

‘UMĀN. iii. Social structure. ‘Umān is overwhelmingly an Arab, Muslim society, and tribal organisation remains an important element in national identity. The country’s rapid development since 1970 has introduced a measure of physical and social mobility, as well as creating an influx of emigrants.

The migration of Arab tribes into ‘Umān predates Islam, with Ḷaḥḥānī or South Arabian tribes moving

along the southern Arabian Peninsula from Yemen into 'Umān around the 2nd century A.D. They were followed several centuries later by 'Adnānī or North Arabian tribes who penetrated from the west along the Gulf coast. The Islamisation of 'Umān resulted in the eviction of the Persianised ruling class stemming from Sāsānid influences and completed the organisation of the tribal framework that continues today.

On the local level, the competition for scarce resources in water and arable land created a mosaic of tribal settlement. Many settlements stretch alongside the courses of *wādīs* and attendant *ḡaladjs* (water channels); frequently the *'alāya* or upper quarter is inhabited by a tribe in traditional rivalry with another tribe occupying the *ḡifāla* or lower quarter. Regionally, a rough balance was obtained through two competing alliances and this balance was replicated on the national level by association with either the Hināwiyya confederation or the opposing Ḡhāfirīyya confederation. Above these confederations stood the Ibādī imāmate [see IBĀDĪYYA] which served as a supertribal or quasi-national institution. Because the tribal confederations acted principally as balancers of power, membership in one or the other tended to be fluid over time. This has tended to blur earlier tendencies for al-Hināwiyya to consist of Ibādī and 'Adnānī tribes and al-Ḡhāfirīyya to consist of Sunnī and Ḡaḡḡānī tribes.

The power of the Ibādī imāmate derived directly from the personal standing of the *imām*, who was both dependent on the support of the principal *ḡhaykhs* of the major tribes of both confederations for his position and the mediating figure between them and between tribes on the regional and local levels. This system gave enormous power to the leading *ḡhaykhs* who dominated the confederations, and especially powerful *ḡhaykhs* were able to use their power to determine the election of *imāms*. During the second half of the 19th century, the powerful *ḡhaykhi* family of the Hināwī al-Ḥirḡ tribe of al-Sharḡiyya region orchestrated a series of attempts to oust the Āl Bū Sa'īd [q.v.] rulers in Maḡḡaḡ in order to restore the imāmate. But by the early 20th century, the head of the Ḡhāfirī Banū Riyām had become the predominant political figure in the interior, and the imām elected in 1920 came from a Ḡhāfirī tribe.

The reassertion of sultanate control over interior 'Umān in the mid-1950s, with the attendant demise of the imāmate, reduced the autonomy of the tribes and restricted the role of the *ḡhaykhs*. For the first time, order and authority was maintained by a permanent army presence and, with a single exception, the *ḡhaykhs* found their responsibilities restricted to leadership of their own tribes. When a new development-minded government appeared as a result of a palace *coup d'état* in 1970, the role of the *ḡhaykhs* was further reduced. The government assumed responsibility for public works and welfare. Social service ministries carried out improvements throughout the country, and a new system of courts and national police usurped many of the traditional functions of the *ḡhaykhs*.

But even though the political power of the tribes has waned considerably since 1970, their social functions remain undiminished. Marriages take place by and large within the tribe, if not within the extended family. The government issues identity cards classifying the holder by tribal membership. Tribesmen seek the assistance of fellow tribesmen in obtaining employment, business help, and resolving problems with the police.

The great majority of the 'Umānī population is

Arab and either Ibādī or Sunnī Muslim. The more prominent of these two divisions is the Ibādī sect, which, until the second half of the 20th century, provided the national leadership of 'Umān through an elected *imām*. Perhaps slightly less than half of 'Umān's total population is Ibādī, all in the northern half of the country. Sunnīs are thought to form slightly more than half of the 'Umānī population. While the north contains both Ibādī and Sunnī tribes, the southern province *Ḡafār* [q.v.] (Dhofar) is entirely Sunnī. While Sunnī tribes in northern 'Umān may be Ḡhāfirī or Mālikī, Ḡafārīs are all Ḡhāfirī. Much of the Sunnī population of Ḡūr and its hinterland is Ḡanbalī.

There are also several small Ḡhīrī communities, mostly located in the capital area of Maḡḡaḡ, all of which are *Dja'fari* or Twelver. Al-Lawātiyya form the largest Ḡhīrī community, numbering perhaps 10,000 and traditionally residing in a closed quarter of Maḡḡaḡ, Maḡḡaḡ's sister settlement. The community seems to be Indian in origin, and at one time was in close connection with Aḡha Ḡhānī Ismā'īlīs, all of whom have since converted or left 'Umān. The Lawātiyya have been settled in Maḡḡaḡ for at least three centuries. The Arab Ḡhīrī community of al-Baḡarīna, formerly concentrated in Maḡḡaḡ itself, is considerably smaller in size and consists of a few families that immigrated to 'Umān independently of each other. 'Adjam, people of Persian origin whose arrival in 'Umān may be supposed to have occurred gradually over the course of centuries, comprises the third Ḡhīrī group. Their numbers are similarly small and they appear to be assimilating into broader 'Umānī society.

The largest non-Arab component of the 'Umānī population is Balūc, mostly residing along al-Bāḡīna coast of the Gulf of Oman and in the capital area. Often included with the Balūc, but nevertheless distinct, is a smaller group known as al-Zadḡāl. Maḡḡaḡ is also home to a few Hindu families, some of whom can trace back their arrival in 'Umān approximately a century and a half. Most of these families hold Indian citizenship and form marriages with relations in India.

Arabic is the predominant language of 'Umān, but nearly a dozen languages are spoken by 'Umānīs. Balūc undoubtedly produces the second-largest proportion of native speakers. The Zadḡāl and Lawātiyya speak their own languages, both akin to *Gujarātī*. The long 'Umānī association with East Africa has resulted in a significant number of 'Umānīs either born in or formerly resident in Zanzibar and neighbouring African countries. Some of these speak Swahili as their primary language, with English second and Arabic third.

Ḡafār is distinct from 'Umān in several respects. Separated by the north by extensive gravel-plain desert, the region traditionally was linked with the Maḡra and Ḡaḡramawt regions of Yemen. The widespread *Kaḡhīr* tribe is perhaps the most extensive group in the region, with subgroups including nomadic sections on the Naḡjd (the stony inland plain) and three clans that traditionally have been prominent in Ḡalāla, *Ḡafār*'s largest settlement and now a small city. Another transhumant section, the Bayt *Kaḡhīr*, inhabits a narrow band of mountainous territory.

The other mountain tribes, commonly known as *ḡjibbālis* and traditionally transhumant as well, occupy similar strip territories, all running perpendicular to the coast and including parts of the coastal plain. These tribes speak a South Arabian language, *Ḡarawī*, apparently adopted from the indigenous inhabitants whom they conquered some six or more centuries

ago. The latter, al-Shahra, maintain a separate but socially inferior identity.

Mahra tribes are also found in Zafār, mainly camel-herding nomads in either the northeastern Najd or along the Yemen border in the west. Some have established themselves recently on the mountains. In addition to al-Shahra, other *da‘if* or socially inferior peoples are also present in Zafār, amongst them al-Mashāyikh and al-Barā‘ima. Ṣalāla and the smaller coastal towns are also inhabited by mixed-race *bahhārs* and descendants of African slaves. Several small groups speaking South Arabian languages have been pushed out into the deserts northwest of Zafār; among these are al-Baṭāhira, al-Hikmān, and the larger and more important al-Ḥarasīs.

Following the end of the civil war in Zafār in the late 1970s, the region has undergone rapid socio-economic development. Most *djibbālīs* have built permanent homes in the mountains, often clustered in new settlements, and some maintain second homes in Ṣalāla.

Traditionally, ‘Umān was a rural country, with most of its population scattered in small agricultural settlements or coastal fishing villages. The process of development since 1970, however, has produced considerable urbanisation. The capital region, consisting in 1970 of the twin towns of Maṣkaṭ and Maṭraḥ with a combined population then of perhaps 25,000, grew to nearly half a million at the beginning of the 21st century. Ṣalāla’s population grew over the same period to nearly 200,000 and Ṣuḥār (on the north-western al-Bāṭina coast), Nizwā (in the interior), and Ṣūr (near the eastern coastal tip) have become relatively large regional centres.

‘Umānī society is relatively free from social stratification, although members of the ruling Āl Bū Sa‘īd family, tribal leaders, religious figures, and wealthy merchants occupy the upper rungs of society. A small middle class has emerged since 1970, but many ‘Umānīs in the Maṣkaṭ region are employed as government employees, soldiers, drivers, and skilled and unskilled labour. The majority of the population outside the capital remains engaged in subsistence agriculture, fishing, or animal husbandry.

The government has used its modest oil revenues to extend roads, electricity, communications, schools, and health-care facilities throughout the country. The country remains dependent on oil income, however, and diversification into natural gas exports and tourism has had limited success. The first university opened in 1986.

Up to 25% of the total population is expatriate, with the greatest numbers coming from south and southeast Asia. While the heaviest concentration is in the capital area, expatriates are dispersed throughout the country and the government periodically has extended bans on expatriate labour to a growing number of occupations in an effort to “Omanise” the labour force and provide employment for a burgeoning indigenous population.

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