

Public Performance, Professionalism and Patronage: Politics of cultural heritage in Southern Arabia

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The Oman of our days is the core of a vast former empire of possessions that stretched from Zanzibar and various points on the East Coast of Africa to the Makran coast in Baluchistan, in what is now Pakistan. The empire of trade was even more widely flung: the interior of Africa's eastern half, the coastal lands of the Arabian Sea including the Gulf, and eastwards all the way to Southern China all were touched by Omani seafarers and traders, and touched the Omanis in turn. With trade and political domination came not only the spread of Islam especially to East Africa, but also the movement of people within this wide network: Africans came to the Arabian Peninsula, many as slaves; Baluchis came to serve as soldiers and remained in Arabia, but also entire villages migrated from the Maqran coast to settle in northern coastal Oman. Persians from the northern Gulf, traders from Northern India – over the centuries, Oman, at the margin of the great Arabian desert, became a culturally and ethnically rich and highly diverse part of the World, which it remains today.

[Map of the Arabian Peninsula](#) | [Map of Oman](#)**

The year 1970 brought Oman the ascent of Sultan Qaboos bin Said to the throne and with that the end of many decades of self-imposed isolation from World affairs. Among the immediate issues to address were the integrity of the State – which was then still called the Sultanate of Muscat and Oman. Multicultural coastal “Muscat” and the Arabian Desert-oriented interior “Oman” were facing in opposite directions. In the Dhofar, “the Southern Region”, there were separatist movements inspired by foreign interests. Sultan Qaboos established an infrastructure of roads, communication, radio and eventually television as preconditions for an effective governance of his domain. Various ministries were set up as part of a comprehensive administrative structure that would implement and manage the emerging national policies.

These national policies faced a dilemma from the outset. On one hand, the notion of integrity of the State in the sense of an Arab Nation State conflicted with the well-established cultural diversity especially in the coastal regions, manifesting itself in various languages and cultural practices. On the other hand, there was and is the policy of “preserving the cultural heritage” which extended to all Omanis. Ambivalences in the interpretation and application of these policies have affected, and continue to affect the construction of a distinct Omani national identity – “who are we, who is ‘we’, how do we want to be seen by the world?” The patronage of expressive behavior – specifically, the public display of symbols of group identity – by the existing political powers is not the only, but perhaps the most important factor in shaping the cultural landscape of Oman.

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The domain of expressive behavior comprises many elements – language, dress, bodily movement etc. – but we are concerned here primarily with performing, which includes singing, playing instruments, dancing, and reciting. Such performing can be seen to occur in two distinct spheres: the private and the public one. Private performing is done not for audiences, not for non-participants in the performing (even though just listening or watching can be seen as participation as well). Lullabies, children's games, singing while working at the gardens or fishing are all non-public or private, in this sense, as are the healing rituals *zār*.

Public performances are always intended for audiences. In Oman, such public performances are offered by formally organized groups (Reyes Schramm 1975) upon formal invitation or “order” from someone outside the performing group. The performers may be “professionals” – that is to say, perform for material profit, in which case the group is known under the name of its owner whose personal property the group and its implements are; or they may perform without material rewards, in which case they are considered to represent and be beholden to a larger grouping, such as a tribe or residential entity.

In this essay I shall deal only with public performances.

The following draws primarily on field work in the town and province of Sohar on the Batinah coast of Northern Oman. I conducted this research between 1985 and 2006, joined in 1990 and 1992 by Salwa El-Shawan, and always with the generous support of the government of the Sultanate. The period of 21 years over which our direct observations are spread, permit of perspectives not only of the state of affairs at particular moments, but also on the long-term processes that have affected the practices of public performances. Mass media – radio, television – and other mediated modes – cassette tapes, video tapes – have spread and become ubiquitous. Radio and television are arms of the government and selectively present programming from within the Sultanate and from the world beyond in ways that also affect local self-perceptions. Tourism with its potential for patronage is in its beginnings, but nevertheless already an influential power in 2006, in part due to associated technologies of music production and notions of modernity. Concepts of old versus new, of “traditional” or “folk” (*sha'bi*) versus “modern” all figure into the dynamics surrounding the patronage of cultural heritage in Oman. In the summer of 1985 when I conducted my first exploration of music related practices, institutions and social networks in the town of Sohar, I encountered many distinct performance groups in the town and its vicinity. Town limits were not officially established, and whether a particular neighborhood or settlement was part of the town of Sohar or just “near Sohar” was often under debate.

Each of these groups “had” one or more arts (*funūn*) that they would perform upon demand, conceptualized as either invitation or order. Each group had someone “responsible” (*'aqīd*). Each group also had a known affiliation with a larger entity, as just mentioned. Each group would be described as either “in” a given location, always the ward or village where the *'aqīd* lived; or “of” a given social entity – a tribe, ethnic group, settlement – which the performance group represented on certain occasions.

The former groups, the “in” groups, would move their association with the residence of the *'aqīd*, but would draw their actual membership from anywhere convenient. These were professionals as just defined: they would perform only for money in accordance with previously negotiated verbal contracts. In Sohar, the groups for women's songs (*ghinnā al-nisā'*) and the groups for *lewah* belonged into this category. Group members

including the *‘aqīd* were generally considered “from the servants”, a reference to past slavery, and mostly of African descent.

The “of” groups, on the other hand, consisted entirely of members from a given tribal, residential or ethnic community which they represented. They acted upon invitation or “order” on certain occasions important to the represented community as a whole, such as weddings and circumcisions *within* the community, or regional celebrations such as religious feasts. These groups would not demand or accept payment for their performances but would consider them an honorific service to the community.

The arts performed, depending on the community to be represented, included the *razhah* (for Arabs of the town of Sohar), the various forms of the *razīf* (*ayyālah* or *wahhābiyah* for village dwellers, *razfah al-badwīyah* for Bedouins who, while also settled, wished to emphasize Bedouin descent), and the praise calls *‘āzī*.

Groups for the performance of a religious ritual, the *mālid*, fit into this categorization only loosely. They are considered as “of” a particular residential area, they perform upon invitation without remuneration but their membership may come from a wider area; in the case of the *ḥalqat al-mālid* from Hijrah, several member had moved to outlying areas due to urban reconstruction, but had maintained their membership in the group. The group may also perform outside their home community provided that is not seen by another *mālid* group as an invasion of their territory.

Two other arts – in fact, complexes of arts – are defined by the non-Arab ethnicity of their performers. “Arts of the Balūsh” with singing in Balūchi are exclusive to Soharis of Baluch descent who have retained some competence in Balūsh language and culture. The “arts of the ‘Ajam” – that is, the small community of Shi‘a Persians concentrated in a coastal quarter of Sohar town – consist primarily of the theatrical *paqet* play with its masks and hand puppets, all sung in dialectal Farsi incomprehensible to non-‘Ajam (and increasingly to members of the community, as well), but still attractive to non-‘Ajam because of the dramatic or comical acting of the masked performers and the play of the hand puppets. Both Balūsh and ‘Ajam perform only upon invitation.

To receive an invitation or an order means recognition, encouragement, it is honorific, whether there is money involved or not. Without invitation there are no performances, the “art will stop” – a fear frequently voiced by Sohari artists in recent years.. Issuing an invitation is the highest form of patronage in Sohar, vital to the continued life of the arts. Who, then, are the patrons, what occasions call for the patronage of which arts?

Again, we can distinguish two spheres in which patronage of the arts is normally exercised.

First, there are the celebrated life cycle events which in due course involve, or used to involve, almost every single Sohari: circumcision – celebrated for boys only; and the wedding, celebrated by both families, though mainly and publicly at the groom’s house. The responsible, the patron in whose power it is to invite “the arts”, is the “owner of the wedding”. He can use – and often does use – the arts to project an image of wealth and cultural identity to the larger community, by inviting many arts, including arts that signify his desired cultural identity and social status. To give an example: In a wedding in July, 1985, a Bedouin family that had relatively recently settled on land on the margins of Sohar town, wished to project an image of well-todo town dwellers. The marriage to a girl of another recently settled Bedouin family of the

same tribe was celebrated by inviting = hiring two groups of *ghinnāh nisā'* and a *lewah* group whose *mizmār* player (oboe) had to be brought from the distant town of Barqa at considerable expense. There was also a *mālid* group that required the costly preparation of a suitable performance space, and an elaborate procession (*zaffah al-mu'āris*) to a distant mosque for “washing the groom” – all of which intended to convey the desired “Arab town dweller” image.

The wish to project a particular ethnic identity and social status, personal preferences, religious sentiments, the availability of particular performance groups and the means at disposal all may enter into the choice of arts for a given event in the private sphere. It is possible, though, to make some generalizations, based on our observations and on an analysis of our numerous interviews with musicians and patrons. Arab patrons will not invite non-Arab groups – Baluch and ‘Ajam – “because we do not understand them.” As a remarkable exception, in January 1991, the Arab owner of a group for women’s songs invited the (‘Ajam) *paket* for the wedding of her son. She commented: “we are friends.”

Bedouins who wish to emphasize their Bedu identity in contrast to that of a town dweller – even though all nomadic or semi-nomadic Bedouins in the Sohar area have long since become sedentary – may insist that at their weddings only “true Bedouin arts” are enacted in the traditional Bedouin way – without drums.

“Being religious” was apparently always a factor in what to invite for a celebration in the private sphere. Religious owners limit themselves to arts that have no or little *tarab* – *mālid*, *razhah* or the *razif*, perhaps even women’s songs – but only by all-female groups. *Lewah* and *qurbah* as well as women’s songs performed by males are considered inappropriate. In 2004 and 2006, *ghinnāh nisā'* groups complained that they were hardly ever invited in Sohar since a Muslim cleric from the Sudan had visited and told people that *ghinnāh nisā'* were ‘*haram*’. Some groups reported, though, that they continued to receive invitations from the Emirates.

While life cycle events are a matter of a given family, lineage, tribe or residential unit, all traditionally under the purview of a *shaykh* (*as-shaykh al-munṭeqah* or *shaykh al-qabīlah*) who shares responsibility for community patronage of life cycle events, there are occasions that call for patronage on the provincial or even the national level, and it is here where national cultural policies and patronage can affect the practice of the arts and the maintenance of cultural heritage in the most substantial ways.

In Sohar, as elsewhere in the Sultanate, the celebration of the two main religious holidays, *īd al-fīṭr* and *īd al-adha*, traditionally called for the enactment of certain arts – *funūn* – in front of the governor, as a way of paying homage or tribute to the Sultan, the ruler of the country, in whose stead the Wali would accept them. The practice was that the Wali’s office would send by means of a soldier an “invitation” or “order” to the *shaykhs* of tribes and of *munaṭiq* to present themselves at the *qal’ah* with their respective performance group. The office of the Wali of Sohar had been held, until 1986, by a branch of the royal family that resided in town. In the mid-1980s, the government introduced administrative regulations that required the rotation of provincial governors every four years. As a consequence, non-resident governors who, according to custom, would spend the feasts with their families elsewhere, were not present to receive the sheikhs and their performance groups to accept homage on behalf of the Sultan; invitations were no longer sent, the public celebration of the Feasts with the performance of local arts collapsed. Eventually, the concept of representative

performance groups began to lose its validity, as well, and some community groups have turned commercial and turned “professional.”

The consequences for the arts of the administrative rule that requires the rotation of governors were unintended, and not well understood by central government. Other government actions were deliberate.

In 1985, the governor of Sohar, by order of a Ministry, established a “*Firqah sha ‘bīyah...*” that would henceforth represent Sohar at national and international events. A selection of musicians from all parts of the province was made and routinely updated ever since. This list included performers of *razḥah*, ‘*ayyālah*, *wahhābīyah* and initially also women members of a *ghinnāh nisā’* group, but the Belūsh, ‘Ajām, mixed-gender *ghinnāh nisā’*, *lewah* and *mālid* were not considered suitable to represent the province. All those arts – the ones that were not recognized, i.e. patronized by the authorities – have reported a dramatic drop of invitations also in the private sphere.

Among recent developments that have directly affected the practice of arts in Sohar are the adoption, in 2000, of a copyright convention by the Sultanate. Locally, this means that only government- approved studios may make recordings for commercial purposes, and they exclude the same arts and performance groups that are not deemed suitable to represent Sohar.

Another potentially significant development is associated with tourism. The municipality of Muscat has organized festivals to which groups from Sohar are invited, but the selection process is the same as for other national and international events.

From across the border with the Emirates, tourism has stimulated a renewal of patronage for a modified form of the *razfah badawīyah*. Reportedly, the tourism ministry of Dubai had instructed local Bedouin performance troupes – traditionally without drums – to “add music” to their performances – meaning instruments. This developed into a new form of the *razfah badawīyah ḥarbīyah* that uses electronic instruments and synthesizers (though no acoustic drums) and microphones for the dancers/ singers, and powerful amplification.

The new form of the *ḥarbīyah* receives patronage mainly from Soharis who want to demonstrate their Bedouin descent and their continuing connections with relatives in the Emirates since it contains elements distinctive of the traditional *ḥarbīyah*: those elements that were considered essential and expressive of Bedouin identity 20 years ago: verse traditional poetry recited on short-phrased melodies without the accompaniment of drums; highly stylized dance movements – in particular, with the head – alternating between two lines of dancers, between which a “poet” and individual dancers with weapons would move; and performance as a participatory, communal activity on festive occasions.

[Video mp4 H264]



Video example 1. Click on the window to play.
Razfah (al-badawīyah ḥarbīyah),
at a Bedouin wedding in Ḥarrat al-Shaykh, August 2, 1990.
Click in the window to play the video inside. Requires adobe reader 6 and +

Otherwise click here :



The new and improved *ḥarbīyah* keeps all this, but it adds electronic amplification and "music" provided by a synthesizer which includes programmed drum beats, and occasionally additional electronic instruments such as an electronic *‘ūd*. The dancers stand behind microphones that limit their movements. More important is a conscious turn to audiences: The two parallel lines of singers/dancers are opened at a right angle, creating a wide space in which anyone may join the performance by dancing and brandishing weapons. The new *ḥarbīyah*, with the patronage of tourism and ethnic pride, revitalizes an old cultural practices that had been pushed to the margins.

[Video mp4 H264]



Video example 2. *Razfah badawīyah harbīyah al-jedīdah*
at a Bedouin wedding in Multhaka, Sohar, December 2004.
Click in the window to play the video inside. Requires adobe reader 6 and +

Otherwise click here :



Patronage of the *funūn* in Sohar – and by extension, throughout Oman - means control over what arts are enacted or excluded at a given event, local, national or international, and over their dissemination by the media. The motivations for granting or withholding recognition and patronage are diverse – they range from religious interpretations to issues of ethnicity to the interpretation and application of national policies. In the practice of arts that rely exclusively on oral tradition, on learning by participation, patronage is the determining factor for the maintenance and shaping of national heritage.

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