

# Oman's Diverse Society: Northern Oman

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*Although the majority of Oman's population is Arab and either Ibadi or Sunni Muslim, the country exhibits a wealth of diversity in ethnic groups and native languages. While these other groups are often small in total size, they are represented in such areas as politics and commerce in numbers disproportionate to the weight of their communities and, although distinctive, are more or less woven into the social fabric of the country. Ethnic identity seems likely to decline as the various communities increasingly mix in education, the workplace, residential areas, social functions, the military, and elsewhere. This article provides brief "snapshots" of these groups and assesses their changing status in Omani society.*

Oman, in the view preferred by its government, is an Arab, Muslim country. Its people are Ibadi or Sunni Muslims — there is not much difference in practice between the two sects — who speak Arabic and belong to a tribe.<sup>1</sup> For most Omanis, this perspective is true. At the same time, however, it tends to obscure a wealth of additional diversity in languages and ethnic groups. Although such groups are often small in total size, they are represented in such areas as politics and commerce in numbers disproportionate to the weight of their communities and, although distinc-

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1. The Ibadi sect constitutes the only surviving branch of the Khawarij (sing. Khariji), the first schism in Islam that eventually died out as a result of its extremist beliefs. Ibadism forms a separate *madhhab* (or school of law) in Islam although it is close to the Maliki school of Sunni Islam. The historical center of Ibadism is in Oman, although there have been Ibadi communities in the Hadramawt, Zanzibar, and North Africa, particularly Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya, where they continue to exist in pockets. The indigenous Omani population may be some 45% Ibadi (concentrated in the historic heartland of the country in the northern interior), approximately 50% Sunni (scattered elsewhere in northern Oman and the overwhelming majority in far eastern and southern Oman), and probably less than 5% Shi'i and Hindu. The ruling Al Bu Sa'id family is Ibadi.

tive, are more or less woven into the social fabric of the country.<sup>2</sup> This diversity is nowhere more profound than in the southern region of Dhufar, but the groups there differ from the Arab majority only in language and thus are not directly comparable to the north.<sup>3</sup>

These self-ascriptive ethnic groups distinguish themselves from the majority Arab Ibadi/Sunni community by language and/or religion. Their ascription by the majority as separate communities is also sustained by their non-participation in the Arab tribal framework.<sup>4</sup> Ethnic boundaries in Oman are not, generally speaking, defined by territory, occupation, or even class, but rather by language or sect, or both. Where language is lost and sectarian differences disappear or are not present, assimilation may occur, as in the case of the 'Ajam, to be discussed below. Conversely, the Baharina retain their uniqueness because of their Shi'ism, despite their shared Arab identity. Not all groups exhibit the same degree of ethnic identity. Social networks increasingly overlap in contemporary Oman and identities transcend boundaries. Members of these groups are not precluded from sharing Omani national identity. Indeed, most wear Omani national dress.<sup>5</sup> Ethnic identity may decline as the various communities increasingly mix in education, the workplace, residential areas, social functions, the military, and elsewhere. The following discussion provides brief "snapshots" of these groups while recognizing the fluidity of ethnic boundaries and ethnic identity.

To a certain degree, the Omani national discourse also embraces the country's history of overseas empire and connections to the Indian Ocean rim and thus reinforces the Omani identity of some of these groups (especially the Zanzibaris). Conversely, some groups of immigrant origin (even if immigration occurred centuries ago) have sought to strengthen their claim to Omani identity by asserting Omani Arab tribal origins. In addition, the social fabric of Oman has become considerably more complex with the sizeable influx of expatriates during the past 30 years — who em-

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2. The information in this article is based partly on published sources as cited in the notes but, more importantly, on interviews, conversations, and observations gathered over the course of 25 years of involvement with Oman, ranging from an initial period of fieldwork in the country in 1974-1975 through residence in Muscat during 1989-1999. As some of the observations and conclusions presented in this article undoubtedly will be regarded as sensitive in Oman, I have not identified the sources of non-published information. It may be noticed that only European languages are represented in references to published material; this is principally because very little reliable information on these groups exists in Arabic or other languages.

3. The linguistic and social communities of Dhufar form the subject of a separate article to be published in the Spring 2004 issue of *The Middle East Journal* and so are not discussed here.

4. The discussion in this paragraph draws on Fredrik Barth, "Introduction," in Fredrik Barth, ed., *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1969; reprinted Prospect Hts., IL: Waveland Press, 1998), pp. 9-38, and Thomas Hylland Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism* (2nd ed.; London: Pluto Press, 2002).

5. Their "belonging" to an Omani national entity is further emphasized by their necessary familiarity with Arabic, which serves as the Omani "national" language. Language is seen as a "primordial" factor in the creation of a sense of shared community. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (rev. ed.; London: Verso, 1991), p. 144.

phatically do not wear Omani national dress. Nevertheless, limitations of space preclude discussion of the various expatriate communities and their impact on Omani society.

A British Political Agent in Muscat, writing at the turn of the century, spoke of 14 languages that might be heard every day in the *suqs* of Muscat and Matrah.<sup>6</sup> Although less than half of these were spoken by Oman's permanent inhabitants and a few are no longer heard, many more languages can be added to the list today as a result of Oman's recent economic development and influx of expatriates.<sup>7</sup> More to the point, however, it can be said that at least 12 languages are spoken as a first language — or as the language of parents — by indigenous Omani citizens.<sup>8</sup> The great majority of these non-Arabic speakers are Sunni Muslims but there are also several small groups of Ja'fari Shi'a and a few Hindu families.

While many of the communities discussed in this article can be found in rural areas scattered across the Sultanate, a significant number are either found entirely in, or trace their roots in Oman to, the conurbation of Muscat and Matrah. This is not

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6. The Political Agent enumerated the languages as: *Arabic* spoken by natives; *Persian* by some natives of Persia who have settled recently in Oman for trade purposes as well as by some families who are of Persian extraction and whose residence dates from the Persian occupation of Muscat; *Baluchi* by the Baluch fishermen and others who form the majority of the servant class throughout State; *English* by the Political Agent and his staff, as well as certain Goanese and other merchants; *French* by the French Consul and certain Belgian arms merchants; *Swahili* by Negro slaves and their relatives; *Somali* by natives of Somaliland who visit Oman's shores yearly in search of dates, etc.; *Hindustani* by the large bulk of the educated population; *Sindi* by Hindu merchants from Sind and by the Khoja community who have within the last century settled in Oman and are rapidly coming to be regarded as part of the Arab population; *Gujarati* by a number of Hindu traders from the southern part of Bombay Presidency, residence of some of whom in Oman dates back for 150 years and possibly more; *Portuguese* or *Goanese* by the Goanese population, merchants, domestic servants, etc., who number a dozen souls or more; *Pushtu* by Baluch and Afghan arms' dealers who are still to be met with occasionally in bazaars; *Armenian* and *Turkish* by Armenian merchants and secretaries and by a few Turkish soldiers who having deserted from the Turkish army operating in Yemen have migrated east and taken service under the sympathetic ruler of Oman. W.G. Grey, "Trade and Races of Oman," *Quarterly Journal of the Mythic Society*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (January 1911), p. 4. Somali, Portuguese, and Armenian could probably be deleted from today's list.

7. In addition to the English, French, Hindi/Urdu, Pushtuni, and Turkish of the earlier list (and leaving aside languages spoken purely by sundry diplomatic missions), prominent additions of languages overheard today would have to include: languages of South India, such as Malayalam and Tamil, whose speakers form the largest expatriate groups; languages of other South Asian countries, such as Sinhalese and Bengali which similarly are represented by large communities of workers; languages of Southeast Asian countries (especially the Philippines and to lesser extent Thailand, Indonesia, China, and Malaysia; Dutch (especially because of Royal Dutch Shell's involvement in Oman's oil industry); other Western European languages represented by diplomats, government employees, commercial managers, and corporate representatives (notably German, Italian, Swedish, and Greek); Japanese, for the same reasons; and even languages of the former Soviet Union (such as Russian and Ukrainian) as hotel workers.

8. These languages are: Arabic, Baluchi, Lawati, Zadjali, Gujarati, Swahili, Qarawi (or *jibbali*), Mahri, Habyoti, Bathari, Hikmani, and Harsusi. The first six of these are discussed in the following pages. The last six belong to Dhufar and therefore are discussed in the companion article.

surprising, given Muscat's position as Oman's preeminent port for more than five centuries. Furthermore, as Oman is largely cut off from the rest of the Arab world by the great sand desert of al-Rub' al-Khali (or Empty Quarter), its natural outlook has been across the surrounding seas. The consequence has been both an immensely rich tradition of maritime trade with cycles of overseas expansion, and the attraction of Oman's seaports as magnets for foreign merchants.

Although the original population of the early villages of Muscat and Matrah appear to have been the Omani Arab tribes of Bani Wuhayb in Muscat and Bani Hasan in Matrah, the rise of Muscat (and Matrah with it) in political and commercial importance attracted a wide variety of outside groups. The population became mixed and its Arab content was gradually diluted and reduced to a minority.<sup>9</sup> With the growth of the capital area since 1970, this process has accelerated as most of Muscat and large parts of Matrah have been abandoned to lower-income groups (including local immigrants from the countryside) and expatriate workers.

## THE VARIOUS COMMUNITIES

### *Baluch*

The Baluch heartland lies along the Makran coast of the Gulf of Oman and Arabian Sea, where Baluchistan comprises one of the four major political divisions of Pakistan and spills across the border into Iran. In 1784, a member of the Omani ruling family sought refuge in the Baluchi port of Gwadar and was allowed to settle there by the ruler of the surrounding region. Gwadar thus became an Omani possession until it was sold to Pakistan in 1958. Omani sovereignty over Gwadar undoubtedly facilitated Baluchi movement to Oman in search of work and settlement. More importantly, however, Baluch have long served as soldiers throughout the Gulf and western Indian Ocean, including Oman. The first modern organized army unit in Oman, established in 1921, was entirely Baluch in composition and the demand for manpower to combat an insurrection in Dhufar during the 1965-1975 period led to steady recruitment of Baluch soldiers until the early 1970s. A number of these soldiers subsequently settled in the Sultanate. Nevertheless, the Baluch presence in Oman long antedates these factors. Early European travellers to Oman in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries mentioned the Baluch, and it can be reasonably assumed that Baluch have resided in the country at least for centuries before that.

The Baluch constitute the largest non-Arab community in Oman and are concentrated along the al-Batina Coast (which stretches along the Gulf of Oman from

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9. See, for example, the comment about Muscat of a British naval captain who surveyed the Omani coastline in 1824: "Hindoostany appears to be the lingua franca, Arabic being only spoken by the native Arabs, who form by far the smallest portion of the inhabitants." W.F.W. Owen, *Narrative of Voyages to Explore the Shores of Africa, Arabia, Madagascar* (London: Richard Bentley, 1833; 2 Vols.; ed. by H.B. Robinson), p. 338.

Muscat to the United Arab Emirates border in the northwest) and in Muscat and Matrah, although pockets of Baluch are to be found elsewhere.<sup>10</sup> Their language is Baluchi and they are uniformly Sunni Muslims. A reasonable guess would put the total numbers of Baluch as high as 245,000 or around 12% of the total Omani population.<sup>11</sup> The *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf, 'Omân, and Central Arabia*, compiled by J.G. Lorimer for the Government of India at the beginning of the twentieth century and in some respects still the most exhaustive source of information today, noted that the Baluch in Muscat and Matrah constituted half or more of the population and served as soldiers, sailors, porters, servants, and petty traders.<sup>12</sup> Both towns possess a Harat al-Balush, or Baluch Quarter.

The Baluch still predominate in Muscat and Matrah today, in part because they tend to fall within lower income groups and because many other Muscat and Matrah families have abandoned the towns for newer residences in the suburbs. Because of their socioeconomic status and perceptions of discrimination, younger Baluch exhibit signs of alienation and, interestingly, sometimes identify with “black power” expressions similar to African-Americans and the Caribbean populations of the United Kingdom. Discrimination against the Baluch, for the most part, appears to be relatively subtle and has no legal basis. Indeed, there have been several Baluchi ministers in government, such as Muhammad Zubayr (Baluchi father) and Ahmad Suwaydan al-Balushi (Minister of PTT). Some of the most prominent merchants are Baluchi, including Yahya Muhammad Nasib and Musa ‘Abd al-Rahman Hasan. Baluchis have also risen in the ranks of security forces, including a former commander of the air force, Talib Miran al-Ra‘isi.

Although most Baluch in Oman trace their origins to what is now Pakistani Baluchistan and identify, even if weakly, with Makrani Baluch tribes, there is an element of Iranian Baluch in Oman as well. The dates of their arrival in Oman appear to be later, a result at least in part of the Shah of Iran’s attempts to extend his authority

10. At some forgotten point in time, a group of Baluch settled in Oman’s inland al-Dhahira region where they adopted the organization of an Arab tribe as well as the Arabic language. By their own explanation, the enclave was created when earlier rulers of Oman sent Baluch to the region as soldiers and guards for officials (interviews in Oman). Local tradition in Manah, a town of the central, interior, Omani heartland, holds that Baluch have been among the earliest inhabitants. Soumyen Bandyopadhyay, “Manh: the Architecture, Archaeology and Social History of a Deserted Omani Settlement” (Ph.D. thesis, University of Liverpool, School of Architecture and Building Engineering, n.d.), chapter 3 (unpaginated).

11. This very rough estimate has been calculated on the basis that one-third of the Omani population of al-Batina is Baluch. The 1993 Omani census enumerates 538,000 residents of al-Batina, of whom about 75% were Omani, and 1,480,000 Omanis in total. Sultanate of Oman, Ministry of Development, *General Census of Population, Housing and Establishments 1993* (Muscat, 1994). Assuming an annual Omani growth rate of 3.5% (unofficial estimates in Muscat range up to 4%), the total Omani population of Oman at the end of 2002 would be 2,018,000 and the Baluch population 245,000 or 12% of the total. It is possible that the Baluch form a lesser proportion of al-Batina’s population but, on the other hand, the numerous Baluch of the capital region have not been included in this estimate.

12. J.G. Lorimer, comp., *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf, 'Omân, and Central Arabia* (Calcutta: Superintendent, Government Printing, Vol. 1: 1915; Vol. 2: 1908; reprinted by various publishers in 1970, 1989, and 1998), pp. 1185 and p. 1200.

to the Iranian Makran in the 1950s and 1960s. Some of these immigrants were used by the present Sultan's father as a sort of paramilitary force, in similar fashion to his use of the Bani 'Umar and al-Hawasina Arab tribes.<sup>13</sup>

### *Zadjalis*

This small community is often mistakenly regarded as Baluch, with whom they are closely linked. According to some Zadjalis in Oman, the Zadjali community in Pakistan has members in both Baluchistan and Sind; whether they were originally Baluchis who migrated to Sind or Sindis who migrated to Baluchistan and were partially absorbed is not clear. Some sources speak of a small Jadgal group scattered in both Pakistani and Iranian Makran, as well as in Sind, whose origins can be traced back to the early Islamic era. Furthermore, they seem to be linked to the large Rais group (which is present in Oman as well) and the Sangur tribe of Baluch.<sup>14</sup> More importantly, the Jadgal are often confused with the Jats and therefore linked with the Loris and Golas, a group of tribes forming the lowest stratum of Baluchistan society, traditionally tenant farmers without many rights. Their origins are often said to be from elsewhere in India.<sup>15</sup> It is this connection with the Jat that sometimes gives rise to an unsubstantiated notion that the Jat are the same as the Zatul (singular, Zutti), the small, nontribal communities of peddlers scattered around the Arabian Peninsula, and that, therefore, the Zadjalis share a common ancestry.

Zadjalis in Oman speak their own language. As one Zadjali described it, if a Zadjali child encounters a Baluchi speaker for the first time, the Zadjali would be able to understand the Baluchi but the Baluchi speaker would not be able to understand the Zadjali speaker. Apparently, the Zadjali language is very close to the Kutchi language spoken by some of the Hindu families in Oman. Because the Zadjali mingle with the Baluch, their numbers in Oman are unknown, although undoubtedly small, and for similar reasons it probably can be assumed that they have been present in Oman as long as the Baluch have.<sup>16</sup> Zadjalis may be found in most areas with Baluch population; a small quarter of Muscat (outside the walls) is known as Harat al-Zadjal.

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13. Apparently some of the descendants of these Iranian Baluch now reside in Kalba, a town in the United Arab Emirates on the Gulf of Oman, where they are administered by the UAE Emirate of Sharja. Interviews in Oman.

14. R. Hughes-Buller, *Baluch District Gazetteer Series, Vol. 7: Makran and Kharan* (Bombay: The Times Press, 1907), pp. 94-95

15. Hughes-Buller, *Baluch District Gazetteer*, and Muhammad Sardar Khan Baluch, *History of Baluch Race and Baluchistan* (Quetta, privately printed, 1958?), pp. 172-173. Fredrick Barth, *Sohar: Culture and Society in an Omani Town* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), pp. 40-41, holds that "Though [the Zadjalis] claim originally to be descended from Arabs, they accept the folk etymology of their name as being Sindh-gali, that is a man from Sindh, the lower Indus valley." Other sources of speculation on their origin are cited in Chapter 3 of Bandyopadhyay, "Manh."

16. Interviews in Oman.

## Hindus

It should not be surprising that Oman's window on the Indian Ocean and its long trading links with the Indian subcontinent should have given rise to the presence of Indian merchants in Muscat for many centuries. Many of these were Banians, Hindu merchants from Sind and Gujarat. Merchants from the city of Thattha in Sind forged trading links with Muscat during the period of Portuguese occupation (1507-1650) and established warehouses in Muscat at this time.<sup>17</sup> Omani historians chronicled the pivotal role of a Banian merchant named Narutim in assisting the Omani recapture of Muscat from the Portuguese in 1650.<sup>18</sup> The Dutch merchant Engelbert Kaempfer, visiting Muscat in 1688, remarked on the presence of Banians,<sup>19</sup> as did the Italian physician Vincenzo Maurizi in the early nineteenth century, who claimed they numbered 4000.<sup>20</sup> The Indian Navy officer J.R. Wellsted, visiting Muscat in the 1830s, remarked that there were more Banians in Muscat than in any other city of Arabia and estimated their number at 1500. He remarked that they nearly monopolized the pearl trade from the Gulf and were prominent in the supply of grain from India and Indian cloth and piece-goods.<sup>21</sup>

By the turn of the twentieth century, the number of Banians were estimated at approximately 200 adult males, some 50 women and a few children. They were engaged as bankers and imported rice, piece-goods, sugar, and coffee from India, exported dates, were silversmiths, and owned some of the best gardens in Muscat's suburbs.<sup>22</sup> Although under the protection of the British Government of India, they suffered from Muscat's insecurity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The siege of Muscat in 1895 by various tribes under an Ibadi revivalist umbrella resulted

17. Calvin H. Allen, Jr., "The Indian Merchant Community of Masqat," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, Vol. 44, Pt. 1 (1981), p. 40; citing William Foster, *The English Factories in India, 1634-1636* (Oxford, 1911), pp. 127-134.

18. G.P. Badger, ed. and trans., *The History of the Imams and Seyyids of 'Umân, by Salîl-ibn-Razîk, from 661-1856* (London: Hakluyt Society, 1871), pp. 81-85.

19. G. Weisgerber, "Muscat in 1688: Engelbert Kaempfer's Report and Engravings," *Journal of Oman Studies*, Vol. 5 (1979), p. 97.

20. Vincenzo Maurizi, *History of Seyd Said, Sultan of Muscat; Together with an Account of the Countries and Peoples on the Shores of the Persian Gulf, Particularly of the Wahabees* (London: J. Booth, 1819; reprinted Cambridge: Oleaner Press, 1984), p. 22. Another contemporaneous visitor, passing through Muscat in 1820, also remarked on the number of Hindu merchants from Bombay and Gujarat. Robert Mignan, *A Winter Journey Through Russia, the Caucasian Alps and Thence Across Mount Zagros by the Pass of Xenophon and the Ten Thousand Greeks, into Koordistan* (London: Richard Bentley, 1839; 2 vols.), p. 243.

21. J.R. Wellsted, *Travels in Arabia* (2 vols.; London: John Murray, 1838; reprinted Graz: Akademische Druke, 1978), Vol. 1, pp. 19 and 21. Allen, "Indian Merchant Community of Masqat," pp. 41-43, describes the process by which the Sindi Bhattia merchants prominent during the Portuguese and Ya'rubi periods were replaced by Kutchi Bhattias over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

22. Lorimer, *Gazetteer*, p. 1185.

in the destruction of the Hindu temple inside the walls and the ransacking of their shops and stores.<sup>23</sup> The political atmosphere, combined with Oman's economic decline, led to the departure of many Hindu merchants from the country.

As a consequence of these developments and the emergence of a new nationalist atmosphere in Oman after 1970, only a handful of Hindu families remain in Oman today. The origin of all the present families is in Gujarat, with many coming from the Kutch district there and so speak Kutchi at home. The Hindus of Muscat primarily lived in either al-Waljat or al-Banyan Quarters, both of which are located inside the old walls.<sup>24</sup> Two temples existed in that area, known generally as Ma'bad al-Banyan and Bayt al-Pir, but both disappeared with the redevelopment of al-Banyan Quarter for the new palace in the mid-1970s. Another temple still exists in al-Hawsh Quarter outside the walls: a temple is believed to have existed on the site for about 150 years but the present temple, Muthi Shwar, was recently rebuilt.<sup>25</sup> Previous Hindu crematoria were located in Kalbuh, formerly a small suburb on the sea just north of Muscat, and near the Christian cemetery, accessible only by sea between Muscat and Sidab. At present, the only Hindu crematorium in Oman is located some distance away near the town of Suhar.

The absence of surviving records limits knowledge of family lineage to oral memory. The families apparently residing in Oman the longest appear to be Purshottam Toprani, Khimji Ramdas, Ratansi Purshottam, and Dhanji Morarji.<sup>26</sup> The connection of the Khimji Ramdas family with Oman apparently derives from a family member who operated a country craft involved in trade between India and the Gulf. He eventually thought it worthwhile to set up business in Muscat, approximately 125 years ago, to export dates and import various goods. Family and commercial ties to India remain very strong and there are also links to East Africa. Khimji Ramdas, from whom the family takes its present name, died in the 1930s and his son Golkaldas served as the key contractor for the present Sultan's father. The family is still close to the ruling family.

Although Ratansi Purshottam (1843-1904) was brought to Muscat by his uncle, family tradition holds that the family has been present in Oman for nearly 250 years. Ratansi soon established his own business and built his fortune in the arms trade and

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23. British Library, Oriental and India Office Collection, R/15/6/37, J. Hayes Sadler, Political Agent, Muscat, to the Political Resident in the Persian Gulf, March 18, 1995.

24. Al-Waljat is the easternmost part of Muscat inside the walls and formerly contained the British and American embassies. Other communities also lived in the quarter and the name sometimes was used to indicate a broader area from the old *suq* and al-Bab al-Saghir gate to the eastern hills. Al-Banyan Quarter obviously received its name from its Hindu inhabitants and contained the homes of many prominent Hindu families, as well as the Indian embassy after 1970.

25. This quarter is also known as Hawsh al-Banyan since it was traditionally used by one of the Hindu families as an area for keeping cows (*hawsh* is Arabic for enclosure or courtyard).

26. Other Hindu families include: Purshottam Kanji, Dharamsey Nensy, D.J. Sampat, Purshottam Damodar, Shah Nagardas Manji, Ramniklal B. Kothari, Madhavji Velji, C. Jayant, Purshottam Madhavji, Laxmidas Tuaria Ved, J.N. Gandhi, Naranji Mirji, and Vallabhadas Tharia. Information on specific Hindu families was obtained in Oman from members of some of the families mentioned.

then became involved in exporting dates to the United States. As his business prospered in the 1890s, he built an enormous house in Muscat's al-Banyan quarter that rivaled the old palace in appearance. This house was destroyed in 1974 to make way for the new Muscat palace. Another house was built on the waterfront in Matrah in 1903 but was demolished in 1979 to make way for the family's new office building.

The Purshottam Toprani family is considered one of the oldest Hindu families in Oman and possessed until recently commercial ledgers dating back to around 1840, which unfortunately have now disappeared. Like the other Hindu families, ties to India remain strong and marriages with Indian branches of the family were common; some family members only arrived in Oman in the last half-century. Before 1970, the family business was concentrated on importing foodstuffs, petrol, and kerosene, and exporting dried dates to India. The demolition of al-Banyan and al-Waljat quarters of Muscat, as well as Muscat's old *suq*, as part of the rebuilding of Muscat in the 1970s, meant that the family relocated its commercial premises and residence to Matrah, as did most of the other Hindu families. Thus, the old balance of Hindu merchants tending to occupy Muscat and Lawatiyah merchants occupying Matrah was altered, although the expansion of the Muscat capital region since 1970 has hastened the flight of families, in terms of both residences and offices, to newer residential and commercial areas away from the two old towns.<sup>27</sup>

Brief mention should be made of two other small communities of Indian origin, traditionally living together in the Kumbar quarter of Matrah, just outside that town's walls. The name of the quarter apparently derived from the Indian caste of Kumbhars, traditionally potters in India, although the Kumbar quarter in Matrah was traditionally noted for bread-making.<sup>28</sup> The quarter was also inhabited by the Sonabara, apparently originating from the Indian caste of Sonis who were gold and silversmiths. The Sonabara continue to specialize as goldsmiths and in recent times many have taken the name of al-Sayigh (Arabic for jeweler) as their family names.<sup>29</sup> Although both communities appear to be Hindu in origin, they are Muslim today.

### *Lawatiyya or Khojas*

The Lawatiyya (singular, Lawati or Lutyani) community — apparently of In-

27. Not all Hindu families have such a long Oman pedigree. Shah Nagardas Manji came to Muscat from Djibouti in 1936, working first for Khimji Ramdas before landing his own contract to supply rationed food supplies to the coastal villages east of Muscat. His son branched out into the fancy goods business and the family operates a chain of high-profile shops throughout the capital area with franchises for Kodak and other imported goods.

28. Gazetteer of India, Government of Gujarat, *Gujarat State Gazetteers, Kutch District* (Ahmedabad, 1971), pp. 132 and 138. This source also seems to indicate that there is a Hindu caste of Kumbhars as well (p. 132) and states that local Muslim converts [in Kutch] are from among Kutch Hindus, speaking Kutchi with only a few who speak Gujarati (pp. 136-137).

29. *Gujarat State Gazetteers*, p. 132, for origins. Lorimer, *Gazetteer*, p. 1198, notes the existence of al-Siyagh quarter in Matrah, located on the sea inside the walls near the present-day fish-market. The inhabitants are described as 50 houses of Hindu silversmiths, as well as Baluch and Bayasirah.

dian origin, at least in the main — is the largest of Oman's three Shi'a groups. They are also known as Khojas or sometimes Hyderabadis. As in the case of the Baluch, the date of their arrival in Oman is unknown but certainly ancient. Community tradition holds that the first members arrived from Kutch approximately 300 to 400 years ago. Perhaps the first historical mention was by the Omani historian Ibn Ruzayq, who noted that notables of the community greeted the first ruler of Oman's present Al Bu Sa'id dynasty on his arrival in Matrah some time in the late 1740s and at least one family can be documented through British records as existing in Oman from the 1780s.<sup>30</sup> They appear to have been Shi'a on their arrival in Oman but were probably originally Hindu.<sup>31</sup>

Traditionally, the community occupied a quarter of Matrah known as Sur al-Lawatiyya (*sur* is Arabic for enclosure). The quarter still exists with attractive Indian-style houses and a large mosque, recently rebuilt in a Persian style, overlooking the corniche and harbor of Matrah. A construction pattern of multi-story adjoining houses gives the quarter a fortified effect, which is further enhanced by the existence of only two small gates providing entrance to the area. Until 1970, non-Lawatiyya were forbidden by the community from entering the *sur* and in recent years visitors are again discouraged from entering. The fort effect is enhanced by the square outline of the quarter, with a round bastion originally guarding each corner.<sup>32</sup> It is possible that the *sur* originally was a Portuguese fort and some Lawatiyya maintain that the community purchased the *sur* from either the original inhabitants of Matrah

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30. Interviews in Oman; Badger, *History of the Imams and Seyyids of 'Umân*, p. 163. In common with other minority groups, some Lawatiyya advance traditions that posit a more Omani or Arab origin for the community. One such tradition holds that the Lawatiyya were originally from the Bani Lu'ayy tribe of al-Hijaz who joined the armies of Islam in the advance on India and settled there, perhaps in Multan, before migrating to Oman. Interviews in Oman. By another tradition, they are descended from one al-Hakam 'Awanat al-Lat, apparently an Omani who accompanied the first Arab campaigns against India and eventually became the governor of Sind. Yet another holds that they belonged to the first sect to appear in Islam, the Khawarij, and fled to Oman for sanctuary, moving later from Oman to India. Allen, "Indian Merchant Community of Masqat," p. 49. Allen also notes that the Portuguese admiral Albuquerque reported that Hindu merchants from Gujarat escaped from Khawr Fakkan (now in the neighboring United Arab Emirates) when he sacked the town in 1507. *Ibid.*, p. 39, citing Afonso de Albuquerque, *The Commentaries of the Great Afonso Dalaboquerque, Second Viceroy of India* (ed. Walter de Gray Birch; London, 1875), Vol. 1, pp. 99-100. Allen observes that the community justifies its claim of 300 to 400 years of residence in Oman because of a sixteenth century date above a gate of their traditional quarter, but he points out that this simply establishes that the gate was built at that time. Allen also casts doubt on the community's claim that they originated in Hyderabad of Sind. *Ibid.*, p. 49.

31. Allen, "Indian Merchant Community of Masqat," p. 49, speculates that the Lawatiyya were originally Bhattias from Sind (many of whom were converted to Islam).

32. Only one tower (at the southwest corner) still stands, having been restored by the Ministry of National Heritage and Culture around the 1970s. A second tower (southeast corner) is in ruins and a third tower (northwest corner) was demolished early in this century and replaced by a large house. The fourth tower (northeast corner) has disappeared as well and in its place stands a café which imitates the circular shape of the tower.

the Bani Hasan, or from the country's Al Bu Sa'id rulers.<sup>33</sup>

Despite the murkiness of Lawati origins, it is clear that the present community derives from at least two principal groups: the main body of Ja'fari Shi'a possibly arriving during the period of the Ya'ariba dynasty (1650-1740s) and a later group of Agha Khani Isma'ili Shi'a probably arriving during the Al Bu Sa'id era (since the 1740s). Confusingly, the entire community is known as (and sometimes refer to themselves as) Khojas, although the term outside Oman (as for example in East Africa) is used for followers of the Agha Khan. As a result of a dispute in the 1860s over being tithed by the Agha Khan, many of the Agha Khanis in Oman were excommunicated by the Agha Khan and as a result converted to the Ja'fariyah branch of Shi'a. The remaining Agha Khanis found themselves at a disadvantage, experienced friction with the Ja'faris, and were not permitted to reside within the *sur*. Following the 1964 revolution in Zanzibar (which threatened many Khojas), the remaining Agha Khanis in Muscat migrated to Pakistan on the orders of the Agha Khan. Thus, the community today is exclusively Ja'fari.

The size of the Lawati population cannot be determined precisely but estimates from the 1970s ranged between 5000 and 10,000. Most resided in Matrah but some families lived in al-Batina towns of Saham, Barka, al-Masna'a, and especially al-Khabura. In recent decades, most of the community has moved out of the Sur al-Lawatiya into new houses in Muscat's modern suburbs. The houses of the *sur* remain intact, a few still the residences of poorer Lawatiya and the remainder temporarily occupied by their owners during religious festivals. The mosque on the cornice remains the principal Shi'a mosque of Oman and is used by the other two Shi'a groups as well as the Lawatiyya. Religious leaders for the Shi'a community have been recruited from Iran, Iraq, and even Bahrain.

Some Lawatiyya families reside elsewhere in the Gulf, although in many cases ties to the community in Muscat are neither documented nor presently existent. Poor economic conditions in Oman earlier in this century prompted some Lawatiyya to emigrate to Iraq in the 1920s. Some of their descendants returned to Oman in the early 1970s. The presence of the family name al-Masqati (*i.e.*, from Muscat) for some of these families in Iraq is paralleled by similarly named families in Bahrain and Kuwait. It is not clear, however, whether these latter families in origin are Lawati or

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33. In support of this theory, a sketch of Matrah fort contained in the Portuguese manuscript of *O livro do Estado ala India Oriental* [The Book of the State of the East Indies] by Pedro Barreto de Resende (1635; held by the Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris) shows a square fort with square or pentagonal towers at each corner situated on a hill overlooking houses on both sides and the sea in front. It could be assumed that this is a sketch of the Portuguese-built Matrah Fort which still sits atop a crag above Matrah harbour at the east end of the town except that the existing fort is actually no more than two small watchtowers connected by parallel curtain walls only a few meters apart and lacks any water supply. It is more logical to surmise that the sketch mistakenly conflates the more dramatic-looking guard-tower on the hill with a fortified garrison in the town which, at some unknown date after the disappearance of the Portuguese, passed into the hands of the Lawatiyah.

Baharni (see below).<sup>34</sup>

The Lawatiyya continue to prosper as merchants, with the most prominent Lawati concern being W.J. Towell, a Muscat firm established by an eponymous American in 1865 and owned by the Sultan family for more than a century. Hajji 'Ali Sultan, the head of the family, served as the head of the Lawatiyah community until his death in the late 1990s and was recognized as such by the government. Other prominent Lawati merchants include Mustafa and Jawad Sultan, from the same Sultan family but in separate business concerns, and Maqbul Hamid.

The Lawatiyah have played only a limited role in politics, largely because of their concentration on commerce and because they are sometimes regarded by many other Omanis as "foreigners." By virtue of education, worldview, and experience, Lawatiyya undoubtedly should have been well represented in Oman's early cabinets of the 1970s and 1980s. But, although Lawatis are widespread throughout the government at most levels, the Lawatis became ministers only in the 1990s, when a son of Hajji 'Ali Sultan, Maqbul, was appointed Minister of Commerce and Industry in 1993 and Muhammad Musa al-Yusuf received the new portfolio of Minister of State for Development Affairs in 1994 (although he had enjoyed ministerial rank as Secretary-General since 1989). Reflective of the community's relatively liberal outlook, Oman's first female under-secretary, Rajihah 'Abd al-Amir, and first female ambassador, Khadijah Hasan al-Lawati, were Lawati women. Still, perceptions of the Lawatiyah by other Omanis may be negatively impacted by the wealth of successful Lawati merchant families, the corruption of a few prominent Lawatis, and sectarian differences.<sup>35</sup>

### *Baharinah and Persians*

The other two Shi'a communities of Oman are Ja'fariyya or Twelver Shi'a like the Lawatiyya but are considerably smaller in size. The term al-Baharina (sing. Bahrani) is used elsewhere in the Gulf, most notably in Bahrain where it refers to the

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34. Oman's Lawati-owned W.J. Towell Company has been prominent in Kuwait as well and some members of the Sultan family have resided there. In addition, the name of the prominent Lutah family of Dubai suggests a Lawati origin. There is another Shi'a connection with Oman, although without any tie to the Lawatiya community. The summit of a mountain overlooking Ghallah (a traditional agricultural village a few kilometers from Muscat) is venerated by Indian and Pakistani Shi'a as a site where the Caliph 'Ali b. Abi Talib stopped on his journey and prayed, leaving his footprint in the rock. This tradition is not shared by Omani Shi'ah and there is no historical evidence that the caliph ever visited Oman.

35. Sunni-Shi'a differences throughout the Arab states of the Gulf have been accentuated as a result of the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and the Iran-Iraq War of 1980-1988. There have been several small political demonstrations by younger Omani Shi'a and at least one attempt to smuggle radical Iranian Shi'a materials into the country (on the last point, see Dale F. Eickelman, "National Identity and Religious Discourse in Contemporary Oman" *International Journal of Islamic and Arabic Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 1 [1989], p. 20). It should be stressed, however, that sectarian differences, like political agitation, are virtually unknown in Oman and inter-communal friction rarely goes beyond unstated resentment.

largest sector of the Bahraini population, a distinct community which is Arab, Shi'a, previously rural, and presumably descended from the original inhabitants of the islands. In Oman, however, al-Baharina simply means Arab Shi'a. There appear to be less than a dozen Bahraini families, nearly all living in Muscat before 1970. Muscat boasts two quarters named al-Baharina, one inside the walls, in the area of Bayt Faransa (now the Omani-French Museum), and the other outside the walls, behind al-Sa'idiyya School. A Bahraini mosque remains in the latter quarter; both still contain *ma'tams*.

It would appear that each Bahraini family migrated to Oman from elsewhere in the Gulf separately, probably over the course of the last several centuries, and then intermarried. Despite its small size, the Bahraini community is quite prominent. Dr. 'Asim al-Jamali was named the first Minister of Health in 1970 and briefly served as Acting Prime Minister when the present Sultan's uncle, Sayyid Tariq b. Taymur, resigned in late 1971.<sup>36</sup> Ahmad 'Abd al-Nabi Makki formerly served as Ambassador to the United States and France and Minister of Civil Service before being appointed Minister of Finance in 1995. The al-Asfur and Darwish (the company is now known as "Muhsin Haydar Darwish") families are prominent merchants, and other families are well represented in the Diwan of Royal Court.<sup>37</sup>

Persians have resided in Oman, particularly Muscat, for centuries.<sup>38</sup> Wellsted in the 1830s noted that Persians, banned from Oman after the expulsion of Nadir Shah's army in the 1740s, were again permitted to reside in Muscat where they were mostly merchants dealing in India piece-goods, coffee, hookahs, and rose-water.<sup>39</sup> At the turn of the twentieth century, Grey remarked on the existence in Muscat of both recently settled Persian traders and long-established families of Persian extraction, while Lorimer noted the existence of a considerable Persian community, occupied as shopkeepers, fishmongers, and makers of quilts and bedding.<sup>40</sup>

The Persian presence is noted in the names of quarters of Muscat and Matrah. The commonly used name for Persians, 'Ajam, is preserved in al-'Ajam quarter of Muscat, which Lorimer notes was inhabited chiefly by Persians. He also mentions that the Nisasil quarter was occupied by Persians from Qishm and other coastal areas;

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36. 'Asim's father, 'Ali Muhammad al-Jamali, served as secretary to Sultans Faysal b. Turki, Taymur b. Faysal, and Sa'id b. Taymur (as well as to the explorer Bertram Thomas when he served as Financial Secretary in Muscat during the late 1920s) before voluntarily going into exile in Karachi and later Zanzibar.

37. There are persistent rumors that the prominent Bahwan merchant family is Bahraini in origin despite their claim to be from the Mukhayni clan of al-Janabah tribe (in Sur and al-Sharqiya region of Oman).

38. Given the proximity of Persian lands across the Gulf of Oman, Oman's colonization by Persia in the centuries before Islam, and Nadir Shah's occupation of Oman in the early eighteenth century, it can be speculated that Persians have lived in Oman as long as have Baluch.

39. J.R. Wellsted, *Travels in Arabia*, Vol. 1, p. 17. He also remarked that other Persians from Bandar 'Abbas, Lar, and Menon (sic), manufactured swords and matchlocks, for which there was a great demand in the interior. *Ibid*.

40. Grey, "Trade and Races of Oman," p. 4; Lorimer, *Gazetteer*, p. 1185.

the name comes from the concentration of weavers who made the cotton undergarments and bedding for the general population, although in later times the weavers appeared to have been drawn from other inhabitants of indeterminate origin.<sup>41</sup> Similarly the nearby Safafir quarter, which Lorimer describes as mainly Bahrani, also included poorer families of Persians who were occupied as coppersmiths, hence the name of the quarter.<sup>42</sup>

The Jibru quarter of Matrah was the home of a mixture of Persians and Baluch, according to Lorimer and others.<sup>43</sup> But in preparation for the Gulf Cooperation Council summit in Muscat in 1985, a large roundabout was constructed in the middle of the quarter and the inhabitants were moved to public housing about 40 kilometers away. Many of the inhabitants of al-‘Ajam were also moved to the same housing about the same time. A large proportion of other ‘Ajam gradually moved to new mixed neighborhoods, intermarried with other communities, and even took Arab family names, so beginning a process of assimilation.<sup>44</sup>

Popular tradition in Oman holds that the tribe of al-Fawaris in Sur and al-Batina region is of Persian origin, probably because the name can be read as a plural of Farisi, i.e. Persian, but there is no supporting evidence for this belief.<sup>45</sup> Tradition, as well as archaeological survey, holds that the extensive ruins at Salut, near Bisya and Bahla in the interior of Oman, were a major center of the pre-Islamic Persian occupation of the country; this has led to belief that the tribe of al-Salut is of Iranian extraction.<sup>46</sup>

### *Swahili Speakers (and African Slaves)*

The Omani connection with East Africa dates at least to the early Islamic era, if not before.<sup>47</sup> In the seventeenth century, Oman’s al-Ya‘ariba rulers drove the Portuguese from Oman and then took over their possessions along the East African littoral. In the first half of the nineteenth century, the Al Bu Sa‘idi ruler of Oman, Sa‘id b.

41. Lorimer, *Gazetteer*, p. 1183; interviews in Muscat.

42. Lorimer, *Gazetteer*, p. 1183; interviews in Muscat.

43. Lorimer, *Gazetteer*, p. 1199; interviews in Muscat.

44. Interviews in Muscat.

45. Interviews in Muscat. It is acknowledged, however, that the name may also be derived from the plural of *faris*, horse-rider.

46. J.C. Wilkinson, *Water and Tribal Settlement in South-East Arabia: A Study of the Aflaj of Oman* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), pp. 127, 129-130; United Kingdom, National Archives, Public Record Office, Foreign Office Records, FO/371/156820, BC1821/1, “The Tribes of Oman (1961)” (an annual compilation by the British Consul-General in Muscat of the location, shaykhs, and affiliation of Oman’s tribes).

47. The first definite mention of Omani-African links occurred when the rulers of interior Oman fled Umayyad attacks by travelling to Africa during the period A.D. 700-705. Subsequent references appear in the tenth and eleventh centuries. The twelfth century Shirazi dynasty in Kilwa is said to have close connections to Oman and the Omani Nabhani rulers of the fifteenth century enjoyed special relations with African rulers. M. Reda Bhacker, *Trade and Empire in Muscat and Zanzibar: The Roots of British Domination* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 25-27.

Sultan, renewed and strengthened Omani domination of the African coast and eventually moved his residence there. His descendants continued to rule in Zanzibar until 1964 and in Oman until today. The Omani influence was felt on the coast from Kenya through Tanzania but it also penetrated far inland as well, including the Congo and Burundi.

Thus, it should not be surprising that racial, linguistic, and cultural influences should permeate both Oman and East Africa. Throughout the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries, numerous Omanis resided in Zanzibar and other parts of Africa, and many more travelled back and forth, engaged in trade or seeking employment and income in Africa when drought and depression affected areas of Oman. The Ibadī religious revival in Oman during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries received much of its inspiration from circles in Zanzibar. A black nationalist revolution in Zanzibar ended the Al Bu Sa'id rule only a year after the termination of the British protectorate had produced independence, and many Omanis were killed in the upheaval or fled the island state. Through the end of 1964, Oman accepted some 3,700 Zanzibari Omani refugees.<sup>48</sup>

The usual term in Oman for Omanis with an East African connection is "Zanzibari," regardless of where the African connection originated. But this does not adequately define who is a "Zanzibari." The group can be further divided into at least three categories. Some Zanzibaris are the descendants of Omanis who went to Africa decades ago and in some cases centuries ago. Such Omanis frequently inter-married with African women. A second level consists of Omanis who were born in East Africa of parents born in Oman. The "return" to Oman of members of both categories generally, although not exclusively, followed the 1964 revolution in Zanzibar. In addition, the native language of both categories was Swahili and many of these Zanzibaris who came to Oman as adults in the 1960s and 1970s never fully mastered Arabic. On the other hand, they were welcome participants in the early stages of Oman's development after 1970 because they were both educated with skills in short supply among other Omanis and because they also spoke English, a necessary language of communication with the largely British officials and advisers in the fledgling Sultanate government.

The third category is more amorphous. Some Omanis, particularly from the eastern port of Sur and the interior province of al-Sharqiyya (which traditionally viewed Sur as its route to the outside world), tended to move between Oman and Africa with casual regularity. Suri dhows have long plied the monsoons of the western Indian Ocean and Suri families have been split between Oman and Africa for just as long. The large al-Hirth tribe of al-Sharqiyya is well represented by Zanzibaris,

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48. FO/371/174550, BC1011/1, J.S.R. Duncan, British Consul-General in Muscat, to Sir William Luce, Political Resident in the Persian Gulf, January 2, 1965, "Muscat Annual Report for 1964." In addition, several hundred refugees were accepted in Dubai. FO/371/185223, B1821/1, M.L. Tait, Political Agency for the Trucial States, to M.C.S. Weston, Arabian Department, Foreign Office, December 30, 1965. The Sultan of Oman refused in the main to accept further refugees. FO/371/185223, B1821/4, D.C. Carden, Consul-General at Muscat, to the Foreign Office, telegram 64 of May 3, 1966.

particularly by al-Barawina (sing. Barwani) clan. The Barwani quarter of Muzdalifa in the Sharqiyya town of Ibra is well-known for its impressive (but now largely abandoned) houses built with money earned in Africa.<sup>49</sup> The name of another old Omani tribe, the Bani Lamk, survives mostly in Zanzibaris named Lamki.

Zanzibaris remain strongly represented in the national oil company, Petroleum Development Oman, as well as in the Ministry of Defence and the various Services, and in the Internal Security Service, the Omani intelligence agency. Zanzibaris were among the first to benefit from Omanization of government positions because of their education and knowledge of English, but later they have been held back from most prominent positions because of their presumed Africanness and frequently suspect Arabic. Their children, born in Oman and educated in Omani schools, speak Arabic fluently but they remain distinct from non-Zanzibari Omani children because of the more liberal and cosmopolitan cultural traits of their families. Numbers of Omani Zanzibaris remain in Zanzibar and elsewhere in East Africa, either because they have not been able to establish their direct connection to Omani tribal relatives or because they lack the funds to relocate.<sup>50</sup>

It should be emphasized that while many Zanzibaris possess some African blood, some may not. Notably, many from the Zanzibari branch of the Al Bu Sa'iid ruling family claim pure Arab descent. Most members of this branch reside in the United Kingdom, including the last Sultan of Zanzibar, although a few have returned to Oman.

At the same time, there is a parallel African influence in Oman, *viz.* the descendants of black African slaves who were imported into Oman in centuries past and until recently to serve as household retainers and bodyguards and to be sold in neighboring countries. Thus, many Omani citizens display dark skin and African characteristics but are accepted in society. While restrictions on marriage and social inequality still exist, some have achieved high status. Since the formal end of slavery in the 1960s, many Africans have abandoned the appellation Khadim (e.g. Muhammad Khadim Bani Fulan, "Muhammad, Slave of the Bani Fulan Tribe") and now describe themselves by simply using the tribal name (e.g. Muhammad al-Fulani), or have adopted a placename as their family name. All restrictions on the movement and choices of the former palace slaves were removed in 1970 as well. Swahili was the most common native language, and a quarter of Matrah is known as Nazimawjah, Swahili for garden of banana trees.

### *Low-Class "Occupational" Groups*

Traditionally, there were a number of small groups in Oman, distinctive because

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49. Paul Bonnenfant and Colette Le Cour Grandmaison, "The Ibra' and Mudayrib Area," *Journal of Oman Studies*, Vol. 3, Part 2 (1977), pp. 91-94; and Colette Le Cour Grandmaison, "Spatial Organisation, Tribal Groupings and Kinship in Ibra'," *Journal of Oman Studies*, Vol. 3, Part 2 (1977), pp. 95-106. The word Barwani derives from the *nisbah*, or identification, for Ibra'.

50. Interviews in Zanzibar.

of their socially inferior status and occupational specializations. The origins of some of these groups were unknown, thus leading to belief in Oman, that the *Bayasira* (sing. Baysari), for example, are descended from the original, pre-Arab inhabitants of the country or from the pre-Islamic Persian settlers. It is equally possible, however, that they consist simply of the residue of individuals and groups who drifted into Oman or were cast out from various tribes. Although traditionally restricted to low-status occupations and forbidden to carry arms, Bayasira occasionally held high positions.<sup>51</sup> Similarly, the *Zatut* (sing. Zutti) were a non-tribal group of unknown origin, occupying a low-caste position in society and performing such tasks as metalworking, carpentry, and circumcisions. It has been suggested that the Zatut of Oman are related to Zatut elsewhere in the Arab world and to the Salubba of northern Arabia, as well as that they are gypsies or ancient immigrants from India, but this seems to be pure speculation.

### *Other Remnants and Disappeared Groups*

Oman has been home to a small but persistent population of Jews until recently. Travellers reported the presence of Jews in Muscat in 1625 (during the Portuguese occupation), in 1673 and 1688 (after the Portuguese expulsion), and again at the beginning of the nineteenth century.<sup>52</sup> Wellsted wrote that some of the Jewish inhabitants of Baghdad who were forced to flee in 1828 found refuge in Muscat where they were occupied in producing silver ornaments, lending money, and producing alcohol.<sup>53</sup> Various travellers of the nineteenth century mentioned Jewish merchants in Muscat, a French visitor in 1898 was approached by an old Jewish seller of jewelry, and Lorimer reported the existence of six Jews in Muscat at the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>54</sup> The last Jew of Muscat apparently was named or called Sulayman al-Yahudi, who may have left Oman about 1948; his children or grandchildren are said

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51. Interviews in Oman. Lorimer, *Gazetteer*, p. 298, says that some authorities state that the Bayasira are a tribe of Hadrami origin but opines that most seem to be the children of Omani Arabs by slave mothers. He estimated their numbers at about 10,000, scattered over most of the country, including a few in Dhufar. Other Omanis maintain that a Baysari could be of slave origin, Baluchi, or even a tribesman who had fallen on hard times. Interviews in Oman. J.C. Wilkinson suggests that "the bayasira of Oman are the earliest inhabitants of the area who have been more or less rejected by later settlers..." "Bayasira and Bayadir," *Arabian Studies*, Vol. 1 (1974), p. 80. The interior town of Manah, for example, until recently contained three groups of Bayasira, distinguished by their occupations. One group, al-Sawaqi, were engaged in work related to the market (*suq*) while another, al-Haddadi, were blacksmiths (from *hadid*, iron). They also served as domestic servants when slaves were not available. Bandyopadhyay, "Manh," ch. 13, sect. 13.4.2.

52. Lorimer, *Gazetteer*, Vol. 1, p. 400, citing Pietro della Valle; Willem Floor, "A Description of Masqat and Oman, Anno 1673 A.D./1084 Q," *Moyen Orient et Océan Indien*, Vols. 16-18, No. 2 (1985), p. 25; Weisgerber, "Muscat in 1688," p. 97; and Maurizi, *History of Seyd Said*, p. 22.

53. *Travels in Arabia*, Vol. 1, pp. 21-22.

54. Emile Allemann, "Mascate," *Le Tour du Monde*, No. 8 (February 23, 1901), p. 87; and Lorimer, *Gazetteer*, p. 1185.

to have converted to Islam.<sup>55</sup> A community of Jewish merchants is known to have resided in Suhar, a town of al-Batina coast and Oman's oldest port, in medieval times and what may be a Jewish cemetery still exists on the outskirts of old Suhar.

Similarly, there are no longer any native *Christians* in Oman. A Nestorian church is said to have been established in al-Mazun (the Persian name for pre-Islamic Oman or possibly just Suhar) during the early centuries of Christianity and bishops from al-Mazun were recorded as attending church synods in the fourth and fifth centuries A.D.<sup>56</sup> But there is no more mention of Christians in Oman until the Portuguese conquest when first a church and then an Augustinian monastery were built in Muscat; these edifices were converted to other uses after the Portuguese were expelled in 1650. In 1896, a group of African boys were freed from slave-traders and placed in the care of the American Mission in Muscat, where they were educated and brought up as Christians.<sup>57</sup> However, it would appear that after they finished their education and found employment, they dispersed throughout Muscat/Matrah and lost their Christian religion. Rumors still exist of families with parents or grandparents that were Christian but these have neither been verified or disproved. Similarly, determining the existence of Portuguese, or more likely Goans with Portuguese blood, presumably residing in Muscat since the seventeenth century, is elusive.<sup>58</sup>

A final, even more mysterious group, may have been the *Lughan*. Lughan is the name of a quarter located outside the walls of Muscat and some distance up al-Wadi al-Kabir. Local tradition says that the Lughan were a people from Baluchistan or Pakistan, perhaps connected to the Baluch in the same way that the Zadjal are connected. A mid-nineteenth century employee of the British Political Agency in Muscat wrote that one group of Hindus in Muscat were known as Lavanas, who were from Multan in Sind and who "display the same genius for commerce as they do in other places, and ... are the mainstay of the Muscat Government."<sup>59</sup> Alternatively, it has been suggested that the name Lughan is a corruption of al-Afghan, in the same way that the Omani placename al-Ashkhara has come to be pronounced Lashkhara. The

55. Interviews in Oman.

56. See the discussion in D.T. Potts, *The Arabian Gulf in Antiquity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), Vol. 2, pp. 330-338, as well as in Hamad Bin Seray, "The Arabian Gulf in Syriac Sources," *New Arabian Studies*, Vol. 4 (1997), p. 217, and A. Dihle, "L'Ambassade de Théophile l'Indien ré-examinée," in T. Fahd, ed., *L'Arabie préislamique et son environnement historique et culturel; Acts du Colloque de Strasbourg, 24-27 Juin 1982* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1989), pp. 461-462. I am indebted to Dr. Monique Kervran for drawing my attention to these sources.

57. *American Mission, 1893-1993* (Muscat: Al Amana Centre, March 1994).

58. Grey, "Trade and Races of Oman," p. 4, mentions that Portuguese or Goanese was spoken in Muscat by a Goanese population of about a dozen, consisting of merchants, domestic servants, etc. Another hint of the existence of this community is the documentation in British archives of the Sultan's grant of land for a Christian cemetery near the American Mission in Muscat. The list of subscribers to the cemetery, in addition to the British Political Agent, the French Consul, a Scottish merchant, the staff of the American Mission and other Europeans in Muscat, included the handwritten names of J.S. de Hallo (?), P.C. Cordeiro, C.M. de Souza, P.A. de Rocha, P.S. Pereira, J.A. dos Remeoris (?), (illegible), Pinto & J. Francisco, L.A. Honterio (?), Benjamin de Souza, and A.C. Di Grastos (?). R/15/6/67 (1900).

59. R/15/6/4, "An Account of Muscat by Mr. Apothecary Gaspar de Rozario, Late in Medical Charge, Her Majesty's Political Agency and Consulate at Muscat" (1872).

that the Omani placename al-Ashkhara has come to be pronounced Lashkhara. The most noteworthy feature of this quarter is the presence nearby of approximately 50 to 100 tombs built of brick and mortar. The origin of these tombs (and of a similar number of the same tombs in the Lawatiyya cemetery in Matrah) is completely unknown. Local tradition holds that they are Turkish or Persian or Portuguese — but there are no inscriptions or religious symbols and the numbers seem too great to be any of these. There are similarities with the Jewish tombs in Suhar.

### *THE PLACE OF VARIANT COMMUNITIES IN OMAN TODAY*

Reference was made at the beginning of this article to the projection of Oman as an Arab, Ibadi/Sunni, tribal country, despite — or perhaps because of — the existence of the many smaller ethnic groups. This projected image undoubtedly plays a positive role in promoting integration of traditionally disparate sectors of the population (including tribes and tribal confederations divided by longstanding animosities) into a single, national community. At the same time, however, it raises the threat of a negative impact by perpetuating a certain intolerance of groups that lay outside the projected norm. It may create pressures to conform, or to eradicate or conceal community traditions and characteristics in order to “pass” as part of the mainstream.

Assimilation seems to be an inescapable aspect of the process of national development. The traditional division in towns and villages of distinct quarters of single (or like) ethnic, linguistic, sectarian, or tribal inhabitants has given way to completely new housing complexes with organization based solely on money to buy property or the acquisition of free plots from the government. While the institution of a national educational system with a standard curriculum is certainly laudable in most respects, the children of the linguistic communities described above not only are taught solely in Arabic but frequently in the Arabic of Egyptian, Jordanian, and other northern Arab teachers. A standard curriculum, often taught by rote, emphasizes the mythic figures and seminal events of the mainstream past while the stories and traditions passed orally from generation to generation in these other communities may no longer be valued and eventually lost. It is clear that the origins of many of the groups of concern here have already passed from living memory; it is the languages that are next in danger.

The members of non-Arab and/or non-Ibadi/Sunni groups are regarded as citizens and officially are incorporated into the majority scheme of things. For example, the government designates one of the prominent leaders of the Lawatiyya community to serve as “shaykh” of his “tribe.” Conscious efforts are made to ensure the groups’ proportional representation in government, either through direct appointments (in the same way that various tribes are always adequately represented) or through the creation of electoral districts for the Majlis al-Shura that will return a member of a group (such as Matrah and al-Lawatiyya).

Undoubtedly, those ethnic distinctions that are underscored by sectarian or linguistic differentiation will constitute the strongest resistance to assimilation. The Shi‘a communities of Oman enjoy enough size and vitality to maintain their distinctiveness in a religious sense, undoubtedly helped by the well-known and rightly re-

garded Omani tolerance of sectarian diversity. The majority of Hindu families are unlikely to assimilate, not only because their religion is so markedly distinctive but particularly because of their continued close ties to India and lack of Omani passports. Before 1970, these families had little reason to consider whether they had an Omani identity. But since then, their “belonging” in Oman has been challenged by, amongst other factors, their choice of passports and thus their citizenship or nationality. By this definition, the Lawatiyya are Omani because they are Omani citizens while the Hindus, with a few exceptions, are not Omani by virtue of their Indian nationality.

It is undeniable that a certain measure of discrimination still exists within Omani society. Baluch are frequently disdained because they are not Arab, speak poor Arabic, and tend to live in the poorer sections of towns and villages. As noted above, some young Baluch, apparently viewing themselves as fellow “blacks” of the world, have embraced the cultural symbols of African-Americans and Caribbeans resident in Britain. Some Omanis continue to regard the Lawatiyya as “foreigners” because of their Indian origin, Shi‘a faith, and traditional segregation from other Omani groups, a factor that undoubtedly prevented Lawatis from achieving ministerial rank in the government until the 1990s. “Zanzibaris” in the capital area have sometimes been regarded in a similar light for reasons of their recent arrival in Oman, their education at Makerere and other African universities, their weakness in Arabic, and earlier promotion in government because of their affinity with British officials. No Zanzibari has ever been a minister and they are routinely denied promotion to other top positions. In addition, ethnic, and especially tribal, affiliation continues to play an important role in social interactions and employment. For example, a ministry headed by a Dhufari will tend to have a preponderance of Dhufaris in key positions.

Still, it should be noted that such discrimination is at the same time residual and marginal. Education plays a marked role in mixing communities together and fostering the notion of advancement on the basis of merit. The growth of Muscat as a modern, capital conurbation, with its emphasis on government and quasi-government employment, the emergence of new and totally mixed neighborhoods, and modern, common shopping precincts, undoubtedly has done much to break down suspicions and traditional ethnic and class distinctions. Attention to tribal, regional, and ethnic representation has been clear in the composition of Oman’s appointed and subsequently elected consultative council. At the same time, this environment unmistakably has renewed emphasis on the importance of wealth in society and sharpened divisions between the *nouveaux riches* of merchants and senior government officials and the masses who serve as farmers, fishermen, clerks, drivers, teaboy, taxi drivers, and watchmen. As in most societies, the best and the brightest of any community can escape the grasp of disadvantaged backgrounds and, once ensconced in privileged position, move easily in Omani and expatriate society.

One of the undeniable results of the rapid process of socioeconomic development of the past thirty years has been the emergence of a system of recruitment and advancement strongly based on merit, regardless of social and racial background. This is not to say that social standing, tribal or regional leadership, or family and marriage connections no longer count — but that they are employed more to tweak the system, rather than to determine its operation.