iii. Social structure.

'Uman 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 'Uman predates Islam, with Kalbani or South Arabian tribes moving
along the southern Arabian Peninsula from Yemen into 'Umán around the 2nd century A.D. They were followed several centuries later by 'Adnání n or North Arabian tribes who penetrated from the west along the Gulf coast. The Islamisation of 'Umán resulted in the eviction of the Persians - ruling class stemming from Sásání 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 wadis and attendant fašls (water channels); frequently the šáhiya or upper quarter is inhabited by a tribe in traditional rivalry with another tribe occupying the sífiya 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 Hinawîyya federation or the opposing Ghâfîrîyya confederation. Above these confederations stood the Ibadî imâtâme [see Mâšrûc] 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 to differentiate between the Hinawîyya to consist of 'Ibadî and 'Adnání tribes and al-Ghâfîrîyya to consist of Sunnî imámî tribes.

...The power of the Ibadî imámîte derived directly from the personal standing of the imâm, who was both dependent on the support of the principal shrîkhs 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 shrîkhs who dominated the confederations, and especially powerful shrîkhs were able to use their power to determine the election of imâms. During the second half of the 19th century, the powerful shrîkhs of the Hinawî al-Hîrîth tribe of al-Sharkîyya region orchestrated a series of attempts to oust the Al Bû Sa'Td [q.v.] rulers in Maskat in order to restore the imâmîte. But by the early 20th century, the head of the Ghâfîrî Banû Riyam had become the predominant political figure in the interior, and the imân elected in 1920 came from a Ghâfîrî tribe.

...The reassertion of sultânate control over interior 'Umán in the mid-1930s, with the attendance of the imâmîte, reduced the autonomy of the tribes and restricted the role of the shrîkhs. For the first time, order and authority was maintained by a permanent army presence and, with a single exception, the shrîkhs 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 shrîkhs 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 shrîkhs.

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 'Umâní population is Arab and either Ibadî or Sunnî Muslim. The more prominent of these two divisions is the Ibadî sect, which, until the second half of the 20th century, provided the national leadership of 'Umân through an elected imâm. Perhaps slightly less than half of 'Umân's total population is Ibadî, all in the northern half of the country. Sunnîs are thought to form slightly more than half of the 'Umâní population. While the north contains both Ibadî and Sunnî tribes, the southern province Zafar [q.v.] (Dhofar) is entirely Sunnî. While Sunnî tribes in northern 'Umân may be Shî'î or Mâlikî, Zafar's are all Shî'î. Much of the Sunnî population of 'Sur and its hinterland is Hanbali.

There are also several small Shî'î communities, mostly located in the capital area of Maskat, all of which are DžafAR or Twerpî. The Lawâtîyya form the largest Shî'î community, numbering perhaps 10,000 and traditionally residing in a closed quarter of Maskat, Maskat's sister settlement. The community seems to be Indian in origin, and at one time was in close connection with Ağha Khánî Ismâ'îllîs, all of whom have since converted or left 'Umân. The Lawâtîyya have been settled in Maskat for at least three centuries. The Arab Shî'î community of al-Ba'ârîna, formerly concentrated in Maskat itself, is considerably smaller in size and consists of a few families that immigrated to 'Umân independently of each other. 'Agâm, people of Persian origin whose arrival in 'Umân may be supposed to have occurred gradually over the course of centuries, comprises the third Shî'î group. Their numbers are similarly small and they appear to be assimilating into broader 'Umâní society.

The largest non-Arab component of the 'Umâní population is Balûc, mostly residing along al-Ba'ârîna coast of the Gulf of Oman and in the capital area. Often included with the Balûc, but nevertheless distinct, is a smaller group known as al-Zađâjîl. Maskat is also home to a few Hindu families, some of whom can trace back their arrival in 'Umân 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 'Umân, but nearly a dozen languages are spoken by 'Umânís. Balûc undoubtedly produces the second-largest proportion of native speakers. The Zađâjîl and Lawâtîyya speak their own languages, both akin to Gujarâtî. The long 'Umâní association with East Africa has resulted in a significant number of 'Umânís 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. 'Zafâr is distinct from 'Umân in several respects. Separated by the north by extensive gravel-plain desert, the region traditionally was linked with the Mahra and Hadramawt regions of Yemen. The widespread Kaţîrî tribe is perhaps the most extensive group in the region, with subgroups including nomadic sections on the Nağîd (the stony inland plain) and three clans that traditionally have been prominent in Salîtâ, Zafar's largest settlement and now a small city. Another transhumant section, the Bayt Kaţîrî, inhabits a narrow band of mountainous territory.

The other mountain tribes, commonly known as dîbâl in 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, Karawî, apparently adopted from the indigenous inhabitants whom they conquered some six or more centuries
ago. The latter, al-Shahr, maintain a separate but socially inferior identity.

Mahra tribes are also found in Zafr, 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-Shahr, other daff or socially inferior peoples are also present in Zafr, amongst them al-Mashayikh and al-Bara’ima. Salala and the smaller coastal towns are also inhabited by mixed-race bahhîrs and descendants of African slaves. Several small groups speaking South Arabian languages have been pushed out into the deserts northwest of Zafr; among these are al-Baṭâhira, al-Hîkmân, and the larger and more important al-Harasis.

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

Traditionally, ‘Uman 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 Maskat and Matrah with a combined population then of perhaps 25,000, grew to nearly half a million at the beginning of the 21st century. Salala’s population grew over the same period to nearly 200,000 and Suflar (on the northwestern al-Bâtîna coast), Nizw (in the interior), and Shîr (near the eastern coastal tip) have become relatively large regional centres.

‘Umâni society is relatively free from social stratification, although members of the ruling Al Bû Sa’id family, tribal leaders, religious figures, and wealthy merchants occupy the upper rungs of society. A small middle class has emerged since 1970, but many ‘Umanîs in the Maskat region are employed as government employees, soldiers, drivers, and skilled and unskilled labour. The majority of the population outside the capital remain 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.