

1 In the Dreamtime of Oil

Wealth and Development in an Anomalous Time

THERE WAS A FURIOUS KNOCK at the door of my room one afternoon. I had been in Bahla, the beautiful walled oasis town in the interior region (*al-Dakhiliya*) of the Sultanate of Oman for just two months, but I already knew that this was highly unusual. I threw on the headscarf that my hosts had asked me to wear while I lived in their home and cautiously opened the door. To my surprise, it was one of my landlord's grown sons. We were both suddenly uncomfortable; until then only my landlady or the young children of the family had come to my door, mostly to let me know that a meal was ready, that visitors had come, or to ask whether I would like to join my landlady as she went to a neighbor's house for a coffee gathering. After an awkward pause, Majid suddenly announced: "Come quickly, there has been a coup d'état!" "What?" I asked, even more surprised. "Yes, a change in government, come downstairs. It's on television," he said urgently. We ran downstairs and joined the rest of the family as they stood silently and solemnly in front of the large television perched on the bookcase of the otherwise furniture-less family room. Indeed, the usual afternoon cartoon programming on Omani national television had been interrupted and a stern-faced newswoman was declaring that the government was about to make an important announcement. But soon it became clear that there had been no coup; rather, the government was issuing a constitution.

I could not stop thinking about Majid's actions. Why had he expected or assumed that there would be a coup? What had motivated him to leave his home in one of the new suburbs of Bahla, jump in his car, and speed over rutted dirt roads to his father's house in the interior of the walled town? There had been no sign of high-level political instability and the Sultan remained, despite

some whispered discontent here and there, immensely popular. And, yet, Majid was convinced that the interruption that day of state-run television could mean only one thing: a coup.

Several months later, I gained a better understanding of the anxieties that had motivated Majid's actions from an unlikely source. A popular Omani soap opera (*halqa*) aired on state-run television. The soap opera seemed to transfix the nation, as it did Bahla. Every evening, after dinner and after the evening prayers, my host family and I would sit on the floor of their family room and watch the program. Whereas the television often served as a source of background noise rather than the focus of the family's or guests' social activities, during the airing of this program, as on the day the constitution was proclaimed, it commanded everyone's undivided attention. Even the ubiquitous tray of coffee and dates, or, my favorite, an evening round of diluted fresh milk mixed with thyme and finely crushed red peppers, would wait until the program was over. The plot of the soap opera was simple, even pat. But, it clearly drew on, tapped into, and encapsulated people's deep-seated anxieties about Oman's unexpected oil wealth, the massive infrastructural, bureaucratic, and social transformations that this wealth produced, and the anticipation of its equally sudden decline.

The elevator in a building where a wealthy businessman works breaks down one day as he enters it. The elevator falls several floors, and the man inside is seriously injured. He is rushed to a hospital and for several days remains in a coma while we, the viewers of the soap opera, follow the turmoil of his family as they grapple with the prospect of losing him, with tensions over his estate, and with anxiety over a lost briefcase full of money that mysteriously disappeared from the elevator during the accident. Several days later, the man awakes from the coma. He has made a complete recovery but for one thing: he cannot remember anything that has happened in the previous thirty years. In the episodes that follow, viewers share in the businessman's awe at the incredible buildings and infrastructure that have become modern Oman: highways, luxury cars, "modern" (non-Qur'anic) schools, the gold doors of a bank, enormous new mosques. Everything is a shock to this man, who has just woken up and cannot believe that what he sees is real.

As the soap opera made explicit, Bahlawis also described Oman's dramatic and sudden transformation from isolation and poverty since 1970, the year Sultan Qaboos bin Sa'ïd al-Bu Sa'ïd ousted his father in a palace coup d'état, as a "reawakening." They also called it "hard to believe" (*ša'b al-taṣḍīq*). Are all the

changes since oil began to be commercially exported in 1967 and since Qaboos bin Sa'īd al-Bu Sa'īd became Sultan real? Or is it a dream? Will all the apparent wealth and infrastructural glamour disappear, like the briefcase, just as mysteriously and suddenly as it appeared? After all, Oman's oil supplies are, as the state continually reminds its citizens, limited. Indeed, could the entire structure of everyday life, including the government, suddenly change again as well? By anticipating a coup and pre-empting the future, Majīd had merely drawn a lesson from the past and linked Oman's political fate to that of its oil. And, by standing at that crucial moment shoulder-to-shoulder with his father, a man distinctly of an older generation, Majīd was affirming his relationship to locality and to the past of interior Oman.

Over the year and a half between 1996 and 1997 that I spent in Bahla participating in everyday neighborly life, I came to see that Oman's post-1970 era of political stability, oil wealth, prosperity, and modernity—no matter how tenuous, unevenly distributed, or experienced as successful or failed—was also often understood as *anomalous*. It was thought of as a time "in between" times of political instability and poverty, of the past and quite possibly of the future too. This book explores how Bahlawis inhabited and understood Oman's dramatic oil-produced transformations. It examines how the past was evoked, experienced, and managed in the present, and how the present was haunted by the future.¹ The book focuses on key institutions, infrastructures, and social practices that Bahlawis described to me as having changed since the early 1970s: the systems of governance and order in Bahla, the availability of leisure time and women's practices of sociality, the implementation of mass state schooling, the introduction of piped water, and, finally, the breaking of connections with East Africa. Tensions about sociality and community more broadly, I argue, were products not only of displeasure with current social and economic conditions, but also of contested understandings of the past and uncertain expectations of the future.

Citizens, development policies, and states often produce and assume multiple and at times contradictory temporalities, sometimes tied to the exploitation of natural resources, often linked to shifts in rule, and, of course, frequently presumed to follow teleologies of progress and modernization. However, while most states, and especially authoritarian ones, presume to hold the keys to a deferred utopian future (Eiss 2002), other states and their development discourses seem to encourage mysteries, miracles, surprises, and deferred dystopias. This is the case of Oman. In part because the state has

encouraged such discourses, many Omanis also wonder if they might “wake up” one day only to discover that the years of prosperity since the 1970 coup have been a dream.

The Sultanate of Oman and the Miracle of the Renaissance

The success that has been achieved in Oman during the years of the renaissance amounts to a miracle. It is the achievement of the leader, and his people guided by the wisdom and determination of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said.

Introduction, Royal Speeches of H.M. Sultan Qaboos bin Said, 1970–1995

Located on the southeastern edge of the Arabian Peninsula, Oman lies between Saudi Arabia to its west, Yemen to its south, the United Arab Emirates to its northwest, and the Arabian Sea to its east.

Today, this territory is known as the Sultanate of Oman, but it only came to be known as such after the 1970 coup d'état that brought Sultan Qaboos bin Sa'id al-Bu Sa'id to power.² Until the mid-1950s, what is now known as the “interior region” (al-Dakhiliya), where the town of Bahla is located, was a quasi-independent theocratic state, the Imamate of Oman, based on Ibadī doctrine, a third branch of Islam after Sunnism and Shi'ism.³ The coastal regions, in contrast, were collectively known as the Sultanate of Muscat.⁴ In the 1950s, when Sultan Sa'id bin Taymur al-Bu Sa'id (r. 1932–1970), with support from the British military, gained control of Imamate villages and towns in the interior, including Bahla, the newly unified territory came to be known as the Sultanate of Muscat *and* Oman.⁵ Then, in 1970, when Sultan Qaboos bin Sa'id al-Bu Sa'id overthrew his father, Sultan Sa'id bin Taymur, in a nearly bloodless coup d'état, the name of the unified territory changed again, this time to the Sultanate of Oman.⁶

Despite the change in name suggesting a fully unified state, the sense that the historic Imamate territory is unique and distinct from the coast continues to have significant social and political import. Indeed, various modes of the state's self-representation (such as textbooks, monuments, and national histories) have encouraged the view that the interior region is unique for being the site of the nation's special religious heritage, solidifying for those in al-Dakhiliya and beyond a sense that theocratic traditions remain particularly important there. Many elderly people I knew in Bahla even continued to refer to the interior region of al-Dakhiliya as Oman and to the coastal region surrounding the capital as Muscat.

The name of the territory is by no means the only thing that changed in the years immediately following the 1970 coup d'état. The infrastructural transformation in the first decade after the coup was especially dramatic. The new state constructed schools, hospitals, roads, and a modern state bureaucracy, first in the capital area and then in the outlying regions.⁷ According to commonly cited statistics, while in 1970 there were three "Western" (that is, non-Qur'anic) schools in Oman, by 1980 there were 363 such schools; while in 1970 there was



Figure 1.1 Map of Oman

one hospital, by 1980 there were 28; and while in 1970 there were six kilometers of asphalt roads, by 1980 there were 12,000.⁸ Within ten years, Oman went from being one of the most isolated states in the world (in league with Albania, Nepal, or North Korea at various moments in the twentieth century) to being an internationally recognized and economically interconnected petro-state. By 1980, Oman ceased to be described by most European and American journalists or visitors as “medieval,” where such amenities as radios and sunglasses were banned, where the “state” was comprised primarily of individual advisors rather than a bureaucracy, and where basic modern infrastructure was all but nonexistent. All that had changed.

The time from Sultan Qaboos’s coup d’état in July 1970 to the present is officially known as the *al-nahḍa*,⁹ translated into English as “renaissance” or “awakening.” The use of the notion of *al-nahḍa* to mark a shift in history is not original to the Qaboos era or to Oman.¹⁰ Influenced by Salafiya movements elsewhere in the Middle East,¹¹ the notion of an “awakening” was also deployed in the nineteenth century by Ibadis in Oman, as well as in North Africa and Zanzibar (Hoffman 2004; Wilkinson 1987: 152–153). The Ibadī awakening of the nineteenth century, however, unlike that of the late twentieth century, was specifically one of religious revival aimed at synthesizing and explaining features of Ibadism for both Ibadis and non-Ibadis (Wilkinson 1987).¹² And, while in other places in the Arab world in the second half of the twentieth century eras referred to as *al-nahḍa* tend to be associated with literary and intellectual revival, the contemporary Omani renaissance tends to be linked to industriousness, cosmopolitanism, piety, and seriousness of purpose, an association that nicely overlaps with development discourses that emphasize private enterprise and hard work.

But *how* did Oman awake? By what cause and to what effect? Oman’s late twentieth-century renaissance, its literal rebirth or awakening from the “coma” of its recent past, is often officially said to have been spurred, as indicated in the introduction to the Royal Speeches, almost miraculously, by Sultan Qaboos. The magic of the Omani state is manifest not simply in the production of wealth without the labor required to extract oil from the earth (as in Fernando Coronil’s description of Venezuela [1997]), but also in that wealth seems to have been produced almost without oil itself. The “anti-politics of development discourse” (J. Ferguson 1990) in Oman functions by emphasizing the miraculous rule of the Sultan and a reawakened spirit of industriousness as well as by de-emphasizing the history of oil and oil-related war in the creation of the unified state.

Downplaying the role of oil in the most recent “renaissance” belies its centrality in the establishment of modern Oman.¹³ Indeed, the unified state that is now known as Oman experienced three wars between the mid-1950s and 1970s, all of which were instigated by oil exploration. These determined the territorial boundaries of the contemporary state and shaped the nature of the new political regime.¹⁴ The first war (1952–1954) was a border conflict with Saudi Arabia over the oasis town of Bureimi. Whereas Saudi Arabia was supported by the American oil company Aramco, the Sultanate of Muscat (in alliance with the Emirate of Abu Dhabi) drew support from Britain. Despite well-known, deep theological tensions between Ibadis and Wahhabis (the particular approach to Islam propagated by the Saudi state), Saudi Arabia was able to motivate Imamate subjects, including those from Bahla, to fight against the Sultanate in this conflict.

The second war (1954–1959) affected Bahla most directly, pitting the coastal Sultanate against the Imamate territories as the Sultan and oil companies aimed to gain access to potential oil fields in what is now al-Dakhiliya. Many Bahlawis fought in support of the Imamate against the British-backed army of the Sultan, which had been sent to “protect” oil exploration teams. When the fighting abated after 1955 and then shifted to a guerilla war in the Jebel Akhdar mountains in 1957, many Bahlawis joined that movement as well.¹⁵ British planes bombed the Bahla fort in 1957 as Imamate forces had retaken the town before moving to the mountains. Guerilla fighting continued until 1959, when the Imamate was finally defeated.

The third war began in 1963 as a Marxist rebellion in the southern Dhofar region (touched off by the assassination of the guard of a British oil engineer) but by 1970 had spread north to the more established oil regions. It was during this conflict, on July 23, 1970, that a young Qaboos bin Sa’id al-Bu Sa’id overthrew his father as Sultan of Muscat and Oman.¹⁶ The war officially ended in 1975 with the defeat of the insurgency.

Downplaying oil as a source of the modern Omani state’s establishment also produces a paradox. While oil is conspicuously, though not surprisingly, tangential to narratives about the founding and development of the nation, oil (and, in particular a preoccupation with its limits) is central to expectations of Oman’s future. Over and over during my time in Oman, people would tell me that the country had twenty years of oil reserves remaining, a time frame, as I illustrate in Chapter 7, that the official press has also projected. Such projections have been made since the early 1970s, but crucially, the horizon of the

exhaustion of the country's oil supply keeps extending into the future. Even the US Department of Energy in 2005 predicted that Oman had about twenty years of oil remaining (US Energy Information Administration 2005).

To be sure, the uncertainty surrounding Oman's future is shaped not only by national proclamations about limited oil supplies, but also by concern about rule. It is generally presumed that Sultan Qaboos has no heir, although, as I also discuss in Chapter 7, rumors about mysterious sons persist. After a nearly fatal car accident in 1995, discussions about possible successors became particularly urgent. It was in the following year that the state issued its constitution, which directly addressed the question of succession. Rather than quelling uncertainty, however, the constitution spawned additional questions and mysteries. Although the document declares that the Sultan has selected a successor, his name is written and sealed in a secret envelope to be opened only upon His Majesty's demise.

Questions about Oman's future, furthermore, are inflected by religion, perhaps nowhere more strongly than in the interior region. Interior Oman's past form of theocratic government, based on Ibadism, remains an imagined and, in some cases, hoped for and redemptive, future. Unlike in Shi'ism and Sunnism, in Ibadī political philosophy, the leader of the Muslim community need not be either a direct descendant or a member of the tribe (the Quraysh) of the Prophet Muhammad, opening the way to a more profane and accessible form of religious governance. Similarly, in Ibadism the theocratic state is understood to exist in one of four "ways of religion" (*masālik al-dīn*) and can, depending on particular political and religious contexts, shift from one to the other, making transition into and out of theocratic rule relatively more available than in most interpretations of Shi'ism and Sunnism.¹⁷ Therefore, while recent revivalist discourses in Oman intersect with transnational Islamist movements that demand social piety and call for the establishment of an Islamic state, the language of theocratic revival in Oman more often draws from people's memories and understandings of local history and political philosophy. Given that the last Ibadī Imamate lasted from 1913 to 1955, it remains part of the living memory of older Omanis. At the beginning of 2005, thirty-one Omanis were arrested, convicted, and then pardoned for plotting to reinstall the Ibadī Imamate state.¹⁸

The era of Oman's "renaissance," defined by dramatic infrastructural development, oil wealth, and modern modes of governance has indeed been remarkable. It has also been, however, an uncertain time, marked by miraculous

beginnings and a preoccupation with a future that may look very different from the present. The exploration of everyday understandings and experiences of these dramatic changes is the subject of this book.

The Problem of Time

In an interview with the Associated Press in 1985 about the then current state of affairs in Oman, the minister of education, Yahya bin Mahfoudh al-Mantheri, repeated what I often heard while I was in Oman over ten years later: “The problem is a problem of time” (*al-mas’ala mas’alat al-waqt*). For al-Mantheri, as for many others, this “problem of time” referred both to the fast pace of Oman’s transformation since 1970 and to the eventual end of oil. The minister continued: “Oman in 1970 was nothing. As we say in Oman, we are running, not walking, to get our infrastructure built.”¹⁹ The hurry for al-Mantheri and others was not only that Oman needed “to catch up” with the rest of the world, but also that at some point in the relatively near future oil reserves would be depleted. Indeed, the title of the article was: “Oman Rushing into Modern Times before Oil Money Runs Out.” The nation’s basic infrastructure therefore needed to be built before this could happen. The present for al-Mantheri was thus sandwiched between the rapidity of change from the past and the threat of the depletion of oil in the future. The future, moreover, was expected both to be an end—to the availability of capital that enabled massive infrastructural projects—and to be unknowable—what life might be like under such conditions was impossible to predict. The present was therefore an anomalous time, set between eras of no oil, and, thus, probable poverty, when the infrastructure of contemporary Oman either did not exist or could no longer be built. As such, Oman’s present was not a step along a trajectory of infinite progress, but an interlude, surprisingly and perhaps miraculously prosperous.

Considering the present to be an interlude (and a surprising one at that) in history rather than a step along a trajectory of progress revises some generally accepted understandings of development discourses and developmentalist states. Literature on development discourses has highlighted the “myth of permanence” associated with urbanization, modernization theory, and development models in general (J. Ferguson 1999), as well as the ways life-cycle stages—birth and maturity—have served as metonyms for national development, both relegating the developing world to the status of the “immature” (Gupta 1998) and setting the world along a linear teleology (Ludden 1992; Manzo 1991). While the problem of time is clearly tied to development

discourses in Oman too, Oman presents a case in which there is no myth of permanence—and no linear teleology—in the first place. The case of Oman likewise suggests that if life-cycle stages serve as metonyms for national trajectories, then the workings not only of birth and maturation but also of death need to be considered. It is precisely the impermanence of oil—its finiteness—that emerges as central to both official declarations about Oman's future and to personal expectations about it. Thus, in contrast to the optimism of most nationalist and developmentalist discourses, apprehension and the unknowable mark expectations of Oman's future.²⁰

How then do we understand the effects and implications of a future-oriented sensibility that is pessimistic, redemptive (in the sense of a possible return to theocratic rule), or accepting of the unknowability of the future? And, what is at stake in the perpetual twenty-year temporal deferral and the fixation on this figure?²¹ The expectation of an oil (and Sultan)-less future could be interpreted as apocalyptic (Baudrillard 1994; Harding and Stewart 1999), as producing a "state of emergency" (Berlant 1996), as entangled in disciplinary technologies and economic conditions that tame chance (Hacking 1990) and manage risk (Mason 2007), or as a future-oriented antonym of the experiential and psychological conditions of "hope" (Crapanzano 2003; Miyazaki 2003, 2006). But it can also be a distinct form of development temporality, one in which "modernity" becomes less an irrevocable and final stage in a teleology of development than a contingent, surprising, and bounded era.

The importance of miracles, surprises, and uncertainties renders the Omani form of development temporality, distinct from other forms of "modern" temporality. Reinhart Koselleck, for one, has emphasized a shift, especially since the eighteenth century, in historical consciousness from a kind of messianic temporality to a linear and progressive one. For Koselleck, messianic history involves a certainty: salvation. Messianic time differs from "modern time" in that with modern time the future "is thought to be open and without boundaries. The vision of last things or the theory of the return of all things has been radically pushed aside by the venture of opening up a new future: a future which, in the emphatic sense of the notion, is totally different from all that passed before" (2002: 120). Koselleck further associates this sense of a "new future" with the notion of progress, whereby the "horizon of sameness" becomes open and whereby progress can happen, when there is planning. Planning makes the openness of the future appear controllable by humans, but also teleological in the developmentalist sense.

This does not fully describe the processes at work in Oman. Or, rather, these processes are intertwined with other temporal (and political) sensibilities, those shaped by an oil industry that predicts limited oil reserves, by questions about hereditary rule, by memories of local history that recognize the possibility of the establishment of a theocratic state, and by understandings of God whose powers include his unique hold on the future. Instead of being set within a myth of permanence or conceived as a step in an “open” teleology of progress, Oman’s present can be thought of as a “dreamtime,”²² a time in between the “realities” of poverty. It is a time of great possibility, when surprise and surreal transformation are the rule rather than the exception. Dreams may be expressions of unconscious desires and fears, as the psychoanalytic tradition emphasizes, but they are also transitory and fleeting, unstable and always about to end. One eventually wakes up from a dream and the surreal qualities of the dream are replaced by the (harsh) realities of life.

To be sure, for some philosophers of modernity such as Walter Benjamin (1969, 1983, 1986), the post-dream awakened state is a revolutionary moment where the truths of inequality are finally laid bare. In the Omani dreamtime there is no Marxian revolutionary teleology, though the future establishment of a theocracy serves, for some, as a form of redemption. Awakening from the dream of unexpected prosperity is an entrance into “reality,” but not one in which revolution ushers in an era of hoped-for equality. It should also be noted, however, that a reestablished theocratic state, in the Omani context, is a far cry from the notion of “messianic time” as described by Koselleck, not to mention Benjamin. A theocracy in the Omani context would be a much more mundane affair, headed by a scholar with purely human qualities who would be elected by a council of male elders.

While the future and its uncertainties haunt Oman’s present, producing an uncanny and disquieting sense of potential return, the past, in multiple forms, is omnipresent too. The businessman in the television soap opera, for example, not only had to adapt to a suddenly changed world, but he also continued to embody the past in ways that were anachronistic in the present, making for both some light comedy and criticism of contemporary values. Indeed, as Bahlawis grappled with and quickly made banal the novelties of oil-enabled development, the past seemed everywhere, and often flattened into a uniform pre-1970 time: “the past.”

In Bahla, “the past” was evident in official monuments and histories, in bodily habits that no longer seemed necessary and yet were practiced as if they

were, in conscious attempts to invigorate an idealized theocratic religiosity, in nostalgic actions and comments about a simpler and more respectful age, in the management of objects that retained their symbolic significance despite a vastly altered social and economic environment, and in attempts to skirt (past) social inequalities in a new social world where the same distinctions and hierarchies were supposed to not matter, or at least not be acknowledged. Such memories and views of the past were clearly “moral practices” (Lambek 1996; vom Bruck 2005) and often tied to material culture (Seremataki 1994). The past was evident too in family genealogies, in ghosts, in the names of property and documents of inheritance, as well as in the genealogical histories of practices and objects.

While the modern Omani state, like most modern nation-states, has a vested interest in promoting particular representations of the past that support its national image, Bahlawis drew in numerous ways on local histories and memories (as well as these national representations) to understand past events, chronologies, and activities in their town and newly formed country. Sometimes personal pasts disrupted official (national or local) narratives; other times they were clearly shaped by them.²³ This book begins with the premise that multiple processes of interpreting and enacting the past were at work in Bahla, and were also influenced by the context as well as the form or genre (Papailias 2005) through which such remembering happened. Indeed, to limit the analysis to one perspective would hardly do justice to the rich details of the past or to the forms—discursive, embodied, and material—through which Bahlawis experienced their dramatically transformed world.

Of Ties and Time

How, then, did Bahlawis experience Oman’s rapid transformation? How did they make sense of the dramatic changes in their town? And, how did their views about the past shape their social relationships and senses of belonging? Not surprisingly, Bahlawis often explicitly compared, for better or worse depending on their religio-political views, their current lives with the past.²⁴ At the heart of these comparisons were concerns about proper personal behavior and proper society: How should people embody and practice pious community or social life? Majid’s return to the home of his father, a highly respected shaykhly man who (like most Bahlawis) had supported the Imamate in the 1950s, signaled his desire to stand with the previous generation and possibly to be part of the decision-making process for the community should it have

become necessary. Similarly, much of the plot of the television soap opera revolved around the degraded values of contemporary life; the good of the family had been forsaken by individual greed. But such loyalties to locality and explicit moral comparisons were not the only ways that the past revealed itself.

Almost every aspect of everyday life was affected by this temporal consciousness and the material conditions of oil wealth. Not long after I arrived in Bahla to live with the wonderful family who, most generously, agreed to rent me a room in their home and to allow me to spend the next year and a half participating in their everyday lives, I began to get a sense of the complexities of Oman's dramatic transformation. Indeed, on the morning after I arrived, once I had unpacked my suitcase, set up my computer on the desk in my room, and shared my first meals with my landlady Zaynab (it would take another month before I would join the rest of the family for meals, because, I later learned, my landlord believed that I—as a “respectable” woman—would feel more comfortable eating separately), Zaynab asked whether I would be interested in joining her to visit her neighbors. Not exactly sure what I was supposed to do on my first official day of fieldwork, I happily agreed.

Zaynab picked up a thermos of coffee and a container of dates and I followed her out of the house. We opened the metal gate in front of her home, stepped over the irrigation canal that ran outside, and turned left down the dirt road. Though the palm trees gave the road some shade, the beating sun made the short walk excruciatingly hot. When we arrived at a neighbor's house, four other women were already there. I soon learned that the women were proximate neighbors and some were relatives. After I introduced myself and after Zaynab explained that I was “American,” the women began what I soon learned was their daily routine of sharing coffee and dates.

My first thought was that I was participating in an old social custom. It was the content of the conversations of these gatherings that I thought would be interesting and, indeed, it often was. The women discussed issues and events in town as far-ranging as the price of goods, someone's impending marriage, their own health, rumors of sorcery (*sihr*), new infrastructure projects, and government policies pertaining to education and property. However, it soon became clear to me that even more than the content, it was the form of the gathering itself (the exchange of coffee and dates, the walks through town), as well as the debates surrounding it, that were more revealing about the complex issues at stake in the changes in their town. What appeared at first glance to be a deeply “traditional” practice, made almost banal through its daily repetition, I soon

came to understand, was considered rather new and served as a nexus around which the tensions emerging from Oman's sudden wealth often focused.²⁵

I was often told that very few women enjoyed such leisure time in the past when agricultural labor was required of them. Before oil wealth shifted the town's economy away from agriculture and, as in other oil-wealthy states, towards government jobs and the local market, I was told, women spent most mornings in the fields collecting alfalfa for their livestock and firewood for cooking. It was, however, not simply the availability of "leisure" time that was new. The essential components of the visiting were new too. Until the early 1970s, coffee was scarce, thermoses nonexistent, and the most popular types of dates, now relatively common, only available to a few families. Nevertheless, as I discuss in Chapter 3, the long histories and symbolic meanings of these luxuries continued to affect how people understood and practiced their exchange, even in the transformed context.

In addition, the town's new spatial order rearranged women's visiting patterns. While quarters and neighborhoods had previously been maintained by gates and walls, by the late 1990s, neighborhood boundaries were marked by asphalt roads and clusters of homes that had become established when families moved out of the old walled neighborhoods to larger plots of land in their former fields (not to mention to the new suburbs on the outskirts of town). While some neighborly groups were composed primarily of kin, many were not, and many included women of different social and economic statuses.

Notions and assumptions about sociality, individual piety, and religiosity were shifting as well. While older Bahlawis considered neighborly sociality a condition of being a proper and pious person, I quickly learned that some younger Bahlawis considered this visiting to be an impediment to human responsibilities to God. Being social, younger Bahlawis argued, was a distraction from the constant remembering of God that was incumbent on pious individuals.²⁶ Thus, rather than considering this sociality to be "proper" (that is, religiously sanctioned), younger Bahlawis argued that it was useless (*ghayr nafa'a*), a waste of time, and thus a sin.²⁷ While visiting was the embodiment of proper behavior for older Bahlawis, some younger Bahlawis believed that women, if they must gather (individual piety at home was considered preferable), should primarily focus on the explicit discussion of what they took to be "religious" matters. In contrast, in defense of their practices and drawing from both religious and developmentalist discourses of productivity, older women, including Zaynab, would often say of their visiting, "you see, this is my work (*shughli*)."

Thus, a social practice that appeared at first deeply “traditional” and a means for understanding other issues in town, was itself tied to historical trajectories and revealed contemporary anxieties about usefulness, productivity, homo-social intimacy, and the meaning of proper piety.

Conflicting views about sociality emerged in Bahla in part because many young people were divided in their attitudes towards the previous generations. On the one hand, those of the new era (who came of age after the 1970s) admired their parents and grandparents because these older generations had lived under and supported a theocratic regime. It goes without saying that there was no unitary post-1970 generation, just as there was no unitary pre-1970 generation. And yet, the break in Omani history represented by the year 1970 continually reinforced the sense of a generational divide and gave it ethnographic salience (Rofel 1999; Winegar 2006). On the other hand, some of the older generations’ practices were deemed to be inappropriate by members of the younger generations. Indeed, while I was conducting research, some Bahlawis celebrated Oman’s post-1970 modernity as “moving forward,” away from improper traditional activities (Deeb 2006).

Certainly, many of these conflicts in Bahla hinged, as they do elsewhere, on gender. Views about women’s “traditions” in particular, as Partha Chatterjee (1989) influentially argued for Indian nationalists, served as a way for some Bahlawis to claim authentic, spiritual values, while simultaneously enabling them to embrace technological and infrastructural modernity. In Bahla, however, not all (or even most) “women’s practices” were remembered nostalgically or considered authentic and pure, as the concern about daily neighborhood visits makes clear.

This book’s attention to practices of visiting and neighborliness emphasizes, therefore, the ways that sociality is historically contingent and tied to political-economic conditions as well as to notions of proper womanhood and religion.²⁸ The deep concern with proper sociality exposes an uneasy relationship to Oman’s contemporary conditions. In Bahla, sociality was an object of political concern and economic change as well as of religious and national discourses. It was shaped by the material effects, regulatory forces, and ideological powers of shifting infrastructural conditions and bureaucratic practices as well as by beliefs about national character, bodily comportment, and religio-legal responsibilities and obligations. It was a product of concerns for an ethic of work, productivity, and piety. And, sociality in turn helped shape what it meant to be female, from the roles expected of married, divorced, or widowed women to the forms

of comportment they were to embody. Zaynab's daily visits with her neighbors were thus hardly the simple acts of social custom that I first believed them to be.

And, indeed, conflicting views about Zaynab's sociality underscored other concerns about what constituted proper community, whether it be a community of believers, a community of the nation of "Omanis" (within the nation-state or beyond), or a community of the town or neighborhood. This book therefore explores these layers of community—the ties—as they are shaped by the temporal uncertainties—the time—of the Omani oil-state.

Chapter Summaries

The chapters of this book examine the administrative, infrastructural, and social features that Bahlawis told me had most changed since the early 1970s: its built environment and related system of rule, social life, education, water, and connections with East Africa. In each, I explore how different generations of Bahlawis understood and experienced these changes, from nostalgia and gratitude to less conscious habits that persisted, somewhat anachronistically, into the present. I also explore their complex and varied relations to "the past." The past in Oman assumed particular salience not simply because of the obvious differences from the present or because of questions surrounding the state's development policies, but also because many people considered the present to be an interlude, an anomalous time between a past of poverty and theocratic rule and a future that might look similar. These tensions animate the social relations as well as understandings of built environment and political order examined in the text. The book is divided into six ethnographic chapters.

Chapter 2 introduces the town of Bahla through its changing built environment and system of rule. By transforming the fort into a national heritage museum, allowing the outer walls to become ruins, remaking the spatial division of the town, and attempting to reorganize the neighborhoods into coherent administrative units, the new political order helped shape conflicting perceptions and experiences of the town. Such perceptions were not only fraught with tensions about the town's moral bearings, but also illustrated shifting understandings of history and expectations of proper governance as they transformed from the personal to the grandiose and from the intimate to the bureaucratic.

Chapter 3 analyzes everyday sociality and especially women's highly organized visiting practices. Though often described as a key component of good personhood, sociality also became the focus of debate about proper and pious activity, particularly among those who argued that it was a new practice avail-

able only with the advent of the oil economy and the demise of subsistence agriculture. Such views about sociality were evident in everyday comments as well as in the poetic associations and histories of the objects exchanged during visits: coffee, dates, and words. As Bahlawis compared the past and the present through such tropes as luxury and leisure, life and survival, human connection and unnecessary verbosity, everyday sociality (and women's sociality in particular) came to represent both the ease and the excesses of the oil era.

The relationship of sociality and proper piety is explored more fully in Chapter 4. Through an examination of a young women's study group, this chapter focuses on the introduction of modern mass education in Oman, growing concerns about religious knowledge, and the emergence of new forms of sociality and religiosity. Criticizing the new school system and harkening back to what they believed to be traditions of Ibadi scholarly life, the study group aimed to teach and discuss the Qur'an, prophetic traditions, and Ibadi doctrine. The young women also opposed their mothers' and grandmothers' visiting practices, complaining that older women engaged in idle talk rather than the pursuit of knowledge. In their critique of everyday sociality, the young women were fundamentally redefining both what it meant to be good women and religion itself. For them, in contrast to their mothers' generation, religion meant consistent and individualized focus on God.

While Chapters 2, 3, and 4 focus on the changing structures of rule, sociality, and education, Chapter 5 examines the effects of shifts at the level of basic infrastructure. The introduction of piped water, along with new systems of water ownership and distribution, also generated concerns and conflicts about history, community, and piety. Just as the forms, methods, and content of modern schools shaped the critique of them, the introduction of piped water was also accompanied by tensions over proper and pious access and distribution as well as nostalgia for local engineering and technology. The chapter analyzes one man's quest to rebuild an old-style well, a family's generational disagreements over how to share drinking water with neighbors, and a college-aged woman's distress at her realization that older women used to bathe together. The parallels and differences between oil and water were certainly not lost on Bahlawis either, as people's concern about the value and potential limits of these natural resources made evident.

Chapter 6 traces the history of Oman's long-standing ties to East Africa (Zanzibar in particular) as well as the severing of these connections in the twentieth century and Oman's subsequent reorientation as an Arab state. Through

a comparison of two women's personal memories, this chapter explores both how the shift towards emphasizing Oman's Arabness has affected forms of hierarchy in Bahla from "caste" to "race" and how the women's personal memories are punctuated by accounts of sociality and neighborliness. Both women also shared the view that Zanzibar, and East Africa more generally, was a place of wealth when they were young, unlike Bahla. Indeed, to one woman, the strange twist of fate that made Oman and Bahla wealthy (and East Africa poor) was evidence of the unpredictability of time and history.

The final chapter expands this discussion of the uncertainty of Oman's future through an examination of official oil projections since 1970 and the constant anticipation of oil's depletion in twenty years—an ever-deferred horizon. It addresses Bahlawi reluctance to make claims about the future ("for only God knows") and the ways that such reluctance has become more prominent in light of predictions about Oman's oil supply and concerns about succession. Limited oil supplies, a mortal Sultan, and an understanding that the future is unknowable to humans combine to create a view of the future that is not linear and a sense of the present as profoundly anomalous.