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# **PARTICIPATION CULTURE IN THE GULF**

**NETWORKS, POLITICS AND IDENTITY**

Edited by  
Nele Lenze and Charlotte Schriwer

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# Participation Culture in the Gulf

Networks, Politics and Identity

Edited by  
**Nele Lenze and  
Charlotte Schriwer**

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## 6 Challenges and aspirations of the "post-oil nation" in the Sultanate of Oman

*Veronika Cummings*

The Omani nation represents one of the youngest populations worldwide. Almost two-thirds of the society are younger than thirty years, born and brought up in the (post-)modernisation era of continuous economic growth, development and improving living conditions that started after Sultan Qaboos bin Said al Said took power in a bloodless coup d'état in 1970. As the father of this young nation, he established the widely recognised political stability of the country with his modest political reforms, political neutrality in regional and international conflicts, and religious tolerance. Furthermore, he aims for the unification of the nation under the umbrella of one Omani national identity. Yet, this is still being challenged by the still-effective tribal structures and the variety of social groups of different ethnic and geographic origins.

The loyalty of the Omani people to the sultan has generally been very high, as the economic growth and improvement of the quality of life in the entire country has always been linked intimately to Qaboos himself. However, social unrest has been simmering since 2011 and popular frustrations find their expression in increasing criticism of the government. A strengthened civil society has emerged as an instrument to display discontent about deep-seated issues in the sociopolitical order. Corruption, the lack of employment for nationals, and the ongoing high presence of economic migrants in the country are central topics of concern, but, in addition, the rigidity and inefficiency of the bureaucratic structures in the dominating public sector are criticised, and claims for a less authoritarian, more democratic system are on the rise.

The domestic challenges are calling into question the politics and the social contract<sup>1</sup> of the current regime. These difficult tasks basically emerge from the efforts to diversify the economy, the continuing high dependence on oil revenues, and the heavy reliance on a foreign labour force. Furthermore, entangled realities and growing contradictions of traditional and modern lifestyles defy the current political system – including the tribal structures that are still vital as well. Finally, social conservatism is rising amongst the local population to distinguish itself more decisively from non-nationals. The aspirations for a national identity (beyond the still-effective "tribal fabric" and "Arabness"<sup>2</sup>) are also spurred by concerns about cultural marginalisation and economic competition between nationals and foreigners.

These confrontations within cultural pluralism and the aspirations of the younger generation of Omanis will be discussed and analysed against the background of the modernisation process and the rising topics of international labour and the contemporary migration regime in the Gulf.

### **The rise of a new modern Omani state**

Since the growth and development of the oil sector in 1967 and with the coming to power of Sultan Qaboos bin Said al Said in 1970 (who continues to lead today as the longest-serving ruler of all Gulf states), Oman has experienced – similar to the other members of the Gulf Cooperation Council – an era of intense economic development and countrywide investment in technical infrastructure (roads, buildings etc.), as well as in terms of social infrastructure (schools, hospitals etc.).

Qaboos put an end to the international isolation and globally obscure existence of the country under his father Sultan Sa'id bin Taimur's auspices in the twentieth century. In the 1960s, under the rule of Taimur, Oman saw social and political stagnation. In agreement with British rule, who mainly wanted to serve their economic interests by controlling areas replete with oil and gas fields in the interior of Oman, the sultan believed that any uncontrolled social and economic development would open the door towards an emergence of political opposition.<sup>3</sup> These politics included preventing any foreign or modern (i.e. European or American export) influences, which led to strong restrictions in the purchase of luxury articles, e.g. cars, imported newspapers or books, and in consumption and lifestyle habits (e.g. consuming alcohol, cigarettes, dress code, outdoor activities etc.).<sup>4</sup> The isolation policy under Sultan Sa'id bin Taimur – from modernists often perceived as backward-looking – also included the cessation of the issuing of entry permits for foreigners to Oman, and similarly tight restrictions on travel for Omani citizens inside and outside the country. He also denied his people educational development and adequate health services,<sup>5</sup> as the effects of education were particularly feared for generating a potential risk for political unrest. The country only had three elementary schools until 1970, but around fifty Qur'anic schools, which taught the majority of pupils countrywide. This stifled, poor social development motivated many Omanis to move abroad and to live in the neighbouring Gulf countries, where a majority worked in subordinate positions compared to the kind of work they would have had at home in Oman.<sup>6</sup>

The coup d'état of Sultan Sa'id's son Qaboos in July 1970 was supported by the British authorities, who shared his interest in releasing the country from its isolation. The political grounding for Qaboos's social and economic modernisation path was to guarantee stability and durability of his political system by enlarging the traditional basis of power, meaning that he had to gain trust amongst a wider group of people than just the allies of the previous sultan. He "used the 'homogenisation power' of the central state"<sup>7</sup> in order to do so, instead of relying on a single social force. The idea was to legitimise a welfare state, so that the Omani population did not rely any longer at the individual level on the

*asabiyyat* (the tribe) but on the state for all social welfare achievements (education, health, housing). This required making himself the only authority able to redistribute the oil rents. The state was to substitute the role previously played by the tribes in providing protection for and socio-economic well-being of the citizens. Thus, he established two things simultaneously: a nation state and a national identity, out of the country that he inherited as a stateless territory.<sup>8</sup>

### **Trilemma of economic, political and social modernisation**

Modernity, or the process of modernisation in normative terms, is generally equated with measurable targets of a linear development process. It mainly appears as such also in the National Development Plans of the Sultanate of Oman, where it basically refers to improved living quality, due to the availability of (newly built) social and technical infrastructure and economic prosperity – all made possible through oil rents.

The era of oil modernisation in the Gulf coincided with the time of accelerated multilayered globalisation processes in the second half of the twentieth century. Sociocultural, economic and geopolitical spheres worldwide have been rapidly entangled under the rule of capitalism and the neo-liberal paradigm. Thus, local traditions had to be balanced in a rapidly disseminating global context – in particular with regard to economic and social development and the possibilities to participate in the newly emerging materialistic lifestyles. Furthermore, the swift set-up of the Gulf modernisation process created new dependencies: economically, it led to a high dependence on the monolithic source of income, which is widely known and described as the economic mode of rentierism. Socially, the Gulf economies became highly reliant on the recruitment of a foreign workforce and expertise since the very beginning of the oil modernisation period, owing to the quantitative lack of local human capital.

The economic modernisation process in the Arab Gulf is to a very large extent a neo-colonial export of modern economic structures from the more industrialised world, led by Europe and America, based on the autochthone resources of oil (and gas) but without additional industrialisation or sufficient economic diversification. However, a paradigmatic contradiction exists as this economic modernisation has been embedded until today in the region's political and social structures, which are divergent from Western, capitalist ideas of political and societal modernity. The Gulf region's specific political, ideological and cultural structures are defined by the hegemonic power system of the hereditary monarchies, and thus led by an authoritarian top-down principle in decision-taking and policymaking. On the social scale, Gulf societies are neither targeting and recognising cultural diversity as a new social reality – which is an inevitable effect of being entangled in a globalised world (in particular with regard to the exchange of human capital, i.e. international work exposure, heterogenisation of the national labour market etc.) – nor primarily structured according to the principles of free market economies, i.e. by socio-economic status, as class societies or similar. The predominant line for the social status in Gulf societies still runs

along the historically defined tribal hierarchy amongst the autochthone inhabitants of the Arabian Peninsula that goes back far beyond the establishment of the contemporary Gulf states. Second, the social stratigraphy distinguishes by the idea and degree of belonging to the region, thus by identity as being a citizen or a non-citizen, temporarily living and working in the Gulf.

Political modernity, in its normative Western or democratic understanding, is characterised by the “rule through modern institutions of the state, bureaucracy, and capitalist enterprise”.<sup>9</sup> Such an understanding of modernity or modernisation is tacitly implicit in what are considered worldwide globalised economies. If modernisation or globalised structures were claimed to exist independently of a democratic, liberal context, a trilemma composed of globalisation, nation state and democracy emerges. The core issue of this trilemma, as formulated by economist Dani Rodrik,<sup>10</sup> is the current crisis of globalisation. This crisis derives from the fuzzy character and transparency, but also from the missing legitimisation (and societal acceptance) of globalisation phenomena. This applies in particular on new lifestyle patterns that conflict with traditions and cultural values. For instance, this occurs when globalisation meets corrupt institutions and authoritarian structures.<sup>11</sup> In reality, all three elements – globalisation, nation state and democracy – can rarely be achieved simultaneously. If economic globalisation, in its primary idea of interdependency of a (liberal) market economy and secular politics, is to take place and be legitimised, it requires, first, in a Western-centric view of modernity a new liberalism that is societally and politically compatible. Such liberalism competes with the still strong traditional structures, habits etc. in the conservative Gulf monarchies. Second, such a new liberalism cannot be replaced simply by an imposed new nationalism. Nationalism itself is a twofold challenge in the Arab Gulf: in the first place it refers to the young nation states that did not exist in the form they do today until the 1970s. Therefore, the national identification process is still in progress and combating with the powerful tribal hierarchy that underlies societal structures. In the second place, nationalism is challenged by the question of whom to address or target in the context of the Gulf countries’ high demographic imbalance between nationals and non-nationals. As can be seen in Figure 6.1, only the two major territorial states of Oman and Saudi Arabia have a majority of nationals amongst the total population (i.e. Omani or Saudi citizenship holders). The smaller Gulf states struggle significantly with the challenge of being outnumbered by foreign residents, whose stay in the country depends on their working visa. According to the GCC’s labour laws, one has to leave the country once his or her working contract is finished. This brings little incentive to identify with one’s nation of residence, even if it is for migrant kids in the second or third generations who were born in the Gulf and would consider it “home”.

Although society and the ruling elite in the Sultanate of Oman represent a rather moderate and open approach towards the above-described changes and structures, the modern Omani post-oil nation is at a critical juncture today: it has to balance the different spheres of economic, political and social modernity in the era of neo-liberal globalism between local tradition and aspirations, and

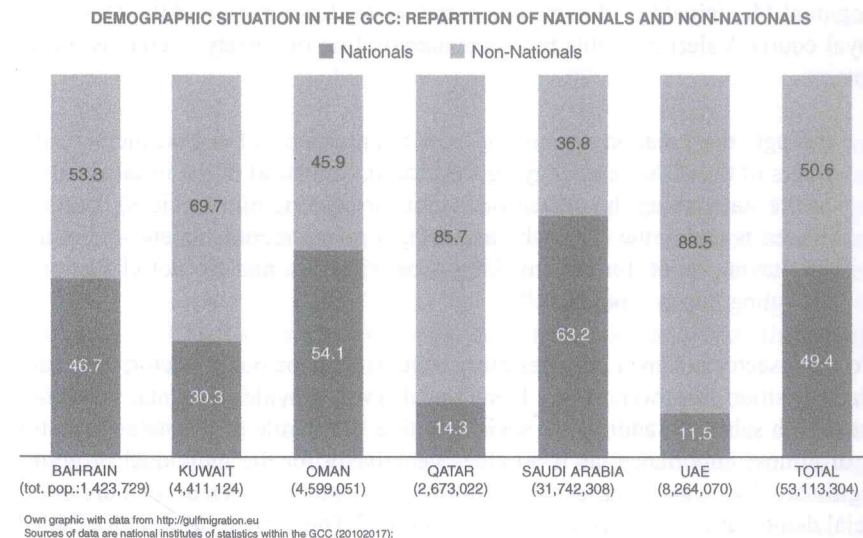


Figure 6.1 Demographic distribution in the GCC: repartition of nationals and non-nationals.

Source: courtesy of the author.

global contexts and expectation of democratic, liberal structures, to continue on a stable path, particularly in the light of a foreseeable political change of the leadership.<sup>12</sup> The modern post-oil nation is economically aspired but socially contested. The key topic for this is the question about the nation underneath the society’s tribal structure – and who is entitled to belong to this “new” nation as a citizen.

### A nation state without a nation?

From 1970 onwards, Sultan Qaboos set the ambitious goal to establish “a nation state with a nation; a geographical and symbolic territory with a political control apparatus”.<sup>13</sup> His aim was to strengthen a nation state with a national identity within the territorial boundaries of what is nowadays contemporary Oman. Three core political strategies were used to achieve this goal: a plan for national development, the protection of the citizens through state welfare, and a unifying national identity.

The state became the main institution to “protect” its citizens through the welfare system, and to give them more individual autonomy from its tribal groups (*asabiyya*). The aim was to strengthen the citizen’s identification with the state, rather than with the tribe, which contributes to the goal of building a shared national identity. Another important strategy in “anchoring the state in the daily proximity of every Omani”<sup>14</sup> was the creation of state jobs in the public sector

(the main sectors for employment are the Ministries of Education, Health, Regional Municipalities, Environment and Water Resources, and the Diwan, or royal court). Valeri calls this the “bureaucratisation of society”<sup>15</sup> and, as Ayubi notes:

through the creation, expansion and maintenance of a bureaucracy, the rulers of the oil-state are paying the citizen.... Instead of the usual situation of the state taxing the citizen (in return for offering him services), here the citizen is taxing the state – by acquiring a government payment – in return for staying quiet, for not invoking tribal rivalries, and for not challenging the ruling family’s position.<sup>16</sup>

No other sector in Oman provides more benefits than the public sector; a bureaucratic position of power, at any hierarchical level, provides a regular and relatively high salary, in addition to social prestige.<sup>17</sup> The role of the state apparatus is of utmost importance, as it provides generously for the individual: it grants legitimate dividends (salaries, social allowances) and it is seen as a “more unofficial democratic mechanism of redistribution”.<sup>18</sup> The sudden oil wealth enabled these thousands of state employees to benefit from the new opportunities for personal enrichment. In exchange, they represent the most reliable and pragmatic allies of the ruler.<sup>19</sup> The closest tribes to the sultan’s family are granted the highest-paid and most influential, i.e. powerful, positions in the bureaucratic hierarchy. However, members of “opposed” or more distant tribes are being provided with middle and lower positions in the public sector for strategic reasons to assuage potential discontent within the population. Thus, Oman has the basic socio-economic structures to produce and reproduce its rentier economy: one main source of revenue, an active population basically employed in the public sector, and the absence of direct taxation.

Regarding the formation of a “modern” Omani identity, the tribally defined stratification is overlaid by the social segregation line that runs between nationals and non-nationals.

National identity in Oman is built upon three pillars: religion, origin (tribe and territory) and culture/language; religion has been nationalised<sup>20</sup> in the form of the dominant School of Ibadism. The latter is known for being moderate, embracing Ibadi–Sunni differences, and living an unwritten tolerance to Shi’ism, in order to avoid religious conflict. Furthermore, Ibadism is known as one of the oldest democratic traditions in history.<sup>21</sup> The practice of *ijtihad*, which allows a continuing interpretation of the Qur’an in the context of changing history, is supporting modernisation owing to its innate openness towards change. This applies likewise to tolerance towards other religions and cultures. Foreigners are, in general, accepted in Muslim societies as long as they submit and subordinate themselves to Muslim leadership. In the Arab Gulf this means in particular subordination to the *kafala* system.<sup>22</sup> But religious categories are also no longer fully applicable to integration of foreigners in modern times, as a majority of the foreigners (from other Arab countries in the MENA region or Asia and Africa)

living and working in the Gulf are also Muslims. Modern Omani citizenship still reflects a strong tribal hierarchy, i.e. racial and ethnic stratification of the Omani society, which is stronger than “Muslimness” alone.

Territorial origin, regional identity and tribal affiliation are concepts that are still effective and mirrored in some political practices today. According to Partrick,<sup>23</sup> this is evident when tribal sheiks are appointed by the sultan, as well as ministers, into the *majlis-al-dawla*.<sup>24</sup> It cannot be denied that there are exceptions, particularly with regard to the popularly voted *majlis-al-shura*. These elections are meant to demonstrate the Omani way towards increased democracy and participation of the nation in governing the country. However, racial tensions within Omani society against foreign residents became a major trigger for the uprisings in 2011,<sup>25</sup> and nepotism, rooted in the tribal hierarchy, was also a major source of political and social contestation.

Today, Oman still retains its racial and tribal identities. The society is racially and ethnically divided into major groups that define one’s individual identity, belonging and standing in society with reference to religion, origin and language. These groups are the Zanzibaris, Baluchis, Lawatiyyas and native Omanis. Further subdivisions into tribes (families) exist, although their number is difficult to define exactly. The tribes or major ethnic groups have territorial homelands that are partly mirrored in the governments of the modern Sultanate. For instance, the Dhofar region in the south is home to many ancient tribes; the desert area in the middle of the country is the territory of different nomadic pastoral tribes with ancestry in central Arabia or Yemen (e.g. the Harasiis tribe);<sup>26</sup> the northern interior and the mountainous region around Jebel Akhtar previously formed the Imamate around Nizwa; and the coastal area (Al-Batinah) stretches from Sohar in the north-east to the capital area of Muscat up to Sur. This coastal plain is historically the most cosmopolitan region of the country.

The historiography of Oman has always been strongly connected with the tribal hierarchy. The currently leading tribe of the Al-Bu Said family has been in power since 1744. Despite the influence of international powers on the political destiny of the tribe over the last two centuries, the declaration of a modern nation state in 1970, and the several steps during the last twenty years to establish a rule of law and institutions, the reality of the Sultanate’s governing principles is that it is still not a constitutional monarchy but a system where tribes “still constitute the back-bone of society at grass-roots level”. As Hoek further explains,

these social formations have an important integrative function, whereby seeking consensus, and negotiating with representatives from all groups concerned are well-proofed methods and conditions for the success of authority and stability within and between the tribes. Moreover, equality of the families, their leaders and the members is a guiding principle.<sup>27</sup>

Today, the political role of the tribes can be viewed from two perspectives: first, from an angle that gives credit to efforts to establish an institution-driven state, members for the Consultative Council (founded in 1991) are elected by the people

and are not nominated by the tribes. Thus, the government represents political institutions such as the police, judicial courts etc. in the regions and municipalities. From a sociocultural perspective, the tribal hierarchy is still very powerful in social and cultural practices of kinship, marriage and affiliation and for social networks.<sup>28</sup> This ascribed sociocultural capital has not ceased to influence professional assignments in the public sector as well as in the private economy and is directly linked to the use of personal influence and networks (*wasta*) for privileges.

Identity struggles also still refer to different sorts of historically gained capital such as geographical capital (origin, regional belongingness), sociocultural capital (e.g. education, language), economic capital (due to trade or merchandise) and mobile capital (transnational connections e.g. of traders). These different sorts of capital have an implicit hierarchy amongst the above-mentioned four main ethnic groups (Zanzibari, Baluchi, Lawatiyya and native Omani). Native Omanis ("Omani-Omanis") who have never left the Arabian Peninsula, and thus possess the most of the geographic capital, feel a sense of superiority towards other groups, in particular towards the Zanzibari Omanis. The latter refer strongly to their origin from the peninsular and their genealogical relation to Arab tribes, although they have been away for some decades. As a result of many Zanzibari Omanis having been educated abroad, having left for economic reasons or because they fled Oman under the rule of Qaboos's father, Taimur bin Said, they have accumulated significant cultural capital. After 1970, when Sultan Qaboos called them to return to Oman, he recognised their contribution to the development of the country by providing them with prestigious positions that required intellect and skills (e.g. in the oil and gas sector). And yet, many Zanzibari families received a certain distrust, having been considered a "threat to social stability",<sup>29</sup> and mutual prejudices emerged which might explain why they are still not overly represented in politics or the royal court (Diwan). Furthermore, positions with direct political influence remain firmly amongst other Omani families. Zanzibari Omanis emphasise their pride in their higher cosmopolitan capital, for example often expressed in their often-broader language skill (English, French) and also with their vernacular language Swahili.

Baluchis show another complex identity struggle in contemporary Oman, as Valeri explains in more detail.<sup>30</sup> Geographic capital is an important distinction between those who most recently settled around Muscat and who proudly emphasise that they speak Baluchi and consider themselves Baluchi Omanis; and those called Arab Baluch, who immigrated to the interior of Oman a longer time ago and identify themselves as an Arab tribe, speaking Arabic and confessing partly even to Ibadism. The latter are supported by the sultan in their socio-political positioning in the modern nation, but today the Baluchi community is polarised within the newly established or claimed *assabyyat* in the nation state.<sup>31</sup>

The Al-Lawatiyya, coming from South Asia (India), have less reference to their geographic origin, but refer to their genealogical connection to Arab tribes. They became devoted to Islam early on in history and have accumulated social capital due to inter-marriages with families from the Arab Gulf. Thus, family

relations exist to the ruling Al Said dynasty since the seventeenth century. Their political influence is further strengthened through social networks, which they obtain also with Lawatiyya families in other countries of the region (e.g. UAE, Qatar, Kuwait or Bahrain). They are influential in the Sultanate's politics and economy owing to the wealth the community has accumulated in business and trade, and they have at their disposal a considerable amount of transnational, as well as social and economic, capital. They are highly respected in Oman owing to their pioneering role in the cosmopolitan history of the Sultanate, establishing the sea trade in the Indian Ocean rim and the commercial trade that is mainly located in Muttrah (Muscat).

Thus, sociohistorical structures appear to have led to cultural differences based on ethnic identity and origin that still exist today, often resulting in the type of careers Omani citizens are likely to follow.

Against this background, the concept of the nation has been neglected and underdeveloped in public debate in the first four decades of the modernisation process. The profoundly increasing awareness and focus on national identity over the last years, particularly celebrated during the National Day Celebrations on 18 November (Sultan Qaboos's birthday), has basically been sparked by socio-economic concerns about demographic imbalances, the internal and regional influence of Iran, and concerns about the health of the sultan and his succession. But the notion of the nation, namely the identification with the Omani nation as a whole, is still widely overpowered by the tribal or regional identification for the majority of the Omani people, although "Arabness" also became a new value for some groups in the post-oil era, in identifying as Gulf Arabs and distinguishing from non-GCC Arabs and other foreigners.

### "Tribal modern": the new Omani society

As Miriam Cooke reveals, with reference to James Clifford, in her analysis under the title *Tribal Modern*,<sup>32</sup> the tribal is still "part of the present" in today's Gulf societies. However, it is important to note that this is the "non-Western present".<sup>33</sup> There is no contradiction between tribal structures and modern lifestyle in the lived reality and values of contemporary Arab Gulf societies, as she sets out further:

The tribal as it appears in the Arab Gulf today is integral to the modern; it constitutes a crucial element in the Gulf's modernity. The tribal was repressed in the middle of the twentieth century because oil imperialists and their local agents considered it a hindrance to modernization, but the tribal is making a comeback in the twenty-first century. In its return, the tribal signals racial privilege, social status, and exclusive entitlement to a share in national profits.<sup>34</sup>

The tribal becomes a major "product" in the promotion and self-identification process for the modern Gulf states, in particular in distinguishing nationals from foreigners.



As mentioned earlier, contemporary Omani society is divided into citizens and non-citizens (foreigners). The next subdivided distinction criteria for the nation, i.e. Omani citizens or nationals who form *the* Omani people, social capital, status and privileges run along the tribal lines. Therefore, the first criterion of distinction is obvious and laid down by rights and rules for foreigners; the second distinctive principle is neither directly visible from the outside nor written down but still powerful and effective within Omani local society. The distribution of status and power within the tribal modern society today is complex and opaque on first sight. The key to this complexity is again the binary cleavage between a neo-colonial, Western, oil imperialist perspective and a local understanding of the modernisation process, or the concept of “modernity”.

The “tribal modern” as a lived reality can fulfil the aspirations of the young Omani nation today – as long as they remain the privileged group, especially on the labour market. With the increasing number of foreign employees evolved, parallel to the still-determining structure of the tribal system, a class system based on socio-economic position, nationality and employment, i.e. one’s position in the labour market hierarchy. Omani nationals form the top of the social pyramid owing to the full rights granted to them as citizens and their unquestioned status of belonging to the country (exclusive entitlement to national wealth). However, the fine distinctions based on the tribal and/or ethnic lineage being Arabs from the Gulf region or Baluchi, Zanzibari etc. are decisive for the criticised rigidity and inefficiency of the bureaucratic structures in the dominating public sector. Claims for a less authoritarian, more democratic system are on the rise, where domestic challenges are calling into question the politics and the social contract of the current regime and are increasingly expressed by the younger generation.

Yet the individual status by nationality for each person living and working in Oman is clear, tensions rise owing to the considerable size of the foreign community in the Sultanate against the backdrop of the increasing youth unemployment amongst nationals.

At 45.9 per cent of the population, non-Omanis show a strong presence in today’s society (see Figure 6.1), especially Arab and Asian foreigners. Moreover, they are in majority inextricably entangled in everyday social and economic life, particularly in that of the younger Omanis, who are accustomed to this sociocultural diversity and to a certain level of comfort. Children from Omani middle- and upper-class families have grown up in a multicultural socialisation scheme made up of foreigners. A majority of schoolteachers are (non-Omani) Arabs; university teaching staff are also highly represented by foreigners. Housemaids, nannies and drivers are mainly from South and South East Asia and the provision of services (the medical sector, administration, IT, the hospitality sector etc.) is also represented by people of different nationalities, mother tongues, cultural beliefs etc., with a high representation of Asian origins. Cultural pluralism (and its further related effects like tolerance, integration etc.) is not yet effectively considered a new fact of the modern society, tightening the tensions between nationals and non-nationals further. Rather, the country is witnessing the emergence of cultural anxieties and a defensive nativism.

Another contradiction to the tolerated but contested large number of foreigners occurs as their high presence nowadays, particularly in urban areas, is mainly seen in the national development scheme as a means to achieve the goal of economic modernisation. The endeavours of the nationalisation of the labour market, i.e. to replace foreigners with national workforce, is the most significant sign of the general understanding – in the Sultanate as well as in the other GCC countries – that migration is a temporarily limited phenomenon. Non-nationals are still denied to varying degrees the full rights of belonging to the country and being recognised as part of the society, even if they had been born and brought up in the country they consider to be their home (migrants’ children in the second or third generations). Despite these aspirations to reduce the number of foreigners, according to the census their number has not decreased, rather the opposite has happened. The aim for economic diversification is unlikely to lead to a significant drop in the number of foreigners in the foreseeable future. One major reason for it is that with further modernisation and extension of economic activities foreigners are still required for the bulk of jobs that are not sought by nationals (in particular in the construction, cleaning and domestic sectors).

In summary, it is the foreigner who defines the national in modern Oman through differentiation: national identity is rather defined by a common, yet blurred distinction from foreigners, triggered as well by the increasing anxiety of being outnumbered or under-represented in one’s own country. A clear definition of the imagination of the self is hard to find. Although the non-Omanis contribute to the society’s cultural heterogeneity and diversity and have become undeniably part of the social reality of the Sultanate, they are also challenging the collective historical memory and branding of Oman as a cosmopolitan nation, because the non-Omanis are supposed to contribute economically and temporarily but not to merge socially and culturally with Omani traditions.

The self-avowal of being a cosmopolitan society (which ultimately means Omanis and non-Omanis living peacefully but without much interaction in private life together) is based on a subtle but powerful subnational distinction of foreigners. As Lowi<sup>35</sup> points out, there is only one category of foreigners that has been socially recognised and appreciated over the last decades: the high-skilled, mainly white foreigner of European descent who has the symbolic capital of power and knowledge, and international business expertise. This is the privileged class of non-Omanis for whom the rhetoric of protectionism has been effective – yet, it has also reduced over the last years in the course of increasing Omanisation policies. They form the smallest foreign class in terms of numbers, followed by the group of non-GCC Arabs (from Egypt, Yemen, Lebanon etc.), who have been living and working in the country as expatriates for the longest period of time; and yet, they still live separated from Omani nationals in spite of similar religious and sociocultural values and habits. The third but by far largest class of foreigners is formed by the Asian and African migrants, who are the most deprived group regarding entitlements and personal freedom to live in the country. In other words,

Gulf states pursuing strategies of global integration are redefining nationalism to embrace cultural pluralism and global engagement in a way that supports their economic and political ambitions.<sup>36</sup>

### Summary: Omani identity, nationalism and cosmopolitanism revised

The pursuit of a socially and politically stable nation that guarantees an environment for a successful economic diversification is challenged to be kept in balance. The high presence of foreigners and their major contribution to today's economic setting is a double-edged sword for the young Omani nation: on the one hand, the presence of foreigners is economically needed and can positively be considered as an "important catalyst to national identity formation".<sup>37</sup> On the other hand, it is socially contested within the changing economic context triggered by the depletion of the natural hydrocarbon resources. Cutbacks in entitlements for national citizens are necessary, as well as pushing further the economic diversification process. The latter needs to cut down the non-productive public sector and put emphasis on strengthening private-sector development. Thus, the number of public-sector jobs are further reduced, which is the main source in terms of labour availability for national citizens. This forces the labour market to turn into a competitive, international landscape, a combination of factors which spurs cultural anxieties and begin to appear to be social, economic and political threats for Omani nationals.

On the other hand, many young Omanis are exposed to international studies and working environments or gain first-hand international work experience abroad. Their desire to identify as a modern, open-minded cosmopolitan nation is growing and it is gradually mitigating the tribal belongingness of their forefathers. This process is presumably occurring even faster with the continuous diminishment of the social welfare state and the benefits for its citizens.

Doubtless, the social contract between the state and the people is changing, where self-responsibility is expected from the individual. On the positive side, this is one step further towards the aspired freedom and participatory turn which the younger generation is asking for; on the flip side, more self-responsibility inevitably comes in exchange for a loss of the protective nature of the state and with a loss of political and social control for the ruling elites. This raises the question: is the post-oil nation ready yet for such changes? Or, in the words of Valeri,<sup>38</sup> "Is the regime or the nation threatened?"

These anxieties could be addressed in a number of ways, through several areas of change that can lead to a smooth transition towards the modern nation state, a few of which will be outlined here.

First, the institutional landscape of the Sultanate needs to be reorganised, to reduce the hindering rigid bureaucracy and to adjust policymaking to the modern structures that are declared with the establishment of the rule of law and related institutions and a free market economy. That means that the political reality needs to match the requirements of a modern civil state that ends the role of tribes and social networks in social and political institutions.

Second, Omani society, in particular the younger generation, is already "clearly transforming from an 'ascribed' to an 'achieved' society where the individual qualities and achievements gradually obtain more weight.... Education, mobility and the process of individualisation play their roles in this development".<sup>39</sup> However, cultural values are still deeply rooted in everyday private and working life. A considerable number of young Omanis gain an international education and work experience to compete with foreign experts on the local labour market. Yet, the veritable spectrum and support for change for them regarding the hidden structures of power and institutionalism is very small.

Third, the openness towards societal pluralism is still contested within the realm of the current nationalisation strategies (across all GCC states), as well as the social practice of lived diversity – namely, the lived separation between foreigners and nationals. This affects in particular the still very low number of inter-national marriages and the strict rules for denying citizenship to children of "mixed" marriages if the father is not an Omani national. The narrative of the cosmopolitan nation is formally and historically true, but does include too much acceptance of modern heterogeneity and loss of "cultural control".

### Notes

- 1 Peterson (2012, 20) defines the social contract for the given context here as the "relationship between ruler and ruled.... That is, paternalistic regimes promise prosperity, order and a freedom to pursue a socially and economically satisfying life, in exchange for acceptance of full site control of politics."
- 2 "Arabness" is often used as a hegemonic discourse for the direct lineage of a tribe from the Arabian Peninsula. It is a very complex and blurred term that is mostly used within the context of the contested and negotiated, mainly imagined, Arab identity. As such, the term is mostly used by Gulf Arabs to distinguish themselves from other people in the Middle East who also speak Arabic and are Muslims. Likewise, it became a commonly used term from foreigners living in the Gulf region to identify nationals in the GCC as "Arabs" or locals.
- 3 Marc Valeri, *Oman: Politics and Society in the Qaboos State* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009): 66–67.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 67.
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 *Ibid.*, 68.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 71.
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007): 2.
- 10 Henning Vöpel, "Alles so global geworden", *Die Welt*, 11 August 2016, 2.
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 Sultan Qaboos bin Said is the longest-ruling leader in the Arab Gulf. He is unmarried and without heirs. For several consecutive years now his health has been of major concern for his people. Even though his succession will be designated only after his demise by royal family members in accordance with the military, people and institutions have already started thinking about how they could operate without His Majesty,

owing to his longer periods of absence from Oman for medical care and services. His succession is officially opaque. However, there is the case of the mysterious “sealed envelope”, in which he has written down the name or names of his wish. The three men believed to be the most likely candidates are the sons of Qaboos’s late uncle, Taruq bin Taimur, who served as the sultan’s first prime minister.

- 13 Valeri, *Oman: Politics and Society*, 73.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 88.
- 15 *Ibid.*
- 16 Nazih Ayubi. *Over-Stating the Arab State: Politics and Society in the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1995): 323.
- 17 Valeri, *Oman: Politics and Society*, 88.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 88–89.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 89.
- 20 Neil Partrick, *Nationalism in the Gulf States*. Kuwait Programme on Development, Governance and Globalisation in the Gulf States (London: 2009): 16.
- 21 See further: Hussein Ghubash, *Oman – The Islamic Democratic Tradition* (London: Routledge, 2006).
- 22 *Kafala* describes a sponsorship system in which a local employer (*kafil*), who can be a private person or a company, sponsors or grants a foreign employee for his or her stay in the country. It is particularly strict for low-paid workers in the Gulf. The sponsor carries the economic and legal responsibility for his “working guest” – which also leads to a certain form of incapacitation of the employee. The sponsor declares the employment to the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor, applies for the working visa and residence permit at the Department of Immigration, and incurs the recruitment costs and medical health provision for the employee.
- 23 Partrick, *Nationalism*, 12.
- 24 The self-conception and vision of Oman’s leadership today is dedicated to “complete the project of democracy in the Sultanate of Oman, and to further enhance social partnership between the government and the people”, as described by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs ([www.mofa.gov.om](http://www.mofa.gov.om)). The Council of Oman is the central establishment to implement the strategies for this project; it consists of the *majlis al-dawla* (State Council) and the *majlis-al-shura* (Consultation Council). The *majlis-al-dawla* enjoys financial and administrative independence and has larger political influence than the *majlis-al-shura*, whose members have to submit draft laws or suggestions to the *majlis-al-dawla* first.
- 25 See further: Marc Valeri, *Simmering Unrest and Succession Challenges in Oman*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 2015.
- 26 Dawn Chatty, *Mobile Pastoralists: Development Planning and Social Change in Oman* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).
- 27 Corien Hoek, *Oman – State, Tribes and Revolution*, 2011 Online: <http://religionresearch.org/closer/2011/03/31/oman-state-tribes-and-revolution>.
- 28 *Ibid.*
- 29 Valeri, *Oman: Politics and Society*, 242.
- 30 *Ibid.*, 239–240.
- 31 *Ibid.*, 240–241.
- 32 Miriam Cooke, *Tribal Modern: Branding New Nations in the Arab Gulf* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA, and London: University of California Press, 2014). In spite of Cooke’s focus on the tribal modern culture of the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain and Kuwait only, her findings are in large also applicable for the Sultanate of Oman. The GCC countries have a comparable historical, geographical, political and sociocultural context. Furthermore, they share the history of having been Bedouin societies and, ultimately, they have a common timeline of the oil-modernisation and nation-building process, which provides the context for this chapter contribution.

- 33 Miriam Cooke, *Tribal Modern*, 9.
- 34 *Ibid.*, 9–10.
- 35 *Confronting the “Invisibly Army”. Identity, Community and Migrant Labor in Gulf States*. Paper presented by Miriam Lowi at the Middle East Studies Association (MESA) in Denver, November 2015.
- 36 Kristin Smith Diwan, 2016, *National Identity and National Projects in the Arab Gulf States*, The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, 10 June 2016. [www.agsiw.org/national-identity-and-national-projects-in-the-arab-gulf-states/](http://www.agsiw.org/national-identity-and-national-projects-in-the-arab-gulf-states/)
- 37 *Ibid.*
- 38 Valeri, *Oman: Politics and Society*, 247.
- 39 Hoek, *Oman – State, Tribes and Revolution*, 2011.

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## Part III

# Nation, identity and change