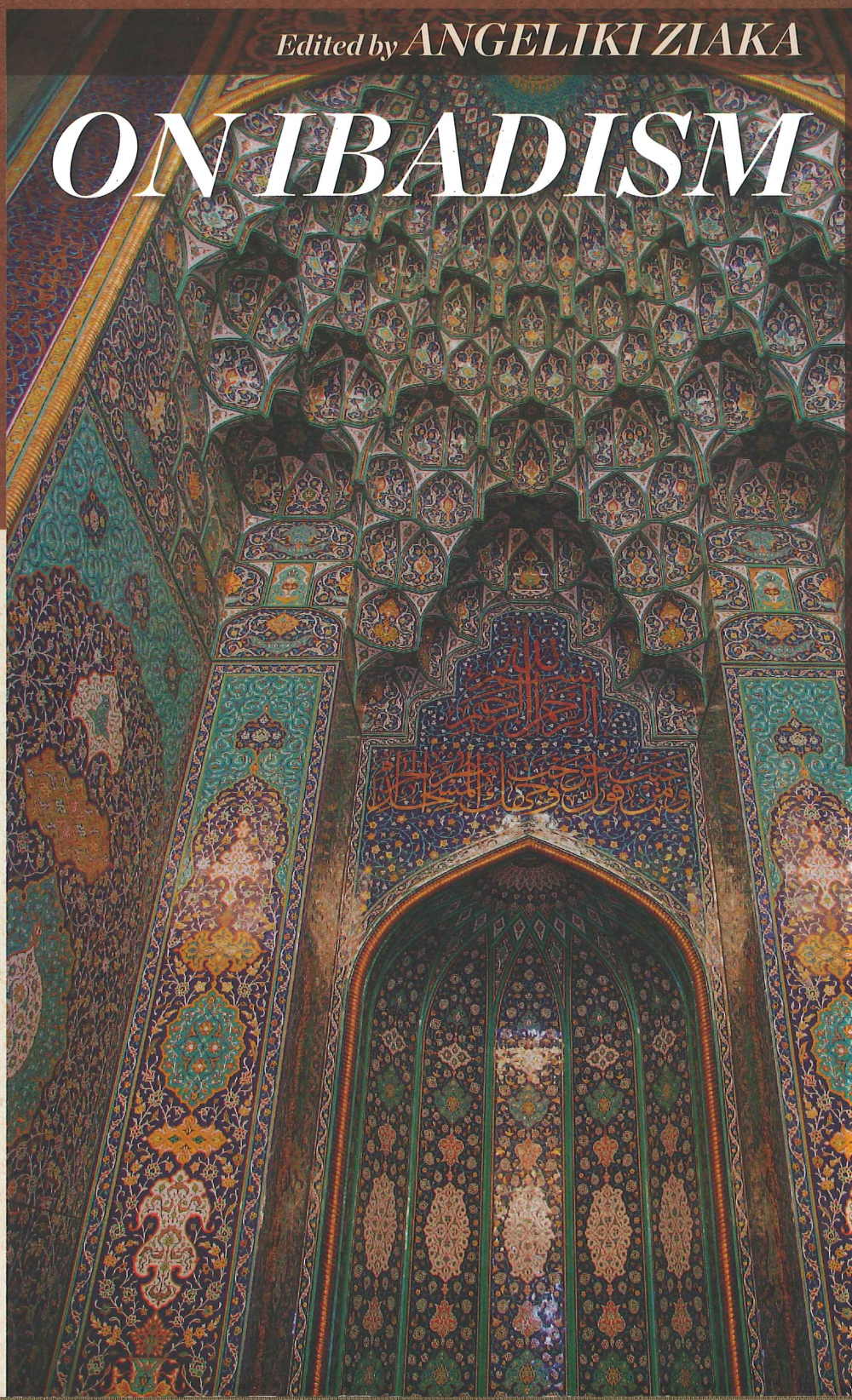
Edited by ANGELIKI ZIAKA

ON IBADISM



OLMS

STUDIES ON IBADISM AND OMAN. VOL 3

Edited by Abdulrahman Al Salimi and Heinz Gaube.

Table of Content

IBADISM AND OMANI NATION-BUILDING SINCE 1970

Marc Valeri*

When Sultan Qaboos came to power in 1970, his room to manoeuvre with regard to the British but also his personal legitimacy was reduced to a minimum. Qaboos had effectively lived under house arrest for the six years before his accession to power. The main members of his family who called to support him returned to Oman after years of exile. As for senior officials who would be appointed to the top positions in the 1970s and who would deal with the country's development, they were mainly from families exiled in the Middle East or in East Africa for one or even several generations.

Against this background the socio-political stability that characterized the Sultanate from the end of the 1970s until 2011 stands out even more. In an important paper on the stability of Middle East monarchies, Lisa Anderson emphasised what she calls the "affinity between monarchy as a regime type and the projects of nation building and state formation".[1] The formation of a national identity is a political process, which emerges when a group of individuals decides to demonstrate the existence of a nation, with two objectives: first, to discredit the desires of another actor (usually a larger political entity, like a colonial power) to assert its control; secondly, to create and spread allegiance to the nation.

In Oman, the ruler inherited a territory without a state in 1970 and immediately faced the need to assert the legitimacy of his accession to the throne.

* Marc Valeri is Senior Lecturer in Political Economy of the Middle East and the Director of the Center for Gulf Studies at the University of Exeter (U.K.)

He had to set himself up as the only worthwhile candidate for power. This was to be achieved with the definition of a new collective identity, able to gather together all the ethno-linguistic groups present on Omani territory. This feeling of belonging to a common 'imagined community'[2] comes within this perspective: it has aimed at promoting a contemporary Omani national identity, which has relied on standardised collective references, as a strategy of legitimisation of his own rule. This strategy was based on previously unknown economic and social development, involving exploitation of a newly significant oil rent, at the same time as a full-scale expansion of the state over the territory and the upheaval of traditional socio-political structures.

Very soon in the history of Oman, Ibadism became the cement of the emerging Omani identity, strengthened in the building of a political and geographical entity identifiable from abroad, *al-misr al-'umaniyya* ('the Omani country'). This notion of an Ibadi heartland, depositary of the original pure Omani features, has lived on until now.[3] This paper examines the relationship between this modern nation-building on the one hand, and Ibadism on the other, i.e., the role Ibadism, as an historical heritage but also as a political reference, has been attributed by the new regime in this contemporary national identity.

Building of an Omani 'national Islam'

A parallel with 19th-century European national identity-building helps to illustrate the path the Sultanate has followed since 1970. Words used by Alain Dieckhoff to describe the European nation-building process in the 19th century echo post-1970 Oman:

> *"The nation as a collection of individuals remained an abstraction, a meaningless slogan [...]. It was absolutely necessary to make it an experienced reality [...], an all-the-time experience [...]. This nationalisation of minds could proceed only from a formidable process of inculcation, which had to be led by the state, zealous propagator of refined culture."*[4]

This 'nationalisation of minds' happened in Oman after the 1970s. Promotion of Omani identity has been the occasion of an 'identity engineering', in which history, heritage (*turath*) but also religious references have been used to anchor the awareness of a new political community.

The 'Arab' and 'Muslim' feature of the country was emphasised by the new regime without any explicit reference to Ibadism. This issue made it possible to avoid

establishing any difference of status among the Arab-Muslim populations settled on the territory. The government soon began to promote a consensual and 'generic'[5] Islam that is peculiar to Oman and neglects both controversial past influences and foreign ones, such as the Saudi Wahhabi influence. No explicit mention is made of the Ibadi legacy in the 1996 Basic Law. The Sultanate is described in Article 1 as an Arab and Islamic state; Articles 2 and 3 establish Islam and Arabic as the religion and the official language of the state, while the *sharia* constitutes the basis of legislation. The regime never could and never wanted to make Islam a trump card in this process of legitimacy-building. The authorities do not believe that they are immune from the emergence of an opposition movement invoking the Ibadi Imamate legacy—or, more generally, any ideology invoking political Islam—to challenge the regime.

While the ruler has never claimed any formal religious authority and has left the public monopoly of religious discourse to the Mufti, the creation of this 'national Islam' went with the endeavour at an early stage to 'bureaucratise' men of religion by integrating them into the state apparatus and to confine them within the Omani field only. That is why relations with Ibadi communities of Tanzania, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya remained weak after 1970. By confining religious personalities within the national framework, the regime has not only controlled their voice and influence more easily but also involved them personally in the promotion of a national identity. For more than thirty years the Omani religious authorities' policy, led by the Mufti of Oman, Sheikh Ahmad al-Khalili, has sought to dilute the differences between the Ibadi and Sunni schools of Islam, while believers of both pray together. In standard sermons established nationally by the Committee for Friday Sermons, differences of schools (*madhhab*) are never mentioned.

No official policy has been implemented to preserve the oldest Omani mosques; in Nakhl, the remains of the old mosque were razed to the ground and replaced by a modern copy of the old *mihrab*.[6] And in the most important towns of the North (Bahla, Nizwa, Sama'il, etc.), new Sultan Qaboos mosques, in which Friday sermons are delivered, have supplanted neglected historical ones, in order to promote a modern, asepticised Omani Islam. The best example is the gorgeous Great Mosque which was inaugurated in 2001 in Bawshar; the edge of its inside court is adorned with niches in honour of various Islamic cultures (Iran, Syria, Andalusia, Central Asia, etc.), to recall Oman's belonging to the regional civilisation.

This does not mean that Ibadi legacy has been completely skimmed over. Politically, the establishment of an official religious discourse completely divorced from the former period was not conceivable. Despite the demographic balance between Sunnis and Ibadis,[7] and because of Ibadism's historical weight, Ibadism still has a more than symbolic pre-eminence: both Muftis who have been appointed since 1970 are Ibadi, as well as the Ministers of Justice and Religious Affairs and most of

the leading personalities and *imams* in both those administrations. Moreover on several occasions Sultan Qaboos himself led 'Aid prayer in the Nizwa mosque, 'the egg of Islam' (*bayda al-islam*), a reference to its central role in Imamate revivals.

But what is particularly interesting is the political use by the new regime of Ibadi references, perfectly understandable by everybody as part of the Ibadi legacy, but without referring them to Ibadism. Let's talk about two of them: *nahda* and *shura*.

Political role of Ibadi references since 1970

The Omani national identity is basically built on the disavowal of the country's pre-1970 history. Regular references in official discourses to a 'new era' implant the conviction that history started in 1970. More broadly the pre-1970 period was branded as a tragic parenthesis in Oman's life, like a metaphor of the 'chronologically gauged A.D.-style slumber.'[8] Nineteenth-century European promoters of nationalism thought that they were living through the 'awakening' of a timeless nation which had existed for ages. When he came to power, Sultan Qaboos used a similar metaphor: "Yesterday, it was complete darkness and with the help of God, tomorrow will be a new dawn on Muscat, Oman and its people".[9]

The selectivity of Oman's national memory is well illustrated by the way Omani history is taught in state schools. Twentieth-century Oman is only skimmed over, leaving a black hole between the imperial nineteenth century and 1970. Nowhere is to be found mention of the social and political divisions of a territory officially known as the 'Sultanate of Muscat and Oman' before 1970, and especially of the conflict that arose in Jabal Akhdar in the 1950s.[10] Besides, it is significant that Ibadism is only referred to as an Omani-based 'variation' of Islam; its political dimension, especially in modern and contemporary times, is never evoked. In this way, the post-1970 authorities seek to conceal political troubles, thus promoting political oblivion.

In order to take over the Ibadi legacy, the official history held a few personalities, like Sultan Sa'id bin Taymur and Imam Ghalib, fully responsible for the pre-1970 situation and the division of the territory, so as to exonerate the whole Inner Oman population, including its tribal leaders—a classic strategy in history to re-create national unity after civil wars. This decision made it possible to draw a veil over all the events and to avoid looking into half a century. Besides, it allowed the authorities to present the 1970 change as a new start and to co-opt former Imamate scholars and members of the most prominent families of the Imamate as intellectual support for this policy.[11]

In 1974, for the first time, the ruler referred to an Omani "Renaissance" *(nahda)*, which gave its name in 1990 to the 23 July commemoration of the anniversary of Qaboos' accession to the throne: "On this immortal landmark day, four years ago, a new sun shone in our beloved land to light the flame of the national spirit and zeal of our citizens, who plunged into building this renaissance [...] Our beloved Oman lives today in the dawn of a great and comprehensive renaissance."[12] This discourse is an obvious reference to the Ibadi tradition and to the Imamate's recurring renaissance when the territory is ruled unfairly—a reference brought back to light and popularised in modern Ibadi intellectual circles by Muhammad al-Salimi's book.[13] Referring to this Oman legacy has been a way to situate the post-1970 regime within a long and glorious history of which, it is implied, the current ruler is the heir and the reviver—the twentieth century being only a parenthesis.

This term became definitely predominant in the early 1980s when preparatory school pupils were asked to "strike out the word 'intifada' and to replace it with 'nahda', in schoolbooks describing 1970 events."[14] The Sultan has followed the *nahda* metaphor all through his rule, by presenting himself as the tutelary father of a just-reborn nation, which "he conducts in its march towards progress and prosperity".[15] This *nahda* ideology has worked all the better for reaching a wide audience among foreign observers, as is shown in titles of books published in the 1970s: *The Reborn Land*,[16] *Dawn over Oman*,[17] or *Oman and its Renaissance*.[18]

Another very interesting reference is *shura*. In the 1996 Basic Law, the system of government is described as a "hereditary Sultanate... based on justice, *shura* (consultation) and equality".[19] Among the political principles, the pre-eminence of the tradition of *shura* is highlighted: "laying suitable foundations for the establishment of the pillars of genuine *shura*, based on the national heritage, its values and its Islamic sharia, and on pride in its history" must be pursued.[20] Moreover the Consultative Assembly bears the name of *Majlis al-shura*. Once again, this political reference is symbolically very meaningful given that Ibadis call themselves the 'people of consultation' (*ahl al-shura*). This principle of consultation has been at the centre of the process of contemporary political legitimacy in Oman, by echoing the double Ibadi tradition of the choice of the Imam and the collegiality of decision-making under his direction. Historically, the *shura* principle was displayed every day in the *sabla*, a meeting during which the tribal *sheikh*, assisted by the *'ulama'* and the other notables, received the group's members who wanted to tell him any problems. In the same way, the Imam listened to supplicants every morning, while he remained inaccessible to foreigners. At a larger level, this picture finds its place within the national myth of a 'traditional Islamic democracy', to quote the title of Hussein Ghubash's book.[21] Oman, it is suggested, possesses an atavistic democratic culture inherited from Ibadism, which explains the intrinsic ability of its people to get rid of authoritarian rulers.

Then, as Franck Mermier explains, we can say that the Ibadi heritage is 'both covered up and glorified'[22]—on the one hand covered up to be merged into the consensual official national Islam promoted under Qaboos, but on the other, at the forefront of national symbols and political references in order to support the legitimacy of the regime.

Towards a politicization of Ibadism?

For ten years now, the Sultanate has had to face a series of social and economic challenges which are calling into question the order established in the 1970s. The arrival on the labour market of young educated people, who are bringing in new dynamics and who have been denied privileges granted to their elders, coincides with a decline in oil production, whose effects are for the moment mitigated by high world prices. The Omani economy remains extremely dependent on oil-derived revenue. The Sultanate is crossed by multiple identity and social dividing lines, made sharper by the economic difficulties which have restricted room for manoeuvre for the regime and for the oil rent's redistribution.

This sensitive social climate is causing a revival of frustration and mutual prejudice, which is leading to a re-polarisation of the society. These tensions generally take the form of questioning the 'Omaniness' of the others and their loyalty to the Omani nation. Every group shows a determination to find its place within the state and, by consequence, a desire for recognition as fully belonging to the Omani nation embodied by the state. At the heart of these strategies is everyone's goal to consolidate his position in order to benefit from rewards (positions, favours, public contracts, etc.). If contemporary Oman is experiencing a resurgence of prejudices and internal frustrations, this particularly involves groups that we can describe as 'peripheral' in the demographic and historical structure, as they do not belong to the Arabic-speaking and Ibadi heart of the territory; they thus permanently need to justify their belonging to the nation. The paradox—or the explanation—is that these groups have a central position in the socio-political architecture erected by Sultan Qaboos. By their political and economic role (Shi'a of Muscat, Swahili-speaking Omanis) or their military role (Baluchis), they imposed themselves as allies the new authority could not do without. One intellectual explained his fear thus: "The feeling of belonging to a great nation exists indeed, but in the interior of the country. For the others, it does not mean anything. [...] For the moment, religion does not have any relevance in the national identity debate. But I fear that it can be used later on with political ends, as one sees in other countries of the region."[23]

Logically, in this context, the issue of the future role of Ibadism in Oman national identity becomes crucial. Despite state efforts to block religious discourse from entering the public sphere, it has entered the political arena. While the Omani authorities always endeavoured to place the religious issue in a timeless situation, they were not able to prevent the intrusion of political issues, or the awareness of differences between Islamic schools, into the mosques. The state has relied since the early 1980s on local religious authorities who have been depositaries of traditional Ibadi knowledge; through them, it has sought to control religious discourse by isolating it from any foreign influence and by standardizing Friday sermons.[24]

The Omani authorities' tolerance of this religious development was originally based on the idea that someone occupied with religious matters will not question the political regime. But nowadays religious charity associations' aid to the underprivileged and newcomers, the widespread idea that the gap is continually widening between those who have access to the levers of power and others, and finally the lack of public means of expression, all give support to the spread of conservative practices in the name of Islam. Over ten years, the regime became aware that this outdated strategy only contributed to shifting debate away from the mosques and strengthening young people's interest in what the government prohibited.

Two events are illustrating this re-emergence of Ibadism on the public scene and hence the questioning surrounding the role of Ibadism in contemporary national identity.

In January and March 2005, successive waves of arrests involving teachers and students of the Education and Islamic Studies colleges of Sultan Qaboos University, as well as senior military and civil officials-such as the head of the Omani delegation for the pilgrimage and son-in-law of the Mufti, Sheikh Kahlan al-Kharusi,[25] and the controller of the mosques at the Sultan's palace office, Salih al-Ribkhi-, led to sentences of more than 70 people. All belonged to the Ibadi school and most of them held graduate and postgraduate university qualifications.[26] The public prosecution accused them of having been members of a banned secret organisation, which was established in all the *wilaya*s of the north of Oman; there may have been a public arm which organised youth summer camps, and an underground wing that attempted to overthrow the current regime by force to establish an Ibadi imamate.[27] Defence counsel for the accused always denied the political dimension of the organisation, but focused on its religious character and on the shared desire of all of them to 'defend the Ibadi doctrine'.[28] No connection with networks abroad or with international organisations was shown during the trial.

For the first time since the Imamate fell in 1959, Ibadism seemed to have arisen as a rallying cry for political mobilisation, which would openly contradict the legitimacy of the nation-state built by and around Sultan Qaboos since 1970. Presumably a very small minority of the individuals arrested had political objectives.

Most of them were certainly not ready for that, but motivated by religious goals and by the conviction that the promotion of an Omani consensual Islam was a threat to the Ibadi legacy. Within the government itself, differences of interpretation were perceptible, between the officials who believed that a harsh answer was necessary against these individuals threatening the stability of the country, and those who pushed for more tolerance and benevolence—according to the idea that the people arrested were first and foremost 'sons of Oman' (abna' *'Uman*), animated by laudable intentions, even if the means employed were condemnable.[29]

Related arguments are central in the theological debates that have been taking place among Ibadi scholars since 2005. In several lectures delivered in 2007 and 2008,[30] the Mufti of Oman made allusion to an emergent trend among young Ibadi scholars emphasizing the need to reconsider the role of myths and rationality in Ibadism. Some of these young scholars, who published books,[31] belonged to the Mufti's office (*maktab al-ifta'*) in the early 2000s but have since left and have found positions in other departments of the Ministry of Awqaf. While mystical forces (magical use of Koran, spirits, evil powers...) have long played a key role in Ibadism,[32] they are discussing the tradition of *'ilm al-sirr* (secret sciences) in Ibadism, and are revisiting Ibadi *hadiths*—which is the reason why the supporters of the Mufti nicknamed them ironically *al-'aqlaniyyun* ('the rationalists'). Even if their influence among the population, which is hard to evaluate, may be extremely limited, the interesting point is that the Mufti has considered them troublesome enough to refer to their writings without naming them explicitly and to warn people against such interpretations. Behind these debates, obviously, lie the issue of religious legitimacy in Oman, the relationship between Ibadi religious authorities and the state, and more generally the role of Ibadism in the Omani nation. Once again, Omani national identity is not explicitly the central issue but lies in the background. These debates revolve around Omani internal issues and involve young Ibadi scholars, educated in Omani institutions, based and working in Oman, who are not believed to be influenced by foreign movements or ideas.

Conclusion

One of Qaboos' major achievements is considered to be the imposition of the idea of an Omani nation as the horizon of all social and political actors' strategies, as well as a collective framework of belonging. Even re-polarisation based on infra-national identities (ethno-linguistic groups, regionalism, etc.), observed in the past ten years, helps reinforce the nation. It represents new means of positioning in the core of the Omani political system. While the wealth opportunities that the state

can offer are dwindling, everyone seeks to consolidate his base in the Omani nation. Such strategies have been carried out in the name of the Omani nation and within the framework defined by it. They are the proof that both national feeling and the Omani state are fully working as references of thought.

In this context, Ibadism, as a historical criterion of 'Omaniness', has lost its preeminence, to the profit of the country's Muslim and Arab identities. This change is explained by the determination of the authorities, since 1970, to reduce the possibility of political rallying behind the memory of the Imamate. Nevertheless, to conclude that Ibadism does not embody any political reference any more would be wrong; the best proof is the dismantling in 2005 of a secret organisation claiming to be acting in 'defence of the Ibadi doctrine' in a context where many Ibadis perceive the promotion of an Omani consensual Islam and a broad Omani Arab identity as a threat to the specific Ibadi legacy.

The intrusion of these questions in the public arena[33] is a sign that a historical cycle is over, and that growing sectors of society, particularly among the younger generations, are reluctant to guarantee the perpetuation of a system in which they feel excluded from political decisions. They are no longer willing to be regarded as politically incapable, nor to abdicate, like their parents, their right to take part in the national debates in the name of socio-economic welfare, which is out of date. It is in this perspective that the debates regarding the role of Ibadism especially, and of infra-national identities in the Omani nation in general, will take place.

NOTES

1 Anderson 1991: 3.
2 Anderson 1983.
3 See, for instance, the use of the term 'the true Oman' to designate the mostly Ibadi interior region, in Le Cour Grandmaison 1982.
4 Dieckhoff 2002: 76.
5 Eickelman 1990: 117.
6 *Le Monde* (Paris), 29 May 1993.
7 According to our own calculations, based on the results of the 2003 census, Ibadi Omanis appear to number 48 to 53% of the whole population, Sunnis 45 to 49% and Shi'a 2 to 3%.
8 Anderson 1983: 195.
9 Ministry of Information 2001: 14.
10 For further details, see Peterson 2007.
11 One of the most significant examples is the noble branch of the Khalili family. Sheikh Sa'ud bin 'Ali is the nephew of one of the last Imams of Oman, Sheikh Muhammad bin 'Abd Allah (1920–54). Sheikh Sa'ud became one of the four members of the very first Cabinet appointed by Qaboos on 15 August 1970. Moreover he owns the powerful business group Al Taher that he founded in 1973, active in contracting (Caterpillar), food and drink (Sprite, Coke), industrial fisheries and distribution of Shell products. Even more curious is the course followed by his brother, Hilal. Appointed governor under Sultan Sa'id in 1943, he was thought likely to succeed his uncle as Imam in 1954, but tribal balance was not favourable to him. He took the Imam's side in the conflict and was named the Imamate's Ambassador in Riyadh in 1954. Benefiting from the 1970 amnesty, he was immediately appointed Sultan Qaboos' Ambassador to Saudi Arabia. His son, Sheikh Salim, held the positions of Minister of Agriculture and chairman of the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry in the 2000s'.
12 Ministry of Information 2001: 24, 29.
13 Salimi 1380/1961.
14 Interview, 14 February 2006.
15 *'Uman* (Muscat), 18 November 2003.
16 Clements 1980.
17 Searle 1979.
18 Hawley 1977.
19 Articles 5, 9.
20 Article 10, Paragraph 3.
21 Ghubash 2006.
22 Mermier 2003: 255.
23 Interview, 1 May 2004.
24 See Dale Eickelman's piece in this volume.
25 By royal decree n.25/2010 issued in March 2010, Sheikh Kahlan was appointed Assistant Mufti of the Sultanate.
26 *al-Hayat* (London), 21 April 2005.
27 *The Times of Oman* (Muscat), 3 May 2005.
28 *al-Hayat*, 19 April 2005.
29 For a detailed discussion of these incidents, see Valeri 2009: especially 184–196.
30 See http://alharah.net/alharah/t3880.html (checked on 5 November 2009). These lectures were gathered into a book entitled *Al-'aql bayn jimah al-tab' wa tarwid al-shari'* (Rationality between impetuosity and taming Islamic law), (Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs 2008).
31 For instance, see 'Adawi and Wahaybi 2007; see also Muharrami 2005. Zakaria al-Muharrami is a lecturer at Sultan Qaboos University.
32 Most of the Ibadi scholars of the early 20th century were renowned for their knowledge in 'secret sciences' (*'ilm al-sirr*): see: Hoffman 2004.
33 For a discussion of the 2011 Omani Spring in light of identity politics, see Valeri 2013.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

'Adawi and Wahaybi 2007
'Adawi, K. and Wahaybi, K.: *Al-iman bayn al-ghayb wa-l-khurafa.* Muscat 2007.

Anderson 1991
Anderson, L.: Absolutism and the Resilience of Monarchy in the Middle East. In: *Political Science Quarterly* 106, 1 (1991) 1–15.

Anderson, 2006
Anderson, B.: *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism.* London 2006.

Clements 1980
Clements, F.A.: *Oman. The Reborn Land.* London 1980.

Dieckhoff 2002
Dieckhoff, A.: *La nation dans tous ses Etats; les identités nationales en mouvement.* Paris 2002.

Eickelman 1990
Eickelman, D.: Identité nationale et discours religieux en Oman. In : Kepel G. and Richard Y. (eds.): *Intellectuels et militants de l'Islam contemporain.* Paris 1990, 103–128.

Ghubash 2006
Ghubash H.: *Oman: The Islamic Democratic Tradition.* New York 2006.

Hawley 1977
Hawley, D.: *Oman and its Renaissance.* London 1977.

Hoffman 2004
Hoffman, V.J.: The Articulation of Ibâdî Identity in Modern Oman and Zanzibar. In: *The Muslim World* 94, 2 (2004).

Le Cour Grandmaison 1982
Le Cour Grandmaison, C.: Présentation du sultanat d'Oman. In: Bonnenfant, P. (ed.): *La péninsule Arabique aujourd'hui.* Vol. 2. Paris 1982.

Mermier 2003
Mermier, F.: De l'invention du patrimoine omanais. In: Lavergne, M. and Dumortier, B. (eds.): *L'Oman contemporain: État, territoire, identité.* Paris 2002, 245–260.

Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs 2008
Al-'aql bayn jimah al-tab' watarwid al-shari'. Muscat 2008.

Ministry of Information 2001
The Royal Speeches of H. M. Sultan Qaboos bin Said. 1970–2000. Muscat 2001.

Muharrami 2005
Muharrami, Z.: *Al-ibadiyya. Tarikh wa manhaj wa mabadi'.* Muscat 2005.

Peterson 2007
Peterson, J.E.: *Oman's Insurgencies: The Sultanate's Struggle for Supremacy.* London 2007.

Salimi 1380/1961
Salimi, M.: *Nahdat al-aʿyan bi-hurriyat ʿuman.* Cairo 1380/1961.

Searle 1979
Searle, P.: *Dawn over Oman.* London 1979.

Valeri 2009
Valeri, M.: Oman: *Politics and Society in the Qaboos State.* London 2009.

Valeri 2013
Valeri, M.: Identity Politics and Nation-Building under Sultan Qaboos. In: Potter, L. G. (ed.): *Sectarian Politics in the Gulf.* London 2013 (forthcoming).