"We Don't Marry Them":
The Politics of Kinship, Transnational Histories, and Nation-Building in
Contemporary Oman

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A Dissertation Presented to the Graduate Faculty
Of the University of Virginia in Candidacy for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Department of Anthropology

University of Virginia
May, 2020

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Abstract

This dissertation focuses on the connections between kinship, marriage, and nation-building in the Sultanate of Oman based on 17 cumulative months of fieldwork between 2014-2016. It tells the story of how Omanis, despite living in an authoritarian state, are actively involved in defining national identity and who counts as "truly" Omani, and it shows how, by utilizing different marriage strategies, they navigate and make evident distinctive ideologies of national belonging.

Sultan Qaboos, who ruled Oman for 50 years, tried to erase historical hierarchies and foreground an egalitarian national identity by making tribes the central unit of national belonging. He also created new tribes for non-Arab Omanis who did not fit into the traditional structure, attempting to flatten tribal hierarchies in the public sphere by making them all equally dependent on the state. In this dissertation, I ask two interrelated questions: What is the relationship between Oman's hierarchical tribal structure and its egalitarian national identity? And how do the different marriage strategies practiced by Arab-Omanis—those with deep roots in the Omani territory—and by Zanzibari-Omanis—those with transnational connections— articulate different models of the Omani nation?

Although the hierarchical implications of tribes (as both kinship and political units) have been rendered publicly taboo by the state, they remain critically important in everyday social relationships and are vigorously debated in private. Kinship practices, particularly marriage choices, are one of the few ways in which the status quo can be meaningfully challenged, negotiated, and/or confirmed, thus making the study of kinship an important avenue for the study of nationalist politics in Oman. I argue that despite the state's focus on shared identity and history, Omani citizens from various backgrounds utilize different marital strategies in order to articulate and eventually make manifest different models of the Omani nation— as either an egalitarian nation for all, or a hierarchical one rooted in the values of Arab purity.

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By Irtefa Binte-Farid

Dedicated to

Baba, Ammu
Nani, Nanabhai

My love, Sohel
and our little Reyya

Table of Contents

<u>Acknowledgments</u>

This project would not have been possible without the guidance and mentorship of my advisor, Dr. Susan McKinnon, who has been by my side throughout the eight years it has taken to complete this dissertation! Susie has supported me as I have grown up, both inside and outside the classroom. I know I would not be the woman or the scholar I am today without her guidance and her profound and continuous support during the different stages of life she has witnessed me go through. Dr. Ira Bashkow has similarly treated me as a whole person, not just as a graduate student with a curious mind. I will forever be grateful for his support from the very first day of graduate school and through some of the most difficult periods of my life. Dr. Daniel Lefkowitz generously offered his time and guidance, especially during the early years of graduate school when I was still learning the ropes, and Dr. Fahad Bishara became a mentor and a friend as I have struggled to balance family life and dissertation-writing during the last stretch. This project might not have been rooted in Oman without advice from Dr. Kath Weston, and it would not have the same transnational lens without the incredible mentorship of Dr. Adria LaViolette. Adria gave me the chance to not only travel to Zanzibar, but also to participate in an archaeological excavation—making my childhood dreams come true! I also want to thank my boss, Siri Russell, for allowing me the flexibility to finish this dissertation in a timely manner.

I am grateful to the Tyng Scholarship Committee at Williams College for funding two summer-intensive Arabic lessons in Oman and in Jordan, for a full year of fieldwork in Oman, and a final year of dissertation write-up. I am also grateful to the Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellows (MMUF) Dissertation Grants Program, administered by the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation, for a year of dissertation write-up funding.

Throughout these years in graduate school, I have been blessed with friends who have become even more than family. My cohort—Dr. Julia Haines, Dr. Macario Garcia, Dr. Lee

Bloch, and Jiyeon Kang—held me up when I was closest to despair. Jacqueline Cieslak, Dr. Dannah Dennis, Dr. Rose Wellman, Dr. Nathalie Nahas, Mary Pancoast, Dr. Alison Broach, Erin Jordan, Grace East, and others showed me what it means to practice ethical community engagement and scholarship. There are many more friends I barely have the space to name (Ayesha Shahid, Zeynep Coskun, Djamila Harouaka, Kellie Huynh), but I especially want to thank Julia, Jacqui, Mac, and Valerie Khaloo: I don't have the words to explain how I have been shaped by your intellectual courage and your firm commitment to justice; all I can say is that I am a better person because I have known you.

Finally, I want to thank my family—especially my parents Dr. Farid Uddin and Dr. Mosfika Yeasmin—who gave up everything in Bangladesh so their children could have the opportunity to spread their wings and learn. I hope your sacrifices were worth it, and that I have been able to make you proud. Thank you to my grandparents—my Nani and Nanabhai, for encouraging me to learn about different peoples and far-away places while anchoring me to my own roots. Thanks also to my sister, to-be Dr. Irteza Binte-Farid—I am so proud to have another anthropologist in the family! Thank you for all the times you have proof-read my essays at the last minute. And of course, thanks to my baby brother Shassata Fahim, who always reminds me to stay grounded and remember the real-life consequences of power and inequality.

Finally, I want to thank my husband and partner, Dr. Sohel Shamsuzzaman. Without his encouragement and emotional support, this dissertation would not have been possible. He took care of me with such love and patience that I had the freedom to focus on my writing, even as a new life was growing inside me and I was working full-time. Sohel, you have shown me what a true and equal partnership looks like. You are my biggest blessing, and I am excited to raise our Reyya with you by my side.

Prologue

On January 10, 2020, I was suddenly flooded by WhatsApp and Twitter messages from my Omani friends; Sultan Qaboos, the long-time ruler of the Sultanate of Oman, had passed away after a prolonged illness. Even though his death did not come not a surprise to anyone, the outpouring of grief was immediate and intense. I followed along on social media as Omanis paid homage to their "Baba Qaboos"; I also observed Western academics on Twitter grapple with how to respectfully capture the immense legacy Sultan Qaboos while critically addressing the strict authoritarian nature of his regime. As the evening unfolded, I found myself worrying alongside my friends about what the future would hold for Oman in the midst of the turmoil in the region without the steadfast figure of Baba Qaboos as the helm.

I had become interested in learning about Oman during my graduate studies, in part because of its cultural and religious peculiarities: it is an Ibadhi Muslim nation situated between Sunni orthodox Saudi Arabia and Shi'a Iran; unlike other Gulf Arab nations, it did not develop itself into an ultra-modern hub following the discovery of oil, focusing instead of upholding its cultural heritage. But I was also deeply curious about its ruler, Sultan Qaboos bin Sa'id al-BuSa'idi, a bachelor monarch who came to power through a coup against his own father, and one who did not have any children and had refused to name an heir. As a scholar of kinship, this ambiguity in succession intrigued me, especially as Sultan Qaboos did his best not to groom anyone for the rule—perhaps in fear that they would usurp his authority as he had done to his father. I initially became curious about the role of kinship within a hereditary Sultanate where the Sultan had no heir, and hoped to understand how succession would be handled and what it could tell us about ideas of genealogy, descent, and power. As I learned more about Oman's long

history as a maritime empire and its centuries-long entanglement with the Indian Ocean world, I began to see dissonances in how contemporary Omanis draw the boundaries of their nation—especially given their transnational family histories and genealogies—and how they make sense of their national identity and define national belonging. Looking beyond state policies, I began to focus on the intimate lives of Omanis who hold different visions of what the Omani nation should be, and who express it through their diverse kinship practices—particularly through their varying marital preferences.

Reflecting on my research after the passing of Sultan Qaboos, however, I began to think about his political legacy: how his leadership had helped Oman maintain stability while facing tremendous political, economic, and social transformations following the discovery of oil, and how he had united the different factions of the nation through his rule. When Sultan Qaboos began his rule in 1970, he was a virtual nobody. Over time, he fashioned himself as the benevolent father to his people and pulled Oman's diverse peoples together around his persona. During his rule, he developed the infrastructure of a modern nation—from building roads, schools, hospitals, bank, etc. Main thoroughfares, mosques, universities, and more were all named after Sultan Qaboos, etching his influence onto the physical landscape of Oman. He became coterminous with the modern nation.

When the Sultan passed away on Jan. 10, 2020, not only was there an outpouring of grief across Oman, but there was also a sense of fear and anxiety regarding the future. However, the Royal Family quickly chose Haitham bin Tariq—the son of Qaboos's paternal uncle—as the new ruler of Oman. Yet Sultan Haitham will continue to face tremendous challenges as he tries to fill his predecessor's role, even if he attempts to keep Qaboos's legacy alive by following the same policies. For one, it is unclear whether he will be able to maintain the same iron grip on the

nation as Sultan Qaboos, who was beloved for his immense contributions to the growth of the nation and the wellbeing of the Omani people. However, Qaboos was simultaneously feared by many because he stifled any and all dissent in order to preserve his rule and to uphold a pan-Omani national identity by glossing over differences and erasing past conflicts.

However, as I show both theoretically and ethnographically in this dissertation, those differences never disappeared; rather, they were carefully preserved in the domestic sphere and used to articulate alternative visions of the Omani nation through the varying marital strategies practiced by Oman's diverse communities. It remains to be seen how the change in political leadership might affect the social positions of Arab-Omanis and Zanzibari-Omanis, and whether their relationship to the state changes as a result. I would argue that kinship, particularly marriage practices, will continue to provide an important avenue for social critique and will allow Omanis from different backgrounds to challenge, negotiate, and confirm their visions of the Omani nation during a shifting political landscape.

Introduction

In 2019, a close friend of mine from Oman excitedly texted me on WhatsApp to tell me about the results of her DNA ancestry test. Sahar had been debating whether to even take the test for months; her mother had been vehemently against it, arguing that they already knew they were 100% Arab-Omani based on their genealogies, and there was no reason to take a DNA test just to prove it. Sahar remained undeterred,

Figure 1: DNA ancestry test results for Sahar.

and she went ahead with the test despite her mom's protests. When she finally got the test results, her first reaction was "oh thank God I'm not boring—I'm not just one thing!"[1]

When I saw her test results, I was struck by the fact that 93% of Sahar's heritage can be genetically traced back to the Arab world—82% to the Arabian Peninsula and 11% to the Levant [see Figure 1]. For me, these results supported her mother's claim that their family were "purely"

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[1] For a critique of the racialization of DNA, see Tallbear (2003)

Arabs. Yet for Sahar, it proved the contrary. She was excited to find that her genealogical map extends beyond the Arabian Peninsula, however marginally. When I asked her why it mattered so much, she became thoughtful and explained solemnly, "I am proud of my Arab background, but I also know my family history. My ancestors were ship captains and merchants who traveled by sea. There is no way we are not mixed! And we should be proud of that, not ashamed."

Sahar is fiercely loyal to her family and proud of their history, but she has never accepted the claims to "purity" as something that sets her apart from and/or above other Omanis who cannot claim a similar heritage. She was drawn to my research on marriage and hierarchy, and had even taken it upon herself to interview her mother using my questions, in an attempt to understand why in-marriage and genealogical purity mattered so much to her family. Though she respected her mom's answers, she was never quite satisfied with them. She once explained to me that for her mother, these were abstract questions because she had mostly grown up within a homogenous community, and she could not see how her answers could be hurtful and even offensive to someone from a different background. Sahar, on the other hand, had attended a multicultural private school in Muscat where she had been exposed to Omanis from a variety of religious, ethnic, and tribal backgrounds from a very young age. She, like many other Omani youth I spoke to, found it hard to reconcile the often-contradictory expectations they faced once they came of age: throughout her childhood, Sahar was taught—both at school and at home— that all Omanis were equal and deserved equal respect and friendship, but as soon as she became marriageable, her family started to focus on how they were somehow "better" than non-Arab and mixed Omanis because of their genealogical "purity" and therefore had the responsibility to maintain that status through their marital choices.

For Sahar, these contradictions are not abstract problems that can be solved theoretically; neither are they limited to the sphere of marriage. Instead, she is deeply aware of how these paradoxes affect her everyday life, including her friendships. Sahar told me once, in tears, about how she had had to distance herself from her closest friends, girls she had grown up with during middle and high school. Throughout much of their school life, they had studied, played, and worked together. However, once they started college, Sahar's family had carefully explained the importance of in-marriage—"how I must marry someone from a 'fully' Arab background because of our 'pure' Arab heritage." She had not agreed with her family on their viewpoint, but she had shared their arguments with her friends in an attempt to make sense of it with their help. For Sahar, sharing her family's position was a way to be vulnerable to her friends—to share with them parts of herself and her background that she could not take pride in.

But instead of finding support amongst her friends, Sahar was faced with anger. All three of her girlfriends were from transnational Zanzibari-Omani backgrounds, and they saw Sahar's family's view as a direct insult to their own family histories. One of them asked her, "Does that mean you won't be allowed to marry my brother—even though you know our family?" Sahar tried to distinguish between herself and her relatives, explaining that it did not matter to her personally as long as the two of them were compatible; but she also tried to be honest and say that her family would most likely not accept the match. Her friends were not happy with her answer and kept pushing, asking whether she would be willing to stand up to her relatives for the sake of her beliefs. They kept asking, "If you don't agree with them anyway, why won't you say you will marry a Zanzibari-Omani man?" For Sahar, it was not an easy answer; the reality of marriage was far from her mind. She knew she had to face these issues one day, but at the time, they were too far in the future for her to answer in any concrete matter. All she could offer her

friends was that she did not agree with her family, but that she was not ready to go against their wishes completely: "How could I reject my whole family for the sake of any one person?"

Sahar's friends were not happy about her unwillingness to stand firmly in support of the values of equality they had been raised with; furthermore, they saw her indecision as a sign of dismissal of their years of friendship. The girls slowly grew apart after this experience. At the time, even though Sahar understood her friends' perspective, she was frustrated by them because she believed they were blaming and ousting her from their midst because of her family, in the same way her family had blamed and excluded them because of their ancestors. She had respected her friends and shared her confusions with them, but instead of offering her support, they had rejected her. It was bitter experience that still brought tears to Sahar's eyes years later.

However, over the years, she has thought more about this moment and tried to answer the questions from her Zanzibari-Omani friends more specifically. She sees how harmful her family's position is: it creates a hierarchy that puts "true"/"native" Arabs at the top and denies full inclusion to Omanis from other backgrounds. That is why finding out that her DNA spans beyond the Arab world—however marginally—was so important for Sahar! With the results in her possession, she has found a way she can stand up to her family: "I now have an excuse if I ever fell in love with someone who's not fully Arab. If my family makes a fuss, I can say neither am I, so I don't see why I can't marry this person."

Sahar is still unwilling to walk away from her close-knit family; she would rather argue with them to try and change their minds instead of disengaging and going against their wishes. She has been having difficult conversations about the link between purity, marriage, status, and belonging with her mother for the last five years. Even though her mom does not agree with Sahar fully, she has also become less rigid in her stance regarding purity. Sahar laughingly

reported to me, "I've made my mom as confused about all this as I am! We are both trying to figure this out together." Over the course of these last few years, Sahar has become more confident about challenging her family's worldview because she knows it is not just about marital preference but about maintaining a hierarchy of inclusion that goes against the egalitarian vision of Oman she wants to live by.

I chose to share Sahar's story in detail because it speaks to many of the issues this dissertation addresses. Through her story, we can see clearly how the interplay between marriage, hierarchy, and national identity are not just abstract theoretical questions; rather, they affect the everyday lives of Omanis—young and old—as they try to navigate a changing social world.

The Sultanate of Oman has undergone radical transformation in the last century, with most change being concentrated in the past fifty years. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Oman's boundaries shrank from that of an expansive trading empire that spanned across the coast of East Africa [see Figure 2], to that of a territorially bounded nation-state; its historic model of a dual sovereignty system—religious Imamate in the interior complemented by a secular Sultanate on the coast—was replaced by an absolute monarchy following a bitter civil war that lasted for almost two decades; oil was discovered in the territory, changing the economic and political structure of the whole nation. Furthermore, the modern Omani state has explicitly tried to reconfigure traditional patterns of hierarchy by proclaiming legal equality for all Omanis regardless of their tribal/ethnic/religious backgrounds through the Basic Law of the State. At the same time, however, hierarchies have not disappeared from Oman. Omanis from different backgrounds—even though they are unable to directly challenge the Sultanate's

political vision—are nevertheless actively involved in defining national identity and belonging and who counts as "truly" Omani.
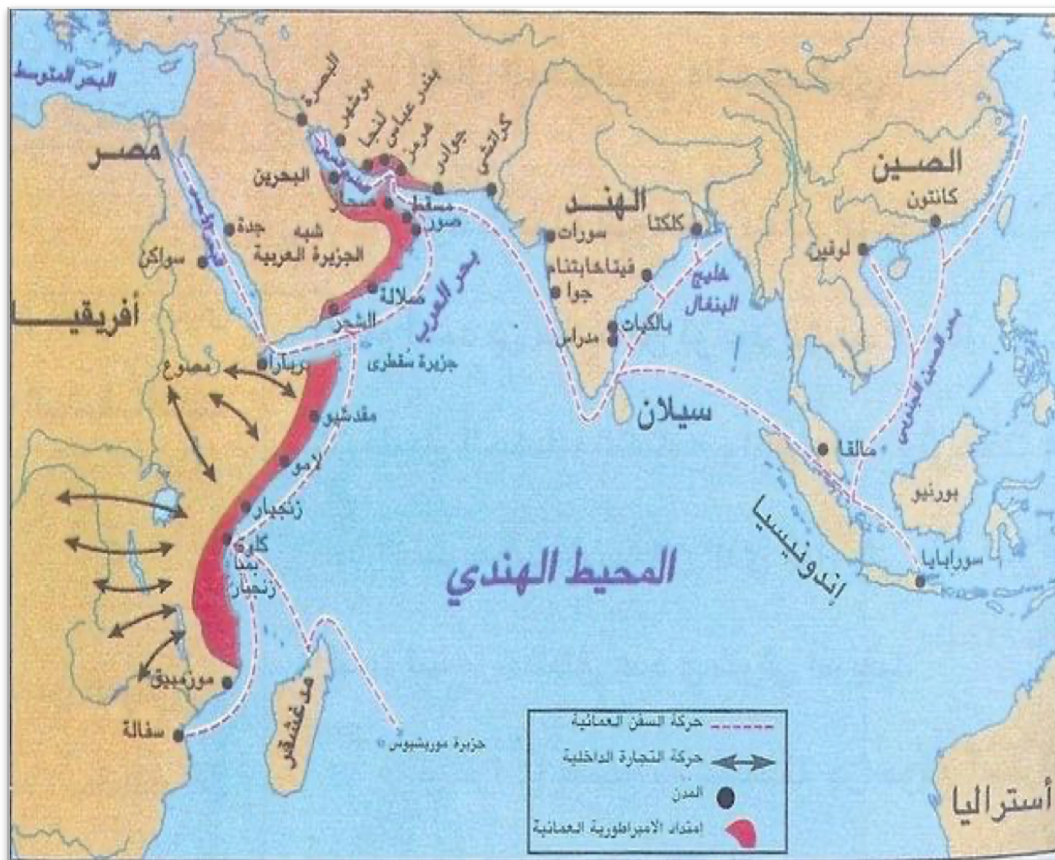
Figure 2: Map of the Indian Ocean, with the expansion of the Omani Empire highlighted in red and trade routes of Omani ships marked with red dashed lines (14fqmrxfuiq31.jpg)

This dissertation explores how these large-scale political and economic transformations have also changed and/or reified Oman's social organization. It does so by looking at shifting marriage patterns and attitudes regarding who is considered an appropriate marriage partner: how do Omanis themselves define who counts as "truly" Omani as they are forced to deal with changing systems of political allegiance, massive displacement associated with rapid urbanization, as well as more intimate exposure to ethnically-different Omanis than ever before? It is also a study in how Omanis from different backgrounds use marriage as a way to articulate

different visions of the Omani nation—whether by trying to hold on to values of purity and isolation by maintaining traditional hierarchies through in-marriage, or by embracing a more egalitarian vision for all Omanis and allowing them into the family regardless of their tribal/ethnic/religious backgrounds. In order to address these questions, this chapter lays out a brief history of Oman, focusing on the nation's demographic diversity, followed by a theoretical foundation that sets up the framing for the rest of the dissertation.

Oman's Geography and Diversity

Situated on the Southeast coast of the Arabian Peninsula, lapped by the waves of the Arabian Gulf (also known as the Persian Gulf) in the East and the Indian Ocean in the South, Oman straddles a prominent geographic space on the margins of both the Arab world and the Indian subcontinent—a space that has been critical to its historic success as a trading empire. Religiously, it is also home to the largest community of Ibadhi Muslims, a third sect of Islam that differs from the Sunni majority in neighboring Saudi Arabia and the Shi'a majority in Iran situated across the Gulf. Their religious and geographic position has allowed Oman not only to stay neutral in regional struggles—such as the proxy war in Yemen or the boycott of Qatar—but also to maintain strong relations with all of their neighbors simultaneously. Oman has even taken on the role of mediator in the region and beyond; the Sultanate hosted many of the secret talks between American and Iranian diplomats that led to the passage of the nuclear treaty during the last years of the Obama presidency.

Despite its long and prosperous history, Omanis are still seen by other Arab nations as suspect in their "Arabness" because of their geography, their history of cosmopolitan contact,

and the resulting diversity within their population. Some Omanis will jokingly point out how, despite their aspirations to Arab purity, they are called "*hunood Arab*", or Arab Indians, by Levantine Arabs. Even foreign migrant workers will make a distinction between the "white Arabs" from the Levant and the "brown Arabs" from Oman. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Omani Empire extended from the western coast of present-day Iran/Pakistan, along the eastern coast of Africa down to the island of Zanzibar [see Figure 2]. Today, Oman is the second largest country in the Arabian Gulf and home to around 5 million people, with 50% of the population living in Muscat, the capital, and the northeastern coastline
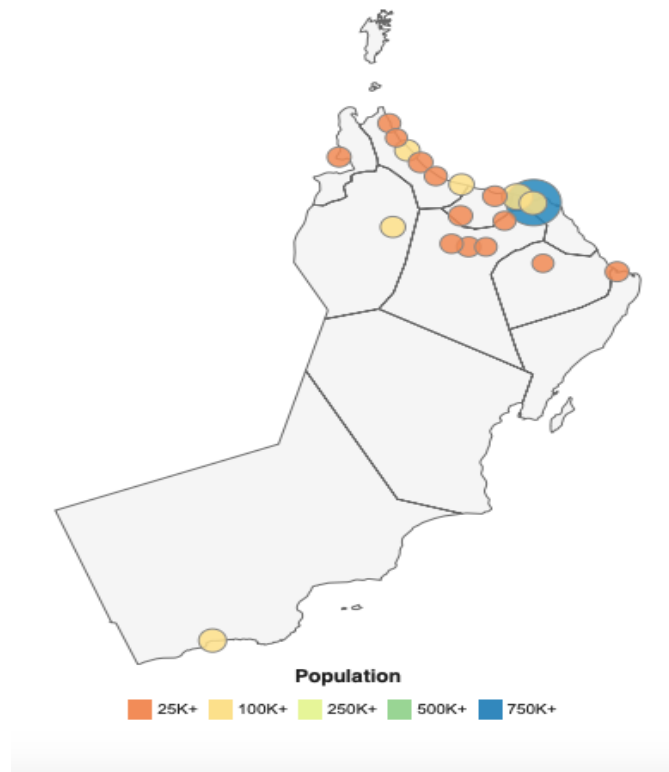
Figure 3: Map of Oman showing population density (http://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/oman-population/)

[see Figure 3]. Centuries of trade, migration, and colonial expansion have affected the demographics of the coastal region: not only have Omani merchants traveled along the Indian Ocean rim to make their fortunes, migrants from around the Indian Ocean world have been part of Omani society for centuries (Bose 2006). Hindu Banyan merchants from Gujarat, Sunni Balushi soldiers from different parts of Pakistan and Iran, Shi'a Lawati tradesmen from the Sind province in Pakistan, and "Zanzibaris"[2] from the East African coast, among many others, have

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[2] Omanis with African heritage are labeled as Zanzibari-Omani irrespective of their African ancestry.

called Muscat home for more than four centuries and have added to the cultural and social identity of Oman in general.

Figure 4: A topographic map of Oman, shaded according to elevation. It highlights how the coastal area in the Northeast (which includes Muscat) is cut off from the interior of the nation by the Jabal Akhdar Mountains (https://www.dreamstime.com/royalty-free-stock-photo-oman-relief-map-image5572565).

While most of these non-Arab groups settled in Muscat and along the northeastern coast, few ventured beyond the Hajar Mountain range to the interior of the nation [see Figure 4]. As such, ethnic, linguistic, and religious differences set the coastal population apart from the more isolated, assumed to be homogeneous "native" Arab tribes in the interior (Peterson 2004; Valeri 2007; Wilkinson 1987). Furthermore, the interior was also the seat of the Ibadhi Imamate, which was absorbed into the Sultanate as recently as 1959 after a bitter civil war. In many ways, the interior tribal structure helped integrate newcomers into Omani society while also keeping a clear social and geographic boundary between "native" Arabs and others: Muscat and the coast acted as a shield and absorbed much of the "foreign" influences that came with being an outward-facing maritime community, thereby maintaining the purity of the interior Arab and Ibadhi heart of Oman.

16

The Arab tribal structure also served to maintain the implicit hierarchies governing interpersonal relationships within and between the different ethnic groups in Oman. According to traditional understandings of the tribal configuration, vertical stratification exists within Arabs—such as between those with noble lineages, those who are commoners, and those who are client groups under the protection of the tribe; even though all are considered equally Arab, they are set apart due to their different tribal rank (Eickelman 1984; Valeri 2013; Wilkinson 1987) and are expected to follow different social customs, especially regarding marriage (al-Azri 2010; Ziadeh 1957). Furthermore, within this narrow definition of the tribal structure, descendants of slaves and non-Arabs, even when they are incorporated into the tribal model, exist as strangers with no origins and no status (Grandmaison 1989). These hierarchies allow for the different categories of people to co-exist and share space while also maintaining strong boundaries between each group.

Even when focusing on equality for all Omanis, the government of Oman has not relegated tribes to the background; instead, the Omani state has emphasized its tribal roots while also attempting to re-configure the tribal organization to include Omanis of all backgrounds. Sultan Qaboos, the ruler of Oman from 1970 until 2020, institutionalized the tribal structure as part of his centralizing agenda for the new state: an official decree passed in 1981 made it mandatory for all citizens to mark their belonging to a tribe through a tribal patronym in their passports and national IDs (Valeri 2013:156). In order to equalize the playing field, the state even created patronyms for the ethnic groups that did not belong to the Arab tribal framework: for example, all Balushi-Omanis were grouped under the name al-Balushi despite the differences within their midst (Valeri 2013:157). Moreover, in 1996, the Basic Law of the State was passed guaranteeing equality between all Omani citizens regardless of tribal, religious, ethnic, or linguistic background. It was an explicit attempt by the Omani state to equalize existing

tribal/ethnic hierarchies. However, as my interlocutors made clear, instead of integrating the non-Arab Omanis into the tribal structure as equals, tribal names such as Al-Balushi highlighted their non-Arab origins and marked them as "outsiders," thereby reinforcing their marginalization within the tribal context. Many Lawati-Omanis, for example, refuse to use these state-created patronyms because they do not want to be associated with "nomadic" Arab tribes and because they want to reject the stigmatization these names reinforce (Valeri 2013:157).

The Basic Law—even though it asserts equality between all Omani citizens regardless of their backgrounds—continues to define Oman as an Arab nation (Article 1, Basic Law 1996), focusing on its Arab heritage at the exclusion of all others, further sidelining Omanis who have not traditionally been part of the Arab tribal community. This dissertation begins by focusing on these tensions: I explore the relationship between historic Omani tribes and the modern nation-state; between Arab ethnic purity, the definition of Oman as an "Arab nation," and the diversity of the nation's population; as well as how marriage becomes a way for Omanis to explore and challenge different visions of the Omani nation. The remainder of this chapter explores these questions theoretically in order to lay a foundation for framing the historic and ethnographic material I share in the rest of the dissertation.

Modernity of Tribes

Within much of Western scholarship, tribal societies continue to be considered as the evolutionary precursors to the modern nation-state. For many scholars, "tribes" are not only backwards but are also seen as colonial impositions because of how European administrators used them to subjugate sub-Saharan Africa (Southall 1970). However, for anyone who has

studied or lived in the contemporary Middle East, the salience of tribes as a historically important native category is undeniable. Tunisian scholar Ibn Khaldun wrote about the cyclical relationship between tribes and centralized state authorities in the fourteenth century, introducing the concept of *asabiyyah* (group feeling) that continues to be used in many sociological studies of the Middle East to this day. The Holy Qur'an recognized the tribe as an important category for identity formation in sixth century Arabia even while calling for a more global identity, i.e., the spiritual category of the Muslim *ummah* that transcends ethnic boundaries. Historians, political scientists, and anthropologists working in the Middle East have been compelled to write about the continuing salience of tribes in the region well into the twenty-first century (Al-Mohammad 2011; Alshawi and Gardner 2013; Chatty 2001; cooke 2014; Dresch 1989, 2013; Hughes 2018; Maisel 2014; Peterson 1977; Shryock 1997).

Nevertheless, because of how the term "tribe" has become loaded with implications of colonial hierarchies and assumptions of backwardness due to its entanglement with nineteenth century evolutionary theory, anthropologists in the late twentieth century operating outside certain regions have largely tried to avoid it (Sneath 2009:143), often without denying underlying teleological assumptions. In their books *Ancient Law* (Maine 1861) and *Ancient Society* (Morgan 1877), Henry Maine and Lewis Henry Morgan made explicit the assumption of social evolution, positing "primitive" kin-based societies as hierarchically lower than "modern" territory-based societies. Evolutionary theorists further presumed that, lacking a state apparatus, some kin-based societies formed into non-hierarchical descent groups because it was the simplest form of organization that nevertheless allowed them to operate across vast spaces, as was the case for nomadic tribes in the Middle East and in Inner Asia (Alshawi and Gardner 2011; Sneath

2009; Tapper 1983). Many nineteenth-century anthropologists accepted these premises and went out in search of cultures that would fit the different evolutionary categories.

Some of this teleological thinking persists to this day, even in parts of the Middle East itself. Ibn Khaldun's assertion that "true" tribes imply nomadic pastoralists, and that settled agriculturalists and/or urban dwellers are somehow deficient in their tribal *asabiyyah* (group feeling), continues to be accepted in many parts of the Arab world (Beck 1986; Khoury and Kostiner 1990; Mohammadpour and Soleimani 2019; Shryock 1997). Corollary assumptions include the ideas that authentic nomadic tribes are a) egalitarian by nature, b) weakened by settlement because they become too hierarchical and lose the social cohesion (*asabiyyah*) that ought to come with tribal membership, and c) must be constantly vigilant against the reach of sedentary centralized state authorities who seek to root them in place (Khoury and Kostiner 1990:14). On the flip side, for modern states, this means that a) they are seen as deficient in terms of their statehood until they bring all tribes into their orbit of influence and b) to be successful, they have to move beyond fractured tribal *asabiyyah* to national unity (Beck 1990:185-225).

These expectations are consistent with narratives of modernity and the ultimate conclusion of the evolutionary timeline, which assumes that modern civilization will emancipate the individual from the grasp of collective kinfolk and outdated rituals, instead embedding her within rational market relations based on contract and law (McKinnon 2013). In other words, the prediction is that as territorial nation-states become more powerful, kin-based tribal groups will make way for the national project: i.e., tribal *asabiyyah* will become sublimated within national unity and tribes will soon be a matter of the past (Mohammadpour and Soleimani 2019:9). Furthermore, it is assumed that the emancipated individual will interact with the state in a direct

way, akin to the "one-man, one-vote" ideology, without having to go through the mediation of the family or the tribe.

However, despite the assumed ruptures of modernity, these predictions have not come to pass in many parts of the world. Rather, the opposite has held true. In Qatar, for example, while the sudden influx of oil money and the associated changes have increased neoliberal consumerism, it has not "liberated" the individual from the collective; instead, oil revenues have strengthened tribes, and tribal identity has become a core component of citizenship and national identity (Alshawi and Gardner 2013). In Iraq, the ravages of the most recent wars have also empowered tribes as the distributors of limited resources and as sources of protection in a dangerous world (Al-Mohammad 2011). In Jordan, the rise of social media has increased tribal allegiance within the youth even while undermining the traditional power of the *shaykhs* (Hughes 2018). Similarly, in Saudi Arabia, tribal affiliation has grown within the newer generations as they embrace new mediums of communication and new forms of political participation while also preserving established traditions, such as marriage strategies along tribal lines (Maisel 2014).

Shifting to a different part of the world, despite the Soviet assault on "backward" traditions in the hopes of creating a socialist nation-state in Turkmenistan, Turkmen have held onto their distinctive genealogical structures and kinship practices; in fact, Soviet intervention increased Turkmen's focus on kinship and genealogy as the locus of group identity (Edgar 2004). Similarly, in Kazakhstan, Soviet efforts to dissolve clans instead activated their subversive power; by removing kinship from the public sphere and driving kinship practices underground, the state infused clan politics with its explosive potential: like in Iraq, kin-based networks beyond the scope of state surveillance allowed access to scarce goods, and clan affiliation

became an increasingly important asset of modern life. One way the contemporary Kazakh state has tried to address this paradox is by trying to re-legitimize clans as acceptable parts of modern political life to bring them back into the orbit of state control (Schatz 2004).

As these examples make clear, tribes and other kin-based societies continue to flourish around the world; many have in fact grown stronger because of the rapid social changes associated with modernization. The predicted evolutionary teleology has not culminated in the impersonal bureaucratic state at the exclusion of all other types of societies, and the "emancipated" individual has not become the sole harbinger of modernity. In fact, tribes and tribesmen (and women) have proven themselves to be not only resilient "survivors" of a bygone era, but also powerful agents of modernity. In this dissertation, I argue that tribes continue to be important categories of identity formation and critical indicators of national belonging in contemporary Oman. As I will show, tribal hierarchies become the discourse through which questions of equality and inclusion are both confirmed and challenged during the marriage process.

Unfortunately, labeling a group as tribal often erases their internal diversity and instead represents them as homogenous (Mohammadpour and Soleimani 2019)—harkening back to the evolutionary theory that posits tribal societies as simple and primitive, even though within the scholarship of the Middle East there is no singular definition of what "tribe" means or how it is structured (Tapper 1990). Many anthropologists have adopted the idea of the tribe as a segmentary descent lineage (Evans-Pritchard 1940a, 1940b; Fortes 1945; Gellner and Micaud 1972; Sahlins 1961), conforming with Ibn Khaldun's conception of Arab society. Yet there is no agreement on whether tribes should be identified culturally in terms of their descent ideology, or structurally in terms of political authority and territory (Tapper 1990:52-3). State administrators

generally view Arab tribes as synonymous with "nomads" and define them as unruly, disruptive, and inferior to settled urban society. At the same time, administrators (and some academics) assume that tribes are bounded groups with stable membership, and therefore can be mapped onto particular territories and classified for comparative purposes (Tapper 1990:54-5).

Anthropologists, too, have tried to establish tribes as consistent categories at different hierarchical levels—e.g., confederacy, tribe, clan, lineage, etc. Some have defined tribes in terms of political coalitions (Barth 1953), localized groups (Tapper 1983), a stage in evolutionary development (Godelier 1977; Sahlins 1961), or even as impediments to state-building (Carroll 2011; Ortega 2009). As a result, the literature of the region allows us to define Arab tribes in terms of multi-faceted, diverse, and heterogeneous socio-political arrangements that change according to particular historical contexts instead of reifying them into fixed categories (Mohammadpour and Soleimani 2019).

In the Omani context, tribes are understood not merely to be about shared descent, but also to be about geography, political authority, and the protection of economic interests (Wilkinson 1987:93, 102-3, 107-8, 110). Tribal boundaries have historically been flexible, allowing individuals, families, and even whole clans to shift from one tribe to another to further their own interests (Peterson 2003:2; Rabi 2006:12, 39-40). Furthermore, even a cursory look at the Omani tribal structure destroys the idea that authentic tribes are nomadic and non-hierarchical: the majority of tribesmen in any given Omani tribe are associated with dependency and are thus seen as hierarchically inferior than the few noble lineages at the top of the ladder (Grandmaison 1989:176; Wilkinson 1987:94-98). Slaves (*'abid, khuddam*)—assumed to be without status, and clients (*mawali*)—members of smaller groups absorbed into larger tribes for the sake of protection (Wilkinson 1987:114), make up a sizeable portion of Omani tribal

population (Wilkinson 1987:97). Yet despite these deliberately nebulous descriptions, tribal

discourse centers around particular ideological nodes, such as patrilineal descent—touching on

issues of genealogical purity and status, and household—which includes slaves and clients who

are not directly related but are nevertheless absorbed into the tribe, therefore touching on issues

of wealth and power. Marriage, even within Arab tribes, is therefore carefully controlled through

laws of compatibility (*kafaʹa*) in order to ensure the continuity of the traditional tribal structure

(al-Azri 2010; Ziadeh 1957). For the purposes of the state, however, all Omani citizens are equal

before the law regardless of their personal rank within a tribe or their tribeʹs status within the

overall tribal landscape of Oman. This contradiction informs my questions about the relationship

between marital choices and national belonging in Oman, since status derived through kinship

and marriage—which can be either hierarchical or egalitarian—and status derived through

political citizenship—which is supposed to be based on values of equality—are often at odds and

point to different visions of the Omani nation.

Marriage Practices and Manifestations of Nationhood

Anthropologists have long written about the relationship between kinship and nation,

particularly in terms of procreation and descent. For example, in 1969 David Schneider argued

that at the ʺpure cultural level,ʺ the same ideas structure both kinship and nation. He highlighted

how ideas about the biogenetic substance or blood as well as law inform ideas about both kinship

and citizenship (Schneider 1969). Feminist anthropologists have further demonstrated how

cultural ideas about gender and procreation not only organize social relationships of kinship and

descent, but also political relationships between citizens and nations. For example, the focus on

the male "seed" often downplays female contributions to conception by imagining women as the containers for (male) identity rather than the creators of identity (Delaney 1995; Limbert 2010; Maurer 1996). Such formulations rationalize gender inequalities in access to citizenship (Chock 1999; Heng and Devan 1992; Maurer 1996). In Oman, for example, the laws governing both tribal identity and citizenship both revolve around patrilineal descent, and women are denied the ability to transmit their identity on to their children (Article 11, Citizenship Law 2014).

Some scholars have pointed out how marriage and descent are deeply intertwined and affect national belonging (Das 1995; Donnan 1990; Maurer 1996). Others have long focused on the power of different types of marriage to express distinctive forms of social organization (Levi-Strauss 1963; Radcliffe-Brown 1930). In fact, investigating marriage rules shows us how different marriage strategies are often practiced within the same society: i.e., hierarchical relations between people occupying different social ranks (noble/commoner) are often complemented by egalitarian relations between others occupying the same social rank (nobles from different tribes). In systems of cousin marriage, for instance, marital alliances between hierarchically ordered ranks contrast with cycles of marital alliances between equals within a particular rank (Lévi-Strauss 1969; Leach 1954, 1971; McKinnon 1991). Because such relations of hierarchy and equality can only be realized through different marital strategies, most social systems have multiple possible marital options that are suited for different social intentions and arrangements (Boon 1977; McKinnon 1991). For instance, Richa Nagar (1998) articulates how varying marriage strategies within transnational Indian families in East Africa generate different expressions of rank and parity. Marriage to ritually "pure" women from India confirms caste rank, whereas marriage to cosmopolitan Indian socialites in Tanzania solidifies status superiority relative to "backwards" Africans. Her main argument is that these strategies are not mutually

exclusive and may be utilized by the same family in order to emphasize multivalent ideas of racial/religious hierarchy and equality.

In her recent works, Susan McKinnon has explored how different forms of marriage (cousin marriage vs. non-kin marriage; polygamy vs. monogamy) can be used to articulate different types of polities—e.g., monarchical, theocratic, republican (McKinnon 2013; 2018). In particular, she has shown how radical historical transformations from a hierarchical system of social and political relations to one with egalitarian aspirations also significantly alters relations of marriage, inheritance, and heredity (McKinnon 2018). She carefully explores how aristocratic traditions of "in-marriage" that the American revolutionary project sought to overturn was rooted in the logic of like-begets-like: "Hereditary aristocracy had long been based on the idea that the essence of nobility was transmissible. Retaining this essence … required a purity of bloodlines without any interference through interclass marriage" (Philip Wilson, quoted in McKinnon 2013:67). Instead, revolutionary and post-revolutionary Americans advocated letting individual merit, love, and friendship be their guide in choosing a spouse—not hereditary rank and wealth (McKinnon 2018:68).

McKinnon's argument about the link between the structural power of different forms of marriage and social organization are particularly relevant for this dissertation. As the Sultanate of Oman goes through radical social change—followed by the discovery of oil in the 1960s, the creation of modern national infrastructure starting in the 1970s, and the social reformations set in motion by Sultan Qaboos's project of equalizing the tribes in the 1980s—different groups of Omanis are affected by the transformations differently. Arab-Omanis with deep roots in the nation's interior often see their privileged status stripped away by the equalizing policies of the nation-state, while non-Arab Omanis are often teased about their precarious place in the modern

nation despite the guarantee of equality codified in the Basic Law of the State. Even though fears of fracturing the emergent national unity creates an atmosphere of censorship in Oman regarding discussing differences, questions about marriage—like who is an appropriate marriage partner, what are the most important characteristics to look for in a potential spouse, who is excluded from the marriage pool—allow us to explore the diverse family histories and political experiences of Omanis and how they relate to the nation-building project. For example, Arab-Omanis can articulate their vision of an Omani nation rooted in the values of Arab purity by emphasizing the importance of in-marriage within tribal equals, whereas Omanis with more transnational family histories can speak to the importance of equality by focusing on marriages grounded in individual compatibility based on educational and economic parity. This dissertation argues that Omanis from various tribal/ethnic backgrounds utilize different marital strategies in order to articulate and eventually make manifest different models of the Omani nation—rooted in either values of hierarchy or equality.

Nation-Building and the Politics of Marriage in Oman

Despite the best efforts of the state, the creation of a shared national identity has been unevenly accomplished in the Sultanate of Oman. On the one hand, Arab-Omanis at the top of the tribal hierarchies continue to focus on learning and preserving their genealogies and tribal history, thus maintaining their prominence amongst those similarly situated without having to challenge the national discourse of equality. Self-ascribed "native" Omanis (*Omani aSlee*), who take pride in their roots/origins (*uSool*) in the nation's interior, continue see themselves as more authentically Omani and try to preserve their authenticity through carefully selecting their

marriage partners. They link rootedness to legitimacy, marking themselves as the "real" inheritors and guardians of Oman's tribal history and traditions. For them, the cosmopolitan coast, which has been in contact with and been influenced by the "foreign" Indian Ocean world for centuries, becomes a place of cultural decay, and its diverse communities become suspect in terms of their Omaniness because of their lack of roots and tribal history, and are thus barred from the marriage pool. In this dissertation, I distinguish between Omanis from Arab tribes by labeling them as Arab-Omanis, and by labeling those who take pride in their origins by emphasizing their genealogical purity as "native" Arab-Omanis.

On the other hand, the diverse populations of Oman who have called the Omani coast home for centuries shift their focus away from the interior to emphasize Oman's cosmopolitan history as a way to anchor themselves in the Omani nation. They often claim belonging by underscoring the contributions of their ancestors to the Omani polity—i.e., Balushi-Omanis will proclaim how their ancestors were soldiers who protected Oman from foreign threats as far back as the sixteenth-century (Peterson 2004a), and Zanzibari-Omanis will affirm how their ancestors traveled abroad to make manifest the Sultan's vision of an Omani trading empire in the Indian Ocean (Binte-Farid 2018). However, these efforts can often backfire—especially as the Basic Law of the State continues to define Oman as an "Arab" nation. While coastal Omanis may try to contest the idea that the "real" Oman is moored in the nation's interior, they often end up adding to the rhetoric of purity of the Arab-Omani tribes in the core by highlighting their own multicultural genealogies and cultural heritage. For example, many Zanzibari-Omanis proudly highlight their transnational identities by claiming their hyphenated identities. At the same time, they try to downgrade Arab-Omanis in the interior by labeling them as Omani-Omani (Slang: *Omani QoHi*—"native" Omani)—pointing out a lack of cosmopolitanism as a backwardness,

thus marking them as incompatible marriage partners. While Zanzibari-Omanis mean this as an insult, emphasizing how Omani-Omanis did not participate in the expansion of the empire, Arabs in the interior embrace these labels as a confirmation that they are the "native" (*aSlee*) Omanis because they maintained their origins (*uSool*) in the Omani heartland.

The state has tried to erase entrenched hierarchies and foreground an egalitarian national identity by a) making tribes the central unit of organization and national belonging; b) creating tribes for those Omanis who did not belong to the traditional tribal structure; and c) flattening tribal hierarchies in the public sphere by making them all equally dependent on the state. However, even though the historical hierarchical implications of tribes (as both kinship and political units) has been rendered publicly taboo by the state, they remain critically important and are actively debated in private—particularly by those who want to preserve not only their genealogical purity, but also the hierarchical implications of that purity. In this dissertation, I ask two interrelated questions. What is the relationship between Oman's hierarchical tribal structure and its egalitarian national identity, particularly as it relates to the history of the Ibadhi Imamate and the maritime empire? And how do the different marriage strategies practiced by Arab-Omanis and by Zanzibari-Omanis articulate different models of the Omani nation?

In order to answer these questions, I first outline a brief history of Oman in Chapter 1— its unique religious heritage, the dual sovereignty of the Ibadhi Imamate and the coastal Sultanate, its history of overseas expansion, as well as the bitter conflicts that wreaked havoc in the region in the last century. In the Chapter 2, I emphasize the voices of "native" Arab-Omanis by introducing the concept of *ʿirq*—often translated as bloodlines/veins/links in a chain. For my interlocutors in this chapter, Arab purity extends beyond genealogy to include tribal roots and histories of migration (or lack thereof). I explain how they trace their claims to authenticity back

to Oman's Ibadhi heritage, and how they continue to emphasize the Ibadhi values of separation

and containment in order to protect their vision of the Omani identity. I also show how, despite

officially losing their privileged status, prominent tribal families continue to have

disproportionate influence in Omani society through the concept of *wasta,* understood to mean a

dense web of connections.

Chapter 3 looks at the migration histories of three different Omani families: one Arab-

Omani family who never emigrated to Africa but nevertheless limit Arab purity to genealogy and

embrace Oman's history of cosmopolitanism, one Zanzibari-Omani family who take pride in

their family's migration as part of the expansion of the Omani empire while also benefiting from

their pure genealogy, and one mixed Zanzibari-Omani family who focus on their personal

contribution to the nation-building process as the true locus of their Omani identity. In all three

cases, active participation in the state-making process is the foundation of their claim to the

Omani national identity. Finally, in Chapter 4, I use the story of a young Zanzibari-Omani couple

to focus on class distinctions within the Zanzibari-Omani community. I draw on their family's

time in East Africa as well as their "return" experience to show how they relate differently not

only to their own family history, but also to the nation-building process.

Ultimately, I argue that it is precisely because Sultan Qaboos has reframed tribal

belonging as the foundation of an egalitarian national polity that there is a taboo on talking about

the traditional hierarchical political order. This does not mean that hierarchical kinship and

marriage practices do not have political implications—indeed they are central to imagining the

nation as an Arab-based hierarchical order. However, those political implications are muted in

face of Qaboos's reconfiguration of the tribal structure as the basis for egalitarian national

belonging. As a result, while questions of hierarchy cannot be discussed in the public sphere,

they are freely articulated, challenged, and confirmed within the domain of kinship during the marriage process. The question of whose status is higher than whose has taken on *increasing* importance in Oman, and control over who to admit into the genealogical future of their families through marriage has become more powerfully freighted with the politics of national belonging. As a result, despite the state's focus on shared identity and history, different Omani communities continue to utilize divergent marital strategies in order to make manifest their visions of the Omani nation—as either an egalitarian nation for all, or a hierarchical one rooted in the values of Arab purity.

Methodology

Participant-observation was the main method I employed during my seventeen months of fieldwork in Oman. Because I was able to secure a homestay, and because my host family was extremely gracious in terms of allowing me access to their extended family networks, I was able to observe and interview women and men in different stages of life—in high school, university, and graduate schools; at the beginning of their careers, established in their careers, and retired— to see how their relationship with the Omani nation and their own family histories change over time, and how it affects their views on marriage. Having the opportunity to interact with them on a regular and repeated basis allowed me to build relationships that went beyond the interviewer/interviewee divide, even while maintaining sight of the fact that I ultimately have the privilege of framing their stories in order to further my own career.

My host family not only introduced me to their extended kin, they also brought me with them on visits to relatives and allowed me to participate in the celebrations of new births, to tag

along during wedding shopping, and to pay my respects to grieving families after a death. They

taught me how to show both joy and grief, and the importance of just being present during the

important moments of collective family history. By being embedded within this family, I was

able to get a good idea not only of what everyday family life looks like in a middle-class Omani

family, but also of how the cycle of visits and celebrations ebb and flow throughout the year. For

example, during my extended fieldwork and my second stay with the family, I was expected to

be part of weekly family gatherings in the home of my host family, and after a given period of

time, I even began to have weekly visitation schedules of my own when I would be expected at

certain houses. If I missed these informal appointments, I would get concerned phone calls or

WhatsApp messages making sure I was all right. During Ramadan, I fasted and prayed alongside

the women in the family, and during the celebration of Qaranqasho[3] in the middle of the month, I

was expected to help organize a party for the family's children and provide my own gifts (during

my second Ramadan in Oman). Before a wedding of one of the cousins, I helped "prepare" the

bride's new home along with her female cousins. I attended National Day[4] school celebrations

with the young children, as well as fireworks in the evening with the adults. During my second

Eid with the family, I not only joined them in their celebrations at their ancestral village, I was

also expected to make the rounds and meet the village "grandmothers" — they were expecting

"the American student living with Dubaiyya" by that time.

　　　　Living within a family structure allowed me amazing access to a wide variety of people,

and it was critical to understanding how kinship obligations shape the structure of daily living for

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[3] This is a unique holiday in the Gulf Arab nations, which falls in the middle of Ramadan. Children dress up in traditional clothes and go around collecting candy from the neighbors—much like Halloween. In my host family, they gathered their extended family together and rented out a community center so the children (numbering upwards of 40) could enjoy the festivities in a safe manner.

[4] National Day falls on November 18th, which is also Sultan Qaboos's birthday.

most Omanis. Most importantly for my research, I was able to observe how often conversations about tribal histories and hierarchies came up during the course of normal life—i.e., relatives would discuss the genealogies of newborns, grandparents would teach their grandchildren about their own family's histories, young children would demand to know why they could not belong to their mother's tribes even if they were more fun, male relatives would discuss the merits of an elected official from their tribe, female cousins would gossip and tease each other about male cousins as marriage prospects, and everyone would happily discuss the couples (and their families) in every wedding invitation that they received! I learned very early that tribal identities and genealogical histories are very much alive in contemporary Oman.

In addition to my host family, I was fortunate enough to embed myself within a few other families and/or groups from different backgrounds—a self-ascribed "truly" Omani family who invited me to their home for occasional family dinners; a Zanzibari-Omani family that takes pride in their African heritage, and who not only welcomed me into their homes and their Friday get-togethers at their farm just outside Muscat, but also introduced me to their extended multi-racial family networks; and a group of Balushi women who invited me to dinners in restaurants and allowed me to spend alternating weekends with them as they took breaks from attending family events. Additionally, I was fortunate enough to bring together a focus group of Omani youth from different tribal, ethnic, regional, economic, and religious backgrounds, who helped me refine my research questions through their continued engagement with my study. They encouraged me to create an online survey, and were instrumental in both designing and spreading it online. Members of this focus group also introduced me to their friends and wider kinship networks, and some even took me to travel with them to their ancestral villages so I could see the difference between Muscat and the rest of the country. Because of their input, I

often conducted group interviews instead of focusing on individual narratives that could identify them and compromise their confidentiality.

In my interactions with these groups, I was able to see the nuances in Omani public discourse regarding marriage. Although differently situated individuals had varying answers to my questions, most of the interlocutors from these groups were willing to discuss them with me in private areas—both individually and in groups. However, I was cautioned to not bring up issues of marriage and hierarchy so openly in public spaces by the same people because the topic was too controversial. Indeed, even without my having to explain it, most of my interlocutors understood the power of investigating marriage and who counts as an "acceptable" marriage partner because of the overlapping domains of kinship and politics. Some people I approached refused to answer my questions, while others would only answer if I could assure their confidentiality. Even my closest interlocutors—no matter how deep a relationship we built together—refused to let me record them as they answered my questions. They were all afraid of misrepresenting themselves and their families, and would only speak if I turned off my recorder and promised not to write down their names in my notes—a wish I respected for everyone. Instead, I took detailed field notes regarding a person's background in terms of their social standing, tribal status, religious upbringing, and class position, all the while withholding names and other identifying information.

Silence. *What* is not said, *when* it is not said, and to *whom* it is not said became a large theme throughout my fieldwork. I quickly realized that people in Oman do not publicly discuss anything "controversial." Until I asked, a group of friends did not know who among them was Sunni or Ibadhi. This lack of curiosity is explicitly cultivated by the Omani government; it is

actually illegal to ask people about their religious sect as it can engender feelings of conflict and create schisms within the diverse population. It is similarly illegal to ask people whether they are descended from "slaves." These silences over differences are celebrated as the positive Omani trait of tolerance. However, focusing only on tolerance assumes that people do not discuss differences at all, or that they are actually accepting of those they define as "others." Within the family sphere, for instance, my Omani interlocutors described their horrified reactions to *Shiʿa* religious traditions and they easily proclaimed how they do not marry into "slave" families.

Initially, I wanted to attribute these public performances of silence to the government's careful control over narratives—in schools, in books, and even in the media. School books do not include significant periods of recent Omani history: they are silent about the Imamate War of the 1950s, when the Imamate and the Sultanate fought over the control of Oman's national territory; about the revolution in the southern region of Dhofar in the 1970s and the attempts of people in that region to declare independence; about British involvement in the *coup d'état* that resulted in the ascension of Sultan Qaboos to the throne. Any period that threatens the myth of a unified Oman is carefully erased from the narrative of national progress. However, I came to learn that just because these "controversial" stories are not told in schools or in history books does not mean that they are forgotten. Many of my interlocutors, once they got to know me better, explained that just because Omanis do not discuss these difficult topics does not mean they are ignorant of the matters at hand. Instead, their role as citizens is to trust the judgment of their Sultan—Sultan Qaboos bin Saʿid al-BuSaʿidi—whose duty it is to ensure the wellbeing of *all* Omanis. Officially, Baba Qaboos deals with the difficult issues; the Omani people are still not entrusted with potentially divisive information (particularly regarding religious background and

tribal status) that could create schisms within the population. That is why there is no census data on religious affiliation in Oman.

These responses highlight a political context in which information that can be easily shared within the family—i.e., genealogies and religious traditions—are often seen as dangerous and subversive in the public sphere. I rarely had to explain to my informants why the topic of marriage is political (and therefore controversial). Even without a review of scholarship on the politics of kinship, they immediately recognized the dangers of such a research topic: discussing marriage and who counts as an appropriate partner requires openly articulating assumed differences and hierarchies that the state continually tries to downplay in the public sphere. While many people refused to speak to me because of their understanding of the risks involved in researching marriage, others (usually young people) eagerly answered my questions because they wanted to break the taboo associated with the topic. For them, talking about difference did not automatically reify existing hierarchies; rather, they hoped that by openly discussing their various backgrounds and family expectations together, they could further learn from and understand each other and perhaps break down entrenched hierarchies.

I was entrusted by many interlocutors with their genealogies in order to help me make sense of the tribal structure and how hierarchies operate, but I have chosen not to include them in this dissertation in order to respect their wishes for confidentiality. I have changed names, altered some kinship relations, and omitted last names in order to protect the privacy of my collaborators. Moreover, in certain cases I have changed the specifics of a person's history in order to make their stories less identifiable, often by creating composite characters of individuals from similar backgrounds so that the main story remains true without necessarily belonging to a single individual.

As part of my research, I also attended courses at the Sultan Qaboos University (SQU), the first national university in Muscat. SQU sponsored my research visa, which allowed me to do research and to stay in the country for a twelve-month period, and gave me access to the resources the university had to provide. I was able to sit in on courses on Omani history and Islamic Law (focusing particularly on lectures of family law), both of which were taught in Arabic. I also sat in on courses on Political Science, a new department in SQU in which courses are mostly taught in English. The lectures by Dr. Leon Goldsmith helped me understand Oman's contemporary political structure, and being present in his classroom also allowed me to listen in as Omani youth discussed their concerns about political participation—both pros and cons.

Along with my seventeen months of fieldwork in Oman, I also traveled to Zanzibar during the summer of 2015 as part of an archaeological dig organized by Dr. Adria LaViolette. Even though I was there for a short time, a mere three weeks, I quickly noticed the continued influence of Oman on the island—not only in terms of the Omani heritage sites that dot the island (like the House of Wonders and the Omani bath house), but also in terms of continued financial support by the Omani government in building infrastructure (including Ibadhi mosques) on the island. Furthermore, my trip to the island greatly helped me when I was in Oman. Zanzibari-Omani elders, especially once they heard that I had traveled to Zanzibar, would often open up and speak to me fondly about their childhood on the island or along the coast. I even got invited by some of them to come along on their annual trips to Zanzibar during the summer, where many continue to maintain a second home. Even though I was unable to take advantage of their offers, they opened their homes to me and made time to answer my many questions as I tried to figure out Oman's complicated relationship with Zanzibar and the East African coast. I have highlighted many of these voices in my dissertation, not only because they were often the

37

most generous in terms of their time and their responses, but because their experiences in both Africa and upon their return to Oman helped me answer some of my questions about the relationship between Oman's multifaceted histories and how they shape contemporary marital choices practiced by different Omanis that anchor different visions of the nation's future.

Who is a Researcher?

One of the reasons I was able to have such wide-ranging access to different groups of Omani nationals was because of my own identity as a brown-skinned hijab-wearing American Muslim woman. Even in terms of acquiring a research visa through the Sultan Qaboos University, I was lucky enough to have the sponsorship of an Omani professor who went out of his way to help me because I was "a good Muslim girl doing a PhD" and he took pride in my achievements. Even when there were questions about the potentially controversial nature of my research, he vouched for me saying I was "a good girl" and would not cause trouble. During my last weeks in Oman, a few of my interlocutors who became close friends told me explicitly that they had agreed to speak to me because I was a "good Muslim" and therefore would understand their struggles and would not try to sensationalize them or portray them as foreign and exotic, and, because of our shared identities and struggles, would not "make us look bad."

In many ways, my identity as a brown Muslim woman was a departure from what many of my interlocutors assumed about researchers. Even though they could not articulate how power and knowledge interact, they recognized that much of the Arab world and its "peculiarities" are framed by Western scholars in an orientalist manner (Said 1978), and therefore many were (rightfully) hesitant to share their personal stories with a foreign researcher who might do the

same. Yet, even though I came from and had been trained in the West, our shared religious identity helped many young Omanis look beyond the researcher/object binary and build relationships of trust with me as a person, with the expectation that I would portray them in their complexity. For others, my identity did not matter; they believed in my expertise because of my American training and were therefore willing to participate in an "objective" research project. While I was honored by the trust of all my interlocutors, it came with its own challenges: my friends expected me to "write the truth" but in a way that would "not make us look bad"; some of them expected me to shy away from controversy, while others hoped that, as an outsider, I would not be afraid to write critically about issues of hierarchy and exclusion.

In this dissertation, I have tried to do justice to all these voices. I have carefully anonymized my interlocutors, often creating composite characters out of many individuals from similar backgrounds in order to tell a story without jeopardizing anyone's identity. I have also tried to write about what I learned honestly, critically, and with the deepest respect for the people who welcomed me into their lives. My aim has been to represent my Omani interlocutors in all their complex glory instead of turning people into stereotypes or falling into Orientalist tropes— a risk one always faces when dealing with such loaded topics as "Arab tribes" and "Muslim marriage rules." I hope I have been successful in doing so both by addressing the existing literature on the topics as well as portraying the real lives and conflicted opinions of complicated human beings.

Chapter 1

On Roots and Routes:

A Brief History of Oman's Geographic and Political Paradox

Oman's Historic Duality

There is a tendency to think that the Gulf Arab (*Khaleeji*) nations exploded onto the international sphere following the discovery of oil in the region and that, before oil, they were desert backwaters inhabited by isolated Bedouins. In this narrative, oil becomes a disruptive force that propels these poor pre-modern *shaykhdoms* into the ultra-modern: the empty desert hinterlands become the glittering skylines of Dubai, Doha, and Manama. Situated at the margins of the recognized "Arab World," *Khaleeji* nations are assumed to be lacking both history and culture. Scholars of the Gulf—including James Onley (2005; 2006; 2007), Fahad Bishara (2014; 2017), Marc Valeri (2007; 2013), John Wilkinson (1987; 2014), Sharon Nagy (1997; 1998; 2000), Jill Crystal (1995), Dale Eickelman (1984; 1985), Christine Eickelman (1984), Neha Vora (2013), Madawi al-Rasheed (2005; 2008; 2018) and many others—have shown how that is not the case: Gulf nations have been connected to, shaped by, and influenced the wider Indian Ocean world for centuries.

The Sultanate of Oman is the one Gulf nation that is seen as the exception to this stereotype because of its long-recorded history of settled agriculture, fisheries, and maritime trade spanning continents (Allen and Rigsbee 2000). It boasts a diverse population and was the

religious center of the Ibadhi sect of Islam until the twentieth century. However, despite this long history, Oman is usually excluded from the prestige of "authentic" Arab culture because of its location of the margins of the Arab world. Omanis themselves will often joke that they are known as the *"hunood Arab"* or "Arab Indians." This not only highlights their long history of connections to the Indian subcontinent, but also puts them beyond the pale of "pure" Arab culture. Rising neo-Arab Orientalism also pits the prestige of the old capitals, such as Cairo, Beirut, and Baghdad, against the sudden rise of the "new" financial centers in the Gulf, portraying the latter as both shallow and inauthentic (al-Rasheed 2018). It is implied that the rapid pace of development following the discovery of oil has stripped the Gulf nations of the little culture they had, molding them into mere icons of Western modernity. In response, Gulf nations, including Oman, have embarked on a quest for authenticity, focusing on their Arab heritage and, in the process, "denying representation to the multiple ethnicities, cultures, and traditions that had historically characterized the Gulf" (al-Rasheed 2018:18). However, as emerging scholarship indicates, in the Gulf, the national cannot be understood without the transnational (Jones et al 2018).

This is particularly true regarding the Sultanate of Oman. It is geographically isolated from the rest of the Arabian Peninsula by the *Rub al Khali* (Empty Quarter), yet it has been part of the global historical network for more than two millennia. The territory of the modern-day Sultanate was home to the prehistoric civilization of Majan, which was involved in trade with the Indus Valley region; pottery from the city of Harappa dating back to the third millennium BCE has been found within Omani territory (*Times of Oman*, 2019). More recently, as an expansive maritime Empire, the Omani coast has been in prolonged contact with the Indian Ocean world during the second millennium CE and peoples from throughout the region have called the coast

home for centuries. Today, Oman is the second largest nation (geographically) in the Arabian Peninsula, and the most diverse (Peterson 2004:34).

The long history of Oman is riddled with paradoxes. While the interior of the country— separated from the coastline by the Hajar Mountain range [see Figure 4 in Introduction]—maintained a deliberate separation from the "outside" world, the spirit of the coastal areas is captured through the legend of Sinbad the Sailor, said to have been born in the port of Sohar in Northern Oman, as well as the real life example of Ahmad
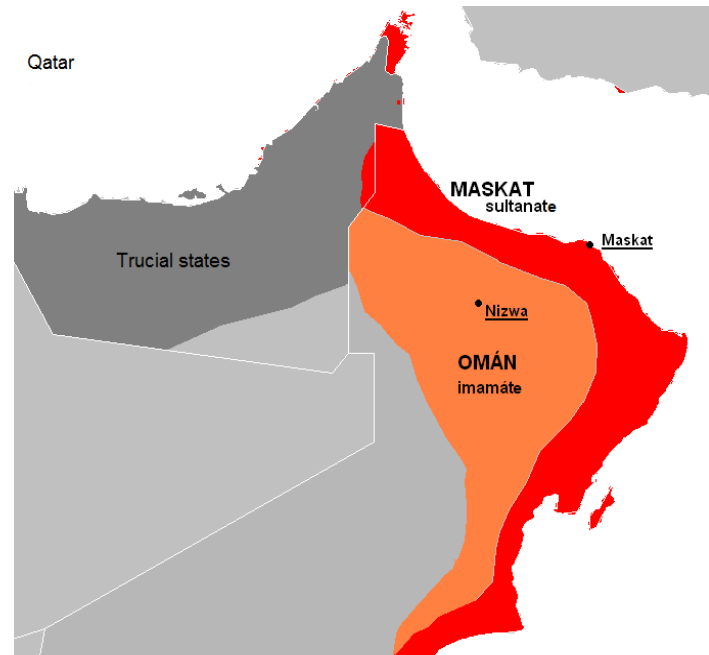
Figure 5: The Imamate of Oman around the middle of the 19th Century in orange, juxtaposed against the Sultanate of Muscat in red (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oman_proper)

bin Majid, a famous Omani mariner and navigator. For much of its existence, the territories were politically divided into the Imamate of Oman, the seat of the inwardly-focused religious Imamate and home of Arab tribes, and the Sultanate of Muscat—seat of the expansion-oriented Sultanate, and home to the diverse populations from around the Indian Ocean rim [see Figure 5]. It was not until the 1950s that the two polities were combined into the Sultanate of Muscat and Oman following the defeat of the Imamate during a bitter civil war, and only in the 1970s was the whole region consolidated as the Sultanate of Oman (Valeri 2013:137). Whenever I refer to Oman, I mean the current post-1970s territory of the Sultanate of Oman unless otherwise specified.

Most Western scholarship on the Sultanate of Oman has focused on the dynamism and cosmopolitanism of the coast while portraying the interior as isolated, backwards, and unchanging for the last two thousand years (Wilkinson 1987:2). Native scholarship, however, has often uplifted the traditions of the interior as authentic, often limiting the "real" history of Oman to the central regions to the exclusion of Muscat and the coast: "The traditional history of Oman as an independent state has always been written by the Omanis, not the Muscatis" (Wilkinson 1987:71). Yet it is important to remember that Oman has never been a monolithic Arab entity (Rabi 2006:36); the coast and its non-Arab population has shaped the history of the overall region as much as the tribes in the interior. Historian John Wilkinson argued that following the rise of Sultan Qaboos in 1970, for the first time in its history the Muscat tradition became hegemonic and the concerns of the interior were pushed to the peripheries of Omani society (Wilkinson 1987:2). Writing more than three decades after Wilkinson, however, I challenge and refute his argument by showing how "the old way of life"—particularly in terms of tribes and the legacy of the Imamate—continues to be central to the Omani identity, particularly when it comes to marriage. Competing historical narratives are often challenged, negotiated, and confirmed within the private sphere of kinship during the marriage process as families ask questions about genealogy, purity, and migration in order to ascertain whether the individual in question could be an appropriate spouse for their relative. Histories of migration, purity, and genealogy continue to have salience because of Oman's complex history of interaction with the outside world as well as the persistence of the traditions of the interior.

This chapter briefly lays out a short history of Oman necessary to understand the building blocks of the modern nation-state and its contemporary social dynamics. First, it gives a concise overview of Oman's Arab tribal structure and settlement patterns in the interior, followed by a

summary of Oman's expansive maritime empire and its resulting population diversity along the coast. Using this foundation, this chapter explains the conflicts between the Imamate and the Sultanate—particularly in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—and how they continue to have repercussions in Omani politics today. Finally, this chapter takes an overall view of Sultan Qaboos's political reforms following his rise to power in 1970, and ends with the uncertainties and fears the Omani people are facing following his death on January 10, 2020. I argue that without knowing these particulars of Oman's historiography, it is not only difficult to contextualize the current policies the Sultanate pursues regarding tribal equality, but it also becomes impossible to understand what shapes the intimate decisions different Omani families make regarding marriage and claims to "origins," "authenticity," and "rootedness" in a transnational nation.

Omani Tribal Structure(s) and Hierarchies

Tribes are not only the building block of the modern Omani nation, they are the medium through which much of Omani history is remembered and narrated. Nevertheless, one of the greatest difficulties I ran into during fieldwork was trying to map out the Omani tribal structure. Every one of my interlocutors began from different explanations of "tribe"—some focusing on noble lineages, some on *shaykh*ly authority, some on vertical distinctions within tribes, some on established systems of tribal patronage, some on tribal rivalries based on access to sources of water, and more. Furthermore, indigenous categories for tribes—most often labeled as *qabila* or *Al*—remain vague, implying lose groupings as "family," "collective," or "people" (Tapper 1990:55-6), and are therefore impossible to classify in neat categories. In general, Omani tribes

are patrilineal and are often associated with a particular region; for example, the al-Abriyin tribe

is associated with the village of Al Hamra in the interior region of Oman (Wilkinson 1987:106).

The rhetoric of tribal kinship, however, can often obfuscate critical issues of hierarchy.

The ascending structure of Omani tribes goes from family unit (*fasila)* to clans/lineages (*fakhd)*

to tribes (*qabila)* to people (*sha'ab).* However, most Omanis would agree that focusing solely on

family and descent leaves out the largest population of tribespeople because "descent is one

thing, tribe another" (Wilkinson 1987:108). The majority of members in any given Omani tribe

are dependents (Grandmaison 1989:176; Wilkinson 1987:94-98). That is to say that slaves

('*abid, khuddam*) who are assumed to be without status, and clients (*mawali*), who include

members of smaller groups absorbed into larger tribes for the sake of protection (Wilkinson

1987:114), make up the largest portion of any Omani tribe (Wilkinson 1987:97). There are

distinct differences in their status within the tribe even when they are able to claim full tribal

membership. Even today, noble lineages—descendants of the tribal *shaykhs*—continue to occupy

the top of the tribal ladder*,* followed by commoners; below them are descendants of the client

lineages who joined the tribe for protection, with descendants of slaves relegated to the bottom.

Even though these hierarchies are no longer officially recognized, much of this history is passed

on and carefully preserved through family genealogies—especially by descendants of the

shaykhs who benefit from maintaining these memories (see Chapter 2).

This simple pyramid model of a tribe is only the beginning of the complexity and

diversity of tribal formation in Oman, where tribes are not only organized through shared

descent, but also through issues of geography, political authority, and the protection of economic

interests (Wilkinson 1987:93, 102-3, 107-8, 110):

> There is the tribe whose core groups (at least) very largely see themselves as a
> true clan (e.g. Ma'awil, the "Abriyin). Others are perfectly well aware of the

fact that they are made up of numerous descent groupings but nevertheless tend to act together cohesively and subscribe to an eponymous ancestor (e.g. the Hawasina). A third type of more or less similar pattern is larger and overly divided into sub-tribes who will only act cohesively at the call of the *tamima* [paramount shaykh], but not necessarily the shaikhs of the core group: such a tribe is conceived more as a confederation (bedu *tayifa,* settled *juma'a*), but still subscribes to the notions of possessing an eponymous ancestor, e.g. the B. Riyam and the B. Ruwaha. Then there is what is clearly a confederation which conceives of itself in *shaff* [alliance] terms alone but nevertheless tends to act regularly together as a tribe even though not subscribing to an eponymous ancestor: such for example are the Sharqiya Hinawis or their rivals the Ghafiri bloc of the lower Wadi Sumayil. A variant of this can be seen with a huge grouping like the Yal Sa'd which, despite its name, is nothing much more than an economic defensive grouping that tends only to act together when there is a threat to the general interests of the Batina. Finally, at the other end of the scale, there are fragmentary tribes. This is not quite the same as the sub-tribes, nor the clan groupings (which are the descent the tribesmen consider themselves as belonging to . . .). Rather it is a grouping, usually dominated by one clan, which makes up the main population within a limited circumscription, notably the dominant quarters of major centres (Wilkinson 1987:123).

Each of these groups is recognized as a legitimate tribe and not seen as demonstrating different levels of tribal formation. It is important to keep this mind when talking about tribal structure and settlement, because there is no singular framework that fits all the tribes of Oman. During his reign, Sultan Qaboos took advantage of this tribal fluidity to create new tribes and challenge entrenched hierarchies.

Despite the diversity of tribal groupings, Omani history identifies two main waves of Arab tribal migration into the region: the first wave involved Bani Qahtan tribes coming into the Omani territory from the South (i.e., the region that is Yemen today) more than two thousand years ago, and the second included the Bani 'Adnan that came via the northern passes—i.e., from what is modern day United Arab Emirates (Peterson 2003:1; Rabi 2006:11; Wilkinson 1987:73). Upon their arrival into the region, they encountered small agricultural communities who relied

on the *aflaj* system for their irrigation needs (Rabi 2006:13). Built in the interior of Oman under the centralized rule of the Persian Achaemenid Empire in the seventh century BCE, the *aflaj* system includes horizontal wells and underground shafts that carry groundwater to the surface and across distances (Wilkinson 1987:23) which are still used today for both irrigation and drinking water (Limbert 2010:125). The incoming nomadic Arabs quickly realized the importance of preserving the system of irrigation they had stumbled upon. Some tribes assimilated into the local population through intermarriage with local women, while other tribes gained dominance over locals. Ultimately, the majority of in-migrating Arab tribes slowly transitioned into more permanent but decentralized settlements in the heart of Oman (Rabi 2006:14), along the slopes and valleys of the Jabal Akhdar, which allowed them to benefit from and preserve the *aflaj* infrastructure [see Figure 6].

Figure 6: Pictures of the *aflaj* system in the village of Misfat al-Abriyin, located on the slopes of the Jabal Akhdar mountains. Photos taken by author in June 2014.

The settled Arab tribes accepted Islam as their new faith in the seventh century CE, and by the eighth century CE, most Omani Arabs had embraced the Ibadhi sect of Islam (Wilkinson 1987:205). Ibadhism is the third and smallest sect of Islam. The Shi'as believe that the Prophet Muhammad's heir—religious and political—should come from his lineage, and as such wanted his cousin Ali to be the first Imam.[5] The Sunnis believe that the Prophet's successor should come from the tribe of the Prophet, but not necessarily his lineage; they outnumbered the Shi'as and elected Abu Bakr as the first Caliph. Finally, Ibadhis believe that "the most knowledgeable and devout Muslim should lead, irrespective of bloodline or ethnicity" (Bos 2009:1) and that he should be democratically elected by the community of scholars (*ulema*) based on his ability to arbitrate tribal disputes. Ibadhism did not emerge immediately following the death of Prophet Muhammad; instead, it grew out of the *khawarij* (literally "those who exit") movement which opposed Caliph Ali's decision to negotiate with the enemy in the midst of battle in 657 CE (Ghazal 2015:238; Bos 2009:2). The movement was strongly persecuted by mainstream Muslims, and many *khawarij* responded to the violence they faced with further violence, even approving the killing of Muslims who did not agree with their viewpoint. The Ibadhis were a moderate sect of the *khawarij* movement*;* they denounced the killing of other Muslims but continued to accept violence as a political tool to oppose unjust rule (Ghazal 2015:238). As a result, while many other *khawarij* sects were persecuted ruthlessly, dissenting Ibadhi scholars were able to find refuge from persecution and flourish in the margins of the Arab world in what is today Oman (Ghubash 2006:1).

As the influence of Ibadhism grew in the Omani interior, Ibadhi scholars began to have increasing impact on tribal politics. Their ability to arbitrate conflicts regarding equitable water

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[5] Ali ibn Abu Talib was the fourth Muslim Caliph.

distribution in an arid climate increased their reputation and consolidated the egalitarian influence of Ibadhi Islam (Rabi 2006:14; Townsend 1977:26-27). As a result, Oman soon became a center for Ibadhi thought, and Arab tribes in the Omani interior elected the first Ibadhi Imam in 751 CE (Ghubash 2006:20; Ghazal 2015:238; Rabi 2006:20). Tribes settled along the coastal regions of Oman, however, moved away from Ibadism and embraced Sunni Orthodoxy during the eleventh century CE (Wilkinson 1987:11).

To some extent, a basic binary has shaped Omani politics since the settlement of Arab tribes in the region: Omani tribes continue to trace their heritage back to either southern Qahtani origins, or to northern 'Adnani origins. A more recent iteration of this binary is the Hinawi vs. Ghafiri rivalry, consolidated during a battle for succession in the eighteenth century CE, which mapped onto not only the South/North divide but also the Sunni/Ibadhi split. Most tribes within the Hinawi coalition claim southern Qahtani and Ibadhi heritage, whereas most tribes within the Ghafiri faction traced their lineage back to the Bani 'Adnan from the North, and the majority follow Sunni orthodoxy (Peterson 2003:1-2). Yet like most inter-tribal alliances (*shaff*), the boundaries between the confederations remained flexible; in fact, the Ibadhi Bani Ghafir tribe at one point joined the Ibadhi Hinawi coalition against the majority Sunni faction that bore their own name (Peterson 2003:2; Rabi 2006:12, 39-40).

Over the course of the last few centuries, the Hinawi-Ghafiri rivalry has become increasingly important in tribal politics in Oman. Geographically, Omani settlements were divided along this binary: "If the inhabitants of the upper part of a valley or town were Ghafiri, then the populace of the lower part of the valley or town would generally be Hinawi" (Peterson 1977:305). If threatened, smaller tribes would often call upon their allies within the Ghafiri or Hinawi confederation for aid against larger neighbors (Peterson 2003:2). The alliances stopped

any predominant tribe from gaining full political hegemony: an overly ambitious tribal leader would find himself facing the collective opposition of the entire rival confederation (Peterson 2003:2). Or as John Wilkinson puts it, "all the main centres [*sic*] of Oman fall within the tribal orbit, but none normally falls within the power of any single group" (Wilkinson 1987:119). In other words, despite the decentralized nature of Omani tribes, the Hinawi-Ghafiri rivalry helped maintain a balance of power in the Omani interior.

One of the only ways to unite Oman's rival confederations was through the figure of the Ibadhi Imam, chosen bilaterally by Ibadhi tribes in both the Hinawi and Ghafiri coalitions— either because of his exceptional merit or to unite the factions against an outside threat; in the latter case, the Imam was qualified as a *daif* (weak) Imam to indicate that he had been chosen to solve a particular problem, not solely because of his religious excellence, and that his title was contingent upon his success. Weak Imams were elected, often during moments of crisis, in order to unite the tribes under the leadership of the Imamate and address the threat at hand; if successful, their tenure as a permanent Imam would be considered by the religious scholars (*ulema)*. In principle, if the *ulema* decided against it, the weak Imam would be asked to vacate his position and the community would continue without an overarching religious leader, with the tribes conducting their affairs as usual (Rabi 2006:22; Wilkinson 1987:160-161).

According to John Wilkinson, who wrote the seminal work on the traditions of the Omani Imamate, Imams "may conceivably come from a poor, simple background, but their Arab lineage is always impeccable" (Wilkinson 1987:109). That is because once elected, an Imam would act as the leader over the tribal *shaykhs,* and had the right to raise taxes and call gather troops from the different tribes who would then act as a united army under his command. In order to maintain his position as an arbitrator, the Imam was supposed either to come from a neutral tribe or to

maintain a separation from tribal affairs (Rabi 2006:19). Yet that has not been true for most of Omani history. The first Ibadhi Imam, Al-Julanda ibn Mas'ud—who belonged to a prominent tribe in Oman at the time—was elected by the tribal religious elite during the eighth century CE as a weak Imam in order to protect Oman from threats by the Muslim orthodoxy (Wilkinson 1987:205).

Al-Julanda was not successful in his endeavors—he lost to the Sunni power at the time, but the geography of Oman protected the fledgling Imamate from a direct assault. Yet despite his failure, Al-Julanda continued his rule as Imam, and even after his death, his family continued to unofficially "rule" for the remainder of the eighth century CE. This became a common pattern through Omani history: the rule of a chosen Imam, elected either for his religious merit or during times of crisis, most often devolved into dynastic rule (Peterson 1977:305; Rabi 2006:23). In fact, there have been five major dynasties that have shaped Omani history, most starting with the election of an Imam: the Julanda in the eighth century, followed by the reign of the Yahmad-Kharus until the eleventh century, the Nabahina from 1154 until 1624, when they were ousted by the Ya'ariba (National Museum of Oman; Rabi 2006:23-25; Wilkinson 1987:205-225). Although the ancestor of the fifth and final dynasty—the BuSa'id dynasty—was initially elected as an Ibadhi Imam, this dynasty as continued to rule without the spiritual backing of the religious elite for almost fourteen generations.

Figure 7: A simplified family tree of the BuSa'idi dynasty, including the Omani and Zanzibari branches as well as the Qays branch that split following the death of Imam Ahmad

Expansion of Oman's Maritime Empire

Imam Ahmad al Bu-Sa'idi was the last elected Imam in Oman who enjoyed the full support of the religious *ulema* in the interior, and secured the backing of the coastal merchant population for his role in expelling the Portuguese from the Omani territory and for uniting Oman's warring tribes. Along with his military prowess, Imam Ahmad was a successful

merchant; he began to advance Oman's maritime capabilities and increased state involvement in commercial enterprises. Under his regime, united Oman emerged as a political and economic power in the Indian Ocean. Imam Ahmad is seen as the founder of Bu-Sa'idi dynasty which remains in power to this day [see Figure 7].

At its zenith, the Omani Empire stretched from the Makran coast in present day Pakistan/Iran all the way to Zanzibar off the east coast of Africa. Yet Omani Arabs had been traveling to East Africa as early as the tenth century CE (Grandmaison 1989:176)—even when their political power in the region was negligible (Wilkinson 1987:43). Over time, Oman slowly gained prominence in the Indian Ocean world, with Muscat becoming the major center for trade with India in the fifteenth century CE; the forts that continue to dominate the skyline of the port of Muscat—Fort Jalali and Fort Mirani—were constructed in 1589 and 1588 respectively by the Portuguese (Wilkinson 1989:44-45), who were later expelled by Imam Ahmad in the seventeenth century CE.

Ahmad was able to expand his power base beyond tribal and religious support through his maritime exploits. By the end of his reign, Imam Ahmad had consolidated a strong mercantile empire with a powerful navy that controlled important trade routes in the Indian Ocean (Rabi 2006:26). Ahmad's descendants, though unable to maintain the unity he had achieved, continued to extend Oman's regional power throughout the Indian Ocean. Sultan bin Ahmad continued the policy of maritime expansion started by his father, acquiring the port of Gwadar (in modern day Pakistan) from the Khan of Kalat in 1784, bringing Kilwa (in East Africa) under BuSa'idi control, and consolidating Omani economic power in Zanzibar (Wilkinson 1987:55). Yet he was not recognized as an Imam by the religious *ulema* in the Omani interior; instead, his brother Sa'id held the spiritual title of Imam while Sultan bin Ahmad moved his base to Muscat and

claimed political authority along the coast [see Figure 5]. This move generated the separation of the religious authority of the Imam in the interior from the political authority on the coast (Rabi 2006:26), creating the scene for the dual-sovereignty model that was bitterly contested during the twentieth century.

The period of maritime expansion during and following Imam Ahmad's rule coincides with some of the first historical records of non-Arabs living in Muscat. European travelers to Oman mentioned Balushis living in the city in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, although it can be safely assumed that they had been there for much longer (Peterson 2004a:35). They served as soldiers for the BuSa'idi rulers during the early years of maritime expansion (Nicolini 2008:335). The first modern army unit in Oman, created in 1921, was entirely composed of Balushi troops (Peterson 2004a:35). Today, Balushi-Omanis make up around 12% of the overall Omani population, around 245,000 people; they are uniformly Sunni and are concentrated along the Omani coastline (Peterson 2004a:36).

Hindu Banyan merchants from India are also first found in historical records around this same time. They forged trade links with Muscat and established a warehouse in the city during the period of Portuguese occupation—1507-1650 (Peterson 2004a:38). Omani historians of the era wrote about the pivotal role some of these Banyan merchants played in supporting Imam Ahmad expel the Portuguese in 1650. Banyans in Oman were bankers who financed many overseas trade ventures, importing rice, sugar, and coffee from India and exporting dates. They also played a critical role in the ivory and slave trade during the Omani empire's era of greatest influence (Glassman 1995:58; Wilkinson 1987:233), but they were considered British subjects and their interests were protected by the British government in India. During the revival of the

Ibadhi movement and the siege of Muscat in 1895, much of Muscat's Banyan population were banished and their temple destroyed. Today, only a handful of Banyan families are left in Oman.

The Lawati-Omani community, also originally from India, is the largest Shi'a group in Oman. They first show up in historical records in the 1740s, when they greeted Imam Ahmad as he entered Muscat (Peterson 2004a:41). They prospered (and continue to prosper) as merchants, and make up some of the wealthiest families in Oman today (Peterson 2004a:43). Today, Lawati-Omanis number around 10,000 and are mostly settled in Muscat.

Despite their long presence and the integral roles all three of these ethnic communities played in Oman's economic expansion and prosperity, Balushis, Banyans, and Lawatis continue to face stigma for their non-Arab origins (Valeri 2013:157). They are not only linguistically and ethnically distinct from Arab-Omanis, they are also religious "others." J. E. Peterson, historian and political analyst of the Arabian Gulf who also worked for the government of Oman in the 1990s, argues that ethnic identities may blur and decline as a result of cultural mixing in the "workplace, residential areas, social functions, the military, and elsewhere" (Peterson 2004a:32), giving rise to a more united pan-Omani identity. Based on seventeen months of fieldwork amongst different groups of Omanis, I disagree with Dr. Peterson. Despite the "mixing" he describes, and despite the government's emphasis on a shared pan-Omani national identity that is both timeless and generic, (Valeri 2013:144), ethnic-turned-tribal hierarchies have not disappeared in Oman. Rather, Omanis from different backgrounds continue to practice marital endogamy, carefully maintaining group boundaries and rank. For Arab-Omanis, in-marriage is a way to maintain their hierarchical privilege within the traditional Arab tribal structure, whereas for Balushis and Lawatis, it is a way to protect themselves and their families from further marginalization by turning inward, preserving their own heritage, and teaching their children to

take pride in their dual identities. Despite the increased exposure to Omanis from different religious, tribal, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds, many of my interlocutors—regardless of their ethnic/religious background—often explained how friendship and respect are different from marriage: "we love them, we are friends with them, but we don't marry them" was a refrain I heard regularly throughout my time in Oman.

The group that is the focus of this dissertation, the Zanzibari-Omanis, complicate the story of endogamy and ethnic boundary-making. Zanzibari-Omani, as a category, emerged as a result of Oman's political and economic supremacy in East Africa. Arab-Omanis had been traveling back and forth from East African since the tenth century CE (Grandmaison 1989:176). During the nineteenth century, the island of Zanzibar became the main source of revenue for Oman through trade in cloves, ivory, and slaves, and Sultan Sa'id bin Sultan al-BuSa'idi—the grandson of Imam Ahmad—moved the capital of the Omani empire to Zanzibar in 1832 [see Figure 5]—in part to profit from the huge demand for luxury goods in Europe, including but not limited to ivory, pearls, and cloves (Ewald 2000:77). Huge numbers of Arab-Omani merchants moved to Zanzibar to take advantage of growing global demands. Some of these migrants settled along the East African coast and on the island of Zanzibar, while others settled in the interior of the continent (see Chapter 4); some intermarried with local African women, while others continued the practice of marital endogamy by marrying Arab women back in the Omani mainland or those born to Arab parents in East Africa (see Chapter 3). Today, both of these groups are lumped together under the label Zanzibari-Omani regardless of the Arab "purity" of their genealogies.

While the label attempts to mark them as a distinct ethnic group, unlike the Balushis, Banyans, and Lawatis, Zanzibari-Omanis are neither religious "others" in Oman—as most

continue to practice the Ibadhi Islam of their Arab-Omani ancestors—nor are they tribal/ethnic "others" because most can claim their origins back to Arab-Omani tribes. Many Arab-Omanis emphasize how Zanzibari-Omani returnees are ethnically separate because of their "mixed" genealogies and their linguistic difference—most Zanzibari-Omani returnees in Oman continue to speak Swahili (and even English) more fluently than Arabic (al-Kharusi 2013:426, 430; Valeri 2007:486)—but according to patrilineal tribal traditions, they are equal members of Arab-Omani tribes as long as they can trace their fathers' origins back to the tribe (see Chapter 3). As a result, it is often difficult for Arab-Omanis to exclude their Zanzibari cousins from the marriage pool using the rhetoric of tribal endogamy; instead, they have had to articulate new concepts of "origins" and "rootedness" in order to maintain their privileged status as the guardians of the "real" Oman (see Chapter 2).

The Ibadhi Imamate and the Coastal Sultanate in the Twentieth Century

The end of the nineteenth century saw Omani Sultans become increasingly dependent on the British Empire for financial assistance, sparking resentment within the interior Arab tribes regarding the influence of an outside power on the inner workings of Oman (Wilkinson 1987:230). Even though the BuSa'idi Sultans were (and continue to be) Ibadhi, tribes in the interior came to believe that they were too easily influenced by "foreign" values and were no longer suitable rulers of Oman. In 1866, Azzan bin Qays al-BuSa'idi from the Qays branch of the dynasty which branched off following the death of Imam Ahmad, was elected as Imam with the help of the Hiwani confederation (Wilkinson 1987:236). One of his first acts was to take control of Muscat and expel the Banyans merchant community who lived there but were considered

subjects and agents of British India. As a result, the British government in India refused to recognize Azzan as a legitimate ruler despite the popular support he enjoyed. Within a few years, the Imamate's economy collapsed and support for the Imam also declined. Turki bin Sa'id—one of the sons of Sultan Sa'id who had not moved to Zanzibar with his father but had stayed on in Oman—took advantage of the Imam's weakness to launch an assault on Muscat in 1870 with the help of the British. He succeeded in taking control of Muscat, but the *ulema* refused to support him. Turki, therefore, established himself as Sultan of Muscat with no Imam to challenge his position [see Figure 7].

In the meantime, Barghash bin Sa'id al-BuSa'idi came to power in Zanzibar in 1870 [see Figure 7], right as Azzan's Imamate was collapsing on the Omani mainland. Sultan Barghash, son of Sultan Sa'id who had moved the Omani capital to Zanzibar, was a powerful leader who ruled in close consultation with the *ulema* in both Zanzibar and in Oman. He fostered the Ibadhi cause, starting the first Ibadhi press, promoting the status and the salary of the judges and religious scholars, and resisting the British over issues such as the ban on slavery (Wilkinson 1987:239). This soon became a rallying cry for the European scramble for Africa: even though the import of slaves into Zanzibar was banned in 1873, European powers asserted (oftentimes correctly) that the ban was not enforced and the practice of slavery continued on the ground. Slavery thus became the justification for all European moves against the Omani empire, including violent land-grabs in the interior of Africa (Wilkinson 1987:240).

As a result, despite the strength of his position on the island of Zanzibari, Sultan Barghash left behind a greatly reduced empire to his son Khalid in 1896. The British, however, afraid of Khalid's popularity and his willingness to continue his father's anti-British policies, decided to prevent his succession to the throne in a brutal fashion. They bombed the palace,

leaving behind 500 dead and wounded. Khalid was forced to flee and seek refuge with the Germans, while twelve of his strongest supporters were fined[6] and exiled (Wilkinson 1987:240). The British appointed a Sultan of their choice, but the Sultans of Zanzibar were henceforth stripped of any autonomy until the island was recognized as an independent nation in 1963.

At the same time, resentment against Sultan Turki was growing in the Omani mainland. He had alienated his supporters in the interior due to the punitive taxes he imposed on all goods entering Muscat from the region (Wilkinson 1987:241). The arrival of the Zanzibari exiles, along with their tales of British brutality and their usurpation of a good Ibadhi ruler, further fueled the simmering anger in the Ibadhi interior against the British and their "puppet" Sultan. The turn of the century thus saw a growing Ibadhi renaissance (*naHda*), fanned by the resentment at home and the assumed betrayal of the BuSa'idi Sultans because of their reliance on an alien power. As such, when Omani religious scholars established an Ibadhi Imamate in 1913, they chose to isolate themselves from the wider world more than any preceding Imamate in order to preserve their independence and their religious purity (Ghazal 2015:240; Wilkinson 1987:245). They even tried to attack and take control of Muscat in 1915 in order to rid Oman of foreign influences, but were defeated by a troop of British trained Anglo-Indian soldiers (Wilkinson 1987:249-250).

An uneasy and contentious stalemate continued between the Sultanate and the Imamate for the remainder of the decade. The assassination of the old Imam in July of 1920, and the subsequent election of a more conciliatory Imam, Muhammad al-Khalili, created the opening necessary for an official agreement between the Imamate and the Sultanate with the British acting as mediators. In September of 1920, representatives of the Imam signed an agreement with the Sultan which divided Oman formally between the Imamate of Oman and the Sultanate

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[6] The fines were used to compensate the Banyan community in Zanzibar for loss of property from the bombings (Wilkinson 1987:240).

of Muscat (Wilkinson 1987:269) [see Figure 5]. The Treaty of Sib granted the Imam a degree of autonomy over the affairs of his supporters, and protected the Sultan from threats against his regime by confining the scope of the Imamate to the interior (Wilkinson 1987:251).

When Sa'id bin Taymur, great-grandson of Sultan Turki, took over the role of Sultan in 1932, he fostered a friendlier working relationship with Imam Muhammad al-Khalili (Rabi 2008). He tried to diminish the influence of the British within his administration by reducing his financial reliance on them (Allen and Rigsbee 2000:3; Rabi 2006:48), which was one of the biggest complaints of the followers of the Imam about the rule of the Sultans. He also centralized the collection of customs in order to raise revenue for his state and fostered connections with world leaders independent of British influence (Rabi 2006:48-51). Sa'id opened the door for *ulema* from the interior to act as judges and administer *shari'a* within the Sultanate with the permission of the Imam (Eickelman 1984:11; Wilkinson 1987:270). Furthermore, as Imam al-Khalili continued the policy of non-engagement with the outside world, he left Sa'id to deal with all foreign policy regarding the region. Sa'id soon began to call himself the Sultan of Muscat and Oman (Wilkinson 1987:271; Valeri 2013:45). This worked well for both polities—as the Imam was able to maintain autonomy and a degree of separation from the outside world, and the Sultan was able to leverage his "power" over the interior with the British Empire to improve his financial position.

Nevertheless, despite his best attempts to protect his territory from outside influence, the outside world began influencing Imam al-Khalili and his supporters. Conditions in the interior began to deteriorate during the twentieth century because of declining revenues from overseas connections (Grandmaison 1989; Wilkinson 1987:302). As a result of worsening finances, many Omanis from within the Imamate territory were forced to seek work in the other oil-rich Gulf

states; upon their trips home, they introduced new ideas and expectations to the isolationist regime (Wilkinson 1987:300).

A few ambitious young Omani leaders began to seek ways to improve the conditions of the interior and strengthen their own positions within the Imamate. Brothers Ghalib and Talib al-Hinai worked for the Imam and began to issue passports to residents of the interior in order to set the Imamate up as a modern independent state separate from the Sultanate (Wilkinson 1987:305, 310). Ultimately, when Imam Muhammad died in May 1952, Ghalib al-Hinai was chosen as the new Imam in 1954 because of his youth (he was 35 years old) and his willingness to embrace change (Wilkinson 1987:309). Imam Ghalib and his brother, Talib al-Hinai, quickly began to appeal to pan-Arab sentiments of the era by highlighting the Sultan's close ties to the British Empire and emphasizing the Imamate's anti-imperialist stance. They were successful in furthering the cause of the Imamate, and Gamal Abdel Nasir—the president of Egypt and a leader of the Pan-Arab movement—declared support for the sister-state of the Ibadhi Imam in 1956 (Rabi 2006:97).
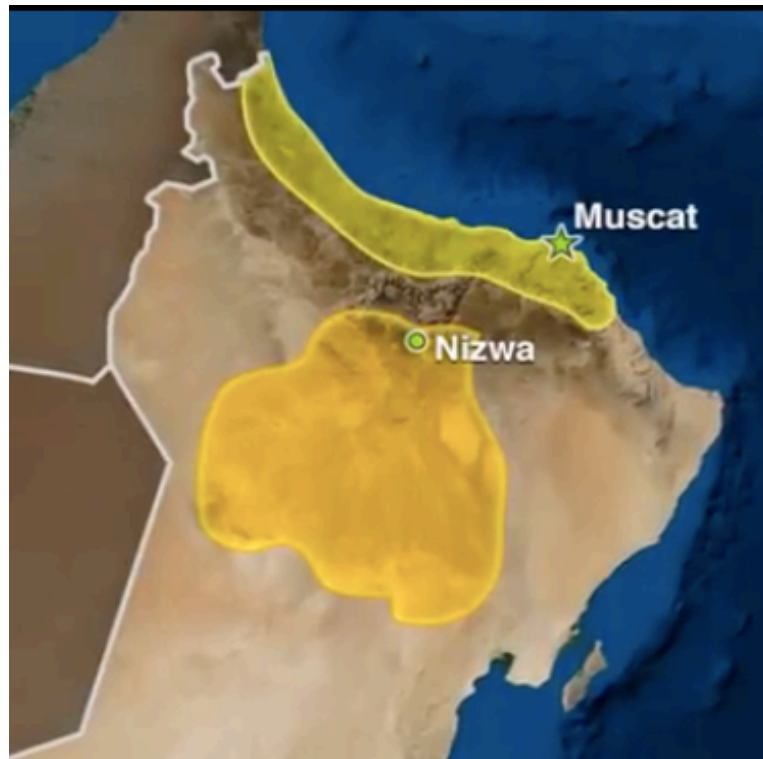
Figure 8: Map showing the coastal Sultanate and its capital Muscat, and the interior Imamate and its capital Nizwa, separated by the Hajar Mountain Range (https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/omans-geographic-challenge)

Unfortunately for Imam Ghalib, despite gaining support within international politics, he alienated his supporters at home as early as mid-1954 because of his thorough embrace of Saudi influence and the emerging pan-Arab nationalism (Wilkinson 1987:314). Seizing this chance, Sultan Sa'id began to prepare for the overthrow of the Imamate. By the end of 1955, the Sultan's troops had gained control over Nizwa [see Figure 8], the capital of the Imamate. The Imam was forced to give up his title and retire to his village near Jabal Akhdar while his brother Talib fled to Saudi Arabia, where he continued to enlist support for the Imamate (Wilkinson 1987:315). Oman was thus united for the first time since 1886. However, instead of solidifying support for the newly united Sultanate, Sultan Sa'id retreated to the southern city of Salalah in the Dhofar province and chose to run the unified Sultanate *in abstentia*, maintaining a great distance from the majority of his countrymen (Valeri 2013:53). Perhaps because of his distance from the tribal center, Sa'id failed to deal adequately with the threats of the Imam's resurgence (Beasant 2002:77; Valeri 2013:53; Wilkinson 1987:317-319).

Talib al-Hinai, the Imam's brother, returned to Oman in June 1957 with arms and troops from Saudi Arabia and international support for the Imamate's cause from pan-Arab leaders. Simultaneously, Ghalib began to reassert himself as the Imam of Oman and started gathering supporters around himself. The Imam's supporters had counted on British non-intervention (Valeri 2013:54), but the British could not sit back and watch a potentially oil rich region fall into chaos. Recognizing a major threat to their interests, the British finally convinced Sultan Sa'id to act, and by the end of August, the combined troops of Britain and the Sultanate had won major cities in the interior back from the Imam's supporters and confined Ghalib, Talib, and their key supporters to the Jabal Akhdar mountains [see Figure 9] (Wilkinson 1987:321).

At this point, the British withdrew most of their troops from the region, leaving behind minimum air support to aid in the siege of the mountains (Allen and Rigsbee 2000:18; Dye 2008:24). Although the Sultan's troops, along with minimal air support from the Royal Air Force (RAF), tried to break apart this alliance, the geography of Jabal Akhdar made it easy for the rebels to hide and continue guerrilla attacks on government convoys and foreign oil companies. Ultimately, the Sultan was forced to recognize that his troops could not dislodge the rebels from their mountain home. In January 1958, Sultan Sa'id signed an agreement,

Figure 9: Jabal Akhdar Mountains, the core of the Ibadhi Imamate (https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Sampling-site-in-Al-Jabal-Al-Akhdar-mountain-Oman_fig1_252930131)

whereby in exchange for financial and military assistance, the British assumed almost total control of the Sultan's Armed Forces (SAF) (Allen and Rigsbee 2000:19).

The RAF increased aerial bombings in the Jabal Akhdar in order to flush out the rebels from their hideouts. As punitive measures against rebels increased, local residents of Jabal Akhdar turned against the Imam. As a result, Imam Ghalib bin Ali al-Hinai, the last Ibadhi Imam

of Oman, was forced to escape into Saudi Arabia in 1959 (Wilkinson 1987:322-23). Imam

Ghalib died in exile in Saudi Arabia in 2009; Oman has not had an Imam since his departure.

The Rebellion in Dhofar

Under the leadership of British officers, the SAF began a "hearts and minds" campaign in Jabal Akhdar despite Sultan Sa'id protests (Rabi 2006:114-118). He was dismayed that his enemies were being "rewarded" when he did not have the funds to honor the tribes who had supported him during the war (Allen and Rigsbee 2000:21). However, under the agreement Sa'id signed in 1958, the British had control over Oman's civil development program

Figure 10: The eleven current governorates of the Sultanate of Oman (https://www.mapsofworld.com/oman/map.html)

and Sa'id found himself relegated to the background as British expatriates took over control over

the daily running of the administration (Allen and Rigsbee 2000:19). In a futile attempt to

maintain a semblance of independence, Sa'id exiled himself to the southern city of Salalah in the

province of Dhofar [see Figure 10], and stayed in touch with Muscat via radio and telegraph

(Peterson 2004:257). Moreover, Sa'id continued with the old Imam's policy of keeping the

outside world out. For instance, he banned the import of foreign products—such as sunglasses and radios—into Oman and even refused to allow Zanzibari-Omanis with their "foreign" ideas to return to Oman following the 1964 Zanzibari Revolution and the eviction of the Arabs. He worried that their presence would exacerbate foreign influence in the region, including the pan-Arab movement that continued to support the fallen Imam as well as the leftist inspiration for the ten-year long revolution in southern province of Dhofar starting in the 1960s.[7]

Starting with the first shipment of oil in 1967, Sultan Sa'id began to take tentative steps towards a more active role in the development of infrastructure in Oman. In 1968, the Sultan made his plans public: he outlined his goal to build new government offices, new housing for government officials, a new hospital, schools for girls, along with a focus on electrification, water supply, and a new port in Muscat (Allen and Rigsbee 2000:25). Nevertheless, control over foreign affairs remained in British hands and Sultan Sa'id continued his self-imposed exile in the southern province of Dhofar in an attempt to distance himself from his subjects in the North and from demands that he could not meet. He treated Dhofar as his own private estate, maintaining strict control over the region and enforcing punitive measures if Dhofaris failed to abide by his rules. Sultan Sa'id's strict policies, along with the poverty in the region, forced many Dhofaris to emigrate to neighboring states, where they were introduced to Nasserist pan-Arabism, as well as Marxism during the establishment of the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen in 1967. Returning emigrants helped establish the Popular Front for the Liberation of the Arabian Gulf (PFLOAG) in Oman in 1968. They quickly began a military offensive in Dhofar and, by early 1970, they controlled two-thirds of the province (Allen and Rigsbee 2000:27-28). The British, fearing a leftist takeover, assumed a more active role in Dhofar's military defense.

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[7] For a thorough discussion of the Dhofari Revolution, including its Nasserist and Marxist influences, see Abdel Razzaq Takriti's *Monsoon Revolution* (2013).

In 1969, the leftist revolution threatened to expand to Northern Oman when a group of Omani exiles, dissatisfied with Sa'id's regime, gathered together in Iraq and formed the National Democratic Front for the Liberation of Oman and the Arabian Gulf (NDFLOAG). They smuggled in arms and attacked the town of Izki in June 1970, galvanizing the opposition to Sultan Sa'id's rule within the country, which at this point included the majority of the nation— including Sa'id's son Qaboos (Allen and Rigsbee 2000:28). The Sultan had sent his son abroad for much of his youth for his education, and had placed Qaboos under a virtual house arrest in Dhofar upon his return to Oman in 1966. Qaboos was completely isolated from the running of the nation and had little contact with tribal leaders or British bureaucrats, except for a carefully selected few by his father. As the country rose up in opposition to his father, Qaboos began to express his desire for change, a desire that his British contacts quietly supported. On July 23, 1970, with British help, Qaboos bin Sa'id deposed his father during a *coup d'état*. Sa'id was exiled to London, and the British government officially recognized Qaboos as Sultan on July 29, 1970. The next day, Sultan Qaboos entered Muscat for the first time in his life (Allen and Rigsbee 2000:29; Valeri 2013:69). Over the next few years, he and his British supporters crushed the leftist rebellion in Dhofar, along with any dissent in the rest of the country.

Qaboos' *NaHda*

Sultan Qaboos has become coterminous with the modern Omani nation to such an extent that it has been difficult for many Omanis to imagine a future without him at the helm (Limbert 2010:9-10). He also signaled a symbolic break with the past by renaming the nation the "Sultanate of Oman" instead of the "Sultanate of Muscat and Oman" in the 1970s—finally

eliminating the historical dichotomy between the Imamate and the Sultanate (Valeri 2013:137).

In August 1970, he travelled around the country for ten days accepting the allegiance of tribal *shaykhs* and their followers and physically taking possession of the Omani territory. Sultan Qaboos's regime has gone out of its way to shape the historical narrative to describe his ascension to the throne not in terms of a coup or an *intifada* (uprising), but through the terminology of the *naHda* (renaissance) (Valeri 2013:133).

Using *naHda* to describe the regime change allowed the Sultan to tap into the history of the Ibadhi tradition of the Imamate cycle (Wilkinson 1987:4), when a righteous Imam is elected to address injustice by previous rulers (Valeri 2013:136). Even though the Sultan can no longer claim spiritual authority, labeling Qaboos's rule in terms of a *naHda* allowed the Omani state to co-opt Ibadhism for their own purposes and legitimize the rule of the Sultan. Moreover, the *naHda* terminology erases the twentieth century as an aberration, situating Qaboos in a long line of righteous rulers who brought peace and prosperity to Oman—like his ancestor, Imam Ahmad, the founder of the BuSa'idi dynasty. Sultan Qaboos is portrayed as the reformer who maintained a solid grip on Oman's illustrious history while also carefully husbanding the nation into the modern era. The Sultan himself focused on this continuity over and over in his speeches—calling on young Omanis to "serve their country by carrying forward what has been achieved in the past," and urging them to use their knowledge and expertise to "play a vital part in building a modern Omani society preserving the gains of the Blessed Renaissance, and achieving greater progress for the present and coming Omani generations, within the framework of the eternal values we all share" (Plekhanov 2004:237).

Some of the structural changes he embraced were transformative for Oman: Sultan Qaboos modernized the banks, centralized state bureaucracy, built hospitals and schools, offered

adult education classes, and granted equal rights to his female subjects. Yet politically, Sultan

Qaboos maintained the status quo. Even as he focused on developing the infrastructure of a

modern state, like his father, Qaboos continued to oppose the political participation of the masses

(Allen and Rigsbee 2000:35, 47)—especially given the recent defeat of the "elected" Ibadhi

Imam. Instead, he fashioned himself as the only source of political legitimacy in Oman by

delegitimizing all other sources of power. Under his regime, tribal *shaykhs* lost much of their

political influence because the Sultan was no longer dependent on their allegiance to validate his

own authority. Moreover, if tribal *shaykhs* refused to acknowledge the complete sovereignty of

the Sultan, they were put under house arrest (Peterson 1977:311). By the mid-1970s, most tribes

were brought under the control of the Sultanate.

In 1996, the Basic Law of the State was codified by royal decree and continues to act as

the Constitution of the Sultanate of Oman. It formalized the structure of the Omani government,

with the Sultan retaining almost all legislative power. In Article 41, the Basic Law states that the

Sultan is "inviolable and must be respected and his orders must be obeyed. The Sultan is the

symbol of national unity as well as its guardian and defender" (Basic Law 1996). Sultan Qaboos,

who codified the law, was also the first Sultan of Oman recognized by the law; he ruled with an

iron fist from July 23, 1970 until Jan. 10, 2020. During his almost fifty-year reign, he modeled

himself as a benevolent but absolute ruler to his people; they in turn fondly referred to him as

Baba Qaboos—the father of the nation. He greatly improved the quality of life for the majority

of his people and extended rights to women and minorities. Under his leadership, Oman created

the institutions of modern governance, including a legislative branch with a bicameral

parliament,[8] an independent judiciary,[9] a financial sector, and a strong military. Qaboos also invested in schools, universities, and hospitals in order to provide educational and medical services to all Omanis.

Following his ascension to power in 1970, when he was still unknown to the majority of interior tribes, Sultan Qaboos legitimized his rule by appealing to non-traditional sources of support—e.g., by urging the Zanzibari-Omani community abroad to "return" home and help build the nation, by granting citizenship to Balushi-Omani soldiers who made up most of the Sultan's Armed Forces, by granting amnesty to the political opponents who had been exiled during his father's rule, even by appointing a relative of the last Ibadhi Imam a key ministerial post (Peterson 2004b:9). As a result, many of these constituents owed their loyalty to the person of the Sultan, the "father of the nation" who has been credited with slowly introducing Oman into the modern world without losing its heritage.

The outlines of Qaboos's vision for the Omani nation is laid out in the 1996 Basic Law of the State, which defines the Sultanate as "an independent, *Arab* (emphasis mine), Islamic, fully sovereign state with Muscat as its capital" (Article 1, Basic Law 1996). It goes on to state that "Arabic is the official language of the State" (Article 3, Basic Law 1996), easily erasing the diversity of languages present in Oman (Peterson 2004a). In Article 15, however, the Basic Law clearly states that "Nationality is regulated by the Law" and not rooted in ethnic background or tribal status; and in Article 17, it argues that "All citizens are equal before the Law, and they are equal in public rights and duties. There shall be no discrimination between them on the grounds

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[8] The Parliament includes the Consultative Council (the *Majlis ash-Shu'ra*), an elected body, and the Council of State (the *Majlis ad-Dawla*), appointed by the Sultan.

[9] Even though the Basic Law provides for an independent judiciary, in practice the Sultan makes all the judicial appointments (Carnegie Endowment 2010).

of gender, origin, colour, language, religion, sect, domicile, or social status." Together, these two

articles paved the way for the equal integration of non-Arabs into the Omani nation.

Furthermore, under social principles, the Basic Law emphasizes the importance of unity and

cohesion, stating "Co-operation, compassion, strong ties between citizens, and the reinforcement

of national unity are a duty. The State shall prevent anything that could lead to division, discord,

or the disruption of national unity" (Article 12, Basic Law 1996). This is why the Omani state

does not collect any information regarding ethnicity or religious background on its census,

because it does not want to highlight the differences within Omani nationals and instead attempts

to always emphasize their shared heritage (Peterson 2013:233).

Over the last few decades, the nation-building project has focused on creating a pan-

Omani national identity that is both timeless and generic and can therefore incorporate Oman's

diverse populations into a single national framework. Most Omani youth today learn the same

standardized Arabic in school regardless of their home regions, and they learn a generic form of

Islam that is inclusive of Ibadhis, Sunnis, and even Shia'as (Valeri 2013:119-147). Furthermore,

Omani youth are introduced to others from different backgrounds during their school years,

expanding their social networks beyond tribal, religious, and ethnic affiliations (Peterson 2004a).

They learn about Omani history not only from their elders but from school textbooks, which do

not valorize particular tribes but rather attempt to focus on equality for all Omanis; even

religious knowledge is no longer a monopoly of elders and Imams but learned through

interaction with peers. If youth were shaped solely through the national curriculum, traditional

hierarchies—along with histories of conflicts—would be a thing of the past. However, as I show

in the rest of the dissertation, despite the efforts of the state, entrenched hierarchies continue to

govern the intimate lives of Omanis from all backgrounds, and are most often challenged, negotiated, and confirmed during the marriage process.

Significance

This dissertation provides a snapshot of Oman during an era of transformation, as it transitions from an expansive empire to a bounded nation-state, still recovering from the bitter civil wars that almost tore the country apart a few decades ago while navigating the drastic economic changes brought on by the discovery of oil. The final defeat of the Ibadhi Imamate in the interior has also affected the social dynamic of the whole nation, as Omanis throughout the territory have come under the control of the Sultanate; theoretically, the values of purity and isolation which defined the Ibadhi core of the nation during the period of the Imamate, have been supplanted by the values of expansion and absorption promoted by the coastal Sultanate. Yet as I show in this dissertation, these Ibadhi values are not only preserved but also mobilized and passed on during the marriage process as Arab-Omanis articulate their vision of Omani as an Arab nation. Similarly, Zanzibari-Omanis with transnational histories define and express their more absorptive and egalitarian vision for the Omani nation through their own marital choices.

These frictions were codified in the 1996 Basic Law of the State because they remain salient in contemporary Omani society. The tensions between Article 1, which labels Oman an Arab nation, and Article 17, which asserts equality for all Omanis, is captured by the 1981 official decree which tried to "tribalize" the non-Arab populations of Oman by assigning them a tribal patronym. The goal of the decree was to keep the Arab tribal structure at the center of the Omani national-identity while also making it accessible for non-Arab Omanis. While some non-

Arab groups (like the Balushis) accepted the official designation as a way to legitimately define themselves as one of the many tribes of Oman, others (like the Lawatis) rejected it because it further stigmatized them by highlighting their non-Arab origins (Valeri 2013:157). At the same time, this equalization threatens the dominance of Arab tribes since it strips "native" Arab-Omanis of their privileged status in the public sphere.

In this dissertation, I focus on the Zanzibari-Omani community in Oman because of their distinctive position within the Arab tribal structure: most "returnees"[10] from Africa are part of Arab-Omani tribes due to their patrilineal genealogies. Even if their ancestors intermarried with local African women, the Arab tribal structure ensured that descendants of Arab-Omani emigrants to Africa remained Arab as identity is passed on by the father regardless of the mother's background (Croucher 2012; Delaney 1995). At the same time, however, Zanzibari-Omanis have been marked as "other" upon their return to Oman, regardless of their genealogies, because of the foreign cultural practices resulting from their time abroad—practices such as speaking Swahili and eating African foods. Even those Zanzibari returnees whose families carefully maintained genealogical purity are subject to this suspicion (see Chapter 2). As a result, Zanzibari-Omanis are uniquely situated to challenge, negotiate, and confirm what it means to be both Arab—whether it should be narrowly defined in terms of tribal genealogy and/or cultural purity—and Omani—whether one has to be Arab in order to be Omani. Juxtaposed to their Arab-Omani countrymen, especially those who are invested in maintaining the hierarchies that ensure their own privileged status, I show how Zanzibari-Omanis from different class backgrounds utilize marriage as a way to articulate distinctive models of the Omani nation—rooted in either values of hierarchy or equality.

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[10] Zanzibari-Omanis are often also labeled as "back-from Africa returnees" because of their family's histories of migration and their "return" to their roots.

Chapter 2

Containing Kinship:

The Role of *'Irq* and *Wasta* in Circumventing the National Narrative

'Irq and Wasta as Counter-Narratives

After a few months in Oman, my interlocutors began to ask me, "You've been asking all these questions about marriage; so, what have you learned so far?" The first few times I heard this question, I panicked and searched my mind for anything I could share that did not seem completely obvious. I was still under the impression that true anthropological insight could only be achieved by peeling back layers of information to reveal an inner truth—something I believed I had not achieved yet. As a result, I would apologetically answer, "Well, a lot of people have told me about *'irq.*" To my surprise, all my questioners would nod solemnly and go on to explain why *'irq* was a critical concept for my research. Even though almost everyone I had spoken to regarding my research had brought up the issue of *'irq,* I had naively assumed that such an "obvious" answer could not be analytically significant. Yet my interlocutors quickly showed me that I had identified an important category not only when it came to marriage, but one that spanned the domains of biology, culture, and geography and was critical to understanding ideas of national identity.

Often translated as vein, bloodline, or links in a chain, *'irq* encompasses ideas of genealogical and cultural origins. My initial exposure to the concept came through "native"

Arab-Omanis who had never migrated away from Oman were invested in upholding their deep roots in the Omani interior. In response to my questions about marital compatibility and tribal equality, they would offer *'irq* as a counter-point—reasons why their families did not extend equality into the sphere of kinship. It took me a long time to realize that *'irq* did not merely imply genealogical and territorial roots, but that it also assumed a connection between biological substance and behavioral characteristics. That is to say that the concept of *'irq* takes for granted the idea that blood and origins affect our behavior, and that our behavior—the language we speak, the foods we eat, the way we dress, etc.,—also affects the biological substance of *'irq.* This was particularly important for "native" Arab-Omanis, who take pride in their Omani roots. In this chapter, I highlight their voices in order to explain how *'irq* challenges the national narrative of equality for all Omanis regardless of their origins.

While the significance of *'irq* became quickly apparent in my research, it took a lot longer for the importance of *wasta* to become clear. *Wasta,* or a dense network of connections, rarely came up during my interviews about marriage and nationhood, but it permeated most conversations I had about the continuity of tribes. Most people brought it up in a humorous manner—either by self-deprecatingly pointing out their own lack of *wasta*, or by highlighting someone else's privileged position with a laugh. It was only after going through my notes upon my return from the field that I realized how often *wasta* came up in my conversations with my interlocutors and I began to think more critically. In this chapter, I juxtapose *'irq* and *wasta* to show how they both speak to issues of persistent hierarchies without overtly challenging the official narrative of equality promoted by the Omani state.

'Irq and the Hidden Dimensions of Blood

I got the chance to speak informally with a member of one of the government ministries in Oman regarding my project a few months after arriving in Muscat for my fieldwork. His niece Khadija had participated in one of the early focus-group interviews I had conducted with Omani youth and had quickly become interested in my research. She offered to introduce me to her uncle because he is known to be well-versed in the history of Omani tribes and wants to impart his knowledge to future generations in order to preserve his version of the traditional Omani society. Shaykh Muhammad agreed to meet with me and graciously answered my questions while sipping Omani coffee in his government office, Khadija acting as a translator when necessary.

During the course of my interview, I asked Shaykh Muhammad, "what makes someone Omani?" His answer was short and precise: "Arab blood (*'irq Arab).*"[11] I was surprised by his candid (and potentially controversial response), especially because many of my interlocutors were those pushed to the margins of Arabness—like Omanis of Zanzibari and Balushi backgrounds—who nevertheless claim an integral place within the Omani nation. Under the Basic Law of the State, they are indeed guaranteed equal legal status:

> All Citizens are equal before the Law and share the same public rights and duties. There shall be no discrimination amongst them on the ground of gender, origin, colour, language, religion, sect, domicile, or social status.[12]

With this in mind, I pushed further: "there are people of many backgrounds in Oman, right? How do they fit into the Omani nation?" Again, he was very clear on the matter: "Yes, there are three types of foreign *'irq* in Oman—African, Indian, and Persian." He went on to explain that while

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[11] Personal interview with Mohammed, Muscat, 16 November 2015.
[12] *Article 17, Basic Law of the State of Oman*, 1996.

the non-Arab Omanis may have passports and be legally considered nationals in the modern nation-state, "native" Arab-Omanis are those with deep roots—those who can trace their genealogies back to Arab tribes anchored in the Omani interior. Therefore, according to Shaykh Muhammad, while Balushis and Zanzibaris can learn Arabic and wear the *dishdasha* (long robe worn by Omani men), they will never be "truly" Omani because their *'irq* is not Arab; their roots lie elsewhere.

The word *'irq* (عرق)—often literally translated as "blood" or "vein"—conjures images of cables linking disparate objects into one unbroken chain—continuous over time and space. In terms of genealogies, it also implies connections to a historic origin point; describing someone as having *'irq Zanjibari* implies that they are not "truly" Omani—either in terms of their lineage or their cultural upbringing *because* they have ties to a region outside Oman. For "native" Arab-Omanis (*Omani aSlee)*, for whom their roots and continuity in the Omani interior are a matter of great pride, the conflation of genealogical impurity with histories of migration serves a broader purpose: it is a way to confirm the purity of those who never left the Omani mainland and are therefore free from all stigma associated with foreign *'irq*.

Legally and religiously, however, there is no difference whether descendants from a male tribesman are born to an Arab woman or a foreigner; each child is supposed to inherit the tribal identity of the father only since a mother's contribution to the process of conception is considered negligible (Croucher 2012:69; see also Delaney 1995). The patrilineal tribal model is captured by the compound term *hasab wa nasab,* in which the latter (*nasab)* refers to a person's genealogy (Ziadeh 1957:506), and the former (*hasab)* refers to his social status (Ziadeh 1957:505, 512). The concept of *'irq* differs from patrilineal genealogies because it is not about tribal identity but rather about the connection between origins and behavior. Furthermore, it is

inherited bilaterally: the mother's *ʿirq,* along with the father's, plays a role in the physical and behavioral characteristics of her child, even if she cannot contribute to his tribal identity. In the patrilineal model, a mother's background does not make a difference, but when speaking about *ʿirq,* maternal origins do matter (Wilkinson 2015:7)—they affect not only the phenotypical features a child may inherit (i.e., skin color, hair texture, nose shape, etc.), but also behavioral characteristics. The concept of *ʿirq*, therefore, straddles the lines between physical and behavioral traits. While someone with non-Arab blood through their matriline may look and pass as Arab, the assumption is that their behavior—the way they walk, their accent when they speak, their preference for certain types of foods, etc.—will betray their secret at some point.[13] That is why *ʿirq* is also known as *ʿirq dassas,* which can be explained as the "hidden dimensions of blood."

To explain the connection between the physical transmission of *ʿirq* and the process of cultural transmission, one of my interlocutors used the following example:

> It is really important that we marry within our own *ʿirq* because you should hold on to your own traditions. In our family, we don't marry Balushis because they are from India originally.… It's not like we hate them or anything. They are our friends, we work with them, we study with them—we love them! But we don't marry them because it's about the future, you see? For example, my brother. He could meet a Balushi girl in college and say "I want to marry her" because he loves her. We can say all we want but he could marry her. But then when he has a son, and he comes to me for my daughter, I will say no. Because who is his boy going to learn from? From his *khaal* (mother's brother) who will teach him things from India—from outside our roots, and we won't know what he is getting. If we let them marry, then after one or two generations, our identity will get lost.[14]

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[13] This is similar to Lamarckian assumptions about inheritance widely accepted in the 19th and early 20th centuries (Bashkow 2016:369).

[14] Group interview with host family members during a camping trip in Bidiya Sands, al Sharqiya Province, 13 February 2016. Conducted in Arabic.

According to this interviewee, therefore, *ʿirq,* traditions, and social behavior are closely tied in the Omani context and affect marital choices. Cousin marriage is one of the cornerstones of how many Arabs have idealized the definition of clans and tribes; however, according to the example above, "mixed" children are supposed to become off-limits for marriage—even to their own cousins—because of their non-Arab *ʿirq.* They become peripheral to the family. As such, the decision to marry (and produce children) is not seen as a choice made just by two individuals but by the whole family since it has the potential to affect the collective marriage pool for future generations. Following the same logic, even if there is no intermarriage with non-Arabs, many "native" Arab-Omanis assume that living abroad permanently changes the nature of one's *ʿirq*—making someone an incompatible marriage partner.

Such blurring of the biology-culture divide could allow for a more inclusive conception of national belonging: for example, a non-Arab person, once she learns Arabic and begins to embody the proper Omani traits (assumed to be Arab), could be considered "truly" Omani since her physical make-up has been changed by her learned conduct.[15] Yet that is not the case. Non-Arab Omanis, such as the Balushis and Lawatis who speak fluent Arabic and abide by social norms are nevertheless marked as outsiders because of their non-Arab tribal names and transnational genealogies. What a cultural reading of *ʿirq* often accomplishes is rather a further tightening of social control—by "native" Arab-Omanis and often even by state policies—in an attempt to preserve a particular version of the timeless Omani heritage from the changes brought about by cultural contact.

Self-identified "native" Arab-Omanis today are not only more discerning about who they

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[15] For a seminal discussion of how kinship is constructed through both shared substances and codes of conduct, see D. Schneider, *American Kinship (*1968).

marry, they are more careful about their behavior in public. Young Arab-Omani men from well-known lineages never wear jeans or other "foreign" clothes while in Oman, instead preferring the *dishdasha* as their uniform of choice in order to mark their Omaniness. In fact, all Omani men are required to wear a particular style of *dishdasha* while attending university, and they must also wear a white *dishdasha* if they are government employees (Valeri 2013:121); non-Omanis are strictly forbidden from wearing the *dishdasha* in public. That is to say, even state policies mark the *dishdasha* as an exclusively Omani garment, but it requires all Omani men to don it—regardless of their ethnic background. Yet many non-Arab Omani men quickly change into less traditional clothes as soon as they are able, while their "native" Arab-Omani counterparts are careful to avoid anything that could imply foreignness in public. That is not to say people always conform to social rules, but that social boundaries are often crossed in private—away from watchful eyes. If someone chooses to break out of the mold publicly, however, they are often assumed to be "mixed"—whether genealogically or culturally— especially by Arab-Omanis.

In fact, for many self-described "native" Arab-Omanis, it does not matter whether someone is Arab-Zanzibari—i.e., they have adopted Swahili cultural practices but are nevertheless genealogically pure—or whether they are African-Zanzibari, i.e., they are genealogically "mixed."[16] Both categories of people are believed to have *'irq Zanjibari* and are therefore often excluded from marital considerations. In this chapter, I show how claims to Omaniness touches not only on issues of blood and endogamy, but also on religious identity, tribal homeland, and histories of migration.

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[16] Both of these are analytic categories used in this dissertation, not local ones. Labeling someone has having *'irq Zanjibari* in fact blurs any distinctions.

Wasta and Arab Privilege

As mentioned already, *'irq* spans beyond biology to include social capital through the associated category of *wasta*. When I asked one of my closest friends from Oman to translate *wasta* for me in the most literal way possible, she laughed and said "Arab privilege." I laughed along with her because that is how *wasta* is understood in Oman even if it is not a definition we could find in the dictionary. The dictionary told us it could mean medium, process, agency, and/or intermediary, but none of those words captured the web of entangled connections that *wasta* conjures up in its day-to-day use in Oman.

Months before this interaction,[17] I had asked a young man who prides himself on his strong tribal roots to explain *wasta* to me. Owais had initially been hesitant about my research, often pointing out how I was circling around very serious and potentially controversial topics that are best left to rest. *Wasta* was not one of those topics, or so I had assumed. It was jokingly peppered into many conversations as my interlocutors realized that I was asking questions about genealogy and marital alliances and speaking to families from multiple tribes. I brought up *wasta* with Owais because I wanted to show him that I was not looking for controversy, and that I wanted to learn about different aspects of Omani culture including ones that appear mundane and are often taken for granted. As soon as the question left my mouth, however, he exclaimed "Why are you writing bad things about Oman?!"

"You think *wasta* is bad? Why?!" I responded, in confusion.

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[17] Interview notes from Feb. 15, 2016.

"Well, it is all about who you know, you see? It shouldn't be that way. Like, if I apply for a job, I will get it because of who my father is, even if there is someone who is as qualified or even better than me. That's wrong—I don't like to use it."

"But you have it? *Wasta* I mean?"

"Yes. But I don't use it."

At this point, I thought he assumed I would equate *wasta* with nepotism and corruption—as too much kinship in the wrong place. So, I tried another approach: "You see, there are many critiques of the assumption that nepotism is a bad thing. It's a very particular cultural idea that says it is bad to help someone you know, that it is somehow unfair to privilege your family over a stranger. But in many parts of the world, maybe even in Oman, helping your family is the moral thing to do—it's what you should do to be a good person. That's why I didn't think *wasta* was necessarily a bad thing—because I thought it was about personal connections."

"Well, that's true," responded Owais. "If you could use *wasta* without hurting anyone else, that's fine. But like I said, whenever I use my *wasta*, it puts someone else down and it shouldn't be like that. So it *is* political, not just personal, and I do think it is bad."

"Ok, fair. When do Omanis use *wasta* most? Like, can you use it to get into SQU [Sultan Qaboos University]?"

"No no, it's not like that. Mostly you use it to get a job. Or to get things done at the ministries or whatever instead of having to wait for the bureaucratic process. It's mainly when you are working with the government that you use your *wasta*."

"Ok ok, I think I see what you're saying. So, when people hear your name, would they know that you have *wasta*?"

Yunus, another young man who had been sitting nearby listening to the whole conversation, jumped in: "Yes, you know when you hear certain tribal (*qabila*) names, you know where they are from and who they are related to. Like Owais's family is very well known, and anyone who knew that would know that he has *wasta*."

Turning back to Owais, I said, "So could people use this knowledge, like figure out your family is important and has *wasta*, and then choose to become friends with you to get more *wasta* themselves?"

Owais very pragmatically answered: "Yes, that's normal. It happens all the time. But I don't always like to tell people about my family because that changes how they act around me. I mean, it's nice to be respected, but I want them to respect me for me. I can in no way deny that who I am, how I think, my attitude — it is all because of my family. And I need to live up to them. I have to be as good as they were, you know? They were legendary!""

Yunus nodded, but went on to add "Except many people already know who your family is before you even say anything, Owais." Looking at me, he pointedly said "*that* is *wasta*."

"So, you can't really brag about having *wasta* because people already know who has it and who doesn't . . . "

"Yes, something like that," agreed both Owais and Yunus.

After this conversation, I started to think about *wasta* as the privileging certain personal relationships for results in political domains. However, it took me a lot longer to understand why some Omanis have *wasta* while others do not, since most Omanis are embedded within large families and tribes and therefore automatically have scattered kinship connections. Yet *wasta* is not merely about family ties, as I came to realize after many more months of questioning; like

ʿirq and purity, it has to do with particular histories of rootedness and political prominence. This is why my host family, who are part of the same umbrella tribe as Owais, nevertheless do not have access to the *wasta* that he so casually tries to hide. Their family's emigration history and time way from the Omani mainland makes their kinship connections suspect, and they have to work especially hard to highlight their Arab genealogy in order to overcome the aura of "foreignness." Owais, on the other hand, does not face the same issue since his ancestors are well-known because of their role as supporters of the Ibadhi Imamate; their names are associated with the Ibadhi core of Oman's geography and history, and as such, Owais benefits from his deep roots without any extra effort on his part. As Yunus said, anyone who knows about his ancestors knows the *wasta* Owais holds because of his lineage. As such, *ʿirq* and *wasta* cannot be easily disentangled; physical and/or genealogical distance away from the Ibadhi core of the nation (i.e., having "foreign" *ʿirq)* also decreases the density of the connections one needs to maintain *wasta*. As a result, *wasta,* even when it is casually mentioned and laughed about, points to the kind of "Arab privilege" my friend had mentioned—because it is mainly "native" Arab-Omanis whose families historically remained in the homeland who have access to *wasta* connections.

Containing Political Genealogies

After helping me during the meeting with her uncle, Shaykh Muhammad, Khadija invited me to dinner at her family home so she could introduce me to her parents. She wanted me to speak with them to get an understanding of how traditional marriage works in Oman. Khadija herself did not agree with her family's emphasis on purity, she nevertheless wanted me to have

the chance to speak to Omanis for whom genealogical purity and tribal compatibility are issues of utmost concern when it comes to marriage.

While her mom answered my questions regarding marital compatibility, I jotted down their genealogical maps so I could later analyze their responses for regional patterns (i.e., the interior versus the coastline). During the course of this post-dinner conversation, I came to realize that Khadija's father was actually from a tribe that had been a close ally of Imam Ghalib al-Hinai, the last Imam of Oman who was forced into exile when his troops lost to the forces of the Sultan in the 1950s. I was duly impressed by this information, as most Omanis do not speak of the Imamate willingly, and I asked them more explicitly about their knowledge of the Imamate and of their family's role in the Imamate War. Because I indicated that I already had knowledge of this period of Omani history that is usually erased from the national narrative, they opened up about their family history. I came to learn that Khadija's family had not only been allies of the Imam, but were also distantly connected to his lineage through marriage. Their genealogical association with the last Imam of Oman definitely affected how Khadija's parents approached marriage compatibility. For them, purity is a fundamental concern regarding marriage, but it is not limited only to genealogical status; rather, it must also include considerations of tribal roots, Ibadhi religious tradition, and the lack of out-migration.

Khadija's father articulated their family's position most clearly. He explained that for them, purity is not merely a matter of status but of history; he would rather his children marry into poor families with the proper roots (*'irq*) who had access to the "correct" history of Oman than allow them to marry into even the richest most prestigious families without the same background. He wants his children to be able to maintain the legacy of the Imamate, and since that can no longer be a political project, it has to be contained within the sphere of kinship

through careful attention to genealogy. Even while Omani state discourse equalizes tribal kinship by attempting to strip it of its history, Khadija's family hold tight to their family history in order to preserve the memory and legacy of another vision of the Omani nation, rooted in the values of Arab and Ibadhi purity, that was defeated but not erased by the forces of the Sultanate.

During one of my visits to their house, I sat on the floor in a pristine parlor drinking *karak* tea and trying to get Khadija and her sister Farah to speak explicitly on the topic of historical memory. I asked them how old they were when they first realized that the historical narrative they were being taught in school left out significant episodes from the nineteenth century—periods that had greatly affected their family's fortunes—financially and politically. Farah began to explain how the silencing of their family history in the public sphere went hand in hand with a renewed sense of pride in their lineage:

> We were taught by our parents NOT to speak out about our family, NOT to tell our side of the story from a very early age—from when we were around six years old I think. Probably because that's when we started going to school and meeting other people. That doesn't mean we don't know our own history and what role our ancestors played . . . but we also know how our family suffered.

At this point, Khadija interrupted her sister: "Not until we were much older though. I don't think Baba started explaining things to me until the last five years. And even then, only because I kept asking. Definitely not until 2009." Seeing my confusion, she explained that Imam Ghalib had died in exile in Saudi Arabia in 2009. Since his death, their father had become more open to talking about him because past allegiances can no longer be revived through the Imam. The possibility of a return to the intense conflicts which threatened to split the nation during the last century—a danger that the current government vigilantly guards against through its careful

silencing of divisive rhetoric and dissenting voices—further diminished following the Imam's death.

The goal of such careful control of the historical narrative is to emphasize the unity of the diverse populations of the nation under a pan-Omani national identity. Instead of learning from periods of conflict—what led to them, who were the actors involved, etc.—the whole problem is swept under the rug in order to preserve and strengthen the image of Oman as the (permanent) oasis of peace in the Middle East. This is not only supposed to strengthen national unity and pride in the Omani identity, but also to engender trust in the government. Omanis today are uncertain about what their future holds—both in terms of who will take Qaboos' place (he did not have any children and did not name an heir prior to his recent death) and whether the future leader will be able to maneuver the nation through the oil crisis.[18] Even as the future becomes more unpredictable, Omanis are encouraged to look to their "shared" airbrushed past in order to draw inspiration regarding their role in the contemporary world.

Within this context, telling the story of the last Imam of Oman and the popular support he enjoyed becomes a political act that challenges the national narrative so carefully constructed by the state to present Qaboos as the only viable ruler of Oman. As such, no mention of Imam Ghalib can be found in public forums within Oman; the memory of his rule and the ensuing conflict has been exiled along with the man himself. While this erasure fits with the larger pattern of silencing "controversial" stories in favor of presenting a united front in contemporary Omani society, it also forces families that were directly involved in the recent wars to ignore

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[18] During my fieldwork year, the price of oil fell dramatically—to less than $28 a barrel, a quarter of the expected price. For Oman, this was a huge blow since 86% of the national economy depends on petrol products. The government had to enforce strict budget cuts, hiring freezes, and salary cuts across the board in an attempt to make up some of the deficit from the falling oil prices.

their lived experiences. Instead of engendering unity and a sense of "shared" history, the silences actually heighten discrepancies in historical memory and foster differential relationships with the government amongst "native" Arab-Omani families. For many ethnic minorities, however, this silencing has opened up narrative space through which they can declare themselves part of the Omani nation.

Unlike many of their classmates, Khadija and Farah knew from a young age that the state sanctioned historical narrative they were taught in school was not "factual"; their family heritage belied the well-crafted national image presented by the textbooks. They grew up with a certain distrust of government rhetoric and a conflicted relationship with the benevolent father-figure of Sultan Qaboos. They cannot deny that the Sultan has radically changed Oman, often for the better: more people have access to education and healthcare; the government has granted equal rights to all Omanis regardless of their tribal/ethnic/religious backgrounds; the Sultan has himself spoken out about women's rights, etc. Simultaneously, however, they cannot ignore that many of Qaboos' policies were fueled by his desire to maintain power by denying traditional sources of political authority, not out of benevolent good will. His decisions have often had negative repercussions for Arab-Omani families like theirs by stripping them of political power and making them dependent on the Sultan's "benevolent protection," or face the accompanying threat of losing it if they step out of line.

In this atmosphere, marriage becomes an intensely political matter that has the potential to change the future of what the Omani nation looks like. As mentioned before, Khadija's uncle works in one of the government ministries. Despite Shaykh Muhammad's history (he was exiled by Sultan Sa'id after the defeat of Imam Ghalib), Sultan Qaboos pardoned Muhammad when he came to power in 1970. In fact, Qaboos pardoned many tribesmen who had sided against his

father during the Imamate War in an attempt to gain their allegiance and expand his base of power. Eventually, many of them were offered government jobs in order to expose them more closely to the nation-building process and its focus on equalizing existing hierarchies. It was also a way to keep close tabs on the *shaykhs* from prominent Arab-Omani lineages who might still have influence on their tribes. Strategically, hiring them into government positions was meant both to contain them within the national infrastructure so that they could not organize against the Sultan, and to convince them of the righteousness of the Sultan's vision.

However, despite years of exposure to the national narrative, Shaykh Muhammad's family background continues to play a huge role in how he makes sense of Oman's history and his vision for the nation's future. While he has to abide by the Basic Law of the State and its emphasis on equality in his professional capacity, he is free to maintain his tribal traditions within the sphere of kinship. In fact, Shaykh Muhammad welcomes this division—he agrees that genealogy, religious affiliation, and migration have nothing to do with someone's potential regarding their career; discriminating against an Omani for these reasons would in fact be "shameful" (*'ayb*). In his professional role, he embraces the values of equality. However, when it comes to marriage for his children, he believes he has every right to ask questions about matters of hierarchy and status because he is adamant that his family's history matters—that it is an integral part of the Omani story even if the Sultan is not willing to tell it. Marriage becomes the main medium through which he can circumvent state censorship and vocalize his beliefs about an alternate model of the Omani nation, rooted in the Imamate's values of Arab purity and separation from the outside world.

Wasta and the Personalization of Government Infrastructure

I kept in touch with Khadija and Farah, Shaykh Muhammad's nieces, throughout my time in Oman, and would often ask for their help understanding particularly complicated concepts. They were able to shift between multiple perspectives regarding national identity, coming from a family that deeply cherishes the importance of genealogical purity while having grown up in a multicultural Oman that publicly embraces equality for all citizens. Both sisters were in their late twenties and had studied abroad for their graduate degrees; as such, they were able to place Oman and its particular culture within a broader global context. They were also honest with me about their struggles, often laughing at the dissonance between their personal beliefs and their respect for their family's legacy. Farah, in particular, summed it up during a particularly poignant meeting when she said "if we were in Harry Potter, we'd be Slytherin—the villains of the story even though we value leadership and loyalty."

When I learned about an Omani woman named Habiba al-Hinai who was petitioning the government for the ability to pass on her citizenship to her son directly—regardless of the citizenship status of her husband—I organized a meeting with Khadija and Farah to make sense of the strong public reaction to the petition. Patrilineal citizenship laws are nothing new in the Gulf; as Khadija put it, citizenship laws in Oman follows older tribal laws of patrilineal descent—children get their identity from their father, whether it be tribal or national. In a tribal context, a child gets her identity from her father regardless of her mother's background; that is why children of Omani men born to enslaved women were nevertheless free and full members of their father's tribe. Similarly, Omani women who marry non-Omani foreigners forego the chance to have children with legal status as Omani citizens since their children obtain their rights to Omani national citizenship through their father.

Because Habiba's son is not an Omani citizen, he could not obtain a scholarship to continue his studies in Oman despite having spent his whole life there. The plight of Habiba and her son had launched a hashtag on twitter (نعم_لمنح_الجنسية_لأبناء_المواطنات#) roughly translating to "yes for granting citizenship for children of Omani women." The hashtag generated thousands of tweets from Omanis, many expressing their support for Habiba, pointing to the larger issue of the lack of gender equality under Oman's citizenship laws, while others argued that all Omanis have to abide by the law as it stands and Habiba should not be granted an exception.[19] Yet hundreds of non-Omanis are granted Omani citizenship through Royal Decree every year, as long as they meet a few basic requirements: they must be residents of Oman for at least fifteen years, be able to speak, read, and write Arabic fluently, and be in good standing with the law[20]—all requirements Habiba's son meets. Yet Habiba had chosen to publicize her situation instead of quietly following the process and asking for an exception for her son. Her public petition was a direct request to Sultan Qaboos to grant her son citizenship—in effect acknowledging his ultimate authority over the issue—and she had gathered almost a hundred signatures from Omani citizens across the country in support of her appeal.

I was curious about why Habiba's case had drawn such wide attention, and whether her background as a human rights activist (Civicus 2017) had affected public perceptions of her demands, but I was more intrigued by the petition format since that kind of collective action is rather rare in Oman. I invited Khadija and Farah for a chat because I wanted to disentangle the petition itself from the law in question, which has been in place for decades. As expected, the sisters agreed that the laws regarding citizenship in Oman are unfair to women, but they also

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[19] Al-Mukrashi, Gulf News (2016)
[20] 2014 Citizenship Law

understood why many Omanis—their uncle included—had such a negative reaction to Habiba's petition. It was not merely because she was asking for a change in the law, but that she was doing so in such a public way. As Khadija explained, "stomping your feet and digging in is not the Omani way. We work more indirectly, more politely—through personal requests and mutual reciprocity." Farah added "maybe she could have used her *wasta* connections [if she had any] to get this done for her son, but she didn't go about it the Omani way."

While Habiba al-Hinai never responded to my questions regarding her family via Twitter, most Omanis assume that she is of Zanzibari background—in part because of her physical appearance, and in part because of her actions—she has caused "trouble" in the past by airing Oman's dirty laundry regarding female genital mutilation (al-Hinai 2014) and is generally unwilling to remain quiet and accept the status quo. Instead of using her personal connections to solve her son's problem, she used online forums and social media to turn her private problem into a public social issue, alienating those in power who could have helped her. From my conversation with Khadija and Farah, it became even more clear to me that *wasta* is not only about having access to a dense web of connections, but that it works best behind closed doors— guarded carefully by those who do have *wasta*. As Owais and Yunus had explained to me before, you cannot brag about your *wasta* connections publicly—as Habiba had tried to do through her collection of signatures. Yes, she had gathered the support of a disparate group of Omanis for her cause, but she had done so in a public and confrontational way. *Wasta* is not about a show of strength, but rather an indirect call on mutual obligations based on shared history and/or genealogy. The petition did not fulfill these basic expectations regarding *wasta*; instead, it encouraged political participation by a diverse group of Omanis in a direct challenge to the status quo—something the Omani state is still not ready for or willing to accept. According to many of

my interlocutors, Omanis are taught to trust and respect their tribal and government leaders and leave decision making up to them. Specifically, Sultan Qaboos is the only one with legislative power in the Omani state; all other bodies have mere advisory power. Any challenge to an existing law can therefore be viewed as a direct challenge to Baba Qaboos's authority and a threat to his nation-building project. As such, Habiba's petition *could not* (and did not) succeed as it could set precedent for further collective action against the Sultan himself.

Where Habiba failed in accomplishing her goal of generating change through her petition, Shaykh Muhammad has succeeded in transforming the role of the government through the practice of *wasta*. In his position as a government employee, he is supposed to answer to the needs of all Omanis; yet he continues to respond more quickly to those who can call upon him through their mutual *wasta* connection. This has not put him at odds with the nation-building project however. Instead, top officials in the ministry recognized his leadership qualities and promoted him further. He has successfully gathered tribal supporters around him even in his new role as part of the modern government infrastructure, but he continues to operate along older traditions of personal connections and mutual obligations. Shaykh Muhammad has been able to do so because does not challenge the government directly; instead, he is supportive of the state's equalizing efforts in his professional capacity while also maintaining his family's privileged status informally by upholding the practice of *wasta*. As a result, his kinsmen are able to utilize his position in the government for their own benefit through their access to him, and he is further able to reify his traditional status as a tribal *shaykh* and create stronger *wasta* networks.

Hierarchical Access to Government Services

These examples—of Habiba's failure and Shaykh Muhammad's success in engaging with and molding the government infrastructure—shows how access to the Omani government still depends largely on personal connections. One of the results of this is that people who have stronger *wasta* connections with employees in the ministries often get their needs met quicker and more often than other Omanis. Because of the nature of *wasta* and how it operates in Oman—dense webs of personal connections that are rooted in physical and genealogical proximity to the Ibadhi core of the Omani homeland—it is mostly "native" Arab-Omanis who benefit from this practice as they are the ones who have the knowledge of tribal history necessary to mobilize *wasta* connections.

In other words, because knowledge of the tribal history of Oman is unevenly distributed, those invested in genealogical purity invest more time in learning and remembering tribal (*qabila)* names, roots, status, and alliances. Others—whether because their ancestors emigrated and settled abroad for generations, or because their ancestors came from "elsewhere"—do not have access to this information as it is closely guarded by the more "rooted" tribesmen to protect their own status. This is why Omanis from the same tribe might have differential access to government benefits—because of their divergent abilities to signal and access *wasta* connections. Furthermore, information regarding rank are often censored by the government in an attempt to equalize the playing field. However, instead of flattening hierarchies, government policies create further inequity by pushing genealogical information into the private sphere where only certain lineages have access to it. As a result, only some Omanis can mobilize *wasta* connections for personal benefits; others are left to find different ways to have their concerns heard.

The most striking aspect of *wasta* is that it is mainly utilized regarding interactions with the government and the public sector—where genealogy and tribal status is not supposed to matter. Yet as Owais, Yunus, and many others I interviewed made clear, *wasta* is most often used when trying to get a job, or during attempts to get the government to listen and respond to grievances. As such, despite the Omani state's attempts to equalize tribes by getting rid of hierarchies in the public sphere, it has inadvertently reified existing hierarchies by forcing critical genealogical information into the private sphere where it is available only to a few. "Native" Arab-Omani families continue to transmit their genealogical heritage to their children, along with information about past alliances and enmities between tribes. During marriage negotiations, much of this information can be weaponized against families who do not fit the criteria of "truly" Omani because of their mixed *'irq*. By doing so, Arab-Omani families, like Shaykh Muhammad's, hold on to an alternate model of the Omani nation, one anchored in the Imamate's values of Arab purity and separation from the outside world.

However, unlike *'irq,* which is mostly discussed in private, *wasta* is spoken about openly in Oman and the unequal access to these connections has become accepted and normalized as another example of Arab privilege. Even without discussing hierarchies or tribal histories publicly, *wasta* allows elite lineages and *shaykhs* to maintain their status informally without challenging the national narrative espoused by the state. As a result, ideas of *'irq*—supposedly limited to the private sphere—nevertheless play a significant role in shaping the Omani government's relationship to its citizens through the practice of *wasta*. Even though the modern Omani state has tried to move away from the Imamate's model of a hierarchical nation by creating a shared national identity for all Omanis and enforcing it through careful control over the national narrative, uneven access to tribal histories has created a system in which well-

connected tribesmen continue to enjoy greater benefits than their less connected countrymen.

Despite the best attempts of the state, traditional hierarchies continue to persist in Oman—within and beyond the private sphere of kinship.

Chapter 3

Claiming *'irq Zanjibari*:

Reframing Oman's Timeless National Identity by Embracing Transnational Histories

National Identity and Cosmopolitan Histories

While the Omani interior was the seat of the Ibadhi Imamate which attempted to maintain a deliberate separation from the outside world, the coastal areas of Oman have long been involved in transnational trade and been oriented towards the Indian Ocean maritime networks. As I have argued already, both versions of Oman′s history—the one that is focused on its Ibadhi roots and the other that emphasizes its cosmopolitan expansion—are fundamental parts of the Omani identity. Upon his sudden ascension to the throne, Sultan Qaboos has not only had to create the infrastructure for a modern nation-state, but also a shared and generic historical narrative for his diverse subjects in order to incorporate them equally into the nation-building process. For example, a presentation at state-funded National Museum of Oman states, "From antiquity, before everything we know, love, and understand came into being, a unique cultural and natural heritage emerged. Its identity is Omani.″

Within this narrative, a timeless and unchanging Omani identity is projected into the past and is seen as independent of any historical context — i.e., it could potentially include the supporters of the Ibadhi Imam as well as the Omani emigrants who travelled across the seas to expand the Omani empire. However, in addition to asserting a sense of continuity with the past,

the national narrative also erases periods of conflict and dissenting voices. As such, supporters of the Imam, like Shaykh Muhammad (from Chapter 2), do not feel represented by the current Omani national narrative as their memories of the Ibadhi Imamate are carefully silenced in the public sphere. On the flip side, even as the state-sanctioned national narrative celebrates Oman's cosmopolitan transnational history, it simultaneously elevates "Arabness" as the marker of national belonging (e.g., making Arabic the lingua franca of all school curriculums, despite the many languages spoken by Omanis). This emphasis often marginalizes Omani families with non-Arab backgrounds who do not fit the Arab tribal model, such as Balushi- and Lawati-Omanis. Yet there is one group of Omani nationals who do feel well-represented by the state's emphasis on its transnational history. For those Omanis—the back-from Africa emigrants who embrace their Zanzibari-Omani identity—who assert their Arab heritage while also affirming their transnational backgrounds, the national narrative allows them to take pride in their histories of migration while also claiming a central space in modern Oman.

This chapter revolves around three case studies of Omani families as they challenge, negotiate, and affirm ideas of "purity" and national identity through their family histories of marriage. For them, being "truly" Omani is not about rootedness in the mainland, but is rather based on bloodlines and does not need to be accompanied by a corresponding code of conduct. One of the figures in this chapter, though similarly rooted as Shaykh Muhammad from the previous chapter, nevertheless does not conflate purity with religious foundations in the nation's interior and a lack of migration. Instead, he embraces his close connection with the Royal Family to emphasize Oman's history of travel and transnational contact. Unlike the "native" Arab-Omanis discussed earlier, he is not invested in the Imamate's values of containment and isolation; however, he does continue to emphasize his family's Arab purity. For the remaining

families, they take pride in their transnational heritage by unapologetically asserting themselves as both Arab *and* African. As such, even as they claim belonging in the Omani nation, they challenge the assumption of an unchanging timeless identity by embracing their *ʿirq Zanjibari*. Taken together, these examples show how many Omanis claim both Arab genealogical purity and belonging without accepting the Imamate′s vision of rootedness and separation; moreover, they reject the idea ″blood″ defines ones cultural and behavioral characteristics—that is, having ″foreign″ *ʿirq* automatically makes their behavior un-Arab and therefore un-Omani. Instead, the Omani voices highlighted in this chapter embrace the vision of expansion and contact practiced by the coastal Sultanate for centuries, and expand what it means to be both Arab and Omani.

"Purity" and Transnational Expansion

I interviewed Sama, a busy professional who made time for me in between her business meetings and we met at a popular restaurant near her work. She was one of the few people who agreed to talk to me based solely on the topic of my research, not because we had previously met and formed a personal connection. Even before meeting her, I knew from her last name that she came from a powerful ″native″ Arab-Omani tribe affiliated with the Royal Family. As such, I expected that she would find my questions insensitive at best, offensive at worst. After all, it had taken me weeks to broach the difficult questions regarding hierarchy and purity with Khadija and Farah, and even longer for them to move beyond vague generic answers to concrete personal details. But to my surprise, Sama was refreshingly direct in her responses. She seemed neither surprised nor offended by my questions, and she easily peppered her answers with personal

anecdotes. In fact, for the sake of "research," she was quite open about the controversy her marriage to a man with *'irq Zanjibari* had engendered within her family.

Sama met her husband, Munir, through her job; they worked together on a project for almost a year. During this time, he let her know he was interested in her. Although she was attracted to him, she knew that his Zanzibari background would be a problem for her family so she turned down his advances. He accepted her decision and maintained a strictly professional relationship henceforward. After their project ended, Sama switched jobs and they no longer saw each other. Nine months later, they ran into each other at a petrol station; this time, Sama gave him her number because she had been thinking about him for the last few months—about the respect he had shown her as a colleague. Upon seeing him, she decided to give him a chance and risk going against her family's wishes to pursue her own happiness. She quickly realized that Munir was the kind of man she wanted to marry: he was open-minded, supportive, and did not mind that she was more successful than him in her career. They dated for a few months and Munir proposed to her in March. Sama says she was completely taken aback; she had not realized that he would want to move things along so quickly. But at this point, she no longer had the option of hiding their relationship from her family. So, she sat her mother down and told her about Munir's proposal. Sama's mother already knew about his family—they are well-known in their own right for their tribe's history of migration and strong connections to Zanzibar. As such, her mother immediately said "no" to the match. In fact, she refused to even notify Sama's father about the proposal, saying, "if you want this to happen, *you* have to tell your father and brothers; I will play no part in this."

Sama was upset by her mother's attitude, but she knew that Munir was the right man for her so she gathered up her courage and went to her father to explain the situation. She was

completely taken aback by his reaction. Sama's father was happy to hear about Munir's proposal;

he knew the family, knew that they were well-known and well-respected despite their Zanzibari

background, and unlike Sama's mother, he did not immediately disregard the proposal. He

agreed to look into Munir's genealogical background before making up his mind. By April,

Munir had sent the names of seven generations of his ancestors to Sama's father in order to

verify his lineage. They soon found out that although Munir's family had lived in Zanzibar for

generations, returning only after the Revolution in 1964, they had nevertheless maintained

genealogical purity: they had married only Arab women, either from the Omani mainland or

from other Arab-Omani families in East Africa. Therefore, although he may speak Swahili, eat

different foods, and live a different lifestyle than Sama's more "rooted" family, he is nevertheless

genealogically "pure." Her father was satisfied with this information and approved of the match.

Her brothers, however, remained unconvinced. In the end, Sama made them go and meet Munir;

he, in turn, gave them the phone number of the *shaykh* (leader) of his tribe. Only after they had

talked to the *shaykh* and had verified Munir's lineage in person did her brothers accept the union.

In May, Munir came to Sama's house with 50 men from his family and they were officially

engaged. They were married that November.

Even though they have been married for a couple of years, Sama and Munir have not

resolved all the miscommunications between the two families. Despite coming from a pure

genealogy, Munir's family is proudly Zanzibari; they do not hide their African upbringing but

rather flaunt it as a sign of their cosmopolitan open-mindedness. Sama's family, as mentioned

before, is strictly Arab. Munir speaks Swahili, English, and Arabic, as does his father; his mother

speaks Swahili fluently and some English, whereas Sama's parents only speak Arabic. As such,

communication between the two mothers-in-law, in particular, remains limited, increasing the

chances of further misunderstanding. However, Sama is learning Swahili in order to better communicate with her in-laws and learn their traditions. She still deals with snide remarks from her own extended family about Munir's Zanzibari background, but she is learning to better navigate their "mixed" marriage.

To an extent, Munir is able to take pride in his African heritage *because* of his genealogical purity; after all, he was able to marry into one of the most prominent Arab tribes in Oman regardless of his mixed cultural upbringing solely due to his pure Arab lineage. Nevertheless, the disagreement within each family regarding their marriage points to vastly different understandings of what it means to be "Omani" today.

For Sama's family, like Khadija's, to be Omani is to be Arab and free from "foreign" influences—both biological and cultural. In fact, most of them view the Omani identity as being anchored not only in Arab bloodlines and its associated cultural qualities (such as Arabic language), but also within the Omani territory; as such, even those who maintained genealogical purity but left the Omani mainland are seen as suspect in their claims to "Omaniness." Qualities associated with blood—that is to say *'irq,* is therefore assumed to also be territorially grounded. This is why Sama's mother rejected Munir's proposal even before checking his background; she assumed that his behavior—the language he speaks, the foods he eats, the way he dresses, etc.— gives a clear indication of his lack of Arab purity. Because he allowed so much "foreign" influence to affect his social conduct, Sama's mother assumed that his *'irq* had been permanently changed. Even after Munir's tribal *shaykh* had verified his pure bloodline, she remained hesitant about letting her daughter marry into such a "mixed" family. She worried that her grandchildren would be seen as less Arab because they will grow up speaking Swahili, which will cause them

to speak Arabic with an accent.[21] This, in turn, would affect their chances of marrying a "native" Arab-Omani spouse in the future. Only after meeting Munir in person and realizing that he speaks Arabic fluently were some of her fears laid to rest. Nevertheless, she did not attend her daughter's wedding, but has since built a stronger relationship with her son-in-law.

Sama's father, unlike the rest of her family, focused more on the biological interpretation of *'irq*. Munir comes from a pure Arab lineage; his immediate ancestors—at far back as at least seven generations—did not marry any "foreign" women. Based on his official genealogy, he is fully Arab—and therefore "truly" Omani—a worthy partner for his daughter. When I asked Sama whether she thinks he would have been similarly lenient if Munir was biologically "mixed" but acted more Arab, she said no. It did not matter to Sama's father that Munir's family do not perform Arabness; it only mattered that they *are* Arab—that is, have "Arab blood." Their "foreign" cultural traditions cannot override their Arab blood, whereas no amount of Arab culture can make up for one's "mixed" genealogy.

Munir's family did not accept his union with Sama without reservations either. His mother, in particular, was concerned about him marrying into a family that they consider narrow-minded in their pursuit of "purity." She recognized that for families like Sama's, being Omani requires the absence of foreign influences, and she feared that they would look down on her family because of their transnational heritage. For Munir's family, however, their Zanzibari background does not make them any less Omani; in fact, they are proud that their ancestors moved to Zanzibar with Sultan Sa'id. Within the family narrative—which mirrors the national narrative portrayed in the National Museum—it was an act of loyalty to follow the Sultan to an

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[21] This is a *very* common misconception in Oman—that speaking a foreign language, particularly Swahili, somehow impedes one's fluency in Arabic (see al-Kharusi 2013). The same is not assumed regarding English; most Omani parents want their children to learn English nowadays.

unknown land to help him establish and expand Omani control in East Africa. Their efforts to colonize Zanzibar helped the Omani Empire flourish throughout the Swahili coast, and upon their return to Oman, they used the knowledge they had gained while abroad to establish the modern bureaucratic system that the nation relies on today. For them, Zanzibar is part and parcel of their Omani identity: without Zanzibar, there is no modern Oman.

"My Ancestors were Brave"

During my time in Oman, I met many families like Munir's who take pride in their transnational Zanzibari heritage. Often, they were the easiest group to approach because they, like me, were more comfortable speaking in English than in Arabic. When I met Zainab, the mother-in-law of one of my closest friends in Oman, she addressed me entirely in English as she spoke to me about her family's story of migration because she knew I was interested in Oman's historic connections with East Africa. As she shared her story, her grandchildren slowly gathered around her. Ranging in age from eight to twenty, they were all eager to hear her recount her days in Kenya. It was clear they all knew the stories already; they kept reminding her of tidbits she had left out, yet they stayed. As the afternoon wore on, it was clear that they were as invested in her story as she was.

Zainab's story began with the marriage of her parents: "My father's mother was an Arab from Zanzibar, and she married my grandfather from Kenya. They didn't want to marry Africans so they married within the family."[22] She was born in Kenya in the 1930s to prosperous third-generation Arab immigrants from Oman, and grew up in the bustling city of Mombasa. She

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[22] Personal interview with Zainab, 17 March 2016. Conducted in English.

attended a Kenyan public school where she learned both English and Swahili. According to

Zainab, the only Arab children in the school were Omani: "The problem with Omanis is that

wherever they went, they began speaking whatever language was there." To this day, Zainab

speaks Arabic haltingly while her English and her Swahili are impeccable. Describing her

childhood, Zainab explained:

> I had a mixed group of friends—Africans, Arabs, and Asians—because I
> was in the Girl Guide.[23] But I preferred to move with the Africans, not the
> Asians; they [the Asians] spoke their own language to each other and I
> didn't understand them. And so, I created a lot of confusion for people: I
> have straight hair, but I'm fluent in Swahili and I run with the Africans.
> So, people would ask me, "who are you?" and I would say, "I'm Arab."

Zainab made clear that for her, being Arab was never about language, or skin color (she

mentioned dark skinned Arab friends), or what she ate or what country she lived in. Instead, it all

came down to tribal genealogy—she was Arab because her parents were Arab. Growing up, she

was not taught that she was Omani: "I knew I was Arab, but I didn't know there were different

kinds of Arabs."

Zainab met her husband, also a child of Arab-Zanzibari parents, following the Revolution

in Zanzibar in 1964. His family had owned clove plantations on the main island of Unguja and

were imprisoned during the Revolution. He managed to flee Zanzibar and took refuge with

Zainab's family in Mombasa. Three months later, they were married *in absentia* as he had

already left Africa and returned to the Arabian Peninsula to avoid arrest by the Zanzibari

authorities in power at the time. In 1966, Zainab followed her husband to Jeddah, Saudi Arabia;

he had been unable to enter Oman after his escape from Kenya as he did not have an Omani

passport. Moreover, his tribe had participated in the recent Imamate War against Sultan Sa'id in

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[23] Alternative name for Girl Scouts.

the 1950s, and men from his family were considered *personae non-grata* in Oman. As such, he chose not to face the possibility of arrest and settled in Saudi Arabia. For Zainab, it did not matter which Arab country they lived in; she had no specific attachment to Oman, and she only had vague ideas about an "Arab world" and her place in it.[24]

Despite her initial apathy, a few years into her stay in Saudi Arabia, Zainab was no longer satisfied with her quality of life. For the first time, she began to recognize the disparities in how her "Omani" children were treated as opposed to how "Saudi" children were treated. She was hired to tutor the children of the royal family in English, but her own children could not attend public schools or participate in the Boy Scouts because "we were Arab but not Saudi." The politics of nationalism fragmented the vague notion of Arab unity she had grown up with. She began to urge her husband to move to Oman despite the associated risks. He kept resisting, telling her, "you will not like Oman—there are no houses and you are afraid of scorpions." But in 1977, Zainab traveled to Muscat alone to see whether such a move was feasible because she had become so frustrated by the limitations her family faced in Saudi Arabia. By then, Sultan Qaboos had overthrown his father and granted amnesty to most families involved in the Imamate War—*if* they backed his new government. The economy was slowly growing, with more houses being built in Muscat. Ultimately, Zainab decided it was worth risking "scorpion bites" to return to Oman because "I was aiming for my kids to be fully accepted in society." Both she and her husband received Omani passports and moved to Oman in 1979. She became an English teacher, and was eventually promoted to the post of school inspector.

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[24] Zainab used the phrase "Arab world" to describe her mental image of Oman and the rest of the Gulf before leaving Kenya.

Today, Zainab takes pride in her contributions to the Omani state′s nascent education system, and her children and grandchildren have strong patriotic connections to Oman specifically. Nevertheless, Zainab has not given her up Kenyan culture—she still speaks Swahili with her children, and continues to call Kenya "my country." Even her grandchildren can understand some Swahili and they enjoy the foods their grandmother grew up with and continues to cook for them. They know about her childhood in Mombasa and her struggles to settle in Muscat; it makes them more grateful for their fluency in Arabic and their place in Omani society. Yet despite their strong sense of Omani identity, Zainab′s grandsons are teased by other boys in school with the insult "son of *mandazi*"[25] because of their family′s connection with East Africa. Instead of rejecting this label, however, Zainab has taught them to respond to their tormentors by highlighting their African heritage:

> I told them to say, "My ancestors were brave—they went all the way to
> Zanzibar and learned a new language and ate different foods. Your family,
> you never went anywhere so you only know dates!"

Although Zainab could have focused on their pure tribal genealogy to help her grandsons challenge the bullies, she instead taught them to take pride in his African heritage. In fact, throughout our conversation, Zainab maintained what appeared to be a paradoxical view of her family′s status in Oman. On the one hand, she defended her family history by explaining that not all Arab-Omani emigrants to Africa had intermarried despite what "native" Arab-Omanis assume—emphasizing her genealogical purity:

> Omanis [who never went to Africa] are fed with these ideas that "*those* are
> Zanzibaris"—like *they* marry just anyone. They [Arab-Omanis] don't
> know that some of us were really strict about the rules of the Arabs. We
> married within the family.

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[25] An East African dessert of fried dough often sprinkled with sugar.

On the other hand, she simultaneously argued that her African cultural heritage did not make her any less Arab, and therefore less Omani, than those who never left the mainland. In fact, she explained more than once how her African upbringing had allowed her to fully participate in the Omani nation-building process, earning her a greater claim to Oman than others. Upon closer look, however, it becomes clear that these two views are intrinsically connected: Zainab's family did emphasize the genealogical principle, because as long as they maintained the purity of their blood, they had the freedom to embrace other African traits without having their Arabness questioned. Instead of seeing her Kenyan background as a deficiency in her Arab status, Zainab sees it as added worth because her cosmopolitan upbringing broadened her horizons. The skills and insights she gained in Kenya allowed her to make significant contributions to the budding Omani education system upon her return. Zainab believes she has a deeper claim to the Omani nation *because* of her mixed cultural heritage—she was able to use her Kenyan background to help build the modern structure of the Omani state.

Patrilineal Genealogies and Passports

Samra is a petite middle-aged woman[26] with dark skin whom I met through her son. During my time with him, Lateef always took pride in his family's cosmopolitan history while simultaneously claiming a singular Arab identity. As such, I was surprised when Samra began her life-story by describing her "mixed" genealogy and highlighting her international childhood in Tanzania. She explained that her father was "pure Arab" and her mother was "pure African," but that they were both born in Tanzania. They got married and had four children in Dar es Salaam.

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[26] Personal interview with Samra, 8 April 2016. Conducted in English.

In 1981, Samra's father decided to return to Oman after Sultan Qaboos asked Omanis in Africa to "return home" and help build the infrastructure necessary for the smooth operation of the modern nation-state. Samra, already in her twenties at the time, decided to join her father in answering the Sultan's call. Her mother stayed behind in Tanzania with some of her siblings. Samra's description of the transition is both humorous and poignant:

> Let me tell you something, all people who live in other countries, they speak their own languages and try to hold on to it. Except Omanis. I can't say all Arabs because the Yemenis in Tanzania spoke Arabic, but not the Omanis. So we didn't know any Arabic—only one of our aunties spoke it. The day before we left, we went to her and asked "How do you say tea? How do you say water?" Like that.

To put another way, the Omanis she knew in Tanzania had integrated into the local community to such an extent that they did not continue speaking Arabic. This allowed families like Samra's to prosper within the local community, but the lack of Arabic fluency was a huge cause for social anxiety upon her return to Oman. However, it turns out Samra's worries came to naught:

> One week after we came here, I … interviewed at a bank, in English. Three days later, they offered me the job … [The day I started my job], I entered the building feeling like a wet chicken—I was so scared someone would speak to me in Arabic! But instead, I met lots of people who spoke Swahili! They saw my afro hair and my short skirt and they were like, "Oh! You're a new girl!" in Swahili. … Now, where I work, most of the people in my department are women from Zanzibar who also speak Swahili, so I feel at home. We eat *mandazi* and speak Swahili in the office, as if we are still in Africa!"

At this point in Samra's narrative, Oman transformed from an intimidating unknown space to "home"—a place where she could be fully herself without downplaying either the Arab or African parts of her identity. She was relieved because she met others with similar African backgrounds and realized that they could be Omani without facing the social pressure to perform a particular version of Arabness.

Remembering Zainab's story, I asked Samra if she had grown up knowing she was Arab or if her mixed heritage had created any confusion for her in terms of where she belonged—i.e., whether she identified more with Tanzania than with Oman, a place she had never seen. Her response was very clear: even though they did not speak Arabic, even though they had never been to Oman, they had never doubted that they were Omani. Because their family in Tanzania had maintained close contact with relatives in Oman by exchanging taped cassettes, Oman was a large part of her mental landscape growing up—albeit in the abstract. They lived in what sounds like an Omani enclave: "an Omani village in the middle of Dar [es Salaam] where everyone was like one family"—but they continued to speak Swahili. Most importantly, she and her siblings knew their father had an Omani passport and that his children's names were listed in it. For Samra, belonging is not about feeling rooted in Oman but about having the documents to prove her claim. For her, Omaniness is not about blood and/or genealogy but about official status authenticated by state documents. Therefore, with a passport in her possession, Samra believes she can eat all the *mandazi* she wants and speak Swahili to her heart's content; in her view, these acts cannot make her any less Omani. In fact, like Munir, she argued that Africa is part and parcel of the Omani identity, and that denying her family's connections to East Africa would be like denying an integral part of the Omani national history.

Arab <u>and</u> African: Not Mutually Exclusive

Despite sharing and embracing the Zanzibari-Omani label, the three figures described above have very different backgrounds: Zainab and Munir can boast a pure Arab genealogy while Samra takes pride in her "mixed" family tree. She could have utilized the patrilineal tribal

discourse to argue that her mother's background does not matter—she is Arab because her father was. After all, for the purposes of the state, citizenship is determined through the patriline. As such, Munir's, Zainab's, and Samra's claims to citizenship are authenticated through their genealogies. In order to assert their Omani nationality, all three emphasize their Arab patriline; however, none do so at the exclusion of their African heritage. Instead, Samra carefully traces her mother's African lineage, preserving the names of each of her grandparents' tribes from the Congo. By doing so, she implies that one does not need a pure genealogy in order to be Arab. By specifically highlighting how they were able to contribute to the Omani nation-building project *because* of their African backgrounds, Munir, Zainab, and Samra all challenge the idea of an unchanging Omani identity free of "foreign" influences.

Theirs is not a simple claim of superiority. While legally all Omanis are considered equal—regardless of ethnic or socioeconomic background—stereotypes exist that make it difficult for those with African *'irq* to be fully integrated into the Omani nation, particularly when it comes to marriage. Whether due to fears of "mixed" blood, foreign traditions, or un-Arab-Omani habitus, many "native" Arab-Omanis—like Sama's mother—do not allow their children to marry into Zanzibari-Omani families regardless of the purity of their genealogies (Valeri 2007:488-490). Unlike Munir, Zainab's children have not married into Arab-Omani families; even though their genealogies could have allowed them to enter into "native" Arab-Omani families, they have all chosen to marry other Zanzibari-Omanis who similarly embrace their transnational heritage. According to one of Zainab's daughters, she could not bear to be seen as lesser by Omani-Omanis because of the same family history she takes so much pride in and wants to pass on to her children. Samra, however, was unable to marry into Arab-Omani families, even those with

histories of migration like Zainab's and Munir's; instead, she married others like herself who were biologically mixed.

In such a cultural context, Munir's, Zainab's, and especially Samra's assertion of their Arab identity is an act of resistance against the narrative of "purity" while recognizing that their childhood in Africa has left resilient impressions—i.e., their job skills, their fluency in Swahili, their taste for African foods such as beans (*maharagi)*, spinach (*mboga*), and fried dough (*mandazi*). Instead of feeling threatened by these apparent deviations from the Omani ideal, Munir, Zainab, and Samra use their experiences to redefine what it means not only to be "truly" Omani but even to be Arab. They use their family history to show how the Omani identity does not require a uniform performance of Arabness; rather, one can be both Arab *and* African because of the interconnected histories of these regions. Yes, they may be looked down upon because of their accents and their embrace of "elsewhere," but they know that there would be no contemporary Oman without the contributions of Zanzibari-Omanis who returned from Africa to build the infrastructure of the modern state.

In many ways, Sultan Qaboos's vision for Oman has privileged back-from-Africa Zanzibari-Omanis; soon after he came to power, he asked them, in particular, to return "home" to help him build a new nation together because, unlike their more rooted counterparts, they had acquired the skills necessary to do so. Many Zanzibari-Omani returnees were educated in English and were trained in technical fields because of their time in British-dominated East Africa. Furthermore, most of them had not been part of the Imamate War on behalf of the Imam or in support of Qaboos's father. They were a neutral group whose support could provide political legitimacy to Qaboos's new regime. Therefore, even as Zanzibari-Omanis relied on the Sultan for shelter after their exile following pan-African uprising, Qaboos relied on their

allegiance to bolster his rule—it was a mutually beneficial relationship. Even today, Zanzibari-

Omanis make up large portions of the government institutions necessary for a prosperous Oman

(Valeri 2007:486).

Yet the vision Zanzibari-Omani returnees like Munir, Zainab, and Samra articulate for the

Omani nation goes beyond their gratitude for the newest Sultan; it harkens back to a longer

paradox in Omani history. It touches on the duality of the Omani identity that has existed for

centuries: the isolated, self-contained Imamate in the interior, anchoring the Ibadhi identity, and

the expansive cosmopolitan coastal communities, tasked by the Sultans to expand Oman′s

frontiers. Even though back-from-Africa returnees may not have directly participated in the

Imamate War, their family histories and their current place in Omani society supports the

Sultanate′s vision of Oman as an expansive maritime power in the region and challenges the

Imamate′s focus on containment. As Munir passionately explained to me:

> Whoever denies that Omanis went there [to Africa] and came back, you′re
> denying part of your Omani history. Our heritage includes sailing, trading,
> traveling. You should accept it—because otherwise you′re the one who is
> *really* not Omani. What makes us *truly* Omani is our acceptance of others. I
> am proud of this.… The strictness regarding marriage, it has to be a recent
> mentality otherwise Omani men would never have married African or Indian
> women.… Today, we are too focused on containing our culture—on making
> sure everything is ″pure″ … but we need to do what our ancestors did—we
> need to take our culture and spread it.

To an extent, Munir′s logic is similar to Sama′s father′s: he is confident that his African ʿirq does

not take away from his Omani identity. However, for him (unlike Zainab), his Omani identity is

not rooted in the ″purity″ of his genealogy but in the political contributions he and his family

have made to the nation/empire, contributions anchored in travel and cultural contact.[27] For him,

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[27] His focus on "contact" obfuscates the colonial policies practiced by the Omani government in Zanzibar and the East African coast, often at great cost to the local populations.

it is not merely his Arab lineage but his family's willingness to brave the unknown and expand the empire that makes him the true inheritor of Oman's legacy. According to his logic, he would have been equally Omani even if his ancestors had married non-Arab women (like Samra's family), as long as they actively participated in Oman's historic empire-making and its contemporary nation-building process.

Wasta vs. Swahili Solidarity in the Future

What Munir fails to articulate is that without the privilege of his impeccable genealogy, he would not have been able to marry Sama. Because of his family's careful attention to genealogy, he, like Zainab, can benefit from the best of both visions—they can boast genealogical purity that anchors them to the Arab homeland while also embracing their transnational histories. For Munir in particular, his genealogy along with his family's continued connection with their tribal *shaykh* allowed him to draw on the *wasta* connections necessary to convince Sama's family of his equal worth. Her brothers only accepted Munir's proposal after the *shaykh* vouched for his family. Zainab's family, despite their emphasis on following "the rules of Arabs" when it comes to marriage, have not maintained similar ties to their tribal *shaykh*. They no longer own a home in their ancestral village and therefore do not spend much time with their kinsmen in their tribal homeland. There is no *shaykh* who knows them well enough to speak for them, yet that has not stopped Zainab or her children from succeeding professionally. Zainab's experience in teaching English allowed her to become an important part of the emerging education sector in Oman without drawing on any *wasta* connections, while her children have benefited from their early access to quality education through their mother. All of

them are all successful in their own fields today, having had a head start over their Arab-Omani peers.

Unlike Zainab, Samra's family have maintained contact with her Arab-Omani kin, but because of her features, it is clear that her family is "mixed" — not just culturally but also biologically. As she herself mentioned, that meant that her marriage pool was smaller in that she could only marry others who were similarly mixed, regardless of what her tribal *shaykh* may say on her behalf. Yet this marginalization from the Arab tribal center has not affected Samra's public life in a negative way. Even when denied access to *wasta* because of her "foreign" *'irq*, despite maintaining close ties to her tribe, Samra has been able to secure jobs throughout her career in Oman because of the skills she had acquired in Tanzania and her Swahili connections.

Nafla al-Kharusi, a professor of English at the Sultan Qaboos University in Oman, describes how speaking Swahili has created a sense of shared solidarity within back-from-Africa returnees despite their genealogical status (al-Kharusi 2013). Whether or not they invested in genealogical purity, Zanzibari-Omanis are often labeled as "outsiders" because of their "foreign" *'irq* by their more rooted countrymen. In the face of such derision, many of them turned to each other and created alternative networks for support. These informal networks also allowed newcomers like Samra access to jobs and benefits despite not having any *wasta* due to their long absence from the Omani mainland (Valeri 2007:494). Many Zanzibari-Omanis continue to actively maintain these informal networks even after decades of residence in Oman: while spending time with Samra, I attended many a women's Qur'an study where the entire meeting was conducted in Swahili. These alternate and continuing forms of solidarity are based not on tribal belonging or genealogical purity, but on shared experience—experience derived from an extended period of time in East Africa, from fluency in Swahili, and from a degree of

marginalization from the Arab tribal center. These solidarity networks have allowed Zanzibari-Omanis to support and uplift one another, much to the chagrin of their Arab-Omani counterparts.

According to Munir, much of the anger and derision Zanzibari-Omanis faced upon returning to Oman following the ascension of Sultan Qaboos in 1970 has faded over the last two decades. He claims that initially, Arab-Omanis were jealous of the "foreigners" who came and took over lucrative government jobs despite not having any *wasta* or any tribal roots. Nevertheless, they could not compete with the Zanzibaris because they had not had the same access to education and professional training. Education was severely restricted in the Omani mainland under the rule of Sultan Sa'id: there were only three boy's schools throughout Oman and no schools for girls. Most Omani men received only basic education in Qur'anic schools in order to be able to read the Holy Book; most women were illiterate. As such, the task of modern nation-building fell on the shoulders of the Zanzibari-Omani returnees. However, because of Sultan Qaboos's emphasis on universal education since the 1970s, Arab-Omanis today have caught up to Zanzibari-Omanis in terms of education, and at least according to Munir, the hostility they felt for his people have subsided.

While Munir sees this as a positive step, it begs the question of how descendants of Zanzibari-Omanis will continue to claim a central place in the Omani nation without having any specialized skills to contribute to the nation-building process. So far, Munir, Zainab, and Samra have all located their claim to Omaniness in their families' and their own personal contributions to the state-making process in addition to their genealogical ties to Oman. But as we have seen already, Munir's genealogical purity and his family's continued contact with their tribal leaders have mitigated some of the difficult aspects of "returning" to the Omani homeland after a prolonged absence. Zainab's and Samra's families, however, were unable to count on similar

tribal support and have instead relied on their ability to contribute to the contemporary nation-building process and their Swahili solidarity networks to claim space in the Omani nation. As their children complete their education in the new Oman and gain fluency in Arabic while losing much of their Swahili (al-Kharusi 2013:426), how will they maintain such solidarity networks? How will they defend their Omani identity—especially when their tribal roots are questioned?

Chapter 4

Cosmopolitan Histories and Hidden Hierarchies:

The Role of Class in Crafting the Zanzibari-Omani Identity

Class and the Expansion of the Omani Empire

Much of the academic rhetoric surrounding Zanzibari-Omanis focuses on their specialized skills, acquired during their time in Africa, and how that has allowed them to contribute to the nation-building process in contemporary Oman (al-Kharusi 2013; al-Rasheed 2005; Valeri 2007, 2013). Unfortunately, this narrative erases the experiences of many back-from-Africa Omanis who returned as unskilled laborers and do their utmost to distance themselves from the Zanzibari label. In this chapter, I investigate Oman's entangled history with the East African coast through the lens of territorial growth, kinship, and class. Instead of looking at all Omani migrants as equal partners in Oman's overseas expansion, however, I focus on the differences within the emigration experience of several Omani groups based on their reasons for leaving the Omani mainland as well as their timing. By focusing on different migration histories and their effects on subsequent marriage patterns, I show how such variations led to the emergence and solidification of class hierarchies within Omani groups in Africa, differences that continued to influence their relationship with the nation-building project upon their return to the mainland.

Despite the equalizing rhetoric espoused by the state, tacit racial and class hierarchies continue to affect not only how Omani nationals with East African heritage relate to their government, but also to their own family histories and even to each other. This chapter highlights tensions within the different communities that are frequently lumped together under the label "Zanzibari-Omanis" or "back-from-Africa returnees" (Valeri 2007:481), stress points that often surface during the marriage process. Their conflicting views regarding their East African heritage show us the fractures within Zanzibari-Omani communities in the face of the contemporary state's attempts to homogenize Oman's history through the rhetoric of equality.

Pure Bloodlines and Modern Love

In the middle of one of my interviews with Badriya, her husband Salem entered the upscale coffee shop we were in, scanned the room for his wife and walked over. What happened next was unexpected: Badriya got up as Salem came closer and the two hugged in public. I wrote down my surprise in my field-notes, stating how it was the first time I had seen a traditional Omani couple touch outside the privacy of their home and how pleasantly jarring it was. After Salem left, I laughed and told my friend about my observation and teased her about her doting husband. She, however, did not laugh; instead, she sighed and said "he was so much more affectionate when we were in Australia. That's where we met, you know?"

Badriya went on to describe how she had met Salem through an Omani intramural group in Australia that gathered occasionally to play volleyball. He was in charge of organizing the men's games while she was in charge of organizing games for the women. A few months after their initial meeting, Salem approached her and asked if they could "halal date" – i.e., talk on the

phone, go out to eat, watch movies, hold hands, etc. However, he also made it clear that if she

said yes, he would ask for her older brother's permission as her legal guardian to court her for

marriage.[28] Badriya says she was stunned; she respected that he asked for her permission directly

but she did not feel ready to give up her single life. She wanted to have fun while she was abroad

without constantly having to worry about her family's reputation. Yet she could not entirely

reject Salem's offer; she was impressed by his good looks, obvious intelligence, and his

treatment of the women in the intramural group—unlike many of the men she knew who had

grown up in segregated spaces, he neither ignored them nor sexualized them. So, she prayed to

Allah for guidance, and a few days later, agreed to accept Salem's offer. During their remaining

time in Australia, Badriya and Salem became inseparable. He was affectionate, attentive, and he

made her laugh. When he officially asked her to marry him, Badriya said yes without hesitation.

She thought she had found her happily-ever-after, but it was not to be so easy: "You see—we

only knew each other in Australia. We never got to spend any time together in Oman, so it was

like starting all over after our wedding. It felt like I didn't know him at all."

      Badriya is an independent young woman in her early-30s, a graduate of some of the top

universities in the world, and a rising star in the emerging environmental sector in Muscat. Even

though she is from a traditional tribe, Badriya's upbringing did not emphasize the conservative

mores of Oman's tribal society. Her father died when she was still a toddler, and her mother

never remarried. Her family's situation forced them to embrace her mother's Zanzibari heritage,

especially in terms of being more open-minded about women studying and working in public.

Without her father in the picture, Badriya's mother had to find work to support her young family;

Mama Maitha's schooling in Zanzibar had prepared her to enter the growing bureaucracy in

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[28] Badriya's father died when she was still a child.

Oman upon her husband's passing. Growing up with such a strong female role model has shaped how Badriya relates to her maternal heritage: she does not hide the fact that her mother's family had lived in Africa (and benefited from it). She also recognizes that she phenotypically passes as "native" Arab, which along with the added privilege of having her father's tribal name, protects her from many of the indignities that back-from-Africa returnees often face regarding their "foreign" heritage. Nevertheless, Badriya tries to embrace her Omani traditions without letting go of her Zanzibari heritage, which she credits with giving her the confidence and freedom to study and work as she chooses. Her leadership qualities, strength of character, and sharp intellect were obvious to me during our first conversation together, as they were obvious to Salem when he met her in Australia: "He says he chose me because he was impressed by my passion and my desire to make a change—because he saw me as a leader."

While preparing for the wedding almost nine years ago, however, Badriya began to realize how little she knew about Salem's background. She had never asked him about his tribal genealogy or his family history—because those concerns were not important to her. Yet issues of "purity" and "tradition" kept coming up as the two tried to envision a life together after the wedding. Despite seeing her as a leader, Salem found it difficult to accept the fact that she would work in a mixed gender setting—because "respectable" women in his family had never done so.[29] Moreover, he would get deeply upset if she claimed her Zanzibari heritage in front of his friends and family, telling her that she was "native" Arab as there were no foreigners within seven generations of her lineage. He meant it as a compliment, but to Badriya it was an erasure of the years her mother's family had spent in Africa and a heritage she takes pride in. Ultimately, she

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[29] Omani society has changed and "respectability" has changed with it. Many Omani women—even those from conservative Arab tribal families—do continue on to graduate studies and work in mixed settings. Almost a decade after his marriage, all of Salem's five sisters work and are hugely successful in their careers today.

realized that, although she had fallen in love with him because of his personality, Salem had carefully selected her, in addition to her other qualities, because her tribal background made her a compatible marriage partner. In fact, they come from different branches of the same tribe, so not only was it easy for Salem to verify the purity of her genealogy—something his family takes very seriously—but it also created an immediate sense of shared history for him. Even though Salem courted Badriya far from the Omani heartland, his actions did not breach the country's social customs but rather followed the well-established traditions of tribal endogamy. Badriya does not question that Salem loves her today, but she has come to realize that he would never have approached her initially if not for her last name, her tribal origins, and the assumed "purity" of her genealogy.

As I listened to Badriya describe her courtship with Salem, I mentally went over everything I knew about his background to see if it correlated with the story I was hearing. I had already met his family and gotten to know their history, which includes time spent in Africa. In fact, I first met Badriya when I visited Salem's family for Friday lunch; I had gotten to know Salem's youngest sister Shamsa through a focus group discussion I had organized regarding my research (where I also met Khadija), and she had graciously invited me to visit and speak with her mother about her experience growing up in Uganda. Mama Zubaida—although she answered my questions patiently—was not a talkative woman, and soon enough, I found my attention shifting to Shamsa and Badriya. From Shamsa, I learned that even though her parents had lived in Africa, they still see themselves as "native" Arab-Omanis since no one in their family ever intermarried with Africans, and because their accent in Arabic is "pure"—i.e., not contaminated by Swahili. At this point, Badriya interjected that she speaks both Arabic *and* Swahili fluently,

but Shamsa waved her off by explaining that it did not matter because her Arabic dialect was "pure." Badriya did not challenge her sister-in-law on the matter, but just shook her head slightly and sighed. I was intrigued by her, and made sure I got her number before I left. We began to meet at coffee shops and restaurants after she finished work so Badriya could share her critical reflections of Omani society with me without the intervention of her in-laws.

From these meetings, along with my continued association with Shamsa, I realized that although both families had spent significant time in Africa, the reasons for their emigration were vastly different and continue to affect how they make sense of their African heritage today. While Badriya's family had moved to Zanzibar many generations ago in order to consolidate the wealth and status they already had on the mainland by taking advantage of the economic opportunities Zanzibar provided, Salem's family had emigrated in the early twentieth century to escape persecution and poverty in Oman; while Badriya's family prospered financially by investing the wealth they had already brought with them, Salem's family settled in the interior of Uganda along the caravan trails in order to take advantage of the trade routes and make ends meet; while Badriya's family members were able to enjoy the island's strong education and healthcare system, Salem's family lived in an isolated Omani enclave in the African interior without access to strong educational infrastructures. As I will show in this chapter, these differences not only shaped their lifestyles in Africa and created a class-based rift despite their shared tribal history, they also continue to influence how both families make sense of their transnational history today.

Class Stratification among Omanis in East Africa

J. E. Peterson, historian and long-time scholar of Oman, breaks down the label Zanzibari-Omani into three sub-categories in his article "Oman's Diverse Society: Northern Oman" (2004). First, he describes Zanzibari-Omanis as those whose ancestors travelled to Africa earlier (in some cases centuries earlier) and often intermarried with African women; second, he writes about first generation immigrants—those who were born in Zanzibar/East Africa to Arab-Omani parents who had emigrated from the mainland; and finally, he describes those—such as Omanis from the *Sharqiyah* (eastern) region—who moved between Zanzibar and Oman with casual regularity before the pan-African uprisings in the 1960s (Peterson 2004:46). All three categories of people are grouped together under the label Zanzibari-Omani in contemporary Oman. In his article, Peterson focuses on the similarities between these different factions: he describes how most of them "returned" to Oman following the Revolution in 1964; how many speak Swahili (and even English) more fluently than Arabic, and how this community has been instrumental in creating the bureaucratic apparatus of the modern nation-state following Sultan Qaboos' ascension to the throne (Peterson 2004:47; see also al-Kharusi 2013; Valeri 2007). Yet by focusing on their parallel experiences, Peterson glosses over the very real class differences that often set these categories of Zanzibari-Omanis apart—both during their time in Africa and upon their return to Oman—differences that continue to influence how they relate to their transnational heritage as well as to the Omani government.

French anthropologist Colette Le Cour Grandmaison (1989), writing more than a decade before Peterson, recognizes similar sub-categories within Omanis with African heritage. She describes how early migrants settled in the trade centers along the East African coast and on the island of Zanzibar and began to consolidate economic and political power—some as early as the

tenth century, while others traveled back and forth from Zanzibar to the Omani mainland, often

ferrying slaves as their merchandise of choice. She also describes how the latter group began to

settle along the caravan routes on the continent's interior once economic conditions changed in

the nineteenth century, when profits from cloves skyrocketed and demands for ivory grew

exponentially. However, instead of ending her inquiry there, she uses these categories as the

basis for her analysis of emerging class differentiation among various factions of the same

Omani tribe that traveled to East Africa. In this section, I will borrow heavily from her short but

extremely thorough article titled
"Rich Cousins, Poor Cousins:
Hidden Stratification among the
Omani Arabs in East Africa"
(1989). Using a case study of the
al-Harthy tribe, she explores how
economic differences first
developed within different sections
of the same tribe over the course of
the nineteenth century, and how
these hierarchies were made
permanent through changing
marital practices. I will use
Grandmaison's insights (1989) to

Figure 11: Map showing some of the coastal towns under Omani control, along with the hinterlands which provided these trade centers with the merchandise for sale from Jonathon Glassman's book titled Feasts and Riots: Revelry, Rebellion, and Popular Consciousness on the Swahili Coast, 1856-1888 (1995:30)

argue that the economic rift that formed and solidified in Africa continues to affect the marriage

patterns of Zanzibari-Omanis even after their return to the Omani homeland.
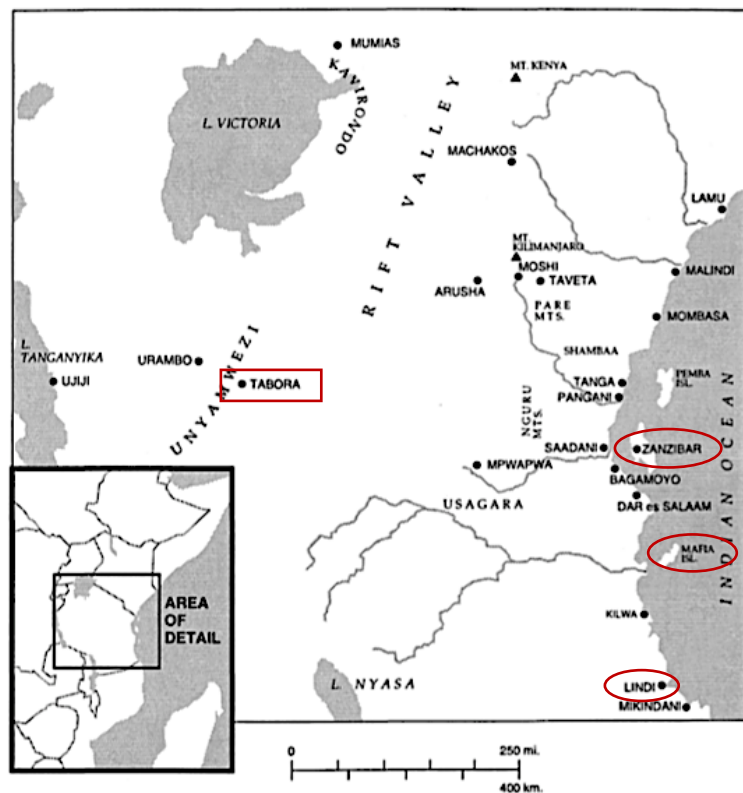
Al-Harthys are one of the biggest tribes in Oman. Hailing from *Sharqiyah* (the Eastern province), they are also well-known for traveling back-and-forth as well as settling in East Africa, some as early as the tenth century (Grandmaison 1989:176; Peterson 2004:45). Most of these early migrants—particularly from the Barwani branch of the tribe, settled along the East African coast and on the island of Zanzibar itself; they soon began to play an important role in the political framework of the Swahili coast. For example, between 1820 and 1870, the ports of Mafia, Lindi, and Zanzibar all had Barwani governors; in fact, the Barwanis controlled the slave trade route that started from Lindi, consolidating their political and economic supremacy [see Figure 11]. Other migrants from different branches of the Harthy tribe (i.e., Sinawis, Tawqis, Isris, etc.) participated in the slave trade but travelled back and forth between Zanzibar and the mainland with the monsoon winds. These itinerant migrants were hosted by their more settled "rich cousins," who also often sponsored their trade ventures (Grandmaison 1989:177).

Changes in the global geo-political context in the nineteenth century, however, transformed the economic life along the East African coast and led to major shifts in the
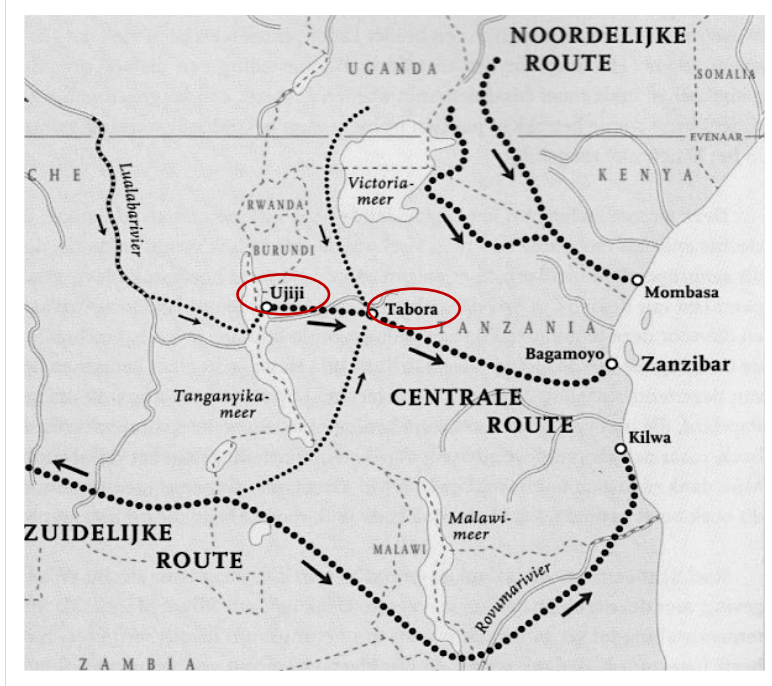
Figure 12: Map of caravan routes and coastal cities, produced by the Afrika Museum Berg en Dal in 2003; (http://omanisilver.com/contents/en-us/d593.html)

goals of the temporary migrants. For one, global demands for ivory increased steeply, which led

to an increase in the number of caravans that traveled to the interior of Africa to acquire ivory; according to Grandmaison, one million porters passed through Tabora[30] [see Figures 11 & 12] every year during the second half of the nineteenth century. Furthermore, even though the British tried to prohibit the slave trade starting in the 1820s, European demands for both ivory and clove actually led to an intensification of slave labor. Instead of exporting enslaved peoples elsewhere or using them for general labor, a large number of slaves were put to work on the increasingly profitable clove plantations in Zanzibar, where they suffered from the harsher work conditions typical within a plantation economy (Glassman 1995:81-84). The al-Harthy sections who were already settled in the trade centers in East Africa (like the Barwanis) benefited greatly from such changing global demands; they were able to invest their accumulated profits into acquiring more land and more slaves for their clove plantations. However, for the more itinerant migrants, the high cost of the monsoon voyages, along with the risks associated with the long journeys and the increasing prohibitions against the slave trade starting in 1822,[31] did not allow them to earn enough profits in order to invest and take advantage of the changing economic forces. Even though more and more "new" Omanis migrated to Africa in search of riches in the nineteenth century, they faced vastly different conditions than their earlier counterparts.

The "new" immigrants, unlike their more established predecessors, did not enjoy any political power upon their arrival. Because of their constant traveling—whether back and forth from Oman or later along the caravan routes—most of these immigrants had only minimal access to education and religious training. Their lack of education, along with their inability to speak Swahili, barred them from the established Arab-Zanzibari intellectual circles and from acquiring

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[30] A trading stop in the interior where free-born Swahili porters were replaced by enslaved laborers (Beachey 1967; Grandmaison 1989; Glassman 1995)

[31] The slave trade was ultimately prohibited in 1876.

any degree of political power. For example, even if these new immigrants settled somewhere in the hinterland and managed to form an important group within the local economy, the Omani Sultan of Zanzibar would assign a governor from the more established Arab coastal communities to oversee and support their efforts—one who was religiously proficient and could communicate with the local population in Swahili (Grandmaison 1989:180).

Excluded from political power, what opportunities were open to the newcomers? While there were minor roles they could play as overseers and managers on the large plantations along the coast and on Zanzibar, it did not lead to riches. Most new migrants thus focused their attention on organizing caravans to the African interior in order to take advantage of the trade in ivory, slowly taking over the caravan routes in the second half of the nineteenth century (Glassman 1995:57). As more Omani migrants began to organize caravans, they used their political and financial connections to the Sultanate (and its Indian clients such as the Banyan merchants) to dominate access to credit in order to finance the ever-expanding caravan routes. According to Jonathon Glassman, historian of Zanzibar,

> As the receding ivory frontier drew the trade further into the heart of the continent, it became enormously difficult to marshall [*sic*] the resources necessary to make commercial enterprises profitable over such far-flung distances. Omani Arabs and their Indian financiers made large investments in the central routes, which can be denoted in the mid-century growth of such towns as Tabora and Ujiji [see Figure 12]. (1995: 58)[32]

Glassman goes on to note that the trade ventures of the new "poor cousins" were no longer financed by their more established counterparts, but by the Indian Banyan merchant community.

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[32] It is important to note that Omani hegemony was unevenly distributed during the nineteenth century, and that there were other caravan routes (not pictured in Figure 12) that were not so wholly dominated by Omani merchants. However, the risks associated with those routes were even greater because the Sultanate did not invest in infrastructure along the way, as they did with the central route starting in Bagamoyo (Glassman 1995). As mentioned earlier, the Barwanis of the al-Harthy tribe controlled the caravan route that started in Lindi (in the South near Kilwa) throughout the nineteenth century.

Even though the lending rates provided by the Banyans were extremely high, the risks associated with the expeditions were assumed by the caravanners themselves, which often meant that a large number of caravan leaders—even Omani migrants—were stuck in a cycle of debt which obliged them to make continuous journeys to the interior (Grandmaison 1989:180). One of the only ways these nomadic traders were able to escape from endless debt was to give up caravan trade, settle along the caravan route in the interior, and engage in small-scale local commercial activities instead. Over time, a growing number of "new" migrants settled along the trade routes in the interior of the continent—i.e., Tanzania, Uganda, Burundi—and became petty traders, leaving large-scale trade to their "rich cousins." These diverging settlement patterns and trade ventures greatly influenced the marital strategies of the different factions of the al-Harthy clan going forward, which in turn affected their ideas of what it meant to be both Arab and Omani.

Marital Practices and the Reification of Hidden Hierarchies

The temporary migration described so far had been essentially masculine. As long as the "new" Omani emigrants maintained their nomadic lifestyle—whether between Oman and East Africa and later between the coast and the interior—they arrived alone or as part of a small kin group of men (father and sons, brothers, uncles and nephews, etc.). During this time, many of the newer and poorer al-Harthy emigrants married free-born African women, often daughters of local chiefs who controlled territories along the caravan routes. These intimate alliances allowed the Arab-Omani outsiders to move through large regions in relative safety while offering a degree of stability for their economic ventures (Grandmaison 1989:181). Often these local women were second (or even third) wives, as it was common for Muslim merchants to create

local alliances through marriage in order to boost their trade ventures throughout the Indian Ocean (Ho 2006:189; Onley 2007:41). However, once these travelers earned enough resources to settle down into a sedentary lifestyle, they brought their Arab wives, mothers, and sisters from the Omani homeland to settle with them. According to Grandmaison, and corroborated by oral interviews with descendants of such communities (such as Mama Dubaiyya), when enough Omani women were available, the once-itinerant merchants returned to the ideal of endogamous tribal marriage. In fact, marriage with women from the same tribe replaced marriage with local elite women—particularly in the African interior—creating isolated enclaves of Omanis who often did not speak Swahili and resisted integration (Grandmaison 1989:181). It is possible to find some such communities even today (Peterson 2004).

It was a different story for the earlier migrant communities that had settled in the coastal trading centers and in Zanzibar. Unlike their cousins in the interior, early Omani settlers had learned Swahili and integrated themselves into the local religio-political framework, often gaining political power and economic supremacy through their efforts (Grandmaison 1989:179). While they maintained genealogical purity by marrying other Arabs, many of the richest plantation owners also owned and had children with enslaved concubines of various ethnic backgrounds. However, all children born to Omani fathers were considered free-born Arabs and enjoyed equal rights of inheritance regardless of the social origins of their mothers (Croucher 2012:69; Romero 2012:377). For example, all of Sultan Sa'id bin Sultan's children were born to concubines since he did not have any children with his pure Omani wife; as such, all the Sultans of Zanzibar after Sa'id were descended from enslaved women but were deemed equally worthy to rule (Romero 2012:374, 377; Ruete 1907:5). Within this context, many Zanzibari-Omanis began to emphasize class compatibility instead of focusing solely on Arab purity, marrying other

Omanis from different tribes but with parity of political, financial, and even cultural status. For example, among the Arab-Omani aristocracy in Zanzibar and along the East African coast, there was a strong tradition of education in Swahili and in English for both boys and girls, while men were also well-versed in classical Arabic (al-Riyami n.d; Grandmaison 1989:182). Arab-Zanzibaris who were not the political elite but had lived in Africa for generations nevertheless saw themselves as separate from the newer Omani immigrants; many called themselves "Zanzibari" (as opposed to Omani) and focused on their transnational cosmopolitan heritage (Glassman 2000:406). To early settlers like the Barwanis, then, even other al-Harthys who had settled in the interior appeared to be uneducated and of low status, and were therefore excluded from considerations of marriage. Thus shunned by their "rich cousins," poorer sections of the al-Harthy tribe were forced to withdraw into an even narrower definition of endogamy, further tightening their social circle (Grandmaison 1989:182).

These diverging circles, created through emerging class differences and further reified by changing marital practices, rarely overlapped. While the coastal al-Harthys focused on class compatibility, those in the interior returned to the ideal of cousin marriage (Grandmaison 1989:181). These historic experiences continue to affect the marital practices of al-Harthy returnees today. Although Grandmaison used the al-Harthy tribe as a case study, similar trends can be found among most Omanis with ancestors who had settled in Africa—such as Mama Dubaiyya's family, as well as Salem's and Badriya's families. Although many young back-from-Africa Omanis like Salem and Badriya may share the same tribal patronym, they have to learn to navigate these ongoing class hierarchies in addition to the politics of Arab purity when it comes to marriage.

Class in Africa and Upon "Return"

To understand why Badriya and Salem differ so strongly regarding their outlook on genealogical purity, it is important to understand their family backgrounds. Badriya's mother, Mama Maitha, was born in a hospital on the island of Zanzibar to parents who had been born on the island as well. Maitha's mother's family had moved to Zanzibar around the time when Sultan Sa'id moved the capital to the island in 1832, but her grandfather had emigrated from Oman as a child in the late nineteenth century. Her family had prospered greatly, having invested the relative wealth they brought with them from the mainland into clove plantations on Zanzibar. Maitha herself was born in the late 1940s and grew up in Stone Town, the capital of Zanzibar, to a middle-class Arab-Zanzibari family. She was raised in a home with "modern" luxuries including indoor bathrooms and electricity. She attended school and learned to read and write both Swahili and English, but she never mastered Arabic beyond basic reading of the Qur'an.

Following the Zanzibari Revolution in 1964, Maitha's father was arrested and detained for weeks. Even though the family was distraught, he was eventually released and was able to return home unlike thousands of others who perished during the purges at that time (Peterson 2004a:46). After his release, he laid low for a few more weeks before smuggling his young family out of the island; however, he was unable to secure their passage into Oman despite his continued connection to their tribal *shaykh*. Sultan Sa'id bin Taymur, father and predecessor of Sultan Qaboos, had closed the borders to African returnees, and despite the *shaykh's* note explicitly claiming them as part of an Omani tribe, Maitha and her family were unable to enter the Omani territory. As a result, they sought temporary shelter in the UAE, but they packed up once again and finally "returned" to Oman in 1970 following the ascension of Sultan Qaboos to the throne and his call for Omanis abroad to return "home" and help build a modern nation.

Neither Maitha nor her parents had ever stepped foot on this territory they were to call home, but they were welcomed with open arms by the new regime.

Despite maintaining ties with their family in the interior over the generations, Maitha's parents were accustomed to a certain level of comfort that the rural regions of Oman could not provide—e.g., there was no electricity or running water, and there were no schools beyond the basic *madrassas* for boys that focused solely on Qur'anic education. As such, they were unwilling to return to their "homeland" in the interior of the nation and decided to remain in the capital, which was slowly developing the infrastructure expected of a modern state under the reign of Sultan Qaboos. Yet connections to the interior continued; Maitha, at this point in her early twenties, ended up marrying one of her more "rooted" cousins whose family had never left the homeland. They went on to have six children before her husband died of a sudden heart attack at a young age. Even after her husband's death, Maitha stayed on in Muscat, and thanks to her educational background in English, she was able to find a job in the emerging bureaucracy and support her young family. With the help of her husband's family and her own income, Maitha was able to send Badriya and her siblings to the most prestigious private school in Muscat, The Sultan's School. Like most private schools in Oman, the Sultan's School is co-educational; yet unlike many other schools, it was established under the sponsorship of the Sultan himself in 1977 and caters to the Omani elite across ethnic and tribal boundaries by boasting a bilingual curriculum—in both English and Arabic—as well as the latest educational technology.[33] Maitha wanted her children to have greater educational opportunities than the government schools could provide, especially in English.

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[33] Khadija and Farah from Chapter 2 also attended The Sultan's School

For Badriya, the Sultan's School was a great fit. Because of her parents' backgrounds, she had grown up speaking Swahili, English, and Arabic interchangeably. At the Sultan School, Badriya was not only able to continue communicating with other Zanzibari-Omanis in both English and Swahili, she could also improve her Arabic language skills—something her mother could not help her with at home. Unlike Maitha, who still struggles with basic Arabic, Badriya is fluent in all three languages both verbally and in terms of reading and writing. However, like her mother, Badriya is also comfortable interacting with peers from all different ethnic and tribal backgrounds—often code switching depending on the context—and both of them continue to see Oman as a multicultural nation that should take pride in its cosmopolitan heritage.

Salem's family had a drastically different experience after moving to East Africa and following their return to Oman in 1970. Unlike Badriya's family who had been settled in Zanzibar for generations, Salem's grandparents moved to East
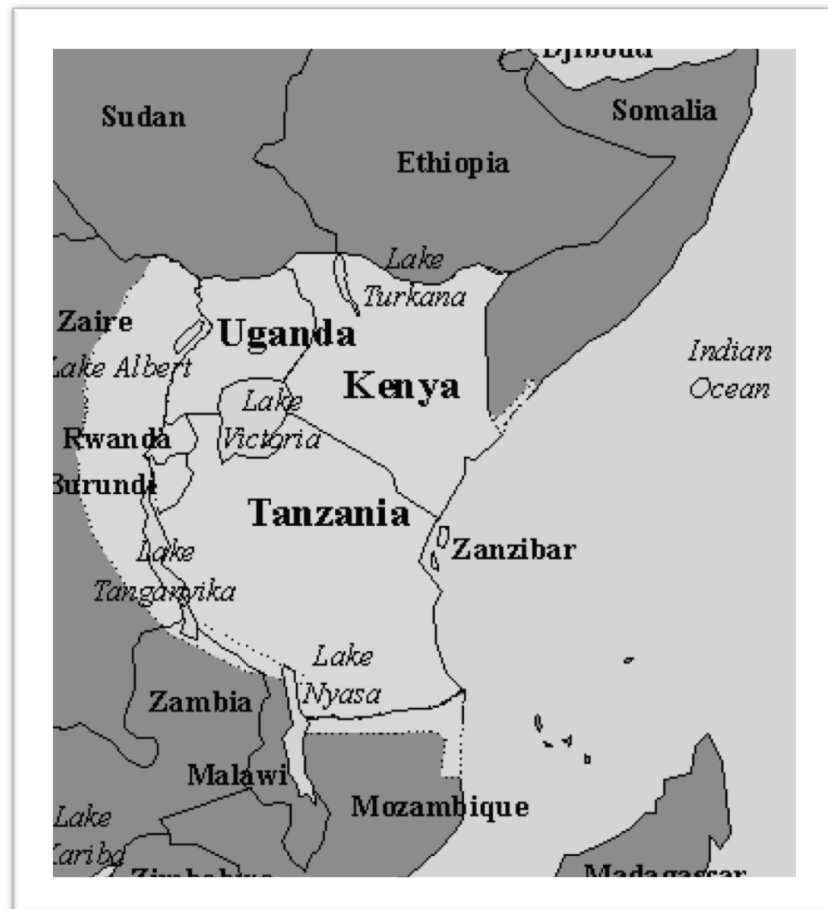
Figure 13: Map of the East Coast of Africa from (https://facultystaff.richmond.edu/~kkasongo/LinguisticMap.htm)

Africa along with his father during the Imamate War in the 1940s and the crushing poverty in the

region. They had been supporters of the Imam, but could not make ends meet during the siege maintained by the Sultan and his British backers. Due to their lack of resources and their distrust of the British, they did not settle in Zanzibar or along the Swahili coast even after they emigrated; instead, they travelled as far inland as Uganda to find a place to settle [see Figure 13]. Salem's father Hamood grew up in a small enclave of Omani settlers from the same region, speaking the Arabic dialect of their province and the interior dialect of Swahili considered to be less "refined" than the coastal version (Valeri 2007:492). He learned to read basic Arabic in order to read the Qur'an, but was unable to continue his studies since he was expected to join his older male relatives on their extended trading routes (as far as Burundi) soon after he turned 12.

When Hamood turned 20, he married his cousin who had been born after their families had already settled in Uganda. They had two children as Hamood continued to work along the caravan trails, but when violence broke out against Arabs and Indians following the rise of Idi Amin in 1972, he encouraged his wife to take their children and return to Oman along with her parents. He remained behind in order to maintain the family's business in Uganda. Upon their arrival in Oman, however, Mama Zubaida was unable to disembark because Omani customs officials would not recognize her children as valid citizens of the nation. Oman had been flooded with back-from-Africa returnees following the ascension of Sultan Qaboos, and while those with skills (e.g., English language speakers) were warmly welcomed into the country, those without had to prove their claims to belonging. Zubaida was told she could enter Oman since her name was recorded in her father's passport, but her children had to remain behind as their father was absent and they had no proof of their genealogical connection to the homeland. It was only after Zubaida's father begged their tribal *shaykh* to intercede on his grandchildren's behalf that Zubaida's children were allowed to enter Oman.

Initially, Zubaida settled in her ancestral village along with her parents, but soon after Hamood joined them in 1974, they moved to Muscat. Hamood, despite being a successful trader in Uganda, was unable to find a job in Oman as he had almost no formal education and no professional training. As a result, he was forced to accept the government provided quarters in the overcrowded and resource-poor neighborhood of Wadi Aday (Valeri 2007:488). Despite its cramped conditions, Wadi Aday ended up improving their access to the opportunities the capital had to offer. Because of their proximity to Muscat, Hamood was able to secure odd jobs around the city and make ends meet until he landed a more stable position within the emergent security service. It is possible that Sultan Qaboos purposefully recruited these poorly educated back-from-Africa Omanis—especially those who had fled Oman because of their family's opposition to the Sultanate—into low-paying low-skill government jobs in order to earn their allegiance. Whatever the reason, despite his lack of education, Hamood was able to earn enough money to support his growing family and even save to build his own home.

Salem is Hamood and Zubaida's only son and the third child born in Oman, followed by one more daughter, Shamsa. Salem and his sisters grew up in the over-populated neighborhood of Wadi Aday, which at the time was on the outskirts of Muscat but was integrated into the city within the decade.[34] They all attended gender-segregated public schools and went on to continue higher education at different universities throughout Oman and even abroad. All of them (barring the youngest sister, Shamsa, who was still in school when I met them) had found good jobs, bringing to fruition their father's vision for his children. However, it was not until he had married off four of his daughters and his only son that Baba Hamood managed to save enough money to build a house for his family in the suburbs of Muscat. Unfortunately, Hamood did not live long

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[34] Wadi Aday continues to be over-crowded, except now the majority of its population are poor South Asian migrant families (from personal observation).

enough to see his family into the house he had spent his whole life saving for; he died of a heart attack a few weeks before construction was completed. It was socially unthinkable for Salem's mother and unmarried sisters to maintain the house alone, so he and Badriya have moved into the new house, Salem taking the place of his late-father as the patriarch of their small household.

"Cosmopolitan" Histories and the Erasure of Class

The year 1964 saw the end of BuSa'idi rule in Zanzibar, marked by a violent uprising which ousted the Arab-Omani elite. While many at the highest ranks of the Arab-Zanzibari society were able to leave the island and coastal towns in haste, the pan-African government that seized power arrested and detained hundreds of small-scale Omani planters, preventing them from escaping even as the revolution turned violent (Peterson 2004:46).[35] For many of the Arab-Zanzibaris who did manage to escape, Oman was home only in the abstract; they had lived in East Africa for generations and had never actually set foot in the mainland. Their "return" was often doubly traumatic as they left behind a life of relative luxury only to find "primitive" conditions in the homeland.

The violence of this period also came as a shock to many Arab-Zanzibaris who had claimed Zanzibar as home for generations and saw themselves as the part of the island's cosmopolitan history. In fact, Zanzibari-Omanis have a tendency to romanticize Zanzibar's fluid multiculturalism, often without taking into account the role of slavery and Arab supremacy in the region. This romantic vision juxtaposes Swahili ethnic indeterminacy against European identity

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[35] Corroborated by eyewitness interview with survivors, such as on Oct. 6, 2016 in Muscat.

paradigms built around measuring and categorizing difference. Some Zanzibari-Omanis even argue that British interference led to the creation of exclusive racial classifications in Zanzibar during the twentieth century and caused the resulting violence (Sheriff 2001). However, what they do not address willingly is that despite the assumed flexibility of racial categories in Zanzibar, "Arab" remained at the top of the hierarchy for the duration of the Zanzibari Sultanate. In other words, flexible racial categories did not lead to equality for the island's indigenous inhabitants. As pan-African nationalists rightfully pointed out during the Zanzibari Revolution, the Arab focus on cosmopolitan multiculturalism was a way to erase the island's African heritage and highlight Arab contributions (Glassman 2000:410). They attempted to rectify the problem by strictly defining exclusive racial categories; citing the Qur'an, they asserted that God had made people into different nations and tribes, and furthermore that "each race should seek its political rights only on the continent that God had apportioned to it" (Glassman 2000:409). African nationalists did not argue that privileging one race over the other was wrong, but that the wrong race was being privileged under the rule of the Arabs. The violent expulsion of Arabs during the Zanzibari Revolution followed as a result of this understanding.

For Arab-Zanzibari returnees and their descendants, especially those like Maitha, Badriya, and Munir (see Chapter 3) whose families had settled in Zanzibar, the violence their families faced in 1964 was directly related to the tightening of racial categories by African nationalists. Upon their return to Oman, they were faced with similarly restrictive definitions of "Arab" that were meant to exclude them from claiming a central place in the new nation-state. The limited definition of "purity" espoused by many Arab-Omanis who never left the mainland (including Sultan Qaboos's father) posited that anyone with *'irq Zanjibari*—whether culturally or biologically—existed outside the boundaries of Arabness. Yet as I have argued in Chapter 3,

back-from-Africa Omanis like Zainab, Samra, and Munir reject this narrow definition of what it means to be Arab. Rather, they claim a central place in the modern Omani nation through their family history of cosmopolitan contact and the skills they acquired during their time abroad—skills that allowed them to serve the fledgling nation-state upon their return "home." They continue to assert the "Zanjibari" label—not only as a way to embrace their transnational identity, but also as a way to mark themselves as distinct from Omanis who never left the mainland and from the "poorer" Omanis who had settled in the African interior and did not benefit from the coast's educational structure. For people like Badriya, Maitha, Zainab, Samra, and Munir, "Zanjibari" becomes a class label as much as a racial one—it highlights their privileged class background while also allowing them to root their claims of belonging in the traditions of the Sultanate. By embracing their *'irq Zanjibari,* they are able to create alternate solidary networks based on their transnational heritage to compensate for the lack of *wasta* connections they had access to upon their return to Oman.

Class and the Denial of Cosmopolitanism

Lower class back-from-Africa returnees, however, did not have access to the same recourse in order to claim a central place in the Omani nation. For example, unlike Badriya, whose family wealth allowed her to attend the Sultan's School and meet students from similar economic backgrounds, Salem attended public school. Like the Sultan's School, public schools in Oman also boast students from a diversity of tribal and ethnic backgrounds; however, instead of finding comfort in this multicultural venue, Salem became the target of insults as a result of his assumed "foreignness." Despite his Arab features, kids in school conflated his lower-class

background with his African heritage and bullied him mercilessly. As a result, Salem learned to view his African past as a source of shame, just like his family's poverty. Unlike many upper-class Zanzibari-Omanis like Badriya who could use their class privilege to defend their family's cosmopolitan history when teased about their "otherness," Salem defended himself by focusing on his family's genealogical purity. In a way, he had no choice. Back-from-Africa returnees like Badriya's family—those who were recruited by the government and helped establish the infrastructures necessary for a modern nation-state (bureaucracy, financial sector, educational sector, etc.), can assert their Omani identity regardless of the purity of their *'irq* because they can point to their personal contributions to the nation-building project. For returnees like Salem's family however, who had little to offer the new state except their physical labor, genealogical purity became crucial to claiming belonging in modern Oman. For Salem, focusing on Arab purity allowed him to defend his Omaniness against racialized insults that targeted both his family's migration history and their poverty.

In many ways, Salem's views align more with those of "native" Arab-Omanis (discussed in Chapter 2) who never left the homeland than with other back-from-Africa returnees like Badriya. Like Khadija's family, Salem's family had also been supporters of the last Imam of Oman; like Shaykh Muhammad, he also emphasizes his family's Arabness—rooted in blood/biology and anchored in the Ibadhi interior—as the marker of the real Omani identity. However, because of the silences surrounding the Ibadhi Imamate in the national narrative, Salem is unable to explicitly tie his family's emigration history to the persecution of the Imam's supporters, which prevents him from being able to fully align himself with the "native" Arab-Omanis who never left the mainland as many of them tend to view Zanzibari-Omanis with suspicion regardless of their claims to genealogical purity. Many of them, like Sama's mother,

assume that prolonged contact with a foreign culture has undermined the essentially Omani characteristics of many returnees—regardless of their relationship with the Imamate or their preservation of genealogical purity. Unlike Badriya, who easily brushes off these remarks, Salem cannot ignore such challenges regarding the purity of his *'irq* because that is the foundation of his family's claim to belonging within the modern nation-state. He cannot point to his family's prominent history in the Omani interior, their courageous support of the Imamate (as they left before the war ended), or their class background and their ability to contribute to the creation of the nation-state as the loci of his Omani identity. Like Shaykh Muhammad, who recognizes that the legacies of the Imamate have to be contained within the sphere of kinship, Salem too emphasizes his family genealogy as the source of his Omaniness. In fact, he goes out of his way to reject the Zanjibari label, instead choosing to maintain a strict definition of Arabness by defending the purity of his family's genealogy.

Flexible vs. Fixed Categories

Despite being labeled Zanzibari-Omani by others, Salem and Badriya had very different childhood experiences growing up as descendants of Omani emigrants because of their diverging class backgrounds. Today, however, their educational backgrounds put them on par with one another professionally. Regardless of whether their parents could or could not contribute to the nation-state, there is no question that both Badriya and Salem are integral parts of the Omani public sector workforce. As a result, their children will have different experiences growing up. Most likely, they will not have the same school experiences as their father but instead will be able to access the same (if not better) quality of education as their mother. Badriya believes that

their educational and class privileges should protect their children from bullying, as it protected her in her own childhood, and wants them to know about and take pride in her family's history of migration. For her, Arab and Zanzibari are both flexible categories that are not mutually exclusive and are equally integral parts of her Omani identity. Yet Salem does not want to confuse his kids about their rightful place in Oman by focusing on transnational histories. He plans on teaching his children about their genealogy as soon as they turn five years old, emphasizing the importance of Arab purity. While Badriya agrees that their children should know about their own family history, she is concerned that focusing on "purity" will teach them that being Arab and having transnational heritage are not compatible, creating a rigid definition of what it means to be both Arab and Omani. She worries that this will end up teaching them to look down on other Omanis who do not fit into the narrow definition of who counts as Omani—turning them into the bullies her husband struggled with in his own childhood.

Even though Badriya and Salem are from different branches of the same tribe, have roots in the same village in the Omani interior, and share family histories of migration to East Africa, they have not been able to come up with a shared definition of what it means to be Omani that they are willing to pass on to their children. For Salem, on the one hand, being Omani should be rooted in Arab purity, which would allow his family—both in the past and in the future—to claim a central place in the modern nation-state. He has made it clear that he initially approached Badriya not only because of her personality, but also because of her genealogy; like his ancestors in Africa, he deliberately continued the tradition of tribal in-marriage to perpetuate his vision of Oman as an Arab nation. Badriya, on the other hand, was interested in Salem because of their shared educational (and assumed class) background; like her ancestors in Zanzibar, when it came to marriage she was focused more on class and educational parity than on tribal endogamy. Even

after a decade of marriage, she does not accept Salim's narrow definition of what it means to be Arab and Omani because of her family's history—they have seen the kind of violence that narrowly defined racial categories can create. As a result, Badriya intentionally embraces the transnational cosmopolitan vision of Oman—one that accepts all citizens regardless of their tribal/ethnic/religious backgrounds as equals. Their on-going impasse not only shows the diversity of opinions within communities that are lumped together under the Zanzibari-Omanis label, but also that there is no singular vision of what it means to be Oman even within the same family. Instead, Omanis across the board continue to challenge, negotiate, and confirm what it means to be Omani through their marital choices and their associated values.

Conclusion

My research started with the question of how the expansive Omani empire transformed into a bounded nation-state and what role marital choices played in the conversion; the goal was not only to understand tremendous social change at both political and intimate scales but also to highlight their interrelatedness. The category that emerged through fieldwork, one that allowed me to make such a connection, was that of the tribe (*qabila*). Most Omanis I interviewed invoked the tribe when answering questions of national belonging and marital compatibility. While some claimed membership in "true" Arab tribes as the real marker of Omaniness, others described how the absorptive nature of patrilineal tribal genealogies allowed for a more flexible definition of Omani identity. Similarly, while some Omanis focused on hierarchies of tribal purity as the litmus test for a suitable marriage partner, others defied tribal endogamy to focus more on compatibility in terms of class and education in choosing a spouse.

Despite its vital role, the category of tribe is simultaneously both over-determined—i.e., it is about genealogy—and nebulous: i.e., it is about descent, but also language, names, features, colorism, control over land, access to water, etc. Ultimately, the category of tribe can be seen as a way to coalesce a field of contested differences around specific nodes, such as patrilineal descent and households, therefore touching upon issues of hierarchy in terms of genealogical status as well as wealth and power. During the days of the Omani Empire, the emphasis on patrilineal genealogies allowed the tribe to act as an absorptive category; that is to say, children born to non-Arab mothers were incorporated into the Arab tribe as equal members. Clients and slaves were also absorbed into the tribe, albeit as lesser members, and were granted a livelihood as well as protection by their patrons and masters. This focus on patrilineal descent allowed

Omani emigrants to essentialize Arabness as a given instead of upholding certain behavioral standards—many early Omani immigrants in Africa adopted Swahili and stopped speaking Arabic altogether but were nevertheless accepted as Arab-Omanis because of their genealogy.

During the transition to nationhood, however, the Omani state could not discount the transgressive power of tribes and had to find ways to control and contain the expansive nature of tribal kinship. To put another way, Omani nationalism had to reconstruct the tribe as both foundational to the Omani identity while also constricting its political power and curtailing its transnational possibilities. To do so, the Omani state scaffolded the national identity onto the Arab tribal structure, creating tribes for non-Arab Omanis while attempting to flatten hierarchies within tribes in the public sphere. Legally speaking, all Omanis are considered equal—as long as they belong to an officially recognized Omani tribe. At the same time, however, Oman continues to define itself as an "Arab" nation, as outlined in the Basic Law of the State, inadvertently elevating Arabness as the marker of Omani identity—often at the expense of long-term non-Arab residents. This paradox results in the tensions outlined within the dissertation: tribes are critical to national identity, but tribal histories and traditional hierarchies cannot be discussed publicly because they can create friction within different tribal groups. Within the sphere of kinship however, these issues can be challenged, negotiated, and/or confirmed. Throughout the dissertation, I have argued that Omanis from various tribal backgrounds utilize different martial strategies not only to elevate their own status, but also to articulate and eventually make manifest different models of the Omani nation—rooted in values of equality or hierarchy.

In focusing on Arab-Omanis with their emphasis on tribal roots and Zanzibari-Omanis with their complex relationship to Arabness, I challenged the teleological assumption that tribes are precursors to nation-states, and that as territorial nation-states become more powerful, kin-

based tribal groups will make way for the national project. Simultaneously, I connected tribal continuity with marital choices and how different marriage practices bring into being different forms of nationhood—uniting tribe, nation, kinship, and history within the same theoretical framework. The legacy of the Ibadhi Imamate as well as the maritime empire remain at the intersection Oman's historical hierarchical tribal structure and its contemporary egalitarian national identity. Arab-Omanis and by Zanzibari-Omanis articulate different models of the Omani nation through their different marital strategies. Through my work, I showed how the study of kinship is an important avenue into the study of nationalist politics in Oman because kinship practices, particularly marriage choices, are one of the few domains through which the status quo can be meaningfully challenged, negotiated, and confirmed. This dissertation makes explicit the connection between different marital strategies—e.g., in-marriage vs. out-marriage in terms of tribes, class, or histories of migration—and the construction of the Omani nation in an era of rapid change.

Furthermore, I anchored my work in the argument that the national in the Arabian Gulf cannot be understood without a transnational lens in order to do justice to the complexity of the long transnational genealogies that can be found in Oman, and the marital choices such expansive genealogies open up and/or limit. There is a tendency to think of the Arabic Gulf nations as bursting into the modern world following the discovery of oil, and previous histories are often erased (or at least downplayed) in the face of the rapid social changes these nations have undergone within the past few decades. As a result, the Gulf has long been marginalized from the arc of Middle Eastern history and has often been ignored within critical works of the region. Left out of wider scholarship, academics of the Gulf often turned inward, focusing on the parochial histories of their own nation-states detached from larger historical and sociopolitical

backgrounds. In the Omani context, this has led to an emphasis on an already-formed timeless Omani identity, rooted in Arab tribalism, even when discussing the region's long-term transnational connections. For example, most literature dealing with Oman's historical entanglements in East Africa propagate a stable national identity unchanged by cultural contact (Bishara in press). Instead of focusing on meaningful cultural exchange and/or hybridization, such as the transformation of what it meant to be Arab in East Africa during the pan-African movement, these works create an ahistorical illusion of a one-way flow of goods and knowledge. Omani emigrants are portrayed as bringing civilization to Africa (Glassman 1995:117; 2000:406; 426; Matthews 2013:138), but there is no recognition that East Africa or the Indian Ocean world affected these Omanis travelers: "In their encounters with other communities, they simply ricochet off one another, as though they were billiard balls" (Bishara in press).

Through my research, I join the emerging field of oceanic history in the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Gulf in trying to destabilize previously accepted territorially-bound geographic categories. I contribute to this literature by bringing the study of kinship and tribal genealogies into the conversation with oceanic histories. Focusing on the diverse genealogical histories of a handful of Zanzibari-Omani families allowed me to show not only the connections created during the Omani empire's expansion, but also how such connections were ruptured and remade as the boundaries of Oman shrank to define the contemporary nation-state. The discourse of a timeless unchanging Omani identity appeared during this time of rapid social transformations and prompted debates about national belonging and citizenship, and about how to tell the nation's transnational history. This rise in nativism ignores the diversity of Oman's population resulting from centuries of transregional connections, instead creating a hierarchy of "true" natives and more recent settlers. Yet precisely by looking more deeply at these transnational

histories at both the political and the genealogical scales, I have challenged the ahistorical framing and argued that these overseas entanglements not only changed Omani emigrants and their sense of self, but that these connections also continue to affect national policies as well as the everyday lives of all Omani citizens today.

This dissertation has shown that the history of the wider Indian Ocean world still reverberates for Omani nationals—whether they claim deep "roots" in the national interior or take pride in their family's overseas connections. Their understanding of both tribal membership and national belonging are shaped by Oman's transnational oceanic histories and influence how they generate their own genealogical futures through their marital choices as well as the nation's future—either as an egalitarian state that embraces all of Oman's diverse population, or a hierarchical one that rewards its "original" Arab population at the expense of others.

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