

Ibādism and State Formation in Oman

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The identity of Oman is characterized by three principal features: its geography reflected in the ancient concept of 'Umān forming one of the main subdivisions of the Arabian Peninsula; its particular form of Islam which treats Oman as constituting an undivided *miṣr*; and its tribal system polarizing originally in a Nizār-Yaman divide and since the 18th century in the Hināwī-Ghāfirī moieties.

The Geographical Dimension

The pronounced geographical identity of Oman stems from the fact that it effectively forms an island, surrounded by sea on three sides and the sand sea of the Rub' al-Khālī on the fourth. Its physical core is formed by the Ḥajar mountains, which run from the entrance to the Gulf to the south coast and rise to over 3000m in the Jabal al-Akhḍar. Their natural defenses make the settlements in the *wādīs* and outwash fans almost impossible of access for external invaders without the connivance of local tribes. The coast on the other hand opens onto the monsoon circulation of the Indian Ocean and its extension through the Strait of Hormuz into the Gulf, with its huge hinterlands of Khurāsān, Sīstān and Fārs and at the head of the Gulf Baṣra, Khūzistān and Iraq. It was the commercial potential of this maritime circulation that was first really integrated during the Sasanid period in what the early Arab geographers called the *Arḍ al-Hind* and with it the development of a major entrepot on the Oman coast, Sohar (Ṣuḥār), and later Qalhāt and finally Muscat (correctly Maskad, arabized Masqat).

Unlike the interior, which no outsider was particularly interested in until the oil era, a strong power can relatively easily take control of the coast and with it the focal nub for international trade. There was therefore an inherent dichotomy in the geography of the country, an inward looking homeland of subsistence agriculture in the interior, and an outward looking base for maritime commerce and overseas empire. That dichotomy translated itself into the political separation represented

by 'Muscat and Oman' when the coast came under the rule of foreigners or their vassals. But whilst the interior could maintain a degree of autonomy in such a situation, access to the monsoonal world remained essential, if for no other reason than the exchange of dates (sugar) for grain. But it went much further than that. In a recent book I have shown that all the Omanis who opened up the ivory trade of the interior of Africa as far as the Congo came from the central core of the country, while the profits of the larger Zanzibar trade were often reinvested back home in revitalizing the *falaj* system.¹

This irrigation system based on underground *qanāt* represents the basis of the settlement pattern that passed with the coming of Islam, to the Arab tribes which had been infiltrating into the northern and southern fringes of Greater Oman. It formed part of an extremely ancient human landscape in which an integrated irrigation system exploiting the hydrological potential of the main *wādīs* focused on a fortified regional centre, to form an almost continuous zone of sub-regions on the desert side of the mountains, extending from Julfār on the Gulf coast to Ja'lān on the South; while within the foothills on the coastal side of the mountains a major zone of fortified settlement extending from the Wādī Banī Ghāfir to the al-Rustāq-al-'Awābī area were in a position to dominate the al-Bāṭina coast, with its continuous strip of agricultural settlement watered by hoist wells, and its ports.

Basic Requirements of Central Government

Certain essential requirements immediately become apparent for the maintenance of this heritage and its potential development. The first is the protection of the irrigation system, fragile but capable of an almost eternal life if properly maintained. That is essentially a matter of tribal conventions recognizing the overriding obligations of the hydrological community, reinforced by Islamic law. It stems from a common view of the moral economy rather than a Wittfogelian centralized authority, but it

does help if the main fortresses are held by *wālīs* rather than local *tamīmas* (tribal confederation leaders) or *amīrs*. The second is to ensure continued access for the population of the interior to the commercial potential of the coast. To some extent this is a matter of mutual commercial interests, but with respect to Imamate government two situations arise. The first occurs when the Imam's authority covers both the coast and interior. This has only occurred twice in Omani history, during the First and Ya'aruba Imamates, both of which lasted about 110 years before ending in terrible civil war. That may not sound long, but it was a great deal more than the original Islamic State, which saw a major apostasy war and two *fitnas* within six decades of the Prophet's death. The second situation arises when an Imam is elected (*'alā l-difa'*) to defend the community in the interior and may practice *taqiyya* to come to terms with the coastal authority, though that does not include surrendering the *bayt al-māl* nor recognizing a right to collect true *zakāt*. A variant form occurs when the '*ulamā*' group behind a worthy person, who while not qualified as an '*ālim*' is well intentioned and will follow their advice. Such a choice of *da'if* (weak) Imam is essentially political; recognition of a leader who is capable of defending and even expanding the community's interests and attempting to re-establish control of the coast.

The Imamate

The Ibādī constitution is based on the concept of the ideal Muslim community, mutually supportive bound by the divine obligations of *walāya*. As the rightful branch of the Muḥakkima who broke with 'Alī at Siffin, its laws are those of the Koran, and nothing but the Koran. These constitute the absolute obligations (*farā'id*), of a Muslim, interpreted by the adjuncts of the *sunna* and the *āthār*. The *sunna* is the tradition of the original *umma*, that of the Prophet and the worthy successors, the first two caliphs. The *sunna* is not based on *ḥadīth*, although these may reinforce *farā'id* and recommendable *faḍā'il*, but of themselves cannot create *ṣam'* (scripture). Rather they represent acceptable *riwāyāt* that have been absorbed into the *āthār al-ṣāliḥīn*. These are the consensual views of the leading '*ulamā*' which devolve on successive generations. All this constitutes *qawl*, words, but that of itself is not sufficient without deeds, *'amal* (Molière without Mozart). It is the duty (not obligation) of the community to make flourish that just rule (*izhār*) in the form of independent Imamate government.

But that is about as far as the theory goes. There existed no pre-existing model about the Imam and his

powers or his selection other than the *sunna*, which effectively meant Abū Bakr and 'Umar, nor how large the community need be to constitute itself as a true Muslim state. The result is that the constitution of the Omani Imamate evolved in two main phases; the rules and conventions established during the first properly constituted Imamate; the second those evolving during and after the civil war that signaled its collapse and quasi-permanent foreign occupation of the coast.

The Imamate Constitution

The essential basis of Imamate rule, although often an *ex post facto* rationalization of real events, evolved during the first hundred or so years of the first fully established Imamate (between roughly 177-277 H), and it is these that will now be briefly described.

The structure of administration was of the simplest. The Imamate was a religious obligation (*fard*). At the head of state was the Imam, who appointed *wālīs* holding the forts of the main regions and *qāḍīs* to administer the law. The authority of the Imam was defined as: "No army is raised, no banner held, no fighting men commanded (i.e. the famous and feared *shurāt*), no legal *ḥadd* punishments ordered, no judgment *ḥukm* given except through the Imam". The relationship with his community was based on a contract (*'aqd*) between the 'elected' Imam in the form of an oath (*bay'a*) of obedience to God's law '*alā ṭā'at Allāh wa ṭā'at rasūlīhī wa l-amr bi-l-ma'rūf wa l-nahy 'an al-munkar* and the mandatory *la ḥukm illā li-llāh* which the electors impose as the condition of his selection. So the Imam had plenipotentiary powers, with no statutory consultative body, nor subject to any other conditional term imposed as part of his election (later *jihād* might be specified). But, and it is a big but, his interpretation of the *ḥukm* was as first amongst equals. His views might be overruled by the consensual opinions of the leading '*ulamā*'.

The 'Ulamā'

So it was the leading '*ulamā*' (*'ulamā' al-thiqāb*) who in reality brought the existing practices into line with Islamic laws; notably in such essential economic and social matters as maritime law, international trade, irrigation and agricultural practices, work, renting, leasing, the specificity or otherwise of contracts etc. And it was their generally accepted *ra'y fatāwā* that also became incorporated into the *āthār* along with those inherited from the guidance of the original Baṣran community. It was

the '*ulamā*' too who selected to be Imam. How many and who? Guided Caliphs seemed 'toral' body, but what was to consult other who their congregationally expedient candid '*ālim*. The *qāḍī l-imā* was not a Grand Mufti

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the *'ulamā'* too who decided on the choice of the man selected to be Imam. And here came another big hic. How many and who? The precedent of the two Rightly Guided Caliphs seemed to justify a very restrained 'electoral' body, but whatever the number the essential need was to consult other *'ulamā'* and through them feel out who their congregation considered acceptable and politically expedient candidates. But there was no official chief *'ālim*. The *qāḍī l-imām* was certainly influential but he was not a Grand Muftī, that is a recent innovation.

But who were the leading *'ulamā'*? Let us not have illusions about democracy. There is very much a *kbāṣṣ wa 'amm* inherent in the Ibādī system. Furthermore, members of that *kbāṣṣ* tended to cultivate the family tradition over generations, their elite status often being reinforced by intermarriage. Understanding who these families are is as essential for understanding the politics of state formation as is the structure of power around the great *tamīma-cum-amīr* families. It is the interaction of the two that largely explains the rise and fall of Imamates in Oman.

Badw wa Ḥaḍar

Before discussing this further, perhaps it would be useful first to widen our perspective with some rather more general remarks about the structure of Imamate government. It remained what Ibn Khaldūn termed *badw*. What that means is better understood by what he meant by *ḥaḍar*. *Ḥaḍar* does not just mean settled. The *ahl al-faḍl*, according to one famous Omani *'ālim* (Nāṣir b. Abī Nabhān, 1778–1847 AD), were the people of the settlements, and it was their duty to keep in order the *'arab*, people of ignorance living in the outback (*qifār*), and incorporate within the Imamate the marchlands of Greater Oman towards neighbouring Greater Bahrain and Greater Yemen. *Ḥaḍar* in the great Empires, on the other hand, represented the values of an urbanised elite, living off the surplus deriving from a quasi-subject peasantry, ruled over by a powerful monarch, administering through a bureaucratic class and control of a standing army. *Badw* for Ibn Khaldūn represented the tribalised societies in the peripheries of empire, who periodically produced a leader that invaded and formed a new dynasty whose rule went through his famous five-generation cycle of rise and decline. But while the ruling dynasties changed, their opportunity to maneuver remained circumscribed by the rules of the geographic chessboard on which they played out their game.

Oman on the other hand remained a tribalised society, likewise immutably *badw*. There was no urbanisation, no notion of a *polis* (from which derive the notions

of polity, policy, politics, police, polite etc.), no rise of a bourgeois class, no translation of money into art, no development of a new literary culture, no evolution of a bureaucracy, no capitalists or bankers, no popular revolt. The *'ulamā'* did not segue into a *magistratura* while such wealth that accrued was invested in maintaining or restoring the existing agricultural and defensive systems. The true Ibādī ethos was egalitarian, opposed to the accumulation of wealth through exploitation of a peasant substrate; the opposite of the conquered empires where the land continued to be subject to the old system of taxation, whatever the religion of the occupant. Unlike the social structure in neighbouring Bahrain and Yemen in which a religious or tribal elite subjected the peasant and labouring classes, the Ibādīs encouraged the conversion of the *majūs* and assimilation of the indigenous population into Arab village society, which was essentially one of small holders. Standing armies were forbidden while *zakāt*, whether on agriculturalists or merchants, remained a totally inadequate basis for building state power. Wealth derived from international trade and for all but the First and Ya'aruba Imamates, that lay for the most part in the hands of outsiders who creamed off the surplus in the form of *mukūs* (Islamically illegitimate taxation) or in the colonial period through a developing Indian capitalist class. So the one Imam of the First Imamate (Muḥannā b. Jayfar al-Fajhī l-Yaḥmadī, 226–237/841–851) who decided to ignore the *'ulamā'* and build Nizwā into a real capital (with 14,000 *ra'ayā*, a standing army of 10,000 troops and 8–9,000 riding beasts, along with a navy of 300 ships), caused a major ruction; with the result that the most learned and respected *'ālim*, Abū 'Abd Allāh Muḥammad b. Maḥbūb (d. 260/873), a son of Abū Sufyān, the last Baṣran so-called Imam, threatened to expose Muḥannā and his supporters' misdeeds if they did not select as his successor his own candidate, the Imam al-Ṣalt b. Mālik al-Kharūṣī (237–272/851–886, deposed). And the Ya'aruba, the other Imamate that really expanded overseas empire, certainly invested in the land in conjunction with certain favoured tribes, but beyond building some new forts and a palace centre, they neither urbanised, nor left any fundamental changes either in the institutions or constitution of the Ibādī state. They too illustrated the Ibn Khaldūnian five-generation model, but the tribal civil war that brought their dynasty to an end, once again reduced the social landscape into an untransformed *badw* society of competing *mulūk* and tribal *tamīmas* in interior Oman, where the new Āl Bū Sa'īd dynasty of Sultans scarcely exercised any authority.

So we need to examine rather more closely the relationship between the tribal and religious dimensions as they affected state building.

The Tribal Dimension

From the start the establishment of the Imamate depended on exploiting tribal rivalries. The Imamate of Ṭālib al-Ḥaqq (ʿAbd Allāh b. Yaḥyā I-Kindī) which took the Holy Cities at the end of Umayyad times harnessed the resentment of the old South Arabian tribes, Kinda, Hamdān and certain Azd clans. The short lived Imamate of al-Julandā b. Masʿūd resulted from exploiting feuds within the family of the old dynasty, while the great First Imamate likewise came into existence through an Azdi leader gathering a following and swearing an oath against the Julandā, a feud that persisted almost throughout the Imamate. And once Julandā power was broken the Imamate was transferred to the most powerful tribal group in Oman, the Azdī Yaḥmad, whose Fajḥ clan was in possession of the former Sasanid base at Rustāq, potentially in control of the agricultural production of the Bāṭina coast and its ports. Another important clan were the Banū Kharūṣ, quasi-independent in their deeply entrenched Wādī behind al-ʿAwābī, their fortified centre at its mouth.

So the Imamate's survival depended on striking a balance between the Yaḥmad's physical power in the mountain fastness of Rustāq, and the clans on the inner side of the mountains under the *'ulamā'* of the Banū Sāma, the main Nizārī tribal grouping which also largely represented the interests of increasingly marginalized northern Oman. To achieve this, their choice tended to favour the more pliant Kharūṣ, rather than the powerful Fajḥ Yaḥmad. And it was a highly respected Kharūṣī *'alim* who decreed that the Imam's authority lapsed if he did not reside at the fort in ʿAqr Nizwā where the tribal population was much more mixed, thereby putting an end to earlier attempts to use Rustāq or Ṣuḥār. Initially al-Ṣalt's election put a check on the authority of the Sāma *'ulamā'*. However, his growing senility resulted in some serious misjudgments over appointments to key posts, notably at Ṣuḥār whose trade and importance far outweighed that of Nizwā, and he was deposed by a son of the last great Sāmī Imam-maker in conjunction with a group of dissatisfied *'ulamā'* from the Jawf (the core inner side of the mountains), aided by the force of an ambitious tribal leader from the Fajḥ Yaḥmadī clan of Rustāq whom they elected Imam. This sparked off the most terrible civil war with the Nizārī tribes calling in the support of the ʿAbbāsids. The result was their occupation of Oman, with the coast remaining more or less under foreign control for three quarters of a millennium until the Yaʿaruba Imamate was established in the 17th century.

A 'Second Imamate' was nevertheless reestablished by the Yaḥmad clans of Rustāq in the first half of the

5th/11th century (which included members of the Khalilī family descending from the deposed Imam al-Ṣalt), who legitimized their monopoly of the post by issuing a *fatwā* declaring all who did not recognize the Rustāq party's dogma that al-Ṣalt was illegally deposed were condemned to hell-fire. That finally put paid to any reconciliation with the northern tribes, alienated the Ḥaḍramīs who established a fully independent Imamate, and was increasingly rejected by the more moderate *'ulamā'* in the central Jawf who established intermittently a rump Imamate at Bahlā, Manaḥ, or Nizwā, which finally went down before the new power in the land, the Nabāhina. Following the occupation of the coast by the Portuguese and a growing threat by the Jubūr dynasty of Greater Bahrain to take control of the interior, aided by the late Nabāhina *mulūk*, themselves threatened by renewed attempts to restore Imamates in the Jawf, the collapse of all central authority finally led to an alliance of the *'ulamā'* with the Yaʿaruba *mulūk* of Rustāq. Under the guidance of his father-in-law, Khamīs b. Saʿīd al-Shaqṣī, Naṣīr b. Murshid b. Mālīk al-Yaʿrubī was elected as Imam in 1624 AD to restore order in the interior and drive out or subject the foreigners and their Omani tribal allies (notably the Banū Hināʿ) and expand overseas empire, a work completed by his cousin, Sulṭān b. Sayf (1649–1680 AD). From the start their Imamate was a purely dynastic succession and like the First Imamate collapsed in a terrible civil war, polarising around the Hināwī–Ghāfirī tribal confederations (although this time with no ideological underpinnings). And once again it ended in foreign occupation, this time by the Persians. Although driven out by Aḥmad b. Saʿīd of the Āl Bū Saʿīd who was nominally recognized as Imam (1753/4–1783 AD), his interests in re-establishing maritime trade coupled to a general lack of support from the interior tribes led to the division between the two parts of Oman opening up again. Even during his lifetime his dynasty was rent by rivalries and the only tribal support the Sultan could count on came from the Sharqīyya Hināwīs. These were alienated by Sayyid Saʿīd b. Sulṭān (r. 1806–1856 AD) in an attempt to deal with the ambitions of the Qays branch of the family in control of Rustāq when towards the end of his reign Ḥumūd b. ʿAzzān b. Qays started to manoeuvre with the Ibādī *'ulamā'* to be recognized as Imam. Thereafter the Būsaʿīdī Sultans increasingly depended on British imperial power to defend their authority, to the extent that Oman and Zanzibar were declared independent Sultanates, with Zanzibar finally (1890 AD) formally declared a British Protectorate.

The Nabḍa

The Ibādī *nabḍa* represented quasi-colonial control over the disorder in the interior. The *yā* movements developed in a world, whose most extreme Wahhābī–Saʿūdī state occupied northern Oman for seven decades of the 19th century. The *nabḍa* is attributed to Kharūṣī (1734–ca. 1822) in events since the death of ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb in the 7th century. And it was the Khalilī Ṣalt from the First Imamate of the Second Imamate who attempted to restore the Imamate within the Būsaʿīdī family. Imam, ʿAzzān b. Qays started in restoring unity in Oman from Buraymī, was later driven out of the Sharqīyya Hināwīs, reigning in the ambitious Awlād Zāhīr of the Būsaʿīdī Turki b. Saʿīd (r. 1871–1890) who regained Muscat in 1890, killed by the Banū Hināwīs. *imān* brokered by the Khalilī to death in a palace

The 20th-Century Imamate

The next, and last Imamate was due to the Būsaʿīdī (1868–1914) switching sides had brought about ʿAzzān b. Qays the Nabḥānī *tamīm* of the fortress was the Jabal al-Ṣālimī's son-in-law. Reluctantly, and largely consolidating their support, he eventually rallied to him, his grandson, Muḥammad b. ʿAzzān, his grandfather by brotherly ties, together to hold the fort. He was killed by promptly surrendering to the British reward when he succeeded to the Imamate at the moment that the

The *Nabḍa*

The Ibādī *nabḍa* represented in part a response to this quasi-colonial control of Omani maritime interests and the disorder in the interior, but also to the wider *salafiyya* movements developing throughout the Muslim world, whose most extreme example saw the rise of the Wahhābī-Sa'ūdī state which threatened and partly occupied northern Oman off and on throughout the first seven decades of the 19th century. The paternity of this *nabḍa* is attributed to Abū Nabḥān Jā'id b. Khamīs al-Kharūṣī (1734–ca. 1822), the first time the Kharūṣ feature in events since the demise of their controversial Imam 'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb in the Jawf at the end of the 15th century. And it was the Khalīlīs, descendants of the Imam al-Ṣalt from the First Imamate and the first and last Imams of the Second Imamate, who now more or less directed attempts to restore the Imamate by exploiting the feud within the Būsa'īdī family and electing in 1868 as a *da'if* Imam, 'Azzān b. Qays at Rustāq. His temporary success in restoring unity in Oman and driving out the Wahhābīs from Buraymī, was largely achieved through the support of the Sharqīyya Hināwīs. But as a result of his firmly reigning in the ambitions of the Ghāfirī *tamīmas* and the Awlād Zāhir of the Banū Hinā', they deserted to Sayyid Turkī b. Sa'īd (r. 1871–1888), and with the help of the British regained Muscat in a battle in which the Imam was killed by the Banū Hinā' chief, and Turkī breaking his *imān* brokered by the British, putting Sa'īd b. Khalfān al-Khalīlī to death in a particularly horrific way.

The 20th-Century Imamate

The next, and last successful attempt to restore an Imamate was due to 'Abd Allāh b. Ḥumayd al-Sālimī (1868–1914) switching to the tribal support of those that had brought about 'Azzān's downfall, with the result that the Nabḥānī *tamīma* of the Banū Riyām, whose natural fortress was the Jabal al-Akhḍar plateau which incorporated the approach via the Wādī Banī Kharūṣ, elected al-Sālimī's son-in-law Sālim b. Rāshid al-Kharūṣī in 1913. Reluctantly, and largely to prevent the Ghāfirīs from consolidating their success, the Sharqīyya Hināwīs eventually rallied to him, while at Samā'il Sa'īd b. Khalfān's grandson, Muḥammad b. 'Abd Allāh al-Khalīlī revenged his grandfather by breaking his guarantee to his own father to hold the fort while he accompanied the incumbent *wālī*, a brother of the Sultan, to Muscat to negotiate, by promptly surrendering it to the Imam. He received his reward when he succeeded Sālim as Imam in 1920, just at the moment that the British, who had saved Fayṣal b.

Turkī (r. 1888–1913) holed up in Muscat, finally negotiated the so-called Treaty of Sib.

So both sides retired into their shells. The leading figures of the *nabḍa* had taken the same attitude as al-Sālimī, who effectively told the Zanzibaris that they had brought their woes on themselves by abandoning the true *ilm* for Western learning.² The result was that the xenophobic Imam Muḥammad rigorously closed the door on any attempt to modernise his domain, even in such matters as health provision, knowing that any chink would bring costs that would threaten his state. The Āl Bū Sa'īd on their side pursued the tradition of absentee rule, which Sayyid Sa'īd b. Sulṭān had started by moving to Zanzibar; with Taymūr b. Fayṣal withdrawing to India and his son Sa'īd (r. 1932–1970) to his private fiefdom of Zūfār. And all that suited the British fine, allowing them to maintain their hold over the region at minimum cost. That is until the old Imam died in May 1954, when the outside world broke in with consequences that need no describing here. Except perhaps to notice that the pent up internal rivalries of the Omani tribal leaders was reflected in their various choices of Dammam, Kuwait, Baghdad, or Cairo as the point of refuge after the British once more saved the Būsa'īdī Sultan. Subsequently the whole Imamate issue became totally eclipsed by the Zūfār war and the succession of Sayyid Qābūs b. Sa'īd in 1970.

The Present

So from start to finish Tribe and State were inextricably linked throughout Imamate history in Oman. That said, there is no reason that the basic morality of Ibādism should not be a guiding principle for the country's rulers, of whatever kind. The Ibādīs have lived longer under non-Imamate rule than they have under Imamate, whilst their community from the start evolved alongside other Muslims in relative harmony, where they prayed behind *jabābira* and were originally *qa'ada* (quietists). The Imamate was a desirable state but not an essential one.

The problem that has to be faced today is the fundamental principle of the Muḥakkīma, that the Koran is absolutely central to the Ibādī belief system. While they emphasise its positive aspects and rightly vaunt their tolerance, they cannot just ignore under a veneer of *taqīyya* those features which are sweeping the Islamic world and beyond into violence by others who also use the word of the Koran to justify their extremism. It may work for the moment within the context of present-day Oman, which in some measure, as in the past, has been carefully insulated from outside influences by the Sultan, but once the going becomes stony again as the economy dries

up, unemployment grows and the welfare state becomes unsustainable, they must ask themselves are the Koran, the *sunna* of the Prophet and the *āṭḥār al-ṣāliḥīn* still the only references on which the state's moral economy may be built. And in what matters, other than the Imamate, are the Ibādīs different from Sunnīs today? They have calqued themselves to such an extent on Sunnī norms that a leading member of the *nahḍa* actually overruled a well established Ibādī *fatwā* with a *ḥadīth*!³

Certainly the history of Oman is largely written in terms of the Imamate, of the approach to and deviation from an idealised community, and as such a worthy model for justifying national pride. These are problems that only the Omanis can answer.

Notes

- 1 Wilkinson 2015.
- 2 Ghazal 2015.
- 3 Francesca 2002.

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