

The Forgotten Generation of Muscat: Reconstructing Omani National Identity After the Zanzibar Revolution of 1964 By Molly Patterson

After the East-African Afro-Shirazi party overthrew the Omani Sultanate in the Zanzibar revolution of 1964, some of the surviving Swahili-speaking Arabs returned to Oman's capital city of Muscat to begin new lives. This paper examines the historical experiences of these communities as they reestablished themselves in Omani society, and investigates the impact of Oman's imperial history in Zanzibar on the post-colonial identity formation of repatriated Omanis in Muscat. Most of the people involved in this study, which I refer to as the "Forgotten Generation of Muscat", belonged to Omani families that lived East Africa for hundreds of years, and abruptly left their African homes to return to Oman in the wake of Zanzibar's independence movement.

This paper was inspired by my own experiences living in Oman with a "Forgotten Generation" Swahili-speaking Omani family in Muscat while on a FLAS fellowship in 2006-7. Sources for this paper include my own interviews, data from government sources, and a survey of secondary literature to explain the process of re-integration that Swahili speaking families underwent in the post-1964 era. As an outsider, it is impossible for me to fully understand the process of displacement and reintegration that East African Omani families experienced during the post-1964 period. However, as a historian, I hope to increase the scholarly understanding of Oman as part of the wider

Indian Ocean system by mining the themes of social and national identity formation during the early phases of Sultan Qābūs' government (1970-present).

The reason for the cognomen “Forgotten Generation” is that, upon returning to Muscat, Omani Arab émigrés from the Swahili Coast were faced with a choice between potential social and economic marginalization or having to shift their cultural identities from Afro-Arab elites to that of Omani Arab citizens. In order to become fully-integrated Omani citizens, English-and Swahili-speaking families had to face the possibility of abandoning portions of their own East African identity for the purpose of rejoining the larger Omani community. The choices they made would cement their role in modern Omani society as well as influence the social and educational policy of Oman's current government.

The members of the “Forgotten Generation” went through a difficult process of repatriation in the late 1970's and early 1980's. They had to adapt to many changes, especially in the areas of linguistic, economic, and social integration. Linguistically, the addition of Gulf Arabic into every-day life proved to be difficult for recent émigrés, used to speaking Swahili and English at home. Economically, many members of the “Forgotten Generation” were (and still are) wealthy elites, which separated them from the long-term residents of mainland Oman. Émigrés most often settled in Oman's capital city of Muscat, however they also interacted with people from the interior, primarily Bedouin from the regions of Ibri, Nizwa, and Sur.¹ Social institutions also caused

¹ Amina Noor. Personal interview. April 3, 2007.

division between the “Forgotten Generation” members and Omanis born in Muscat, as most émigrés retained the same social circles they had in East Africa, which included many social and business contacts in Western Europe and the United States, setting them further apart from Muscat society at large.

While the economically elite status of many of the members of the “Forgotten Generation” allowed them certain rights and privileges in Qābūs’ newly formed Sultanate of Oman, their process of repatriation was inhibited by political upheaval, their links to East African language and culture, and their historical ties to the multiethnic Zanzibar archipelago. By focusing on the repatriated Arab communities of East Africa, forced to re-articulate their own cultural beliefs before the wider Omani public, this paper hopes to offer key insights into the historical process of post-colonial identity formation in the Sultanate of Oman.

While much has been written in recent years about the history of post-revolutionary Zanzibar, there is a scarcity of information about the impact of these events on the expatriated (and repatriated) Zanzibari Arab communities. The racial and economic inequities of the Zanzibar Revolution have produced an Afro-centric narrative of the Revolution, often disregarding its impact on the peoples of the Arabian Peninsula. On one hand this is a reaction, and rightly so, against the pattern of historical narratives that so often favor imperialists - British and Arab in the case of Zanzibar. However, it is also important for Historians to examine the legacy of such imperial histories not only on the imperialized, but also on the imperializer. There is very little scholarly attention paid

to the influence of East African culture on the Arabian Gulf peoples, despite the *longue durée* of the historical relationship between these two import regions of the Indian Ocean economic system.

Historical Context – Brittan and Oman’s Dual Imperial Histories

The legacy of British imperialism in South Eastern Arabia is particularly complex. “Trucial Oman” was composed of a group of Sheikdoms organized as a British protectorate from 1820-1971, roughly covering the region of the modern United Arab Emirates and Omani Governorate of Musandam. Excluding Musandam, the Sultanate of Oman itself was not a British protectorate, however it was under indirect control of the British Royal Navy throughout much of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The British East India Company exercised economic imperialism in Oman through the imposition of unfair treaties, the formation of monopoly companies, and the exploitation of local resources.²

Oman was in the unique situation of being simultaneously a British imperialized territory, albeit an indirect one, and the imperializer of Zanzibar. The British were well aware of Omani imperial presence in Zanzibar, and the British government attempted to control aspects of Oman’s role in East Africa, most notably the slave trade.³ In the wake of the Napoleonic Wars (1803-1815), the Omani governorship of Zanzibar became a

² The Gulf Committee, *Documents of the National Struggle in Oman and the Arabian Gulf*. (London: Russell Press, 1974). Pp. 12-14.

³ Moses D. E. Nwulia, *Brittan and Slavery in East Africa*. (Washington DC: Three Continents Press), P.29.

pawn in the British and French scramble for imperial hegemony in Africa.⁴ The impact of these complex dual imperial histories on the people of modern Oman should not be underestimated.

Oman has deep-rooted imperial links to East Africa, possibly dating back to the pre-Islamic era, when trading ships from South-Eastern Arabia used the powers of the monsoon winds to establish trading diasporas on the gold-rich littorals of the Swahili Coast. Early Arab Muslim explorers such as the Baghdad-born Al-Mas‘ūdī traveled through the Indian Ocean system in the early part of the tenth century AD / sixth century AH. He sailed to China, India, Persia, Oman, and East Africa. Even though there is ample archeological evidence of early Muslim settlement in the Swahili region, widespread textual evidence of these settlement patterns does not emerge until the early Islamic middle period. In al-Mas‘ūdī’s *Kitāb Murūj a-Dhahab wa Ma‘ādin al-Jawhar*, Al-Mas‘ūdī mentions the existence of a Muslim royal family lands of the East African Zanj⁵. This is one of the first known references to permanent Muslim settlement in the Swahili region.⁶ “One of these islands, which is two days sail from the coast has a Muslim population and a royal family. This is the island of Kanbalu of which we have spoken.”⁷ Kanbalu, the area that al-Mas‘ūdī is describing in this passage is most probably

⁴ Beatrice Nicolini, *Makran, Oman, and Zanzibar: Three-Terminal Cultural Corridor in the Western Indian Ocean, 1799-1856*. (Leiden: Brill, 19) Pp. 77-110.

⁵ Zanj is a name used by pre-modern Arab geographers to refer primarily to the peoples of Sub-Saharan Africa.

⁶ Randall L. Pouwels, "The Medieval Foundations of East African Islam," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 11, no. 3 (1978). P. 210.

⁷ G.S.P Freeman-Grenville, *The East African Coast: Select Documents from the First to the Earlier Nineteenth Century*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), Pp. 14-17.

Ras Mkumbuu in Pemba.⁸ (The Zanzibar Archipelago consists of two main islands off the coast of mainland Tanzania - Unguja and Pemba).

Although reference to origins and the specific religious background of these particular Muslims remain obscure, evidence from early Omani sources such as the *Ibādī Kilwa Chronicle* indicates that this group of settlers may have contained members of the first wave of Omani Ibādī migrants who were cast out of South Arabia as a result of political unrest in Arabia and Mesopotamia in the tenth and eleventh centuries CE.⁹ Ibādī Islam flourished in East Africa in the Islamic Middle Period, and is still practiced by almost all “Forgotten Generation” Omanis in Muscat.

While there are Ibādī communities in parts of North and East Africa, Oman is the only country in the world with a majority Ibādī Muslim population. In modern Oman, Ibādī Muslims primarily occupy the northern reaches of the country, especially around the current capitol of Muscat and the former capitol of Nizwa. Ibādī Islam grew from one of the earliest Muslim reform movements, the Khawārij, who believed that any virtuous Muslim had the right lead the community, just at the community had the right to remove any unjust leader from power. In Oman, this concept of leadership ultimately developed into the institutionalized of the Ibādī *Imama* (Imamate). “It (the Ibādī *Imama*) consisted of different substitutions of

⁸ G.S.P. Freeman-Grenville, *The East African Coast: Select Documents from the First to the Earlier Nineteen Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962). P. 14.

⁹ J. C. Wilkinson, "Oman and East Africa: New Light on Early Kilwan History from the Omani Sources," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 14, no. 2 (1981). P. 286.

authority which were believed to be appropriate to certain contexts (called *masālik al-dīn*, stages of religion), and thereby to supply a suitable type of leader for the distinct situation in which the Ibādī community found itself. In other words, different conditions of the community required different types of authority and therefore different types of leaders.”¹⁰ The religious identities of “Forgotten Generation” Omanis is rooted in early expression of East African Ibādī Islam.

In addition to its older Ibādī trading diaspora colonies in East Africa, Oman maintained both direct and indirect imperial power over large portions of the region ever since the seventeenth century when Omani Arabs managed wrest control over fort Jesus at Mombasa from the hands of the Portuguese.¹¹ Sultan bin Seif (1649-68) and his son Seif bin Sultan (1680-1711) members of the Ya‘ariba dynasty liberated many of the Omani trading settlements scattered along the East African coast from the Portuguese.¹² Like many parts of the Indian Ocean world, Omani East Africa and Oman itself were subject to the imperial ambitions of several additional western European countries in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. After a series of conflicts between German, French, and British forces during the late nineteenth century for control over Zanzibar, Britain emerged victorious.

¹⁰ Adam Gaiser, *Muslims, Scholars, Soldiers: The Origin and Elaboration of the Ibadi Imamate Traditions*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010) P. 9.

¹¹ Don Peterson, *Revolution in Zanzibar: An American Cold War Tale* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2002). P. 7.

¹² Ian Skeet, *Muscat and Oman, the End of An Era*, First ed. (London: Faber and Faber, 1974), History. P. 211.

Arab political authority in the Swahili region lasted until 1964, finally ending in a violent anti-imperialist revolution in Zanzibar when Afro-Shirazi revolutionaries, led by the Ugandan-born John Okello, cast out the Arabs and deposed the Omani sultan of Zanzibar, Sayyid Sir Jamishid bin Abdullah Al Said (r. 1963-1964). The ongoing economic and social inequalities between local African communities and the Arab elites, as well as rising nationalist sentiment in the Swahili region, provoked the uprising that ultimately caused the end of Oman's empire in East Africa.¹³

While the cultural and religious exchange colored the relationship between Oman and East Africa, there was also animosity between the two. The rhetoric of intolerance is never one-sided. In the following passage, Dustin M. Wai explains that there is an enduring negative view of Arabs settlers in East Africa:

Arabs have penetrated Africa, enslaving some of its inhabitants, and imported their religion (Islam) and language (Arabic). They have felt superior as the conveyors of a 'civilized' culture, and have generally tended towards those regarded as 'inferior'. In turn, many Africans still view Arabs as cunning, crafty, dishonest, and untrustworthy, not in the least because their racial and cultural arrogance continues to revive 'memories' of the rampages of slave traders in their region.¹⁴

Drawing on this latent anti-Arab sentiment, Okello encouraged his Afro-Shirazi revolutionaries to drive out the Arab imperialists by any means necessary. Historical records of the exact number of Arab families massacred during the Zanzibar revolution are ambiguous. John Okello claimed that: "11,995 people lost their lives in the coup,"

¹³ Michael F. Lofchie, "The Zanzibar Revolution: Background and Aftermath," *African Studies Bulletin* 7, no. 4 (1964). Pp. 15-16.

¹⁴ Dunstan M. Wai, "African-Arab Relations: Interdependence or Misplaced Optimism?," *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 21, no. 2 (1983). P.189.

however more conservative estimates put the numbers closer to 5,000.¹⁵ The events of the Zanzibar revolution are recorded in Gualtiero Jacopetti's 1966 disturbing and graphic mondo film "Africa, Addio!" which depicts, among other atrocities on the African continent, the massacre of Zanzibari Arabs at the hands of Okello's revolutionary guard.

National Identity Formation in Oman After 1964

1964 was a transitional year in the development of Oman's national identity due to the influx of East Africans of Omani decent into the country, the discovery of oil in the region, and political instability in the Dhofar region of Southern Oman.¹⁶ Oman's own turbulent history of the 1960's and 70's combined with the violence suffered by the Omani families of East Africa ensured that their process of cultural integration would not be a smooth one.

Some scholars argue that Oman, with its long tradition of adherence to the institution of Ibādī Imamate, as well as its geographic isolation from the rest of the Arabian Peninsula, went through a different process of national identity formation than other parts of the Arabian Peninsula.¹⁷ Hussein Ghubash believes that, as early as the Abbasid Age (750-1258), the notions of *shūrā* (democracy) and *imām* (sovereignty) were firmly cemented in Oman's national consciousness.¹⁸ Despite Ghubash's assertion that

¹⁵ Helen-Louise Hunter, *Zanzubar: the Hundred Days Revolution* (Oxford: Praeger, 2009). P. 48.

¹⁶ Uzi Rabi, *The Emergence of States in a Tribal Society* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2006). Pp. 183-214.

¹⁷ Hussein Ghubash, *Oman: The Islamic Democratic Tradition* (New York: Routledge, 2006). P. 1.

¹⁸ Ibid. P. 2.

there was national unity in Oman during under the Abbasids, it is clear that by the time of the 1964 Zanzibar revolution the region was in a state of political stagnation. One of the primary reasons for Oman's political problems during this time was the division between the Bū Sa'īd Dynasty¹⁹ 'Sultan' who ruled the costal areas, and the Ibādī Imam who held political and religious power in the interior.²⁰

In addition, at a time when the Gulf region, lead by Saudi Arabia, sought to define Arab nationalism (with a distinctly Sunni flavor), Oman was under the rule of insular Ibādī Sultan Sa'īd bin Taīmūr (r. 1932-1970).²¹ Despite the economic progress made by Oman's neighbors, problematic institutions such as the slave trade were not abolished in Oman until 1970, when Sultan Sa'īd bin Taīmūr 's son Sultan Qābūs removed his father from political power.²² It was into Sultan Sa'īd bin Taīmūr's failing empire, weighed down by poverty and rebellion, that the "Forgotten Generation" émigrés returned to in 1964 and 1965.

Under the reign of Sultan Sa'īd ibn Taymūr (r. 1932-1970), Oman was isolated from the rest of the Arabian Peninsula and the larger Indian Ocean system, including East Africa. In addition, Sa'īd ibn Taymūr made an example out of the Omani citizens of the Southern province of Dhofar, robbing them of the their livelihood and access to the outside world. According to one 1965 UN report:

¹⁹ The Bū Sa'īds are the current rulers of Oman.

²⁰ Nabil M. Kaylani, "Politics and Religion in 'Uman: A Historical Overview," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 10, no. 4 (1979). P. 570

²¹ Mamoun Fandy, *Uncivil War of Words: Media and Politics in the Arab World* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2007). P. 40.

²² Christiane Bird, *The Sultan's Shadow* (New York: Random House, 2010). P. 30.

The people of Dhofar, the Committee was told, were treated by the Sultan as slaves. He was cruel and imposed many arbitrary restrictions on the people. They were not permitted to travel outside; they were not permitted to build houses; food could only be bought in one walled market where the quantity that could be bought was fixed; and were not allowed to import or export goods.²³

Some of the wealthiest Swahili-speaking Omani émigrés from East Africa avoided repatriation to the Arabian mainland during this insular period in Oman's history, choosing instead to set up temporary homes elsewhere.²⁴ Surviving émigrés with connections abroad chose instead to flee to the capital cities of Europe, like Paris and London, where they could circumvent the unrest in their homeland.²⁵

I interviewed one such émigré, a member of the Al Bū Sa'īd, dynasty, who spent his youth in London, and only returned to Oman in the 1980's.²⁶ He spoke fondly of his experiences in Britain, and displayed mementos of his time in Britain in his sitting room. The privileged social status "Forgotten Generation" émigrés, such as this member of the wealthy Al Bū Sa'īd, dynasty, may have prevented any accusation of complicity in Western Imperialism by their own countrymen. These westernized Omani families later returned to Oman, many in the mid to late 1970s after the government of Sa'īd ibn Taymūr's son, the Sandhurst educated, Qābūs ibn Sa'īd Āl Sa'īd (r. 1970-present day) was firmly established as Sultan of Oman.

²³Francis Owtram, *A Modern History of Oman: Formation of the State Since 1920* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004). P.121.

²⁴ A. Bū Sa'īd. Personal interview. April 4, 2007.

²⁵ A. Bū Sa'īd. Personal interview. April 4, 2007.

²⁶ A. Bū Sa'īd. Personal interview. April 4, 2007.

The coup at the hands of Sa‘īd ibn Taymūr’s son Qābūs reinvigorated Oman and gave its people, including recently repatriated Swahili-speaking Omanis a new constitution and a newly forged national identity. Sultan Qābūs launched an ambitious development campaign in Oman, funded primarily by the country’s recently tapped oil reserves. Part of the Sultan’s five-point plan for the revival of his Gulf kingdom spoke directly to Oman’s burgeoning national identity as a modern Arab state. Qābūs’ goal was to: “Start a diplomatic initiative with the aim of having Oman recognized as a genuine Arab state with its own legal form of government and isolate the PDRY (People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen) from receiving support from other Arab states.”²⁷ He has also asserted his support numerous times for popular Arab political cause such as the establishment of a viable Palestinian state.²⁸

While “Forgotten Generation” families clearly benefitted from Sultan Qābūs’ nation-wide development plan, which included advantages like free healthcare and education, it was the assertion of Arab Statehood that challenged the émigrés to rearticulate their social and cultural beliefs, abandoning some of their ties to East Africa in order to become fully realized members of the modern Omani State through the long process of social integration.

Once back in Oman, members of the “Forgotten Generation” were labeled *Zinjibari* by their countrymen in Muscat. Technically a *Zinjibari* is someone of Arab

²⁷J. Townsend, *Oman: The Making of a Modern State* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1977). P. 101

²⁸ “Education in Oman” Cultural Office of the Embassy of Oman, Washington D.C. Accessed May 2, 2013. <http://www.omani.info/education.htm#speech>.

descent who has historical or cultural ties with East Africa, however, in modern Omani society it is a title that has both pejorative and positive connotations depending on the context in which it is used.²⁹ The term *Zinjibari* was used as a pejorative primarily by nationals from mainland Oman who accused recent émigrés of adopting false Omani tribal names for the purpose of gaining Omani citizenship.³⁰ On the other hand, many members of the *Zinjibari* “Forgotten Generation” had (and still have) high socioeconomic status as a result of their association with both British and Arab imperialism in East Africa.

For “Forgotten Generation” women in Muscat, the process of integration was complicated by different gender expectations in East Africa and Arabia. Many females had to adapt their style of dress and behavior when they were repatriated to Oman. According to my host family, Arab women in East Africa, while they dressed modestly, did not wear the black Gulf-Style *Abaya* and *Shayla* (outer cloak and head scarf) until they returned to Oman, preferring instead to wear African or European styles of dress.³¹ Many elite female members of the “Forgotten Generation” spoke about the flexibility of their gender roles, depending on whether they were in Oman or traveling abroad in Zanzibar, the United States, or Europe – dressing and acting according to the traditions of their current situation.

²⁹ Nafla S. a Kharusi, " The ethnic label Zinjibari: Politics and language choice implications among Swahili Speakers in Oman," *Original Version Before Changes (Final Version at <http://etn.sagepub.com/>)*. P. 1

³⁰ Ibid. P. 12.

³¹ Amina Noor. Personal interview. February 25, 2007.

Like the subject of gender, the subject of race and racial identity in Oman is quite fluid. The enslavement of African people by Arabs was a major catalyst for the Zanzibar Revolution of 1964. The Arab slave trade from Africa predated that of both Europe and the United States, and continued well into the 1960's.³² However, in Islamic theology, although not always in practice, race does not imply social status. In Oman, African slaves often assumed the tribal identity of their owners.³³ Intermarriage between high-status East African families and "Forgotten Generation" Omanis was relatively common, resulting in a mixed Arab-East African heritage.

Some "Forgotten Generation" Omanis feel a deep historical connection with East Africa, which is sometimes expressed using the radicalized social construct of "Blackness". One of my "Forgotten Generations" research contacts introduced me to her Zanzibari-Arab uncle over the telephone, and we made an appointment to meet me at a café. "You will know me," he said cheerfully, "I am a fat Black man." Statements such as this lead me to believe that some members of the "Forgotten Generation" have considerable pride in their identity as East Africans and the associated concept of "Blackness".

My scholarly assessment of any potential racial tension between Omani-born Arabs and "Forgotten Generation" families is disadvantaged for several reasons. There is

³² Rhoda E. Howard-Hassmann, "Reparations for the Slave Trade: Rhetoric, Law, History and Political Realities," *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue Canadienne des Études Africaines* 41, no. 3 (2007). P. 438.

³³ Edward A. Alpers, "Recollecting Africa: Diasporic Memory in the Indian Ocean World," *African Studies Review* 43, no. 1 (2000). P. 87.

a critical lack of scholarship on the topic of race and racism in the modern Arabian Gulf states. While I was warmly received as a guest in both Omani-born and “Forgotten Generation” homes in Muscat, I am well aware that my position as an outsider excluded me from certain conversations. My hostess explained to me that Omani manners dictate that guests are spared any potential embarrassment caused by controversial topics such as religion, race, or politics.³⁴

Cultural Syncretism – Language and Artistic Heritage

The presence of the Swahili language in Muscat is found everywhere, from the tradition Souk to modern markets such as multinational Carrefour Shopping Centre. “All who know Oman, or at least Masqat, note the continuing currency of Swahili there, a vivid reminder of the historic connections between East Africa and the countries of the Persian Gulf.”³⁵ Perhaps the strongest link between Oman and the Swahili language is found in “Forgotten Generation” homes, as I observed on many occasions.

The academic history of Swahili and Arabic languages clearly illustrates the lack of consideration paid to African influences in Arabia. In the past considerable scholarly attention was paid to Arabic cognates in the Swahili language, however most modern scholars agree that Arabic influence on Swahili is perhaps only a couple of centuries old and that Swahili remains a distinctly Bantu language.³⁶ While the national language of

³⁴ Amina Noor. Personal interview. March 23, 2007.

³⁵ Ibid. P. 93.

³⁶ Thomas T. Spear, *The Swahili: Reconstructing the History and Language of an African Society, 800-1500* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985). P. 15.

Oman is Arabic, approximately 22,000 people speak Swahili out of a population of three million.³⁷ “Forgotten Generation” families, while fluent in Arabic, English, and Swahili, often feel most comfortable conversing in Swahili.³⁸ Swahili words are often used in greetings, and peppered throughout English and Arabic sentences.

According to the constitution of Oman established in 1979, the educational system of Oman and cultural principles of Omani nationalism are inexorably connected. The following excerpt of Article 13 of the Constitution of Oman outlines the role and importance of public education in defining the cultural principles in the this newly formed Omani nation: “Education aims to raise and develop general cultural standards, promote scientific thought, kindle the spirit of enquiry, meet the needs of the economic and social plans, and create a generation strong in body and moral fibre, proud of its nation, country and heritage, and committed to safe guarding their achievements.”³⁹ In addition to these parameters, Article 3 of the Constitution of Oman states that: “Arabic is the official language of the State.”⁴⁰ Omani school children also begin English language education at age 7. The reason for this according to the Oman’s Ministry of Education, is that: “Acquiring a good level of the English language is necessary particularly in higher education colleges where science-based courses are conducted in that language.”⁴¹ While

³⁷ “Omani Languages” Ethnologue, Accessed April 17, 2013.

<http://www.ethnologue.com/country/OM/languages>

³⁸ Amina Noor. Personal interview. March 12 2007.

³⁹ “The Constitution of Oman, Article 16” Accessed February 3, 2013.

http://www.servat.unibe.ch/icl/mu00000_.html

⁴⁰ “The Constitution of Oman, Article 3.” Accessed February 3, 2013.

http://www.servat.unibe.ch/icl/mu00000_.html

⁴¹ “Education in Oman” Cultural Office of the Embassy of Oman, Washiongton D.C.

Accessed May 2, 2013. <http://www.omani.info/education.htm#overview>

Arabic is deeply linked with Oman's religious and cultural traditions, English is seen as a modern language necessary for political and economic progress.

The question of whether or not to adopt the Arabic language was particularly important for returning members of the "Forgotten Generation", as many had grown up speaking Swahili or English as their first language. When Arabic was used in East Africa, it was mostly for liturgical or official purposes.⁴² Much has been written about the important role that the Arabic language in the formation of post-colonial Arab nationalism and pan-Arab nationalism. It is worthy of note that Swahili Arab émigrés to Oman seemed to intentionally eschew Arabic in contexts where it is not necessary.

The "Forgotten Generation" families, both young and old, continued the tradition of speaking both English and Swahili, favoring Swahili, and used Arabic only for prayer, despite the passage of almost 40 years after their returned from Zanzibar and many years in the Arabic-dominated Omani public education system.⁴³ Food, clothing, and music were all also distinctly East African inside household walls, whereas outside, "Forgotten Generation" families wore formal Omani national dress and spoke English in the shops. Again, my position as a foreign outside observer doubtless influenced these interactions. (I speak English and Arabic, and I know very little Swahili.) I can mention here that the interactions between non-"Forgotten Generation" Omanis took place most commonly in Arabic, a language that I never heard my hosts speak, except when praying. However,

⁴² Amina Noor. Personal interview. March 18 2007.

⁴³ Amina Noor. Personal interview. March 23 2007.

“Forgotten Generation” family members used Swahili quite often in casual conversation and on the telephone.

These actions clearly challenge any idea that assimilation was a primary goal for the “Forgotten Generation” families. Instead, it indicated the duality and complexity of post-colonial identity formation in the modern Sultanate of Oman. While using Omani dress in public, the celebration of East African culture and heritage in the private space indicate that the historical link with the Swahili coast is a source of great pride and celebration for “Forgotten Generation” families. It is an expression both of shared historical experience and elite social status.

The cultural syncretism between Arabia and East Africa touches many areas of life in Oman. East African culture is clearly visible in Oman’s artistic heritage.

Ethnographers have theorized that Swahili influence on Omani culture has produced uniquely Afro-Omani art forms on the Arabian mainland:

In the twentieth century the evidence becomes still richer and more persuasive. Extensive research in Oman has yielded rich documentation on what are officially referred to as Afro-Omani arts. For example, one major category of Omani drum is called msondo, a word directly incorporated from Swahili. Two of the principal forms of singing and dance known as at-tanburah (also known as an-nuban, and az-zar) clearly derive from northeast Africa, Nuban being a common category of slave provenance dating back to the nineteenth century, while zar is the most widespread form of indigenous spirit possession in the Sudan, Ethiopia, and Somalia. Still another African musical form in southern Oman is called ar-rabubah, which takes its name from rababa, a local appellation for the tanburah.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Alpers, Edward. "Recollecting Africa: Diasporic Memory in the Indian Ocean World." P. 91.

During my stay in Oman, I attended several “Forgotten Generation” weddings and Henna Parties⁴⁵, where Zanzibari food was served and East African music was played. East African culture has a tremendous impact on modern Oman. Upon leaving Oman, my hostess Amina Noor presented me, not with an Omani souvenir, but with a beautiful Zanzibari *Kanga*, an brightly colored cloth wrap that is commonly worn by both men and women in East Africa.

Conclusion

The repatriation of “Forgotten Generation” families had a significant impact on the history of modern Oman. Perhaps one of the most important changes in Oman’s modern history was the rise of Sultan Qābūs to power, replacing his circumscribed father Sa‘īd ibn Taymūr. “Forgotten Generation” families were integral in bringing Sultan Qābūs to his current position as the leader of Oman. Connections with British-backed Arab Imperialist in Zanzibar helped to solidify the Sandhurst educated Sultan Qābūs’ claim to the throne. The economic elitism of the costal, primarily Muscat based families, strengthened the Sultans’ power versus that of the Imamate’s inland political authority. The internationalism of “Forgotten Generation” families, with contacts on three continents, helped Oman’s economy develop quickly by exploiting its oil resources and building its tourism infrastructure.

⁴⁵ A Henna party is a woman’s party that often takes place before a Muslim Wedding where the Bride’s hands are decorated with henna. In Oman, Henna parties are also opportunities for women to socialize with each other and enjoy music, dancing, and lavish food.

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