

Ethnic, Linguistic, and Religious Pluralism in Oman: The Link with Political Stability⁽¹⁾

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This study examines pluralism and its impact on the political and religious balance in Omani Society, whether religious, linguistic, ethnic, and confessional pluralism or geographical and cultural pluralism. It frames the issue within its geographical and historical contexts and provides an anthropological account of structural patterns in a Gulf state which has rarely been studied. The research will observe three types of discourse, each of which attempts to redefine the components of Omani society and culture. The religious discourse and its significant effect on religious tolerance is the most dynamic discourse. In this context, the convergence of sectarian religious discourse in Oman will be discussed along with the extent to which the Omani Sultanate is influenced by the widespread sectarianism in the Greater Middle East today. The cultural discourse will also be discussed in its contemporary modern form, despite being structurally, sociologically, and politically incomplete. Finally, the paper also explores political discourse and its consolidation of pluralism as a concept in Omani society.

Oman Omani Society Social Pluralism Sectarianism

Approaching the Issue at its Core

This study explores the most important demographic phenomenon in Oman — pluralism — and its impact on the religious and political balance in Omani Society. This includes linguistic (Arabic, Swahili, Balochi, Mehri, Shehri/Jabali, Kumzari, Luwātī and others), religious (Muslim, Baha'i, Hindu), confessional (Ibadi Muslim, Sunni Muslim, Shia Muslim), and

ethnic (Arab, Zanzibari, Balochi, Luwātī, Bayāsira,⁽³⁾ descendants of former slaves referred to as “‘*Abīd*”, Persian, Jat Indian⁽⁴⁾ and others)⁽⁵⁾ pluralism. Pluralism also manifests regionally through the various cultures of the North and South, and especially the culture of the Omani interior (Al-Dakhil) and of the coastal regions, from Ras al-Hadd in the southeast to Ras

1 This study was originally published in Issue 11, Winter 2015 of the quarterly peer-reviewed journal social sciences and humanities Omran.

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3 Despite the widespread use of the term Bayāsira in Omani culture in traditional Omani culture, this concept is ambiguous and takes on several meanings:

1. It connotes former slaves.
2. It indicates Omanis who do not have documentation or knowledge of their ethnic origins or line of descent (as opposed to most slaves whose origins were documented).
3. Bayāsira tend not to be black and instead appear to be of Arab ethnicity, unlike the group referred to as former slaves.

Some Omanis believe that the Bayāsira are the children of Arab Omani men and slave mothers.

However, all these different understandings reflect the great ambiguity that surrounds this category and there are no anthropological studies on this issue, which may be due to weak sources or perhaps the sensitivity of the subject.

4 Some historians have mentioned that Jat Indians, are from the Jat sect in India, and some draw similarities to the Roma community in the Arab world. See: John Gordon Lorimer, *Salṭanat 'Umān Fī Dalīl al-Khalīj*, Reviewed and Edited by of Saif al-Muskari, (Besan Publishing and Distribution: Beirut, 2015) Volume 2, p. 420.

5 This study deals with a range of different concepts directly related to the social history in Oman, such as the concept of descendants of former slaves (referred to as ‘*abīd*), al-Bayāsira, Jat Indians, and other terms that must be viewed in their historical contexts. Most of these concepts have undergone radical changes both globally and specifically in Oman. Human rights laws and international covenants that have greatly worked to humanize all ethnic groups and end slavery. But conceptualization remains a cognitive problem in the first place, as many of these concepts are quite difficult to change because they are historically linked to social contexts. For example, until the 1970s in Oman these terms were widespread, and Omani society was subjected to perceptions of social class. Socially, Omanis are still affected by these social perceptions, especially in terms of marriage, despite laws put in place to further equality.

Musandam in the northwest. Over the course of the past five centuries, this ethnic, linguistic and religious diversity has contributed to creating political and intellectual balance within Omani society.

The paper will use structural approaches to frame pluralism in its geographical and historical contexts. Oman remained an independent country during the rule of the central Islamic Umayyad, Abbasid and Ottoman empires, and its geographical location helped create a political and intellectual balance in Omani society. For thousands of years Omanis explored the sea, with huge influence in East Africa and East Asia as far as China, allowing cultural phenomena from abroad to influence the internal intellectual structures of Omani society. Additionally, this study makes an initial attempt at observing three types of discourse, each of which tries to redefine the social and cultural communities of Oman. Religious discourse and its significant impact on religious tolerance is the most dynamic and the convergence of different sects' discourses in Oman will be discussed. The paper will also try to ascertain the extent to which the Omani Sultanate has been influenced by sectarianism widespread in the Greater Middle East today. The contemporary, modern cultural discourse will also be

discussed despite being structurally, sociologically, and politically incomplete. Finally, the paper explores political discourse and its consolidation of pluralism as a concept in Omani society.

This task requires deep extended research, based on wide-ranging data that goes beyond the scope of this study. This paper will make initial attempts to unpack this topic, providing a space to understand the demographic changes witnessed in Oman today. It will also provide an understanding of pluralism in its internal structure in the coming years, and its impact on the concepts of integration and social tolerance in Oman.

The paper begins by examining relevant concepts closely related to the subject of pluralism, such as the concepts of tolerance, world views, understanding⁽⁶⁾, coexistence and so on. These concepts should be brought in line with the topic in order to understand the cognitive meanings of pluralism in Oman. The study will ultimately try to answer the following questions: What are the outcomes of pluralism in Oman? Can Omani society remain resilient in the midst of sectarian conflicts sweeping the Arab world? How can the political, social and religious landscape be imagined in Oman in the coming years?

A Conceptual Approach to “Pluralism”

The conversation around problematic concepts is an important one because it reveals the depth of cultural connotations and cognitive transformations that accompany any given concept. The concept comes to reflect the historical and political transformation of a society from its initial constitutive beginnings until the appearance of the concept within its specific semantic field. In this sense, the concept may appear devoid of any epistemological meaning. It is not affected by social, political and cultural connotations until a certain period. Terminology undergoes transitions as would existential beings, sometimes becoming a phenomenon.

It seems today that most modern terms were created by the great religious, social and political cultural shifts undergone by the Western mind, especially those relating to concepts of human rights, civil society, the

view of the other and coexistence. Despite the Islamic mind's historical projections onto these concepts today, they are simply alternative interpretations of the meanings implied by these terms in the Western mind. During its production of this terminology and its inherent civilian and humanistic implications — i.e. civil society, human rights, the view of the other and coexistence — the Western mind underwent a human experience that lasted from the fourteenth century until the modern and postmodern age. For this reason, it does not endow these concepts with historical, textual meanings, but rather the human experiences suffered by Western societies for more than five centuries.

However, Islamic societies today are witnessing an attempt to Islamize these terms and give their

⁶ Understanding here is used to describe the concept of the ability to understand that which is culturally different and to establish a common dialogue on the basis of equality between all parties. Tolerance, on the other hand, indicates the lack of hostility towards the other and a respect of their cultural and religious customs.

connotations historical textual grounding. The paradox here appears wide given that concepts bear the weight of various cultures, whether in their historicity or in their cultural implications. Hence, the process of viewing “the other” or coexistence is very difficult, firstly because these projections blurred the lines between the terminology and its inherent connotations, which stemmed from a certain human experience. The second difficulty is due to the difference in the premises and meanings which these concepts carry. This paradox can be represented in the following diagram:

It seems that these concepts are not a reflection of a monolithic culture, but rather of social and political transformations that have heterogeneous, and sometimes conflicting, cultures. This can encumber human coexistence because the view of the other⁽⁷⁾ is no longer based on concepts that carry simply humanistic connotations, but also historical and religious ones.

This is the premise of this paper, which proposes to imbue civil society and human rights concepts with a shared humanistic culture, regardless of the circumstances in which this terminology took shape. To maintain social stability in a state with ethnic, linguistic and religious diversity, the humanistic commonality of the concepts of civil society and the rights of the other must be understood, away from any historical projections. This should render the human experience of these concepts an active presence in the collective mind, despite the apparent difficulty of ripping modern terminology away from the historical context of the society in which it arose.

The Arab classical tradition (*turāth*), especially in its political and religious aspects, never used terms such as “tolerance”, “understanding” or “world views”. It was more inclined towards terminology more prevalent in the sacred text, such as *al-‘afw* (forgiveness, exoneration), *al-maḥabba* (love,

affection) and others. As John Locke explains in *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, Tolerance as a concept emerged in a bloody climate of ethnic and religious conflict. This is especially potent in the Western Catholic-Protestant experience after the Saint Bartholomew’s Day Massacre perpetrated by Catholics against Protestants in 1572. The concept of “understanding”, meanwhile, emerged with the onset of the reign of Western rationality, and its doctrines of reason, comprehension and intellect.⁽⁸⁾ Understanding succeeded tolerance, because it required an “existential recognition of the other, as there must be two parties for understanding to occur, while tolerance is a call to socially accept the other even while denying them psychologically and rationally”.⁽⁹⁾ This interpretation is difficult to accept, because while “tolerance” expresses subjectivism and the existential recognition of the other, understanding indicates an attempt to comprehend and discern the other’s structures of thought. It aims for partnership through understanding various thought structures of a human whatever their religion or culture. Whatever the cognitive differences between the two concepts, they both express the need to recognizing the other as an urgent human necessity imposed by the human experience itself.

The concept of “world views” (*Weltanschauung*) was one refined by philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911), who understood the concept as research into metaphilosophy.⁽¹⁰⁾ The term involves basic human perceptions which he considers universally applicable and comprehensive, and their implications for human life. However, he goes back to criticize this universality on the grounds that there are many different world views that conflict over theology, metaphysics, the arts and philosophy, all of which seek to reveal the truth. A critical reading of the concept is thus necessary, not only to place it in its temporal and geographical context, but also to uncover the commonalities of these perceptions so

7 The early emergence of distinctions between the (Muslim) self and the (non-Muslim) other came with the onset of Islam; it means seeing the other, who did not embrace Islam as the infidel, or even hypocrites, in terms of Islamic legislative provisions, in terms of the relationship that must be established between the Muslim and non-Muslim, and also their fate after death. Then the concept evolved after the formation of religious schools of thought (*Madhhabs*) to establish sectarian affiliations. It then developed in social culture to form contrasts between the self and the other; the way that the self viewed the other in terms of religiously, culturally, socially and ethnically. However, the “View of the other” did not appear as a concept or term until modern history, even if its historical beginnings were established centuries ago.

8 Hasan Hanafi, “Min Al-Tasāmuḥ ila Al-Tafāhum: Taḥlīl Fīnūmīnūlūjī,” *al-Tafāhum*, Year 9, Issue 31 (Winter 2011) p. 11

9 Ibid.

10 Wilhelm Dilthey, *Der Aufbau der geschichtlichen Welt in den Geisteswissenschaften* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1981), pp. 332-335.

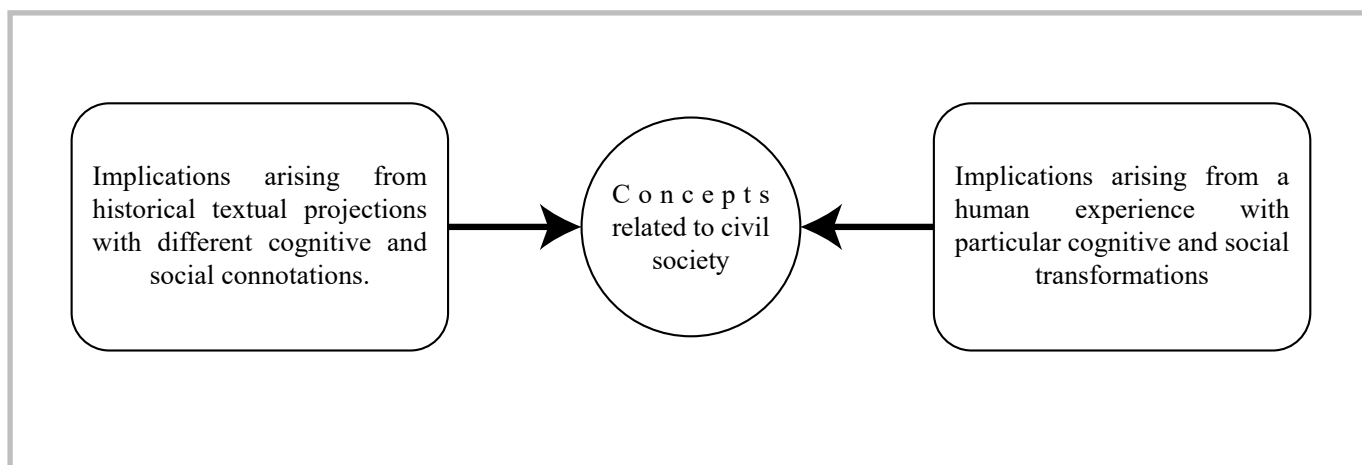
as to constitute a solid foundation for human ethics and behavior. The aim is to give meaning to life in terms of existence and fate; the essence of human life and humanity.⁽¹¹⁾

According to Dilthey, this critical reading constituted a continuation of the philosophy of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), exploring the human duty resulting from pure reason about his fate through practical reason regarding space and time. Research on “world views” thus stemmed from Kantian philosophy and its distinction between practical and pure reason. Pure reason carries basic perceptions by virtue of reflection, and practical reason searches for realistic arrangements or conditions that fulfil the perception of time and space or society and state.⁽¹²⁾

Even though Omani history saw bloody domestic and foreign conflicts following the advent of Islam, terms like “tolerance”, “understanding” and “world view” did not appear in Omani literature or religious writings. They appeared firstly in the abstract: in the historical Omani relationship with its diverse linguistic, confessional and ethnic groups, in the sense that these bloody conflicts did not turn into sectarian ones. They then began to appear in the

modern political experience (post-1970). Most of the internal conflicts in Oman were either purely religious (the Ibadi doctrine of the Imamate) or about social/political problems mostly resulting from the Imamate debate, while the external conflicts revolved around the expulsion of the colonizer.

Theoretically, the concepts of “tolerance”, “understanding” and “the view of the other” have only appeared in Oman in the past decade. This is mostly due to what might be considered the globalization of ideas that occurred throughout the Arab world after the events of 9/11. These concepts not only rely on the emergence of political, religious, and social tensions, but also require an existential philosophy that believes in the right of the other to live as well as the right to differ. The concept of tolerance is not very compatible with the system of Islamic tradition either jurisprudentially or theologically. This is why most of the internal conflicts between Omanis themselves stem from their deeply divided understanding of religious political theories (Ibadi concepts of the Imamate). The Islamic heritage, in terms of texts, historical sources, and doctrinal interpretations, cannot tolerate that which it considers wrong, precluding the appearance of these concepts.



Linguistic and Ethnic Pluralism in Oman

In this connection I first want to discuss the internal structure of Omani society: its social, ethnic, linguistic, religious and confessional makeup. This constitutes an anthropological examination of the

11 Ridwan Al Sayyid, *Ru'yat al-'Ālam; Wijhat Nazar Islāmiyya*, Nadwat al-Fiqh al-Islāmī (Muscat: Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs, 2013), 1.

12 Ibid, 1

structural patterns in a Gulf state about which few studies have been conducted. The Omani Sultanate is considered one of the most ethnically, linguistically and religiously diverse areas in the Arab Gulf. Yet it has not received the precise academic attention necessary to reveal the extent, strength, and functions of this diversity and its ability to create strategic balances within the state and society. It is in dire need of geopolitical and ethnographic studies and strategic studies that can interpret the stages and cultural transformations of Omani society, which can be referred to as the “demographic periodization of the Omani State”.

According to some studies, Omani history goes back more than five thousand years.⁽¹³⁾ Before the advent of Islam, Arabs were displaced to Oman from the North and the South following the destruction of the Great Dam of Ma'rib. Oman embraced Islam voluntarily, and it was one of the great civilizational centers that received a message from the prophet calling on them to embrace Islam along with Egypt, Yemen, Rome, Persia and Constantinople. After the events of the First Fitnah, beginning with the assassination of Uthman, Oman adopted the Ibadi *madhhab* (confession/sect) which has historical roots in the Muhakkima (the group who walked out of arbitration between Ali ibn Abi Talib and Mu'awiya, initiating the Khawarij movement). Religious pluralism in Oman dates back at least to the third century AH (ninth century CE),⁽¹⁴⁾ and possibly even further back. In Sohar and the Omani coast Shia, Murji'ah and Mu'tazila were present during that time period, limited in number and not having enough political or social weight to put them in the running for competition for a position of authority. These *madhhabs* (sects/confessions) were perhaps not made up of Omani Arabs, but rather of immigrants from the Arabian Peninsula during the first half of the second century AH, following the bloody sectarian wars of the Great Fitnah. Oman maintained its religious pluralism without any sectarian religious conflicts, and there is no religious

or sectarian aggression on the part of either the state or individuals recorded in Omani history.

The Omani coast remained commercially active since antiquity, with Abu Ubaid al-Qasim ibn Salam (died 150 AH / 767-768 CE) reaching China and undertaking a big role in the spread of Islam. The sons of the Imam of Oman Al-Julanda bin Mas'ood (who ruled Oman in the 2nd century AH/8th century AD) were forced to flee to East Africa after bloody battles with the Umayyad state, indicating that Omanis had previously explored these seaports. From 1270 AD until 1500 the Kingdom of Hormuz⁽¹⁵⁾ was able to take control of the Omani coast from Ras Al Hadd to the east and Ras Musandam to the north (the Strait of Hormuz and its islands). The Portuguese managed to occupy the Omani coast in 1500 AD for a further century and a half, turning the Omani coastline into a magnet for migrations coming from the Eastern bank of the Sea of Oman and the Gulf, especially migrations from India, Balochistan and Persia. The Yaruba and Al Said dynasties greatly expanded the Omani presence in the Indian Ocean and the East African coast, which contributed greatly to entrenching the culture of linguistic, ethnic, and religious diversity. The Omani coast amassed a great multitude of ethnicities for reasons that can be summarized by the following four points:

1. The historic presence of different ethnic groups along the Omani coast. The Kingdom of Hormuz and the Portuguese had both dominated the region until the age of the Yaruba dynasty which managed to expel the Portuguese from the Omani coast and the Indian Ocean and then sought the aid of the Balochi military forces to resolve the internal differences that occurred in the late Yaruba state. The diverse ethnicities along the Omani coast thus developed over more than five centuries in which the Hormuz kingdom and the Portuguese dominated militarily, and Indians and other foreigners dominated economically.

13 Recent discoveries from archaeological expeditions in Oman indicate that the oldest discoveries along the Omani coast date back to the 5th millennium BC. See: Yusef Badawi, *Tārīkh 'Umān Bayn al-Qadīm wa'l-Hadīth* (Abu Dhabi: Al Safa, 2008) 14-15.

14 A letter sent by the religious authority Hashim bin Ghailan to the Imam of Oman, Al-Julanda bin Mas'ood, in the third century AH alludes to the existence of the Qadiriyya and Murji'ah *madhhabs* and some Khawarij such as the Sufis in Sohar. See: Hashim bin Ghailan, *Risālat Hāshim bin Ghaylān: Kitāb as-Siyar wa'l-Jawābāt*, ed. Sayyida Ismail Kashif, (Muscat: Ministry of Heritage and Culture, 1986) vol. 2. p: 38.

15 Hormuz Hormuzan: Ancient Hormuz is located on the coastal plain near the mouth of the Minab River, about thirty miles from Bandar Abbas, in Kerman, then its political capital was moved to a small island in the middle of the sea on the island of Jarun. See: Ibrahim Khouri and Ahmad Jalal Al-Tadmuri, *Sulṭanat Hurmuz al-Arabiya: Sayṭarat Sulṭanat Hurmuz al-'Arabiyya 'alā al-Khalīj al-'Arabī*, (Ras Al Khaimah, UAE: Center for Studies and Documents, 1999), vol. 2, p. 7-13

2. The prevalence of different religions following Omani control in East Africa, Balochistan, Bushehr, Bandar Abbas, Bahrain and the Kingdom of Hormuz, which hosted both Persians and Indians. This happened during the Yaruba and Busaid dynasties and contributed greatly to the diversity of *madhhabs* (sects/confessions) and religions.
3. The Saudi encroachment — known as the Wahhabi invasion in Omani historical literature — onto some Omani land. The Wahhabi doctrine thus became more pervasive in areas along the border with Saudi Arabia, overlooking the Rub' al Khali Desert. Thus, while many different religious, confessional, and ethnic groups gathered around the northeast (the coast), Wahhabism penetrated from the southwest and northwest (the desert) and was able to exert considerable influence in these areas, especially since quite a few tribes in those areas were of North Arab descent (Adnanites).
4. The political conflict between the Al Said Sultanate and the Imamate in the Omani interior. This led to the internal disintegration of the Sultanate authority, which then controlled territory as far as Zanzibar and Balochistan. Yet both authorities, religious and political, followed the Ibadi *madhhab* and were ethnically Arab. This conflict also led to Sultan Said bin Sultan (died 1856) initiating a heavy reliance on Balochis for the first time, despite their historic presence in Oman. They eventually formed most of the military during the Al Said dynasty up until the end of Sultan Said bin Taimur's reign in 1970.

Over the past five centuries, Oman not only witnessed this great diversity, but also underwent a golden age in maritime exploration and a re-emergence of the Imamate. This led to bloody wars, in which the Omani tribes divided into two groups, the Ghafiriya and the Hanawiya at the end of the Yaruba dynasty. Thus,

Balochis

The Balochi tribe⁽¹⁶⁾ is today considered one of the largest in Oman, with its members spread across

Oman did not emerge from this cycle of regional victories and internal failures until 1975, with the reign of Sultan Qaboos. The new Sultan brought a stability to the country that has lasted until the present day, a mighty feat considering the history of social and political volatility. So, given this history, how can Oman be assessed as a linguistically, religiously and ethnically diverse country?

Any academic researcher will find it difficult to be objective when discussing pluralism in Oman for several reasons. Firstly, there is a dearth of reliable historical documents, and a similar scarcity of detailed and accurate statistics about the number of ethnic and language groups. Instead this study relies upon the available documents, with recourse to observation and deduction in analyzing this anthropological data and historical documents. This means the study will make assumptions more than it will draw a true historical picture of these ethnic groups and their economic, cultural, political and social impact in Oman. Additionally, oral interviews often seem to lack objectivity as they are based on religious, social or historically nationalist points of view, or narrow cognitive perceptions where emotion and ignorance play a major role in their formation in the collective Omani imaginary.

Before examining the most significant elements of ethnic diversity in Oman, it must be noted that historians differ on the true proportion of these ethnicities in relation to Arabs. Some historians believe that the Luwātīs and the Balochis are of Arab origin, displaced from the Arabian Peninsula during the 2nd century AH (8th century CE) only to later return. This is often the case in Arab and more generally in human migrations. This genealogical dispute will not be of great importance in this research, but will be addressed briefly. This is not a historical investigation into the history of these ethnicities, but an assessment of the inherent anthropological functions of these ethnicities in the re-establishment of power in contemporary Oman.

the Sultanate but mostly concentrated along the coastal regions. Despite the tense historical

16 The many tribes in Balochistan include the Korkij, Zadjal, Huti, and Ra'isi, among others. See Lorimer, vol. 2, p. 411

relations between the Balochis and the Omani tribes of the Oman interior that stemmed from social, political and perhaps economic reasons, they have been able, at various historical points, to penetrate aspects of Omani society even if those particular social tensions left a permanent psychological and perhaps sociological imprint. The beginnings of the Baloch presence in Oman have raised many questions for historians and researchers. When did they come to Oman? How? What was the political role played by the Balochis from the 7th century onwards? How are Balochis culturally distinct? What role did this culture play in the creation of social and religious balances in Omani society?

Whatever the answers to those questions, it is clear that the social and political role of Balochis in Oman has grown steadily over the past five centuries. They have managed to integrate with Omanis socially and politically and have been among the most loyal tribes to the Al Said dynasty throughout its political history. As such, the Balochi political agenda is in line with the political leadership. Additionally, they were able to integrate with parts of society in the Oman interior and some embraced Ibadism, with some becoming judges in the era of Ibadī Imam Muhammad bin ‘Abdallah al-Khalili (d. 1954), such as Judge Abu Ubaidah Abdullah bin Muhammad al-Balushi (d. 1998). While most Balochis retained their Sunni identity, some even became Shia. And it appears that of those who embraced Shiism, a few had mixed with the Shias on the coast, and perhaps some had originally come from Iran, not Balochistan. Generally, Balochi political thinking has not been based on *madhhabi*/confessional or religious issues, which have been of no great significance to their community, but they were most adept at integrating with the Ibadī Omanis. They pray in Ibadī mosques and call the *adhān* and, similarly, the Ibadī tribes do not rebuke whichever *madhhab* the Balochi may pertain to. Many Balochis live among the Omani tribes and practice their religious rituals freely.

At a social level, Balochis have suffered from widespread social discrimination. For a Balochi to marry into an Arab tribe was difficult mostly because they were foreign, and an image of

foreignness is conjured in the collective Omani mind. This ethnic perspective persists to this day, despite major breakthroughs among the more recent urban generations. However, the Balochis differ according to geographical location. Those who live in the Omani interior are more integrated into the Omani tribes within and many stopped speaking Baloch halfway through the 19th century. They formed their own communities with many similarities to Arab society. The Balochis who populated the Omani coastline however found Arabic a major obstacle to their integration, and in the second half of the 20th century, many found learning it a difficult task.

Omani religious acceptance of Balochis has contrasted with their social discrimination against them and this paradox gives deep indications of the Omani way of thinking. Religion in Ibadī Omani society was not a significant factor in how they envisioned the other. There is a considerable space for religious and confessional freedoms, while ethnicity (as a social obstacle) is a closed circle, not just for Balochis, but every other ethnic minority. In fact, this social discrimination even occurs among Omani tribes themselves and thus it has become enshrined in society and remains prevalent today. The Omani collective mind contrasts slaves with free people, Arabs with foreigners, Bedouins with urban communities — like the fishermen of Al Batinah Region who live opposite lifestyles to the Bedouin — and the Omanis with Zanzibaris. This is how these unrelenting social distinctions were formed.

Balochis maintain their social norms and customs to a great extent, especially those who live in coastal areas, whether in celebratory traditions like weddings and religious holidays, or in terms of cuisine and the food traditions according to occasion. As such, the independent cultural personality of the Balochis has been passed on down the generations. Every year, the Balochis in Oman hold a cultural week, showcasing the traditional culture that distinguishes them from other ethnic groups in Oman. This culture has played important positive roles in the ethnological distinctions of Omani society, and today it can be said that they represent a significant ethnological factor in the Omani political balance.

Luwātīs

Some historians claim that the Luwātī people can be traced back to Omani Arab roots⁽¹⁷⁾ while others “refer to them in their writings as Haydarābādīs (from Hyderabad), a name indicating to their homeland... just as they refer to Balochis with reference to Balochistan. This remained the most common designation of the Luwātīs until relatively recently, and is similar to how those who live in the Omani province of al-Khaburah are referred to as Khābūrīs. But while Khābūrī remains a common descriptor, reference to the Indian Hyderabadī has disappeared over the last thirty years or so.⁽¹⁸⁾”

The Luwātī lifestyle and way of thinking differs from the Balochis, which has left them isolated from other Omani tribes for the past five centuries or more. They live in a small quarter within in the city of Muttrah called Sūr al-Luwātiyya, and retain their own culture, schools, religious references, mosques and *Husayniyyas*.⁽¹⁹⁾ They have thus struggled to integrate in Omani society culturally and in terms of ideas, customs and traditions. Nor have they integrated with the other ethnic groups such as their Balochi neighbors.

Many obstacles still prevent Luwātī integration with other Omani tribes, and vice versa, especially in marriage, which forms a basis of social fusion. However, important factors that led to this isolation and tight living space must be considered:

Religion (The Shi’i *Madhhab*)

As Shias, the Luwātīs follow rituals and customs that are independent of the Sunni and Ibadī *madhhabs*. When it comes to formal religious rituals, religious integration between Sunnis and Ibadīs is much easier than the integration between the Shia and the Ibadīs. This can explain the absence of Shia in the Ibadī and Sunni mosques or of Ibadīs and Sunnis in Shi’i mosques.

Rituals in formal religious culture are an important element in isolation, contrasting with the Balochi community. Most Balochis are Sunni, but with little zeal for their *madhhab* or sectarian fervor. That is why there are Balochis who have adopted Ibadism and even Shiism, and have managed to penetrate the highest levels of the religious legal system. Balochis have overcome historic animosity with the Omanis to penetrate Omani society, while the Luwātīs have not, despite never having confronted the tribes of the Oman Interior militarily. They worked as merchants and closed themselves within Sūr al-Luwātiyya, with a small number leaving for Al Batinah Coast. They managed to create small communities in Al Batinah, especially in Sohar, Al-Khabura, Al-Musannah, and Barka.

Language

The Luwātīs have their own language, also called Khojki in reference to the old name ascribed to the Luwātīs in Sindh, in an area referred to as Khoja — and a Luwātī pronunciation of Persian honorific title *Khwāja*.⁽²⁰⁾ Luwātī is part of the northwest Indo-Aryan language within the Indo-European language family.⁽²¹⁾ Its script was limited to the Nizari Ismailis in the Sindh, Gujarat and Punjab provinces of India, in order to codify religious literature but has become extinct in Oman.⁽²²⁾ Luwātīs, with the exception of those who have been educated, have struggled to speak Arabic over past centuries, perhaps until the 20th century.⁽²³⁾ In contrast, Omani tribes exclusively speak Arabic. It is well-known that a lack of language proficiency is a social distinction that is sometimes used to ridicule the non-Arabic speaking other.

The Luwātīs’ geographic isolation over the past few centuries was a major factor in their inability to master Arabic. They kept guards at their gates who would only allow entry to known guests. At this

17 Jawad bin Ja’far bin Ibrahim Al-Khabori Al-Luwātī, *Al-Adwār al-‘Umāniyya fi al-Qārrah al-Hindiyya, Dawr Banī Sāmah bin Lu’ayy — al-Luwātiyyah*, (Beirut: Dār āal-Nubalā’, 2001) 46. He goes on to say, on page 48, that they are the descendants of Lu’ayy bin al-Harith bin Samah bin Lu’ayy al-Qurshi, who left Oman for India while serving in the Islamic Army around the year 15 AH. They settled in Sindh and were known as Bani Lu’ayy, which is where the epithet Luwātī came from.

18 Bilal Al-Khaburi (Oral Interview), Muscat, 4/6/2014

19 A type of congregation hall for Shi’i commemoration ceremonies

20 The Omani Encyclopedia, (Muscat: Ministry of Heritage and Culture, 2013), vol. 8, p. 3073

21 Ibid, 3073

22 Ibid 3073

23 Bilal Al-Khaburi (Oral Interview), Muscat, 4/6/2014

point, it is necessary to differentiate between the Luwātīs living along Al Batinah coast from and the Luwātīs in Muttrah. Those who lived in Al Batinah integrated more with the other tribes. Beginning in the second half of the 20th century many of them stopped using Luwātī, which improved their ability to speak Arabic and mix with the rest of the Omani tribal community.⁽²⁴⁾

Culture

Culture is another important element. There are no cultural commonalities between of the Luwātīs and the Omani interior, whether in language, religion or place. This lack of commonality can be attributed to tribal groups as well as the Luwātīs. While Omanis have succeeded in integrating in East Africa, despite fundamental ethnic, linguistic, and religious differences, they were unable to integrate with the Luwātī within Muscat. This paradox requires a deep anthropological reading.

The Economic Dimension

The Luwātīs have never relied on Omanis for their livelihood. They arrived in Muscat as merchants and perhaps they were from higher social classes in the Multan area of India.⁽²⁵⁾ On a visit to Muscat, the Imam Ahmed Busaeed, who established the Al Said

dynasty in the 18th century, met first with the Bani Hassan tribe, then the Luwātīs and then with the rest of the population.⁽²⁶⁾ This order of events indicates the social status of the Luwātīs. Consequently, they do not see themselves in need of assimilating with the Omani tribes; they have enough money to remain independent from the rest of Muttrah, where they dominate the biggest traditional souk in the country. They also own many shops in the historic Al-Khabura souk in Batinah.

These factors all contributed to the closed environment in which the Luwātīs live and preserve their customs, traditions, language, culture and distinct religious rituals. They represent important strategic balances economically and politically, as demonstrated by their support of the central political authority. Neither the tribes of the Omani interior nor the Imamate have ever undertaken any acts of aggression against the Luwātīs for sectarian or ethnic reasons, despite their differences. It appears that this separation, albeit less acute today, will continue for the next 20 years. Their integration is firstly contingent upon the degree of Ibadi-Shi'i rapprochement, but also on their willingness to compromise on their economic successes over the last five centuries and the economic worries that accompany marriage outside of the family.

Zanzibaris

This group came from Zanzibar during the reign of Sultan Qaboos bin Said, with their descriptor indicating their initial migration to East Africa. Most of them are concentrated in the capital and the Oman Interior and are descendants of the Omani Arab tribes who migrated to East Africa during the three centuries prior.⁽²⁷⁾ They left in great numbers during the rule of Said III bin Taimur because of the bleak economic and political conditions of the era, returning with ascent of Sultan Qaboos to the

throne. Some of them held important positions in the early state as they were often highly educated and multilingual – many spoke English, Zanzibari, Arabic and those who came from areas ruled by France such as the Comoros Islands and Burundi spoke French.

Most of those who came from East Africa are Ibadis, having migrated from Muscat, home to very few Omani Sunnis in the first place.⁽²⁸⁾ Before they migrated from Oman, they came from the Western

24 Ibid

25 Ibid

26 Al-Luwātī, p. 66

27 According to the documents of Amin al-Mazroui, the Omani presence in the African continent dates back to the middle of the first millennium BC and Omani sailors played a major role in this era. The migration of Suleiman and Said (the sons of Al-Julanda in the 1st century AH/ 7th century CE) to these areas indicates the Omani presence there as it is unlikely Omani royalty would migrate to an unknown land. This is the first recorded migration of Omanis to East Africa, but the year 1698 - during the reign of Imam Saif bin Sultan - is the official date for the Omani conquest of Kilwa Kisiwani, Pate Island, Zanzibar and Mombasa. See: William Harold Ingrams, *Zanzibar, Its History and Its People* (California: H.F. & G. Witherby, 1931).

28 Ibid 187

and Eastern Hajar Mountains, which are populated mostly by Ibadis. They have contributed greatly to the dissemination of Omani customs and traditions, and some embraced Shafi'i Sunnism, influenced by the Shafi'is in East Africa. But religion or *madhhab* did not represent a real point of distinction between them, and – significantly – they think linguistically more than they think religiously, unlike the Luwātīs or Balochis. In this sense the Zanzibari language contributed to their assimilation more than religion or *madhhab*. Therefore, intermarriage was not uncommon and not subject to religious obstacles as linguistic affiliation imposed a different way of thinking and lifestyle. This led them to maintain a strong culture at the expense of religion, becoming

cultural rather than religious groups, integrated in Zanzibar with other religions and sects, as has been documented in Orientalist literature.⁽²⁹⁾

The different ways of thinking for the Zanzibaris, Luwātīs, and the Balochis become clear here. While a confessional-religious dimension predominates in the case of the Luwātīs, for the the Balochis it is a social-national element and the Zanzibaris a linguistic-cultural one. On the other hand, tribal and religious components represent the most important influences on Omani tribes of the Interior. These different ways of thinking undoubtedly contributed to the formation of deep cultural intersection in Omani society and in creating political balances in Oman.

Bahá'í Persians

The Bahá'ís form part of a number of Omanis granted citizenship in the past thirty years. They came to Oman with the aim of "pioneering" a term commonly used in the Bahá'í faith in place of proselytizing, or what is referred to as *Da'wah* in Islam. The historical presence of the Bahá'ís in Oman date back to 1950.⁽³⁰⁾

Bahá'ís do not wield much cultural, social, political, or even economic influence in Oman. They were compelled to join other tribes because they face significant social difficulties associated with integration into Omani society, especially regarding

marriage. Despite the fact the “*Ajamī*” tribe is well known in Oman, having come from Persia, most of them are Sunni or Shi'i Muslims and the Bahá'ís thus cannot intermarry with them because of religious differences. They are thus left no choice but to marry from outside Oman.

The Bahá'ís of Oman all speak Farsi, and some Arabic. There is an insignificant number of Omani Arabs who have converted to the Bahá'í faith but even those converts practice their religion in secret, fearing a law that forbids conversion to another religion.

Hindus

The Omanis and travel literature call this group “*Bāniyān*”. Commerce brought them to the Omani coast, forming the history of trade between Oman and the Indian Ocean. Max Freiherr von Oppenheim, at the turn of the 20th century, wrote that “many Indians settled in Muscat as a result of the long-standing relations with India. Some of them are Hindus, or,

as the Omanis call them, “*Banyan*”; they live in complete isolation from the rest of the population. They only work in the field of commerce and they can usually be easily identified by their slim figures and distinctive clothing, but their number does not exceed five hundred.”⁽³¹⁾

29 See for example: Issa bin Nasser al Ismaily, *Zanjibār at-Takālub al-Isī māri wa-Tijārat ar-Riqq*, translated from Swahili by Mubarak Al Sabahi, (Dar Al Ghurair Printing & Publishing: Dubai, 2012) and Nasser Al Rayami, *Zanjibār Shakhṣiyyāt wa-Aḥdāth*, (Beirut Bookshop: Beirut, 2009).

30 Information here about Bahá'ís in Oman has been gathered from Nabil al-Ajmi, an Omani Baha'i of Persian origin, interviewed on 16/12/2013. In 1950, five Baha'i Persians came as merchants and dentists to Amman. Four of them died, and one is still alive, living in Sohar. They first landed in Muscat, then some went to Tire, and then they were distributed in the major cities of Oman such as Sohar, Al-Buraimi, Ibri, Nizwa and Salalah.

31 Max Freiherr von Oppenheim, *Rihla ilā Masqaṭ 'ibr al-Khalīj*, (Baghdad: Dar al-Awraq, 2007) 55-56. This is a translated Chapter from Max Freiherr von Oppenheim's German language book: *Vom Mittelmeer Zum Persischen Golf Durch Den Hauran, Die Syrische Wüste Und Mesopotamien*. (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer (Ernst Vohsen), 1899-1900).

These historical texts confirm the presence of Hindus along the Omani coast, although their economic presence had already begun to manifest throughout the previous five centuries. They do not hold much weight in political society but they dominate the political economy. They exert demonstrable influence in economic decisions because of their direct impact on the market. Oman engaged with the Indian Ocean culturally, which explains the common characteristics between Omanis and the cultures of the Indian Ocean in terms of dress and food. Trade has played a major role in Omani cultural development.

By social nature, Hindus are peaceful, and do not proselytize for a specific religion. Nor are they involved in wars or sectarian or social conflicts. Some of them have settled along the Omani coast, and they have freely practiced the Hindu religion during the reign of Sultan Qaboos. They also respect the laws governing religious freedoms in Oman, garnering acceptance from the state.

These groups are considered to have the most important ethnological presence alongside the Arab-Omani tribes in Oman. Their ethnological importance lies in their ability to play major roles in the social, religious and economic balances, despite the existence of other ethnicities in Omani society such as the so-called “‘*Abīd*” or the Bayāsira. The historical origins of these groups however are difficult to obtain reliable or accurate information about. It is certain that their migrations in Oman were successive and from a range of geographic locations and ethnic groups, and that they were subject to political and social changes in Oman, especially over the past five

centuries. The “‘*Abīd*” or the Bayāsira were socially differentiated, especially in matters of marriage.

Consequently, these groups often feel like they have no social influence but remain an ethnological presence in Omani social history. These groups do not have much social or political weight because they do not have a distinct unified culture to distinguish them from the Omani culture and express their character. They do not have a language and most of them are either Ibadi or Sunni Muslims and so their long presence in Omani history has left their original culture indistinguishable from the local culture they live in. They have no independent geographical, religious and linguistic sources like those of other ethnic groups. There are also other ethnicities with various amounts of influence such as the Arab Bahrainis from Bahrain and Iraq, and perhaps from the Arabian Peninsula, who follow the Ja’fari school of Shiism, and constitute a large economic presence in Oman.

This ethnic diversity produced many languages in Omani society, since most of the Omani population came from outside the country, and Arabic was not their first language. Therefore, Oman is rich in multilingualism; along with Arabic, Balochi, Luwātī, Kumzari⁽³²⁾, Farsi and Swahili, there are the four languages of the Omani South — Mehri, Harsusi, Shehri and Bathari, as well as Hobyót, all of which are living languages.⁽³³⁾ These languages have created cultural similarities among the inhabitants of southern Oman, whether in customs, traditions, customs or music and song. Their ways of thinking have become similar, aided by religious homogeneity. They all follow the

32 Historians consider the Kumzari language an Indo-European language belonging to the southwestern group of Iranian languages. It is spoken by the inhabitants of Kumzar island of the Musandam province of Oman, a peninsula on the Strait of Hormuz. There are also people in Iran, and some in the United Arab Emirates, however, those who speak in the UAE are Kumzari, immigrants from the island who work in the UAE. UNESCO considers this language endangered. The inhabitants of the Kumzari peninsula belong to the tribe of Shehhi, an Arab tribe, spread widely in Musandam. A research trip to the island revealed that, as well as Kumzari, they also speak varying levels of Arabic.

33 There are several languages in the province of Dhofar (southern Oman), some of which are ancient languages. Some sources refer to the ancient Arabic languages found in the South region. Therefore some of these languages are similar in syntax and pronunciation, such as the Shehri/Jibbali, Mehri, Harsusi, Bathari, and Hobyót. Bathari is a spoken language of a group living in the desert of Dhofar province. It is also spoken by some residents of Al Wuṣṭa Governorate, Shalim and the Hallaniyat Islands, Ash Shuwaymiyyah. It is close linguistically to Shehri/Jibbali, Mehri and Harsusi, which indicates that all these languages descended from a single linguistic origin. The Harsusi language is also spoken, and its origin and development is unknown, but it is one of the languages that originated in southern Oman. The language is also spoken by most of the residents of Haima. It is related to other languages in the south, who share common traits in nouns, pronouns, verbs and vocabulary. The Shehri language is not spoken by a single social group, but every tribe living in the Salalah, Al Haffah and Dahariz regions. Until the early 1970s, this language was the language of most of the population. The Hobyót language is spread in a border area between Oman and Yemen, in a mountainous and coastal region, close to Jibbali and Mehri languages. Its similarity to other languages of the south is a result of geographical, social and economic factors. Behind all these languages lie different cultures, so in all of these languages beautiful literature and poetry can be found that reveals the southern society.

Shafi'i school of Sunnism. Hence, South Oman is a region rich in ethnological, ethnic, linguistic and religious unity.

This linguistic diversity has contributed greatly to the formation of Omani culture, either in the way of thinking or in the development of the historical character of these ethnic formations. Without a doubt,

multilingualism helps society to operate with broad tolerance. Every language has a culture behind it, and an independent historical character in terms of customs, traditions and lifestyle. It has been noted how the Zanzibari language contributed to a major shift in thinking among Zanzibari migrants, despite their Omani Arab historical roots.

Religious and Confessional (Madhhab) Plurality

Just as Oman is characterized by linguistic and ethnic pluralism, it is also characterized by religious and confessional pluralism. It is the only country in the Arab world where the three Islamic confessions (*Madhhabs*) have a strong presence and represent social entities that have been practicing their culture, identity and religious traditions for centuries: Ibadis, Shi'is and Sunnis. Baha'is, Hindus and Christians also have a religious presence in the country. In addition, there was a small Jewish community in Muttrah that is said to have migrated from Baghdad in the early 19th century, but they have since left.⁽³⁴⁾ This diversity was documented by English traveler William Palgrave, who visited Oman in the 19th century and wrote of the various ethnicities and religions in Oman, saying there were Jews, Christians, "Mohammedans" and Hindus.⁽³⁵⁾

Here, I will present structural approaches to understanding the relationship between religion and culture in particular, or between religious and other types of social and political discourse in general, in order to understand the movement and process of religious discourse in Oman.

First, two important problems arise in the intellectual formation of religious discourse in general, and Ibadi discourse in particular. The first is that the vocabulary of the religious discourse forms an important pivotal relationship in re-shaping the components of the Omani religious society, an anthropological process that demonstrates how patterns of discourse navigate the religious/cultural/social matrix. The second is to understand the pragmatic transformations that occur between two important discourses – the religious and the political – in their attempts to dominate the

collective conscience. This is more of a cognitive issue than an anthropological problem, and they are deeply intertwined.

The first issue pertains to the necessity of understanding the structural connection between the cultural as a social discourse, which shapes ethnic diversity in Oman, and the religious as primarily a political discourse — i.e. it includes a political project (the imamate), then a social discourse (a marked/formal identity), and a doctrinal discourse (the doctrinal conflict between right/wrong). The dialectic between these intersecting elements must be understood, beginning with the relationship of religion to culture, then of religion to society (the tribal issue) and also to the political (the Imamate). Finally the relationship of religion to religion must be understood (Islamization and sectarianism).

Just from reading contemporary Omani history it is clear that the process of separating religious and other discourses is very complex. When religion proclaims its existence as a political model (the imamate/caliphate) for society and the state, it often affects the structure of the tribal social system, which can be observed in Omani history. But it does not become a purely confessional project, nor does it transform into a project to dominate the cultural commonalities between the plethora of groups in Omani society, in which its customs, traditions and diverse culture are embedded.

Thus, the equilibrium comes to rest on cultural and religious society, which is highly significant. Culture, and all its linguistic, ethnic and religious manifestations, was also diverse in pre-1970 Omani history, and religious discourse did not dominate. The Ibadi imamate as a religious-political establishment

34 Oppenheim (Arabic translation), 53

35 William Gifford Palgrave, *Narrative of Year's Journey through Central and Eastern Arabia (1862-1863)*, 2 vols (London: Macmillan, 1865), p. 244.

does not transform directly into a sectarian project or an ideological cultural project but tries only to apply justice in legislating and in its general social behavior, as stipulated by the Ibadi school of law. Consequently, the Omanis who ruled large parts of eastern Africa and did not seek to propagate their confession despite their position of political authority. Some great Ibadi scholars lived there for a long period of time without ever opening schools of jurisprudence through which they could disseminate Ibadism.

The religious discourse in Oman has not been historically detached from the tribal social structure and cannot maneuver without encountering elements of tribal society. The political/religious conflict over the Imamate sometimes transforms into a purely social conflict between Omani tribes and sometimes develops into a new social problem. This happened at the end of the Yaruba dynasty, when in 1718 the Omanis divided socially into two groups known as the Hinawi and the Ghafiri.⁽³⁶⁾ These social-political events evolved to the point that Oman transformed into two tribal blocs. The Hinawi were led by Khalaf bin Mubarak Al-Hinai, while Mohammed bin Nasser Al-Ghafri headed the Ghafiri. The effects of the ensuing civil war continued to be felt until the reign of Said bin Taimur in 1932.

These tribal alliances helped diminish the significance of potential sectarian conflicts in Omani society. They contributed significantly to the development of social formations that engaged the collective Omani mind more than traditional sectarian formations. Additionally, this conflict refashioned an enduring social problem, dividing Omanis once again into Adnani and Qahtani tribes; Northern and Southern Arabs with the Ghafiri Hinawi split representing a radical change in Omani tribal formations with each tribal bloc split into Adnani or Qahtani associations and into Sunni and Ibadi sects. Accordingly, this changed the socio-political landscape for the first time in Omani history.

Religion as a purely sectarian/*madhhabi* model has not appeared in the history of the Omani state and has not dominated Ibadi imamate thought. Therefore,

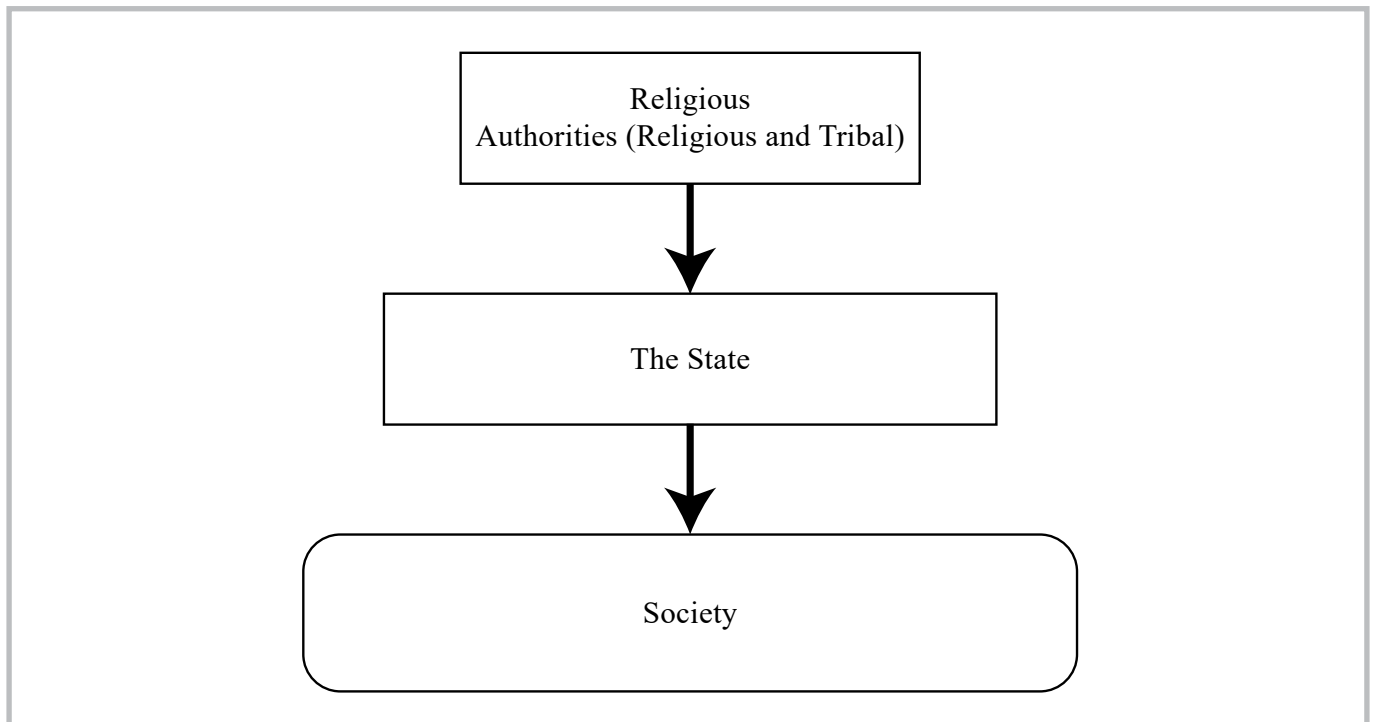
there has not been much religious/theological debate in Omani religious history, nor in the history of East Africa under Omani rule, in the last five centuries.

The religious model as a political project is related to the Imamate (the Caliphate) and has often been tied to the tribe as an important element of the Ibadi political project. Hence, it often had the support of all the Omani tribes of each sect or religion. It can be said that the relationship between religion as a political model and the social as a tribal structure is tense and dialectical and cannot be separated from religion. At the same time, the relationship between religion as a confessional (*madhhabi*) practice and the social as a cultural presence has been subdued throughout Omani history.

In social history and Ibadi religious history specifically, there is no record of a sectarian (*madhhabi*) project or a cultural project with the ideological and religious foundations of the Imamate in Oman throughout its long history. There is an important problem here; religion in Oman was only part of its multiculturalism, not the other way round. Culture is the primary determinant of the link between society and state. In this case, religiosity becomes part of the metaphysical heritage of the state because the way of thinking in multicultural societies preserves room for maneuver in society. This space impedes dogmatic religious models tied up with the dual concepts of right and wrong or *ḥalāl* and *ḥarām*. Religion here transforms into a historical culture to express an identity based on appearance more than a doctrine that assumes absolute truth. It also transforms into daily ritual practices and exercises its effectiveness in society as a cultural sign associated with political identity and historical presence. This explains the lack of any sectarian conflict in Omani history, even in the modern age.

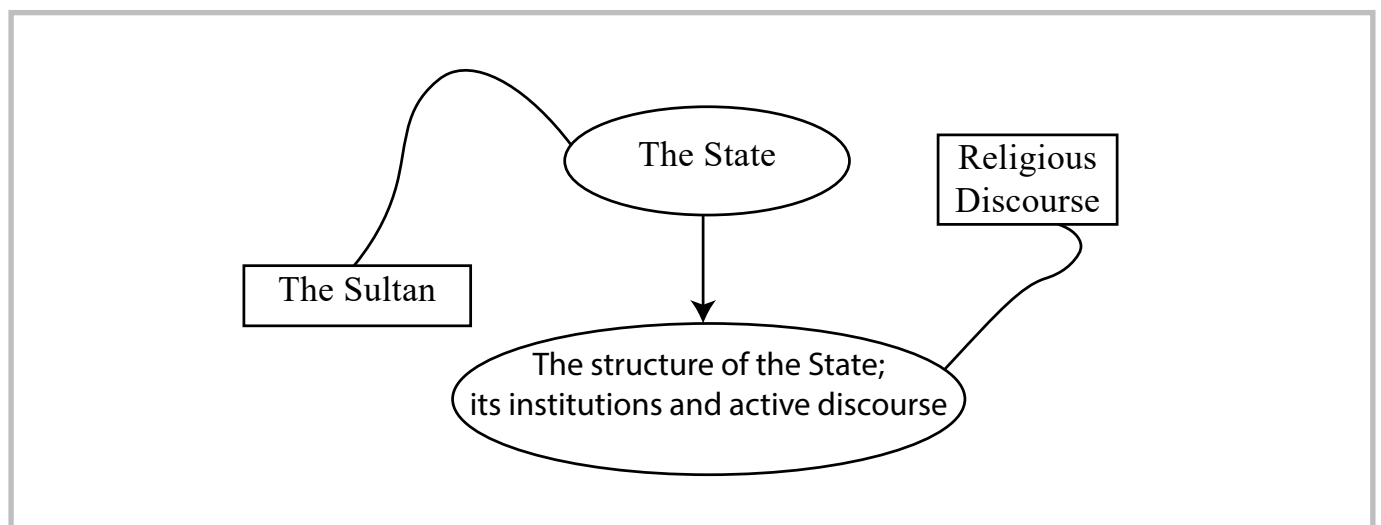
Religion and tribalism formed political-social components in Oman and represented the pillars of thought in the Omani Ibadi Imamate. Here it is appropriate to clarify the traditional state form, as the diagram below demonstrates:

36 This followed the death of Imam Sultan bin Saif in 1718, and some social leaders (the family of the dynasty in particular and the Arabs of the north) wanted to appoint his son as the Imam, despite his age (10 years old), while the Ibadi religious authorities considers his appointment a violation of the conditions of the Ibadi Imamate, and appointed Muhanna ibn Sultan, the husband of the young son's aunt. The Yaruba family stuck with the son, Saif bin Sultan as Imam, which led to the division of the Omanis into two groups known as the Hinawi and the Ghafiri. See: Abdullah bin Hamid Al-Salimi, *Toḥfat al-'ayān bi-Sīrat Ahl 'Umān*, vol. 2, (Muscat: Al-Maṭābi' Al-Dhahabiyah, 1993), 115.



While the modern civil state after 1970 worked to institutionalize the religious discourse, placing it within a religious institution that was restricted to

conditions subject to structure and legislation, and concerned with a directed specific discourse, as the following diagram shows:



This institutional shift to a religious discourse, or, in other words, the attempt to place religious discourse within the institutional framework, automatically transformed the Ibadi discourse — as the real actor in the Omani religious discourse — from a discourse that controls the shape of the state into a partial discourse seeking to conceptually and subjectively redefine the Ibadi school according to thought systems (*Système de pensée*) bringing them closer to the religious minorities. More precisely, this transformation led the Ibadi school to work within a system of societies and not within a state. Consequently, the cognitive output of this school

and ideological engagement today has shifted to serve this type of thinking. This structural transformation is similar to the greater transformations that happened within religious movements which are concerned with the group as a contemporary thought/contractual system rather than being concerned with society as path to radical social change.

Religious movements in the Islamic world thus transform, sometimes arbitrarily and other times systematically, into closed off blocs with only narrow spaces to exercise their discourse and legislation. This forces them to be distinct

from other movements in terms of behavior, thought, culture and organization. However, the shift of the discourse from a closed framework (the group) to a wider social space (society) often happens arbitrarily, aiming to form a “corrective movement” within societies. Islamic societies have deviated from the prophetic approach, and political power is thus subjugated and its sovereign decisions made null through the domination of “society”. This leads to sectarian and religious clashes within the state. The state as a political model disappears, to be replaced by the religious model, which is represented by new emerging powers that express themselves religiously or socially in a separate and insular fashion. Thus, religious ideas often navigate within the tight structure of the state and religious thought suffers from historical notions that lead it to automatically shift its discourse, molding it to the contextual circumstances. This thought also reproduces concepts and theories in order to be consistent with the era it is in but usually fails because religious thought is naturally locked into historical texts.

The post-1970 Ibadi school transformed from a concept of the state to a concept of the group, beating a significant retreat from the previous trend of building a connection between the religious and the social – that is, this relationship has significantly diminished since the Imamate period. The modern Omani state has come to dominate this issue (the social actor) with its political discourse, which is completely separate from the religious discourse. The state also worked to dismantle the perception of a former historical social character (represented by the appointment of ministers from outside historical social actors) and reconstructed it – or perhaps allowed it to reconstruct itself as a civil vision that concerns the individual, as opposed to the tribe, as a new social and civil space.

Additionally, post-renaissance Omani society became concerned with a more universal knowledge, which endowed it with a serious awareness of the social

transformation process. Social sources of authority no longer represent a significant moral value in building the social self, resulting in great changes to Omani society. This is clearly represented in the 2011 events demanding political and economic reforms. The social authorities were not able to undertake a positive role in these events, and the authority of the individual overpowered the strength of social systems. At the same time, the balance between the cultural and the religious has become somewhat tipped towards the religious because religious discourses in the Arab world generally began to take ideological shapes, which strongly apply its history, image, and formal rituals in the collective mind. This seems to happen arbitrarily in Omani society but the marks of transformation are yet to appear clearly in Oman and require more study.

The Omani religious discourse thus formed in two stages: the historical and the modern. There have been radical changes in the structure of religious thought politically, socially and culturally and in the structure of its relationship with the state as well as with other social and confessional communities in Oman. Accordingly, the dialectical relationship between the religious and the political appears, like the relationship between the religious and the social, to have been subdued by the major changes that have taken place in Omani society. Thus, the relationship between religious and cultural also appears to be tense from the major cultural modernist transformations. However, despite the Omani collective mind being historically religious, ethnological diversity in Oman has made the religious discourse more tolerant when it comes to implementing political ideas. The religious discourse itself is drawn from many confessions (*Madhhabs*) and schools. Therefore, social awareness is formed across diverse religious discourses which are often conflicting in social and political visions. This has led to the weakening of religion and its subsequent incapacity to be socially or politically effective.

Forecasts

Current conditions in Oman are different from those of the previous historical stages and will dictate the country’s political future. The transition from a traditional state (based on ethnic, confessional and regional topography) to a state based on civil society has set the political tone for political decision-makers and the pragmatic balances of traditional power centers have been greatly altered by global

and regional gravitations. Oman has also witnessed demographic changes in recent years that have altered the political landscape.

Today, new transformations can be observed on the Omani political scene: the beginnings of new civil institutions influenced by various currents of thought, and the political symbolism in the collective Omani mind drawn by these political forces and the current

agenda within the Omani administration. Thus, the social, economic and political centers of power on the one hand, and the impact on political decision-making on the other hand, have become somewhat polarized. Oman can be read ethnographically, religiously, socially/tribally or even regionally, with each aspect distinguished by its independent historical character through its modes of thinking, its religious contexts, its tribal and linguistic composition, and its social and religious traditions.

Tribal, confessional, religious, ethnic and linguistic pluralism thrust the language of tolerance upon the collective Omani mind because tolerance began to

be restricted. This is especially the case for religious tolerance, which had been lost by most Arab countries. However, this stability is not guaranteed to continue in the coming years, which will perhaps witness a population explosion followed by a political, religious and social intellectual resurgence. The country will also see a depletion of oil resources and possibly a change in the structure of the political state (constitutional monarchy) and a change in the shape of the Arab region, which will no doubt indirectly affect Oman. These transformations mean that a new geopolitical map cannot be ruled out, given the demographic changes imposed by ethnic, religious and linguistic pluralism.

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