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## A Vision of Modernity: Narratives of Historical (Dis)continuity in Oman



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### Abstracts

English Français

Be it in academic publications, official speeches or ordinary narratives, the history of Oman and the foundations of its modern nation-state usually appear as a continuous teleological process. The dichotomies such as tradition *vis-à-vis* modernity and darkness versus enlightenment (or *nahḍa*) are articulated into a narrative of progression and transformation. This article aims to understand the conception and experience of these notions by looking at how the construction of history and its temporality follows an ethos of continuity. It examines if the vision of modernity selected and incorporated in the national narrative of building a peaceful Oman and creating an Omani identity anchored on Ibadi values is sustainable in the long term. In this process, the Omani citizen emerged, part of the modern citizenship process that requires creating bonds of aggregation through national identity and the relationship between people and state. Finally, the article focuses on the tensions that arise from the way modernisation is framed in the historical trajectory of the state-building, nowadays going through leadership changes and transitioning to a post-oil era.

Que ce soit dans les recherches académiques, les discours officiels ou ordinaires, l'histoire d'Oman et les fondements de son État-nation moderne apparaît généralement comme un processus téléologique continu. Les dichotomies telles que la tradition et la modernité ainsi que l'obscurité contre l'illumination, généralement entendu comme "renaissance, ou *nahḍa* sont articulées au sein d'un récit de progrès et de transformation. Cet article vise à comprendre la conception et l'expérience de ces notions en examinant comment la construction de l'histoire et sa temporalité suivent une éthique de la continuité. Il examine si la vision de la modernité qui a été sélectionnée et incorporée dans le récit national de la construction d'un Oman pacifique et de la création d'une identité omanaise ancrée sur les valeurs ibadites est durable à long terme. Dans ce processus, le citoyen omanais a émergé, ce qui fait partie du processus de citoyenneté moderne qui nécessite de créer des liens d'agrégation à travers l'identité nationale



et la relation entre le peuple et l'État. Enfin, l'article se concentre sur les tensions qui découlent de la façon dont la modernisation est encadrée dans la trajectoire historique de la construction de l'État, qui connaît aujourd'hui des changements de son dirigeant et qui passe à l'ère post-pétrolière.

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## ***Index terms***

**Mots-clés :** Sultanat d'Oman, renaissance, modernité, tradition, identité nationale, patrimoine, Oman Vision 2040

**Keywords :** Sultanate of Oman, renaissance, modernity, tradition, national identity, heritage, Oman Vision 2040

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## ***Full text***

# **Introduction**


- 1 Over the last five decades, Oman's history has been portrayed as a successful model of transformation and modernisation, in contrast with its past. The dichotomies such as tradition vis-à-vis modernity and darkness versus light, generally understood *nahḍa* or the renaissance, are articulated into a narrative of progression and transformation. This process is often attributed to the modernising efforts of Sultan Qaboos bin Sa'id which was aided by the discovery of oil, as in other Gulf countries. Progression occurred with new buildings and infrastructure, which spurred the construction of schools, universities, hospitals and other public governmental institutions. This process consolidated a centralised state and a nation-state that, until the 1970s, was fragmented into a Sultanate and an Imamate. The unification of both entities has solidified Oman as a sovereign and modern nation-state, instilling the Omani identity as a fundamental element for unifying a diverse population, linguistically, ethnically and religiously.
- 2 As envisaged by Sultan Qaboos bin Sa'id<sup>1</sup>, Oman is nowadays described as a country with a modern society, encapsulated into a narrative of historical continuity where elements of the past can, from an external viewpoint, appear as selected and reinterpreted to convey a unitary vision of development and modernisation. However, modernity is not a simple category and being modern is not an assessment of linear progressiveness. Shmuel Eisenstadt looks at modernity as a "distinct civilisation with distinct institutional and cultural characteristics," and as "modes of interpretation of the world"<sup>2</sup>. He analyses the modernisation process as a cultural programme that emphasises the increase of individual autonomy. This implies the possibility for individuals of the society to participate more actively in their context in order to transform it with their forces<sup>3</sup>.
- 3 Historically, Oman has been at the centre of centripetal modernising forces in different times, being confronted with new knowledge, cultures and people. Moreover, the country's turbulent political events have influenced its current path of development to pursue a peaceful national identity that avoids questioning authority or making political demands<sup>4</sup>. The government has refined the idea of modernisation to fit in the historical narrative of Oman, which is not in itself different from other countries in the Middle East. In fact, what makes it unique is why modernity was chosen in these moulds by the government and how the Omani citizens have accepted it to become modern, but with traditions, as many people often express. Thus, associating the contrast between modernisation and tradition is oversimplifying the process of acquiring modernity and forging a sense of national identity, which I intend to analyse in this article.



- 4 The central inquiry of this exploratory article is to examine if the vision of modernity that was selected and incorporated into the national narrative of building a peaceful Oman and creating an Omani identity anchored on Ibadi values is sustainable in the long term. My aim is to understand how modernity was naturalised in the historical trajectory of the state-building until nowadays, a time of regime change and a transition towards a post-oil era that could be disruptive. In this process, I argue that Ibadi-Islam had a particular role in how it shaped the Omani identity and the emergence of Omani citizens.
- 5 Oman's perception of time from a historical perspective can provide an account of how the modernisation forces were present during its time as a seafarer power, expanding through the maritime routes of the Indian Ocean until Africa. In contrast, during certain moments of history, Oman became isolated from the rest of the world, cautiously developing and many times rejecting foreign influences. Besides, the conflicts in Dhofar and the Jebel Akhdar region<sup>5</sup> are important events that have contributed to how modernity has been incorporated into the shared history of nation-building.
- 6 By looking at these events and then, at how they were introduced visually and spatially in the daily lives of Omanis, modernity is revealed as a continuous process, yet fissures of the past that were left aside cannot be dismissed from people's memory and their relationship with the state. In this interaction between the Omani and the nation-state building, traditions are recalibrated to fit the official narrative. Although less emphasised in public discourse, the Ibadi religious tradition is mostly present in how the Omani identity has been consolidating. In fact, the chosen path of modernity generates a society that is perceived as harmonious, guided by a generic Islam. By focusing on the younger layer of the Omani population, I intend to understand how the youth perceives and reconciles the vision of modernisation with traditions. The role of Sultan Qaboos in this process was essential, and with his death, Oman is now going through a new era that is still uncertain. Thus, the last part addresses the challenges that his successor, Haitham bin Tariq, will face in post-pandemic Oman, where the chosen vision of modernity is defied by its internal fissures and the uncertainty of a fragile economy.
- 7 This article is supported by the methodological approach of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in 2015 and 2016 within Master's research. During the fieldwork, around thirty interviews were conducted with individuals, along with personal observations and interactions with local Omanis. Due to the pandemic Covid-19 travel restrictions, conducting more recent ground interviews was not possible. Instead, informal online conversations during the initial months of 2021 have provided some data that has enriched this research. Six interviews were selected from the different interviews conducted, mainly for their relevance to the theme. Most of the interviewees are young Omanis (female and male, aged 18 to 35) and religious authority figures from the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs office<sup>6</sup>.

## **I. The modernisation waves in Omani history**

### **1. Oman's perception of time from a historical perspective**

- 8  Oman's history is an interaction of foreign powers presence and influence, competing interests, religious disputes and territorial conflict, which has contributed to its development as a nation-state. Moreover, its dynamic historical epochs reflect

how the country had been in touch with modernisation, influences from abroad, which were visible to the leaderships.

9 During the 16th century, the Portuguese conquest of Oman, particularly Muscat and other coastal towns, influenced how the country developed and asserted itself as a seafarer power<sup>7</sup>. In fact, the defeat and expulsion of the Portuguese by the Al Ya'ribah dynasty had been possible by using the Portuguese's knowledge of military and technology<sup>8</sup>. Later, the Omani power was able to develop as a trading empire by following them across the Indian Ocean, and down the east coast of Africa, with Zanzibar as the main power centre<sup>9</sup>. The presence in East Africa had stimulated the exchange and influences of new ideas and other religious currents that were preeminent at that time. This expansion era was later contrasted by a period of isolation with Sultan Sa'id bin Taymur's rule from 1932 to 1970. During this time, Oman was politically fragmented and suffered economic stagnation<sup>10</sup>. The country had closed to the world, as the sultan refused to modernise the country, often described as suspicious of the modern trends<sup>11</sup>. His reign was described by his extreme political control and reluctance to develop the country as modern ideas could contaminate it.

10 Sultan Qaboos coming to power represented a new beginning for a country living in the dark ages, as scholars refer to the era of his father's rule<sup>12</sup>. The new economic and social transformation began in Oman, and this period was described as the "Omani renaissance" or *nahḍa*. This was incorporated in the sultan's speech, and it echoed all of Oman, as it was becoming a modern state, with profound economic and social change in the society. The infrastructural development that took place at the beginning of the 1970s intended to put Oman on the path of modernisation and give it new meaning as a nation<sup>13</sup>.

11 Right after he acceded to the throne, the sultan was confronted by the Dhofar rebellion, where he managed to defeat the insurgents with the British military intervention in the conflict<sup>14</sup>. This event was fundamental in how the national narrative of Omani identity took form. It was not the first conflict that had broken in the country, with the previous war in Jabal Akhdar exacerbating the tensions between the imamate and the sultanate in the light of the Treaty of Seeb that had been signed in 1920<sup>15</sup>. The treaty divided the country into the Sultanate of Muscat, ruled by the sultan, and Oman, ruled by the imam and the tribal shaykhs of the interior.

12 With Sultan Qaboos, a new history supplanted these turbulent political occurrences to dissipate the struggle between the Imamate and the Sultanate. In fact, the collapse of the Ibadi imamate in 1955 weakened the Ibadi political power since the Imam was both a political ruler and a spiritual leader who was supported by the Ibadi scholars. Historically, the Ibadi scholars had a significant political role in the affairs of the imam and how Oman developed. Therefore, with a weak opposition, the Sultan created the position of the Mufti, centralising the religious authority in Omani society. During this time, the chosen version of modernisation and creation of Omani identity included a selection of historical elements such as Oman as a seafarer and openness to the world anchored in Ibadi value of peacefulness and tolerance.

13 My interview with a shaykh from the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs provides a better comprehension of the implications of Ibadism in the historiography of the modernisation narrative. During our discussion, he vehemently mentioned the role of Sultan Qaboos in conciliating religion with modernity and identity, stating:

"The wise leadership of his majesty, the sultan is another essential element in shaping the modern identity of Oman altogether, and I think that this is because of the moderate approach found within the Ibadi school of thought, found in Oman throughout its history, so no one can underestimate the role of the wise leadership in preserving the identity of the country and even improving the positive elements and components of that identity"<sup>16</sup>.



14 For this Ibadi Shaykh, the sultan has been wisely implementing policies while at the same time respecting what they consider Ibadi traditions, such as tolerance, openness, respect, peace and consensus, without forgetting their role in guiding the youth. In that regard, although Sultan Qaboos' era is recognised as a rupture with the past and the temporal break assumes a new beginning towards progress, the contemporary Omani society is far from the conception of historical linearity since there are multiple ways of experiencing and conceptualising time. In fact, Mandana Limbert, during her ethnographic work in a small interior city of Oman – Bahla, has observed the intergenerational tensions, where memories of a past before Sultan Qaboos's era are interwoven with the present, which are still uncertain since the oil supplies will eventually end<sup>17</sup>. The modern developments which reorganised the city of Bahla, as seen through the eyes of elders and younger generations, provide an account of how modernisation is conceptualised. It also shows the government's efforts in developing a national narrative where social order is experienced through state planning projects, bureaucracy and policies.

15 With that in mind, the national narrative also incorporates a certain conceptualisation of the “Omani citizen”, with shared values and beliefs. But being Omani is not a homogenous identity<sup>18</sup>. It contains a multitude of different ethnic, linguistic and religious diversity, which can defy the national interest and identity. The articulation of a narrative of modernity and development has created an institutionalised form of Omani history. This reframes the past by restructuring time, in which nation-building and citizenship are embedded into a national and historical truth. Hence, the idea of history has a past that represents the roots of a country, the present that has progressed and renewed by reconciling with the past, into a modern and developed future.

16 From the point of view of temporal experience, what is at stake in the transition to modernity is a new form of articulation between the past and the future, experience and expectation, which involves a progressive separation between both. According to Reinhart Koselleck, during the Renaissance, “the modern time was identified with progress since it was progress that conceptualised the difference between the past so far and the coming future”<sup>19</sup>. In his explanation, time is encapsulated within progress, which is validated as a universal simultaneous project where in reality, it is not. According to the author, progress has become a collective singular, transformed into a subject that has been universalised as an ideal aspired for the advance of humanity<sup>20</sup>. Progress, thus, became an agent of time, erasing the local progress and incorporating them into the progress of whole human history. This process can be seen within the history of any country, and Oman is no exception. Despite its particular and different local progress, the narrative of progress and modernisation has been intertwined and presented as national.

17 R. Koselleck also emphasises that experience and expectation started to be associated with the perception of the past and future<sup>21</sup>. This moment defined how humans began to understand and relate to history. The author's point is that something in the experience, in the perception of time, has changed. Time does not only become the way in which all stories unfold, it acquires a historical quality. In the process of Omani nation-building, Sultan Qaboos has managed to conciliate this perspective by permeating Oman's landscape with historical symbolism representing its most desired qualities, such as the spirit of discovery and navigation in reminiscence to its maritime history and presence in East Africa. In addition, in the narrative of modernisation, it was emphasised the openness to the world and tolerance towards other people and culture. At the same time, a notion of harmony was infused, where the Omani peacefulness became the prime characteristic of Oman's identity.



## 2. Becoming modern: elements of visualisation

18 Faisal, 20 years old engineering student, has been living in Muscat since he was born. He has already travelled extensively to other countries and is well familiar with European and Gulf cities. He is very proud of his city since it has not succumbed to an artificial modernisation, which he explains as “building random things without any historical meaning”<sup>22</sup>. He knows Muscat and saw many changes as he was growing up, being aware that “although Muscat is following the modernising steps of its neighbouring countries, the city’s architectonic development is different from other cities in the Gulf. I am proud that Muscat is maintaining a more traditional appearance regarding the organisation of the city”<sup>23</sup>, he recognises that there are power relations entangled with how certain areas are more developed, where the periphery is mainly populated by migrants from India and South Asia, while the coastal area belongs to upper-class Omanis.

19 This extract illustrates how youth envision their social environment and city, demarking it from other surrounding Gulf capitals, highlighting the elements that are visually implemented to convey the idea of tradition. From one side, one can grasp the distant and old traditions of the ancestors, but at the same time, these undergo through a process of reshaping as contemporary ideals, which are permeating the urban landscape. Henri Lefebvre’s theory of the production of space can provide a framework for understanding the process of modernisation and its influence in the capital of Oman, Muscat. He challenges the conception that addresses space as innocent, non-political, isolated from context, and as a specific aspect of social organisation<sup>24</sup>. His approach to social space and urban reality is connected to the reproduction of social relations of production and modes of production as well. In fact, Muscat reflects how space was produced and modified in order to reinterpret the Omani identity and culture in people’s everyday surroundings. At the same time, as the state is engaging in nation-building and strengthening the Omani identity, the Omanis are also part of this process, selecting, adapting and sometimes resisting or contesting how the city’s identity is asserted.

20 In fact, the discovery of oil was the impetus for profound development and industrialisation in the country. Despite many changes in the urban architectural landscape in the Gulf capitals, Muscat is one of the few cities still keen to maintain its traditional heritage. Aurel von Richthofen has pointed out that Muscat has welcomed contemporary buildings aesthetically in harmony with local vernacular architecture<sup>25</sup>. Forts, castles and other defensive depictions can be seen in the landscapes of Oman, reminiscent of a past that conveys power and sovereignty. Aesthetically, the defensive imagery differentiates the country’s architecture while metaphorically accentuating the national narratives’ landscape.

21 The Tower of Renaissance (or *Burj al-sahwa*) clock tower is one of the recognisable icons of Muscat, near the city centre when one arrives in the capital by car. It was built in 1985 to commemorate Oman’s 25 years of renaissance and is considered a national monument. In many of Sultan Qaboos’s speeches, this renaissance ideology<sup>26</sup> is used through the *nahda* metaphor to convey a new era after he accedes to the throne. Sometimes, the term *sahwa*, or awakening, is used in historiography to refer to a new beginning after Oman’s period of isolation with the father of Sultan Qaboos, Sultan bin Taimur. The monument reflects the country’s defensive architecture – the forts and castles, while the base is embellished with bas-reliefs that illustrate the past and the present. Another important detail is the mosaics. These represent Oman’s maritime history<sup>27</sup>, with everyday objects and scenes such as the *dalla* (coffee pot), *khanjar* (dagger), dhows or ships.

22 For Marc Valeri, monuments like the Tower of Renaissance, built at the entries of main cities, consolidate the nation-state imaginary and its heritage<sup>28</sup>. Many other symbolic and traditional objects are often displayed on monuments and used to



convey a sense of tradition in modern construction. This embodiment of modernity in Oman reflects how it was conceived to preserve a local tradition as heritage with economic and industrial modernisation to create harmony. The city of Muscat has experienced significant transformation since the advent of oil urbanisation through state-led development processes. However, unlike other Gulf countries, which replaced the old with the new to make place for a modern city, Muscat has retained its historic urban centre<sup>29</sup> by utilising the traditional in the heritage dimension.

23 As the landscape of the city changed, the perceptions of its history have also altered. The urban geography does not hold an aesthetic functionality, but also a practical one, as it is embedded into a mode of representation that contains a unitary historical and political narrative. The visual commemorations of historical memory encapsulate time, history and tradition, by giving context to how the nation was created.

24 Retrospectively, the scholarly literature has written extensively about Oman and its rebirth as a modern country<sup>30</sup>. Some authors portray the differences in Oman after Sultan Qaboos, emphasising its path towards modernisation and progress in contrast to tradition. There is a clear demarcation and not continuity between the reigns. Sultan Qaboos' discourse on the renaissance reflects how *nahḍa* has forged the basis for setting the material substance of a state whose institutional networks and political organisation have used its force to create a modern nationwide system. The visual power of institutions, such as universities, hospitals, government organisations and mosques, convey a sense of belonging to the present rooted in the past. The new positions that were created by the government in different times during Sultan Qaboos' reign are also part of his modernising efforts, albeit, sometimes they were also a way to appease the demands of the younger population. Parallely, the development of the city and continuing emergence of new buildings has contributed to the emergence of a private sector, although part of the centralised state, always present in reconfiguring people's daily lives. In this process, a binary order was created and institutionalised, where reality is seen through the dual lenses of state vis-à-vis society, and official versus unofficial government, interiorised by the Omani citizen.

## II. A modern Omani and a tolerant Ibadi

### 1. Traditions reoriented

25 Every Friday, on Oman Radio English station 90.4, a talk show called "Knowing your religion" addresses a different topic by shedding light on religion and its various aspects with guests to express their views. The audience can interact with the presenters, Shaykh Kahlan al Kharusi, the assistant to the Grand Mufti of Oman and the host Hatim, who received calls from the auditors. The talk show is presented in English, most probably to appeal to all the communities in Oman and provide more clarification about Islam. Many of those calls were from young Omanis, asking questions about marriage, doubts about praying during Ramadan or what is allowed and not allowed in Islam<sup>31</sup> in the present time. This radio program illustrates the attempts to bring religion interpretation in line with contemporary Omani society, which has welcomed modernisation although managing to retain traditional characteristics. In one of my conversations with a Shaykh from the Ministry of Endowment and Religious Affairs, the contrast of modernity versus traditional is often referred as a current debate that is permeating the Omani governmental decisions. He highlights that this modernisation process should not be seen as conflictual:



“Now, many people tend to think there is a conflict between modernity and being able to preserve your identity or conservatism. But I do not think because every single period of history has its modern wave. The point is: are you going to isolate yourself? Can you isolate yourself? Or do you have to dissolve in that modernity? Or there is something else in between, which is to integrate? This is what is going on in this country. (...) There is a moderate way to benefit from modernity and not to dissolve in other people’s cultures”<sup>32</sup>.

26 His views reflect a version of modernity that Oman is pursuing, which is to integrate by maintaining its traditions, but at the same time, it reconfigures them in the everyday lives of Omanis. These traditions are appropriated and reproduced not passively but in an interactive way.

27 When looking at the concepts of tradition and modernity, they can still be envisaged as opposites. The idea between the old and the new, the fixed and the changing, the past and the progressive way of the future, are usually presented as contrasting views. The terms modern versus traditional suggest two different approaches towards the negotiation of change, with the traditional resisting it and the modern accepting it. In some discussions with Omanis, tradition is associated with a belief, transmitted from generation to generation. Hisham, 34 years old government employee, mentioned that the practice of tolerance, respect and consensus are values that his grandfather always emphasised in what made people in Oman special. Originally from Bahla, he moved to Muscat for studies and stayed after finding a job. He speaks about his family being open to others, as he has many friends from other countries. For him, this is related to the Ibadi values, that his ancestors have left their family. When speaking about traditions, he says that “Ibadi traditions are the reason Oman is peaceful and always in harmony with others. We want to live a good life and not to be disturbed by conflict like in other countries”<sup>33</sup>. He refers to a past and how his knowledge about Ibadi values was passed through generations from his grandfather to his father, always emphasising the uniqueness of Omanis for being Ibadis.

28 In contrast, for some Omani youth, the reconciliation of modernity with tradition has been a process of questioning and reflection. Malak, a 29 years old lecturer, who was educated abroad, has struggled with her return to Oman after a decade of living in different countries. For her, being Omani is being Ibadi, which is entirely different from other religious traditions in Oman. As her upbringing mainly was abroad, she presented herself as an Ibadi but with a critical mind, understanding that not every tradition is religion, as she reflects: “Many people in Oman do not want to see the country losing its identity, and they think that more modernity like in other countries in the Gulf will make traditions disappear. For this reason, Oman may seem stuck”<sup>34</sup>. Malak is keen on change, and she sees her daily struggles as necessary to make people understand that traditional ways of doing things do not mean that they are right or better than others. She also underlines that: “The role of Ibadi traditions is embedded in everything we do. Even when passing by and saying “hi” to a stranger. You are expected to behave in a certain way”<sup>35</sup>.

29 First, the fear of losing the identity, which she refers to, can allude to a group of people who reject the idea of modernity, associating it with westernisation and values that are completely opposite from their upbringing. Westernisation is seen as individualistic, where the focus on the individual is seen as egotistical, while living in the community is the suitable way to live, where the family absorbs the individual. Secondly, the role of Ibadi-Islam in the modernisation project and Omani state-building is modulated, although Ibadi references were appropriated and used to create a unitary Omani identity. The differing views on the role of Ibadi-Islam in shaping Omani identity are useful for understanding how the Ibadi traditions are not monolithic or static. Although Ibadi-Islam has an invisible presence in the society, in the sense that direct influences of it are not publicly emphasised nor discussed, the Omani citizens can be seen through the framework of Ibadi traditions that are



reconfigured in the daily demands of modern education and professional life. A Shaykh that I have interviewed has referred that “[...] We cannot deny that the school itself has shaped the identity of its followers because the Ibadi values promote peace, tolerance and harmony in the society”<sup>36</sup>.

30 These Ibadi values have been part of Oman’s history, and although some traditions may have been altered, their fundamental features are still present today. In the transformative process of the tradition, if there is no awareness, tradition could be considered invented or inauthentic, as Eric Hobsbawm argues<sup>37</sup>. Thus, traditions are not passive constructions, but a dynamic system of beliefs and practices passed from generations, which are subject to change.

31 Similarly, one can define modernity as a cultural phenomenon with moral prescriptions, where ideas, principles and values interact in different ways with unknown results. Being modern or becoming modern is related to the process of modernisation, which for many European and North American societies is concomitant with economic growth, industrialisation and technological advancement<sup>38</sup>. Likewise, this approach is taken by other countries, which are following the path of economic, industrial and technological development. Some of these countries have embraced an ambiguous modernity followed by a process of transformation. The traditional inherited elements in a society were aimed to be modernised, either by adjustment or refinement, while at the same time, removing the features that are considered inelegant or inappropriate to show the idea of progress to the population. This process goes according to each country’s vision, experiences and objectives in the modern and globalised world.

32 With this in mind, the process of modernisation in Oman, with its industrialisation and the emergence of a centralised state, reflects that despite the official historical narrative that has dominated since 1970, there are subjacent versions of modernity that are happening and can be placed within Oman’s long history. The vision of modernity has been consolidating during its history, at different times, since modernity is a qualitative and not a chronological event. Moreover, the Ibadi Imamate history is entrenched in Oman’s development as a country and nation and cannot be dismissed in the modernisation process. By rethinking this process, the Omani modernisation can be seen in versions, which have unfolded and consolidated with different local ontological formations.

## 2. Embracing the Omani identity

33 The idea of modernity has been guiding many countries that achieved modernisation in temporal linearity. In this process, time was dynamised as a force in history itself<sup>39</sup>. In Oman, history assumes a continuum framed to convey changes through times. The past is reconfigured as heritage, and in turn, it has reconfigured the political and social realities by forging an imaginary that is reflected in new material culture and a body politic to create an identity that is embodied in the figure of the Omani citizen. Within this modernisation process, Oman has become a nation with citizens who are proud to be Omani. During an informal conversation with Adil, a 29 years old public sector employee, stated: “Being Omani and Ibadi is something I have always known to be, even if I do not know much about it, I believe the Omani are different from other Gulf countries, because of our Ibadi tradition”<sup>40</sup>. This kind of answer was usual, many young Omanis have expressed similar feelings. Indeed, Adil considers that in Oman, the government has managed to make people feel proud, emphasising the role of Sultan Qaboos, who is the leader that they most revere.

34 With that in mind, the idea of “Omani” as a collective identity is encapsulated in the persona of Sultan Qaboos, where the cult of personality is connected to how Omanis feel their identity, fostered by the omanisation programs and policies. Although this has been successful so far, the Omani identity is not homogenous as



ethnic, religious and tribal ties are still competing with this identity. During Sultan Qaboos' reign, the Omani citizen was the "subject" of creation, being in formation. This was achieved not only through the historical narrative but also through economic policies that have managed to forge a national identity. In this process, the Omani identity has been asserted through the omanisation programs, where Omani citizens are privileged to be in positions that were previously taken by expatriates.

35 Although Omanis have assumed more prominent roles in the employment sector, their behaviour is usually perceived as being quiescent and passive, particularly politically. This characteristic is noticeable when looking at the lack of political participation and the weak civil society. However, the perception of neutrality does not reflect a lack of awareness. Neutrality is itself a political choice. As the Omanis assume their roles as citizens vis-à-vis its state, neutrality can be seen as a decision to avoid discussing controversial issues out of fear or repercussions of appearing or being seen in a certain way. Yet, this does not impede the citizens from expressing themselves, creating new resilient and creative ways of discussion. There are several online platforms and forums where Omanis have been engaging to speak about certain issues, particularly related to employment and salaries. On several occasions, there were protests where young people expressed their dissatisfaction with the lack of opportunities and demanded changes.

36 Considering the debate on modernisation, one can assume that modernity in Oman can be seen as a narrative choice.<sup>41</sup> The Omani identity is entrenched in the historical narrative, anchored on Ibadi values, especially peace and tolerance, which represent Sultan Qaboos' vision for the nation-state building of Oman and its people. In people's everyday lives, these values are often reinterpreted, negotiated and reconfigured to adapt to their circumstances, which does not always mean that peace and tolerance are practised. Oman's history is filled with historical events that are not peaceful; in fact, there is war, conflict, disagreements and struggles, which could be one of the reasons why the values of peace and tolerance were selected. The desire to instil these qualities to produce a more quiescent behaviour of its citizens is understandable as the country has had a turbulent past of divisions and skirmishes between the interior, the south and the coast. Its multi-ethnic complex religious society and so far, without sectarian problems, reflects as well how the state has been keen to continue the promotion of peace and tolerance as inherent values of the Omani identity.

37 In the long term and due to the uncertainty of a post-oil transition, now conjugated with the post-pandemic crisis, it is questionable if peacefulness will continue to persist as the economic situation deteriorates, among other internal factors. The idea of Oman as an oasis of peace and tolerance, part of a broader discourse that is conveyed by the government and the religious elite, has been promoted in Oman and abroad but may face challenges from the Omani citizens. Their expectations and demands are increasing as life becomes more complex and dynamic, and the state may not be able to continuously maintain prosperity and stability. Moreover, the neutrality that the Omani citizens have chosen may also change, defying the status quo of the government that has been politically stable.

### 3. A mirror for the Sultans: Oman of today and tomorrow

38 Following the death of Sultan Qaboos in January 2020, Sultan Haitham bin Tariq was chosen to be the next leader for the sultanate. His nomination as a sultan was unknown for the country since there was no direct heir from Sultan Qaboos. Although it was a surprise for some, for others the appointment of Sultan Haitham was obvious since he was known for being wise in his decisions<sup>42</sup>. Moreover, his



background was in consonance with the path that Sultan Qaboos envisioned for Oman's modernisation and development. Sultan Haitham had previously worked as Minister of Culture and Heritage, having served as undersecretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the chairman of Oman Vision 2040 as well.

39 On 11th January 2020, the new leader of Oman, Sultan Haitham, stated in his first royal speech:

“Our only relief—the best with which we can eternalise his achievements—is to pursue his rightful legacy and derive impetus for the brilliant steps that he treaded in full confidence and determination, to preserve the gains that he made and to build upon them. This is what we are resolved to execute, God willing. We shall march forward on this road so that Oman could attain and maintain its prominent place in which (His Majesty Sultan Qaboos) wished to position it and for which he stayed on vigils to realise that goal, and, alas, he was granted success in his endeavours.”<sup>43</sup>

40 In this speech, he urges the Omani people to stand together and continue to build Oman in the prolongment of Sultan Qaboos' vision. In fact, Sultan Haitham has vowed to continue the policies set by the former sultan to preserve the country's stability and maintain its role as a peace mediator in the region. A month after Qaboos's death, Sultan Haitham's second speech was directed to the people of Oman, where he praised their loyalty and dedication to the country. It seems that with this speech, the new leader is emphasising the role of Omani citizens, alluding to the renaissance concept, as the country is set to continue the stages of development, declaring:

“[...] we will dedicate our life for Oman and its citizens, to continue its triumphant march and blessed renaissance, we call upon you to vow to Allah to do so. We are absolutely confident in your ability to deal with the requirements of this stage and the stages to come, with a necessary clear vision, profound wisdom, solid determination and great sacrifices.”<sup>44</sup>

41 With the transition in power to Sultan Haitham, there are new challenges that can affect the Omani identity and disrupt the social contract between its citizens and the state. The figure of Sultan Qaboos is no longer at the centre of the identity, and the new leader may not be able to replace his popularity nor achieve the same status as him. Although this speech reflects that the people of Oman are an important actor in the continuation of nation-building and development, requiring everyone to be committed and at the same time calling them to make a sacrifice, this is yet to be seen. The rhetoric in attributing the people of Oman a primary role represents that there is an envisioned change in the relationship of the Omani citizen with the state, possibly giving the citizen a more active role<sup>45</sup>.

42 Oman as a nation-state is now stable and solid, and the Omanis are entering a new stage, where the country is facing a difficult transition towards a post-oil era. The pandemic Covid-19 has also exacerbated Oman's weak economy, with recent protests taking place in Sohar and Salalah<sup>46</sup>. Although Vision 2040 intends to diversify the economy away from oil and continue with the omanisation programme, creating new jobs and stimulating economic growth, many of its goals have to be revised. In 1995, Oman was the first country in the Gulf region to announce and implement Vision 2020 and now, Vision 2040<sup>47</sup>. The first development plan outlined the country's economic and social goals, aiming to enhance economic diversification to stimulate economic growth and, thus, tackle the unemployment problem. As for Vision 2040, the government envisages all Omanis working together to contribute to the development and modernisation of the country. Its ambitious objectives are aligned with the United Nations' sustainable development goals aiming to create a society that focuses on people, knowledge, protection and preservation of the environment<sup>48</sup>. One important aspect of Vision 2040 is the focus on youth and their needs, intending to foster technological advancement and empower the younger generations to



innovate and creatively contribute to a vibrant and prosperous Oman. Ultimately, Vision 2040 represents a vision of the country's future in an era post-oil by turning it into a sustainable place with modernising forces around local culture and traditions.

43 At this juncture, the preservation of cultural traditions becomes challenging in a rapidly globalising world. Thus, the articulated narrative of Omani history goes hand in hand with continuous modernisation. Oman's strategic location in the Gulf region is mentioned as crucial to developing and leveraging its maritime potentiality as a continuation of its past as a seafarer merchant power. Moreover, its role as a peace mediator due to its particular Ibadi tradition is emphasised, as Oman is set to contribute to the disputes and conflicts in the region.

44 Vision 2040 is a source of inspiration for the population to bring them together and collectively strive for a modern country. However, in this vision of modernity, there are two aspects to consider. First, although Vision 2040 reflects on Oman's economy and the repercussions of regional political challenges, nothing is mentioned about the internal political challenges. So far, the country has managed to develop and strengthen its state. However, while the country is developing, so are its citizens, especially the youth. Beyond the centralised power of the state, there is the Omani civil society which is still very weak<sup>49</sup>.

45 Moreover, there are serious doubts about how the changes that are mentioned in the Vision 2040 can happen. The question of whether power can be distributed through different institutions and to civil society remains an incognita. This means the possibility of establishing political parties and elections, among other organisations in a peaceful way. Secondly, the Omani identity is still challenged by the existing genealogical and kinship ties, which are still seen as important in the Omani society, and reflect the hierarchical differences within Omani citizenship<sup>50</sup>. Despite the attempts to bring the tribes under the centralised state, the focus on origins as a form of recognising the ancestry and its relations with the past can still defy the modern state.<sup>51</sup> Thus, these challenges need concrete reforms and transformations, considering the present economic disparities and unemployment rates under the centralised state.

## Conclusion

46 The idea of Oman becoming modern with the advent of Sultan Qaboos has been argued by many scholars. However, modernisation is not linear, and there are different moments in Oman's history, where the process of modernity may have already begun in different places. The version of modernity that has been naturalised in the historical trajectory reflects constraints and tensions as they frame time and history as continuous. Therefore, there is a sense of continuity but, at the same time, discontinuity. In the historiography of Oman, one can trace that the forces of modernisation were already at work in multiple ways and at different rhythms, considering as well that Oman was previously a Sultanate and an Imamate. These differences were later aggregated into a singular progress – a national narrative for Oman's unique development that Sultan Qaboos envisioned.

47 The new transition of power to Sultan Haitham is in itself a historical moment for Oman, representing an opportunity for changes. Although it will be challenging for him to have the same gravitas as his predecessor, Sultan Haitham has vowed to continue Sultan Qaboos' path toward progress. The question of whether Oman can transition towards a more diversified economy, where power circulates within the official governmental structures, and civil society, is yet to be seen. So far, hydrocarbons continue to guarantee the national budget revenues, and despite the programs such as Vision 2040, or the previous one, Vision 2020, there are many challenges that are still impeding the country from getting out of dependence on oil.



For example, the Kafkian bureaucracy, complex tribal balances and the continuous trap of not being able to fall into the same dependency path of ideas. There are many solutions that were conveyed in these future visions, and citizens have expectations that these will be accomplished.

48 In fact, the second speech of Sultan Haitham emphasizes elevating the role of the Omani people and including them in how the country is developing further. This is also a challenge because at the core of Omani identity is the persona of Sultan Qaboos, who was able to create an Omani national identity, reducing the tensions that could arise from the many fragmented internal identities. The Omani citizens have been part of the modernisation process, which has had an impact on how their daily habitus, is suffused with the values of peace and tolerance. The concept of peace is part of Oman's identity formation, which was carefully selected and diffused. However, in the long term, the idea of peaceful citizens may dissipate if the government cannot fulfil the citizens' expectations. The promises of a progressed and developed Oman, in a post-oil society, face many challenges, as the Covid-19 crisis has exposed many countries and exacerbated their economic vulnerabilities<sup>52</sup>. Moreover, the consequences of a weak economy have an impact on how citizens see their leadership, which reflects the responsibility of the government to ensure that the decisions are not made independently but include the people. The inclusivity of citizens is fundamental for the continuously shared identity and the development of the country. These observations reflect some of the concerns that were expressed during the conversations with Omanis and their perspectives regarding the future of the country. In this regard, the discussions do not aim to undermine the government's efforts so far but to contemplate the possibility of a stronger civil society, where people are able to convey their preoccupations and needs in an articulated and organised form.

49 The repercussions of the pandemic will be felt in the following years, and Oman, like other countries, will be faced with difficult decisions to safeguard the stability of its country. Besides, the acceleration of technology spurred by the sanitary crisis is inevitable and will affect how societies are organised and their relationship with each other, and possibly the government. The advent of unprecedented technological progress is a contemporary challenge that is part of the modernisation process<sup>53</sup>. Since the history of Oman is presented as continuous yet, at the same time, with breaks of discontinuity, the new changes are difficult to assess since they are happening while more significant changes are simultaneously happening in the world, which also affects how local transformations are able to take place. It is yet to be seen, if the vision of the Sultan of the past with the Sultan of the present will converge into a clearer vision, with more opportunities for positive transitions, where the Omani citizens, particularly the young population, can become active participants in their future.

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## Notes

1 VALERI, 2013.

2 EISENSTADT, 2000, p. 28.

3 *ibid.*

4 VALERI, 2013.

5 The Jabal Akhdar is a mountain located in the interior of Oman, which is literally known as the green mountain.

6 The names of all the interviewees and participants were changed to ensure their anonymity.

7 DIONISIUS, 2005.

8 EL-ASHBAN, 1979.

9 JONES & RIDOUT, 2015.

10 J. E. PETERSON, 1978.

11 VALERI, 2013.

12 TOWNSEND, 1977.

13 VALERI, 2013.

14 LLEN JR. & RIGSBEE II, 2000.

15 J. E. PETERSON, 1976.

16 Interview, Muscat, 20 April 2016.

17 LIMBERT, 2010.

18 PETERSON, 2006.

19 KOSELLECK, 2002, p. 120.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 100.

21 *Ibid.*

22 Interview, Muscat, 18 April, 2016.

23 *Ibid.*

24 LEFEBVRE, 1991.

25 VON RICHTHOFEN, 2016, p. 137-158.

26 VALERI, 2013, p. 133.

27 AL SALIMI, Abdulrahman and STAPLES, Eric (eds.), 2017.

28 *Ibid.*, p.134.

29 Muttrah is the city's old commercial and historical centre.

30 See for example: CLEMENTS FIRST NAME, *Oman. The Reborn Land*, London, Longman, 1980; SEARLE FIRST NAME, *Dawn over Oman*, London, Allen and Unwin, 1979; HAWLEY FIRST NAME, *Oman and its Renaissance*, London, Stacey International, 1977.

31 Some questions seemed trivial such as if yoga was allowed in Islam since the arrival of fitness and health clubs was becoming increasingly popular in Oman. Many people were uncertain if practicing an activity would be considered *haram*. Other questions were specific about marriage, such as the preparation of a woman before getting married.

32 Interview, Muscat, 20 April, 2016.

33 Interview, Muscat, 15 February, 2016.

34 Interview, Muscat, 10 May, 2016.

35 *Ibid.*

36 Interview, Muscat, 12 June, 2016.

37 HOBBSAWM, 1983.

38 DELANTY, 2013.

39 KOSELLECK, 1985.

40 Informal conversation, 10 March 2016.

41 ANDERSON, 1991.

42 Informal discussion, 2021.

43 "Speech of His Majesty Sultan Haitham Bin Tarik", January 11, 2020. Omani Ministry of Information, online. URL: <https://omaninfo.om/images/library/file/Book953388.pdf>

44 "Speech of His Majesty Sultan Haitham Bin Tarik", February 23, 2020. Omani Ministry of Information, online. URL: <https://omaninfo.om/images/library/file/Book768139.pdf>



45 Informal discussion, 2021.

46 “Rare protests in Oman over jobs draw massive police response”, *Al Jazeera*, 24 May, 2021, online. URL: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/5/24/rare-protests-in-oman-over-jobs-draw-massive-police-response>

47 Oman Vision 2040 Document, online. URL: [https://isfu.gov.om/2040/Vision\\_Documents\\_En.pdf](https://isfu.gov.om/2040/Vision_Documents_En.pdf)

48 Times News Service. “Oman Vision 2040 has received UN praise”, *Times of Oman*, 21 July, 2019, online. URL: <https://timesofoman.com/article/78756-oman-vision-2040-has-received-un-praise-sunaidi>

49 AL FARSI, 2013.

50 RABI, 2011.

51 VALERI, 2013.

52 Mogielnicki, Robert. “Qaboos Successor Must Focus on Economic Prioritization,” *The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, 13 January, 2020. Online. URL: <https://agsiw.org/qaboosuccessor-must-focus-on-economic-prioritization/>

53 Oman Vision 2040 Document, p. 30. Online. URL: [https://isfu.gov.om/2040/Vision\\_Documents\\_En.pdf](https://isfu.gov.om/2040/Vision_Documents_En.pdf)

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