurisprudence and every day administration. History premised on an exemplary function would depend on a continuity of the space of experience whereby expectations would remain stable over long periods of time and bring nothing new (Koselleck 2002; Hirshckind 1996). This continuity of experience was undergirded by the assumption of a divinely revealed standard of behaviour based on the prescriptive demands of the Quran and the Prophetic *sunna*. The future itself was therefore defined by the exemplary character of the Prophet and his rightful successors, as articulated by Ibadi doctrine. These political and doctrinal issues gave rise to a set of historical experiences and their interpretations were internalized, becoming pivotal to realizing the Ibadi community's conception of salvation. These histories in turn set the horizons within which reasoning could occur and political conflicts could be understood, predicating distinctive modes of behaving and acting as preconditions for inhabiting the world ethically and politically.

Nation building as part of Oman's modernity however re-figured the role of history to a teleological framework oriented towards progress. In assuming a modernist conception of time, the past and the future were not based on continuity but on a widening difference. The future was assumed to bring about fundamentally new situations that the experiences of the past could not possibly **materially** co-opt, since it contained elements that were irreducibly different. To rely on the exemplars of the past would be to "lag behind", since it would signify the refusal to acknowledge the notion of change, as fundamental differences accumulate over time towards a transformed future. These were the basic assumptions for temporal relations for a modern historicity. So how could tradition in Oman facilitate modern nation building? In becoming signs, the forts as well as its repository of objects were transfigured into the heritage of modern Oman. They assumed a form of a past well adapted to the changing horizons of a future in moving away from the materiality of causal encounters and their consequences towards referentiality and communication in their mode of history. Losing the integral relationship with their transactors, the relationship has become one of representation instead, where the object stands in for a set of abstract values and spiritual principles of an "authentic past" generating the possibility of a transcendent essence instead of lived experiences. Let loose from its initial moorings in theological and doctrinal predicates, tradition is made to stand for an imagined community directed at the material and moral transformation of the entire population through its objectification into abstract values and principles that presuppose that a future full of continual novelty may still be harnessed to a past that is essentially settled.

Orna-mentality as Practices of Memory

The period January 27th to February 24th, 2011 witnessed the yearly return of the Muscat Festival amidst great fanfare throughout Oman in the Arabic and English mass media as "the celebration

of Oman's traditional arts, culture and heritage".[77] Thousands were reported be thronging to the festival from Muscat and beyond. One of its primary venues, the Qurum Natural Park in Muscat, was the site of one of the main highlights of the festival: the Oman Arts and Heritage Village. Each day of the festival was dedicated to a particular region of the country and a competition was in place for those regional inhabitants who were the most successful in displaying their 'traditional life styles', handicrafts, songs, dances and foods. Each day's events were commented on radio and televised live. Amidst finger food stalls, refreshment stands, open-air consumer exhibitions of the latest technology and a small international heritage area, a space had been delineated by the crenelated contours, arched recesses, arrow slits and circular watchtowers of a model fort enclosure. Within this space, Omani tradition was writ large. A small open area with date palms featured women in traditional Omani dress of *disdāsha* (long colourful and sometimes sequinned tunic), *sarwal* (trousers) and *shayla* (head covering) presiding over children playing traditional children's games and playing on old rope swings. Older women mimicked the old ways in going about with bundles of firewood or carrying water on their heads, amidst farm animals, generating a moment for visitors to the village, most of whom were Omani, to reflect on how difficult and arduous life was even in the midst of fun and games. Men in regional folk dress sat in circles playing music and singing while women and young girls moved in rhythmic procession, beating time with their hands, and singing celebratory wedding songs while carrying the wedding accoutrements in a traditional wedding re-enactment, amongst other singing and dancing performances (Fig. 3.2).

Figure 3.2 Wedding dances from the coastal region of Suwaiq in the Batinah region of Oman are re-enacted here as part of the Muscat festival, 2011. Note the re-constructed crenellated contours that enframe the space of the the Oman Heritage Village

[77] The Muscat Festival, although an annual event (except for 2010, when it was cancelled due to fears of the swine flu contagion), was augmented, through the introduction of several international sporting events including a "Tour of Oman" (a cross-country cycling event) and an "International Extreme Sailing Series". These were widely publicized, attracting the attention of the international news media, including the *New York Times*, Sky News, French TV as well as global websites such a yahoo and Hotmail. This is part of a larger venture on the part of the State to promote Oman as an international brand and tourist destination, a project begun in the late 1990s to generate a major alternative source of revenue to oil and natural gas.

The open food court was overflowing with customers gathered around frazzled women trying to keep up with the various purchases made from the enormous platters of saffron rice cooked with stewed fish or meat, large cooking pots of gravy, local breads, *halwa* (a sweetmeat flavoured with cardamom and rose water and now symbolic of national *karam* or generosity), and the variety of fruits and vegetables indigenous to the region. Along the perimeter were a plethora of handicrafts on sale including frankincense, incense burners, framed *khanajar* (Omani dagger), textile weavings and pillows, rugs and silverwork. One could see the artisans at work at the potter's wheel, hammering in nails while constructing the *manadīs* (trousseau chests) or chatting to each other while working on *zarrie* (laces made with gold and silver metallic coloured thread that often adorns 'traditional' women's dress).

Observing the comings and goings of peoples in the handicraft area, it definitely appeared as if most of the customers for these wares were Omani, an observation confirmed by talking with several artisans. Fascinated by the movement of the hands of the potter with whom I had been conversing, I had not noticed that a couple had approached and were asking about the prices for the miniature pots that the potter had been carefully but expeditiously making (Fig. 3.3).

Figure 3.3 A Potter at work at the crafts area of the Muscat Festival, 2011

Explaining my interest in objects, I asked them about the significance of this particular type of ceramic pot. The potter answered that it was the *jaḥla*, the miniature version of the type that in the past would often be suspended by a rope outside windows or walls of a residential home or a local mosque in order to provide thirsty passersby with drinking water. This was considered an ethic-moral obligation in providing for the community as a customary part of everyday life. There is a Prophetic *hadith* that states, "The man who holds back water from another will have God's mercy held back from him" (Varisco as cited by Limbert 2010: 123).[78] When I asked the couple why they would buy the miniature version, the man replied that it was "just for decoration (*zakhāraf*) now as part of heritage, since it is no longer the custom. It is something to contemplate (*lil tafakkur*)." Other Omani customers replied briefly that this was *zīna* (decoration) for the home as a symbol (*rūmuz*) of heritage. In their role as heritage miniatures, these objects become endowed with new perceptual possibilities that organize attention and cognition. Imbued

[78] For an account on the transformation of the uses and significance of water as part of modernity in the Sultanate of Oman, see Limbert 2010: 115-134.

with a certain ethos, set of values and prescribed emotions, these material forms in their circulation participate in a culture of the past that simplifies and reduces, effacing political complexity even as it exemplifies the complex relationship between consumerism and national heritage. That which was public, mechanically efficacious, and material in its social practices and implications is reduced to the realm of privatized viewing and experience, a moment captured and preserved, that is now referential in serving as evidence for something immaterial and abstract.

In transforming the role of materiality from use value to the picturesque, through culture as a commodity, there lies the danger of losing that authenticity that is Oman. In fact, the demand for such objects by tourists as well as Omanis has created a souvenir market distinct from those authentic crafts that were once valued for their use value. Today the tourist markets, whether in Muscat or Nizwa, are flooded with these souvenir items, which are usually made through techniques of mass production by foreign workers in factories for the tourism market. One often sees Pakistani and Indian middlemen carrying boxes of souvenirs into the tourist shops of the Nizwa fort complex area. When I asked a shopkeeper where they were coming from, he informed me that there are workshops (*warshāt*) in the Matrah souk area – one of the largest and most tourist-oriented 'traditional' souks in Oman – in Muscat, where Omanis supervise and preside over the manufacture of mass-produced souvenir items, worked on by immigrant workers. The establishment of the *al-hai'a al-'amma ll-ṣ inā'at al-harafiya* (General Directorate of Handicrafts), a minor government ministry, in 2003 was a direct response intended to stem the tide of mass-produced souvenir goods and handicrafts coming in from abroad. As one of its general directors informed me,

> the directorate focuses on the construction of an infrastructure for the making of authentic (*aṣīl*) Omani handicrafts made by Omani craftsmen and their families as part of a way to coalesce (*tawhīd*) efforts in a project that had until recently had been distributed within different government roles. The goal is to preserve the civilization legacy (*maurūth*) of crafts in the Sultanate and to transfer this civilizational heritage (*irth*) to the children and the coming generations, and to preserve Omani identity and its distinctiveness with these crafts. Many of our craftsmen today are getting rather old and there is a lack of desire (*'adam al-raghba*) to continue craft work.

He went on to explain that the mass-produced crafts that are coming in from the Philippines or Bangladesh do resemble Omani handicrafts, but they are merely imitations (*muqallada*), and of poor quality at that. The desire to create "authentic" Omani handicrafts, therefore, has not only translated into massive projects for the training and funding of a new generation of Omani craftspeople, but also resulted in the construction of government-sponsored regional showrooms, training workshops (each dedicated to a particular craft such as silver, textile, palm fibres, etc.) and design programmes. These enterprises have in turn coalesced to establish the drive to extract design motifs and decorative elements from various forts' carved and painted panels, traditional wooden doors or windows as well as the abstract reliefs of old mosque mihrabs, in order to generate an overall distinctive aesthetic vocabulary that is de-contextualized and abstracted to serve as a lexicon of decoration for Omani craftsmanship that may be used to beautify and decorate a ceramic item, silverwork, a *khanjar* belt, a button, or a bag handle, taking up a variety of forms and ultimately a wide array of uses to adapt to modern consumer needs and tastes in accordance with global marketing trends. These serve as truncated and standardized material traces of the past, evoking its experiences even while arranging it as the *rūh* (spirit) of Oman.

These crafts and their products, conceived as organic extensions of the land, are considered as the embodiment of the different environments that characterize Oman. Simultaneously, official pamphlets, journals and volumes documenting craft activity that have been published by the directorate as well as the Ministry of Heritage and Culture espouse the perspective of each object embodying the innovative skills and unique talent of the Omani craftsman as a type that had once been widely distributed as some of the principle exports to ports on the Indian Ocean trade networks. Handicrafts thus become part of a living fabric of modern Oman inasmuch as it is perceived that producing, interacting and living with these embodiments of history – that signify the general principles of innovation, skill and creativity as part of entrenched everyday experiences of a distinctive past that is Oman – becomes a means of grounding oneself within an ethos conditioned by the sedimentation of tradition in spirit and its accompanying values. The iterability of these objectifications becomes part of the larger enterprise of entering into the moulding and exercise of citizenship. In the process of attempting to adapt to the march of 'progress', this consciousness and the concepts enabled by these material forms would respond to change and transformation in ways that would, ideally, generate the norm in citizenship through inhabiting the conventional modes of thinking about the past. It would be on such terms that the Omani citizen would harmonize him/herself to change, through a process of inclusion and exclusion that conforms to pervasive understandings of history and tradition. But what if the Omani citizen responds to the habits and concepts embodied in these material forms in ways that defy the conventional, forging an alternative perspective as to what it means to be an Omani today, premised on a different relationship to the past?

Tradition in this context is more than just a utilitarian technique for creatively adapting to what are assumed to be new situations brought about by a constantly evolving present. It becomes a mode of existence that enables the self to discharge his/her socio-political role as a citizen in embodying a telos, one whose end is crucially tied to the exercise of certain virtues grounded in the past. Inhabiting the past becomes part of a national temporal mode of being that is considered necessary for the cultivation of certain abstract values, concepts and ideas through their objective forms. These become exercises considered crucial to achieve a modality of modernity alternative to that of the West, conceived as both model and enemy, which is still amenable to modes of modern governance. This fundamental understanding that innovation and creativity rather than repetition are necessary for tradition to be transmitted over time stems from underlying modernist assumptions about the nature of the material past as one that is past, a spiritual counterpart that is imminent to the present, a future in flux and bound to change, and their relationship with each other. Inhabiting such a past, in the present, provides the very basis for establishing the criteria of sociality through which persons and relationships are constituted.

The phenomenon of ornamentality in Oman can be conceived in two ways: One might well ask whether Omanis who are buying these products in such large numbers are actively participating in a consumer culture that enables politically acquiescence to a depoliticized idealized version of the past through the purchase of such tokens, or are these indexical forms related to an insatiable growth of nostalgia, straining towards the past instead of the future, and grasping at lived memories that are impossible to realize through the abstracted and textual elements of a second-hand past embodied in these objects? In other words, are these semiotic forms susceptible to the inherent hazards of decontexualization and recontexualization (Keane 2007)? The phenomenon

of handicraft and souvenir production has blurred the boundaries between public and private and political and apolitical, in establishing a new life in the private domains of market consumption, the home, life histories and emotional attachments. The rise of the tourism market in the late 1990s, accompanied by increased investment in handicraft production by the state, has generated a new matrix of consumerist and sentimental practices that are engaged with the Sultanate's past and its objectification as a series of abstract values and commitments, embodied in material form. These have been widely disseminated, publicly espoused and displayed by state officials, civil society organizations and the mass media, as well as invested in by private enterprises and lay citizens. Such commitment has manifested itself in a series of novel practices such as appropriating national signs of heritage, creating life histories and personal memories through them, even while developing a nostalgic yearning for the days prior to the *nahda*. Through these relationships with the material past, one can explore the ways in which major segments of Omani society, specifically Nizwani society, relate to the modern state and its constitutive ties to a certain form of the past as part of the ethical mode of being an Omani citizen.

The Transforming Role of the Dalla (Coffee Pot) in Social Practice and Its Implications

In Muscat, many of the homes I visited (usually those of middle-class professionals) displayed miniature forms of heritage that indicated a personal relationship with the state that the citizen wanted to activate through a private consumer choice. In incorporating these objects as part of a private display, they were procuring public icons of the state as ornamental pieces based on the free market choice of a private citizen. In stark contrast, however, the houses of people of a similar social class in Nizwa that I visited were more likely to have pictures of old Nizwa of the late 1960s and early to mid-70s on their walls, before its conceptual and material transformation into heritage and modernization projects as part of the *nahda*. These photographs circulated across social contexts, in offices as well as people's homes, and were collected and shared among friends and colleagues through mobile phones and laptops, especially (but not limited to) those of middle age (in their 30s and 40s) who had grown up in the *nahda* period. I was able to obtain a large number of these photographs as aids to facilitate personal reminiscences with ease due to their great demand, from the main photography studio in town, where a number of framed prints of old Nizwa were hung on the walls. The ubiquity of these old photographs did not strike me as being of great relevance until I heard people's life stories and memories as to what Nizwa had been like, at which time they often commented on old landmarks, institutions and the nature of old time relationships.

I often chatted with Nasser on my frequent early visits to the Nizwa fort. In his mid-60s, one could often find him sitting quietly watching tourists browsing or talking with his assistant at the fort gift shop over which he presided. One day, on hearing about my interest in the history of the *harat al-aqr*, the oldest quarter of Nizwa, which bordered the fort-souk complex, he informed me that he had in fact lived there as a youth. He offered to take me on a personal tour of the quarter, his old house and the areas that he had frequented over the years while telling me something of his life story. As we walked the very narrow lanes, passed crumbling houses with their rusted iron grilled windows, some of whose walls had already turned to rubble amidst small overgrown date gardens, he mused about life before the *nahda* as one that was more simple and a time when people were more sociable (*akhtar ijtimā'ī*). There was no development in terms of street

planning, education or health. The source of livelihood was primarily agriculture, although a few were in trade. When he was young, he reminisced, these houses now falling away were inhabited. Life was indeed hard back then, in all respects – materially, socially, economically and in terms of medical expertise. There was a lack of goods, the price of living had gone up, there was little rain and the date palms and fruit trees were not bearing fruit. There was a lack of basic food. People could perhaps eat dates, but rice was very rare. Most people fled the hardships to go abroad during the 1960s.[79]

After 1970, with the *nahda*, more and more people left the area to move out to the suburbs, buying reclaimed land from the arid areas through government subsidies and loans and building planned houses that were thought to be more suitable (*akhtar lā'iq*). These were the consequences (*'awāqib*) of development (*taṭ awar*), as he put it. The rooms of these old mud brick houses were considered too small and constrained. Omanis would keep their goats and sheep inside and their layout was considered to be too confined and basic, with no amenities such as electricity or air conditioning. His life had also been shaped by these transformative socio-political circumstances. Before 1970, he had been illiterate and was a cook for British private companies in Muscat, where he worked through the day and into the night, leaving him with no possibility of pursuing learning. With the onset of the *nahda*, a series of opportunities for education and more palatable work were established. In the 1970s, a factory for the processing and packaging opened in Nizwa. This was accompanied by government ministries setting up administrative branches in major urban centres in Oman in the late 1970s and '80s. These jobs involved a single working shift from seven in the morning until two in the afternoon. Nasser, now retired, had worked at the date factory early on and at the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries. Taking advantage of such a schedule as well as days off, he was able to enrol in the primary classes of the local adult literacy centre. As he proudly told me, his years of work were also punctuated by years of study, until 1994 when he finally graduated with a degree in literature from the University of Beirut (through distance learning).

As we stopped by the remains of an old local mosque where he used to pray, he explained that before the *nahda*, it was well known that 60%-70% of the population had migrated and life had been difficult. But this was also a time when people in Nizwa lived with each other, especially as the old houses were situated close to each other. In those days, no one emerged from their house alone. They were always closely followed by their kin and neighbours. In each quarter people

[79] The aftermath of the Jabal Akhdar war in the late 1950s, witnessed Sultan Said bin Taimur, the present sultan's father, adopt an isolationist stance towards the interior. Although the presence of foreign (primarily British) experts was more significant than ever in handling affairs of state in the Sultanate of Oman and Muscat at this time, the British and the sultan were both reluctant to invest in social and economic development, fearing the possible rise of a political opposition, specifically as a result of Arab Socialism or Nasserism from abroad, a movement that in their eyes was having a calamitous effect on the stability of the Middle East as a whole. The strong need to oppose any "foreign" or "modern" ideas led to the opposition and strict regulation of owning a car, importing newspapers, books or even medicine. Even riding bicycles, playing football or music, wearing glasses, closed shoes or any type of "foreign dress" such as trousers etc. were prohibited. This of course meant that the development of health and education services was viewed with great opposition. In fact, the sultan considered that the education system introduced by the British to India was the basic seed for the rise of the independence movement that led to the ousting of the British in 1947 (Valeri 2009: 64-69; Peterson 1978: 180-200).

adhered (*mutamāssikīn*) to each other.[80] The rich would help those who were poor in the *hara* and the poor would stand by (*yūqaf*) the rich, in times of misfortune (*muṣ ībа*) or happiness (*afrāh*) or at any time after the *'asr* or *maghreb* prayer where they would sit with each other. He then explained that, "this was a widespread habit when neighbours perhaps from about five houses would sit together in one place, making a *sabla.* They would sit and chat in the evenings (*yasmūrun*), exchanging news on the latest events in the area, mediate quarrels between neighbours or effect consultations about a bad crop or a political meeting to reform the outlying region (*balad*). This was the basic aim of the *sabla*." Or, he further elaborated, if someone died and there was a funeral (*'azā'*), people from the *hara* and neighbouring areas would sit in the *sabla* after his death and offer condolences to the bereaved. Before the *nahda*, he continued, people who had no work or learning to do would gather at a *sabla* in the mornings after *fajr* prayer and would *taqhawa* (partake of the daily social rituals of coffee and dates) and breakfast together. Sometimes they would go off before *ẓ uhr* prayer, to engage in agriculture or trade nearby, or each person would engage in a craft by bringing something to work on with their hands while chatting as a means of increasing their income. If there was any emergency, these people were available.

By this time we had reached an old bare-branched tree by one of the old watchtowers and some of the tumbled down ruins of the old houses. Nasser informed me that this used to be one of the places where he often met his neighbours and friends in a *sabla* gathering. When I asked him where these *sablas* were usually located, he further explained that there were two types. A *sabla* could be in a specific person's house on the ground floor and close to the main entrance,[81] so as to preserve the sanctity (*ḥ urma*) of the women. Neighbours come together and bring coffee and something simple for breakfast, such a piece of bread or cheese, according to their means. These were the more private *sablas.* More common were the *sabla 'amma* (public *sabla*), of which there was one on almost every street (*zaqāq*).[82] These were open all the time for whoever wanted to sit or inquire about possible work until late into the night. It was, he concluded, "fundamentally social in goal." If someone didn't have a job waiting or if a craftsman wanted to work on his silver, palm weavings, rope making or any handwork, he could busy himself at the

[80] They might also have been part of the same kinship group as families even though living in separate houses at times, lived close together in the same quarter. However, *harat al-'aqr* was different as a residential quarter from others in Nizwa in that there were a number of families from different tribes who were living together. No one tribe predominated in numbers, although some were more powerful than others, such as the Albu Saidi. This was perhaps due to its proximity to the administrative and commercial heart of the city, the fort-souk-congregational mosque complex.

[81] In the more modern houses, the private *sabla* (although when there are no male guests, this is often the family sitting room) has often been built with a separate entrance from the main entrance and can now be accessed from the outside without disturbing the more private domain and its female family members.

[82] Other informants mentioned that *harat al-'aqr* as the largest, oldest and most important of Nizwa's quarters was unusual in that it had roughly five public *sablāt.* Most of the smaller quarters had only one or two public *sablat.* All the men in the quarter would participate in its daily life, with or without guests being present. In other regions of Oman, there are tribes who live in close proximity to each other and who still participate in a *sabla* sociality. There were only three such examples in Nizwa when I was there (2010/2011), when the al-Sulaimaniyin, al-Saifis and the al-Kindis had a tribal oriented *sabla* as part of their residential areas. However, anyone else, I was told, was also welcome, especially if they had disputes or problems to resolve, as these families were renowned for their learning and as having many *ulama* and judges among their numbers.

sabla and pass the time with companions while the young boys would prepare the coffee. When I inquired about *sablas* today, he said that they still exist but are usually only for weddings, funerals or lectures and are called *majlis/majalis.* "These are large ones that have been newly built for 300 people that can be rented out for a small fee for such occasions." He ended by stating that, "the old type of *sabla* is very rare today and are seldom frequented except on occasional evenings, when some of the older people still gather as neighbours and companions at *Maghreb* time."

In recalling the past, Nasser was weaving together a generic history in which he was implicitly contrasting the past with a present where people, as he saw it, were too involved in their lives of work and study or, as he later remarked, watching television to really cooperate or even relate to each other. These were the consequences of the *nahda.* Although this description of the *sabla* as a social institution was narrated to me for the first time fairly early in my field work, it was a consistent theme of recall and contemplation when I inquired about past experiences and memories. The *sabla's* constitutive role in forging collaborative relationships only became richer in specificity in talking with a variety of people. Concepts such as *takātuf* (mutual solidarity), *tarāḥum* (mutual understanding) and *takāluf* (mutual guarantee) were the substance of key relationships and feelings that, from many Nizwani perspectives, was decidedly generated as a result of the daily recourse of sitting at the *sabla.* These were linked to the fulfilment of *sharī'a* ethico-legal and moral notions of obligation and responsibility to one's neighbours and kin. This was a time, I was constantly reminded, when people were more cohesive (*mutalāṣuq*), especially since twenty people might well have been living in a single multi-generational home, unlike today when each man tries to set up his own family household, leaving the parents eventually alone.

But the sentiments surrounding talk of the *sabla* as something that was now fundamentally "lacking" remained a familiar refrain throughout as people reminisced about its increasing infrequency and the ensuing want of time for forging social ties and relationships even with one's closest neighbours. One young man, a shopkeeper whose scholarly family had deep roots in the area, called the days of the *sabla* a past that was longed for (*māḍī ishtiyāq*). Although I was able to see only the ruins of several in the *harat al-'aqr*, they were described to me as being for the most part simple rooms for fifteen to twenty people made of mud brick or an *'arish*, a hut made of date palms much like the reconstructed model in the fort's courtyard. But it was its fundamental role as a medium in forging the fabric of peoples' mundane every day relationships that was constantly emphasized. In the perspectives of many, its loss has led to a and the resulting deficiency in hospitality, social cohesion or cooperation between neighbours, the very values lauded by national heritage as part of a revival or *nahda*.

These narrations were not simply relegated to the time before the *nahda* but, as became increasingly clear, the *sabla* as a daily custom had in fact ebbed away in the last twenty years.[83]

[83] Although the *sabla* was primarily a men's daily practice and a once stable institution of life in the *hara* or quarter, women in their turn would go on regular visits to neighbours, as part of a fundamental social phenomenon that has been aptly described by Mandana Limbert (2010) in her work on Bahla, a city neighbouring Nizwa in the interior. These would inevitably be accompanied by *taqahwa*, the exchange of coffee and dates. However, in Nizwa, as my landlady explained to me, "Although neighbours are still connected (*muttaṣalīn*) through the exchange of food, the habit of *taqahwa* is rare now because everyone has work, is busy with their children and so on. But there are still ties

It was often expressed to me that men and an increasing number of women are now dispersed in working full time in schools, government institutions or in the army in areas distant from the immediate vicinity of their *hara*. Many of the men have to commute back and forth between Muscat and Nizwa, preferring to spend their week days in Muscat and returning to their families on the weekends. Studying among the young is now longer and more intensive than it ever had been previously. When people return from work, they just want to eat and relax and have no time to socialize. This state of affairs was creating a certain distancing effect amongst people in Nizwa.

Coffee always figured prominently in describing the social affinities and ties of neighbours and kin in the past as part of the forging of social bonds that generated a *hara* in such descriptions of the *sabla* as: "the neighbours brought coffee to the *sabla* in the mornings", "there was always a *dalla* for coffee warming in the corner of the *sabla*", "we just brought a little coffee and some dates with us to the *sabla"*, or "in the evenings we would make the rounds of coffee." As Mandana Limbert (2010: 46-82) has lucidly described, coffee (and dates) in Oman have historically specific assumptions embedded in their use and have formed an intimate role in shaping peoples' relationships with each other. In constructing his perspective of the past, Nasser linked the presence of coffee with the intimate social ties that people had fostered through "solidarity" between rich and poor, "cooperation" in times of need, the generating of social bonds through the obligation to reciprocate hospitality. For others, like Sheikh Suleiman, an official at the Ministry of Higher Education in his 40s, it was part of a different age that still entangles itself in the then and now through a series of sensorial images: as he mused, one "can still remember the *sabla* when one hears the gentle murmur (*kharīr*) of coffee being poured and the clattering of coffee cups." This was also considered to be an intrinsic part of legal-moral duties, and a well-known Prophetic *hadith* was often quoted to me in Nizwa in this regard: "He who believes in God and the Last Day, must honour his guest."

The presence of the *dalla* and its contents were part of these ties of obligation and reciprocity as its form and social use was embedded in a physical causality that determined peoples' material interactions, demands and dynamics with each other. In a Maussian sense, the *dalla* was an extension of the giver's personality and the lubricant that enabled the cultivation of socio-moral relationships. These relationships were considered inseparable from the material exchange of dates, coffee and sometimes the local seasonal fruit that Nizwa was well known for, such as bananas, papayas, melons, mangoes, lemons among others. Those who did not *taqahwa* ("do coffee") with their guests with, at the very least, dates and coffee, I was often told, were considered as not honouring *(ikrām*) them, even if they offered them a sumptuous repast overall. As my landlady explained to me, dates were eaten throughout the year either as freshly plucked and ripe fruit (*ruṭ ab*) or in a half-dried and processed form as *suh* during the rest of the year after the harvest season was over. Those who finished their quota from their palm gardens would be compelled to buy some from the markets, not only for the household but for the principal obligatory offering to guests, along with coffee as part of *'urf*, or custom. The two together were considered, as my landlady put it, "as a way of balancing the sweetness and hotness of the dates with the slight bitterness of the coffee and lightening the taste overall so it would not be

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between neighbour and neighbour especially when there is an occasion or someone is sick or there is a funeral, then the relations are strong. But the ritual of *taqahwa* has begun to wane, that's it (*bada'at talāshat khalās*)."

overwhelming sweet."[84] They also enabled the very acts of obligation and reciprocity that defined the guest-host relationship. It would only be in the *nahda* period that the *dalla* would disarticulate itself in order to stand alone as the abstract national symbol for Oman's valuation of hospitality, thereby losing that integral relationship that defined its constitutive material basis to induce social ties.

A number of people from prominent *ulama* families mentioned the importance of the *sabla* as a forum of study and social intercourse between the imam, the *ulama* and the more advanced students of *fiqh* after *al-maghreb* prayer. As one of them explained, "One of the *ulama* would read a book of *'ilm* (learning) either on the fundamentals of *fiqh*, doctrine, grammar or history to those present and the imam or one of the elders would explain what was necessary to understand and clarify its content." These would have taken place in the fort as well as private home or local mosques. M*ajalis al-'ilm* were a widespread phenomenon among lower levels of *ulama* in every *hara.* Books however were not restricted to the scholarly. A number of men in Nizwa, from different walks of life, ranging from shopkeepers to government administrators and school teachers, recalled that despite the fact that many people, even after 1970, did not know how to read and write, many were well aware of the historical works of Nur al Din al-Salmi's *Tuhfat-al-A'yan* and Izkawi's *Kashf al-Ghumma* on Oman among others. In the evenings when people were sitting in the *sabla*, someone, perhaps an *'alam* from the neighbourhood, would usually bring a book to read aloud, or recite from memory.

The most popular works were those filled with stories and histories of the prophets, the imams and the righteous (*ṣalihīn*) such as the two mentioned above. The scholar or reader would sit at the *ṣadr* (place of honour) reflecting and reproducing a social hierarchy based on learning, age, influence and social status, which would vary according to the occasion, circumstances and number of senior people present at any one time. A hearth made of stones or sand with coals piled on was usually located to the side of the room where a fire kept the ceramic or copper *dalla* hot, keeping the coffee warm for a while. It would then customarily be poured and distributed first to those of highest rank and then to the lower strata by young boys. Ali, one of the fort custodians, recalled that when people celebrated the Prophet's birthday, one of the more learned among them would bring a book on the *sirat al-nabawi* (life of the Prophet) and coffee would be prepared for the *sabla.* He would read the most important passages, describing the Prophet and the events of his life, while people listened and offered *du'a* (supplications) afterwards.

Both al-Salmi's *Tuhfat-al-A'yan* and Izkawi's *Kashf al-Ghumma* mention their audience as listeners. The *Kashf al-Ghumma* (12th century AH/18th century AD) which was recalled by many as a popular work that was often read out loud in the past, is generally considered the oldest of the three main historical works of Oman's late history (17th-20th centuries). In the introduction, Izkawi lays out the reasons for his writing:

> I had noticed that most of the people of our time have forgotten the origin of their honourable doctrine. And they have become uninterested in reading books written by former generations. In including information on the Ibadi imams and their doctrine, I have given it a superficial disguise as stories and historical accounts, whilst inwardly it relates to the chosen sect because people **will not listen** to the actual historical tradition but are more desirous of hearing legendary stories. So I

[84] Mandana Limbert makes a similar argument among visiting groups of women in her neighbourhood in Bahla during her fieldwork (2010: 69-70).

> have bent myself to please them so that they may **listen** and concentrate their attention in reading it with a pure heart so that they may know the fundamentals of the sect and acknowledge the people of truth in a true manner. (2000: 16-17)[85]

Through recasting the listener's thought into the structural mode of historically edifying tales, Izkawi was trying to preach, guide and direct through recalling how man is remembered through the contexts of his actions, whether good or evil, insofar as they are judged on the basis of criteria oriented towards the fulfilment of God's will as understood by an Ibadi interpretation of the Quran and the *sunna* of the Prophet. As Lambek (2010: 28) has noted, forging an ethical way of life requires work and necessitates attention. In becoming ethical guidelines, these acts of recollection were vested in the recitation of the life stories of the imams, their words and deeds (*athār*), driving and counselling the listener towards correct courses of action. In navigating doctrine, these written accounts were more than mere conduits of information. Public reading, which was widespread as an integral part of the *sabla*, actively contributed to modes of heightened awareness where the self became the object of scrutiny and assessment. Through inspiring pious fear, revulsion or passion – among a myriad of other emotions –, these histories in turn became part of a pedagogic process where their absorption into the self becomes the generative basis for deepening and honing the inclination towards pious disposition in everyday life. In other words, these relations to the past were not simply referential or communicative, but were the doctrinal extension of a history delineated by the life of the Prophet and the two caliphs after him. The Prophet and to a lesser extent Abu Bakr and 'Umar were the exemplars for the constitution of the "Golden Age" that provided the substrate for Ibadi doctrinal tradition and practices of Islamic virtue. One of the core elements around which the writing, recitation and reception of late histories seemed to coalesce was the notion of *athār*. This can be understood as "trace", or ideas of relic, vestige or footprint, something that is left behind. Its usage in the sense of the speech and deeds of major historical figures became part of the process of historically attuning one's sensibilities, emotions and ethical orientation through the process of story-telling.

The *sabla* therefore had a fundamental ethical dimension in acting as a means towards moral health and Islamic virtue. I was further reminded of this facet by one of the members of the al-Kindi tribe, Dr Amjad. He observed that right until the mid-1980s, the *sabla* was a viable daily social institution that forged the site of a series of disciplinary practices where young boys interacted with their fathers and grandfathers, creating a three-generation forum where, as he noted, "we were taught manners, how to conduct ourselves and how to respect the norms and values of a society." In listening to talk of daily life, while watching manifestations of mutual cooperation and assistance and serving coffee to their elders, they were being brought up to assume the moral basis for inhabiting a certain ethos, one that was considered necessary to being a good Muslim as a family member and as a neighbour, a marked category in *sharī'a* as part of legal doctrine and popular discourse. It was at the *sabla* that they discovered, discussed and provided assistance to someone who was sick, arranged help for somebody else to haul large piles of palm tree, helped the children of the wife of a neighbour whose husband was residing and working in Kuwait. "The entire *hara*," he noted, "would bring up the children, helping the mother whose husband was abroad. If I misbehaved, I would be picked up right away.

[85] This translation of the introduction to Izkawi's text has been taken from Sulaiman I. Askari's dissertation, *Study on Kashf al-Ghumma al-Jami' li-Akhbār al-Umma*, D. Phil, University of Manchester, 1984.

Neighbours in the *hara* would ask me, 'Did you pray in the masjid? Did you help your neighbour? Why are you fighting with your mother or brothers?'"

Coffee and dates were fundamentally imbricated in the set of practices of sociality through which a certain ethico-political reasoning emerged. This was a socio-political public life in which embodied histories gave rise to a certain commonplace type of reasoning and set of sensibilities – memories, aspirations and anxieties – that in turn shaped commitments and determined action (Asad 2003: 184-185; Hirschkind 2006:30). The abstraction of the coffee pot from these ethically-binding relationships into a national icon has opened up avenues where it is now being reconfigured into new regimes of cultural logic. Its display today as an example of Omani *karam* has restaged its possibilities into being bought and sold as part of the standard widely disseminated repertoire of "heritage", and as a display value set in place by the Omani state, a global market and the consumers they generate. This does not mean that the importance of coffee and dates has diminished. Ordinary household or even office visits, as well as large occasions such as funerals and weddings or feasts of any sort are always accompanied by the minimal obligatory offerings of coffee and dates as part of the prevailing understandings of the host-guest relationship. But the ironic display of the *dalla* as part of a now commercial and political domain does bring about a sharp sense of loss among men for the ritual of *taqahwa*, its significance as part of *sabla* culture and its material role in enabling an ethically binding sociality that lay beyond the demands of a cash economy.[86] The *dalla* in Nizwa becomes part of the memories of a set of values that are now marked more by their increased absence public culture than their substantive presence today. Once embodying and engendering *karam* as a social and political levelling tool, the *dalla* has now become part of a contemporary world that can no longer produce authentic experience. I have only seen the *dalla* used in places where 'tradition' has become integral to the experience of immersing oneself in the 'true' Oman as part of the deluxe hospitality package offered by a decadent five-star hotel or restaurant experience.

Today, in Nizwa, for the everyday household and otherwise, the plastic thermos imported from China is considered more efficient in keeping coffee warm for a longer period and has effectively replaced the ceramic or copper *dalla*. The "inevitable coffee-pot in full requisition" (1901: 471) noted by Colonel Miles in his observations and explanations of *sabla* life during his travels through the Jabel al-Akhdar area near Nizwa in the late 19th century played a utilitarian role. Rendered plain, its practical function involved pouring coffee, thus ensuring the ability to generate causal social relations. Today, the *dalla's* bid to transform the political and religious landscape, as 'heritage' and therefore an object of display, becomes the focus of design fashions and decorative imagery rather than the plain surface that once typified it.

Khalfan was one of the few old copper and silversmiths who still pursued the craft in the city, even into his mid-70s. Although his own sons had declined to learn the craft in order to pursue more lucrative opportunities in the government sector, Khalfan was training two young men from a family of silver and coppersmiths in Bahla. Although the two apprentices had learnt the craft from their fathers from an early age, they had not been taught the art of design. Khalfan's international status as a model craftsman, whose work has often been exhibited around the world including at the Silk Road Festival at the Smithsonian Mall in Washington DC (Summer 2002), was partly as a result of his being able to adapt and acquire new skills in order to continue

[86] For a parallel study on the role of *karam* as part of a commercial and national repertoire, see Shryock (2004)

earning an income from his copper and silverwork. As he explained to me, echoing the sentiments of others at the Directorate of Handicrafts, the distinctive shape of the *dalla* (its tapered base, curved spout and ornamental dangles) has in recent decades become subject to increasing amounts of chasing, engraving and embossing work, where tiny dotted indentations are made in intricate patterns on the metal assuming, the forms of old Nizwa design motifs. The material qualities of visibility and ornamentality become increasingly important, as such utilitarian items as the *dalla* become heritage, structuring perceptual experience in turn through their assuming the objective form of an abstract series of significances they are supposed to express as part of a representational approach. On such terms, the *dalla* and its decorative surface serve as "bundles of iconicity" that index the relevant qualities that authoritively resonate with the territoriality of the Omani nation state (Keane 2005: 196).

Transformation of the Sociality of the Khanjar

Courage (*shajā'a*), masculinity (*rujūla*), esteem (*haiba*) and nobility (*shahāma*) were the four attributes that would often be mentioned when I inquired about memories of wearing the *khanjar* (the Omani curved dagger) prior to 1970. Alfred Gell (1998) suggested that the soldier's weapon, rather than being merely an accountrement appropriated by the acting subject, was in fact a necessary element in his role as an agent. In other words, the "soldier" himself was made up of parts, the person and the weapon. In talking to a variety of peoples, it became increasingly clear that the *khanjar* -- and other weaponry to a lesser extent – appeared to contain some of the elements that define human agency and in constructing the "Omani" was an integral part of his agency. Wearing a *khanjar* (usually worn at a slightly angle position over the abdomen) inextricably linked the person to a series of virtues that enabled him to discharge his social role. In addition to being a weapon for self-defence, the *khanjar* was an object of genealogical pride, since it was usually inherited and was thus a necessary social element for defining the self genealogically in terms of being a descendant of a specific clan and tribe.

I was repeatedly told that, in those days, it was impossible for someone to leave their house and move about in public without their *khanjar*. It was a necessity in frequenting the *sabla*, the souk, the fort to meet the *wali* or the *qadi* or for attending any occasion or festival. When boys reached the age of maturity (*bulūg*) of fifteen, they were obligated to start wearing it. If possible, it was usually accompanied by a rifle (usually Henri Martinis) on their shoulders with a leather cartridge belt of ammunition (bullets) around their waist, especially if going on a journey. It was considered a failing (*'aib*) not to do so. My landlady's stepfather, now an old gentleman who is much revered among Nizwanis for his scholarship, a product of the Imamate period, explained to me that this was a matter of *sharaf* (honour). "No one would go to the souk or anywhere without it", he said. When, still baffled about its obligatory status, I asked him why this was the case, he replied that "this is custom (*'adat*). If somebody did, he would be embarrassed and ashamed (*yastahī wa yakhjal*). One could not call on him (*laff 'alaihi*). The *khanjar* had to be with you". One old gentleman, who could often be found whiling away his time while talking to the stall owners in the souk and with whom I would occasionally stop to talk, realizing that I wasn't quite grasping the importance of the *khanjar* explained that it was a type of adornment (*zīna*) that was linked to a person much like the tie on a Western suit. A man who did not wear it was considered to be worthless (*mā lahu qīmat*). "If anyone saw you, they would ridicule you (*yaskhar minish*)." At the same time, I was told that the *khanjar* was a weapon to be used either to kill or in less

dramatic fashion for more practical and mundane tasks such as cutting meat or skinning hides. The blade was thus the most important element and as such it was also the most expensive, especially if it was a good quality steel one. Those in good condition would be kept as part of a family legacy and would be removed from the hilt and replaced by a blade of lesser value if the *khanjar* was to be sold, a scenario that became increasingly prevalent over the course of the *nahda* period. I was assured that there were many without decoration or silverwork and that were simply leather whose primary purpose was the knife within rather than their outer appearance.

Wearing a *khanjar* was in itself a marker of social status and distinction. European travelogues from the 17th to the 19th centuries often mention the simplicity of Omani dress, noting that the clothes worn by the imam, a soldier and a peasant hardly differed except by way of a distinction in the turban and the dagger (Slot 1993: 180-94). These distinctions ranged from a hilt fashioned from rhinoceros horn and ivory to the cheaper hard woods or resin. Those with horn would often be faced with pure silver in a variety of decorative forms and techniques, a luxury that could be afforded by very few in Nizwa. Those who were agricultural workers, hired hands for the date harvest season or water bearers also had to wear something that was thought to indicate the same set of qualities. This could be something as simple as a rope made up of goat hair or leather with a plain blade stuck through it or a cartridge belt with empty bullets. This was especially the case in the 1970s, when most people in Nizwa were still occupied either in trade, agriculture or herding. This occupational trend gradually changed in the late 1980s and 1990s with more people being taken up with government positions, the military and commerce. The *khanjar* as the embodiment of social status and a certain type of masculinity was sufficiently pervasive as a mark of distinction, that one person told me of a former slave, now more than 90 years old, who still wears the *khanjar* that he was able to buy, never setting it aside even in sleep. Even today, I was told, a man who comes in wearing a *khanjar* is treated with a respect and treated markedly differently to someone without one.

One young shopkeeper, an avid collector of old photographs and films of old Nizwa, informed me that he had films from 1975 that showed everyone in the souk wearing a *khanjar*. Over the past few decades, however, as I was frequently told, "it has become merely a symbol", "the young today are not dependent on it" or "these things have become superficial (*shakalīya*)." The *khanjar* is another object that has been extracted from its lived material ties and relationships to transcend to the level of becoming a national symbol as well as a standard part of "traditional" national Omani dress consisting of the *disdāsha*, the *maṣ ar* (a turban type covering for the head) and the *khanjar*. The very materiality of the khanjar, induced by its form as well as the possibilities enabled by wearing it, were a part of everyday experiences for the Omanis of Nizwa, inasmuch as it was embedded within social practices, the making of social relationships and their possibilities; as a national symbol the *khanjar* has been extracted from this lived material existence and as a transcendent object has assumed a different role in opening up a different set of implications through inviting new projects altogether. Mass mediated and widely disseminated, as a national symbol[87] it has become de-materialized into an icon of Oman and the values of manhood and nobility that it once embodied have become imbricated in the atemporal abstract plane of deeply entrenched *taqalid al-aṣ līya* (authentic traditions) against a national

[87] The *khanjar* with its belt (specifically the *khanjar al-sa'īdīya* which is named after the current al-Said royal dynasty for which they were usually made) is part of the national symbol of the country set in the middle of two drawn swords.

landscape. Re-categorized as heritage, the *khanjar* gets repackaged to produce a certain predetermined emotional response of pride and a shared national sentiment. As "tradition", I was told that many Omanis are proud of possessing an old *khanjar* as a part of their history, the work of their fathers and grandfathers and now a lucrative form of investment. As a genuine antiquity, depending on the quality of silver it has as well as the craftsmanship and detailed work, a *khanjar* may now fetch from two to three thousand rials ($5-8,000). These are considered examples of the skilled and innovative hand craftsmanship that are thought to exemplify, at least spiritually, a continuous trajectory in Omani history in sharp contrast to the cheap substitutes that are mass produced by migrant labourers today as souvenirs.
The mass media often extols the importance of wearing the *khanjar* today, as a means of inhabiting one's national heritage and tradition and as part of harmonizing the past with the contemporary world, through "strengthening the sense of self in the "Omani man" or of bringing into "maturity (*iktīmāl*) the full sense of "Omani manhood (*rajūla*)".[88] The assistant librarian at the Nizwa *jami'* (congregational mosque) library, a scholarly man in his early 30s with an interest in geology, further elucidated this in explaining how he bought tiny *khanajar* for his sons, "to teach my children, to remind them of their history and for them to get used to wearing them." The *khanjar* has thus moved towards becoming part of a self-conscious form of communication for the cultivation of forms of thought and behaviour that are considered emblematic of national virtues as part of a telos towards acquiring an abstract set of ethical standards, and has ceded its former role of a dependent and enabler of the habitual basis of embodied relationships (those interventions of authority, relatives and neighbours) that were once an integral part of its customary use and its implications.

But its very abstraction from this living matrix has already rendered it dispensable to many. Today, many consider it as an encumbrance to the modern material way of living. The old ex-guardsman (*'askarī*), an uncle of one the fort custodians, chuckled when I asked him about the paucity of its use today and replied,

> How can you drive a car or sit in an office with it hanging on your waist? In the days of the *khanjar* people would walk and would carry their goods either on a donkey or on their head. So there were no obstacles and they could walk around with the *khanjar* and the stick. This was due to a type of watchfulness (*intibāh*) not out of fear since the fort was manned by guards as well as the watch towers and gates, but as part of a type of heritage (*turāth*). This was based on the customary ways (*'urf*) inherited from our fathers and grandfathers. But with changes in modes of life (*ma'īsh*) people have started changing their habits.

The old sheikh who still mans an office in the mornings for official notary business informed me during a chat that, "there are few houses that don't have at least one *khanjar* or gun but no one uses them."

Today, it is primarily worn for official occasions or has become part of a framed wall display. In such a role, I was often told by shopkeepers that the blade is no longer important and is not even kept sharp, but the decoration on the hilt and scabbard have assumed an added importance and

[88] This typical portrayal of the importance of the *khanjar* in the modern world is from an article, "The Khanjar, Symbol of Authenticity and Masculinity for Omanis," *Oman* (national Arabic newspaper), June 24th 2010. However, its assumptions are ubiquitous as part of official discourse in print and audio-visual media.

have become a focal point of attention to the new generation of craftsmen being trained by the General Directorate of Handicrafts. At the same time, it was explained to me that since the items are now expendable and the price of gold and silver has gone up in the past twenty years, they are not worth investing in. People may or may not buy one based on personal circumstances. My favourite taxi driver, Abdullah informed me on one of our drives that since he was not likely ever to attend official occasions, he had burrowed the *khanjar* that he wore for his own wedding – one of the few times that he needed one – from a friend. My landlady on the other hand explained that the men in her family were too impatient to encumber themselves with it while conducting their usual business, and therefore there were none kept among the men in her immediate nuclear family – a husband and three sons. In becoming part of national dress, however, it is usually incumbent upon presiding officials to wear one for official occasions, in opening up a school or a project, or occasionally for festivals as a way of emphatically refiguring oneself as an Omani. Otherwise, as my landlady informed me, "If you go to the souk today to buy something, you don't need it. This is the norm (*'adī*)."

However, on another point, she as well as other Omanis that I talked to were emphatic about, and that was that, in moving in public or official areas, especially in their city,[89] it was incumbent on the Omani to wear the *disdāsha* and the *maṣ ar* or *kumma (*embroidered cap widely worn by Omani men). Inasmuch as clothing is considered to have an intimate relationship with persons, the Omani *disdāsha* as a sign is embedded within a certain historicity with regard to its sheer materiality. As mentioned previously, the state has made it compulsory for all Omani government administrators to wear the standardized Omani *disdāsha*[90] and *maṣ ar* as part of the normal workplace attire for men. With the influx of foreign workers from the late 1970s onwards, many of whom could be found working in shops and restaurants in the Nizwa city centre (not to mention other major cities and towns in Oman), the core of which is still the fort-congregational mosque-souk complex, it was thought desirable to have a means of distinguishing who was Arab and Omani from foreigners such as the Pakistanis or Indians. The *disdāsha* is therefore perceived as acting as a clear index of being a national and being treated accordingly versus the foreign guest worker or expatriate. Other Omanis explained the unofficial need to wear the *disdāsha* among males from an early age as one that was more conducive to the socially recognized conventions of Islamic dress, whose general principles are guided by modesty and looseness on the body. As one person told me, for an Omani boy to go to the souk in trousers and shirt would be *'aib* (a failing) and he would be scolded for it: "How can you come to the souk area like this? This is not part of our morals or religion." Children learn not to do this from an early age and to wear a *disdāsha* in public. One school teacher from Nizwa further explained that his children "would now feel too embarrassed to wear trousers because it opposes (*yūkhālaf*) the conduct (*sulūk*) of society. This is a way of losing (*faqdān*) Omani cultural identity and its

[89] Omani men have, in fact, worn a greater variety of clothing than before the *nahda* period, but it is context specific. For recreational activities such as picnics, hikes, swimming and for sporting activities, more casual tracksuit-type clothing could be worn, where independently attired legs would allow for a longer stride. If they are at home they might wear something more casual such as pants or shorts and a short sleeved shirt. When travelling abroad, of course, many Omanis who do not want to stand out do wear Western style clothing.

[90] This is usually white, and there are specific places for top embroidery (wrists, neckline, opening and across the back at the shoulder blades). There is a specific form of tassel that typifies the Omani *disdāsha* that is now standardized that renders it distinctive from other types of male national dress in the Gulf countries, such as those of the UAE, Saudi Arabia or Kuwait.

traditions. Those who shed (*munsalakhīn*) their society's mode of behaviour, are considered to have no value in society (*lā qīmat lahum fi al-mujtama'*). Copying (*taqlīd*) Western fashions will only end in defeat (*inhizām*) and with feelings of inadequacy (*shu'ūr bil-naqṣ*) for the Omani man."

The *disdāsha*, and its accoutrements, thus become part of a cluster of habits and expectations, constitutive of a public performative in moulding citizenship towards the fulfilment of a set of general principles that embody tradition and history. These become part of small habitual acts by which the capillary effects of history can be felt, working towards shaping a person on an intimate level towards becoming an Omani, through inhabiting "authentic tradition" and becoming a virtuous Muslim in accordance with the modern state.

'Tradition' in the Old Souks and its Manifestation

Among the artisans in the bazaar at Nizwa are makers of camel-saddles, potters, silversmiths, cobblers, carpenters, makers of halwa, blacksmith…. But the most noteworthy part of the bazaar, which is only shaded from the sun by strips of matting here and there, and is not particularly clean, is the copper market, which though inviting by the quaintness of its wares, is repellent from the incessant noise and deafening din of the hammering going on. (Miles as cited by Ward 1987: 262)

The centuries-old souks of Nizwa, *al-gharbi* (western) and *al-sharqi* (eastern), are amongst a number of fabled old markets in the country that have been the object of much state discourse and planning for their "revival" (*in'āsh wa al-nuhuḍ*) as centres of trade and commerce especially for the selling of traditional crafts that are produced by Omani craftsmen as a major source of income. Through the 1990s and into the 2000s this was considered as a way of saving these souks from being made redundant by the onslaught of new department stores, supermarkets and grocery shops that have transformed the urban landscape of the city. However, even as projects of restoration, conservation and heritage management have been deployed by the modern state, invoking normative categories and standards, their consequences have become fraught with uncertainties, provoking a sense of precariousness that has come about through the historical specificity of circumstances shaped by a transforming social economy.

The *souq al-sharqi* stands at the northern end of the new souk complex,[91] opposite the *souq al-gharbi*, the fort and the road that leads to the *hārat al-'aqr*. It was once the primary market in the region for the buying and selling of meat, fish and grains. Flanked on either side by wooden doors, its mud brick walls and wide arches show distinct signs of cracks and fissures. On either

[91] The new souk complex was designed and built in 1993. The idea behind it, according to its architect, was undergirded by general principles that were assumed to operate in the layout and organization of the "Arab souk" where each type of product is allocated its own place. In following these "general" guidelines, instead of being a multi-sectional complex, each section of the "traditional bazaar" has become a small building in its own right to facilitate sanitation and a greater sense of order, creating a cluster effect around a large open space. Each building is dedicated to a particular product: fruits and vegetables (includes a date section), fish, meat, handicrafts and tourism, silver, and copper work, including old rifles, cattle and cattle auctions. It has won international recognition, including the first prize for the Architecture of the Souq, awarded by the Arab Town Organization (in Doha) and in 1995 it was nominated for the Aga Khan Award for Architecture.

side of a narrow corridor are a series of raised enclosed spaces that make up the variety of stalls that once characterized the souk. Most of these are shuttered now, in disrepair, and appear to be being used for storage. Piles of goods and boxes could be found by the side of some of these shuttered stalls, but despite my visiting in the mornings (9.00-13.00) and evenings (16.00-18.00) when they should have been open on weekdays, they remained closed. Only a few stalls at the end were open for business, selling nuts, Arab and Indian spices, herbs, teas, Arab coffee, local honey and other products that could not easily be found in a more Western-oriented supermarket. One of the shopkeepers talked with me about the old days in the 1960s and even the ’70s when goods would be brought in by camel and donkey. The souk at that time would be open from the time of *salat al-ẓuhr* (around midday) to *salat al-aṣr* (mid-afternoon). Most of the shopkeepers used to be farmers or builders in those days and would therefore work from morning until afternoons at their respective occupations before coming into the souk. Thoughtfully, he mused that back then the souks were more crowded and sometimes most of the goods would be finished by the end of two hours. Now he is losing customers and money and even though there is an increase in population and markets in the area, the profits in the old souk come slowly, especially as the larger shops can outprice him. Most of his customers come for specifically Omani goods such as red sugar (made from sugar cane), spices such as *za’atar*, fenugreek (*ḥulba*), and local date syrup amongst other products that cannot be obtained from regular shops or supermarkets.

The *Suq al-Gharbi* stands in the shadow of the fort, opposite the congregational mosque and outside the perimeters of the residential quarters. Surrounded by thick walls, with large wooden doors on either end, the area consists of a series of interconnected narrow corridors through a series of high concave archways, with large cubicle niches that can be fully shuttered, thus making up the stalls on either side. Unlike the *Suq al-Sharqi*, the *Suq al-Gharbi* has been the focus of a major renovation (*tarmīm*) and restoration (*i’ādat binā’*) project in recent years (1990s, at the same time as the building of the new souk complex); although the local trades people who once worked in it preferred to think of the project more along the lines of demolition and rebuilding. When I visited Nizwa in 2006, it was a bustling and crowded market zone, primarily selling jewellery, weaponry, hair accessories, perfumes and women’s and children’s clothing. In 2010-2011, it was virtually deserted and most stalls were shuttered up. A few old stall owners still listlessly waited for customers but most shopkeepers sat on their stall steps and chatted with each other over cups of coffee and dates. The busiest person in the souk was the old sheikh of the district, who kept an open office, crammed full of books and files, who was one of the public notaries of the area as well as an official advisor for any member of the public who cared to drop in. Opposite him was a *khanjar* seller, who would buy old *khanajar* from Omanis and sell them, primarily to tourists. A number of clothing stalls were open, but with few customers.

The sheikh kindly took time in between clients to explain the reasons for the general state of desolation among the stalls of this souk. As he explained, the shops that were there before the renovation began were wider, but in implementing the new model of the ‘authentic’ Arab souk, the walls they had built took up larger spaces and affected the layout transforming the very configuration of the shops. Before renovation, the shops were roomier and people could move about and would sit on the steps of their stalls. “Now”, as he explained, “all activity has been cut and a great deal has been lost.” He reminisced about the time when the *Suq al-Gharbi* was the one market in the area where all trading activity took place. Back then, he said, both the souks

were simple affairs that sold fish and meat and seeds. He ended with the sour note that, "the increasing number of markets and shops that are open until midnight are what has finished off (*khalas*) this souk and left it lifeless (*mafi nīshāṭ*)." When I asked him about the wide dissemination of media reports linking the old souks with the revival of handicraft production, he replied that the new souk complex has already worked itself into building shops that are specific to heritage, along with fish and meat etc. At one time, one could get everything from the *Suq al-Sharqi* and *al-Gharbi*, but now, he informed me, "they have limited themselves. They have built redundant shops and markets that specialize in everything." Another shopkeeper affirmed that trades people were not happy with the small spaces left by the renovation of the old souk, and despite government support to open up shops here, there was no place to put their goods; it wasn't practical and many of the stalls have now been converted into storage spaces. Those who tried opening up stalls were not making enough profit from the straggling groups of tourists who made their way through the doors to browse through the souk and had decided to rent spaces outside.

There were quite a few grumbles amongst shopkeepers over the unwillingness of the Ministry of Heritage and Culture, the director of the project, to change the interior of the building to make it more amenable to commerce. There were complaints among the group of shopkeepers about the dim lighting, the décor as well as the fact that the doors could not fully open from the outside so that customers were not fully aware of the existence of the souks. Apparently, the Ministry had refused any changes or additions on the grounds that the souk is now listed as a historic building and any changes would interfere with its "authentic" fabric. As they told me in regret, at one time this souk was the centre of the city and was even busier than the *Suq al-Sharqi* but because of these renovations and the control of the Ministry of Heritage and Culture, it has failed.

Transformation of the Haras (Quarters) and their Boundaries

Nizwa as a town is broadly divided into an upper (*'alaya*) and a lower (*sifala*) division set at the foot of the Jabal al-Akhdar range. These divisions were premised on their relative distance to the Jabal al-Akhdar, which one can see in the distance, especially from *'alaya* as well as their relative height from it. These were not merely geographical divisions, however, but are pregnant with historical connotations and social implications that have changed over time. During the Imamate period, the boundaries of the division were maintained by each half by being associated with a series of tribal alliances that were, as peoples' memories suggested, usually in a state of attrition (*taharūshāt*), though never outright war – at least during the last Ibadi Imamate. These divisions corresponded roughly with the two main rival tribal confederations, the Ghafiri in *'alaya* and the Hinawi in *sifala.*[92] Each division in turn was and still is divided into a number of regions. *'Alaya* is mainly characterized as the region of *ṣamad* in the north of the city, while *sifala* is divided into *'aqr* in the south and *sa'al* in the east. Each region is further divided into a number of quarters. Some quarters were and to some extent still are considered as the locale of a specific tribe, whose kin live close to one another.

[92] It was the unification of these two tribal confederations around the concept of the Imamate that made possible the successful rebellion against the sultan in 1913 and the establishment of an autonomous Ibadi Imamate in 1920/21 as a result of the Sib Agreement, "brokered" by the British on behalf of the sultan.

The *hārat al-'aqr* was and continues to be considered an unusual residential quarter in being made up of a melange of different tribal groups since it lies in the heart of the city, i.e. the fort-congregational mosque-souk area, although some tribes such as the Albu Saidi were considered the most dominant in the *hara* in terms of influence if not in numbers. Other *haras* might be strongly associated with a single tribe, even being named after them, such as the *Ridat al Kunud*, linked to the Kindi tribe in *'alaya* (the upper town). But for the most part, I was told, there was more mixing of tribal relations in living arrangements now than previously. The region of *sa'al* was known for quarters that were specifically related to particular types of livelihood and craft activity, such as leatherwork or copper and silverwork, and was often associated in people's minds with being the home of many of the *akhdām*, those descended from slaves and client tribes rather than the authentic (*'aṣ al*) "Arab".

Although the city itself is unwalled, each *hara* generally consists of a group of houses adjoining each other with a wall surrounding it accompanied by large gates and watchtowers. The same wall encompassed both the *hārat al-'aqr* and the fort. I was told that before the *al-nahḍa* every *hara* was strictly monitored in terms of movement and interaction with strangers by walls, watchtowers and gates to ensure security. The gates were guarded and closed at night after *'ashā'* prayer and were not opened unless absolutely necessary (Fig. 3.4).

Figure 3.4 One of the crumbling old gates of the that once regulated the flow of people in the old quarter of Al-

'Aqr

In peoples' memories, these regulative features were not considered one of impediment, oppression or control but were thought of more in terms of enabling the creation of a sociality where people, rich and poor, would adhere to one another (*mutamāsukīn*) – unlike, it was tacitly understood, today when rises in salary and standards of living have produced unexpected consequences for that way of life, as discussed above. This was a time, I was told by my landlady lady's father, a grizzled middle aged man (late 50s and 60s) who was well off as the co-owner of a building supplies company and a hotel catering primarily to tourists on the outskirts of the city, "when the rich would assist the poor and the poor would stand by the rich man whether in times of trouble or at any time when they would still together after *al-maghreb* prayer even after 1970 as part of a *sabla*."

This was especially the case when houses adjoined (*mutalāṣiq*) each other, sharing the same walls forging a type of intimacy (*ulfa*) and creating a type of security (*amān*) and protection (*amn*) that formed the basis of a trust (*thiqa*) that "was the reason for a Muslim to respect his neighbour." *Sablas* and mosques were usually built close to the gates or the main streets, in order that visitors would not be too troubled in finding a mosque to pray in. They would usually be hospitably received in the *majlis*/*sabla* of the *hāra* especially as most houses were too small to have one. At the same time, the location of the institutions that "strangers" would be frequenting while visiting the *hāra* – the public *sabla* and the mosque – was determined in spaces that actively monitored the boundaries between the inside and outside, the private and public of the *hāra*, in order to safeguard the sanctity (*hurma*) of the houses and the interiority of dwelling quarters.

While watchtowers, gates, thick walls and guards created enclaves of sociality and patterned interactions as each quarter was delimited and regulated in terms of ties and relationships, those who were better off moved back and forth on a seasonal basis to their agricultural gardens and palms plantations on the outskirts. In displaying photographs of the fort surrounded by a forest of palms, many of the people with whom I talked would reminisce about the seasonal movements of families when agriculture was the primary source of livelihood in Nizwa before the advent of the oil economy. The height of summer and autumn was also the time for the harvesting of dates, and better-off families would often leave their houses in the *hārāt* at that time and stay in the cool shade of their plantations, on the outskirts outside the walls, amidst the trees and the flowing *aflaj* waters, until autumn when harvesting was over. Poorer people would often find seasonal work at this time, in drawing water or helping with the harvest, setting up temporary shelters in the fields. Dates were transported back to the houses in the *hāra* to be put in storage or processed into a variety of products such as *dibs* (date syrup/honey), dried dates etc. for local sales or for export.

Women would participate in the work of farming with men in gathering wood, carrying water, clearing fallen branches, harvesting and preparing fruits and vegetables for sale, amongst a myriad of other tasks, but there was no mixing and the sexes lived separate lives. At the same time, men and women did know each other as neighbours and perhaps as kin even though they were not *maḥārim* (close female relatives such as a sister, aunt, daughter, stepmother or daughter-in-law) and would greet each other in passing. One middle-aged teacher explained to me that any man in the *hāra* back then considered a girl of the quarter to be a sister as part of an ethical mode of living. He emphasized that the fostering of social ties generated from living together created strong feelings of protection between kin and neighbours. Now, I was told, because women usually travel in cars and go to work returning to an enclosed home, they are seldom seen, especially as the weekends are spent on household work, on children or trips to Muscat (a very popular recreational and shopping jaunt). This in turn has led to a greater sense of isolation amongst people, even those living together as neighbours and kin. After 1970, and especially through the '80s and '90s, people in Nizwa contend with an increased modern mass education system and a centralized bureaucratic infrastructure, with greater dispersion.

The main city centre made up of the fort-old souk-congregational mosque complex has also become imbricated in different social practices and interactions as a result of the ongoing *nahḍa* period, and in response has become part of a different set of experiences for women. Women

were not generally allowed into the souk area by the imam because of the large numbers of men usually congregated there. And as an alternative, I was told, a number of them, especially widows who were trying to earn a livelihood, set themselves up as merchants in their own right selling a variety of clothes, cloth and jewellery to women through neighbourly visits and social networks. They either obtain goods through the men in their families or set up appointments with local merchants and shopkeepers, who are not likely to have other customers at that time. This was a normative state of affairs into the 1980s but is now considered to be in sharp contrast with the present when women can come to visit the souk at any time they please. However, the general reluctance to visit the main souks or the open-air Friday market continues to a certain extent into the present day when many Nizwani women, including my landlady, felt reluctant to walk about and shop in the area because of the increasing number of men in the city centre. This not only included foreign labourers, who could often be seen either working in stores or sitting among the sheltered archways and rest stops in the area, but also Omanis who come from all over the interior to work in government services, the retail enterprises that have sprung up in regional capital or in taxi cabs. Muscat with its anonymity was often preferred as a favoured shopping destination especially in order to avoid gossip and talk, of any sort, among acquaintances about a woman shopping among strange men even if she was accompanied by her husband. Nizwa women would usually travel in their cars to a favoured shop in Nizwa's city centre, and either go up and buy the necessary, returning to their cars almost immediately, or send one of their children to do so as a way of maintaining anonymity. When I inquired about these shopping practices from my landlady, she replied that she preferred the supermarkets especially as they were quieter and, being on the city outskirts, there were not too many men about, unlike the city centre. She further explained that most girls, when they reach the teenage years, felt much too embarrassed or awkward (*tastahī*) to even attend the 'Id fair in the city centre, partly because of the crowds of men usually milling around.

All the walks that women of my acquaintance took in the evenings as exercise or in order to visit a relative or neighbour were usually within the environs of the walled quarters, amongst the houses of acquaintances, kin and neighbours, passed old mosques and Quranic schools, and sheltered by the narrow rough paths that were usually overhung by low-walled palm orchards and fruit gardens with the narrow stone channels of the *aflaj* running through them. These were spatial terrains that Nizwani women with roots in the area were socially tied to and habituated towards. This was in contrast to the possibility of walking along the new highways on the other side, built by the State, which were open, usually treeless, highly visible and vulnerable to the stares of "strangers", typically foreign workers who would walk to and from the city centre along the main roads. Women usually negotiated these highways by car, in order to maintain anonymity, effectively categorizing them into spaces to avoid.[93]

The Ministry of Heritage and Culture has in recent decades undertaken the study, documentation, preservation and management of traditional Omani architecture that is considered as "travelling through times past as a stretch of deeply rooted history exemplified by innovation (*ibdā'*) and originality (*ibtikār*) and as an architectural fabric that is simultaneously

[93] Mandana Limbert makes a parallel argument of the effect of modern highways on town divisions and women's movements in Bahla, Oman (2010: 19-46).

considered to be characteristic of continuity and authenticity."[94] Enabled by the concept of heritage and history, everyday residential homes are now considered as the closest to that which remains of the socio-economic and cultural traditional existence of Omanis from times past. The documentation, preservation and museumification of their forms in hundreds of old residential quarters scattered throughout the different regions would delineate another point of intersection where the past becomes the basis for 1) the revival of 'authentic' traditional values to be carefully cultivated and fostered in harmony with the present, and 2) the basis of economic development through touristic commoditisation. These would include examples of certain established building types such as the *sabla*, principle gates of a *hāra* with its attached watchtowers, as well as the underground oven, the *tanur*,[95] which were common building types and are considered today as examples of communal living and a cooperative way of life; traditional building types and techniques would also merit preservation and would include residential houses, old souks, mosques and *katātīb* where the Quran was taught to children as well as defensive features such as walls, watchtowers and fortified gates.

As a result, in recent years mandates (Council of Ministers, #102/535) have been passed warning against the demolition or renovation of any building in the old *hārāt* deemed historic, except with the permission of the Ministry who would monitor all activities. Building within certain historic zones, which would include for example the vicinity of the congregational mosque-fort-souk cluster in Nizwa, is strictly forbidden except with the express permission of the Ministry. Establishing an alternative set of uses for old gardens and date plantations, by their owners, especially by way of building on them likewise also requires a permit from the Ministry. Likewise, permission is not granted to construct any new buildings that are higher than the historic buildings in the vicinity. In the case of Nizwa, this would be the fort itself. This mandate was passed on the grounds that new structures should not mar the field of vision of the spatial enclave of historic sites as part of the heritage realm. On a similar note, even the types of colours that can be used on the surfaces of new establishments in the vicinity of heritage sites and historic buildings are limited to those permitted by the Ministry. These have become the lynchpins for a new epistemic framework where relations with a past are produced through such terms as "heritage", "culture", "history" and "handicrafts", inculcating new norms, as has been explained, in education, ethics and citizenship while also being absorbed into new economic rationalities where documentation, management, conservation and investment become part of the language of 'history' and "culture". In this instance, the architecture of old residential quarters generates the visual idiom by which to bestow an aura of historical longevity and continuity to an overarching national narrative.

[94] Introduction of the *Documentation Project of Omani Harāt* published by the Ministry of Heritage and Culture – Council for the Registration and Preservation of Groups of Historic Buildings, 2009.

[95] The *tanur* is an underground pit oven usually used for Eid celebrations, when the residents of a *hara* come to specific areas in the neighbourhood, bringing the household meat to roast. In Nizwa, in the *sifala* area, this is usually soaked in spices and then wrapped in palm fronds to be put in a specially-made sand oven. I was told that, in times past, as part of an age-old tradition, neighbours and kin would come together to prepare the pit, line it with stones and charcoal and cover the roasting meats with sand over the space of two days in order to make the meat especially tender. While I was there for Eid celebrations in 2010 however, although many Omanis (especially men) were gathered and helping with the preparations, Pakistani and Indian workers were also involved doing the heavy work of digging and actively manning the temperature of the oven.

These landmarks insomuch as they are captured instead by early (1960s and 1970s) photographs, films and digital imagery on cameras, mobile phones or laptops as public display or private expressions of nostalgic sentiments by the ordinary citizens of Nizwa, become marked as residual reminders of rupture that become memorials of what had once taken place. The consumption of these images is shaped by a state-wide widely mediatised discourse, in 1) being conceived along a teleological temporal plane, and 2) are expressed as general principles and values in the grammar of abstracted traditional ways of life and communal living, , cultivated by the state as part of the rubric of ideal citizenship. But the very projects of preservation and museumification that the state fosters as part of living the *nahda* or a "revival" where tradition perpetuates itself through these architectural forms and material objects generate a sense of loss amongst many Nizwanis, instead, in view of the pace of material developments, concrete changes and their implications as part of modern nation building, disrupting the logic of heritage even while conforming to it.

Greater wealth and subsidized loans for land from the government has led to greater diffusion in residential patterns and an overall move away from the old neighbourhoods. At the same time, it has also moved towards greater centralized governance through institutionalized bureaucracies, ranging from the wali's office, the branches of various ministries and the judicial notary to the police stations and the regional court. Those policies regulating the maintenance and additions allowed for old houses in the *hārāt* have had a definitive effect in recent years on people's choice of residence, especially among the younger generation (late 20s and 30s) when those working neither have the time nor patience to cope with bureaucratic obstacles and the filling out of the necessary forms nor the means to afford accompanying increases in land prices in building in the old *hārāt*, leading at times to the only possible alternative, which is to buy land in one of the newer officially zoned areas (*aḥyā'*) and build anew.

Today, although much of the *hārat al-aqr* is in ruins, there are still signs of habitation. As I walked about one morning with Khalfan, the copper and silversmith who had grown up in the area, passing ruined doorways, partially tumbled down guard towers and old gate ways, he informed me that the *ṣārūj* also called "Omani cement" (made of sundried mud brick) which most houses in the area were layered with (in a mixture of mud and straw), needed to be plastered in yearly intervals on the surfaces of the surrounding houses and mosques in order to maintain their appearance. At one time, this was a communal effort; now the crumbling and cracked appearance on the façade of many of the old buildings is a direct result of migration and overall neglect. When I tried to peer into some of the open houses to get a sense of what the layout would have been, Khalfan informed me that many of the original inhabitants had left the *hara* to move into the newer suburbs (*ḥayy/aḥyā'*) which were arid lands reclaimed as new residential neighbourhoods of Nizwa where residents could build larger houses with amenities such as electricity and air conditioning. Many of these old houses had been rented out to foreign workers, who were primarily bachelors and lived in groups. Knowing my great interest in this quarter, my landlady would periodically warn me while driving through the *hārat*, in the evenings to visit her mother's family who still lived there, not to walk in the area in the evenings on my own. She explained that there were *hunud* (Indians) about and it was no longer safe. Their presence as bachelors (with no acknowledged social ties) and foreigners ("strangers") within the quarter had transformed the spatial boundaries of the quarter itself and the significance that it once had. Being ensconced within its walls was synonymous with safety and security in

opposition to being outside its perimeter and in danger. Today, with its moribund physical boundaries, these neighbourhoods with their now fluid borders are increasingly set against the ubiquitous presence and maintenance of a social order defined and regulated by the modern nation state, reaffirming the inextricable daily dependence of Nizwa – once capital of the 20th century Ibadi Imamate – on the larger fabric of nation building and civil infrastructure.

As Khalfan and I walked by, we could see hanging clotheslines in the doorway and hear Indian music in the background. Many of these buildings were set amongst small date plantations and fruit gardens with narrow water channels, the *aflaj*, fed by underground springs running through them. One could often see Indian workers tending to these fields. Almost every family in Nizwa, I was told, no matter how poor, still keeps a small garden, if not a farm, whose fruit, especially dates, sustains them, ideally throughout the year. Excess produce would often be sold at auction in the fruit and vegetable souk, creating an alternative source of income for people, especially as the standard of living was so high here. Since the Omani owners of these gardens often work in administrative or government jobs during the day, they would hire foreign field hands (mostly Indian) to tend to them on a daily basis. A question that I constantly posed to people in Nizwa was why they continued to own date gardens when they are no longer a source of income or a basic form of sustenance, given the variety of cheap imported foodstuffs available.[96] The importance of eating and distributing dates from a family-owned garden was explained to me as something that could not really be understood on a cognitive level, but was part of the process of inhabiting sentimental memory, when dates had once been the very stuff of life, particularly in times of famine in years past. This was especially the case when "as Muslims and Arabs, dates were the principle repast" (*wajba min al-wajbāt al-ra'īsī*), as my landlady replied in her answer, and all that "kept you from going hungry at times." Giving a neighbour the fruit off your tree is still considered as giving away part of your sustenance, creating a social debt and thus establishing affective social ties with them. Possessing a few palms or renting out the yield of a neighbour's trees today is enough to satisfy today's household needs and fulfil the responsibilities of being a host. Khalfan's strong ties to his plot had partly led him to decide to build a small house in it to live out his years after retirement surrounded by his sons who lived in the area as well.

However, a number of people I talked with spoke angrily about the fact that the transformations resulting in a sudden decrease in the dependence on agriculture as a basic livelihood has resulted in Nizwa losing 50% of its valuable farming land to newly-built houses, and the few date palms that families keep are considered a mere symbolic gesture to a past that has disappeared over time. As one resident informed me angrily, "this is land that was carefully cultivated and maintained by our forefathers. To buy it and use it for housing is very wrong considering that this was once valuable agricultural land." Many of the photographs that I viewed that were in the possession of a variety of people from taxi drivers, to shopkeepers and even professors' offices in Nizwa, usually showed a panoramic landscape of green palms around the fort in the midst of which were the relatively smaller and compact grey outlines of the myriad of buildings that made

[96] Although the Nizwa area was self-sufficient in wheat, rice was a staple and had to be imported from India in exchange for dried fruits such as dates and lemons. It therefore became subject to British regulation and control in the course of the 20th century as a means of manipulating the internal politics and policies of the Ibadi Imamate in the 1920s and '30s. The Imamate was especially susceptible to such interventions as the trade in rice was primarily in the hands of merchants who were subjects of the British Raj.

up the city of Nizwa and its quarters. This view of Nizwa was depicted on photographs dating from the 1960s at the earliest right up to 1979. The mid-1980s, I was often told, marked the beginning of dramatic transformations in the urban landscape and its accompanying changes.

One morning, in a conversation over dates and coffee with two of Nizwa fort's custodians and their companions, while going over old photographs in their possession, I asked about changes to the old city centre characterized by the fort-great mosque-old souk complex over the past forty years. Today, it is fronted by a variety of shops and restaurants on either side of the main road that was built in the 1970s. This road, a product of the national centralizing infrastructure that was often considered to herald the beginnings of the *nahḍa* period, is today one of the main arteries of the city that starts in Muscat 140 kilometres away and moves towards Bahla, al-Hamra and Ibri in the interior. They explained that the city centre has expanded to encompass parts of the residential quarter of *hārāt, al-wadi al-gharbiya* (western wadi) that adjoins *hārat al-ʿaqr* and the fort, and has been inundated following a real estate boom since the mid-1970s, when new companies and enterprises from the outside world came in, in order to invest and buy buildings to establish trading companies and shops in the area. Many people at that time either sold their houses or, at the very least, just the lower level for stores, renting out rooms on the upper floor to the influx of foreign workers who were entering in large numbers. These were not only workers for building and construction but also for managing the new trading companies, their supermarkets and shop fronts, and included teachers, doctors, nurses, engineers and maintenance workers for civic infrastructure and building etc. among their growing numbers. Many of the building projects and consumer retail chains were not only catering to Omanis but were adapting themselves to the needs and tastes of a growing expatriate population. This was the beginning of the redundancy of the old souks of *al-gharbi* and *al-sharqi* and the beginnings of a fast-paced competitive race between Nizwanis themselves to build and open shops for ready-made clothes, groceries, supermarkets etc.

Rapid developments in government civic infrastructure and movements in commerce accompanied by a sharp rise in car traffic in the late 70s and 80s forged the basis for an increasing clash of crowds, especially when the Bedouins would come into the city on foot bringing their goats and sheep in order to sell their animals and their products at the main cattle market, under the spreading shade of a large tree by the great mosque. This tree had assumed mythical proportions among middle-aged Nizwanis with whom I talked and figured in a number of photographs of the area dating to the 1970s and early 80s, since it had long been customary for people to congregate here in droves, bargaining, buying and auctioning off their animals for sale. Congestion in the area due to traffic and an increase in livestock selling was one of the primary reasons for the transformation of the cattle market into one of the key sections of the "traditional" and yet systemic and orderly souk complex, in the early 1990s, which was primarily built on agricultural land belonging to the state (*bait al-māl*). This was considered as another example when the "tradition" of animal auctions would be adapted, to be in harmony with Oman's modernity. It was in the course of building the new souk, in 1990, that the tree finally fell one night. Its falling had led to a proliferation of tales and accounts in which the tree itself becomes symbolic of a historic age when it had once been the crossroads for a regional cattle market. When I asked one of my narrators, a young security guard and taxi driver in his early 30s, why the tree assumed such great importance, he replied that "the old always retains that which is the most authentic/original (*aṣ al*). The modern builds, or destroys or covers up the old.

These [pointing to the photos on his mobile phone] are memories (*dhikrayāt*). There is always a danger that we will forget when we see something new in the place of these historic sites and lose a sense of the original in the process. These pictures are dear to me now especially as I remember walking in this area when I was young."

Nostalgia and its Politicization

The very processes of museumification and heritage formation have made people sharply aware of the material constitution of everyday life. Once interacting, consuming and living with these material forms as part of everyday experiences, they now become categorized in accordance with whether they bear the hallmarks of progress or that of the traditional. The category of tradition is thus experienced as maximally symbolic of a representative past even as it is transformed into something abstract and indeterminate in that form. Even a simply statement such as, "celebrating the culture and heritage of Oman"[97] is effectively casting national and state forms and practices onto a landscape, emptying it of any causal significance derived from Imamate lived experiences and becoming the very ground on which "culture" and "history" become unrepresentable for many Nizwanis.

Even as material progress transforms the urban fabric of Nizwa and organizes people to develop their industry and skills through inhabiting tradition as a form of reasoning and a mode of existence, there was another side for many locals in Nizwa: the loss and gradual disappearance of the very values that encapsulate the past for the state, as living objects of experience, in the sensorial responses they once enabled and the possibilities they opened up towards generating a certain sociality on the ground. Where the past in official discourse is considered in terms of revival and unleashed potentiality for the future, for many in Nizwa it was experienced as one of loss, irretrievable in the face of modernization and change especially in the face of inflation, the rising cost and standard of living and increased unemployment.

It was often lamented that the days before the *nahda* and into the 1970s and '80s was a time when men and women helped each other and life was simpler, cheaper and clearer (*sāṭ i'*). An ongoing complaint was how the demands on life are much harder now as houses become more expensive. In former years, they were considered more economical since the materials, primarily mud brick and the palm tree, were local. Building and repair work, among other tasks, was a communal effort, and life was often characterized by contemporary Nizwanis as one of mutual solidarity (*takāful*) and close connection (*tarābuṭ*). In marriage, a man would usually live with his father and grandfather in the same house in contrast to nowadays when each man on getting married feels compelled to build or rent a house or apartment of his own, resulting in dispersion. Back then, I was informed, a few silver bangles and a ring was enough for the *mahr* (dowry) especially as one was more than likely to marry a family member (usually a first cousin) or a girl from the *hara*. The *mahr* would on average cost 50-60 *qursh* (approx. OR 100-200),[98] and one's morals and character was considered more important than his salary or job expectations. While I

[97] Taken from the widely disseminated pamphlets given to all visitors of the Muscat Festival held from January 27th-February 24th, 2011

[98] At one time the *qursh fransi* or the Maria Theresa dollar was one of the standard currencies of Oman; 1 *qursh* = 110 *baisa* roughly. A 1000 *baisa* today is equal to OR 1/$ 2.60.

was in Nizwa, there were constant complaints among the younger men that the *mahr* had reached astronomical levels, being on average between 5,000-7,000 OR ($ 12,987-18,100) especially with the increasing demand for gold and precious stones rather than silver jewellery, in addition to incurring wedding and engagement celebration expenses (approx. OR 2,000/$ 5,194). Many men are unable to marry until they can afford to rent or buy a house, its furnishings and a car. This has resulted in increased expenses especially if there were dependents involved (such as parents) and an exponential increase in the workload for many to meet the rising standard of living especially among young and middle-aged men.

Tariq, a local from Nizwa, would often take me on my research trips to Muscat, giving us a chance to chat. Tariq worked at the branch of the Ministry of Defense in Nizwa. During evenings and weekends he would wander the streets in his taxi looking for customers. Although he had steady work, and a subsidized loan from the government to buy a plot in one of the new official suburbs of the city, his mother and sisters were dependent on him for living expenses. He was trying to earn enough money to build a house in order to plan for a family in the future. His story is representative of most of the taxi drivers that I travelled with over the course of my sixteen month's field work in Nizwa and in Muscat who were compelled to hold down two jobs in order to meet living expenses and plan for a future. Most worked in the mornings in government administration or a private company and would then spend evenings travelling the roads looking for customers as taxi drivers, spending time, if they could, with their families on the weekends.

Many like him, kept photographs of old Nizwa on their mobile phones and would display them with explanations on the material changes they had witnessed during their lifetime in the city and its material consequences in their lives. The heritage institutions within which now obsolete objects, relationships and concepts have been objectified to be commodified and consumed as part of Oman's experience of modernity, as *nahda*, has instead produced an experiential sense of the past that cannot be encapsulated within the existing terminology of heritage language and official discourse. The resulting widespread but unofficial circulation of photographs of old Nizwa has become part of an emergent sense of nostalgia, offering themselves up for a reflection on loss among many in Nizwa, especially men of the younger generation of men (late 20s-40s).

This sense of loss has been shaped, as an alter ego to modernity, on the back of the unilinear progression of time that forges the backbone of the Omani concept of modernity, the *nahḍa*, and its concomitant abstract conception of a "renewal" and reconstruction of the past (Boym 2001; Ozyuruk 2006). In the face of the concrete transformations brought about by modernization, many in Nizwa expressed the need for the practical embeddedness and embodied effects of the very values fostered by the national objectification of tradition, as part of the realm of lived experiences that conditioned their lives rather than as the indeterminate and abstract spirit of conventional public representation that now effectively separates these objectified values from their social bonds and causal implications. This has engendered a type of nostalgia where the past is recognized as one that can no longer exist, since it is already interpellated through the representational and commodity structures of heritage, becoming effectively irretrievable and unrepeatable, given the impetus towards a future of material development and modernity. However, this sense of loss has also become internalized in becoming a constitutive part of how the present is critiqued as an integral part of living memories that have since informed the

present struggles of many in Oman, including Nizwanis against growing economic disparities, unemployment and political corruption.

In early 2011, in the wake of protests in Tunisia and subsequently Egypt and Bahrain, this sense of nostalgia opened up a political space in Nizwa (and elsewhere), in assuming a more political edge, and becoming a source of moral and political anxiety that called for active political intervention. Many of the younger men I had talked to and shared photographs with actively supported the protests, even if only a few took part in the demonstrations that took place in Muscat and Nizwa (university area) as well as other regional centres in early 2011. Although the Western mass media, by and large, homed in on the protests as a call for constitutional monarchy, greater political representation, and the end of corruption by cabinet ministers, some of the most violent demonstrations such as those in Sohar (February 2011), an industrial port city to the north of Muscat, were intimately related to demands for better economic prospects as a result of rising unemployment and costs of living.[99] Even as an increasingly analytical and abstract sense of tradition, its temporal rationale, and its institutionalization as heritage and consumerism has attempted to co-opt the very nature and politics of the lived experiences of the Imamate, it has produced forms of marginalized communal memories embodied in the unofficial circulation and exchange of old photographs dating from the time of the Jebal al-Akhdar war onwards (1958 to the mid-1970s). On the one hand, these memories may be considered in terms of nostalgic monuments to a dead past; for many Nizwanis, however, they have also forged an alternative understanding of the past – as part of lived relationships – that continue to have effects on the present in assuming a political edge that informs the nature of present struggles with tradition as an integral form of modern state governance.

[99] Sohar's protests made world headlines on February 27th, 2011, when violent clashes between protestors and police armed with teargas canisters and rubber bullets led to the death of two demonstrators. Protests in Muscat and other smaller regional centres and towns in Oman had until that time been peaceful. In March 2011, Sultan Qaboos responded to accusations of corruption by sacking and replacing most members of his cabinet. He also increased the powers of the Consultation Council (*Majlis ash-Shura*) which is an elected body and which now has televised parliamentary debates. In a series of royal decrees, he also raised state spending in 2011 and 2012 in order to create 50,000 new jobs in the public and private sector and provide opportunities for job training. This was accompanied by making provisions for increasing social security and improving living conditions through comprehensive increases in state salaries, unemployment benefits, the rescheduling of debts and the creation of a marriage fund to facilitate the provision of dowries. Its aim is not merely to provide loans or financial grants to enable young men of limited means to marry but was also considered a way of enhancing social solidarity and community integration as part of facilitating the process of forming the "proper family" through relieving economic pressure (*Oman Tribune*, March 14th 2011).

CHAPTER FOUR

THE MEANING OF THE PAST AS A LEGACY OF SLAVERY

> *The human* (*insān*) *in the Sultanate of Oman has his hierarchies and levels beginning with the terms, "sheikh", "pure" and "Arab" but not ending with the terms "subordinate" (taba'*), "*servant/slave ('abd*), "*client" (mawla*), *"servant"* (*khādim*) *from the establishment of the modern nation state in 1970…*
>
> Salim al-Tuwaiya. "An Entry into Racial Discrimination in Oman" 2007, http://www.farrq.net/forums/showthread.php?t=137.

One day, while talking to the custodians of the fort in Nizwa, an older gentleman joined us. He had once been a guardsman at the fort and, knowing my great interest in daily life there before 1970, his nephew, one of the custodians, had invited him to join us for a chat. He had brought with him an old deed of sale of property, and on my expressing deep interest in the type of language used to delineate property borders, he offered to photocopy it for me. When the second copy came back, however, on looking it over to make sure that it was authentic, he noticed that the word "*mawla*" (client) was linked to the buyer of the property and hurriedly asked his nephew for a way to erase the name from the copy altogether before handing it over to me. A bottle of white-out was somehow produced. When I, half amused and half curious, asked him for his reasons for wanting it removed, he replied that the term was erased out of respect for the sultan and his efforts to promote equality after slavery.

Erasing the name *mawla* physically in 2011 from a copy of a property document more than forty years old was no less than the resonance of transformations that took place from 1970 onwards that not only affected politics, law and education in Oman but also introduced new ethical modes of engaging the past that challenged the old epistemologies of history. The aural discipline of history, its orientation towards exemplary models for virtuous conduct as part of a Quranic worldview and its grounding in *sirāt al mustaqīm* (the right path) as defined by Ibadi *sharī'a'* had become objects of new political concern and active intervention. Simultaneously, however, the very basis by which a new subject of history has been engendered by the practices of heritage has increasingly scrapped against the nation state, producing alternative understandings of ethics and history.

This chapter is an ethnographic exploration of the paradoxes constitutive of the notion of equality in modern Oman from 1970 onwards as it marks a sudden shift in the concepts organizing the historical experiences of slavery, once an integral part of everyday life in 20th century Oman. Its very formulation is made across a dense swathe of historical relations that informs both the constraints and possibilities that the concept "equality" holds in Oman. Equality becomes part of potential lines of movement as memories and narratives becoming productive in the unfolding of futures that contend with the national narrative of progress. Such movements are mobilized by contradictory relations with the past even as they lead to alternative possibilities of becoming, fracturing tradition even as they enable it through contesting articulations of ethics, politics and history.

A large and white-turreted edifice, the Sohar Fort presides over the Gulf of Oman coastline as one of the primary historical sites of the Batinah coastal region. One of the many forts and

castles in the region, it has been restored and museumified by the Ministry of Heritage and Culture. Like the fort in Nizwa, the walls of its passageways are hung with old Henry Martini rifles and swords. Its chambers have been transformed into a series of exhibit halls that teleologically map the Oman region as a whole, spatializing time in operating as conduits for knowledge. Through geological timelines and rock specimens, archaeological finds in the area including copper carvings, Sindi pottery pieces, Chinese statuettes and Roman coins, a certain historical logic comes into effect. Facilitated by lighted backdrops of the excavations in Sohar and elsewhere in Oman, as well as artistic imaginaries of the city over time, the museum tracks the labour and technologies used to harness the land's resources through copper mining, agriculture, sea commerce and boat building from ancient times into the medieval period when Sohar slowly grew in prominence and prosperity as a major trading entrepôt and metropolis as well as a material witness to the defeat of the Portuguese – who had once garrisoned it and strengthened its defences – by the Ya'ariba Imamate in A.D. 1643.

As a discursive mechanism, deploying visible knowledge through a unitary set of narrative techniques and texts, the museum is more than a mere repository of artefacts. It becomes an operation of periodizing, with its concomitant inclusions, occlusions and reifications, grounding the categories of culture and heritage upon substantive distinctions between the ancient, medieval and modern while rendering them legible to be placed within larger "universal" histories of "progress" and "civilization". There is however, as emphasized in chapters 2 and 3, another set of practices at work here, where the exhibit format aims to elicit and sediment certain forms of attention and modes of perception by which the Omani citizen is enjoined to become ever more modern through imbibing this relationship with the past, facilitating a process of working on the self. However, even as this operation of historical representation cleaves through the past in forging its truth, it has decided political effects.[100] In establishing the underlying rubric of a territorial community through the process of preserving the past, it also becomes a forceful means of silencing those elements that are excluded, a type of waste generated by the leftovers and residue that sorely lack explanation, making them difficult to render intelligible even as they play a fundamental role in the creation of forms of sociality. These become the "remnant traces of a beginning as impossible to retrieve as to forget" (De Certeau 1988: 47). But they also become "survivals" that figure as the return of the repressed, upsetting the "proper" order of historical representation and interpretation even as they reconfigure the experiences of modernity among Omanis as its underside. One such remnant is the officially unacknowledged legacy of slavery. These official attempts to silence it by marginalizing its memories altogether were, I was quietly told, driven by fear of exacerbating tribal tensions and longstanding conflicts. However, the history of slavery continues to have tangible effects in the reproduction and negotiation of finely-grained social distinctions and marriage practices among Omanis.

In claiming a single consciousness, as a secular nation, Oman has grounded itself in the notion that every citizen is equal to every other as a legal and political member of the state, entitled to equal rights. This assumption undergirds the national language of historical truths of landscapes, buildings and other material forms as one centred on the labour of cultivation and working over the land and its resources. This form of belonging, which stresses territoriality and productive labour, forges the underlying basis for cultivating the ethical self-awareness of the citizen. Yet

[100] On the political effects of historical representation as institutionalized practice, see De Certeau 1988; Hayden White 1990; Chakrabarty 2000.

the Sohar Fort, like other historical landmarks in the region, has also been embedded within alternative forms of social belonging, grounded in a past based on the notion of *walā'* (clientage) with its language of patrilineal descent (*nasab*), lineage, blood and the stigma of slavery.[101]

Slavery in 20th Century Oman

The 19th and early 20th centuries – ending around 1929 – saw a boom in industries in the Gulf region that had a high demand for labour, specifically slave labour, leading to a sharp rise in the number of slaves in the region. The Gulf's pearl and date industries were determined by larger global economic forces subject to international consumer demands and the rise and fall of supply and demand (Hopper 2008). Although not large by global standards, the Arabian date was increasingly marking the shift from domestic agricultural production to a cash crop export economy, especially to India.[102] Date exports on such a regional scale facilitated the import of rice, a staple in Omani households until today. The Sohar Fort was part of larger regional forces in the 19th century that witnessed a growth in date plantations in the Batinah region and its 150 mile coastal stretch on the Gulf of Oman, moving northward from Muscat and continuing into Sohar. This therefore became the focal point of one of the largest populations of enslaved Africans and their progeny in a region whose date production required intensive irrigation techniques, a state of affairs that continued into the 1930s.[103] However, global capitalism was more than a set of impersonal forces at work, since it shaped life-worlds in the process.

Domestic slavery in Oman was characterized as being of two types: 1) household (domestic, body guards, and coffee makers) and 2) industrial (date plantations and pearl diving). At a time of financial stringency and a bad pearl market, the slave was also noted as frequently being better off than the free Arab tribesman. His lot under the industrial sector was considered considerably harder than working in a household, but no more than that of the free tribesman. A number of colonial reports noted that domestic slavery in the Arabian Peninsula was like the conventional Uncle Tom's Cabin picture of prisoners in gangs with overseers. Instead, slaves were often sent

[101] Fredrik Barth, one of the first ethnographers of *nahda* Oman, did his fieldwork in Sohar in the mid-1970s (1974-1976). He noted (1983) the centrality of certain institutions such as the market and the large fortress in Sohar where the sultan's appointed governor still presided over the region, directing public matters. He further observes the range of social divisions that characterized Sohar at that time including wealth and property, the mark of slavery, ethnic origin and language at a time when society was also deeply affected by political instability and labour migration.

[102] Oman's share in the date plantation economy was relatively small compared to the larger sectors in Iraq, for example, but it was considered to have been an especially dynamic force in the creation of a global trade network, especially in carving out a niche in the US date market in the 19th century. The first American export company, W.J. Towell was established in 1866 especially to ship Omani *fardh* dates to New York (Hopper 2008; Bhacker 1992).

[103] The Batinah region also witnessed covert slave trade operations into the 20th century, which due to the anti-slave measures taken by the British navy were now directed primarily towards the Mekran coast (a coastal strip in the south of Sind and Baluchistan considered to be part of Persian Baluchistan) along the coast of the Arabian Sea and the Gulf of Oman. Those enslaved in the 1920s and 1930s, although mere trickles compared to the past, were primarily Baluchis (R/15/1/226; R/15/1/230). Wudam, a small coastal settlement in the Batinah region became the centre of trafficking as most slaves were re-exported to Saudi Arabia, other Gulf ports or Iran.

to tend date gardens, to fish or to pearl[104] by their masters and there were opportunities for them to reach the nearest manumission authority either through British sloops that frequented the coast or the political agent stationed in Muscat as well as other Gulf ports, but few did so.[105] Also duly noted were the ties of sentiment that often characterized the relationship between the slave and the family household which he served, and the possibility of freely mingling with the community to which they belonged. One of the reasons the British gave for the dearth of applications to the political agency for manumission among slaves in Oman was that the domestic slave, in most cases, was economically no worse off than the free man. The master of the slave was bound to feed his dependent and clothe him sufficiently, providing him with a wife and a home. The freeman, however, although able to keep his earnings, had to support himself and his household for the rest of the year beyond the pearling season.

Bertram Sidney Thomas, who had been the finance minister and the *wazir* of the sultan (1925-1932), recounts an incident when he had once employed a slave and asked him why he did not apply for his freedom with the agency. The slave replied that his master falling on bad times could not afford to keep him and had therefore turned him out to earn his own living. If however he was out of work his master always fed him until he got work and he expressed himself ready to return to work for his master when his financial situation improved. Thomas continues in noting that the majority of domestic slaves in the Persian Gulf were more concerned about practical issues by which they could obtain a modicum of the necessities of life than with abstract considerations.[106]

Many of these slaves were born into their masters' families and regarded themselves as part of the household, attached to them by ties of sentiment and dependence. Social ties of belonging in the region were based on ideas of household and family that moved beyond that of the nuclear family and immediate blood relatives to include dependents, both those who were slaves and those who were freed. While not abolishing slavery, constant voluntary emancipation did take place in Oman over the course of the 19th and 20th centuries (Sheriff 2005: 115-116; Jwaideh and Cox 1989: 50-4; Barth 1983: 46-47). Those emancipated were regularly co-opted into the concept of fictive kinship, creating family networks and tribal ties. Whether they were pearl divers, sailors, administrators, or family retainers, former slaves and their descendants were adopted into the tribes of their masters, and became clients (*mawāli*, sing. *mawla*),[107] assuming

[104] Although there are no pearling banks along Muscat or its coastal regions a large number of Omanis from the Batinah (almost 5,000, of whom 1,000 were believed to be slaves) would migrate to the Trucial coast (present day Emirates) seasonally to participate in the pearl diving season (R/15/1/230; R/15/2/601).

[105] In a report issued by the British Political Resident, Bushire, Iran to the India Office (20th July 1935, R/15/1/228); in a report on "Domestic Slavery in the Persian Gulf" from the Honourable Liet-Colonel H.V. Biscoe, Political Resident of the Persian Gulf to the Foreign Secretary to the government of India, New Delhi (18th March, 1930, R/15/1/230); in an anonymous note entitled "Minute file xiii/3", 23rd July 1948, R/15/1/234.

[106] Report by Bertram Thomas *wazir* of the Muscat state (R/15/2/601)

[107] The *mawāli* category is a rather broad one in that it also included smaller Arab tribes or foreign peoples that in the past had resorted to the protection of larger and more powerful tribal groupings for protection as well as to acquire rights as members of a community. These groups included the *bayāsira* whose origins are rather murky, with differing ideas about their ancestry ranging from being descendants of the original inhabitants of the region prior to the Arab migrations to migrants from Hadrawmawt. It also included the *zuti* who are thought to have been descendants of prisoners of war who had became clients of Arab tribes, facilitating their assimilation. What all these

the name and descent line of the Arab tribe – the clan eponym – they had been adopted into and establishing patron-client bonds with their former masters. They accommodated themselves to lives conditioned by the 'patronage' of their former masters, to whom they were forever bound through establishing hereditary bonds of kinship. As one informant explained, "this created a system of tribes that were free and not free. Those not free were clients (*mawāli*)." With the official abolition of the status of slavery from 1970 onwards, many of the progeny of former slaves retained their tribal affiliations as surnames and were registered accordingly with the state.

However, these modes of belonging were embedded within a larger social world of complex status differentiation in accordance with honour, lineage, wealth and occupation. As many of my informants in both Nizwa and Muscat observed, a series of broader categories generated a hierarchy of *aṣ al* ("pure") free tribal Arab as opposed to the *khādim* (plural *khaddām*), those clients (*mawāli*) who were former slaves or descended from them. These oppositions emerged around the ability to trace patrilineal ancestry and conceptualizations of blood. Noble qualities or qualities of leadership were not acknowledged exclusively on the basis of demonstration but were also considered to manifest themselves through being passed down through tribal descent. The *sharaf* (nobility) of the tribe was judged according to the accumulated deeds of their ancestors and therefore the relative supremacy of a tribe was assessed with reference to a patrilineal genealogy (*nasab*) going back to the first Arab migrations of the Adnani and Qahtani tribal confederations to the Oman region in the pre-Islamic era. Personal faults or defects could in turn be attributed to the taint of slavery in ancestral pedigree. The excellence of a line could be affected by the blood brought into the group through marriage. The purity of one's blood was thus determined by being able to trace the paternal tribal genealogy and, to a lesser extent, the maternal line that in turn determined possibilities of being in life, potential attributes, qualities and therefore expectations. This would partly account for, as I was informed, more than half the marriages in Nizwa being between first cousins, as underlying assumptions about descent encouraged agnatic endogamy of marriage with one's father's brother's daughter. As one elderly sheikh informed me, "those who could not trace their lineage back to the beginnings, were not Arabs."

The category of *khādim* was therefore not a social status or a cultural category as much as it was a historically determined set of social attributes and moral qualities that were grounded in a certain social mode of belonging – that of being a slave – and was considered genetic in that it could be transmitted to descendants. The category of being a *khādim* lay at the nexus of lineage, occupation and to some degree physical features. The idea that "blood" will show was also strong in the widespread and much discussed allusions that someone's descent from slaves could also be identified without any specific knowledge of their lineage but through African physical features.[108] Accordingly, a set of attributes or qualities would be ascribed to them as an inherent

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groups had in common was that they were *mawāli* clients of Arab tribes whose ancestry was therefore co-opted into Arab genealogies. Their inability to trace their origin, which remained ambiguous, rendered them hierarchically lower, unlike even the most ordinary 'pure' *(aṣ li*)Arabs who I was told could at the very least trace their lineage back ten generations even if they were not the descendants of kings or the Prophet's family.

[108] Although one could therefore call the category of *khādim* a racial category, it assumes a more complicated turn when noting that there were those who were known to be *khuddām* and therefore slaves in origin who had not come from the African coast but from other regions such as Persia or Baluchistan or even the Ottoman lands. These are

part of that descent. The circumstances of history itself, its possibilities and consequences for personhood were thus considered as written into something innate, something genetic. Biological facts of inheritance were driven by history and its context.

This material was however more than mere biology since it was considered to be causal in having social implications in engendering a certain set of relationships and mode of belonging. In indexing ancestral origins and connections with the past, it also carried with it the constraints and possibilities that these histories enabled. Whose lineage one chose to conjoin with would determine the prospects of one's descendants as marriage entailed not only ties with one's spouse but with his/her tribal ancestors and their lives and fortunes. There were stories circulating in Nizwa of certain prominent tribes in Oman including the Al Bu Said tribe – the tribe of the Sultan – some of whose sheikhs were well known to have refused all offers for their daughters' hand in marriage from tribal outsiders for fear that any progeny would inherit attributes that were not associated with the tribe. In consequences, the daughters languished, growing into middle-aged spinsters, single women in a society that frowned on such a status.

One well known and much requested local expert on genealogy in Nizwa explained this notion simply as "the source of the tribe is its lineage (*naṣ ab*) meaning that I am a Kindi by way of my ancestry." He continued his explanation with the following Prophetic *hadith*, "He who traces his lineage (*intasab*) from those who are not in fact his forefathers or assumes that he is not among the clients, will be cursed by God (*la'nat allah 'alaihi*), his angels and the peoples." Assuming a name and thus a genealogy that was not one's own was conceived as fostering false assumptions among those interacting with you as they accorded you a place within the matrix of local societal or even inter-personal norms and was therefore a deviation from the path of God. Even if such a doctrinal injunction cannot be assumed to translate directly into practice, what the *hadith* does bring to the fore is that the histories and memories embodied in the self determined the affective basis by which people forged social ties with one another.

Although social mobility was an integral part of the sociality in Oman and *mawāli* were distinguished as having acquired wealth, honour or scholarship through becoming administrators, governors, judges, scholars and even imams, the polarity between the *aṣ ali* and *khādim* had broader connotations in the type of occupations that were generally pursued by slaves, former slaves and their progeny before the *nahḍa*. Both Miles and Thomas, for example, noted their ubiquity in the *sabla* gatherings where the *khuddām* often prepared and served the coffee and an integral part of the life of the *sabla.*[109] One elderly teacher painted a picture for me as he noted that before the 70s, "when one entered the *majlis*, the chief (*sayyid*) would sit at the place of honour (*ṣ adr*) and then the *khādim* or the *mawla* would sit at the end." Certain types of work that were considered debased occupations were synonymous with being taken up by the *mawāli*. These included the work of auctioneers/brokers, metal smiths, butchers, shepherds, or cuppers (blood-letting). As a number of my interlocutors emphasized, even thirty-five to forty years ago one would find documents in which a person would be named *fūlan mawlā fūlan* (name, the client of so and so tribe/clan).

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therefore not hard racial categories that divide Arabs from non-Arabs but flexible indications of wealth, stature and power.

[109] Miles, "Across the Green Mountains of Oman", p. 471, and Thomas, *Alarms and Excursions in Arabia,* pp. 117-118.

The Legacy of Slavery in Nahda Oman

One day during the first week of my fieldwork in Nizwa, I was having lunch with my landlord and his family. In the course of talking about my work in exploring people's present relations with their past, my landlord mentioned people's ongoing interest in the a*ṣ l* (lineage/descent) of tribes in what was considered an open secret (*sirrīya lākin ma'rūfa*) in the community, that so-and-so family were *mawāli* in origin. As he went on to assert, this way of thinking was widespread before the *nahḍa* but was no longer as publicly prevalent due to the issuing of laws preventing it. However, local gossip and talk of reputations, work and marriage scandals still shaped people's perceptions and relationships. He qualified this by further noting that it is less common than before, especially as *mawāli* have earned a respectable place in society as intellectuals through learning and education. He went further to observe that people interact and engage with them on every level except through marriage. There are neighbours and friends who were thought be *mawāli.* They transact business and visit each other, participating in all types of matters together. However, when it comes to marriage practices, the notions of *sharaf* (honour) and *'ayb* (shame) play a pivotal role in re-fashioning the divisions between *asal* (original) and *mawla*[110] (client). This paradoxical state of affairs can be further elucidated within the framework of transformations that have occurred as part of modern nation state building and its developmental endeavours.

Most people in Nizwa when mentioning marriage practices would caution that from 1970 onwards laws or sultanic decrees had been issued that proclaim that 1) all Omanis are equal and are to be treated accordingly, 2) slavery has been officially abolished, 3) the word *khādim* is not to be mentioned in public when referring to any person nor was anyone's origin to be talked of on penalty of imprisonment or fines,[111] 4) no official mention could ever be made of the term *mawla* or *walā'* that usually accompanied a person's written name before 1970. If a person had once been *al Saifi bal walā'* or *al-Sulaimani bal walā'* as clients of tribes, for example, his surname would officially be registered from 1970 onwards as that of the tribe only. The ideal implication was that since the person's name would no longer allude to his/her ancestry or lineage, this would result in sameness in social interaction, education and job prospects.

The ethos of equality as an integral aspect of citizenship has undergirded the introduction of free state education, health care, subsidized housing and a state-wide flow of jobs in governmental bureaucratic ranks. But modern state formation in Oman also testifies to the limits of ethical transformation and cultivation through engaging with tradition as part of developmental endeavours. Social notions of *walā'* are persistent remnants of the past; even as its practices and its underlying logic have become a mode of living pushed aside by the onslaught of progress in Oman, it is still a legacy that plays a structural role in Oman's modernity.

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[110] The term *mawla* (client) and *khādim* (servant) are used almost interchangeably at this point among Omanis. It is hard to differentiate between the two, especially as all slaves when eventually manumitted became clients in assuming the tribal lineage of their patrons and in perpetuating the patron-client relationship until 1970.

[111] Barth does mention such a Sultanic decree in which people informed him that the sultan had declared that "they are free people. No one can say that they are good or bad.… The *wāli* can punish any man who calls another *khādim*, and they should no more say *habib* to others" (1983: 228).

This has been enabled by the active political and legal intervention of the modern state into tribal politics as part of rendering it more consonant with a secular-liberal form of governance and its accompanying goals of social and political development. Tribal sheikhs and their lower ranks, often hereditary or selected from among tribal clan members and endorsed by the Ministry of the Interior, become an integral aspect of the bureaucratic state, reporting to the local *wali* or governor and assuming the role of intermediaries between the members of their community and the government. They are the legal notaries, representatives of their districts in governmental hierarchies as well as official mediators for any problems that may arise or need to be referred to the local police or government offices. As paid officials, the nature of their relations with the government facilitates a network of relationships that embodies the historical ties between each tribe and the Sultanate prior to 1970 even as they are domesticated by it. Distinctions between tribes and their ancestral lineages thus become an object of political concern to the modern state, and certain key ministries have developed a reputation of being under the purview of tribal Arabs, including the Ministries of the Interior and of Justice, the Omani Internal Security Service, the *Majlis ash-Shura* (National Consultative Council) and the Ministry of Endowment and Religious Affairs. The tribe has thus not been marginalized so much as reconfigured under modern state governance and its engagements with the past continue to inform the present in some fashion.

Between the consequences of two pivotal ethical forces, both grounded in legacies of historical experience as part of the everyday, the aspirations deployed by the developmental endeavours of the modern state and the enduring legacies of tribal politics, ancestral lineage and sociality, a certain quotidian set of practices emerge. Reputation, private gossip, scandals, education and kinship become the basis for negotiating the gap between equality and local modes of belonging as a means of establishing the standards of respectability.

One night, in celebration of Oman's national day, my landlady, her small daughters and I visited the handicraft festival held at the Women's Association (*jam'īya al-mar'a*). Having visited the group a number of times for lectures and gatherings, I had gotten to know several of the women quite well. On that night, many of them called me to look at the crafts and weavings in their stalls and to try out the local beauty products on sale, explaining their many roles as part of the ongoing vitality of traditional life. Afterwards, while driving back home, my landlady explained quietly that I needed to be very careful in my relations with these women as many of them were *khuddām*, as evident in their features, and might try to take advantage of me. She went on to mention emphatically that many of them might be middle class or even rich, pursuing their crafts as a hobby or as a leisure activity; but the *khuddām* in general were considered to be more exploitative than others in the community even if they had money. That was characteristic of them since they had a reputation (*sum'a*) of loving wealth and of taking advantage.

At the time, the generalization rather startled me but over the course of my residence in Nizwa and visitation of other families nearby, I came to realize that those men and women stigmatized as being of *khūddām* descent were considered to be at the margins of respectability in Nizwani society. Certain areas such as the open Friday market by Nizwa's fortified complex was often stigmatized by the women of the neighbourhood as being frequented by too many men from different regions of the interior, making it a place that no respectable woman would frequent. To

visit it would be a cause of shame (*'ayb*) and would lead to embarrassment (*nastaḥi*), hence the preference for supermarkets.

During a visit to a neighbour's house with my landlady, I expressed interest in visiting the Friday market and inquired as to the identities of the women who did attend the market. The many replies that emerged were that many might not be from Nizwa, thus facilitating an anonymous identity, or they would more than likely be *khuddām* or Bedouin women who could frequently be seen selling or buying things there. When I asked for an explanation of this, the women further elaborated that the *khuddām* are usually ready to get into everything (*yadkhuluna fi kul shai'*). What would be a source of shame to the Arab tribal women in the neighbourhood – to the point where they could not emerge from the car, as they put it – would be a potential opportunity to a *khādim* woman. As far as the women of the neighbourhood were concerned, this type of behaviour, whatever its truism, placed them outside the boundaries of respectability. Over the course of my fieldwork I discovered that another characteristic considered inherently part of *khādim* identity was being prone to a certain unrestraint (*mubāḥa*) in violating (*naqḍ*) the protocols of respectability. This included playing music too loud in the neighbourhood during a wedding celebration, even after the call to prayer has been sounded in the mosque nearby when a 'respectable' person would have switched off the music.

The modernist Omani state has defined the boundaries of the public and private in ensuring that no mention of the term *khādim* as a discursively constituted act be voiced in the public domain and that citizens themselves engage in the necessary practices of cultivating and internalizing secular liberal principles of equality in citizenship through heritage among other civic acts. But these practices have also effectively generated a more intimate sphere where the division between the *khuddām* and the Arabs are effectively constituted through the effects of gossip and talk of reputations, becoming a series of polar oppositional forces that define the limits of acceptable behaviour among women in the Nizwani community. Characterized by a series of ahistorical traits and attributes, the *khuddām* by virtue of their slave ancestry are thus effectively relegated to the margins of respectability in the community.

Although people of slave ancestry seldom if ever talk about their ancestral lineage, residents even in as large a town as Nizwa would usually know the backgrounds and circumstances of longstanding families either by name or even by their place of residence in certain old quarters. I was warned by my landlady in pursuing my inquires on this subject never to approach the topic directly to those who were known to be *khaddām* in origin but only to allude to it in the most oblique manner I could manage for fear of upsetting them. However, given that the term *mawlā* had fallen into disuse as an indelible link to one's name, there were few ways of knowing a new resident's lineage from their mere appearance. With increasing migration to the big cities as well as interactions in schools and places of work, there was increasing talk as to how to recognize someone's lineage, especially in matters of marriage. As one informant, a young college administrator noted, "before 1970, this was not an issue since everyone was well known. Now, with the government implementing equality, there is no way of knowing the family origin in terms of name." Visits to my landlady's family and neighbours were often characterized by talk on the increasing doubts accompanying marriage practices today in ascertaining the family background of a spouse, especially of a potential husband. How was it possible to ensure a

family's origin, especially as physical features were not a surety and the subject itself could only be pursued through discreet inquiries with the right people and officials?

One rather exasperated informant, a legal consultant, in answer to my queries, gave an overall picture of the importance of lineage in contemporary Oman with the following observations:

> Whether you are at work or seeking a wife, people will try and compartmentalize you in terms of tribe. In the workplace, they will try and elicit information as to whether you are of sheikh status, ordinary or below ordinary. And they will deal with you accordingly. They will be very careful how they would joke about slaves and *bayasir* in front of you. If you do come from a family of very good standing, they would take extra steps to be kind and courteous. If you are seeking their daughter's hand in marriage, they would be even worse making inquiries into your genealogy, wealth, relatives and in-laws.

Although this notion of worth was clearly something that an individual could definitively demonstrate in Oman, it was very often constitutively premised on being tribalized. It was on this basis that a reputation developed within a social milieu.

Certain accounts I heard in the course of neighbourhood and family visits in Nizwa would only have been possible in the time of the *nahḍa*. Over the past forty years, with its continuous engagement in embodying its narration of equality, through free education among other rights, the state has produced a citizenry generating a new mode of ethical being that embodies the temporal framework of development within which respectability as a citizen is conceived in terms of the grammatical language of labour, knowledge and conduct. With such new resources available from the state, those of *mawāli* ancestry are transforming the meaning of status and reputation in the local community. This often involves contestatory understandings of the past. One such case that I heard about in my social visits in the neighbourhood in Nizwa involved the weekly auction of water time for irrigating the local gardens from the local *aflāj* (water canal system). This was usually transacted by a *dallāl* (auctioneer/broker) who was invariably *khādim* in origin. These were occupational practices that had once effectively drawn social distinctions between tribal Arabs and those who were *mawāli.* On this one occasion, however, there was no auctioneer available and somebody had to mediate the sales. Those originally of slave ancestry – who were of the younger generation, were mostly were well educated and had government positions – angrily refused to broker the auction when asked, rejecting its implications of hierarchy. The situation escalated into a major quarrel between the tribal Arabs and those of *khādim* origin, until the local sheikh was brought in to conciliate the two sides. Many of the craftsmen whom I came to know in Nizwa, especially metal smiths, had sons who had pursued upward social mobility and attain government positions with their more secure status and better salary, leaving their fathers' craft, with its negative implications, behind.

Modernity in Oman however has opened up alternative avenues to achieve respectability through education and wealth becoming a fundamental means of fulfilling the aspirations of 'development' as well as carving out a place in the community. I came to know the Said family through a series of unforeseen but fortunate events. I had gotten hold of a series of old endowment documents from an old mosque in one of the old quarters. Having difficulty reading the scrawling handwriting, I inquired at the library of the great mosque. One of the librarians put me in touch with his wife's family. This inquiry marked the beginning of a series of visits and

consultations with a rather warm and vibrant family, whose hospitality made me feel very much at ease. The two eldest daughters were at university and were doing degrees in computer science and English language translation, skills that were in high demand in the job market in Oman. Their father would often join us in our conversations or walks in the small date garden and farm adjoining the house and talk about the impact that the *nahda* had had on his own life and the possibilities it had opened up. He was an administrator at the army post in Nizwa and although he hadn't received a promotion in almost twenty years, like other Omanis he engaged in a series of small alternative jobs in buying and selling the fruits, vegetables and animal products that he was able to grow and produce on his small farm to keep his children in comfortable circumstances. As far as he was concerned, life before the *nahda* had been limited. As he emphatically stated, education of any sort had been the privilege of a scholarly elite. The opportunities that opened up from 1970 onwards, especially in education, he claimed to be intimately connected to the benevolent personhood of the sultan himself in ushering in a new era that had ended such unequal access to resources. He himself had only been able to get to the third standard before leaving school to work before he was twelve, but he was determined that his sons and daughters take full advantage of the new freedoms made available to them.

Of course I met other Omani fathers who also emphasized the central importance of education, but what struck me about the head of this household was the fact that they were so much worse off than their neighbours, as evident in the simplicity of their dwelling and its poor furnishings. Yet he was putting his daughters through private university in Nizwa and would go over the lessons of the younger ones each evening. Moreover, one of the elder girls at university was being sent to Scotland over the summer to study English with a group of students as part of a study abroad program, an expense that, as she privately told me later, was overwhelming for her father to incur but on which he had insisted as crucial to her future.

At the time, these circumstances didn't really strike me as too important. However, one day when I lightly touched on the event when talking to my landlady while helping her with breakfast preparations, she mentioned her surprise in a father allowing his daughter to go alone to Scotland to study. It wasn't until I mentioned the name of the family and where they lived that she informed me that they were a *khādim* family. She went on to observe that an Arab tribal family would be much more reluctant to send their daughter away to study, although it does sometimes happen, and that many stories circulated in the neighbourhood as to the consequences of such an undertaking. She then recalled a story about one of the most prominent scholarly tribes in Nizwa. There was a daughter from that tribe who studied in Egypt for a year and a half, had gotten married clandestinely and become pregnant there. Her husband finally left her and she came home to Nizwa crying and desperate. Her family took her back in and her husband finally came to Oman – but only to divorce her and leave again. She ended up with breast cancer and later died. Her former husband had no interest in the child, who is now being brought up by his mother's family.

She observed that there is a constant fear that young girls will stray and lose their sense of *'adat wa taqālid* (customs and traditions) that makes them Omani and Muslim. She reminded me of another story of a girl who had travelled to London to study. Her father was a religious scholar (*mutawwa*) who had seen her off at the airport. When she was on the plane, however, she removed her *hijab* and *'abāya* and ended up wearing a shirt and jeans. As far as Ruqayya was

concerned, this was tantamount to abandoning the very basis on which one has been brought up, the everyday practices that condition one's becoming a proper Muslim and Omani that ideally should enable you to confront the unknown, especially when that involves studying abroad on your own while still retaining one's '*adāt wa taqālid'* (customs and traditions. There was this constant sense in the course of conversations, here and elsewhere, that tradition is a form of cultivation, the sedimentation of a series of ethical practices based on past precedent that one is brought up with and that in turn structure the very conditions through which modernization is confronted, selected and filtered. It was through the successful embodiment of tradition that one maintained respectability. The two girls, both Omani and tribal Arabs, had, as she phrased it, due either to their youth or improper upbringing failed to fulfil the proper protocols of respectability when confronting the outside and therefore failed to embody the necessary social virtues.

Their stories, among many that circulate in the gossip channels of the neighbourhood, continually defined the basis of norms of respectability and status as an integral element to social belonging, disciplining members of the Nizwani community into assimilating its values. For the family Said however, although overtly welcomed everywhere by neighbours and friends, stature, reputation and respect for those considered *khuddām* in origin, and therefore without lineage, could only come about through availing themselves of the opportunities made available by the advent of the *nahḍa* and ingesting the language of 'development' it deployed, which included taking chances in seizing unique educational opportunities. But even that avenue has its constraints and limitations.

Ashwaq's family were old acquaintances and neighbours of my landlady. The mother of the family, Ashwaq was an extremely chatty and informative person to drop in on and talk with, especially as her life had been an unusually full and rich one. She had married, like most Nizwani girls, at sixteen years of age in the late 1970s, but took the unusual step of deciding that she would go on studying. Most girls of her age were raising children and setting up households. She endeavoured to do this while continuing to educate herself through studying texts at home and sitting the exams at an official centre. She emphasized how much her family encouraged her in her educational endeavours, which were undertaken through correspondence classes with the University of Beirut. Later she began to work, taking up a number of important administrative posts in Nizwa. This was an unusually large number of roles to balance and manage in Nizwa even thirty years later. Towards the end of my stay, I went to pay them a long visit in a final farewell. Ashwaq was especially enthused about seeing me as she was standing for elections as a candidate for the seat representing the Nizwa region for the *majlis ash-shura* (Consultative Council), the elected body that serves an advisory role to the State. She had just come back from a training session that was focusing in on guiding women candidates through the crucial exercises of how to talk, deliver speeches and give addresses on mass media. Ashwaq was especially adamant that I tell Ruqayya, my landlady, to vote for her as part of the cause for women's' rights in Oman and for better future prospects for her own daughters.

When I conveyed the message to Ruqayya she merely smiled and replied that, in the end, Ashwaq was a *khādima* and would never be able to generate the types of relationships and ties among the local tribes that were required to be elected. The candidate who won would be someone who had already formed the basis for respect, reputation and mediation between tribes and could therefore facilitate access to the resources of Muscat and Nizwa in order to serve a

Nizwani constituency. There was an obvious intimation that only a tribal Arab of *aṣ al* (pure) lineage could command that type of respect and in fact previous members of the *Majlis ash-Shura* had been scions of the old tribal and scholarly elite. She informed me that Ashwaq had stood for elections the term before and had only received a handful of votes. There were people a lot better qualified than Ashwaq, she concluded.

Fragmentation of Tradition: Dynamics of Continuity and Change in the Slave Legacy

To many in Nizwa and Muscat, social worth assessed on the basis of genealogy and origin narrations is no more than a recalcitrant tribal past that stubbornly clings on in the face of the national rhetoric of equality. Quandaries emerge from Oman's articulation of a narrative of modernity and development, its construction of the basis of agency, and the disappointments that these notions produced. If Oman's idea of historical agency has introduced the notions of labour, resourcefulness, civic values and conduct as the generative basis of a future, then the persistence of alternative styles of reasoning about the past needed to be obliterated. If the stuff of tradition in Oman is considered to be a source of power and value, then it can only be so on a selective basis. Certain historical experiences needed to be rendered unnecessary and loosened from their moorings in peoples' lives. A number of Omani human rights groups have demanded a degree of autonomy from certain forms of *'adāt wa taqālid* (customs and traditions) in order to bring the state closer to fulfilling its nationalist framework. The debates, commentaries and conversations accompanying these movements have been primarily played out on internet social forums as an alternative to the strictly regulated official media domain.[112] These have provided a new medium for forging an alternative language that cuts through institutional logics to formulate its own mode of historical consciousness. A growing number of those working within this medium argue that local social realities need to conform to but also oppose the national imaginary by resorting to a Universalist history of human rights with its legacy of treating slavery as a key element of barbarism to be left behind. This section explores the dilemmas that ensue when these two analytic histories, their languages, traditions and the senses of self they forge, come into conflict with each other.

Instituting a taboo on revealing tribal origins in public was one means of establishing a national consensus on the centrality of equality as the cornerstone of Omani national identity. It undergirded the nonverbal and implicit aspects of the Omani imaginary, cultivating a didactic and performative model of citizenship in abolishing any form of acknowledgement of genealogical ancestry through nullifying the term *mawlā* (client) and its social implications. However, to a number of those descended from *mawālī*, this practice has also effectively abolished their blood ancestry by indelibly linking them with their patron tribe, displacing their own sense of history and inheritance. Assimilated to a life-world that still articulates itself through blood ties and tribal kinship, a number of those I talked to or communicated with via e-mail felt like they had been denied any sense of lineage, robbed of a sense of kinship to their own

[112] As an alternative to a rigidly circumscribed official mass media, internet social forums have become increasingly vociferous forums for debates and commentaries on the current state of affairs in Oman among those who are considered to belong to the generation of the *nahḍa* who were born in and shaped by the infrastructure of modernity introduced from 1970 onwards.

ancestors whose status as clients had made them a tabula rasa. As descendants of slaves, they were fundamentally tied to the historical patron-client relations that had displaced their own genealogy and continued to feel that shame through the active social networks of neighbourhoods, gossip circuits, marriage practices and, most importantly, through their surname.

Some Omanis have changed their names and moved to the big cities and towns where they remain more anonymous. A number of those in Nizwa who were of *khādim* origin have changed their lineage (*nasab*) to a known ancestor who had been a *mawlā* to a patron tribe. This has in time become a family name even as their tribe remains officially registered as that of their former masters'. I was told that many of these families have tried to efface the histories of patron-client relationship through assuming such family names from 1970 onwards, as part of the process of severing connections with their former patrons and communities and as a necessary means of re-fashioning social ties and connections through the prism of equality and anonymity.

While I was conducting fieldwork in Oman, such tensions had come to the fore, especially on the internet social forum websites that were buzzing with the latest news on a major case that many amongst those politically active were heatedly debating, especially those among the younger *nahḍa* generation in Muscat as well as Nizwa. The case involved the al-Tuwaiya clan (comprising more than two hundred members) and their attempts to transfigure their relations with their former patron tribe, the al-Harthy, one of the most powerful tribal confederations in Oman, through changing their *nasab*. As passionately noted in an essay written by the primary defendant, Salem al-Tuwaiya,[113] in 2006 the Ministry of the Interior set up a "Council to Rectify Tribal Designations, Titles and Names." Their proceedings resulted in a decision to cancel the names of two unofficial "tribes" from all official documentation (including passports and ID cards) on the basis of rectifying (*taṣḥih*) them, one of which was the al-Tuwaiya. The reasoning
behind the council's decision[114] was primarily due to the lack of evidence and justification to sanction the use of the surname (*laqab*) Aal (household of) Tuwaiya in their official documentation as it had been listed. The council concluded that this eponym was not in fact a tribal name but that of a man, that it was not known in its district of origin, and that the clan itself were the *mawālī* of the al-Harth tribal confederation, and thus the name itself was one that had been minted fairly recently. They recommended instead that the name be changed to that of Awlad Tuwaiya (sons of Tuwaiya), without the use of "*Aal*",[115] this being a designation that was assumed only by a few of the most powerful tribes in Oman, including the royal family, the Aal

[113] Salim al-Tuwayya. "An Entry into Racial Discrimination in Oman", 2007, http://www.farrq.net/forums/showthread.php?t=137.

[114] Ibid., p. 4.

[115] This "aal" should not be mistaken for the al that characterizes many family names in the Arab world, including those in Oman. This is an "Aal" (آل) that is a designation and prefix of only a handful of the most powerful Arab tribes in the region, including the royal family (Aal Said) and is considered synonymous with honour (*sharaf*) and nobility in the region, hence the discomfiture of the council.

Said. The second alternative was to change the clan's family name altogether to that of their former patrons, the al-Harthi.[116]

The primary proponents of the case, two brothers, Salem and Abdullah, who were highly educated in the Western and Arab worlds, considered this as an example of the tribal discrimination and racism that characterizes everyday life in Oman in a myriad of ways. As an acquaintance of the brothers mentioned to me, "they felt like they were being enslaved again." As far as they were concerned, this ministerial decision, its language and rationale had re-articulated a society polarized by the designations of *aṣ al* (pure tribal Arab) versus *mawlā* (client) and entrenched a hierarchy with its untenable socio-political consequences in a national community that officially professed that all citizens were equal. As Salim al-Tuwaiya noted (2007: 5), the recommendation of the Ministry of the Interior were underwritten by certain underlying assumptions centred on the notion of "lineage" and "origin" the results of which would have an impact on every piece of civil and legal documentation held by the family through which they conduct their daily affairs, ranging from bank statements, college diplomas, property deeds, and hospital cards to passports and IDs. As far as Salim al-Tuwaiya was concerned, the term "*qabīla*" (tribe) is defined in the *lisān al-'arab* dictionary as a specific type of kin-based grouping that claims descent from a single ancestor through ties of blood. From his perspective, this definition affirmed his argument that every human being is fundamentally associated to his forefathers and not to a lineage that is not his by direct descent (2007: 5). On this basis, Salim al-Tuwaiya argued that his clan had a right to designate their own *nasab*. It was on the formulation of the notion of a "natural right (*al-haq al-ṭ abī'ī*) to choose" (2007: 6) that the case was taken up by human rights organizations.

The following years witnessed the al-Tuwaiya clan appeal to Omani officials in what they considered to be a case of outright discrimination and in 2008 the case began to circulate among human rights organizations including Amnesty International and was broadcast by al-Hurra satellite news channel. A resolution was being worked out in early 2011 through an international lawyer on the basis that "the right of any person to use the name of their family is a fundamental human right which is an integral element to the right of expression."[117] To the al-Tuwaiya, tribal ties and its hierarchical relations seemed a backward legacy to a history that was considered as a steady march towards progress embodied in the language of equality, choice and lineage as delineating humanity's natural form of being and an ontological fact. Enfolded within the strong moral overtones of the principle of "a right of expression", and its universalist undertaking, however, lay an understanding of naming as an act divorced from any historical ties and socio-political relationships. Ancestry and its representation, from such a perspective, becomes a matter of arbitrary choice in which the act of assuming a family name is one removed from any specifically grounded historical concerns. In its depoliticized nature it becomes an act of individual human autonomy, one independent of social and political institutions, and a matter of choice. It is on these terms that humanity is equalized into a naturalized essence. In my ongoing e-mail correspondence with Abdullah al-Tuwaiya, he emphatically stated that their desire to

[116] According to the Abdullah al-Tuwaiya as well as others conversant with the case, there was also pressure brought to bear on the Ministry of the Interior by certain members of the al-Harthi tribe to displace the Tuwaiya name altogether and have it replaced with al-Harthi

[117] This argument was cited in a letter between the al-Tuwaiya and their lawyer, Curtis F.J. Doebbler, dated 16th July 2011 and was part of an e-mail correspondence between myself and Abdullah al-Tuwaiya.

pursue their case was premised on "living the way we want and doing things according to our beliefs." Establishing equality for the al-Tuwaiya was a process of doing away with those historical relationships altogether. As he went on to explain, "our insistence on keeping the *aal* was because it is our name. And it is printed in all our official documents and nobody has anything to do with it." Stating one's *nasab* was not considered a mode of social belonging in a historically determined social niche as much as the subjection of a natural essence, a restriction on the right to choose where sociality itself in its ideal humanist form is purged of power relations and its accompanying histories.

At the same time, however, both the Omani state and the al-Tuwaiya family were more than aware that their roles as citizens were also grounded in a very different understanding of what political and civil equality entailed where the issue of *nasab* was constitutively social within a matrix of historical relationships. The act of naming for Salim al-Tuwaiya went beyond the logic of arbitrarily representing the unitary character of a kinship network through encapsulating it with a surname. Stating one's *nasab* or lineage in modern Oman is a practice with wider consequences inasmuch as it necessarily knotted with larger socio-political continuities and transformations that have taken place as part of the historical emergence of the Sultanate of Oman and the paradoxical nature of the relationships that it has established with its citizens. These historical transformations and the unfulfilled expectations that they have given rise to as part of Oman's national modernity have in turn forged and honed the affective sensibilities, emotional anxieties and frustrated aspirations through which Salim al-Tuwaiya, like other Omanis of *mawāli* origins, understand their ancestral past and are shaped by it.

Inasmuch as the modern state has greatly contributed to the cultivation of an ethic of equality materially and discursively, genealogy and kinship ties continue to delineate a social mode of belonging that serves as an integral but tacit facet of the fostering of hierarchical difference as part of the experience of citizenship in Oman. Even as the tribe comes to be an object of increased regulation by the centralized state, the continued emphasis on the normative claims of *aṣ al* (origin) as an intrinsic acknowledgement of ancestry and its relations to the past within a grammar of modern statehood renders the resulting hierarchical differences deeply problematic.

These underlying assumptions spurred Salim al-Tuwaiya's own call for fully realizing the rhetoric of equality espoused by the modern state through pursuing his case of changing his ancestral name through national and international juridical settings. But the zealous pursuit for a resolution to this case through the bureaucracy of the Ministry of the Interior was not conceived on the basis of doing away with tribal differences altogether, as the idealistic humanism of human rights discourse would suggest. As his brother Abdullah explained, "the idea of replacing our name with the al-Harthi threatens our very existence, our freedom." Al-Tuwaiya's bid for claiming the "*aal"* as part of his family name was still predicated on its linkage with notions of independence as opposed to the sense of servitude and dependency implicated in the continual recall of the historic ties to one's patron tribe by being re-named al-Harthi. Even as it called for a levelling of tribal differences through the breakage of historical ties altogether, the al-Tuwaiya case was fundamentally shaped by the hierarchical sociality of lineage itself in Oman today and its social implications for respectability and honour. As Salim al-Tuwaiya's arguments and the debates that it has generated spark unofficial controversy and commentaries in Oman, it has also produced an understanding that the act of naming is fundamentally consequential in transforming

socio-political relationships and ties with the past in formulating an ethical sense of self as generative of the conditions of equality, sociality and citizenship in modern Oman. But it is also an act that, by its very nature, grounds the legacies of historical experiences in ways that saturate everyday life in a markedly selective manner conditioned by the politics of the underlying normative constructs of lineage, origin and history. Marriage practices serve as one such example.

Marriage as a Fractured Tradition of Interpretive Practices

Ashwaq had invited me to have lunch with her son and daughter-in-law who were coming from Muscat on one of their regular visits to the family. The lunch itself had been full of conversation and laughter. Afterwards, general talk had turned to the tribal character of candidacy as an integral feature of Nizwa elections. Ashwaq's daughter-in-law, a legal research consultant and a fiery activist who had taken part in Oman's Arab Spring sit-ins in Muscat that had occurred the previous month, mentioned a case she was working on at the time. It was being much talked of unofficially in Muscat since it had found its way to the High Court, the highest judicial arbiter of the land. A woman married to a man whom she had liked requested a divorce after two years of marriage on discovering that he had deceived her with regard to his family background. She had discovered that he was of *mawlā* descent and the judge finally ruled in her favour, citing that the lack of *kafā'at az-zawāj*, compatibility/equivalence in marriage between man and woman by way of lineage were grounds for divorce.

This was not the first time that I had heard of the widespread phenomenon of endogamous marriage practices determined by criteria of descent, but it was the first time that I realized that it had been legally institutionalized through the notion of *kafā'a* (this can mean equivalence or compatibility) in marriage as part of *sharī'a* in the Sultanate of Oman. Greatly shaped by Egypt's historical trajectory in law (Asad 2003; Mahmood 2012), modern Oman's Ibadi *sharī'a* has been reconfigured by the division between public and private, state and domestic as part of modern governance following the rubric of a now almost universal formula for secularization. It has come to be reconfigured, pegged and relegated to defining the contours of personal status law where it regulates the now privatized affairs of family, marriage and gender encased within certain normative understandings. Central among these normative assumptions is the notion of *'urf* (customary ways) that conjoins with family law to juridically delineate an autonomous space where the customs and traditions of the Omani community are recognized as overlapping and linking in with religion and family law, knitting together to create a single legal domain. The textually-based criteria for marriage selection was often the object of ongoing open debate and critique among different Ibadi jurists and scholars over the course of centuries, including the 20th Ibadi Imamate[118] and included extensive discussions on the conditions of *kafā'a.* These have

[118] Khalid Al-Azri's (2013: 42-43) work on the impact of *kafā'a* includes a debate between Imam Abu Muhammad Sa'id al-Khalili (d. around 1871) and a powerful tribal leader and prominent Ibadi scholar, Isa bin Salih al-Harthi on the criteria that determine the deployment of *kafā'a.* Al-Khalili insisted that the only criteria that could be allowed was lineage, whereas al-Harthi, citing another prominent scholar, Shaykh Muhna b. Khalfan b. Mohammed (d. 1835), insisted that "one should be equal to the woman in everything: lineage, followed by religion, property and then her beauty" (44). Imam al-Khalili retorts with the idea that beauty is a criteria that is "immeasurable and cannot be equalized". He qualifies this by referencing a historical account of the Prophet's uncle's son, Ibn Abbas, who would not have been able to marry under such conditions since he was blind as well as others, including the founder

now become codified into an abstract and principled recognition that marriage and its basis are socially constitutive, in forging the historically grounded ties and relations that underlie a hierarchical society and that therefore pertain to status, respectability and affect. Article 20 of the Omani Personal Status Law recognizes the notion of *kafā'a* or equivalence as part of the conditions of marriage.

Therefore, criteria such as those of "religion, profession, lineage and freedom that are absent from either party [of the marriage) resulting in the lowering of a family's social status or social daily life making them ashamed or embarrassed"[119] would be grounds for annulment or divorce. It was these assumptions that made Ashwaq's daughter-in-law so embittered as she spoke of her disappointment with the final verdict. As a human rights activist and researcher, who took the notion of civil and political equality and its enshrinement in Oman's Basic Law (White Book) as a foundational condition of nationhood, the idea of the law recognizing the validity of religious traditional criteria predicated on differences rather than the language of individual rights, personal choice and self-will was a stance that, from her perspective, was in fundamental contradiction to Oman's own commitment to equality in citizenship as well as its avowed secular support of human rights.

However, it was a scenario that seemed bound to reiterate itself constantly for, as I was told by a myriad of people in Nizwa and Muscat, ranging from district sheikhs, scholars and teachers, craftsmen, shopkeepers, government officials, neighbours, and relatives of the family I was living with, the *nahḍa* has brought about new forms of interaction between those who are descended from *mawāli* and those who are of "pure" tribal Arab lineage, especially through work, schooling and new forms of intercourse generated by migration to the big cities and new residential suburbs. However, this has only exacerbated the fears of possible marital mismatches between those of different lineages and thus social positions as fathers ascertain the tribal origin and lineage, wealth and occupation of a potential spouse in order to cultivate and strengthen the basis of social respectability afforded by such a relationship. In short, the doctrine of *kafā'a* recognizes the intrinsic social base of a marriage that not only entails the union of two individuals so much as it forges ties and relations between two families and tribes.

The repercussions of such a mismatched marriage I was told were severe in that it would be considered dishonour (*'ār*) that would be impossible for members within larger family circles to accept and would cause something of an uproar in a refusal to acknowledge or countenance such a union. As one scholar and advisor at the Ministry of Higher Education in Nizwa explained to me, "the premise of *kafā'a* is to ensure that husband and wife are a match to each other (*mutamāthilīn*) in the basics of their lives and in their principles in order that they may be able to live together." A woman, he went on to explain, would not want to live with a man who was beneath her in *nasab* (lineage) in this respect even though he might be higher in morals. Even if she did and he, as her father and guardian, with much struggle accepted such a marriage for her sake on the basis of her husband being someone that had acquired status through education and

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of the Ibadi school, Jabir b. Zayd, who was partially blind as well. One of the best examples of course was the Prophet and his wife, Khadija'.

[119] This quote is from a High Court verdict dating 7th June 2003 and cited by Al-Azri, 57, 2013. For an illuminating discussion on the legal conflicts that arisen around the codification of *kafā'a* and its social consequences in Omani society, see Khalid al-Azri's *Social and Gender Inequality in Oman*, Routledge 2013.

wealth, the tribe or family would never accept it: "Our people would treat me with hostility and might even cut me off (*yuqāṭ i'ūnī*) and no longer consider me as one among them." At this point, his wife chimed in that

> mentally (*nafsīyān*) if we even contemplate the future and the children of such a marriage, how would the children be perceived and how would they see themselves? How could they take pride (*yufakharū*) in themselves as their lives would continue to be splintered (*mushatitīn*) by an in-between where they would never be accepted, socially, as children not begotten through a certain 'proper' order that would enable them to live life accordingly.

She continued to note that this was not so much a problem with the self or with the family but an issue that concerned society as a whole.

It was moreover a question that has nothing to do with the absolutely ethical autonomy of the potential husband and wife, as human rights activists would have it, but how a certain social hierarchy ordered along certain finely-grained distinctions intersects with the conjugal contract to generate forms of judgement and behaviour that determine the levels of respectability by which one could live and still achieve status. Sociality and the self merge here to be cultivated and instilled in the embodied-self as part of the development of a finely-tuned disposition that could formulate such "social" questions as a potential spouse might ask at the possibility of such an engagement: Will my marriage be compatible? Can I respect my husband knowing what he is in the community? How will our children grow up? How will they be treated by others in the neighbourhood and by our families? The objectives as I was repeatedly told were not simply intended to preserve the "harmony" (*insijām*) and stability *(istiqrār*) between the spouses to ensure a lasting marriage but to develop the proper social relations that would avoid an upheaval *(fitna*) of the community ensuring the commitment to a sociality established by local normative assumptions that were based on customary practices (*a'rāf*). But these are also customs and traditions that are intimately intertwined with substantive *sharī'a* doctrine that recognizes the integral hierarchical nature of a society even as it acknowledges the equality of Muslims in the face of piety.

There are two Prophetic *hadith*s considered sound *(ṣaḥiḥ*) that were often quoted by people in Nizwa as I tried to make sense of this seeming paradox. "There is no preference of the Arab or the *'Ajami* (Persian) except in piety" and "Choose your seed (*natūf*) (carefully) for blood will tell (*'irq dassās*)." The first *hadith* was based primarily on the rights and duties tied to the act of worshipping God that equalizes all Muslims even as it assesses them along a hierarchical plane premised on their fulfilment of the necessary acts in accordance with an assessment based on belief and piety. The second *hadith*, however, was considered to emphasize the notion of choosing one's spouse with care on the basis of any number of socially grounded criteria (moral character, lineage, wealth, occupation, piety) that goes beyond the stigma of slavery in order to achieve an "equivalent" marriage. It resonates with the idea of the old English adage, "What's bred into the bone comes out in the flesh". The conditions and rules governing *kafā'a* were conceded as being much debated between schools of law as well as among Ibadi jurists and scholars themselves. But the idea of *kafā'a* itself was recognized in general as the constitutive social basis through which Muslims cultivate their lives, their capabilities not only of virtuous conduct but ethical living that are acquired and embodied by the individual through the network of authorities, institutions, kin and neighbours that surround them. Since the tradition guiding

practices and habits would differ depending on the considerable variation in levelled stature, respectability, learning and ancestry, the notion of social "compatibility" becomes crucial, opening up a gateway for the concerns of a hierarchical society. It is in determining the rubric of conditions necessary for establishing the limits of "compatibility" that legal opinion enters into defining the social basis for conjugal relations that organizes the conceptual and material basis for acting ethically as well as formulating the basis by which a multi-layered perception of community unfolds, effectively creating a hierarchy.

Re-articulated to become integral to the concept of *sharī'a* now set into the socio-legal structures of the modern state that regulates and resolves disputes pertaining to all matters of marriage and divorce, the conditions of *kafā'a* of marriage partners have survived. Its presuppositions of marriage as a relationship that is socially embodied and recognized accordingly stands in strong contrast to the idea of absolute ethical autonomy deployed by a human rights point of view. The assumption of differences as part of a socio-political order in the former is considered to sharply contend with the principle of equality that sanctifies unitary citizenship in the nation state.

The increasing attacks on the establishment of *kafā'a* in family law, specifically its tacit acknowledgement of lineage and descent, may be considered as a result of the ongoing internal structural tensions within modern state building. Simultaneously, however, they are also the product of the fracturing of the Islamic tradition in Oman, in terms of both rupture and continuity. Modes of argumentation by which the marriage conditions of *kafā'a* is grounded in past precedence and the kinds of discrimination inherited forms the underlying basis for invoking a certain model of the past on both sides of the debate, lending them authority and intelligibility. The grammatical materials of these series of arguments is derived from the Quran, the Prophetic *sunna* and accounts of Golden Age of the Prophet and his companions coalescing into an orientation for an ethical life in the present but from two differing perspectives. Yet each establishes its bearings by engaging with the language of Islamic tradition through the adoption of different temporal modes and interpretive readings of the past, weaving together fragmented arguments and elements in order to cohere them to forge contending understandings of ethical life as part of a lived experience of Islam in the modern world. In short, they create two contrasting modes of engaging history in adopting different modes of reasoning.

Nizwanis in general were well aware of the polyvocality nature of the debates that have existed around conditions of *kafā'a*. Its importance in forging an ethical sociality was invoked not only by Prophetic *hadith* but also by accounts of the Prophet's companions that grounded an overarching need to incorporate and reorganize contemporary issues, experiences and desires to configure with the exemplary account wielded by the golden age, an imperative that in turn generated the many arguments and debates that ensued when talking about the issues at stake in marriage selection. These were based on the authority of a past that was considered to connect the no longer there with the still there as part of the everyday facts of tradition. Certain narrations of the companions and Prophetic *hadith* were recollected to me as authoritative accounts of the modular past and its sanction of the present day practices of *kafā'a.*

One evening while sitting at the back table of the library of the Great Mosque in Nizwa waiting to keep an appointment with a recently published writer on the topic of *kafā'a*, I began talking to two middle-aged scholars of Islamic *fiqh* who were doing research. Although both had written on

various topics related to the Ibadi school, they, like many others I had met, also worked at more practical professions, one being a school teacher and the other an administrator at the University of Nizwa. In explaining my interest in the topic of *nasab* (lineage) and its relationship to *kafā'a*, Sulaiman, the school teacher, a thin, quiet, bearded man with a rather measured way of speaking, quoted a *hadith* that he assured me was sound when I expressed my surprise at its words. It states that "All Muslims are equivalent (*akfā'*) except the *mawla*, cupper/barber, grocer and the weaver."[120] He went on to explain that a marriage between an Arab tribal woman and those among the more the lower occupational levels was not an equitable one inasmuch as it would not bring about any type of stability (*istiqrār*) either to the family or, on a larger scale, within the community.

In order to further elucidate the point, his companion went on to give an account of the marriage between Zaynab bint Jahsh, a first cousin of the Prophet, and his adopted son Zayd Ibn Haritha, who had been an ex-slave and was now a much beloved *mawlā* to the Prophet. He had originally been Arab but had been kidnapped when he was young and sold into slavery until he finally came into the possession of the Prophet and his wife Khadijah. This was a marriage that Zaynab was against in the beginning as she considered herself a member of the Quraysh tribe and a tribal Arab. She was therefore in a higher social position than Zayd ibn Haritha who was a freed slave. Their two years of marriage were unhappy ones and there was conflict between them until finally a Quranic verse (22: 18) came down that enabled her to divorce Zayd in order to marry the Prophet in order to placate her sense of honour. This was an issue he ended with, of family stability. These were *hadith*s and accounts that were often repeated to me over the following months that grounded the legitimacy of marriage practices in an exemplary past even as others emphatically noted alternative narratives that established Islam as equalizing all Muslims in the face of piety on the same basis. These included that of Usama bin Zayd, who was the son of Zayd, the Prophet's adopted son and freed slave. Usama was therefore considered a *khādim* who distinguished himself in battle from the time of the Prophet onwards, becoming a military leader under caliph Umar ibn al-Khattab. These were not considered as necessarily paradoxical for the virtues inherent in carrying out the obligations in being an Ibadi Muslim such as piety were not bound up in social status. Marriage however was considered an act that was constitutively social, and therefore an integral part of *'urf*, in establishing the relations that knitted lineages together, creating the ties of equivalence that ideally create a sociality that, while hierarchical, is also in harmony itself. The split that human rights activists perceive between an autonomous subject and customs and traditions becomes intimately intertwined here for those who perceive the logic of *kafā'a* through *sharī'a.*

An Alternative Understanding

A number of the younger generation of Omanis, both men and women in their 20s and early 30s in Nizwa and Muscat, are fundamentally inclined towards human rights as an intervention into

[120] This hadith which has provoked a great deal of controversy among human rights circles is found in the Ibadi hadith collection of *Imam al*-Rabi' (*al-Jami al-Sahih*). There were other Prophetic traditions that were quoted to me to legitimize applying the conditions of *kafā'a* on a marriage. One of them states, "Arabs are the *akfa'* of Arabs and Quraysh are the *akfa'* of the Quraysh. The people of one tribe or one family would be *akfa'* among themselves, and people of one race would be *akfa'* among themselves." Both these hadiths have been used in cases of divorce (Al-Azri 2013: 55-56).

what they consider as evidence of the constant recreation of a racist hierarchy within a national grammar through affirming lineage as a practice of differentiation in court resolutions of marriage disputes. From their point of view, such practices in an Islamic society go against the principles of equality that define the religion as it should be practiced by a modern Muslim state. However, this clamouring emphasis for an egalitarianism that is considered the hallmark of Islam has also effectively displaced the open ended and unstable field of centuries-old authoritative discourse and debate on the subject of conditions of *kafā'a* with a principle distilled down and fixed around the notion of Islamic equality. In the process the specificities of the debates and their historical and cultural contexts have given way to the abstracting of a spiritual general meaning from centuries of discourse and varied perspectives more consonant with a "universal" religious perspective that centres on an overarching history of universal humanity and equality (Masuzawa 2005).

This shift in fact marks a changing conception of historicity as Oman's experiences of socio-political modernity and the role of the tribe are assessed against a Western progressive teleological yardstick with its telos definitively marked as political and civil equality. On the basis of this scale, Oman's modern experiences are incomplete necessitating reform and the purging of the notion of the tribe and its underlying grammar of lineage, blood ties and ancestry. For the human rights activists, insofar as they still ground themselves in an Islamic tradition, the abstract principle of equality becomes a means of engaging with the same sources of an authoritative past but through a different mode of interpretive reading to adopt an alternative reasoning that legitimizes modern temporality. The 'not yet' scenario becomes the lens through which to calibrate the Prophetic past in order to point towards a changing future that bears such an aim. Its grounding in the life of the Prophet and his companions conditions its legitimacy and structures its mode of reasoning.
This principle of equality becomes the basis for interpreting the authoritative past and to locate, through accounts of the Prophet and his companions, the means of proving that Islam truly does overlap with a human rights discourse in endorsing an egalitarian spirit independent of certain engagements with the past. The world espoused by these activists is, ironically, one that is therefore already detached from being centred on the Quran, *sunna* and early Islamic history, inasmuch as human rights and its underlying principles form the autonomous temporal framework from which the sources of *sharī'a* are engaged with, debated on and understood. The accounts of exemplary history are now held at a reflective distance from "reality", creating a distinction between the two in critical thought and sensibility. This reflective distance is mediated and conditioned by human rights discourse and its underlying assumptions. Human rights activists in Oman are engaging in global temporal narration as an ethical way of living but through deep engagements with an inherited past intimately tied to that of the Prophet and his companions as a means of reforming and configuring the tribal landscape of Oman even while retaining *sharī'a* as an integral part of the political and legal framework of modern Oman. The questions however now turn to whether the fundamentals of *sharī'a*, the Quran, the narrative accounts of Islamic history and the *sunna* of the Prophet are in harmony with the experiences and concept of egalitarianism as an integral part of an alternative temporal sensibility, that of the unilinear teleology of progress.

Hamid, a petroleum engineer and son of a High Court judge, recently published a book entitled, *Kafā'a and God's Plan in the World* (2003). His work and the internet conversations that

followed his publicizing his ideas have led many to consider him one of the first to instigate recent debates on the practices of *kafa'a.* His work is centred on transforming its terrain through grounding his ideas in equality in invoking the International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination that Oman ratified in 2003 but also in proclaiming Islam as a religion that calls for unity and not division (2003: 1-5), a complete religion for humanity (*dīn bashrī shāmil*). On these terms, the practices of *kafā'a* in Hamid's view result in a form of racial discrimination, a work of evil. His aims are to return to the fundamentals of Islam, to the Quran and the Prophetic *sunna*, in order to distinguish between the sources of *kafā'a* and its implementation in social practice. Accordingly, a number of key *hadith* that consider lineage as a criterion for a compatible marriage, that have been authoritative sources in Ibadi *fiqh* and that continue to regulate the conditions of marriage and divorce in court, are analyzed theologically and found to be weak. In talking with him, in person, it was clear that he still considered *kafā'a* legitimate in laying out the conditions of "equivalence" in marriage. However, this was to be on the basis of a family's status in morality, education and culture rather than that of tribe and ancestry. This was part of Oman's customs and traditions that he considered bound to become moribund over the course of time with Oman's exposure to alternative ideas from the outside, thereby transforming the very basis by which Ibadi Islam would be practiced, following along the lines of a unilinear progress.

The book has been banned by the government on orders, according to Hamid, by the Ministry of Endowment and Religious Affairs on the basis of its criticism of the authorities of Ibadi *sharī'a.* However, it was intensively debated on the internet where it instigated a broad opposition between those who considered such discrimination on the basis of lineage as antithetical to Islam and the many who still considered the importance of tribe, lineage and blood ties. In debating the possibilities of intermarriage between differing levels of tribal and ethical groups, one participant bluntly stated "whoever wants to be a relative in marriage to slaves, they can do so, but there is no need to trouble us with such a topic."[121]

Many of the human rights activists that I spoke with thus considered the grammar of tribalism as obstructions imposed by both *sharī'a* and *'urf* as customs and tradition to be overcome in order to fulfil the ideals of Omani nationalism and Islam. Grounded in Islamic traditional sources, a number of them mentioned the story of Bilal as well as that of Abu Zayd. One activist, narrated to me, how the Prophet in his assumption that all men are sons of Adam and thereby equal became extremely angry when a Muslim called after Bilal "O son of Black". The Prophet in turn informed him, "You are a person of ignorance." The story of the Prophet's emphasis on the intrinsic humanity of all Muslims was further emphasized in noting the marriage between his cousin, Zaynab b. Jahsh and Zayd b. Haritha his *mawla.* This account was mentioned a number of times as proof of the egalitarian spirit of Islam as espoused by the Prophet without mentioning the divorce that finally ended the marriage.

Oman's modernity has witnessed the fracturing of the moral coherence of *sharī'a* ethical practice to become disparate domains of logic and action that create alternative spaces for ethical forms of living. A deep engagement with the Islamic past continues to play an integral role in the effective exercises of certain modes of ethical engagement, including the deployment of criteria of *kafā'a* that determines the social conditions of marital relations in Oman. As has been

[121] Cited by Al-Azri (2013: 60-61)

emphasized throughout this chapter, the bringing forward of ethical elements from the past does not imply the passing of an "unchanging substance" (Asad 2003: 222). Rather, it is one whose mundane quotidian practices have been transformed by the grammar of nationalism and modern state formation to assume new articulations of religion accompanied by glaring contradictions and paradoxes that fracture its form. Yet, inasmuch as each fissure still holds onto the notion of Islam – grounded in the complex movements of argumentation and interpretation between its canonical texts, classical past and everyday practices – it forces us to engage with the very modes of debate and reasoning that centre around an authoritative understanding of the classical past rooted in inherited religious practices. This understanding becomes the material for a "historically extended socially embodied argument" (MacIntyre 1984: 222) that animates fractures into achieving new coherence even as it takes form through its assimilation into alternative forms of temporal logic and ethical orientation, laying the groundwork for possible contestatory futures. Insofar as both these contradictory logics – in understanding, action and time – ground their reasoning on being continuous with the Islamic tradition, they create a multi-temporal space characterized by the tensions and contestations between them and the reality of the authoritative past accounts they deploy, its inclusions and exclusions that undergird the paradoxes of living equality in the modern Omani state.

CHAPTER FIVE

WHAT'S IN A NAME? THOUGHTS ON THE AL-LAWATI AS A HISTORICAL CATEGORY

> *The history that the Lawatiya have had has been a source of tension. I have no doubt that we are Omani. If my great grandfather's grave is in Oman, how can I claim to be from somewhere else?*
>
> – From my field notes, Muscat, Oman 2011

Two miles west of Muscat lay Matrah, one of the most important commercial centres and trading emporia of pre-*nahda* Oman. Like Muscat, its landward side is surrounded by craggy volcanic hills and the town itself lies along the beach front. A Portuguese fort stands on a rocky point on the east end of the town. At one time, according to Lorimer's Gazetteer (1908), Matrah was the entrepot where the bulk of the trade of northern Oman took place; it was the primary destination for all trade caravans coming for and from the interior and was the main loading and unloading zone for a variety of trading goods, including imports of staples such as rice, piece goods, sugar, oil, iron and spices from Bombay, and exports such as dried and fresh dates as well as some quantity of dried fish.

Today, the Matrah seafront is flanked by a corniche walkway and the town, now an administrative district of Muscat, is one of the main tourist destinations of the city. A number of cruise ships dock in its port in the winter and spring months, disgorging hundreds of tourists who join other visitors (and residents) to explore the Matrah souq, widely advertised as one of the oldest commercial centres of Oman as well as the "traditional" souq *par excellence*. The souq includes recently "restored" structures of old wooden-beamed, painted ceilings and crowded stalls whose wares range from sacks of spices and perfume oils to antiques, carpets, handicrafts, household goods, ready-made garments, and a gold market that wind their way through narrow lanes beyond the reaches of the naked eye. Close to the beachfront entrance of the Matrah souk, along a line of shops overlooking the shoreline lies a low-arched crenellated gateway into which one can usually peek to see two middle-aged men lounging together in chairs.[122] Above the doorway are the words "*sur al-Lawatiya*" (*sur* in Arabic means "fortified enclosure"). The gate enclosure itself is manned by guards who monitor the entrance of the Sur al-Lawati, rendering it inaccessible to any outsider who is not accompanied by a member of the community. This is the large rectangular fortified residential enclosure in which the Muslim al-Lawati community once resided as a prosperous merchant community who, along with the Hindu Banian merchants, were the key business middlemen in the import and export trade of Oman.

Once flanked by two great gates and four towers, these bastions have undergone substantial material changes as each tower has come under the weight of larger social transformations that have also refigured the significance and meaning of the *sur* as a whole. Only one tower remains, the focus of a restoration project sponsored by the Ministry of Heritage and Culture. One was "stolen" – in the words of members of the community – in order to make way for the construction of a house, the third was demolished, and the fourth has been transformed into a

[122] The second gateway is on the opposite end on the land side of the *sur*.

coffee shop, the interior of which is round, like its predecessor. What was once built for security from Arab attacks and privacy for the women of the community has now become the domain of scrawny roving cats and a number of older women who have always considered it their first home and have refused to move elsewhere. Although all the houses in the *sur* are owned, rented or linked to members of the al-Lawati community, very few members of the group live here on a permanent basis. Of the hundreds of families who once considered the *sur* their residence,[123] since the 1970s almost all have removed to beyond the walls to settle in residential villas in Muscat's more modern districts with their amenities of modern plumbing and electricity. Houses within the *sur*, however, are still in private hands and may not be sold or rented out to any member outside of the community.

Unlike the bustling souq next door, since the 1970s the *sur*'s residences and narrow alleys have become increasingly emptied - for the most part - off the noise and bustle of a life world. An exception to this trend are the late afternoons and evenings, when it comes alive with men and, predominantly, women moving through the narrow lanes to attend the *majalis* of the many *ma'ātim* in the enclosure as well as those in the main mosque. This is especially the case during Ramadan, Muharram and Safar, the important months of Shi'a devotional life that are closely linked to the mourning rituals and ceremonies of '*ashura*, the tenth day of Muharram that is dedicated to the commemoration of the martyrdom of Imam Hussein and his followers in the Battle of Karbala (A.D. 680). Indeed, the main gate is in fact overshadowed by the towering outlines of a bulbous dome and minaret, decorated in the glazed mosaic-faience tile work characteristic of Persian religious architecture. These architectural elements and decorative patterns are the prominent markers of what many consider the most important Shi'a mosque in Oman.

The façade of the *sur* along the beach front assumes the form of a fortified structure through its construction pattern of a series of multi-storied houses, closely adhering to each other. Together they also create an architectural aesthetic unique to the Omani builtscape, with its emphasis on a series of bow-arched windows and semi-closed balconies with intricate lattice work, sloping roofs and slender colonnades that more prominently exhibit elements of traditional Gujrati residential architecture than those of Muscat and its surrounding environs, which are exemplified by unadorned exteriors with no balconies.

The ultimate result is the construction of an enclosure that delineates an inward looking community, whose formal entrances were once kept locked at night, establishing exclusivity around itself. However, the architecture also expresses historical ties with vernacular architecture in other parts of the Indian Ocean coastlines, creating an aesthetic "equivalence" that links different coastal regions with each other (Simpson and Kresse 2008: 20). As a place, its fortified form has been hammered and hewed from the embodied practices that have both simultaneously

[123] According to Lorimer (1908: 1034), the majority of the al-Lawati community, who also call themselves Khojas, lived in Matrah and at the time numbered 1,080. There were also (and still are) families living along the Batinah coast who were engaged in the trade networks and retail end of business. In 1908, their numbers were: in al-Khaborah on the Batinah (125 people), the city of Sohar and Suwaiq (30 people). A considerable number also lived in Trucial Oman (now part of the United Arab Emirates) and Iran. Estimates of the population of the community from the 1970s onwards are between 5,000 and 10,000, most of who still live in Matrah and the al-Batinah coast in al-Khabora, Saham, Barka and Masna'a (Peterson 2004: 42-43).

forged and unfolded themselves in shaping its space and significance over the course of the twentieth century.

In this chapter, I flesh out issues about history and the ways in which certain elements of the past are selected and others ignored in the process of constructing a possible terrain of pluralism that defines how being al-Lawati is lived and imagined in its engagement with the Omani nationalist tradition and ethos. Specifically, I explore how efforts of settlement and rooting manifest themselves in locally specific ways that attempt to conceptualize and manage the problem of difference against more dominant normative models that are premised on the experiences of the Arab tribal tradition. This "difference" is sedimented with a range of historical experiences that enable a range of perceptual possibilities that structure the ways in which they are envisioned. Those that come to the fore, in becoming available to human consciousness and action, are enabled by the perceptual regimes of the nation state. However, even as this regime instils certain modes of attentiveness or inattentiveness to the past through pedagogical techniques, discursive practices and aesthetic forms of public life, it also opens up new and unanticipated spaces for contestation as the category of "al-Lawati" comes under ethical and political struggle in Omani society in the wake of the 2011 Arab Spring protests in Oman.

Questions regarding what it means to speak of "home," "origins" and "continuity" become central in carving out spaces of belonging that mark out a terrain of commonality even as they delimit the social and political conditions of fitting into Oman's pluralist space (Fortier 1999: 42). The *sur* is intimately associated with the al-Lawati, constituting the site of their belonging in Oman and the locale for the iterated performance of a collective Shi'a body linked to the Kutch-Sind region, and thus opening up possibilities for the construction of different ethical subjects within contemporary Oman. Modes of history and collective memory circulate and embody thresholds of belonging, becoming the sites for the production of al-Lawati subject hood even as they generate a simultaneous countermovement that produces ambiguity or indeterminacy, destabilising the embeddedness of this historical category. These contested meanings and histories and their links to the wider social networks and power structures of the Indian Ocean trade network of the nineteenth and twentieth century's are constitutive of the *sur al-Lawatiya* as the ancestral space of the al-Lawati community of Oman.

The very term "al-Lawati/Lawatiya" and its wide dissemination as part of the standardized recognition of a tribe of that name in official regulatory documentation is a way of exploring the relations between knowledge and power, histories and the practices they enable. In historicising the significance of the category in my analysis, I locate it as the on-going product of perception structured by signifying practices; these are mediated by modes of historical experience and collective memory, producing the effects of a concrete ethnic essence through forms of recognition that are produced in the course of daily interactions between the different groups that constitute Oman's plurality. In short, this chapter delves into the work of memory and forgetting and the forms of politics it makes possible in the struggle over different histories and geographical orientations that ground a way of life through its social engagements and patterns of connectedness with the other.

The al-Lawati as British Subjects

In Lorimer's Gazetteer,[124] the al-Lawati are called the Khojas,[125] a term the British considered an Indian caste identification. This is a term that the al-Lawati of Oman still use widely amongst themselves, forming the integral basis of their own self-understanding, although it has no bearing on their relations with other Omanis. The category itself – and all that it connotes – is one that has been worked over by British nineteenth century legal governance and colonial state work that has had a decisive impact on people's sense of self and historical consciousness over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the Indo-Pakistan region as well as the Gulf and East Africa. The term's significance today is the effective result of having been worked as part of colonial endeavours to make religion the all-important and exclusive category of classification in the governance of the British Raj against the more contradictory and multiple but fluid strands that made up the al-Lawati understanding of what being a Khoja in Oman signified, its shift over time in modes of worship as well as forms of social life. Even as the Khojas were a widely disseminated presence in many of the commercial and trading centres of the Indian Ocean especially East Africa and the Arab-Persian Gulf regions, their historical experiences as migrants and settlers were distinctive, creating communities that were shaped by particular social and political imaginaries that informed the ways in which knowledge was socially reproduced. The past weighs heavily in shaping understandings of who were and are insiders in the Omani landscape; while these categories may be historicised and thereby rendered arbitrary, these versions of the past become increasingly potent and productive in their capacity to shape relationships, boundaries and spaces with lasting consequences.

From the British perspective, the Khoja of Oman were recognized through their assimilation into a meta-narrative of history, authenticity and distinctiveness that was drawn from the Kutch/Sind regions of Western India. Linguistically and culturally they were considered to be part of a past that incorporated Sind into the worlds of Islam and the interactive exchange of missionary activities, trade networks and regional relations based on knowledge and religion that had migrated from western lands. In Lorimer's words, "The Khojas are a sect of people whose ancestors were Hindus in origin who were converted to and have throughout abided in the faith of the Shi'a Imami Ismailis and which have always been and still are bound by ties of spiritual allegiance to the hereditary imams of the Ismailis" (1908: 2378). Such a narrative, however, not only had a fraught and politicised history related to the British colonial presence in India, but in its bid to interpret the past and render it coherent became part of a process of intervention that juridically designated the Khojas as part of the Ismaili sect of Islam, which was one of the lasting results of the testimonial verdict of a landmark case settled by the Bombay High Court in

[124] The Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf, Oman and Central Arabia, also called Lorimer's Gazetteer, was compiled by officials of the British Government of India with the intention of providing policymakers and agents a "convenient and portable handbook to the places and interests with which they are likely to be concerned". The original edition was a secret document issued by the British Raj in 1908 and 1915 and was regarded as an essential prerequisite to strengthening British understanding and influence in a region that was increasingly subject to international intervention.

[125] In Lorimer's volume 2, dedicated to the geography and statistical analysis of the Gulf region and arranged alphabetically, the al-Lawati are placed under K for "Khoja sect". The entry merely notes that in the Sultanate of Oman, the Khojas are known to the Arabs as "Lawatiya" and that they are also commonly spoken of as Haiderābādis.

1866.[126] With this legal decision in what became more than a mere property dispute – centred as it was around the figure of the Aga Khan and his claims to leadership –, the Khojas went from being a caste (a social group based on ties of endogamy, occupation, language and religious practices) to being labelled Ismailis according to state mandate, and therefore placed in new forms of inhabitation within the larger discursive Islamic tradition, its historical engagements and debates. This historical narrative was premised on seminal works by scholars of Oriental studies who traced the Khojas back, in unbroken descent, to the Assassin legends of the Middle Ages (Bartle 1876: 430).

As Purohit (2012: 4-5) emphasises in her analysis of the case, prior to this ruling the Khojas did not identify with any one single religious identity, employing multiple and alternative forms of self-recognition. But the schisms that occurred in Bombay as a result of these tensions, culminating in the constitution of the administrative category "Ismaili", was also reproduced amongst the Khojas of the Persian Gulf region. Their lasting effects, as many of those in Oman informed me, became part of a collective memory that has rendered them distinct from the rest of the Khoja community and its adherence to Aga Khan as the Ismaili Imam. Even as many of the Khojas in Bombay, seceded by becoming Sunnis, those in Matrah, Oman, retained their Shi'a persuasions by formally becoming Ithna 'Ashari even as they rejected the possibility of being Nizari Ismailis, followers of the Aga Khan.

These events, with their focus centred on the British Raj, its jurisdiction, and its role in religious movements and social transformation undergirded the British understanding and categorization of the Khoja of Oman. For the British, the al-Lawati were a local group of Khojas who were from a trading class and had originated in the villages and towns of Upper Sind. Originally Hindu, they were converted in the fifteenth century by Pir Sadrudin, a *dā'i* (missionary) of the Ismaili Shi'a sect (Bartle 1876: 431). Court records, gazettes and journals, compiled by former British administrators, formed the core of representations of the past that defined the Khoja, including the al-Lawati in Oman. However, even as this narrative was heavily weighted towards determining the nature of the al-Lawati and their overall role in its informal empire through engagements with historical and contemporary events in India, it had acquired an ambiguous

[126] Although the tensions around the case had begun well before the suit was filed in 1866, the Aga Khan Case, as it was called, related to a suit filed by a group of leaders of the Khoja caste against the Aga Khan, an exiled Persian nobleman who had allied himself to the British by assisting them in their conquest of Sind. The Aga Khan case was ostensibly a property dispute, since the Aga Khan claimed to be the religious leader of the Khojas. Although they were many who considered him to be a source of guidance and object of veneration, there were also elders who opposed his presence in the community since he was demanding control of communal property, control of caste affairs as well as payments of revenues and tithes. In the course of the trial the presiding Judge, Justice Arnold, found it increasingly expedient to determine what the Khojas were in terms of their religious identity before he would be able to resolve property ownership. The plaintiffs argued that the property of the Khojas belonged only to members of the caste who were Sunnis, and since the Aga Khan was not a Khoja he had no right to intervene in caste property issues. In the course of the trial, Khoja religious poetry, the Quran as well as Oriental scholarship on Persian history and Shi'a Islam were used in order to prove that the Khojas and the Aga Khan was in fact Shi'a in persuasion, specifically Shi'a Nizari Ismaili. The verdict favoured the Aga Khan, determining that the Khoja were Ismails and that therefore the property of the Khoja caste did belong to the Aga Khan, as their living Imam, believed to be the direct descendant of Ali ibn Abi Talib and the Prophet's daughter, Fatima Az-Zahra (Purohit 2012; Asani 2011: 95-129).

approach in addressing a key issue at stake, which was whether the Khojas were British subjects or not.

This ambiguity rested on the British acknowledgement of the duration of Khoja presence in the region. Like the Hadrami diasporic settlements across the Indian Ocean lands that Ho describes (2006: xxi), the Khojas had "comported themselves to local arrangements wherever they went. They settled and sojourned in towns big and small … entering into relations that were more intimate, sticky and prolonged than the Europeans could countenance."[127] Being a British subject hinged on whether the ancestors of al-Lawati community members had migrated before or after the British conquest of Sind in 1840.[128] In his entry for the Khojas, Lorimer (1908: 1034) states that of the 250 males among the Khoja caste living in Matrah, 120 were British subjects with the rights to British protection[129] and travel passes. Of 41 families living in other parts of the Sultanate, 29 were under British protection. The rest were subjects of the sultan.

In 1895, Arab tribes led by the al-Harthi, who were to play a pivotal role in the establishment of the Imamate in 1913, attacked Muscat and occupied it. The Sultan and his family had to escape by fleeing over the roofs of Indian merchants until they made it to the British Agency. The Sultan finally took refuge in Fort Jalali and arrangements were made for the protection of British subjects and their property. These included the distribution of notices of nationality that were affixed to the doors of their houses and godowns. But at Matrah, the Khojas withdrew to their

[127] Although several elders of the al-Lawati community believe their migration and settlement in the region to have occurred no less than three hundred years ago, based on a date inscribed on the upper panels of the western gate of the *sur al-lawati* which states 1074 A.H./A.D. 1663, scholars have generally dated their arrival in Oman to the late eighteenth century. Noting that the alternative name for the al-Lawati/Khojas is Hyderabadi, these scholars assume that merchants who had established themselves in Hyderabad, Sind built in 1768, would have started settling in the Muscat region only after that date, playing an important role in the trade of the Western Indian Ocean from that time onwards (Allen 1981; Markovits 1999). It is generally thought that the al-Lawati migrated and settled in Oman in successive waves between the late eighteenth and the late nineteenth centuries (Allen 1981).

[128] In Muscat in 1858, Sultan Thawayni received a guarantee from the British that those Lawati/Khojas who were settled in Oman before the British occupation of Sind in 1840 would not be regarded as British subjects (Bhacker 1992: 172). The entire question of British extraterritorial jurisdiction was one of contentious debate. Sultan Turki ibn Said maintained that many of those under ostensible British protection were in fact under the Sultan's and were therefore not entitled to tax exemption. Specifically, he held that the entire Khoja community were his subjects and it was with great reluctance that he conceded in 1873 and 1876 that they, like the Hindus, were due British protection (Landen 1967: 230). In his writings on Oman, Sir Percy Cox, Political Agent and Consul at Muscat (1899-1904) remarks that communities of British Indians, which included the Hindu Banians and the "Muhammadans of Khoja persuasion, descendants of immigrants from Sind and disciples of H.H. the Aga Khan or recent seceders from his faith, that it was the duty of the British representative to look after and occasionally visit" (as cited in Ward 1987: 299).

[129] The benefits of British protection were the following: exemption from private property searches; exemption from local taxes; right of full discharge from creditors if bankrupt; British assistance in debt recovery; British official representation in any local trial; and exemption from direct interference by local authorities. Those who were British subjects or British protected could also obtain the assistance of the British diplomatic serve for reparations for any damage or losses incurred during an attack by the local population (Allen 1981: 52). It is generally thought that this close association with the British may have been one of the primary reasons for the sacking and burning of Khoja and Banian shops in the course of various raids on Muscat and the Batinah coast. They were often viewed as British agents, giving rise to negative consequences that still reverberate today.

fort which was supplied with a British flag.[130] These British subjects, according to archival material, were all considered to be Indian merchants, crucial actors in the British imperial enterprise. They were generally considered to have the necessary connections with associate firms in other cities across the waters and in India itself to facilitate business, and were primarily financiers, wholesale and retail merchants able to exploit the changing economic relationships brought about by the advent of European-owned trade carrying steamships in the 1860s (Landen 1967: 132-33). Although most of the Khojas were petty traders, artisans and shopkeepers dealing in piece-goods, spices and so on in the early twentieth century, about twelve of them did do business on a large scale, administering the locally established commercial enterprises of the Gulf region (Lorimer I 1908: 1034). Dates for export, for example, were brought in from the interior groves and plantations from Wadi Sama'il, Oman and the al-Sharqiyah and collected in Matrah by Khoja date merchants who were primarily responsible for the collection and distribution of dates inside Oman to be exported on steam ships from Muscat (Landen 1967: 143).

For the British, the Indian merchants – embodied by the Hindu Banians and the Muslim Khojas of Matrah – were intermediaries between Western businesses and Arab society, acting as managing agents, a key component in commercial organizations in the region, where they provided expert knowledge and facilitated entry into the local economy and exchange networks. Their familiarity with local politics and social conditions made the resident Indian merchants and their agency firms key interlocutors who had a virtual monopoly over Omani foreign trade and Muscati business activities (Lorimer I 1908: 2, 382-83, II: 1, 197-1201). In the late nineteenth century, the Indian merchants had superseded the Arabs, becoming the primary importers, exporters, retailers, distributors, bankers, ship owners and government officials (Landen: 1967: 139). As the most powerful merchants, their commercial importance and interests meant that despite being ostensibly a-political, inasmuch as their priority was business, they were still a significant force in regional politics given that that the Sultan of Muscat was largely dependent on Indian administered loans or port customs.[131]

Grounded in a system based on British protection and Sultanic ties, the al-Lawati or Khoja community were integral to a system that assured the Muscati state of a source of credit and the British of benefits and ties. The al-Lawati presence meant that one of the primary agents of their informal governance of the region moved away from Oman and towards British India's overall ruling strategies (Bhacker 1992: 196). As Wilkinson notes, with a fragmented mountain hinterland and the ability to cut off supplies and exports to the interior, as well as to increase customs tax from the main port and from the Batinah coastal region, a *modus vivendi* was reached without recourse to active armed intervention, fortifications or armed alliances (1987: 69). The lynchpin of this system was the British Indian merchant. The Khojas were therefore not only co-opted into the administrative apparatus of imperial sovereignty but were defined in terms of their orientation towards the British Raj. India became the pivot around which not only a socio-political geography was built – one that allocated a space for the Khojas – but around which a body of knowledge about India's history, religions and societies was organized that

[130] Major Sadler's report during the rebellion of 1895 (R/15/6/37).

[131] By the mid-nineteenth century, it became increasingly clear that the Banian and, to a lesser degree, the Khoja merchants were in almost complete control of finances of state as creditors as well as loan and tax farmers in East Africa as well as Oman (Landen 1967; Hamilton 2010: 149).

informed the practices of governing populations that went far beyond the confines of India to encompass the empire as a whole (Cohn 1996; Metcalf 2007). As Lorimer observed, even as the local Arab population were denied access into the *sur al-Lawati*, "the only non-Khojas admitted into the enclosure are the British officials at Muscat, whom they regard as their **natural** protectors" (1908 II: 1034). This is largely a perspective governed by the archival material of the India Office Records and the British imperia. The *sur al-Lawati* in this context comes into being as the nodule point at the intersection of trade networks, imperial administration and historical imaginings.

Memories of Khoja History and Sociality prior to the Nahda period

Even as the al-Lawati community was co-opted into a regional system that was increasingly penetrated by imperial channels of control and surveillance, they were also determined by a mode of life shaped by local conditions and regional relations, shifting geographies that were transmitted through daily education, devotional practices and modes of sociality that rendered them a distinctive community. Today, fragmentary memories and conceptions of the past carve out the ancestral space that defines the contours of the life ways of the *sur al-Lawatiya*; however, they also may be understood as the very form in which the resources of the past establish an affective orientation towards daily living, one that grounds an ethical understanding of living the good life in accordance with being an Omani citizen as well as a member of the al-Lawati community. Granted, there are undeniable breaks or ruptures in people's understanding of their past and these shards of memories, to a degree, varied in detail among the many community members with whom I dined and met over the course of my fieldwork. These included gaps between textual references and oral memory, official pedagogy and those sustained by popular knowledge and its vitality. The possibilities of these fragments and their ethical possibilities are taken up by Veena Das's (2007: 5-6) work on the effects of collective violence in India. Inasmuch as the fragment has lost its coherence as a part of a totalizing logic, it may still carry possibilities within itself in a piecemeal fashion that animates a certain way of living.

In this context, the potency of these memory fragments are informed by the ways in which they translate and work through the differences between the Arab tribal tradition, its values and forms of deep engagement with the past, which lie at the core of Omani national coherence, and the al-Lawati oral histories passed down through the generations. These effectively underlie the "topography" of the al-Lawati self, making it possible for this minority to array themselves with a plurality of narrative forms and past imagery by which to inhabit Oman's past and engage with it in the present even while challenging the unitary coherence of its national narrative.

This goes beyond a matter of the accuracy of these accounts or people's ideological conviction of their truth, as these forms of inner sincerity cannot be publicly gauged, given their inaccessibility as well as the potential for their being caught in a mire of inconsistencies. What comes to the fore, instead, is how people manifest these historic understandings, reproducing them and making these pieces and remnants a basis for inhabiting the present even as the available national vocabulary proves woefully inadequate. In order to understand the conditions under which the al-Lawati become subject to forms of history and its political consequences, one needs to demonstrate that even as they surrender to the disciplinary nature of history and memory that lies at the core of nation building in Oman, their very structural presence as citizens

at the margins of the normative nationalist grid and its claims to truth, as well as their perceived continuing association with trade and commerce – an integral facet of their own sense of self – fundamentally de-stabilizes nationalist understanding, marking the impossibility of such a national imaginary. In the process it generates ambiguous forms of politics and personhoods among the al-Lawati and others. Even as these forms become sites of interpellation, they also become spaces for critique and manoeuvrability in modern Oman. This was clearly demonstrated in the wake of the Arab Spring protests in Oman in March 2011.

The experiences of migration, local trade, business interactions, and political and social ties coalesced, fundamentally transforming the boundaries of the community suggested by the British understanding the Khoja as a community based on caste and religion. The Khoja integration into the Omani region went well beyond the structures of empire to be shaped by the networks of commerce, the movements of religious learning, regional mobility and interaction. I met Habib at one of the four-star hotels along Muscat's beachfront. A tall and spare man in his late sixties, wearing the familiar tasselled *disdasha* and the *kumma*, that proclaimed the Omani citizen, he was nevertheless still a striking contrast to the many older sheikhs, scholars and government bureaucrats I had encountered and talked with over the course of my fieldwork in Nizwa. This was not merely a matter of his beardless state, although that was one facet; more importantly, this was the first time that my conversation with an Omani was conducted entirely in English, and it would be the first of many similar experiences with community members; in the course of having tea,. Habib, considered by many to be a spokesman and an elder of the al-Lawati community, explained the distinctiveness of the history of the al-Lawati in Oman. He mused, "Before the *nahda* the government was poor. The Sultans were always in need of money. The only source of income was the little bit of export they did. The Lawati being rich helped the government and that is how they got their power."

He also recounted stories of legendary members of the community. Bhacker Abdul Latif, for example, who was once the sheikh of the community, consolidated and expanded the Haji Bhacker Company established in 1895 that initially dealt primarily in firearms and pearls. Later, it became the leading exporter of fish, mainly to Germany and Holland, and today its name is synonymous with shipping in Oman and the handling of lighterage on an almost exclusive contract with the state. His father had come from Kutch and the son, equipped with money and intelligence, was considered one of the richest men in Matrah in the 1950s, was a close friend of Sultan Said bin Taimur and was well-respected by the British. His grand-daughter, in her late twenties, later augmented the story by relating what she had heard from her family that the news of his death in 1953 was announced on BBC radio and that the flag was flown at half-mast for three days in Muscat. Today, the Bhacker Haji Abdul Latif Fazul is one of several formidable al-Lawati merchant dynasties exercising a quasi-monopoly over the maritime freight sector in Matrah today (Valeri 2009: 105). Photographs of the three generations of Abdul Latif families portrayed on company literature and websites, on office walls or in family albums, show three distinguished bearded men wearing Omani garb generally associated with elite tribal leaders: the *bisht* (an outer cloak usually of wool worn over the *disdasha* with gold trimming along its open ends) and the *masar*. I was also informed that many would wear the *khanjar* in their travels through the interior, the Batinah coastal region or in their meetings with Arab tribes, but in the *sur* itself it was not worn.

The Sultans' relationships with the al-Lawati community and their dependence on them to shore up always shaky finances were often emphasised by my interlocutors to underscore the loyalty that the community had towards the Sultan that was constitutive of their understandings of being subjects to the Sultan and being Muscati. These were stories held in common as part of a community narrative reservoir that were in wide circulation and were often recounted to me by different sources. I was told there were times when the Arab tribes of the interior invaded Muscat and the cities of Muscat/Matrah were close to being occupied, it was often, , the al-Lawati merchant community that enabled the Sultan to buy off the invading tribal armies. This was also the scenario at the time of the Ibadi tribal revolt against the Sultan in 1913 when the last Imamate was established in the interior: one of the sheikhs of the al-Lawati community, Habib Murad, became a legendary figure in the community by giving Sultan Taimur the keys to his godown (where all his merchandise was stored), informing him to take whatever he needed in order to thwart the invasion.

One community member, a scholar who has written about the once vibrant social life in the *sur*, mentioned that Sultan Faisal had considered the al-Lawati the "star" of his country due to their riches and their education. Both oral and textual[132] memory recall the reverberations of the Arabic *khutba* from the mimbars of both *ma'atim* and mosques, the flow of Arabic *qaşa'id* (poetry verses) from the *rithā'* (poetry of mourning) of Hussein, the panegyrics on the Prophet as well as the pleasant evenings spent during earlier days before the *nahda* along the beach outside the *sur* when the young men competed with each other on their memorization and knowledge of Arabic poetry. At the same time, the Khojas were distinctive in Oman for introducing new modes of education that were greatly shaped by their ties to the Raj. From the 1940s onwards, the al-Lawati community had established their own local schools in the Matrah area. Unlike the *katātīb* system, the emphasis of which was on memorising the Quran and Prophetic hadith, these schools were based on the modern education system and were organized around the premise of the Lancastrian system where a single headmaster and his abler students were used as "assistants" to the teacher in order to pass on their knowledge to others for monthly fees of 30 Indian rupees; the text books used were primers from Egypt and India and the focus was on English, Arabic, mathematics and accounting.[133] Most of the students were the sons of traders and retailers. The Khojas were however considered one of the most intellectual of the many ethnic groups that lived in Oman due to their command of English as well as their business acumen and ties to the Indian Ocean region and Europe.

Even as the men often engaged in trade and travels across the region, assimilating through dress, knowledge of the language and local ways, their permanent enclave in Matrah remained socially segregated from the rest of the region, most especially through the practices of endogamous marriage. Although the men of the al-Lawati community occasionally married women who were Baluchi or Arab, I was repeatedly informed that before 1970 women invariably married within

[132] There are few works by local scholars and para-experts on the al-Lawati community. Two of the most noteworthy however are Jawad al-Khabori's *adwār al-'umanīya fī al-qarat al-hindīya* (The Role of the Omani in the Indian sub-continent) and Mohsin bin Jum'a bin Muhammad al-Lawati's *sur al-lawati.* Both books are virtually impossible to get in bookstores yet they are widely disseminated among community members and their ideas seemed well known to most.

[133] These schools are closely associated with the al-Lawati community; however, they were considered to be open to all in the Matrah region and a number of Baluchis and some Arabs did attend classes there.

the community. These practices were solidified by a distinctive language, Khojki, based on Sindhi and Kutchi, although Arabic, as mentioned earlier, was widely used in business, learning and pleasure. The community was autonomous and disputes and disagreements were mediated by an elected sheikh and presided over by a council of members.

Many of the older generation have memories of the close-knit ties and networks that created a distinctive form of sociality in the *sur* that was continuously solidified through neighbourly and family interactions, religious observances related to the births and deaths of the Prophet and his family, and celebratory occasions and feasts, all of which took place within the confines of the *sur* and its public spaces, its mosques and *ma'atim.* There were *majalis* outside the *sur* where the men of the community would gather to hold councils, Quranic recitation gatherings during Ramadan evenings, wedding celebrations, social gatherings, and moments merely for relaxation and talk. Many of the young men in their twenties would stay up all night discussing business, and people would often sleep here, as the terraces often held beds. The mornings from 7:30 to 12.00 and the afternoons and evenings from 3-6 pm would find the *sur* empty of men who were busy going about their business activities; the only visitors to the enclave was the twice daily visits of the water man who would bring water daily in his leather bags, filling the many water pots and vessels that were used for washing and bathing as well as men who brought firewood for cooking. The gates of the *sur* were locked at night and for the most part no one was allowed to enter during the day.

Memories of their regional ties with other Khojas based in India are recalled through the flotsam and jetsam of washed up fragments that have been passed down through the generations. These are premised on division and conflict rather than commonalities. A number of the al-Lawati recalled that the main mosque of the *sur* once housed the *jamā'at khāna* (council hall, which is a term commonly used for where the Khoja congregate and preside over social functions and keep religious observances. Today the term is used solely to refer to its being an Imami Ismaili place of worship and congregation).[134] Opinions differ on the role of the Aga Khan and his claim to be the direct heir to the imams of the Middle Ages; among the Khojas in Matrah the question was recollected as a time of vociferous arguments and armed fights in the 1850s, culminating in the destruction of the *jamā'at* within the *sur*. One member of the community recalled how a woman of the *sur* took up all of the vessels and materials related to the *jamā'at* that was once within the great mosque, went onto the beach area and threw them into the sea. Those families who supported the Aga Khan, twenty in number, were asked to leave the *sur* and the remaining families, the majority, formally became Ithna'Asharis. The building that was once the *jamā'at* itself became a wholly Ithna'Ashari mosque. The religious practices of the Matrah Khoja community came to be greatly shaped by *'ulama* from Najaf who were formally invited to

[134] It is clear throughout the oral accounts that I heard from community members as well as those written by colonial authorities that the Khoja were mostly Shi'a, although some were and still are Sunni as well. Bartle for example (1876: 431), mentions that the Aga Khan attended the *majalis* during the months of Muharram and Safar to listen to the *qira'at* or narrative accounts of the Battle of Karbala as well as presiding over the distribution of water mixed with the holy dust of Karbala. Thousands, according to Bartle (435), also went on pilgrimage to Karbala. The legal proceedings initiated on behalf of the Aga Khan in 1866 led to the formal and separatist administrative and doctrinal schism that ultimately divided the Khojas of Matrah and elsewhere into Ithna'Ashari Shi'as and Imami Ismaili Shi'as. Many families among the al-Lawati are still divided between the two Shi'a sects, but today all al-Lawati of Oman are overtly Shi'a Ithna'Ashari.

preside over the community's legal needs in the late nineteenth century. Today, the daily lives of the community are punctuated by the religious practices and acts of devotion that are specifically related to the Shi'a Ithna'Ashari tradition and the missionary and devotional activities of scholars and preachers from Kuwait, Bahrain, Basra and Najaf. The trans-regional impact of events happening in Bombay, the capital of the British Raj, is revealed here. Colonial officials, personalities such as the Aga Khan and his family, and dissidents in the Bombay Khoja community, who were far away were intimately involved in the historical trajectory of the Matrah Khoja community and the events surrounding it,[135] thereby projecting power and meaning over a scalar geography of empire, religious practice, and knowledge and modes of sociality that in turn created the social landscape of the *sur*, a foundation for generating potentials.

These memories provide an alternative sense of history, one which constitutes a community of a distinctive character that established a local footing in response to regional socio-political and religious dynamics. They provide evidence of an alternative set of values and material structures and processes that destabilize the hegemonic construction of the Khojas of Matrah and their social world built out of the British archives, giving way to one that is less categorical and more amorphous. This is not a matter of an objective historical portrayal, based on the conception of the "real," so much as one that considers subjects are constructed on the basis of how their perception is structured, the effects of sedimented layers of particular experiences, practices and pasts, some of whose elements come to the fore, informing the ways one sees and acts in the world (Scott 1991). The contours of Oman itself were hardly decisively demarcated at this time, being porous to imperial informal governance, religious debates and regional rivalry.

One of the key issues that the al-Lawati have needed to confront, reason and resolve among themselves as well as through their relations with other groups of Oman, is one that has risen to the forefront with the rise of nationhood and territorially-grounded state-building in Oman. As the Khoja diaspora has been pushed out of imperial channels of control and encased within the boxed-up boundaries of nations and their intersecting lines of sovereign jurisdiction and international public and private bureaucratic gateways, a question has been posed both overtly and tacitly by a myriad of social actors: Who are the al-Lawati? This question reaches out to the specificity of their historical experiences that had shaped their own self-understanding and the ways that it has been made visible or invisible through Omani national history, normative values and iconic imagery. Their ambiguity has been undergirded by a double movement: even as the Khojas have moved out of the *sur* enclave en masse from 1970 onwards to settle in the open suburbs of Muscat, assimilating into national public life and institutional state settings with other Omanis as "equal" citizens, they have also become increasingly conscious of their embodiment of critical differences that undermine the dominant national narratives from within. Politically

[135] In his appendices, Lorimer (Vol 1, part II, 2379) notes that in 1885, the Government of India had refused to interfere on behalf of those Imami Khojas who had been dispossessed of the use of the original Khoja *jama'at*. There were arguments that they were entitled to it under the decision made by the Bombay High Court in favour of the Aga Khan in 1866, but there was a sense that it would be a somewhat extraneous exercise given that only twenty families had been ousted and had in the end been allowed to build a new *jama'at* now only for Imami Ismailis outside the *sur*. In 1886, Lorimer reports that the government was looking into complaints that certain Khoja women in Matrah were being abused by their husbands in order to force them to join the Ithana'Ashari community and renounce any allegiances or ties with the Aga Khan. It later turned out to be a case of only one Khoja woman.

"hot" terms such as "Arab" and "tribe" become especially salient in historical and political discourse in delineating the wavering substance of an answer.

Who are the al-Lawati?

The capacities that the al-Lawati brings to bear in order to discursively and materially engage with the specificity of their difference within a nationally articulated landscape are subject to a number of contesting relationships between politics and the past. On the one hand, as elaborated in chapters 2 and 3, the state normative narrative and its imagery establishes a unifying aspect of historical experience, one embedded within a homogenous language of deep roots (*'arāqa*) entrenched in the land and the values that it has inculcated over the centuries that have come about through working the region and its resources in order to build a flourishing nation along the temporal baseline of a progressive historicity. These, according to the narrative, have laid out the core and distinctiveness of Omani nation building, dissolving any differences within its domain in order to forge the accumulative and common denominator on which a national consciousness is built. On the other hand, this denial of social difference is paradoxically set against strong structural and institutional state governance that has been constitutively undergirded by a tribal hierarchy, as noted in chapter 4, where the notion of being Arab as an originary category is intimately linked to that of *asal* (descent), patrilineal genealogy and tribal history.

These intersections, their complex discursive processes and the everyday sensibilities they enable, generate the ways in which al-Lawati subjectivity is produced, through the modes of reasoning and the types of politics they make possible in their organization and interpretation of historical experience. Being an al-Lawati, with all the nuances of what it means, is something that has been inherently unstable and in itself is a series of stories and histories that has been formulated as part of an age; a series of connotations whose potency has come about through the struggles of a particular moment. In a footnote in his entry on the Khojas, Lorimer (Vol. II 1908: 1035) briefly mentions that in the Sultanate of Oman, the Khojas are known among the Arabs as Lawatiya. Although the origins of the term are obscure, he suggests that it may be derived from the word *lota*, the Indian water vessel, which it was commonly said they used to carry when they first arrived in the region. He further noted that the Khojas never call themselves Lawatiya and dislike the name. Whatever the truth of these remarks, a century later, the name has become part of normative institutional nomenclature, where every citizen linked through the patrilineal line to the Khojas/al-Lawati is officially placed within that categorical term as part of its transformation into an officially endorsed "tribal" patronym and all its ensuing legal and administrative documentation.[136]

1. Changes to the connotation of the term are intimately linked to the wide dissemination of a history spread by one of the few texts that has delved into the question of who the al-Lawati were: Jawad al-Khaburi al-Lawati's *al-adwār al-'Umaniyya fi'l-Qārra al-Hindiyya: dawr Bani Sama b. Lu'ay* (2001). A historian and philosopher, Jawad al-

[136] Families who have refused to change their surnames to al-Lawati, preferring their original names. However, these families are generally known to be from the al-Lawati community by virtue of their names and the forms they assume, many of which can be traced to an Indo-Pakistan descent line.

> Khaburi (1913-1984) was an unusual member of a community more noted for its merchants and artisans. A childhood intimate of Sultan Said bin Taimur,[137] Jawad al-Khabori later went into voluntary exile due to political and religious differences with members of the community as well as the Sultan. During his years of residence in Bombay and later Karachi, he began writing this work on a topic that, according to his associates, had often plagued him: the word "al-Lawatiya" and its relationship to Oman. One of his former associates recalls that in addition to his historical curiosity, Jawad had been, as a scholar of Arabic literature and history, made to feel inferior because he was considered "Indian" while growing up with a self-understanding of being more "Arab". As the old associate recalls, the need to answer this question came to a head when he was with a group of Arab tribesmen and someone had posed a question that related to Arab poetry. Jawad answered the question and gave an explanation that they were not aware of. One of them laughed and said, "See, this Indian chap knew it and we did not know." This type of division, in the context of growing Arab nationalism in the late 1950s, aroused profound disquiet that spurred him towards his writing this text. Al-Khaburi was one of many among the older generation of al-Lawati who felt such anxieties at a time when the Imam in exile and his supporters were rallying around a new banner and movement of Arab nationalism and were pressing for full membership of the Arab League.[138]

While sitting with one of my interlocutors, Mustafa, a retired employee of PDO (Petroleum Development Oman) and his wife in their small living room and listening to their life experiences in Oman, Mustafa suddenly pointed to a black and white photograph behind me. Depicting a grove of date palms, it was a portrayal of two rows of men in military garb and carrying rifles. All except one, the British officer of a military unit of the Sultan's Armed Forces, wore Middle Eastern *kaffiyeh* on their heads. The photograph was a portrayal of Mustafa and his fellow cadets, a mixture of Arabs, Baluchis and some al-Lawati, who were serving the Sultan under the direction and training of the British in Buraimi in 1964. As Mustafa recalled, the 1960s, when he enlisted, was a time of the prevalent spirit of Nasserism and a strong sense of Arab identity even among the Sultan's troops. The exclusion of the al-Lawati minority from those memories, feeling and desires embodied in the narrative of Arab nationalism at the time, as Mustafa explained, "made many among the al-Lawati feel minus in their hearts and less than others."[139]

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[137] According to the preface of the book written by the scholar Muhsin al-Jum'a, which narrates the life of the author, Jawad al-Khaburi was a "milk brother" to Sultan Said bin Taimur, a fostered kin relationship that referred to the fact that al-Khabori's mother nursed the sultan as an infant as well. Sultan Said moreover spent many of his days residing at the *sur* as did Jawad al-Khaburi in the palace during their childhood.

[138] The Imam and his supporters were by the late 1950s no longer considered an isolated Ibadi state, carrying on the inheritance of an Imamate established in 1913 due to local historical and political dynamics, but a legitimate Arab state whose rights to sovereignty were being suppressed by a Western imperial power and its puppet, the Sultan of Muscat (Rabi 2006; Peterson 1978).

[139] It is worth noting here that Sultan Said himself, although proud of his Ibadi historical background, was not really interested in orienting Oman to the Arab World. Instead, his relationships with the Indian sub-continent, Pakistan and India were stronger (Rabi).

Jawad al-Khabori's work, written during the sixties and seventies, was attempting to address these issues where the notion of being Arab and Omani were being navigated as nodule points around which to address the narratives and practices of the al-Lawati and their place in the modern nation state. Al-Khabori's main thesis was that the al-Lawati were descendants of the Arab tribe, Banu Sama' bin Lu'ay (al-Lawa'iya). In Oman, he notes, the "ta" has often been used as a substitute for the "hamza" in both written literature as well as the spoken word to facilitate easier pronunciation. With this observation, al-Khaburi assimilates the Khojas historically into the Arab and tribal traditions and histories of the Arabian Peninsula. In this view, Sind and Kutch are on the margin of what is now clearly an Arab/Muslim trajectory that focuses in on movement, conquest, social transformation, and the drift of peoples from west to east and back again, establishing a narrative of return to a home posited as one of pure Arab tribal origin.

This ethno-history uses Arab primary histories, secondary scholarship in Arabic, Urdu and English that draw on a range of events, epochs and sources, oral tales, material features in the landscape as well as received wisdom recounted on the shores of Mutrah, the coffee houses and the *majālis* to generate what might be considered a double movement: even as a historical narration that forges its understanding of the Khojas through the conception of Hindu origins and caste is marginalized by the advent of a nationalist modernity, another past comes to the fore, unofficially disseminated through the spread of ideas and literary texts that enables a historically grounded presence, rooting the Khojas of Oman in the national landscape as al-Lawa'iya, through enfolding them within an Arab tribal genealogy. In the narrative, the al-Lawa'iya are part of the armies of the early Arab conquests that established an Arab-Islamic state in the region of Multan, an enduring legacy of large scale movements that seamlessly integrate Multan, Sind and Oman into a historical geography of conquest, religious reform and mobility. There were further migrations by the Banu Sama' in the wake of the conquests of Oman by the Qarmatians in 317 A.H/A.D. 929. The conquest of Multan by the Fatimid missionaries in 347 A.H. /A.D. 958 was foreshadowed by the earlier conversion of the Bani Sama' to Shi'ism in Bahrain by the Qarmatians. The state's conquest and occupation by Mahmud of Ghazna, in the early eleventh century, ultimately led to the large scale dispersion of the tribe across the Indian sub-continent. Linguistically, the fact that the al-Lawati speak Khojki is attributed to this intermediary period when they were residing in Sind after leaving Oman in the first century A.H./seventh century A.D., returning to the "mother country" from the eighteenth century onwards during the age of Imam Ahmed bin Said Albu Said.

Although the narration of an Arab genealogy among the al-Lawati community did not originate with al-Khaburi, it was most systemically elaborated in his work. A number of the older generation recalled the distribution of pamphlets and short works such as those of Muhammed al-Tawil pre-dating the *nahda* that had attempted to trace the al-Lawati back to Arab tribal origins through the use of specific family trees or the undated booklet of Muhammad Taqi Hasan al-'Umani, which had adopted an alternative account that suggested that the Lawatiya were descended from Hakam bin 'Awanat al-Lat, who commanded the first Arab invasion of the Indian sub-continent and later became governor of Sind (Ward 1987: 73). The assumption of a genealogy that goes back in lineage and blood to the Arab tribes as well as to the early histories of Islamic conversion was a powerfully pervasive one, of which I often heard variations when talking with different members of the community across gender and age groups.

It was however, by no means uncontested. When I inquired about this line of thinking, a number of the elders in the community voiced reservations with the idea of being Arab in descent. As far as many of them were concerned, they were Arabs through their rooted presence in the region that had stretched over long periods of time, attested to by the presence of age-old gravestones in Rustaq as well as the looming stature of age and longevity of the main mosque and the *sur* itself. As one descendant in his contemplation of the issue observed, "If my great grandfather's grave is in Oman how can I claim to be from somewhere else?"

What it meant to be Arab was a strong point of contention that veered between two differing perspectives: singular tribal descent to a more diverse one where many families from different groups have earned the category through the longevity of their interactions and productive relationships with the region and its peoples over the course of, what is commonly believed to be, four hundred years. As one former diplomat told me abruptly in reply to my questions about the importance of 'origin' in Oman, "all this talk about roots is highly improper. Everybody comes from somewhere else. The world has been changing for thousands of years. We may have come from Kutch but we've lived here for centuries and we've become Arabs."

And yet both sides of the argument have been fundamentally shaped by a language of commonality that sets the limits on how identities are set and recognized within a bordered national terrain. The terms "Arab" and "tribe" have become central in channelling the movement away from the complex overlapping of bonds that were characteristic of being a Khoja of Matrah towards internalising the exclusive boundaries of Omani nation building and fabricating the inner self through new modes of belonging and ties of affinity. A chance remark, breezily mentioned by a young al-Lawati journalist, made known to me that it was only in the late 1970s that the al-Lawati received their official name. In discussing the issue with other members of the community, it was revealed that prior to this, most official and legal documentation, including Omani passports, registered members as "Hyderabadi". It was not clear as to whether the name change was a government initiative or one spearheaded by the community's elders, but there was a powerful general movement to bring all those linked to the community under a single tribal (*qabīla*) name to facilitate government administration and registration that had specifically Muslim and Arab connotations rather than an Indian tinge. With al-Khabori's ideas already widely disseminated even prior to the publication of the text, the transformation of the community's name and its standardization to al-Lawati as a "tribe" descended by blood from Usama bin Lu'ay came to forge the backbone for the assimilation of the Khoja/Hyderabadi/al-Lawati into the homogenous time of national politics. As one scholar in the community informed me, "Over the course of the seventies, they have rejected the idea of being Indian especially as they climbed higher in government circles, oil industry and diplomacy."

Regardless of people's conviction of this "truth", this genealogical emphasis makes two important facets real: even while it allows the tracing of an origin consonant with an essential national grammar and its manifestation in governance, it makes it possible for communities of diverse historical experiences to co-inhabit with each in new relations of mutuality and ethical engagements, such as those espoused in the citizenship values, ethical principles and form of religion that draws out the boundaries of who is native vs. the outsider within the national terrain. In the process, certain forms of collective memory, sense of the past, geographic belonging, its sensibilities and desires are abandoned in order to embrace others as part of the process of

becoming a modern Omani and Arab (Asad 2003: 180). This includes the categories of both "Hyderabadi" and "Khoja" that become increasingly unliveable in the histories and life worlds they conjure up, necessitating a refiguration by embodying the material and abstract norms of Omani citizenship.

At the same time, if the very possibilities of being an Omani citizen are predicated on engaging with the notion of being both tribal and Arab, then this political subjectivity is also caught in the ethical and political conundrums of histories from which this figure emerges in the first place. This thought process strongly resonates with an explanation that an al-Lawati trader from al-Khaborah in the Batinah gave to me in answer to my inquiries on the importance of name: "if you are an Omani and your origins are Pakistani and your surname in ultimately Khan, the presence of this name will always remain, reminding you and others that you are not originally from Oman but from Pakistan. In the end, an obstacle (*ḥājiz)* will arise between you." Even as the power of history making works to ground itself in the everyday through the act of naming, and thereby re-configuring, it necessarily generates paradoxes and fissures that manifest themselves in displaying critical differences in the very histories and values that lie at the heart of the national narrative (Ivy 1995: 1-29). A binary is constantly in place throughout where the concept of local/foreign forged on a platform of histories becomes the underlying basis for an entire suite of potent associations linked to the al-Lawati tribe – rich/poor, Indian/Arab, exploitative/in need, miserly/hospitable, educated/ignorant – that articulate groups' daily relationships with each other.

These designations become part of a continuum that identify people and places as either more foreign or more local and part of a more or less stable structure of perception. As most of the al-Lawati returned to Oman after spending the lean years of the 1950s and 1960s abroad, they were generally considered to be one of the most qualified groups to construct the modern infrastructure of the country. With their command of English and the degrees that most had obtained in the Middle East, Pakistan and India, they were placed in high positions in the ministries, Petroleum Development Oman (PDO), business and industry as well as diplomatic circles. The al-Lawati in Oman have come to be construed in general through the framework of descent, wealth, religion, education and influence, as well as more tangible facets such as phenotype, mannerisms, a style of walking, a form of speech or an accent that informs a certain classificatory valuation of peoples in their relations with each other that might not necessarily be hierarchical. A good friend from the Batinah region once jokingly mentioned how he could spot a Lawati just by the way they communicated with each other, even when he could not hear their conversation.

The local rituals of hospitality in the guest-host exchanges of coffee and dates in the Arab interior that is now centrally iconic of Omani generosity (see chapter 3) and the ethical value dispositions that are normally considered to emanate from such acts as open-handedness and magnanimity become fraught in a continually felt gap between those considered to embody the ideals of Oman in their daily ways and those not. Over the course of my many visits to family households among the al-Lawati, I was usually accompanied by a friend, an Ibadi from Nizwa who was also a taxi driver. Many times after I left the house, he would ask me curiously if they had served me any food. One immediate feature in my visitations of al-Lawati households, especially for someone like me who had been living in the interior, was that dates and coffee

were not part of the necessary ritual offerings to a guest. Instead, baked snacks or juice were more the norm, set on a coffee table rather than spread out on a mat on the ground. There were occasions when, for a variety of reasons, only a drink was offered. Abdullah on hearing this several times mentioned that this was not unusual since the al-Lawati were known to be *bukhalā'* (miserly). At the time, I merely thought this was a personal prejudice. However, during a number of later visits to several prominent officials in the ministries of the Interior and Heritage and Culture, I independently heard the term "*bakhīl*" being used several times as a pervasive stereotype of the al-Lawati. These officials, in angry denunciation, cited the many endowments and causes for good that the members of the community have dedicated themselves to that benefitted all in Oman, including the schools set up in Matrah in the 1940s and 1950s when there were virtually none.

As fractured memories, unassimilated into the singular national record and its imagery, the histories of the British imperia and the Imamate opposition confront the present, suspended but not forgotten. More specifically, they inhabit the world in working through a continual felt gap between the ideals embodied in citizenship values, such as those of equality, and the sensibilities that are thought to accompany them, such as a commitment to moral consistency and generosity to those being exploited. This perception structured and sedimented by an alternative sense of time informed the trajectory of the Arab Spring protests in Feb/March 2011. When protests were first directed against the ministers for their removal on charges of corruption, among the first names to be called were non-Arab, non-tribal Omanis including Maqbool Ali Sultan, an al-Lawati, who was Minister of Trade and Industry at the time. Even though other names followed, the al-Lawati still consider this a culmination of generations of resentment and anger that had naturalised into an antipathy against the community who are perceived as rich, with a monopoly on the business, banking and trade resources of Oman, and ultimately outsiders and exploiters.

In his work on social and gender inequality in Oman, al-Azri notes the histories and the ethnic differentiation that has come about through them in structuring the perception of the work-a-day world in recording the remarks made by a banker from the interior who was working at the Omani National Bank. In an interview with al-Azri, the banker states in frustration that "this is a bank of al-Lawatiya … Every day I feel that people want to question me. Why are you here? Why don't you go and work in the Ministry of Heritage and Culture or for the secret police" (2013: 51). Even in banter with friends these fragments jar through, upending any sense of the all-encompassing discursive and aesthetic forms of history inhabited by the state. Murtada, an official at the Ministry of the Interior as well as the al-Lawati Awqaf administration, recalled an event during one of our meetings in which a conversation with a friend turned from gentle teasing into a serious argument.

Murtada could not quite remember what the quarrel was about but what he did recall affected him deeply. His friend, in anger, had informed him that the Lawatiya were in Oman only as guests of the Sultan. They owed their citizenship entirely to his beneficence and were in fact not real Arabs, native to the area. Murtada, in great anger, told his companion, a Hinai from the interior, that it was only through his people's support of HM that the Sultan was even able to assume power and usher in the *nahda.* They, the Arabs of the interior, had tried to wage war on his family and tried to overthrow them. As far as he was concerned, the fact that he was born

there, had dedicated his entire life to the area, and was going to die there made him an Arab and Omani.

The Sur al-Lawatiya Today

Inasmuch as the *sur* has become a space increasingly marginalized by the advent of national modernity, it has in the same movement become yoked into inhabiting those distinctions that are considered necessary, for many in the community, towards being an Omani citizen of the al-Lawati tribe today: being a practising Shi'a. Objectified forms of the past, through their institutional repetition and systemic dissemination, stretch out to create a public sphere that establishes the conditions for a productive and creative national citizenry. In the process, attachments to other kinds of traditions, which evoke a different set of histories, are relegated to the private and domestic domains. Coming alive with people's hurried movements and the buzzing of conversation on many an evening during the months of Muharram and Safar especially, the fortified enclosure of the *sur* today graphically illustrates the sharpening division between religion and the political, private and public that anchors the secular nature of the modern state today.

Many families have held on to their properties, and with increased prosperity brought about by the benefits of state oil wealth have acquired more houses over the years. A number of these have been given over to al-Lawati *awqāf* (religious endowments), and transformed into *ma'ātim* and *husseīniyāt* specifically for women to attend lectures and *qirā'at* (readings). Televisions screens on the walls in some of the larger spaces are often hooked up for live viewing of the *khutba*, lectures and readings during times of important religious observances that take place in the main mosque opposite the corniche that are usually frequented only by the men of the community. The tables outside many of the small open squares of the quarter near the main *husseīniyāt* are manned during these times by young men who talk to potential customers about the arrays of tapes, CDs, t-shirts and books that delve into Shi'a doctrine, religious songs and the sermons and readings of some of the more famous preachers and scholars of the Gulf region, Saudi Arabia and Iraq arranged in front of them.

Although emptied of occupants on most days, most of the houses have become havens for family get-togethers and chats with old neighbours and friends after attending the *ma'atim* in the evenings, rests after the religious observances of '*āshura* all night and evening meals during the month of Ramadan. Some of the old narrow houses that were no more than large spaces in which different activities took place in various corners have been demolished outright and restructured in order to correlate with the modern emphasis on constructing multiple rooms, each of which correspond to separate social functions along generational and gender lines. Many of these houses, strikingly different from their older neighbours with their crumbling masonry, graphitised fronts and peeling walls, have been purposefully built to correspond to the overall aesthetics and traditional building features for which the *sur al-Lawatiya* is renowned. Those facing the corniche have been required to do so by municipality rules as the *sur* has increasingly become the object of State ventures in historic preservation and museumification that still remain in their nascent stages.

Even as memories and histories make a place, a place can also make histories. For many of the al-Lawati, a "return" to the *sur* continues to mark a sense of critical difference that demarcates the specificity of their mode of belonging in Oman and the histories it is grounded in. As one elderly member of the community informed me when I inquired as to the reasons why people come from all over Muscat to attend the *ma'ātim* there, even though there are Shi'a mosques in other districts of Muscat such as Khuwayr, Ruwi and Madinat Sultan Qaboos, the *sur* is the one place where people can speak Khojki to each other. As the Royal Diwan begins its initiatives to monumentalize the *sur,* its very bid to carve out a national narrative history that integrates the *sur* into the Omani national idiom produces its own ambivalences. The al-Lawati past and collective memories in their dense and many layered otherness ultimately de-stabilize the state and nation as the universal subjects of history and the trajectory of a universal progress, even while solidifying its structural rubric of "Arabness" and "Tribalism". Histories and geographies converge to create a contested terrain that illuminates the politics of terrains and peoples.

CONCLUSION

Towards the end of my field work, in May 2011, I was having one of a series of wide ranging discussions with Tariq, a Lawati businessman from the Batinah region on imperialism, the nation and Islam in his offices on the upper floors of a small shopping centre in the Ruwi district in Muscat. In the course of our talk, Tariq recounted an incident that has stayed with me and in fact deeply shaped the writing focus of this dissertation. He mentioned how nonsensical the notion of *'adāt wa taqālīd* had become in *nahḍa* Oman. He recalled how during one 'Id celebration, he was watching performances of men doing *ruzha* (a national dance performed by men and featuring stylized sword play), elaborate poetry readings and carefully choreographed camel races. His friend turned to him at one point and said "thank God we still preserve our *'adāt wa taqālid.* Tariq laughed at this, and told him that in fact, we have been completely imperalized and these are Western ideas about Omani culture and traditions. As far as he was concerned, as he further explained his ideas to me, these practices along with the tasellated *disdasha* and the miniature coffee sets had been chosen, institutionalized and become part of a national repertoire that was entirely superficial, taken from the mendacity of daily life routines.

To make his understanding even clearer and knowing that I was from Pakistan, Tariq offered up the prospect of museumifying the practice of chewing paan (betel nut chewing), and its residues on red tinged stained teeth or the splattered blots on the crowded street pavements as a parallel example of how such a ubiquitous act could be rendered into an extremely trite iconic image of a country. From his perspective, fundamental principles such as love and devotion to God, cooperation with each other in times of need, the books of scholarship written by the *'ulamā'*, these were the true basis of '*adāt* and therefore deserved to be preserved. For me, his perspective raised many questions about the Omanis' own intense encounter with the unsettled nature of their own past. It related, too, to their on-going encounters with a bounded landscape where image and word permeate throughout to create the conditions for fixing memories in place through historiography and imagery, to the point of becoming banal. Tariq very rightly alluded to the underlying relations between power and knowledge that characterizes Oman's modern era. However, given Tariq's own furious engagement with heritage discourse--by contrast with his friend's more complaisant attitude--how can we acknowledge the power of history-making without assuming it to be either all-determining of Omani experience which would imply an encompassing acceptance of a singular progressive temporality; even while we try to push away from an understanding that any alternative to a teleological timeline is outright resistance?

Like other states in the region, the oil boom of the 1970s, has enabled Oman to invest in an infrastructure of history-making where the material forms of fort landscapes, handicrafts, old *sharī'a* manuscripts, and everyday items such as the *khanjar* or the *dalla* become distinctive sites of materialization of the past, premised on the notion that they can be seen and are therefore indexical to the process of 'capturing the past' as heritage. These artifacts as the very foundations of the primary evidentiary terrain on which the nation is now built. It is on this empirical basis that historical narratives make visible the contours of the Sultanate of Oman as well as the conditions for moral growth of its citizens. To attend to such histories and their efficacy in the present becomes the basis for answering the seemingly simple question as to how people are being shaped as subjects: how they ought to live, and the demands that progress is instigating in remaking their character.

Drawing on ethnographic research, this dissertation was inspired by Arendt's distinction between tradition as a *burden* and the past as a *force* (1977: xvi-xvii). It calls attention to the complex and multiple ties that harness the ethical challenges of citizenship in modern Oman to the particular legacies, burdens and expectations of the past, and the significance of colonial and the Ibadi Imamate histories for cultural, political and ethical life in modern times. In other words, Oman's history making cannot be extricated from the histories of the British Empire, the languages and practices of informal governance, and the discourses and practices of anti-imperialism that they engendered, including the formation of the last Ibadi Imamate (1913-1958). This legacy forms modern Omani governance and imaginaries--including, importantly, the imagined national community--as well as a particular approach to the cultivation of the past. By cultivation here I mean the discursive and material basis by which these developmental horizons have constructed such categories as 'religion' and 'tradition'. How have these categories forged the practical tools through which people engage in their own desires, needs and habits in the pursuit of an ethical life? These were among the first questions with which I started this dissertation, but they also seem to be fitting ones by which to conclude it.

Research on the role of tradition in modern Islamic societies has tended to figure the past through one of three primary paradigms: 1) as a mask whose guise of continuity misrepresents social reality characterized by the truth of change 2) as an ideological modern tool whose function is to authenticate novelty in the guise of continuity; 3) as a sign of backwardness in its refusal to acknowledge the inevitability of necessary change. All three approaches adopt a modernist conception of time, in accepting the truth of change and the denial of any sense of constancy. In order to avoid falling into the tradition/modernity dichotomy, the opposition of repetition or unchanging substance vs. transformation or change also needs to be dislodged. Following MacIntyre's work (1984), this requires that the past be understood as integral to a distinctive field of reasoning or a style of argumentation, interpretation and reiteration that structures possible forms of practice and ways of living. Through effectively unravelling the complex temporal structures that a tradition may embody - i.e. in its conceptualization of the relations between past, present and future – tradition itself becomes a space "in which one experiences a multiplicity of times and confronts a variety of memories" producing the many contestations and tensions that inhabit a person" (Asad 2006: 234-235).

Inasmuch as material texts and objects become an unavoidable facet in heritage formation, they simply cannot be reduced to the status of evidentiary proof of historical narratives. As Webb Keane notes (2008), these semiotic forms, in their travels across contexts, become embedded within social relationships that are brought about by the material utility of the form itself. Moving well beyond the realm of representation in their public dimension, they become objects of experiences, organizing responses in different ways and in each context; they acquire new features that become paramount in acting as conduits for social practices that inform their use. The changing nature of sovereignty from that of the Imamate to the modern nation of Oman materialized itself in transforming the semiotic nature of material sites, objects and texts inducing a new set of responses through cultivating a new ethical impetus and temporal direction.

Neither the historical narratives embodied by material heritage nor the specific forms of community and politics being fashioned on its terrain can be understood without looking back at the profound political and social changes that the region has witnessed over the course of the twentieth and twenty first centuries. The Nizwa fort, once the administrative and judicial arbiter of the Ibadi Imamate, has been one of many forts and castles that have been the bastion for forms of history and the socio-political configurations that underpinned the religious and political sovereignty of the Imamate. Its historical practices, presuppositions, forms of evidence and argument were established on the basis of an exemplary history grounded in the Quran as well as the *Sunna* of the Prophet, his companions as well as the words and deeds of former imams. This authoritative past became the exemplary and stable grounding within which the heterogeneous circumstances of life's affairs were interpreted and argued against forming the basis by which to interpret correct actions vs. incorrect, that which was right vs. that which was forbidden. This discursive yardstick undergirded the embodied existence of the self in determining whether his/her concrete actions would enable an advance on this defined path (as interpreted by Ibadi doctrine) of virtue oriented around a Quranic world view as part of a larger communal ethical life that necessitated that almost all aspects of community work be harnessed towards the fulfillment of higher moral principles. This authoritative past provided the underlying basis for encounters, contestations and ultimately revolution among the Ibadis that heralded the rise of the Imamate in 1913 as a direct result of region's experience of British informal governance of the peninsula.

British attitudes and policies were themselves undergirded by the temporal logic of 'modernizing' the coast. With the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, the politics of British rule in India, and British Raj interests in the Arab-Persian Gulf, imperial intervention - which was regarded as deliverance from tribal backwardness and ignorance - in the repression of the slave trade and the regulation of arms traffic had a profound impact on the region activating an alternative form of temporal reasoning that cast the Sultan and his British supporters in the light of *jababira* (tyrannical rulers who did not govern in accordance with Ibadi *sharī'a*) who had come to power unlawfully, resulting in the uprising.

The rise of the Omani nation state in 1970 highlighted the work of heritage in Muscat and the regional capitals as a new matrix of institutions, infrastructures, knowledge and practices that translate, appropriate and transform the very ways in which people view what were once daily objects and frequented sites (see chapter 2). In a programme of social transformation, their material forms and function ceases to be meaningful in the same way. Extracted from the anchorage of their socio-political and ethical contexts, these material forms and sites, become portable and accessible, to be inserted into new contexts and mass media circulation, and harnessed into signs for invisible and abstract moral values such as 'social solidarity', 'communal cooperation', 'generous hospitality', 'productive creativity'. These new semiotic practices have created artifacts, manuscripts, landscapes, exhibitions, museums and architectures – establishing the national foundations of a new territorial imaginary through modern techniques: the Sultanate of Oman. In breaking with the Ibadi Imamate and its Islamic tradition, the state recalibrates the domains of history and Islam, rendering them into categories of knowledge and practice amenable to modernist secular ends. Oman's "renaissance" (*nahda*) sense of the past is directly indebted to the sense of history that the British brought with them to the Gulf region. The relationship between materiality, history and ethics lays the foundations for organizing a new form of envisioning – an eye honed by techniques of perception and modes of reasoning that

are resonant with beholding a nationalist sensibility and ethical citizenship and blind to the archaic religious embodiments of history.

A new sense of historicity and religion is fashioned in which the turn to the past defines political and ethical life, as transcendent in its aim to realize for citizens a certain set of values that embody nationhood in its path towards secular progress. The conceptualization of the past is partitioned into the process of 'heritage' making under global custody through World Heritage, as well as through local revision. Grounded in human action, the secular concept of history now reaches back into an infinite past and stretches ahead into an ever-changing infinite future. With the introduction and standardization of this new aesthetic and national grammar, this abstract system of representation provides the tangible evidence upon which Omani popular and pedagogical history rely on a new secular and national genre of history that defines the contours of the public sphere. This conception of history transforms the locus of authority from the past to the future in organizing historical experiences. Tradition in Oman's modernity, in other words, assumes the form of a past that facilitates new and ever-changing visions of the future. As an integral part of modernity, the specificities of the past embodied in heritage provides the very conditions that cultivate the 'innovate' self over the 'custom' bound one. In short, material heritage undergirds a conceptualization of the past that establishes a new set of relationships with modernity, providing the conditions in which ethical behaviors are obliged to assume a certain form.

The towering Nizwa fort stands for the ways in which rationally-organized heritage discourse and practices interpellate residents of a city that was once the administrative capital of the 20th century Imamate (see chapter 3). The analytic of heritage, however - in its embeddedness within the narrative of progress – in its attempts to subordinate experience or the 'lived' into itself, generates an alternative reading of the past amongst members of long-established families, one that establishes a new kind of relationship between citizens and the modern state: a nostalgia that manifests itself in discursive practices and materialities of private and domestic realms. Still shaped by a sense of linear time, this notion of loss is by no means an uncritical longing to return to the past; in residents' gravitation towards the circulation of old photographs, basic historical knowledge was full of memories or oral recollections of daily routines and sensorial ways of live that invoke a different sociality one more reminiscent of the Imamate days than the more alienating transformations that have been brought about by the fundamental material and social changes that the city has gone through during the *nahḍa* as part of the onslaught of modernity. Once daily objects, historic sites and architectural structures, now classed under heritage, were often invoked as having once facilitated more inter-personal and embodied forms of sociality, sensibilities and practices that were integral to living ethically in accordance with Ibadi *sharī'a*. Despite the emphasis on a continuity of certain ethical principles, a widening gap was deeply felt between the cultivation of these values and the dispositions that are meant to emerge from them in the wake of mass migration, growing alienation from one's neighbors, increased bureaucracy, chronic unemployment, increased debts and rising costs in the standard of living that characterize recent years. These expressions of nostalgia were especially prevalent among the children of the *nahda*, those who had been born after 1970; Many among this generation lamented the present state of affairs in the city as bringing a sense of loss of cohesion of social forms and certainty, reworking the time and space of the Imamate as one of plenitude in measuring it to the present. This longing for a lost way of life assumed a political edge in its focus on a not yet arrived future

and furnished one of the underlying reasons behind support for the February/March Arab Spring protests in Oman in 2011.

Even as the national narrative of progress – with its concomitant conceptualization of the past - has disrupted Oman's Islamic tradition with projects of self-conscious transformation, it has constructed certain differences that appear to be anachronisms and don't fit well into the overall narrative at work (Chakrabarty 2000). One of these contradictions, I argue, is the on-going repercussions of Oman's slave legacy in Nizwa and elsewhere in Oman (see chap. 4). Even as heritage discourse emphasizes and celebrates the concept of equality rendering it a reality in the granting of the same rights and privileges to all citizens, tribal genealogy, descent lines, origins and the emphasis on blood continue to shape the contours of the community through perpetuating divisions between those who are *asal* (pure tribal descent) verses those who are *mawali* (descended from slaves or client tribes). Genealogy goes beyond race to form the basis of entire set of tribal hierarchies that coalesce around the importance given to the *sharī'a* concept of *kafa'a* ('sufficiency of a person as a potential spouse). These divisions particularly manifest themselves in marriage and divorce practices creating a series of tense paradoxes in the domain of family law that modern *shari'a* has now been reduced and re-configured into on the basis of the notion of *'urf* or customary ways. The criteria for *kafa'a* has produced discord among many in Oman, let alone Nizwa giving rise to a broad opposition movement based on human rights whose discursive arguments lay claim to reforming the 'spirit' of Islam through reinterpreting the Quran, the Prophetic *sunna* and the stories of the companions in their emphasis on the notion of sameness, as opposed to most residents of Nizwa who do not consider the formulation of hierarchy and differences incommensurable with their understandings of a true *sharī'a* society, with its centuries of material scholarship on the concept.

The centuries' long tradition of the Ibadi Imamate and its opposition to informal British governance is belied by the long standing presence of minority religious groups that have played an integral role in Oman's twentieth century history (see chap. 5). Comprised of a number of ethnic groups, modern Oman is often lauded for its pluralism and toleration, virtues celebrated in heritage discourse in its focus on maritime traditions, the interactive flow of trade goods and ideas across time and space and the prosperity of overseas settlements. I argue however that in viewing toleration as a political practice, the very management of the differences that underwrite political and ethical life in Oman can be explored through those that define the al-Lawati, their historical sensibilities and attitudes as ambivalently integral to the national imaginary. The Lawatiya, the largest Shi'a group in Oman originally from the Sind/Kutch region, I argue, allocate a place for themselves within a national framework through negotiating the structures of inclusion and exclusion that are brought into play in the selective harnessing and excisions of different forms of history collective memory that underpin a geographic orientation.

As opposed to heritage discourse which relates to its constituents through invoking territoriality and the primordial bonds of a life-world that comes about through working the land and its resources, daily state administrative relations and the work-a-day world are mediated by the concept of origin, tribal descent and blood ties. Entangled within these paradoxical logics, fragmentary forms of the al-Lawati densely sedimented past, harness the available history vocabulary in order for members to forge a piecemeal orientation towards living citizenship in the present as Arabs and Muslims. Even as many in the community recall the financial support

that reflected their loyalties to the Sultan or the longevity of their presence in the region as a prosperous merchant community, others have placed emphasis on being the al-Lawati, descendants of the Bani Sama' bin Lu'ay, one of the earliest tribal groups of the Oman region to embark on the Islamic conquests of Sind. In the process, the Lawatiya are remade in the public domain into an officially recognized Arab tribe, the al-Lawati even as their once residential space, the sur al-Lawati is privatized and de-politicized into a domain of Shi'a worship.

In a widely cited answer to a question posed by a Kuwaiti journalist as to how he had managed to unify the heterogeneous Omani population, Sultan Qaboos replied that his success was due to a combination of "our heritage with modernization. And I believe that we have succeeded with this combination."[140] In analyzing heritage sites, objects, and practices --the ways in which the past is narratively shaped to authoritatively invoke or distance itself from present practices--I've shown the modes of reasoning and the techniques by which the Sultanate of Oman has become a tangible, substantial presence in the surrounding region, by its mode of selectivity in invoking and figuring a past as a a seafaring merchant power, while disclaiming its role as arbiter of Islamic tradition, even as it excises mention of colonial and anti-colonial struggles within the public domain. The effective result is the regulation of religion, its space and efficacy through the formation and regulation of modern modes of history and historicity. As a pervasive mode of power, heritage has therefore been a determinant in shaping the perceptual habits and affective sensibilities of its audience. At the same time, it has sought to erase alternative histories and conceptions of time. But such practices of making and eliding historical narratives can only always be fragmentary: alternative versions seep through the cracks, and problematize the very idea of the modern nation state, with its universalizing teleological ethos.

These alternatives invoke different conceptions of time, embedded in alternative histories and geographies, and thus make epistemological commitments to a national and global imagination necessarily more provisional and less totalizing, creating rifts and fissures along the way. These indeterminacies ultimately mark the impossibility of bordering off the histories of the nation, its underlying temporal logic and practices from alternatives. "Inhabiting" heritage forms the nexus of competing modes of engagement with material objects and landscapes in Oman even as it mobilizes the very different anxieties that this history offers. Material forms produce a unique register for the exploration of the embodiment of multiple temporalities - destabilizing the modernist notion of time and its ties to global conservation practice - the practices and sensibilities that they foster and the ways in which they refigure new modes of relationships between religion and politics.

[140] Ahmad al-Jarallah, 'His Majesty the Sultan in a Wide-Ranging Interview to Kuwait's Al Siyassa Daily', 2006 http://www.chamberoman.com/pdf/alghorfa_jan_feb06/special_interview.pdf

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