

## OMAN AND IBADISM FROM A RELIGIOUS REGIONAL PERSPECTIVE

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SUNTO. – Questo paper affronta il tema dell’identità Omanita e l’ideologico religioso Islamico Ibadita. Fra gli elementi principali che caratterizzano l’Oman, si possono considerare: 1. La sua particolare configurazione geografica. 2. La sua popolazione multi-culturale e multi-religiosa sin da epoche antichissime e precedent l’Islam stesso. 3. La dottrina Islamica Ibadita. Conseguentemente, in primo luogo l’Autore si sofferma sulle particolari connotazioni geografiche dell’Oman e suoi molteplici ‘paesaggi’, i quali hanno indubbiamente avuto un profondo impatto sugli habitat umani e la loro organizzazione all’interno delle diverse nicchie ecologiche del Paese, risalendo a secoli se non a millenni or sono. Riguardo a quest’ultimo aspetto, una delle principali connotazioni è stata quella del tribalismo e le sue complementarietà all’interno di una cornice che, in Oman, è sempre stata caratterizzata da multi-culturalità e multi-religiosità. Quindi, con l’avvento dell’Islam, un nuovo fattore si è imposto sulla scena storica omanita: l’Ibadismo e le sue dinamiche. Dopo un breve schema storico e in ampia parte riferendosi al paper precedente, il discorso puntualizza i principi base dell’Ibadismo e della sua evoluzione nel tempo, il ruolo giocato in Oman nel corso dei secoli, il suo impatto sulla società locale e il modello politico-istituzionale che esso ha contribuito a forgiare e modellare. Si tratta di una eredità culturale tramandata nei secoli fino ad oggi. Infine, l’Autore dà un rapido ma chiaro affresco dell’Ibadismo e del suo ideologico religioso oggi, il rapporto fra questa ideologia religiosa e il concetto di Modernità tecnologica e sociale, Corano e principi guida religiosi di fronte alle diversità, la risposta Ibadita di fronte a un nuovo modello di società inter-religiosa e inter-etnica.

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ABSTRACT. – The following paper deals with Oman’s identity and the Islamic Ibadi religious ideology. Amongst the main factors that characterize Oman there are: 1. Its

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particular location and geo-morphological configuration. 2. Its multicultural and multi-religious population since remote epochs. 3. The Islamic Ibadi religious ideology. Following this order, the Author illustrates the geographical location of Oman and its multifarious landscapes and ecological niches, explaining how these have had a large impact on the human regional models of life through centuries if not millennia. With regard to this latter issue, tribalism and its complementarities are depicted as one of the main features that up to the present are a specific Omani connotation within a multicultural and multi-religious framework. Then, with the advent of Islam, a new factor stood out in the Omani history: the Ibadi religious dynamic. After a concise historical outline and referring to the previous paper, the discourse focuses the fundamental principles of this religious ideology and its evolution with specific regard to the role plaid by Ibadism in Oman during the course of centuries, its impact on the local society and the political-institutional model it contributed to forge and mold: a cultural heritage up to present times. Lastly, the Author gives a clear picture of Ibadism today, and the new regional perspective of Ibadi Islamic ideology vis-à-vis Modernity, its response to an inter-ethnic, intercultural and interfaith society and the guiding principles to diversities.

## 1. GEOGRAPHICAL LOCATION

Oman has acquired its identity from the interaction of three main factors – geographical location, tribal composition and Ibadi Islamic ideology.

### 1.1. *Geographical and human environment*

Oman has been described as an inhabited island occupying the south-eastern corner of the Arabian Peninsula (Wilkinson, 1987, p. 21). It is surrounded by sea on three sides, with the interior cut off from the rest of Arabia by the rolling sand dunes of the Empty Quarter, or *Rub' al-Khali*. In the centre of the country is a long mountain range extending from the Musandam Peninsula to Ras al-Hadd, while to the south a barren expanse of stony desert and salt flats stretches to Dhofar and “Greater Yemen”, and along the Gulf coast towards the State of Qatar and “Greater Bahrain” (Figs. 1-2).

According to the classical Arabic historian al-Asma‘i (d. 828 CE), Yemen extended from Oman to Najran and included Hadhramawt, while “Bainunah” (more or less the area currently occupied by the Emirate of Abu Dhabi) was the land which separated Oman from

Bahrain. While “Greater Oman” today is divided between the Sultanate of Oman and the United Arab Emirates, economics – as well as other factors such as locations of the Sultan’s traditional power centres – have had the effect of drawing its populations inwards from the border regions towards the country’s main settled areas. Consequently, both the southern “Yemeni” and northern “Nizar” tribal groups have gravitated to the centre and intermingled, with the result that they differ from the tribes living in the neighbouring areas (*Fig. 1*).

Traditionally, the people of the region made their living from agriculture and the sea. The main settlements were either spread over the deep wadis and the contiguous areas bordering the deserts, or along the shores of the Gulf of Oman on the Batinah strip, which occupies the area between the mountains and the sea. Due to the nature of the terrain, there was little contact between the villages of the interior and the coast.

The settled area along the Gulf coast which extends to what is now the Emirate of Dubai used to be known to geographers in earlier times as Julfar. Beyond Julfar lays al-Asma‘i’s “Bainunah”, whose nomadic tribes lived of the agriculturally productive land in today’s Liwa oasis, supplemented by seasonal fishing and pearl-diving. The arid southern coast – exposed to the violent winds which batter it at certain times of the year – was of no major economic value until you reached the region of Dhofar, which at present is bordered by Yemen and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

The mountainous heart of the country is crossed by a few rugged, rocky passes defended by strategic forts that are virtually impregnable to attackers unless the latter are supported by the local tribes. The “Achille’s Heel” is the plain on the western side of the mountains, which would allow sea-borne forces to attack from Julfar (today’s Ras al-Khaimah) towards Towam (Buraimi) and al-Sirat (Ibri district). However, their advance would be blocked by the natural barrier of Jabal Kawr, which would prevent them from reaching the interior, or the true centre of Oman – a region also defended by the massive forts of Nakhal, Bahla and Nizwa (*Figs. 16-19*) and further protected by the forts and castles on the other side of the rocky Jabal al-Akhdhar massif; these include the town of Rustaq, which controls access to the harbours and cultivated fields of the Batinah. That settled coastal strip is supplied with water from wells, while the agricultural villages of the interior have been dependent since ancient times upon a network of

*aflāj* (irrigation channels) – a system which forms the nucleus of life for the settled populations (Figs. 20-22).

While the isolation and tribal structure of the settled inland region would tend to make its inhabitants somewhat inward-looking, the sea has had precisely the opposite effect, and it is because of this factor that, since Sasanian times if not earlier, Oman has tended to look either eastwards towards what the ancient geographers called “*Ard al-Hind*” (“the Land of India”) – when the monsoon winds enabled Oman’s trading vessels to sail to the Indian sub-continent and beyond it towards China – or westwards to the entrance to the Red Sea and beyond it towards the shores of east Africa, Zanzibar and Kilwa (currently on the coast of Tanzania) (Figs. 1 and 15).

Oman also occupies a commanding position at the entrance to the Gulf, which enabled it to dominate the route leading to the lucrative markets of Iraq, the *Bilad al-Fars* (Persia) and Kerman. It was of major importance, since Oman’s location gave it a strong trading advantage and it was also a significant agricultural producer. During the later Sasanian period much of the country was under Sasanian direct occupation and comprised a territory known as Mazun, and it was only after the arrival of Islam that the tribes which had migrated to Oman from the south-west of the Arabian Peninsula (either along the coast via Shihr and Hadhramawt or through central Arabia and Bahrain) were able to expel the Persian ruling class and establish Arab rule. Later, with the establishment of the Abbasid Caliphate (750 CE), Oman’s maritime links enabled it to bring in a new era of prosperity centred on Sohar, as illustrated by Piacentini in her paper (Figs. 14-15).

Oman continued to boast strong ties with the Persian side of the Gulf, and one result of this was that Persia’s southern coastal region came under the control of leaders of Omani origin. The most famous of these was the family of Al-Julanda bin Karkar of the Bani Sulaimah (descendants of Malik bin Fahm al-Azdi). Their successors included the individuals who established the ruling Hormuz dynasty (Wilkinson, 2010, p. 405) .

The decline of the Gulf’s markets, and the growing importance of trade with East Africa, the Red Sea and the Mediterranean, caused Sohar’s transit trade to slump. To maintain its dominant position in the Indian Ocean trade, the ruling Hormuz dynasty then developed Qalhat, which was located on the open sea and nearer to the main monsoon belt (Figs. 14-15).

### 1.2. *Ibadism. Tribal composition and complementarity*

Oman's inward-looking and outward-looking "faces" were in fact like two sides of the same coin and had the effect of reinforcing the Ibadi dictum that "Oman comprises a region and a distinct, single unit of the Islamic world that cannot accept being divided". At the same time, when Oman was engaged in naval sieges and attacks, military operations were not only carried out by the inhabitants of the coastal regions. According to a recent study on the opening up of the "ivory frontiers" in Africa, when the Omanis and – to a lesser degree, the Swahilis – succeeded in reaching the Upper Congo (currently the Democratic Republic of Congo), the tribes involved were from central and eastern Oman and the trading networks included people from all the three regions in which Ibadism was endemic (Wilkinson, 2015).

It should be recognized that this engagement with the outside world was more than just "compatible" with the Ibadi ideology, since it was also a fundamental factor in the propagation of the Ibadi faith. One striking feature of Omani *fiqh* (jurisprudence) is that it deals with several situations related to seafaring activities.

The Omani government, as well as the Ibadis and other interested parties, needed to be prepared to agree on the same reciprocal trading rights as those enjoyed by Omanis in other countries. One possible compromise solution that emerged was that all contacts should be channelled and centralized through a single maritime centre like Sohar, Muscat or Sur. By adopting this approach the '*ulema*' (religious scholars) sought to ensure that *tabawun* (slackness/excessive tolerance) and *bid'ā'* (heresy) from the outside world did not infiltrate into the interior regions, which had remained largely tribal and traditional. At another level, they also concluded that seafaring activities, property ownership and trade outside the country's borders meant that conflicts and schisms in the interior needed to be suspended, since it was the interior that was the bastion of traditional Omani society and Ibadi ideology and the source of its strength.

At the same time, it was recognized that the need for contact between the interior and the outside world was an unavoidable political reality which determined relations between the Omanis living in the interior and any foreign occupying authority that might happen to control the coastal regions. It was this factor that led to the division of the country into "Muscat and Oman" or "Sohar and Oman" (as happened

in the early days of Islam: see for example *Fig. 8*). However, this was always a temporary compromise; indeed, it was foreign occupation that motivated the Omani people to unite and expel or defeat the “oppressors” (whether they were foreigners or even local tyrants bent on exploiting the poor and simple village tribal people), and it was this motivation that was to lead the nation out of the morass of backwardness to become a naval empire ruled by the united, just rule of the Ibadi Imamate. This ideology drew the bulk of its support from the leading families of the ‘*ulema*’, who continued to supply the country with its judges and *walis*, even during the colonization by foreign powers, as it was the case under Seljuk rule illustrated by Piacentini in her paper. The networks of teachers and students who emerged as a result were later able to penetrate the tribal and regional centres of power.

## 2. IBADISM

The Ibadis, or *Muhakkimah*, have historically been known as the *Khawarij*, or the people who rejected the arbitration at the Battle of Siffin in 657 CE between Ali and Mu‘awiyah. They were a disparate group and, while they contained some radical elements, the most moderate of the *Muhakkimah* – such as the Ibadis – have continued to survive to this day.

The main teachings of the *Muhakkimah* may be summarised under three headings:

1. Their rejection of the notion that authority should be vested exclusively in the descendants of Ali bin Abi Talib or the Quraysh (*i.e.* the tribe of the Prophet). Rather, they maintain that all Muslims are equal and that there is no difference between them whether in race, colour or language. These teachings had a major influence on early political Islam and created a new dimension, or way of thinking, which transcended the narrow confines of tribalism. Their views on this question were opposed by both Sunnis and Shiites.
2. Over the course of their revolutions, they evolved the concept of regionalism, or “regional states”, outside the control of the central authority (or what was known as the Caliphate). Consequently, they were able to establish separate states in Oman, Fars, Yemen, Hadhramawt and North Africa, and the result was that this concept of independence from the “*Jama‘ah*” (officially recognized as the

“Community”) or Caliphate, added a new and hitherto unfamiliar dimension to Islamic political thought. That is to say, by replacing the idea of hereditary rule with a system in which the ruler would be chosen from among the best candidates for the job, they developed and reinforced the values of justice, equality and shared responsibility. This had an impact on their early poetry in the first and second centuries AH, or eighth and ninth centuries CE - a time when the general trend of Arab poetry was towards eulogy and elegy; by contrast, their focus was on high moral values. This feature may well have been the seed that gave rise to national or regional states among those communities that did not recognize the politico-religious authority of the Sunni and Shiite establishments.

3. It was over the course of their debates and political activities that they developed their early ideas on Islamic theology (*ilm al-kalam*). Here their focus was on two trends. On issues concerning the nature of the Divinity, they rejected the use of simile to describe the Divine Essence, or the idea that it could be used as an instrument for soothing or fortune-telling. Meanwhile, where Man was concerned, their interest was centred on issues such as free will and predestination, sin and its various categories, and matters pertaining to “*al-amr bi al-ma'ruf wa al-nahiy'ani al-munkar*” (enjoining virtue and forbidding vice). The debates became so heated that the Mu'tazilites (one of the leading schools of theology (for more information, see Encyclopaedia of Islam, 2nd edition, 1993, VII: 783-93) were sometimes described sneeringly by their opponents as “the Catamites of the *Khawarij*” on the grounds that they were allegedly influenced by Kharijite ideas. As these early debates continued between the different groups of philosophical theologians, we also find the Salafist theologian Ibn Taymiyyah describing the Ash'arites (the main Sunni theological school, which he opposed) as “the Catamites of the Mu'tazilites”.

This shows clearly that the early debates between the *Muhakkimah* had become an established feature of the Islamic theological discourse. It is unfortunate that, on questions such as these, they (*i.e.* the *Muhakkimah*/*Khawarij*) have often been accused of having abandoned the teachings of Islam – to the extent that numerous false *Hadith* (or traditions) have been attributed to the Prophet Muhammad. As a result few of them remain today outside Oman and North and East Africa.

### 3. CULTURAL AND INTELLECTUAL DIVERSITY

With a history going back over five thousand years, when Oman voluntarily embraced Islam in the year 8 HG/629 CE the Arabian Peninsula was surrounded by powerful kingdoms. Of all the rulers of the regions that received the Prophet's Message, which included Yemen, Fars, Egypt and Constantinople, only the kings of Oman – the ruling Julandite dynasty – enjoyed the explicit endorsement of the Prophet Muhammad and his successors, the Rightly-Guided Caliphs.

While the Ibadi school has always had a major influence on Omani culture over the past thirteen centuries, religious pluralism has been a feature of the country since the eighth century CE, particularly in the coastal regions, where there were small numbers of Shiite, Murji'ites, Qadrites and Mu'tazilites as well as followers of some other faiths such as Judaism, Christianity and Hinduism.

Oman's coasts have been open to trade since ancient times. The historian Ibn Habib records that Chinese vessels were seen in the town of Diba, in northern Oman, in the fourth century CE and that the Julandite kings received taxes from them.

If this report is true, it could be the first instance of contact between China and Arabia during the pre-Islamic period. Sailing in the opposite direction, the Omani merchants Abu 'Ubaydah 'Abdullah bin al Qasim and Al Nadhar bin Maymun (both during eighth century) were among the first Arabs to reach China.

So, the shores of Oman provided the country with a springboard for contacts with nations outside the region and gave it a cultural influence over an area extending from the coasts of East Africa and across the Indian Ocean to the Indian sub-continent and the scattered islands of Malaya (*Fig. 15*). This gave rise to legends in Arab literature such as the stories of Sindbad the Sailor and Sulayman the Merchant, and Buzurg bin Shahriyar's *'Aja'ib al-Hind* ("Wonders of India"). More or less Oman was the centre of these stories.

These factors enabled Oman to enrich itself with a multitude of ethnicities (Arab, Swahili, Baluchi, Indian, Persian, and Turk among others). According to Lorimer, at the end of the nineteenth century Muscat had the busiest harbour in the region and over fourteen languages could regularly be heard there at any one time. The natural consequence of this was that with its numerous different faiths (Islam, Christianity, Judaism and Hinduism) and Islamic schools, Oman

became a rare example of pluralism in the Arab world (Lorimer, 1908-1915, p. 1185).

This linguistic, religious and cultural diversity represented in Oman's culture, along with its wide range of different intellectual attitudes, made it one of the liveliest, most tolerant and open-minded centres of culture and learning in Arabia.

#### 4. ISLAM AND MODERN OMAN

Since 1970, when His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said assumed power in the country, Oman has undergone a process of rapid development and modernisation (*Figs. 23-27*). From its modest beginnings, with a mere 10 km. of asphalt roads and hardly any of the other normal features of contemporary life, the state began laying down the foundations of a modern infrastructure, including free education and health care for all its citizens. This era of Omani history is known as the Renaissance, not only in view of its tremendous material achievements, but also because it has sought to bring religion into line with the realities of life in a modern state.

The Basic Law of the State stipulates that Islam is the state religion [For a Muslim Country, what in the West is commonly called "Constitution" is the Qur'an, Word of God. The Basic Law is the corpus that comprehends the fundamental "rules" or "laws" deduced by religious scholars from the Qur'anic prescriptions]. Here it is important to note that the religion referred to is Islam, not Ibadism. At the same time, the Basic Law does not classify the country's citizens on the basis of their religion in any definable way. Although the vast majority of Omani nationals are Muslims, they also include a small percentage of Hindus whose ancestors originally came from India over a century ago and became integrated into the community through trade. There are also followers of other religions who have acquired Omani citizenship. Although these cases are exceptions rather than the rule, when a person wishes to become an Omani citizen he or she is not required to embrace Islam as a condition of being granted citizenship, as is the case in some other Islamic countries.

Reflecting the fact that diversity is a feature of Omani society, the Basic Law of the State stipulates: "All citizens are equal before the law and they are equal in public rights and duties. There shall be no dis-

crimination between them on the grounds of gender, origin, colour, language, religion, sect, domicile or social status" (Fig. 28). This means that if a Filipino Christian or an Indian Hindu 'expatriate' becomes involved in a labour dispute with an Omani Muslim, the court will issue its ruling on the basis of the facts of the case, not the religious affiliations of the parties involved. Furthermore, in a move to reflect the diversity of the country's nationals and resident expatriates, in 1997 the name of the Ministry of *Awqaf* (Endowments), Justice and Islamic Affairs was changed to "Ministry of *Awqaf* and Religious Affairs". Oman was the first country in the region to adopt such an approach; the change from the term "Islamic Affairs" to "Religious Affairs" sends a clear signal that the government believes in and accepts religious diversity. Another indication of this is the fact that His Majesty Sultan Qaboos has granted land for Muslims, Hindus and Christians to build their own places of worship. An active intercultural, interfaith programme has also been set up at the Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque through "*Al-Tafahom*" – an academic periodical published by the Ministry of *Awqaf* and Religious Affairs.

One challenge facing the government is how to cater for the growing diversity resulting from the increasing numbers of expatriates, who now form 30 per cent of the country's overall population. This situation has led to a rise in applications for places of worship that exceeds the current capacity to respond to them adequately.

With regard to the legal system, non-Muslims are sometimes perturbed by the word "*Shar'iyah*", or "(Shariah) law/legitimacy" – a term which is sometimes used correctly and sometimes incorrectly. It is often assumed that it refers to a list of Islamic laws based upon the Holy Qur'an.

This assumption is inaccurate for two reasons. The first is that the development of Islamic *fiqh* and the ability to adapt it is a far broader and more complex question than this. The second is that "*Shar'iyah*" in this context is a term denoting "Islam-compatible" principles and values. Oman's Civil Law, Commercial Law and Criminal Law are comparable to equivalent laws in force in other modern states; the Civil Law covers issues such as marriage and inheritance; known as the Personal Status Law, they do not contain any religious language.

Another important point worth noting is that, although Islam is the state religion, the state does not stipulate that anyone is obliged to embrace it. In other words, the situation is similar to that of Europe,

where the official religion is accorded its status in view of its historical role in laying the foundations upon which the state has been built; so, while the official religion enjoys a special relationship with the state, the state does not order its subjects to adopt it.

In Oman, people are free to choose their religion for themselves and practice it freely, provided – of course – that the appropriate facilities exist for them to do so. And while Islam is the state religion and “Islamic Education” is part of the general school curriculum, non-Muslim students are not required to study that particular discipline and the syllabus itself only covers those elements that are common to Muslims of all denominations. In 2006 the syllabus was changed so that the focus was placed on Islamic culture and civilization rather than just the Islamic creed itself, the aim being to help students to develop a relationship between their Islamic heritage and the broader cultural context of the other civilizations around them.

In re-examining our approach to Omani history, as outlined in Piacentini’s discourse, one important thing to note about Oman’s “distinct identity” is its ability to avoid being drawn into a “pro” or “anti” camp when there is a conflict, and its belief in inclusivity and unity, not exclusivity and rejection. Here we should compare these qualities with some of the intellectual traditions that have developed in Islamic thought, which strongly insist that several categories of diversity should be tolerated in Islamic countries. In this connection, the Holy Qur’an itself regards the “*Ahl al-Kitab*” (the People of the Book – *i.e.* Jews and Christians) as having received Divinely Revealed Books, with the result that Islam has traditionally accorded them a special status which has allowed them to live in the Islamic community while observing their own religious costumes and laws.

While this can be taken as the guiding principle for countries with diverse populations, Oman’s Islamic heritage accepts a greater degree of diversity than this. Although we recognize and accept the special relationship that exists between the Abrahamic faiths, this does not exclude the possibility of numerous other types of relationships as well.

It is to be hoped that these relationships between Muslims and others will grow and prosper. The fundamental principle is that all relations must be governed and guided by reason, sound values and justice.

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