

Shifting Terrain: Destroying While Preserving the Dalla (Coffee Pot) and the Ethos of Neighbourliness in the Sultanate of Oman

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Since its establishment as a modern nation state from 1970, Oman has pursued a policy of national integration and modernization through a number of heritage institutions ranging from museums, restoration of historic sites and a market for heritage crafts. In organizing historical experiences, these material forms of national heritage provide the context within which the very foundations of the nation take shape. But history making has also become the site for the production of new ethical metrics, political demands, social relations around public knowledge and forms of Islamic religiosity. Centred on the *dalla*, or the Omani coffee pot, this paper considers how the social practices and knowledges induced by its material form and function becomes the basis for examining the shift from the religio-ethical relationships that defined the *shari'a* society of the last Ibadi Islamic Imamate that ruled the interior of the region (1913-1958) of Oman to those that define 'heritage' as part of modern state building today. Through an analysis of the causality induced by its form, the socio-ethical practices it spurs and their implications, the coffee pot becomes a venue for exploring the tectonic encounter between the emergent system of nationally sanctioned history making with the alternative and contending forms of memory, temporality, agency and religiosity that it paradoxically engenders. In the process, I explore the conflicted ways that change may be experienced as part of these alternative relationships to time, and thus move beyond the assumed constancy of "homogenous empty time" towards different temporal conflations.

Since its inception as a nation state from 1970 onwards, Oman's expanding heritage industry and market for crafts and sites, exemplified by the boom in museums, exhibitions, cultural festivals and the restoration of more than a hundred forts, castles and citadels, affects a territorially bounded nation state. Material forms ranging from old mosques and *shari'a* manuscripts to restored forts now museumified, and national symbols such as the coffee pot (*dalla*) and the dagger (*khanjar*), saturate the landscape and become part of a public, visual memorialization of the past. In public spaces and the circulation of media these ubiquitous tangible forms provide the context within which the very foundations of the nation take shape. Yet, the heritage project in modern Oman has also reconfigured of the public domains of history and Islam as seemingly

separate and autonomous, thus erasing any awareness of the socio-political and ethical relationships that once characterized Ibadi Islamic rule (1913-1958) in the region. The result is the transformation of what was a *shari'a* society through practices of progressive historicity.

This study is set within the paradoxes and ambiguities unleashed by the contestations of two very different forms of governance. Firstly, the last Ibadi Imamate (1913-1957) of the Omani region was established within a tribally organized society with its administrative capital in the city of Nizwa in the interior. It was intimately linked to the broader framework of the *umma*, a theologically invoked space that enabled Muslims to embody Ibadi *sharī'a* as the practical juridical system by which they were governed and the daily moral and ethical mores they inhabited. Authority was undergirded by an ethical form of life premised on the Quran and the *sunna* (ways) of the Prophet and his companions in accordance with ideas about the exemplarity as interpreted by histories of the Ibadi school. This state of affairs was in direct opposition to that which prevailed over the coastal areas of Oman where monarchical dynastic rulers, the Al Said sultanate, had gradually ceded power to British imperial sovereignty. The fall of the Imamate under British air bombardment and the Sultanate's Anglo-Omani forces produced the boundaries of a new political geography defined by the demands of modern state building and its comprehensive oil producing infrastructure.

Secondly, the establishment of modern nation state building from 1970 onwards has also involved the work of heritage, as a particular modality of history making that has concretely transformed the terrain from one inhabited by a *sharī'a* sociality and a theological sense of time to the progressive linearity that defines a national space (Anderson 1983: 24-26). The material forms and aesthetic qualities of historic artefacts, objects and sites whose form and function once embedded them as integral elements in Ibadi *sharī'a* sociability now assume an iterative mode of

representation that makes them simultaneously significant and mundane. Material forms and their circulation through institutional techniques of education and mass publicity assume a widely disseminated aesthetic pedagogy that cultivates everyday civic virtues such as solidarity, generosity, pluralism, a sense of communal obligation, innovation and entrepreneurship. This movement forward along a linear axis has involved reconfiguring a temporal rationale and its heavily laden values. It effectively produces a nationalist past conducive towards the forward movement of progressive time and its assumptions of a limitless and ever changing future that defines social and political improvement along the lines of a developmental paradigm (Koselleck 2002). The operation of heritage enters into the domain of modern man, where the effacement of those histories whose juridical and ethical-moral bases were founded on a divine text and established on historical analogies of virtuous exemplary figures of the Islamic past, gives way to a more institutionalised mode of historical consciousness rooted in a humanist world and the self-conscious reasoning of mankind. This development has entailed a fundamental redefinition of the temporal relationship between past, present and future. But how do such shifting temporal undertakings enable different ways of understanding history? How do diverse ways of organizing historical experiences promote new forms of self-reflection as culturally constituted ways of being?

Problematizing the Objectification of Tradition

A number of Middle East scholars (Cooke 2014; Mitchell 2002; Abu Al Haj 2001; Eickelman and Piscatori 1996) have noted that as a result of modern mass education, technological innovations and mass media, there has been a heightened awareness and an increase in knowledge about history among ordinary citizens. This has been the direct result of the increased formalization and institutionalization of the past for a mass audience through national rituals,

celebrations, material and discursive practices that have become a ubiquitous facet of modern public life. In making such observations, scholars have echoed a forceful argument made by Hobsbawm and Ranger (1986) about how conscious awareness, deliberation and participation among national subjects in public historical narratives and their repetitive enactment are in fact the result of the ‘modern’ invention of tradition. It is argued that the institutionalization of the past as a repository of idioms, languages and symbols has served to sanction social and political projects that are in fact of more recent duration. In analysing the rituals and symbols of modern public life as tactical moves within a modern politics of historical authenticity, there is a tacit assumption that ‘uninvented traditions’ or more authentic traditions that characterize the pre-modern era were based on that which was invariable and unreflected upon. The result of this division in analytical thinking is the encapsulation of tradition in terms of the ingrained habitual vs. the conscious articulation of the past. This assumption that the objectification of the past is part of a universalist modern tendency, prevents a more in-depth examination of the conditions under which major shifts take place in the ways that distinctive styles of reason are forged in deliberating over the past, the types of normative personhood that are idealized as a result of emergent pedagogical practices and the historically specific types of self-reflection that have been cultivated as a result. Tradition is often conventionally understood as the emulation and repetition of an unchanging substance. However, in order to question how its internal temporal structure (connections between past-present-future) may produce multiple forms of relatedness and therefore a variety of rationales, I seek to draw attention to the ways in which the past authoritative conceptualizes and concretely manifests its relationship to the present and future, thereby producing multiple modes of historical consciousness even while instantiating distinctive epistemological, temporal and cultural worlds (Asad 2003: 222; Agrama 2010).

In exploring the shifts in how different ways of reasoning the past are conceived and inhabited as competing lifeworlds of meaning, certain objects may become key entry points towards examining the tensions between the perpetuation and alteration of time itself. Objects become, what Kathleen Stewart describes as “lines of action” that are not merely materially there but bring about potential actions and orientations in enabling new ways of perceiving space, time and history. The *dalla* (traditional coffee pot), for example, comes to embody the intimate histories gathered around the ways it continues to be put to quotidian use. Over the course of the twentieth century, larger socio-political and ethical processes have been at work in transforming the embodied ways in which the material qualities of the *dalla* have been experienced and acquired salience as part of daily life (Dudley 2010; Keane 2005). The changing ways in which the *dalla's* material qualities have been rendered significant are metonymic for broader configurations of politics and historiography. These configurations have pedagogically structured and transmitted memory in turn, made visible new perceptual capacities, and introduced new sensorial ways of experiencing the significance of the *dalla*. In taking a closer look at changes in the ways that the *dalla* becomes relevant I pose two questions: Over the course of the twentieth century, what specific conceptions of history, sovereignty and moral order emerge through actual uses of the *dalla* and what specific forms of practical and perceptual self-awareness come to take root from these practices as the past is recalled and the present and future are reordered accordingly. Based on my ethnographic fieldwork in Muscat and Nizwa in 2010 and 2011, I seek to draw attention to how the *dalla* materializes and expresses multiple modes of historical consciousness even while instantiating distinctive epistemological, temporal and cultural worlds (Asad 2003: 222; Agrama 2010).

Sociality and Ethical Formation during the Imamate

During the Imamate, according to many who had lived through the Imamate, Nizwa was a community that allocated its daily activities in accordance to the temporal rhythms of the five daily prayers. Even when making appointments or making neighbourly visits, in modern Oman, people, both young and old in Nizwa would set up meetings based on a sense of time grounded in the daily prayer cycle. As many members of long standing families recalled, this was a time when the *sabla* played an integral role in structuring people's everyday routines. In translation, the term *sabla* means both "place" where friends, kin and neighbours gathered for the exchange of news and "act of talking" itself. As Nasser, the elderly proprietor of the Nizwa fort's gift shop recalled, "this was a widespread habit when neighbours perhaps from about five houses would sit together in one place, making a *sabla*. They would sit and chat in the evenings (*yasmūrun*), exchanging news on the latest events in the area, mediate quarrels between neighbours or effect consultations about a bad crop or a political meeting to reform the outlying region (*balad*). This was the basic aim of the *sabla*." Or, he further elaborated, perhaps someone died and there was a funeral (*'azā*); people from the *hara* and neighbouring areas would sit in the *sabla* after his death and offer condolences to the bereaved. Before the *nahda* he continued, people who had no work or learning to do would gather at a *sabla* in the mornings after *fajr* (dawn prayer) and partake of the daily social rituals of coffee and dates and breakfast together (*taqhawa*). Sometimes they would go off before *zuhr* prayer (early afternoon prayer), to engage in agriculture or trade nearby, other times each person would bring a craft or something to work on with their hands while chatting as a means of increasing their income. If there was any emergency in the community, these people were available.

As a meeting place, the *sabla* could exist almost anywhere-- under a shady tree, a space under a make-shift shelter made of palm branches or a small chamber, for example. A *sabla* as I was repeatedly informed could be of two types, a private or public. The private kind were located in specific person's house on the ground floor and close to the main entrance¹ so as to preserve the sanctity (*hurma*) of the women. Neighbours came together and brought coffee and something simple for breakfast such a piece of bread or cheese, according to their means. More common was the *sabla 'amma* (public *sabla*) found on almost every street (*zaqāq*)². These were open all the time for whoever wanted to sit or inquire about possible work until late into the night. It was, he ended "fundamentally social in goal." If someone didn't have a job to do or if a craftsman wanted to work on his silver, palm weavings, rope making or any handwork, he could busy himself at the *sabla* and pass the time with companions while the young boys or slaves would prepare the coffee.

Inasmuch as the *sabla* and its social dynamics were structured by socio-political hierarchical structure, a constant theme of recall and contemplation was the *sabla's* constitutive role in forging collaborative relationships. Concepts such as *takātuf* (mutual solidarity), *tarāhum* (mutual understanding) and *takāhuf* (mutual guarantee) were the substance of key relationships

¹ In the more modern houses, the private *sabla* (although when there are no male guests, this is often the family sitting room) has often been built with a separate entrance from the main entrance and can now be accessed from the outside without disturbing the more private domain and its female family members.

² Other informants mentioned that *harat al-'aqr* as the largest, oldest and most important of Nizwa's quarters, was unusual in this respect in that it had roughly five public *sablāt*. Most of the smaller quarters had only one or two public *sablat*. And everyone in the quarter i.e. the men would participate in its daily life, with or without guests being present. In other regions of Oman, there are tribes, who live in close vicinity to each other and who still participate in a *sabla* sociality. There were only three such examples in Nizwa when I was there 2010/2011 where the, al-Sulaimaniyin, al-Saifis and the al-Kindis had a tribal oriented *sabla* as part of their residential areas. However, anyone else, I was told was also welcome especially if they disputes or problems to resolve as these families were renowned for their learning and as having sired many *ulama* and judges among their numbers.

and feelings that from many Nizwani perspectives was decidedly generated as a result of the daily recourse of sitting at the *sabla*. These were linked to the fulfillment of *shari'a* ethico-legal and moral notions of obligation and responsibility to one's neighbours and kin. This was a time, I was constantly reminded, when people were more cohesive (*mutalāṣuq*). When I inquired about *sablas* today, Nasser mentioned that they still exist but are usually only for weddings, funerals or lectures and are called *majlis/majalis*. "These are large ones that have been newly built for three hundred people that can be rented out for a small fee for such occasions." He ended by stating that, "the old type *sabla* is very rare today and are seldom frequented except on occasional evenings, when some of the older people still gather as neighbours and companions at *maghreb* (early evening prayer) time."

The modern state of Oman, with its centralized bureaucracy, social welfare policies and political economy has become the dominant basis of reorganizing the social conditions of lives in ways that enable a national population to come about. The citizen subject now created comes to expect certain rights ranging from employment expectations within a government bureaucracy, to social welfare, subsidized loans, free health and education. These expectations displace communal ties and relationships with that of modern state regulation and expectations of a "better" life. It is the creation of such conditions that modern choices of work, study and entertainment come about effectively reorganizing the social and political domains. In recalling the past, Nasser among others, was weaving together a generic history in contrasting the past with a present in which people, as he saw it, were too involved in their lives of work and study or as he later remarked watching television to cooperate and relate to each other as part of the intimate forms of sociability required by *sabla* gatherings. Its efficacy as a forum for information exchange, entertainment, religious and ethical formation, the forging of communal

obligations and networks as well as dispute resolution has been radically transformed with state modernization and the new conditions to which everyday practices were henceforth linked to.

Coffee as Part of *Sabla* Socialization

Coffee always figured prominently into past descriptions of neighbour and kinship bonds as part of the forging of social relationships that generated a *hara* (residential quarter). For example, “the neighbours brought coffee to the *sabla* in the mornings,” “there was always a *dalla* for coffee warming in the corner of the *sabla*,” “we just brought a little coffee and some dates with us to the *sabla*” or “in the evenings we would make the rounds of coffee.” As Mandana Limbert (2010: 46-82) has lucidly described, coffee (and dates) in Oman have historically specific assumptions embedded in their use and have formed an intimate role in shaping peoples’ relationships with each other. Nasser constructed his perspective of the past by linking the presence of coffee with the intimate social ties that people fostered through “solidarity” between rich and poor, “cooperation” in times of need, all of which generated social bonds through the obligation to reciprocate hospitality. For others like Sheikh Suleiman, an official in his 40s at the Ministry of Higher Education, it was part of a different age that entangles itself in the then and now through a series of sensorial images where one “can still remember the *sabla* when one hears the gentle murmur (*kharīr*) of coffee being poured and the clattering of coffee cups.” This was also considered to be an intrinsic part of legal-moral duties and a well-known Prophetic hadith was often quoted to me in Nizwa in this regard, “He who believes in God and the Last Day, must honour his guest.”

In such a context, the resemblance or iconism of the *dalla*, as a serving utensil instigated the act of pouring coffee, an action which was and still is a necessary part towards sedimenting ties of obligation and reciprocity. In other words, the *dalla* and what it was socially conceived

as, was embedded in peoples' material interactions, demands and dynamics with each other. In a Maussain sense, the *dalla* was an extension of the giver's personality and the lubricant that enabled the cultivation of socio-moral relationships. These relationships were considered inseparable from the material exchange of dates and coffee. Those who did not do *taqahwa* ("the social act of doing coffee") with their guests with at the very least, dates and coffee, I was often told, were considered not honouring (*ikrām*) them, even if they offered them a sumptuous repast overall. As my land lady explained to me, the two together were considered, "a way of balancing the sweetness and hotness of the dates with the slight bitterness of the coffee and lightening the taste overall so it would not be overwhelming sweet."³ But they also enabled the very acts of obligation and reciprocity that defined guest friendship. It would only be in the *nahda* period, the period of Oman's modernization as a nation state that the *dalla* would disarticulate itself in order to stand alone as the abstract national symbol for Oman's valuation of hospitality, communal obligation and honour to the guest. In become symbolic of a series of transcendental qualities, it would lose that integral relationship that defined its constitutive material basis to induce the ties that bind and its ensuing socially binding debt.

Narrating History as Part of *Sabla* Socialization and Ethical Formation

It was within such a set of perceptual conditions, that history moved beyond mode of cognition to assume sensorial and practical dimensions that contributed to a distinctly Islamic form of sociability. A number of people from prominent '*ulamā*' families mentioned the importance of the *sabla* as a forum of study and social intercourse between the Imam, the *ulama* and the more advanced students of *fiqh* after *al-maghreb* prayer. As one of them explained, "One of the *ulama*

³ Mandana Limbert makes a similar argument among visiting groups of women in her neighbourhood in Bahla during her fieldwork (2010: 69-70).

would read a book of *'ilm* (learning) either on the fundamentals of *fiqh* doctrine, grammar or history to those present, and the Imam or one of the elders would explain what was necessary to understand and clarify its content.” These would have taken place in the fort as well as private homes or local mosques. *Majalis al- 'ilm* were a widespread phenomenon among lower levels of ulama in every *hara*. Books however, were not restricted to the scholarly. A number of men in Nizwa from different walks of life, ranging from shop keepers to government administrators and school teachers, recalled that despite the fact that many people, even after 1970, did not know how to read and write, were well aware of the historical works of Nur al-Din al-Salmi’s *Tuhfat-al-A'yan* and Izkawi’s *Kashf al-Ghumma* on Oman among others. In the evenings when people were sitting in the *sabla*, someone, perhaps an *'alam* from the neighbourhood, would usually bring a book to read from to recite out loud or to recount its words from his own memories.

The most popular works were those filled with stories and histories of the prophets, the imams and the righteous (*ṣalihīn*) such as the two mentioned above. The scholar or reader would sit at the *ṣadr*, (place of honour) reflecting and reproducing the social hierarchy based on learning, age, influence and social status which varied according to occasion and circumstance. A hearth made of stones or sand with coals piled on was usually located to the side of the room where a fire kept the ceramic or copper *dalla* hot, keeping the coffee warm for a while. It would then customarily be poured and distributed first to those of highest rank and then to the lower rungs by young boys. Ali, one of the fort custodians, recalled that when people celebrated the Prophet’s birthday, one of the more learned among them would bring a book on the *sirat al-nabawi* (life of the Prophet) and coffee would be prepared for the *sabla*. He would read the most important passages, describing the Prophet and the events of his life while people listened and prayed a *du'a* (supplications) afterwards.

Both al-Salmi *Tuhfat-al-A'yan* and Izkawi's *Kashf al-Ghumma* explicitly mention their audience as listeners. The *Kashf al-Ghumma* (12th century A.H/18th century A.D.) which was recalled by many as a popular work that was often read out loud in the past, is generally considered the oldest of the three main historical works of Oman's late history (17th -20th centuries). In the introduction, Izkawi lays out the reasons for his writing as,

I had noticed that most of the people of our time have forgotten the origin of their honourable doctrine And they have become uninterested in reading books written by former generations. In including information on the Ibadi Imams and their doctrine, I have given it a superficial disguise as stories and historical accounts, whilst inwardly it relates to the chosen sect because people **will not listen** to the actual historical tradition but are more desirous of hearing legendary stories. So I have bent myself to please them so that they may **listen** and concentrate their attention in reading it with a pure heart so that they may know the fundamentals of the sect and acknowledge the people of truth in a true manner (2000: 16-17).⁴

Through recasting the listener's thought into the structural mode of historically edifying tales, Izkawi was preaching and guiding on the basis of criteria oriented towards the fulfillment of God's will as understood by an Ibadi interpretation of the Quran and the *sunna* of the Prophet. As Lambek (2010: 28) noted, forging an ethical way of life requires work and necessitates attention. In becoming ethical guidelines, such acts of recollection were vested in the recitation of the life stories of the Imams, their words and deeds (*athār*), driving and counseling the listener towards correct courses of action. In navigating doctrine, these written accounts were more than mere conduits of information. Public reading which was widespread as an integral part of the *sabla* actively contributed towards modes of heightened awareness where the self became the object of scrutiny and assessment. Through inspiring pious fear, revulsion or passion among a myriad of other emotions, histories in turn became part of a pedagogic process whereby their absorption into the self becomes the generative basis for deepening and honing the inclination

⁴ This translation of the introduction to Izkawi's text has been taken from Sulaiman I. Askari's dissertation, *Study on Kashf al-Ghumma al-Jami' li-Akhhār al-Umma*, D. Phil University of Manchester, 1984.

towards pious disposition in every-day life. In other words, such relations to the past were not simply referential or communicative, but were the doctrinal extension of a history delineated by the life of the Prophet and the two caliphs after him. The Prophet and to a lesser extent, Abu Bakr and ‘Umar were the exemplars for the constitution of the “Golden Age” that provided the substrate for Ibadi doctrinal tradition and practices of Islamic virtue.

One of the core elements around which the writing, recitation and reception of late histories seemed to coalesce was the notion of *athār* which could be understood as “trace”. But it can also be translated into ideas of relic, vestige or footprint, something that is left behind. Its usage in the sense of the speech and deeds of major historical figures became part of the process of historically attuning one’s sensibilities, emotions and ethical orientation through the process of story-telling and its transmission (Berkey 2001). These histories as discursive practices set in the practical daily setting of the *sabla* were narrated, argued about, interpreted and thereby worked their way through transforming the very basis by which social relationships were tethered to the fabric of daily life in an Ibadi community.

The *sabla* therefore, had a fundamental ethical dimension in acting as a means towards cultivating habits of moral health and Islamic virtue. I was further reminded of this facet, by one of the members of the al-Kindi tribe, Dr. Amjad among others. He observed that right into the mid-1980s, the *sabla* was a viable daily social institution that forged the site of a series of disciplinary practices where young boys interacted with their fathers and grandfathers, creating a three generation forum where as he noted, “we were taught manners, how to conduct ourselves and how to respect the norms and values of a society.” In listening and consuming talk of daily life, while watching manifestations of mutual cooperation and assistance and serving coffee to their elders, they were being brought up to assume the moral basis for inhabiting a certain ethos,

one that was considered necessary to being a good Muslim as a family member and as a neighbour, a marked category in *shari'a* as part of legal doctrine and popular discourse. It was at the *sabla* that they discovered, discussed and provided assistance to someone who was sick, arranged help for somebody else to haul large piles of palm tree, helped the children of the wife of a neighbour whose husband was residing and working in Kuwait. “The entire *hara*,” he noted, “would bring up the children, helping the mother whose husband was abroad. If I did any misconduct, I would be picked up right away. Neighbours in the *hara* would ask me did you pray in the masjid? Did you help your neighbour? Why are you fighting with your mother or brothers?”

Coffee and dates were fundamentally imbricated in the set of practices of sociality through which a certain ethical-political reasoning emerged. This was a socio-political public life where embodied histories gave rise to a certain commonplace type of reasoning and set of sensibilities – memories, aspirations and anxieties - that in turn shaped commitments and determined action within the religio-political framework of the Ibadi sectarian tradition (Asad 2003: 184-185; Hirschkind 2006:30). The past as the embodiment of an ethico-political world was therefore not conceived as symbolic but rather as causative in undergirding institutional power and disciplinary practices where merit in the form of piety in commanding right and forbidding wrong became institutionalized in developing normative modalities of action for proper daily guidance in the interpretation and deployment of jurisprudence and every day administration. History premised on an exemplary function would depend on a continuity of the space of experience whereby expectations would remain stable over long periods of time and bring nothing new (Koselleck 1985 and 2002; Hirschkind 1996). This continuity of experience was undergirded by the assumption of a divinely revealed standard of behaviour based on the

prescriptive demands of the Quran and the Prophetic Sunna. The future itself was therefore defined by the exemplary character of the Prophet and his ‘rightful’ successors as articulated by Ibadi doctrine. The Ibadi sect had a very specific understanding of legitimate succession and the nature of authority within the *umma* after the death of the Prophet. These political and doctrinal issues gave rise to a set of historical experiences and their interpretations were internalized, becoming pivotal to realizing the Ibadi community’s conception of salvation. These histories in turn set the horizons within which reasoning could occur, and political conflicts could be understood, predicating distinctive modes of behaving and acting as preconditions for inhabiting the world ethically and politically.

The nation building project that has defined Oman’s modernity from 1970 onwards has recalibrated the role of history to a teleological framework oriented towards progress. In assuming a modernist conception of time, the past and the future are no longer based on continuity but on a widening difference. Today, the future is widely assumed to bring about fundamentally new situations that past experiences cannot **materially** co-opt, since it contains elements that are irreducibly different. To rely on the exemplars of the past would be to “lag behind” since it would signify the refusal to acknowledge the notion of change as fundamental differences accumulate over time towards creating a transformed future. The question undergirding the institutionalization of history as heritage in Oman has been: how can the past accommodate change? In other words, how can tradition now conceived as heritage facilitate the production of an Omani national subject?

The Impact of Heritage through the Dalla

The thrust of transforming the *dalla* into an object of heritage has involved the work of “purification” (Latour 1991) in making separations between the material form of the *dalla* and

the concrete ties and relationships that once bound it to the world. The material property of visibility now becomes crucial to the organization of a new perceptual regime that becomes formative of a national consciousness. Abstracted from their socially binding relationships, kinship obligations and customary ties, the *dalla* among other objects are now arranged and organized in accordance to state institutional settings and emerging socio-economic communities of practice. The relationship now assumes one of signification wherein the object indexes a relationship with the past, transmitting high ideals and virtues such as ‘social affinity’ ‘mutual respect’ and ‘tradition’ against the backdrop of Omani nation building. A moral tradition of civic virtues and principles are cultivated that articulate closely with the daily rhythms demanded of the material development endeavours of the modern state apparatus. As material witnesses to something very ‘real’, they carve out a landscape, draw out a historical vision and produce a political geographical unit through circulating discursive practices such as lavishly photographed official publications, school textbooks, museum exhibits and handicraft ornaments. Urban landscapes⁵ are defined and made substantive through the repetition of certain standardized traditional motifs through street montages and city wide murals that come to embody the “spirit” of the past working “in harmony” with the contemporary demands for progress and development in forging a certain aesthetic and set of ethics that produces the specificity of Oman.

As part of a secular history grounded in the land, God is eliminated from the public scene and modern virtues are fostered as part of a normalizing moral force directed towards good citizenship for an entire population. These objects and sites, as visual modes of representation, become an iterative, standardized vocabulary that transforms history, in concept and practice,

⁵ This is especially the case of the national capital, Muscat. And it is also a prevalent phenomenon although to a lesser degree in major regional capitals such as Sohar, Nizwa or Salalah.

thereby opening up new social and political possibilities of being. In assuming museal values, they are transformed into the indexical traces of a series of causal processes that structure an alternative sense of history and tradition. Placed within a different grammar of history, the ways in which the emergent citizen encounters and experiences such new vocabulary as ‘civilization’, ‘culture’, ‘progress’ are through an engagement with highly orchestrated object worlds that materialize that which is considered quintessentially Oman as a unitary nation with its signal virtues.

For example, in the exhibit, *daurat al hayat* (cycle of life) at the Museum of Omani Heritage/Omani Museum in Muscat, hospitality rituals as part of every-day traditional life is exemplified by three men knelling on a locally woven carpet, a palm woven *shatt* which is used to cover food (in this case, hospitality would usually entail dates). On the side, by another palm woven mat, slippers are set by a boiling kettle with coffee in it waiting to be poured. A large panel in the background reads:

The hospitality of the Omani people is legendary. However, in the past it was also essential for survival. Generosity and mutual responsibility has evolved over centuries and was necessary as part of a survival strategy in the the harsh, natural and tribal environment of the Arabian Peninsula.

Today’s guest in an Omani home, whether a member of the family, friend, neighbor or guest is received with utmost generosity. Hospitality traditions include an exchange of news and information after which the guest is served fruits, Omani coffee and dates....

This exhibit like others in the Sultanate are situated in the ethnographic present (Fabian 1983), where dynamics of change are not acknowledged nor is a historical context given. High ideals such as “hospitality”, “generosity”, “mutual responsibility’ become substantially linked to a territorial polity part of an imaginary community which despite transformations and changes across time and space, still stand as an enduring substratum that outlasts finite biological life.

This organic power appears to stem from indelible linkages to the land. Tradition, in this context, becomes a process whereby taming the land and domesticating it becomes part of a dynamism of spontaneous and purposive becoming (Mårkus 1993). Man's ability to master his environment generates the ability for him to become a being who is able to shape his natural self as well as his external conditions. In this sense its basic meaning would be metaphorically resonant with that of cultivating and tilling the soil resulting in the ethical and intellectual development of mind or soul. In defining the citizen, these narratives focus on the generation of self, who embraced tradition, through the cultivation of a certain set of normative values developed by one's forbears through their purposive work and practices on land and sea. Transcending their concrete circumstances, the culmination of this notion of labouring the land—material artefacts, settlements and sites—comes to be revaluated into a mighty reservoir of abstract values and principles that stretches from the ancient past to the present day. To engage with a *sabla* today with its intrinsic relationship to the exchange of coffee and dates is to immerse oneself in an ethos linked to a brand of national distinctiveness and authenticity. The *sabla* has now become tethered with spaces that cultivate a modern Omani citizenry.

Objects such as the *dalla*, the *mandooos* (trousseau chests) or the *khanjar* comes to be construed as products of the autochthonous process of using materials and techniques that have developed as part of adapting to the land as the results of Oman's particular ecological conditions and adaptive requirements. The uniqueness and creativity construed in these material objects, their preservation in museum exhibits and regeneration through the fostering of a new generation of craftsmen is conceived as being part of efforts to rejuvenate the values that these objects now materialize as a continuity and immediacy of the past in the present. The desire to create "authentic" Omani handicrafts, therefore, has not only translated into massive projects for

the training and funding of a new generation of Omani craftspeople, but has also resulted in the construction of government sponsored regional showrooms, training workshops (each dedicated to a particular craft such as silver, textile, palm fibres etc.) and design programmes. Such enterprises, in turn, have coalesced to establish the drive towards extracting design motifs and decorative elements from forts, old mosques and other historic sites in order to generate an overall distinctive aesthetic vocabulary that serves as a lexicon of decoration for Omani craftsmanship. These visual thematics may be used to beautify and decorate a ceramic item, silver work, a *khanjar* belt, a button, or a bag handle taking up a variety of forms and ultimately a wide array of uses to adapt to modern day consumer needs and tastes in accordance with global marketing trends. They serve as truncated and standardized material traces to the past, evoking its experiences even while arranging it, as the *rūh* (spirit) of Oman. The body of the *dalla* itself now becomes a canvas for increasing amounts of chasing, engraving and embossing work, where tiny dotted indentations are made in intricate patterns on the metal assuming the forms of old Nizwa design motifs. On such terms, the *dalla* becomes a decorative surface that indexes the relevant material qualities that authoritatively embodies the historical consciousness of a humanist world and the reasonings of secular statehood.

In becoming signs, the *dalla* and other objects of heritage come to embody traditions of virtue that evoke the past in order to inhabit the present with its promise of uncertain futures. They assumed a past well adapted to the changing horizons of a future in moving away from the materiality of causal encounters and their consequences towards referentiality and communication in their mode of history. Let loose from its initial moorings in theological and doctrinal predicates, tradition assumes material form as heritage and embeds and embodies the boundaries within which contemporary life organizes the political and moral transformation of

the entire population. In creating a sense of a national homogenous community, the *sabla* is transformed into a leveling tool inasmuch as its primary role as a predominantly male forum of public life is quietly occluded.⁶ Its once hierarchical social workings, grounded in age, reputation and stature are now officially subsumed in favour of a narrative that downplays differences. A narrative is forged by weaving talk of a time immemorial with historical references that repetitively extoll the *sabla's* abiding legacy of cultivating an ethical way of living that is uniquely Omani. The *sabla* like the *dalla* and other objects, architectures and sites are tethered to a set of civic virtues that do not merely serve as an abstract system of values but ground practical engagements of living modernity. The very materiality of these semiotic forms and their arrangements come to be considered as a binding, necessary link to qualities that mobilizes *turath* as part of the logic and experience of recalling the past in ways that facilitate a particular envisioning of present and future.

Heritage in Oman is considered part of a process of “renewing consciousness” or as a “source of pride, honour and a sense of belonging”, as various public officials repeatedly informed me. These objects and images assume a useful metonymic role in embodying visual media that act as cues, habituating the eye and enabling the emotional attachments and ethical qualities to which they are tethered to sink into people’s experiences given the wide dissemination and ubiquity of these forms as part of their everyday lives and travels. The associations these material forms evoke are oriented towards invoking affective attachments and a sense of purpose that aims to cultivate a certain ethical disposition grounded in a modality of history as part of inhabiting the ordinary. The sensorial impact of these objects and sites become

⁶ Women do have their own *sablās* in the form of morning and evening visits that are similarly characterized by the exchange of talk as well as coffee and dates. See Mandana Limbert’s work, *In the Time of Oil* (2010).

integral to ways of seeing and experiencing that are not purely cognitive but that are deeply shaped by the circuits of institutional disciplinary practices and ethical exercises through which modes of living histories are honed and habituated and according to which perceptual capacities, affective dispositions and the ability to morally discriminate are calibrated. (Hirschkind 2006; Dudley 2010).

For many Omanis, the prospect of facing a new and different future facilitates moves towards *turath* (heritage) as a set of founding principles that both modernizes and mediates the overwhelming onslaught of Western cultural imperialism and the spectre of blind mimicry publicly lamented as eroding the authenticity of the Arab-Islamic character of Oman on the one hand even while warding off the problematic possibilities of reliving the ways of what is widely construed as a problematic past on the other in order to retain an autonomous and authentic footing. Heritage and its metacultural operation produces the space for sedimenting a particular affective-perceptual response that is undergirded by a new set of vocabulary ('civilization', 'heritage', 'progress', 'creativity and innovation') on which the actions, objects and knowledges that constitute this emergent sense of history depend. The disciplinary shaping of this sense of perception and understanding that is the temporal frame of history and tradition in modern Oman resonates with Bourdieu's idea of habitus which inculcates and habituates forms of knowledge, disposition and behaviour in the subject in ways that are compatible with modern structures of power thereby resulting in the mutual penetration of realities between an individual's subjectivity and societal objectivity. The implications of this practice move beyond the realm of cognition and an abstract understanding of the past towards the content of an educational curriculum and modes of public sociability and conduct that define the Omani public sphere.

As one public intellectual informed me, rapid Westernization and mass consumerism has produced a great deal of debate on how these phenomena produce cracks and fissures between generations as youth especially move away from their roots and origin. This would result, he claimed, in a spiritual gap between the generations and unbalanced emotions due to a lack of “harmony” with those values that had once rooted Omani society and were now in danger of being left behind. Modernity in contemporary Oman becomes a matter not simply of material but moral aspiration, where heritage assumes the role of working upon the self, an endeavour that not only collects, works on, and displays material remains but also disciplines and transforms aspirations, sentiments, loyalties and fears through institutional practices and activities in a bid to forge the ethical and social norms of the “harmonious” citizen.

Turath or heritage as part of the Omani *nahda* becomes at once historical and contemporary in structuring living consciousness and rendering it amenable to the forward thrust of the teleological linearity of modern time. Unlike the age of exempla, heritage in this temporal logic is not juxtaposing the present with precedents to be returned to in order to initiate reform. Instead heritage transforms the past into an unvarying fundament that is considered distinctly different from the present and future even as it is subsumed into a form and content amenable to being revived and strengthened into a foundation that nurtures a mode of appraisal and acculturation, one generated by a set of perceptual skills structured by a museological mode of representation. By reworking continuities with the past, heritage and its distinctive temporal structure becomes a tool kit for the transformation of youth into Omani citizens. Through domesticating tradition into a specific logic and moral ethos, heritage becomes integral to the process of cultivating and attuning to a selective mode of history as the necessary means towards responding and adapting to the modernist assumptions of a future in flux. In carving out a

nationalist terrain, heritage and its epistemological, historical and geographical truths mediate both the dangers and promises of global modernity in organizing the ‘proper’ local parameters of daily living. The possibilities of such a ‘revival’ or “renaissance” of history embodied in the term *nahda* itself, that defines the developmental endeavours of Oman as a modern nation state from 1970 onwards, are in fact grounded in the forms of historicity and memory. Heritage, although a seemingly universal form of knowledge production that typifies nation state building, becomes an enabling condition for “traditional practices” to establish the times and spaces for the modern. And yet, I would caution against critiquing visual historical narratives as mere ideological ploys that are purely instrumental due to their deployment for real politik reasons. Even as the language of heritage becomes official sanctioned memory, it may also be sedimented to the point of becoming the very idiom in which hopes, desires, frustrations and critique may be expressed opening up possibilities for alternative temporal rationales.

Nostalgia as Political Critique

In contemporary Oman, instabilities and their effects are powerfully shaped by the continually felt gap between the national historical narratives and the aspirations and civic values intimately associated with them. These object and sites now elicit emotional responses structured along the lines of values and principles that are part of the national idiom. Even as the days of the Ibadi Imamate are recalled, it is the language of heritage and its grammatical structuring of a homogenous linear history that becomes the discursive medium for struggling to make political claims through ethical principles. As the daily use of social institutions and objects such as the *sabla* and the *dalla* are repetitively evoked, they are considered by many Nizwanis to be present and absent concurrently. They are present inasmuch as they are objects and locales that index a past that still exists and is preserved through being reworked as part of an institutional imperative

towards inhabiting a distinctive Omani modernity. They are simultaneously absent inasmuch as the concrete experience of that historical revival and its ethical impetus are considered by many to have gradually disappeared in the face of the widespread socio-economic dislocations and transformations that has been the experience of modernization in Oman.

The representational power of these objects is considered incapable of materializing the experiences and relations with past social structures that had once been empirically realized. Instead, these material forms now transfigured into heritage often function as “metonymic traces of corporeal absence” (Gibson 2004: 285), of a lived past that is considered to be irretrievably lost. The *sabla* and its association with the *dalla* instead become objects of nostalgia. The time of the *sabla* was a time when people, as neighbours and kin, adhered (*mutamāssikīn*) to each other⁷. The rich would help the poor in the *hara*, and the poor would stand by (*yūqaf*) the rich during times of misfortune (*muṣība*) or happiness (*afrāh*). These sentiments were considered fundamentally lacking today as people from different walks of life in Nizwa reminisced about the increasing infrequency of the *sabla* and the ensuing want of time for forging social ties and relationships even with one’s closest neighbours. The days of the *sabla* were, called by one young man, a shop keeper whose scholarly family had deep roots in the area, “a past that was longed for” (*māḍī ishtiyāq*). It was its fundamental role as a medium in forging the fabric of peoples’ mundane every day relationships that was constantly emphasized. The resulting deficiency in hospitality, social cohesion or cooperation between neighbours, the very values

⁷ They might also have been part of the same kinship group as families even though living in separate houses at times, lived close together in the same quarter. However *harat al-‘aqr* was different as a residential quarter from others in Nizwa in that there were a number of families from different tribes who were living together. No one tribe predominated in numbers although some were more powerful than others such as the Albu Saidi. This was perhaps due to its proximity to the administrative and commercial heart of the city, the fort-souk-congregational mosque complex.

lauded by national heritage as part of a revival or *nahda*, has effectively become moribund from many people's perspectives as a result of Oman's modernity.

It was often expressed to me that now is a time when men and an increasing number of women are working full time in schools, government institutions, or in the army in areas distant from the immediate vicinity of their *hara*. Many of the men have to commute back and forth between Muscat and Nizwa and, therefore, prefer to spend their week days in Muscat and return to their families on the weekends. Studying among the young is now longer and more intensive than it ever had been previously. In the face of the all-consuming modern work ethic that stretches from 8am-3pm as well as the increasing emphasis on bourgeois domesticity, characterized by the trichotomous framework of home, work and leisure, modernization for all its valorisation of history as heritage is conceded as creating a distancing effect amongst people in Nizwa.

But the ironic display of the *dalla* as part of a commercial and political domain nowadays does bring about a sharp sense of loss among men for the ritual of *taqahwa*, its significance as part of *sabla* culture, and its material role in enabling an ethically binding sociality that lay beyond the demands of a cash economy.⁸ Even as the *sabla* and its social rituals are celebrated as part of an 'authentic' modernity that has come down unmodified across the ages, it becomes part of the memories of a set of values, such as communal living, cooperation, mutuality, now marked more for their growing absence in public culture than their substantive social entrenchment.

⁸ For a parallel study on the role of *karam* as part of a commercial and national repertoire, go to Shryock (2004)

In the face of an all-encompassing urban infrastructural transformation, the crumbled ruins of several *sablas* that were part of old residential quarters of Nizwa are circulated through a variety of personal media forms. These images become expressions of nostalgic sentiments by the residents of Nizwa as buildings and sites and become marked as residual reminders of rupture. Photographs (1960s and 70s) of the Nizwa fort as well as of the sablas, orchards, gates and towers of the old city assume a new life through personal circuits of cameras, mobile phones, laptops as well as public and private displays in homes and offices. These photographs were in the possession of a variety of people ranging from taxi drivers and shopkeepers to the offices of bureaucrats and university professors. The very projects of preservation that have resulted in a state celebration of a revival or *nahda* of the past, have also displaced tradition, thus generating a sense of loss. The infrastructural and technological transformations that have accompanied modern state building have disrupted the logic of heritage even while conforming to it. This in turn has led to a practice of pictorial documentation of what once was that has produced a citizen subject adapted to conditions of a disruptive and yet to be achieved modernity.

The very processes of museumification have made people sharply aware of the material constitution of every-day life. Once interacting, consuming and living with these material forms as part of every-day experiences, they now become categorized in accordance with whether they bear the hallmarks of “tradition” in ways amenable to an idea of Progress. The “ways of seeing”⁹ cultivated among citizen-subjects results in a sense of ‘tradition’ that is experienced as maximally symbolic of a representative past even as it is transformed into something immaterial and indeterminate in that form. Even a simple statement such as, “celebrating the culture and

⁹ See Berger’s *Ways of Seeing* (1972) as well as Strassler’s “*Refracted Visions*” (2010).

heritage of Oman”¹⁰ is effectively casting national and state forms and practices onto a landscape, emptying it of any causal significance derived from Imamate lived experiences and becomes in effect the very ground on which “culture” and “history” becomes unrepresentable for many Nizwanis.

Even as the past becomes visible in producing a form of reason and a mode of inhabiting modernity, it produces blindnesses as well: the loss and gradual disappearance of the very values that encapsulate the past for the state, as living objects of experience, in the sensorial responses they once enabled and the possibilities they opened up towards generating a certain sociality on the ground. Where the past in official discourse is considered in terms of revival and unleashed potentiality for the future, for many in Nizwa, it was experienced as one of displacement, irretrievable in the face of modernizing changes in the face of inflation, the rising cost and standard of living and increased unemployment.

It was often lamented even among the younger generations who had been born well after that the Imamate, that the days before the *nahda* and into the 70s was a time when men and women helped each other and life was simpler, cheaper and clearer (*sāti*). An ongoing complaint was how the demands on life are much harder now as houses become more expensive. In former years, they were considered more economical since the materials primarily mud brick and the palm tree, were local. Building and repair work, among other tasks was a communal effort, and life was often characterized by contemporary Nizwanis as one of mutual solidarity (*takāful*) and close connection (*tarābuṭ*). In marriage, a man would usually live with his father and grandfather in the same house in contrast to nowadays when each man upon getting married

¹⁰ Taken from the widely disseminated pamphlets given to all visitors of the Muscat Festival held from January 27th-February 24th, 2011

feels compelled to build or rent a house or apartment of his own, resulting in dispersion. I was informed that a few silver bangles and a ring was enough for the *mahr* (dowry) especially as one was more than likely to marry a family member (usually a first cousin) or a girl from the *hara*. The *mahr* would on average cost 50-60 *qursh*/ approx. OR 100-200.¹¹ And one's morals and character were considered more important than his salary or job expectations. While I was in Nizwa, there were constant complaints among this younger generation that the *mahr* had reached astronomical levels on average between 5,000-7,000 O.R (\$ 12,987-18,100) especially with the increasing demand for gold and precious stones rather than silver jewellery, in addition to incurring wedding and engagement celebration expenses (approx. OR 2,000/\$ 5,194). Many men were unable to marry until they could afford to rent or buy a house, its furnishings and a car. This has resulted in increased expenses especially if there were dependents involved (such as parents) and an exponential increase in the workload for many to meet the rising standard of living especially among young and middle aged men. To keep up with expenses, many have taken to driving taxis in the evenings while working morning shifts in government administration and the private sector..

Many among them kept photographs of old Nizwa on their mobile phones and would display them with explanations on the material changes they had witnessed during their lifetime in the city and its material consequences in their lives. The resulting widespread but unofficial circulation of photographs of old Nizwa and their digital formats has become part of an emergent sense of nostalgia, offering themselves up for a reflection on loss, among many in Nizwa especially among the younger generation of men (late 20s-40s). In the face of the concrete

¹¹ At one time the *qursh fransi* or the Maria Theresa dollar was one of the standard currencies of Oman. 1 *qursh* = 110 *baisa* roughly. A 1000 *baisa* today is equal to OR 1/\$ 2.60.

transformations brought about by modernization, many in Nizwa expressed the need for the practical embeddedness and embodied effects of the very values fostered by the national objectification of tradition as part of the realm of lived experiences rather than as the indeterminate spirit of a museal mode of representation. This sense of loss has also become internalized in becoming a constitutive part of how the present is critiqued as an integral part of living memories that have since informed the present struggles of many in Oman, including Nizwanis against growing economic disparities, unemployment and political corruption.

In early 2011, in the wake of protests in Tunisia and subsequently Egypt and Bahrain, this sense of nostalgia assumed a more critical edge, and became a source of moral and political anxiety that called for active political intervention. Many of the younger men I had talked to and shared photographs with actively supported the protests, even if only a few took part in the demonstrations that took place in Muscat and Nizwa (university area) as well as other regional centres in early 2011. Although the Western mass media, by and large, homed in on the protests as a call for constitutional monarchy, greater political representation, and the end of corruption by cabinet ministers, some of the most violent demonstrations such as those in Sohar (Feb 2011), an industrial port city to the north of Muscat, were intimately related to demands for better economic prospects as a result of rising unemployment and the costs of living.¹²

¹² Sohar's protests became world headlines on Feb 27th 2011, when violent clashes between protestors and police armed with teargas canisters and rubber bullets, led to the death of two demonstrators. Protests in Muscat and other smaller regional centers and towns in Oman had until that time, been peaceful. In March 2011, Sultan Qaboos responded to accusations of corruption by sacking and replacing most members of his cabinet. He also increased the powers of the Consultation Council (*Majlis ash-Shura*) which is an elected body and which now has televised parliamentary debates. In a series of royal decrees, he also raised state spending in 2011 and 2012 in order to create 50,000 new jobs in the public and private sector and provide opportunities for job training. This was accompanied by making provisions for increasing social security and improving living conditions through comprehensive increases in state salaries, unemployment benefits, the rescheduling of debts and the creation of a marriage fund to facilitate the provision of dowries. Its aim is not merely to provide loans or financial grants to

These narratives of loss among them do not question the propriety of the nation state but it does question the ramifications of the modernization project itself, as pursued by the state. Their understanding of the past, as an uncompromised good, fashioned out of old photographs of Nizwa and their exchange, recasts the terms by which modernization is implemented. Even as state history is transformed into a practical means to establish an inhabitable niche within which to live modernity, the shared, yet shifting, moral world founded on claims to the continued historical presence of those social values that unite all Omanis is currently at stake in Omani ethical debates. The issues of social solidarity, generosity, equality and inter-personal consultation—values that are made the recurrent object of representation—are often brought up in such cases. Through their iterative presence in narrative form, via mass media networks and educational forums, as well as their repetitive and tangible visual embodiment in icons—such as the dhow, incense burner, coffee pot, architectural features, etc.—they solidify the visual historical narratives that inundate public spaces and embody Oman’s notion of progressive development. This gap continually ignites tensions and anxieties, opening up a space for politics, through the articulation of alternative forms of temporality and history, thereby generating a dynamic perceptual relationship between the past and the present. The counterhistory produced by informal photograph exchange emulates the state’s historiographical framework of transforming the past into a museal mode of representation even as it deploys an alternative rationale of time in understanding the truth of history as revealed by compelling indexical signs. The photographs of the *sabla* among other sites, point to a different semiotic logic where they

enable young men of limited means to marry but was also considered a means towards enhancing social solidarity and community integration as part of facilitating the process of forming the “proper family” through relieving economic pressure (*Oman Tribune*, March 14th 2011).

become “melancholy objects” (Gibson 2004) that reveal an understanding about an irrevocable loss of the past of which, despite state celebration, there has been no return and recovery.

The effective result is the dislodging of sanctioned modes of history (and thus memory) through the invocation of temporal arrangements that undermine the political foreclosures that the modern state has exacted as the price of nation-building. And yet, these critiques, in order to be intelligible as political interventions, work through the histories put into play by the state. They refer to the available temporal logics, iconic imagery and discursive tropes that sanctify its boundaries and abide by the existing terms of address that anchor it within an array of institutional networks. In the process, dissenters create an inhabitable location within the existing narrative of belonging that put alternative historical logics and their subject positions to work without fundamentally redefining the entire national project of the sultanate. In doing so, they question the fulfilment of the conditions of political belonging that undergird the nation state and its long-standing promise of teleological modernisation with its accompanying value system. These effects are felt, even while the limits of what can be said or done within the existing domain of public life are being redefined.

