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Symposium: *Politics of Time, Material Heritage and Islamic Religiosity*
Brown University
24-25 April 2015
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Soqotra's Musealization of the Present and Mobilization of the Past

CONFERENCE PAPER DRAFT
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From the Spectacular to the Vernacular

The spectacular boom in the museum and heritage industries in the Arabian Peninsula in the past decade has generated an equally fast-growing literature on what all this "heritage revivalism" (Fox et al 2006) may signify.[1] Whereas critical scholarship on the production, commemoration, and representation of "the past" in the Arab world to the East has exposed the violent and devastating effects of state-driven and expert-engineered heritage projects—be it through their dispossession of local communities (Mitchell 2002, Colla 2007, Elias 2007); their destruction of traditional foundations (Salamandra 2004; Williams 2002a, 2002b; Shryock 2004); or their saccharine but nevertheless exclusionary displays of cultural authenticity, national unity and political legitimacy (Davis 1994; Porter 2003; Pieprzak 2010)—it has also become attentive to the creative and generative capacities of both expert and lay projects to produce arenas for activism and new forms of governance (De Cesari 2010; Silverstein 2012; Davis 2011; Peutz 2012). In contrast, much of the literature on museums and heritage in the Arab Gulf states remains fixated on these projects as inventions and simulacra: as "the copy of the copy without an original, or the image that shapes the brand" (cooke 2014: 122).[2]

Instead of contributing to the critique of this critique (cf. Exell and Rico 2013; Exell and Rico 2014), my contention here is that scholars working on museums and heritage—or, more broadly, on temporalities, materiality, and "culture"—in the Arabian Peninsula might also become more attentive to the generative, political and truly unsettling capacities of these projects (unsettling of senses and sensibilities, not necessarily of people) were we to shift our focus from the "spectacular" to the "vernacular": from the national museum to the private collection; from the "global" coastal cities to the parochial outposts or interiors; from the "heritage village" to the village home; from Arabic texts to colloquial subtexts. Some scholars working in the GCC have been doing just this. For example, Karen Exell's discussion of Sheikh Faisal bin Qassim Al Thani's personal *majlis* collection-turned-private museum in Doha alerts us to "a form of locally-produced heritage management that…offers an alternative view of contemporary Qatari

[1] See, for example: Vora; Khalaf; Fox et al; Bristol-Rhys; Lawson and al-Naboodah; Wakefield; Boussa; Doherty; Fibiger.
[2] See, also, Khalaf; Fibiger; Vora.

perceptions of heritage and the past" (Exell 2014: 65). Similarly, Mandana Limbert's description of Hamad's *zaygra* (water well) in Bahla reveals not only the technologies, materials, and senses of Oman's pre-*nahda* period, but also an individual'*s* determined desire to retain something of the spirit and sociality associated with this past (Limbert 2010: 120-21). And yet, although further examples clearly abound, much of the scholarship on the region has been blind to or dismissive of the ways and places in which vernacular museums and heritage collections are being actively created, curated and authorized from the ground-up—not just as counter-memory to a national commemorative narrative, but as an "activist" project that produces new relations of and demands on authority.

In this paper *(and for the purpose of this conference only),* I focus on what I consider to be one such vernacular project: the rudimentary "Soqotra Folk Museum" on Yemen's Soqotra island. Rather than dismiss, as some visitors have, this small, private collection of material artifacts as but an inconsequential (if quaint) simulacrum of a conventional museum model at the outermost limits of the Arabian Sea, I argue here that its very significance derives from its vernacular capacity to unsettle both international and Soqotran narratives of the archipelago's past and present transformations. [3] Moreover, through an elucidation of its genesis and broader context, which I aim to provide here, we can interpret even this miniature museum as a nothing less than a metamuseum of the veritable purchase of "heritage" in the Arabian Peninsula today.

A History of Heritage on Soqotra

The largest and biologically most diverse island in the Arab world, Soqotra has been counted also among the ten most botanically important island groups globally. It is furthermore—or, at least, was until recently—one of the poorest and least developed regions in Yemen, itself one of the world's "Least Developed Countries." Despite having been ruled by the al-'Afrar sultans from the Mahri coastal port of Qishn (al-Mahra is the easternmost province of today's Yemen) for much of its history (from circa 1480 to 1967), Soqotrans have had and continue to retain strong connections to Oman.[4] The

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[3] Although this purpose-built museum houses a private collection, as does Sheikh Faisal's, I prefer to call it a "vernacular" museum to distinguish its genesis from that of the private collections, however "alternative," that belong to ruling or elite families.

[4] Although our knowledge of Soqotra's early history is inexact, it appears that the island was at various times influenced by, dependent upon, and settled by people from Oman from about the 4th century to about the 13th century AD. What we do know is that early as the mid-fourth century AD Soqotra was Christianized through Nestorian missionaries and merchants from Persia by way of the then-Nestorian province of Oman (Biedermann 2010; Müller 2001). In circa 752 AD, Soqotra was brought under the direct control of Oman's Ibadi imamate as a strategic base for Oman's East African slave trade (Wilkinson 1981). Omani control of Soqotra seems to have continued in some form for about a century until a Christian rebellion against Soqotra's Ibadi governor and his men invoked an Omani expedition under Oman's Imam al-Salt bin Malik (r. 857-886) to retake Soqotra (Müller 2001, Wilkinson 1981). Following this expedition, the island seems to have reverted to predominantly Christian influence with ecclesiastic connections to the Nestorian Church of Mesopotamia and Persia, and especially Baghdad, but it also seems to have been a dependency of Dhufar in the early 13th century (Müller 2001; Ibn al-Mudjawir in Smith 1985). In 1507, a Portuguese fleet under command of Tristão da Cunha and Afonso de Albuquerque captured the Mahri fort on Soqotra and installed a

island attracted the attention also of several European empires: a Portuguese garrison tried unsuccessfully to rule over and "protect" its Christian population from 1507-1511; the British tried unsuccessfully to first purchase and then occupy the island in 1834 and 1835; and in 1886/88 the British government concluded treaties with the Sultan of Soqotra and Qishn, respectively, resulting in the "Mahra Sultanate of Qishn and Soqotra" becoming the first British Protectorate in southwest Arabia. This new arrangement prompted the ruling al-'Afrar sultan to move from Qishn to Soqotra, from where his heirs continued to rule over Soqotra (but remained only titular rulers over al-Mahra) until 1967. Following the decolonization of Aden and the Protectorates, Soqotra was incorporated into the independent People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (South Yemen), which demarcated the island as a military zone and prohibited travel to and from it. In 1990, Soqotra became a part of the newly unified Republic of Yemen. In 1996, the government declared this archipelago "a special, natural area in urgent need of protection" and commissioning an EU-funded Master Plan for its development. These actions opened the door to the implementation of several, consecutive integrated conservation and development projects (hereafter: the ICDP), which, prior to the onset of the Arab uprisings, had injected around twenty million dollars in foreign aid into Soqotra. This may seem paltry, but given the anemic state of Soqotra's local governance structure, it was, in many cases, the ICDP that served as the proxy government on Soqotra. Indeed, Soqotrans often viewed the ICDP—or "the Environment," as they called it—as the island's newest regulatory regime.

Soqotrans were thus introduced and made subject to a palpable form of what Aihwa Ong (2008) calls "shared" sovereignty under which the state temporarily relinquishes some control over special areas in order to attract international investment and expertise and ultimately increase its own economic and political influence. In this case, the "weak" Yemeni state would seek in its enclavization of Soqotra a way to (re)capture the international tourism and capital fleeing its conflict-ridden mainland. Fundamental to Ong's concept of "shared sovereignty" are the zoning technologies and strategies deployed by sovereign states to facilitate these gradations in governance. In Soqotra, one of the greatest accomplishments of the ICDP was the implementation by presidential decree of the Conservation Zoning Plan, which marked certain regions as "protected areas" and prepared them for international ecotourism. Its greatest accomplishment—if we can attribute this at all to the ICDP's entrenchment on the island—was UNESCO's inscription of the Soqotra Archipelago in July 2008 as a World Heritage site under natural criterion X (biological diversity and threatened species): the first "natural" site in Yemen and one of only four "natural" sites in the Arab world (compared to 71 "cultural" sites).[5] Earlier that same year, the Government of Yemen

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garrison there to rule over and "protect" the alleged Christians on the island. The Portuguese garrison only lasted until 1511 when Albuquerque, who had left to take Muscat and the island of Hormuz before becoming the viceroy of Portuguese India, sent forces to dismantle the fort and transfer the settlement's remaining occupants to Goa (Beckingham 1983).

[5] Yemen has three "cultural" World Heritage sites: the Old Walled City of Shibam, the Old Walled City of Sana'a, and the Historic Town of Zabid (which has been red-listed as endangered). The Arab world's four natural sites are: Wadi al-Hitan (Egypt); Banc d'Arguin National Park (Mauritania), Ichkeul National Park (Tunisia), and the Soqotra Archipelago (Yemen). A fifth site, Oman's Arabia Oryx Sanctuary, was delisted in 2007 after the Omani government decided to substantially reduce the size of its protected area. (It is the first site in the world to have been delisted, rather than red-listed.)

passed a cabinet decree mandating that the entire archipelago would be placed under the rule of a semi-autonomous "Soqotra Authority" responsible for coordinating its foreign aid and governance, a precondition for its World Heritage inscription.

Meanwhile, Soqotran pastoralists and school children were disciplined (more and less) through the ICDP's rural outreach and environmental awareness programs to view "the environment" as an object that requires their care, an abstraction that will bring them "development," and a commodity that will attract tourist dollars. European NGOs and university research groups set up their own conservation and development programs with support for plant nurseries, fisheries, turtle monitoring, beekeeping, and ecotourism development. The ICDP also flew in various foreign "experts" for consultation and to, among other things, train rural men how to work as "local" tour guides and to prevail upon rural women to produce "handicrafts" for sale (Peutz 2013). In a time that the Government was reducing its subsidies of basic foods and petrol upon which so many of its impoverished citizens relied, Soqotrans were encouraged to "enterprise themselves" (Rose 2006) and transform their "natural" heritage into their economic future.

Although many of the ICDP's various development programs failed, theirs and the Government's reliance on foreign investment and tourism was foiled also by the unanticipated uprisings in the Arab world. For the past few years, there have been few if any tourists on Soqotra and many local "guides" have abandoned the rudimentary campsites built by the ICDP to return to fishing or their herds. Even the ICDP headquarters on Soqotra—once a busy hub of over 100 employees—has been all but vacated, as are the buildings of the other transnational NGOs that evacuated Soqotra at the start of the Yemeni revolution. (Since the beginning of "Operation Decisive Storm" this past March, all flights to the island have been suspended and the Soqotrans are relying on dhows from Oman and Sharjah to bring in food supplies.)

Although it is now too difficult to say what will happen to Soqotra and Soqotrans in the near future, a year ago I would have said that the lasting impact of the ICDP's presence in the lives of Soqotrans could be noted in at least three ways. First, of course, this once impoverished region has found its place among the planet's most privileged enclaves: globally branded and networked World Heritage sites. Until the current military operation ceases allowing foreign investment and tourism to possibly pick up again, this will not in itself lift rural Soqotrans from poverty but it will ensure that Soqotra continues to be governed through the transnational regulatory regimes that now have a stake in its reconfiguration as a world property. At the very least, international bodies will be concerned about threats to its protection. Second, as the "development" *of* the islands had become almost ancillary to the development of expertise—and experts—*on* the islands, many Soqotrans had started to produce and position themselves within a parallel "ecology of expertise" one that contested, even as it modeled itself on this, in Soqotra, novel "assemblage of science, administration, and foreign experts" (Ong 2004). Third, as the language of revolution permeated the island and emboldened Soqotrans to demand that also their local leadership step down, Soqotrans felt increasingly authorized to place similar demands on transnational NGOs and other extra-state entities, like the ICDPs, in some instances even rejecting their "aid" altogether. While it

is questionable whether Soqotrans would have become as politically emboldened as they have had it not been for the massive uprisings on the mainland, their "grassroots" engineering of a creative, activist, and *cultural* heritage in response to the "natural" World Heritage project both proceeded the events of 2011 and provided the scaffolding from which the Soqotran "revolution" could be launched (Peutz 2012).

Nature/Culture, Redux

When the international consultants began drafting the World Heritage nomination file, they gave little to no consideration as to whether the Soqotra Archipelago should be nominated as a "mixed" (natural and cultural) property. Nominating Soqotra as a "mixed" site would be too risky, the consultants had determined; clearly, Soqotra contained "biological diversity and threatened species" (criterion X for "natural" properties), but elements of cultural significance? To them, this seemed a difficult case. Although Soqotra has some remarkable archaeological sites and structures—Eriosh plain with its first millennium BCE graffiti (Ray 2003); inscriptions left in Hoq cave by various sailors between the 1st c. BCE and 6th c. AD (Strauch 2012); ruins of a Mahri and a Portuguese fort from the 15th and 16th centuries; and other scriptural and structural evidence of its historical maritime significance—little is actually known about these sites (with the exception now of Hoq cave). Moreover, all these objects and inscriptions point to "outside" visitors and incursions; Soqotra's "indigenous" cultural sites—e.g., the palace of the last ruling sultan, the remains of a 16th century Christian church in Suq—lie in ruins or are, simply, wanting in "outstanding universal value." Apart from these challenges, it was actually the "environment" that had been rendered "material"; between 1997 (when the first ICDP began) and 2007 (when the nomination was submitted), the entire landscape had been mapped, zoned, and labeled; species had become iconic "objects"; and, by the time I moved into a protected area in 2004, even pastoral school children could rattle off the Soqotri, Arabic, English and Latin names of every tree and bird in the vicinity. But little thought, care or funding was given by the ICDP or the Yemeni government to Soqotrans' "intangible" culture: their poetry, stories, music or language.

It should not be a surprising then that in the same year that the Soqotra Archipelago was inscribed as a natural World Heritage site for its biological diversity and threatened species (which occurred in June 2008), individual Soqotrans took to engineering, displaying and performing publically a *cultural heritage* over which *they* could claim expertise. It was in this context, in December 2008, that the Soqotra Society for Heritage and History—an NGO that had received limited initial financial support from the ICDP— staged its first island-wide poetry contest with financial support from Soqotrans living in the Arab Gulf states. The poetry contest, inspired by "*Million's Poet*," a popular reality TV-show produced by Abu Dhabi's Authority for Culture and Heritage, took this competition as their model and tried to replicate its very form, albeit it featuring Soqotri-language poetry only. In its first, tentative year, the contest's organizers sought to frame their cultural heritage as a necessary and valuable ingredient of the nation-state deserving of national recognition (in contrast to the foreign experts' framing of Soqotran environmental heritage as being so unique that it needed

international protection). By the end of 2011, however, the event had become a platform for demonstrating Socotran cultural sovereignty as a legitimizing discourse for their contending visions of—and verses on—the prospects for Socotra's political sovereignty.

It was also in this context, leading up to the World Heritage inscription, that Soqotrans celebrated the timely opening of the "Soqotra Folk Museum": the first museum *in* and *of* Soqotra, and one that was conceived, curated, and financed by a Soqotran living in Oman, independently of the state, NGOs, and even the ICDP. (While a Czech research team had mounted a permanent education and scientific exhibit of many of Soqotra's endemic species and ecological zones in the ICDP's headquarters, and the ICDP maintained its own extensive collection of preserved species for research and documentation purposes, these collections have not been open to the public in the same way that the museum is—nor do they reflect any of the human history of the island.) The Folk Museum, moreover, showcases not only the island's *endemic* assets, but also its *exogenous* transactions: through, for examples, its display of colorful garments imported from India, silver jewelry made of Maria Theresa dollars, and depictions of archaeological finds pointing to early Indian settlements.

Whereas the Italian consultant-authors of Soqotra's World Heritage nomination file had stressed Soqotra's "high degree of isolation" that had contributed to the islands' current value as a "uniquely preserved living museum," a "Noah's ark," and "a 'living laboratory' for the study of evolution," that was now under threat, these Soqotran heritage engineers—the collector and the poets—displayed their island's regional connectivity, past and present. These grassroots initiatives were thus as much a critique of the UNESCO model as they were a reflection of it: the island Soqotrans inhabit cannot be demarcated according to use zones and nature reserves; their heritage is neither strictly natural nor cultural; and if the island were to be transformed into a "living museum"—as Soqotrans feared—then Soqotrans would build counter-museums to narrate their own lives. It is to this museum that I now turn.

The Soqotra Folk Museum

On the north shore of Soqotra, an hour's drive from its nominal capital, Hadibo, and just a few kilometers shy of its easternmost cape, stands a one-room rectangular stone building and courtyard housing the island's first and only private collection of material artifacts and culture. This purpose-built house of "Soqotri Heritage," as a small stone plaque affixed to its external wall reads in Arabic—or, the "Soqotra Folk Museum," according to its English translation underneath—contains an impressive array of objects grouped loosely according to their functions, uses and contexts. Visitors to the museum enter through a pebbled courtyard, passing several transplanted endemic tree species, a wooden log boat (*huri*) and a small stack of whale vertebrae. Upon entering the room, one may first notice a wooden log boat with sail; a female mannequin ensconced in a glass case; a crudely stuffed goat; a wall-mounted case of silver jewelry; the trunk of a palm tree; many goatskins and pots; and a series of laminated copies of photographs taken by visiting British officers in the 1950s and 60s. A closer look reveals carefully

ordered scenes and assemblages depicting “traditional” Soqotran life: in the home (the kitchen, the storeroom, everyday household objects, implements and tools, a weaving loom, clothing and other personal items); in the *badiya* (pack animals and pastoral husbandry, milk production, date cultivation); on the coast (fishing gear, traps, corals, a lobster shell and the skin of a moray eel); enriched by life-stages and celebrations (childhood games, puberty and marriage, musical instruments); religious knowledge (a prominently placed school board, ink wells, and photocopied pages from a Holy Quran dated from the late 16th century); and travel (travel documents and passports issued by the Bin ‘Afrar government prior to 1967). And every assemblage is meticulously labeled with a list of the names—in English, Soqotri, and Arabic—and uses of each of the items in its range.[6]

If foreign tourists whose guides elected to stop at the Soqotra Folk Museum en route to the island’s more spectacular dune-swept promontory have been surprised to find such a visitor-oriented “institution” in such a remote and unassuming roadside hamlet, Soqotran Bedouin who have happened upon the museum have probably been equally surprised to find such an enviable, modern, concrete *house* sheltering nothing but things—and such commonplace things that, if no longer in use, have now been discarded, no less. In other words, despite the house-cum-museum’s obvious charms, there is something quite *unheimlich* or uncanny about its presence, its contents, and its presentation to both foreign visitors and local residents, alike. I mean uncanny neither in the strict Freudian sense as something fearful and frightening arising from a return of a repressed psychic or primitive past (Freud 1919), nor as a mistranslation of unheimlich as simply un-homely—although this “home” is that, too. Instead, I draw on Royal’s descriptions of the uncanny as “a peculiar commingling of the familiar and unfamiliar”; an “estranged ordinariness”; “a sense of homeliness uprooted”; a “defamiliarization or ‘making strange’” (Royal 2003). “Above all,” Royal explains, “the uncanny is intimately entwined in language, with how we conceive and represent what is happening within ourselves, to ourselves, to the world, when uncanny strangeness is at issue” (Royal 2003). This vernacular—that is, domestic, native, informal, dialectal—museum unsettles (itself).[7]

The Soqotra Folk Museum is unsettling, one might think, in that it displaces the expert curation, classification and evaluation of the archipelago with a private, Soqotran collection situated inside a Soqotran-style house. This is certainly unsettling to experts, as I learned during a tour of the museum with a group of heritage consultants in December 2013. Having expected them to applaud the founder’s singular efforts to preserve his community’s heritage, I was surprised when their responses were largely dismissive. While two of the Arab consultants criticized the museum for being “old school”—“the entire labeling system has to be redone”; “it needs to be reorganized”; “it

[6] The Soqotri language, which remains unwritten, is not given equal prominence by the English and Arabic labels. While the English-language labels include the Soqotri names (in a simplified phonetic transcription) for nearly every item listed, the Arabic-language labels include only a few Soqotri names per label, with these being transcribed into Arabic and demarcated by parentheses. What this means is that tourists and other readers of English visiting the museum will be exposed to far more Soqotri terms than will be the average Soqotran (or other Arab) visitor reading the Arabic signs.
[7] Royal (2003) takes this one step further, writing that, “the uncanny is (the) unsettling (of itself).”

needs proper lighting," they suggested—the third criticized it for not being *Soqotran* enough, that is, for being but a poor imitation of non-indigenous (Western) model. In other words, the museum is neither sufficiently modern nor sufficiently traditional (indigenous) to fulfill our expectations for it. But this is not what makes it uncanny.

The museum's uncanniness, rather, stems from its "critical disturbance of what is proper" (Royal 2003)—a disturbance of "any straightforward sense of what is inside and what is outside" (Royal 2003); what is object and what is thing. During my first visit to the museum in 2007, a few months before its official opening, I happened upon its founder, Ahmad bin Sa'ad Khamis Tahki al-Saqatri, preparing objects for his exhibition. As we talked about his project, Ahmad Sa'ad wrapped twine around a makeshift ball to recreate one of the games he used to play as a child. Minutes later, a clique of neighboring teenaged girls entered the museum-house for the first time, too. The girls were fascinated with the plastic mannequin robed in a knee-length shimmering royal blue dress of the kind that their mothers used to wear, and draped in the silver jewelry that is no longer in fashion: *al-moda al-jadida,* the new fashion, consists of long black abayyas and gold. Even Ahmad Sa'ad's middle-aged sisters, who had walked in behind the girls, were amazed by the embryonic display. "Look at that dress! Look at that silver!" they exclaimed of the styles—and quite possibly of some of the very *things*—that they used to wear before Yemen's unification, prior to their "second-life" as artifacts in their brother's collection. As I sat with his sisters, Ahmad Sa'ad guided the teenagers through the museum space, showing them the millstone (which they or their mothers still used daily to grind wheat in their homes); the various goatskins (used in their own homes for producing butter milk and storing dates); the leather harness (which their fathers and brothers still used regularly to scale their date palms during the pollination and harvesting seasons); and the various products that rural Soqotran women make from palm fibers (such as the palm mats, twine, and baskets that their mothers were weaving during the hot, still afternoons). For these and other Soqotran (especially rural) visitors, the museum is transforming many of their present-day *things*—household tools, implements and materials—into past objects, objects that suddenly appear quaint and "closed in upon itself" (Ingold 2012: 436) once they've traveled the short distance from the home to the museum.

At the same time, the museum is turning past objects—the circumcision stone (upon which teenaged boys about to be circumcised would sit), the amulets worn to protect against evil, the wooden writing board used in early schools, the passport issued by Sultan Issa bin Ali bin Saad bin Towari—into *present* things (Heidegger 1971): objects once discarded that are now brought near; that near Soqotrans to their not-so-long-ago, but so-distant "past." Having (had) "the ability to make things happen, to produce effects" (Bennett 2010: 5)—like protection, empowerment, mobility—these "things" conjure a pre-1967 Soqotra that remains politically salient today. Indeed, precisely because many of the objects exhibited are still in use today, the Sultanate appears to directly predate the present, eliding any references to its more proximate, socialist past (1967-1990). Entering into the Soqotri Folk Museum, one of the first "things" that Soqotrans will notice is the uncanny presence of the last ruling sultan, Sultan Issa bin Ali in the form of an unlabeled photograph at the center of the exhibit. Why uncanny? Not many Soqotrans to my knowledge have seen photographs of the last ruling sultan

before and, when people whom I know have seen such images for the first time, they have been surprised to see that Sultan Issa appears less regal than he does in their memories and imagination. (In this particular image, too, Sultan Issa has been decentered as the photographer's lens was trained on the armed bodyguard behind him.) Exiting the museum, one cannot help but notice the more ubiquitous poster of Yemen's most recent president, ʻAbd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi, affixed to the inside of the museum's front door. One enters into the space of the sultanate; one exits back into the space of the republic. It is through this indeterminateness between object and thing, between present and past, between inside and outside, I contend, that this museum makes the familiar strange and the strange uncannily familiar.

Ahmad bin Saʻd Khamis Tahki, *al-Saqatri*

To see the Soqotra Folk Museum for what it is—that is, not simply as an incongruous attempt to preserve heritage locally, but rather as an extra-ordinary endeavor—it is helpful to know more of its genesis and of the trajectory of the man who established it. This Soqotra museum-house owes its existence to Ahmad bin Saʻd Khamis Tahki, al-Saqatri: a man whose very name reveals his displacement. An emigrant from one of Soqotra's endemically rich regions (now, under the Conservation Zoning Plan, a protected area), Ahmad Saʻd lived most of his life in Oman, where he had settled in the early 1970s. From 1993 to his death in 2010, he served as the elected shaykh of the small but vibrant Soqotran "community" in Salalah. After having met Ahmad Saʻd during one of his visits to Soqotra, I visited him and his family at his home in Salalah in 2005 and it was there that I first saw his personal collection of Soqotri artifacts displayed, as are many private collections in this region in his home's semi-public *majlis* (or receiving room) in which and around which his male Soqotri constituents would gather (Exell 2014). But if this *majlis* with its glass-enclosed cases of "Soqotri" jewelry, books and documents on Soqotra, and a large wall painting of *particular* (not abstract forms of) Dragon's Blood trees from his home region, already resembled a museum (as I remarked in my notes at the time), then it was, like its founder, a museum in exile.

Born in the early 1950s into a pastoral family living humbly in the badiya, Ahmad Saʻd left Soqotra as a young teen to find work in the expanding economies in the Gulf. His family, like so many other families on the island, had lost the majority of their herds during the 1943 drought, which in conjunction with regional food shortages due to the Second World War, precipitated an island-wide famine, followed by others a few years later.[8] Although Ahmad Saʻd had memorized the Qu'ran and was functionally literate, he sought also to further his education beyond that which he could receive from the

[8] Soqotrans, who name all their drought years, remember this year as *ʻenoh di mindo'*: the Year of the Vultures and Carrion. This year is remembered not only for the numbers who starved and died, but also for the extraordinary amount of theft among herders driven to steal each other's livestock for their own survival. It is remembered also for how the sultan dealt with such "petty lawlessness"—by cutting off the offender's right hand and stringing it up on a tree, or around his neck. (According to the British political officer stationed on Soqotra at the time, "one such gruesome relic [a dismembered right hand] was brought into camp recently followed by a request that the Doctor be asked to treat it with preservatives as it was to be worn for one month. The request was refused." IOR, R/20/C/1404, "Bulletin. Socotra Island. November & December, 1943," A/PO Major C. Tudor-Pole, 13.1.1944.)

island's few religious schools. Thus, together with a few other youth, Ahmad Sa'd traveled by dhow in the mid 1960s to Mahra, to Dubai, and finally to Dammam, where he found work as a houseboy. As such, Ahmad Sa'd was one of several hundred Soqotrans who left the island in search of work; one of several thousand Soqotrans who ended up settling in Oman or the United Arab Emirates (the majority are in the UAE); and one of millions of Yemenis who left North and South Yemen to work in the oil-rich states of the Arab Gulf. Where his story departs from many of these migrants is in his turn to fight for his host state against his "native" state—or, more accurately in his case, against the first "state" that granted him citizenship.

Four years later after his initial departure, as Ahmad Sa'd headed back to Soqotra traveling first overland from Dammam to Muscat and then to Salalah, he was warned by other Soqotrans against returning. It was now 1971: the National Liberation Front (NLF) had entered Soqotra and claimed it for the People's Republic of South Yemen (later, the PDRY), abolishing the centuries old Sultanate of Mahra and Soqotra; the Sultan and his family members were imprisoned in Aden; and the NLF (which had morphed into the Yemeni Socialist Party) embarked on a program of socialization, redistributing even the date palms in Soqotra from the poor to the very poor. It was also the height of the Dhufar Rebellion, a liberation movement aided by the PDRY against the Sultanate of Muscat and Oman. Opposed to the socialist revolution in South Yemen and observing its spread into Oman, Ahmad Sa'd and his peers joined an irregular counterinsurgency unit of approximately 100 Soqotrans and 50 Mahris—this one named *firqat al-wahda*—to help the Sultan's Armed Forces fight against the Aden-supported rebels. Afraid of returning to Soqotra, where emigrants faced imprisonment and even execution by the Party—in 1974, several of the Sultan's family members, his wazir, and two return emigrants had been executed by firing squad— Ahmad Sa'd fought with this unit through 1975, when the revolution was finally defeated. One of the motivating factors in his unit's fight *for* the Sultanate of Muscat and Oman was their belief that, once successful, Sultan Qaboos would liberate Soqotra from the socialist South Yemen. [9]

After the rebellion was squashed, Ahmad Sa'd entered the Omani civil service, married, had ten children, and settled down, now as an Omani citizen, with little hope of return. From 1972 until the final years of the socialist regime, Soqotra had been placed "under lock and key"; with the exception of the few Soqotrans who managed to flee the island in the late 60s and early 70s, nearly all travel and communication between Soqotra and the outside world had been blocked. Ahmad Sa'd recalled being able to send his first letter to his brother remaining on the island in 1988, through a Scottish ethnobotanist, Miranda Morris, who had been working in Salalah.

Then, in 1991—a year after Yemen's historic unification— Ahmad Sa'd finally returned to his island home after twenty-five years abroad, twenty of them in exile. He had

[9] Remarkably, this firqat fought in opposition to the many Mahris who supported the Dhufar Liberation Front and allowed its supply, military and educational centre to operate on Mahri territory. This center "was created with the help of a Mohammad bin-Humeid, an influential Mahri Sheikh who was disgruntled with the Sultan [Issa]" and who had convinced Sultan Issa's equally disgruntled relatives in al-Ghaida to permit this center to operate in their territory (Takriti 2013: 78). (For more on the role of these irregular units, see Ladwig III 2008).

traveled there with a small team of researchers, including Miranda Morris, to document Soqotra's unique language and flora and fauna. Of course, the island's infrastructure and people's lifestyles had changed during his absence, but what surprised him, he recalled, was that people seemed to have no interest in their past. Everything that Ahmad Saʻd had remembered—from customs to traditional apparel and adornment—seemed to him in danger of disappearing. Inspired perhaps by the expedition's collection of specimens and plant names documenting the island's natural history, Ahmad Saʻd began collecting specimens of Socotri material culture while, at the same time, setting aside some Omani riyal each month until he could finally afford to build the museum to house them. Indeed, although the museum opened officially in 2008, Ahmad Saʻd dated its establishment to 1991, when he first initiated his collection. "I had noticed that the people on the island had no interest in their past, that is, everything they had had was gone: the silver was gone; everything was gone," he told me in the summer 2007, while working on assembling and labeling his vastly enlarged collection. Indeed, the previous year, he had been invited to the opening of the Soqotra Exhibition at the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh, where he was further inspired by the musealogical model. Certainly, Ahmad Saʻd received also a lot of support from his researcher-friends, especially Miranda Morris who is largely to thank for the museum's English-language documentation. In this sense, the expert-critics I mentioned before are not entirely incorrect to point out that the museum is not fully "Soqotran."

And yet, what is more interesting for our own understanding of heritage practices in the Arabian Peninsula is not whether or the degree to which a "local" or vernacular project modeled itself on a "Western" or "global" design (as critics of both national and "local" projects often contend), but rather the recognition of how regional and transnational these vernacular projects might be. If the Soqotra Folk Museum draws on "Western" models, then certainly it draws on Omani examples and narratives, too. Like all Omani citizens living in the time of Sultan Qaboos, Ahmad Saʻd was surrounded by—indeed, fought for—the narrative of a miraculous modernity: a "reawakening" (*nahda*) from a period of deep "political instability and poverty" (Limbert 2010). Ahmad Saʻd would have been witness to the ways in which "Oman's heritage industry and market for heritage crafts and sites…fashions a distinctly territorial landscape and polity, marking it as a modern nation state" (Sachedina, n.d.). And, despite his emphasis on what in Soqotra had already disappeared, Ahmad Saʻd surely would have noticed that the mundane, personal objects that had been transformed into Oman's cultural wealth through the nation's forts, festivals and museums, were in ever more abundance in Soqotra, where they were, moreover, still in use. The Soqotra Folk Museum then tells the story not of an island that is "untouched" or "lost"—as several of the museum visitors have suggested in their entries to the museum's guest-book—but of a regionally interconnected society (for all but the twenty years of PDRY rule) that has experienced profound transformations, much like those on the Arabian mainland. It is also very much a product and project of one man's journey from Soqotra to Yemen, Oman, Scotland and back again, representing Ahmad Saʻd's long-awaited 'return'—through his erstwhile *majlis* collection—that had been denied to him as a young adult.

Conclusion

With Ahmad Sa'd's death, his museum has died a little, too. Some things have gone missing; some displays have become more jumbled. But even before that, there was much that had remained absent. Ahmad Sa'd had not found a way to represent Soqotra's intangible culture—the poetry performances that occur always *outside* the home, and in this region, just down the beach from the museum, at night—nor had he represented Soqotra's African population or Soqotra's "negative heritage" (the stories of male sorcerers and banished witches that Soqotrans are now ashamed of); the socialist period (*al-jahaliyya*); his own exile; or, indeed, anything post-Sultanate. Instead, it is the annual Soqotran poetry contest that has taken up and politicized these themes. Moreover, because Socotri poetry relies on metaphor to discuss, for example, the executions in the 1970s and to critique the excesses of power, even dated poems can be recycled and redeployed in the service of reform and revolution. Elsewhere, I have described in greater detail how the poetry contest and the creative, activist heritage it elicits provided the scaffolding from which the Soqotran Arab Spring was launched (Peutz 2012).

This does not make this little, one-room museum-home on Soqotra's northern shore, nor its founder's singular and even quixotic efforts to preserve the present behind glass boxes, any less extra-ordinary. The "estranged ordinariness" (Royal 2003) of this vernacular museum emerges from its surprising connections to various places and its disruption of linear time. This is important, I contend, for not only does the vernacular disturb the spectacular, but also it disrupts the false opposition in much scholarship on the Arabian Peninsula between the "global" (usually "Western) action and the "local" (usually pan-Arab) reaction. The vernacular museum or heritage project, like the individual life, is not spatially or temporally bound. It may just be un-heimlich.