Introduction

What is modern Oman? Today, Oman looks and feels like most people's idea of a modern country. This is particularly true in the capital city, Muscat, with its busy freeways and malls full of the latest consumer goods, and its high levels of Internet penetration and smartphone use, which are evident to even the casual observer. But at the same time Oman today retains many features that might be considered typical of distinctly premodern or traditional society. It is ruled by a hereditary monarchy, everyday social life involves widespread religious observance, 'traditional' conceptions of the family are a powerful influence on the decisions made by individual Omanis, and even in the capital city, Omani men and women wear what most observers would instantly recognise as 'traditional' dress.

Most Omanis, too, probably think that it is the freeways and the technology, along with some of the more striking achievements of the contemporary state – the comprehensive welfare system and public education – that make their country modern. That is to say, they identify as modern those things in which Oman resembles countries whose economies and social systems are the result of a process of industrialisation that began, typically, in Europe and the United States in the nineteenth century. To call Oman modern in this sense, and to contrast its modern and traditional elements in this way, then, is to imply a process of linear development, to suggest a narrative of progress from a 'backward' or 'underdeveloped' state towards the achievement of a recognisable condition of modernity. This is a perspective shared by many Western accounts of Oman's history, and it is also the dominant commonsense Omani understanding of that history, often reinforced by the present

government's own narrative of national 'renaissance' and economic development since 1970.

The reality is a little more complex. The achievement of the visible and commonsense modernity so evident in Oman today has indeed been quite remarkable. The familiar story of a country that was considered 'medieval' in its social arrangements and lack of infrastructure (paved roads, schools, hospitals and so on) in the mid-twentieth century, but which was transformed through the investment of oil revenues after 1970 into the self-evidently 'developed' nation of 2015, is, in many respects, entirely true. But it leaves out two complications. First, many underlying features of this contemporary Omani modernity can be traced to a much earlier period in the country's history, most particularly to its long participation in global trade networks. Second, several key aspects of what look like residues of Omani 'tradition' are in fact products of the very same earlier history. Above all, the hereditary monarchy of the Al Bu Said was itself an innovation, forged not in some 'medieval' past but, rather, in the late eighteenth century, at precisely the moment at which Oman decisively established itself as a significant participant in an increasingly global capitalist economy.

So it might make more sense to draw a distinction between two related senses of modern and modernisation in Oman. One is the familiar, everyday sense, referring to capitalist economic development, technological advances, centralised administration and the provision of public services. The other might refer to features of Omani society that look, in these terms, much less modern but which, in the context of a history of Oman such as this one, are in fact best understood as characteristics of a distinctively Omani modernity. These might include, therefore, the hereditary monarchy, the consolidation of a coherent 'traditional' national identity, as well as the country's participation in cosmopolitan networks of commerce and cultural exchange. At some points, these two senses of modernity converge, but not always.

Modernity, in the sense intended in this book, then, is a state of contradiction and tension among elements of a culture.

Modernity in Oman is not the resolution of this contradiction, but the experience of living with it: living with tensions between urban and rural patterns of life (and in the case of many Omanis, moving on a weekly basis between them) or negotiating the place of religious observance and practice in relation to a dominant global secularism. The example of Oman might also help us think about the nature of modernity

elsewhere in similar terms. To be modern is to live in the present a set of tensions between a knowledge of the past and an imaginary future. In other words, the condition of being modern involves the persistence of the non-modern, a continual negotiation over what it is to be modern and, in the case of Oman, what it is to be Oman or Omani.

POLITICAL GEOGRAPHY

The Sultanate of Oman, to give the modern nation its official title, is located in the southeast of the Arabian Peninsula, with three land borders – with the United Arab Emirates to the north and west, Saudi Arabia to the west and Yemen to the south and west. To the east of Oman's long coastline is the Indian Ocean. From the coastal capital of Oman, Muscat, to Karachi on the other side of the Indian Ocean is a voyage of about 900 kilometres. Rising up behind Muscat is a dramatic line of rugged dark mountains, the Hajar range, which separates the two main axes of the traditional Omani nation – the coast and the interior – from one another. Northwest along the coast itself, between Muscat and another historical Omani port, Sohar, is the narrow plain called the Batinah. This is the region from which Omanis have traditionally ventured abroad, building multiple trade connections in the Gulf, across the Indian Ocean and even south to the coast of eastern Africa. Crossing the Hajar mountains brings you into the interior of the country, the Dakhliyah, where the people have tended to focus more exclusively upon subsistence agriculture and where Oman's traditional religious institutions are at their strongest, especially in the old capital and oasis town, Nizwa. Rising in the heart of the interior is the plateau known as the Jebel Akhdar (Green Mountain), where the altitude creates a cooler climate than in the desert below and where fruit and flowers grow on mountainside terraces. North and west of the Dakhliyah is the Dhahirah, beyond which lies the desert area of the Rub al-Khali (Empty Quarter). Southeast and beyond Muscat in the opposite direction from Sohar, the coast is rockier as it reaches down to another famous port town, Sur. Inland from Sur is the desert region known as the Sharqiyah. South of here, and for many centuries reached primarily by sea, is the distinctive region of Dhofar, where another coastal plain sits at the feet of mountains that separate the cultivable lowlands from the vast expanses of the Arabian Desert. Dhofar is the only part of the Arabian Peninsula with weather affected by the Indian Ocean monsoon, which produces every July and August the season known as *khareef*, in which

mists and rains descend upon the hillsides of the Dhofari *jebel*, turning an otherwise largely barren landscape into a carpet of green decked with wild flowers. The relationship between coast and interior, the particular character of the Jebel Akhdar and the unique culture of Dhofar have all contributed significantly to the course of Oman's history, both ancient and modern, in ways we shall try to explain in the chapters that follow.

Perhaps the most significant determining factor in Oman's modern history has been its position at the Strait of Hormuz. The Strait of Hormuz is a narrow sea passage between the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean. One shore of the Strait is the tip of Oman's Musandam Peninsula, slightly less than 40 kilometres from the southern Iranian coast which forms its other shore. Once oil exports from the Gulf became crucial to the economies of the industrial world, from around the middle of the twentieth century, the Strait became one of the most important waterways in the world, with around 40 percent of all seaborne traded oil passing through it. Maintaining the secure passage of oil tankers from export terminals in major producing nations of the Gulf (Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates) into the open ocean, and on to major consumers, has therefore long been a matter of the highest priority for producers and consumers alike. Since 1979, the unpredictable and sometimes confrontational policies of the Islamic Republic of Iran have given rise to fears among other producers and, especially, Western consumers that Iran might close the Strait, either through a deliberate blockade or by creating tensions and conflict that would deter ships from leaving or entering the Gulf. Between 1984 and 1988, in the second half of the war between Iran and Iraq, for example, Iraqi forces attacked shipping, including oil tankers, in an effort to provoke Iran into a closure of the Strait, thereby making the United States intervene to prevent the Iranians and thus enter the war on Iraq's side. In a more recent move that indicates how much regional producers would like to be free of such disruptions, in 2012 the UAE started to export oil via a new terminal in Fujairah, thereby avoiding the need to use the Strait of Hormuz. This is an advantage that Oman has always enjoyed – all its ports have direct access to the open ocean. Of the other Arab states of the Gulf only the UAE, via its short Sharjah and Fujairah littorals, and Saudi Arabia, via its Red Sea coastline, can avoid the use of the Strait for seaborne oil exports. Iraq, Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar currently rely entirely upon the Strait of Hormuz. Not only does this mean that they each have a strategic interest in maintaining good relations with Oman, it also places upon Oman an obligation to its neighbours to maintain the good relations with Iran upon which their

capacity jointly to guarantee the security of the Strait depends. Iran's own interest in the security of the Strait of Hormuz is considerable: according to a recent Iranian estimate, around 80 percent of Iran's foreign trade passes through it.[1]

Although Oman as a distinct geographical and political entity has a very long history, not all of the territory encompassed by the modern state has always been part of Oman. The regions of Batinah, Dakhliyah and Sharqiyah, with their key towns such as Muscat, Nizwa, Rustaq, Sohar and Sur, may be regarded as a more or less consistent core, even if, at times, there have been tensions and divisions between them and contests for political supremacy in Oman between leaders from within these various regions. Throughout most of Oman's history there has been a broad political, social and economic distinction between coast and interior, sometimes expressed in the name given to the country, Muscat and Oman. At times in Oman's history this distinction has widened to division between two different political entities. These have sometimes been conceptualised as a Sultanate, ruled by dynasties whose political power derives from control of the coast, and an Imamate, ruled by leaders in keeping with Oman's unique religious-political tradition of Ibadism (of which more shortly). The incorporation of Dhofar into this social and political system is of relatively recent origin, and its complete assimilation to the modern state was not achieved until after the name of the country was changed from Muscat and Oman to Sultanate of Oman in 1970 and the military conflict in the region was resolved in the mid-1970s. In addition to the consolidation of territory which led to the formation of the modern nation-state in its current form, changes have occurred because of other territories which have, at various times in Oman's history, formed part of Oman and contributed substantially to its economic, social and cultural development. Foremost among these is the East African archipelago of Zanzibar, which in the mid-nineteenth century formed part of a distributed network of Omani interests and possessions. Less well known is the province of Gwadar on the Makran coast of what is now Pakistan, which Oman eventually sold to the Pakistani government in 1958. So the process by which the modern nation came into being involved both acquiring and relinquishing land, until the nation was eventually consolidated in a single more or less contiguous territory.

[1] Asghar Jafari-Valdani, 'The Geopolitics of the Strait of Hormuz and the Iran–Oman Relations', *Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs*, 4.2 (2012), pp. 7–40 (13).

CULTURAL HISTORY

Oman is an Arab and a Muslim nation. That general characterisation disguises a great deal of cultural diversity, however. It is widely believed that some of the non-Arabic tribes in Dhofar are in fact the descendants of peoples who inhabited southern Arabia before the successive migrations of Arabs into the area. The historical record, both textual and archaeological, leaves room for doubt and contention over the dates of these migrations, normally referred to as the Azd migrations, and on the related question of the extent of Persian rule over and occupation of territory in what is now Oman.[2] There is some broad agreement that there were at least two major migrations, one of which involved tribes that moved from what is now Yemen, first into Dhofar and subsequently northwards. A second phase of Arab migration is generally understood to have followed and to have involved tribes entering what is now Oman through the territory from the north, around the Buraimi oasis (which marks the northern limit of the Omani region now known as the Dhahirah). Further migrations may also have brought new tribes into the mountains of central Oman. Omani tribal genealogies tend to trace descent from either the migration from the north or the migration from the south, and the principal division between Omani tribal confederations (the Hinawi and the Ghafiri) is held to express this distinction, even where, in practice, origins and affiliations are much more complex than this straightforward bipolarity would suggest.[3] These

[2] See, inter alia, J. C. Wilkinson, *Water and Tribal Settlement in South-East Arabia: A Study of the Aflaj of Oman* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977); J. C. Wilkinson, 'Arab–Persian Land Relationships in Late Sasanid Oman', *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 3 (1973), pp. 40–51; Brian Ulrich, *Constructing Al-Azd: Tribal Identity and Society in the Early Islamic Centuries* (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2008); Brian Ulrich, 'The Azd Migrations Reconsidered: Narratives of Ab Muzayqiya and Malik b. Fahm in Historiographic Context', *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 38 (2008), pp. 311–318; Derek Kennet, 'The Decline of Eastern Arabia in the Sasanian Period', *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* 18 (2007), pp. 86–122; and D. Potts, *The Arabian Gulf in Antiquity*, vols. 1 and 2 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990).

[3] The Hinawi–Ghafiri distinction seems to have entered Omani historiography in the early eighteenth century CE, when tribes which traced their origins to the southern migration (Yamanis) were led by a member of the Bani Hina in a political and military struggle for power with tribes which identified themselves with the migration from the north (Nizaris) under the leadership of a member of the Bani Ghafir. See Uzi Rabi, *The Emergence of States in a Tribal Society: Oman Under Said bin Taymur, 1932–1970* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2006), pp. 11–12. As Patricia Risso points out, the 'alleged fundamental tribal split among all Arabians', which this division reiterates, is 'oversimplified'. See Patricia Risso, *Oman and Muscat: An Early Modern History* (London: Croom Helm, 1986), p. 4. We will return to this issue in our discussion of the Ya'ariba civil war in Chapter 1.

Azd tribes came into contact, and eventually, it seems, conflict, with Persians who had settled in parts of what is now northern Oman, under both the Achaemenid (from the sixth century BCE) and Sasanid (from the third century BCE to the seventh century CE) Empires. During this period, following the Azd migrations and the rise of the Sasanid Empire, Rustaq and Sohar became the two most important Omani settlements, and the leaders of the Arab tribes, al-Julanda, exercised power from Rustaq on behalf of the Persians, whose headquarters were in Sohar.

Omani historiography offers the story of Malik bin Fahm as an origin narrative for Oman as an Arab nation. This story appears in the *Kashf al-ghumma*, an anonymous history, probably written in the first half of the eighteenth century and sometimes attributed to Sirhan bin Said bin Sirhan bin Mohammed. At the start of the story Malik bin Fahm lives in 'el-Sarat' in what is now Yemen. He decides to leave his homeland when one of his nephews kills a dog belonging to a neighbour who is under Malik's protection. Taking with him the people of his tribe who owe him allegiance, he travels towards Oman, learning on the way that the Persians are inhabiting Oman. He gathers a force of Arabs from the areas through which he passes and confronts the Persians, who send out an advance guard from their stronghold in Sohar. When the Persians refuse to reach an agreement with Malik bin Fahm which would allow him to settle in Oman, he prepares for confrontation on a plain near the town of Nizwa. The Persians attack, and after a battle of three days Malik bin Fahm kills the Persian commander in single combat and the Persian army flees the field. As a result of the ensuing treaty, the Persians are granted a year in which to evacuate Oman, and they withdraw to Sohar. During this period 'it is said' that the Persians destroyed many water channels (Sulayman bin Daoud having constructed ten thousand of them in Oman). The Persian ruler is incensed at news of Malik bin Fahm's victory, and instead of allowing the defeated Persians to return to their own country, he sends a troop of his most renowned warriors via Bahrain to Oman. Malik bin Fahm's smaller force defeats this second Persian attack and goes on to take control over the whole of Oman, 'governing wisely and well' for seventy years until his death at the age of 120. Book One of the *Kashf al-ghumma* ends as follows:

> The Persians did not return to Oman after their expulsion by Malik until his reign terminated, and his children reigned in his place, and the kingdom of Oman came into the possession of el-Julanda-bin el-Mustatir el-Mawali, and Persia fell into the hands of the Benu Sasan. There was a peace between them and el-Julanda in Oman, and the Persians kept a force of 4000 warriors in Oman and a deputy with

the kings of the el-Azd. The Persians abode on the sea coast, and the el-Azd ruled in the interior plains and hills and districts of Oman, the direction of affairs being entirely with them.[4]

This eighteenth-century history, quite probably written at a time when the Persians were once again exercising considerable influence in Oman, and just before their expulsion by the founder of the Al Bu Said dynasty, Ahmad bin Said, shows how the writing of ancient history – the story of Malik bin Fahm and his triumphs over the Persians – may have as much to say about the moment in which it is written as it does about the historical events it purports to relate. It affirms Omani autonomy and it does so specifically by contrasting it with the alternative, which is subjugation to Persian rule. By painting such a picture of the historical past it affirms a desire for a future in which the same autonomy is achieved. It is perhaps worth noting that three highly significant events, the arrival of the Arabs in Oman, Oman's embrace of Islam and the inauguration of the Al Bu Said dynasty, are all associated in Omani historiography with Omanis throwing off the Persian yoke.

There is in fact some considerable scholarly debate over the extent of Sasanid Persian rule in eastern Arabia generally, and Oman in particular, during this period. Some scholars have argued that the Persians in Oman ruled directly, exerted territorial control, owned land and contributed to a period of economic prosperity. Some recent work has challenged this view, suggesting more indirect control and disputing the evidence of a significant economic impact, other than from maritime trade.[5] It is, however, generally accepted that the Persians were responsible for developing viable agriculture in Oman through the construction of systems of irrigation channels known in Persian as *qanat* and in Omani Arabic as *aflaj* (sing. *falaj*). These are the channels attributed in the *Kashf al-ghumma* to the Persian Sulayman bin Daoud. The use of *aflaj* in Oman has been central to the maintenance of life there even into the twenty-first century, and Oman's *aflaj* are the most extensive outside Iran. The social interaction encouraged by the use of *aflaj*, which require the development of complex systems for the management of a scarce and essential collective resource,

[4] *Kashf al-Ghumma*, translated and annotated by E. C. Ross as 'Annals of Oman, from Early Times to the Year 1728 A.D. From an Arabic MS. by Sheykh Sirhan bin Said bin Sirhan bin Muhammad of the Benu Ali Tribe of Oman', in E. C. Ross, 'Political Agent at Muscat', *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, pt. I, no. 2 (1874), pp. 111–196.

[5] For a summary of the competing scholarly accounts see Brian Ulrich, 'Oman and Bahrain in Late Antiquity: The Sasanians' Arabian Periphery', *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 41 (2011), pp. 377–385.

has given Omani culture a strong material basis for cooperation, which, as we have suggested elsewhere, contributes to a more general cultural preference for non-confrontational and consensual decision-making.[6]

As the new religion founded by the Prophet Mohammed started to spread through the Arabian Peninsula, his ambassador Amr bin al-As brought news of Islam to the most prominent Omani Arab rulers, Jaifar and Abd al-Julanda. Following consultation with other tribal leaders and religious scholars, a decision was taken to embrace Islam. The alliance thus forged with the Muslims of Mecca and Medina strengthened al-Julanda political power to such an extent that the Omani rulers were able to force a Persian withdrawal from the Batinah. These Omani leaders also drew their coastal territory into the political ambit of the first Caliphate, and Omanis participated in its subsequent expansion, including the conversion of the Sasanid Persian Empire and a substantial portion of the eastern Roman Empire. It was in Basra, a city which soon became one of the main centres of Islamic political power, that the distinctive strand of Islamic thought and practice that would come to be associated most strongly with Oman – Ibadism – came into being. The origins of Ibadism – named after Abdullah bin Ibad, although its leading intellectual founder was Jabir bin Zaid, a scholar from Nizwa who had settled in Basra – lie in disputes over succession in the Caliphate, which began with the accession of Uthman, the third Caliph and the first not to have been a companion of the Prophet. Those who became the Ibadis were among those who opposed a dynastic succession in the Caliphate. Ibadism was brought to Oman in 747 CE, and a first attempt was made to establish an Imamate on the basis of Ibadi religious, political and legal principles, with an Arab tribal leader elected as the first Imam. Foremost among these principles were the equality of all Muslims and the opposition to tyrannical power, both of which were to be sustained through the leader of the Muslim community being chosen through a process of consultation (*shura*). The specific Ibadi emphasis on *shura* – which we will discuss, in terms of its modern application, in Chapter 7 – is one of the principal ways in which Ibadis are conventionally distinguished from Sunnis and Shias. There are a number of differences in religious doctrine and interpretation, too, as well as in everyday religious practice, by which

[6] See Jeremy Jones and Nicholas Ridout, *Oman, Culture and Diplomacy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), pp. 54–57. On *aflaj*, see also Wilkinson, *Water and Tribal Settlement*, and Dale R. Lightfoot, 'The Origin and Diffusion of Qanats in Arabia: New Evidence from the Northern and Southern Peninsula', *Geographical Journal* 166.3 (2000), pp. 215–226.

Ibadis may be distinguished from other Muslims, but Ibadis themselves tend to avoid discussion of sectarian difference, sometimes referring to Ibadism as a *madhab* without a *madhab* (sect without a sect).[7] This is consistent with one of the distinctive positions adopted by the Ibadis at the time of their formation: unlike the Kharijites, who constituted another of the main groups opposed to dynastic succession in the early Caliphate, the Ibadis rejected the use of force as a way of settling such disputes.

Modern Oman has the largest proportion of Ibadis of any country in the world (there are significant communities of Ibadis in Libya, Tunisia and Algeria, as well as in Zanzibar, in the latter case as a direct result of the Omani presence). The Omani government does not include sectarian questions in its census, but the most reliable estimates suggest that Ibadis account for about 45 percent of the population, although many sources tend to reproduce claims that Ibadis constitute a majority and, in some cases, up to 75 percent of the population. Whatever the precise figure, what is important is the cultural and intellectual influence of Ibadism on Omani social and political life. The ruling Al Bu Said dynasty are Ibadis, and there are aspects of modern government, particularly under Sultan Qaboos, which, as we shall see, draw substantially on elements of Ibadi tradition. Nonetheless, the most long-standing political tension in the modern era can be characterised, at least in part, as that between the religious tradition of the 'elective' Imamate of the interior and the dynastic rulers of the coast, even though, as many historians have noted, the Imamate itself became a largely dynastic institution.[8] The Imamate's claim to political autonomy from the coast, or even, in some cases, to overall political leadership of Oman, rests upon its long and continuous role in the social and religious life of the country, and upon its adherence to its tradition of elective leadership. As we shall see, the consolidation of Al Bu Said rule in modern Oman has depended substantially on the dynasty's capacity to conduct the business of government with appropriate regard for Ibadi principles and sensibilities. The government risks opposition when its policies can be portrayed as out of touch with principles to which Imamate leaders, or

[7] Scholarly accounts in English of Ibadism include Ahmed Hamoud al-Maamiry, *Oman and Ibadism* (New Delhi: Lancers, 1980); Amr Khalifa al-Nami, *Studies in Ibadhism* (Open Mind, 2007); J. C. Wilkinson, *The Imamate Tradition of Oman* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Khalid al-Azri, *Social and Gender Inequality in Oman: The Power of Religious and Political Tradition* (London: Routledge, 2012); and Valerie Hoffman, *The Essentials of Ibadism* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2012).

[8] See, in particular, Wilkinson, *The Imamate Tradition*, pp. 9–17.