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The Territorial Divisions of Oman

The "Colonial" Inheritance

At first sight, the territorial fragmentation of the Omani region on the eve of the British withdrawal from the Gulf was both ludicrous and an economic nonsense.

Traditionally, the distribution of population had been dictated by the region's agricultural and maritime resources. Settlement is concentrated in narrow valleys and the outwash zone that runs along the desert side of the 650-km-long mountain range, stretching from the Musandam Peninsula to Ra's al-Hadd: and on the coastal side in various bays and in the Batina strip facing the Gulf of Oman. That itself forms an arm channelling the trade of the Indian Ocean maritime circulation dominated by the seasonal monsoon system towards the Gulf via the Strait of Hormuz. This zone of traditional business activity is precisely the area which has no hydrocarbon potential by reason of its geology. The region's oil fields are located in structural folds or traps dominated by salt tectonics, onshore in the desert or offshore in the shallow continental waters of the Gulf. In other words, in the areas which traditionally had the poorest natural resources, exploited by a small sedentary population in the ports and an essentially nomadic population moving between the seasonal grazing potentials of

the desert, a few outlying oases (notably the Liwa) and the fishing and pearling resources of the Gulf. In terms of tribal territory, the poorer the grazing, the larger the *dar/dira*.

If therefore tribal territory is used as the criterion for determining political boundaries, then it follows that the poorest tribes are those with the greatest chance of having oil resources. "The poor shall be rich and the rich poor." The most glaring example of that is Abu Dhabi with a territory six to eight times as large as the rest of the Trucial States combined and a pre-oil population in the order of 15,000 and with the least potential for modern development. Similarly at the time that the present writer was working in Oman (1965) when the Sultan Sa'id bin Taymur was deliberately pursuing a policy of favouring the bedu tribes at the cost of the settled who had "rebelled" against him, an Omani writer rather bitterly wrote of the Duru in whose *dar* Fahud and the other main potential oil fields then largely lay, "whereas formerly they were a few odd sections (*butun*) now they are a major tribal unit (*qabila*) independent in its affairs, whether in war or peace"[1].

The fragmentation of the Trucial States

Abu Dhabi illustrates also another aspect of the ludicrous pattern of territorial division that characterized northern Oman before independence and which still has its role to play in the distribution of political power within the United Arab Emirates today. It was the only one of the Omani States (including the Sultanate which has an exclave in the Musandam Peninsula) to form a continuous unit of territory. All the other Trucial States, consisted of two, three or even in the case of Sharjah four, non-contiguous bits. Little Ajman for example, with a population of under 5,000 (1968) and an area of 260km^2

[1] Siyabi Salim bin Humud, *Is'af al-a'yan fi ansab ahl 'Uman*, Beirut 1965, p. 78.

divided into three. In the same sort of way, the village of Diba on the east coast was shared between no less than three "states", based on the supposed traditional allegiance of the groups inhabiting its various quarters.

The reason for this fragmentation is in fact fairly simple. In the traditional way of life, three main sets of resources dictated the economies of the population, agriculture in the oases, animal husbandry in the desert, and fishing and pearling on the coast. Pearls were the only major commercial export, and pearling expanded greatly in the 19th century in the waters to the east of Qatar, contained largely within a line running from the tip of that peninsula to opposite Dubai. As with oil later, that gave Abu Dhabi the lion's share, and the expansion of this most westerly coastal settlement into a putative state, notably under Zayd bin Khalifa (1855-1909) had much more to do with control of this "industry,, than it did with his role as a leader amongst the bedu of northern Oman, whatever the image portrayed. But in other respects, Abu Dhabi did not enjoy the traditional wealth and potential of those states to the east, where the rich fishing grounds along of the coast of Oman extend around the entrance to the Gulf, and it lay outside the centres of potential maritime power and trade located on the Arab side of the Strait of Hormuz. Furthermore, until Zayd bin Khalifa established a base in one of the irrigated settlements of the Buraymi oasis (al-'Ayn), Abu Dhabi's only agricultural resource lay in the small isolated palm gardens among the dunes of the Liwa. So when the pearl market collapsed in the 1920s Abu Dhabi lapsed into the poverty of a peripheral desert economy.

In the main settled part of what became the Trucial States where water and grazing were relatively plentiful, political and economic power required establishing control over ports on either side of the narrow northern tip of the mountains, as too on the Persian side opposite. It was precisely this strategic control that had enabled various dynasties and states

from al-Julanda bin Karkar times right through to that of the Portuguese nearly a thousand years later to extract "protective" costs on shipping or even force others to use designated ports (as in the case of Hormuz). But under the Jowasim (Qawasim), encouraged by the Wahhabis, these exactions reached proportions at the start of the 19th century that the East India Company deemed "piracy" and ended in the expeditions which gave rise to the Trucial system. The story needs no repeating here, but the end result was that any sheikh who exercised a semblance of authority along the Arab coast round the entrance to the Gulf was obliged to subscribe to a set of agreements dictated by Britain. Some of these original statelets disappeared and others were added but the end result was the "Trucial Sheikhdoms".

Hence when the British started to try and define the boundaries of the Trucial States in the 1950s, they found that they had to start from the basis of a port (the *raison d'être* for its existence as a "State") and then develop a concept of territory in terms of property rights and the linkages of those who used the port to the tribal sheikh who had subscribed to the Trucial system. So instead of a port of around 750 souls with its immediate hinterland extending some two to two and a half miles around the town forming an enclave within Sharjah territory and with no dependent village or Bedouin tribe owing allegiance, as Lorimer described the "small independent principality" of Ajman at the start of the 20th century, it ended with two other pieces of dependent territory. A Trucial State was essentially found to be made up of the eponymous port, with perhaps another one on the eastern side of the mountains, an oasis or two in the interior, and in some cases the territory of a semi-nomadic tribe deemed to owe "fealty" to the "ruler" of the port.

That terminology represented the translation of traditional notions of tribal relations (fortunately not complicated by notions of Islamic legitimacy, at least in the Trucial area as we

shall see) into a framework of law by which Britain could arbitrate between the rulers and more importantly in due course, present the criteria employed as consistent with international law.

Tribal territory

Of itself, a tribe had no recognition in international law: it was not a member of the "Family of Nations". Its territory was therefore *res nullius* and subject to whatever independent Power (or one of its subject territories recognized by the other Powers) could establish a legal claim. Such claims however, had to be rationalized within the concepts of an international law which in fact largely derived from European notions of property and state rooted in feudal origins. So tribal "loyalties" and ties were often translated and recast into terms which smacked more of Medieval Europe, than they did of Arabian society[2]. The problem however became acute in the full desert hinterlands which characterized most of Abu Dhabi and where the fundamental issue in international law became "effective occupancy". Ibn Sa'ud (King 'Abdulaziz) rejected the notion of the small British protégé states as having a tribal hinterland and expressed his view quite succinctly when the frontier issue emerged in 1934[3]:

> All the tribes living between the coastal towns of Qatar and the coast of Oman and the Hadramaut belong to the Saudi Arab Kingdom, are entirely submissive to the laws of that country, pay zakat, and are obedient to the calls of the Government in the time of war (jihad) etc.

Furthermore, in the traditional political geography of the Oman region, others had an equal claim to such supposed

[2] See in particular the Dubai-Sharjah arbitration.
[3] Hamza to Ryan, *British Memorial (on Buraimi Arbitration)*, 20th June 1934, Annex D, no. 7.

"independence" as the Sheikhs of the ports of northern Oman, notably the powerful Bani Bu 'Ali in south-eastern Oman whom the British had to deal with by a land expedition which was defeated and necessitated a second following the subjection of the "Pirate Ports" in the 1820s. Yet, along the main Oman coast the policy was to maintain the rights of their ally the Sultan / "Imam" of Muscat to be the sovereign power, so tribal authority in the ports of the south-east was denied. In other words, the criteria exercised for pragmatic reasons were inconsistent from the start. In northern Oman tribal authority became the feature for determining the area's political units and drawing of boundaries; in Oman the maritime facade was deemed integral.

The lesson learnt from the Bani Bu 'Ali expedition however, was never forgotten: do not get out of range of your ships' guns. What happened in the interior of the country was not of importance so long as it did not threaten the coast. That is why in the first seven decades of the 19th century the British encouraged their two main protégé states, Muscat and Bahrain, which were the basis of their maritime control round to East Africa, to come to terms with the Wahhabi state when necessary. It was not until this state re-emerged as one of the "Family of Nations" in the form of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1932 that hinterlands began to develop an importance. From that time tribal independence became an issue again: as for example in the Dhahira where the Political Agent Muscat reported in 1936[4]:

> Dhahira is an independent district some fifty miles south west of Khaburah. Its capital is Yanqul [Na'im]. It is not in Muscat territory and any disturbances occurring there would not involve the Sultan.

However, in the interior such independence could not be

[4] Telegram, 2nd March 1936, in IOR R/15/3/8/5.

recognized, even though the district with its capital was far more important in the traditional geography as the little port "principality" belonging to a minor branch of the same tribe, Ajman. Inconsistence in application of the criteria for defining territory was to be one of the great failings of Britain as the protecting power in the Oman region.

Oil resources

Another was that no effort was ever made to work towards understanding about sharing oil resources. Apart from anything else, that would have meant dealing with Shakhbut bin Sultan, who had been ruling in Abu Dhabi since 1929 and Sayyid Sa'id bin Taymur in the Sultanate since 1932. Yet the fact is, that the entire Omani region was without oil for many years after its discovery in the other states of the Gulf, and the oil concessions were in the hands of the same company, the Iraq Petroleum and Associated Companies (IPC) which itself had been more or less forced on the rulers by the British Government but which showed little interest in the region, acquired along with the Aden Protectorate principally for pre-emptive reasons. Before second world war, its activities were confined to a few superficial surveys and its principal interest in the Gulf was in Qatar where oil was discovered shortly before the war.

Nor did the area excite the concern of Ibn Sa'ud and his concessionary oil company. The genesis of the frontier dispute with Britain arose from defining Qatar's boundaries and indeed only impinged on our area at the extreme western limit of Abu Dhabi, in Khawr al-'Udayd. In fairness, however, it should be added that the areas controlled by the Sultan of Muscat, who described himself as Sultan of Muscat and Oman, and the Trucial Sheikhs was so little known, that the IPC had little incentive to explore an area where so little of the

workings of authority in the region was understood that initially two sheikhdoms were actually overlooked (Ajman and Umm al-Qaiwain). Indeed, a company report of 1938 spoke of the Imam being in a special relationship with Ibn Sa'ud [5]! And when they did try and make a survey in the Dhahira they merely excited the cupidity of the tribes who claimed independence from any of the authorities the IPC had signed up with, as the Political Agent in Muscat had already recognized. Yet even after the war when the IPC had of necessity to become rather more active, it had to sign special agreements with the tribes in order to try and gain access to the Dhahira and when the Sultan cancelled these and attempted to make his own arrangements with them, the oil company party was shot up and the Minister of the Interior (Ahmad bin Ibrahim of the Qays branch of the Al Bu Sa'id) had to retreat with fourteen leading sheikhs shouting that the Sultan had no authority over them and that the letters of allegiance had been obtained in 1948 by trickery[6].

But even once the IPC was able to start drilling results were most disappointing. The prize structure of Fahud when first drilled showed no oil (the company had been unable to make any proper surveys and located the well crestally) whilst at Ghabah and Haima deep wells had also proved dry, as well as a shallow well at Afar. The result is that three of the four main IPC partners abandoned interest and left the concession to Shell (85%: Partex ex Gulbenkian 15%) in 1960. It was not until February 1964 that oil was discovered and the decision to go into commercial production taken at the end of the year. In Trucial Oman, it was not Abu Dhabi that had at first interested the IPC group. The first two exploration wells were drilled in Dubai and Sharjah territory and proved dry. At the time when

[5] It should be remembered however, that the terms of the Treaty of Seeb were a carefully guarded secret.
[6] J. C. Wilkinson, *The Imamate Tradition of Oman*, Cambridge UP, 1987, ch. 12.

the IPC partners left Oman and completely abandoned southern Arabia, they were also discussing doing the same thing on the Trucial Coast!

The example of Aden (the Colonial Office)

So there was, perhaps, some potential for cooperation between the protégé states of the region. After all, in Aden[7] until the 1930s, the India Office[8] relationship had been more or less based on the Trucial system in the Gulf. However, the whole picture changed when the Colonial Office took over in 1937, partly as a result of a petition from the Arab community. The basis of the federal structure which eventually emerged before independence was laid well before the war when H. Ingrams started to work in the Hadrami states in 1934, and finally persuaded the Quayti Sultan to sign an Advisory Treaty, more or less on the lines of the Colonial Office's model of the Malay Sultanate treaties (the Federated Malay States), and was himself appointed Resident Advisor at Mukalla. He then developed a sort of Peace Plan by which the tribes subscribed to an extendable three years truce, with the aim of incorporating the sedentary tribes around the core area of the Wadi: at the same time the nomads were also gradually brought in. That incorporation coincided with the "Aden Protectorate Order, [March] 1937", whereby the capital became a Crown Colony, and the two wings Protectorates, or rather more exactly Protected States[9], the East Aden Protectorate and the West (the original "nine cantons"). That was given effect by the formation of the Aden Protectorate

[7] The following is largely based on the Ingrams papers in the Middle East Centre at St Antony's, Oxford. See also his *Arabia and the Isles*.
[8] Until 1932 it had still been under the Government of Bombay!
[9] The common feature is that both defence and external affairs were under the control of the British Government. In the latter the Crown's internal jurisdiction was limited and there was always a local Ruler (Cf sir K. Roberts-Way, *Commonwealth and Colonial Law*, London 1966, pp. 47-48).

Levies, Hadrami Bedouin Legion etc. In 1939 a similar agreement was developed with the Kathiri and part of the Shanafir (plus Sayun and Tarim, subsequently extended to the Bal 'Ubayd). The Manahil refused to join because of Sayar raiding and that resulted in an important punitive action being taken against the group responsible and the occupation and fortification of Husn al-'Abr.

British policy in the Oman region (the India Office and Foreign Office)

This vigorous proactive approach towards integrating the territory, pacifying the tribes and repulsing any threat of aggression from either of Aden's independent neighbours, Yemen and Saudi Arabia, should be contrasted with the policy adopted and pursued in Trucial Oman after the first world war and defined in 1928 as our present position in the Trucial Coast is sufficient to protect essential British interests, that we should endeavour to maintain the independence of the Trucial Chiefs, and should not allow our present position in regard to them be weakened in any way; that we can rely upon our existing treaty rights to secure this end; and that it is not desirable at present to incur the further commitments that would be involved in the conclusion of regular "Protectorate" treaties[10].

The essential was to maintain the *status quo* and avoid any but diplomatic representations to protect the area. So, in the Gulf, only Kuwait had promises of unqualified "protection"; Bahrain (but not its "dependencies" on the mainland) had become protected, effectively since 1847, more formally from 1861 and 1867, while Qatar, whose "independence" was finally recognized in 1916, had promises of "good

[10] Report of 2nd October 1928 in IOR (India Office Records), L/P&S/10/1271.

offices" in the case of aggression by land (i.e. Saudi Arabia). The India Office was perfectly capable of leaning heavily on the Sheikhs when it thought necessary, but its interests were confined to maintaining the maritime peace (war by land was fine but at sea it was "piracy") and at keeping outside powers at bay. It was not interested in the affairs of the tribes or their rulers and made no effort physically to stop the war between Abu Dhabi and Dubai (1946-1948). Its knowledge and practice of external relations remained unheedful of the declarations of the Berlin Congress (1884-1885) and it continued to think in terms of "spheres of influence" and natural or geographic boundaries. External affairs had always strictly been the affair of the Foreign Office, but since dealings had been primarily with the Ottoman and Persian Empires, and ensuring European Powers remained out of the British Lake it was not really until Saudi Arabia emerged as an international power (essentially by the terms of the 1927 Treaty of Jeddah), that it had to take on board the concept of "effective occupation" in Arabia. The result was that the India Office considered it "pusillanimous" in the defence of its interests and the two were frequently at loggerheads, notably over the Khawr al-'Udayd issue. After the British withdrawal from India, the Foreign Office took over responsibility for the Gulf, by which time the whole international and oil game had changed. On the other hand, Sir Rupert Hay, deeply steeped in the India Office tradition and appointed Gulf Resident in 1946, was kept on by the Foreign Office until 1955. So it is not surprising that British policy in the region vacillated between appeasement and firm action (no one believed Britain would intervene in Buraymi and Oman after Suez), and its approach to dealing with recalcitrant rulers was highly inconsistent.

These internal divisions of authority in the British Government should always be borne in mind when considering both policy and manifestation of its authority in the region which concerns us. The situation was made even more

complex by the fact that the relationship with the Sultan was on a quite different legal footing from the rest of the region, and dated back to the *qaulnameh* of 1798. In the past, the British had often been able to impose their will due to the weakness of the Sultans and their indebtedness to Indian merchants who were British subjects. Sd Sa'id bin Taymur had learned that lesson and ensured that he never got into debt. Financial probity also provided the excuse to ensure that no development or other threatening modernization took place in his country. Furthermore, he theoretically had the right to conduct his own foreign relations. So whilst he depended on the British to defend him he also had to be party to any agreement made on his behalf and was capable of throwing a spanner in the works when he so chose. Generally however, his attitude was to sit back and do nothing. Even so, the British if they had had the will, could have exerted pressure on him and even got rid of him, as eventually happened, many years too late.

The heritage from the past

Yet having said all that, it would be a major error to consider the territorial fragmentation of Oman as a colonial heritage. The divisions were inherent in the region's geography and history. This is expressed in the very title of the 1963 United Nations "Question of Oman" (the de Ribbing report) which starts with the warning "the name Oman has been used in different ways depending on who is referring to it and in which context it has been used".

Essentially we may define Oman as the region where human organization focuses on the isolated mountain chain located at the south-eastern corner of the Arabian Peninsula. It is one of the ancient tradition geographical divisions of Arabia, neighbouring Bahrain, and Yemen. One of the oldest

authorities on the geography of Arabia, Al-Asma'i (d 213./828, as cited by Yaqut) defines Yemen as extending from Oman to Najran, while Baynuna is the area separating Oman from Bahrain. He specifies that Yemen includes Hadramaut and al-Shihr. Bahrain (what might be called Greater Bahrain) is, of course, not just the modern archipelago state but the area characterized by springs arising from the confined aquifers of fossil water draining from the Najd scarp and watering the oases of the Hasa province as well as the islands, onshore and off. That this notion of Oman having a regional identity has remained current was brought home to me when on going to work in Abu Dhabi in 1959, a Qatari remarked "Ah, so you've got your wish and you're going to Oman". Whilst there, the need to see Shakhbut arose but I was told he was in Oman. That I discovered meant the Abu Dhabi territory in the so-called Buraymi oasis. Whilst there, the group of men with brightly coloured headdresses waiting in the Sheikh's *majlis* were described to me as being from Oman. Some years later I called on one of them at his home in Ibri. As I was leaving en route via Nizwa, I almost anticipated his remark: "Ah, so you are going to Oman". Something was getting increasingly Omani as I penetrated to the ancient capital of the Imamate. Perhaps not surprising that Ambassador de Ribbing's report to the United Nations and that of the subsequent *Ad Hoc* Committee took 866 paras and 24 annexes trying to answer the question, "What is Oman?". Let us try to be a little more successful and brief.

Core and Frontier

Geographers sometimes analyse a region in terms of core and frontier. It is an ancient concept, fundamental to the Greek

city-state, the *polis* and its *chora*[11]. It is essentially the view of a self-sufficient, urban-based society living off its agricultural hinterland, the sort of social structure that also characterizes at a much larger scale what Ibn Khaldun termed *hadar* society with its five generation cycle of empire. As the urban based central government strengthened its hold of the land surrounding its core area, it incorporated its tribal (*badw*) fringe: and as it weakened in dynastic rivalries, the tribesmen profited to take control and form a new dynasty. The players changed, the game itself did not. This model is exemplified in the changing fortunes of the areas that formed the Ottoman, Persian, and Sherifian Empires, characterised by a three tier class structure, an absolute monarch ruling with a standing army, and an administrative class exploiting a substrate of peasantry. These ideas are only of limited application to the Oman region, for never from the time the Sasanids were evicted from "Mazun" with the coming of Islam until the modern era did such a society develop. Oman always remained tribal and every time power and wealth concentrated to the point of developing a centralised government structure, the ideology of the Ibadi Imamate and the forces of tribal and regional fission reasserted themselves in what the present writer has termed the Imamate cycle.

Nevertheless, that cycle itself had certain of the characteristics of the Ibn Khaldun model, and there was a *badw* (*'arab*) *hadar* dichotomy. As we have seen the core of Oman was a settled, albeit tribal society, but with mountain nomads (*shawawi*), mixed shoat (sheep and goats) and camel groups living on the fringes of the settlements in the *siyuh* (outwash fans), and pure camel herders nomadising beyond in the outer desert. All these nomad relations, however were essentially with the Oman settlements and not those of the neighbouring regions.

[11] See in particular M. I. Finley, "*The Ancient City...*", *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 1977, vol.19, pp. 305-327.

Natural boundaries

Also inherent in the idea of the *polis-chora* notion of core and frontier is the idea of a self sufficient and naturally defended region. At the time of the Berlin Congress, convened in 1884 primarily to thrash out the basis of territorial claims in West Africa, Sir Travers Twiss made a review of the situation about "settlements" and their limits in the light of existing international law for the Foreign Office[12]. That centred on the notion of what he terms the arcifinious (naturally bounded) state as elaborated by Verro and Grotius. The limits of a settlement were those which were necessary to the independence and security of the settlement. The aspect which Twiss emphasizes however, as relevant to defining the boundaries of a settlement, is defence. Here Verro's idea of the arcifinious state took on a distinctly European aspect, for rivers and mountains were deemed eminently good examples of such boundaries. In Arabia they are not, for not only are there no rivers, but the mountains tend to form foci of settlement. But the concept of a natural defensive line is by no means foreign to the main settled areas of Arabia and the seas and deserts formed these natural boundaries. In Oman in particular, which is very much like an island, surrounded by sea on three sides, and a sand sea on the fourth.

The so-called Rub' al-Khali (Great Sands) is a very real natural defensive system and for that reason came to be used as the basis of drawing boundaries for separating the Aden Protectorates from Saudi Arabia, as too for defining the western boundary of Oman. The British liked "geographic" boundaries, zones of separation, great sabkhas, sand seas or the ocean itself. Such features also had the merit of frequently separating different *genres de vie* and tribal confederations as

[12] See discussion in December 1884 in Foreign Office Confidential Print 5051.

well as forming a natural defence. And so did the Sultan. From Buraymi to Ra's Dharbat 'Ali he considered the "Great Sands" as his limits, he pronounced in 1937[13].

The problem however lay at either end of the sand fields and along the coasts which provided connectivity with neighbouring regions and the outside world.

The "Yemen" frontier, Dhofar

Two lines of traditional migration have brought Arab tribes into Oman from an original source in South West Arabia, one along the south coast, the other through central Arabia and Bahrain.

The earliest tribes to arrive seem to have come primarily by the former route, but the latter has been far more important for later historical relations. That helps to explain why northern Oman has been lost to the central core whereas formal Sultanate territory in the south incorporates the province of Dhofar where political troubles have been some of the most important in modern times, as too the problem of defining the formal boundary. It is important therefore to understand Dhofar's "frontier" characteristics if the story of the attachment of this very special province to the Sultanate is to be understood. Although quite distinctive and with a unique climate for Arabia Dhofar nevertheless formed part of what the Omanis considered Bilad al-Mahra, while the classical Arabic geographers describe it as one of the provinces of al-Shihr.

These old concepts of what constituted Mahraland and al-Shihr are still current in the traditional geography of the

[13] Cf Wilkinson, *Arabia's Frontiers*, I. B. Tauris 1991, pp. 199-202.

region today[14]. The latter does not simply refer to the port of that name, largely developed by the Kathiris, but more generally to the southern coast of what became the East Aden Protectorate. It is the homeland of the *Wa-shihris* of East Africa. The early tribal relationships of the inhabitants of this region with those of Oman is indicated in early Islamic history by Abu 'Ubayda, who denigrates the Azd by saying that Ardashir bin Babak (i.e. the early Sasanids, but possibly even Achaemanids) had made them sailors in Shihr Oman six hundred years before Islam[15]. Similarly, in the rationalized genealogies we find a crude attempt to Arabize the Mahra by making them Mahra bin Haydan bin 'Amr bin al-Haf, but even this last name is indicative of their South Arabian origins. More specifically amongst the Qudaa groupings associated with the early Malik bin Fahm migrations to southern Oman are some assimilated Mahra groupings, one of which, the Qamar (whence presumably the Jabal Qamar of Dhofar) who took refuge with the B. Riyam (themselves largely living in the Jaalan at that time), after failing in a coup to take Raysut, then the capital of Dhofar[16].

However, whatever the genealogical manipulation, the fact remains that Mahraland is of a different culture from that of Oman. As the name Bilad al-Mahra suggests. The Mahra are not a tribe but rather a people and their language belongs to the Old South Arabian (OSA) grouping. Ingrams says that their language, clothes and customs are foreign to their neighbours in the west, who scarcely consider them as Arabs. On the other hand, they are *sharif* (of honourable descent), unlike the Shihri OSA speakers of the Hadara (South Coast) who basically are *da'if* (weak, subject tribes), with lowly occupations and not permitted (traditionally) to carry arms.

[14] Cf S. B. al-Tabuki, "Tribal Structures in South Oman", *Arabian Studies* vi, 1982, pp. 51-56.
[15] Cf Yaqut, *Mu'jam al-Buldan*, art. al-Muzun.
[16] Cf *inter alia* Hamdani *Sifa*, edn Muller pp. 50-51, Bakri *Mu'jam* ed Wûstenfelfd 417.

Omani wali was killed[21]. It is essentially with a renewed expansion of Oman's trade empire in East Africa in the 19th century that the modern control dates. The traditional Omani sovereignty boundary was at Ra's Madraka, but there were Dhofari trading links particularly with the Shargiyya, Sur and Masirah Island. However, the actual occupation of Dhofar in 1829 was a purely pre-emptive strike designed to remove a possible successor of an entrepreneur from a South Arabian *sayyid* family when he died: but shortly afterwards Sd Sa'id bin Sultan removed his garrison and Dhofar lapsed into its customary anarchy. It was the same threat of control by a south Arabian family, this time nominally acting in the name of the Ottoman government which was then trying to reassert its old authority in South-West Arabia, that led to the Omani Sultan taking a renewed interest. The person concerned is described by Lorimer as a "Moplah priest"[22].

"Moplah" was a term used by the British in India for Arabs, mostly of Hadrami descent, settled on the Malabar coast. The particular person concerned, al-Fadl al-'Alawi, had been expelled for political agitation there and taken refuge in the Hijaz. In 1875 he seems to have returned to his home area of southern Arabia and claimed to govern Dhofar in the name of the Ottoman Sultan. "Priest" because he was an Alawite claimant to being a *sayyid*. His exactions however eventually led to both the Qara and Kathir to rise against him and he was forced to leave in 1879. Turki bin Sa'id reasserted Muscat's hold by appointing a wali, although the Gulf Resident thought this ill advised. Under Sayyid Sa'id bin Taymur Dhofar became treated as the Sultan's personal fief, with consequences that need no spelling out here. Today Dhofar is assimilated into the rest of the Sultanate and these historical

[21] Cf Wilkinson, 1987, 332n10.
[22] References in Wilkinson, 1987, pp. 56-57. For the "Moplah priest" see J. B. Kelly, *Britain and the Persian Gulf 1795- 1880*, Oxford 1968, pp. 772-775.

and cultural distinctions attenuated. The problem of the frontier originally sketched between the East Aden Protectorate starting at some unspecified point on the coast at Ra's Dharbat 'Ali to wherever the Saudi boundary was deemed to be also caused major problems, but these have finally been settled.

The al-Bahrain boundary

Traditionally both the classical sources and Omani state that al-Baynuna is so-called because it separates Bahrain from Oman[23]. But the area so designated today is but a vestige of the name which probably then described the whole area of what is now western Abu Dhabi, including the Liwa. In 1877, Colonel S.B. Miles recorded that Sabkhat Matti (which forms the western limit of modern Baynuna) "according to the concurrent testimony of all the Sheikhs and best informed persons I have spoken to... is the boundary line between Najd [i.e. central Arabia] and Oman, and has been so considered from time immemorial"[24].

However, the question of the boundary is also deeply linked to the relationship of the tribes of northern Oman with those of Greater Bahrain, the history of migration and the alienation of northern Oman from the rest of Oman. One aspect of this has already been indicated, the fact that northern Oman is orientated towards the Gulf and not the Indian Ocean and its history tied up with that of the British Trucial system. However, much more fundamental is the fact that unlike southern Oman, the northern region has been the scene of continued migration from the Bahrain region and consequently tribal, political and religious linkages between the two great

[23] Eg Yaqut, *Mu'jam*, art Baynuna: al-'Awtabi, Bib. Nat. Paris, Ms 69 r.
[24] Ibidem.

geographical regions have often played an important role in Omani history. Furthermore, the alienation of the northern confederations from the tribal structure of the central Omani region can be traced right back to the history of the Julanda of Oman in pre-Islamic times and the shift of power to the tribes of central Oman after the Sasanids were evicted from "Mazun", reflected also in the history of the Azd tribes in Basra in early Islamic times. That alienation developed in the First Imamate and ended in civil war at the end of the 3rd/9th century. Since I have written about this and the history of Arab migration into Oman extensively I will simply confine myself to certain remarks of relevance[25].

The first is that whilst in central Oman tribal and family roots are deep and the association of place and clan close, in northern Oman wave after wave of migrant groups (not only from Bahrain but also from the Persian coast opposite[26]) have not only given rise to totally different tribal confederations and nomenclature from those of the early days (Kinda, Huddan, Sama etc), but the old toponymy has disappeared, or is vestigial (as in the case of Baynuna already mentioned). Tuwam, once a capital and the gateway to Oman for migrants survives only as *laqab* (nickname) of Tayma for al-'Ayn, that is 'Ayn al-Zawahir, the vestigial groups of the old tribal settlers, subject since the latter half of the 19th century to the Abu Dhabi Emirate. The ruling Al Bu Falah are themselves probably an element in the Hilali Jubur migrations of the 16th century, who settled first in the Liwa area and consolidated the "Bani Yas", in due course founding a settlement on the coast at Abu Dhabi. So just as Tuwam disappeared and the oasis as a whole designated by the name of one of its constituent villages, Buraymi, so on the coast, the

[25] J. C. Wilkinson, *Water and Tribal Settlement in South-East Arabia,* Clarendon Press, Oxford 1977.
[26] E.g. the Awlad Ra'is or Riyayisa, and Balush.

name Julfar dropped with the rise of the Jowasim state, whilst the Dhahira came to designate the area between Tuwam and Sirr, another old regional name also no longer used and now generally referred to by its principal settlement, Ibri.

Secondly, Ibadism which has become associated with the ideology of the core of Oman has disappeared from northern Oman. Generally the area lapsed into a neutral Sunnism of the Shafii school, although the Maliki school also made inroads, probably under the influence of the Jubur who held the whole of eastern Arabia at the time the Portuguese arrived. Of greater historic significance have been more extremist Islamic influences. From earliest times Oman was subject to attempts by other "Khariji" groupings to establish themselves, and after the civil war Qarmatism also made inroads. But the real lasting threat came from Wahhabism. And as Colonel Pelly noted in 1866[27] "...One notable feature of these inroads is, that those among the invaders who are *bona fide* Wahhabis of Najd seem to be comparatively few. They are rather the leaders of frontier tribes on the borders of Oman itself. Or as the *Sirat* Nasir bin A. Nabhan states [t]hen there came the *madhhab* of 'Abd al-Wahhab al-Najdi: it was particularly successful with the bedu (*a'rab*), ignorant peoples living in the deserts outside the people of the *buldan* (villages/towns), who are people of *fadl*. And when the Wahhabi state faded, many of those who had become Wahhabis became Sunnis and so there are many Sunnis (in Oman)."

The Al Sa'ud, the camel-herding nomads and the Saudi-Omani boundary

This defection of the nomads is both of interest and the greatest political importance.

[27] Quoted *Muscat and its Relations with the Wahhabee Power*, India Office document ca 1866.

For reasons that are deeply bound up with the formation of the Al Sa'ud -Wahhabi state, Ibn Sa'ud attached the highest priority to his sovereignty over the bedu tribes. That loyalty was deemed essential both to the personal relationships of the Al Sa'ud as the rulers of "Saudi" Arabia, and to the Wahhabi state, of which the Al Sa'ud ruler was "Defender of the Faith". This was indicated by the fact that, at least in the First Wahhabi Empire (that is until 1819), the *zakat* collected from the sedentary population was controlled by the regional centres, but that taken from the bedu went direct to the Saudi Amir in Diriya[28]. Furthermore, it is interesting to observe that when Ibn Sa'ud's tax collectors started appearing again in the Oman region they never attempted to collect *zakat* from the sedentary population, but only from the pure camel grazing nomads:

Once the boundary issue emerged in 1934, Britain adopted the legal principle that the Saudi state had inherited the boundary defined by the Blue and Violet lines in agreements with the Ottoman Empire shortly before the first world war limiting the Porte's sphere of influence in Arabia. That successor state argument was totally rejected by Ibn Sa'ud for whom tribal criteria were all that mattered when he in turn formulated his boundary claim. He consistently stated that he could also have invoked ancestral rights, which in his view the British had formally recognized under the terms of their first treaty (Darin) with him in 1915, but he had never done so and the sole principle that his government used for its territorial claims was the principle which is laid down and accepted in ordinary International Law [i.e.] claiming territory which is occupied by their subjects on which they have jurisdiction and in which their writ runs[29].

[28] Cf *Kitab Lum' al-Shihab fi sirat... 'Abd al-Wahhab*, British Library Ms 23.346.

[29] Note from Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the British Ambassador 10th Decemeber 1949 cf *British Memorial*, Annex D, No 28.

That last statement was a reformulation in terms of international law when Saudi Arabia withdrew its 1935 line after the war, but it was nevertheless consistent with what had been the original stance. Ibn Sa'ud claimed the bedu, and that is made clear by the first ever Saudi statement on the boundary already quoted concerning the hinterland tribes of the British protégés. However, that principle was somewhat modified in an effort to reach settlement, so that according to the Foreign Minister's letter of 2nd July 1935 explaining the concessions made by the Saudi Line[30].

The fact that the Government of His Majesty King 'Abdulaziz did not adopt the wide principle which was the basis of her relations with the tribes of the desert which had declared their allegiance and submission to His Majesty the King as the tribes of Dakiyah – Manahil, Kathir and Murra – and most of the tribes of Manasir, Duru, 'Awamir and Bani Ghafir and others, but were content to mention the natural boundaries which were generally recognized by the tribes inhabiting the desert as belonging to the tribes on whose members and lands His Majesty's Government has exercised direct influence for a long period, during which their ordinary members and their Sheikhs were actually in His Majesty's service and His Majesty's regular army.

Britain on its side was also getting ready to be accommodating. They knew for a fact that in the hinterland of their protégés in the Gulf, it was indeed the writ of Ibn Sa'ud and his powerful Ibn Jiluwi relative, who was governor of the Eastern Province (Hasa), that represented the sole central government authority over the majority of tribes (and certainly all the bedu tribes), at least in Eastern Arabia as far as the southern Dhahira, where the Imam of Oman's influence

[30] The quotation is from Foreign Office Papers E4111/77/91 as given in *British Memorial*, Annex D No. 12, and has clearly suffered in translation, but the purport is reasonably clear, that is the Saudis were not pressing their claims to all the tribes that they could, but only those with particularly close association with the King.

perhaps started. Certainly none of the British protégés attempted to collect *zakat* from the nomadic tribes (except the Imam of Oman). However, the British also believed that this *zakat* collection was in part "Danegeld", and even where properly collected in accordance with the principles of the Wahhabi state, reflected really no more than the personal influence of Ibn Sa'ud (and Ibn Jiluwi). Such manifestations of the "personal" rule of Ibn Sa'ud had to be resisted, for it would largely disappear with his death, whereas Britain's own position in the Gulf would persist.

So when offering their 1935 concession from what they considered their legal frontier of the Blue and Violet Lines, they had to play down the tribal criterion. Sir Andrew Ryan was instructed[31] in putting forward the British Line of 1935 to tell the Saudis that they were indeed prepared to make concessions in areas and settlements shown to be used by tribes recognizing the sovereignty of Ibn Sa'ud. However, he was also to make clear, no satisfactory frontier was constructible on a tribal basis alone, because of their shifting allegiances and the fact that tribal territories might well overlap in their peripheries. Tribal criteria could only be valuable where sovereignty was exclusive and primarily political (what they meant by that is not entirely clear): but that historic, geographic and strategic considerations might also have some relevance. Thus, Ryan was to say, they were responding to the Saudi view that the only basis of reaching settlement was to establish and allocate grazing grounds in accordance with the political allegiances of the desert tribes concerned, by conceding that the *dira* of the widespread Al Murra was Saudi and that their boundary proposal was, in part, based on the list of 161 wells that had earlier been presented by the Saudis. However, in certain places (and those in fact were the area in primarily dispute at the time, Qatar and

[31] See IOR L/P&S/12/2135 and R/15/6/164 notably FO E 6037/77/9.

Khawr al-'Udayd) they could not meet the Saudi claims.

It is relevant to note in the light of what has been said earlier about the poorer the tribe the greater its *dar*, that conceding that the Murra possessed an exclusive tribal territory meant that perhaps 5,000-10,000 people gave Ibn Sa'ud half a million sq. km, a territory about the size of France. However, it should also be emphasised that oil was not an issue (except for the British in the Qatar peninsula). That only really came to the fore after the second world war when Aramco lawyers developed the Saudi frontier claim and "withdrew" its 1935 "offer" (the Hamza line). So after the stalemate of 1935, the British started to enquire more closely of the Sultan and Aden possible concessions and made an offer of a possible modification of the Great Sands to a line beyond which the Sultan had agreed he had "no claims". Ibn Sa'ud made clear that he was not prepared to give way over the southern Qatar boundary, where his line was based on the "needs of the tribes", while the Oman concession was of no interest since the country thereabouts was pure desert[32]. Pure desert was generally where the oil structures lay.

It is not intended to pursue the issue of the boundary in the Oman region further here. The Saudi claim of 1949 and subsequent occupation of part of the Buraymi Oasis in 1952 was based on two different elements. The first, a specific frontier line defining Abu Dhabi which effectively removed most of its territory on the grounds (partly relevant to Qatar) that the Bani Hajir, Manasir, 'Awamir, Al Murra, Dawasir etc. were Saudi tribes. Beyond the final point of this specific line, the Saudis went on to say that the territory was under the authority of "Sheikhdoms which are not in treaty relations with the British Government" and the frontier would be negotiated directly with them.

[32] Wilkinson, 1991, Ch. X.

Muscat and Oman

That latter statement implied that the Dhahira belonged neither to the Trucial States nor the Sultan and that interior Oman was independent. Of course, the Wahhabi state was not going to recognize an Imamate as such in a formal statement of frontier and so it was assimilated with the other non-specified Sheikhdoms. But if there were any doubt about it a follow up note a month later made matters totally clear.

The position is that Buraymi, and the lands of Imam Khalili and their dependencies, are populated by Saudi Arabian tribes, and are not under the jurisdiction of the Sultan of Muskat, nor under the Sheikh of Abu Dhabi and it is therefore unreasonable to proceed with conversations with the British Government for the delimitation of frontiers between the Saudi Arabian Kingdom and these Sheikhdoms.

That poses the question of what was the relationship of Sultan and Imam, and the limit of their respective territories. In turn that raises deeper issues of the dichotomy implicit in the title used by Sd Sa'id Taymur, "Sultan of Muscat and Oman".

Basically it symbolised the two aspects of Oman; the one the port, the trading centre strongly under the influence of foreigners, the other inward looking Oman, isolationist, tribalised and subscribing to the Ibadi ideology of the elected Imam. But that is a travesty of the truth. To exist Oman needs to use both its native resources (fishing, grazing, agriculture) and the potential offered by its commercial and strategic location in the trade of the Indian Ocean monsoon system and its access to the vast hinterland of the Gulf. There has always been a major commercial entrepot somewhere on the eastern coast, Sohar, Qalhat, Muscat, while its territory frequently extended to exclaves on the Persian and Makran coast opposite (the last being Gwadar). From Sasanid times at least, Oman was incorporated in what the earliest Arab geographers

described as the *Ard al-Hind*, stretching around the Indian coast (and even beyond at various times, to Pegu (Burma) and even China) and down the East African coast, where Omani colonies and even empire were built from coastal centres, Kilwa, Mombassa, Pemba, Zanzibar, and further north Lamu, Malindi etc. In the 19th century, this empire developed unprecedented expansion into the interior with a major rise in demand for ivory that pushed Omani and other Arab traders based on Zanzibar to open up what became quasi independent Sultanates as far as Manyuema (Upper Congo) as well as in the regions around the Great Lakes. Although the Canning award of 1861 settling the succession of Sd Sa'id bin Sultan (d 1856) formally divided the Zanzibar and Muscat Sultanates, that was a purely nominal change of sovereignty until the British made Zanzibar a Protectorate in 1890. But despite the importance for Oman of this East African "Empire, the basis of its overseas commercial relations has always been with India. Reciprocal rights have had to be accepted and the basic Imamate rules were laid down by A. 'Abdullah Muhammad (son of the last Basran "Imam", Mahbub bin al-Rahil who was qadi in Sohar from 249 AH to his death 260/873)[33]. The essential to note here however, is that it was in this maritime capital alone that foreigners, and particularly polytheists were permitted to live. So the international port has always been a cosmopolitan centre with resident foreign communities, Persian, Baluch, Khojas, Hindu "Banians", Jews, Christians, etc. It is this centre too, along with certain other strategic ports, that outside powers sought to control and impose their regime, either directly or through vassals. Muscat's importance developed with the decline of Hormuzi power which was particularly associated with Qalhat, and it was fortified by the Portuguese as their last stronghold in Arabia

[33] See J. C. Wilkinson, "Suhar (Sohar) in the Early Islamic Period: the Written Evidence", *South Asian Archaeology*, 1977, pp. 887-907.

until evicted by the Yaariba in the middle of the 18th century. Yet, it was not until after the death of Sd Sa'id that the control of the British was really established, both in Muscat and Zanzibar as part of an imperial strategy. As we have seen, their hold was partly developed through the Indian Banian merchants who established new financial power with the "industrialization" and commercialisation of pearling, date exports, ivory, cloves, the financing of expeditions to the interior of Africa etc. And it was to the leaders of these merchants that the customs dues were farmed both in Zanzibar and Muscat, certainly at least by Sd Sa'id bin Sultan's reign. And his successors, whose states were separated in 1861 inevitably became financially indebted to him, while the Sultan of Muscat was also dependant on the British for the payment of the "Zanzibar subsidy"[34]. At the opposite pole to Muscat was Nizwa, officially the seat of the Imamate, though the old Sasanid power base on the other side of the central mountain block, Rustaq, also developed as a second seat periodically. Imamate and Sultanate, like Muscat and Oman, could be seen as labels for two extremities of a continuum. One is based notionally in the Ibadi concept of statehood, whereby the most suitable is elected by his equals amongst the *'ulama'* and rules by the laws of the *sharia* in consultation with them. His temporal power derives from the obedience of the tribesmen to the call to *jihad* (*shurat* in Ibadi terminology), from the administration of his *qadis* and *walis* who hold the main forts, and from the limited wealth deriving from *zakat*, the only legally imposable tax. Of itself that funding is totally inadequate, and it is from overseas trade and war plunder (*ghanima*) that wealth derived. That necessitated unifying the coast and interior, and maintaining a navy as well as a commercial fleet. The power of Sultans, theoretically represents the opposite pole; they are *jababira* (tyrants),

[34] Part of the settlement of the Canning Award separating the two countries.

supported by the *ahl al-baghi* (rather than the *ahl al-fadl*), Islamically unconstitutional, oppressive (*sultan al-jawr)*, and frequently allied with foreigners, even unbelievers. In reality Imamate history shows that authority usually becomes hereditary and oppressive, while Sultans often try to maintain an Islamic justice and also depend on tribal support rather than standing armies. Nevertheless, their wealth and power generally depend on developing pragmatic relations with outside forces that periodically take control of "Muscat", and they are often quasi vassals of foreigners, Muslim or Christian. They therefore usually reside in the maritime capital; in the case of the Al Bu Sa'id first Muscat and then Zanzibar, and finally away from all contact with their own people, in India and Dhofar.

Associated with the development of British imperial power after the abolishment of the East India Company, its unpopular measures concerning slaving and financial hold of trade through the hated protected "Banian" merchants, the Al Bu Sa'id regime increasingly became held responsible for the loss of freedom and economic ills of the Omanis, both at home and abroad. Since the civil war which marked the end of the Ya'ariba rule around 1725 the Imamate had virtually disappeared, although the first Al Bu Sa'id Sultan, Ahmad bin Sa'id (d.1782) does seem to have had some sort of election (1753/4) and was recognized more generally as an "Imam" in the sense that he had considerable support. Towards the end of his reign a sort of *al-salafiyya* movement began to develop in Oman which recreated a new Ibadi orthodoxy and in the time of his successors attempted to re-establish Imamate rule. For pragmatic reasons it had to find candidates amongst the Al Bu Sa'id family, most successfully in 'Azzan bin Qays of the Qays branch in Rustaq (who was elected a *da'if* Imam with limited powers in 1868). It also supported Barghash bin Sa'id in Zanzibar. The former was overthrown with British connivance by Turki bin Sa'id (Sultan 1871-88) and brutally put to death along with the leading *'alim,* Sa'id bin Khalfan al-

Khalili; while in Zanzibar Barghash (Sultan 1870-1888) was brought to heel by the imperial powers (Britain and Germany) and the attempt to place his son Khalid as successor smashed by a British bombardment. From now on, the Al Bu Sa'id were beyond the Ibadi pale.

The restoration of the Imamate

In May 1913, under the inspiration of 'Abdullah bin Humayd al-Salimi (d. 1914), an Imam was elected, Salim bin Rashid al-Kharusi, a member of the Kharus (Yahmad 'Azd) which had provided over twenty Imams from the time of the first Imamate. The movement gathered force and the main centres and leaders both in the interior and on the Batina coast (notably the Yal Sa'd) recognized him. In January 1915 the long heralded assault of Muscat took place, with a force of 3,000, but the attack was beaten off by the well entrenched Anglo Indian troops around the capital area who more or less cleared the Batina area. Desultory negotiations under the aegis of the British took place, but it was not until after the first world war that pressure was increased on the Imamate and the blockade of the coast intensified, coupled to punitive customs dues on date exports. In July 1920, the Imam was assassinated by a dissident Wahiba tribesman and Muhammad bin 'Abdullah al-Khalili, member of another Kharusi family and the grandson of the murdered Sa'id bin Khalfan al-Khalili of 'Azzan bin Qays Imamate, was elected. Shortly after, a settlement was reached between the two sides, negotiated by the British agent (R. Wingate) and 'Isa bin Salih al-Harithi, the Imam's intermediary[35], the so-called "Treaty of Seeb".

Theoretically the Imam held sway in central Oman,

[35] And son of Salih bin 'Ali (1834-96), the leader of the main power confederation behind 'Azzan bin Qays's Imamate.

but in certain areas effectively ruled through the great tribal leaders, notably the Nabhani leader of the Ghafiri Riyam confederation in the al-Jabal al-Akhdar region[36] and in the Shargiyya through 'Isa bin Salih al-Harithi (d 1946), *tamima* of the Hinawi confederation there. The Sultan's writ was established partly with the help of British force from the boundary at Khatmat Milaha in the north along the Batina with extensions in the south-east in the port areas of Qurayat and Sur, plus Dhofar and the Musandam Peninsula. Except in the lower Batina however, there was a sort of buffer zone of tribes between the two whose loyalties were ambiguous and opportunistic, with neither side appointing officials or, more significantly, collecting tax. An important extension of the Imam's domain occurred when the Saudi tax collectors started to reappear in the Buraymi area as a result of the 'Awamir, Al Bu Shamis and Duru of the Dhahira appealing for support from the governor of Hasa in their war against the Bani Yas and Manasir of Abu Dhabi and 'Isa bin. Salih al-Harithi occupied the old centres of the Sirr (Ibri area) in 1925. But he went no further since the predominantly Ghafiri tribes saw it as a plot by the Hinawis (Abu Dhabi and Dubai, and the Hirth alliance) to take control and they appealed to Sulayman bin Himyar al-Nabhani of the Ghafiri alliance of central Oman who threatened to attack Nizwa if 'Isa did not retire, his first assertion of his new leadership.

The resulting highly ambiguous situation of tribal intrigue was partly resolved when the Imam determined to bring order in this area and with a small expedition in 1940 established his wali, the formidable Muhammad bin Salim al-Riqayshi who stymied the Nabhani leaders ambitions in the area. Shortly before he had also brought the important

[36] It was at Himyar bin Nasir's "capital" of Tanuf that the Imam had been elected by the Ghafiris in 1913, but he died just before the Imam, and his son Sulyaman bin Himyar, who later was to play an ever growing role, was then but a boy of 13.

'Abriyin tribe based on al-Hamra to heel. But just before the Imam died in 1954 the area had again thrown off the Imam's yoke and tribal intrigue was rife, from which the Sultan tried to profit, as well as the Ghafiri leaders in the Dhahira and Sulayman bin Himyar. The ambiguity of the situation is illustrated by the fact that at one stage the Imam had appointed as his wali an *'alim* from the 'Abriyin tribe who had also been appointed *qadi al-qudat* in Muscat. That fact shows that in some ways the cooperation between the Sultan and the Imam had been increasing after Taymur bin Faysal was allowed to abdicate from his inept and absentee rule in India in 1931. His son Sd Sa'id's reign seemed to usher in a new era and he carefully cultivated orthodoxy and started to rectify some of his father's failures to implement the conditions of Seeb. Amongst other things, he reformed the collection of customs and he started appointing Omanis to his judiciary. This led to the development of an open door policy by 'Isa bin Salih al-Harithi whose intrigues to extend his authority beyond the Shargiyya in the south-east caused ructions with the conservative elements. The Imam wrote chiding him that the opening and the shutting of the door to Muscat was via the Shargiyya[37]. But Sa'id was preparing for the future to give meaning to his titular claim of being Sultan of Muscat and Oman. This became pressing after he signed the oil concession in June 1937 with IPC which assigned it to Petroleum Development (Oman and Dhofar). The Imam, on the contrary, was determined to keep all foreign influences at bay. So whilst the oil company had the concession for the whole territory it could only operate in those areas which the Sultan gave it permission to do so, and the Sultan had no intention of upsetting the old Imam. A *modus vivendi* had developed that was respected by both parties, although that did not prevent

[37] Muhammad bin 'Abdullah al-Salimi, *Nahdat al-A'yan bi Hurriyat 'Uman,* Cairo n.d., 80.

the Sultan from intriguing in their mutual frontier zone, notably with 'Isa in the Jaalan or with certain tribes in the mountain hinterland of the Sirr region.

The Treaty of Seeb

The formal relationship between the two sides had been deliberately left ambiguous by the British negotiator at Seeb. In the first place it was not a "Treaty" but a *sulh* (peace agreement). The phrasing was set such that the tribes would believe they were independent whilst at the same time the British government could deny to the Sultan they had derogated his overall suzerainty[38]. So the Sultan was called the Sultan and the other side the Omanis. But the Sultan (Taymur bin Faysal, as usual absent in India) claimed to be Sultan of Muscat and Oman while the Imam simply signed as Imam al-Muslimin, and the British negotiator made it quite clear back home, that the Imam did not recognize the Sultan. The Imam's title was theoretically universal but in fact by the Muslims he was referring to the Islamic *misr* of Oman, which meant more or less the same thing as what the Sultan claimed to rule. That was clearly brought out in the intrigues concerning Bani Bu 'Ali territory when the *tamima,* thoroughly alarmed that the Sultan might attack him, wrote to the Imam asking what his reaction would be, he replied "If the Sultan, helped by the English should so do, we must uphold the law (*sharia*); and that is to defend the *misr,* for Oman is one piece and not to be subdivided"[39].

So Sa'id refused absolutely to let the oil company see the Treaty of Seeb which he stated was a purely internal arrangement and the British government had no alternative but

[38] IOR R/15/6.264 and L/P&S.10.427.
[39] *Nahda,* 1982.

to go along with him. That meant too accepting that the Imamate was an integral part of the Sultan's territories and thus under the same sort of protection.

The Dhahira problem[40]

The territories the Sultan claimed extended up to and included the whole Buraymi oasis, where he refused to recognize the rights established by Sheikh Zayd bin Khalifa after the Saudi withdrawal in 1869. So it included the Dhahira, which the Political Agent in Muscat had said was independent in 1936, and it was there that after the war the oil company started to try and operate. As we have seen the Company's representative made side arrangements with the main tribal leaders, but the Sultan cancelled these with disastrous results, the Na'im in particular claiming total independence. But by this time the Fahud structure had been spotted from the air and that had became the primary objective for the oil company. In Saudi Arabia on the other hand, the American oil company, Aramco, had begun to consider the Trucial coast had considerable oil potential and started making serious incursions into territory hitherto covered by the pre-war *modus vivendi*. The result was the reformulation of the Saudi frontier claim dated 14th October 1949.

The problem was that the Gulf Resident, Sir Rupert Hay, had by now decreed that the IPC could not deal with the sheikhs but the Sultan absolutely refused to show any initiative in asserting his claims or provide supporting evidence to counter the Saudis. He absolutely refused to produce the letters the sheikhs had signed in 1948 as being beneath his dignity: "The Muscat government is content with the situation as it exists today, and trusts HMG [Britain] will be able to avoid

[40] For the following see Wilkinson, 1987, pp. 290-295 and 1991, Chapter 12 *et seq.*

the development of any boundary dispute". "The Sultan may be 'content with situation as it exists today', (whatever he means by that and whatever the situation is), it is fairly clear that the Saudis will not be content with it" a frustrated Foreign Office reiterated to its representative at Muscat, just before the 1949 Saudi statement of frontier. And even after it, he stuck by his letter of 1937 (his no claims line) and refused to say anything more. But, as a Foreign Office study pointed out, it would be difficult to sustain the Sultan's *de jure* right over the Imamate tribes on grounds that in distant times they had been under Sultanate rule and the Sultan had never renounced right to their allegiance (whatever the Treaty of Sib said): and with regards to Buraimi and the Dhahira emphasised that it is of little use to refer to the temporary character of Wahhabi occupation when we are forced to admit much longer periods when the Sultan has had no effective jurisdiction at all.

So in subsequent negotiations with the Saudis all the concentration was on the specifics of the Abu Dhabi territorial dispute and Oman was not mentioned. Nevertheless, it was essential that something be done about the Dhahira; and so the British representative on the Trucial Coast apparently authorised the IPC representative to start dealing direct again with the tribes. The Sultan was furious and claimed that his work had been set back two years and his relations with the Imam upset.

The Buraymi crisis

These had indeed been improving as events were about to show. One thing he was right in telling the British, the Imam and he were in complete agreement with respect to foreign policy, at least as far as their old Saudi-Wahhabi enemy was concerned, and proof of this was soon forthcoming. Attempts to negotiate at the Dammam Conference with the Saudis early

in 1952 reached an impasse with Sir Rupert Hay leaving an exaggerated counter-claim for Abu Dhabi on the table. On 31st August, the Shamsi sheikh of Hamasa, one of the Sultanate villages in the Buraymi oasis, returned from Saudi Arabia with Turki bin 'Utayshan who installed himself announcing he had been appointed Saudi governor at the request of the people and sending letters to various sheikhs as far as Dank in the Dhahira pronouncing them Saudi subjects, and requesting support from the Rulers of Dubai and Sharjah (traditional rivals of Abu Dhabi). This coup was sweetened by a massive distribution of hospitality and largesse. Various actions were taken by the Trucial Oman Levies and RAF, as too by the Ruler of Abu Dhabi and the Sultan to reinforce their authority in the other Buraymi villages, but the real display of Omani unity arose when the Imam and Sultan raised a joint force of tribesmen to deal with the situation. One group of 400 was to advance from Dariz in the 'Ibri area, while the main contingent of 1,000 moved from Sohar. The State Department had been taken quite unaware by the occupation of Hamasa until appealed to by the Saudis to mediate. Frightened that the British might resort to violence, they put considerable pressure for the government to stop the expedition and the Sultan had no other course but to comply.

What a triumph of American diplomacy and display of British weakness. A great opportunity to bring the two parts of Oman closer together was missed, the standstill agreement finally reached on 26th October 1952 provided a massive opportunity for Saudi intrigue and proof that the British were now no longer the dominant power, and the whole affair ended in bloodshed and the use of force.

In the meantime, the IPC had been told to concentrate its exploration in the Hawshi Huqf area on the south coast of Oman in the desert hinterland of Jaalan where there was a vacuum of power and where the Sultan claimed the bedu Janaba and Harasis had no relationship with the Imam. So in

February 1954 a landing established a base at Duqm with a force recruited for it, the "Muscat and Oman Field Force". The Imam immediately protested, and the Sultan made clear that the company was to stick to the coastal area and not to try and make contact with the Duru in whose *dar* Fahud lay, and whose main area of contact with the settled areas was in the 'Ibri region.

Election of the Imam Ghalib

In May the Imam died. Partly out of respect, partly out of fear and ignorance the majority of Omanis had remained loyal to their ageing Imam who had for long been expected to die. But the young and ambitious were ready for that day. The Khalili had wanted 'Abdullah, a son of the Imam Salim bin Rashid al-Kharusi, as his successor, but the time was ripe for change. So he was persuaded to fall in line with the choice of Ghalib bin 'Ali bin Hilal al-Hina'i and formally renounced 'Abdullah in a properly witnessed document"[41]. Ghalib was duly elected on the day he died with full Imamate powers.

It is not necessary to dwell on the consequences. No one comes out with any credit. The oil company forced its way to the 'Ibri area and secured the support of the Duru, thereby gaining access to Fahud. The rivalries and ambitions of the main leaders in the Imamate became blatant and it asserted its independence internationally and courted the Saudis and Nasser's Egypt. Following the breakdown of arbitration proceedings in October 1955 the Buraymi oasis was reoccupied by the Trucial Oman Scouts and the Saudis and their most blatant local supporters evicted. A unilateral declaration of frontier was also made. Within six weeks, the forces of the Sultan

[41] Written by Muhammad bin Salim al-Riqayshi and some twenty witnesses. For the text see *al-Falaq* (Zanzibar), 22 Ram 1373.

capitalising on the Saudi rout, the reaffirmation of British prestige, and the disaffection of many with the Imam Ghalib (and his ambitious brother, Talib), carried out a bloodless coup by occupying Nizwa and the strongholds of the Imamate. The Sultan made a rapid tour from Salalah up the inside of the mountains as far as Buraymi (where he met Sheikh Shakhbut) and back down the Batina, staying six weeks in Muscat before returning to Dhofar. Many pledged allegiance (including Sulayman bin Himyar), although others fled and the Imam retired to Bilad Sayt under the custody of his kinsman, the Sheikh of the Bani Hina.

Thus was Oman reunited and for the first time since 1886 a Sultan visited the interior of the country over which he claimed sovereignty. All might have ended reasonably satisfactorily. But instead the Sultan returned to absentee rule, determined to keep his country isolated, backward, and divided. Divide and rule was his policy, divide by playing on tribal fissiparousness and the ambitions of individuals, rule by building up a centralised power structure through modern communications and armaments. Lack of money was his excuse not to develop, but in fact he had made a personal fortune by parsimony and speculation, exploiting the wartime situation and post-war rationing (on one occasion rerouting wheat for his ill-fed subjects to Kuwait where prices were higher) and speculating on currency. He had also made a coup with the Dhofar concession in his personal fiefdom (which the IPC had been more or less forced to give up), through the offices of the American entrepreneur, Wendell Phillips and the announcement of the discovery of what in fact proved heavy non-commercial oil. He was also receiving concessionary payments, aid for development from the British government, and customs dues, while in 1958 he made a windfall on the sale of Gwadar to the Pakistani Government. But not a penny went on development, no schools, hospitals, or roads, while any private initiative was stifled. The benefit of oil employment was confined to the bedu by his tribal policy justified by the use of tribal *dars*, the criterion which the British refused when dealing with the Saudis but was now the basis for drawing boundaries in the Trucial States, as we have seen. The Sultan also had a remarkable ability of keeping the British at bay; powerless to change his policy (after all he was the best judge of the needs of his people), but bound to protect him. And yet reunification ought to have been the key priority after 1955!

Trouble soon started brewing, first in the Shargiyya and then with the Imam's rising in 1957. It was put down by the British army and RAF bombing. Coming as it did so soon after Suez, this "imperialist" intervention had to be brief and so the Sultan's Armed Forces were completely reorganized, commanded, trained, and armed by British seconded and mercenary officers. But the Imam's resistance was far from finished and further intervention was required at the end of 1958, again by British regular forces who were used to dislodge the "rebels" from the al-Jabal al-Akhdar and surrounding fortresses. So they resorted to mining and terrorist activities, and for five years the main passage through the Sumayil Gap was closed to the oil company, and operations at Fahud continued by flights over the mountains. All of which was exploited by Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the Arab League with The Oman Question raised at the United Nations by the Imamate groupings and other exiled discontents. In the meantime serious Marxist backed revolution had exploded in Dhofar.

The British withdrawal

With the British decision to withdraw from the Gulf, something had to be done. It had already left Aden in 1966 and it was clear that its days in the Gulf were numbered. The problematic Sheikh Shakhbut had already been removed in 1966 and replaced by his brother Sheikh Zayd in Abu Dhabi who

was given authority by the British to try and settle the boundary issue with Saudi Arabia, where potential oil structures were being found in the west of the country and on either side of the unilaterally declared boundary. With King Faysal in power, there had been a change of attitude, relations had been patched up with Britain, whilst the Yemen and South Yemen situations were preoccupying him. He also knew the frontier issue intimately and there was reason to suppose he might be more accommodating than King Sa'ud. At the start of 1968, the British Government announced it would withdraw from the Gulf by 1971 and something urgently had to be done about the protégé states. The usual *solution de facilité* of a Federation quickly went the way of other such efforts and Qatar and Bahrain refused to join in any case (as too, initially, did Ra's al-Khayma). Sheikh Zayd quickly appreciated the need to use his rapidly growing oil revenues to develop a sort of union in the Trucial States, spread wealth, develop a communal defensive system and settle their boundary bickering. So the United Arab Emirates came into existence on the 2nd December 1971 followed by a boundary agreement with Saudi Arabia in August 1974, though some details remained uncertain, not least because there was no Saudi settlement with Oman and there were differences between Abu Dhabi (UAE) and Oman.

In Oman itself the situation was serious. The Sultan's survival against the Dhofar Liberation Front had depended on British and Iranian forces, and that at a time when all was about to change as Shell prepared to go into production (actual exports started 1967). And still the Sultan refused to spend money on development or modernize his country. In Muscat the gates were still locked at dusk and the only made up road in the whole country extended a mile or two towards Matrah! Yet it was not until July 1970 that he was finally deposed. By which time there was no question of associating Oman with some form of regional structure for a Greater Oman. Nor would Iran and Saudi Arabia have given their blessing to it. So

under the rule of Sultan Qaboos the terrible errors of the past began to be tackled, helped by oil revenues, a general fear of the Marxist threat in the region as a whole, and by Tariq bin Taymur's personal efforts to reconcile exiled leaders with the new regime. The situation in Dhofar was finally mastered and the boundary with South Yemen (unified with the North in 1990) agreed, as too that with Saudi Arabia and the UAE. More important still, despite some early errors, a sensible development and modernization of the country was implemented, the country integrated, the old wounds healed and personalities reconciled. A demographic explosion means that there are few who remember the old days and Muscat and Oman are today reunited as one country.