Poems to Open Palms: Praise Performance and the State in the Sultanate of Oman

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The Graduate Center, City University of New York

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POEMS TO OPEN PALMS: PRAISE PERFORMANCE AND THE STATE IN THE
SULTANATE OF OMAN

by

BRADFORD J. GARVEY

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Music in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York
2019
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by
Bradford J. Garvey

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Music in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
Abstract

Poems to Open Palms: Praise Performance and the State in the Sultanate of Oman
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Advisor: Jane C. Sugarman

This dissertation traces the musical constitution of moral, economic, material, and social relations between rural communities and the state in the Sultanate of Oman. I argue that communities embedded within the authoritarian state hegemony of the Sultanate form and affirm social relations with the state through its embodied proxy, Sultan Qābūs bin Ṣaʻīd Āl Bū Ṣaʻīd, via the reciprocal exchange of state-directed giving and praise poetry responses. The circuit of exchange catalyzes the social production of political legitimacy and ensures continued generous distribution by mythopoetically presenting such cyclicity as resulting from elite and non-elite mutuality. This praise poetry is rendered within two song and dance complexes: al-razḥa, a collective war dance with drumming and antiphonal choral singing, and al-‘āzī, a choral ode with a solo singer, tight poetic structure, and a chorus of responders. Through a close analysis of the content and context of praise poems sung by Arab men’s performance troupes experienced over a year of participant observation fieldwork, I argue that praise poetry is an overlooked site for the construction and negotiation of state political legitimacy. Drawing on heterodox and Gramscian political economy, I show how musical performance operates within broader circuits of exchange by functioning as a site wherein non-market economic logics are fused with moral, performative, and political norms. Instead of simply tracing a circuit of utilitarian exchange (praise for gifts for praise), I focus on the how gifts and their responses reciprocally negotiate social relations between state elites and non-elites. By focusing on the words and actions of non-elites as they integrate the various proffered benefits of a distributive state into their own
community, I attempt to complicate standard explanations of Arabian Gulf politics and statecraft. I posit two social mechanisms—one which relates generosity and political legitimacy and one that relates performance with the construction of a moral political community—and then follow them through their operation in social space. By singing praise poetry at celebrations of state distribution, praisers rhetorically render such state gifting as “generosity,” which is deeply tied to good leadership in the Omani context. In addition, praisers simultaneously mythopoetically generate a political community of generous givers and grateful receivers who are linked by relations of history, homeland, religion, and kinship. In this way, praise “opens palms” and induces continued elite distributions. However, unequal gifting is fraught with social hazard and threatens to trap communities in dependency relations with the state. By attending to the pragmatics of performance, however, I argue that razha and ‘āzī tacitly address this threat of dependency by performing strength and dignity while simultaneously seeking to redraw the relations of unequal gifting from ones of dependency to ones of mutual obligation—a “moral economy.” This ethnomusicological study is an attempt to show how musical and linguistic performers draw on a wide variety of tacit and explicit economic, moral, political, and communal factors in order to take social action in a context of authoritarian state hegemony.
Acknowledgements

السلام عليكم ورحمة الله وبركاته

Making one’s debts and relationships, academic and otherwise, public by acknowledging them is a task that I study throughout this dissertation, but it makes the task no less complicated and vexing. And yet, to sing in praise of those so worthy of it is a cheering task. My first thanks go to my dissertation committee: Jane Sugarman, Stephen Blum, Virginia Danielson, and Peter Manuel. I must single out Jane Sugarman, my advisor, for shaping this project with such patience while it has at times seemed ready to leap away in dozens of uninteresting directions. Her constant engagement, critical eye, and good will has stewarded this dissertation throughout its drafting with a wisdom that is second only to her scholarly expertise. Stephen Blum has constantly nurtured my tendencies to read widely and critically. Within ethnomusicology—an adopted home for me—I must give special thanks to Ginny Danielson, Peter Manuel, Salwa El-Shawan Castelo-Branco, Anne Rasmussen, Kay Hardy Campbell, Scheherezade Hassan, Aisha Bil-Khair, Khalid al-Budoor, Ahmad al-Salhi, David Samuels, and Jeffers Engelhardt for their professional and academic guidance over the years. Special thanks for the extraordinary patience of Mary-Beth Moss and everyone at the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research—sorry about the visa.

I have learned so much in conversation with my fellow graduate students that singling them out seems impossible. Joseph Alpar, Dean Reynolds, Emmy Williamson, Stephanie Lou George, Jana Zoric, Josh Katz-Rosene, Brendan Kibbee, Manuela Arciniegas, George Murer, Purba Debnath, Bruno Bartra, Gordan Dale, Johnny Frias, Insia Malik, Chris McGuiness, Lynne Stillings, Brian Bond, and Elaine Sandoval have been an incredible group of colleagues. Outside
of the GC bubble, Siv B. Lie (sorry to lump you in with these grad student bums), and Davindar Singh have been intense interlocutors and very good friends.

Musallim al-Kathīrī welcomed me warmly in Oman, and I wish the best to the Oman Centre for Traditional Music, where I was fortunate to meet Fatḥī Muḥsin and where I wish Muʿataṣim many more concerts. I cannot thank Dr. Hilāl bin Saʿīd al-Ḥagīrī and the staff of the Ministry of Heritage and Culture in Oman enough, especially the Literature and Arts division. I must also acknowledge Dr. Mājid al-Ḥarthī, Abū Ghaṣṣān, and Saʿīd al-Mandharī for their insight into Omani life. The staff at Noor Majan Training Institute were especially gracious, especially Sulṭān and Ḥussayn, who finally taught me how to say “no” like a Gulfie rather than an Egyptian. That said, my wonderful Arabic teachers in Amherst and New York, Tayeb El-Hibri and Christopher Stone, deserve immense credit for teaching me to say anything at all.

My heartiest thanks and appreciation must go to my friends in Dakhiliyya. In Bahlā’, the Shukaylī brothers and their sons made my visits wonderfully familial. When my car broke down outside of the Fort, you saved me by letting me borrow your own car to drive home for the night. Such incredible generosity can hardly be repaid, but I was glad when you were able to sell more mutton to the Yemeni restaurant because I, the Englishman, ate there. In Nizwa, the members of the Firqat al-Shihabā’ were always kind and patient. In Izkī, the Firqat Izkī’s office was always a wonderful visit, as were the wonderful conversations within. Manaḥ, of course, deserves special mention. It was a second home to me, and I felt cared for as a brother there, if a moody one who insisted on recording everything that made sound. Ḥamad is a dear friend and one that I will never be able to fully repay. Every page of this dissertation bears his straightforward wisdom and insight. I hope it is a high honor that I felt that he was looking over my shoulder as I wrote every word. To the administration of the Firqat al-ʿArabī, Aḥmad “Bawsh” and Ṭalāl “Shiringibillū”
(illī yashrub al-maī killū), many thanks and sorry for all the questions. Abdullah and Aḥmad bin Gaʿrūf deserve special thanks for the drum lessons. Khamīs, Salām, Šālim, Muḥammad, Aḥmad, Thānī, Khālid, ‘Alī, and all the rest: mashkūrīn. I also want to thank the many women who made my fieldwork pleasant and kept me well-fed, without ever meeting me, and acknowledge the labor and expense that went into providing the fruit, dates, tea, coffee, and meals that accompanied most of my interviews.

To my parents, Holle and Phil, I hope this makes you proud. To my brothers, Ansel and Chris, this is what I’ve been up to all these years. To the Ancients, thank you for being an inspiration. To my wife, Margarite Whitten, I owe you everything. To Henry Leon, hopefully this will get me a job so we can keep feeding you.
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A Note on Translation and Transliteration.

Translating and transliterating Omani Arabic is a complex task. I have chosen to use the standard of transliteration adopted by the International Journal of Middle East Studies due to its simplicity.

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I have attempted to render the sounds of Interior Omani dialectical speech with some spellings but not with new orthographic characters. This is only for parsimony: words such as "هود" هود "knock knock!" are perhaps better rendered with a dipthong like "hōd" instead of "hawd" but readers familiar with such phonic differences will be able to identify issues like these with relative ease.

Translation issues were constant with this project because no standard dictionary of Omani dialectical Arabic is available. Dialects differ in substantial ways from neighborhood to neighborhood, let alone over the large province my research was located within. While I learned as much as I could and checked translations as often as possible, some words and phrases eluded even my most poetically inclined colleagues and interlocutors. When there were questions or issues, I chose what I took to be the best rendering of the word or phrase. Errors are mine alone.

Some features of Interior Omani Arabic as I learned it that may confuse speakers of other Arabic dialects are (1) the use of infixes (-inn-) between pronomial suffixes and verbal nouns (e.g., شايفنھّ shāyifinnuh, "I saw him"); (2) the use of يوم yawm for "when" as in عندما andimā; (3) the alternation between the “hard” Egyptian jīm (g) and the “soft” Emirati jīm (y); (4) the use of shay for the Shami “fī” in “there are…” constructions; (5) wāgid as a general amplifier/intensifier (more, lots, many, very, etc.) (6) frequent use of anaptyxis: masqat rendered as musqāṭuh, etc.; (7) ultimate emphasis when using pronomial suffixes: e.g., ‘ا-KHĪ “my brother,” ّab-WĪ “my father”; (8) use of -ish for the 2p f.s., e.g., kitābish “your (f.) book.”
Introductions: Approaching the state by way of poetry: Praise, performance, and political economy

Āh, yiwāb, yallah yiwāb!—Ah, answer, O God, answer!

So began a poem sung before Qābūs bin Sa’īd bin Ṭaymūr Āl Bū Sa’īdī, the Sultan of Oman, as similar poems have begun before similar Omani rulers for more than a century. This time, the poem was given on the occasion of the fortieth anniversary of the Sultan’s taking the throne. On that day in November 2010, thousands of heavily armed Omani men were gathered in Muscat to sing praise poetry, arranged in neat squares under the Sultan’s stoic gaze. The poetry, composed specifically for the event, was an Omani ’āzī, or choral ode, presented after a collective sword dance, razḥa. Both performances, addressed to the Sultan, praised his leadership and the Omani renaissance he brought about. Such performances have marked nearly every National Day (yawm al-waṭanī) since 1970, though perhaps never with such spectacular character. The singer of the poetry, the famous Muḥammad al-Marzūqī, stood tall in his white dishdāsha and clutched the straight Omani sayf sword in one hand and its sheath and turs buckler in the other. A maṣar, a large, embroidered square of thin wool, was wrapped painstakingly around the crown of his head, while a matching belt wrapped and framed the deeply bent khanjar dagger that he wore at the front of his waist. Al-Marzūqī marched the group straight towards an open gap in a huge arrangement of other Omani men, arranged in tight, uniform squares: shirtless wrestlers, phalanxes of police and soldiers, and thousands of other similarly dressed performers. The performers were all members of one or another of the hundreds of governmentally registered performance troupes from all over northern Oman. Two-headed, slightly hourglass-shaped drums, a larger and a smaller historically twinned, hung from the shoulders of drummers, thundering out responses in the open space between poetic and human
performing lines. As Al-Marzūqī sang out the lines, he held up his arms and turned his head and trunk back and forth, addressing audiences actual, televizual, and virtual to the conclusion:

قابوس قابوس قابوس سلطان البلاد،
نشهد لعذلك أجمعين

Qābūs, Qābūs, Qābūs, sulṭān al-bilād,
Nashhad li-ʿadālak ʿajmaʾīn.

Qābūs, Sultan of the land,
We all bear witness to your justice!

Al-Marzūqī was at the head of a large group of similarly dressed and armed men who roared responses to each hemistich of the ode, beating the drums in affirmation.

Yā slīm! They cried, “Truly!”

Al-Marzuqi continued:

يامن تعليت الوتاد،
وتشرفت باسمك سند

Yā man taʿalayt al-witād,
Wa tashsharaft bi-ʿismak sanad!

O, you who raised up the wall-pegs,
You are honored as your name is treasure and pillar and bond.

Music Example 1 contains a sketch of two selections from this performance, one drawn from the very first line, and one from the last. Measure 1 represents the first half of the first couplet. Measure 2 is the final half of the couplet, including the unchanging final addition, ʿubyān yā kibār al-shiyyīm (youths of the greatest moral character). Measure 3 skips to the the first hemistich of the final couplet, the intensive climax of the piece. The event, broadcast live on national television and radio channels, recorded on video and CD, was sold in stores and posted on dozens of internet forums and on Youtube. The 2010 performance is often referenced by Omanis as emblematic of
‘āzī, a perfect performance of what it is and does, and indeed, it has served as the basis for imitations both in Oman and abroad.

40th National Day ‘āzī

Praise be to God, the Supporter; unique, with none before him in anything.
Creator of humanity, bounty comes from his extended hand.

Music example 1. A sketch of the first couplet of the 40th National Day ‘āzī vocal line, which is the basis for all others except the final couplet.

The 2010 performance raises a number of questions about the role of sung poetry and performance in the mediation of the state. According to the Omani Centre for Traditional Music, the people of the Sultanate perform some 180+ distinct musical practices. Why did the Omani state, known for its stability and prosperity, choose to celebrate its 40th anniversary in this way, with historical genres of sung poetry and a war dance? What is the history of these practices of
praise? What does such musical praise do? Who sings, to whom is it directed, and why? What do performances of these collective praise practices tell us about the ways in which political authority in Oman is imagined, enacted, transmitted, communicated, and reproduced? If these genres were selected for this highly politicized context, what role, if any, has collective performance had in the development and legitimation of Omani political structures and shaping of political space?

This dissertation is a study of the relationships between men’s public performance and political authority amongst Arabs in the Sultanate of Oman, based on field research conducted over thirteen months between 2015-2017. In it, I propose to study the social legitimation of contemporary political authority in the Sultanate of Oman by closely studying Omani Arab performance practices, called al-funūn al-sha’abiyya (lit., “popular arts”). I especially foreground performances like the one recounted above, that are framed as praise responses to the Sultan, the state’s embodied duplicate. As we shall see, such praise is often rendered as a response to state-directed giving, rhetorically producing it as generosity—a trait that is tightly linked with good leadership in Oman. Rather than studying these practices as reflecting or commenting on other, more concretely political behavior (as we might imagine protest music does), I frame them as political behavior. They are an irreducible part of a political economic order predicated on generous giving.

Poetry and dance may seem a strange way to enter the study of politics. This is perhaps doubly true of praise. However, the specific configuration of ideals of political authority, especially links between generosity and good leadership, historical patterns of material inequality, governance in authoritarian oil-states, and cultural associations among poetry, giving, and authority make such an entry appropriate. Performance has not just functioned as praise for Omani Arab elites, however, it has also accompanied their armies and colonial ventures. This relationship
has further cemented the role of public performance as central to state hegemony. I will argue that poets, especially praise poets, have historically occupied an important role in Omani political economy by shaping the interactions between rulers and the ruled through facilitating communication and material and musical exchange between them, and that this historical relationship has been seized upon by contemporary capitalist state agents to solidify contemporary state hegemony.

The main way that Omani state elites have sought to legitimate the contemporary state-form is by providing state-directed development and other distributions of state largesse, which, as an aspect of good leadership, demonstrate right authority, leadership capacity, and responsible rulership. Leaders give. Understood as a kind of gift that necessitates response amongst recipients, state generosity prompts certain lower-status groups to offer praise as a form of recognition of that legitimate leadership, in order to incorporate that generosity into deserving communities. Since gifts between unequal groups have the potential to draw individuals and communities into dependency relations with the giver, praise is also taken as a site for lower-status praisers to represent themselves and make claims on the higher-status gifter. Whether or not all these aspects are successfully implemented or always function adequately is highly contextually dependent, but this basic function is an understanding that is implicitly shared amongst many performers and non-performers alike. Generosity, as a value that is widely shared across class lines, can function as an avenue of communication across those lines as well as a source of temporary cross-class alliances: hegemony.

However, this study does not simply track generosity and giving as a hegemony-producing strategy of state elites. Rather, I focus on non-elite responses to generosity. As Antonio Gramsci wrote, “hegemony presupposes that account be taken of the interests and the tendencies of the
groups over which hegemony is to be exercised” so “that a certain compromise equilibrium should be formed” (1971:161). Hegemony is a tensely negotiated and only fitfully realized rapprochement, drawing unsystematically on some values and practices that are shared across classes and some that are not. Taking this reversed approach highlights how state-directed giving is not simply a unidirectional process, but a conflictual, semi-voluntary, and constantly reevaluated cross-class compromise: in Katherine Bowie’s terms, a détente. Generosity, as a mutually valued ideal shared between elites and non-elites, forms both a useful tool for elites and an exploitable resource for non-elites. I take an ethnomusicological approach to the production of hegemony as a function of the mutual give and take, the push and pull, of generosity and praise. Praise doesn’t just mechanically respond to or account for generosity: it changes it, compels it, acts on it. In Oman, praise and generosity are not simply batted back and forth by vain elites and sycophantic non-elites: they circle each other in tense equilibrium.

To draw out these varied aspects of performance and its relationship to the political efforts of elites, I often draw on Antonio Gramsci’s insights into the complex interweaving of political, economic, ideological, and cultural elements in the formation of state hegemony to help inform a critical perspective that attends to the actual material relations of domination as well as the intricacy and historical embeddedness of poetic performance, social relations, and gifting. I argue that subordinated praisers use praise—and the ideal models of authority that are communicated in praise—to insist on the mutual interdependence of lower and higher classes in making a just, well-led, and moral community. They do so, in their view, without ceding autonomy. Praisers perceive their praise as continuing but also prompting circuits of giving and praising between dominant and subordinated classes. Praise opens palms. Ultimately, I and my Omani interlocutors see in praise the potential to shape the behavior of leaders in such a way that bends them towards justice,
redistribution, and caring responsibility—not by demanding representation due to taxation, but by manipulating the fame, name, and reputation of elites.

Towards a Political-Economic Ethnomusicology of the Oman

While I draw on a variety of fields, I cannot do so with equal expertise. I see this ethnographic and ethnomusicological research as making important contributions to three overlapping literatures: (1) the ethnomusicology and anthropology of the Middle East, specifically of the Arabian Gulf and Peninsula, and the relationship between men’s poetry and politics; (2) political and economic ethnomusicology; and (3) and the anthropology and ethnomusicology of the state.

a. Poetry and Its Forms of Life: Ethnomusicology of the Middle East.

I engage three broad strands in the ethnomusicology and anthropology of the Middle East. First, I continue and extend studies of the relationship between performance, politics, and social relations. Second, I draw upon studies of political organization to show how performances of praise intervene in a political economy that has historically been predicated on generous redistribution. Finally, I extend research on Islamic legal and intellectual interpretations of the permissibility of music in an Ibadī context, arguing that scholars have underestimated the pragmatic justification of sonic practices deemed practically useful by overemphasizing the capacity of sonic formations to help develop ethical or moral personhood.

The Middle East is an ideal setting for this kind of research because, over the last thirty years, scholars have increasingly noted the deep relationship between politics and performance in the region. J. Andrew Bush has advocated that “the politics of poetry [in the Middle East] is a problem to be discovered anew in each milieu” (2016, 203). Tracing poetry as an everyday activity
of politics, rather than a spectacular one, compels us to reckon with how poetry works to “distribute obligations and attachments across a set of relationships” that call our notions of subjectivity, temporality, and the ordinary to “account” for themselves (202). Bush’s urge to rediscover the relationship between poetry and politics helps to situate the performance of praise as a crucial amplifying node in the circulation of elite generosity, praise, and legitimation.

Anthropologists have shown how expressive practices form an arena for a variety of ideological and political engagement, ranging from discourses of urban modernity (Shannon 2006), to tribal mediation (Caton 1990). The study of poetry, both formal, ceremonial poetry and local vernacular genres, has long been recognized as a lens into Arab men’s political worlds. As Khaled Furani argues, “poetic forms and forms of life are inseparable” (2012, 2). Such work has dealt with poets’ roles in managing interpersonal, intergroup, or socio-political conflicts, while other scholars have focused on poetry’s ability to manifest alternative social ideologies or its relationship to political power in the present and past. Anthropologically informed research into Arab poetry has sometimes taken its political function to be exhausted by its role as a medium for conflict. As Abu-Lughod pointed out in Veiled Sentiments (1986) and emphasized in her new 1999 preface, the study of men’s poetry in particular has seen it as a form of agonistic contest, often ignoring its other pragmatic, economic, emotionally affective, affiliative, and communicative features. It was Steven Caton’s work in the late 1980s and early 1990s that helped to show the

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conciliatory aspect of poetry, one in which armed conflict is mitigated, rather than celebrated, by persuasive words (1987, 1990). Nevertheless, much work since Caton and Abu Lughod’s insights has refocused on the role of poetry in conflict, though this has been expanded beyond the narrow confines of martial valor, tribal bellicosity, or fakhr boasting to include critiques of colonialism, imperialism, patriarchy, tribalism, and Zionism. Other trends have moved to studying poetry’s role in creating selves, both religious and otherwise (Furani 2012, 2018; Bush 2015, 2016). Perhaps because previous research has so strongly emphasized conflict as the context for poetry, or the self as a central nexus, there has been little ethnographic attention to praise. Praise is quintessentially other-regarding poetry. Praise is neither the celebration of martial conflict nor its conciliation, but rather a deep affirmation of connection, dependence, and mutuality. Hearing praise as guided by Omanis, as this dissertation does, sheds light on a form of politics that focuses on building, affirming, and maintaining socio-political relationships within a status-differentiated group rather than amongst separate classes. Politics, so often seen as conflict in the Middle East, can be conciliatory and deferential without being “weak,” “indifferent,” or “passive.”

Abu-Lughod’s conclusion further criticizes previous work on Middle Eastern politics for minimizing the role of emotional engagement in political activity, which is seen as a rational male domain (1986, 255-8). Flagg Miller’s The Moral Resonance of Arab Media (2007) helps to address this second issue by showing how particular registers of poetic speech and topicality help constitute poets as moral agents who eschew material gain (2007, 23). Yet, there is little research on the ways in which actual performance parameters help to shape and communicate the emotional content of ostensibly “rational” political speech. Khaled Furani’s (2012, 2018) sensitive attention to the technical aspects of poetic composition is a welcome examination of the ways in which poetry’s metrics are understood as a means of becoming “free” through formal mastery. I pay
special attention not to metrical features, but instead to the pragmatic features of performance that help build and propagate emotional states amongst performers alongside texts. I therefore respond to Sheila Carapico’s (2004) “invitation” to study the Arabian Peninsula by studying emotionally charged oral performance with explicit political-economic ends in Oman. My study extends the literature on the close connection between performance and politics in the Middle East by identifying a precise and historically continuous mechanism for this connection, contextualized within a process of authoritarian state-formation that has gained broad legitimacy via the expansion of historically salient modes of poetical-cum-political engagement.

Much recent work in the anthropology of poetry has emphasized its sonic and linguistic aspects, seeing these aspects as a way to move between semantic, lexical and affective aspects of poetic speech (Fox 2016; Furani 2012; Webster 2016, 2018). Taking seriously the rhythmic, melodic, and performative features of sung poetry amongst Arabs in the Peninsula may be an especially helpful extension of this literature on Arab poetry. Ethnomusicology has always adopted this analytical specificity, but in the Arab Gulf states it is an emerging field. The publication of Lisa Urkevich’s *The Musical Traditions of the Arabian Peninsula* (2015), a comprehensive catalogue of performance forms grouped by geographic region, is an important basis for comparative work. Urkevich’s extensive fieldwork and broad familiarity with Gulf musical scenes is unequalled in English-language research. However, she does not include any examples from the “southern Gulf” (the UAE or Oman), despite the fact that many genres discussed in the text have direct analogues in those areas. The sensitivity of Urkevich’s fieldwork setting dissuaded fuller engagement with anthropological or historical literature, which prevents both generalization and further insight into social mechanics relevant to the history and development of the genres. Omani primary literature also prefers this documentary approach, eschewing historical and
anthropological detail for close but somewhat decontextualized investigation of particular regional art forms (al-Khusaibi 1985; al-Muwwaytī 1991; al-Shaydī 2008). Urkevich maintains that she does this to avoid “insulting” her interlocutors, and similar constraints were managed by other scholars working in English, including Aisha Bilkhair Khalifa (2006), Majid al-Harthy (2012), and Salwa El-Shawan Castelo-Branco and Dieter Christensen (2009), who worked with local scholars to produce engaged, critical historical and social scientific work.

Christensen and El-Shawan Castelo-Branco’s 2009 monograph, which situates dozens of performance practices in their recent historical and social context in the coastal city of Şoḥār, Oman, is the most important ethnographic source for this dissertation. The main strength of the work is its simultaneous comprehensiveness and attention to ethnographic detail, which includes many direct quotes and excerpts from interviews. The commitment to comprehensiveness is important in basic research in the Arabian Gulf region, which boasts a bewildering number of practices, terms, concepts, and ways of organizing performance, but often leads to many more questions than answers. For example, the razḥa as performed in Şoḥār is considered by locals to be the most emblematic local art form, even though the government has declared a different and relatively unloved form as representative of the region and has prominently patronized its performance to the detriment of the razḥa groups. The investigation of why and under what circumstances this occurred is underdeveloped and is one specific question I hope to answer. More generally, the question of how the government has patronized and disseminated various art forms and thereby impacted developing national political spaces and framed its legitimacy amongst different regions can be addressed in dialogue with this existing work. Lastly, this work, in combination with Musallim al-Kathīrī’s (2005) and Christensen’s (2003) earlier work, provides a good basis for musical analysis that I will extend further and in more detail. In sum, no monograph
exists that focuses directly on a small number of related genres and attempts to historicize and localize them within relevant social mechanics based on anthropological theory.

The second aspect of Middle Eastern anthropology that I critically address is the study of political authority in state contexts, and specifically relations between rulers and ruled in the Arabian Peninsula. I offer an ethnographically informed analysis of what I term a “social mechanism” of legitimation through the directed generosity of rulers and the inducement of reciprocal responses to it. I will address the concept of social mechanisms after the literature review. By “directed generosity” I mean the way that distributions are managed by rulers in order to implement relations of dependency amongst subordinated classes, while also building alliances and mutual support. While historical research has identified this strategy as crucial to maintaining and even expanding a ruler’s sphere of influence as a general Middle Eastern pattern (Karateke and Reinkowski 2005), studies of Bedouin and Peninsular urban groups have explored it more ethnographically (Lancaster 1981; Lancaster and Lancaster 2011; Al-Rasheed 1991). However, few studies have explored what such directed generosity means amongst the ruled. Specifically, little ethnographic research has sought out the way that groups receiving such redistributions think about them, how they find meaning in them, and how they respond. If we recognize that directed generosity is one part of a larger circuit of exchange, then we should expect it to generate a specific response. I identify this response as the performance of praise poetry and collective dance.

This same arrangement has often been considered as an example of patronage-clientage relations. While I argue against this approach in Chapter 3, I nevertheless draw on this literature to explain certain socio-political relations in Oman. Michael Gilsenan’s well-known contribution to Ernest Gellner and John Waterbury’s edited collection *Patrons and Clients in Mediterranean Societies* (1977), entitled “Against Patron-Client Relations,” argued that focusing on the
integrative capacities of such patronage obscured the class relations of unequal power that sustain them. Rather than simply personal relationships or balanced exchanges of goods and services (see for example Campbell 1964), Gilsenan saw patron-client relations in the ‘Akkar mountains of Lebanon as shot through with power, with its implications being dependency and domination. Alex Weingrod (1977), in the same collection, also focused on power relations, but concluded that rather than dismissing personalized relations as the ideological constructions of elites, they might be a way to navigate relations of dependency. “Encounters between patrons and clients, or among patrons themselves,” he concluded,

are highly stylised, ritualised performances, and hence patronage relationships can also be conceptualised as ceremonies of a kind. This is perhaps what [John] Campbell had in mind when he wrote that ‘the role of the patron is to give benefits; that of the client is to honour the patron by accepting dependence’ [Campbell 1964, 259]. To ‘give honour’ is to partake in a ceremonial offering, and hence patronage relationships can be conceptualised as a series of performances. (1977, 50)

Praise, as we will see, is central to these performances. Is a turn to praise not a retreat from class- and power-oriented analyses, however? I argue that it is not—we can recognize both relations of inequality and the deeply personal ties and practices that manifest across class lines within those relations. In fact, this is what gives them such immense cultural importance. Isabelle Rivoal (2012, 2014, 2017), Andrew Shryock (2004, 2008, 2012), and Sally Howell (2001), for example, have argued that relations of hospitality, hosting, and honoring guests furnish a perspective on politics that richly attends to the dynamic tensions manifest in personalized, sociable interactions in the context of sometimes radical class inequality. Following the recent anti-utilitarian turn in Francophone anthropology exemplified by the Mouvement Anti-Utilitariste dans les Sciences Sociales or MAUSS, Rivoal’s research amongst Druze clients in the Shuf of
Lebanon reveals how patron-client relations are never a “duality”: “The understanding of Lebanese politics cannot be exhausted by describing power as it manifests itself in the confessional system and patronage relations, in terms of the control of resources and asymmetry alone” (2012, 17). It is not simply economic inequality that explains relations of clientage and patronage, but the way these relations are normalized, interpreted, internalized, and communicated. Clientage is intensely personal, even quotidian, motivating emotional attachments and desires even as it shapes them. This “return to hospitality” has prompted a special issue in the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* devoted to the theme (2012).

I take the insights developed within these studies to reflect on the way that deeply personalized relations with the state and its proxies can nevertheless manifest within structural relations of profound inequality. In the context of the state-form, however, such personalized relations take on new significance as they are motivated as the basis of claims of sovereignty (Rivoal 2017), and, in the case of Oman, legitimacy. I take this research on visitation, hospitality, and patron-client relations in new directions. Specifically, because I focus on the way the state is brought into these relations, I identify some important differences between hospitality, patronage, and generosity and what these distinctions imply. I argue that the correct way to interpret state-directed giving to state citizens in the Arabian Gulf is not “hospitality,” which is more properly directed at “outsiders,” nor as “patronage,” which implies extra-state political affiliation, but as “generosity.” Peter Lienhardt noted that a common attitude towards foreigners in Kuwait was expressed in the formula *lā taʿī al-ghārib al-ʿāda; hūwa rāyiḥ,* “give the stranger something better than everyday treatment; he will soon be on his way,” which I also found prevalent in Oman.

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6 “On ne peut épuiser la compréhension du politique au Liban en décrivant le pouvoir tel qu’il se manifeste dans le système confessionnel et les relations de patronage sous le seul rapport du contrôle des ressources et de l’asymétrie.”
Generosity is an attribute of leaders that is also an expectation placed on them by the ruled, which impinges directly on the behavior of all parties involved. Rather than leaders showing “hospitality” to their citizens, they are rendered as “generous”—a rendering that is achieved in a praise response.

My research indicates that the response given by the ruled to the rulers is not a kind of tit-for-tat account keeping, but the nurturance of a specific relationship based on mutual, reciprocated obligations: to give and to praise. Contrary to the predictions of “Rentier State” theorists, the absence of taxation does not compel a lack of engagement with the state or a kind of political quiescence (see Mitchell 2013), but in fact motivates a variety of praise responses. Praise, however, is neither simple nor straightforward. Giving and praising do not simply equal one another, match each other, or negate one another, but compel and catalyze one another. The profound emotional states and affective associations developed while singing praise poetry and jointly moving in collective dance are real and poignant, even if they occur in the context of class domination. Similarly, poets do not believe that their poetry falls on deaf ears, but instead fiercely contend that their poetry solves political problems, instructs leaders on how to behave, and pries open miserly fists. Praise poetry, far from sycophancy or money-grubbing, is concrete political practice. Conventional praise responses not only communicate the fulfillment and consequent recognition of state development (coded as generosity) but also serve to render state development and historical patterns of leadership based on generous redistribution as identical. It is in the context of the contemporary oil-state that this relationship of mutual obligations, densely interwoven with personalized relations and class asymmetries, is amplified and universalized to become a core pillar of the legitimation of the state. As Alice Wilson (2016) has shown, the same

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7 See Giacomo and Beblawi 1987, but also updates in al-Farsi 2013 and Hertog 2010.
modes of governance can serve to sustain vastly different forms of socio-political organization, from tribes to state-projects. I see the recognition of generosity through praise as playing an important role in sustaining cycles of redistribution that are themselves a mechanism of political legitimation.

**b. Political and Economic Ethnomusicology**

“I mean, like, nobody owns the stuff [Irish traditional music]. You can’t own this stuff.” (Irish traditional musician, reported in McCann 2001, 92).

I see this dissertation as making critical interventions in ethnomusicological research on political and economic topics by explicitly modeling a political-economic approach to performance that builds on research on music, reciprocity, and the “moral economy” (Carrier 2017; Götz 2015). In this section, I briefly present these terms and my approach while foregrounding recent ethnomusicological literatures that take a similar line.

As a point of departure, we might note that, speaking broadly, most ethnographic approaches in ethnomusicology have committed to both roughly holistic and roughly orthodox notions of “economies” and “politics.” While this is simply practical for research that does not directly critically engage with taken-for-granted political institutions like governments or practices like voting, my argument calls into question some of these common sensical usages by highlighting their deep embeddedness in one another. This research is not unique in this regard, but insofar as my ethnographic data interrogate such approaches, I think it is useful to pick out specific previous engagements with the notion of the “economic” or the “political” as independent categories, without implying any attempt to disaggregate them from their cultural and historical settings.

This dissertation is predicated on two heterodox political-economic notions: reciprocity and the moral economy. Reciprocity at its most basic is concerned with the ways in which actions
compel responses and therefore lead to continued, mutually reinforcing (i.e., reciprocal) action chains.\textsuperscript{8} Linda Molm defines reciprocity as a norm that can be glossed as “the giving of benefits to another in return for benefits received” (Molm 2010, 119) but the inverse (punishments for punishments) also exists. While reciprocity has seen tremendous development as a theoretical concept in anthropology, economics, sociology, psychology, game theory, and other fields, my approach to reciprocity relies mostly on anthropology. Here, reciprocity refers specifically to the non-market exchange of goods, ideas, or labor, governed by a norm that demands the return of benefits extended. For more than a century, reciprocity has been exemplified by the practice of giving, receiving, and returning gifts, as sketched by Marcel Mauss (1923). The gift literature is vast; I examine it more closely in chapter 4. I frame praise and generosity as locked in reciprocal circuits that construct relationships between elite givers and non-elite praisers who are linked by senses of mutual obligation. The construction of a legitimate, well-ordered community is predicated on these inculcated senses of mutuality and inter-reliance that emerge in the acts of giving, receiving, and returning benefits of different types and qualities.

The way that continued reciprocity—that is, the circulation of generosity and praise—helps to construct a community of mutual, contrasting obligations has most often been referred to as a “moral economy” (Carrier 2017; Scott 1976; Thompson 1971). For James Carrier, a “moral economy” is not one in which moral notions circulate or one that seems to have net moral benefits, but is instead one whose reciprocal relations “encourage us to look at economic transactions in terms of relationships and their histories” (2017, 32). Rather than the faceless, anonymous, and profit-maximizing transactions that operate in an admittedly hypothetical market economy,

\textsuperscript{8} This general view is often espoused in sociology: see Gould 2002; Molm 2010; Molm, Collett, and Schaefer 2007; Komter 2007.
transactions in a moral economy are based on trust, obligation, and mutualism. Mutuality and obligation are not simply structural features of something called a “moral economy,” but are instead produced by the continued norm-governed interactions of differently constituted individuals and groups. Reciprocity and the moral economy are linked concepts: we might say that moral economies are those economic networks that foreground relations of reciprocity and obligation. Profit and market logics still operate in a moral economy but are attenuated by human sociality, norms of reciprocity, and the centrality of obligations. In this sense, I identify a reciprocal relation occurring across class lines in a southeast Arabian context as a moral economy that manages the movement of goods and praise. What praise does in the Omani context, I argue, is highlight and commend the reciprocal elements of this moral economy, encouraging their continued salience. Praise is a bulwark against the collapse of a moral economy into a market economy.

Before turning to the research in ethnomusicology to which this dissertation is indebted, we should briefly address some more orthodox economic approaches in the field. Much recent explicitly economic ethnomusicology is dedicated to understanding the role of music as a commodity within certain “markets,” which are often considered to be coextensive with an “economy” in a certain country. I am thinking particularly of the work done by Georgina Born and her interlocutors in the *MusDig* project: *Music, Digitisation, Mediation: Towards Interdisciplinary Music Studies*, and studies of particular “music economies” (such as Perullo 2011 in urban Tanzania, Beaster-Jones 2016 in India), but also the increased interest in intellectual property rights (best exemplified by the *SAGE Handbook in Intellectual Property* of 2014). This research effectively studies musical products as they circulate within narrowly defined state capitalist legal

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networks, which are taken to be an important context for studying the circulation of music, rights, and money. This is important research, but given the tremendous variety and historical time-depth of human musical practices, it is surely not the whole story—and to be sure, these scholars make no such claim. However, the study of music and “the economy” is often presumed to be a study of a capitalist music market, with musical products as commodities.

Further, we might note two deeply linked problems with this presupposition of capitalist economies. The first is that the “national economy” is not a natural state of affairs but a deeply managed ideological construction that is coterminous with the rise of states and that therefore requires historicization.\textsuperscript{10} If there are broadly analogous processes occurring in various economies, it is unlikely to be the result of anything but the imposition of certain legal frameworks, economic modeling and tracking technologies, and the like. The “economy” imagined by this research is often overly systematized and circumscribed as a “market”. That is, this understanding of “the economy” posits a universality for global capitalism and its concomitant social effects that it does not have while it simultaneously excludes or effaces other forms of economic logic.

The second problem is that such analyses operate with “music” functioning straightforwardly a “commodity.” While some scholars have investigated commodification as a process (notably Taylor 2016, 2017), accepting the commodity status of music as a given may discourage our ethnomusicological imagination. Taking reciprocity and moral economy approaches helps to show us how objects and performances do not necessarily emerge as commodities nor are they destined to become them. They are transformed into commodities. By eliding this process, or by assuming markets, or by ignoring other economic logics, we risk what

feminist Marxist scholars J. K. Gibson-Graham have called “capitalocentrism,” that is, a bias whereby

forms of economy (not to mention noneconomic aspects of social life) are often understood primarily with reference to capitalism: as being fundamentally the same as (or modeled upon) capitalism, or as being deficient or substandard imitations; as being opposite to capitalism; as being the complement of capitalism; as existing in capitalism's space or orbit. (1996: 6)

Capitalocentrism renders “capitalism” as a totalizing system, a powerful and completed imposition of logics of market relations that have swamped and replaced all others. As Gibson-Graham have argued, “the economy” is in fact a dense, historically and culturally contingent collection of practices in which only some are governed by market-derived logics. Other logics of giving, exchange, sharing, communality, debt, sacrifice, theft, care, distribution, obligation, offering, and exploitation are always operating alongside and amongst market relations (1996).

Against this prevailing logic, Mayfair Mei-Hui Yang’s work on what she terms “economic hybridity” in Wenzhou, China offers a way to understand how “indigenous economies are not always plowed under with the introduction of capitalism but may even experience renewal and pose a challenge to capitalist principles” (Yang 2000, 477). Yang’s investigation of ritual economies that involve the conspicuous accumulation and destruction of capital in rural China (similar to “potlatches” amongst Kwakwaka’wakw nobles) challenges the notion that capitalist logics fully replace other preexisting ones (2000; 2007). Yang and Gibson-Graham not only demonstrate that reductive, capitalocentric economism and the “Eurocentric assumption that the Midas touch of capitalism immediately destroys local indigenous economies and cultures” (Yang 2000, 481) fails to describe our actual lives, but it also fails to imagine economics otherwise.
I want to be clear that I don’t think that research into the circulation of music objects within some circumscribed capitalist sphere is useless or trivial. It is emphatically not. The problematic I am picking out here is that such research *takes too much for granted* about “music,” its commodity status, and its relation to “the economy.” Rejecting this premise, ethnomusicologist Jayson Beaster-Jones asks us to consider “what makes music as a commodity different from, say, soap?” (2014, 336). Despite “not being as different as we might hope,” Beaster-Jones concludes that the experience of music and the *use* of music, along with its potential to “overwhelm” exchange, are two features to which we can concretely point (336-37). While we may quibble with that, the more important point here is that “music is only *ambivalently* a commodity,” a status that “must be enforced” with “rigorous policing, lobbying, legislation, and enforcement” (337). Anna Tsing shows precisely this enforcement and management of commodities as she traces the metamorphosis of the *matsutake* mushroom from gift to commodity to gift as it circulates around the Pacific (2015). This is a pivotal insight. It is not that we have failed to imagine the various ways music *can circulate* (“as commodities” versus “as gifts”) in or as “economies” but that we have failed to interrogate the conditions of possibility that undergird that circulation. One of those conditions has been the violent enforcement of capitalist social relations as they are folded into the ideological and material construction of the state form and its transnational legal frameworks.

Gibson-Graham and Yang’s shared intervention is an important one if we are to try to understand reciprocal circuits of praise and obligation as not just reducible to rational actors exchanging tit-for-tat benefits, or as a simple manifestation of capitalist market logics, or as a mere puppet show of power since “gift economies” have historically been entirely replaced by “market economies” (Bowie 1998). Without a robust alternative model—say, reciprocity and the moral economy—and a good reason to think that capital relations might not explain all the facts—the
critique of capitalocentrism—the tendency to explain praise relationships as basically the purchase of consent seems just obviously true. It is not. So let’s sketch out such an alternative here.

One way that economic anthropologists and ethnomusicologists have come to imagine the economic otherwise is to turn back to Marcel Mauss’s insightful research on “the gift” presented in his *Essai sur le don* published in 1923 (Buenconsejo 2002; McCann 2001; Morcom 2015a, 2015b; Sykes 2018). A similar move has been to evoke the notion of “moral” exchange that is tentatively opposed to market practices (Hoffman 2002; Petrović and Hofman 2018; Potuoğlu-Cook 2006; Tausig 2014). While in both anthropology and ethnomusicology this has often manifested in a tendency to invoke “egalitarianism” or “primitive communism,” in which reciprocal relations of gifting or music-making are devoid of structures of power and class, feminist scholarship has shown this conception to be quite false (Kisliuk 1998, among many).

While there are many examples of this appeal to “egalitarianism,” we can focus on more fruitful analyses here. Ethnomusicologist Anthony McCann, for example, has argued that the traditional Irish “session”—a collective performance of “at least three people who play jigs, reels, hornpipes, planxties, and so on in heterophonic union” (2001, 91)—“conforms readily to the idea of a ‘gift cycle’ ” (93). Drawing on Lewis Hyde’s (1983) application of gift-thinking to art production, McCann argues that the free movement of authored music, learning, and expertise within sessions is a form of “de-commodification” in which tunes “written as commercial, commodified money-making works” are nevertheless transformed into “gifts to be distributed freely among musicians in a context of tradition and community” (McCann 2001, 92-3; see also Kaul 2007). While McCann develops this position into one that posits Irish traditional music as a “common property resource” (96), we can see how the concept of “tradition,” so often maligned as an ossifying, museumifying discourse which renders certain practices, attitudes, and relations
as “non-” or “pre-modern,” might actually be a social relation of a profoundly anti-capitalist nature. It is perhaps no wonder that “tradition” is so often seen as a source of backwardness. Nevertheless, as Ian Hayes argues, even such self-consciously “traditional” North Atlantic musicians must “strike a balance” between “sharing and charging” for musical performances (2011).

Rather than positing traditional music as a protected reserve, shielded from capital relations and “market forces,” ethnomusicologist Anna Morcom has studied various Tibetan musicians’ integration into the “hegemonic world system” as “non-linear and inconsistent” (2015b, 293). “The capitalist nature of a given form of music or music making,” she writes, “is not simply a factor of monetisation or marketisation or technological or stylistic format and it cannot be judged in isolation” (293). Instead, as she shows, various logics, obligations, and values motivate Tibetan performers to give music away, use it for charity, or frame their performances as “community work” even as they engage with it as a money-making enterprise (288). Such work turns on the expectation that singers sing “primarily for the community rather than individual gain” (289). Morcom sees this as an example of Polanyi’s notion of an “embedded economy,” one in which economic activity is constrained and delimited by non-economic processes—for Tibetans, the experience of exile. For Morcom, tracing the impact of “capitalism” in music relies on a three-layered approach consisting of “a lowest subsistence layer, the middle layer of market exchange, and the capitalist layer of the anti-market on top” (292). The “embeddedness” of Tibetan pop music in wider communal engagements creates an “air pocket” which selectively separates it from total inclusion in alienating capitalist relations, complicating straightforward narratives of the total subsumption of music making into global capitalist flows.

Monograph-length studies that analyze musical objects as “gifts” are fewer. I’ll discuss two notable attempts: José S. Buenconsejo’s ethnography *Songs and Gifts at the Frontier: Person*

Buenconsejo’s ethnography of Manobo possession rituals—which include “ritual song, dance, and speech”—shows how reciprocal relations do more than “perform formalized sociability,” but are basic to “envoicing” Manobo subjectivity (xi). Contesting the straightforward, utilitarian reading of Mauss that holds that gifts are given to receive gifts in return, Buenconsejo shows that Manobo gifting is best explained as a kind of sacrifice. For Manobo, “gift giving goes beyond ‘getting something in return.’ Instead, it is sacrificial because it is meant to be "eaten," distributed, destroyed, or shared… To give is to become a sociable being, one capable of sharing gifts with others because those others are also human beings like oneself” (300). Exchange, manifested in the movement of food, songs, and possession, makes persons and makes them equal. Through careful reading of Manobo ritual texts and contexts, Buenconsejo diagrams deeply shared values of reciprocity enmeshed in Manobo subjectivity and how these values have been “confronted” by Visayan lowland settlers, missionaries, money economies, and logging. He examines such figures as the sacrificed “anarchic pig,” the sharing of symbolically dense foods, and the role of literal and figurative sweat in indexing “togetherness” as the ritual, embodied, and symbolic manifestation of proper reciprocal Manobo sociality (50ff., 64). The narrative retelling of myths called sugilen not only relays messages like “‘one receives if one gives’ and that ‘those in a top position who will not participate in prestations now will later on be in the low position of the Other World,’ ” but also inculcates senses of the place of Manobo in the greater cosmos, kalibutan (64). Buenconsejo concludes that these kinds of narratives relate the “Manobo epistemology of the person: one that is inherently sociable because s/he is naturally predisposed to share food with his kin who is a katunged (i.e., one who is literally in front of the self). It is
shameful to be otherwise” (295). To be kin, in Manobo terms, is to share food without question or compromise—an implicit baseline reciprocity that is manifested and disseminated in ritual performance.

The increasing imposition of market logics has caused some Manobo to modify ritual practice in order to build “strategies for circumventing that material inequality” (295). The increasing saliency of market relations and material inequality were heralded by the arrival of Visayan outsiders to the Agusan valley in the 1950s and necessitated a response in ritual form. In his studies of newly hybrid ritual forms, Buenconsejo argues for a conception of communication that is undertaken “to recreate a community, pulling what is distant into the circuit of affinity” (2002, 240). “What is distant” might include Manobo persons, animals, deities, Visayans, and spirits, *diwata*, from whom Manobo learn how to share, how to live, and how to make community. Communication in dance, ritual, song, speech, and sacrifice pulls individuals into social relations, which are implicitly predicated on sharing and communality. The distant are drawn into gifting relations that bring them into safe contact with the Manobo. As spirit mediums take on the roles of the figures in myths and contemporary social life, they “sacrifice” themselves as a kind of social gift in order to (re)produce social harmony in the face of social disharmony of various types. Communication in ritual “bridges the experience of forces from strange distant realms outside the community” by incorporating them in Manobo bodies, cosmologies, and social relations (353). Gift relations achieve a similar end—they bring outside beings (spirits, Manobo kin, Visayan elites, missionaries, anarchic pigs) into humane communal relations. These gifts are often encoded in ritual song and dance, and so therefore *operate* on social and spiritual relations:

> the repeated act of giving ritual gifts to [spirits] does not place human beings in a fixed subordinate position. On the contrary, gifts can undermine the structural asymmetrical context of "dominance" and "subordination." They make participants— spirits and humans— acquire equal values. (353)
Rituals “viscerally [reinstitute] the notion of reciprocity and interpersonal exchange” amongst humans, spirits, elites, and affines by asserting their commonality as partners in exchange (349). Confronted by predatory elites, international capital, and material inequality, ritual forcefully asserts the continued relevance of a moral economy amongst the Manobo.

Buenconsejo’s careful study itself tries to bridge political economic and symbolic, structuralist, and critical approaches. His exploration of a Manobo moral economy is one of the most detailed and rigorous I have yet read. There are two broad findings from Buenconsejo’s work that inform my analysis. The first is that while Manobo gifts may be intended to be sacrifices—a major way Buenconsejo contrasts Manobo gifts with Mauss’s conception—they nevertheless compel returns. Even if they are eaten, destroyed, gifts are not necessarily important as quantifiable objects that cue a later return, calibrated by some utilitarian maximization. Rather, they constitute both a social relationship and mark the giver as a human, one with whom relations can be made. However, Buenconsejo’s characterization of Mauss’s claim as a utilitarian calculus to which the Manobo gift-sacrifice is a corrective is a misreading of Mauss. Rather, anthropological theorization on Mauss’s gift has deliberately shown how it is the relationships formed in gift exchange that are as important as any objects or values moved between persons. More positively, however, Buenconsejo opens up a path for understanding how gift exchange might not always be a simple recapitulation of dominance and subordination, of magister and minister. Gifting relations, and the capacity to instantiate them, might draw participants into recognizing their basic equality as persons and as gifters. In Chapter 4, I try to show how the specific performance of razha as praise upsets straightforward readings of dependency on elite distribution.

Jim Sykes’s The Musical Gift: Sonic Generosity in Post-War Sri Lanka (2018) takes a different tack. Rather than focusing on social relations, he focuses on the gift’s role in care,
protection, and peace-making. Sykes argues that “some sounds are meant to be given… as a technology of care… [as] ways of helping others with sound” (2018, 15). “Musical giving,” Sykes offers, “is perhaps the major missing actor from music studies” (16). “Musical gifts,” such as those prestations made and given by the Beravā drummer caste of Sinhala Buddhist ritual masters, are “given as public offerings to encourage deities to protect people” and to cement certain kinds of relations and obligations of protection between humans, gods, Buddhas, communities, demons, and animals (19). Beravā “drum speech” prestations are gifts given to achieve something: protection, care, relationships, access. He terms this “sonic efficacy”: the capacity for music to do things in the world. At the same time, these gifts circulate amongst many different social (and supernatural) groups in Sri Lanka. This reality directs Sykes to “think broadly about various Sri Lankan aesthetic systems that utilize sonic generosity” in order to understand how shared musical resources can become caught up in processes of ethnic differentiation (47). He claims that sonic generosity as manifested in a “sonic gift economy” (7) has been historically obscured by a “distinction between ‘the monetary economy’ and ‘the arts’ reinforced by British colonial liberalism and postcolonial ethnonationalism” (12). Sri Lankan sonic practices of various kinds came to be defined as “music” in the Eurocentric sense, and so were transformed from a “sonic gift” into an expression of certain static, bounded, and individualized identities. Much of Sykes’s theorization is, in fact, concerned with upending the “liberal aesthetic” construal of music as being important only to building and expressing identities, not as political action, not as nurturing or caring for others, and not acting as a gift. “Musical giving is ignored,” Sykes argues, “because of the centrality to the modern global imagination of the idea that music is a form of personal and communal expression” over and above anything else (17). This serves to bifurcate musical
practices from political and economic ones, which prompts Sykes to conclude that “the arts exist in economies but are not typically considered to be economies” (17).

There remain lingering issues with Sykes’s argument, similar in shape to those manifested in earlier egalitarian approaches. From the outset, there are many scholars who consider music to be an “economy” of one sort or another: say, as an economy of emotion or aesthetics (Jarjour 2018), of moral sentiments (Hoffman 2002), as overlapping systems of exchange (Quintero 2018), or just as a “music economy” (Perullo 2011). So it’s not a problem of recognizing that music circulates within certain prescribed networks, but rather a problem of conflating that circulation with market economies. Are there no other ways to impel the circulation of sounds? Obviously, there are: as Sykes points out, sonic gifts circulate between humans, animals, demons, Buddhas, and deities predicated on beseeching protection—and yet even then he ultimately posits that Sri Lankan “musical gifts” circulate within a “sonic gift economy” that might be separate from or folded into “the” capitalist “monetary economy.” However, this splitting of “the economy” into two “economies”—say, one motivated by the gift and one motivated by the market (pace Gregory 1982, see Bloch and Parry 1989)—has been specifically challenged by much recent research in economic anthropology.11 Buenconsejo might be read as pursuing the same split, between exchange that makes persons and exchange that alienates them. Rendering Sykes’ “musical gift” or Buenconsejo’s “sacrificial gift” as an economy that is at least tentatively drawn against “the global capitalist economy” fails to recognize how “the economy” already contains an incredible diversity of relations beyond, beneath, and behind those organized by the market, as shown by Gibson-Graham, Yang, and others. Surely analyzing something as “an economy” does not show

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how it runs counter to a “monetary economy.” As we have learned from Morcom and McCann, diverse logics of exchange and the material realities of obligation, community, and inequality that constrain them are tightly interwoven. Musicians and ritualists draw on and are compelled by these various opportunities and constrictions.

The most considerable oversight in Sykes’s invocation of “the gift,” however, is his failure to recognize the potential of gifting relations to produce dependency by sustaining economic and social asymmetries, especially in state spaces. Buenconsejo accounts for this potential but does not demonstrate its negotiation in musical or ritual life, rather relying on his understanding of the “sacrificial gift” to eliminate this potential. For Sykes, “musical gifts” seem to circulate freely amongst elites and non-elites, rulers and ruled in Sri Lanka, because there is almost no attention to questions of class, power relations, or state/elite domination—fundamental features of any “anarchist (ethno)musicology” that I would understand (2018, 47). Reciprocal systems are not innocent systems. I follow this thread very closely through the literature of the Middle East and within the anthropology of the state.

While a few ethnomusicologists have framed their problematic in terms of reciprocity, more have usefully invoked the notion of a moral economy as a way of explaining the tense relationships between music production, money, obligation, market logics, and community. While most ethnomusicologists have invoked a moral economy to mean a domain in which moral sentiments circulate (Hoffmann 2002; Petrović and Hofman 2018; Potuoğlu-Cook 2006), others have invoked the more specific anthropological notion or something like it (Cooper 2015; Miller 2002; Morcom 2015a, 2015b; Tausig 2014). Katherine Hoffman, for example, has modeled Berber women’s song poetry genres (tizrrarin and tinḏdamin) in the Anti-Atlas of Morocco as a “moral economy” (2002, 510). While she does not draw on the economic or anthropological literature on
moral economies, she points out similar processes: the sung poetry is “uncommodified” (512), it trades in moral commentary, and it sustains relationships between participants. Benjamin Tausig, on the other hand, directly invokes the notion of “moral economies” in his discussion of moral dynamics in music making and monetary compensation at Red Shirt protests in Thailand (2014). Tausig takes the example of Mii, a mor lam musician, as a case to examine manifestations of a “musical morality” in the face of neoliberal reform, money-making in market settings, and teacher-student dynamics (263). Mii negotiated his moral commitments—to students, both Thai and foreign, to “provincial culture”—in the midst of the Red Shirt protests and neoliberal developments in Thai society that opened up new spaces for money making as well as moral peril (269-71). Here, Tausig hints at the capacity of preexisting moral forms to retain their shape and their ability to induce behavior in the face of sometimes overwhelming neoliberal change—a critique of capitalocentrism as manifested in neoliberal myth-making.

Adjacent to research that shows how non-market-based practices (like reciprocity) or certain comportments and relationships (like moral sentiments and obligations) co-exist with market logics is research on alternative, non-state-based political modalities. There are two literatures that I think have been very effective in this way. The first emphasizes the radical potential of art to articulate, facilitate, or imagine non- or extra-state political interactions, and the second shows how music and performance has constituted a primary political activity before and during the rapid expansion of the capitalist state form.

The first literature has found its most emphatic and convincing expression in dance studies (Graff 1997; Kowal, Siegmund, and Martin 2015; Martin 1998; Mills 2017; Thompson 2014). Dancer and theorist Randy Martin crystalized the capacity of dance to sharpen our perception of “a proliferation of political activity throughout the social fabric and not simply confined to what
are formally considered to be political institutions” (1998, 2). While Martin draws our attention to dance’s potential to carve out new political spaces, others have emphasized the ways in which dance questions normative understandings of expressive politics. Dana Mills theorizes studies of political dance in *Dance and Politics* (2017) as vacillating between “the weak reading of political dance—the use of dance to rearticulate the meaning of ideas discussed in verbal language—and the strong reading of political dance—dance expressing the meaning of political ideas independently of verbal language” (2017, 25). Strong readings of political dance show how dance can become a “source of possibility” for participants and spectators, as Ellen Graff (1997) showed in her studies of collective dance and Leftist political organizing in New York from 1928-42.

The second literature is sparse but deeply suggestive. Here, I examine historical and contemporary studies of varieties of performance that have constituted a basic political activity in polities other than contemporary states. These are, in effect, studies that trace the incorporation of historically functional musico-political practices into the international capitalist state-system, the juxtaposition of musical forms of recognizing authority, or the historical roles of performances, instruments, and sounds to serve particular political orders. Since these studies operate on the claim that sound is/was political practice, they are often historical.

Damascus Kafumbe’s *Tuning the Kingdom: Kawuugulu Musical Performance, Politics, and Storytelling in Buganda* (2018) presents *Kawuugulu*, a drum ensemble closely associated with the Baganda king, or *kabaka*, as a form of political action which predates the expansion of British colonialism and postcolonial state-building processes. Kafumbe argues that *kawuugulu* performances “articulate the very means by which Buganda and its society manage themselves” insofar as *kawuugulu* performance deals with the linked political domains of “kinship, clanship, and kingship” (7). In its role as a royal ensemble, *kawuugulu* was tasked with entertaining,
educating, celebrating, and even “protecting” the kabaka—a duty that was unfulfilled when the Ugandan government attacked and abolished the Kingdom of Buganda in 1966-67, killing performers and destroying musical instruments (25). State violence targeted music-makers and instruments in Uganda precisely because they were political “agents,” in Kafumbe’s terms (41-42). Kafumbe shows that kawuugulu has functioned politically within and between Baganda clans as well as fulfilling obligations to the kabaka. By focusing on such ensemble performances, the Butiko clan that performs on kawuugulu, and other objects of the royal regalia, Kafumbe shows that this social arrangement of political musical practice “allows” kawuugulu “to manage, structure, model, and legitimize a collaborative relationship between the kabaka and his subjects” (62). The kawuugulu and its performers are clearly a basic political activity in Buganda, through which the Butiko clan “speaks for all clans… and also to all clans” (79).

While Kafumbe shows how a particular drum ensemble is a crucial site in which the political operates in the Lake Region of Africa, musicologists, especially of the Renaissance and Baroque, have produced several useful studies that present music both as an expression of a certain political order and as a political activity that links ideals of royal authority to musical practice (Feldman 2010; Heller 2004). Katherine Butler’s Music in Elizabethan Court Politics (2015) asks “how and why was music useful” within this royal political order (6). In 1575, “Court musicians William Byrd and Thomas Tallis claimed that music was ‘indispensable to the state,,'” likely drawing on “Plato’s notion that the character of the state could be moulded by the modes and rhythms that were permitted” within it (6). Similarly, music might also “inspire virtue” in the monarch, or persuade them to take good counsel, just as much as it might be used for manipulation (10 ff.). Butler concludes by noting three ways in which musical performance was concrete political practice for Elizabethans: “first as an audible harmony comparable to political concord;
second as a sign of education, social status, and even virtue (if correctly used); and third as a means of persuasion” (11). These three forms of music-making as politics can be found in many other times and places: performed music as an instantiation of cosmic harmony animated performance in 17th-century Spain (Gonzalez 2015) as much as it did Ancient China (Brindley 2012). To these, however, we must add music as praise, which has functioned as a mode of political engagement in the Middle East (where it has mostly been traced in literary works) and in sub-Saharan Africa, where its musicality and oral performance has been more appreciated (Omojola 2011; Waterman 1990).

The upshot to all this is that our deliberate investigations of music and the economy or and politics should not assume the economy or politics are generalizable domains. I want to conclude by pointing out two pitfalls that seem all too common: the assumption that “Politics” looks like the politics that occurs in capitalist states of the last hundred years or so, and that investigation of music in an economy is investigation of music as it relates to capital. I think we need to tread a narrow path between making *everything* into politics and too strictly defining politics to what conforms to conventional notions of the political. Similarly, we should be wary of slipping between talking about economies and interrogations of capitalism as a historical phenomenon. Neither of these things is identical to the other. Avoiding these pitfalls requires rigorous historicizing, a dogged commitment to ethnographic specificity, an open ear, and a willingness to be both surprised and corrected. More concretely, we should recognize how music functions as both a commodity and as a way to build relationships of obligation, responsibility, and care that constrain the mechanical grind of the market.

c. The Cultivation of People in Song: The Ethnomusicology of the State
As a topic in social science, “the state” has inspired scholars to develop a dense and complicated literature. The state was an early interest as well, occupying some of the pioneers of the discipline (see Chapter 6). Rather than simply adopting a productive research agenda, this review will present some substantive critiques of the major positions and propose a novel rearrangement of them. Ethnomusicology and anthropology have often engaged with the state, usually because it is seen as the proper arena of “politics” (which I challenged above), but also as a patron of arts, a colonizing power predicated on white supremacy and genocide, a “fiction,” a set of institutions, a vanishing organizing power predicated on territory, an irrelevancy due to transnational media connections, and so on. While I will save a fuller review of this literature for chapter 6, I want to at least sketch my approach to “the state” here as both a material and ideological project. Assessing the “state” as a project, or as being composed of various projects, has produced considerable insight while acknowledging the simultaneous concrete existence of the state, the capacity of its elites to “improvise” (Jeffrey 2014), and its necessarily unfinished character. Further, grasping the “state” as a complex of sometimes contradictory or unaligned material and ideological projects shows how music, sound, and performance can abut, adjoin, and sometimes align with state power.

This dissertation began as a study of the contemporary authoritarian state in the Arabian Peninsula and the role of certain performance practices in legitimating its rule. In studying the multiple social and class relations, histories, ideals of authority, and aesthetics that animate this relation, I was drawn in several directions: towards praise, generosity, dependency, anti-political performances, notions of practicality, and Islamic legal discourses on music, amongst others. I approach all these topics as unfolding in conjuncture with “the state,” which I take to be an unfolding social project that attempts to organize, stabilize, and perpetuate social relations of
inequality between dominant class minorities and dominated class majorities through material strategies such as the centralization of bureaucracy, legal systems, delimitations of acceptable politics, regimes of audibility, and organized violence. “States” are not simply objects, or structures, or systems, or organizations, but are historically realized through lived, shifting, and “improvised” tactics, modes of governance, and patterns of class interaction that largely aim to concentrate power amongst the ruling classes. They are simultaneously the fixation of unequal social relations and the ideological strategies that mask this practice by rendering it intelligible as a social object.

The state “has always been the patrimony of some privileged class or other,” Mikhail Bakunin noted, “a priestly class, an aristocratic class, a bourgeois class… but it is absolutely necessary for the salvation of the state that there should be some privileged class devoted to its preservation” (Bakunin 1972, 318).¹² This concentration of power in a state is never complete, however, because states exist amongst other states: “whoever says state necessarily says a particular limited state, doubtless comprising… many different peoples and countries, but excluding still more… consequently whoever says state says a state, and whoever says a state affirms by that the existence of other states” (316). The coexistence of states, for Bakunin, is a virtual guarantee of “competition, jealousy, truceless and endless war,” conquest, and “conquered peoples, enslaved and in bondage” (316). This unavoidable conflict is grounded on the “supremacy of state morality” over particular, local, human interests, so much so that states can only co-exist

¹² The broadly “anarchist” understanding of society as composed of “ruling classes” and “subordinate” or “ruled classes” has often been critiqued as idealistic, simplistic, or unable to capture the complexity of actual class identity. This is probably true. It is also true that those who rule are also very often social elites (Khan 2012), either being drawn from this stratum or entering into it predicated on rulership, especially when combined with capitalist markets. Further, much of the work of rule is engaged across this “class divide.” As I argue in chapter 6, the clearest way to address this weakness is with Gramsci’s notion of state hegemony.
for a short time (316). States, ideologically represented as territorial units, necessarily rupture “the universal solidarity of humanity” (316). “State morality” compels the ruling classes to “see to it that all its subjects think and, above all, act in total compliance with the patriotic morality of the State,” which construes the building and maintenance of the state as being “the supreme objective” (316-7). Here, Bakunin succinctly links the material social relations of rule to its legitimating ideological tactics. He probably overstates the case. What is important is to emphasize that this legitimation is profoundly empowered by the concentration of social power and material resources within the hands of the ruling classes, whatever shape this power takes.

The scholar whose approach both best addresses the ideological construction of the “state” as a monolithic entity and interrogates its material basis of unequal social relations is Antonio Gramsci. Gramsci is useful here because, while Bakunin and other anarchist thinkers effectively and radically diagnose the state form, they have relatively little to say about why and how it is legitimated amongst the ruled, how it manufactures consent, how it coaxes and cajoles the populations it claims to behave in certain ways and to accept “the terms of order” (Robinson 1983)—in Foucault’s parlance, how they “conduct the conduct” of the ruled. If we accept an anarchist definition of the state above, the question of how that system of inequality is maintained becomes crucial.

This is precisely the question that Gramsci’s elaboration of hegemony seeks to answer (Crehan 2002, 104). Gramsci shows how inequality is sustained by the capacity of the ruling classes to employ a wide range of tactics to perpetuate their dominance: in one case, state elites might jail dissidents or murder drummers, in another they might build a highway or dam or protect a border from an enemy, in another they might overwhelm dissent with gifts, while in another they might implement piecemeal reforms or boast their defense of abstract notions like “the people,”
“law and order,” or “free markets.” All these strategies draw subordinate classes into recognizing the tacit topologies of power under state rule: its “general direction,” or “common sense.” For Gramsci, the “‘spontaneous’ consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant influential group” is just as much produced by the state as it is produced by civil society (1971, 12, 263). These strategies function as yet another arena where the putative divisions between classes are obscured, as well as providing another way that state elites can impose their “general direction” on human life. One example of this is the ways that Omani state agents have targeted local civic performance groups for registration, requiring renewal every year. The Ministry of Heritage not only requires that groups register with the state before performing at state celebrations, but also uses these registrations to monitor their activity, edit their song texts, and delimit their performance repertoire. While I found this somewhat troubling, I ultimately had to acquiesce to my Omani friends who told me it was “better that we register than not doing razha at all” (nasaggal al-yawm 'ashān 'āshwālinā min innā mā narzah b'ad).

With this notion of hegemony, it becomes much clearer how praise poetry can legitimate the political order of authoritarian regimes when ideals of authority rest partially on generous giving. Praise poetry, especially public, collective praise poetry, is rendered from subordinates to rulers, that is, across class “boundaries.” It forms a link, a tenuous and temporary alliance, that might be strengthened or weakened over time. While it can be strengthened in various ways, the imposition of a general order is never complete, since it is routinely demystified by subordinated classes (Scott 1985, 305ff.). For example, as E.P. Thompson has pointed out, “even ‘liberality’ and ‘charity’ may be seen as calculated acts of class appeasement… what is (from above) an ‘act of giving’ is (from below) an ‘act of getting’” (1978, 150). Interpretations differ based on class
position, but competing ideologies do not just exist, they are actively cultivated and disseminated. Gifts are neither fully explained as “how elites intend [them] to be seen—as disinterested liberality” nor as how the critical analyst reads them—as “a cynical disguise for appropriation” (Scott 1985, 309). Instead, gifts are a constituting medium of social relations, whose character is deeply sensitive to context and manipulation.

As James Scott argued in his study of class conflict and hegemony in a Malaysian town he named Sedaka, morally valenced stories that circulate across and between classes are “attempts to create and maintain a certain view of what decent, acceptable human behavior ought to be” (1985, 23). “The implicit purpose of these competing ideologies is not just to convince but to control,” he continued, “better stated, they aim to control by convincing. To the extent that they shape behavior, they achieve a class purpose as well” (23). While Scott recognizes the vulnerability to elites to “slander, gossip, character assassination,” he overlooks another potential “weapon of the weak”: praise.

Praise weakly exploits the very narrative that elites insist is true—that elites are generous and hence moral leaders—by asking them to “put up or shut up.” More important is that praise is not an element of state hegemony that can be modeled as a consequence of elite failures to effectively coopt, coerce, and constrain the available actions of the subordinated (Scott 1990, 90ff.). Often, hegemony is tacitly understood as an equilibrium that maximizes exploitation while minimizing the potential for direct violent reprisals from the exploited. However, this understanding fails to account for how the subordinated actively, not just reactively, shape the contours of a given hegemonic order, as Bowie (1998) and Greenhouse (2012) point out. In the Omani case, I think that praise poetry can function for and against the prevailing political “terms of order” by strategically manipulating certain axioms of legitimated domination. Rather than
actively questioning that order, since, as Scott has noted, “most acts of power from below…largely observe the ‘rules’ even if their objective is to undermine them,” praise plays parts of the system against itself (Scott 1990, 93). It is a tool, a tactic, an attempt, a mechanism—an effort to shape the behavior of elites. It is an active practice of training elites to be members of the moral economy from which they claim their legitimation. Praise may be one way that the subordinated work a given system of exploitation to their “minimum disadvantage” (Hobsbawm 1973, 3ff.).

d. A brief word on social mechanisms

To conclude this overview, I want to briefly address a key theoretical device in my analysis. It is the concept of the “social mechanism.” The concept of the social mechanism was first sketched by Herdström and Swedberg (1998) but has been expanded by many others. Sociologist Neil Gross summarizes the social mechanism as “a more or less general sequence or set of social events or processes analyzed at a lower order of complexity or aggregation by which—in certain circumstances—some cause X tends to bring about some effect Y in the realm of human social relations” (2009, 364). I use social mechanisms in what Daniel Steel has called “process tracing” (2004, 67). “Process tracing,” writes Steel, “consists in presenting evidence for the existence of several social practices that, when linked together, produce a chain of causation from one variable to another” (67). As I trace the role of praise in compelling generosity, and generosity’s potential for producing dependency, I show how certain pragmatic features of performance address this danger. Tracing the relation between ideals (like what makes a good leader), practices that define social relationships (like generosity), and the social effects these practices have leads me to speculate on mechanisms that might plausibly explain such regularities. I hypothesize two specific mechanisms (described in chapters 3 and 4) and demonstrate their historical stability and the results of their joint operation.
This dissertation, my biases, and my research methods

I am a white, cisgendered native English-speaking man that was born in a smallish city in western Massachusetts and lived most of my childhood in urban and rural settings. I was raised in a neighborhood of what used to be termed “ethnic whites” (Irish, Polish, Portuguese, and Italian, mostly) and Puerto Ricans, who liked one another mostly because they were all Catholic. Nearly all of my early communal memories were associated with my Parish, including schooling. My father, whose father was Irish and Yankee and mother was French-Canadian, grew up in the same city. His Yankee ancestors were land-owning farmers in a nearby rural area and his Irish ancestors, who spoke Irish well into the twentieth century, were carpenters and factory workers. My mother, Italian and Irish-German, grew up near Albany. Her father and grandmother emigrated together to the United States from southern Italy, while her Irish-German side had arrived in New York City about a generation earlier. My parents, two brothers, and I lived in a duplex with my uncle while my parents worked in a chain bookstore. Later, when my father got a job in IT and my mother attended community college to become an registered nurse, we were forced to move to a more rural area.

I think the move, which happened around the year 2000, was personally very alienating for me, which is useful for an ethnographer. The change in social world was drastic. In a mostly WASP-y protestant farm town, I learned that everyone wasn’t Catholic and that not everyone wanted cannolis for dessert. Obviously, the attacks on the World Trade Center on 9/11 and the subsequent imperialist war-crime attacks on Afghanistan and Iraq were of tremendous importance, but I wasn’t aware enough at the time to do anything but to try and keep informed. My later studies at The University of Massachusetts, Amherst introduced me to Arabic and anthropology, while my musical background led me to investigate the Middle East’s various art traditions. Many
anthropologists of the Middle East note that studying the Arab world was “in” for a while due to the amount of government funding for language study and research. I didn’t benefit from this until I received a “Critical Language Scholarship” to study Arabic the summer before I began my graduate study in ethnomusicology. I received an email from the State Department asking if I’d prefer to study in Morocco, Jordan, Tunis, Egypt, or Oman. I knew that I didn’t want to study in Morocco or Egypt. I wanted to study somewhere that was not like those places. I chose Oman as a first choice and Jordan as a second.

Visiting and learning in Oman changed my life. It felt simultaneously exotic and wonderful and also like none of the other students wanted to be there. I felt that there were interesting things going on everywhere, but even other anthropology students were profoundly disinterested. One memorable conversation included the gem that “Oman seemed like an orientalist’s version of Egypt.” In any case, I knew then that I wanted to do research there. Since I was already interested in music and performance, I asked around about “music in Oman.” To my surprise, nearly all my friends responded by claiming that where they were from in the interior, there wasn’t any music. But there was music in Dhofar, or maybe with the Bedouins. Later in my stay, I watched several āzī-s and performed in several razha-s, which, as I know now, are not music. But they were performed by those same friends who claimed that no music existed in the interior. Nizwā, being a cultural center of some import, would later be my base for conducting ethnomusicological research within the regional network of towns in the interior province of al-Dakhiliyya.

I received a Wenner-Gren Dissertation Fieldwork Grant on my second try in late 2015 to fund a year of research on the role of “tribal arts” in political legitimation in Oman. (I did earnestly think “tribal” was the best way to describe them, to my current horror, but this phrasing is sometimes used in Oman). I secured recognition and support for my research from the Ministry of
Heritage’s office of the Popular Arts in Muscat, for which I will always be thankful. This was one of the main offices that helped to inscribe the ‘āzī as part of our Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2012. I stayed in Oman, living near the north-south highway interchange in Nizwā, for about ten months before returning for another three. By this writing, I have spent about a year and half in Oman working on this project.

A sketch of the performers and their social environment

The Sultanate of Oman is a unitary, authoritarian state whose Sultan (and Prime Minister and Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces and Minister of Defence and Minister of Foreign Affairs) is Sultan Qābūs bin Ṣa‘īd Āl Bū Ṣa‘īd, the longest ruler in the Middle East and the absolute monarch. He issues law by decree, such as the constitution-like Basic Statutes of the State, which ostensibly affords basic civil protections for citizens. In actuality, governance is largely based on distribution networks—of legal arrangements, import rights, financial outlays, contracts, development funds, land, loans, and of government jobs or favors—and is therefore highly personalized, secretive, and contextual. This is called ṣṭa (connections, “pull”) as it is in many Arab contexts. Much of the daily operation of government distribution flows from the Sultan or his agents in Ministries through the hands of many local leaders arranged in a loose but structured hierarchy. Elites (shaykh-s, government agents, hospital administrators, ministry officials, state media, government contractors, business owners) form the capillary ends of a distribution hierarchy that moves goods, services, cash, and opportunities from the state to its citizens. Hence, for everything distributed by the state, there is a long chain of gifters and intermediaries. This form of distribution may seem corrupt (or at least potentially corruptible) but it is not anathema to accounting and formal budgets, as we shall see, and can be extremely flexible to current demands. Nevertheless, it is extremely opaque, elitist, and can be easily weaponized against dissenters,
making it a major hedge against political reform. While suffrage was extended to most citizens in 2002, most elections are perfunctory and the Sultan appoints members of the Majlis al-dawla personally. As of 2016, no independent media exist in Oman. The government actively discourages private assembly, social development projects, and political parties are outlawed. Journalists critical of the regime are routinely jailed or exiled, their books banned and families threatened. Some piecemeal democratic reforms were made to address the limited protests occurring in 2011 and 2012, and while people remain enthusiastic for more involvement in the political process, opportunities are limited.

While the Omani economy is one of the more diversified economies in the region, the largest sector (fluctuating between 60% and 80%) of GDP comes from the crude oil industry. These revenues accrue largely though state ownership of 60% of Petroleum Development Oman, the largest supplier of crude oil and natural gas in the Sultanate. A huge proportion of the state budget is redirected into social services, and, while this percentage has declined slightly in recent years, expenditures to citizens still hover around 40% of the total budget. With a population of about 2.99 million Omani nationals (as well as some 2 million expatriates) and growth at a steady 5.2% clip, such expenditures are likely to continue at similar levels for some time. This support system is increasingly necessary as unemployment reaches 20%.

As has been noted by many scholars, Oman has perhaps witnessed the most dramatic change in living standards of any country in the world over the last 50 years. The UNDP report of 1997 reports an HDI of 0.704 and adds that since 1970,

Life expectancy has increased by 30 years [to 70 years in 1996]… infant mortality was reduced from more than 200 per 1000 live births in 1960 to less than 30 in 1994… in 1970,

13 However, see Castles 1998 for criticism of this data.
there were only three schools—all primary, providing an education for 900 pupils—all boys. By 1994 there were 454,000 students in 920 schools, and 49% were girls… Maternal deaths declined to 27 per 100,000 live births. (28)

At the same time, the state had provided some 96% of its population with free basic health care access. As of the 2018 update, Oman has improved over ten percentage points from a “Middle” (up to 0.799) to “Very High” development score at 0.82 (UNDP 2018). Increases in mean years of education (nine and a half) and expected education (nearly fourteen) and increases in life expectancy (to 77 years) and general health have continued to show improvement, alongside a high Gender Development Index of 0.942. Crime, with the exception of smuggling and white-collar corruption, seems to be very low.

It is this history that helps to explain why the Sultan is both a despotic autocrat and a generally beloved figure. While political rights are minimal, social welfare programs are considerable and incredible development—perhaps the most significant improvement in the entire world—is a demonstrable fact of everyday life (“Oman most-improved nation in last 40 years, UN index says,” The Globe and Mail, 2 May 2018). So while some agitate for democratic reforms, many others are hesitant to criticize the state’s own narrative of its success (Al-Farsi 2015). When we turn to praise, the situation becomes yet more complicated as payouts, obligations, manners, history, aesthetics, and community cohesion all come into play.

Focusing more on my research area, the Dākhiliyya or “interior” province has long been the heartland of Arab Omani culture, as well as a center of Ibadism, the third great Islamic madhhab. Dākhiliyya itself is of modest populational size: government statistics put it at about 350,000 Omani nationals out of a national total of 2.99 million, or about 12% of the Omani population (NCSI data 2019). The wilayat of Manaḥ has only about 15,000 persons, compared to
the 90,000 of Nizwa and 60,000 of Bahlā’, but in all parts of Dākhiliyya population levels are rising rapidly. Over the last 30 years, household size in the region has hovered around 8 persons, which, coupled with the significant population growth, indicates that many new households have sprung up, straining existing housing arrangements (NCSI 2019). The province is distinctly split between the large towns and the outlying agricultural villages, with certain parts seeming very urban and others very rural. Nevertheless, the towns in which I worked had thriving social and musical scenes—if one knew where to look.

Luckily, the performance groups I had maintained contact with since my language studies and brief pilot research were gracious hosts. I worked with a number of neighborhood-based performance groups, but none were more helpful, patient, and engaged interlocutors than the Firqat al-‘Arabī li-l-funūn al-sha‘abiyya bi-wilāyat Manaḥ in the neighborhood of al-Ma‘arā in Manaḥ. In Bahlā, I worked with the Firqat Bahlā li-l-funūn al-sha‘abiyya administered by the Shukaylī brothers and their sons; in 'Izkī, with the Firqat 'Izkī li-l-funūn al-sha‘abiyya and the Firqat Shamūkh al-Magid (which no longer exists); in Nizwā with the Firqat al-Shihabā‘ and the Firqat al-Shabābiyya; and in Manaḥ with the Firqat Ḥarāt al-Bilād, and the Firqat al-Ma‘mad.

Groups like these are based in a neighborhood and usually include a number of generational cohorts: it is very common for brothers, fathers, uncles, and grandfathers to all be present for one performance. In a very real sense, the groups themselves form the core of a given community—a group of neighboring, relatively socially equal households that are well-known within this or that neighborhood. Groups are composed of friends and neighbors who typically have known each other all their lives. They were often groups of friends who had passed through primary schooling together, then transitioned to local sports and civic clubs, maintaining their social ties and
increasing their prestige in the community. Group members join because doing *razha* is an activity that is perceived as heritage, they can spend time with their friends, write poetry, and remain active. While not everyone in town joins these groups, the more connected people are with the local community, the more likely they are to be a member of the group. The extremely low performative barrier to entry means that most people can join in, even for a few songs, though they may not be able to be a permanent fixture in the group. When asked, members often report that *razha* is not only fun, but membership is incumbent upon them as members of their community. If people who can perform don’t, word spreads and they are cajoled back into the group. Certainly, young men sometimes drag their feet when asked to perform, some shy away from dancing and singing, and others are too busy. Nevertheless, performers, in general, are proud to perform part of their heritage.

It is important to point out that I specifically based my research on groups that perform praise—hence, the perspective of those that find praise nauseating is lacking. There are certainly people in Oman who find praise to be uninteresting, sycophantic, obsequious, and the like and consider praise of the state to be appallingly naïve. Those people also generally do not perform the *funūn*. I focused instead on praisers and sought to understand how and why they praised the state and its agents. While praise of the state is sometimes offered because it is a “safe” and supposedly “neutral” topic and allows for performances to continue unmolested, much more often praise is given with real sincerity.

Performance groups are often one aspect of broader civic organizations that might include a soccer team, committees that plan street and falaj cleaning days, organize workshops for health and safety, run a large, communal *tanur* oven, and so on. As we shall see, these performance/civic groups are more common in provincial areas, but they are by no means exclusive to them. Since
cities like Muscat and Sohar are sectioned into neighborhoods, groups often form within the confines of one of the older neighborhoods, performing much the same function as those I studied in the countryside. In Muscat, for example, the Firqat Sidāb in the neighborhood of Sidāb performs mālid, a choral, antiphonal singing practice, for local occasions and teaches younger neighborhood boys how to perform as well. Similar groups exist in Old Muscat, Seeb, and other older sections of town devoted to razḥa.

Razḥa and ‘āzī flourished in both urban and rural locales within Dākhiliyya. While razḥa has a rural character to it, it is less seen as a specifically “country” performance as it is an expression of a primordial Omani identity, which is strongly associated, in part, with an imagined rural past. Similarly, coastal genres appeal to an imagined seafaring past. While of course there is some debate about the reality of these pasts, rural folks in the Dākhiliyya were happy to boast about a seafaring past. Part of the rural character of the razḥa is associate with bellicosity, warfare, and “older” or “traditional” values of community, egalitarianism, sovereignty, and self-reliance. These values are displayed in the organization of the dance, the costumes, and in the poetry, all of which inspire serious aesthetic fascination. The poetry is the primary interst of most performers and audiences, but costumes and weapons also arouse delicate attention and interest. Poetry is regarded as extremely evocative: it can be coy, boastful, prideful, flirtatious, and morally purposeful. While urbane, cosmopolitan folks may look down on razḥa because it is a little coarse, blustering, and loud, they do not, in general, disparage it as inauthentic or sycophantic. Part of this is due to the positioning of razḥa as a kind of national art form, and part of it is due to the way razḥa clearly reflects real socioeconomic divisions in the Sultanate.

The socioeconomic status of group members may vary widely but shaykh-s and hence shaykh-ly families never participate. There is a clear distinction between families who are fairly
wealthy and those that are *shaykh*-s. For example, in Bahlā’, group leaders are significantly more wealthy than some of the other members, but no group members do not work for a living, be it in agriculture, auto repair, animal husbandry, or other service work. The groups leaders are not *shaykh*-s—at least not to a level where they might consider not performing. In fact, Oman has seen a significant decrease in wealth inequality over the last few decades (a GINI index drop from the low 40s to the high 20s since 2000, NCSI data 2019). This is especially striking in a country where a thin layer of elites control such a huge proportion of revenues. On the topic of money, while performers do make some money for performing (the amount varies with the patron) no one can make a living on just performing, since payouts are too low and inconsistent. Further, handshake deals (moderated through WhatsApp nowadays) between friends, locals, and acquaintances may mean playing a wedding for free or in exchange for a share in the feast. Other engagements, such as playing for the opening of a car dealership or a grocery store, might net the group a few hundred riyals, which usually ended up in a shared group account administered by one or two persons. The funds might be used for clothing, daggers, gasoline, swords, food, water, and other such things. During national holidays, especially the big celebrations every 5 years, a performer might be given a few thousand riyals, but this is not a subsistence strategy for most. This is evidenced by the fact that group members will sometimes choose not to perform at an event but instead set up a small booth to sell smallgoods, toys, and candy at the margins of a performance space rather than performing. Similarly, educational levels can vary: I spoke with doctoral students, college students, bank managers, and engineers as well as some older folks who had not had any formal schooling after learning to read the Qur’an.

Within one town, several performance groups may be present, some of which boast histories from the early 1970s, while other are only a few years old. Of these groups, only one
contained a working agent of the Omani state, the Firqat al-Shihabā’ in Nizwā, whose manager worked in the Wali’s Office in Nizwā. Because so many individuals draw at least part of their income from the state (as cash, loan forgiveness, beneficial interest rates, land grants, etc.), it is impossible to draw a strict dividing line between folks who “work with the state” and those who avoid it. Most rural groups, like those in Manaḥ and ’Izkī, were composed of working-class rural men and lower-middle-class townsmen. Often rural men worked in service sectors in nearby towns (like clerking in cellphone offices) and on family farms, while others worked as private tow-truck operators, excavators, taxi drivers, or guards for governmental buildings or banks. Most supplemented their incomes in various ways: selling farm produce (mostly melons and onions) or trinkets, candy, and toys at stalls in town markets. Some group members were in technical college in Nizwā whiles others were in the army or police and only participated when they were home. In the larger towns of Bahlā’ and Nizwā, groups were considerably wealthier and concomitantly larger, more well-equipped, and more closely associated with state performances. The leaders of the Firqat Bahlā’, Muḥammad and Sālim bin Sulaymān al-Shukaylī, are nationally recognized experts and their performances were chosen to represent ‘āzī and razha in the new Omani National Museum. Pictures and videos of their performances frequently circulate on Omani social media networks. Despite the comparatively modest wealth that their performances have brought them, Sālim still works part-time in a smallgoods shop just north of Bahlā’ in al-Ma‘mūra. His sons and nephews raise shoats for local restaurants (which are very delicious) and are affluent enough to sponsor several Bengali “guest” workers.

What all these groups have in common is that they perform razha and ‘āzī. Only one group performed a third genre, called al-rūgh, using a short, dual-reed pipe (similar to a Lebanese mijwiz) of the same name, and they did so because it was a shawāwī genre, that is, one that belonged, like
them, to a small group of semi-nomadic pastoralists. *Razha* and *‘āzī*, on the other hand, are linked genres in the minds of these performers, and are performed by Omani townsmen in the Dākhiliyya, Bāṭinah, Sharqiyya, and Żāhira provinces of northern Oman. Bedouins have other genres, as do people in other regions. I chose to study in Dākhiliyya because of the density of towns with active, governmentally registered performance groups. While I could have situated my study in Sharqiyya and studied an arguably more vital performance scene (but with fewer formal registered groups), I was interested in the ways in which performance was related to state rule. Dākhiliyya seemed to be the best place to situate the research expressed in that way.

*Razha* and *‘āzī* in Dakhiliyya are most often performed to celebrate—as Omanis put it, for *farah*, joy. This might include weddings, university graduations, religious holidays, or the opening of a new car dealership. I was often invited to perform *razha* for collective weddings, religious holidays, and more minor opening ceremonies, such as for sports events or branches of restaurants. These kinds of events were strictly opposed to those that celebrated government actions of one kind or another. Those are not for *farah*, and, accordingly, I was never invited to perform in those. For example, I attended several events tied to the opening of a new *majlis*, or community center devoted to one or another neighborhood. The *razha*-s presented in those ceremonies were thought to express the solidarity of the neighborhood and reconfirm the mutual relations of political obligation that inhere in that act of giving and receiving. I, as a guest but not a member (nor even a potential member) of the political body in question, was not fit to participate in performances that express such political solidarity. Similar events might be held for opening a new satellite of the Ministry of Heritage and Culture or a new water pumping station. Other events I was not invited to participate in were those that celebrated National Day, that praised the Sultan specifically, or were organized by a governor for some special state occasion. *‘Āzī*-s were only given at occasions
like these, ones of particular importance, those that might have a row of important elites seated before the performers. These elites would range in importance from local *shaykh*-s to members of the ruling family, ministry agents, and local governors, *wālī*-s. For these occasions, new ‘āzī-*s were typically written, as was the ‘āzī presented in the beginning of this chapter. I discuss the importance of the distinction between celebratory and political performances throughout this dissertation, though I focus explicitly on political ones.

My research was almost entirely composed of various modes of interviewing, recording performances, and participant observation. I recreate many of my interviews throughout this dissertation so I will not belabor them here. It was important for me to bring Omani voices themselves into the text as naturally as possible. While I did not transcribe all my audio interviews, I notated them all and have transcribed relevant portions. By participant-observation I am happy to say that it mostly meant singing and dancing with people who were very kind, thoughtful, and welcoming. While I often took breaks to record the performance, I was welcomed in most dances. I was excluded from the most serious praise poetry, Omani music and praise videos, and state and civic events, which were highly politically charged. While I struggled with the decision to wear a *dishdāsha* and *kumma*, I ultimately decided against it in public. The next time I go I will consider wearing it to performances, but I think I was right to not wear it in general. I felt that it was too much like wearing a costume. Especially as a white-read Westerner, I was afforded considerable unwarranted respect and privilege, and I thought that wearing the local clothing was a situation where, even if it was wrong, no one would tell me so until it was too late. I asked Omanis I trusted many times and they were split—some thought it would be strange or disrespectful while others constantly encouraged me to do so.
I had hoped to convince a drummer to teach me how to play the *raḥmānī* and *kāsir* drums. Everyone I spoke to thought this was a bad idea—nobody else did that, so why should I? I would just pick it up as we drummed and danced, like everyone else. I did, but I felt like I wasn’t being a good ethnomusicologist. Surely there was a drum language, or some deep symbolic significance only understood by drummers that I would miss? There might be, but mostly the drums were not considered a very interesting thing to study. What most folks pointed me to was the poetry, the collective emotions of performance, the way that praise demonstrated their goodwill and joy, the way it connected them to the Sultan and local leaders. I attended many performances but I analyze only a dozen or so in this dissertation. I notated most of the *rażha* melodies while I was in the field and drum parts back in the US. Transcription was sometimes interesting to my Omani friends, and I taught a few how to read the melodies as I had written them, which they decided wasn’t really helpful because they knew the melodies anyhow. I had to agree.

I realized a few things early on. First, and something with which I am not comfortable, is that I was never going to meet any of my friends’ female kin or wives, except for a few very kind grandmothers and young children. This was just not possible. At my first wedding in Manah, our *rażha* troupe was marching down a short side street toward the host’s home. Behind us, a larger group of women were performing *al-wayliyya al-maḥiyya*, a woman’s communal dance. *Wayliyya* is performed by women in public without an *abāya*, but rather in colorful *sirwāl* trousers, a tunic, and heavily decorated headpieces. As they linked arms around their shoulders, they swayed down the street in ten or so rows, free hands shaking the *‘aḍūd*, an anklet that doubled as a rattle, like a maraca. They sang melodies in a manner very similar to *rażha*, and so I lifted up my phone to record. As I did so, my friends grabbed my phone and tutted at me: “Hey, that’s not

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for us. They wouldn’t like if you filmed them.” I didn’t protest, but it was not the last time I would be told by my friends not to record women performing wayliyya, al-kīdhā’, or wannā. Filming women performing would have been disrespectful and would have lowered me in the eyes of my friends. I chose not to, but it wasn’t much of a choice.

Two other things bear mentioning. I was rarely invited to the “family” section of houses, which was a source of deep disappointment for me. I felt this meant that I was not really an accepted member of the society in Manah, where I had spent so much time. I’m not sure this is true in retrospect, but it felt that way then. Second is that I was not considered wealthy by my Omani interlocutors. I was a guest, who, for some, overstay his welcome. In any case, I had no problems that stemmed from perceptions that I had more money than anyone else. No one tried to get a visa to the US from me. Only rarely would someone ask me for cash or to buy a phone card. As a guest, I was an illogical target for requests. While some folks tried to see if I had any government or ministry connections, I struggled with a severe lack of wasṭa, connections, or pull. Without children and away from my wife, I was considered a bit of an anomaly, but there was some recognition that Orientalists (mustashriqīn, like me) could study Arabic poetry. And so I was affectionately integrated as the “duktūr/dukhtūr” who was studying al-funūn al-shaʿabiyya, which constructed me as honoring Omani heritage and bringing some respect and foreign recognition to it, which I hope is true.

The dissertation outline

I develop the argument of this dissertation over five ethnographic chapters. I begin with a framing chapter that focuses on Oman’s natural and social environment and then proceed to the core subjects of my research: praise, generosity, legitimacy, and the state.
Chapter 1 is a presentation of information about Oman, its location, geography, flora and fauna, and rural life that is relevant to the study of sung poetry and praise as a political-economic practice. I present a historical, economic, and political overview that helps to situate my argument. I sketch some topics of significant importance: archaeological accounts of agriculture and irrigation, human geography, social structure, tribes, and political organization on several social scales. I round out the chapter with a critical account of the events and changes over the twentieth century in Oman, a period that has seen intense historicization by local and foreign scholars.

Chapter 2 is an attempt to “take praise seriously,” that is, attend to it with the same mindset as Omani poets and performers do. It connects praise poetry in Oman to the practices of political power in Oman. In it, I make the case that praise poetry, far from being an exercise in mere flattery, has in many times and many places been considered crucial to the maintenance and reconfiguration of social order. In scholarly discourse, maligning praise is a thoroughly modern obsession, the allergy to it a thoroughly modern disease. Chapter 2 also serves as an introduction to the ‘āzī as a poetic and performance form.

Chapter 3 links praise poetry to a social mechanism that I term the “Generosity/Legitimacy mechanism.” I show that generosity (amongst many other practices) has been considered a critical obligation of leaders in the Middle East, and that display of generosity, the act itself, is a demonstration of the effectiveness of that leadership. I show that generosity is not merely an ideological conceit developed by ruling classes to accrue consent or quash political resistance, but a profoundly and deeply shared moral commitment amongst all kinds of people in all sorts of class positions. This shared cross-class valuation of generosity does not altogether avoid the dangers of “the gift,” which compels response at the risk of signaling dependency. This chapter also serves as an introduction to the razha as a performance practice.
Chapter 4 turns directly to the ways in which razha acts as praise of generosity without necessarily signaling dependency. I posit a second mechanism, the Razha Integration mechanism, to explain why razha performance changes (or appears to change) the dynamics and dangers of gift exchange in unequal social situations. I argue that praise integrates power into community. Since it is the role of leaders to give, but taking those gifts may signal weakness, I show how razha performance skirts the threat of dependency by framing the reception of generosity as an affirmation of support in continuing circuits of mutual obligation. It is, as I sketched above, a practice that asserts the moral character of this moral economy. This is delicate terrain, however, and this is not always seen as successful. Omani performers think of praise as a kind of work that sustains community as a moral economy, work which is invited and never imposed. Praise performance is a deeply shared emotional practice, but as a way of displaying dignity and pride, it can and sometimes does fail to waylay accusations of dependency, sycophancy, and weakness.

Chapter 5 turns to ’Ibāḍī legal interpretations of the proper role of music amongst good Muslims. I show that an underappreciated category of “acceptable” music, in certain Islamic contexts and at certain times, has been music that serves a practical purpose: in the Omani case, for war. Since war is, as Bakunin pointed out, the inevitable destiny of states, music for war is inevitably the music of the state. I analyze this situation because it shows how music can be rendered “Islamically” legitimate simply because it is useful for the ends of the state, not for the inculcation of religious orthodoxy or personalized practices of self-fashioning.

Chapter 6 is a discussion of the ways in which razha and āzī have become so closely tied to state power in Oman. Based on the previous chapters, I show how it has functioned as a real juncture in the political-economy of Omani state rule, a role it has had for some time. Within the contemporary state, this role has simultaneously expanded and contracted. As alternatives to the
state were destroyed, one by one, praise became centralized and served largely to render the Sultan, as the proxy of the state, as a generous giver and ferocious defender of Oman, hence legitimating his authoritarian rule over the country. The state has also capitalized on the “Arab” character of these genres, promoting an image of the state as masculine, militant, traditional, Arab, and Muslim.

Finally, the conclusion revisits some of these themes, questions some of their (and my) assumptions, and suggests some avenues for further research. I dwell especially on the category of “legitimacy,” which I construe as essential to the Omani authoritarian state, and, indeed to many other states. Is it? Are there other ways to understand the ubiquity and perpetuation of political domination? Lastly, I turn back to the notion of the “moral economy” and link it to recent approaches to ethics in ethnomusicology and anthropology, proposing a new old way of looking at things.
Chapter 1: Historical Patterns of Social and Political Organization in Oman

I rely on a detailed understanding of the history and environmental setting of polities in Oman, and, while my focus will be mainly on the last two hundred years, certain background knowledge on the ecological and economic base of interior Oman will be valuable to contextualize the argument. This overview largely focuses on Inner Oman, the setting of the dissertation.

There are four purposes to this introduction to Oman, its ecology, and the history of its peoples. The first is that the diversity of species, especially flora, displays the multiple avenues of movement for humans, animals, and even climactic patterns into and through the region, and neatly summarizes its unique location at the juncture of three major geographical regions. The second purpose is to draw attention to how the human settlement pattern of Oman has had implications for the development of structures of governance in Oman. These settlement patterns have helped to develop and privilege certain modes of group-based interaction, display, and communication. The third purpose is to familiarize the reader with the animals, plants, and material culture of the townspeople in the Omani interior. The genres under discussion are, generally speaking, performed by agriculturalists, and often invoke imagery and vocabulary unique to their experience and not shared with the elite written poetry of the literate ‘ulamā. As a fourth purpose, this chapter serves as an introduction to several social, cultural, and political concepts that will be referenced throughout the dissertation, including historical polities (the Ibāḍī Imamate, the Sultanate, tribes) and social structure (authority structures, human geography, historical economic interactions). Finally, this chapter will give a brief overview of my critical reading of the state in the twentieth century.
The Ecological Setting

The Arabian sub-continent occupies a central position bridging Africa, the Levant, and Asia, providing both marine and terrestrial avenues of dispersal to humans and other animals between these larger regions. Situated on the extreme southeastern corner of the 2.5 million km² Arabian Peninsula, the Sultanate of Oman (roughly stretching between 16.5° N to 25° N and from 52° E to 60° E) is bordered on all sides by inhospitably arid deserts and the sea. To the east and southeast is the Indian Ocean, which along the northern shore quiets into the Arabian Sea and funnels into the Persian Gulf proper through the Strait of Hormuz (on the Persian coast) and the Musandam Peninsula (on the Arabian coast). While the northern shore of Oman is relatively quiet and slopes gently from mountains in the interior to the sea, the eastern and southeastern shores plunge directly into the Indian Ocean. Framing the north and south of the country are two high mountain ranges (~3000m), between which stretches the long gravel plain and wadi outwash regions that extend the rocky piedmont of these mountains. As these gravel plains stretch on and water grows scarcer, they gradually transform into the arid desert region that characterizes the middle of the modern country and that separates the north from the south, called the Jiddat al-Ḥarāsīs after the main Bedouin group that now inhabits it. In the south, the Ţufār range extends still further along the coast into Yemen’s Ḥaḍramawt and frames the large southern coastal city of Ṣalāla.

The north of the country (roughly 21° N to 25° N) is the most densely populated region in Oman. It in turn is dominated by the Ḥajar mountain range, which forms a central backbone mirroring the coast from Ra’s al-Ḥadd in the east to the tip of Musandam in the northwest. The mountains, topped by the limestone massif called Jabal Akhḍar or “Green Mountain”, are riven by
large wadi\textsuperscript{15} systems that drain rainwater from the tops of the mountains both northward and southward into large gravel outwash plains, which have been the main natural feature sustaining human settlement. The range itself is divided into two halves, western and eastern, by the Sumāʾīl Gap, which slopes rapidly upward from the coastal capital of Muscat into the high plains of the interior. This remains the largest and most accessible pathway between the coast and the interior of the country, though several other natural pathways radiate northward and connect interior and coastal towns along the range’s length. The broad gravel plain called the Bāṭina extends approximately 50km between the coast and the mountains and is heavily populated and extensively cultivated by tapping groundwater via wells. On the southern, interior side of the mountains, wadi outwash radiates outwards for more than a hundred kilometers into the central desert described above and the large sand dune desert of the Rubʿa al-Khālī—the famed “Empty Quarter”. These natural barriers have served to isolate the interior from the central high plains of the Arabian Shield, now known as Najd in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Natural ecological zones in Oman depend on the availability of water. Contrary to the popular imagination, Oman is not devoid of plant and animal life, though it is characterized by uneven blooms due to fluctuations in rain. Vast stretches of gravel plain are only sporadically punctuated by seemingly unvariegated plant life. Annual rainfall averages one hundred millimeters and is both highly locational and seasonal, with some regions receiving nearly none (the Jiddat al-Ḥarāsīs, for example, Chatty 1996, 79-81). In certain areas, especially near still or flowing wadi

\textsuperscript{15} Wadi, (Ar.  wādī), refers to both a dry river bed and the valley or drainage area that it is situated within. Wadis are almost always named and are often named after the largest group that lives in its confines. Wadis are important geographical features because they channel available water in predictable ways, even if they are prone to dangerous flooding.
beds and in the many microclimates produced by the vagaries of the piedmontane and montane regions, plant life is arrestingly verdant and diverse.

In general, plant biologists and ecologists note that Oman is separated into two main zones: the south, which is wetter and is largely composed of plants that are related to those in Africa, and the north, whose flora are continuous with the mountainous regions of Iran. Along the central and southern coasts, monsoon patterns driven along Indian Ocean currents result in far more available water arriving in the form of thick, moist fog than actual precipitation. It is here that Frankincense trees (largely *Boswellia sacra*, CLA. *al-lubbān*) have been harvested for thousands of years. This late-summer monsoon season, called *al-kharīf*, is an immensely popular time for vacationers throughout the Arabian Peninsula to visit due to this brief lushness.
In the north, moisture precipitates along the tops of the Ḥajar mountains and is funneled down along the wadi gullies and eventually into deep aquifers (though Al-Mashakhi and Koll 2007 estimate only ~15% of precipitation reaches these). Snow is not unknown atop and along the ranges, where the temperature, as is common in semi-arid regions, can fluctuate more than 30°C in a single day. Plant life in Oman, as in most agricultural areas, is neatly divided between wild and cultivated species, and knowledge of plants as both crops and forage is distributed widely. In
fact, many regions are symbolized by a plant in their own and in governmental media—Samā’il by the date palm, Ŭufār by the Frankincense tree, and Manaḥ by the medicinal shrub *mitk*. Generally speaking, cultivated plants are more common in poetry than wild plants, but herbs, foreign spices like saffron and clove, fruit trees, and wild flowering trees that are used in honey production are very common poetic images in the oral poetry of Omani townspeople. While arid regions of shifting dunes may support a variety of grasses that sprout up after rains, the semi-arid gravel plains and piedmont regions that form the main ecological zone of this dissertation are characterized by stretches of tall grasses, both annual and perennial, and wild herbs. Grasses generally sprout for a few months after early spring rains and are valued fodder for pasturage, alongside commercially grown feed crops. Thorny *Acacia* trees are common throughout the plains of Oman, together with huge *ghaf* trees (*Prosopis cineraria*) and the ubiquitous date palm (*Phoenix dactylifera*). In the piedmontane regions, drupes flourish alongside many kinds of small shrubs and stubborn succulents. Flowers and various asters are commonly found higher in the Jabal Akhḍar range, where domesticated roses (mainly “Damask” varieties *CLA. ward*) are cultivated for rose water production.

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18 Both *tortilis*, *CLA. simr*, *simra* and *ehrenbergiana*, *CLA. salam*.

In love *rażḥāt, rażḥāt ghazzaliyya*, plants are often used as a metaphor for women and women’s bodies. Some are broadly shared motifs, including flowers:

يَا وَرَدَ زَاَّهِي وِينَ قَاَّصِد تَرَحَّل خَليِّت دَارُكَ وَالْمَنَازِل خَالِيَة

خَليِّت دَارِكَ فِي الْحُشَّاْيَا شَاَعَالِهَا مَا تَتِنْظُفُ دَامُ الْمُوْدَةُ بَاقِيَة

Yā ward zāhī, wayn qāṣīd tartahil,
khallayt dārik wa-l-manāzīl khāliyya.
Khalayt nārik fī-l-ḥashāya shā’ila
mā tanzaﬁ, dām al-muwadda bāqiyya.

O brilliant rose, where do you intend to go?
You’ve left your home, the houses empty.
You’ve left your fire in the hearth
burning unextinguished—love yet remains.

اللَّهُ طَلَبَتَكَ فِي صَلَاتِي وَالْقِيٰمَ تَجْمَّعُ قِلُوبٍ هَايِمَةٍ وَمُشْنَتَهُ

تَحْيٌ الْبَسَاتِينِ الْعَنْبِ وَالْيَاسَمِينِ وَتَحْيٌ قُلُوبٍ بِالْأَمَسِ كَانَتُ مَيْتَهُ

Allah, ṭalabtak fī ṣalātī wa-l-qiyyām
tajjama’ qulūb ħāyima wa mushattata;
Tahay al-basāṭīn al-‘anb wa-l-yasāmīn
wa tahāy qulūb bi-l-‘ams kānat mayyīta.

O God, your request is in my prayers; all creation
gathers love-mad and distant hearts.
You enliven the gardens of grapes and jasmine
just as you revive hearts yesterday dead.

Others are more locally specific. Here, the anonymous poet imagines the issue of loving two people as similar to the problem of cultivating different fruit trees, the date palm and the banana plant.

يا مُوزِ اللُّغَتَالِي يا مُوزِ اللُّغَتَالِي طَاحٌ النَّخْلَ وَبَقَى عِواوِينُهُ

خَايِفٌ عَلَى مَالِي خَايِفٌ عَلَى مَالِي طَاحٌ وَتَهِيَدٌ مِنَ سَواوِينِهِ

Yā mawz al-ḥughatālī, yā mawz al-ḥughatālī,
ṭāh al-nakhl wa baqayt ‘awāwaynūh
Khayif ‘alā mālī, khayif ‘alā mālī,
ṭāḥ wa tahaddum min sawāwaynūh

O, verdant and tall banana tree! O verdant and tall banana tree,
The date palm has fallen and only its stalk remains.
I fear for what’s mine, I fear for what’s mine,
It’s fallen and destroyed what I’ve built.

This poem turns on the identification of kinds of women with kinds of plants—the banana tree, fertile and foreign, stands in for an extramarital and exotic lover, while the date palm, ordinary and local, for the loyal wife. The date palm’s falling represents the loyal wife leaving her husband, likely to take up with her kin, the husband’s *shamag*, thus destroying all that he has worked so hard for. The “verdant and tall banana tree” is informed here that the affair has ruined his life. This poem was explained to me several times referring to women from non-Arab or Zufārī backgrounds—just as they come from away and live in northern Oman, so did the banana tree. While it’s considered a little *risqué*, it is a poem known by many performers.

*Figure 2.* Date palms (*Phoenix dactylifera*) growing over a cover crop of Rhodes grass, *Chloris gayana*, January 2016. Al-Ḥamrā’, Dakhilliyah.
Figure 3. Maturing dates, July 2016. Al-Ma‘arā, Manaḥ, Dakhiliya.
Figure 4. A *gelba* of alfalfa, *qāṭ, Medicago sativa*, bordered with Rhodes grass, July 2016. Al-Ma‘arā, Manah, Dakhiliya.
Figure 5. *Acacia tortilis*, CLA. *simr, simra*, close, December 2015. ‘Ibrī, al-Ẓāhira.
Figure 6. Arabian toad (*Duttaphrynus arabicus*) in flooded *falaj* irrigation basin (*galba*) with of *Coriandrum*, January 2016. Wadi Bani Kharūs, ‘Awābī, al-Bāţina.
Figure 7. *Acacia tortilis*, CLA. *simr, simra*, November 2015. Bāt, ‘Ībrī, al-Ẓāhirah.
Figure 8. *Ghaf* tree, *Prosposis cineraria*, close, June 2016. Al-bilād, Manaḥ, Dakhiliyya.
Figure 10. Wadi Ḍamm pool, February 2016.

Fauna in Oman are also divided into Asiatic and African origins. While mammals are relatively sparsely distributed over the landscape, insects and birds are very common. Many birds are seasonal, moving with the monsoon around the northern Indian Ocean rim. One of these seasonal visitors is the iridescent blue Indian Roller, *Coracias benghalensis*, who makes its home amongst the dense foliage of the date palms in the north. Called variously *bū ʿAzrāq* or *al-ṣuqrāq* in the Interior, these jay-sized birds are known for their acrobatic and “rolling” flightpaths, often glimpsed as a flash of blue just beneath the dusty green of the palms. Other Passerines range from the drab: thrushes, scrub robins, swifts (*Apus*), cuckoos, to the spectacular Palestine sunbird (*Cinnyris osea*), hoopoe (*Upupa epops*), and white-eared bulbul (*Pycnonotus leucotis*). Desert adapted insects and arachnids occupy the most arid regions to the watered wadis, sharing space
with the arabian toad (*Duttaphrynus arabicus*, O. Ar. *al-kurra*), various dragonflies, mud wasps, lizards and geckos. Mammals are largely nocturnal, desert-adapted variants of species common to southwest Asia, ranging from the miniscule jumping mouse *jarbū* (Dipodidae), various vesper bats, the Ethiopian hedgehog (*Paraechinus aethiopicus*), desert foxes, hares, and caracals, to the possibly extirpated arabian leopard (*Panthera pardus nimr*, CLA. *nimr*). The most varied and populous large mammals are bovid ruminants, including various species of *Capra*, wild (*C. nubiana*) and feral, gazelles, and the Omani tahr (*Arabitragus jayakari*). The magnificent arabian oryx (*Oryx leucoryx*, CLA. *al-mahā*) has recently been reintroduced (Chatty 1996). Perhaps because wild fauna are relatively sparse in Oman the discovery of species new to biology is a relatively common occurrence, with new lizards, plants, and even something as large as an owl being documented as late as 2013. Many of the bovids have held onto niches in the region for many thousands of years and have been primary prey species for human populations, as well as becoming rich and densely layered poetic and artistic symbols. The flighty and graceful gazelle, *al-rīm*, is a common stand-in for female beloveds; while the ostrich, *al-na‘āma*, long ago extirpated from Oman, stands for a speedy messenger or steed; the Arabian Oryx, *al-mahā*, has become something of a national symbol in Oman for a noble and strong individual. Just as women are often considered as prey species and as plants, men are often considered predator species. Clive Holes and Said Salman Abu Athera make an important note about the role of predators as poetic images.

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21 See Collins 2002 for an extensive overview of human/animal relations throughout the ancient Middle East, and compare with Sowayan’s 1985 discussion of modern poetic symbolism with camels, horses (32-3) and other animals (58).
Predators at the top of the food chain, like falcons of various kinds (ṣaqr, shihān, nadāwi), eagles (‘iqāb), lions (layth, asad, sabi’) and cheetahs (fahad) are always used to represent the alpha male of the human species—noble, single-minded, ruthless, and brave. Thus a routine piece of praise for a prominent Bedouin tribal leader begins:

He’s like a noble falcon, and he’s generous to a fault;

Lavishly, unstintingly, he gives, and we exalt! (Holes and Abu Athera 2009, 19-20)

Truly exceptional men and women, however, are often represented as celestial objects: the sun, the moon, comets, and stars.

**Human Settlement**

Human settlement in the Arabian Peninsula is ancient, owing to the Peninsula’s proximity to East African avenues of hominin dispersal and the later movement of peoples from the Levant. This is evidenced by both genetic data (Rídl et al. 2009; Cabrera et al. 2009) and Acheulean archaeological remains from the Early and Middle Pleistocene, from 2 million to 200,000 years ago (Petraglia 2003; Petraglia et al. 2009). These hominins likely migrated along with other African species, such as the *Papio hamadryas* baboons studied by Fernandes (2009), during times of favorable climactic conditions, even when the Red Sea was at a high point (2009, 90-91). They seemed to have settled along the coasts, exploiting near-shore marine sessile deposits like shellfish as they migrated from modern Yemen northward along the Red Sea and ringing the peninsula to the Gulf (Bolvin et al. 2009; Giraud 2009).

Jumping forward to the Pleistocene/Holocene transition, by c. 7000 BCE an agrarian/pastoralist system based on domestic bovine and caprine domestication, blended with natural resource gathering in several biomes, was well-established. Dromedary camel (*Camelus dromedarius*) domestication is more recent, likely innovated within the last 5000 years due to the
increasing aridity of the Middle East and northeast Africa. Uerpmann (1999) presents a camel and horse graveyard in Sharjah, UAE, active between 300 BCE and 200 CE, which richly attests to their cultural and economic role amongst human settlers by that time. Wild dromedary remains in Yemen have been reliably dated to c. 7000 BCE by Grigson et al (1989). Almathen et al.’s 2016 analysis of the largest dromedary DNA set so far leads them to conclude that dromedaries were first domesticated in the southeastern Arabian Peninsula, though they are also marked by continuous wild genetic inputs that are extremely varied due to the wide ranges of caravan routes. While dromedary and equine pastoralism is largely the province of nomadic groups and is present throughout the country (Janzen 1986; Chatty 1996), bovine pastoralism is more concentrated in the south, though some house cows are kept in the north for milk, manure, plowing, and meat. Various caprines are kept by villagers, *shawāwī* (semi-permanent pastoralists exploiting hilly and mountainous terrain) and Bedouin groups for milk, meat, leather, and wool.

Regardless of its exact shape and origin, a recognizable nomadic pastoral technology complex seems to have been present in the region over the last 4000 years, during which human settlers began to divide into two broad groups. These groups have long recognized themselves as ḥaḍar and badū, in modern Arabic. Ḥaḍar, or agrarian villagers and town dwellers, historically have clustered around reliable water sources and pursued large-scale agriculture and small-scale animal husbandry. Crops depended on the availability of water, elevation, and other specifics of climate, but staples were dates and grain, supplemented by fruit trees, vegetables, fodder crops, onions, and honey cultivation. Honey is extremely highly valued in Oman as a kind of medicine, and has been supplementing the incomes of agriculturalists for some time (Lancasters 2011, 22)

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22 Villagers also referred to *badū* as *‘arab*, though this has largely come to refer to the broader ethnic group (cf. Jabbūr 1988, 1-3).
chapters 5, 6). Badū, or Bedouin, are fully nomadic pastoral specialists, have historically exploited the vast expanses of semi-arid plains with their domesticated flocks. This has resulted in two linked but semi-separate populations who exploit two very different environments within the same geographic region that are nevertheless inextricably linked. This social structure, which Chatty (1983, 149-50) refers to as the “ecological trinity” of urban town, rural village, and pastoral nomadic, is the economic basis for human settlement in the Arabian Peninsula in the historical era.23

No one segment could survive without interaction and exchange with the others, and the combined exploitation of each environmental niche was crucial for survival in harsh conditions. Pastoralists exploited arid and semi-arid environments by flexibly responding to changing weather conditions and took advantage of foraging opportunities over large ranges to produce dairy, meat, wool, and other animal products. These products were traded in larger market towns, which in turn imported foodstuffs (rice and coffee, animal feed) and technologies (firearms and cookware) that sustained nomadic life. Wealth from the villages, which produced the bulk of the food (dates, vegetables, fruits, and grains), handicrafts (from wool, leather, metal wood, and palm leaves), fodder, and labor in this system, was concentrated and distributed by the towns (Dutton 1999). In Greater Oman, interior economic systems were also connected to those on the coast, which formed the first node in the crucial overseas trading links that have sustained and connected these

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23 On the urban town system, see Al-Torki and Cole 1989, Al-Rasheed 1991, Meneley 1996, and Limbert 2010; on rural villages, Eickelman 1984 (though al-Ḥamrā’ has some unique characteristics), Dutton 1999, and Lancaster and Lancaster 2011; on nomadic pastoralists, see Cole 1975, Lancaster 1981, Jabbūr 1988, and Chatty 1996. There are of course many other authors, including early orientalists like Doughty (1932) and Thesiger (1959). Social movement between and amongst these groups is high. Several anthropologists have noted that as the badū have been forcibly settled by state apparatuses, the term badū has come to refer more to an ‘identity’ than an economic niche (cf. Cole 2003 and Jordan 2011 for discussions of this process in Saudi Arabia).
communities to larger Indian Ocean trading networks. Coastal fisherman and the Jenaba Bedouin produced various species of dried sardines (‘awma) as feed for camels and fertilizer, along with dried shark for consumption (qursh), though with refrigerated trucks for seafood this is becoming rarer. Delighted to see my reaction to its relatively mild flavor but unforgiving texture, an older performer told me that “Sharks eat people all over the world, you know, but in Oman, we eat sharks!” The goal of all of this economic exchange and interaction, as the Lancasters (2011, 296) point out, was not necessarily wealth as much as self-sufficiency.

a. Agriculture, irrigation, and settlement

As has been noted by archaeologists, geographers, and historians, the availability of water, both natural and culturally modified, has played a major role in the dispersal and settlement of humans throughout their history in Oman. Though early theorists considered the availability of water in arid environments to be the determining feature of human social evolution, detailed scholarship has shown that these models fail to accurately account for observed patterns (Cleuziou 2009). The cultural and technological management of water is nevertheless crucial in the agricultural belts that stretch northwest and southeast along the north and south faces of the Ḥajar range. These two regions form the agricultural belts of northern Oman, linked by cultivation up the wadis and down the main central gap. Different areas, of course, can sustain different cultivation patterns, but some features are common enough to be taken as generalities. The agricultural pattern of the interior of the country is substantially similar to other regions, and so will be taken as a model.
b. Irrigation Basins

One widely shared feature, regardless of irrigation type, is the organization of cultivable land into small irrigation basins, usually called *galba*-s, measuring some twenty square meters on average.\(^\text{24}\) These irrigation basins are usually square and surrounded by a short dirt wall (approximately ten to fifteen centimeters) and are connected to an irrigation source, either a well or a *falaj*, so that they may be intermittently flooded. The rebuilding of the short wall (built up from dried soil at the surface of the *galba*) and the irrigation of the basin are often reciprocal labor-trading events that culminate with a picnic or some other gift being exchanged for a few hours’ work. *Galba*-s need to be shaped and sloped to the available land and require a relatively large amount of labor-power to produce and maintain each growing season. Often, these *galba* are shaded by one or two date palms, which help trap moisture and dampen the sometimes-overwhelming sunlight to provide a cooler, moister, and more hospitable microclimate for other crops and animals. Both family gardens and large fields in Oman are typically cut into a patchwork of these *galba*-s, which allows for the selective funneling of water to successful areas, simple fallow period rotations, and more varied cultivation in a small area.

c. The Falaj-s of Oman.

The technological innovation of *falaj*-s (CLA. plural *afālāj*, horizontal well and channel irrigation systems), in the eastern end of the Peninsula allowed for the typical pattern of nucleated settlement in the piedmont and wadi ecosystems that Costa (1983) identified and that still characterizes the Greater Oman region (see Potts 1990). The *falaj* system of Oman is based on tapping groundwater associated with wadi beds and their alluvial fans, with most channels dug

\(^{24}\) See Dutton (1999, 32-4) for a detailed discussion.
more than ten meters below the surface, as opposed to the surface-water trapping techniques like terraces and dams utilized in Yemen and the Hijaz (Charbonnier 2015). The very largest of the underground channels, qanat-s, may reach for more than 12 km, such as the extensive Mālikī falaj that runs through the interior. Dutton (1989) reports that by 1982, the Public Authority for Water Resources in Oman estimated that existing falaj-s irrigated some 55% of all arable land and this figure has likely expanded since then. The remaining land is watered by wells, as the falaj system has always been supplemented by excavated wells, both for concerns with defense (Wilkinson 1987, 24) and due to local conditions and new settlements (Limbert 2010, 117-23).

Figure 12. A ghayl or surface falaj and a holding pool irrigating Alfalfa and mixed crops on the left (west) and not on the right (east), July 2016. Karshā’, Manah, Dakhiliyya Province, Oman.
Though the source of the *falaj* technology and the identity of its original constructors remains a debate,\(^{25}\) the presence of agricultural crops like wheat dated to c. 3000 BCE points to the probable development of irrigation, likely wells, horizontal or otherwise by that time (Charbonnier 2015; Desruelles 2016). These “underground water-draining galleries” (Boucharlat 2001, 2003) were undoubtedly widespread by the time of expanding Iron Age settlements (1300 to 300 BCE), though controversial research in Bahlā has dated parts of an early *falaj* to the Early Bronze, c. 3000 BCE (Orchard and Orchard 2007; but see Charbonnier 2015 for criticisms). From the 6\(^{th}\) century BCE to the 7\(^{th}\) century CE the Oman peninsula was administered by successive Persian empires: the Achmaenids to c. 250 BCE, followed briefly by the Parthians, and by the 3\(^{rd}\) century AD the Sassanians had expanded and seized control of coastal ports and larger interior towns. It is this later period that Wilkinson (1987) recognizes as the most likely period of deep *qanat* construction. The Persian colonists were already familiar with *qanat* technology in Persia and applied it to similar habitats in the mountains and wadis of northern Oman, starting with the western piedmont zone leading to the coast (Wilkinson 1977, 1983b, 1987). Local Omani oral traditions date certain *falaj*-s as well, attributing some to rich families and others to mythic figures. The Mālikī *falaj* mentioned above was supposedly ordered by the mythic Mālik bin Fahim, the leader of the ‘Azd tribes out of Yemen and into Oman after the collapse of the Mārib Dam in Yemen in the 570s CE.

Suffice it to say that the day-to-day management of *falaj* systems in Oman is extremely well-developed, despite Wilkinson’s (1983b) shock that Omanis did not verbally distinguish between the different “types” of *falaj* that he identified. The Arabic root from which *falaj* is derived

refers to “splitting” or “dividing” a source, and this accurately describes both the macro-level function of the *falaj* system and the everyday management of its water resources.

Daily allotments of water from a main *falaj* or well are distributed to farmers’ fields over a certain period, which are monitored and administrated by local irrigation officials, *wākil*, some deputies, ‘ārif-s, and an accountant, *qābiḍ* (cf, Charbonnier 2014 on this system in Ādam). These administrators manage the distribution of the available water based on managing access and flow—each farmer is allotted a certain span of time, measured in ‘*athar*-s, (roughly a half-hour), during which water is shunted into their fields (Al-Ghafiri 2004; Al-Ghafiri et al. 2013). During the day, the sun was historically referenced for timing; at night, the stars against some physical feature (some towns still used these methods well into the 21st century, see Nash 2007 and Lancasters 2001, 193). Most *falaj*-s have been mapped and renovated by the Sultanate over the last 40 years, resulting in a visual and technical uniformity that may not reflect historical differences. Repair and amendment of the deep main *qanāt* *falaj*-s and subsidiary *ghayl* and *saqiyyā* *falaj*-s has been a constant endeavor of Omani townspeople, even though massive new construction efforts were likely rare—limited by labor availability, cooperation, and intermittent foreign and civil warfare. Historically, the ‘Awāmir tribe have been contacted to maintain and repair failing *falaj*-s, but not necessarily to build new *qanat*-s, though wealthy families have paid for the expansion of *falaj*-s for particular towns or villages. Indeed, as Limbert points out, Omani historians have represented the prosperity of towns as inextricably linked to the status of their *falaj*-s, a connection continued by state ideology on water access (2010, 117-9) and in local chat, which often relates to water and where it is “feeding” (*taghadhī*) the land.
Figure 13. A raised *falaj* aqueduct, April 2016. Birkat al-mawz, Nizwā, Dakhiliyyah.
d. Concentric rings of settlement.

At its most basic, interior settlement can be envisaged as a series of concentric and abutting rings of agricultural villages and market towns, drawing water out of a single wadi system and distributing it selectively throughout its alluvial fan. It is crucial to remember that these towns’ populations form more or less integrated systems, all trading, moving, marrying, and communicating with varying intensity as the natural and social environments permit.

These wadi-cum-market systems begin with a ring of small but agriculturally rich villages at the base of the western Ḥajar that are situated near the head of a wadi. These towns often have smaller deposits of rich soil tucked into rocky crevasses and lack larger fields, and so some can invest more in orchard agriculture over field crops, including guavas and papayas, mangoes,
pomegranates, bananas, lemons, citrons, and stands of date palms. Most agriculture in this area was undertaken on land held by the farmers themselves, but small amounts of sharecropping and seasonal labor was also present. From north to south and around the western Ḥajar: Yanqul, al-Ḥamrā’, Tanūf, Birkat al-Mawz (“Banana Pond”), and ’Imṭī are examples of these small but agriculturally rich towns. These smaller towns are often valuable targets for the expansion of a certain shaykh’s power, a location where he might control a sufficient amount of the land to consider the area his power base. Al-Ḥamrā’ and Misfat al-‘Abriyyin are considered strongly linked to the ‘Abriyyin; Dārig al-Fawārīs, to, unsurprisingly, the Fawārīs. Tanūf is another example, once being the stronghold of the Bānī Rīyām under Sulaymān bin Himyār al-Nabhānī, “The Lord of the Green Mountain,” who, along with a leader of the Ḥirth from the Sharqiyyah and the last Imam Ghālib bin ‘Alī bin Hilāl al-Hināʾī, led the Jebel Ḥakhdār conflict (1954-9) against the Sultan. Tanūf was flattened by a small contingent of British bomber aircraft at the direct order of the Sultan, in retribution for Sulaymān bin Ḥimyār’s refusal to cede power. Inhabitants were warned beforehand.
Figure 15. “Concentric rings of settlement”: the red line marks the approximate heads of wāḍī-s and the first ring of small towns. The blue line and the first major highway, in grey, mark the ring of market towns (the small outward jutting box includes Manaḥ). The black line marks the outer edge of settlement that is sustained by this wāḍī drainage and *falaj* network. © OpenStreetMap contributors.

Further along the alluvial fan of the wadi are large, market towns that control *falaj* flow downstream and have served as administrative centers for governors and Islamic judges, qāḍī-s, during times of state centralization or as independent city-states otherwise: ‘Ibrī, Bahlā, Nizwā, and Izkī. These towns continue to play key governmental roles by being the seats of local administrative “states,” *wilāya*, that are named after their associated major town: *wilāyat Nizwā*, *wilāyat Bahlā*, etc. Nizwā, for example, was also the nominal capital of the Ibāḍī Imamate over certain periods, largely due to its geographic location and mixed population.
Most agriculture in these towns was and is composed of family-owned date palm gardens that shade mixed small-crop farming, amended by household animal husbandry. In these towns, the percentage of sharecroppers and seasonal laborers was also higher, as larger proportions of the total agricultural land was owned by absentee landlords, whether wealthier Bedouin or townsfolk. Nowadays, most farmland is owned by Omanis who employ foreign laborers from the Mashriq or, increasingly, South Asia. Dates and animal fodder are the largest crops. Typically, sections of these towns are densely inhabited by certain families and marked by the presence of a family sablā, a specialized majlis or communal meeting room. Often, these neighborhoods are named for local notables, like Al-Sayfī section of Nizwā, northwest of the market, or the Ṣabbagh neighborhood of Bahlā inhabited by several Al-Shukaylī families. Regional souqs, or markets, are invariably located in these larger towns, and they also therefore host the largest concentrations of trading families and handicraft producers, including weavers, potters, metalsmiths, carpenters, and other skilled professions.

These market towns are extremely ancient in Oman, have substantial forts, walls, and the oldest mosques. They are divided into many local neighborhood quarters (Wikan 1982; Eickelman 1984) and often two tribal-cum-political “moieties,” usually referred to as “upper” (CLA. ‘aliyā) and “lower” (CLA. sifāla) sections. These divisions have remained salient even as they have been transformed and shifted by new state infrastructure, documented by Limbert (2010). A Qaṣṣābī inhabitant of ʾIzkī’s wealthier Yaman division related to me that youths from the poorer Nizār division would pelt his car with rocks whenever he lingered too long while passing through. He explained this enmity as a lingering result of the fact that inhabitants of Nizār were active in

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26 The sections are not equally divided as segmentary lineage theory would predict – rather, they are often divided into a larger (2/3) section and a smaller (1/3) section.
their support of the revived Imamate in the 1950s, while those in Yaman were pragmatically more receptive to whoever seemed to be winning—the Sultan’s army and foreign mercenaries. The subsequent wealth of Yaman in comparison to Nizār is not a coincidence, but an effect of state politics in Oman. Natives of the various towns also harbor a distinct competitive streak amongst one another, comparing the age of structures in the town, their historical importance and relation to key figures, stereotypical attitudes, foibles, differences in accent, and—especially in conversations with me—musical authenticity, techniques, and abilities.  

Further downstream from the market towns is a long and uneven ring of smaller towns and villages that often specialize in wheat-sorghum-barley agriculture due to wider tracts of available land. Most of these productive villages are small, such as Tan‘am, al-Bisyah, Gabrīn, Manah, and Zukayt. Manah is something of an outlier, as it is situated at the juncture of two large wadi systems (receiving water from falaj-s from Nizwā and ‘Izkī) and has soil rich enough to sustain both a relatively large population and, historically, a variety of orchard crops and flowers. Manah has long been considered the “breadbasket” of the Interior, and control of it has been crucial to securing a base of production for Imamate leadership. Typically, dates and orchard crops are more difficult to sustain, but the concomitant increase of arable land makes these regions especially suited to grains, melons, flowers, animal fodder, vegetables, and herbs. In times when water is abundant,  

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27 Nizwāns and Bahlāwīs are undoubtedly the target of the most playful derision, likely due to their prosperity and renown in comparison to the other towns. According to one interlocutor, Nizwans are constantly “cackling like owls” (dāhikīn mithl al-būma) amongst themselves but play at being deadly serious amongst other townspeople (owls are considered rather stupid birds in inner Oman). Other common insults claim that Nizwans use “Indian” or “Bengali” drums rather than true “Omani” drums, and that they wait to see what Bahlāwīs do musically in order to copy it. Bahlāwīs fare no better, accused of not being able to pronounce the glottal qāf (instead producing the weak velar kāf) while some of their performance troupes are described as being “yes-men” for the government (sometimes called muṣabbilīn (“drummers”) and sometimes ma‘ama‘a‘īyyin from ma`, or “with”).
tree crops like almonds, mangoes, and citrons flourish. Further, the wide, flat plains filled with *Acacia* and various wildflowers make this area especially conducive to beekeeping and honey production, with towns such as Fīqīn hosting particularly productive hives. Increased water usage in the larger towns due to population increases and the concomitant stress on water availability has been particularly devastating to these agricultural communities. Outside this ring, towns are progressively less integrated with the large market towns of the interior and more Bedouin in character owing to their proximity to the more arid habitats exploited by them (such as ‘Izz and Sināw).

**Social structure and the development of states**

The overview of human settlement patterns above gives us a good picture of the environment in which people have lived and labored through the historical period in question. The situation we find in the interior is broadly characterized by wide stretches of open, unsettled country punctuated by many small settlements, some extremely dense and well-developed. This situation produces a kind of paradox. There is both undeniable uniformity, in pastoral/agricultural technologies, especially highly complex skills like date farming and dromedary husbandry, but also in social structure (tribes, *qabīla*, pl. *qabā’īl*; housing/family units, *ḥāyān*; bilateral kinship networks, ‘*ayyāl, shamag*; neighborhoods, *ḥārāt*; ‘moiety’ divisions), religion and religious law (Ibadism), customary law (‘*urf, see Wilkinson 1987, 196-7; Weir 2008 for a case in Yemen), marriage patterns and law (generally patrilocal), modes of warfare, family roles, language, clothing and adornment, domestic material culture, architecture, musical instruments, social reproduction, cultural values, notions of authority and leadership, and shared markets. However,

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28 See Dresch 2013 for an extended discussion of “equality” in marriage.
despite these broad similarities, this settlement pattern also allows for the contrary possibility: to retracted from these systems, remain isolated, autonomous, and separate. Wilkinson’s (1987) by now notorious theory of the “Imamate Cycle” relies on just this tendency in Oman, in which he posits a kind of “circulation”—of goods, ideas, technologies—that affords Omansis the reciprocal capacity for “fusion” into larger centralized states and for “fission” into independent units based on geographic and settlement structures. These twinned factors are expressed by very fine grades of dialect variance, vocabulary (gestural and linguistic), clothing style, and senses of “home”.

Just as “fission and fusion” is shaped by the arrangement of settlement relative to water sources, we also find modes of communication between and amongst groups that are appropriate to this social system. Indeed, this intense cultivation of difference in the face of overwhelming similarity is no better expressed than in the wide variety of seemingly minor details that distinguish the collective performance styles in the various towns, with each town claiming their own as best and most authentic. A common difference cited between razha performers in Nizwa and elsewhere is that Nizwans tend to tightly cross their arms and rock from the waist when particularly emotionally aroused, a gesture that was glossed as “womanly” by other groups. When I pointed out that this was often associated with the ecstatic states of Sufis in other parts of the Arab world, this was taken as yet more evidence of the femininity of the gesture. As another brief example, drum shape, sound, and ways of addressing and playing drums, questions of what composes a matching set, the number and size of drums, whether they can be named, and how to wear them are all points of contention that invoke regional specificities. Some groups feel comfortable using

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29 I do not deal with the “theory” in depth—see Eickelman (1980) for an unanswered critique based on Wilkinson’s earlier formulations. The theory attempts to account for state formation in Oman by looking at features that are internal to Omani society, and fails to adequately recognize features of state formation that are external—features that all theorists of state formation rightly prioritize.
drums as a seat, while others find this an unbelievable affront to the drum. This situation of settlement dispersal/cultural commonality and fission/fusion state formation reveals that Omanis had developed means of communication and interaction that could simultaneously allow for this broad-based sharing of cultural values, modes of behavior, and senses of authority and right leadership, but also flexible enough to allow for the expression of group-based identities that were often quite fine. To properly contextualize this claim, I now turn to a brief overview of the social and governmental system of Oman over the last few hundred years, with special reference to the interior.

**Tribes in Oman**

Any discussion of the notion of the “tribe” in social science discourse is complicated due to definitional variety, rampant misapplications, and the impact of colonial rule. In this dissertation, “tribe” is an English translation of the Arabic term *qabila*, which refers to a kin group that shares a variable sense of identity or belonging based on a biological or fictive relationship to an eponymous ancestor. This definition is complicated historically in Oman by the presence of alliances and protections, *shaff* and *khuwa*, Arabian slavery, fictive kinship, and contemporary state attempts to curtail the social weight of tribes and tribalism. Nevertheless, historically, one’s position in relation to a tribe has largely structured one’s position in society and potentials for movements within it. As historians of Omani sources have pointed out, social movements and conflicts are often narrated by Omani historians as actions by “one of tribe X” or even simply “tribe X did such and such.” In this way, the anonymity of individuals is maintained and the tribe, however delineated in a particular instance, becomes equally implicated in the actual actions of a small number of people. Tribe names stand in for the actions of many people, such as when migrating or managing conflict, and thus have a certain role to play in historical and social thinking.
more broadly. *Qabīlī*, an adjective based on *qabīla*, is nevertheless often used to describe nepotistic, stupid, or anti-social behavior—this is most often used in performance contexts to lightly criticize a group for not inviting other groups to perform alongside them, or for preferring nearby groups to ones further afield. One example of this was a discussion about how performance troupes are chosen to perform at events. A Nizwan performer brought up the situation in Birkat al-Mawz at a collective wedding:

**Nizwan performer**: Someone in Birkat al-Mawz might contact so-and-so from tribe so-and-so *(bū fulān min bānī fulān)* because they don’t want any trouble from other folks, I mean, they want to honor their guests with a troupe that is appropriate [to the occasion]. Some down the way hit the road *(ba‘ādu yaḍrab al-ṭarīq)* up the mountain [Jebel Akhdar] to get a troupe. You were at the collective wedding there [in Birkat al-Mawz on 15 July 2017], no? Yeah, so you know that the group from Manaḥ was there. Now, what were they doing there? *(Birkat al-Mawz is in the *wilāya* of Nizwā, Manaḥ is the capital of its own *wilāya)*. That’s tribalism for you—al-Tawbī, al-Riyāmī, al-Rāshidī, so on and so on... look at the names!

**BJG**: Hmm, yeah, that’s true, but there’s Tawbiyyin everywhere and there were also Manādhīr at the wedding as well, from al-Sulayf. And Firqat al-Shihabā’ *(my interlocutor’s troupe in Nizwa)* is available…

**NP**: By God, we’re available!

Later, when I was discussing the same topic with the group from Manaḥ that was performing at the group wedding, a member laughed:

**Manaḥ perfomer**: [Laughs] they said that? We attended *(ḥaḍart al-firqa)* because we bring real arts, authentic art *(fann ’aṣīl)*, and they know we throw new *razḥāt (nilqā razḥat gidīda)*, meaning
newly written verses and suitable to the occasion. They are very new (Firqat al-Shihabā’) and I don’t think they have a manager (munassiq).

This exchange indicates how charges of “tribalism” are levelled against certain groups to explain their relative success. Whether or not “tribalism” actually explains the troupe from Manah’s presence at the collective wedding in Birkat al-Mawz or whether it is explicable by their superior marketing is unclear.

Figure 16. Public invitation to the collective wedding. The top two lines read: ‘Sponsored by His Excellency the Shaykh ‘Ali bin Nasir al-Mahruqi, secretary general of the majlis al-shūrā’. Then follow other sponsorships, directions and times, and finally the name of the young men who are being married. AQAR is one of the largest Omani real estate and development firms and owns a large hotel just up the road on Jebel Akhdar.

One major way that tribes structured the social world in Oman was by tribal “divisions,” sympathies or antipathies that were assumed based on tribal positioning. These divisions and the number of terms relating to various subsets of them have changed over time. A current, if shifting,
major division in Oman involves one of two large groupings, or confederations, referred to as al-Ghāfirī and al-Hināwī. Both of these confederations are composed of a shifting number of smaller tribal coalitions, such as the Bānī Rīyām, which were historically led by an ‘amīr. These large concatenations are composed of individual tribes, such as al-Tawbiyyin, which are headed by a shaykh derived from a prominent lineage within them. It is this level of organization from which individuals derive their third name: al-Tawbī for men, and al-Tawbiyya for women, for example. Today, these smallest tribal genealogical units are most important with regard to governmental policy, reputation, marriages, and social standing.

While older sources (Eickelman 1980; Carter 1982; Wilkinson 1987) do take a critical view of the neatness of the tribal system and the degree to which it conforms to the “ideal type” of the tribe posited by segmentary lineage theory, the current situation of tribes in the new state has changed very much. As Limbert (2010, 40-1) notes, the role of the shaykh has taken on a new salience for the state. The position of the shaykh in the Arabian Peninsula has historically been very elastic, and could describe quite different situations of authority, derived from different sources—the term shaykh might refer to a religious figure with little in the way of political responsibility or a neighborhood leader just as legibly as it could be applied to a local power broker.

In order to curtail the authority of larger tribal leadership, the state now directly appoints the shaykh-s of a given neighborhood (and always favors those that have supported the Sultan), which may or may not correspond to the shaykh of a tribe. This has served to entrench deeper economic divisions between “shaykh-ly” families and non-shaykh-ly families, replacing the historically variable role with a hereditary one. By multiplying the roles of manufactured authority, the state has effectively divided tribal authority in such a way as to preclude historical methods of coalition building by tribal allegiance—“fusion.” This also results in the petty competition of an
increasing number of claimants on authority in a given place or group: one of Limbert’s interlocutors maligned the current situation as having “too many shaykh-s” (2010, 41).

The most important aspect of tribalism for this study is its authority structure of shaykh-s and ’amīr-s (or shaykh-s al-tamīma) and the reciprocal obligations that manifest between them and their tribes or neighborhoods. The shaykh is a position of authority internal to a tribal grouping, but not necessarily in control of it in a coercive sense (contrast Lancasters 2011, chapter 7; Wilkinson 1987 chapter 4). Nevertheless, the shaykh for any single tribal grouping is typically derived from a single family, often referred to as a shaykhly family, who share a tribal name with the broader lineage group (for example the shaykh of the Tawbiyyin would probably be named al-Tawbī, of the Shukayl, al-Shukaylī, just like any member of the tribe). Shaykhly families maintain their status by extracting wealth from the people and land that they have authority over, not just their own tribe. A shaykhly family might own property in many locations, some of which might even be administered by a different shaykh. Nowadays, shaykh-s derive a large portion of their income and holdings from the Sultan’s government, which they then keep, distribute, or donate as they see fit.

Active coercion emerges through the relations with which shaykh-s solidify their economic position: collecting taxes and customs, demanding shares of crops in areas that they have leased to sharecroppers, seizing illegal property, leading raids, and the extensive and predatory money-lending that has plagued Arabian laborers for centuries. While never as baldly exploitative as the lending practiced in pearl fisheries, shaykh-s and wealthy trading families often engaged in money-lending practices that kept agriculturalists, tradespeople, caravaneers, and low-volume traders in a state of permanent debt. Agriculturalists, tied to land and reliant on the weather, have been perennial targets for exploitative money-lending, which only became more necessary over
the last hundred years. Of course, debt relationships and exchange relations are very common amongst agriculturalists exploiting highly variable niches all over the world, but, with the decline of in-kind trading (muqayatha) and the imposition of the money economy, shaykh-s and traders with cash at the ready were well-positioned to exploit cash-poor agriculturalists who were no longer able to pay taxes and debts with their produce. Borrowing against future agricultural production to replace crop loss, invest in new and necessary technological advancements, make household repairs, or pay for a wedding, farmers were often forced to give up their own property.\textsuperscript{30} This land, was, of course, not farmed by the shaykhly family, but was instead sold, leased, or granted to loyal retainers or groups that the shaykh wanted to bring into his political orbit.

At times when centralized state structures were weak or non-existent, shaykh-s could, through various means, come to rule larger and larger territories and thereby assume authority over larger groups of people. As many scholars of the region have noted, it is authority over people, rather than land itself, which is valuable in semi-arid environments. As an example, Al-Rasheed describes the expansion of the Rashīdī power base the town of Hail in modern northern Saudi Arabia over the past few centuries (1991). The Rashīdīs were largely recognized as leaders by their intense development of the Hail area in the 12\textsuperscript{th}/18\textsuperscript{th} century, investing widely in agriculture, drawing in regional trade routes, and restoring the local marketplace, or sūq. The financial outlay the Rashīdīs were able to afford solidified their position as ‘amīr-s, an authority above that of shaykh, and the efflorescence of Hail was evidence of their success and leadership. The local

\textsuperscript{30} Farmers in Oman were generally free owners of their fully alienable land (mulk), rather than being organized into fiefs, semi-feudal ‘iqṭā‘ relations, or communal ownership as in other Arab contexts. Land and ownership of land is relatively poorly covered in shari‘a law, and so various local systems have existed in the Islamic world. See chapters 5 and 6 of Wilkinson 1987 for a more detailed description of an idealized system, and chapters 2 and 9 in Al-Torki and Cole 1989 for a more realistic description.
economic boom in Hail drew more people to settle there, and the Rashīdīs even drew a stipend from the Ottoman Sultan, under whose nominal authority Hail remained. Further, the family was instrumental in re-routing caravan trade from Mesopotamia and Persia through Hail to the Hijaz by organizing guards to guarantee their defense and ensuring public safety. The region of Hail and its hinterland came to be known as an ‘imāra, the seat of a centralized authority related to a particular family. Hence, tribally related shaykh-s of non-Rashīdī families came to rely on the Rashīdī ‘amīr for benefits, legal judgments, defense, and arbitration. As more and more people came to recognize the Rashīdī ‘amīr-s as legitimate leaders, their reputation grew and added to their prestige. The ultimate failure of the Rashīdī ‘imara to fend off the attacks of the Āl Sa‘ūd, a non-tribal alliance based on Wahhabi Islamic teachings, illustrates Wilkinson’s claim that the tribal state is ultimately a “dead-end.” As Al-Rasheed shows, the Rashīdī state could only expect to integrate people from outside its tribal network as long as its leaders could hold personal control, and expanding the ‘imara was all the more difficult when it bordered other similarly derived tribal states. While expansion over friendly and related tribal groupings could be extremely rapid, expansion grew more and more difficult and expensive as genealogical links (fictive or otherwise) dwindled in contemporary relevance.

Within Greater Oman, the ‘amīr need not always exercise the excellence of leadership displayed by the Rashīdīs in Hail to remain ‘amīr-s, nor even hold power within a defined ‘imara. Rather, within larger tribal groupings the shaykh-s of certain families functioned more as ‘amīr-s while also fulfilling the role of shaykh within their own branch (Lancasters 2011, 305). For example, historically, the shaykh of the Nabāhina has operated as the shaykh al-tamīma or ‘amīr of the entire Bānī Rīyām, which includes the Nabāhina, the Tawbiyyin, and many others. The ‘amīr at this level represents the interests of his tribe and those that are aligned with it to some
higher ruler—in Oman’s case, the Imam, a king, or the Sultan. It is precisely this supra-tribal position that the current Sultan and his father succeeded in eliminating through murder, prison, exile, and politicking.

Above the position of the tribal ’amīr, the very highest political position takes different names in different places and times. Local strongmen might take mālik (“king” or “lord,” hence the “Lord of the Green Mountain,” Sulaymān bin Ḥimyar who held power in the mid-20th century) while larger regional leaders might choose sulṭān, ’amīr, or ’imām under differing circumstances of state structural stability, loyalty, sources of legitimacy, and prestige. These names reveal subtle shades of difference between the assumed privileges and power bases of the wielder and the leader’s relationship to preexisting institutional regimes of power, which reciprocally places certain obligations and duties upon the holder. Many of these will be discussed more concretely in chapters 3 and 4.

**Government in Oman**

There is a tendency in Omani historiography to present the Imamate of Oman and the Sultanate of Muscat as “opposing” polities. While this is true for some periods, this antagonism was not the natural relationship between the interior and the coast, but the result of predatory elites of one region trying to capture the other.

As a result of these predations, the present-day Sultanate of Oman is a concatenation of several largely independent historical polities and a number of peripheral regions that were officially integrated in 1970 (although unsettled borders remained a political issue until the early 1990s). The two most important and historically stable polities were the Ibāḍī Imamate of Oman, which flourished and dissolved several times over its lifespan, approximately from c. 133/751—1378/1959, and the Sultanate of Muscat, a thallassocratic coastal trading state that fissioned off of
and eventually eclipsed the Imamate due to its economic and military dominance in the mid-12th/18th century. The Ibāḍī Imamate, a theocracy based on the well-developed political philosophy of the third great Islamic madhhab, Ibāḍism, was located across the central Ḥajar range, and, at times of maximum centralization and expansion, could stretch along the coasts of Oman to Julfār (modern day R’as al-Khayma), Ṣūr, ‘Ibrī, and Ādam. The Imamate should not be considered, as it has been in the past, as entirely located in the current interior province of Dakhiliyyah, since the capital of several Imamate governments was al-Rustāq, an old Persian capital (hence the name) on the coastal side of the Ḥajar mountains. Further, Imams were often interested in exerting administrative control over profitable coastal port cities like Ṣuḥār and caravan nodes like ‘Ibrī in order to supplement their often meager treasuries.

The Sultanate’s leaders, on the other hand, who began as Imams, were largely interested in securing the coast of Oman and its important ports in order to extend their power over Indian Ocean trade. On the coast, much more emphasis was placed on mercantile trade throughout the Indian Ocean, with Muscat and Seeb forming crucial harbors at the headwaters of the Arabian Gulf. Over the 12th/18th and 13th/19th century, the coastal Sultans were able to take advantage of economic gains initiated by the Ya‘arībī Imams (reigned c. 11th/17th-12th/18th centuries) to build new naval fleets and impose their nominal and later functional rulership over Hormuz (which was actually rented from the Persian government), Bahrain, the East African littoral, and even parts of modern Pakistan and India. As European colonial powers gave more control to their colonial governments, these extra-governmental apparatuses were more able to thwart the Sultan’s ambitions in the Indian Ocean militarily and economically.

The Imamate and the Sultanate of Muscat, when they coincided, alternated between open conflict and stable coexistence. Economic specialization was often maintained by regional politics,
since any attempts by the Imamate to expand into coastal trade were disrupted by, at first, the ‘Abbasid Caliphs in Baghdad, and, later, the Persian shahs, both of which depended on the region for overseas trade and customs income and would not allow the establishment of an independent state on the coast. Thus, the Ibāḍī Imamate was often confined to the interior, while the coast was alternately threatened by or under the direct rule of foreign powers until the 18th century. Historians Patricia Risso (1986) and John C. Wilkinson (1987) have produced dense histories of these relations, both internally and regionally, and modeled their development as dependent on each other: as the Imamate gained centralized control over the interior, coastal power waned due to raids and defections, prompting its seizure by foreign powers and its defense or recapture by the Ibāḍī state; as coastal power increased and local elites could fend off foreign invasions and prosper economically, the interior languished and fissioned into smaller local political entities, allowing coastal leaders to extend their hegemony into the interior, and, eventually, to far reaches of the Indian Ocean and central Africa.

a. The Ibāḍī Imamate in Oman

The latest iteration of the Ibāḍī Imamate in Oman ended in the 1370s/1950s but can be traced back for over a thousand years prior. A strongly decentralized theocracy based on Ibāḍī Islam, the Imamate thrived between periods of the great expansions of nearby Islamic and, later, European colonial empires. Generalizing about such a long-lived, idealized, and variable system of government such as the Ibāḍī Imamate in Oman is difficult and is made even more so by the fact that the only extant historical sources were written by a small number of male Arab Ibāḍī intellectuals drawn from religiously trained families. This has resulted in accounts that are histories not of Oman and its people, but of one of its governmental systems from the perspective of those who most benefitted from it. Indeed, if we take Wilkinson, the main Orientalist historian of the
Imamate, at his word, the Imamate may not even be a particularly *unique* system of government in the Arabian Peninsula. Wilkinson (1977, 1987) describes the Ibāḍī Imamate as built out of and accommodating pre-existing tribal authority structures in the region, even as it was an overlay of certain Ibāḍī political principles over a largely tribal base. Further, Wilkinson is at pains to distinguish the Ibāḍī Imamate from other extant theocracies on the Peninsula, such as the Zaydī Imamate of Yemen and the Sa‘ūdī-Wahhābī state of Saudi Arabia, and even from similar theocratic systems across the Muslim world. In short, there is little that distinguishes the Ibāḍī Imamate from other theocratic supra-tribal states across the region, other than the highly developed political philosophies developed within each one.

Two such distinguishing features for the Ibāḍī Imamate were the notion of a drafted contract binding rulers to certain responsibilities and obligations (*ʿaqd*), and the formal election of each Imam by oligarchs and theocrats, as outlined by Ghubash (2006). As Lienhardt (2001) and Al-Rasheed (1991) have pointed out, dynastic succession in Arabian tribal states (“shaykhdoms”) has the potential to be intensely violent, as no principles like primogeniture are recognized. The Imamate, however, was conceived as an elected position that was to be held by the most capable of a field of candidates. While in theory each election selected a candidate on his own virtues, electors (the *ahl al-hall wa-l-ʿaqd*, “those who loosen and bind”) functionally created the major dynasties that have ruled Oman in various ways since 548/1154: the non-Imamate Nabhānī Kings (*mulūk*), (548-1033/1154-1624), the Yaʿarībī Imams, (1033-1162/1624-1749), and the Āl Bū Saʿīd Sultans, (1162-current/ 1749-current). The Imamate was predicated on sustaining the rule of a thin stratum of tribal leaders, landowners, and religious experts to the exclusion of common people. When those classes ruled, historians recognize the Imamate. When other ones did, they do not.
Despite a long and contingent history, certain regularities of the Imamate can be established, and histories of nearby societies can help us understand the interim periods of non-Imamate rule. The institutional structure of the Imamate was largely a thin administrative apparatus that spread over towns and villages that accepted the Imam’s appointment of a wālī, or governor, and a qādī, or judge, for the town. These officials were drawn from various elite shaykhly families who supported the Imamate, and while they acted largely independently from the Imam, they could be trusted to consult him on serious matters, side with his decisions, extract appropriate taxes, raise tribal levies, and ensure the peace (salāma) and rule of law (‘imn wa ’imān). As the Lancasters (2011) note, the most crucial role of any leader was arbitration, ḥukm, from which common words for government, ḥukūma, and a wise leader, ḥākim, are derived. These terms are still used in the razḥa poetry of Omanis to describe their leaders and their attributes. Strong imams were noted for being arbiters par excellence, mediating between tribal elites near and far. The most binding and important of the Imam’s duties, however, was to uphold sharī’a law amongst the believing community, as interpreted by Ibāḍī doctrine. Of crucial interest here to common folk was the Imam’s role in maintaining a responsible “police” force, ‘askārī-s, and guaranteeing “safety and security” in the Imamate (largely by controlling forts and the distribution of weapons). Importantly, the Imam did not command a standing army, and, indeed, a standing army was considered illegal and indicative of coercive intentions. While he did maintain retainers and guards, formal armies needed to be raised from the local population. The defense of the Imamate was considered the duty of all good Muslims within the Imamate, and this duty could be called upon by the Imam as was necessary. Imamate armies were raised by sending out a call for the organization of tribesmen via the beating of war drums and the circulation of war songs, razḥa, and associated genres, and these songs accompanied the warriors along their mission.
According to modern and contemporary sources, the Imam himself would hold *majlis*-style meetings in the administrative fort in his capital in the mornings and early afternoons to settle disputes and hear legal cases that could not be arbitrated through other means. In this way, the Omani Imam acted in a way that was almost entirely like tribal ‘*amīr*-s in the Arabian Peninsula more broadly, especially in the Gulf and Central Arabia. The main difference was the Imam’s severely constrained ability to impose taxes and the inability to maintain a private army, countered by his status as a religious expert. Only those types of taxes and amounts permitted in Islamic law were allowed. Nevertheless, Imams often held vastly different amounts of coercive and economic power. The interpretation of the *Ibāḍī* Imamate as being virtually identical to the overall function of tribal state formation is supported by the capacity of several Imams, like the first *Ya’arūbī* Imam Nāṣir bin Murshid (r. 1033/1624-1059/1649), to assume a level of legitimacy with sheer economic and military might.

Leveraging his success in waging war on the Portuguese and accumulating land, Nāṣir, a weak Imam elected during the tail end of the *Nabhānī* dynasty, successfully rejuvenated the Imamate and overshadowed the *Nabhānī* by building a large, multi-tribal coalition. Nāṣir’s nephew Sayf bin Sulṭān (r. 1104/1692-3-1124/1711) distinguished himself by rebuilding damaged *falaj*-s, introducing new crops (including saffron and coconut), and buying up, reportedly, a full third of all agricultural land in his domains, earning him the nickname “*qayd al-‘ard,*” the “Chain of the Land.” The decline of the *Ya’arūbī* dynasty in factional infighting amongst cousins with equal claim to the Imamate is yet more evidence to the closeness of the governmental styles.

The capacity of some leaders to have their wider ambitions legitimated is underlined by the political-philosophical notion of the Imamate and the Imam as having two states: one of strength and one of weakness. Periods of open rulership and expansion of the Imamate apparatus
were *ex post facto* called *ẓuhūr*, “open, visible,” and the Imam might even have certain military capabilities penned into his election contract, in which case his leadership would be referred to as *shārī* (literally, “seller.” i.e., one who sells his life in battle). The other was a period of weakness of the Imam’s powers (a *da’if* imam), manifesting in his inability to fulfill his main obligation in “enjoining the right and forbidding the wrong” (The Qur’ān, Āl ‘Amrān, 3, 104, 110), leading the Imamate into a state of decline or concealment (*kitmān*).

The most recent expansion of the interior state was not possible until the arrival of European colonial powers (primarily the Portuguese, Dutch, French, and British) in the 11th/16th century, when coastal Omanis were able to leverage the Europeans against their Safavid rulers. At first, the Portuguese simply replaced the Persians at the top of the Gulf tax and custom collection hierarchy, which resulted in the *Estado da India* imposing their own *cartazes* system all around the Indian Ocean rim (Newitt 1986). By the 1060s/1650s the Imam Nāṣir bin Murshid had driven the Portuguese from the Omani coast, though they remained entrenched in southern Iran, east Africa, and India. Imam Nāṣir’s sons pursued the Portuguese relentlessly using their own captured *caraval*-style ships, waging generally successful campaigns to the south, capturing East African city-states, and generally unsuccessful campaigns along the coasts of Cochin and Malabar in India. The weakened Persian Empire (during the Safavid/Afsharid transition) could not afford to reestablish its control of the Omani coast, and the Imamate quickly took this opportunity to seize coastal towns and install themselves as the main beneficiaries of maritime economic activity, resulting in a brief period of Imamate coastal control that brought considerable wealth to the Interior. The dynastic rule of the Ya’arubā Imams, noted above, led to a succession crisis which was resolved by one of the parties inviting the aid of Persian armies, which, upon completion of their mission, seized control of the coast for Persian leaders once again. This final direct colonial
aggression paved the way for a coastal Ibāḍī elite of the Āl bū Saʿīd tribe, Aḥmad bin Saʿīd Āl Bū Saʿīd, to lead the fight against the Persians from his base as appointed wālī of Ṣuḥār. He was eventually formally elected Imām of the Ibāḍī state in 1749, largely by virtue of his military success and wealth, since he possessed virtually no religious credentials. His dynasty, still in power today, saw the extension of Omani overseas economic activity into the western coast of India and the present-day Congo of central and southern Africa, the occupation of Zanzibar, Mombasa, Bahrain and Gwadar on the Makrān coast. The immense Omani maritime empire had, by the 1840s, established itself as an important trading power in the eastern Indian Ocean, especially in the export of slaves and spices from central Africa to south and southwest Asia. In 1856, due to a colonially imposed succession crisis, the unified state was divided into two separate realms—one located in Oman proper, the other in Zanzibar on the Swahili coast of modern-day Tanzania. The immense productivity and wealth of Zanzibar compared to Oman, and the collapse of the slave trade due to the British Moratorium in the 1840s, prompted nearly 80% of all Arab families in Muscat to migrate to East Africa, many of whom are now only beginning to return. This state has often been called a “trading state” by historians, as it survived mostly on the imposition of customs and taxes and extended its control of coastal cities largely for economic reasons—legitimacy was linked more to economic control and military strength than anything else. As the focus of the Muscat Sultans turned ever more away from Oman and toward East Africa, shaykh-s of the interior were more able to build their own increasingly independent city-states.

b. A critical approach to the twentieth century

Much of the rest of this dissertation discusses the twentieth century, so I will only briefly sketch it here. The twentieth century witnessed the end of the interior Imamate and the unification of Oman as a Sultanate by 1959. In 1913, the largely independent tribal states of the interior fitfully
united under the banner of the Imamate and elected Sālim bin Rāshid al-Kharūsī as Imam in Tanūf, simultaneously declaring the Sultan as illegitimate. The Sultan soon afterwards died of natural causes. Imamate-affiliated elites immediately began raiding the rich cities along the coast, who they saw as valid legal targets for pillaging. The Imam eventually agreed to endorse the Treaty of al-Sīb in 1920 with the coastal Sultan Taymūr bin Faisal (r. 1913-32), which tacitly recognized the Imamate’s autonomy in the interior in exchange for their cessation of raids on coastal cities. The treaty remained relatively stable until Taymūr’s son, Sultan Sa‘īd (r.1932-1970), sold oil exploration rights in the interior to the newly formed British Petroleum Development Oman (PDO), which interior leaders saw as their legal prerogative. This move unexpectedly corresponded with the death of the Imam, Muḥammad bin ‘Abdullah al-Khalīlī, which pushed the newly elected Imam, in a bid to legitimize himself, to initiate a secessionist movement by securing Saudi Arabian military and political aid. By 1959, and with the help of the British, the movement had been defeated, the Imamate abolished, the treaty abrogated, and tribal elites had formally capitulated to the rule of the coastal Sultan. With the relative stability that this produced, oil production was increased, export regularized, and the Sultanate’s finances began to improve. After this victory, Sultan Sa‘īd withdrew to the southern Ţūfār region and isolated himself from everyday politics. His isolation, sluggish development, and ineffective leadership led to the spread of a Marxist rebellion in the southern region of Ţufār in the 1960s, and periodic unrest in the interior.

In 1970, Sultan Ša‘īd bin Ṭaymūr’s son, Qābūs, led a successful and bloodless palace coup and installed himself as Sultan. His rule has seen the gradual expansion of an efficient transportation network, intense infrastructural development, the establishment of a modern hospital and education system, and regularization of international trade and foreign relations. As many critical anthropologists have shown, the Omani state in this period has often been described
as progressive and developing merely by the juxtaposition of two numbers: one from before 1970, and one from “today.” Such and such miles of road existed before 1970, observers claim, while many more miles exist today. The same is replicated for schools, hospitals, electrical transformer stations, banks, and so on. This is useful, but it portrays development and urbanization as “the inevitable juggernaut of progress,” as Emily Yeh puts it (2013, 203), and perhaps more problematically renders development as a simple matter of numbers.

In any case, the numbers are arresting for their incredible growth and much of this is due to the expansion of the state’s institutional presence predicated on booming oil revenues. It is easy to overemphasize the gross export of oil in Oman and ignore the structural reality of its tiny population, rendering the per capita distributional potential of the Omani state incredibly high in comparison to other states. Eickelman notes that in 1979, Egypt’s state oil-derived income in fact doubled Oman’s (1987, 181). This capacity for distribution is often used to make claims about the “nature” of the state that distributes: that it is predicated on “rent,” that it is an “allocation state,” that it is “distributional” or has a “reversed tax system” (Eickelman 1987, 181). While I challenge this conception more in chapter 6, I want to point out now that this is a peculiarly “capitalocentric” construction, as Gibson-Graham put it. It takes for granted that “the Midas touch of capitalism,” manifested as oil export-derived profits, overwhelms, displaces, and eventually obliterates preexisting ideas about fairness, exchange, distribution, generosity, and many other social relations, obligations, and ideas about mutuality (Yang 2000, 481; Yang 2005). As anthropologists have shown, this is not quite right: a wide range of practices, logics, and orientations to money and obligation concurrently circulate alongside the market. For example, the notion that state distributions of wealth result in a “rentier psychology” that produces political quiescence is an ahistorical misreading of social life before such distributions (Luciani 1987). Political scientist
Jocelyn Sage Mitchell has shown that the political stability of Gulf regimes is not fully explained by distribution (2013). A number of the theses derived from the “rentier state” school are incorrect (“loyalty is to the system, not the individuals in power,” “an allocation state does not need to refer to a national myth” [Luciani 1987, 74-5]) but some are very insightful (that appeals to ethnic belonging and genealogical tradition restricts claimants on distributions (Luciani 1987, 75)). Therefore, the assumption that these oil export-derived profits resulted in drastic changes in local social norms in ways that are similar all over the world is probably wrong.

Nazih Ayubi developed a detailed and profoundly insightful analysis of Arab states that draws on both “political economy” and “political culture” approaches (1995, 6ff.). He, more than most others, has been able to show how various Arab states progressed in different directions based on their “lop-sided” development: some were guided by the military, others by national bourgeoisies, mineral extraction, or factories. The most profound insight is his insistence on the “articulation” between the capitalist mode of production and a variety of others, including tributary, control-based, and circulationist modes. “Articulation” is the neo-Marxist term for the process by which forms/modes of production coalesce into and change one another, which shapes and is shaped by ideological production. This is broadly analogous to Gibson-Graham’s and Yang’s critique of “capitalocentrism.” This high level of articulation is why Ayubi describes many Arab states as having a “fluid class map” in which movement is possible and hardened class identities are rare. Such a class distribution makes attending to anarchist approaches to the state, sharpened by a Gramscian attention to the ways in which alliances, ideas, and values are shaped across strata and throughout that class map, more appropriate. The money derived from the export of oil, as we shall see, not only changed the way that ruling classes perpetuated their rule but
changed the stakes of political interactions between rulers and ruled in affect-laden and historically charged arenas like praise.

So let’s now turn to praise.
Chapter 2: “We salute the designs that are in good order”: Praise, Power, and Poetry in Oman

أول سلامي ع الدار والحله
وعليك خاطري ومن سكن فيه
في ديرة العز اهل الكرم
ظه قابوس يا نورا شارجا فيها

My first greetings go to the homeland and the encampment;
you are on my mind, and those who live there.
The people of generosity are in pride’s homeland!
it is for him, Qābūs, O its eastern light!
- Anonymous welcoming razha.

Ne al soh ne al les þat leod-scopes singed.
What minstrels sing is neither all true nor all lies.
-Laȝamon, The Brut, a 12th century Middle English history poem.

This chapter is about praise poetry and its relationship to power in Oman. Following other ethnomusicologists, I take poetry and its performance as a crucial lens on sociality. While the focus is on one country in the Arab Middle East, it draws on examples from many historical periods and regions. This is justified by the fact that praise poetry is one of the most extensive, ancient, and common forms of poetry in the Asian, African, and European continents. Praise is and has been deeply embedded in the social poetics of everyday life and in the relationship between rulers, patrons, poets, and communities. These widespread practices, while varied, resemble each other in ways that point to profound similarities in social function and, as Lila Abu-Lughod puts it, an “ideology of social life” (1986, 32). In examining this ideology, I follow Abu-Lughod’s (1986) call to situate poetic performances more firmly within the “background” of social life and investigate the “basic cultural notions” that animate it (1986, 32). Likewise, I am guided by Saad Sowayan’s recently repeated call to bring more theoretical rigor to the study of Arabian poetic performance practices, especially due to his interest in examining it in light of “cultural notions”
that are broadly shared with Classical societies (2003, 2015). Finally, I embrace certain political economic strands of linguistic anthropology that argue that we should recognize the role of praise poetry as a constituent practice within certain political economies, rather than a more conventional argument that traces how a broader political economy impacts one or another genre.

Almost 30 years ago, Susan Gal (1989) and Judith Irvine (1989) pushed us to consider language performance as constituting what we call political and economic practices, not just as an arbitrary system that represents actual political and economic practices. It’s the difference between a protest song and a vote. One reflects, the other just is. Irvine identified West African praise as the perfect example. It doesn’t reflect broader political economic concerns. It just is a political and economic practice of certain social arrangements, like selling or buying or voting or giving things away. Without it, things don’t work.

I argue that in Oman, today and in the past, ideals about how rulers should rule, how power can be exercised, and what constitutes proper and dignified exchange between rulers and ruled are modeled in men’s performance of public praise poetry. The crucial cultural notion that manages poetic exchanges between rulers and ruled is the notion of madīḥ or madiḥa, “praise.” Praise (CLA, madh), for Omani Arabs of the Interior, is a crucial function of ‘āzī and of razḥa, and each performance of these genres is at least partially animated by it. Praise poetry in Oman is now and has been a vital indicator of relationships between rulers and the ruled. It makes claims on correct behavior and works to facilitate the exchange of deeds and goods between ruling classes and the ruled. Praise is not ironic or facile, and is, in fact, deeply engaged in the everyday creation of both class hegemony and shared values between classes.

Unlike other praise contexts, the general pattern of gift exchange animates this Omani praise relationship, in which gifts and good deeds obligate a public reception which stimulates a
return of the gift and a replication of the cycle. In this case, good deeds and correct action obligate praise which in turn stimulates continued correct action. Furthermore, the ties between people and their home is so tight that they feel obligated to respond to good deeds with thanks and recognition, and to do so in a way that is related to or representative of their location. How and why praise functions in managing relations of power and creating communities in the context of the contemporary authoritarian state is investigated in this chapter but is also essential to understanding the analytic arc of my argument.

In this chapter, I argue that thinking with Omanis about the function of praise in regimes of power reveals the ways that exchanges of praise manage relations between communities and ruling classes in Oman. Further, I hypothesize that aspects of this relationship continue to operate today, primarily to symbolize ideals of rulership that undergird Arabian authoritarian regimes. To make this argument, I review some general literature on praise poetry and compare and contrast various systems (Early Irish; West and Southern African; Greek; Icelandic; Chinese; English; Arab; Nepalese) through history and space. I will review some of the literature on the classical Arabic qaṣīda to show how it overlaps with and differs from the Omani choral ode, ‘āzī. Finally, I take a close look at relationships between poetic forms, praise, authority, social structure, and good manners in Oman.

**a. Hearing Praise**

How can we hear praise? And more to the point, aren’t we already? The simple answer is no; the more complicated answer is—who’s we?

Music that involves praise is probably studied very often in ethnomusicology because it is found almost everywhere, praising all kinds of things: humans, Gods, prophets, animals, seasons, food, ancestors, plants, lineages, and so on. And yet, ethnomusicologists have said surprisingly
little on praise as a social tool. It was obvious to my Omani interlocutors that I would study praise in relation to power. It is less obvious to Western academics and intellectuals. Serious investigation of praise poetry is, to some extent, harried by the deep antipathy with which praise poetry has been regarded in Europe and the Americas in recent times. Praise poetry has come to be deeply suspect, if not the height of inartistry, in the academy and among academics. The writing of ostentatious praise, modern wisdom goes, is the province of the dimwitted, the weak, the purchased, or the duped. Why is this so? I think part of this is a latent ideology of individualism in academic discourse. Despite idealizing “strong” communities based on interdependence and mutuality, we tend to sneer a bit at overt expressions of that same dependency when it admits to the central weakness that is a predicate to interdependence. Similarly, the “romance of resistance” remains alive and well: we prefer our subjects to hiss and spit at powerful elites rather than see those elites as a part of society (even if deleterious).

The question of why praise has declined so far in the estimation of the literary elite motivated J.R. Burrow’s short but insightful work, *The Poetry of Praise* (2008), which traces this profound shift in English language poetry’s relationship to praise since *Beowulf*. In it he writes,

> This study of praise in medieval poetry grew out of the observation that modern critics and readers (myself included) commonly find it hard to come to terms with the many varieties of eulogistic writing that are encountered there. So we either turn our eyes away from this ‘poetry of praise’ or else look in it too eagerly for such ironies and reservations as may accommodate it to modern tastes and values. (2008, vii)

Indeed, for a thousand years after the inscription of *Beowulf*, the English language and its ancestors had been used for praise poetry. Praise was a valuable and important *function* of poetry in England, and in many other places besides. However, at the time of his writing, Burrow can comfortably claim that “praise is no longer a prime function of poetic activity” (2008, 3).
While Burrow points to the c. 1688 CE development of the English Poet Laureate as the beginning of the decline in English praise poetry, whatever the cause, I was raised in a society that did not value praise poetry. I was not alone in this, however. During a discussion of my fieldwork with an anthropologist of Oman, I was told that in Oman “no one takes that [praise] stuff seriously; they all laugh at it… it’s embarrassing.” During my fieldwork, an Egyptian friend told me he despised Omani poets who “pull on scraps of meat (sharḥat laḥm) like dogs” when they compose praise poetry for the elite. Ethnomusicologist Eric Charry reports similar “derogatory remarks about the apparently unabashed soliciting of gifts by praise singers” in European reporting on Malian jeli, or praise singers, whose great crime appears to rest largely in accepting remuneration in public (2000, 98). \(^{31}\) Praise, and the movement of material and non-material goods relating to this praise, is undignified.

Drawing on literatures of praise poetry from many places and times, I argue for the exact opposite approach. By hearing praise, I mean to think against this modern wisdom regarding praise poetry. It is not tit-for-tat exchange, or blame, or accounting, or sycophantic. To be clear, it can be those things. The kneejerk reaction to hear praise as embarrassing or sycophantic is probably sometimes right but is also not nearly the whole story.

Let’s dwell on this kneejerk description of praise for a moment. There are two useful and cautionary criticisms of this logic predicated on the critical position that I sketched in the introduction. Think about why we work. Obviously, money is high on that list, because it allows us to survive in a monetary economy. But, consider this: would you take one penny less a year if it meant that you got honest, sincere validation and respect from your peers? A lot of us do more

\(^{31}\) Charry continues to make a crucial point, reflected in many other societies: “Whatever is provided to the jeli [praise singer], be it cash, food, animals, land, or whatever, is not traditionally considered to be a payment. But rather is seen as cementing an ancient historical interdependence” (2000, 98).
than just take a penny less: we get on airplanes and fly all over the place to conferences and talks for the chance to get that validation. Praise, at its most effective, validates persons for their actions, predicated on some shared sense of social and moral commitments. Of course, validation and conferences can be explained by invoking some kind of maximized capital-rationalization. But here we should be wary of capitalocentrism, as defined by Marxist scholars J.K. Gibson-Graham (1996, 2006). I noticed this in myself. When I thought about the problem of work and validation, I kept thinking until I could explain this behavior in terms of getting money or ways to make more money in the future. I just entertained other explanations until I could really explain it with reference to market economics and money or earnings maximization. Why did I think that was more correct than thinking of validation, senses of community, being heard, sharing a passion for a topic, or any number of other motivations? That’s a perfect example of capitalocentric thinking, which is deeply engrained and naturalized in us. Searching for a broadly capitalist practice instead of recognizing other, potentially anti-capitalist or non-capitalist practices is precisely the way that market capitalism comes to be understood as a stable, universal system in which all other things are embedded—including praise, gifts, wealth destruction, and whatever else.

The second criticism also includes a minor reformulation of Gramsci’s notion of hegemony. I want to suggest that praise, because it not only recognizes good deeds and ties them to ideals like generosity, keeping promises, and the like, might keep those ideas in circulation amongst the ruling classes. The way Gramsci sees hegemony construction is mostly (but not completely) a one-way process: it is an imposition of a “general direction” on life, based on elite bourgeois values and ideas, whose imposition is managed by both coercion and cooptation. I think this is right. However, there are reasons to think that the reverse might also be possible. For example, this imposition might not be complete (that is, “the general direction” isn’t everything),
or maybe some ideas are shared at such a basic level that they bleed across class position, or maybe some ideas move from the subordinate to the ruling classes. We should entertain the possibility that hegemony is a bit more of a compromise than we at first suspect. Gramsci was, after all, generally suspicious of anything being a fully completed and stable system, including things we often think of as “systems,” like “culture” (Crehan 2002). We already know that elites take ideas and practices from subordinated classes: think of blue jeans that cost $1000, working class “authenticity,” or eating offal and off-cuts of meat in fancy restaurants. The best example of this is the white elite adoption of cultural practices of racially subordinated groups, like the musics, languages, and comportment of African-Americans in the US. Could praise be one way that ideas and values are communicated and even shared across class boundaries in Oman?

Ideas like “you should be generous if you can” might ultimately be derived from something like “the moral economy” identified by James Scott and others as obtaining within non-elite groups. I think it is possible that praise sustains ideas that are derived from or benefit subordinated classes. Praise might be one of the few ways that anti-political or anti-capitalist ideas are even heard or entertained by the ruling classes, because praise is explicitly targeted at them and is imaginatively dreamt up by the subordinated specifically to catch elite attention. I’m even tempted to consider the sneering disregard for praise on the part of some middle-class folks and elites as a handmaiden to the inculcation of a capitalist work ethic. Why ask for things when you could be working towards getting them yourself? But let’s return to the issue at hand.

If a general disinclination to studying praise can be discerned, we can turn to the question of “who’s we?” Here, I’m thinking of ethnomusicologists, and specifically of ethnomusicologists
who see praise as functioning within a broad notion of political economy. Ethnomusicologists of West Africa have certainly dealt with praise the most, and amongst those Christopher Waterman (1990) and Aaron Carter-Ényì (2018) have been particularly insightful. Despite the richness with which Waterman studies praise, I expect many ethnomusicologists share Veit Erlmann’s feelings on the topic in his analysis of Waterman’s 1990 Jùjú: A Social History and Ethnography of an African Popular Music. Erlmann suggests that jùjú serves to “underline a mode of transaction focused on the generous distribution of wealth in exchange for favorable portrayals of the social role of the rich and powerful” (1996, 22). Drawing on Bataille’s work on the gift in The Accursed Share, he suggests that in jùjú “the lies of the rich are changed into truth” (22). Erlmann in turn praises Waterman for seeing through the “embarrassingly obsequious song texts in modern jùjú” and for Waterman’s tremulous denial that jùjú is entirely in the service of power (Waterman 1990, 227-8). Embarrassing to whom? To the praisers? To the praised? Or to the academic?

We might step back here and ask, why should Yorùbá elites pay for yín, praise, or want to have a good name in the first place? Mostly, it seems like reputation and networking. The circulation of praise and money as delayed reciprocity is, in Waterman’s words, a “life strategy” for people along a wide range of the class spectrum, a way of “making it” in urban West Africa in uncertain times (1990, 177). Occasions for generosity, like jùjú concerts, funerals, weddings, and all manner of other social occasions, are chances to “[activate] crucial socioeconomic networks” and to “raise [one’s] standing in the community” (Waterman 1990, 174, 177). Waterman concludes that it is music that “establishes norms legitimating public demonstrations of wealth, generosity, and good character” as good deeds like generosity are refracted through praise to construe them

32 Socio-cultural anthropologists in general fare worse here: even if they do admit that performance might have a legitimate social function, all the criticisms we might level at ethnomusicologists then take over.
both as a general social good and as an example to others (187). In her study of songs for the *gurna* dance in northern Cameroon, Clare Ignatowski argues for the normative power of poetry as operating in a similar way (2006). While Yorùbá weddings raise the status of the host, they also "function as a support system for the poor, *tálákà*" who are "allowed to gather around the edges of the host’s compound, and to partake in the food, drink, and gifts circulated among the invited participants" (177). That’s a social good that should be encouraged, even if grounded on inequality. There are lots of other good reasons to cultivate a good reputation, and many of them are shared with humanity in general: to be represented as trustworthy, powerful, and well-connected is probably useful in lots of contexts.

What differentiates the Omani context from the West African one is social structure and orientation. In Lagos, praise performance is the medium of individual social networks; in Oman, praise circulates between communities and their leaders. Praise does circulate in personal networks wherein one poet habitually praises a web of patrons from whom he takes money in public performance in Oman and the Gulf, but it is relatively rare—not a "life strategy" chosen by many. Omani Arab poets do take money for their work (as they should) but it is not "sprayed" on them in public as it is during *jùjú* concerts. In fact, we shall see that movements of money in that way do occur and are explicitly contrasted with good, effective praise. The lack of public "spraying" for praise is probably due to the fact that there is no social position devoted to praise like griots or *oríkì* poets in Oman. What leaders are praised for in Oman is not helping individuals, but for helping communities—villages, towns, cities—and so praise responses are often similarly communal. Communities, or representative groups therefrom, praise leaders, which necessarily disrupts the "ego-centered" praise networking so common in urban Lagos and other places. The fact that there is no independent praising group means that there is correspondingly no criticizing
group: in fact, without those personalized networks of competing patrons, much of the power that critical poetry would be deeply diminished. If you criticize a big family in one neighborhood of Lagos, you can expect that its rivals will throw some cash at you when they have a celebration. If you viciously criticize the Sultan in Oman, don’t expect anyone else to be generous, because he doesn’t have any rivals.

That music plays some positive or normative role in defining proper social comportment is a strongly validated finding in ethnomusicology. Often, however, this function is not regarded as “praise” so much as it is considered “discourse” in the Foucauldian sense. This is accurate, but it is also important to disaggregate the clutch of speech and performance genres folded into the notion of “discourse” to see how any single one operates in particular, historical ways.

In this chapter, I want to take praise poetry for what praise poets, the praised, and audiences in Oman take it for—an authentic commendation of good deeds with an eye to promoting them in the future. Praise picks out and celebrates social relationships between individuals and their community in virtue of their fulfillment of ideals, moral norms, and social obligations. This is not to take attention away from the crucial role that criticism and the threat of criticism also play. For praise poets, however, praise communicates with leaders in a manner far subtler than criticism. It also does so in a way that is “virtuous” and “high-minded” both for performers and for their communities. Where praise and blame co-operate, blame, criticism, and invective are modes of speech that beget only more blame, criticism and invective, which might quickly spiral into violence. Praise, we shall see, has been conceived by many groups, including Omanis, to encourage and amplify the lives, reputation, and sociality of all those involved. Praise is not undignified—rather, the exchange that occurs in praise contexts is a crucial medium for the communal portrayal and maintenance of dignity. That praise might be cheaply bought is true. That
poets exaggerate and can be manipulated is wisdom shared in the Islamic world and outside of it. However, praise, when done carefully and honestly, has lasting social effects that are important. And, indeed, we shall see that these kinds of effects can be manipulated as well. But when we try to hear praise, we can see that not only do Interior Omanis take praise poetry seriously, for very specific reasons, but that their commitment to it is vital to the ways in which power, authority, and governance are naturalized and rationalized in the Interior.

**Praise in Many Times and Places**

I was highly skeptical of praise poetry when I first sat down with a poet of ḍāzī, the most vaunted vocal poetic genre in the Interior of Oman. I was mainly interested in learning how poets overtly or covertly demand goods and services from authority figures through the threat of invective. Invective in Arabic poetry was fun, humorous, and also dangerous—speaking truth to power! Praise poets, on the other hand, at least to my mind, were sycophants and money-grubbers. Listening to early interviews is now difficult due to my impatience to hear about the “real” secret behind the poetry: veiled criticism, invective, bald-faced demands made on leaders deemed only marginally legitimate. Despite the fact that I had been trained not to think in this way (see Abu-Lughod 1990 on “resistance”; Asad 1973 on “sultanic authority”; and Rosaldo 1989 on “imperialist nostalgia”), I was not wholly naïve to expect this as an ethnomusicologist. The role of the poet as a dealer in invective and social criticism is very strongly emphasized in the West African literature on modern griots (Hale 1998; Kaschula 1999) and in Zulu and Xhosa izibongo (Kresse 1998; Mafeje 1967; Opland 1975), on Yorùbá oríkì (Barber 1991; Barber and Waterman 1995), on ancient Irish filidh and baird-s (Carney 1985), Greek panegyrists (Kurke 2010[1991]), Norse skald-s (Mitchell 2001), Somali poets (Andrzejewski 2011), medieval Chinese fu poetry (賦) (Wu 2009), and so on.
Praise is indeed often twinned with blame, and this twinning is often recognized as the source of poetry’s social efficacy. Oftentimes, political economies of praise function largely because the threat of invective is ever present. However, praise and blame operate in different ways to impel or curtail action. Andrzejewski, for example, writes that

Somalis often say that a good poet can sow peace and also hatred: he can win friendship by praise and appreciation, deepen an existing feud, or lead to a new one… For a political party it is a great asset to have a good poet devoted to its cause: poems in praise of sultans and clan chiefs are increasingly giving way to panegyrics on party leaders and members of the government, and political crises are enlivened from political bombardments on all sides. Such polemical pieces seldom descend to the scurrility and churlishness of eighteenth-century English lampoons, but use such weapons as exhortation, praise, reproach and emotional blackmail. (2011, 6-7)

Hoffman notes that amongst the Mande, “the power to praise as well as to rebuke belongs to the griot caste” (2000, 242). Throughout her ethnography of Malian griot, Hoffman highlights the ways in which the poet wields a capacity for social change through words and the threat of words. Opland (1975) writes that the Xhosa imbongi tribal poet in southern Africa had the role of herald, praiser, disseminator, but also of critic. Public criticism, in fact, was the sole province of imbongi—“the chief’s councilors could also criticize him [the chief], of course, but never in public, as the imbongi did” (1975, 193). Fusheng Wu (2008) adds, however, that criticism, even in verse, was not always open. Amongst early Chinese poets the function of panegyric was “to advise…in the disguise of praise” (Wu 2008, 6). This amounted to the development of “indirect criticism” (fēng 諷), which was a practice of Chinese poets “because it was dangerous to directly admonish the Son of Heaven” (20). So much so, in fact, that the poet “Sima Xiangru put his political advice in the mouth of His Majesty to create the impression that it came spontaneously from Emperor Wu himself [r. 141-87 BCE]” (2008, 20). Chinese court poets used praise, rather than criticism, in order to subtly influence rulers.
In all these varied contexts, we find that the poet has a clear social function in relation to worldly power and to relationships between autonomous groups. This was also the case in the Middle East amongst Arab groups, both before and after the rise of Islam.

a. The Pre-Islamic Arab Poet

There is a long history of writing on the social functions of poetry amongst the pre-Islamic Arab tribes. This mode of writing is perhaps typified by citing Ibn Rāshiq al-Qaywarānī’s (d. 456/1064) famous description of poets in his treatise al-‘umda:

When there appeared a poet in a family of the Arabs, the other tribes round about would gather together to that family and wish them joy of their good luck. Feasts would be got ready, the women of the tribe would join together in bands, playing upon lutes, as they were wont to do at bridals, and the men and boys would congratulate one another; for a poet was a defence to the honour of them all, a weapon to ward off insult from their good name, and a means of perpetuating their glorious deeds and of establishing their fame for ever. And they used not to wish one another joy but for three things—the birth of a boy, the coming to light of a poet, and the foaling of a noble mare. (Cited in and translated by Sir Charles Lyall 1930, xv-xvii)

The poet, for the pre-Islamic Arab tribe, was a mouthpiece. Arabist R.A. Nicholson has claimed that:

In those days [the Pre-Islamic period or jāhiliyya] poetry was no luxury for the cultured few, but the sole medium of literary expression. Every tribe had its poets, who freely uttered what they felt and thought. Their unwritten words “flew across the desert faster than arrows,” and came home to the hearts and bosoms of all who heard them… the pagan shā‘ir is the oracle of his tribe, their guide in peace and their champion in war. It was to him they

33 Compare this to Kresse’s (1998) claim for the “poetic license” fiercely maintained for praise poets “which applies to most south-east African societies, granting freedom of expression to public statements in the form of praise poetry” (171).
turned for counsel when they sought new pastures, only at his word would they pitch or
strike their ‘houses of hair.’\(^{34}\) (2010[1930], 72-3)

They advertised the tribe’s successes and virtues and lambasted their enemies’ failings within
conventionalized poetic forms utilizing meter and rhyme (qāffiya) instead of the rhymed prose
(saj’) used by soothsayers and fortune-tellers (McDonald 1978; Nicholson 2011[1930], 74-6).

b. The Qaṣīda

The primary form of poetic contest amongst these pre-Islamic poets was the classical
qāṣīda, the polythematic monorhymed ode. Nicholson presents a number of theories on the
meaning of qāṣīda, though certainly the most compelling is that the poem is composed for a
specific purpose or as an entreaty, owing to the trilateral root q-s-d, referring to “intention” (though
see Nicholson 2010[1930], 76n.3). This style spread with the expansion of the armies of Islam and
became a crucial part of the urbanized social poetics of the Islamic Caliphates, especially in courtly
contexts (al-Tha’alibi 1990, 222-27; Sperl and Shackle 1996; Ibn Qutaybah 1986, 1:167-73, 1:388-
391, 3:135-219). Many scholars of Arabic literature have made contributions to our understanding
of praise poetry and the qāṣīda in the cultural milieu of medieval Islamic polities (Ḍayf 1960-88\(^{35}\);
Gould concisely presents the qāṣīda, amongst other panegyric forms including Sanskritic praśastī
carvings and Chinese fu poems, as “a discourse about, within, and sometimes against sovereign

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\(^{34}\) ‘houses of hair’, i.e., the woven goat-hair tents of the northern Arabian Bedouin, sometimes called
“black-tent Bedouin.” These are contrasted with southern (including Omani) Bedu groups, who did not
historically use woven goat-hair tents (see Chatty 1996, Ch.4, for example).

\(^{35}\) For purposes of this study, cf volumes 1-5 (al-‘aṣr al-jāhilī [The Pre-Islamic Era] (1960), al-‘aṣr al-
power” (2015, 264). More particularly, Suzanne Pickney Stetkevych has located Arabic classical and vernacular poetry’s potency in its “mythopoetic function,” that is, its role in (re-) producing a community in words, history, and myth (1993, 2002). This is a broad function of poetry in which it is a medium to present history, character, myths, and a sense of communal heritage to an audience. While earlier Arabists noted the social and normative role of poetry amongst tribal groups, Stetkevych has tied this function to the ways in which praise in qaṣīda form “created, encoded and promulgated a myth and ideology of legitimate Arabo-Islamic rule” in the courts of the early Islamic Caliphates (2002, ix).

The formal classical qaṣīda was a means by which authority was recognized, communicated, and legitimated. “The panegyric qaṣīda,” Stefan Sperl writes, is “a formal testimony of the legitimacy of political authority” in which “the glory of the social order is proclaimed” (1989, 26). Sperl especially notes the relationship between panegyric poetry and cultural notions of kingship: “[the development of the praise qaṣīda) is a perfect illustration of the function of Kingship in society.” It suggests that this poetry is a liturgical expression of the basic values and political ideals of the ‘Abbasid state” (1977, 90). The qaṣīda, then, models and vocally iterates the qualities of the king, his leadership, and the basis of his authority.

If this was the case for qaṣīda-s in the courts of the Caliphs, it was no less the case in the vernacular and within non-state contexts in post-classical Arabia up to the modern day. “The

36 See the example of the ’āzī from 1996 cited below as one example of the mythopoetic function of Omani poetry.

37 For more in-depth looks at Islamic kingship and legitimacy see Belkaziz (2009) for a presentation of modern Islamic philosophical perspectives; Oakley (2006, Ch. 2) for a historical comparative perspective; Akbarzadeh and Saeed (2003) for a contemporary comparative perspective; Reid and Gilsenan (2007) on Islamic state legitimacy in South and Central Asia.

38 For a recounting of the major changes that the qaṣīda underwent in this period see Badawi’s (1980) description of “primary” (Pre-Islamic) versus secondary (later) qaṣīda-s.
vernacular poetry of premodern Arabia,” according to Sowayan, “is a register of social events and a codification of the moral principles and cultural values that made life… meaningful” for Arab communities (1985, 17-8). In addition to this larger function, poetry was a critical means of communication between tribes and individuals, whether badū or ḥaḍr (see Sowayan 1985, 53-66 for badū contexts, Ch. IV for the ḥaḍr). It is in this sense that vernacular poetic genres, be they the nabatī traditions so valorized by the Gulf states, or the ‘āzī and razḥa in Oman, have formed a crucial form of social commentary for Peninsular Arabs.

Yemeni vernacular poetry especially has been studied as a discourse “about, within, and sometimes against” power. Steven Caton, in his study Peaks of Yemen I Summon: Poetry as Cultural Practice in a North Yemeni Tribe (1990), highlights the moral and political role of improvised oral poetry in a number of violent and nonviolent feuds, weddings, and everyday interactions in Khawlān at-Ṭiyāl in Northern Yemen. Caton writes that, for his tribal interlocutors, rather than espousing universal truth or beauty, “the poet reveals only specific truths: he is concerned with providing solutions to particular and concrete problems of political action” (1990, 182). Rather than wreathing universal truths with the garlands of beautiful phrasing, the poet has a social obligation to identify issues of concern and prompt their solution. Lucine Taminian’s (2001) dissertation on genres of Yemeni poetry documents how norms and practices of the classical qaṣīda are managed and creatively transformed into the vernacular in a community of other poets, who are often critically engaged in both poetical and social change. The form of the qaṣīda is not a limitation on expression, but rather a set of norms that “[turns] poetic production into a craft and the mastery of which requires the acquisition of specific linguistic and prosodic knowledge” (Taminian 2001, v). Anthropologist Flagg Miller writes in his 2007 The Moral Resonance of Arab Media: Audiocassette Poetry and Culture in Yemen that “Yemenis praise the
use of folk poetry for ‘solving problems’ in the community…like doctors, I was told, poets could ‘reveal the truth’ (yikshif al-haqīqah)” (2007, 107). He details what he calls the “epistolary practice” of audiocassette poetry in the bid’ wa jiwāḥ (he translates this as “initiation and response”) genre, in which poets trade poetic works that share prosodic patterning, melodic and thematic material, and phrasing. Poems, Miller concludes, cannot be understood in isolation from the answers or responses they have elicited or are responding to, nor can they be separated from the political and material realities of the time of their composition. He cites a number of bid’ wa jiwāḥ exchanges that occurred between regional governors and their constituencies: one in particular, composed in 1957, sought to restore tribal unity in opposing British aerial campaigns and colonial presence in Aden (Miller 2007,148-50). Kantrien Vanpee’s 2015 dissertation has brought literary examination of the classical qaṣīda themes of praise and boasting into the nabaṭī poetry of the 21st century by studying their use in waṭaniyya (“nationalistic,” or “patriotic”) poems in the United Arab Emirates and Qatar. Vanpree examines both printed scholarship and the popular nabaṭī competition TV program shā’ir al-milyūn (“Poet of the Millions”) and ultimately concludes that these poems “should be understood as one of the many guises of mubāya’a,” an iteration of “the performative lexicon of allegiance” to recognized leaders dating to the time of the prophet Muḥammad (2014, iii, 99-102). These scholars all show how Arabic vernacular poetry constitutes social action within a certain milieu, highlighting the agonistic, persuasive, moral, political, and affiliative aspects of sung verse.

The Path of Glory: Praise in Oman

In my initial interviews on the subject of Omani poetic forms, I chose not to focus on the literary qaṣīda, but rather on uniquely Omani forms of oral poetry: the processional choral ode, ‘āzī, and the shorter war-dance razḥa, which are forms linked in performance and function. I
expected to find shades of the previous role of Arab poets in these Omani forms, especially the mixture of praise and invective within single poetic genres. Such a mixture of types had been reported by other scholars of post-classical oral poetry: in the non-qaṣīda genres of zāmil, bālā and Jewish humaynī poems, along with the vernacular bid’ wa-jiwāb qaṣīda-s of Yemen (Caton 1990; Miller 2007; Wagner 2009); in both ghinnāwa and nabaṭī poetry amongst the Bedouin (Abu Lughod 1986; Lavie 1990; Holes and Abu Athera 2009); nabaṭī in Saudi Arabia (Sowayan 1985, 1992; Kurpershoek 1994, 1995, 1999, 2002); as well as extemporized verbal dueling genres in Palestine and Saudi Arabia (Sbait 1989, 1993; Sowayan 1989; Yaqub 2007 and Urkevich 2015, 23). Further, studies of the classical medieval qaṣīda indicate that praise neighbored blame even in panegyric poetry (Sharlet 2011; Sperl 1989, 2009; Stekevych 2002, 2010). However, I did not find Omani poets to wield invective as much as they wielded praise, nor do I expect invective—covert or otherwise—to be some putative core of Omani oral poetry at all. The reason for this is not that Omanis are not or cannot be sharp-tongued, but rather that the very poetic genres that I had chosen to study were appropriate for some kinds of poetic expression but not others: namely, for praise and not for blame.

a. Introducing the ‘āzī in Oman

I translate the term ‘āzī, as a performance practice in Oman, as a processional choral ode.39 This is because the ‘āzī is a presentation of an ode, a qaṣīda, by a single declaimer who calls to a responding chorus, usually several dozen individuals, as they all march in a line or circle. The declaimer stands at the head of a small group of drummers and swordsmen, which in turn march

39 The Omani Ministry of Culture, when it sought to inscribe the ‘āzī as a part of our human intangible cultural heritage through UNESCO, prefers the term “processional elegy.” The English term “elegy,” derived from the Greek elegeia, is incorrect. Elegy refers to lament and is dedicated to the dead.
at the head of a larger group. Often, these groups march together in a long line, but occasionally the declaimer’s smaller group marches around the inside of a large circle framed by the chorus group. During my fieldwork, the declaimer held an Omani straight-bladed sword, *sayf*, and a buckler, *turs*. Sometimes, the poet carried a smartphone or a piece of paper behind the *turs* or even instead of it, but this was frowned upon. The chorus members usually carry weapons, which might be swords, shields, or rifles. After hemistiches, the chorus might discharge their rifles, slap the swords and shields together, or snap their swords in such a way that the blade “buzzes” and shakes (O.Ar. verb: *hāz*, *yihizz*), a crucial gesture of armed manliness and grace in wielding the weapon. Drummers would play short bursts after hemistiches, but also play fast rolls after full lines, trailing off in tempo as the declaimer took up the verse again. All participants also shout conventional phrases at particular structural locations that varied from one region to another.

The term ‘āzī refers both to the person who “recites” or “throws” (O. Ar. *yilqā’) the poem,\(^{40}\) and the form of the poem itself. ‘Āzī itself means several things. It can refer to praise and praising: “Omanis say: ‘So-and-so ‘āzī-s\(^{41}\) you!’ or ‘He ‘āzī-s\(^{42}\) of you!’, meaning, he enumerates your virtues and your fine and noble distinctions. He is proud of you all, or he humbly requests of you that you support him” (al-Shaydī 2008, 204). The term ‘āzī can also refer to an act of appeal for help, support, or aid in an activity. Most importantly, at least conceptually, it can also refer to genealogy and lineage, and especially the invocation or elucidation of them. In classical Arabic, this term refers to the delineation of a lineage, or of tracing some thing back along a history.\(^{43}\) Al-

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\(^{40}\) This person is also sometimes called the “poet,” *shā‘ir*, “singer (of nasheed),” *munshid* (al-Shaydī 2008, 205), or “performer,” *mu‘addī*.

\(^{41}\) A form I verb of ‘-z-ū.

\(^{42}\) A form VIII verb of ‘-z-ū.

\(^{43}\) The classical definition includes, interestingly, “laying blame,” but this is not a part of current usage in Oman. I do not know if this relates to the former capacity of ‘āzī to lay blame.
Shaydī offers a linguistic example: “so-and-so traced [themselves] back to so-and-so by way of lineage (’azwā’an or ’aziyyan)\(^{44}\), or, his relation to him, truly or falsely” (2008, 204).

In fact, famed ‘āzī Muḥammad bin ‘Alī al-Marzūqī describes the opening section of the ‘āzī as ‘azwā, referring specifically to the tracing of an ancestry, a commonality of history. What most poets think was summed up by al-Marzūqī when he described ‘āzī as a kind of nasaba (root: \(n-s-b\) refers to “relation; tracing”), that is, a kind of genealogical reckoning. Al-Marzūqī stated in a television interview on ‘āzī that:

\[
\text{āzā} \text{[the root of ‘āzī]} \text{means nasaba [n-s-b]. So the ‘āzī-singer is a nāsib [n-s-b], a “genealogist.”}^{45} \text{ And the Omani, because he is the son of glory, because he is the son of history, you always find this same inclination to a relation (intisāb, n-s-b) to his community, a relation to his ’umma, a relation to his glory, history, civilization. And due to that, this art came, this art unique to Oman, only Oman, and it expresses this Omani characteristic. If an Omani, it’s said, ‘āzī-s another, perhaps his bin ‘am (extended family), or his nation, or his tribe—(he states) his relation to them; he makes clear to them the path to glory by way of example.}^{46}
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An ‘āzī is both a presentation of and a claim on a certain genealogy. The ‘āzī calls on living ancestors of a certain lineage to praise them and to compare them to their forbears, thus praising them all and exhorting them to certain actions or continued good behavior. Most scholars refer to the main text of the ‘āzī as a “qaṣīda,” even as a qaṣīda nabaṭiyya (al-Shaydī 2008, 205-8). Al-Marzūqī echoes most of my interlocutors when he claims that the main theme of the ‘āzī is fakhr

\(^{44}\)This is an awkward translation, utilizing the adjectival ḥāl construction, or “accusative of state,” of ‘azā (Hassanein 2006, 79). That is, “s.o. traces their lineage back in the manner of tracing one’s lineage back.” This is made more difficult by the disagreement of the trilateral root: either ‘-z-ū or ‘-z-ā (Wehr, 1994, ‘-z-ū/’-z-ā).

\(^{45}\)The active participle, or ’ism fā’il of n-s-b in Omani Arabic. In classical Arabic, a genealogist is nissāb, a construction similar to the construction for carpenter (nijjār), butcher (jizzār), qaṣīda writer (qaṣṣād), zajal writer (zajjāl), etc.

(self-praise or boasting) and *madh* (praise). He does not mention blame, satire, invective, lampoon, or criticism—a number of terms denoted by *hijāʾ*—at all.

This omission is interesting especially when we consider the structure of the ‘āzī. The opening section, which al-Marzūqī calls the ‘azwā, is usually referred to as *al-ṣayḥāt* (shouts), *al-hitāfāt* (calls, acclamations), or, in the interior, *al-taʾiyūṭa* (to call out). This is a sequence of calls and responses (in parantheses) that begins:

Yā muslimīn tikabbar! O, Muslims! Stand proud!

*(Allāhu akbār!)* (God is great!)

‘Asūd aʾāzī bi-ʾasūd! Lions! I praise/call on lions!

(‘Asūd!)

‘Asūd wilād al-ʾamm! Lions! Kin!

(‘Asūd!)

‘Asūd baḥar al-ṭumm! Lions! The depths of the sea!

(‘Asūd!)

‘Asūd jabal al-ṣumm! Lions! The massive mountains!

(‘Asūd!)

‘Asūd ahil al-rakidiṭāt! Lions! The riders of war-mounts!

(‘Asūd!)

‘Asūd ahil al-sayḥāt! Lions! The people of the *sayḥāt*[ treeless gravel plains]

(‘Asūd!)

After this introductory call-and-response, the ‘āzī presents the poem to a conventional melody. Depending on the location and the form of the *qaṣīda*, the poet calls out either two or four lines of poetry before the procession responds. To mark the beginning of the declaimer’s poetry, he would sing: ʾāh, *iwāb yallah iwāb*[^47] (Answer, Oh God, answer). Between hemistiches, or a certain number

[^47]: *Iwāb* = O.Ar., *gawwāb* = CLA, *jawwāb*. I do not know why some words are pronounced with the “Emirati” pronunciation of *jīm* as ʾāʾ rather than the Inner Omani ʾāʾ, or why others, like *qāf*, are pronounced as ʾāʾ, a characteristic of the upper Gulf, Yemen, and the central and northern Arabian Peninsula.
of feet, *taf’īl*, the chorus responds with: *wa silimt!* (Surely; unobjectionable!). After the conclusion of the couplet or quatrain, the poet usually sings *subyān akbār al-shiyim* (youths of the greatest moral character!) or *mulk allah yidūm* (the reign of God is everlasting!). After this, the procession would give a long loud vocable cry: Āḥ! In analysis, final vowels are lengthened such that silence is only very brief and avoided if possible. It is the wave of sound produced by the chorus that propels the ‘āzī to sing.

We can take a short example from an ‘āzī “thrown” by a young Muḥammad bin ‘Alī al-Marzūqī at the Sultan’s tent in celebration of the Eid al-Adha in 1996 in the northern Bāṭina coastal town of Ṣaḥam. This is one “unit” of an ‘āzī couplet, by which I mean the couplet itself and the frame markers that surround it and orient the listener.

āḥ, iwāḥ yallah iwāḥ  Answer, O God, Answer. [First frame marker.]
suna’a al-’imāna wa-l-ḥalāl  [The ‘Azd tribe] made peace and rightness
ṭaradu al-furus wa burṭughāl!  [by] Throwing out the Persians and Portugal. (Surely!) [distich line marker.]
  (wa silimt!)
Al-’azd yā nimr ar-rigāl,  The ‘Azd!, O tiger of men,
Ahil marwiyya wa-sh-shiyim!  Storied people, of great moral character.
Ṣubyān ya akbār al-shiyim!  Youths of the greatest moral character! [Ending of couplet marker.]
  (wa mulk allah yidūm!)  (And the reign of God is everlasting.) [End of unit marker].

48 Usually considered a conventional ending in the coastal Bāṭina region.

49 Usually considered a conventional ending in the interior Dakhiliyya region.

Here, we can see how the conventional “frame markers” orient the listener to the text and aid in the memorization of the text. Before the couplet begins, the ‘āzī cuts through the long cry given by the procession to make the couplet heard. He then gives the first line of the couplet and the procession responds. Finally, he completes the couplet and marks its completion with another formula. Between full couplets, the procession carries the note in their long cry and the sequence begins again.

b. Praise and Blame in ‘āzī

Here I want to present some transcriptions from my initial interviews with the ‘āzī Aḥmad al-Riyāmī in al-Maʿarā, in wilāyāt Manaḥ in 2015:

BJG (author): What would you say are the main topics of ‘āzī?

AR: The main topics? Well, praise, pride, the community (al-gumāʿa), the local homeland (al-dīra), the nation, Qābūs,… these things. Al-‘āzī is praise (madīha), of course.


AR: I mean, it depends on the, the occasion. You need to praise the group you are with… The community, Qābūs, the patron (rāʾī), the same things as the topics, really. Like I told you, I write an ‘āzī on the basis of the celebration, the occasion. Of course in the old days (zamān al-‘awwal), it was the tribe, tribal boasting (fakhr al-qabīla) was a part, and spreading news or events, meetings between tribes, peace negotiations (al-ṣulḥ), and the like.

BJG: Now, praise, that’s one of the main types of poetry, is that not so?

AR: Yes, that’s correct…

BJG: And there are other types, several other types: there’s praise, there’s love (al-ghazal wa-lā al-hubb) for example…

AR: Yes, of course!
BJG: … there’s boasting (fakhr), there’s description (wasf), there’s elegy (marthiyya)…

AR: …marthiyya, yes [laughs]…

BJG: … and then finally, there’s invective or satire (hijā’). So, praise and invective are the most important…

AR: [cutting the air with his hand] No, no, no, no. Never invective, no, no, no. Without invective, no, ‘āzī is praise, like I said. Love, maybe, description, maybe, but it is first and foremost praise.

BJG: By God, you don’t use invective in ‘āzī?

AR: By God, we never use invective, not really. (Hushed tone) How could I throw lines of invective (kayf ilqā biyūt min al-hijā’) in an ‘āzī from my own mouth? No, that’s completely disrespectful (ghayr muḥtar b-il-tamām). No, no, no (softly tutting).

BJG: … I mean, never? You’ve never heard a line of invective in an ‘āzī?

AR: (Gently) No, doctor. Never in my life in this art. Imagine, a line of invective sitting amongst the praise! (khayyal bayt min al-hijā’ gālis ‘and al-madiḥa).

This is a very strong response, and not typical of most of my interviews. Often, poets or performers would not disagree as strongly as Aḥmad. What Aḥmad is explaining to me for the first time is how to properly separate madiḥa and fakhr, praise, from hijā’, blame. In ‘āzī, the proper theme is only praise—of the self, the tribe, the ruler, the nation.

I translate hijā’ as “blame” here advisedly, because the category of satire, invective, and defamatory verse in English language scholarship is largely collectively referred to as “blame” when it is explicitly contrasted with praise (see Burrow 2008; Kurke 2010(1991); Sharlet 2011). As it turns out, this distinction is not only of extreme antiquity, but also crucial to the social functioning of panegyric. I now want to turn to investigating this separation, alongside several
other general principles that become important to hearing praise. We shall see that in ʿāzī the result of this separation bears more resemblance to the “indirect criticism” (feng 讽) of Chinese praise poetry than to the outright mixture of praise and blame that animates other such praise contexts. This, in turn, interrelates with Omani notions of shūrā, or consultation between rulers and the ruled.

There are five general principles that are important to the social function of praise poetry in Oman that are relevant to my argument:

1) the separation of madiha and fakhr from hijā’;
2) that proper praise “magnifies” and improper praise or blame “diminishes”;
3) that praise is addressed to power and aimed at integrating power into community;
4) that praise manages power relationships by manipulating fame, name, and reputation;
5) that praise is civic labor, an obligatory response to generosity and an inducement to further giving.

In this chapter, I discuss the first two points in depth. The other three will be addressed in subsequent chapters that present why I believe praise poetry facilitates generosity and grants legitimacy borne out of sense of cross-class mutuality in Oman. What is interesting about Omani conceptions about the relationship of praise poetry and power is that they highlight both cultural notions of poetry, praise, and authority of extreme time-depth and the impact of more recent conflicts borne of authoritarian state formation, cultural policy, and the flows of global capital. When we consider that the primary patron and target of praise poetry nowadays is the state, symbolized by the personage of Sultan Qābūs, this leap is less daunting than it may at first seem.

Praise and Blame

Ní fuilet a maíne,
nocho mó a-tá a maisse
nocho mó r a géire:
Nocho déine acht braisse.

His riches are non-existent,
and his beauty is no greater,
nor great is his acuteness.
He does nothing but boast.

(A Middle Irish satirical verse, c. 1036).

As this short Irish poem shows, praise and blame are considered close kin in many places and times: the mere removal of negative markers would render this poem as praise. Aḥmad’s insistence on separating praise and blame is not unique to Omanis, but the way in which this is achieved in Omani oral poetry does distinguish Oman from its near neighbors. In this section, I trace the evolution of the separation of praise and blame in poetic discourse in Ancient Greece, Latin and Northern Europe, and the Medieval Middle East. This circuitous route is actually much more straightforward than it initially may sound.

Of primary importance to generalized (and elite) notions of poetics in all these societies was Aristotle’s *Poetics* (c. 335 BCE), translated into Arabic c. 320/932 from a Syriac version dating from c. 81/700 CE (Kemal 1991, 1-2). *Poetics* was the subject of a series of commentaries, synthesizes, and summaries by nearly every light of “Golden Age” Islamic philosophy, especially in the Aristotelian and anti-Aristotelian continua adumbrated by al-Fārābī (d. 339/950, Latinized as “Alpharabius”), Ibn Ṣīnā (d. 428/1037, “Avicenna”), al-Ghazzālī (d. 504/1111, “Algazel”), and Ibn Rushd (d. 594/1198, “Averroës”). Rather than comb through the various analytics and claims

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51 While it is true that Islamic philosophies of poetics circulated amongst the elite, recent scholarship by Jocelyn Sharlet (2011) makes the important case that, especially in the case of poetry and poetics, there was a huge degree of social mobility in the Medieval Middle East and Central Asia. Successful court poets came from many backgrounds and were exposed to elite culture, including philosophy, during their stay. Further, Burrow (2008, chapter 2), makes the case that elite Latin cultural notions were just as present in the English vernacular, evidenced by their discussion in *Beowulf*. 
made by these philosophers, it suits our purpose merely to distill the differences that they felt they were justified in making to Aristotle’s notions of poetics. Though such skirting over of details is certainly and avowedly problematic, excellent summaries, commentaries, and investigations from much more qualified scholars are readily available (for example, Adamson and Taylor 2005; Butterworth 1977; Corbin 2001; Dahiyat 1974; Kemal 1991).

Simply put, all of these scholars were interested in understanding both the social role of poetics and its logical status vis-à-vis formal logic, language, mathematics, music, and geometry. The reason for this, I would argue, is the high status accorded to poetry amongst the early Muslims. Later Islamic scholars, in Kemal’s words, had to reckon with the fact that poetry was considered to have “a relation to our minds, emotions, and behaviour which make it important to politics and the community of Islam,” which also justifies its use as a grammatical aid to the Qur’ān (Cantarino 1975, 80-99; Kemal 1991, 79).

The most important and succinct summary of Aristotle’s work is Ibn Rushd’s, in which he claims that “every poem and poetic statement is either praise (madīḥ) or blame (hijā’)” (1986, 54). It was this bifurcated conception of Aristotle’s Poetics that was brought into Latin as laudatio and vituperatio by Hermannus Alemannus (Hermann the German) in 13th century CE Spain. While later commentators criticized Ibn Rushd’s translation of the Greek terms for “tragedy” and “comedy” as “madīḥ” and “hijā’” as incorrect, Rebecca Gould has suggested instead that “Ibn Rushd transposed Aristotle’s historical genealogy [that all poetic discourse originated from distinguishing encomium, or praise, from lampoon, or blame], which pertained only to past literary production, into a general theory of poetry” (2014, 3). Ibn Rushd’s intent was to universalize the insights he found Aristotle’s Poetics and to “explicate a poetics more appropriate to his Andalusian milieu” (4). When understood as Ibn Rushd did, “praise and blame were to shape subsequent
discourse about literature in the Islamic world and Christendom well into the early modern period” (3). A near contemporary of Ibn Rushd, the Qur’ānic scholar Al-Rāghib al-Īṣfahānī (“The Monk of Iṣfahān,” d. 502/1109), neatly summarizes the intensity of this distinction: “let one who is not moved to pleasure by praise or who does not react to blame with repulsion be reckoned dead” (cited in Sharlet 2014, 8).

If we can clearly show that elite literary discourse embraced a strict distinction between praise and blame, it is no less the case that this distinction operated throughout the society in question. In a 2012 dissertation on the social milieu of pre-Islamic poets, Hamad Alajmi relates a story about the relationship between praise and blame. Bishr, the great poet, composed some lines of blame against the family of ‘Aws and his mother Suʻadā. After capturing Bishr, Aws went to his mother, Suʻdá, and told her, “I got the one who attacked you and me [in his verse], what do you think I should do with him?” Suʻdá replied, “I think you should give him his property back, forgive him, and provide him with gifts, and I too will do the same, for nothing can, except his madīḥ, wash away his hijā’. ” (2012, 186-7)

Praise and blame counteract each other. However, and more importantly, they are meaningful because they have real social weight, because the poem outlasts the poet. This is evidenced by examining any of the many societies in which poets have held a crucial functional role in relation to authority.

**a. Praise and Blame in Early Medieval Ireland**

I want to take an extended look at one such society. I present some data on early medieval Irish society (c. 8th-12th century CE) as an example of both the heights to which this division of praise from blame can be theorized and the crucial social role that poets could claim in this context. In a highly conservative, hierarchical, and decentralized society, poets played a crucial role by communicating between leaders and managing the circulation of praise and blame by manipulating
Honor was not the abstract but reciprocal system of self- and other-regarding senses of personal and collective worth that was formulated in Julian Pitts-River’s classic 1965 article, but rather, as Roisin McLaughlin’s *Early Irish Satire* (2008) puts it:

> The importance of reputation in early Ireland is reflected in the concept of lóg n-enech ‘honour-price’. This established the amount of compensation due to a person in the event of an injury and also acted as a measure of his status in a hierarchical society. (21)

This was a literal price that varied with structural position and could be voided due to improper behavior. McLaughlin provides a useful overview of Old and Middle Irish sources that demonstrates the types and varieties of satire available to the Irish poet, *fili*. Her description of the *fili*’s milieu and role will already seem familiar to us:

> Operating within such [an honorbound, highly conservative, hierarchical, and decentralized] society, the poet wielded considerable power through his ability to praise and satirise: just as a person’s honour could be enhanced through praise, so his standing in society could be diminished through satire. (2008, 1)

Al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī would likely agree with a law recorded in the Irish heptads: “There are seven kings in Irish law who are not entitled to compensation or honour-price… [one of them is] a king who tolerates satire or satirising” (McLaughlin 2008, 3-4). Here rendered as satire, blame was accorded legal status in early Ireland and was tightly regulated. The early Irish judged satire to be “justified or unjustified” according to the facts of the specific case. Justified satire was the due of evil, greedy, or stupid deeds. Unjust satire required the payment of the honour-price of the slandered party. This tight regulation was partly due to the cultural notion that blame was considered a very serious threat to life and limb—specifically one’s honor, *enech*, literally

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52 Fergus Kelly, in his *A Guide to Early Irish Law*, relates that only kings, lords, priests, and poets (*I., filidh*) were reckoned as having “fully privileged” status, called *nemed* (1988, 43).

53 Poets were considered to have magical means at their disposal as well – in a famous episode of *The Annals of Ulster*, the poet-chief of all Ireland, Cuán ua Lothcháin, was killed in Tethba. Those that killed
“cheek” or “face.” Kelly points out that the Irish terms for satire are commonly rendered as *áerad* (striking) or *rindad* (cutting), and McLaughlin notes that a common motif of “cutting the face” of the satirized so that blood would pour down their cheeks, literally and figuratively, was particularly evocative (Kelly 1988, 137; McLaughlin 2008, 4-5). As late as 1414 CE, we are told, Lord Lieutenant John Stanley died of satire-induced wounds (McLaughlin 2008, 4-5). Satire was also legally regulated because rampant, uncontrolled blame could deeply upset the balance between the various Irish *túath*, or kingdoms. Just as early Irish *filidh* had access to a powerful legal sanction on their rulers, so too were unsanctioned satirists (*cáinte*) “reviled by both secular and ecclesiastical authorities” because they wielded blame without the proper credentials (McLaughlin 2008, 4). Praise and blame were so well divided that “fraudulent poets” (*filidh diupartach*) were considered to have their *nemed* status degraded, and “false praise” (*tár molta*) was considered to be the “equivalent of satire” in its ill effects and legal status (2008, 6, 7).

Part of the credentials required by Irish *filidh* was understanding the varieties of legal satire, outlined in the Old Irish tract *Cis li Fodlai Aíre?*, “How Many Divisions of Satire Are There?” and various later commentaries. To cement the point, McLaughlin has translated a selection of 87 stanzas of Middle Irish poetry that classify the versified modes of satire (which she helpfully numbers for our clarity):

1) Satires and curses (nos. 1-30).
2) Invectives, which are further classified into four types:
   Type A: a series of abusive epithets in the vocative in which the subject is addressed by name (nos. 31-49).
   Type B: a series of abusive epithets in the vocative in which the subject remains anonymous or is at most identified with a particular place (nos. 50-6).

him all “became putrid within the hour. That was a poet’s miracle” (Mac Airt and Mac Niocaill 1983, 462-64).
Type C: a series of abusive epithets in the nominative in which the subject is named (nos. 57-79) [for an example, see the poem 68, Rí Connacht, cenn lemain, “The King of Connacht, a block-head”].

Type D: a series of abusive epithets in the nominative in which the subject remains anonymous or is at most identified with a particular place (nos. 80-6) (2008, 2-3)

That satire was simultaneously a powerful tool and carefully regulated in Early Ireland should now be abundantly clear. Palinode-s, praise poems, however, were considered an even more powerful social tool. An unjustified satire demanded praise as recompense, rather than honor-price, because “praise was believed to negate the ill effects of satire” (McLaughlin 2008, 7). What makes this case so interesting and relevant to the separation of praise from blame, however, is the extent to which the Irish agreed on why this was so valuable. An example from an Old Irish text on law is worth quoting in full: “No wise or learned person should doubt that blood is shed by words and tongue as it is seen to be shed by hands with weapons, i.e., no knowledgeable person thinks that false words are any less of a sin than shedding of blood by hand” (McLaughlin 2008, 4-5). Satire is a dangerous game, for it draws blood as surely and as easily as a sword or spear. Satire is a means of last resort.

b. Praise, blame, and conflict

While we cannot ask early Irish filidh why this was so, they might agree with what an ~60-year-old ‘āzī\(^{54}\) from the wilāya of ’Izkī had to say.

BJG: O bā, have you heard of blame being used in al-‘āzī?

\(^{54}\) Who requested to remain anonymous throughout this dissertation.
AI: Hmm, blame. You mean strong/harsh words (*kalām shadīda*), is that not so? *Hāāāāy*, you know the stock phrases of the ‘āzī… *Asūd, gabal al-ṣumm! Asūd, baḥar al-ṭumm!* (You lions, you massive mountains! You lions, you depths of the sea!)

BJG: This is blame? This is…

AI: *Asūd al-mashhūrīn!* (You lions of the famed ones!) No, it’s not blame (*hijā’) as the *qaṣīda* poets have it (‘*and munaẓẓīm al-qaṣā’id*). No, that’s not for ‘āzī; these are strong/harsh words, meaning, words of war. Fighting words, you might say. (AI pushes out his chest and gestures broadly) We will come at the enemy like the crashing waves of a typhoon! We are as steadfast as the massive mountain peaks; unmoveable! (*Iḥnā b-agī’ *a-l-‘adū ka-amwāg al-‘āsifa! thābitūn ka-qimmat al-gabāl al-ṭumm, ṣāmudūn!* You know, among the old-timers (*kibār al-sinn*), these words were heavy (*kān wāgid thaqīl*), very heavy.

BJG: Heavy? Do you mean it was a declaration of war? Between the tribes, or…?

AI: *Al-hamdulillah*, no, may God preserve His Majesty Qābūs bin Saʿīd Āl Bū Saʿīd. Honestly, I mean more like these are words one needs to believe in (‘*alayh yu’min bihā*), do you follow me? They’re not weak words.

I believe that AI invoked the personage of Sultan Qābūs in order to avoid talking about tribal conflict, even conflict that, in his case, was purely theoretical. He was just a boy when the Royal Air Force was being deployed against the *Nizār* quarter of ’Izkī and further up into the mountains.

However, as political scientist Marc Valeri has recorded, Interior Ibāḍīs still clearly share the “memory of the Jabal Akhdar war in the 1950s, when the Sultan’s Armed Forces and the British destroyed the Imamate… people in Inner Oman remember how bad the al-Būsaʿīd were and know they are all alike” (2015, 36-37). As I learned from other young performers, there is a shared
memory of tribal conflict, all relegated to the time “before Qābūs.” Here I discussed the issue with a young member of the Firqat 'Izkī lil-funūn al-sha'abiyya in 2015:

**MFI:** Al-ḥamdulillah, there are no bloody conflicts (mā šayṣarā‘āt damawiyah) like that nowadays (referring to fighting between the Nizār and Yaman sections of 'Izkī). But why are we called Yaman, doctor?

**BJG:** Tell me, akhī.

**MFI:** Because we are true Arabs, we came from Yemen. We are of the Qahtān. You know, 'Izkī is far older than other towns, Nizwā for example. Nizwā is a youth compared to us greybeards in 'Izkī, [we laugh] truly, truly. But the important point is that us in Yaman, we are brothers of Yemenis. And what of them now? Their situation is dire, dire, I mean (ḥālathū ḥāāāl, ya'ni). Fighting between the tribes, there is no winner, blood flows without end and the battles stretch out (jālat)… may God preserve and protect them, the good-hearted, the humble. Wallahi, we are blood brothers… God is all-knowing.

There but for the grace of God go I, MFI seems to be saying. His rumination on the current conflict in Yemen links it directly to tribal and state conflict, a conflict that drags on and on. He is making a point that is commonly heard in Oman: that without the guidance of Qābūs, or Omanis “natural” distaste for conflict, or some other reason, contemporary Oman might look just like Yemen (Phillips and Hunt 2017). The linkage here, between “strong words” and the potential for tribal conflict, underlies the contradictions that swirl around the popularity of performance practices so deeply linked with warfare and tribal conflict occurring in a state context that presents
itself as an “oasis of peace” (wāḥa al-salām). In a conversation with an ‘āzī in Bahlā,\(^{55}\) he responded to my question about whether he had heard of hijā’ in ‘āzī with a snort:

No, he said, and do you know why? When you are with your friends and you make a mistake, they mock you “O fool, congratulations on such and such” in a sarcastic way, what do you do? I said, you return the insult! Exactly, he said, it’s back and forth, reply, reply, reply like bullets shot back and forth. Then everyone is fighting, everyone’s face is blackened [everyone is shamed]. The nature of ‘āzī is above this. (Fieldnote: 5/23/2016)

The poet is making the case that praise in ‘āzī is more high-minded, more collectively ennobling than blame.

Kurke makes a similar point in her discussion of epinikia praise poetry in 5\(^{th}\) century BCE Greece when she writes that for Pindar, “each act of praising [was] a deliberate choice not to blame” and incite conflict (1991, 87). For Pindar, there must be nothing mean in the praise, because while praise is the construction of poetic community, blame is the active destruction of it, and giving praise well and honestly is a reflection on the praiser’s virtue as well as the praised (87-90). We shall see more of this discourse when we discuss the role of praise in facilitating generosity and community in chapter three. We can conclude by examining Hoffman’s report that, during the conflict between Kita griots, the very act of listing all the problematic behavior of the belligerents would be physically dangerous:

So extreme was the anger and consternation of the griot leaders over their Kita brethren’s refusal to resolve their conflict that to communicate it in elaborate speech, to go over every detail, to rehearse all the faults and lay blame upon the guilty would have had even more deleterious effects. Primary among these would have been the release of lethal quantities of ɲama,\(^{56}\) of which more than enough to maim, kill, destroy relationships, and disturb the

\(^{55}\) This conversation was not recorded due to a technical failure. I reproduce his answer from my fieldnotes written in my car after the interview, hence the looser translation.

\(^{56}\) The impersonal natural/mystical energy that Mande believe suffuse all things and activities. Exertion and conflict, even or perhaps especially in words, release quantities of ɲama that are considered deadly (Hoffman 2000, 67-8).
peace of the griot had already been unleashed during the two years of warfare... all had been wronged; all had done wrong. So much hurtful individual and collective history, so much emotional damage, could not be adequately expressed with words. (2000, 182)

The Mande griots cited here see explicitly laying out every personal and collective wrong as simply rousing antipathies that are best left unroused. Further, as Hoffmann adds, every party was guilty. The recitation of these wrongs, especially amongst such a tight community, would simply lead to more conflict. The Baṣran Islamic jurist al-Mawardi once wrote that the poet “is one who rides a lion: people fear him because of his mount, [yet] he himself is even more fearful” (cited in Sharlet 2011, 35). Poets are powerful, but they must be wary of that power.

At the end of a conversation with Ḥamad al-Tawbī, he once grew frustrated with my insistence on criticism. “Look,” he said, all of us have faults and have erred. What good does it do, what benefit is there to casting blame at one another? (nataławimu b’adinā b’ad?) Everyone knows the failings of the others (nadrī kullunā al-muwalimāt wa-l-mashākil māl al-‘awkhirīn), do we say, ‘I rebuke/blame you, O whoever? (alūmik yā hūwa yā hīya)? No, no. Do you remember the first razḥa we talked about? [sings] Khūṭī lā talamūnī /hināk rūḥī makhzanūh (O brothers, don’t blame/rebuke me, There is where my soul is kept). ‘Don’t blame/rebuke me’, he is part of the community, we don’t distance ourselves from him (mū nab’ad ‘anuh).

In small, rural societies like Manaḥ and its villages, where population is low and the future, as anthropologist Mandana Limbert (2010) has shown, is felt as deeply uncertain, picking fights and casting blame is a self-destruction that must be avoided.

c. A lesson in praise and blame

Praise and blame were separated because they had different functions and they had different results. Sharlet indicates as much when she writes that, amongst Medieval Islamic praise poets, “intentional ambiguity of praise and blame was valorized, unintentional conflations were not” (2011, 18). Similarly, among the early Irish, two types of mixture are telling: “áer co ndath
molta, ‘satire with the colour of praise’, and molad co ndath aíre, ‘praise with the colour of satire’” (McLaughlin 2008, 8). Praise and satire could be mixed, but carefully and without confusing the two. Confusion between blame and praise could be socially disastrous. While the results of satire could sometimes be dangerous, with praise it was rarely so. Of course, anyone who participated in systems of praise was aware of the danger of false praise, seeking payment, and the like. However, for Omanis, it is not just that blame can instigate social troubles. Rather, it is, as many ethnomusicologists have noted, that speaking praise and blame has effects on the moral climate within which one is constituted (an idea particularly well-studied in India, cf. Rahaim 2012; Weidman 2006).

One night, sharing strong ginger tea with a performance troupe in Manaḥ after hours of dancing for the ‘īd al-fiṭr, the conversation drifted to an ‘āzī performer that I had recently interviewed. Several members of the group I was now sitting with in the mājlis had warned me not to talk to him, saying, “We bring the drum-pair out for honor, he only brings the drum-pair for money.” When I interviewed this poet, his son posted a picture of the interview on Instagram and WhatsApp and I was instantly outed. I spent a day thumbing through a torrent of half-joking “frowny face” emojis from my friends in Manaḥ on every social media platform available. This failure was especially embarrassing since by then I thought I had learned to hide my activities from others as best as possible, just as Anne Meneley had in Zabīd, Yemen (1996). I thought making a joke would be appropriate, so I said, “You know, here you start the ‘āzī with “Yāh, iwāb!” (“O, (hear me and) answer!”) He starts his with “Yā, riyāl!” (O, the currency of Oman!). While most of the group laughed, falling over each other and tugging at each other’s sleeves, the eldest performer cut us off with a pained look. “Imagine, strong words from the Amrikī! Do we not all forget our manners sometimes, doctor? It is important to respect our kind-hearted neighbors in [that village],
just as they respect and honor us.” Suitably chastened, I sat in silence until we broke up and went home.

d. Praise increases, blame diminishes

Later, when I reflected on this event, I understood that “strong words” had the capacity to break bonds—not only for the speaker, but also for their community. Kurke, discussing the “integrative” role of Pindaric odes, writes that “the encomium that occurs for the sake of one man is an ornament also for the rest of the citizens” (1991, 164). Reflecting on the idea about praise, blame, and manners that eldest performer was trying to communicate to all of us, I offer a mixed metaphor: “rising praise lifts all boats.” That is to say, everyone in the community is bettered when praise is administered honestly, well, and as a response to a legitimate good deed. Offering praise with generosity is a reflection of the good manners of the community as a whole, while belittling a good deed with unjustified blame, false praise, or jealousy is the opposite. Good manners increase good manners, and bad manners not only encourage bad manners, but decrease good manners. In Dwight Reynolds’s Heroic Poets, Poetic Heroes (1995), he notes how Egyptian oral poets use a praise song to the Prophet Muḥammad to quiet crowds and gain their attention. Since such stock phrases “require the appropriate responses,” the singing of praise verses to the Prophet Muḥammad reminds the group of their shared interests in cultivating appropriate bodily and mental conduct (1995, 184). Reynolds notes that this practice is similar to how the automatic recitation of “religious formulas which require responses from all present” can “[diffuse] tensions” and draw others into safe social contact (1995, 184).

Many groups have seen that praise augments, increases, adds, or magnifies the praised, while blame reduces them. The Roman orator Quintilian wrote quite specifically that “to praise a subject is to magnify it and adorn it” (cited in Burrow 2008, 28). Correspondingly, “when someone
is praised,” Hoffman writes of the Mande griot, “it is said the person is enlarged. When someone is generous, the person is said to be boundless” (2000, 275n.14). Charry quotes a jeli who claims that “when a praise song is sung for someone, his energy to enact is augmented,” requiring recompense in the sacrifice of money or goods (2000, 51). In the case of early medieval Ireland, blame could literally reduce the honor-price of the target, to ignore the fact that it might reduce their life by killing them (as seen amongst the Mande, as well). Marie Lecomte-Tiloune, in her study of Nepalese bards, likewise notes that they “increase” their noble patrons with praise, badhai (2016, 216-7). In Oman, praise increases (often the CLA. zād, yizīd; ziyāda) and rouses or encourages (O. Ar. shag’a, yushag’a; shugā’) the ’adab, or the good manners and refined behavior of the praised. In a short discussion of praise, the Omani chronicler bin Razīq writes that “and it is said that praise (al-hamd) is oral commendation (al-thinā’ bi-l-lisan) intending [for] aggrandizement” (1978, 69).

One day, sitting alongside a dry falaj in al-Ma’arā, Ḥamad extemporized on the different roles of drums and poetry in Omani music: “Drums bring beauty; poetry increases/amplifies the expression” (at-ṭabl ya’tī al-gamāl wa-l-shi’r yizīd at-ta’bīr). Indeed, one of his own wedding razḥa poems, on the theme of love, uses this same term:

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Multaqānā al-yawm fī-l-‘inter
Naḥtafī bi-l-faraḥ wa-tzīdu,
Wa-l-‘arūs tīd wa-tatmakhkhar
Yā ḥillāt al-labs fī ‘īdu
```

Our meeting today is at the Intercontinental Hotel
We celebrate in joy and you increase it!
The bride adds [to it] and walks swaying;  
O, how beautiful the clothes on their wedding day.

Burrow calls this the *auxetic* function, a capacity of poetry to render ordinary things as magnificent: the largest, the biggest, the tallest, the wisest, the most generous (2008, 12). Recall the most fecund of all possible banana trees in Chapter 1, for example. *Auxesis* might also be seen in the way that every object in praise poetry is made of gold, perfume is omnipresent, swords are legendarily sharp, armor always gleams, and feasts are never-ending. Another *razḥa*, this time unattributed:

بلبسك بلبسك خاتم  
ذهب غالي وثمن  
بعطرك بعطرك عطر  
الورد والياسمين

*Bi-labisik, bi-labisik, khātim*  
*dhahib ghālī wa ṭhamīn*  
*bi-‘aṭīrik, bi-‘aṭīrik, ‘aṭīr*  
*al-ward wa-l-yāsimīn.*

By your clothing, by your clothing;  
a tent, golden, rich, and valuable.  
By your perfume, by your perfume,  
perfume of rose and jasmine.

Burrow traces the development of this *auxetic* function as *amplificatio* through Latin, derived, once again, from Aristotle’s discussion of praise’s ability to “magnify” the praised (2008, Ch. 1). Burrow cites Vincent de Beauvais’ (d. 1260s) approving citation of al-Farābī when he wrote:

the special business of poetry is, by its utterances, to make people imagine something to be more beautiful or more repulsive than it really is, in such a way that the hearer, believing, will be roused to either shun or seek what they imagine. (cited in Burrow 2008, 17-8)
Poets urge action by having the ability to exaggerate, to build up, to increase and using it well. Indeed, Robert Von Hallberg has argued that “the objective of poetry is encouragement… poets cannot praise constantly, granted, and yet the deepest power of poetry comes from praise, not criticism” (2014, 40). Similarly, Burrow writes that the “standard medieval poetic justification for poetic auxesis” was that Latin Christian medieval poets “have as their purpose to urge men on to certain actions that are subject to the will, and to dissuade them from others” (2008, 19). This is a familiar notion in Oman, though it is not necessarily held to only function within poetry.

**Learning from Praise: Education and Manners**

The concept of increasing or rousing “manners” or “refined behavior” was an important one for Omani poets and performers. This is not the only emotion that music can evoke, by any means, as we shall see in chapter 4 and in our discussion of Islamic jurisprudence regarding music and warfare in chapter 5. However, a common story told by older Omanis who remember ʿāzī from their childhood is that it was these poems that taught them not only proper comportment, but also the numbers, the *abjad* (the ordering of Arabic letters), the days of the week, and the months of the year. The *qaṣīda* that forms the main body of the ʿāzī can take a number of shapes based on ordering principles. Poetic line-groups might progress by using words that start with subsequent letters of the Arabic *abjad* “alphabet,” called “al-ʿalafiyya.” ⁵⁷ Schematically,

A: A--- / ---a

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⁵⁷ This kind of didactic pattern was also used for runes in Anglo-Saxon, Norse, and Celtic poetic traditions, and likely many others. Irish *briatharogam*-s presented the letters and sounds of Irish with accompanying lines of *kenning*, or word combinations that, in this case, define the meaning of the letter (MacManus 1988). According to Halsall (1981), Norse and Anglo-Saxon runes were enumerated and sequenced in rune-poems which were “alphabetical” and also mnemonic. Two famous lines of the Anglo-Saxon poem are worth quoting. The ‘X’ rune, *gyfu*, was presented with the word for “gift” and the accompanying line “generosity brings credit and honor, which supports one’s dignity; it furnishes help and subsistence to all broken men who are devoid of aught else.” *Feoh*, Ṛ, “wealth”; Wealth is a comfort to all men; yet must every man bestow it freely, if he wish to gain honour in the sight of the Lord.”
See al-Shaydī 2008, 207-9 for a textual example. The āzī al-‘adidiyya proceeds by a sequence of numbers, recently used by the Omani-Emirati artist al-Wasmī to structure an āzī for the 45th anniversary of the Qābūs state in Buraimi. Further, rarer, sub-types proceed by day of the week or months of the year.

‘Āzī are clearly didactic in the conventional sense. More important for oral poets in Oman, however, has been their ability to bestow virtuous behavior and ensure good behavior. This is a pattern that also has wide historical and geographic reach, especially in reference to praise. The Dutch theologian Erasmus (d. 1536) made this educational function clear when he criticized his contemporaries “who think Panegyrics are nothing but flattery [and] appear not to know with what design this kind of writing was invented by men of great sagacity, whose object it was, that by having the image of virtue put before them, bad princes might be made better, the good encouraged, the ignorant instructed, the mistake set right, the wavering quickened, and even the abandoned brought to some sense of shame.” (cited in Gould 2015, 255)

Not only does Erasmus explain a function of poetry, but he also shows that praise corrects in a way that does not necessarily endanger the social order. Like Chinese poets putting words in the mouths of their patrons, panegyrists can instruct without the use of blame. Von Hallberg’s

---/---a
---/---a
---/---b
B: B---/---a
---/---a
---/---a
---/---b
C: C--- and so on.58

---/---a
---/---a
---/---b

58 Interestingly, but likely just another quirk of philology, is the fact that hijā‘ refers to both satire and to the alphabetical ordering of things. This was never brought up by my interviewees, who knew precisely what I meant by hijā‘, but scholars sometimes use it in the alphabetical sense.
statement that “to praise noble power encourages the powerful to act nobly” (2014, 69) would ring true to many praise singers, and certainly to Omani poets. To return to the Islamic Peripatetics, Ibn Ṣīnā’s notions of the moral status of poetry is relatively unambiguous: poetry attains a moral status insofar as it renders honorable and valuable those values that a society has rendered virtuous, and condemns and mocks those that are without virtue. Ibn Ṣīnā justifies the social status of poetry through a clear social function. He also articulates inherited and developing Islamic notions that correlate speech with clarity, sincerity, truth, revelation, and the inimitability of the Qur’ān by clarifying poetry’s status within them. This cultural notion equating structured, thoughtful, well-mannered speech with truth and rationality is crucial to the ways in which poetic speech becomes the medium through which power is addressed.

a. Manners and Propriety

Unni Wikan (1982) and Christine Eickelman (1984), two ethnographers working in different places in Oman in the late 1970s and 80s, made note of the intense cultivation of manners and refined behavior where they studied. Wikan, in her study of coastal Sohar, argued that the notions of sharaf (honor) and ‘ayb (shame), while rarely articulated in casual talk, were deeply embedded within a notion of a personal cultivation of right behavior. Honor, for Soharis, was both an “ideal” and a “measure of one’s actual value as a person,” meaning that it was both measured

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59 See also Charles Hirschkind’s (2006) The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics for a presentist discussion of this notion in contemporary Egypt. This is especially problematic in his contentious claim that aesthetic and rational aspects of ‘piety’ cannot be “disarticulated,” despite this being a hallmark of every Islamic Peripatetic [for an example of Hirschkind’s thinking, see 220n4]).
by a kind of shared conceptual yardstick and contingent on other’s measurements derived therefrom (1982, 148-153). However, to her chagrin, she found that censuring talk was not at all common among Soharis, who had little interest in slandering others and picking over their failures. “If people are barred to this extent from censuring each other,” she asks, “how then is honor secured?” (1982, 162). Her conclusions bear quite strongly on my argument:

Whereas among the poor in Cairo, life seems to center on the shaming of others so as to gain value for oneself by contrast, in Oman the concern is to build merit within oneself by honoring others… In Sohar, everyone is seen as vulnerable—that is, the human condition, inextricably bound up with life in society… Honor, in this society… demands of men and women alike that you do not offend, but in a manner unassertive, graceful, and dignified, you must treat everyone as politely—that is, tactfully, correctly, hospitably, morally, and amicably—as possible. That is the essence of honor in Oman. (1982, 166-7)

Honor is manifest in treating others with respect and dignity, in maintaining a sense of propriety and dignity even when difficult. It is a refusal to do otherwise that is hallmark of honorable behavior in Oman.

Eickelman’s 1984 ethnography, Women and Community in Oman, similarly documents the nested notions of “propriety” and good manners in Oman, in this case, in the interior at al-Ḥamrā’. Khajal, a kind of female-gendered bodily social comportment, animates Omani women’s behavior amongst related and non-related kin in social situations (1984, 68-78). Maintaining khajal demands a certain kind of deferential behavior, as it places a series of “constraint[s] caused by the fear of doing something improper” (1984, 70). This sense of constrained action is traced through the conduct of persons eating, marrying, and managing social inequality. We should not interpret this, as Wikan can sometimes be read to do, as a kind of “hollowness” in the intensity of sociality in Inner Oman. Rather, it is a shared and common gestural and cognitive vocabulary that creates a
field of social interaction that is profoundly communal, despite social inequalities obvious to all. Eickelman concludes (similarly to Wikan), that these differences are overridden by the shared perception that the people of Hamra form part of one tribe and one community, separate from others… this sense of trust in the comportment of others in the community gives women considerable freedom within the oasis—freedom to organize their workday and their visiting as they see fit. Paradoxically, the people of Hamra place a high value on individual responsibility and noninterference in the affairs of others. At the same time, the range of comportment in public, and even within the household and family cluster, is sharply limited by a strict code of conduct that everyone is assumed to know and accept. The consequent necessity for indirectness in dealing with others magnifies the most minute details of social interaction. (1984, 131-2)

These deeply shared senses of comportment, in these cases embodied largely by women, are similarly central to maintaining social grace. By limiting the kind of agonistic social interaction that so animates the Egyptian urban neighborhood and other Mediterranean societies, these shared senses of propriety militate against the destruction of communal ties. Wikan’s shock that Sohari women maintained social contacts with a “flagrant prostitute” is a particularly clear example of the primacy of neighborly and communal ties over more agonistic ones. This is not to say that agonistic ties do not exist. Instead, we should look for kinds of “indirectness” as they manifest in praise and the didactic roles of Omani praise poetry.

The efficacy of indirectness can also be manifested in very direct ways. Indirect comments in ‘āzī, we shall see, can help to produce direct results. I want to conclude this section with a longer example of this direct indirectness which comes from my notes on a public performance of razhās. One afternoon after the maghrib prayer, Ḥamad, the munassiq (manager) of the Firqat al-‘Arabī li-l-funūn al-sha‘biyya was preparing to address the group in the parking lot before a performance at the opening of a new Science and Engineering building at Sultan Qaboos University. We had driven out from Manaḥ in order to “bring pride to the students” at the opening of the building.
group, divided between the old-timers and the youths (al-shayb wa al-shabāb), was practically giddy with excitement because the campus was packed with people. The parking lot was jammed with cars, and the youths had taken their time in straightening their matching maṣar-s, or headwraps, and hazm-s, or embroidered belts in the reflections of tinted SUV windows. Older performers relished flicking their swords up and down: “zayn il-hizz il-yawm” (“The sword-flicker is fine today!”) one said to another. “Al-hamdulillah!” came the whispered reply. The building itself was a few stories tall and groups had gathered to see the performance in a central square.

The group was scheduled to perform before and after the SQU skateboarding club, which was anxiously setting up and testing various jumps and ramps. Outdoor staircases led up the corners of the building, whose façade arced like a “C” around the central square. No one under thirty failed to point out to me that each landing was packed with young female students from the university. “Il-ḥarīm, khawī, shūf! Wayyak binarzha taḥt al-munẓar wa aqūlik…” (“Girls, khawī, look! And we’re gonna be dancing the razha with you right underneath their gaze…”) one of the boys gestured weakly to a woman high in one of the spiral stairs leading up the building, “al-bint māl al-azraq traaaaaykī inta…” (“The one in the blue is loooooooking at you!”). The wave of cackling somehow knocked into an older youth down the line, who feigned that it had caused him to pull his maṣar down his face. He turned toward us with his brand new maṣar pulled down over his eyes, cocked his head slowly to one side, and mocked pulling out his khanjar belt-dagger—a gesture to spurned honor. “Yā guma’al!” (“Hey, Everybody!”) came the shout from Ĥamad. “Sima’, sima’ (listen, listen). Today, we’ve been honored to be invited to perform razha at the college of His Majesty, His Highness Sultan Qābūs, may God lengthen his life.” He explained how the group would enter the square in the mashiyya, a processional razha, but did not stipulate the poetry or the melody. There was some squabbling about who would recite (ilqā’/yilqā’) the first line, and
whether they would have an ‘āzī. The main ‘āzī performer begged off, saying that they had written so many razha-s for the event that there was no need, which basically sealed the deal since no one else was going to give an ‘āzī. Ḥamad continued, “we are guests here today, just as they are our guests in the razha. We will not forget our manners (ma binansā adabunā baynū). I don’t want to hear that “they had no manners, they had no respect” or anything like that (mū bāghī asma‘ ʻillī ma lahu adab, ma lahu ihtirām walā shay kidhā). We will be amongst male and female students, young women, so act like men and be good-mannered people (muʿaddābīn).” When I spoke with Ḥamad after the event, I asked him why he stressed the comportment of the group amongst the students: “Well, first, as you know, regarding the mixture of men and women, this is the source of many problems. You must [act] respectful, and our adab increases the adab and the good moral behavior of the students, as well (ʿadabnā yīzīdʿadab wa-akhlāq aṭ-ṭalaba gumīʾan, bʿad).”

A Case Study of Praise: Examining Praise at a Soccer Pitch

In the summer of 2016, a large private bank in Oman, Bank Muscat, was funding a huge social development campaign which consisted of providing the numerous official soccer clubs of Oman with turfed soccer pitches. Artificial and actual grass was trucked in to replace the gravel and packed dirt fields that were (and still are) common in rural areas. This initiative, though funded by the bank, was overseen by the Ministry of Sports Affairs, a ministry established by Royal decree in 2004. Manaḥ’s Farīq al-ʿArabī, a sporting club, was chosen to receive one of the turf fields on their field in the neighborhood of al-Maʿarā, and it was built over the course of a few months: equipped with high walls, bright lights, new goals, fresh artificial turf, and a watering system, the pitch was completely transformed.

When the pitch was near opening, the performance troupe attached to the same neighborhood civic club, the Firqat al-ʿArabī l-al-funūn al-shʿabiyya, was called by the Ministry
of Sports Affairs, the local wālī in Manaḥ, and the local shaykh-s of al-Maʿarā to plan a performance. The local Manḥī groups Firqat Ḥārat al-Bilād and the Firqat al-Maʿamad were also called upon to share the honor and to ensure a large body of performers. The poet Rabīʿ al-Mallāḥ was chosen to write and throw the ‘āzī (though others have said that he “presents himself/puts himself forward to be chosen” (huwa yataqaddam nafsu)” thereby forcing others to relent to his wishes). In any case, the opening ceremonies for the soccer match would include several razḥa-s written for the occasion, a qaṣīda written by local poet Ābū Ghaṣṣān, speeches by several figures, and the ‘āzī.

After the ‘aṣr prayer, at around 3:30, I met the gathering Firqat al-ʿArabī just outside the southern gates of the new field. As I moved around the group shaking hands and bumping noses in greeting, someone called out, “Go and see the field, doctor, let us get ready!” Several of the younger members of the group were straining to set their maṣar-s just right on their ears and foreheads: straight, overlapped just so, and crisp. I walked out onto the beautiful green field, completely at odds with the surrounding dusty browns. Several “big personalities” (kibār al-shakhsīyāt) greeted me as I entered and began to set up my microphones.

“He’s the one researching the popular arts,” I heard one whisper as they approached, “and he hangs around al-Maʿarā.” They greeted me warmly and insisted I take some water and other drinks. “This is a big day,” I said, and before I could continue, one of the shaykh-s added, “It’s a big day indeed! We are greeting a son of the Āl Bū Saʿīdī, a minister from the Ministry of Sports Affairs. And just look how we have responded: this is Manaḥ! We recognize [their] help and support, the provision of services and the guarantee of safety and security.” As we chatted, I reflected that this response was typical of talk about the role of the state in developing Oman into a “modern” state. There is little that logically connects “safety and security” with laying artificial
grass on a soccer pitch except that it is a similar kind of expectation placed on the state and its leadership.

A few moments later, I heard the crack of the young brothers Aḥmad and ‘Abdallah bin Ga’arūf testing the tightness of their drums. I excused myself and made my way over, but they pointed with the noses over toward the eastern gate of the field, where two lines of dancers were forming. About 50-60 dancers formed two long rows extending out from the gate across the field, framing a kind of walkway for the distinguished guests to walk down. Over the hubbub of the crowd, I heard a voice shout, “someone give a razḥa!” As I sidled up to one of the lines, I heard an older performer give a long, elaborate mulālā’, a kind of unaccompanied vocable melody that outlines the melody of the coming poetry. I scanned the opposing line quickly and it turned out to be Khalfān, an older performer from the Firqat al-Ma’amad—an appropriate person to give the first razḥa. His voice was almost caught off in the wind, but as he concluded, our line erupted in response, echoing the mulālā’ back and establishing the rhythmic interchange of choral parts. After a few more exchanges, Khalfān sang the poem that would “ride” (tarkab) the melody:

أول سلامي ع الدار والحله
وعليكم خاطري ومن سكن فيه
في ديرة العز اهل الكرم فله
قابوس يا نورا شارجا فيها

‘Awal salāmī ‘a al-dār wa-l-hilla,
w- ‘alaykum khāṭirī wa-man sakin fih
Fī dīrat al-‘izz ‘ahil al-karam fa-l-hu
Qābūs, yā nūran shārqan fīhā

My first greetings go to the homeland and the encampment, you are on mind, and those who live there. The noble people of generosity are in pride’s homeland; it is Qābūs’s, O it’s eastern light!]
This was a good choice by Khalfān because this particular poem is very common, so the wind did not interfere with our ability to respond to it. Our line roared back, enthused by the poem and by the incoming guests. As the drummers took their place between the lines, the choruses began to sway back and forth. After a few exchanges of the poetry, the drums roared into action and the dance began in earnest.

In this welcoming mode, the dancers simply took a step forward and back, starting with the right foot and closing with the left, then rocking back on the left and closing with the right. When the drums moved closer to one line or the other, those nearest to the drum bent their knees deeply but kept straight backs, tilted forward at the waist toward the drums and bobbed together, sometimes throwing their heads backwards and forwards in a deep nod. Others shouted encouraging “Ho ho!”s on upbeats, eliciting a range of shouted responses. As the guests filtered in and waved to us, I took a step back and began filming. I noted early on in my fieldwork that guests rarely dance with the dancers—unlike in other parts of the Gulf for example—a topic I take up in Chapter 4. For now, the dancers closed ranks behind the guests and marched them safely across the field to their designated seats.

As the dancers took their seats, towards the northern goal, I watched as a procession of well-dressed Omani bankers and businessmen made short speeches to the crowd. No one around me appeared to pay any attention, due to the high winds and distance. After a few moments, Ābū Ghaṣṣān, the talented local poet, brought his wheelchair up to the microphone and read a relatively short qaṣīda, dedicated to the al-’Arabī team, the town, the shaykh-s, and the local representative from the Ministry of Sports Affairs, Khālid bin Ḥamad Āl Bū Sa‘īdī. As Ābū Ghaṣṣān concluded, several people nearby whispered, “aḥsant,” meaning a mixture of thanks and recognition for a job well done. Soon after, our phones lit up as Abū Ghaṣṣān sent us the poem as a picture over
WhatsApp. The managers of the event then beckoned the poet Rabī‘ al-Mallāħ to start the ‘āzī, and Rabī‘ waved his hands to gather the performers. They formed a dense group behind him and moved to the center of the field with another razha. As they reached the center, Rabī‘ came to the front of the group, turned them toward the seated guests, took out his iPhone and performed the following ‘āzī in the manner described above—sword in one hand and phone in the other.

Hear him, O Lord of Splendor / The Everlasting God lives forever
Scattering peace like pure, fresh water / to guests and the graciously received group.

I greet you, O issue of the generous / You have honored your people and the station
And have given us from you a badge of honor / O creator of wondrous sayings.

O creator of sayings and art / O soother of the grievous mood;
Our homeland yearns to play a melody / Directly to you, O understanding one.

When we heard of your coming / We came to be in your presence.
O my lord, this is your [appearance] / We are proud of it, without doubt.

Lord and son of a lord by grandfather / You, Khālid bin Ḥamad,
If you undertook your actions my / pen is prepared to respond in its way.

Every homeland is built by men / When those men work hand in hand.
As for laziness, it has no place / neither near nor far.

This is the mission of every youth / Wading into challenge and difficulty.
And for those that walk the path of rightness / It's impossible for their actions to fade.

These are our benefits in Manaḥ / We salute the designs that are in good order,
[Those] that Qābūs taught us and acts in good faith / Qābūs is a physician to the ’umma.

O my homeland al-Ma'arā, peace! / You gave me pride, you gave me respect.
Around you men are on the lookout / For any strange thing.

In conclusion, I ask for your forgiveness / Time passes by so quickly.
If I only had more lines / to give the ‘āzī right up to the setting of the sun.60

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60 Appendix 1, poem 4.
The poem itself is perhaps not beautiful but is a perfect example of the themes that we examined in this chapter. First, the poet begins by placing the listeners into a certain context: God is great, and we are Muslims gathered here in the long tradition of guests and hosts. He then greets the host, “the issue of the generous,” and commends him for his actions in giving al-Ma’arā a “badge of honor” in the form of the soccer pitch. Note that the field was funded by Bank Muscat, not just the Ministry of Sports Affairs. Nevertheless, neither the bank nor the Ministry are the focus of praise. Instead, it is a minor member of the royal family, a ministry member sent off to attend these kinds of celebrations probably dozens of times before. Next, Rabī’ shifts to the desires of the “homeland” to “play him a melody”—that is, give the razha—and have him hear it. In fact, he continues, when the people of Manaḥ heard of Khālid’s attendance, they all rushed to volunteer to sing praises for him. The voluntary nature of praise is established. This instance of praise is a recognition of Khālid’s good deed of helping to establish the field, but also in attending the opening and gracing it with his presence.

After this, Rabī’ shifts to pointing out that the people of Manaḥ are not lazy. Why is this? First of all, I think it is a way to represent praise as a civic labor, outlined in chapter 4. It is also a recognition of the kind of gift that this soccer pitch is. It is unreturnable. It is a service that is given in good faith to the people of Manaḥ to use and enjoy. Rabī’ seems to say, “this is a fine gift, one that we did not have. But don’t confuse our not having it with laziness, no, we’ve done our part in cooperating again and again, and are not shy of work.” At the end of these two lines, he turns back onto the praised: those who do good deeds are never forgotten. The gathered performers and the neighborhoods they represent have done the hard work of building a community, but it is “impossible” for the good deed of building the soccer pitch and attending the opening on the part of Khālid to “fade.” It will. But playing on his vanity is a kind of social insurance.
Finally, Rabī’ praises the leadership of Sultan Qābūs, highlighting the “benefits” he has brought and the “designs” he has wrought. Such a display links the current situation to broader national and regional concerns with development and the Omani renaissance, mythopoetically drawing the connection between soccer pitches with grass and broader narratives of national development. Finally, Rabī’ stamps the performance as indelibly emerging from the rightful, watchful, and patriotic people of al-Maʿarā. This good deed is good because it accrued to the people of Manah, as rightful recipients and watchful protectors of the state. In a way, the ʿāzī concludes by claiming that the good deed so praised today is only possible because the people of Manah are “on the lookout for any strange thing.”

Conclusions

This ʿāzī is an exceptional example of praise in the Omani case. It moves between the core interests of praisers and constructs the praised as ultimately reliant on the community, though through their actions they are momentarily individualized and lauded. Despite the organization of this chapter, it was hearing and discussing this ʿāzī that taught me so much about the circulations of praise in Oman, and its deep connections to senses of community and political relationships. The poem is not uncontroversial: many interlocutors found something to criticize. Often, they pointed out that the poem was much too short and brief, but in my view, the brevity of the poem distills the core elements of praise into a dense string of deeply meaningful statements full of implication. It is, in a very real sense, a concentrated and forceful expression of what praise is in the context of the Omani ʿāzī. What became clear to me after hearing this poem is that it is both a recognition of a good deed and a way of ensuring those good deeds continue to happen. It is both a response and a provocation, a reflection and an incitement. This is what is meant by praise as an intervention: praise leaps into social relations to modify, manipulate, induce, and commend them.
It is an exhortation as much as a recognition. Ideally, it shapes future action by extolling past actions, linking them in the creation of community. In the next chapter, we will discuss what kinds of good deeds deserve such praise, and in the following, we will examine why and how communities perform in such a way as to demonstrate the mutually entangled political lives of rulers and the ruled.
Chapter 3: Swords and Gold: Generosity and Legitimacy in Omani Praise Performance

Praise poetry is by its very nature a gift exchanged. (Kurke, 1991, 91)

Authority is root and radical, sense and prescience. (Robinson 1983, 30)

Wealth is the measure of hope / and likewise it magnifies the despicable.
Even if he’s a falcon,⁶¹ if his palm is empty, / no one will look upon him.
And if I had the cup of wealth / [but] travelled like a poor camel-driver,
Folks would redouble greetings / and everyone would extend their hand.⁶² (al-Falāḥī 2013, 115)

The next two chapters examine how social relationships of authority and political legitimacy are enacted in Oman through the obligatory circulation of praise performance and generosity from leaders. Such economic arrangements are often called “distributive economies” because goods circulate insofar as they are doled out by certain individuals, organizations, or institutions. Generosity may seem a strange place to look for the relationships between authority and performance, even in distributive cases. In fact, Omani performers I spoke with encouraged me to conceive of praise for leaders in this way. Speaking with the ‘āzī Rabī‘ al-Mallāḥ about the role of leaders after his praise performance at the opening of the soccer pitch in Manaḥ, he said “Why do I say, ‘If you undertook your actions, / my pen is prepared to respond in its way’? This mean that if he shows generosity, we will remember it (law yubayyin al-kirāma binatadhākruh)!”

This chapter makes the case that generosity, manifested in many ways, is a shared commitment of both performers and leaders in a variety of authority and political structures,

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⁶¹ Ṣaqr, a type of falcon, as discussed previously, refers to a noble and brave fighter.

⁶² An Omani occasional poem, a qaṣīda nabatīyya. Composed in Buṭayn by Khalfān bin Sayf al-Falāḥī known as “Wālid Shuṭṭa” after being ignored in the sabla in Ghussār.
ranging from “tribal” to “state” (Wilson 2016). Leaders (both shaykh-s and sultans) are expected to be generous to their followers, and when they are, performers from subordinate classes respond with praise. For the ruling classes, this expectation of generosity can secure their legitimacy in the eyes of polity members. For performers, displaying their appreciation of generosity also displays their commitment to the generous leader and the social relations that bind them. Many performers see the relationships between giving and praising good leadership with razha as evidence of the efficacy of that relationship—a confirmation of a healthy social order.

**Two Takes on Generosity: The Gift and a Social Mechanism**

“Generosity” is the term I use to generally translate a number of Arabic terms. Most are used interchangeably (sakā’, sakāwa or ṣakāwa; karam or kirāma; jūd or jawad; samāḥa) some are considered archaic and only really used for poetry addressed to elites (like naddā or marūwa), and others are somewhat specific to patronage and wasṭa. I think that more able Arabists would try to match these terms to more specific English terms like “liberality,” “magnanimity,” “open-handedness,” or more neutral terms like “giving,” but I think “generosity” is an adequate covering term. It fails to distinguish between those who give because they are rich and those who give even while poor, but this is in accordance with local usage. The underlying notion of all these terms is plainly “generosity”: giving of oneself freely and indiscriminately.

Generosity is valued across social classes. In Oman, generosity is as much a virtue of the pauper as it is the prince. It is precisely this mutual valuation that makes “generosity” a useful basis for the inculcation of temporary cross-class alliances—hegemony (in Bowie’s 1998 terms). Speaking very generally, elites see generosity as a strategy to legitimate themselves, and non-
elites see the inculcation of generosity in elites as a hedge against uncertainty. Generosity, like praise, lifts all boats.

I analyze this situation in two ways: first, as a manifestation of reciprocity and gift exchange, and second as a mechanism that produces political legitimacy.

a. The Gift

I see the relationship between giving leaders and the receiving led as motivated not by strict market logics of loss and gain, but as motivated by logics of reciprocity that are most effectively studied in the literature on “the gift.” It is emphatically not a one-way process of “distribution,” but one in which the led give the leaders something quite material in return. As recent scholarship on the gift has shown, what makes circuits of exchange so crucial to social reproduction is not that they merely circulate goods, but that they also form and define social relationships. As anthropologists Keith Hart and Chris Hann conclude, Mauss’s most basic insight was that “society” or “the social” could not be assumed to be “pre-existent,” but were, in fact, always under construction, even demanding construction (2011, 166). Generosity and giving form social relations, especially generosity from leaders, and that givers are rarely disinterested in how that society takes shape. The risk of becoming dependent and subservient to generous givers is very real. I show how a model of generosity that produces political legitimacy has unique ramifications for performance in Oman. Because generosity is linked to good leadership but also has the capacity to produce dependency and inequality, praise performance becomes a site of distinct social tension. Praising generosity has been construed as sycophancy, groveling, and self-interested—my research reveals a different aspect of this cycle. This case of generosity and praise response illustrates several important features of Omani conceptual and
behavioral associations between performance, sociality, and authority that are thrown into relief by the social tensions that figure within such performances.

Generosity has been studied by anthropologist Margaret Wilson amongst Chinese traders in Papua New Guinea, where she described it as “a model of giving which incurs no debt, and emphasis on status that does not imply hierarchy” (1989, 26). “Generosity,” Wilson claims, “emerges as a system for simultaneously negotiating status and for maintaining equality within the community” (1989, ii). What is compelling about such a notion of generosity is how it can be cited as the basis of actions that have profoundly divergent results—producing relations of equality and also differentiating status. If such a claim is surprising for our critically minded readers, it is not for those who have studied gifting and its relation to hospitality in the Middle East, particularly in women’s networks of visiting. As Anne Meneley (1997) has shown in Zabid, Yemen, gifts, generosity, and hospitality are serious business in the play of social distinction but are nevertheless forms of caring redistribution. While circuits of visiting between women are crucial in producing such distinction, the very predictability and obligations inherent in visiting form a tenuous social network of “near-equals” who recognize themselves as constituting the social elite of Zabid. As we shall see, generosity is a basic expectation for leaders in the modern state just as much as it has been in the past for smaller-scale leaders. One element in the endurance of this expectation (and the practices that follow it) is the continued relevance of praise poetry as mediating relations between dominant and subordinated classes. Praise largely circulates between classes.

More critically minded readers might balk at this formulation. They would prefer that “generosity” in this case be framed in terms of bribes, intimidation, corruption, patronage politics, or some other obviously coercive function of power. As I have argued previously, the
ability to give in this way is a predicate of social inequality. The social relations that index this inequality are sustained by material concentrations of social power, organized violence, and practices that differentially arrange economic capital. However, in this chapter, I want to examine the range that a word like “generosity” can exhibit, and how it can be deployed in very different social situations to shape behavior. Generosity is not an ideological construction of the ruling classes. It is a profoundly social impulse that challenges simplistic, capitalocentric descriptions of social life, like those that balk at generosity. Pace Gregory (1982), markets and gifts may be different ways of thinking about circulation and what impels it, but one does not simply replace the other (Tsing 2015). This is why an Omani performer can buy a beautiful new belt with cash from a wage job in the morning, freely Google a new melody on a phone gifted to them in the afternoon, and praise generosity from elites through razha in the evening. Market, mixed-market, and reciprocal exchanges co-exist.

b. A Social Mechanism

My second overarching contribution is to frame this mutualistic generosity and response circuit as a social mechanism that produces political legitimacy. I term this the Generosity/Legitimation mechanism and discuss it in detail in this chapter’s section on authority. Even though generosity is a value and ideal that crosses class boundaries, it is clearly differentially understood within those classes—and therefore makes generosity a potential basis for hegemony construction. While conceptions of generosity may differ amongst the ruling class (think noblesse oblige), it is also true that the material benefits derived from redistribution speak for themselves. Who cares what the king thinks when you’ve got your goose, or your hospital, or a paved road? What if, though, your king is Donald Trump and he has crazy ideas about “bootstraps” and no regard whatsoever for generosity? What becomes interesting with praise is
that it keeps ideas like “generosity” alive, afloat, worth something, circulating, *mattering* not for just everyday folks but also for the ruling classes.

An ethnomusicological approach to this mechanism uncovers, or at least forefronts, the performed *response* to the directed generosity of elites as praise. While other studies of distributive economies do not record responses to generosity or fail to consider that generosity might obligate a response, this study shows that generosity is not just repaid with “political quietism” or necessarily results in a decayed civil society, but instead prompts praise responses. These praise responses are not simply natural, spontaneous outpourings of joy, nor are they entirely overdetermined, shaped, and controlled by elites—a kind of obsequious puppet show. Rather, they are a negotiated, respectfully agonistic, not-quite-cooperative and not-quite-competitive arena of compulsion, cajoling, and urging. Praise and generosity are locked in continuous circuits of tense persuasion. The circulation of praise and generosity, locked in circuits of obligation, leads to the construction of stable relations that undergird a moral economy.

As we saw in the last chapter, praise is not a simple affair. Praise performance plays on the differences between ideals and realities. As many scholars have shown, seemingly straightforward praise can hide multiple meanings, even if never stooping to outright criticism (Abu-Lughod 1986; Barber 1991; Gilman 2001, 2009; Hoffman 1995; Gunner 1995). Ideally, praise attempts to subtly guide authority through persuasion (Caton 1987). In contemporary Oman, however, praise is both very common and socially problematic. Authentic praise is understood to be necessary to sustain mutual obligations toward generosity between rulers and ruled and promote good leadership, but it can easily shade into sycophancy and undignified begging. This is not unknown in Oman or in the broader Middle East. This danger of dependency and
sycophancy is especially acute in the context of obligations of reciprocity inherent in “gift” exchange and patronage. Many scholars examining different cultural contexts have shown how gifts and generosity from social elites can put individuals and communities in a bind: refusal jeopardizes social ties, but overeager acceptance can signal dependence and weakness.

c. Outline

I analyze the social uncertainty of generosity, gifts, and political legitimacy by drawing insight from two literatures on norms of authority and gifting relationships in the context of the state. Both of the approaches I just outlined move into and out of focus in the following discussion. In the first part of the chapter, I discuss the razha as a performance practice. Next, I present a deep survey of the ethnographic literature on the social norm of generosity underlying the legitimacy of Arabian and Middle Eastern polities. I briefly present some recent social scientific research on the notion of “legitimacy” (Cohen 1988; Jeffrey, McConnell, and Wilson 2015; Karateke and Reinkowski 2005) and “authority” (Agrama 2010; Feldman 2008; Gibson 2007). In the second part, I outline the tensions manifested in gift-exchange relations by highlighting the social uncertainty manifest in obligations of giving, receiving, and returning gifts (Douglas 1990; Mauss 1990; Sigaud 2002). Specifically, I examine how recent approaches to “the gift” in the context of the nation-state have highlighted its role in legitimating the dominance of the state over local communities. I review recent work on the construction of Tibet’s political “indebtedness” to China via development programs (Caple 2015; Yeh 2013), the ways in which gift exchanges recalibrate relationships in Asia and Africa (Campergue 2015; Caple 2015; Coderey 2015; de la Perrière 2015; Wilson 2016), and most importantly, the sometimes agonistic sociality of obligation in women’s visiting networks in the Middle East (Eickelman 1984; Limbert 2010; Meneley 1997; Al-Torki and Cole 1989; Wikan 1982).
I argue that the mutual obligations that are tacit in gift exchange relationships can be manipulated in various ways to create and recreate new social relationships. In the view of practitioners, the social uncertainty manifest in the Scylla of conceding dependency or the Charybdis of being ungracious, immoral, and asocial is obliterated in razḥa performance. Ruling classes may have a very different view. Praise and its return in generosity and its return in praise is an ever-evolving dynamic. While razḥa works in several ways to “integrate power into community” (Kurke 2013), I conclude the chapter by suggesting how this cultural complex has been manipulated by elites to secure and legitimate the authoritarian state.

**Razḥa as a performance form and a model of interaction**

Razḥa is the most common Arab men’s communal dance form in most of northern Oman. Razḥa-s can break out at many occasions, really wherever a group of men are gathering in public in celebration: at religious festival days, weekend nights at the souq, soccer matches, national holidays, and so on. Razḥa are most often planned for a specific event, however, by inviting and engaging a firqa that specializes in razḥa performance. These planned events are even more numerous: national festivals and cultural fairs in several Gulf states; opening celebrations for stores, auto dealerships, roads, highway exits, infrastructural developments; horse races, human races, camel beauty pageants, auto shows, date exhibitions, and local cultural exhibits. Oftentimes civic groups will hire a firqa to enliven some public seminar or demonstration. Weddings are a staple venue for many groups. I am most interested in those performances that are directly funded by or have as their patron state agents, including the Sultan. They are neither the most nor the least common type of event, but they are a rich site for exploring the relation between these performance practices and ideals of authority and state legitimacy.
Let’s talk a bit about razha as a performance practice. I will focus here on the understanding of razha that was common amongst male performers in Manaḥ during my research period. Razha in Manaḥ was very similar to other places I visited—certainly Manḥis could dance with any other group, and others with them—but I will point out some places where their conceptions differ from their neighbors.

There are a number of kinds of razha-s in Manaḥ, including those that are called “walking razha-s” (razhāt al-mashiyya), “fast razha-s” (razhāt al-qaṣṣāfīyya or just al-qaṣṣāfī), and “slow razha-s” (razhāt al-nāḥīyya). Some folks thought there should be a fourth, the razha al-harbiyya (war razha). A few folks in Manaḥ would refer to al-qaṣṣāfī as al-qaṣṣābī or as al-gaṣṣābī. Outside of Manaḥ, al-nāḥīyya is usually called al-nāʿīha. For some, there was no difference between razha-s and another practice called razfa, but whenever this topic came up people who “knew” the difference corrected those who thought there was none. The main difference was the presence of drums and who participated: razfa had no drums whereas razha requires drums, razfa was for Bedu and razha for townspeople.

Razha-s were almost always performed in a long sequence of linked dances with short pauses between them. As many as ten razha-s might be sung in a row before dancers take a more substantial break, with individual members joining and leaving the lines of singers and dancers as they saw fit.

Depending on the type of razha, performers are arranged in one of two ways: either in a long line, for mashiyya, or in a circle, facing lines, or a crowd divided into two groups for the other types. Razhāt al-mashiyya usually begins with the performers clustered as a group, but as the group begins to move, they collect into rows of five to six dancers and follow the drummers in a marching step. In al-qaṣṣāfī and al-nāḥīyya, dancers stand in two arching unlinked lines that
frame a circle, within which circulate the drummers. The size of the circle was dependent on the
number of performers, but dancers in one line were usually touching shoulders, a situation called
takātif, or “rubbing shoulders.” Usually having enough space wasn’t an issue, but at the Fī ḥubb
Qābūs festival the number of participants made the performance space inadequate, and so the
circled dancers were two rows deep. This was not considered a good solution by the people with
whom I discussed it. The best setup for the circular razha-s is to have two facing semicircles of
dancers, close enough to hear one another.

All razha-s I heard had a few features in common. While mashiyya simply moved from
one location to another, the other types all occurred within a delimited area. Usually razha-s
were called for by one line or the other—if a member of line A began the last razha, then the
haqq, or “right” (but in this sense meaning obligation), was upon the other line to give the next.
One line might berate another: “verse,63 somebody! Who’s versing [giving the razha]? Where’s
the razha? (Shill! Man yishill? Al-razha hayna?)” When a specific razha began, say a qaṣṣāfī,
one initial singer took the lead, though he might not leave his spot in one of the lines of dancers.
He would gesture for silence, then yulāli’ or “give the mulālā’.” A mulālā´ is a string of vocables
sung to the beat of the poetic line that sketches the melodic arc of the piece. Mulālā´-s are based
on a few syllables and vowels: yā, layl, lay, way, āh, and lā. Mulālā´ are not fixed. Instead, they
are semi-improvised in order to “ride” (yarkab) the melody well and highlight the predominant
rhythmic feel. They are also not always sung the same way, even for the same text. The same
melody might be used for many texts, and often serve as a basis for composing poetry: if the line
“rides” the melody, then it is good poetry.

63 Dieter Christensen and Salwa El-Shawan Castelo-Branco’s translation of shill/yishill (2009).
The *mulālā’* is sung until everyone knew it, which usually requires a number of cycles. When the person who gave the *razha* is satisfied, he raises his arms for silence a second time and gives the first poetic line. With this, the dancer/singers pick up the line and “throw” (*yilqa’*) it back and forth antiphonally, until the second poetic line is given. This is usually called the *radd*, the “response.” Due to the din of performance, not everyone understands the poetic lines before the drums kick in, and so often singers would look down the line for someone who knew it and listen in for an explanation while the other line was “carrying” (*yahmul*) the verse. One could elbow one’s neighbor and ask, “what’s the *radd*?” and expect to hear the second verse spoken out clearly. Oftentimes, singers would forget the first or second line and return to the *mulālā’* for a few sequences, or even just mumble through lines hitting major syllables. Only occasionally was this criticized, and even in those situations very lightly.

This textual sequence is sketched in an example from Bahlā’, in Music Example 2. The first three measures present the *mulālā’* and the second three present the text to which the *mulālā’* corresponds.
'Awal salām (First greetings)
Vocables (Yay lä...)
First greetings, with God, go to the rightly guided, etc.

Music example 2. The relation between a mulālā’ and a poetic line, over a simplified raḥmānī and kāsir rhythm.
When the poetic lines were sufficiently spread along the lines, the *razḥa* began in earnest. The dancers had usually already begun to sway and dance to the rhythm of the *mulālā‘*, though this often shifted with the introduction of the drums.

The drum pair, called the *zāna*, was usually composed of one larger drum and one smaller drum. They were usually a pair of drums made together to be played as a pair, and so were similar in design and construction. The larger of the pair was called *rahmānī*, while the smaller was called *kāsir*. Some groups used more than two drums, and the doubled drum was always considered to be an extra *rahmānī*, rather than the “middle” sized *ranna* reported by El-Mallah (1998). The biggest difference in playing style was playing with the hands (*bi-l-yid*) or with a striker (*ḍarb*, pronounced *ẓarb*) and a switch (*radd*). The other difference that was commented on was the shape of the drum. Some were barrel shaped and made of very thin plywood, while others were carved into an hourglass-shape and lathed with decorative lines. While both styles were two-headed and tightened with ropes, the hourglass shaped drums were usually considered higher quality—some even considered them “Omani” as opposed to the cheaper drums, which were called “Bengali,” “Pakistani,” or “Indian.”
Figure 17. Barrel-shaped drums used by the Firqat Bahlā’, played with the hands.
Figure 18. The zāna drum pair played by the bin Ga‘rūf brothers in the Firqat al-‘Arabī, played by a striker, zarb, in the right hand and a switch called radd, the “response,” in the other. The drums were hung from the shoulder and the tightening straps along the ropes were pushed toward the “striker” end.
Figure 19. The Firqat al-'Arabī with an ‘āzī singer from 'Adam with the zāna in the foreground. The kāsir is leaning on the raḥmānī and both are hourglass-shaped. Both the żarb and the radd are made of date palm parts. The żarb is carved from the heartwood of the trunk and the radd is made by stripping the leaves off of an older leaf-stem.
Figure 20. The Firqat Bahlā’ records an ‘āzī in the Bahlā’ Fort. Drummers play a raḥmānī (right) and a kāsir (left) between poetic lines, both played with the hands.
Groups that played with the hands (Bahlā’, Nizwā, and some groups in ’Izkī) were often maligned by groups that played with sticks. The striker and switch combination was considered to be the “original” or “authentic” (’asli) way of playing. They point to the fact that this way of playing is common in the Sharqiyya, which is taken to be the origin of razha in general. The variety of techniques and sounds produced by the sticks was larger than with the hands, which could only vary the sound of drumstrokes by hitting the rim of the drum or the center. In performance, the rahmānī (the “great” or “big one”) was considered a kind of “ground,” emphasizing beats with which dance steps were coordinated. The smaller kāsir, or “cutter,” played more elaborated lines against the rahmānī beat. However, both drums often settled into long stable patterns (as in music example 2 and 3), meaning that the kāsir player was not always improvising over the rahmānī, even though he was free to. On the other hand, drummers who frequently played together often had cues for more complex drumming sequences that they would use variously throughout performances. In music example 3, I have sketched some interactions between the rahmānī and the kāsir in a common razha al-nāhiyya as played by the Firqat al-’Arabī (using strikers and switches). In this example, X noteheads are played with the switch and filled ones with the striker. Measures 1-2, 5-8, 11-12 are a “stable” pattern that might continue for 90% of the performance, while mm. 3-4 and 9-10 are some common zāna variations, where both drummers coordinate to enliven the rhythm. These are common because they shift the perception of the downbeat by emphasizing the upbeat after them, as in the rahmānī part in mm. 9-10, which is a typical variation that takes many forms. I have sketched purely kāsir variations from the Firqat Bahlā’ in music example 4. In this example, normal noteheads represent open, right-handed strokes on the right side of the drum, while crosses represent open, left handed strokes on the left side.
Music example 4. *Kāsir* variations from drummers of the Firqat Bahlā’.

The drum, especially the *raḥmānī*, anchors the dance steps. While they can be very idiosyncratic, the basic steps are also sketched in music example 3 and 7. Upstemmed quarter notes represent the right foot, while downstems represent the left foot. Arrows to the right over the note mark a step forward, toward the center of the circle, and arrows to the left are steps away from the circle. The basic step was a right foot forward on beat one, then a close with the left foot, a step back with the left, and then with the right. Usually, this last right-foot movement was “bobbed,” not really taking weight before it was emphatically stomped down on beat one again. The shoulders and head were all used in different ways, usually bobbing on upbeats or following the drumming. As a whole, the two lines danced in place for a few cycles of singing the poetic lines, then the group that “gave” the *razha* would widen their dance steps and start to move as a group around the circle counter-clockwise. When they reached the other line, that line would begin moving around the circle as well until they made one full circuit and all dancers were in their original positions. If desired, this circuit would continue. When movement around the circle ceased, performers could then signal for a second sequence of moves, in which one line would march forward until it reached the other, sing a few lines, and then retreat. This was mirrored by the other line. Occasionally, both lines would march toward the center and surround
the drums, with all the dancers in close contact. This sequence was usually only done once or twice during a performance and was a period of intense invigoration. All of these dance figures were signaled by one or more dancers by holding up their arms or otherwise communicating nonverbally. To conclude the performance, one dancer at the center of the line would hold up their ʿaṣā-s (camel sticks) or swords and waggle them in the air, and all the other would join in. This meant that the poetry should not be repeated by the opposing line, and the performance would cease.

a. Razха as a “Model” of Social Life

Amongst men familiar with it, razha is often used as an example of how social life is imagined, or as an example of how it “used to be.” Since razha is based on communication, cooperation, and interaction amongst peers that nevertheless includes some tensions (who should give the poetry, how long to dance, who can stop a performance, and so on), this is not a huge logical leap. Most interviewees described the basis of razha as “shakhṣayn mutiqābilayn,” that is, “two people meeting” or “two facing parties.” When I asked who the people were—were they a shaykh and a tribesperson? Two equals? The Imam and a shaykh? Enslaved people? one respondent from Nizwā answered this way: “It is a meeting between folks on the same level, dignified and honorable men. No one is beneath the other, one is not above [the other]. They are equal—slaves or no, they are all Omanis and so they can razha.” When I pressed that the people who played the drums in the last razha were all from formerly enslaved families, he answered by seizing a kāsir drum from the SUV trunk next to us and playing it with ease. A few members called out “yalla!” in approval since he rarely played anymore. “Who was a slave? All [can] play, it’s to his taste. Whoever wants to play, he takes the drum. Stay awhile and you will see, people take the role that they are comfortable [with].”
A performer from Manah concurred:

We are all Omanis, here we play together (*nal‘ab ma‘ b‘ad*). Tribes, slaves, we are sons of al-Ma‘arā and we *razha* together because it is incumbent upon us to show that we are united, strong, steadfast. I mean… We are one in *razha* because we are one in al-Ma‘arā. Our lives are twisted up together (*hiyatnā tafattala*) like this, so [if] one has a good year, we all do. We share our joys and our setbacks. Believe me, I lived in Muscat, we were alone, each had their castle and we lived alone among many people, no neighbors, no circles of friends [*da‘ira*], no *razha*.

Contrast this with a discussion with a performer from Izkī. We were discussing the various arts in the Arabian Peninsula, when we came to al-*‘arḍa al-najdiyya*, a war dance from the Najd plateau of Saudi Arabia. In the *‘arḍa*, I noted, the royal family also participates, whereas the Sultan of Oman never does.

That’s true, yes. Of course, they are Saudi propagandists (literally “drummers,” *muṭṭabbilīn*). Ordinary folks do *sāmir*, or sometimes they call this *samra*. Or *ad-dahha*, this is the authentic art of Najd [see Urkevich 2015 for descriptions of *‘arḍa* (64-70), *samrī* (73-5), and al-*daḥha* (24-8)]. *Razha* is authentic here in Oman, it’s in the blood. The *shaykh*-s and the Sultan don’t *razha* because that’s not appropriate to their station (*maqāmuhum*). You play the *‘ūd*, yes? If you play the *‘ūd* on stage, do you clap when you finish? No, it’s the same thing. We *razha* for the Sultan, why should he *razha* with us shoulder to shoulder (*laysh yarzaḥ ma‘nā tikātifan*)?

I asked if the Sultan even knew how to *razha*:

I don’t know. Remember he’s from Šalāla, on his mother’s side. The first time he arrived in Muscat, he was the Sultan, he didn’t grow up in Oman but he knows it (Oman). When he goes to Musandam [an exclave on the tip of the Oman peninsula] does he know the *rawwāḥ* or the *līwā* or the *nadbah*? No, that’s not his role.

I pressed him as to whether *shaykh*-s or Majlis al-Shūrā representatives perform when *razha* events were held for them:

No, they don’t. I heard that one of them said, he said, “I wish I could perform the *razha* here in *Izkī* with all of you like I did when I was a child!” Now I don’t know if he did

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64 *Rawwāḥ* and *nadbah*, a collective drumming practice and a formalized war-cry, respectively, are common amongst the Shihūḥ in Musandam. *Līwā* is an Afro-Arab practice that takes different forms up and down the coasts of the Persian Gulf.
 razha or not. But the government does not allow [it]. You know, I told you we have many police officers in the group, they can’t perform on National Day, or for government representatives, or things like this.

During the second night of the ‘īd al-fiṭr in Manaḥ in 2016, I had driven over to meet many of the performers in the Firqat al-‘Arabī who were going to dance in the center of town. I parked at the junction of the main ring road around Manaḥ and a central branching thoroughfare that hugged the northern edge neighborhood of al-Ma‘arā. The troupe slowly filtered in and began performing razha-s a few hours after the later afternoon ‘asr prayer. Passing cars, filled with other locals, honked and pulled over to film, join the dance, or watch. Members of nearby houses slowly filtered out, women looking from windows and men bringing out sodas and water bottles and shouting encouragement. Others opened their front gates and beckoned members inside for meals, snacks, and conversation. Children played in and around our dancing lines, demanding to have portraits taken, to handle swords, and to join the dancing and drumming.

We stood in two facing lines of fifteen men each, with many people joining and leaving the lines over the evening. Men were dressed fairly casually, relaxing after a long day of visiting and family events in kumma-s and unbuttoned dishdāsha-s. The dance lines stepped slowly in a wide circle to the beat of the drums, dancers nodding and swaying their camel sticks in a loose unison. One line, the line that received the poetry from the other, looped in a long arc toward the others, who danced in place. When the moving line met the stationary one, they all moved in one long line together in a full circle, finally coming to rest where they began. Members held up their sticks to signify the final iteration of the song, which ends with little fanfare as the drummers place their drums on the ground. As different members showed up, they were greeted with shouts to join the lines. New arrivals moved down the lines of dancers shaking hands and touching

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65 I am unable to confirm if this is a written policy, an unwritten rule, or just a rumor.
nose-to-nose (*khashma*), sharing conventional greetings. As the *maghrib* prayer approached, we switched from the circle dance formation to the marching formation, snaking under the pastel yellow street lights of the old town and between plots of heavy, ripening date trees to the old *masjid* where most performers prayed. Others had prayed beforehand. As we waited for others to finish, I spoke with Muhanna, a middle-aged performer. I asked him why they held a performance of *razْha* for the Eid and why they chose that part of town.

Of course we have to celebrate the *‘īd*, we’re celebrating the fulfillment of Ramadan. We’re expressing joy that we’ve fulfilled a religious duty, that we are in Manaḥ with our families and our loved ones, that we can share in the joy of the holiday. And how can we celebrate anywhere else? Are we not Manḥī-s, from al-Ma’arā? So we perform in the center [of al-Ma’arā]. How can we go to Bilād [a nearby neighborhood] and *razْha*? They do their *razْha*, they are proud of their heritage there (*yaftakhirū bi-turāthihim*), and so it’s upon us to do so as well (*’alaynā nasūwīh b’ad*). Every town celebrates like this. Did you see, not everyone performs, some, you know, they celebrate in different ways. The *shaykh*-s won’t celebrate this way, but we do, for their sake (*’alā khāṭirhum*).

This situation does not emerge solely from the dynamics of gift exchange, but also from the tension between social norms and ideal models of authority. Social inequality, egalitarian ideals, obvious hierarchy, and associations of performance and publicness also manifest. These are closely tied, but useful to distinguish in analysis. These quotes highlight the juxtaposition of social ideals like radical egalitarianism and personal autonomy with concrete social realities of entrenched class inequality and hierarchy. This is especially complicated in the context of racialized slavery and racialized guest workers. Everyone can play the drum, but drummers descend mostly from enslaved peoples. The *razْha* is about a meeting of equals, but modern *razْha* does not admit the Sultan or other minor leaders or authorities to participate. Leaders, like women and non-Omani Arabs, are exempted from the *razْha*, from the “burden” of representing the community in this way.
In this study, the context of recognizing the generosity of leaders is the most potent generator of social tension because it places several deeply shared Omani cultural ideals at odds. Generosity, especially by leaders, is often associated with the production and sustenance of unequal relations. Kings give, and followers receive. However, cultural ideals of personal autonomy, legitimate authority, radical equality, and dignity are directly undermined in contexts of hierarchical generosity and a history of institutional slavery. Razha performance re-frames these hierarchical arrangements by foregrounding the community they represent as Omani, Arab, dignified, and as part of a circuit of exchange between rulers and ruled.

**Generosity: An Ethnographic Interlude**

One cool summer night, I sat in the breezy, aqua green painted majlis, or reception room, of the poet Ziyād bin Khālid al-Shukayh⁶⁶ a northern neighborhood of Bahlā. The TV was blaring a Turkish soap opera dubbed into Syrian Arabic. After his grandson brought in the coffee and snacks, the fāwālā, Ziyād poured coffee and handed me sambūsa after sambūsa, or fried triangular dumplings (though in this case baked, because Ziyād needed to watch his fat intake due to a heart condition. He mused “by God, these are just as good, anything baked is as fine as fried!”). Eventually, we relaxed into chatting. We sat with our backs to the low green couches that ringed the room, tiny porcelain coffee cups gently tinkling together as they floated in a bowl of water between us. The topic of discussion was his ‘āzī performance, filmed earlier that evening in the Bahla Fort, a UNESCO World Heritage site. The filming was for their entrance in the 2016 Sultan Qabūs Prize for Culture, Arts, and Literature. Certain performance troupes were

⁶⁶ A pseudonym.
invited to submit for the prize, one for each state, which Ziyād claimed amounted to some 50,000 OMR (129,861.70 USD).

“Wow, that’s a lot of money,” I said, rocking back.

“Yes… of course, it’s nothing to the Sultan.” He rubbed his short, jowly beard and fixed his hazel eyes on me.

“I didn’t compose this ‘āzī for money, doctor, it could be five riyāl and I would be pleased and honored to win.”

(Of course, bā.)

“This [prize] is a gift from the Sultan, God lengthen his life and bring him health. He supports the arts, poetry, the traditions of the Omani people. You see this in the festivals, in the celebrations and the rest. That is the role of the leader (ḥākim): he must hold the nation (yumassik al-waṭan) and he must have an open palm, then the people will respect him. What a generous man the Sultan is! He gives liberally, him (yusakhkhī huwā), but he is no fool.”

“Yes,” I interjected, “you know I’ve heard that the shaykh is the ‘sayf wa-mansaf’, the sword and the meal, is that not so?”

“Yes,” he laughed,

“Yes. I’m laughing because that’s the way Bedouin talk, country folk, you know, old Bedouins and those long in the tooth talk that way. Why did they say that? They said that because in the old days, everything came from the shaykhs, the shaykh-s held the country for the Imam. In the time of the last Imam, it was harsh, there were no drums except in the festival days and for war. This was a bit before my time, but if you were hungry, you could go to the sabla or the fort up there and the shaykh or the wālī would have a meal and he would share with anyone who came. It was open, it was democratic like you
Americans. Now, yes, we wanted to play drums and do razha, but the Imam forbade those things. Perhaps he was wrong, perhaps he was right—I don’t want to enter into that issue, ḥayn mū abī dākhiluh).

“Now, with Qābūs, I arranged this ‘āzī as praise for the Sultan. Why? Who has been a better leader (ḥākim) for Oman and for Omanis? He brought about the renaissance, he brought everything. We had nothing before him. Nothing, it was nothing. Do you know why the Sultan is the most generous leader? He brought cars, trucks, you know, these things. Why is this so important? Because this is not just for humans, no, no, no, no, no. No, it was also for the animals, the donkeys, the camels, the horses, God lengthen your life. Imagine, in the days before Qābūs, we had a donkey, and we had all these things, piles and piles of things, clothes, baskets, everything was on this donkey. And me, right on top! I feared I would fall off, you know. But at night I wept, I wept! I was small. I said to my uncle, why do we have to tire the donkey so, she works so hard and carries so much? And he said to me, “look, every day a hundred donkeys go up and down the Jabal Ḥakdar, carrying more than that. They know the work they must do, and we feed them and care for them. They have no tongue to speak pain, so we must treat them well as Muslims and we do.” Then I understood, but I am glad now that they don’t have to do such work, that’s why I say in the poem that Qābūs was generous to everyone, to the animals and the humans. That’s how generous he is. Who is happier for Qābūs and his rule? Us or the animals? I don’t know, I don’t know.”

Note that this conversation moved from performance to the personal acceptance of money from a government culture prize to the generosity of minor shaykh-s to the generosity of the Sultan. Such ideas are linked and circulate through class positions. If leaders are generous,
bigger, greater leaders are yet more so. The Sultan’s generosity, for example, expands even to the non-human. Had anyone claimed that Qābūs’s generosity extended past humans and to animals but the poets? Praise, in turn, must recognize this greatness—not merely because of money, but because of the social benefits it demonstrably brings. Authority well enacted and demonstrated is praised, which, in turn, is a basis of legitimacy. It is, in the minds of Omani praise poets, their poetry that augments the honor and reputation of those they praise. Poetry augments leaders as it guides them. Part of that guidance is the promotion and inculcation of generosity.

**Two Linked Social Mechanisms**

Due to these social tensions and the values that variously undergird them, I model the case of praise for good leadership manifested in generosity as one in which two social mechanisms are operant. Importantly, mechanisms and their effects are dependent on culturally learned understandings and expectations of sociality. I will briefly explain the two models here.

The first mechanism refers to the long-standing obligation of redistributive generosity for Arabian leaders, manifest in small- and large-scale social organization (Karateke and Reinkowski 2005; Al-Rasheed 1991). Such generosity is both obligatory and understood to secure the legitimacy of the giver. However, because of norms of reciprocity, this mechanism also produces social uncertainty by putting social ideals like egalitarianism and autonomy in tension. I call this the Generosity/Legitimacy mechanism, and it is the focus of this chapter.

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67 In this case, mechanisms explain these interactions better than framing them as processes that occur within “ideal models” (Gibson 2007), “cultural models” (D’Andrade and Strauss 1992) or “cultural schemas” (Karateke and Reinkowski 2005; Strauss and Quinn 1997) of authority because mechanisms refer to cause and effect processes rather than dispositions. Whether we call this set of dispositions or norms a *habitus* with Bourdieu or a schema with cognitive anthropologists or habits with pragmatists is a, theoretically speaking, relatively fine issue that is not crucial to the discussion here.
The second mechanism is the way in which razha performance intervenes in the Generosity/Legitimacy Mechanism. It does so by managing the social uncertainty produced by elite giving and framing givers and praisers as part of a mutual moral economy. I refer to this as the Razha Integration Mechanism, and it is covered in the next chapter.

Let’s now turn to the Generosity/Legitimacy mechanism.

**Swords and Gold: The Generosity/Legitimacy mechanism**

"A tribal leader," claimed [Shaykh] Zayid [bin Sulṭān al-Nahyān] of Abu Dhabi, "should have a sword in one hand and gold in the other and know when to use either inducement" (Rabi 2011, 124). While it’s possible that Shaykh Zayed read Gramsci, it’s more likely that Zayid was just a very astute leader who knew his cultural milieu very well. Here, we’re going to focus on one of Zayid’s hands: the one with gold in it.

In this section, I give an overview of the Generosity/Legitimacy mechanism. The Generosity/Legitimacy mechanism is a widespread and ancient Middle Eastern practice wherein leaders display generosity in order to legitimate their own authority, solidify relationships to their followers, and the demonstrate the efficacy of their rule. Note that this is just one of the mechanisms that rulers use to legitimize their rule (Karateke and Reinkowski 2005). This particular model, however, is one that is most likely to be connected with praise and performance, which is why it is highlighted here.

This link, I contend, is not random, but deeply structured by the values and institutions that operate within this mechanism. Generosity, often seen as a personal quality, may seem a strange thing to attribute to state practice. As classicist Paul Veyne claims in his *Bread and Circuses*, however, while Imperial Roman leaders were compelled to provide welfare in order to sustain their position, “people did not talk about the craft of kingship, instead they exalted the
virtues of the reigning prince” (1990, 37). It is the personal qualities of the prince, like generosity, rather than effective statecraft, that are praised. States cannot have personal qualities like generosity but can be praised as if they do.

Such a mechanism, or something substantially like it, may be familiar in other parts of the world. It is a way of framing that is available to leaders in many times and places. Anthropologist Emily T. Yeh shows, in her ethnography of Chinese development in Tibet, that “since the 1980s… the Chinese state has staked the legitimization of its sovereignty over Tibet on Tibetan gratitude for the gift of development” (2013, 231). If anything makes the Omani and Arabian Peninsular context unique it is the time-depth of this practice, its connection to praise practices, and its co-occurrence on multiple social scales, from the smallest tribal units to modern states.

I choose to frame this discussion as analyzing “generosity” as opposed to “patronage.” Patronage is well-studied in the case of Arabic poetics (e.g., Sharlet 2011) and in social science in general (e.g., Gellner 1977). However, framing this discussion as generosity allows two important facets of the relationship between performance and authority to emerge. The first is that “generosity” is a trait that is valorized within different social classes in largely the same way. Just as individual people are praised for generosity, so is the Sultan. This co-presence at differing social scales shows how “generosity” compels praise responses regardless of the provenance of the generosity. Secondly, generosity is sufficiently generalized in Omani and Arab society so as to include charity, personality, building infrastructure, hosting feasts, gifts, a moral stance, and a variety of other practices and dispositions that are picked out for praise. The patron is praised for his actions, many of which are glossed as generosity. Certainly, “patronage” can and should be analyzed in the Arabian Gulf, especially in the case of actors peripheral to the
“state” itself. In other contexts, Lisa Gilman (2009) fruitfully characterizes the gifting practices of Malawian politicians as “patronage,” as does Wenner in Sri Lanka (2015). These are analyses of the ways in which particular personalities draw followers into their sphere of influence through gifting. In this sense, “patronage” is a style of pragmatically exhibiting the wider norm of generosity. In this section, I analyze how widespread discourses of “generosity” and embodied praise responses to it form a basis of legitimate rulership in Oman.

a. Authority and Legitimacy: Distinctions and definitions

In order to understand why “good deeds” like generosity on the part of leaders work to promote legitimacy, we need to understand how notions of authority, leadership, praise, and generosity interact. If generosity produces legitimacy, one important way it does so is through public praise for figures of authority. In short, generosity is an ideal obligation and a concrete practice that reinforces the claims of individuals to authority in the Middle East. Such an investigation will also show why praise is seen as an obligation of the ruled. Due to the paucity of sources on this relationship directly dealing with Omani material, we will need to look at nearby related social forms in other Arabic-speaking regions. While there is by no means a large literature on the topic, we can sketch a fairly coherent picture of the ways in which authority has been understood by rulers and ruled in the Arabian Peninsula for the past few hundred years by looking at a range of historical and ethnographic research.

First, we should briefly address the definitions of “legitimacy” and “authority.” These ideas are tightly interlinked. Hakan Karateke and Maurus Reinkowski open their volume Legitimizing the Order: The Ottoman Rhetoric of State Power with the statement that “authority and legitimacy are closely related concepts” (2005, 1). “Authority,” they write, “signifies the claim by a group, an individual or an institution to the right to rule… whereas legitimacy must be
understood as a form of ‘belief’, ascribed as a distinctive feature by the subjects to those in power” (2005, 1). We can contrast this with anthropologist Ilana Feldman’s (2008) research into the differences between authority and legitimacy in the bureaucracies of British Mandate and Egyptian-administered Gaza (1917-67). Citing sociologist Richard Sennett’s 1980 monograph *Authority*, she refers to authority as a “process of interpreting power” in the functioning of government (Feldman 2008, 14-5).68 The government in Gaza, like other colonial situations, could make little claim to “authenticity,” and so claims to its authority “could not provide a stable ground” for governing (2008, 15). It was instead the reiterative and quotidian aspects of bureaucracy that formed a basis of authority, drawing people in to participating in the everyday “work of rule” (2008, 17-8). This participation, however, did not instill a “belief” in the legitimacy of these administrations in ordinary Gazans. Gazans did not believe that these non-native administrations had to be (or perhaps even could be) evaluated in terms of the “rightness of a political pattern” (Apter 1965, 236) but rather that they were simply able to get things done in a limited, circumscribed fashion—what Feldman calls “tactical government” (Feldman 2008, 18).

So what do we make of these terms? I want to specify what I mean by “legitimacy” and “authority” in the following two brief sections.

**b. Legitimacy as belief and evaluation**

68 We should note here that Sennett sees authority as a kind of “emotional bond” (1980, 3), arguing that authority “can become a process, a making and breaking, a remaking of meanings. It *can be* visible and legible” in his conclusion (1980, 168). Sennett’s definition of authority is much less firm than Feldman’s citation implies, but this reflects more on the weakness of Sennett’s argument than on her use of it. Authority remains practice-based and iterative in something we can identify as a process, even if Sennett fails to recognize it.
Hakan Karateke bases his study of Ottoman legitimacy on two interrelated aspects of “legitimacy”: the normative schema and factual measures of legitimacy (2005, 17). A “normative schema” of legitimacy refers to the established legal apparatuses, norms, and institutions that legitimate a particular leader: heredity (“I come from a long line of Sultans”), claims to the divine (“I have divine right”), or tradition (“We have always been ruled by a Sultan”). Karateke claims that such normative schemas of legitimacy are of primary importance to other political elites (2005, 18-9). Factual measures of legitimacy refer to the actual concrete practices and results of those practices: building hospitals, offering welfare, distributing clothing, food, weapons, horses, and the like. In Karateke’s view, these forms of legitimacy operate on different social classes: political elites are often interested in normative legitimacy, while subordinated classes are drawn to factual measures.

A similar perspective on “legitimacy” as a belief was put forth most rigorously by Ronald Cohen in the introduction to the 1988 volume State Formation and Political Legitimacy that he co-edited with Judith D. Toland. Here, Cohen formulates a “synthetic” definition of legitimacy as a “function of its [1] coercive capacities, 69 [2] the benefits derived from compliance, [3] the moral validity of governmental practices, and [4] the continuing evaluation of these practices by the polity members” (1988, xxx). Legitimacy is a belief that is predicated on practices, both of authorities and of polity members. In this view, generosity from leaders produces legitimacy by operating through propositions [2] and [3], while the praise response operates on [3] and [4] by

69 This is an important aspect that is overlooked in this chapter and taken up partially in chapter 6. However, a similar argument could be produced by evaluating Omani performers’ understanding of Sultan Qābūs’s success in curbing tribal conflict and making Oman “an oasis of peace and security,” another crucial aspect of Arabian peninsular authority. The razha was without a doubt a war-song in the past, thought this is not retained in current practice. Indeed, as Allen, Jr. and Rigsbee (2000) point out, Qābūs understood himself, at least through the 1980s, as a war-leader whose chief success was ensuring peace through force of arms and widespread generosity and amnesty.
commenting on [2]. More directly, generosity provides benefits [2] that are enacted through morally valid practices of hospitality and obligation [3]. Praise evaluates these practices [4] in light of their putative benefits [2] and their moral validity [3]. Where Cohen can fruitfully be combined with Karateke’s account is in recognizing the ways in which people evaluate leaders not just in terms of practical effects, but also the ways that these practical effects conform to widely shared moral norms.

Put another way, legitimacy also means that there are rules constraining those in authority from the arbitrary use of the power or office. These rules constrain kings as well as their subjects, governors as well as those they govern. Authority (or the powers distributed to offices and statuses by tradition) formally relates officials, rulers, and other authorities to one another and to their subjects; authority ‘structures’ (i.e. arranges) the way power is to be used… in other words, all human societies contain inequities fostered by authority relations that are culturally approved and morally valid. The study of how and why this develops and changes is encompassed in the concept of legitimacy. (Cohen 1988, xviii)

Following Orlando Patterson’s view in his 1982 Slavery and Social Death that “legitimacy is a process involving incorporation of power relations into a moral order or a system of beliefs about how things ‘ought’ to be done,” Cohen’s perspective shows how praise figures into structures of power that are, at root, coercive (Cohen 1988, xvi). Here, Gramsci would agree: arguably, the Euro-American concept of “legitimacy” is just the liberal figleaf affixed to his wider concept of hegemony. “Legitimacy” and “hegemony” both probe how “inequities fostered by authority relations” come to be considered “culturally approved and morally valid” (Cohen 1988, xviii).

So, if praise is a belief that is constantly evaluated with reference to some shared norms, praise and blame is one way that this might be accomplished. And yet praise is a response in some places and times and not in others. Praise exists, as Gould (2015) contends, at the ambiguous juncture between speaking to and speaking against power. As we saw in the last chapter, outright “blame” precludes this productive ambiguity. “In other words,” Cohen writes, “it is never altogether clear whether the acceptance of a political order involves grudging or
whole-hearted acceptance” (1988, xvi). Such a position allows for both the inclusion of the individual (and the community) within a shared, if contested, moral economy with leaders, along with a capacity to speak and act. In Oman, praise is a medium of communication between leaders that saves the honor and dignity of all those involved by acknowledging their interdependence.

Practices such as praise are a useful vehicle for the evaluation of legitimacy because they span both ideal beliefs and concrete realities. Geographers Alex Jeffrey and Fiona McConnell and anthropologist Alice Wilson (2015) similarly view legitimacy as a belief based on practices evaluated through some “system of beliefs” regarding the right exercise of authority. In their introduction to a special volume on the concept of legitimacy in the journal *Geoforum*, they note how renewed interest in state theory examines the legitimation of particular structures of authority by “focusing on the practices and performances through which legitimacy is secured” (2015, 178). Expanding on this, however, they want to understand how legitimacy operates both as *normative* (“under what circumstance can a governing authority be considered valid?”) and as *processual* (“a technique of governance rather than an achieved status”) in order to destabilize the state as the sole holder of legitimacy (2015, 179-80). Such a perspective, they argue, allows scholars to “move beyond the unidirectional idea that legitimacy emanates from the state” and adopt a “more nuanced and critically attuned engagement with the notion of legitimacy” (2015, 179-80). Such a perspective, they hope, will help illuminate how legitimacy is produced and sustained in what they call “anomalous political spaces” like refugee camps, government-in-exile, and the like (2015, 180).

I use legitimacy in Cohen’s sense, but I will occasionally borrow Karateke’s useful terminology (specifically *factual measures* of legitimacy) and Jeffrey, McConnell, and Wilson’s deliberate juxtaposition of normative and processual approaches.
c. Authority as a role and a practice

If framing “legitimacy” as a process that is constantly undergoing revision and adaptation has proved useful, it has been no less so for the concept of authority. While classic essays on authority have considered it a basis from which to give orders and have them obeyed, as we shall see, this only accounts for part of the Omani and Arabian Peninsular case. Authority is a slippery concept because it has two broad meanings. It can refer to a positional role or to a basis upon which advice or orders can be given.

In Hussein Ali Agrama’s investigation of authority in relation to ethical practice in al-Azhār’s fatwā council, he writes that his “concern is not the source of authority, not the question ‘why does it bind?’ but, rather, its mode, that is, to ask, ‘what kind of binding is it?’ ” (2010, 4). Agrama is skeptical of the notion that authority “binds” because it has some unassailable basis that we can point to, but is rather interested in what actions it impels, its effects, the relationships it produces. Authority, in the fatwā council, does not imply that orders will be followed, or even that they can be given (Agrama 2010, 4). A similar notion holds in Oman and the Arabian Peninsula. Arabist Clinton Bailey records a common saying amongst the Bedouin of the Sinai that was also recognized by Omanis: “‘a hand forced to grip the sword will not strike” (al-yid illi masawba a’-l-sayf lā tadrub). Thus, every chief understands that it is inviting trouble to try and force a tribesman to do what is not in his interest” (Bailey 2009, 14). This is certainly the perspective of many groups in the Interior with reference to the state: they are invited to perform, not commanded.

Following such recent anthropological research into the concept of “authority” and the anthropology of the state, I see authority not as a finalized achievement that is secured prior to governance, but as constantly reiterated via social practices (Feldman 2008). Such practices can
help to establish both the claim to authority (Karateke and Reinkowski 2005) and also demonstrate the range of proper actions accorded to that status. As noted above, Feldman rightly contends that “authority” should be distinguished from “legitimacy” (2008, 12-17). Such a distinction is contrasted to Weber’s claim that authority is “legitimated domination”—a notion that fails to account for the situation she found in Gaza. Whatever authority that Gazan administrators enjoyed was not legitimate nor legitimated (2008, 17-18). A role and its powers can be recognized, while any individual holder may be legitimate or illegitimate. Feldman claims that Gazan administrators were authoritative largely through their own “self-referential” bureaucratic practices, through their capacity to draw ordinary Gazans into participating with them in governance. They did not simply “hold” authority, they were authoritative insofar as they were effective in deploying governmental resources “tactically.” This is why Cohen refers to authority as the “powers distributed to offices and statuses” (Cohen 1988, xviii). In this study, “authority” refers to the position of leadership (be it shaykh, Imam, or Sultan) and the array of historically and culturally variable practices available to that position. These range from taxation to giving advice to imposing capital punishment. Different leaders seize more authority, others less. For example, in the past, religiously minded Imams often discontinued lucrative taxes when they were not justified by Islamic law.⁷⁰ Such rights also come with obligations and expectations, and here is where authorities and their practices come to be seen as legitimate or not. I also often use the term “authority structures,” which refers to an idealized understanding of the various roles and statuses and their capabilities that are associated with some polity. Hence, the

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⁷⁰ See the example of Imam Muhanna, secretly elected against the wishes of the more powerful tribal confederations in the early 18th century. In his brief stint as Imam, he cancelled custom taxes at the port of Muscat because they were higher than stipulated in Islamic law, clearly within his authority as Imam. The move did not gain him any legitimacy, however, and he was murdered soon afterward (Bathurst 1972).
"authority structure" of a tribally organized polity might accord shaykh-s high status and a large range of capabilities, whereas in state-organized polities such capabilities would be highly constrained.

d. A Word on Ideal Models

The complexity of thinking about authority and legitimacy is in what Karateke refers to as "normative aspects" and what Cohen calls "systems of beliefs." Thomas Gibson (2007) refers to these developed, symbolically dense, and historically contingent sets of expectations and practices with which leaders are evaluated and political goals are framed as "ideal models" of authority. "I use the term 'ideal model' [in Makassar]," Gibson explains,

for the way the experiences and relationships generated by the symbolic complexes present in a social formation are brought to consciousness and synthesized into an explicit model, which then becomes the goal of political action. The power of rulers within a social formation largely depends upon the legitimate authority that is granted to them by their subjects when they act in accordance with a widely accepted ideal model. (Gibson 2007, 5)

Such an approach is well-formed for the Omani case, in which social organization is extremely fluid and yet shares many basic ideals and practices. These models are flexible enough to admit of different forms of rulership, whose legitimacy is demonstrated and evaluated according to the model. This helps to explain why tribal, religious, Sultanic, and state-based social organizations can be legitimated through the same suite of practices: in our case, generosity and praise in razha. Ideals often outlast the political order in which they operate, though they are always reshaped in the present.

One of the reasons that Gibson insists on the "ideal model" as opposed to "ideal type" or any other such construction is because he recognizes that ideal models are constantly updated and re-evaluated, and therefore can inform different modes of social organization. They assume
very little about the mind, psychology, cognition, biology, or whatever else. They are not fully-formed and inherited, but rather cobbled together and unsystematic. This conforms with Wilkinson’s (1987) convincing argument that the ideological rationalization of the Imamate was a kind of “Islamization” of a pre-existing tribally based authority structure. Eickelman’s (1985) study of authority and legitimacy in Inner Oman concurs. He makes the case that, in 1955, after the Sultan seized the cities of the Interior, the former Imamate populace did not consider him to be prima facie an illegitimate leader for them (1985). To the contrary, insofar as he fulfilled his duties as a leader—duties that are similarly idealized in theocratic and monarchic form—he was not rejected. The Imamate and the Sultanate, as different ideal models of authority, nevertheless shared a wide array of features and expectations. Even predating the military takeover of the Interior, qāḍī-s trained and working in Imamate towns were allowed to transfer to Sultanate towns with the Imam’s blessing. Imam al-Khalīlī wrote to one such transfer applicant that he “could serve Islam equally well by working for the sultan” (1985, 11). From these kinds of social exchanges (and from reports of oil wealth in other Gulf states), several tribal tamīma-s pressed other notables to accept absorption into the Sultanate in order to benefit from the modernization campaign they thought Sultan Saʿīd bin Ṭaymūr would initiate with oil resources discovered further inland. After 18 months, however, elites mobilized a popular rebellion against the Sultanate due to repeated failures to conform to expected models of leadership.71

71 Though see Rabi (2011) for Sultan Saʿīd bin Ṭaymūr’s apparent anxiety over his claim to any Islamic authority. He immediately, for example, refused to be called sultān al-muslimīn (“Sultan of the Muslims,” a portmanteau of sultān and imam al-muslimīn, “Imam of the Muslims” and a clear example of the “cannibalization” of one political system by another) because he knew he lacked the proper Islamic credentials (Eickelman 1985, 17; Rabi 2011, 87, 100-1). His piecemeal efforts from 1955 onward to demonstrate that he would promote putatively Islamic social values (such as limiting the playing of “music” and personally ordering the flogging of tobacco smokers “caught” in Maṭraḥ square) were more an attempt to “forestall criticism from Ibadhi circles in the interior” than a grand gesture to Islamic legitimacy (Rabi 2011, 88).
e. Thinking about “ideal models” of authority at different scales through history

With these definitions and evaluation through ideal models in mind, we can start to trace how the Generosity/Legitimacy mechanism has worked over time. Rather than soliciting a full-fledged “ideal model” of authority from interlocutors, I take praise poetry as one way that these models are shaped, communicated, and learned by Omanis. Before we look at praise, however, I want to look at areas of convergence between different historical descriptions of tribally based social authority furnished by researchers on several social levels and from several class perspectives throughout the Arabian Peninsula. This will give us a sufficiently broad understanding of authority from which to analyze specific mechanisms of generosity and praise. These descriptions range from small-scale Bedouin society,\(^{72}\) to towns and shaykhdoms,\(^ {73}\) to regional and state levels.\(^ {74}\) Of course, not all these accounts focus directly on authority at the same social level or agree in all respects. However, there are important features of Omani social organization that make such comparisons more acceptable. “In the Trucial Coast,” Lienhardt points out, “one finds no such strongly marked division between the life of the bedouin and the life of the settled people as exists in the more fertile parts of the Middle East” (2001, 81).

Keeping in mind that the Peninsula is extremely diverse, we can still note certain regularities in political structure amongst Arab groups.


As William and Felicity Lancaster put it, the basis of social authority in the Arabian Peninsula is “*ḥukma*, from the [Arabic trilateral] root *ḥ-k-m*, basically, ‘arbitration’” (Lancasters 2011, 298). Rulers at all scales were respected and legitimate insofar as they were successful arbiters of disputes, keepers of peace, knowledgeable of customary law, honorable, generous, and open and available (Lancasters 2011, 298-309; Onley and Khalaf 2006). Historian James Onley and sociologist Sulayman Khalaf conclude their article on *shaykh*-ly authority in the pre-oil Arabian Gulf by noting that it was “frail, vulnerable, and precarious” (2006, 204). Such frailty was predicated on the basic ideal models that informed political authority, namely, that “the entire premise of organization is equality, autonomy, and the acquisition of reputation” in which the “only political power available is the ability to influence the decisions of others” (Lancaster 1981, 73).

Note that coercion, violence, was not a part of these most basic assumptions. Other than keeping the peace, there is little sense in which leaders were able to coerce action. Caton (1987) has argued that we recognize the limited role of coercion as basic to the play of power in tribal societies in the Arabian Peninsula. It is “persuasion” based on dialogue, rather than violence, that is the crucial form of power within these systems. “The leader in tribal society is a man who must know how to persuade an audience by rhetorical means as opposed to coercing them by the use or the threat of force,” Caton argues (1987, 93). Such a system, he concludes, “must be explained in light of cultural notions such as autonomy because an actor would only try to persuade someone whom he could not or should not compel” (1987, 96). I believe that the ethnographic record supports such statements. However, how do these ideal models of authority

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75 An idea developed by Max Gluckman (1956) and refined by Aronoff and his collaborators in the 1986 edited volume *The Frailty of Authority*. 
and “cultural notions” of autonomy, equality, and reputation function in the context of centralizing states? Or in the contexts of strong patriarchy, ethnic border maintenance, and authoritarian governments? The answer is that such frailty could be overcome by ambitious leaders in various ways, through appeals to religious unity, alliances with merchant families, relations to outside powers (Western and Ottoman), or oil revenues. These latter examples, especially, show the importance of the generosity/legitimacy mechanism.

f. Ideal models of authority and generosity across class

Ideal models of authority, as Karateke noted, may vary with class distinctions. While elites require justifications for one elite to claim the throne—however modern it seems—most non-elites find little difference between one leader and another. As the Lancasters point out, while the lack of primogeniture in Arab polities in the Oman Peninsula may shock Europeans and lead to bloodshed amongst elites, non-elites show little concern. They paid the same tax, it just went to someone else. It was action that has differentiated one predatory elite from his similarly well-heeled doubles. Generosity is a virtue that relies on both concrete action and reputation. Giving generously is an action that has salience for everyone, and everyone can judge it, read it, and praise it. Later, we will both discuss how generosity’s mutual valuation is a tool of hegemony construction and how it might function as “small arms in the class war,” as James Scott put it. Keeping the virtue of generosity circulating as a virtue amongst elites might be a more efficient tactic in “class warfare” than burning a police station or robbing an elite’s date store.

Here, we turn to a discussion of how generosity has been a mechanism for legitimation on multiple social scales and across different class lines. As noted in Chapter 1, social organization in Oman has historically ranged from loosely organized Bedouin family groups to
tribal chieftaincies right through to centralized states and empire. Al-Rasheed refers to this range in the Northern Arabian emirate of Hail [Ḥā’il] as being between “two leaderships” (1991, ch. 3). The first is manifested in the smaller-scale shaykh and the second in the larger scale ’amīr (1991, 82). Shammar shaykh-s led small-scale, autonomous groups and worked within a “decentralized political structure ideology” which allowed them limited authority in mediation, resolution, settlement disputes, and redistribution of resources (1991, 77, 81). In her view, ’amīr-s were leaders of states composed hierarchically of shaykh-s related within one tribal confederation (in Inner Oman over the last few centuries the role of ’amīr would be called tamīma), the settled oasis population, and nomadic groups (1991, 78-82). The crucial difference is the ’amīr’s ability to coerce individuals and inflict punishment by way of access to a militia predicated on their expanded economic base. While some scholars (notably those who have generalized from Bedouin data i.e., Bailey 2009; Cole 1975; the Lancasters, 1981, 1999, 2011) have overemphasized the practical reality of the strong egalitarian strain in Arabian ideal models of authority, Al-Rasheed notes that the two leaderships were in constant tension, fluctuating between, in Robinson’s (1980) terms, the “political” and the “anti-political”:

The growing tendency towards greater centralization and the creation of more stable forms of government was constantly being checked by the decentralizing tendencies of the Shammar tribal system [the tribal confederation to which the Rashīdī ’amīr-s belonged]. This system was not favorable to the maintenance of permanent political relations and alliances. It was based on the principle of local group autonomy at the political, military and economic levels… the tension between the two tendencies was dispersed, encompassed and partially overcome through the system of subsidies to tribal sheikhs. The amirs maintained a tradition of subsidizing these sheikhs through the continuous distribution of cash and gifts of rice, coffee, sugar, camels, and weapons. These gifts operated as a bribe to maintain the allegiance of the sheikhs, who remained to a great extent autonomous. The subsidies cemented, enforced and strengthened what would otherwise have been a loose, fragile, and weak political relationship between the Hail leadership [the Rashīdī ’amīr-s] and the Shammar. The system remained operative as long as the amirs were able to provide these subsidies and as long as their interests coincided with those of the Shammar. (Al-Rasheed 1991, 81-2)
What these two modes of leadership have in common is the ways in which they are legitimated through the practice of generosity. Generosity is a general expectation for properly socialized and honorable individuals, but it is a critical lynchpin of legitimacy when it comes to leaders. The same notion of generosity is operant in both “leaderships.” If authority is predicated on autonomy and equality, generosity and hospitality are mechanisms of integrating, persuading, and drawing these autonomous units together.

“The Sultan’s influence,” writes Bannerman on the Omani state in the late 19th century, was spread by the same mechanisms that the shaikhs used, but on a grander scale… he dispensed a regular and substantial supply of gifts and money to local shaikhs. These payments were very important as tribal leaders became dependent on the Sultan for the revenue necessary to maintain their own positions. In this manner a hierarchy of wealth was established whereby the Sultan increased his own prestige and influence through giving or withholding gifts from shaikhs who pleased or displeased him. (Bannerman 1976, 28)

This is not to say that financial outlays cannot be perceived as “bribes”—the case of Yemen (Phillips 2008) make this extremely clear—but only that this outlay is not illicit. It is an expectation for how things work, even though it can be framed in different ways. What is important to note in the case of the new states in the Gulf is why and how these states have been able to utilize the same mechanisms of legitimacy as those on much smaller scales. The question of why this mechanism works and why it is praised in the way that it is in Oman depends on understanding the various roles it takes in Middle Eastern societies.

g. Killing Horses for Dinner: Generosity as a Social Premise

Now we can turn to the ways in which generosity is understood and inculcated as a value in individuals from various class backgrounds.

Generosity is, as the Lancasters put it, a premise of Arabian Peninsular society, “the cement of social practice” (2011, 10). “There is no option,” they conclude, social premises like
generosity “have to be done” and are expected as much between equals as between those of differing status (2011, 10). James Onley and Sulayman Khalaf concur, noting that “tremendous importance is attached to a ruler’s reputation for generosity” (2006, 199). Wedeen similarly cites generosity as a prerequisite of the North Yemeni Imams (2006, 33). Lienhardt agrees:

The members of any bedouin groups would be easy prey to human enemies and a harsh environment were they not bound together by very strong ties of social and political solidarity. The bedouin ethos sets a high value on generosity and the right to expect and demand help from each other. A bedouin who is generous to her cousins does no more than the bedouin ethos requires of her. Private resources are only private in a limited way: they are subject to many and strong communal demands. (Lienhardt 2001, 41)

Generosity and its virtues are well reported in the Bedouin literature. Thesiger (1959) records that his Omani companion Bin Kabina marveled at the stupefying generosity of Bakhit, a visitor warmly welcomed to their camp one night:

He had rheumy eyes, a long nose, and a thatch of grey hair. The skin sagged in folds over the cavity of his stomach. I thought, ‘He looks like a proper old beggar. I bet he asks for something.’ Later in the evening he did and I gave him five riyals, but by then I had changed my opinion. Bin Kabina said to me: ‘He is of the Bait Imani and famous.’ I asked, ‘What for?’ and he answered, ‘His generosity.’ I said, ‘I should not have thought he owned anything to be generous with’, and Bin Kabina said, ‘He hasn’t now. He hasn’t got a single camel. He hasn’t even got a wife. His son, a fine boy, was killed two years ago by the Dahm. Once he was one of the richest men in the tribe, now he has nothing except a few goats.’ I asked: ‘What happened to his camels? Did raiders take them, or did they die of disease?’ and Bin Kabina answered, ‘No. His generosity ruined him. No one ever came to his tents but he killed a camel to feed them. By God, he is generous!’ I could hear the envy in his voice. (Thesiger 1959, 71)

Such reports are familiar and can be multiplied. John Lewis Burckhardt recounted a story circulating amongst the Bedouin he traveled with concerning “Djerba, the present powerful sheikh of Beni Shammar in Mesopotamia,” who agreed to slaughter his prized horse to feed two hungry guests (1831, 195-6). As he tied the poor beast’s feet to do so, he heard camels approaching bearing sacks of rice that had been sent as a gift from Qāsim, saving his horse from the cook-pot. This story harkens back to Ḥātim al-Ṭāʾī, the semi-legendary pre-Islamic figure
famed for his generosity. Here’s his story narrated by a young Omani in Nizwā, proud to tell me the story in front of his uncle:

**Storyteller:** Ħātim was a *shaykh* of the Ṭāʾī of the Qaḥṭānī. He was the most generous (*akram*) *shaykh*, anyone who had a request he fulfilled it. His generosity (*gawdu*) was [so] great that when another *shaykh* demanded his territory and title from him, he just gave them away and lived in the desert. Just like that! So, he lived there for many years with nothing. A man heard of his famous generosity (*nadā*), and so came to the evil *shaykh* and said, “I am looking for Ħātim, the great *shaykh*, for aid.” The evil *shaykh* was greedy, he didn’t help anyone but himself (*lā yibūl ‘alā garaḥ*). So [the man] returned home, and he saw a poor man in the desert, and this was Ħātim but he did not know. So he said, “I am searching for this Ħātim, because I need aid.”

**Storyteller’s uncle:** And Ħātim, what did he say?

**ST:** He said, “I am Ħātim, and I know the evil *shaykh* is looking for me (*yibānī*) and will pay you for me. Bring me to him, and he will reward you (*bayasakhkhī ‘alayk*).”

**STU:** That’s generosity (*dhak al-ṣakhāwa*)! That’s generosity, he gave himself up (*yistislim ḥiyātu*), is that true or what?

**ST:** Yes. The evil *shaykh* was sad when he saw Ħātim come to give himself in to help this man, and when he saw how Ħātim held himself together in the face of this (*kayf Ħātim masika nafsu imam kullu hadha*), he gave everything back to [Ħātim].

**BJG:** Wow, what a story.

**STU:** Yes, there is another part. There are many stories.

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76 I triple checked this translation, because this phrase literally means “he did not or would not urinate on a wound.” This refers to extreme stinginess, and in this sense, didn’t elicit laughter from anyone but me, which I have omitted here to keep the story intact. Others I discussed this term with considered it a Bedouin-derived expression or extremely old-fashioned, and so it would fit the context of the story.
BJG: Please, please.

STU: Now, listen [nephew], I don’t think you heard this one in school. One day, long ago, a king heard of Ḥātim and said, “I am more generous than he (askha’ minnuh). I will ask him for the best of his horses.” He asked for this because Ḥātim loved his horses. So, the king sent a messenger to Ḥātim, and [the messenger] spent the night in his tent and they had a meal, this was the custom... In the morning, the messenger said, “I have come from King so-and-so, to ask from you your favorite horse.” What did Ḥātim say? He said, “I wish you had told me last night, for I killed my favorite horse last night for our dinner.” Imagine! Now, you wanted examples of generosity (al-sakhāwa), he is the most generous of Arabs. And he was a Christian; later the Ṭāʾī became Muslims of course.⁷⁷

Generosity is likewise among the four “cardinal” virtues used to evaluate Shlaywīḥ al-ʿAṭāwī, the famed raid-leader and “Desert Knight,” according to Kurpershoek (1995, 86). These virtues were the same as those picked out by the Medieval scholar Qudāma bin Jaʿafar al-Baghdādī (d. ~377/948) in his Naqd al-shiʿr, which included generosity, courage, intelligence, and temperance (Kurpershoek 1995, 85n114). In the poems that record his life,

These cardinal virtues are stressed as the key to Šlēwīḥ’s success as a leader: in dangerous situations he personally takes the greatest risks; he is the one who climbs mountains in order to spy out the country, but he is generous in letting the others share in the booty and modest in his own demands; and if the group is hard pressed by hunger or thirst he chooses to abstain and voluntarily renounces his legitimate part of the remaining rations in favour of his comrades. As Šlēwīḥ’s famous verse put it, ‘When the water-skins are dry except for a few last drops, I leave my share of water to the others, proud to abstain’. (Kurpershoek 1995, 86)

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⁷⁷ Abdulla El Tayib cites Ḥātim’s poetry as emblematic of a particular moral stance on generosity and its relationship to fame in pre-Islamic Arabia, one mirrored all over Eurasia: “O, Mawiya [Ḥātim’s wife], wealth comes and goes. What lasts of wealth is to be well spoken of and leave a good memory” (1983, 31). Irish mythic hero Cu Chulainn adds: “‘Little care I,’ said Cu Chulainn, ‘nor though I were but one day or one night in being, so long as after me the history of myself and doings may endure” (Greene 1985, 51).
Just as Shlaywīḥ is considered a good leader for his generosity in sharing his food and “abstaining with pride,” so are the shaykh-s who routinely spend their entire fortune in the name of their community. Lancaster (1981) reacts with a mixture of annoyance and admiration when he writes that:

one of the sheikhs [of the Ruwāla], through whose hands tens of thousands of pounds sterling passed annually, was frequently strapped for cash and used to borrow £50 off me to pay for repairs to a truck. On the other hand, when money was available he would hand out hundreds with gay abandon or buy a new car (which was given away in a few weeks). This insouciant attitude is attractive but it makes it almost impossible to maintain accounts… this carefree attitude to money is in part genuine and in part impression management… the women, who are equally generous, keep household accounts fairly carefully and are keen on the value of money. (Lancaster 1981, 97-8)

Similarly, Lienhardt recounts a tragic story between two brothers, Ḥamdān and Sulṭān bin Zayid. Ḥamdān ruled Dubai from 1912-22.

Hamdan was a man of extreme generosity, giving away all he had to those who asked for it and therefore extremely poor. Thus he was not able to give his brother the sums of money which the brother and his wife thought he should. They appear to have imagined that he was much richer than he was, because he was generous, and that he was intentionally depriving them of money. When Sultan killed Hamdan, quite suddenly and unexpectedly with his own hand, he is said to have immediately opened the treasury where he found nothing, and then to have turned and wept. (Lienhardt 2001, 180)

Vasiliev notes that generosity was a basis of Saʿūdī rulership since the times of the Emirate of al-Dirʿiyya (1745-1818 CE), when Saʿūd bin ‘Abd al-ʿAzīz (r. 1803-1814) hosted “several hundred guests a day” and perhaps some 50% of state expenditure was for “entertainment of guests,” the “relief of paupers,” and infrastructure (2000, 119-21). “The money thus allowed for guests,” Vasiliev writes, citing Burckhardt, “is paid into the hands of sheikhs, who keep a sort of public house, where all strangers may halt and be fed gratis; it is thought just that the whole community should contribute toward their expenses” (2000, 119-21). Ibn Bishr, a
historian of Najd, claimed that the budget of al-Ḥāsa was divided into three parts, with one allotment going directly for “gifts and monetary allotments” to local *shaykh*-s (2000, 121-2).

‘Abd al-‘Azīz (r. 1765-1803), according to Ibn Bishr, once “pricked [one of 25 sacks of *riyāl*-s that came to the palace as revenue] with his sabre and said, “The Lord has given me power over this, but He has not given this any power over me!” and started distributing the money” (2000, 122).

**Gifts that Flatten Houses: Generosity and Dependency**

In the opening of this chapter, I noted that I would take two approaches to generosity: one investigating mechanisms of political legitimacy, and one involving the gift. While we will see many more examples of the ways that ideal models of authority and generosity are textually exchanged in verse and speech, we can turn now to the literature on the “gift” to see the more dangerous aspect of such giving, especially as manifested in strict power differentials.

Anthropologists have long applied Mauss’s (1950) unexpected insight into the mutual obligations incited by gifting in his 1923 *Essai sur le don* to describe the ways in which the movement of goods helps to weave a social fabric. Mauss’s key discovery was that in many societies, gifts are not freely given, but are *obligatory*: “one gives because one is compelled to do so, because the recipient possesses some kind of right of property over anything that belongs to the donor” (1990, 13). Leaders give, partially, because they have no choice. Socrates made a similar point in Xenophon’s *Oeconomicus* about the endless duties and obligations of the wealthy—to fund wars, receive guests, raise horses, and organize choruses—warning that “wherever you seem to do any of these things inadequately, I know that the Athenians will punish you no less than if they had caught you stealing their own property” (cited in Kurke 2013, 147-8). The obligation to give further catalyzes a chain of obligations—to receive the gift and to
return the gift (Mauss 1990, 8-14). The “potlatch,” the ritual giving, consumption, and
destruction of goods in the native Pacific Northwest, is a paradigmatic example. In the potlatch,
X̱aayda (Haïda) and Kwakw̱aka’wakw (Kwakiutl) elites sought to draw others into their sphere
of influence by giving so generously that the humiliated recipients, unable to reciprocate, were
put “‘in the shadow of [the giver’s) name” (Mauss 1990, 39). This, in Mauss’s terms, is one way
that rivalrous givers “transform into persons having an obligation those that have placed [them]
under a similar obligation” (1990, 37). Nobles engaged each other ritually and economically
through agonistically competitive generosity in order to gain followers and to avoid having their
name and house “flattened” by failure (Mauss 1990, 39).

Scholars such as Mary Douglas (1990), Anne Meneley (1997), Florence Weber (1989),
Annette B. Weiner (1992), Margaret Wilson (1989), and Emily T. Yeh (2013; 2014) have shown
us the ways in which what is glossed as gift exchange creates, regulates, and manages social
relationships. While many anthropologists have taken for granted that Mauss was describing the
history of the contract through “a theory of exchange whose primary feature is the identification
of the gift with the spirit of the donor.” Lygia Sigaud argues that Mauss’s primary lesson is that
gifting produces obligations and social relationships (2002, 335). In light of such data, Mary
Douglas states that “a gift that does nothing to enhance solidarity is a contradiction” (1990, vii).
In this sense, generosity, gifting, and reciprocity have the capacity to produce social relationships
of equality and inequality, that is, they are capable of affirming equality or of creating and

78 Though see Campergue 2015; Caple 2015; Corderey 2015; de la Perrière 2015; Godelier 1996;
Weber 1989, 2000 for a substantial Francophone critique of these interpretations of the “gift,”
“exchange,” and “reciprocity.”
sustaining hierarchy. As Jacques Godbout concludes, “the gift between equals gives rise to equality, the gift between those who are unequal gives rise to inequality” (1998, 137).

In the context of the Generosity/Legitimacy mechanism, goods and praise are circulated but not merely equated—rather, a social relationship is confirmed. The failure of either party to “play their part” promises a failure of the system. “The relationship established” through gifting, as Weber shows in her study of French peasant life, “is more important than what occasioned it” (1989, 81). Lancaster reports a similar finding among the Ruwāla Bedouin. A display of generosity from a Ruwāla shaykh “is not wholly disinterested,” but rather “is, in itself, a political statement of autonomy and a means of spreading reputation and gathering information” (1981, 94-5). It is not the livestock, ammunition, trucks, or cash that is important, it is that the act of giving, receiving, and recognition of mutual obligation is an active claim to community as much as it is a claim to the capacity to sustain its autonomy via distribution.

a. With Friends Like These…: Women’s Visitation Networks

In the Middle East, the most in-depth and nuanced discussions of the ways in which generosity, hospitality, and gift exchange manipulate social relationships is found in the ethnographic record on women’s visitation networks (Al-Torki and Cole 1989; Eickelman 1984; Kanafani-Zahar 1983; Limbert 2010; Meneley 1996; Wikan 1982). Neighbors and the neighbor group hold special status in Islamic thought, but its patterns and conception are historically contingent and variable (Limbert 2010, 54-7). Nevertheless, visitation and the quotidian exchange of gifts and hospitality are the focus of women’s intense scrutiny and evaluation. Any inequality or failure of reciprocal relations is evidenced both as a moral and as a material one, and hence can lead to social ostracization, weakness, and dependency.
Meneley’s *Tournaments of Value* (1996) is one of the most sustained analyses of the topic, focusing on the intense and strategic practice of *khurūj*, “going out,” amongst women of the *nās* (respectable people) and *kibār* (landowning elites) in Zabid, Yemen in the 1980s and 1990s. “Exchange of hospitality in Zabid,” she writes, “like in other ethnographically known forms of exchange, has both unifying and divisive aspects” (Meneley 1996, 4). Among Zabidi women, the exchange of visits and hospitality defines the borders of their community of interrelated *bayt*-s (family households), partially through the financial outlay required to throw a respectable event. Wealth does not mean honor for a *bayt* in and of itself, rather, “their honourable status is contingent upon the appropriate distribution and consumption of resources” (1996, 57). Eickelman (1984), Limbert (2010), and Wikan (1982) report similar processes of social differentiation in Oman, resulting in a pattern of distinction between elite *shaykh*-ly and non-*shaykh*-ly families circulating in different but partially overlapping circles. Material wealth, in Zabid, should be shown off through hospitality, since such generosity is a “glorious deed” that builds honor (1996, 3-4, 37). However, Meneley shows us a paradox built into this system. While the visitor adds to the honor of the host by the host’s “aggressive welcoming” whereby the guest is subordinated, visitors also delight in making hosts fetch them things—food, drink, better pillows (1996, 101). Kanafani-Zahar adds that in the United Arab Emirates, the host and guest try to assert their dominance over each other—in Zabid, these demands on the host are a way to “tilt the balance” a bit back in the favor of the visitor (Kanafani-Zahar 1983, 98). While lower-status women visit higher-status women more often, patterns of visitation are remembered for a long time and unreciprocated visits are not forgotten. Such long memories are activated through the attribution of praise and blame: good hosts are praised, bad ones are criticized mercilessly, mostly in gossip (1996, 97-101). Such constant comment and jockeying typifies Zabidi social
life because hierarchy is “continually re-enacted or altered through the process of recognition inherent in the exchange of hospitality” (1996, 180). Meneley highlights the crucial feature of this Zabidi visiting network in the dual nature of generosity: “generosity is a positive quality, but, by being generous, one is attempting to encompass, at least temporarily, those to whom one is being generous”—in other words, to flatten them (1997, 194).

Another important aspect that these scholars point out are the mutual benefits derived from visiting, hospitality, and generosity. As Kanafani-Zahar, Wikan, Eickelman, and Meneley all stress, honor accrues to the guest as well as the host. “To honor a guest is a duty (wajib) of the hostess: if a woman honors her guest she honors herself and if she does not, she demeans herself” (Kanafani-Zahar 1983, 101). Such a mutual benefit does not mean that interaction in Oman is always as smooth as it appears to be (Eickelman 1984, ch. 4, 6). In Zabid, for example, Meneley points out that “the solicitous insistence of the hostess is in contrast with the stylized, decorous refusal of the guest,” who seeks to represent herself as controlled and not dependent, greedy, or vulgar (1997, 103). Such a personal display brings honor to the guest and tests the commitment of the host. This mutual benefit is also understood to be at work in explaining why Zabidi women adorn themselves with jewelry. Adornment brings honor to the wearer and to the viewer, though it may risk the “evil eye,” and displays the generosity of the wearer’s bayt (1996, 117). I was personally struck by the amount and intensity of personal grooming before praise performances in Oman, sometimes taking a full two hours before an event was scheduled. Groups of men would help each other fasten belts, arrange daggers and cellphones, and straighten dishdāsha-s. Men would stare into the reflections of car windows for minutes on end arranging the folds of their maṣar headwrap so that they would be perfectly straight and crisp.
These kinds of behaviors need to be understood in the context of the mutual accrual of honor and in the ways that obligations of sociality operate with the tensions of equality and encompassing.

b. “A Wilderness of Hearts”: Generosity and the State

[The Ottoman Sultan] was the one who bestowed, and every act of bestowing reaffirmed his prosperity. “Man is a slave of benevolence,” declares the 17th-century scholar Katib Çelebi, describing the desperate situation of soldiers in Erzurum during the Yerevan campaign. “A shortage in generosity and bounty can result in a wilderness of hearts.” (Karateke 2005, 47)

If generosity is a strongly felt obligation within families and an important part of ideal models of authority, it is no less so in the context of the state. And, just as generosity can produce legitimacy, a shortage of it is dangerous, as Çelebi shows. Anthropologists of the state have recently adopted a practice-oriented approach to the state-form, just as they have towards its ideological basis of authority and legitimacy (Akhil and Gupta 2006). Such social practices, as we have seen, can range from the quotidian—filing (Feldman 2008), paperwork (Gupta 2012; Hull 2012), rituals of voting (Wedeen 2007)—to the spectacular (Adams 2012; Chatty 2009; Rasmussen and al-Harthy 2012). As we have seen, generosity as a practice can be small-scale and personal (such as handing out cash or slaughtering animals) or spectacular (massive development projects). Generosity and its symbolic construction is vital to the construction of state dependency, and hence hegemony, in the Arabian Gulf.

Karateke’s (2005) essay on the legitimating practices of the Ottoman sultans reveals the logic of this mechanism for the state. In the distribution of welfare services and the deployment of symbols, the maintenance of “order,” and other such concretized demonstrations of generosity, Ottoman sultans demonstrated the efficacy of their leadership. This is Karateke’s factual legitimacy, or what Cohen calls “the benefits of compliance.” These practices were variegated and situational but always predicated on asymmetry. “Since the lands the Ottoman
sultan ruled belonged to him personally,” Karateke notes, “he was materially beyond compare relative to his subjects” (2005, 46). Such prosperity made a “positive impression only insofar as its possessor was generous” and so “generosity and charity figured high on the list of characteristics of the ideal sultan” (47). For common folk, Ottoman sultans fulfilled requests for cash, distributed meat on Fridays, established welfare programs, funded charitable buildings (bath-houses, caravanserais, schools, dervish lodges, bridges, public fountains), held public celebrations, cancelled taxes, abolished debts, and made charitable donations to hospitals or for natural disasters (37-53). By 1831, such charity was routinely published in the official newspaper Taqvim-i veqayi (51). Directed at other elites, this generosity took the form of subsidies given in order to “undermine potential opposition or critical voices” (47). “Expensive horses, precious clocks, jewelry, swords, orders, and many kinds of robes of honor” were distributed amongst bureaucrats, doctors, and other intellectuals to secure their loyalty through unmatchable gifts (47-8).

Unmatchable “gifts” become the basis for a more coercive form of generosity. Lienhardt’s account of the practice of shūfa in the Trucial Shaykhdoms is just one example (2001, 200-1). According to Lienhardt, shaykh-s in need of cash would inform merchants that they would be paying them a formal visit, with all their retainers in tow—certainly a high honor. However, they expected not only a meal for dozens or hundreds of participants, but a large sum of cash as well. Failure to give over the cash could result in legal actions, beatings, or worse. I was told tales of the same practice of agonistic visiting by Omani leaders—if an up-and-coming shaykh was too ambitious, a formal visit from a higher authority would show him what the burden of rulership really meant. The sheer outlay of generosity expected by the higher authority from the presumptuous shaykh would bankrupt the lesser over the course of single feast.
If the dangers of dependency and encompassment are understood in women’s visiting networks, they are no less a threat in state and community relations. The capacity for the gift to be used to foster dependency is manifested in the context of structured unequal access to resources. “Generosity” can help produce social arrangements by manipulating the way this gifting is framed by actors. For states like Oman, development can be framed as generosity by drawing on long histories of the practice and on idealized models of authority and distribution. Even if such a framing is resisted or contested by Omanis (which it sometimes is), various state apparatuses can draw on both traditional and developmental discourses to justify their programs.

In other contexts, re-framing can be considerably more contested. Emily T. Yeh’s ethnography *Taming Tibet* (2013) takes the “Janus-faced nature of the gift” as a way to understand divergent responses to the development practices of the People’s Republic of China in the autonomous region of Tibet (2013, 15). “Gifts always establish relationships or bonds,” Yeh writes, “as well as their accompanying obligations to give, receive, and reciprocate. Thus, the act of giving contains within it two opposite movements: it is an act of both generosity and violence, of sharing and debt. To be given a gift is also to lose some measure of autonomy and freedom” (2013, 15). Drawing on Bourdieu’s notion of symbolic domination, a form of domination that naturalizes existing exploitative relations, she shows how Chinese perceptions of development are framed as a generous gift that requires appreciation. The transnational Tibet movement, however, “rejects the idea that development has been a pure gift” (2013, 14). One example of such gift-giving was The Comfortable Housing Project, begun in 2006, in which the Chinese state spent some 13.3 billion yuan ($1.95 billion) to build “socialist villages” for over 23,000 families in Western Tibet (2013, 232). This gift, for Yeh, amounts to “a form of indebtedness engineering” in which the giver is primarily interested in drawing the recipient into
a relationship of dependency. Tibetans are expected to show gratitude and appreciation, acknowledging their “indebtedness” to the Chinese state (2013, ch.7). Yeh shows that “development as gift” really hinges on the creation of the “identities of the subjects involved,” as “giver and receiver” (magister and minister, for Mauss). It is in the framing of development as gift that the Chinese “state” becomes, in Yeh’s word, “ontologically” real—by drawing individuals into the deeply human relationship of giving, reciprocity, and obligation, the “state comes to be recognized as if it were a concrete entity” (2013, 16).

Yeh’s ethnography offers an orientation to the ways in which cultural norms of generosity and good leadership are brought into the era of the current state-form. Tracking this translation of a historical ideal model, sociologist Sulayman Khalaf and economist Hassan Hammoud have described Persian Gulf states as “oil welfare states” (1988). Such states are based on the state’s control over oil wealth and its redistribution. As opposed to “welfare societies,” wherein political rights (suffrage, representation, citizenship, etc.) precede the attainment of social rights (welfare, healthcare, stipends, etc.), “oil welfare states” fulfill social rights before political ones (1988, 345-350). “One of the first and most significant changes,” they write,
is the emergence of a new economic configuration within the old pre-oil traditional support structure of the Shaikhs’ authority. …through their control of the government executive apparatus the shaikhs found themselves in control of the flow of wealth in society.79 This direct control aided the ruling and traditional forms of tribal allegiances. This new structural disarticulation, in a sense, helped the state to come closer to the masses of society. This was achieved simply through the ruler’s new economic capacity and commitment to modernize state and society. Modernization has meant the building up of a modern institutional infrastructure, through which wealth and lavish welfare services have begun to be distributed among the population. However, this process of distribution is done with some measure of calculated care and, until now, it seems at the expense of the population's political rights. (Khalaf and Hammoud 1988, 350)

79 I would add that this is not new, but is an increase in both access and in quantity due to flows of international capital.
Khalaf and Hammoud point out that this new politics of allocation is represented as a kind of paternalism, with the leader as a symbolic “father” to the nation (1988, 351; see also Abu-Hakima 1972). “The right of rulership of the Shaikhly aristocratic families,” they conclude, “who are linked to notable tribal origins, is still legitimated in part by shared beliefs in old values and traditions” (1988, 351). One of these “old values” is the notion of generosity and its links to legitimacy and right leadership, built into ideal models of authority. This generosity-cum-welfare is so extreme, and its existence so crucial to legitimacy, that Khalaf later described it as “the image of unlimited good,” wherein the state is a never-ending source of wealth, security, and privilege (1992).

Yemen, in contrast, offers a good example of the limitations of this mechanism. In the fractious Yemeni political scene, many scholars have noted how the state has attempted to maintain control by both relying on tribal legitimacy while simultaneously undermining its political potential. In this manner “the state remains slightly stronger than the fractured society over which it presides” (Phillips 2008, 93). The Yemeni government, through the current Department of Tribal Affairs (which has gone through many permutations and names since its establishment in 1963) distributes a variety of gifts to some 4-5000 “significant sheikhs” throughout the country (Stephen Day estimates it at “as much as half the government’s total outlays”) (cited in Phillips 2008, 96, 104-5). “The DTA works on a simple carrot-and-stick principle: in the first instance, the government pays the sheikh a monthly stipend… the more [the

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80 Blending kinship and political terminology as a tactic of normalizing governance is common in nation-building rhetoric throughout the world. One example will suffice: Gilman notes that dictator Hastings Kamuzu Banda fashioned himself the *nkhoswe*, an authoritative male figure that women consult in times of crisis, to all women in Malawi (2009, 47-8).
sheikhs) get from the government the more support they provide the government in doing what is asked of them” (2008, 104).

In this vein, Caton has observed that, while the role of Yemeni shaykhs has remained stable over the last twenty years:

what was different was their newfound wealth, resulting from government subsidy and capital accumulations, evident in their big cars, expensive guns, and many retainers. How long tribals leaders in Yemen would continue to be primus inter pares and deal with their constituents in direct, face-to-face communication was an interesting question… a good sheikh has to perform a delicate balancing act between his obligations to his followers and the demands of the state, which put a strain on him that might have always been but never in so acute a form. (Caton 2001, 331-2)

In Sarah Phillips’s view, financial outlays to shaykh-s are tactical because they cannot co-opt all challengers to state authority: “while the Yemeni regime might like to co-opt all potential dissenters into its patronage system, it simply does not have the financial resources to do so” (2008, 7). As state revenues have dwindled, political fault lines have emerged, since conversely “legitimacy that is gained through the ability to distribute wealth is compromised when that capacity deteriorates” (2008, 93). Due to this, the Yemeni state needs to marshal many other complementary “legitimacy enhancing” mechanisms, including piecemeal democratic reforms (2008, 4-5).

81 In the Yemeni case, “patronage” is an appropriate term to describe this system, because it refers to “state-adjacent” individuals producing their own power bases. These individuals might mostly funnel state generosity but they do so for their own sakes, rather than for the state.
c. “It does not become the generous to forget benefits”: Generosity in Omani Statecraft

In the Omani case, a similar argument can be made. For as far back as we have records, historical patterns of authority amongst sedentary and nomadic leaders (shaykh-s, imām-s, sultan-s, malik-s, and amīr-s) in Oman (and the Arabian Peninsula) have relied on these leaders being perceived as generous (Badger 1871). Ḥumayd bin Muḥammad bin Razīq’s late 1800s histories Al-shu‘ā’ al-shā’i’ bi-l-lam‘ān fī dhikr ‘asmā’ I’ma ‘Umān (Well-known Rays of Brightness for Remembering the Names of the Imams of Oman, a mnemonic poem and history of the Imams until the rise of the Āl Bū Sa‘īd dynasty, 1978) and the Al-faṭḥ al-mubayn fī sīra al-sāda āl Bū Sa‘īdiyīn (The Clear Conquest concerning the Tale of the Sayyids of the Āl Bū Sa‘īd, 1977) both document the close link between generosity and legitimacy. These works were compiled, edited, and translated into English by Badger (1871) as The History of the Imams and Seyyids of Oman.

The first Omani Imam, Julānda bin Mas‘ūd, (r.132/749-134/751) is described by bin Razīq as “just, generous, and pious” (fāḍilan, ‘ādilan ḥilmian, taqīyan ‘āliman) (bin Razīq 1978, 21; Badger 1871, 7). In fact, virtually every Imam and Sayyid covered in bin Razīq’s chronicle is distinguished by the retelling of a number of examples of his generosity and the praise that it deserves (written in CLA as madḥ, ḥamd, thinā’; see bin Razīq 1978, 69 for example). Such generosity was manifest in gifts (like fruit trees, goods, horses, robes, cash, saddles, gold, houses, hospitality, and administrative positions), stipends distributed amongst tribespeople, along with

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82 Of course, the opposite movement of goods was possible and institutionalized. See Vasiliev (2000, 45) and Lienhardt (2001, 105) for wisaya, money paid by some individual seeking protections (dākhila or zabīn) from a shaykh, and Vassiliev (2000, 47-8) and Lancaster (1997, 120-5) for the famous khuwā, or payments that excluded a group, village, or caravan from Bedouin depredations.
repairing and expanding *falaj*-s (Badger 1871; Bathurst 1972; bin Razīq 1978; Rabi 2011; Al-Rasheed 1991; Wilkinson 1987). Infrastructure, such as the maintenance of *falaj*-s, roads, markets, orchards, *masjid*-s and *jāmi’*-s, courts, *sabla*-s, feasts, and the like, was also the province of local and regional leaders (Wilkinson 1987, 38-9).

The obligations of generosity were directed and situational. Imams and sultans routinely gave gifts of land and employment to politically active elites with an eye to coopting threats to the state. Those same elites conspired to host rulers as they moved around the country on business, incurring useful debts. Throughout bin Razīq’s chronicle, he makes mention of the ways in which Imams, kings, and *shaykh*-s were able to gain legitimacy in the eyes of common people through generosity (see Badger 1871, 7, 41-2, 90, 134, 158-88, 193, 241). Further, regional leaders often tried to win the favor of Omanis with gifts. One example is the *’amīr* of Hormuz, who in the 1270s sought to extract tribute from the Omani coast and distributed robes (and likely food) amongst various leaders to secure it (bin Razīq 1978, 72).

Many of the great castles, forts, and mansions that dot the Omani landscape are the work of one or another Imam, King, or other ruler. In Bahrain, historian Nelida Fuccaro recounts that the residences that the Āl Khalīfa built around 1900 “became powerful symbols of tribal authority” (Fuccaro 2009, 38). “In this period,” she continues, “the consolidation of dynastic rule led to the emergence of a new type of public architecture which affirmed the tribal pedigree of the ruling family and celebrated the Bedouin arts of generosity, hospitality, and physical prowess” (2009, 38). As noted in Chapter 1, certain Omani leaders like the later Ya‘arūbī Sayf bin Sulṭān I (cousin of Nāṣir) attempted to revive and renew the agricultural and architectural base of Oman, but most leaders could not support such grand efforts (Wilkinson 1987, 220-1). By the time of the 19th and 20th century Imamates, the issue of wealth (and its distribution) put
pressure on the Imam. While he could reward his followers with relatively lucrative administrative positions in certain circumstances, especially in periods of greater centralization, it was the Sultan whose economic power allowed for greater latitude in gifting and payments (recall the above discussion of the transferal of qāḍī-s from the Imamate to the Sultanate offered by Eickelman 1985).

For the Yaʿarūbī Imam Nāṣir bin Murshid (r. 1033-59/1624-49), for example, who successfully forced the Portuguese from the Omani coast, gifts and generosity secured political alliances. Historian R.D. Bathurst writes that

the election of an imam is not sufficient in itself to guarantee a return to law and order. Nasir bin Murshid, the first Yaʿrubī imam, elected in al-Rustaq, had first to gain control of one of the traditional seats of imamate rule in Oman proper, the forts of Nizwa or Bahla. Thenceforth the success of his campaigns would depend on raising forces strong enough to defeat the powerful provincial muluk (mulūk, “kings”)… He could only persuade the tribal leaders by appealing to their piety, by offering them governorships of provincial towns captured, or by holding out opportunity of plundering territory overrun. By these methods, in approximately 8 years, the entire country was subdued. (Bathurst 1972, 95)

It was by extending gifts that the Yaʿribī dynasty was able to centralize and strengthen the Imamate state apparatus. If early on Nāṣir had little to give, denied profits from coastal trade by the Portuguese, by the later 11th/17th century his dynasty was able to fully benefit from maritime links. Nevertheless, Nāṣir’s successful attacks on the Portuguese outposts on the coast were able to furnish him with enough booty to construct the massive cylindrical fort at Nizwā, secure trade relations, and dispense horses and arms to his followers as well as repair a variety of falaj-s between his capital and ’Izkī (Badger 1871, 88-9). “Once full involvement in maritime trade had become possible,” Bathurst writes, “patronage dispensed by successive imams far exceeded anything experienced before” (Bathurst 1972, 106).
Resorting simply to extensive generosity and largesse was not enough to prop up the legitimacy of the later hereditary Imams of the Ya‘arîbî, who, despite huge gains in economic and imperial development, faced opposition on religious grounds (Ghubash 2006, 60-5). This massive outlay of generosity-qua-patronage could not stave off internal conflict and what can fairly be termed a “legitimacy crisis” sparked the Hinâwî-Ghâfirî civil war of c. 1130-61/1718-1737, which “debased the office [of the Imamate] by making it a trophy to be won by force of arms” (Kelly 1972, 108). The lack of centralized authority and number of pretender Imams over this period point to a lack of legitimacy accruing to any particular leader: the Ya‘arîbî family was wealthy and had hereditary claims to the Imamate which were not recognized by other tribal groups or large swathes of the ‘ulamâ’.

In this account, it is no coincidence that the first Āl Bû Sa‘îd Imam, Aḥmad bin Sa‘îd Āl Bû Sa‘îdî (1154-1197/1741-1783), seized power from his base as the governor of the richest Omani coastal port of the time, Ṣuḥâr. Aḥmad distinguished himself by repelling the Persian army of Nadir Shah, invited by the desperate Sayf bin Sulṭân II to fight Imamate “pretenders” during the civil war. The Shah saw a golden opportunity to extend his hegemony over the Omani coast and his armies refused to leave, eventually seizing control of Muscat and imposing a poll tax on other coastal cities (Ghubash 2006, 65-7). Aḥmad eventually tricked and repelled the Persians and took Muscat for himself, which led to his quick election as Imam. Aḥmad’s subsequent consolidation cemented his place in Omani history as a shrewd and effective leader. Even though bin Razîq’s chronicle is often considered overly laudatory of the Āl Bû Sa‘îdî dynasty, his stories of the generosity of Imam Aḥmad are telling. Even before he seized the Imamate, Aḥmad the governor was dispensing generosity as befit a leader:

Ahmed carried on the government entrusted to him with justice and equity, and was exceedingly liberal to the inhabitants, by whom he was greatly beloved. The tribes of esh-
Shamâl and ezh-Zhâhirah also came to him, sometimes in crowds and sometimes singly and in couples, and he entertained them with profuse hospitality. He was urbane to rich and poor, to the learned and ignorant, and his condescension to all ranks raised him in general estimation. The sheikhs of the el-Jibûr, also, from el-Hufry, and el-Harâdy, and Hai-’âsim paid their respects to him, and he treated them most munificently, so that his renown spread far and wide, all the people obeyed him gladly, and all tongues extolled the justice of his administration… when Seif-bin-Sultan (the nominal reigning Imam that appointed Aḥmad to his post in Ṣuḥār] heard of these proceedings he said to some of his officers: “Ahmed-bin-Saîd acts in this way in order to estrange the people and draw them to himself, his object being to make his what is now mine.” (Badger 1871, 134, his translation of bin Razîq 2001, 291)

Such a tactic was common and his rivals were quite aware of its efficacy. Later in the chronicle, Aḥmad is especially praised for his generosity to the author’s father and grandfather (Badger 1871, 158-9), whereupon the author then lists the gifts that Imam Ahmad sent out to recognize loyalty shown to him before his ascent (159). He was specifically praised in poetry for drawing out the good virtues in the people, dealing defeat to stinginess (Bin Razîq 2001, 323). Aḥmad even went out of his way to find and water a then-withered tree that he had taken shade under years before. A qâdî in Nizwā questioned his wisdom, to which Aḥmad reportedly replied:

“‘It does not become the generous (hurr\(^3\))… to forget benefits: he who does so is not generous. The generous should recognize benefits received either from the animate or the inanimate.’ ‘I think it is a wise precept,’ rejoined the Kadhî; ‘the generous and noble ought not to forget such recognition’” (1871, 160; Bin Razîq 2001 311-12). In the later provenanced section, which updates the work through the mid-19th century, the author writes:

The Imâm Ahmed was a most liberal man in every respect: he never listened to those who slandered his friends, and he never questioned the accounts of any of his Wakîls [agents]. The bare statement of the latter that they had expended so much and had received *kharâj* [generally a land tax but see Wilkinson (1987, 180-1)] to such an amount was accepted by him; if any thing was due by him he paid it at once. One of his Wakîls, a

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\(^3\) The word *hurr* here refers to being “free,” noble, and generous, as well as implications of purity and lack of external restraint. Freedom here is predicated on the capacity to give and recognize social obligations—even to a tree.
man of er-Rastāk [al-Rustāq]—I think he was of the family of el-Hally—came to him on a certain occasion… and reported he had expended one thousand silver *Mahmūdis* for his, the Imām’s household. The Imām forthwith ordered one of his servants to go to the house and bring him one of the bags labelled one thousand silver *Mahmūdis*; the man went and brought a bag which contained one thousand *Mashkhases* [Venetian zecchino; gold ducats] in gold. When the Wakīl opened it and found that a mistake had been made he returned with it to the Imām, whereupon the latter inquired how much the bag contained. On being told that it contained one thousand gold *Mashkhases*, he said: “It is God’s bounty; therefore, be grateful to Him for the gift.” So the Wakīl retained the money and thanked the Imām for his liberality.

Another instance to the same effect is as follows:—The Imām had appointed Rabīaah-bin-Ahmed, el-Ruwāhy, who was a poor man at the time, Wakīl over the property of Nuamān-Barkah. Two years after, Rabīaah began to purchase property on his own account, as also date-trees at Barkah and el-Jau. This fact having been reported to the Imām, when the letter came to Nuamān from er-Rustāk on his way to Máskat [Muscat], he said to Rabīaah: “Is it true as people say that out of this agency you have managed to purchase property in the town of Barkah and in the towns of el-Jau and Nakhl?” The other replied: “O Imām, I found a treasure and with it was enabled to purchase property.” “Where did you find it?” rejoined the Imām. “Just where you are standing,” replied Rabīaah. The Imām, comprehending at once the figurative speech, smiled and said, “It is God’s bounty towards you; so thank God for it and praise Him for His goodness to you.” (Badger 1871, 186-7)

Later dynasts of the Āl Bū Sa‘īd would wield generosity in precisely the same way, and extensive holdings in East Africa and later oil revenues would expand this capacity many times over (Owtram 1999,125). However, due in part to their lack of religious legitimacy and in part to the greater profits promised overseas, successive Āl Bū Sa‘īdī *sayyid*-s and sultans focused on building their Omani empire abroad, directly leading to the election of a family rival ‘Azzān bin Qays as Imam in 1868. As many scholars have noted, from the early decades of the 1800s the coast and the Interior of Oman began to separate administratively. Largely, the coastal sultans ignored Inner Oman, whose inhabitants were repeatedly harassed by the expanding Saudi emirate of al-Dir‘iyya. After the immensely successful reign of Sultan Sa‘īd, the Omani empire was divided by the British into the Omani and Zanzibari portions in 1856. The reigns of the next Omani sultans, Faysal and Türkī, were plagued by British interests, restive tribes, and resistance
from the ‘ulamā’, ultimately resulting in the election of the Imam Sālim ibn Rāshid al-Kharūsī as Imam and the nominal deposition of Türkī in 1913 (Wilkinson 1987, 249).

However, as Wilkinson (1987) and al-Hashimy (1994) have shown, the financial situation of any claimant to the Imamate was dire. Imam ‘Azzān (r. 1868-1870) and his branch were related to the Sultanic family, but despite shrewd leadership he could not consolidate power with his meager tax base (Wilkinson 1987, 238-40). Imam Sālim’s (r. 1913-1920) economic situation was no less dire, as al-Hashimy shows—for example, he began his reign with 300 Maria Theresa dollars and nearly all of his many military expenditures were covered by tribal shaykh-s, couched in the terms of hibāt, or donations “with the intention of helping the State meet its obligations” (al-Hashimy 1994, 250-9). Sālim also combined the role of wālī and qāḍī in several towns, in order to save money on salaries (al-Hashimy 1994, 236). The split between Oman and Zanzibar, and later Oman and Muscat, would prove disastrous for the Omani people. Historian Robert Landen, writing in 1967, could claim that in the early 1860s, in the midst of a cotton boom lifting other Gulf states,

Oman plummeted into a depression from which it never recovered… [From the early 1860s] Oman dropped into insignificance within the space of a few years. Unlike other areas of the Gulf, Oman has yet to experience an oil boom. She exists as an example of a country which has suffered but has not benefitted from modernization. (1967, 89-90, italics mine)

Obviously, in a few years an “oil boom” and its attendant economic growth would be secured under Sa‘īd bin Ṭaymūr and his son, Qābūs. The profits derived from oil would lift Sa‘īd’s last few years, but early on he had to maintain a fairly strict budget. Nevertheless, Bierschenk writes that Sultan Sa‘īd bin Ṭaymūr’s policy to outbuy the Imam, who was unable to compete with it financially, was remarkably successful. Between 1937 and 1939, the Sultan of Muscat was visited by the two leading sheikhs of the Eastern Province (al-sharqiya), Ali Abdullah al-Hamuda of the Bani Bu Ali and Isa Salih al-Harthi, leader of the Hinawi faction of the Omani tribes,
Sheikh Ahmad Muhammad, the son-in-law of the Imam, as well as by the leading men of the Dhahirah tribes. They all left Muscat showered with gifts and arms. (Bierschenk 1989, 213)

Historians Francis Owtram and Uzi Rabi have shown that Sultan Sa‘īd did, however, operate a tight budget at the time—showing that such payouts were crucial to maintaining rule, rather than an extravagance (Owtram 1999; Rabi 2011). The Sultan was notorious even for remaining aloof from Omanis: according to Owtram “this helped him avoid expenditure: by refusing to see the many supplicants for aid at his palace in Muscat and by spending ever more of his time in Salalah he reduced the need to pay out subsidies unless it suited him” (1999, 126). Such a policy may have made Sultan Sa‘īd a fiscally responsible Sultan, but he was not a popular one, with all manner of cruelties attributed to him (Rabi 2011). If Sa‘īd bin Ṭaymūr’s efforts at political unification often involved engaging in practices of generosity to secure his legitimacy (doling out positions and gifts amongst tribal leaders in Inner Oman) this was no innovation, but a standard mechanism of rule (Rabi 2011, 165-74). It was not forgone by his son, Qābūs, the modern “father of the nation,” either. On the paternalistic aspect of Omani political authority, historian J.E. Peterson concurs with Khalaf and Hammoud’s description:

The ruler, like the shaykh of the tribe, like the father of the family, is the father of the country. He demands respect, obedience, and total loyalty. In exchange, he assumes responsibility for the protection and welfare of his constituents… This traditional pattern of patriarchy has been reinforced in Oman, as well as to an even greater degree in the other Gulf states, by the accrual of oil revenues to the state and thus to the ruler as the guardian of the state… It also produces a social dependence on the state as employer (including both the civil service and the security services), provider of social welfare programs, arbiter of propriety and acceptability, and definer of cultural, social and political values. Just as the members of a patriarchal family depend on the father to take care of them, so Omanis display an expectation that the state must initiate and supervise action in nearly all spheres and to guarantee the results. (Peterson 2005, 8)

There are several points to critique in this formulation (see Chapter 6) but for now, the general frame is accurate. Nearly all works on Oman, scholarly and popular, remark upon the
Omani “renaissance” orchestrated by Sultan Qābūs. However, when compared to other Gulf states, Oman is relatively poor, “barely [producing] enough oil to cover its development costs” (Allen, Jr. and Rigsbee 2000, 108). Calvin Allen, Jr. and W. Lynn Rigsbee have shown that “while the commercial and tribal elite sought domination in revenue-producing economic development, infrastructure and human resource development were left largely to technocrats and central government control” (2000, 155). Sectors where profit was more difficult to obtain were left to the state, whereas other sectors (industry, fisheries, finance, tourism) were privatized. This pragmatic generosity, coupled with increased efforts to extend benefits like healthcare and transportation networks, allowed the Sultan to extend his authority over larger and larger areas.

This policy allowed the Sultan, and the state apparatus of which he was the figurehead, a reason to intervene in tribal structures of authority throughout Oman—to provide welfare for Omanis (Rabi 2011, 158-60). Sa‘īd extended centralized control over Inner Oman by building a main access road from Muscat through the Sumā’il Gap and extended the benefits of scientific agriculture by establishing a model farm outside of Nizwā. He laid plans for multiple schools, communication networks, and hospitals, which would remain unfulfilled until his son ascended to the throne. This same policy of generosity-cum-development was adopted by Qābūs after his 1970 ascension. One such example is the extension of healthcare to the Ḥarāsīs tribe of the al-Wuṣṭa region in 1980, documented by anthropologist Dawn Chatty:

“Several days into our journey and halfway across our proposed itinerary, we came upon a small group of nomadic pastoral Harasiis tribe families preparing to attend a wedding. We stopped and asked their permission to begin vaccinating their children. We were asked why we wanted to do this.

We said, “The Sultan of Oman wishes to see all Omanis immunized against these diseases.”

“Why should he want to do this for us?” they persisted.
We were initially at a loss for an answer. We had assumed that the sense of belonging to one nation and of the obligations of leadership had reached this part of the country. It had not. (Chatty 2009, 39)

If it had not in 1980, the Generosity/Legitimacy mechanism was still available. In fact, Chatty’s convoy was instrumental in that mechanism.

However successful this approach has been, it is also costly. In Sulaiman al-Farsi’s study of democratization in Oman, he shows that, like other states that rely on the generosity/legitimacy mechanism, state distribution of wealth has a limited horizon (2013, 5).

One of al-Farsi’s interlocutors reflected that gifts and wealth distribution has left no chance for a real political opposition to coalesce. But he also argues that this positivity from the government needs appreciation not confrontation. Indeed, [the interviewee] refers here to the implicit social contract and political initiatives that come as gifts from the government, but the question that must be answered here is, ‘Will the government be able to continue with the rentier state model in the post-oil era?’ (al-Farsi 2013, 203)

Certain scholars take yet a more critical approach. Political scientist Marc Valeri, for example, has documented this same division in development planning (and the frequency with which the Omani state has been forced to cut social programs) as having serious drawbacks for political stability (Valeri 2007, 2013). It is no coincidence—from the perspective of Valeri—that Qābūs has turned oil revenues toward social development:

Early on, Sultan Qābūs had to broaden his base of allies and forge personal ties with the population that were no longer dependent on a unique social force. To do so, he will utilize for his own account the homogenizing power of the state. The exploitation of a nascent oil rent makes possible an economic and social development without precedent, in which the state, in expanding over the territory, will be the pivot. In sum, the objective of the Sultan is the rendering of OMANIS individually as dependent for their daily lives, not on ‘aṣṣabiyya (CLA, “tribal cohesion”), but the state. (Valeri 2007, 111-2)\(^\text{84}\)

\(^{84}\) Très tôt, le sultan Qabous se doit donc d'élargir la base de ses alliés et tisser des liens personnels avec le population qui ne le rendent plus aussi dépendant à une force sociale particulière. Pour ce faire, il va utiliser à son compte la puissance homogénéisatrice de l'état. L'exploitation d'une rente pétrolière naissante, mais croissant de manière exponentielle, rend
This drawing in, what Valeri and Peterson (and many others) refer to as a production of dependency, is the generosity/legitimacy mechanism at work. Such a perspective brings us back to the more socially detrimental aspects of generosity and gift-giving, so often exploited by elites. Gifts that, as Mauss said, can “flatten.” Gifts that reproduce inequality while ostensibly recognizing equality.

By showing these shared ideals operating on different levels of society, I argue, along with Al-Rasheed and Khalaf and Hammoud, that “the amir’s basis of legitimacy was to a great extent similar to the sheikh’s” from small to state scales, in terms of both the practical effect and the symbolic weight attached to certain practices: in this case, the obligatory generosity of the leader (Al-Rasheed 1991, 78). Generosity does, however, form a common logic. For Shaykh-s on the smaller end of social structure, generosity refers to the redistribution of wealth created by the community. On the larger scale, the 'amīr was not only expected to perform this function, but also to distribute yet greater wealth and infrastructure for the benefit of townspeople, agriculturalists, and pastoralists. He was also motivated to extend his generosity to co-opt political rivals, smaller Shaykh-led political units, and the ‘ulamā’. Gestures like holding feasts on festival days and funding the construction of communal buildings (masjid-s, markets, and the like) were symbolic manifestations and demonstrations of the leader’s generosity. And generosity, as we have seen, is valued all across the class spectrum.

In the Persian Gulf states that emerged from the rapid decay of British colonial power after the Second World War, the expansion of the power of the traditional elites was dramatic, if possible un développement économique et social sans précédent, dont l’état, en expansion tous azimuts sur le territoire, sera la pivot. En somme, l’objectif du Sultan est de rendre les Omanais individuellement tributaires pour leur vie de tous les jours, non plus de la ‘assabiyya, mais de l’état.
not unprecedented. Valeri’s claim that the Omani state was a “development without precedent” should be interpreted as referring to scale, not organization or cultural model (2007, 112). A delicate balance between claims to modernization and to traditionalism has animated the political destinies of new political elites and informed their symbolic and historical mythologies. Gibson’s “ideal model” takes seriously the symbolic aspects of authority and politics and accords well with research that investigates the role of ritual (Geertz 1980; Kertzer 1988) and “aesthetic” practices in the construction of the nation-state (Adams 2010; Mookherjee 2011). The political symbolism manifest in performance, as many scholars have pointed out, shifts and changes with changes in social organization (Atkinson 1989; Bloch 1986; Guss 2000; Gilman 2009; Leach 1954; Reed 2010). However, as I have shown, the same kinds of ideals are drawn on to justify the social order on multiple social scales. In some ways, this is reminiscent of the ways in which kinship terminology is co-opted by the state in hopes of manifesting within state-society relations the same kinds of relations that are manifest in the family unit. The symbol of the leader’s generosity and the praise response it engenders has been often utilized in legitimating state power.

**Encompassing Relations: A circuit of Generosity and Praise in the context of the “gift”**

In this final section, we turn to the performance of praise, the other half of the circuit of exchange between rulers and ruled, and evaluate its form in Oman in relation to insights drawn from studying gift exchange. The sense that generosity is an obligation of leadership is, as we’ve seen, a widely held ideal. A leader of a razha group in Bahlā’ remarked that, as the leader (ra‘īs), it was his responsibility to feed and clothe every member at each performance, even those that only rarely showed up. “None can razha with us without a belt-dagger khangar, without the same mašar, without a neat dishdāsha, a sword and buckler, and all this.” He pointed to cases of
bottled water on the ground in the middle of the dancing circle. “I bring him water, I will bring him food if he needs it. Anything he asks, it honors me to be available [to him].” All leaders of groups made similar statements to me, though some were more interested in expressing the communal aspect of group life. “Some people from towns like Bahlā’, Nizwā, [he] manages razha troupes like he is the Sultan, like he can take command (mithl yirūm yahbish al-amr),” responded a performer from Firqat al-Bilād in Manah. “Here, we’re more like people in al-Sharqiyya,” he continued, waving at the group, “everyone participates as they like.” In fact, most groups do have a rotating leadership role, which carries little importance other than the title. The same performer in the Firqat Ḥārat al-Bilād joked with me that “if the group had anything at all, we would share it all among us—luckily, we have nothing like the rich groups.”

A similar sense of obligation informs praise performance responses to leaders’ generosity. Performers consider generosity to be a “good deed”—fulfilling a social obligation—and as such obliges a response in praise, which strengthens the leader’s reputation (cf. Caton 1985 for a broader discussion). The inducement to respond with praise was, in my interlocutors’ terms, “incumbent upon us” (‘alā ‘ātiqunā, lit. “[to be] upon our shoulders”), or simply “upon us” (‘alaynā). “If he [an authority figure] comes to our hometown,” reflected one performer from Manah, “we must go out (‘alaynā naṭla’) and meet him with the razha. If we do not, we have not done well, this is a great shame; when someone comes you have to represent yourself… as a community. We appreciate his coming (naqaddar ḥudūruh).” Praise is seen as a “turn” in the relation between rulers and the ruled. “The poet praises the king for justice, generosity, acuity, and might,” writes Arabist Suzanne Stekevych, “but the poem at the same time challenges the king to prove or confirm this praise through an immediate action that all present will witness as

85 See Limbert (2010, ch. 5) for a discussion of norms of generosity regarding water in Bahlā’.
proof of his authority and legitimacy” (2002, 34). Indeed, it can be seen as a guarantee for further generosity from rulers. According to an older performer, Sulṭān:

The Sultan is very generous to Manaḥ. Why? Because we are true sons of Oman, and we hold our traditions and he knows this when we snap and buzz the blades (*lamma nihizz al-asyāf*, “when he sees us *razha*”). You know, he brought the *huṣn al-shamūkh*, he brought the language school [the SQU extension for teaching Arabic as a second language], there is a new museum, he is rebuilding the Old Quarter of Bilād. These are true treasures of Omani heritage, and soon Manaḥ will be a center of tourism and all this. *Wallahi*, he knows that everything he does in Manaḥ we welcome [it] and we respond [to it].

Generosity that is not responded to with praise might disappear, as well. Sulṭān continued by saying that “If we don’t do the *razha* to welcome our guests, the big and the small, how are we any different from the Indians and Bangladeshis? We are no different. If we are from Manaḥ, then it is upon us that we *razha*, just as it is upon the Sulṭān to aid [us].” In this framing, Sulṭān points out the direct and deep link between regional and national identity and the obligations to perform. This circuit of obligation between authority and praise is clear to him as a properly socialized member of a broader moral economy, a functioning social order. Such a social order is composed of people who contribute different things to maintain it.

There is no question that people in Manah, not just performers, recognize that these different contributions are unequal. Anthropologist David Graeber refers to this kind of economic relation as a moral relation of *hierarchy*, as opposed to communal relations (which involve giving freely) and exchange relations (which are “tit-for-tat” exchanges between equals) (Graeber 2014, ch. 5). Such a hierarchical relationship *does* engage widespread human norms about reciprocity, even though in this case a return gift is totally impossible (Graeber 2014, 109-13). A small agricultural community—even a prosperous multi-tribal market town—cannot give an electrical transfer station, generous loans for house construction, a highway off-ramp, or a new soccer pitch to the Sultan, let alone the apparatuses of the state. “When gifts cannot be fully
reciprocated,” writes Yeh, “they establish, express, or legitimize relationships of power and inequality” (2013, 15). Such a response would be plainly absurd—I diligently asked about it anyway, to the derision of my Omani interlocutors.

We were discussing an upcoming performance in ‘Izz, a small town near Manaḥ, over tiny cups of milky karak tea. Standing near the idling car, I asked where the drummers were. Ḥamad stared out over a low wall dividing the café from a small masjid prayer room. “Oh, they heard the Sultan was arriving at the Ḥuṣn al-Shamūk and so they are looking for a little money. And so they’re late.” The Ḥuṣn al-Shamūk is the Sultan’s gigantic and opulent palace just outside Manaḥ, where he has held court more and more as his health has declined. It is surrounded by a tremendous wall and houses many complexes, including a wonderful and wholly under-utilized library.

“The Sultan hands out money? We should go,” I laughed.

“No, it’s the guards who do it. Also, I don’t think you’d get any, O Englishman,” said Ṭalāl, turning his sleepy eyes towards me. He shaded them with his hand, pushing his light blue kimma back on his head and breaking into a slow smile.

“Well, what if I recite a poem? Does anyone know one I can use? Does anyone remember the ‘āzī Ḥuṣn al-Shamūk by al-Marzūqī? That was given at the opening of the Ḥuṣn, no?”

“Yes, that’s right, it’s a really beautiful ‘āzī, and the razha-s were the real thing (wāgid ‘asīla). It’s a great honor to have it here in Manaḥ, and it brought jobs. The Sultan gifted us with the construction of the Ḥuṣn in Manaḥ because he knew that we are true sons of Oman, he feels comfort among us.” Ḥamad finished the cup of karak and threw it almost into the nearby trash can. He smacked his lips and said to himself, “The Nescafe is better here.”
“You said it was a gift? Is it not so that you should respond to gifts, you should give an equal gift, or something like that?” I asked, expecting the performers to talk about their role in the opening of the ḥuṣn.

“Yes, doctor,” replied Ṭālāl, “we gave another ḥuṣn al-Shamūkh to His Majesty (naqaddam li-l-galāla ḥuṣn thānī) in Ṣalāla, you see.”

“Don’t mind him,” his brother replied, “he’s being sarcastic. The ḥusn is a great symbol of the renaissance and of the glories of Oman (amgād ‘umān). That’s why it’s called ‘Fort of Glory/Loftiness.’”

Ṭālāl’s is an important joke. The very notion that the group—and by extension, the moral community that they represent—might respond to the generosity of the Sultan in kind is so ridiculous that it is openly mocked. Material social relations forbid it. Rather, it is the obligation of good leadership to provide such things. The receivers of generosity expect such dispensations based on their being part of a community with a leader who acts according to their expectations, and not, as many political scientists have it, because they pay taxes. In fact, such a simplistic cause-and-effect relation is precisely what leaders want who they “lead” to think.86 The Lancasters describe the situation this way:

Participation by tribal and rural groups or notables in the activities of decentralised or re-centralised states is often seen by historians and political scientists to be as clients of the

86 The vagaries of taxes, payments, dispensations, stipends, paid services, religious charity (ṣadaqā and zakā, not an exact analogy to Christian tithe systems), and the state’s or shaykh’s treasury cannot be fully analyzed here. Suffice it so say that while Al-Rasheed (1991) finds “bribes” an appropriate translation for stipendiary payments issuing from the Rashīdī shaykh-s in Hail, my use of the CLA term rashwa to describe pay for performance was met with strong disagreement. Further, Eickelman (1985), Wilkinson (1987) and Rabi (2011) note that a shaykh’s acceptance of stipends from the state treasury was not in any way a contract or pledge of allegiance to that leader. A perfect example of this is the shaykh of the ‘Abriyīn tribe (based in al-Ḥamrā’) accepting a stipend from Sultan Taymūr in the 1950s but not aiding the Sultan’s armed forces as they marched to confront the former Imam’s brother Ṭālib in Balad Sayt at the outset of the Jabal Akhdar War in 1957 (Allfree 1968, 55-6). This withdrawal of support was not a failure of morale, resolve, or breaking a promise or contract on the part of the ‘Abriyīn and their shaykh. Rather, it was a pragmatic move based on evaluating the jeopardized strength of the Sultan.
patron state/polity or as being tributarised by the state (e.g. al-Azmeh 1986:82, 86; al Rasheed 1989: 232; Kostiner 1991: 225; Velud 1995). Central government may intend such a dependency. Locally, payments of subventions by the Ottoman Empire, the Mandate governments, the early and modern bin Sa'ud rulers are seen by tribal leaders and tribespeople as a return for their help in keeping the peace. (Lancasters 1999, 345-6)

In other words, local groups do not see the acceptance of pay as a promise or a contract for future behavior, but rather as a fulfillment of an existing relationship. The mutual obligations examined here—to give and to praise—are not framed as debts, requirements, duties, coercion, economic exchanges, bribes, services, or paid labor. Rather, they are the evidence of a functioning relationship between rulers and ruled, a continuing circuit of goods and recognition predicated on shared notions of the good. The way that Omani Arabs explained razha as a “response” (CLA, radd) indicates to me that they saw it not only as linked to generosity, but also as engaging it, meeting it in some equal way. It is the quality of that relationship—egalitarian, hierarchical, critical, respectful, dignified or humiliating—that razha operates on, as we shall see in the next chapter.

a. Why praise is not saying ‘Thank you’

Performance groups present themselves as dignified, historically “located” collectives when they praise because generosity is not free from ulterior motives. Florence Weber writes that the gift “masks” other goals and relationships (1989, 74). This is in fact what makes generosity and praise so compelling—it is potentially dangerous to the social order. This is especially the case when it is hierarchical. “Gifts” that come from the Omani government are given to those who deserve them—Omanis, ostensibly equals with any other—but simultaneously put them in danger of signaling dependency.
I asked several times whether or not the razha was a way of saying “thank you” to the Sultan—to my mind, the proper response to a gift. None agreed with this interpretation. Ahmad, the nephew of Sālim bin Sulaymān al-Shukaylī of Bahlā’, replied that “when you do something that is your role [to do so], what do we say?” I answered, “we say ‘lā shukr ‘alā wāgib’, is that not so?” “Exactly,” he responded,

…we say ‘No thanks [are necessary] for [performing one’s] duty. Saying ‘Thank you’ is not necessary (mū lāzim). We also often say, ‘you’ve done well’ (ahsant) instead of ‘thank you’, in Oman. Or [‘you are’ or perhaps ‘that is’) ‘praiseworthy’ (mashkūr/a). Now why do we say that? Because you’ve done well, you’ve done the correct thing. I don’t thank my father for giving me food, a home. That’s his role. ‘Thank you’ is not expected. I will say, ahsant, ‘you’ve done well’… if I say anything.

The difference between a duty or an obligation and the kinds of activities for which thanks are necessary is delineated here clearly. Graeber, reflecting on the super-abundance of “pleases” and “thank-yous” in American sociality, refers to it as the “quintessence of middle-class morality” (2014, 123). Such a morality asserts a kind of false equality that is, in his view, based on the imputation of norms regarding exchange (the tit-for-tat trade of goods among equals) to those that properly involve what he terms “baseline communism” (the free movement of goods as people need them) (123-4). He notes that in contexts where it is assumed that people will take care of one another, people “often find it insulting to constantly be told, in effect, that there is some chance that they might not do their job as a waiter or taxi driver correctly, or provide house guests with tea” (124).87 Anthropologist Jacques Godbout reads the French

87 Anecdotally, I was told on several separate occasions to stop saying “thank you” in English and “shukran” in Arabic so very much. Ḥamad in Manaḥ had to tell me privately to stop thanking everyone when meeting folks or drinking tea or coffee with them. I also made a habit of thanking the invariably South Asian waitstaff that were subjected to endless torment from the performance troupes when we ate together. This too was taken to be incorrect. My wife and I were also corrected by a couple from Kerala that hosted us for a period in Muscat. The implication in each occasion was that my effusive thanks for the most basic hospitality was at the least annoying, perhaps showing weakness, and at the worst insulting.
“merci” (thank you) against the literature of the gift. Gifts, he thinks, are dangerous. “For instance,” he writes, “the word ‘thank you’—in French merci—may be seen as an indirect way of saying that the very fact of receiving a gift can make one in some sense dependent, can put one at the “mercy” (merci in French) of the giver” (1998, 8). Such a perspective on attributing generosity is presented by Wilson in her work on Chinese traders in Papua:

I asked a young PNG-Chinese boy what he thought of his mother. “She knows how to survive,” he said. He smiled. “I’m like that too.” He offered me half of the cocoa pod he had stolen off a tree. “You’re lucky to have me with you, huh? Otherwise you’d get lost. And I can climb the trees and get you all (the cocoa pods) you want.” I thanked him. “You’re very generous.” He looked at me with scorn. “Of course.” What else did I expect? As his mother later explained to me, PNG-Chinese are, by definition, generous to each other, otherwise they never would have survived their history. (Wilson 1989, 77)

Certainly the same can be said for Omanis.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has posited the first of two linked mechanisms that help show how praise and political authority are linked: the Generosity/Legitimacy mechanism. In this chapter, I outlined a “macro” process: that is, the linkage between two broad social behaviors and beliefs: the generosity of leaders and their perceived legitimacy. This was complicated by the reciprocal mutuality of the “gift,” analyzed in several places and on several scales. While many other factors and practices also play into this process, generosity is an important one for our purposes because, as I have shown, Omanis recognize that praise is an appropriate response to such generosity. For some Omanis, their praise involves performing razha and ‘āzī, linked performance practices that have a long history of mediating political relationships in Oman. In the next chapter, I show how the form and practice of razha, as a collective dance and song practice, has particular implications in performers’ understandings of praise and their role in praising.
Chapter 4: A Moral Economy of Praise: How Razha Integrates Power into Community

كل دار تبنى بالرجال
لما تتعاضد بالرجال
أما الكسل ماله مجال
لا من بعيد ولا قريب

Every homeland is built by men,
when those men work hand in hand.
As for laziness, it has no place
neither near nor far.

Rabī’al-Millāḥ bin al-Murr al-Hidayfī,
‘āzī for the Firqat Ḥārat al-Bilād li-l-funūn al-sha‘abiyya

In this chapter, I investigate collective performance responses to the
Generosity/Legitimacy mechanism described in chapter 2. There are many kinds of responses to
the Generosity/Legitimacy mechanism, but the one we will focus on here is collective praise
performance in the sung-poetry and dance complex called razha. This chapter presents razha
performance as another potential mechanism, what I call the Razha Integration mechanism.
Integration in this context refers to two processes: 1) the pulling together and mutual expression
of both dependency and power on the part of performers; and 2) the socially and culturally
realized public reception and recognition of generosity. Thinking abstractly, we can conceive of
this mechanism as working during or within the overall process of the Generosity/Legitimacy
mechanism. During this overall mechanism, the specific ways that razha are performed is
understood to signal not only dependency, but also power, cultural authority, strength, Omani
identity, dignity, masculinity, communal bonds, and other positively evaluated qualities. My data
suggest that razha is a social mechanism that mediates a central social uncertainty that emerges
in the context of leaders’ gifts—generosity’s potential for both equality and inequality.
This hypothesis relies on the ambiguity of the social processes involved in the Generosity/Legitimacy mechanism. If the general mechanism of “generosity produces legitimacy” holds in Oman, we can see that it has taken a variety of courses throughout history. Direct disbursal of cash and goods to tribal leaders is qualitatively and quantitatively different from disbursements to patronize poets, which differs yet again from the expansion of infrastructure and other social welfare benefits and the ensuing collective praise response. Each of these can be conceived to be operating according to its own cultural logic, although some elements are shared.

a. Experimenting with the “Alchemy” of Generosity: A Theoretical Détente

Before showing how this proposed mechanism functions, we should draw the focus to an argument latent in the last chapter. In it, I briefly pointed out that the mutual valuation of generosity amongst elites and non-elites means that “generosity” as a concept and practice might be a potential source of hegemony construction. Similarly, I intimated that the obligation of elites to be generous was both a specific strategy of rule as well as an emblem of their commitment to a reciprocal moral economy. While I explored community- and state-based generosity as interacting with the vicissitudes of gift exchange, it bears repeating that anthropologists have largely confined their analyses of gift exchange to small-scale societies. While this is thankfully changing, Katherine Bowie’s concern that “the significance of gift giving in the political economy of complex societies deserves more attention” remains salient (1998, 476; but see Yeh 2013). In her study of the “alchemy” of charitable giving as a way of *tham bun* (making merit) in Theravada Buddhist Thai villages, Bowie shows that a variety of interpretations undergird different acts of giving and receiving. Even though monks and temples are considered the worthiest recipients of gifts, the practices of beggars are understood to be “making merit by
allowing those who are better off to part with material possessions and thus practice non-attachment” (471-72). By focusing on class in this way, Bowie is able to point out how “the role of the poor in shaping the behavior of the wealthier has been ignored” in scholarship on the gift. “Morality,” she writes, “is responsive to social context” and givers and receivers are mutually constituted along moral valences as well as political economic ones (474). While merit-making “masked inequality with a veil of legitimacy,” it was nevertheless a “weapon of the weak,” wherein apparently voluntarist giving was subtly coerced from the wealthy by ever-present threats of theft, violence, and looting (474-76). Bowie argues that charity *qua* merit-making developed as a kind of class *détente*: it eased class tensions by generating charity from the wealthy to provide for the needy while never calamitously upsetting the status quo. Bowie seems to conclude that non-elites regard violence as the unspoken potential response to failures of continued charity.

While we often imagine the wealthy patron giving out goods, we rarely imagine how such giving is interpretively shaped, meaningfully intervened on, and constrained by the actions of the receiver. Further, as Bowie points out, there may be negative consequences to *not* giving—basically, Thai non-elites compel elites to give at least in part by threatening violence if it does not continue. Hegemony, in the Gramscian sense, might be best conceived of not as a temporary alliance, or coincidence of interests, but instead as a *détente*, as Bowie claims. “Hegemony presupposes that account be taken of the interests and the tendencies of the groups over which hegemony is to be exercised,” wrote Gramsci, so “that a certain compromise equilibrium should be formed” (1971:161). It is this compromise, this class standoff, that I think is enacted in performed responses of praise. As I noted in the last chapter, while there has been some attention given to elites’ practices of directed generosity, there has been little effective
attention to the responses that non-elites return. In that vein, this chapter not only analyzes those responses, but attempts to show that those responses are not merely the expression of gratitude, but are attempts to speak back, to intervene, to provoke. Omani praisers, when they razor, do not simply “receive” gifts.

It is here where I think we can usefully extend Bowie’s work. Focusing closely on the responses of non-elites shows how non-elites can compel giving through negative means—“give generously or we’ll kill you”—and through positive means. Praise might be an example of a positive means. Rather than the implied threat of violence, praise is a concrete action that ties acts of giving with a particular set of ideals of authority, moral action, and a community. As we saw in our discussion of ethnomusicologists’ study of praise, praise has an explicit normative component. While hegemony might be a détente rather than an alliance, praise is a way of ensuring the continuation of that détente in a way that benefits non-elites at the same time as it benefits elites by insisting on and disseminating norms that achieve that goal. In short, praise as manifest in razor and ‘āzī is a way of turning acts of giving into relations of obligation—it turns acts of giving into a moral economy.

I argue that this razor Integration mechanism operates through praise performance in such a way that it circumvents and modifies the relationship between performers and elites from one of dependency and encompassment to one of obligation and reciprocity. Generosity is not just a good deed, it is a good deed because it helps specific communities. Rather than producing one-way relations of patronage dependency like those of the Islamic Middle East surveyed by Sharlet (2014), razor performance instantiates renewed and reaffirmed relations of mutuality.

88 I do not mean to imply moral valences here, equating “positive” with “good”, just that one is a concrete action and the other is the lack of action.
between performers and elites, changing the way that the Generosity/Legitimacy mechanism operates. This sustains the integrity and solidarity of the community in the face of a sometimes overwhelmingly powerful state apparatus of development and giving. What I mean by this is that the form, presentation, and texts of ḥa and āzī and what these forms, presentations, and texts mean to performers prevent or diminish the social effects of dependency that can arise in unequal gift exchange. They do not obliterate unequal power relations, but they might transform them, tame them, reduce them to mutual obligations cycling throughout a community built of locals and the ruling classes. Performers assert that their communities and elites are part of a network of trust and mutual obligation—a moral economy. In ḥa, community members display their reception of gifts and represent the community as morally deserving of the gifts along several axes: because they are dignified, because they are part of an egalitarian society, because they are Omani, and importantly, because praise is a form of civic labor that deserves recognition. I do not think it obscures the deeply unequal social and material relations between these vastly different class positions. It does not “produce” egalitarianism. Performance does, however, demonstrate and display graciousness, dignity, communality, sociality, and Omani heritage while also enacting the reception of generosity that ultimately cannot be returned.

b. The Ḥa Integration mechanism

In chapter 2 I proposed five principles of praise that would be investigated. In this chapter I analyze principles 3—5:

3) that praise is addressed to power and aimed at integrating power into community;

4) that praise manages power relationships by manipulating fame, name, and reputation;

5) that praise is civic labor, an obligatory response to generosity and an inducement to further giving.
When we think about praise and generosity as being mutual obligations, as being linked in a moral economy, we can see how principles 3—5 are not only responses to praiseworthy behavior, but responses that intervene in those relationships. For performers and communities, praise is not a straightforward exchange, but a way of doing something to achieve certain ends. Such ends can be material—indeed they often are—but can also point to the production or maintenance of certain kinds of social relationships and identities. These are not opposed ends. Rather, these principles show how praisers manipulate context, social status differentials, shared mythopoetic histories, imagery, reputation, and notions of equality in order to draw elites into a shared moral economy, and to fix them there.

This drawing in is achieved in several ways, and I think that it must be continuously re-performed. Surely, elites would prefer not to give and enjoy the same benefits of hegemonic control. Preventing the moral economy’s dissolution into a market economy requires continual intervention. The reason I argue that praise intervenes in social relationships of praise is that performers often explain that razha is a response (CLA. radd) to praiseworthy deeds (variously referred to as O. Ar. makrūma/makrūmā, mafkhara/mafākhir, or CLA. khayrāt, ḥasānāt) or noble virtues (O. Ar. faḍīla/faḍā'il, mazīyya/mazāyā). Praise in the Omani context is a claim on ruling classes: that they are caught in mutual obligation relations with local communities—that they constitute a shared moral economy. Giving and praising, while not transactions, are reciprocally arranged and produce certain social relationships. I trace this mechanism though analyses of performance and the way that performers motivate four discourses:

1. **Communities are necessary to complete circuits of praise.** Performers frame themselves as necessary to the completion of exchange circuits of praise and goods by being a crucial source of praise and representation, initiated through invitations and
consultation. Further, they present themselves as a community that is a **worthy and correct recipient** of gifts from leaders by mythopoetically presenting a shared history between their community and leaders, that is, as Omani Arabs. Since it is also an obligation on givers to *receive* praise, the context of receiving collective praise is used by performers to represent their communality. Leaders, in turn, regard engaging *razha* groups as a way to produce interest in their activities. Performance is then a way of “encompassing” the praised, just as the generous giver “encompasses” the recipient. They are obliged to listen, to pay attention, and to remunerate.

2. **Performers present themselves as dignified and proud.** Performers *graciously receive* gifts in a way that does not demean them and also *asserts* their autonomy, pride, and dignity through bodily comportment, adornment, and dignified communal movement. Dignity and pride are embodied through bodily states like *ḥamās,*

(enthusiasm/excitement, fervor, élan); *shugā‘a,* (bravery, courage, also encouragement); and *rigūla,* (masculinity, manliness). By “accepting” or “integrating” gifts into a community by acting as representatives of the community, they obscure direct relationships of dependence that might obtain in dyadic gift relations.

3. **Performers see praise as labor that is necessary to building community.** Since performers generally conceive of praise in moral and sociable terms as outlined in Chapter 2 *and* are obligated to respond to generous giving, they frame their praise, communal charity, and male sociability as Omanis as a kind of labor in service of the nation and community. This framing signals that they do not receive gifts for “nothing.” Both the performance practices and the labor involved in maintaining a community are often compared to work and operates as a kind of maintenance of sociality.
4. Performers understand praise performance and gifts to be necessarily communally oriented. Omani razha and ‘āzī differ from other forms of the Generosity/Legitimacy mechanism because they are necessarily communal and collective, recognizing obligations not between patrons and clients, but between rulers and communities. Since gifts of development and infrastructure are given not to individuals but for communal use, the praise response must also be communal. The forms of performance themselves are necessarily communal and are taken as evidence of the ways in which performance necessarily implicates the entire community.

c. Outline

Much of this chapter follows one performance over the course of an afternoon and the days of planning before it and shows how different discourses animate the ways in which form, presentation, and text confront and subvert the dangers of dependency. The framing event of this chapter was a festival arranged in the wilāya of Manaḥ in the Interior which was organized by the wālī on October 6th, 2017. The festival, entitled “fī ḥubb Qābūs” (“For the love of [Sultan] Qābūs”), was planned for the evening of the Friday at the end of a week that witnessed new photos and videos of the Sultan being released on Omani state media after no such pictures or videos had been seen of him for several months. The Sultan was in fact in residence at his palace in Manaḥ, the Ḥuṣn al-Shamūkh mentioned previously. Ḥamad, the manager of the Firqat al-‘Arabī in al-Ma’arā, informed me that the appearance of the Sultan was very reassuring to the people of Oman, who did not know whether he was alive or dead. His appearance caused many groups and governmental bodies to plan celebrations for the weekend. In the days leading up to Friday night, the group was busy consulting with the office of the wālī to hammer out the details of their performance. As I discuss certain features of this performance and the events leading up
to it, I will show how these four discourses come into play when performance is addressed to power.

Over the course of this chapter, I document two related threads: how performers use *razha* to skirt the potential that generosity would render them as weak or dependent, and how performers actively draw elites into relations of mutual dependence in a moral economy.

**“Transforming power into community”: Praise as a Necessity**

The organization and the planning of the *fi ḥubb Qābūs* festival was mostly undertaken in the few days between the appearance of the Sultan in various media and the next available day off, Friday. I asked the performance groups and later the *wālī* whether they could have a festival without the performance groups. “Never,” replied the *wālī*, “they are a necessary part of our community and they present our unity and our pride (humā giza’ ḍurūrī min mugtam’anā wa-yubayyinū waḥdatunā wa-‘izzunā).” 89 When I relayed this to some of the groups, one member memorably replied: “that’s true, we’ve heard that before, but I tell you no one would come if it wasn’t for us.”

“How do you mean?” I asked.

“If it was just speeches and odes? No, that won’t work (*mā yaṣlaḥ*), no one would come. He [the *wālī*] knows what brings crowds, and he wants crowds. The *wālī* is good, brings beneficial things to us from his virtuous nature (*yigīb al-ashiyā’ al-mufīda min faḍā’īluh*), and we do *razha*. If we are invited, there will be crowds. Simple.”

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89 Some of his enthusiasm must be attributed to his speaking to me and his knowledge of my project. Performance groups in Manaḥ have noted that former *wālī*-s have not taken really any personal interest in the groups at all, simply delegating lower officials to make sure they are present. Certainly some celebrations and events from the past did not involve one or more of the groups, to their chagrin.
“I see. And are those things equal? Is that an equal exchange (tabādul⁹⁰ mustāwī) between the good things and the razḥa?”

“No,” he replied, “there is no exchange. We do razḥa today for Qābūs, and the wālī is recognized because he brought us together. He hosts the event—each contributes to the event in [their own] way (yasāham fī al-mushārika kulli ḥad bi-ṭarīqu).”

This is an example of the first discourse I present here: that of the way that performers and hosts see their praise as essential or necessary to the completion of the circuit of exchange and praise. If performers are keen on seeing the razḥa as a kind of necessary part of a circuit of mutual obligation, it is because the danger of dependency is at least tacitly understood. Performers are not merely paying a debt or thanking a patron. From the perspective of razḥa performers, generosity and praise in the Generosity/Legitimacy mechanism form a circuit between equals of different capacities. It is not a squaring of accounts because there is no way to “account” for the things which are exchanged. The fact of their exchange, and the different and incommensurable “value” that is attributed to the exchanged praise and goods, are enough to make the claim that this circuit is one of mutual concern and commitment. If it was just an equitable exchange, a contract, a debt to be repaid, then the logic of thanks and accounting would operate. But it is not. Rather, this circuit of goods and praise is a sort of expectation based on the mutual fulfillment of different but linked obligations. It is the fulfillment of an obligation pursuant to previously fulfilled obligations. Just as performers and the communities they represent cannot fund the building of palaces and hospitals, leaders cannot praise themselves.

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⁹⁰ It should be noted here that tabādul is a word that does not in itself imply any equality in quantity, just participation in some kind of transfer, as “exchange” does in English. In Arabic, the word does not necessarily imply an economic focus, though see chapter 6 in Lancasters (2011) for their take on concepts of exchange in the Oman Peninsula.
Good deeds require the praise of a moral community that matters to the doer of the deed. For Omani celebrations of development, good rule, and infrastructure, praise poetry operates as it does in South Africa: “the recitation of praise poetry is a constitutive element of the event itself”—it forms the basis of the entire affair (Kresse 1998, 188). That praise is central to these gatherings is important because it fulfills the need for deeds to be recognized unambiguously in appropriate praise.

Classicist Leslie Kurke (2013) explains the necessity of praise in Ancient Greece when she quotes one of Pindar’s lines, “For praise from home is mixed with blame” (2001, 76). In her interpretation,

the same house that produces achievements cannot also manufacture their glorification. Praise must come from outside in order that the surrounding community not be alienated, or put positively, the value of the achievement is the prestige it has in the eyes of the community, so the praise must come from the larger group. (Kurke 2013, 76)

Kurke’s argument throughout her monograph The Traffic in Praise is that Ancient Greek praise poetry, *epinikia*, was part of an “economy” of praise and good deeds that constantly circulated amongst houses, patrons, poets, and communities. Aristocrats, participating in the earliest Olympic games, were praised for their victories in order “to match the deed in words” (2013, 86). In a sense, victory and good deeds set individuals apart from society, and praise poetry reincorporated them by reminding them why the deeds performed were good and praiseworthy: because they served the community. Indeed, in the 5th century BCE context of shifting political power from influential independent aristocratic households to the mixed urban city-state *polis*, drawing aristocrats into the moral community of the *polis* was “the condition of its survival” (2013, 225). Elites’ contributions to mutual defense, festivals, taxes, and other social goods were necessary to the continuing viability of the city-state social structure. The fear that aristocrats might “absent themselves from the *polis*” could be avoided by mollifying them with praise
Rather than allowing aristocrats to distance themselves from the everyday life of the community, community members sought ways to link aristocrats to the life and future of the *polis* itself. Von Hallberg summarizes Kurke’s argument as showing how “[Pindar’s] poems produce power by giving an athlete, a household, and a city recognition from outside the city’s borders” (2014, 46). In such a condition, praise poetry “sets out to produce general value for a wide audience to share” and is therefore part of a system that “transforms power into community” (2014, 47). Power—in this case, power that inheres in fame, name, and reputation—brings a person, family, or deed into direct mythopoetic contact with a real, discrete community.

Power in the ancient Greek *polis* was held by independent noble houses (at least at first), who were drawn into the civic life of the city to ensure their collective survival. Being “drawn in” means that the noble houses were convinced in one way or another to use their economic capital for the general benefit of the *polis* rather than merely for themselves. In the contemporary Middle East, the state-form and those that control its institutions hold similar constitutive power. Since praise is “addressed to power” (per the 3rd principle of praise I outlined above), we find that Omani praise practices often deal with relationships between rulers and ruled.

Older extant *razḥa*-s were directed at *shaykh*-s and *qāḍī*-s. For example:

بالروف بالروف يالقاضي بالروف خلي المشاكل تاخذ مجاريه
بئلروف بئلروف ياهقاضي بئلروف خلي المشاكل تاخذ مجاريه

*Ta’khudh migāriyya* wa *al-ḥagg al-mabrūr*

*ta kursî al-ḥikūma kulli hadd yanḍîu.*

Take it easy, O *qāḍī*, take it easy,
leave your problems and take a trip.
Take a trip—the *ḥajj* pilgrimage:
the seat of government is all of us and life goes on.
Another refers to the *shaykh* and his role within the community as a kind of shepherd (see Music Example 5).

**Bahānī, yā bahānī (Congratulations)**

*Congratulations, from the shaykh and his flock.*
*from my home that brings me joy, dispeller of homesickness.*


The *shaykh* mentioned here quickly comes to be understood as the Sultan in conversation. Newer *razha*-s, of course, are almost always directed at Sultan Qābūs, like this example from the *fī ḥubb* Qābūs festival:
Matā yarga' linā (When he returns to us)
When he returns to us, this heroic leader, from the land of Germany, when he returns to us, etc.

Music example 6. Razḥa melody from the fī ḥubb Qābūs festival, written by Khalfān of al-Ma‘amad.

Matā yarga’ linā ha-al-qā’id al-baṭal,
Min dīrat al-‘Ālmān matā yarga’ ‘alaynā;
Kull ‘Umān al-yawm mishtāqa li-shūftak
Yā sayyid sulṭān ‘inta linā dukhr

When he returns to us, this heroic leader
from the land of Germany, when he returns to us
All of Oman today misses seeing you
O lord Sultan, you are a treasure to us.

a. Praise, Power, and Relationality

Insofar as praise is addressed to power, it is relational. Because it often moves from lower
to higher status individuals, it can index relations of weakness as well as strength. Shryock and
Howell’s (2001) investigations of karam (CLA. generosity, hospitality) in the Hashemite
Kingdom of Jordan confirm this fact. Their discussion of the ways in which the ‘Adwani tribe
has positioned themselves vis-à-vis the ruling Hashemites reveal, to them, the strength and the
weakness of their position. When they were told the names of the “who’s who” of ‘Adwani
notables over the course of their research, they found that the lists were often given to Shryock in
confidence. Not only could these lists provoke envy in other families, but:
a mood of insecurity accompanies the construction of these lists, because they show beyond all doubt that the power to make (or break) an ‘Adwani notable now lies securely in government hands. Rhetorically, the lists create a double bind: they stand as proof of the “good relations” between the ‘Adwan, a shaykhly house, and the Hashemites, Jordan’s ruling house, but they simultaneously betray a spirit of calculated self-promotion that should never trouble the heads of the truly powerful, who bestow favors on others and rely on status inferiors to praise them for it. As the proverb says, “He who praises himself is a liar” (man hamad nafs-u fa-howa kâdhib). (Shryock 2001:253-4)

Shryock and Howell’s report shows two important facets of the relationships between praise and power: first, praise marks unequal relations. Since “real power” in some sense cannot be dependent, showing unambiguous dependency signals weakness. The ‘Adwani can only claim power through their dependence on the Hashemite state, and so can make only a limited and circumscribed claim on power. More importantly for our case here, however, is the fact that power can secure praise, but cannot praise itself. Self-praise makes one “a liar”; it is a praise that cannot be trusted. Proper praise, believable praise, requires “status inferiors” to produce and disseminate. This situation is partly what prompts the distribution of goods—economic power cannot be directly transformed into hegemonic power without human performance. Praise is necessary, but it cannot be produced by those who are praised—therefore, praisers are necessary as well. If praisers depend on giving, givers depend on praise.

b. Offering Invitations, Acknowledging Mutuality

The more time I spent with Omani performers of praise poetry, the more I realized that they knew that they were necessary and were proud of it. This does not mean that they were haughty. Instead, they had a sense of purpose as valued members of the community, even though this perception could be shaken in various ways. Performers think that their praise is not only an obligation but is necessary to the function of the overall Generosity/Legitimacy mechanism. However, the way that performers’ participation is realized changes the way in which
participants in the Generosity/Legitimacy mechanism perceive their relationship. One practice that performers point to as evidence of their necessity is the formal invitation. My research concurs with Christensen and Castelo-Branco’s survey of Ṣuḥār insofar as performers expect to be invited to perform, and not commanded (2009, 218-9).

As a contrast, in medieval examples of poetic patronage we see that poets took advantage of the presence of the king, shah, or caliph in his court to attempt to solicit patronage. This is similarly a way for praisers to affirm their necessary role in the “economy of praise” (Kurke 2013). However, poets were not necessarily invited to give praise poetry in the courts of caliphs, they simply showed up and expected an informed audience. For example, in Kumiko Yamamoto’s *The Oral Background of Persian Epics: Storytelling and Poetry* (2003), she presents Persian courts as having been relatively open to poets, with rulers distributing largesse in anticipation of the arrival of praisers at festivals. The poets, reciting praise and epics, were a kind of entertainment. She cites a courtly text on such an exchange:

[Mas'ūd I] sat down to the feast of nowruz. He had brought many presents and taken a lot of trouble [in preparing the feast]. He heard poems (še'r) recited by poets (šo'arā'), to enjoy himself in this time of winter, and unwind and relax. [When the poets finished reciting,] he gave them presents. (2003, 54)

Present-day Omanis, on the other hand, do not perceive their razha poetry in praise contexts as being for entertainment and would not imagine performing without explicit permission. One important way that performance groups demonstrate their necessity to the praised is by only performing for an invitation (da'wa, Christensen and Castelo-Branco (2009) also report *barwah*). While many performances involve the direct transfer of cash, groups leaders made

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91 When I asked the troupe about the term *barwah*, several respondents were surprised that it was in use in Ṣuḥār in between the 1980s and 2005. One described *barwah* this way: “*barwah* means a letter from the wālī, a letter with a seal from the wālī that says something, I don’t know what. I
sure to tell me that they would not perform for leaders without express invitation from some involved representative.

The invitation for performance at these kinds of events always moves from the powerful to the less powerful. Making a request makes one vulnerable. Thus, when local leaders (like the wālī of Manaḥ in the case of the fi ḥubb Qābūs festival) call a meeting to solicit the performance groups and invite them to participate, groups perceive this as a proper way in which the leader subtly lowers himself in order to secure their involvement. The invitation is a potential signal of dependency because it shows how the festival requires the participation of status inferiors. This is a major way in which groups point to their necessity in this circuit of exchange—they could not be ordered, but only invited by leaders, just as one would approach an equal—even if this equality is temporary.

Aḥmad, the ‘āzī and Vice President of the group in al-Maʿarā, related that he was summoned (along with the leaders of the other performance groups in Manaḥ) to the office of the wālī in order to discuss setting up the fi ḥubb Qābūs festival to celebrate. He emphasized that this was a formal invitation, not a command. “It was consultation (shūrā),” he pointed out,

it was not a command (ʿamr). In fact, this was a very good meeting and the first in a long time. We have been invited to come to the office of the wālī before to discuss performances. This was different. All the groups came, and the wālī said he wanted a big performance. Māshāllah, you saw the crowd (al-gumhūr), it was a big event. I have never seen this in my time in the group, it was the largest in Manaḥ that I can remember.

The fact that Aḥmad considers this consultation reflects how important the notions of an invitation and collaboration are for the praise groups. The notion of consultation is a crucial one for Omani political and social life (Ghubash 2001). In this case, the wālī’s invitation brought

have never seen a real barwah but that’s how things were done in the old days. If he [the wālī] announced something, if he made a ruling, then there would be barwah.”
together the four different neighborhood groups in Manaḥ, which impressed many Manḥī-s. In a conversation after the conclusion of the event, I asked a few members about the cooperation they saw:

**BJG:** Have the four groups ever worked together before this? This was a very large number of performers today, I think.

**Ḥamad:** This is the biggest number I have seen. This is why al-Waḥshī [the wālī of Manah] is respected, because he does consultation with all the groups.

**BJG:** And not all the groups get along, you might say. They don’t all agree.

**Salām:** “We say ‘bull’, and they say milk it.”

**Ḥ:** That’s true. But this is what al-Waḥshī does, this is why he is loved. He brings us together, brings everyone [together] and brings a big participation. His invitation is heard.

The wālī’s ability to draw together the disparate groups—to persuade, to arbitrate—is a critical ability of “the shaykh” in Arabian political culture. Part of this comes from knowing when to issue invitations and to whom. For Ṣuḥāris, such an invitation is crucial to the organization and proper reception of performance, especially when the performance is addressed to power in front of the wālī’s office (Christensen and Castelo-Branco 2009, 218-9). It is no less so for Manḥī-s, who take the invitation as a kind of solicitation and the beginning of an obligation. “Without an invitation, how could we *razḥa*?” another performer remarked when I

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92 *Naqūl thūr, yiqūlū ḥilbuh.* This is an old saying, perhaps not so commonly used anymore. Salām and I enjoyed talking about old sayings and idioms and he had brought this one up in a group conversation earlier that day. The phrase refers to disagreement or two people who do not see something the same way. Usually it is applied to people who ignore advice or incorrectly assess a situation. In this case, it can refer to obstinate disagreement or contradiction stemming from dislike.
“[Would] we just go and take their space, be annoying, sing and dance for money just like that? No, never, doctor, that would be no good.”

Though invitations always move from the powerful to the less powerful, this “power” can be situational. For example, oftentimes members of the performance troupes will expect direct invitations to perform, rather than general requests from troupe leadership. The “administration” (O. Ar. 'idāra or mudīriya) of the troupe often announces group events by sending a written invitation that stipulates location, uniform, event type, and whether or not group members should bring antique rifles. Here is the invitation to the festival sent to members of the Firqat al-'Arabī:

“For the Love of Qābūs” festival:

Delighting in the high station and radiating benevolence of His Highness and being aware of his generous favors (makrūmāt) and the gifts ('aṭāʿāt) of the renaissance and its continuing progress over 47 years, the sons of Manaḥ are honored to hold the “For the Love of Qābūs” festival at 4:00 pm next Friday afternoon 06/10/2017 at the racetrack of the Dressage Club near the Manaḥ Health Center. The festival will include: 1) Men’s Arts; 2) Women’s Arts; 3) Horse and Camel shows; 4) Drone aviation; 5) Unfurling of the colors of the flag of the Sultanate and pictures of His Majesty; 6) Closing ceremony (al-ʿāzī). The invitation is open to all.

In the name of [local shaykh] and by his request I present to you an invitation to participate in the festival in the Governate of Manaḥ and in the neighborhood of al-Maʿāmād near the Manaḥ Health Center. We ask of you that you participate alongside your brothers in the 4 performance troupes of Manaḥ in the mid-afternoon and into the evening and we would be honored by your attendance and presence. You are welcome as honored guests or as participants and may God grant you a thousand blessings in bond and wealth to raise the level of the arts in our Governate by your presence and attendance.

The date is Friday 06/10/2017 and we will begin in the mid-afternoon, from the ‘Aṣr prayer until the ‘Ashā’ prayer and afterwards God willing we will eat dinner (we will tell you if it’s cancelled). Your attendance in any number will be most welcome, an honor and a pleasure from you all, but as always the largest number of participants is the best. We ask especially for the participation of the youth; please listen and respond to this message. Your participation is most welcome.

In regard to uniforms, please wear a white dishdāsha and a maṣar and khanjar of your own. If you do not have a khanjar with you, they will be provided and available for you from the common supply. Guns are not permitted at the event.

Please accept my sincerest regards and most beautiful greetings, and may your days pass in health and good fortune.
c. How Invitations Avoid “Praise from Home”

Invitations are also crucial because they make praise a voluntary engagement, at least nominally. Two other proverbs make this clear: a pan-Arab caution that “Only the Devil praises himself” (lā yashukkar nafsu illā ʿIblīs) and the delightfully Omani colloquial “He who praises himself deserves a kick” (Bū maddāḥ nafsu yibālu rafsa). Praisers are necessary to the proper functioning of the circuit of exchange that animates the Generosity/Legitimacy mechanism, but “praise from home is mixed with blame” and self-praisers are “liars.” This means that forced praise is just as tainted as self-praise. This puts pressure on leaders to make praise look as voluntary as possible. Hence the importance of the invitation, even if this invitation cannot really be ignored. Elites must seek out praisers. That said, leaders do maintain a distance between themselves and performers during the event. For example, at the fī ḥubb Qābūs event, despite the large number of participants and the successful round of invitations, all the invited guests sat in a long row in front of the dancing and parade ground. None of these important guests, including members of the Bū Saʿīd family, performed praise for the Sultan. In an interview about why leaders do not perform the razḥa in Oman the way Saudi royalty perform al-ʿarḍa al-najdiyya, one respondent replied that:

Respondent: It’s really rare that a shaykh might do razḥa; but in Saudi it could be that they do it because they need to make more confidence in the leaders, you know? Here we have confidence in our leader and in our society (‘andonā thiqqa baynunā wa-as-sulṭān wa-al-mugtama’) so why would he come and razḥa? He knows that we will do razḥa even if he was not there among us, but I don’t know about in Saudi. I wonder if they would do it without him, because you know you will be rewarded for doing [it]. Us, no,
there’s no reward, there’s no money. We do it because we are proud, and there is a request. How could we refuse an invitation to show our pride?

BJG: There is a line from the group in Bahlā, “sayyidnā fī al-‘amr wa-ṭā’a” (Our leader [we’re with you] whether ordered or voluntarily obedient).

R: Yeeeeeessssss, exactly. We would do razḥa if there was an order [to do so] and voluntarily, as well. Exactly.

This respondent muses that the political situation in Saudi Arabia may make the façade of equality more important, which leads to shared performance with leaders. While Omanis of high social rank might write praise poetry, they rarely perform it. I myself have never seen a “leader” or host of any description participate in the razḥa, much less an ‘āzī, but this does not mean that this never occurred. When we look at the written history of razḥa-s in chapter 5, in fact, we will see that leaders are at least recorded to have participated. The changes in the social rank and role of participants reveal some important changes in Omani society over the last 50 years that will be investigated in chapter 6.

Praise from a Second “Home”: Locating the Moral Economy

After an invitation, groups start to plan their performances, write poetry, and choose their uniforms. This is the point at which praisers begin to (re)construct their moral economy, to insist once again on the reciprocal relations that tie giving and praising. Once the groups in Manaḥ were invited to perform for the fī ḥubb Qābūs festival, many began to write razḥa-s for the event. Once again, the poet who gave the ‘āzī at the soccer pitch, Rabī’, volunteered himself for the performance of this ‘āzī, and the expectation of the other groups was that he would write a new qaṣīda for the event. The types of poems that the groups wrote will occupy us here insofar as they represent themselves as a proper community to offer praise, and reciprocally, to accept
generosity from leaders. One crucial social function that performance groups accomplish in performance is to help identify the community that they represent as morally and culturally correct recipients of generosity. This means that performers recognize the circuit of generosity not as a general pattern of exchange that obtains between givers and receivers or leaders and followers, but specifically within their communities. Praise is discursively realized as a necessity chiefly because of what it does within the specific moral, political, and cultural community in which it is sung.

In Oman, the Sultan, various local or national patrons, and families are praised for their traits or actions, but always from a certain person from a certain location. Omanis see this as a necessary way in which specific deeds are recognized by specific communities, be they regional, ethnic, or religious. Omani praise practices are always tied in one way or another to a discrete location. This is partially accomplished by the way the performance groups are named after a particular town, region or even neighborhood. All groups are officially connected by way of name and by formal governmental registration with a particular locale. For example, the four groups that were invited to the festival represented four large neighborhoods in Ma'anaḥ. They were: 1) The Firqat Ḥārat al-Bilād li-l-funūn al-sha‘biyya; 2) The Firqat al-‘Arabī li-l-funūn al-sha‘biyya; 3) The Firqat al-Ma‘amad li-l-funūn al-sha‘biyya; and 4) the new Firqat al-Fiqīn li-l-funūn al-sha‘biyya, representing, respectively, the Ḥārat al-Bilād neighborhood, the al-Ma‘arā neighborhood, the Ma‘amad neighborhood, and the Fiqīn neighborhood. Praise rarely occurs without also mentioning the nation, a state, or even a village, though this is more common in ‘āzī than it is in razḥa. Due to the shorter form of razḥa poems, they often require tacit knowledge of the present event and its surroundings to be fully understood. A good example of the way that
poetry frames the relationship between generous givers and praisers is a *razha* written and then sung by Khalfān, an older and founding member of the Firqat al-Ma’amad, at the festival.

‘Awal salām allah li-Qābūs al-mu‘azzam
Yalī ‘alaynā fād bigūd wa makrūmāt,
Ṣabah ‘umān al-yawm fī khabr al-nu‘am
Wa yā allah ‘amru madīd sanīn (fī) tā’ ilāt

First, God’s greeting to Qābūs the great,
He rules over us, overflowing with generous gifts and benefits,
Oman awoke today to blessed news,
O God, his age great, years of glory.

Figure 21. Khalfān and another performer holding a copy of the *razha*-s Khalfān had written for the Fī ḫubb Qābūs festival. The first is discussed above—in conversation, everyone agreed that he had forgotten a “fī” in his writing in the last line. “It rides better that way,” a younger poet remarked.

Part of this poem is clear, but the “blessed news” refers to the appearance of Qābūs on television—the reason for the festival. This kind of poem marks the distribution of goods
because the “generous gifts and benefits” (gūd wa mākrūmāt) specifically refers to goods and services delivered by a patron to various clients (also from the root of the word used here for “generosity” or “hospitality,” karam) as a deed to be recognized by the “first greeting.”93 It is also important to note that while no location is verbally encoded in the text, Khalfān is so famous in Manaḥ that the poem is automatically associated with Ma’amad and its community. The community recognizes the good deed of the Sultan, the “blessed news” of his continued health, and wishes for yet more. It is a recognition of a particular social relationship as well as a plea for it to continue, from a certain poet, in a certain place, and at a certain time. The wish for his long life is implicitly a wish for these same kinds of social relations to continue, where a powerful figure is morally obligated to help his own community.

While much of this locational marking is accomplished pragmatically and deictically in razḥa, that is, through the people, group, grammar, and location of performance, in ‘āzī these markers are often verbalized. Recall the ‘āzī presented for the soccer pitch in al-Ma‘arā:

These are our benefits in Manaḥ / We salute the designs that are in good order,

[Those] that Qābūs taught us and acts in good faith / Qābūs is a physician to the 'umma.

O my homeland al-Ma'arā, peace! / You gave me pride, you gave me respect.

First the poet mentions the town and governate of Manaḥ, followed by the larger (potentially transnational) notion of the ‘umma, the religious community of Muslims. After this, he mentions the small neighborhood of al-Ma‘arā, the location of the performance and the home of most of the participants.

93 See Caton 1986 for a discussion of the importance of greeting. In Oman as well there exists an elaborate culture of greeting with various registers and requirements stemming from cultural and religious sources.
The ‘āzī written for the festival mentions the Sultan alongside various cities and landmarks associated with state power:

… / And with one tongue⁹⁴ they all spoke

With one tongue, all of them [spoke] / and the results and blessings came,

Witnessed by the Ḍaṣr al-‘Alam⁹⁵ / In Muscat, the fine, the unshakeable.

In Muscat and the rest of the cities / and in every inch of the nation,

We thank [Qābūs] happily and publicly / God loves those who are grateful.

Ziyād al-Shukaylī also incorporates location-specific lines into his 2016 ‘āzī, in direct speech to the Sultan.

BJG: Often, bā, you say “You have Sumay’il, you have Ḥazim, your glory stretched from the lands of the Persians to Zanzibar, you have Buraymī and Ṣuḥār.” I’m not quoting the lines, the poetic lines exactly but that is the construction, with “you have” (‘indak). Why is that so, why do you say the cities as a list like that?

Ziyād: Yes. Well, I do that to, to list the glories of Oman (amgād ‘Umān). I do that so that all know the breadth of Oman (misāfat ‘Umān), and the great cities that it is composed of. I also do this for Bahlā’, you didn’t mention Bahlā’, but I also do this for Bahlā’. So it is known, we are also a part of Oman and we are Omanis.

BJG: But you use the “you/your” pronoun (-ak). Why do you do this?

Z: That’s because I am speaking to His Highness. I am speaking to him. If I am speaking with you, I say “you” is that not so? He knows me, and I know him. He needs to know who I am and I am from Bahlā’ and I am of the Shukayl and like this. I’m not just someone from nowhere, or

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⁹⁴ Referring here to Sultan Qābūs acting on behalf of all Omanis.
⁹⁵ The royal palace built by Qābūs in Muscat, after demolishing his father’s.
asking for money or help or aid with no right or basis (min ghayr haqq wala ‘asās). In the old days, as I told you before, the ‘āzī informed people about news and it was also a form of requesting aid. If you request aid, there must be a relationship, it’s on the basis of something [or “it’s because of something,” (lāzim hunāk ‘alāqa fa-huwa ‘alā ‘asās shay). And what is the basis? It’s because of help from you, you supported them, you stood by them, and they reciprocate (Wa-al-‘asās mū? Al-‘asās huwa al-rifid mink. Tarfidhū, tugīrhū96, wa-b’ad yiraddū lak).

In this case, Ziyād makes clear the ways in which support relies on mutual relations and reputation. He is not just any poet, but rather an Omani Arab Muslim poet from Bahlā’, with a historical relationship with Muscat, the Sultan, and the various cities of Oman. The cities belong to the Sultan, and insofar as they do, he is beholden to consult with them. Whether he does so is a different matter. What Ziyād is saying here, with the tact of a “status inferior” and praiser, is that there is a certain relationship between good, moral, Omani people and a good, moral leader. He is drawing a socially realized circle around a particular moral economy. The praiser is using the elite’s reputation for providing help to secure help in the present.

Marshall Sahlins has pointed out that kinship distance often recapitulates the moral stakes of exchange relationships: kin are given things freely, community members are given gifts (to be returned), and strangers are only engaged with in impersonal market exchange (1972, 190ff.). While this can be complicated, praise from non-elites to elites might be conceived as a way of mediating the enormous social distance between praisers and the praised by ensuring that the praised are kept as intimates in exchange, if not in kinship distance. Praise calls on powerful

96 From the form IV verb ‘ajār from the root j-ā/ū-r, “to stand by or aid.” Other verbs from this root include “to be neighbors with” and “to support, shelter, or protect.”
social elites and attempts to embed them within such a fictive kinship proximity just as it seeks to embed them within a moral economy—the two are linked.

Praisers mythopoetically create a morally valenced relationship. This not only draws some of the power of the poetry back to the poet (the praiser reminds the praised where he is from or where he is) but he also in some way binds thepraised to the place or community. Von Hallberg writes, “the casual modern view is that praise is a gift to a deserving or undeserving recipient. The ancient one was rather that praise circulates through a culture, justly binding people in a network of obligations” (2014, 48). The praiser draws the praised into a “network of obligations” that involves forming social relationships with the praiser and his community, however brief. The crucial resource that is manipulated by poets here is fame, name, or reputation. Poets use the potency of having a good reputation in both positive and negative sense. In a positive sense, they praise good deeds to add to the reputation and fame of the praised. In the negative sense, they provide models for kinds of good behavior that would be praised. It is this kind of negative praise that helps to manipulate leaders. Interpreting what Khalfān sang to the wālī and to the Sultan: “God lengthens the life of those who give generously… you do give generously, don’t you?”

a. In and Out of the Moral Economy: Proper and Improper Praisers

While it is the case that praise comes from proper sources, it is also true that Arab Omanis praise the Sultan and local leaders for things that all manner of people use. For example, praisers often mention the generosity of the Sultan with regard to rebuilding and restoring “Old Towns” (referring to the sections of abandoned houses and living spaces adjacent to modern housing built by the state in one way or another), highways, hospitals, modern amenities, power transformers, and water resources. All of these “good deeds” are of general social benefit. South
Asian and European guest workers, as well as tourists, benefit just as much if not more from these infrastructural investments, and yet they (and I) are not expected to praise the Sultan for them, certainly not in Omani poetic idioms. So why should Omani Arabs continue to praise these general benefits?

Asking about why only Omanis praise things that everyone uses, I recorded several different answers.

**Respondent 1:** How could anyone else praise the Sultan for these things? You say everyone uses the highway, yes, this is the reality. But how could you Englishmen praise the sultan for this? No, it’s not your place, you cannot. You use it, yes, but it is for development, part of the renaissance.

Another:

**R2:** We praise, as I told you, on the basis of our duty, it’s upon us (*‘alā asās al-wājib ‘alaynā*). It is not upon you, or the Indians, or anyone else.

A third replied:

**BJG:** So, just imagine that you never performed for the opening of the soccer pitch or anything like that. Could you use the soccer pitch? For example, the players didn’t do *razha* but they use it the most of course.

**R3:** Of course they didn’t need to *razha* in order to use the pitch. But I tell you, if no one came to recognize and honor the *shaykh*-s that helped build the pitch, that would be a great shame.

**BJG:** You mean that you couldn’t use it?

**R3:** … No, no, I don’t think so, I mean, it would be a great shame.

**BJG:** But it is for you, I mean, it is built for your sake.
R3: Yes, also [Bank Muscat, who funded the construction] and the state, I mean, the health ministry. They [all have] plans. It is for our sake but we have… to accept it in an appropriate way (al-mafrūḍ annu nataqabiluh bi-ṭarīqa munāsiba).

And finally:

R4: I tell you, now we rely on foreigners. But they will not be here forever, we don’t need them. We are strong and we don’t need them, soon they will all be gone.

BJG: They will be gone? I’m a foreigner.

R4: Yes, that is true. I mean the Indians will be gone. We have given them enough already.

BJG: And we foreigners are not able to praise the Sultan for these benefits, as you say.

R4: They cannot even speak Arabic, or English, God knows. They wouldn’t know who to praise, who to respect.

An appropriate response, it is clear, is a praise response. In addition, it is not just a praise response, but praise coming from certain sources and bodies. In our case, it is from Omani Arab Muslim men from the rural Interior region of Oman. Indian guest workers, foreigners, and ethnographers are not fully able to participate in the shared moral economy that performers call into being as they praise.

However, as we’ve seen, their praise is not a kind of reflex, an automatic recognition of good deeds, but rather an orchestrated and mutual realization of a social relationship with known parties. Foreigners are both shamed and symbolically excised from the social fabric by their inability to praise and “know” who to respect. Omani praisers not only have the ability to praise in socially acceptable ways, but also know what relationships are important and what personalities and activities require praising. Even for appropriately positioned praisers, however,
simply showing up to opening day festivities with praise poems comes from a place a weakness. Likewise, buying praise outright is questionable. Being invited to accept and recognize the good leadership of the Sultan’s development programs through poetry and performance is quite a different relationship than showing up uninvited with sycophantic verse in hand, certainly to Omanis. Further, this kind of location- and community-specific praise reveals the ways in which power has circulated in Oman, that is, in a relatively small-scale but modular rulership. Most importantly, however, this kind of praise poetry seeks to draw the praised into a moral community with the praisers. Rabī’’s ‘āzī for the event concludes by recognizing this:

This is our way and our path / O God, we ask, all of us
Preserve for us our Sultan / And extend his life for years.

b. Grabbed by Praise: Encompassing the Giver

Earlier in this section, I indicated that praisers know that they are necessary, and that the praised are partly dependent on them for praise. One way that they identify this, I showed, was by accepting invitations, and another was identifying themselves as part of a specific community with the praised. Another way that praisers see themselves as having some power over the praised is the fact that the praised must pay attention to the praiser. 97 This is especially obvious when praisers speculate on the emotional states of the praised, whether they induce tears or an assortment of other emotional states that are more specific to Omani emotional registers.

I want to cite here an explanation of this viewpoint put forward in a group interview in Manaḥ. Late in my fieldwork, I had started to focus on why razḥa was a group performance activity, and why it was necessary in addition to the qaṣīda. I spoke with the young ‘āzī of the

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97 Earlier I referred to this as “encompassing” the praised, following Meneley 1996.
Firqa al-‘Arabī troupe in his new home (fīllā, “villa”) on the outskirts of al-Ma‘arā. As I drove up with Ḥamad, he noted the new garden. “I haven’t been to his new house yet.” He playfully grabbed my arm as he turned the car off. “I’m sorry, villa!” He laughed at the term used for these kinds of homes, separated off from one another and surrounded by a 2.5m high wall. Ḥamad lived in an older home, tucked tightly together with others on the main road, a secondary stage in the move out of the old walled quarters of Omani towns filled with hayyān, mud-brick and date-palm trunk houses that accommodated large families.

Aḥmad began to slide the metal gate open to greet us after Ḥamad honked the car horn. Ḥamad elbowed me as I was opening the car door and smiled again, pointing with his nose to the gate. I knew he wanted me to shout, “hawd, hawd!,” a type of greeting and warning to homeowners, which announced guests, that meant something like “knock-knock!” This was not considered very refined behavior and Omani were delighted whenever I could be cajoled enough to do it. I was saved by Aḥmad simply waving us in. We walked into the courtyard and Aḥmad showed us some new gardens, low against the cement wall. I was encouraged to take a seat and prepare my recorder in the majlis, a separated room to host guests. Aḥmad’s was air conditioned, I immediately noticed, to a bone-chilling 16C. When the friends re-entered, I rose to greet them and we exchanged pleasantries again. Aḥmad, who had rather infamously (within the group, anyway) ignored my WhatsApp messages for a few days, pointed to a deep cut on his palm as an explanation. “I’m telling you, the phone beeped, and I reached to grab it and pow! I wounded my hand on the fence I was working on, there was blood everywhere. I went right to the hospital and I forgot about it, doctor, wallahi.”
“It’s no matter,” I said, waving it off, “as long as you’re well.” We settled into the interview session after sharing coffee, dates, and fruit. As the interview continued, I asked about *qaṣīda* and ‘āzī:

**BJG:** I’ve heard that you can ask for things in poetry, for example, you can ask for money, or help, or what have you.

**A:** Yes, I’ve heard that. That is so.

**BJG:** Can you do the same in ‘āzī? Can you ask for…

**A:** Oh, no no…

**Ḥ:** No, I’ve never heard of that…

**A:** I’ve never heard of, yeah, right, I’ve never heard of that. No I don’t think so.

**BJG:** Why is that?

**A:** [scratches his beard and looks up to the ceiling and over to Ḥ] Eh…

**Ḥ:** Eh, well I think…

**A:** It’s not done, it’s not done.

**Ḥ:** [shakes his head vigorously] It’s not done.

**A:** That is the *qaṣīda* in which you request things. It’s a great shame to not fulfill a request when it’s asked from a shaykh in a *qaṣīda*, a great shame (*wāgid ‘ayb*). You don’t ask in ‘āzī; in ‘āzī, you need to show strength, manliness (*al-rigūla*), I mean, your pride and heritage. You represent your community, so you need to bring enthusiasm/vigor (*al-ḥamās*).

**BJG:** Is there no enthusiasm/vigor in *qaṣīda*?

**A:** In *razḥa* there is more, much more, no doubt, *māshāllah*. As you know, doctor, *razḥa* is unique to Oman, and so it touches the heart of all Omanis.

**BJG:** Even leaders and others who have authority?
A: Everyone in the same way. Do you remember, yā ḥakī [turning to Ḥ] the al-Marzūqī ʿāzī when the Sultan shed one tear? You can see it, doctor, go on YouTube or the internet. We could see it now. He was just a boy, he was so young, but he had, māshāllah, he had a voice. [the conversation continues as he searches for it.] … Ah, here, here, look… there, there’s the tear. Look at him, [sitting] steadfast on the throne, and even then see how the arts grab him (wa bʿad shūf kayf al-funūn tamsikuḥ)98

BJG: Yes, I see that. Have you ever seen anyone cry at one of your events?

Ḥ: No, no, but I have spoken to people afterwards and they know us because we always bring masculinity and enthusiasm/vigor. You can see the ṭarab overtake them (tirūm tushāhid kayf yistaʿiz al-ṭarab ʿalayhum).

BJG: Ṣarab? The way other Arabs talk about ṭarab, that’s what you mean?

Ḥ: Yeah, you know about ṭarab I think. It’s very important…

BJG: Wait, what’s ṭarab, how do you see…

A: …Ṭarab is, I mean, a strong emotion, it’s a strong feeling from someone who listens to the arts. They are grabbed, they are grabbed [by the arts].

BJG: How do you see that?

A: How do you see ṭarab? Well, maybe they move in their chair, they move their arms, they can’t look away. This is ṭarab. Then they are with you.

A few days later, I brought up the conversation with another group of performers:

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**BJG:** So, do you think it is good when you grab the shaykh-s and guests? Emotionally, I mean, when they are caught up in ṭarab?

**R:** Is it good? Yes, it is good that they listen, and if they listen they will feel the emotions of the arts. All this ṭarab talk you are telling us about, I don’t know. If they invite a group, they must listen, it’s a great shame if they don’t listen or look at their phone or any of this. If they are a romantic type, I suppose they might be grabbed, but at the least they must listen.

**BJG:** Why must they listen?

**R:** They must listen to them (lāzim yistamiʿūn ilayhum) because they invited the group. If you invite the group and treat them poorly, they will know and not listen to your invitation a second time. Listening to them is respect, even if it is boring. [laughter].

These conversations show how performers consider the ability of the arts to “grab” the praised an important display of their power. They do not have many examples of the ways in which specific political goals or aims are achieved by the arts (though such stories are common in the genre of qaṣīda). Rather, they point out the important way in which leaders are brought into the moral and emotional community of the performers through the emotional displays of the praised. The praised are “with” the praisers when they are emotionally “grabbed.” Those who are praised are obligated to listen to the praise and may be strongly affected by it. Though this effect may be unpredictable, it does indicate how histories of performance and language can mark the boundaries of communities.

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99 This position recalls Wellstead’s comment on Omani performers: “I found no surer way of exciting a kindly feeling towards myself, when among this rude people, than by listening with apparent interest to these performances [songs and dances]” (Wellstead 1837, 75).
Order and Chaos, Pride and Disgrace: Embodying Power as Emotional Display

If praisers from a certain place and group are necessary to this circulation, they are not neutral mediators of praise and generosity. Instead, they actively shape their own roles within this circuit by managing their comportment and presenting themselves in a certain way. They do so by embodying power through manifesting dignity (al-kirāma), honor (al-sharaf\(^\text{100}\)), and pride (al-fakhr) along with a number of other potent emotional and physical states. In this section, I want to highlight the ways in which Omani performers of razha and ’āzī present themselves in such a way that displays power as dignity, honor, and pride rather than dependency. It is very important that performers of razha and ’āzī do not project weakness, fear, or helplessness, which is disgraceful. Much like the Manobo in the Philippines with whom Buenconsejo studied find stinginess to be disgraceful, Omani praisers find a wide array of emotional and physical states disgraceful in performance—undress, uncleanliness, unkempt hair, dirty clothing—and exhibit a constant concern with grooming and scent. Loss of emotional control, uncoordination, femininity or squeamishness, sycophancy, and a lack of tact or good manners in speech or action are similarly considered unbecoming and ruin a performance.

The most serious flaw of a razha, though, is one that communicates weakness and dependency. A razha that “begs” (tas’āl) is reprehensible—powerful men do not beg. As we noted earlier, the oral qaṣīda, while an undoubtedly important genre, may in fact signal weakness when compared to the oral ’āzī or razha precisely because it might make an appeal or request.

\(^\text{100}\) ‘ird (CLA, “honor”), as a legal constituent of a person inhabiting an honor system, as for example discussed by Frank Stewart (1994), is not discussed in this section. The term al-nāmūs, referring to a kind of personal honor and code in Oman (and heard often in ’āzī poetry because it rhymes with Qābūs), is also not discussed here (though see Meneley 1996, 103 for more literature on this specific word).
Performers perceive of *razha* as an extremely dignified practice, one in which “all Omanis are equal,” including the Sultan and other leaders. Performers and elites are tentatively equal—that is, not in a *magister* and *minister* relationship. They are equal insofar as they are members of a moral economy, necessary to one another if not materially similar. *Razha*-s should project power, confidence, poise, masculinity, and dignity. The three Arabic terms listed above do not exhaust the terms used to describe the feelings of dignity, honor, and pride that are developed in the course of *razha*, but they are the most common. Finer-grained distinctions can undoubtedly be made, but for our purposes here these terms and translations shall suffice.

Most Omani men I worked with perceived participation in the *funūn* as an honorable practice, one that displays both their heritage and the strength of their traditions. Since each performance is not only evidence of their pride and dignity but also an expansion of it, performers interpret *razha* not as an expression of weakness and dependency, but of strength and autonomy. Some performers point to the fact that the government patronizes these events as evidence of their acceptance, while others say that they are more accepted nowadays because the government sponsors them. In any case, as opposed to other nearby regions, performance of *razha* or *‘āzī* does not denigrate Omanis. In nearby Yemen and in the Mashriq, dancers and drummers (especially women) are considered to occupy low social strata and are accorded very little social prestige (van Nieuwkerk 1995; Adra 2001). While Omani performers are not social elites (as very few if any of the praised perform) they are also not specifically disparaged. They are, in Shryock’s terms, “status inferiors” who are nevertheless necessary to elite reproduction. I sometimes heard light criticism and playful joking about music or singing, especially mocking certain types of voices, but discourses on Omani nationalism appear to have replaced older assumptions about performers.
Christine Eickelman reports some of these older perspectives when she writes that *shaykh*-ly women in al-Ḥamrā’ do not sing at weddings or for religious festivals, and neither do their male kin. Rather, it is “the descendants of slaves” who make music for the festivals (1984, 73-5). This seems to fail to distinguish between non-*shaykh*-ly Arabs and African-descended enslaved populations. During my research, Arabs of the ‘Abriyīn tribe in al-Ḥamrā’, descendants of those who Eickelman described, noted that many of their ancestors participated in the arts and they were not necessarily descendants of enslaved populations. This is perhaps a question of perspective: as many anthropologists have pointed out, those at the bottom of the social structure often have a much better grasp of its nuances than those at the top. The same claim—that music-makers were exclusively drawn from enslaved peoples—was reported by European travel writers who noted that drummers were enslaved Arabic-speakers of African descent (Wellstead 1838, 70-1, 345-8). This is not the case today, where only 35% of participants I interviewed consider themselves or are considered by others to be partial descendants of enslaved people and form the majority of drummers. I draw this distinction not to diminish the role of enslaved Africans in the development of these genres, but to show how at least today, it is not the case that only descendants of enslaved populations perform.

The importance of expressing and embodying dignity in the *razāḥa* is made especially clear when it is compared with behaviors and practices that are not considered dignified. As I was sitting in the old souq of Manaḥ one day, an older performer named Ḥsmā‘īl approached me, asking about my weekend. After obligatory pleasantries, I realized he wanted to share something with me. He began:

“This weekend, I was out with the Sultan,” he boasted.

“Really!” I responded, suspicious. I’d heard this kind of story many times.
“Yeah, he drove by in the area back by the Genāba [the nearby Bedouin], and I was out there getting money, look, I was like this all weekend,” he smiled and threw himself on the ground, scuffling his feet and miming grabbing at fluttering riyāl-s in front of him. “And somebody elbowed me (drukunī)! Wham! And I went ‘oh!’ and fell like this!” He rolled on the ground but still mimed grabbing at money all around him, laughing. The commotion brought over his nephew.

“Uncle, what are you doing? What’s going on here? (Shasālifa?)”

“I’m showing the Englishman about the weekend, the money throwing.”

“All right, Uncle, that’s fine, that’s enough now. Ignore him, doctor, he’s just confused.”

His nephew helped ’Ismāʿīl to his feet. The others looked over briefly and continued in their conversations.

I brought up ’Ismāʿīl’s actions a few days later. Ḥamad tutted.

“Yes, this is the shame of the Omanis (fidāḥat al-ʿumāniyīn), I suppose you want to talk about it. Yes, it is called nashḥa, this is when the Sultan’s guards drive around in a four-by-four and throw out money randomly (bi-gizāf). There’s a crowd that follows them and snatches it up, they run after it grabbing at money. It’s a total mess, chaos (rabsha). You can see it on Twitter and on YouTube, I’ll show you.¹⁰¹ It’s a real disgrace, no honor, no dignity.”

“I’ve never heard of this,” I ventured, “why does the Sultan do this?”

“Why? He has his ways. He’s wise, there must be some reason for it. There are poor folks who are afraid to ask for things, maybe, they need money but are ashamed. Maybe, who knows? Poor ’Ismāʿīl has no sense, he’s old and forgets. He performs with us because he is our kin, he’s

¹⁰¹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WfFDODbdLSA
known in Manaḥ, but he degrades his dignity when he chases the *nashḥa* (*yarakhkha* *nafs* *gārī b’ad al-nashḥa*).

I saw an opportunity for a sensitive question. “So people chase after money thrown from the Sultan’s car? Isn’t that a bit like the *razḥa*-s for the Sultan after he is generous? Is that like *nashḥa*?”

“Ha, not at all,” Ḥamad scoffed, “*razḥa* has the greatest pride and honor, it shows it, *nashḥa* is a disgrace. A complete shame; no, *razḥa* is not at all the same. One is order, the other chaos (*wāḥid lahu al-nīzām, al-thānī rabsha*). It’s completely the opposite, one hundred percent (*al-’aks bi-l-tamām, mi’a bi-l-mi’a*).”

The difference between the ways generosity is recognized in *razḥa* and *nashḥa* is clearly understood, if not articulated. The notion that *razḥa* and *nashḥa* might be the same kind of activity is plainly absurd. One of the main ways Omans conceive of this difference is in the way that performance frames the former as orderly, managed, and the latter as unordered and undignified. *Razḥa* is a display of dignity, pride, prestige, and honor because of the way performers present themselves. Dignity and pride are performed in three ways: in clothing and appearance; in bodily comportment; and in the inculcation of proper emotional states.

**a. Anointing the Mirror of the Self: Material Display and Dignity**

Despite any other social hardships they face, all group members in Manaḥ are sure to present themselves with dignity (*al-kirāma*). This manifests visually in the great care and attention that is given to personal appearance. No performer considers dancing without a crisp *dishdāsha*, a tightly-wound and fresh *maṣar* (ideally made in Kashmir, with elaborate hand-stitched patterns), a leather belt chased with silvered thread holding a new Samsung phone and buckled with a decorative *khanjar* belt dagger, prayer beads, an ‘*asā* camel stick, and an antique
sword and buckler. Just as the Zabidi women that Meneley studied with place great value on personal appearance (Meneley 1996), which brings honor (al-sharaf) to oneself and others, so do Omani performers. Outward appearance is a mirror of inner value.
Figure 22. A fully dressed dancer from the Firqat al-‘Arabī at a performance in ʿAdam. He carries an antique British Lee-Enfield rifle, multiple bullet belts, a khanjar, prayer beads, a crisp dishdāsha and expertly wrapped maṣar.
Figure 23. Two members of the administration of the Firqat al-‘Arabī shopping in Nizwā wearing everyday clothing, the *dishdāsha* and *kumma* cap.
For performers especially, looking put together is a point of pride that brings honor to the viewer as much as the wearer. Before every performance that I saw, performers would take twenty minutes to an hour to dress themselves, usually outside their cars using their windows as mirrors. This period of “dressing up” was very pointedly related to the notion of al-kirāma.

“Dressing well and with fine things shows that we feel our dignity, that we show our dignity and know that we represent more than ourselves when we razha,” claimed one performer from al-Ḥamrā’. Generally speaking, performers would show up in an everyday dishdāsha and kumma (as in Figure 22) and then change into a finer dishdāsha. With the freshly pressed dishdāsha, they would then wrap their maṣar around their head, put on their belt and dagger, slide shell casings into the belt loops, wrap their prayer beads around their dagger hilt, slide their phone into their belt, affix their shoulder straps, and apply perfume to their hands, faces, and headwraps. Afterwards, duelers would bring out their swords and bucklers and test them out. This is done, in general, in small groups, who comment on each other’s clothing continuously. Prior to this, and often occasioned by the upcoming performance, performers would have their hair cut and beards trimmed into a variety of shapes102 (a poorly groomed beard is especially bad form, something I learned the hard way). Oftentimes, one member would help wrap the maṣar of another, tightly tucking in stray lengths of fabric to expose the maximum number of folds, embroidered designs, and frills. The belt often requires a second pair of hands, since it is buckled in the back and is worn very tight. After the belt is buckled, the khanjar dagger must be positioned just so, since

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102 There are dozens of names for beard styles in inner Oman. A beard that is longer around the mouth is referred to as a saʿūdī “Saudi” or a gifla “lock”; if the beard is squarely cut to form a right angle on the cheek, it is a khangar; if the beard tapers to two points on the neck, reaching the sternocleidomastoid muscle, it is a sayfiyya “sword-style” or gambiyya “dagger-style”; if the area around the lower lip is shaved, it is a hilāl “crescent moon”; etc.
some performers like it vertical, others jaunty, others pointed up and away from the abdomen (see Figure 21).

The final touch for most performers is some kind of perfume. Commercial brands of perfume are often used on dishdāsha-s and maṣar-s, but the fragrant smoke of freshly burning frankincense, myrrh, or oud is preferred. Performances are often concluded with the distribution of perfume and local “natural” rosewater (with a distinct smoky smell due to its mode of production). Perfume is thought to combat the sweat and unpleasant odor that builds up through prolonged performance, while “natural” rosewater is poured onto the hands and over the head to “cool and comfort the heart” (yubārid al-fu‘ād), a phrase which has both literal and figurative overtones. All of these elements are interesting to us here because they show us just how much attention is given to a beautiful personal appearance, and also how much that personal appearance is managed socially.

On the day of the fī ḥubb Qābūs festival, after all the invites had been accepted and plans made, I met the Firqat al-ʿArabī at a flat gravel parking area near the Manaḥ Health Centre. Ḥamad and I were the first to arrive and we sat awaiting the others. We chatted for a few minutes while others began to show up. When more members of the administration for the group showed up, they decided to check and see if some more members were out in the farm plots praying. Several farm plots in an agricultural exclave belonging to members of the al-Maʿarā neighborhood are clustered near a government-dug well, equipped with a small bathroom and prayer room. As we pulled up to it along the narrow service road that connects it to town, Ḥamad noticed that the large steel gate that is drawn over the road to prevent people from driving down it was open, commenting that “certainly they’re down here, because [so-and-so] always leaves
this cursed gate open whenever he’s here.” As we pulled up along the farm plots, Ḥamad called out the various owners of the plots and where plots had previously been.

“Here is Khamīs’s [plot],” Ḥamad said, squinting against the setting sun to our west, “and look, his ox is out.” The ox in question was a small, Japanese 4-cycle roto-tiller, sometimes still called a “plow” (O. Ar. ḥirth/a, CLA. mihrāth). Since most plot-farming occurs on a small-scale basis, these hand-pushed tillers have totally replaced the former yoked oxen.

We arrived at the end of the paved road at the small cluster of outbuildings, bathrooms, open washbasin, and prayer rooms and spotted a few neighborhood folks out my passenger window. Smoke billowed in from across the tiny parking lot, spreading from a number of felled date palm trunks, being burned to be re-tilled into the soil. Through the smoke we saw the tall figure of a performer named Muḥsin coming out of the prayer room.

“Look at this,” said someone in the car. “They’re all out here.” Indeed, several more had been just behind Muḥsin, coming down the stairs in good spirits.

“Peace be upon you! How are you all, well I trust? Where have you all been?!” Ḥamad called out from the driver’s seat, leaning over me on the passenger side.

“And peace be upon you as well, I’m well, we’re well. We were praying, what are you up to?”

“What are we up to? You know what we’re doing. We’re getting ready for the event today, and we find you out here?”

“There’s an event today?” Muḥsin feigned a shocked expression. “O, father, I hadn’t heard!”
“You hadn’t heard!” continued Ḥamad. “You hadn’t heard? I told you, I told everyone, I texted, I called, I called your brother, I sent you messages, WhatsApp, I sent you [them]. Have you and your phone been sleeping since Monday?”

“No, I haven’t been sleeping, are you inviting us now? Is there time? I am busy today, I have circumstances.”

“Yes,” Ḥamad replied, dryly, “yes, we all have circumstances. But you know there’s a performance today. We need you there.”

“Well, if there’s a performance, and the doctor is coming,” he smiled at me, “then I’ll be there to support you all.”

The others, lapsing into similar conversations around us, shouting from the car back to the stairs of the prayer room, began to assent as a group.

“We’ll see you there!” several shouted out, walking back to their cars.

As we turned the car around to head back to the parking spot, one of the performers in the car with us tapped my shoulder.

“Did you see that?”

“What do you mean?”

“They didn’t hear about the performance? Ha! No, they heard. They were pretending to be on their farms this morning so we would have to come out and ask them. If they were farming, they would be in tee-shirts and wizar-s [ankle-length waistwraps], God lengthen your life. And they were wearing maṣar-s! Who wears a maṣar to chop down a date palm trunk? They hadn’t heard. Huh! Phooey!”

We all laughed.
The management and primping that occurs before each performance is an understood part of the entire process. The laughter that this anecdote provoked was not mocking their appearance, but rather their obvious deception, related to their desire to be formally invited (echoing our discussion of invitations in the second section of this chapter). Their clothing, in fact, gave them away. One of the first performances I documented was preceded by 45 minutes of dressing and grooming prior to the event itself, and this time was planned by the administration. Young performers are often called to task for showing up without having any of the required items, but these are always provided by the administration of the group in question. Old-timers are particularly apt to call out younger performers who take dozens of selfies throughout the process of dressing up for Instagram, Snapchat, and WhatsApp. Notwithstanding some tensions between the generations, no performer is expected to arrive at a performance “dressed up,” and nearly all comment favorably on one another’s appearance. The well-dressed performers pretending to be working on their farms sought to present themselves as dignified equals with the group leaders I was riding with. Never intending to skip the performance, they instead sought to elicit respect by dressing well and ignoring compulsions to perform. By dressing in their best, they acknowledged their intention to perform while simultaneously asserting their independence and autonomy.

The uniforms for performers are expensive. While *dishdāsha*-s and camel sticks are fairly cheap, with even the very finest rarely exceeding twenty OMR (~fifty USD), *maṣar*-s vary widely in price and quality, with truly splendid *maṣar*-s fetching hundreds of *riyāl*-s. Daggers, while usually given as gifts or inherited, can cost thousands of dollars, and respectable pieces are at least 2-300 OMR ($500-$750). Swords and rifles can be even more expensive and are often decorated with silver wire even after the fact, further increasing their cost. Discussing the cost of
items is one of the common topics of conversation in these dressing up periods, even if the item in question is not owned by the wearer. Due to the cost of daggers and the requirement that uniforms be at least mostly similar, groups often collectively own a few dozen *maṣar*-s and perhaps a dozen presentable daggers for participants to wear in case they forget (or in rare cases) do not own their own dagger. Collectively owned materials establish baseline equality in dress for all members and are freely given out to the needy or forgetful.

Days after the festival I received a call from one of the managers of the Firqat al-ʿArabī, asking me to accompany them on a trip to the souq to inquire after belts.

“Belts?” I asked, “how can I help?” I was confused as to why they might ask me along. Anything I inquired after in the souq, they assured me, was three times more expensive than it was for them.

“It’s part of the uniform, so you should see where they are made and what not,” he offered, “come pick me up and we’ll go look in Manaḥ and if we have to we’ll go to Sināw or Nizwā, ok? We want to buy enough belts for the group, so say 50 or so.”

I assented and we picked up a few more members before heading to a men’s clothing rental shop across from the Sultan Qābūs mosque near the administrative center of Manaḥ. As we hopped out of the car and climbed up to the second story (the first story was a women’s clothing store), Ṭalāl noted that prices would be expensive everywhere since gasoline prices had recently been raised. Similar to many such establishments, the clothing rental store was full of mirrors and gleaming white marble and lined with expensive and beautiful sets of men’s clothing hanging along each wall. After customary greetings, I walked around the walls taking in the different patterns and types of *dishdāsha*.
“This is from Ṣūr,” Ṭalāl noted, slipping up beside me. “You can tell because of how the collar and karkūsha (a small bundle of loosely tied threads that hangs from the collar and is typically perfumed) are sewn in and all wrinkly… and the dagger, here, look, the hilt is gold. Yep, that’s Ṣūrī all right.” Indeed, the front collar was not only embroidered with gold thread but had the wrinkled appearance typical of Ṣūrī style. For Ṭalāl, as for many Ibāḍīs, wearing gold was frowned upon—not a concern for the inhabitants of the majority Sunnī coastal town.

“200 riyāl!” came a hoarse whisper from the front counter. “Yā būwī, you’ve made a mistake. Didn’t I say “salāmu ‘alaykum” when I entered? 200 riyāl, never, no no t in my life have I heard such a thing.”

“What’s the matter? You’re looking for belts?” I asked, walking up to the counter.

“Prices are high,” came the reply from the uninterested Omani shopkeeper. He took down an embroidered bullet belt from the wall behind him and laid it down next to the one that another group member was fingering. “These here are designer bullets (riṣāṣi dīziyin], you know, from China. This is cheaper.” The “designer” bullets were small, hollow metal casts that were painted gold or silver.

“We want the real bullets, antiques. We can’t wear these. Listen, we’re buying bulk, can’t you get us a deal?”

The shopkeeper sighed. “The problem is that each antique bullet is 5 riyāl. You will require hundreds of bullets, I don’t even know where we can get that many. Belts I can get, but bullets?”

“I have a friend in the army,” someone from our group piped up from the back. “Maybe we can go to the army base and get bullets.”
“I don’t think the army will give you bullets,” I laughed. No one seemed to agree, and several thought that going to the army base nearby would be a great idea.

“Okay, thank you,” surrendered Ṭalāl as negotiations staggered to an impasse. “Khalla, let’s get out of here. May god grant you plenty.”

Outside, the group gathered at the bottom of the steps. Each knew a place they could get belts for cheap, had a mountain of bullets at home, and was related to someone who owned a clothing rental store that could get them 40 belts by the weekend.

“Why does everyone want a belt anyway? Don’t people bring their own belts?” I asked Ṭalal. He slowly tilted his head at me and grinned devilishly.

“Well, you see, not everyone can afford these belts. As you heard, they’re very expensive. And someone was taking all those pictures of belts and putting them on Insta[gram]. Now everybody wants a nice belt, with antique bullets, and they’re saying they don’t look dignified next to someone with a nice belt with bullets (mā yabdū karīm ganbū ḥadd bi-ḥazm al-riṣāṣī).”

By taking pictures of the nicer dressed members of the group, who were often younger, I had inadvertently highlighted some internal inequalities in the group. In this case, those who lacked belts made a point of demanding them from the group administration in order to retain their dignity, rather than to redress a particular social inequality. Expressing their inability to maintain a dignified bodily comportment was at least as important, for the group as a whole, than economic disparities between members.

b. Embodying Emotional States, Dangerous and Otherwise

Another factor that contributes to the way in which performance helps to partially overcome the relations of dependency that threaten social relations between rulers and the ruled
is bodily comportment—in this case, the bodily comportment of performers. This is, as we have seen, deeply tied to dress and appearance for most razḥa performers. Performers not only fashion a beautiful appearance but also strive to act in ways that reflect their self-respect and dignity. This does not require a “stiff upper lip” or the reserved bodily comportment of guests or patrons of the performance, who must sit still and pay attention to the performance. Rather, the performer needs to project certain kinds of comportments (that often overlap with emotional states, as we will see in a moment) that are appropriate to his situation. Leaders or administrative members of groups often shade in and out of full participation in the dancing and singing, moving around to encourage participation, take pictures, or greet honored guests. In general, however, embodied behavior is thought to be based in and also project certain emotional states.

These emotional states are linked both to the necessity of praisers (only praisers can safely call up these powerful emotional states) and to the ways in which praisers represent themselves as powerful members of the moral economy. They are, after all, armed, coordinated, virile, energized, and numerous. Razḥa has been a dance for war—and, in the opinion of some performers, it could be again.

**c. Rigūla or Masculinity**

One important point, footnoted earlier, is the way in which performers embody “masculinity” or rigūla. A masculine comportment is physically open and wide, with the chest thrust forward and head up. It is aggressive and confident, manifesting in decisive, unhesitating movement in dance steps. The razḥa dance steps allow for a great deal of improvisation from dancers. Dance styles that were routinely described as projecting rigūla in feedback interviews were those that involved a great deal of bouncing vertical trunk movement, with the spine fairly straight, deep knee bends and shoulder hunches, and strong stomps on each footfall. Further,
rigūla-style voices are loud, open-mouthed, and clipped as opposed to melismatic. Gentle swaying, closed arms, downturned heads, and quiet singing are considered “womanly” and not appropriate to the performance of razḥa. Women, when they dance, do not exhibit these features, so we can safely assume that this dichotomy is more concerned with the maintenance of a certain kind of hegemonic masculinity than it is with distinguishing between social genders as experienced and embodied by Omanis.

One way that rigūla is identified is with the intransitive verb khashuna/yakhshun, “to be rough, coarse, raw, unpolished or crude.” Importantly, the verb describes a way of doing things in performance, not a part of performance itself. Performers say, roughly, that so-and-so “is coarse” in dance or singing or general behavior, as suits the context, meaning that the behavior in question is done in a tough, masculine way, unconsidered or unbeautified. For example, after a short trip to Kachchh, India some of my friends asked what I had played and sung for my Indian hosts. I replied that while I played a lot of Omani music for my Indian friends, I could not really perform because one shouldn’t perform the music without dancing as well (as they had insisted so many times). My Indian hosts were not at all interested in dancing, since they themselves considered this unbefitting the masculine appreciation of music. They only responded positively to a particular ʿāzī singer from ʿIzkī, who sang long, unaccompanied and untexted melismatic lines before the Arabic couplets of the qaṣīda. When I relayed this to my friends in Oman, they laughed, and one responded that while the singer was indeed good, he yatanaghunaghu-ed the melody, meaning that he “cuddled” or “acted tenderly toward” or perhaps “cooed” the melody in a way that was beautiful but unbecoming of a man, who must yakhshun a melody. Indians, they insisted, prefer these effeminate ways of singing that are heavily melismatic and (in their opinion) overly adorned. I should point out that the verb tanaghunaghul/yatanaghnagh is often
used to describe the way that men and women act towards babies, referring to a collection of activities (cooing, holding, stroking, rocking) and a way of enacting them (softly, slowly, warmly, tenderly). It is not a verb used only to describe women, nor is *yakhshun* used only for men. My interlocutors were, in effect, comparing the qualities they valued in music to those they imagined were valued by my Indian hosts.

Feelings of masculinity are deeply tied to senses of pride, especially as expressed in the terms *al-fakhr* or, more rarely, *al-‘izz*, power or might. This sense of *rigūla* was reported by the leader of a group in Nizwā, who recalled that when he first was invited into the *razha* by his father, he remembered that “I was proud of my [feeling of] masculinity (*kunt aftakhir bi-rigūlatī*), I was amongst the men and doing *razha* as an equal with them.” Crucially, this meant that he was dressed completely in the way that other men were, with a real dagger in his belt. The giving of a real dagger to a youth is an important life-cycle event for many Omanis, and his corresponded with his full inclusion in the men’s dance performance as well. In his case, the feeling of *rigūla* emerges from inhabiting a certain kind of body adorned in certain ways, recognized by peers and superiors as being like their own male bodies.

d. *Shugā‘a* or Encouraged Bravery

The classical definition for *shugā‘a* is bravery, but Omani performers conflate its meaning with the Form II and V verbal forms [II (=f‘a‘ala): *shajja‘a/yushajja‘a*; V (=taf‘a‘ala): *tashajja‘a/yatashajja‘a*], referring to encouraging or heartening some other person or persons. Hence, a performance can be “brave,” which in this context might also mean that it is “heartening,” “encouraging,” or “emboldening.” *Shugā‘a* is also often used to refer to the ways in which performers urge others into participating more actively. A common behavior for performers is to run from one’s own line to the other to sing directly in the face of a group
member from the facing line that the first thinks is “slacking” (yaqṣar). For example, during the first multi-group performance at the fī ḥubb Qābūs festival, older members of the Firqat al-‘Arabī ran up and sang loudly into the faces of their own younger members, to encourage them to perform more actively. If younger members have taken out their phone or are losing focus in some other way, older members approach these “slacking” performers to draw them back into performing by grabbing them or lightly striking them with their camel stick. Other techniques include grabbing a performers’ shoulders, making him bob, and shouting yallā (let’s go!), halā (hey!), ‘āshū (feel it!) or yā shabāb (O youths!). Performances that were rated as exhibiting shugā’a or that were described using the verbs shown above were often “marching” or “walking razha-s” (razḥāt al-māshiyya). These are universally in duple rhythms, to accommodate marching steps. Certain joint dance movements are especially associated with shugā’a, though it is important to realize that they do not comprise a particular dance movement that is called shugā’a. Rather, shugā’a is a way of behaving that increases participation, and, as the next section will cover, encourages ḥamās.

Many of the actions that are encouraging (tashgī”) are thought to resemble the movements of armies. For example, one common move during a walking razha is for the back half of the parade of dancers to stop marching (but otherwise continue bobbing to the beat of the drums) and raise their camel sticks over their heads, poised like swords. After the front half of the parade line moves about ten meters away, they spin around as individuals and charge the backs of the front half of the parade, yelling and waving their camel sticks as if to hit them. Often, the performers who initiate this move will hold back their fellows until they can charge “while they have the line;” that is, while they should be singing their half of the razha couplet.
Figure 24 illustrates this pattern of dancers, but they are charging the drummers, who have drifted ahead.
e. Ḥamās, or Vigor and Enthusiasm

Shugāʿa and ḥamās are deeply interrelated emotional states and the suites of behaviors that exhibit or develop them are similar. As we will see in the next chapter, ḥamās is the critical emotional state for understanding the ways in which razḥa and ʿāzī have been integrated into broader Omani political systems and Ibāḍī Islamic rulings. Classical Arabic sources define ḥamās as “courage,” “zeal,” or “valor,” derived from the trilateral root ḥ-m-s. Among orientalists, the word is often used to refer to themed collections of poetry (for example, Abū Tammām’s Ḥamāsa of c. 845/230, which spawned several other such collections). These literary collections often included militaristic or self-praise poetry that would be similar in topic and theme to poetry written today by razḥa poets. Shiʿr ḥamāsī, “poetry of courage,” however, often
refers to something akin to “epic” in the Arabic literary canon, though the included poems are better referred to as “heroic.” In many ways, it is because raẓha and ʿāzī produce ḥamās that they have been accorded some level of respect in elite Omani society.

In contemporary Oman, ḥamās refers to a heightened emotional state of vigor, excitation, or enthusiasm. A range of behaviors are associated with ḥamās, but they are not all positive. It can arise in sports, driving quickly, fighting and angry speech, and performance, among other things. When Omani performers or audiences talk about ḥamās in performance, they talk about it in two main ways. First, they talk about ways to produce it, or, in their terms, “giving” or “bringing” it (yaʿṭī or yiğīb al-ḥamās). Second, they talk about performances that have it or exhibit it by saying, shay ḥamās fīh (there’s ḥamās in it), ishʿur al-ḥamās (feel the ḥamās) al-ḥamās mawgūd (ḥamās is present/here), or shūf al-ḥamās (look at the ḥamās). All these kinds of statements might also be put into the past tense to refer to past performances. For Omanis, ḥamās is best experienced as a collective emotional state—some group should exhibit or feel ḥamās. As we shall see, ḥamās is more problematic if it is felt individually, especially when it is not shared or spread to other members of the group. Ḥamās is most acceptable when it is a product of a group experience.

When I presented videos of performances and tried to have participants show me “when” ḥamās started or who brought it, my interlocutors were hesitant to do so. One performer, Fahd, responded this way:

Fahd: In reality it is not that I feel ḥamās and you feel it, and he feels it… No, it is that there is ḥamās among us… you need others to feel it as a group, maybe you need more than one person to feel ḥamās together (maʿ bʿaḍ). Usually ḥamās is brought by the drums (yuʿṭī bi-l-ṭubūl) and

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103 “Feel” here in the sense of “emotionally experience” like one “feels” anger or sadness.
then we feel it, but sometimes you will see it in the duelists and this is rousing for the others (wa hadhā tashgī’\textsuperscript{104} al-b’ād).

BJG: Can you imagine a performance where one person feels ḥamās and no one else does?

F: Perhaps, perhaps. This is not a good thing though, sometimes there’s someone who feels ḥamās strongly and the others do not and that is not good because there is no balance (mā shay mayzān).

BJG: Balance?

F: Yes… I have seen old-timers feel hamās alone, and people think they act foolish. You see, in the old days, the drums didn’t play that much, so they were powerful, razha was a very strong thing, I mean. Here, one day I was in Bānī Bū Ḥaṣan…

BJG: That is in the Sharqiyya governate, no?

F: Yes, far from here but they have strong razha there, different, but every Friday evening they are there. The town participates, not groups, they don’t need groups to organize things like we do here. Anyway, I was there on the weekend, and I heard the drums so I came out to see them, they were hundreds, really. But there were many, and I joined the line and there was no ḥamās among us. I saw the duelists, some old greybeards, they had their swords out, I mean, bang bang bang. Then I realized, they were really fighting! I mean, really making war, so I said to one standing with me in the line, I said, “who are these duelists? Are they feuding, do they have a deep-rooted hatred for one another (tashāḥīn b’ādu al-b’ād)?” “No,” he said, “they are just fighting, old-timers cannot control their emotions (mā yisayṭirū ‘alā mashā’ir), he thinks it’s a real war.” I tell you, they fought like devils. Here, when we duel, you try and hit his buckler, some the thumb. They were really trying to kill one another. I ask you, is this good? No.

\textsuperscript{104} The gerund of sh-ʃ-‘ examined as shugā’a above.
BJG: Might ḥamās be dangerous (*iḥtimāl al-ḥamās khaṭīr*)?

F: I don’t know about dangerous. Anyway, one man fell, and the other took his dagger out and tried to slit his throat, take his head as they say. That’s how it was in the old days, things were brutal. He tried to take this man’s head in the duel!

BJG: No!

F: Yes, I am telling you the truth, praise be to God, lord of the two worlds. He did not kill him of course, but the one on the ground stayed there like a corpse for ten minutes.

BJG: And this is ḥamās?

F: Yes, but it’s no good. It’s no good.

This expression of ḥamās, enthusiasm and vigor, is wrong because it is not shared or does not rouse others. The performers do not feel ḥamās to the same extent that the duelists do, and this effects the collective emotional state of the group. The duelists take things too far, even though (or perhaps because) they feel ḥamās. When I related this story to others, they showed me several videos of this kind of ḥamās state in razḥa duels. Several were worried that this would be too much for an “Englishman” (myself) to bear. Other such individual displays of ḥamās are similarly regarded with a mixture of interest and disdain. For example, videos are often shared on WhatsApp groups that show individual dancers falling or rolling on the ground, pulling their daggers out to threaten one another, or vigorously swinging their heads back and forth in front of the beating drums. These kinds of behaviors were very uncommon in Dakhiliya, but one Bahlāwī performer related a story about one of Qābūs’s early trips to Dakhiliya in which a dancer felt
such *hamās* that he fired his gun in the air and destroyed several power lines that had just been installed.  

Socially acceptable *hamās* is exhibited as a group or by an individual who is then matched by his group. The feeling of *hamās* is often reported when there is a high level of excitement and participation from amongst the group. When *hamās* is appropriate, it is a powerfully transformative and engaging collective emotion. When it is felt as part of a group, it reinforces that group’s sense of themselves as a strong and masculine whole, one that demands attention and respect. The collectively felt attainment of *hamās* affirms the unified front that collective performance in Oman seeks to present.

At an event organized by the Women’s Association of Manaḥ, I was invited to dance with the Firqat al-‘Arabī to welcome about a dozen guests from Great Britain. The event was held at the newly renovated old quarter in al-Bilād, a neighborhood of Manaḥ, and we were set up in two lines along either side of the long central avenue leading from the northern gate. After the welcoming *razha*-s, we sat in the central avenue for almost two hours while the Women’s Association ran their meeting. Tempers were growing short.

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105 This story type is common in Dakhiliya and is often pitched to the problem being discussed: a tribe is too rural and backward, and holds a *razha* under a newly installed power transformer and destroys it by firing off rounds into the air; a notorious drunk shows up to a *razha* and shoots several new power lines in his celebration; an Indian once tried to *razha* and seized a gun from an Omani dancer and accidentally discharged it into a power line, ruining the party. The moral of this story type is fairly straightforward.

106 The importance of presenting a “unified front” in Arabian peninsular societies has been commented upon by several scholars of the region. Meneley (1996) writes that the houses of Zabīd go to great lengths to obscure and tamp down any public perception of infighting within them. Similarly, Dresch and Piscatori note that a “politics of closeness” (*qarāba*) manages means of access between the political elite and ordinary Gulf citizens (2013, 24-5). *Qarāba* refers specifically to the ways in which persons and social units manage who may speak and interact with them, when, and under what circumstances—the management of the public face of a corporate group.
“Ḥamad, we’ve got things to do, it’s a working day,” one exasperated youth whined. “We can’t sit here all day waiting for these ladies.” Several others agreed, but an older performer, Layth, scolded them into performing a *razḥa qaṣṣāfiyya* (“fast” *razḥa*) in order to “encourage the return of the group’s *ḥamās*” (*li-tashgīr ‘awdat al-ḥamās*). Layth pulled me off the low bench just inside the main gate and pushed me toward the middle of one dancing line.

“Come on, doctor, let’s *razḥa!*” he shouted, pulling others up as well. He started giving a rousing, fast *qaṣṣāfiya*, and the drummers moved to the center of the circle. Layth moved around the circle, making sure every member understood his lines and heard the melody, insuring full participation. As the drums thundered into the rhythm and we took turns singing the melody back and forth, the drummers paced over to Layth’s line, stopping in front of him. Along with the main beats, Layth slowly bobbed his shoulders and neck and bent his waist down toward the drums. He jauntily swung his camel stick backwards and forwards, and the dancers to his left and right began to do the same. Layth’s entire line began to “bow” to the drums, which invigorated my line. As the opposing line raised themselves back up, they lifted their camel sticks above their heads and began to march with the drums toward our own line. When they reached us, the entire group was packed together within perhaps a meter, shoulder to shoulder with the drummers. My own line began to shout “ho ho! Ha ha!” on the off-beats of the drum rhythm and hunching and bobbing just as the first line had. The drummers followed us and we danced backwards along with the drums, hunched almost completely over, bobbing and throwing our shoulders into every other beat. As the first line backed away, a young member of the group administration spread his arms out across our line next to me and said, “one more!” On the last repetition of the melody, we shouted out on the off-beats and stomped our feet as hard as we could. Watching the drummers and the far line, which had their camel sticks all raised above
their heads to signal the last line of singing, we all jumped and stamped hard on the last beat. In the silence, we all broke out laughing, panting for air. Layth beamed, sweat dripping to the end of his nose.

“That’s hamās, boys, that’s hamās!”

“There’s no Money in this Art”: Praise as Dignified Work

The third discourse that transforms the ways that performers perceive their own praise performance is in framing it as work or labor. Praise and performance are framed as a kind of work on the behalf of a community. This framing draws an implicit analogy with giving—just as giving helps a community, so does labor for it. Community work like this does not gain the worker money, like a wage—and neither does praise. Giving, praise, and labor are at least partially compared, but not in terms of their ability to produce money. Money is secondary to obligation. In brief, I learned that Omanis praise performers think of razha the same way they think of cleaning falaj-s, painting anti-smoking signs, and taking care of the communal underground oven in town: it is a form of civic labor. It keeps community going. And insofar as it keeps community going, it keeps ties with elites going.

To understand why framing praise performance as a kind of labor reframes it as a dignified practice, we need to understand how certain kinds of labor are differently valued.107 Amongst rural Omani Arab men, “work” (shuql or ‘aml) is highly valued, especially certain kinds of community service and farm labor. While the menial and unglamorous labor on the farm is performed by South Asian contract laborers, most members of the groups in Manah also

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107 This differential in valuation is highly racialized—devalued labor is performed by South Asians, who are simultaneously denigrated for doing it and prevented from joining in valued labor. See Jain and Oommen (2017) for further discussion.
tended to their family farms in some capacity. Plant maintenance, monitoring irrigation flows, digging *galbāt*, and transporting farming equipment and materials are often undertaken by Omani Arabs, while harvesting, planting, maintaining date palms, managing irrigation canals, weeding, cleaning equipment, and tilling are often not. The former types of labor are valorized insofar as they are topics of conversations that speakers use to praise themselves. This is especially the case if this farm labor cuts into time otherwise spent in wage work (*dawwām*). For example, a common story trope involves the speaker listing their responsibilities on the farm, with their family, and at their wage-paying job, but ultimately prioritizing family and productive farm labor, which is accompanied by a wave of compliments. Even though these farms are often small-scale, merely supplementing household pantries, they are often central to rural identities.

Similarly, community service is also considered a kind of dignified work. One way this manifests is in the roles of performance groups within a broader network of civil organizations in Manaḥ. This is a pattern that also obtains, to greater and lesser degrees, in the other large towns in Dakhiliyya. In Manaḥ, the Firqat al-‘Arabī li-l-funūn al-sh‘abiyya fi wilāyat Manaḥ is part of (*tāb’a*, lit. “follows”) the older football club in Manaḥ, the Farīq al-‘Arabī. This organization, one of the oldest civil organizations in Manaḥ, also arranges collective clean-up efforts for the local *falaj*-s, Qu’rān readings and memorization competitions, wedding feasts for members and other locals, festival celebrations, and the maintenance of the collective *tanūr* (underground oven) just outside the town community center (*sabra*).
Figure 25. A bundle of cooked meat (khisfa) is pulled out of the still-hot tanūr oven.

The oven is approximately 3.5 m wide and 5 m deep and is used to cook huge quantities of meat during religious holidays. Wood fuel and maintenance are paid for by members, who each contribute a few riyāl-s before and after each use. Group members compete to do the most “work” during the brief period while the tanūr is in use. They volunteer to carry wrapped parcels of meat (khisfāt) from each house to the oven, and deliver them a day later, after cooking. Some members carry the wrapped raw or cooked mutton in wheelbarrows, but houses further into the neighborhood usually require a pick-up truck. A younger relative of the driver stands over the cab in the bed of the truck, shouting out to neighbors that they are collecting freshly wrapped parcels or dropping them off. Others work on chopping wood and building a massive fire inside the oven, reached by lowering ladders down into it. At the events I participated in, after the fire was of a suitable size, villagers quickly hurled in over a hundred khisfāt at once. Once they were inside, they dragged a huge metal cover over the mouth of the oven and sealed it
with mud standing by, kneaded by foot by a half-dozen younger group members. After a day of
sealed cooking, ladders are lowered down into the still smoldering oven and those “not afraid of
work” head down into the oven. Once down, they attach ropes to the various meat parcels, which
are hauled up by groups circling the smoking opening. Afterwards, they distribute the meat to its
owners, clean the oven, and cover it until the next barbecue.

I arrived in Manah for the first time a week after a collective clean-up of a falaj. ‘Abdullah, a performer I had met before in Muscat, joked that I had shown up “just in time to
help celebrate” but not help in the hard work, just like his brothers reportedly always do. He
continued:

We’ve done this many times, the razha troupe. We don’t just razha, we help in many
ways. We do this because it helps the Sultan, as well. We need to start taking care of
ourselves, our own houses and the falaj is part of that. Many people complain to the
government, ‘give us this or that’, no, no, no. Here, we are not like that, we are humble.
We don’t want problems and we’re not afraid of hard work.

Others concurred, giving examples of nearby towns and their reputed fear of hard work. “We’ll
become like the Sa‘ūdīs,” said one, “tired only from counting our money!”

These kinds of work are either public (like working with the tanūr) or made public
(telling stories about one’s valued work). More precisely, work like this is only made public
insofar as it is dignified, masculine, honorable, and signals the worker’s economic power, bodily
strength, wisdom, responsibilities, and skills. We can briefly contrast this kind of talk with talk
about wage work, in offices and government ministries, which is almost always negative. Often
this work is not challenging or interesting, or alternatively extremely stressful. For example, one
Omani ‘āzī singer worked as a guard at a water pumping station. When asked about his work
(dawwām), he replied, “I don’t do anything. I just sit. It’s not work but it’s for the government so
it’s ok.” Guard work is not valued work insofar as it does not improve the social standing (broadly construed) of the worker in the way that valued work can.

Due to this, when the topic of work comes up in many razha and ‘āzī poems, we should interpret it as a kind of work that is a “good deed,” that is dignified, and that reaffirms masculine identities. In this way, performers frame performance as work, good manners, pride, and heritage, an endeavor that is industrious and rebuilds the community. Praise is different from and in some ways opposed to labor that is undignified or servile. Rather than being handed everything that they have, performers categorize razha as a kind of productive and useful labor that is necessary to reproduce community. In this same vein, when performers talk about composing poetry for razḥāt and ‘āzī, they refer to it as “work.” Those who avoid performance unreasonably are referred to as “shirking” or “slacking,” qaṣaru/yaqṣar. Further, if they have to excuse themselves from an invitation to perform with a good reason (say, due to dawwām or wage work), they often reply to the invitation saying, “I apologize, I have work” to which the administration replies, “thank you, that’s fine, you’ve not shirked/slacked (mā taqṣaru).”

When the manager of the Firqat al-‘Arabī, Ḥamad, first drove me around the ring road that encircles Manah, he brought me to a short, graded hill to the north side of the town. When he climbed out of his Subaru to take in the view, he waved his hand across the brown landscape. “When I was younger, this was all green,” he said softly. “Now look, this is dead lot after dead lot. My land is back further south, and it grows a little, water is available. Water is available. But here…” I commented on the lack of date palms, which I had also seen in ‘Ibrī, where a drought of over five years was just breaking.

Ḥamad: Look, there are some. But that’s not what these fields were, these were oats, barley, wheat, grass for animals. In the town we have more dates, but here is grain. Grain doesn’t need
too much water and look, there’s not enough. We have date palms in the south, but there's little water and people are now burning them, you'll see the smoke later in the year.

BJG: Where does the water come from?

Ḥ: It comes from ‘Izkī, from the falaj al-Malikī.

BJG: No! That’s so far [~twenty-three km].

Ḥ: Wallahi, it’s a long falaj. Our ancestors were strong, they came with Malik bin Fahm [the ancient Arab leader and “founder” of Oman] and they made the falaj-s. And now we preserve them, when our fathers were poor and had nothing, they preserved them. Now, with the renaissance, we preserve them still. They are life, seriously, they are life.

BJG: Can’t you use mechanical pumps?

Ḥ: Of course, but the water is low in the earth, the earth is thirsty. Ask others, when they built their houses I saw that they dug down a meter, two meters and found water. Now, you have to dig and dig. The government made a dam, you know, there’s one near Firq [a small town between Manaḥ and Nizwā] and one in ’Imṭī [a town north of ’Izkī], we will see them. But in Manaḥ we have to be careful with regard to water. For fifteen years there has been drought, water is not available.

Ḥamad was making clear that some obligations are shared by the community as necessities of its survival. Mechanical pumps were an option but have depleted water levels for the entire community. Government intervention can be imagined, but the onus of responsibility falls, for Ḥamad and for many other Manḥīs, onto the people of Manaḥ themselves.

a. Praise as labor for the community

It may seem strange to think of valued labor emerging as a way in which performers frame their praise as signaling their dignity, especially when the major exchange cycle is
predicated on mutual obligations of unequal gifting. This discourse seems to motivate an alternative moral universe, one in which good workers reap their just rewards, when the Generosity/Legitimacy mechanism presents a moral universe where webs of interlocking and unequal mutual obligations knit together stratified social classes. For most rentier theorists, the labor of Gulf citizens is hardly a consideration, because the state provides benefits regardless of their labor. If in Kuwait Sulayman Khalaf could claim that the state presented an “image of unlimited good,” an indefinitely long future of wealth and plenty for all, for example, Limbert has shown that no such idea can be claimed for Oman, emanating either from the state or the people (2010). Rather, she writes that people conceive of Oman’s economic renaissance as a kind of “dream-time” between the “realities of poverty” in the past and the imagined future (2010, 11). As Limbert shows, this perception has deeply altered Omanis’ relationship with their own past and with notions of “communal responsibility,” neighborhood relations, and women’s sociality (2010, 11-16, 132, 80-1).

Such uncertainties were likewise present in Manaḥ, but Manḥīs were quick to point out the ways that they were working hard to improve Manaḥ by themselves and along with the state. When I pointed out that only a minority of Manḥīs performed in the razha, one participant rejoined that “more came out” during the religious and national holidays, but it was true that “others stay in their houses nowadays and forget who they are.” Another performer, on a different occasion, responded to the same point by pointing out that these days, people feel “they deserve more from the government and forget their manners.” A different Manḥī pointed out that everyone knew razha, but some were embarrassed, or were “too lazy, afraid of work,” or “were conceited (mutakabbirīn, anfhū kidha (pushing his nose up with his finger)),” because it is associated with rural life. But when National Day comes, he said, “you’ll see, everyone
participates." Despite this speaker’s confidence, the participation of “everyone,” even during festivals and state holidays, is not guaranteed. As we saw in the last section, invitations and even pestering is sometimes necessary for the group to be brought together. When Ḥamad and the rest of the administration brought me along to gather the missing members out at the prayer room in the agricultural exclave before the fi ḥubb Qābūs festival, they made this clear. Each had stories of the amounts of phone calls, texts, emails, and visits that they made in order to secure the highest possible turnout for events.

“Being a manager is constant work, and mind you, there’s no money in this art,” Ḥamad began:

You have to love the arts in your heart, have them in your heart, in order to do this. To get the youths to come to meetings, I have to call them, send messages, emails, I go to where they are, I go to their work (dawwām) and find them and ask them. ‘Why didn’t you reply, why haven’t we heard from you?’ If they have circumstances (ẓurūf) then we say okay, peace be upon you. If there’s work, ok. But if they’re just slacking (yaqṣārū bass) then I will keep going after them (fa-adawwur ‘alayhum ‘alā ṭūl). You have to do this. I take time to do it this way, because it’s easy to slack and be lazy but we must work and work or we might lose ourselves or we will forget our culture (lāzim nashtaghal wa-nashtaghal walā iḥnā maʿadūmīn walā rāḥ nanṣī turāthnā).

Others agreed with this assessment and volunteered similar stories regarding their work to keep the group together.

This everyday maintenance of male social ties across households is a similar kind of civic labor. In this case, much of this community work is performed amongst and between men as kin and quasi-kin. Letters, text messages, and home visits to cajole, convince, and persuade group members to perform with them is a constant endeavor. The extent and intensity of this community-sustaining labor amongst Omani performance groups may seem surprising given the fact that so many simultaneously report that praise is a kind a mutual response that is “necessary” to functioning of the Generosity/Legitimacy mechanism. These discourses may compete less
than they at first appear, however. As we saw with the farmers dressed to the nines, denying the compulsion to perform is a way to index autonomy. Often, messages that solicit performers reference the necessity of performance, dignity, and representation and stress communal obligations. In a way, this civic labor of men soliciting one another is one method by which these discourses of communality circulate amongst performers. This circulation serves to guarantee continued participation in the exchange cycle. Praise requires considerable mental, physical, and emotional exertion, but that burden is lightened with many hands.

b. “As for laziness, it has no place”: Generosity accrues to those that work

It is in performances that the results of this community work are most clearly seen. Returning to the fi ḥubb Qābūs festival, when the group was finally together and dressed, they circled up around the drummers in the parking lot and started to sing short melodies individually, trying to encourage someone to throw the first shilla. After a moment, an older performer sang a razha qaṣṣāfiyya including a few already composed poetic half-lines:

\[
\begin{align*} 
\text{أَنْثَرُ سَلَامَيْ فِي الْدَارِ وَالْحَلَّةِ} \\
\text{مِثْلَ السَّيْلِ يَسَلِّكُ الْغَدرَانَة} \\
\text{تَرَابُ يَبْكُي مَا حَدُّ يَشْلَهُ} \\
\text{يَبْكُي بِعْرَ وَالْنَاسِ كَسْلَانَة} \\
\end{align*}
\]

Inthar salāmī ʿalā al-dār wa-l-ḥilla,  
mīthl al-sayl yisaylik ghadrāna  
ṭarab yabbī mā hadd yishīluh,  
yabkī bi-ʿibr wa nās kaslāna

Spread my greetings to the homeland and the encampments,  
Like the soft rain drizzling down to you [and settling in] small, clear pools.  
Tarab weeps [because] no one sings the poetic line,  
It weeps to its heart and the people are lazy.
As the poetic line circulated a few times, the ‘āzī singer that worked in the water pumping station shouted over the group, “or they are thieves! (walā ḥarāmī!) instead of wa nāṣ kaslāna. This replacement (kaslānalḥarāmī) was a joke, but further reveals the relationship between praise, work, and generosity. Those who fail to sing the lines are lazy, or worse, are thieves. They take the generosity of rulers for granted and give nothing back, do not work. Another element of this relationship is how it frames work and labor as a moral good to be desired, especially work for the community. Recall the ‘āzī given for the opening of the soccer pitch in Manaḥ:

Every homeland is built by men / When those men work hand in hand.
As for laziness, it has no place / neither near nor far.
This is the mission of every youth / Wading into challenge and difficulty.
And for those that walk the path of rightness / It's impossible for their actions to fade.

Work to “build” the homeland is valorized and mythopoetically made into a “mission” for every youth. Youths, at least for many of my interlocutors, are the most in need of direction.

Importantly, praise not only responds to certain kinds of labor, but also mythopoetically presents certain kinds of labor as valued. It both constructs and presents certain kinds of activity as praiseworthy, thereby ideally promoting them. Citizens themselves are rhetorically produced as actors who can work to benefit their homelands in various ways (though many of the more workaday and unflattering aspects of this sociable labor are not at all recognized). Those who are lazy are complacent and take advantage of the mutualistic relationships between rulers and the ruled. Those who work, in contrast, present themselves as part of the same moral economy in which the Generosity/Legitimacy mechanism operates. Framing praise as a kind of labor, and a specialized one at that, makes maintenance of the social order and maintenance of the relations between rulers and ruled a valued and responsible activity.
For some, learning the arts is also “work,” work that is valued since it reproduces community and passes on traditions. When I asked why more people do not feel obligated to praise, one interlocutor, Muḥammad from Nizwā, replied that:

Muḥammad: Praise and the arts are not difficult, but people are busy. People now live alone, they do not come down to the market to razḥa with us. When my father was young, they would play the drums in town and everyone heard. Nowadays, how do you play the drum so everyone hears (kayf taṭabl ‘alshān sim‘ayū al-jamī‘)? But you will see, the old-timers always bring their grandchildren to do razḥa if we are doing it and they see us. The youths know that this is a hobby, yes, but an important one. People have work, they have duties, there is pressure on them, but still the arts are here. This is authentically Omani, and it takes effort to maintain and spread these things. Our fathers and ancestors worked to pass these down to us, and we must struggle to maintain them.

BJG: Does the government not help in maintaining the arts? Patronizing them?

M: What does the government do? They sit in their offices and they drink coffee. They are experts in drinking coffee, they don’t know the arts. They just like to film [the arts] for television, but they don’t know [the arts]. It takes real work (yaḥtāq ‘alā al-shughl) to learn them, years I mean. What you’ve seen is a drop from an ocean, one drop from an ocean.

He then shared with me a beautiful little video that he had in his phone, which slowly scrolled through a variety of black and white pictures while a solo singer gave a mulālā’ and versed a razḥa:

أول زمان الطرب زاهي
واليوم راحوا مزهيه
صاروا العرب ساهي ولاهي
‘Āwal zaman al-ṭarab zāhī,
Wa-l-yawm râḥū mazahaynuh,
Ṣārū al-‘arab sāhī wa lāhī,
Wa-l-qalb yiṣīḥ al-ṭarab haynuh.

In the past, ṭarab was bright and lively,
And today those that brightened it have gone;
The people have become neglectful and forgetful,
And the heart cries out, “ṭarab, where is it?”

The term ṭarab here refers to a feeling that is deeply linked to musical performance, that A.J. Racy defined as a kind of “ecstasy” (2004). Here, it is a stand in for attention and caring for the funūn. The text has the tone of a lament, that the funūn might be lost due to neglect and effects an urge to the listener to join the singer in searching for that feeling of ṭarab, set deep in a past but not yet, perhaps, gone. This will take work, Muḥammad emphasized, teaching and learning and commitment. The work of praise is part of the work of community, undertaken by a community and what makes a community. When it is successful, it helps to link communities to the ruling classes and integrate their plays of power in ways that do not threaten the solidarity of the community while not risking the social ills of rebuffing such gifts.

Conclusion

This chapter has presented the Razha Integration mechanism as manifested through several discourses. This mechanism works within razha performances to shape the way they are interpreted by performers and elites alike. By presenting themselves as dignified, morally-correct local recipients of elite generosity, they at least partially skirt the potentials for dependency and weakness potential in the broader Generosity/Legitimacy mechanism. Additionally, they frame their contributions and obligations (as necessary praisers, with praise as labor) as linking them to
elites in a web of mutual obligations that I have called a moral economy. Moral economies are those in which transactions are not neutral and anonymous, but reciprocal and affirming of social relationships.

What I think is important here is that the praise response is not just acknowledging generosity and recognizing dependency. As we have learned from scholars like Buenconsejo (2002), the norm of reciprocity does not exhaust the effects of gift exchange. Rather, the atmosphere, the embedded and interpreted meanings of exchange, can be altered or influenced by thoughtful action. By attending closely to performance, or rather to the ideas that inform performance and make it meaningful, we see that ḥa does more than account for generosity, or even just impel it. Instead, the actual performance of ḥa is understood as asserting pride, dignity, masculinity, autonomy, civic care, and other strong, positively valanced states. Potentially, conceptually anyway, ḥa receives generosity without conceding dependency just as it draws elites into the continued giving that sustains a moral economy and a shared community. Nevertheless, I do not think that ḥa somehow distances itself from the flows and constraints of global capital. Rather, it asserts a different logic of circulation: reciprocity. And yet, the reciprocity remains necessarily addressed to the only institution that can sustain such dramatic and transformative acts of generosity: the state form.
Chapter 5: Warfare and Welcome: Historical Sources on the Role of Omani Performance Practices and State Power

And the instruments of entertainment that have no use
Outside of themselves are to be broken whenever they are found,
In all of their types that exist,
Because in this there is no benefit.

Some readers may wonder how it could be possible that a musical practice could possibly have been a stable, public social mechanism of legitimation and the construction of a moral economy in a region of the world that is most well known for its peoples’ intense condemnation of “music.” I don’t want to hand-wave this issue away. I think it’s a good question. In fact, when we dig into this confusion, we find that it is far more interesting than just a legalistic valuation or condemnation of music. What I show in the chapter is that razḥa and ‘āzī have been provisionally tolerated in Omani Arab Muslim society not because it is orthodox to do so, pace Talal Asad, nor because they are particularly meaningful practices for constructions of a moral self, contra Shahab Ahmed (2015). Rather, they are tolerated merely because they are practical: they serve some explicit purpose. In fact, many “musical” genres are tolerated for precisely this purpose. This seems to be an underrecognized issue in the interminable debates on whether “Islam” condemns or tolerates or valorizes music. Historically, razḥa and ‘āzī seem to have been tolerated because they were technologies of warfare—and insofar as they supported war, they were deeply connected to statecraft, elites, and leadership.

In order to show this, I analyze both historical records and Ibāḍī Islamic rulings on the status of music and musical instruments. I review some of the literature in ethnomusicology on these topics, as well as some major attempts at theorizing Islam and Islamic legal practice. I conclude the chapter by examining the close relationship between razḥa, ‘āzī, and state power.
An Untended Flower: Music in Omani Histories

Writing a musical history of Oman based on primary sources is extremely difficult. In a conversation with another student of Omani music, she remarked that it was an “untended flower” (*warid mā yughtadhī*)—it had the potential for great beauty and meaning, but was mostly left alone. As Walīd al-Nabhānī notes in *From the History of Music in Oman: Problems and Texts* (*Min tārīkh al-mūsīqā fī ‘Umān ’ishkāliyyāt wa nuṣūṣ*) (2016):

The number of historical musical studies in Oman is small and this is not surprising given that we know that Omanis did not write on this topic or on the arts in general, despite their contributions in other sciences, such as astronomy and medicine. The first attempts at paying attention to Omani music—collecting, classifying, and analyzing—date back to the early eighties of the last century. This is when His Majesty Sultan Qābūs ordered the collection of Omani musical heritage in a national plan adopted by the Ministry of Information, and this launched the first efforts in this field. Features of interest [then] rolled out continuously in the study of Omani musical arts, their instruments, and their different aspects. (al-Nabhānī 2016, 11)

As al-Nabhānī and other authors (al-Kathīrī 2005; al-Shaydī 2008; Christensen and Castelo Branco 2009; El Mallah 1998) note, no primary documents thus far uncovered in Oman or about Oman specifically cover music. Not only are primary histories relatively few, but those that we possess were written by Ibāḍī intellectuals who were, in general, strongly opposed to music in theory and in practice. Musallim al-Kathīrī adds that these sources “have focused most of their attention on political and military actions, and mention of some musical instruments and their uses comes [only] sparsely in their pages” (2005, 47). Those that do come, however, are undoubtedly about *razḥa*, further cementing the genre as the one most closely associated with political power in Oman. In a conversation with al-Kathīrī himself, he told me that the “*razḥa* is the history of Oman.” While this is true, the actual stitching together of this history is perhaps impossible due to the occasional nature of the poetry. At the ends of events, I would often ask poets what they sang that day, and more often than not, they had already forgotten the text.
While *razha*-s are clearly commentaries on the day, they are not purposefully memorized like the *qaṣīda*, the famed “register of the Arabs.” *Razha*-s were rarely written down before literacy achieved its current levels. More important in terms of written sources is that literate Ibāḍī scholars were asked to make statements on the Islamic legality of music on several occasions and these opinions were collected. While we will see that much of the information offered by these scholars is outdated (especially regarding instrument types), it is the perspective they provide on the limited permissibility accorded to music that interests us here.

**Warfare and Welcome: Omani Orientations to the Charge of Music**

A few days before Ramadan began in 2016, I was sitting in Ḥāmad’s *majlis* enjoying a *ḥilba*, a milky fenugreek-flavored drink. As I was setting out my notebook and recorder, Ḥāmad noticed a book on the status of music in Islam in my bag.

“Oh, father,” he moaned. “What is this?”

“This?” I picked up the book. “This is a book about Islamic jurisprudence…”

“Well, I can see that, doctor, what do you want with it (*shtibā bih*)?”

“I just wanted to know the opinions of Ibāḍī scholars on music…”

“That’s fine,” Ḥāmad said, leaning back and pulling his *dishdāsha* over his feet, “but you’re not studying music. If you want to know about that, it’s not in *razha*. There’s no melody, there’s no singing, there’s no instruments (*mā shay al-naghmāt, mā shay al-ghinā’, mā shay al-ma’āzif*). But I’m no scholar, don’t ask me. I don’t know. Listen, I don’t want to enter into that

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108 Eickelman (1983) estimates the literate population in al-Ḥamrā’ in the 1940s at eight percent, “of whom most possessed little more than basic literacy,” and offers this as a reasonable guess for the rest of Inner Oman (166).
issue, I don’t even want to enter it (mū ḍāghī adakhkhalu). The razha is for warfare and welcome, that’s what I say to any Imam.”

“That reminds me, why isn’t the razha ever performed if a new mosque is opened?” I asked facetiously, trying to corner him. I knew that this was a total impossibility, even then.

“Oh, lord spread blessings and mercy like rain. That is a good question for the Islamic scholars, I do not know.”

Months earlier, I was discussing some of the local arts that were less well-known than the razha and the ‘āzī with Khamīs, the leader of a new troupe in ’Izkī. We were meeting in his ‘azba, a kind of semi-permanent camp and corral for grazing stock, eating dates by the goat pen that he affectionately referred to as the “UN” (“I’ve got every type of goat in there,” he boasted, “Indian, Pakistani, Sindhi, Afghan, Somali, Kenyan, Nubian, Egyptian, Georgian, Bosnian, Iraqi, Persian, Balochi, Roman, and Chinese—it’s the UN of goats (al-‘umum al-mutaḥḥida māl al-hūsh”). After a half-hour of chatting, a pickup full of Khamīs’s male kin pulled up. We exchanged pleasantries and they joined us in eating dates.

“We’re talking about music,” Khamīs said casually, flicking his eyes over to his younger brother.

“The arts?” His brother replied.

“No, music, this Englishman wants to study music here.”

“Well, not music, God lengthen your lives,” I jumped in, “I want to study the arts. But we were chatting a bit about music around here. Khamīs said that you all perform al-rūgh in the early dusk?” Al-rūgh is a genre of instrumental reed-pipe music accompanied by drumming and some sung poetry. The word rūgh refers to both the genre and the reed-pipe, which is shaped and played like the more common mijwiz. I have never encountered any source that discusses al-rūgh
and so it may be a genre that is mostly performed by *shawāwī* (semi-nomadic herders) performers, whose music is largely undocumented in Western scholarship. The area around ‘Izkī is, however, home to many rare and undocumented instruments, including a kind of gourd resonator monochord, a large family of African-derived idiophones, and so on.

“*Al-rūgh*,” his brother chuckled, “that’s the horn-pipe of Satan (*mizmār al-shayṭān*)¹⁰⁹, that *al-rūgh.* The only thing worse is the *zār,* did you hear about the *zār?*” The *zār* is a common name for a genre of healing music mostly performed by and for women: as it deals with *jinn,* supernatural beings, it is roundly condemned by Islamic scholars.¹¹⁰

“*Zār?* You want to see a *zār,* doctor?” Khamīs perked up. “*Mizmār al-shayṭān,* ha! I hold a *zār* here every night. *Zār* and *mizmār,* all night.” Of course Khamīs did not hold a performance of *zār* or *rūgh* every night, but he was voicing an opinion contrary to his brother’s take on music. Rather than acquiescing to the putative illicit nature of music, as Ḥamad would later do, Khamīs pushed back against that discourse, claiming to embrace a profoundly controversial genre of music.

As these anecdotes show, Omanis express a wide range of perspectives on music, from those like Khamīs’s—that embrace music—to those that condemn it. Before we discuss particular Ibāḍī perspectives on the issue of music, however, we should outline the general stakes of the debate over the status of music in Islamic discourse. Such a foray bears a long pedigree:

¹⁰⁹ The famous rebuke uttered by the Prophet’s father-in-law and longtime follower Abū Bakr in an equally-famous hadith. Abū Bakr admonished two women of the ‘Anṣār singing in the presence of the Prophet on a festival day by saying, “The horn-pipes of Satan [*mizāmir al-shayṭān*] in the house of God’s Prophet!” The Prophet’s reply: “Let them sing, O Abū Bakr, verily to every nation there is a festival, and this is our festival.”

¹¹⁰ See Janice Boddy’s 1990 ethnography *Wombs and Alien Spirits* for a deeper discussion of *zār.*
Amnon Shiloah introduces it as an “interminable debate” in his *Music in the World of Islam* (1995, 31). “The debate elicited views that varied from complete negation to full admittance of all musical forms and means, even dance,” he continues, “between these two extremes we can find all possible nuances” (1995, 31). Oman is no exception. Early in my research, when I was not pursuing Omanis’ perceptions of the Islamic status of music, I nevertheless recorded a wide range of beliefs. These often correlated with the social and economic position of the actor: an official in the Omani Center for Traditional Music told me that “that debate is over, from the Middle Ages the scholars agree that music is permitted”; a performer of the Sufi-inflected\(^{111}\) *mālid* genre told me that “rhythm (*al-‘īqā*) is a powerful tool for religion, and must be used with care”; a performer of *razḥa* at the Muscat Festival brought me a *fatwā* declaring attendance at the Muscat Festival to be avoided if possible because it included music (*mūsīqā*, “especially from Bahrain,” he added).

Understanding how differently positioned Muslims regard music requires both historical and ethnographic engagement. To do this, we should begin, in Talal Asad’s terms, “as Muslims do, from the context of a discursive tradition that includes and relates itself to the founding texts of the Qur’an and the Hadith” (1986, 14). This is precisely Lois Al-Faruqi’s initial point in her 1985 article on “Music, Musicians, and Muslim Law,” worth quoting here in full:

> The first question that must be asked if we are to avoid misunderstanding the attitude of Islam toward music and musicians is: Who or what shall be regarded as speaking for Islam? We are all well aware of the multitudinous collections of often contradictory statements, both oral and written, on music that have come from various regions and periods of Islamic history. Are all of these sources to be regarded as equally qualified to speak for Islam? Or are we to content ourselves with examining only one person’s or one group’s opinion on the matter? In order to be true to the data and to Islamic civilization, it

\(^{111}\) Valerie J. Hoffman points out that a major difference between Ibāḍī and Wahhābī doctrine is the importance of mysticism to Ibāḍī scholars (2015). While few Ibāḍīs might refer to themselves as Sufis, a similar concept of *sulūk*, or “pathways” in religion, is present in many of the writings of scholars during the 19th century Ibāḍī “renaissance.”
would seem that the researcher should investigate as many as possible of the materials that a consensus of the Muslims themselves consider to be authoritative in these matters. Coverage of the sources of wide acceptance within the culture is demanded by logic as well as cultural and intellectual honesty. (1985, 3-4)

The irony of course, is that starting “as Muslims do” reveals precisely the core complexity of discussing music and Islam: that there is no obvious universal position. The only sūra, or verse, in the entire Qurʾān that scholars have argued refers directly the music is Luqmān 6: “And of those people who buy idle talk to lead [others] astray from the path of God without knowledge, and take it as mockery, they will [face] a humiliating punishment.” The central term in this sūra, “idle talk,” is a translation of al-lahū al-ḥadīth, whose exact translation has been subject to many opinions.112 Indeed, this is why Asad promotes studying Islam and Islamic practices as “discursive traditions” (1986, 14). For Asad, “a tradition consists essentially of discourses that seek to instruct practitioners regarding the correct forms and purpose of a given practice” (14). Such practices are constituted within discourses that relate to past, present, and future, and are Islamic insofar as they are practices “into which Muslims are inducted as Muslims” (15). An Islamic practice so constituted is authorized as orthodoxy by those with power—“wherever Muslims have power to regulate, uphold, require or adjust correct practices,” Asad claims, “and to condemn, exclude, undermine, or replace incorrect ones, there is the domain of orthodoxy,” which is “crucial to all Islamic traditions” (15). For our discussion here, we should recognize that the “interminable debate” over the legal status of music is precisely the kind of discursive tradition to which Asad is drawing attention. However, despite Asad’s claim of the constant push for orthodoxy (and orthopraxis), the status of certain kinds of music remains doggedly murky.

112 See al-Awtaneh 2012 for a fuller discussion.
This situation is noted by historian Shahab Ahmed when he criticizes Asad’s notion of Islam as a tradition in *What is Islam?* (2016):

The subtle yet crucial problem with Asad’s conceptualization of Islam as a “discursive tradition” is precisely his locating the definitive quality of the discursive tradition in the dynamic of authoritative prescription of the correct: that is, in orthodoxy, which emerges irresistibly in his conceptualization as the “crucial” component in Islam. (2016, 272-3)

For Ahmed, it is incorrect “to put forward a schema where the definitive purpose of the discursive tradition/Islam *is* the production of orthodoxy” (273). “The effect of Asad’s conceptualization of Islam as a discursive tradition,” he continues, “is to present Islam as a tradition which, for all its variety, is constituted by an overriding concern to institute orthodoxy” (273). Ahmed instead argues that, at least within what he terms the “Balkans-to-Bengal complex,” a “temporal-geographical entity” stretching from Sarajevo to Dhaka, a huge range of discursive practices have flourished—"Avicennan philosophy, Akbarian Sufism, Suhrawardīan Illuminationism, Ḥāfiẓian poetics, figural painting and wine-drinking”—never striving for orthodoxy, embracing complexity, and that are nevertheless “at the very center of the discursive tradition” and hence Islam (277). One of Ahmed’s strongest statements of this fact comes from analyzing the musical life of Amīr Khusraw, the famed inventor of *qawwālī*, (650-725/1253-1325). Noting that music is rarely considered “Islamic,” he shows that despite this, “in the self-statement of Muslims, we find that music is made *meaningful* precisely in… Islamic terms” (427). Ahmed claims that Khusraw’s heterodox and anti-authoritarian “couplets on music constitute and make normative statements that are at once philosophy, Sufism, theology, Qur’ānic exegesis and law” and hence take part in the “discursive tradition” as much as any scholars seeking orthodoxy.\footnote{Ahmed concludes that positions like Asad’s and those that have built on his ideas have generally failed to thoroughly investigate the notion of “authority” in Islam. One scholar who has...}
What we learn from Ahmed’s criticism of Asad is that to use Asad’s definition is to focus squarely on the hegemonic play of power in Islamic societies. Productively, Ahmed frames Asad’s position as one that allows us to draw a succinct link between Islamic discursive practices and the politics of the state, in its many forms.

In Oman and amongst Ibāḍīs, what is interesting about the outcome of this debate over the status of music is not that it does not seek orthodoxy and orthopraxy, since it decidedly does. Rather, the avowedly Islamic conclusions of it admit the performance of a controversial practice—the *razha*—for controversial reasons. Ibāḍī rulings on music are neither simply a matter of applying or constructing an orthodoxy, as Asad would have it, nor do they merely privilege the capacity of practices to “have meaning” for Muslims, as would Ahmed. Instead, we can see a strong pragmatic thread, attending closely to context and wary of the ramifications of overzealous condemnation. Rather than trying to establish an Ibāḍī “doctrine” on music, we can use these writings and fatwas to trace the shifting role of music in Oman. Historically, the *razha* is deeply associated with the state and with political (and tribal) power due to its connections with warfare, social communication, and communal organization. The ability to host a *razha* and act as its patron is a demonstration of one’s political position and resources. However, the *razha* is not a straightforwardly admitted practice since it does not sit easily with most Islamic scholars in Oman. The reason why is explored next.

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taken this quite seriously (and before Ahmed’s critique) is anthropologist Hussein Ali Agrama (see for example 2010) who casts the fatwa as a form of ethical practice. Far from modeling fatwa as an authoritarian tool in the “overriding concern to institute orthodoxy,” Agrama argues that the authority of the fatwa lies in its ability to offer guidance and wisdom, not a capacity to enforce compliance (2010, 14).
Music and Muslim Law, Redux

Al-Faruqui’s classic investigation of the status of music in Islam presents a hierarchy of “sound art expressions” (handasah al-ṣawt) that are arranged in relation to two poles whose statuses are clear (1985, 7). At the top of the hierarchy lies the most legitimate form of handasah al-ṣawt: Qur’anic recitation (qirā’a), and at the bottom is “sensuous music associated with unacceptable contexts” (8). Virtually all Islamic scholars are in agreement on the position of these two forms. Down the hierarchy (which al-Faruqi operationalizes as representing fewer people assenting that that genre is straightforwardly legitimate [14]) are, in order:

A. Religious chants: (adhān, tahlīl, talbiyyah, takbirāt, madiḥ, tasbīh, and tahmīd) that are a duty to believers;

B. Chanted poetry with noble themes;

C. Family/Celebration music (lullabies, women’s songs, wedding songs, etc.)

D. “Occupational” music (caravan chants, shepherd’s tunes, work songs, etc.)

E. Military Music (tabl khānah) (8).

Everything “below” this threshold is commonly considered “music”—mūsīqā—and is therefore at least controversial if not fully illegitimate. Al-Faruqi valuably concludes that the intention of the hierarchy was not to “destroy all sound-art” (27), but rather to submit musical pleasure to higher ethical standards. She argues that “a number of interrelated aspects seem to have been involved in determining the implicit hierarchy of sound art that is described here” (13). However, the four aspects she picks out (conformity with Qur’anic chant; conformity with the “aesthetic demands of the culture” (13); community acceptance or esteem; and “conformance in sound-art to the moral demands of Islam”) do not account for either the reasons why this hierarchy developed or the role of hegemonic power in the attempts to establish it as orthodoxy. These are
not the questions she was seeking to answer with her article, but we can usefully extend her work by introducing these concerns.

Al-Faruqi presents a picture of Islamic proscriptions on music that hints at two further aspects of the implicit hierarchy of Islamic sound-art. The first aspect is the dual nature of condemnation and promotion. As Asad has argued, the tendency to orthodoxy is not only negative, that is, excluding certain practices, but also positive, that is promoting certain practices. Al-Faruqi rightly notes this when she writes that the hierarchy was meant as much to promote certain genres as it was to delegitimize others. We also see that the construction of certain genres as music preserves other genres from the charge of being music. This discursive tradition of judging music not only marks some genres as legitimate, but also marks some as other. These other genres include music for frivolous entertainment, music that promotes sensual eroticism, music that is non-functional: genres that are not serious or functional. Hence, the people who engage in them are not to be taken seriously. Those who do not engage in them, conversely, are serious and should be taken seriously or taken to be doing something useful. Islamic proscriptions on music and non-music serve to distinguish types of behavior from one another and associate those behaviors with different bodies, minds, classes, and the like. As Shiloah writes, “the total prohibition involves only art music, which displays man’s vanity and primarily furthers interest in mundane, worldly matters” (Shiloah 1995, 37). These he contrasts with Islamically permitted genres, whose acceptance is due to the “predominance of the text in religious or folk music, wherein the combination of sounds is relegated to a secondary role, or is a device mainly designed to support the words and enhance their meaning” (37). In fact, the main social punishment that those who play and make a living by unlawful music receive is that their testimony in Islamic courts is invalidated (see al-Sulaymānī 2011).
The second aspect that these authors bring out but do not directly express is the role of function in the determination of what is Islamically permitted. The four aspects that Al-Faruqi puts forward for explaining the organization of the hierarchy clearly focus on the higher end of the chart. Al-Faruqi seems to justify the chart in terms of how the other legitimate forms of art relate to the chanted Qur’ān. While this is clearly operant in the case of the religious chants that sit just below the chanted Qur’ān in Islamic permissibility, there seems to be little that connects the rest of the legitimate genres to the Qur’ān. Rather, what connects these other legitimate genres is that they fulfill a certain specific role, that is, they have a defined and unobjectionable social function. Women’s wedding music, lullabies, “occupational” music, and military music have relatively clear functions but little relationship to the recitation of the Qur’ān. The final division of legitimate music is chanted poetry with “noble themes.” In the context of this dissertation, we can see how and why it might be more parsimonious to think of this as a functional genre as well: this poetry is often praise or the kinds of serious political poetry from rulers that has long been a part of Arabian political discourse (Sowayan 2003).

As we will see, Omani (and other) Ibāḍīs have attended quite sensitively and pragmatically to the question of the status of music, just as they have maintained a clear orthodox stance and attention to the meaningful aspects of musical practices. As Agrama (2010) has noted, the power of the fatwa lies not on what basis it can compel action, but the way that it offers avenues of action. In this case, it compels actions by attempting to mark the boundaries of ethical engagement with performance practices by picking some out as moral, some as immoral, and others as simply practical. The question is then whether or not this emphasis on function and usefulness is a part of the Islamic discursive tradition on music.
When we look at Ibāḍī scholars’ judgments pertaining to music, one recent text stands out: Khālid bin ‘Īsā bin Ṣāliḥ al-Sulaymānī's Al-ghinā’ wa al-maʿāzif fi al-mayzān: qirā’a fī al-aḥkām al-fiqhiyya al-mut’aliqa bi al-ghinā’ wa al-maʿāzif wa ḥukhmhumā fī al-islām (Singing and Musical Instruments in the Balance: A Study on Jurisprudential Judgments Pertaining to Singing and Musical Instruments and their Judgment in Islām, 2001). Al-Sulaymānī gives an overview of the debate surrounding music first by looking at the Qur’ān and the “pure sunna” (Ibāḍīs regard only a small selection of hadīth-s as “pure”), then by taking up a philological approach to the definition of the key terms “singing” (al-ghinā’) and “the playing of musical instruments” (al-maʿāzif). Finally, he reviews the more recent perspectives espoused by Ibāḍīs and the other Islamic legal schools (Shī‘ī, Ḥanāfī, Shafa‘ī, Mālikī, and Hanbālī). Interestingly, al-Sulaymānī begins his text with a section called “A Necessary Word,” in which he writes that some might think that writing a book about music is already problematic, no matter its conclusions. He imagines them saying:

Does he not realize (the poor fool) that he who is addicted to trivialities of mind is himself trivial?!! That he invites the people to walk the dark path in which he himself lives?!! That he has set himself as a demeaner of this great religion?!! That he attacks God and His Prophet by analyzing what God and His Prophet have made impermissible?!! (2011, 17).

This passage shows us that the default position of the informed layperson is that music is already impermissible. Further, even an investigation of it is problematic because it may lead some people astray. Al-Sulaymānī answers this charge by writing that compiling such a book could be of some benefit to others in clarifying their religion. He quotes the Sūra-s al-Dhariyāt 55: “And remind, for reminding benefits the believers” and the famous Āl-‘Umrān 110: “You are the finest
nation raised up to [benefit] the people, enjoining the right and forbidding the wrong, and you believe in God” to set himself as one who reminds the Muslim of what is forbidden.

Al-Sulaymānī then discusses the key terms of *al-ghinā’* and *al-ma‘āzif* and reviews how many scholars before him have used the terms. These two terms are often used in conjunction with one another in the Islamic jurisprudence on music, referring at least in general to “singing” and “musical instruments and the playing of musical instruments.”

**a. Al-ghinā’ and al-ma‘āzif**

Al-Sulaymānī writes that “singing” (*al-ghinā’*) is a “polluted word” (*kalima mulawwita*) due to its association with “those that draw from singing a craft and profession; and those that bring to it musical instruments that move/agitate the spirit, that arouse passionate love and obscenity” (20). It is for this reason that “those with common sense are on their guard against using the word ‘singing’ (*al-ghinā’*) and avoid it, and they replace it with other words such as the word *inshād*” (20). Such a shift in vocabulary does not change the status of music that is already “polluted.” “If we come to the general meaning of the word *al-ghinā’* amongst the Arabs,” Al-Sulaymānī continues,

we find it comes amongst them by the meaning of [1] beautifying the voice and uplifting [raising] it, and by the meaning of [2] the *ḥudā* [cameleers’ songs], and [3] songs of poetry on occasions of happiness and joy and otherwise, [though subsequently] this word was stuck after that with *al-ghinā’ al-mājin* (“immoral singing”) as the most common usage. (21)

Al-Sulaymānī concludes by firmly distinguishing between *al-ghinā’ al-mubāḥ* and *al-ghinā’ al-muharram*. *Mubāḥ* (CLA, permissible) in Islamic jurisprudence means something that is permitted but for which there is neither reward nor punishment, something towards which one ought to cultivate indifference. *Al-ghinā’ al-mubāḥ* for al-Sulaymānī “is chaste, modest,
respectable, authentic singing, free from the traces of indecency and which is not accompanied by musical instruments and the forbidden *tarab*. This type is now classified under the name *inshād*” (23). As for *al-ghinā’ al-muḥarram*, al-Sulaymānī quotes Māliki scholar Abū ‘Abdullah al-Qurṭabī (610-671/1214-1273):

> It is immoral singing…[as al-Qurṭabī said] it is ‘singing which agitates the spirits and that arouses them to passionate love, amorous poetry and obscenity… which moves the still and reveals the hidden… this is that type of singing if it has poetry that celebrates [women in verse] by mentioning women and descriptions of their beauties, and mentioning wine and other forbidden things upon which there is no difference [in opinion amongst scholars] in their being forbidden… As for what the Sufis have created these days it is from an addiction to listening to the sung (*samā’ al-mughānnī*) and the instruments of *tarab.*” (24)

As we saw above, at some point the last definition, that is, music being associated with immorality, became the most commonly used definition of *al-ghinā’. Other types of singing used to be referred to as *ghinā’,* including the Islamically licit genres of wedding/life cycle and occupational music. However, the word itself has come to represent all that is negative and illicit in vocal music for many Islamic scholars.

*Al-ma’āzif*, likewise, has come to refer to all musical instruments and the playing of them. Early definitions, such as those compiled by Ibn Manẓūr (d. 711/1312), indicate that *al-ma’āzif* referred only to the playing of instruments, not the instruments themselves, equating it with *malāhī*, or “entertainment.” Later scholars amended the meaning of *al-ma’āzif* to include musical instruments themselves (al-Sulaymānī 2011, 24-6). A point worth lingering on here is that the instruments and their functions as reported by al-Sulaymānī are of considerable antiquity. There is, for example, no reporting on new instruments or on a wide range of commonly used instruments and considerable attention is paid to instruments that haven’t been used in hundreds of years. For example, his list of instruments includes the *kinārā* (“about which
there is some disagreement” as to whether it is an ‘ūd or a duff), the kūba (an hourglass drum), and the sanj (the Persian cheng or harp).

Walīd al-Nabhānī notes the same confusions in his chapter on musical instruments discussed in the Omani Ibāḍī fiqh literature. In a chapter devoted to the case of the dāhir, he notes that Ibāḍīs have often defined al-maʿazif only as chordophones, using the word al-mizāmir for aerophones and al-mizāhir for idio- and membranophones (2016, 44). Similar to the misunderstanding over the kināra, al-Nabhānī cites other scholars who have reported on the kibārāt, some saying that “it is an ‘ūd as well, and some folks say it is a duff” (44). Al-Nabhānī concludes that, due to this confusion and the surrounding context, the instrument “was not present at the time of the author,” Muḥammad bin Ṭāhir al-Kindī (d. c. 508/1115).

b. Ibāḍī Pragmatism: Condemnation and Conciliation

When al-Sulaymānī shifts his focus to presenting the perspectives of Ibāḍī perspectives on music, he is unequivocal:

The reader of the books of Ibāḍī scholars that treat the question of singing and musical instruments and what is related to them (in the judgment of jurisprudential scholars) finds that Ibāḍism is amongst the harshest of all the Islamic schools in condemning singing and its instruments. There is no difference amongst Ibāḍī scholars and their rulings, neither in the past nor in the present, on the question of forbidding singing and musical instruments. Rather, their statements on the two are the most ruthless of all statements, and they consider the two amongst the greatest of sins and most reprehensible actions. (2011, 95)

Such is the position espoused by Muḥammad bin Ṭāhir al-Kindī, cited above: “listening to entertainment is disobedient, sitting amongst it is sinfulness, and working in it is apostasy (of ungratefulness towards God’s blessings, CLA. kufr al-nuʿama)” (96). Many Ibāḍī scholars have interpreted this kind of harsh judgment as permitting the destruction of instruments as a means of defense against them. The breaking of instruments is a common behavior cultivated in “enjoining
the right and forbidding the wrong” (see Cook 2000). Such a statement is recorded by the 11th/17th century Ibāḍī scholar Shaykh Muḥammad bin ‘Abdullah bin Jum’a bin ‘Abīdān al-Nizwī:

As for the dahra/daïre and the mizmār-s and all the instruments of entertainment, it is permitted for you to break them if you are able, if they are used or not. As for the dahra/daïre, the āṣnāj (cymbals) and zamārāt, they are to be broken wherever found, used or not. As for the reed instrument (qasba), as it has been said: ‘when it is used and there is singing with it’… as for the duff-s, if they are used outside of the month of marriage, then they are to be broken. (cited in al-Sulaymānī 2011, 98)

Another instrument mentioned by the Ibāḍīs, more familiar in Central Asia, is the ṭunbūr.

Interestingly, Mūsā bin Ābī Jābir al-Manḥī (of Manaḥ, d. 181/797) writes that one has “permission to leave it unbroken “if it was without adornment (‘idha kān l-ghayr zayna),

[though] if the value of the ṭunbūr seemed high, then most scholars permitted breaking it ‘even if it was of great value’” (al-Nabhānī 2016, 45). As opposed to discussions of instruments that perhaps were not used in Oman or were no longer used there, these details seem to indicate that not only was the ṭunbūr present at some time, but that it was differentiated in construction.

Lieutenant Wellstead reports but does not name an instrument that may be related to this ṭunbūr:

“seated cross-legged under the scanty shade of the date-palm, I have often listened to [a Bedouin] thus amusing himself for hours. The only accompaniment is a rude guitar with two strings” (1837, 74-5).

Al-Kindī reportedly asked another scholar, ’Abī al-Ḥuwārī, about

the dahra/daïre, is it to be broken if it is not played? And he replied: yes, it is broken… so I said to him: And if I see a duff in a house is it for/upon me to break it? He said: Yes, that is for/upon you. Another speaker said to him: Is it permitted to sell duff-s at a Muslim souq [or marketplace]? He said: No, that is not permissible. (al-Sulaymānī 2011, 99)

On this last point, the selling of music instruments in a Muslim souq, another scholar compares this to the “foolishness of the relaxation of the [obligation] to covering of the men of the world”
“the letting down of hair onto backs,” men dressing like women and the converse, or allowing youths and idiots to carry weapons (al-Sulaymānī 2011, 103).

Ibāḍīs were careful not just to condemn their own music, but that of Africans, British subjects, and Indians as well (Cook 2001, 409-10). British Imperial officers stationed in Muscat noted in 1869 that the influence of Sa‘īd bin Khalfān al-Khalīfī, an Ibāḍī scholar, had reached such a level that he outlawed the weekly music sessions of the Siddi-s (a population derived from enslaved Africans) in the capital (Johny 2010, 70). Similarly, the British Political Agent in Muscat had to intervene when Ibāḍī leaders requested that he prevent his Indian subjects from beating drums or playing musical instruments. Disbrowe [the Political Agent in Muscat] refused to heed the request. Instead, he replied that if these activities were restricted only during hours when it is unreasonable or caused disturbance then an understanding could be reached between the two sides. [Imām] ‘Azzān in his reply stated that music was to be banned at all time [sic] and no concession would be made to British subjects. (Johny 2010, 71)

However, recall that ‘Azzān’s time as Imām was predicated on his opposition to imperial ingresses in Oman and his call to reassert the religious basis of the Imamate.

The essential statement on music for our purposes, however, is a qaṣīda written by the famed Imām ‘Abdullah bin Ḥumayd “Nūr al-Dīn” al-Sālimī (1286-1332/1869-1914) in the Jawhār al-Niẓām fī ‘ilmī al-’adyān wa-l-ahkām (The Jewel of Order in the Science of Religions and Judgments), a collection of poems and prose sections that gather and expound on Ibāḍī Islamic themes. In the section entitled “Book of the Order of the World,” in the subsection on “Enjoining the Right and Forbidding the Wrong,” he writes the following lines:

And the instruments of entertainment that have no use
Outside of themselves are to be broken whenever they are found,
In all of their types that exist,
Because in this there is no benefit.

Bin Maḥbūb told us about his compatriot;
That he played a drum with no mind to it.
And in their telling, he [Bin Maḥbūb] rent the leather [of the drumheads]
And that is incumbent upon any of the proper [Muslims].

And they are not permitted to play the drum,
For entertainment — but for two ‘just meanings’:
And that is the terrorization of enemies,
And as a response to the distant cries [of communication],

And as a call to the prayers of the festival (al-‘īd)
Or to a serious and purposeful meeting between them [Muslims].

(cited in al-Sulaymānī 2011, 96-7)

Nūr al-Dīn demonstrates the harsh Ibāḍī take on music as requiring the destruction of musical instruments. However, what this passage shows most clearly is the pragmatic Ibāḍī interest in function and uselessness. The poet’s main criticism of music and musical instruments in this passage is that the instruments of entertainment are to be broken “because in [them] there is no benefit” and they “have no use outside of themselves.” Al-Sulaymānī adds that musical instruments are “not [the kind of things] that are benefitted from” (97). When the “two ‘just meanings’” for using instruments are provided, they are clearly phrased in terms of function: insofar as drums are useful in times of war (to terrorize enemies and coordinate soldiers) and in peace (to gather the Muslims to festival and consultation) they are permitted. This is a clear expression of what Al-Faruqi presented as the hierarchy of handasa al-sawt, but the justification of it is not presented in terms of the sound-art’s similarity to the recitation of the Qurʾān, but of its benefit to believers in other ways.

The current Grand Muftī of the Sultanate of Oman, Aḥmad bin Ḥamad al-Khalīlī, has issued several fatwas about music and echoes his predecessors very closely. Condemnation should be the general stance, but bets are hedged. The general Ibāḍī interpretation of music contends that the “al-lahū al-ḥadīth” mentioned in Luqmān 6 refers to music, musical
instruments, the purchase or renting of music, and nearly everything else related to it. In an undated fatwa issued by the Muftī, he summarizes an Ibāḍī position:

*Al-lahū* is impermissible (*yahram al-lahū*) when it pulls to it corruption and emits iniquity. Its impermissibility is evidenced by the true speech of the Most High: “And of those people who buy idle talk to lead [others] astray from the path of God without knowledge” [Luqmān 6]. *Al-lahū al-hādīth* in this verse is “singing,” as narrated by the learned interpreter and translator of the Qur’ān Ibn ‘Abbās—God’s mercy upon him. Thus it was told about the Prophet—May God send prayers and peace—through the telling of 12 of his followers, of [his] prohibition of singing and playing and instruments (*al-ghinā’ wa-l-‘azif wa-l-zamr*). Despite this, scholars have permitted, in the case of war, what inspires ḥamās (vigor, enthusiasm) in the believers and strengthens their resolves. However, war songs (*inshād-s*) that carry ḥamās are conditional provided that they do not come at the expense of religious duties, such as impeding the duty to remember God and the duty of prayer; surely, God knows best. (cited in al-Sulaymānī 2011, 106)

Once again, function outweighs the doctrinal slash-and-burn prohibition of music. Music is, in fact, too useful to ban completely. In my discussions of this with another religious scholar, he explained to me that non-Muslims often think that Muslims ban alcohol and music without exception: “In fact,” he pointed out, “alcohol and music are common. Why? Because you need alcohol for cleaning, chemistry, for useful things (*ashiyā’ mufīda*) like perfume. It is the same with music. It is not ḥarām without exception—if it is useful and beneficial to the Muslim, he must use and benefit from it.”

The definition of permitted sonic art for Ibāḍīs is also quite wide—as Al-Faruqi notes, it is only that music which is most strongly associated with immoral settings that is uniformly denounced. In a 2005 fatwa, the Muftī also commented on a variety of *inshād-s* that were sent to him. The letter and response read:114

July 2005 / Jumādā al-thānī 1426 Fatwa
In the name of God, the merciful, the compassionate.
His Eminence the Shaykh / ’Āḥmad bin Hamad al-Khalīlī the Venerable Grand Muftī of the Sultanate:

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114 I have not yet found the sound examples that accompanied the letter.
Peace be upon you, and God’s blessings and mercy,

The included attachment with the letter is a group of inshād-s that include various vocal expressions. Since the controversy amongst people has increased around [music’s] judgment according to the Sharia, we submit it to your Eminence, seeking from you the blessing of notifying us as to its status.

The attachment is ordered as follows:
1. Al-duff?
2. Western music/rhythm? (al-‘īqā’ al-gharbī)
3. Sea music with or without interlocking clapping?
4. Invigorating military music?
5. Melismata (Āhāt) - by a natural human voice?
6. Melismata by sampler (a human voice entered into a computer then used in performance)?
7. Autotune (a human voice entered into a computer and purified to become sharp, free from melodic impurities)?
8. Vocal alternatives (a human voice entered into a computer which then undergoes editing until it becomes like another voice)?
9. Bass (al-bayz) (a rough voice accompanying music/rhythm either human or non-human)?

The answer: It is well-known that devotion is a wide door. So he who is prudent leaves [unmolested] the non-prohibited—that is most safe and forthright. As for the judgment, I do not find in what has been presented in these expressions something that is forbidden except for the Western music, insofar as it is in imitation of non-believers, and the Sea Music with interlocking clapping due to the clapping. Surely God knows best.

(cited in al-Sulaymānī 2011, 109-110)

Is Music Useful or Useless?

What emerges from the discussion of music most clearly is (1) that proscriptions on music made by Ibāḍīs are very fine-grained, and (2) that a crucial deciding factor is whether or not the music or instrument serves a discrete and necessary social function. Hence, while musical instruments are broadly impermissible, commonly held exceptions exist to preserve what is useful and beneficial—similarly, music that is considered to have no use or benefit is prohibited.

Discussing Ibāḍīs’ take on musical instruments in general, Cook reports that

[Omani Ibāḍī] jurists will consider—though not necessarily adopt—a kinder view of an instrument if it meets one or more of the following criteria: if it is not actually being
played; it is being played without the accompaniment of singing, revelry or partying; it could in principle be used for some legitimate purpose; it is being used by children rather than adults. (2001, 411, italics mine)

One example of this kind of thinking is given by al-Nabahānī when he writes that the large qaṣba (CLA, “reed,” flute) was “beneficial in remembering the hereafter (or death in another reading). It was reported about Al-Wuḍāḥ bin ‘Aqaba (f. 237/851) that his son Ziyād saw him listening to the sound of the large qaṣba while crying” (2015, 45-6).

This practical mode of thinking in religious matters was reported by Limbert (2010) in her ethnographic research on sociality in Bahlā’ as well. However, Limbert notes the reverse:

While older Bahlawis [people from the town of Bahlā’] 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 upon pious individuals. 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. (2010, 14)

Rather than the usefulness of a practice determining its acceptability, it is the uselessness of an action (within a certain discourse) that condemns it. Despite protestations that visiting might, in fact, be a kind of work (shughl] (like praise), its frivolity is enough to make it sinful. Limbert notes that Oliver Leaman (1980) traces this tendency of equating “uselessness” with sin back to the 3rd/10th-11th century Islamic jurist ‘Abd al-Jabbar, who first presented the uselessness of an action as “sufficient condition of its evilness,” whatever the consequences (129). If, as ‘Abd al-Jabbar claims, everything has value because there is a purpose behind its existence, anything which is not in accordance with this purpose must be evil. The performance of a useless action must be objectionable on such a view, since it involves acting as though there were no all-encompassing purpose at work in creation. (Leaman 1980, 129)
Despite the high-mindedness of this claim, for Omanis the concept of uselessness is a very practical one. A common saying amongst Omanis when evaluating something is to say “mā yāṣlaḥ,” which means both “it’s not proper” and “it’s not useable, not practicable,” or the opposite, “yāṣlaḥ,” meaning that it is fitting, serviceable, or useful. An Omani proverb runs, gald al-fi’r mā yāṣlaḥ l-al-raḥmānī (lit., “a mouse’s hide isn’t useful/ enough to skin a raḥmānī drum”), used to refer to meager attempts to solve a big problem. Encouragements to drink more water, juice, or coffee, to eat more, or to use incense are accompanied by the phrase, “it will benefit you” (yistafīdak). After many interviews and performances, I was asked “did you benefit from it?” (tistafīd minnu?) Discussing the moral dangers of coffee and coffee consumption in Bahlā’, Limbert cites a jurisprudential qaṣīda by the scholar Mājid bin Khamīs al-‘Abrī (1252-1340/1836/7-1921/2) who “simply notes that there is nothing wrong with coffee and that its effects are not harmful, but rather useful” (66).

a. **Legitimating the Drums of War**

However, the most important exception for a discussion of the razha and the drumming in it is the Ibāḍī exceptions for military music. “It is noteworthy that the attitudes of the [Ibāḍī] jurists are not uniformly hardline in all these matters,” writes Cook, and that “the single most prominent motive behind the softer views is military” (2001, 410). His paragraph on this exception is worth citing at length:

One jurist who considers playing chess a grave sin allows it when the object is instruction in military strategy. Another describes male shrieking as a wrong and a residue of the Jāhiliyya, but relents when asked to consider it as a war-cry intended to rally the troops and strike fear into the enemy; he expresses the hope that it may then be permitted, though his preference would be for the use of the Islamic war-cry ‘God is greatest!’ … One jurist recollects that in the coastal city of Şuḥār, Maṭṭār and his men had not been prevented from use of this drum [the duhra], and he wonders what the doctrine of the scholars concerned can have been; we know from elsewhere that Maṭṭār and his men were Indians [possibly Baloch], a military force which the Imām maintained in Şuḥār.
Another jurist states that a certain Abū ’l-Ḥuwārī al-Ma‘nī used to object to the Indian who beat the drum in the camp (sc. at Nizwā in the Omani interior), and distanced himself from the Oman in consequence. More striking than any of this is the discussion of the question whether the imam may overlook the misdeeds of his own followers in wartime; one view accepts this concession, the other rejects it. The emphasis on military efficacy is doubtless linked to the resilience of the imamate in Oman. (Cook 2001, 410-411)

Al-Nabhānī notes the same process regarding drums in the Interior. “It seems that drums acquired their legitimacy from some Islamic scholars due to their effect they had during war and in meeting the enemy” (2016, 46). He writes, “Shaykh Khamīs bin Sa‘īd al-Shaqṣī (c. 1030s-1090s/1620s-1680s) confirms that when he said:… ‘In our days, the drum is not considered shameful (lā yistaqbah al-ṭabl) especially if it was a time of war, in a parade at the (military?) camps, and perhaps as a sign or notice of that” (46). Al-Shaqṣī concludes that “each time period and people has its own legal judgment,” and al-Nabhānī astutely notes that this is perhaps written with a sense of resignation. Al-Shaqṣī was, after all, “one of [Imām Nāṣir bin Murshid’s] central supporters” and “this period was a time of the wars to unify the nation and throw out the occupying Portuguese” (46). This echoes the stances cited in earlier sections from the current Grand Muftī, Nūr al-Dīn al-Sālimī, and others. In the next section, we will examine more closely the context and social ramifications of this doctrinal position over the last few centuries, and the controversial role it has had in aiding state power.

“The Right has come”: Music in Omani statecraft

In the previous section, we have seen how, despite early and continued condemnation of music and musical instruments, Omani Ibāḍī intellectuals have made special exceptions for the drum in times of war or for the inspiration of fighters. In this section, I collect and review much of the extant textual evidence for the role of music in non-jurisprudential contexts. I focus on two
contexts: that of Oman proper, and the Omani colonization of East Africa and Zanzibar. As we shall see, reports of music in these contexts are often associated with the violent display of state power. Insofar as music is played in the context of such state displays, it is tolerated as useful. Outside of this context, it is often condemned. This trend is especially well-documented since the early 11th/17th century, which corresponds with the rapid expansion of Omani state power, internal development, and imperial ambitions. It is perhaps unsurprising that the bulk of anecdotes including drums and performance come from this period.

a. Oman Proper

Omani musicologist Musallim al-Kathiri has gathered some of the few mentions of music and instruments that exist in the native Omani historical texts, especially from Nūr al-Dīn al-Sālimī’s history *Tuhfa al-ʿaʿyān bi-sīra ahl ʿUmān* (Masterpiece of the Notables in the Story of the People of Oman, 1998]. In al-Sālimī’s retelling of the origin myth of the Omani Arabs, it is the Persians who used “trumpets and drums” in their fight against them, while the Arabs did not (al-Kathiri 2005, 48). However, somewhere in the intervening millennia Arabs began to use drums for a variety of purposes, often communal, military, and political. Due to the paucity of evidence over this period, we will confine ourselves to the last two or three centuries.

Historical examples of music and drumming largely begin with the end of the Yaʿāriba and beginnings of the Āl Bū Saʿīdī dynasty, in the mid-18th century. Nūr al-Dīn and bin Razīq both retell the story of the founder of the Āl Bū Saʿīd dynasty Aḥmad bin Saʿīd’s Trojan Horse-like hoodwinking of the Persian invaders at Barka using drums (al-Kathiri 2005, 48). Aḥmad had apparently invited all the remaining Persian leaders in Oman to a grand feast in the fort at Barka, during which he fed them lavishly (including perhaps alcohol). In their overfed stupor, Aḥmad commanded a drummer to play from the ramparts and call out, “anyone who has a complaint
against the Persians, come take your revenge!” Upon hearing the call, Omanis fell on the trapped Persians and murdered them, save for a number who were expelled back to Bandar Abbas. Later in bin Razīq’s telling, two descendants of Aḥmad cemented peace between them “by beat of drum” (Badger 1871, 202), while another anecdote notes the presence of horn trumpets amongst the army of the Imam ‘Azzān (r. 1284-6/1868-1870) (Al-Kathīrī 2005, 48).

More than just the presence of drums, the razha complex has long been associated with warfare. Al-Kathīrī notes that comparable to other Islamic contexts, music had a “specific military function in Omani armies” (2005, 48-9). An anonymous text recorded in the late 1980s can serve as an example:

Sayyidī lan ’amr ‘alaynā  
Nasabbiq al-bārhūt wa-l-nār  
Fī al-ma‘arāk lan talāqaynā  
Nartamī law damnā gārī

Our Lord [need] not order us;  
We race to the gunpowder and spark.  
In battle you will not find us  
Falling, though runs our blood!

Wellsted is likely the first to describe the dance in English and does regard it as a “war dance.”

Men dance with weapons and display their courage and skill-at-arms (1837, 69, 319-22):

Upon my return to the tent [in Ga‘alān Bānī Bū ‘Alī, a town in the southwestern Sharqiyya region] I found there the whole of the tribe, at Beni-Abu-‘Ali, consisting of about two hundred and fifty men, assembled for the purpose of exhibiting their war dance. They had formed a circle, within which five or six of their number now entered. After walking leisurely round for some time, each challenged one of the spectators by

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115 This is likely the ṣāyiḥ, a town crier who played instruments (a drum also called ṣāyiḥ or horn trumpets, barāghīm) and made announcements, typically employed in many forts and castles as described by al-Shaydī (2008, 119 n.266). Al-Kathīrī adds that “one Omani citizen” recalled that drums were very common in signaling certain kinds of activities: one knew the sound of the neighborhood’s drum, and different drums announced the arrival of important guests, others that enemies were at the gates. Al-Hashimy writes that Sultan Fayṣal sounded a drum to warn the citizens of Muscat that “it was unsafe to stay outside the walls at night” due to the Imam Sālim’s raids (1994, 108).
striking him gently with the flat of his sword. His adversary immediately leaped forth, and a feigned combat ensued. They have but two cuts, one directly downwards at the head, and the other horizontally across the legs. They parry neither with the sword nor shield, but avoid the blows by leaping or bounding backwards. The blade of their sword is three feet in length, straight, thin, double-edged, and as sharp as a razor. As they carry it upright before them, by a peculiar motion of their wrist they cause it to vibrate in a very remarkable manner, which has a singularly striking effect when they are assembled in any considerable number. The shield is attached to the sword by a leathern thong; it measures about fourteen inches in diameter, and is generally used to parry the thrust of the spear, or jambeer [likely the khanjar]. It was part of the entertainment to fire off their matchlocks under the legs of some one of the spectators, who appeared too intent on watching the game to observe their approach, and any signs of alarm which incautiously escaped the individual, added greatly to their mirth. Their only music consisted of a small drum, beaten by a slave. (Wellsted 1837, 69-70)

The context, dueling, and regalia he describes are strikingly similar to current practice in the Interior, with the exception of the playing of a single drum as opposed to a matched pair. Rather than just dodging the sword, the aim nowadays is often the satisfying clack of hitting your opponent’s shield. The circle dance style of the razha might have been developed in the southwestern Sharqiyya—this is certainly the opinion of many of my interlocutors—and this text provides some more evidence. Yusuf al-Shawqi, the Director of the Omani Centre for Traditional Music prior to Musallim al-Kathiri, notes that a variety of the razha which involves the two encircling lines is named razha al-ḥuwāmah (the “gliding razha”) and is “common in the provinces of the Sharqiyyah, especially in Ṣūr, Ja’alān Bānī Bū ‘Alī and Ja’alān Bānī Bū Ḥasan” (1994, 155). In the interior, however, this style coexists with many others, which are likely just as antique.

Later, in Muscat, Wellsted describes another razha form, involving meeting lines:

The men amused themselves [during the ‘īd celebration] with horse and camel races, and with the same description of war-dance as I have described in my account of the Beni-Abu-‘Ali Arabs. They also practised another, which I have never seen elsewhere: two lines form at the distance of ten or fifteen yards, and approach each other to the sound of a drum, beaten by two slaves stationed midway between them. They proceed at a slow and measured pace, until within about two yards from each other, and then either party, after simultaneously bowing their heads, retreated to the same distance as before; in this
manner they continued to approach, bow, and retreat as long as I remained. (1837, 319-22)

This style of *razha* is another unnamed but common form in the Interior, and the blending of the two might be evidence of the development of the line form outside of the southwestern Sharqiyya, and the circle form within it. In any case, both are closely associated with warfare and the movements of soldiers and battle lines.

Direct evidence of the *razha* being used in warfare is presented by bin Razīq in his history of the Āl Bū Sa‘īdī-s (bin Razīq 2001). Sultān, the son of the Imam Aḥmad Āl Bū Sa‘īdī, the governor of Ṣuḥār who repelled the Persians from Oman, was living in Gwadar on the Makrān coast after a failed coup against his father. The Baloch ruler there granted the town and its environs to Sultān as a gift, which the Omanis retained until the late 1950s. After the death of his father and nephew, who had been appointed the wālī of Muscat by his own father (at that time the Imam Sa‘īd bin Aḥmad), Sultān returned to Oman in c. 1206/1792 and marched on Muscat. He sent a letter before him proclaiming that he was only interested in attacking the forts of the city and would leave the inhabitants and merchants in peace. The merchants, one in fact the author’s father, devised a clever way to gauge the strength and will of the defenders. The merchant families fired muskets into the valley through which Sultān’s army would have to march and cried that they had met the enemy. When the defensive forts in Muscat merely fired their muskets into the air in a bid to pretend that they were willing to fight rather than emerging, the merchants of Muscat knew they would be defeated by Sultān’s army.

About an hour afterwards Sultan and his force approached through the Wadi, with their swords drawn and singing as their war-song this noble sentiment, “The right has come and has overthrown the wrong; the wrong is overthrown!” (wa siyūfihi maslūla wa Sultān yamshī ‘imāmihim. Wa shaʿārihim hadhihi al-āyā al-sharīfa, ‘jāʾ al-ḥaqqa wā zahiq al-bāṭil, ‘inna al-bāṭil kān zuhūqan’ [bin Razīq 2001, 370]). When they reached my father's house, my father went out to Sultan, took his hand, congratulated him, and informed him that he had read his letter to the notables and merchants of Maskat, and that
they had expressed themselves much gratified at his consideration for them [Sulṭān soon successfully took the forts.] (Badger 1871, 217)

The original text in question here gives a more literal translation as “and their war-song was this noble verse of the Qu’rān,” since the quoted war-cry is found in Sūra al-’Isrā’ 81. With the description of marching, naked swords in hand, a leading patron, and a collective war-cry, I think it is not unreasonable to read this as an example of a razha or very conservatively as some kind of proto-razha. Here, an army marches and gives a war-cry together, clearly fulfilling the practical premise of Ibāḍī Islamic tolerations for razha—prosecuting military action against a foe of the state. The text of the presumptive razha is also Qur’ānic, therefore waylaying concern that the text might be objectionable on other grounds.

Several of the “cousin” forms of the razha in the Žāhira and Buraymī region are also clearly linked to warfare. One, al-ḥarbiyya, is simply named “the one for war (CLA, ḥarb).” Al-Shaydā notes that al-‘ayyāla, “one of the arts of war and the sword,” is named for “attackers” or “those that come against” (O. Ar, ‘āl, pl. ‘ayyāl) (2008, 211, 211 n.610). “It was named thus al-‘ayyāla because it was performed for warfare when one tribe came against (taʿāl) another” (2008, 211 n.610). An example from 1986:

Yā dār al-falak, yā dār wa nayyāl al-ghumām  
Winn shira’ al-masgūl ḥinnā fī hawwāh  
Wilā’ wilaynā al-dār wa al-‘izz istigām  
Wilā’ namawt wa nistirīh min al-ḥayāh.

O Heavens, O home of the dispeller of clouds.  
The swords come buzzing and we’re in love.  
If we fled the homeland and upright honor,  
Then we die and take a rest from life.

Al-Kathīrī claims that the razha al-wahābiyya form is named after the Saudi Wahhābī movement, as the dance groups performed to prepare for battle against them during their incursion in the early 1800s. “Nowadays, the wahābiyya / ‘ayyāla is known in the areas that were
the stage to this conflict,” in the Zāhira, northern Bāṭina, and in the United Arab Emirates (50).

Al-Kathīrī continues: “arms (swords, daggers, rifles, and camel-sticks) are considered a common symbol in dance within many of the traditional Omani musical forms, as in [the arts that exemplify] hamās, self-praise, and praise” (2008, 50).

Razḥa-s were clearly closely tied to fighters and fighting. Following our investigation in the first section, this should imply that this kind of music was permitted insofar as it fulfilled a function. Interestingly, historian Saʿīd bin Muḥammad bin Saʿīd al-Hashimy, in his dissertation on the rule of the revivalist Imam Sālim bin Rāshid (r.1331-8/1913-20), records that

According to one story [Imam Sālim] was walking one day near the fort of Nazwa (the old traditional capital of the Ibāḍ) and he heard some soldiers singing and dancing. He shouted at them: behave yourselves in this place! When the soldiers heard his commanding voice they became full of fear and became quiet. (1994, 56)

Clearly Imam Sālim was admonishing these soldiers for performing what was likely a razḥa. This story helps to show that razḥa were necessary at certain times but were not necessarily warmly embraced by elites at all times. Razḥa is useful and dangerous. While it is valued for instilling virtue and encouraging the faithful, it can also inspire religious rebuke and celebrate vice. Some of my interlocutors, for example, were especially fond of razḥa-s that were called ghazaliyya, love razḥa. One such razḥa was taught to me after a raucous meal of ṣalūna, a kind of watery curry, whose gingery spice was said to excite the eater to sing this:

\[
\begin{align*}
Kharagat min al-ḥuṣn al-muṣūfa \\
\text{‘ūdiḥā}^{116} \text{ yaḥanni al-ṣuṣūf}.
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{ṣadriḥā sab’a niṣūf} \\
\text{tabarī al-’ila wa al-sigām} \\
\text{‘aynihā nugm al-thirayya’} \\
\text{khudhiḥā badr al-tamām} \\
mazūriḥā mā dām hayya
\end{align*}
\]

^{116} As mentioned in the first chapter, this literally means “her wood,” in this region of Oman read as “her tree trunk,” referring to her figure.
She went out from the fair castle,
    Her slim waist swaying.
Her chest is half a seven,\(^{117}\)
    That cures all sickness and ills
Her eye is the North Star,
    Her cheek the full moon.
Her visits are what sustains life;
    Bah, tomorrow consider the consequences!

This is precisely the kind of poem that would in any other case be considered forbidden as immoral singing, ghinā’ al-mājin. However, this razḥa is now sung at weddings (“just late in the evening, you know, when the kids are off to bed,” one man sheepishly offered).

Recall that since the Imam was not allowed to have a standing army, tribes had to be petitioned to join his military excursions. Often Imams did this with letters (see al-Hashimy 1994), but from what we’ve seen it seems likely that much of this work amongst common people was accomplished through sung poetry. In the entry on razḥa in his 1994 Dictionary of Traditional Music in Oman, Shawqi writes that it “was a way of announcing war, victory, peace, or the mediation of peace between warring parties” (1994, 152). This recalls the peace announcement made between Imam Aḥmad’s descendants cited above, but also highlights the razḥa’s role in the context of military action. Razḫa not only encouraged and invigorated those doing battle, but also mediated information about warfare, broadcasting it amongst both belligerents and those uninvolved in the actual prosecution of armed conflict. Al-Shaydī gives an example of a razḥa sung in the context of a meeting between different parties:

\[\text{ḥinnā birūg al-mikhāyl}\\ \text{wā-l-ri’ūd al-gawiyya}\\ \text{tashad linā al-gabāyil}\\ \text{yawm ḥall al-līgiyya}\]

\(^{117}\) A seven written in Indian numerals, used in Oman, is ७, and so “half a seven” cut horizontally is thought to resemble cleavage.
We are the lightning of the incessant downpour,
The peals of strong thunder.
Witness the tribes mustered to us,
On this day of meeting! (2008, 122)

A *razha* like this one probably played an important role in not only invigorating soldiers but informing them of the stakes and encouraging them and their leaders to join.

Another intriguing anecdote shows us further how the arts were both folded into the state apparatus and functioned in disseminating information. In ‘Ābī Bashīr Muḥammad “Shayba” bin Nūr al-Dīn ‘Abdullah bin Ḥumayd al-Sālimī’s (d. 1314-1406/1893-1985) history of the 20th century Imamate *Kitāb nahḍa al-‘āʾyān bi-hurriyya ‘Umān* (The Book of the Notables’ Renaissance in the Liberation of Oman), he chronicles the election of the Imam Muḥammad bin ‘Abdullah al-Khalīlī in 1920. “Just after sunrise on Friday the 13th day of Dhī al-Qa‘ada of the year 1338/1920] the religious scholars, notables, and ‘those that bind and loose’ (*‘arbāb al-ḥall wa-l-‘aqd*) gathered in the Nizwā mosque” to finalize the contract and pledge of allegiance to the Imam Muḥammad bin ‘Abdullah al-Khalīlī (324). They apparently had to nearly force the title on him, and even “did not take from him a pledge nor condition, as was taken from weak Imams,” something that would limit his activities and purview as Imam (324). After listing the personages that then pledged allegiance to the new Imam (concluding with “the common folk”),

His Eminence ’Abū Mālik gave the people a speech about contract, then after him ’Abū Zayd gave a speech to the army. After the conclusion of the two speeches, the *majlis* participants dispersed and the Imam took power—the doors were opened for him, cannons rang out the good news, and fine singers and criers began spreading (the news around Oman, *wa qām al-ṣādiḥ wa al-bāghim bi-l-nashr*).

Happiness effaces this honor presented,
So the sad do not frown when you are smiling. (al-Sālimi 1998, 324-5)
The terms al-ṣādiḥ and al-bāghim require explanation here. Al-ṣādiḥ\textsuperscript{118} refers to a fine, powerful male singer, a kind of falsetto which is also used to describe the singing of birds. The verb it is derived from means “to sing, to chant” (Wehr 1994, ʿ-ḥ). Al-bāghim is slightly less straightforward. A historian put it to me this way:

**Historian:** What al-Sālimi means here is not the literal meaning, this word means a cow or gazelle or camel that is lowing/bellowing. Baghama means to cry out, or to call out but it is for pastoral animals. Often this is said between the mother and the young, the young lows after the mother. It wants milk, it sees a lion, like this. Here, it is a combination of terms that shows that all were singing the name of the Imam, in high voices, the ṣādiḥ, and the low voices, the bāghim. Like we say, I searched East and West—did you go all the way to China and then to America? No, it is an expression of magnitude, do you understand me?

**BJG:** Yes, it is clear now. And what do you think he means by this, in terms of the arts?

**H:** This is unmistakable; he means by this the ʿāzī and the razḥa (kiānat al-ʿāzī wa-l-razḥa), this is the ṣādiḥ and bāghim respectively. The high voice and the low voice, this also carries the meaning of the high classes (al-khāṣa) and the low (al-ʿāma) in society. In this he means the news spread far and wide.

It is important to mention here that the historian in question knew the topic of my dissertation and so his attribution of the meaning of ṣādiḥ and bāghim as ʿāzī and razḥa may be more friendly than factual.

\textsuperscript{118} The ʿism fāʿ il of the verb ṣadaḥa/yāṣdah, ʿ-ḥ; though see Wehr 1994 who defines it as a “note raised a semitone, a sharp.”
However, there is some evidence that ‘āzī-s and razḥa-s were performed for the Imam Sālim’s election ceremony in 1913. During my research, an ‘āzī began to circulate on social media that was claimed to be one sung at this election. “A qaṣīda from an ‘āzī dating to around 1913, to the election of the Imam Sālim bin Rāshid al-Kharūṣī,” the text read, “the same spirit of ḥamās and national pride that was in that day is in this ‘āzī.” I could not corroborate the historical accuracy of the poem myself, though many readers claimed that the antiquated language was enough proof—many words challenged even accomplished poets. Al-Hāshimy claims that many of the poems that were read that day “were later published in a book called Tahānī al-Imām Sālim b. Rāshid al-Kharūṣī (Congratulations to the Imam Sālim bin Rāshid al-Kharūṣī) by [Shaykh] Nāṣir b. Sulaymān al-Lamkī in Zanzibar in 1332/1914” (1994, 88). Note that this election proceeded with the same formal order of genres of oral performance as we have seen in celebrations involving the wālī of Manaḥ, during the opening of the soccer pitch, and others. First, there are formal speeches given by relevant persons, followed by recited poems written for the occasion, followed by “singing and chanting.”119 In any case, the translation of this purported ‘āzī is incomplete and tentative. Nevertheless, the ‘āzī demonstrates much of what has been claimed regarding generosity and giving, communal representation, and mutual obligations between rulers and ruled:

I invoke the name of the Originator,
My heart sharpened by my important task.

The news has spread about the Ghāfīrī (meaning the Shaykh Ḥīmyar bin Nāṣir al-Nabhānī al-Riyāmī [d. 1920], who was counted as the leader of the Ghāfīrī faction in the Sultanate)120

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119 In Jan Morris’s description of the Sultan Sa‘īd’s 1955-6 royal progress through the Interior, Sultan in Oman, she describes the reception of the Sultan in Nizwā in terms similar to those expressed by other authors; typically, no specific mention is made of music.

120 A staunch ally of Imam Sālim’s Imamate, he led the Bānī Riyām tribe on several campaigns against Bahlā’, Gabrīn, and Rustāq on behalf of the Imamate.
That he is extraordinary, and the Imam comes forth.

He is extraordinary, and the faithful come forth.
‘Ibrī and Tanūf have escaped.121

Ḥimyar is insatiable, no man exceeds him,
Other than widowers and orphans.122

Other than widowers; Father of the right,
Who makes things affordable by his own wealth!

From Sharjah and the northern country,
Beyond wasting from hunger, he devours foods.

Beyond wasting from hunger, he is to them a seller of his life (shirāh),
And to them he dispenses the zakāh tax.

They have called the Maghrib prayer for years,
And he loves the Muslims’ victory.

They said, “yeh, we are ready!”
The people are at the ready.

Obediently, the people are ready,
And they are proud of Nizwa, the westernmost.

In the fort123 blows a strong wind,
Undertaking the destruction of the ugly.

Undertaking the destruction from the wall.
O bin Ḥamad, there is no victory for you.124

Confronted, he despaired from life,
He drank from the fated cup of death by his own hand.

He drank the cup of death from his own hand,

121 This refers to the two towns joining the Imamate, presumably. Tanūf was the place where the Imam Sālim was elected; ‘Ibrī was the “turbulent frontier province” of the Imamate, bordering Saudi Arabia and constantly threatening independence (Wilkinson 1987, 254).

122 This was said to refer to Ḥimyar’s humility; others claimed it referred to his “hunger for war, which was like a widower’s or orphan’s hunger for food.”

123 Likely Nizwā fort, where Imam Sālim held power.

124 Referring to Sayyid Sayf ibn Ḥamad Āl Bū Saʿīdī, the ruler of Nizwā fort, who committed suicide during the Imam’s siege of it.
The sugar-cane presses did not speak of it.\textsuperscript{125}

Follower of the writings of the [high officials]\textsuperscript{126},
A horse [i.e., bin Ḥamad] they led by the halter and bit.

A horse they led goes onward,
[While] the army is in the mosque safely,

Not one fatigued, unbroken;
By God the victory is everlasting.

The WhatsApp message concluded, “it is said that the owner of this ‘āzī is Barīk bin Ḥamūd bin Khaṣīb bin Salīm bin Mubarak bin Khanjar bin ‘Umrān al-Raḥbī (of the house of the ’Awlād Salīm).” The same poem can be found online with similar attributions.

A final anecdote brings us to the next section of this chapter. W. H. Ingrams, the well-known British historian of Zanzibar, recalled that one day, while he rested at Chake in Pemba, a crew of Omani sailors had arrived, forced to seek shelter there rather in Zanzibar due to bad weather. Being British, he writes that

\begin{quote}
I asked them all to tea. They were Suris [from Ṣūr in Oman] and it was my first contact with them. What struck me most was the fact that they were all black. They had, however, finer features than our Bantus and were bearded…they rather alarmed me by coming to tea armed to the teeth with sticks, swords and round shields of rhinoceros hide, as well as the usual \textit{jambiya} [curved dagger] round their waists. Some also carried small war drums. After the gentle manners of my Zanzibar and Pemba friends the uncouth habits of the seafarers at first surprised me, but they were friendly and appreciated the party even if they were not entirely at home with cups and saucers and cakes. However they were quite happy with the sherbet and black coffee in Arab cups, and afterwards proposed to dance a Razha for me.
\end{quote}

The reason of the armament now became clear. Their intentions were peaceful but the display they gave was extremely warlike. The orchestra of drums struck up and the rest, pairing themselves off, indulged in mimic contests on the lawn, which I thought might end fatally at any moment, for they made great sweeping lashes at each other with their swords, which were apparently only avoided by dexterous countering with shields

\textsuperscript{125} Nizwā and this region in general was known for growing a large amount of sugar-cane, which was pressed into a sweet drink; perhaps what carried the poison that the \textit{wālī} drank?

\textsuperscript{126} Probably referring to the Sultan’s administration, for whom the \textit{wālī} held the city.
or by leaps in the air over the passing sword which would have made any skipping enthusiast envious. Some performed with jambiyas, making circular downward strokes parried by shield. When one overcame his opponent he would sit astride him and make as though to gouge out his eyes with horrifying realism. (Ingrams 1966, 38-9)

Once again, the razha is associated with warfare and welcome. In this case, it is performed by sailors coming down the East African coast. In the next section, we will see how this movement of people is further evidence of the central role of the razha in the politics of the state.

b. Omani colonization of East Africa

The final source of evidence on the role of music in Omani statecraft comes from the Omani expansion into East Africa. In the period from about 1650 to 1898, two successive waves of colonization and imperial ambition animated Omani leaders and merchants to take more sustained interest in controlling East African trade. This expansion was begun by the Ya‘āriba dynasty, though as Wilkinson comments “the power of the Ya‘arubī merely increased without being consolidated” (1987, 50). It took the economic base and connections of the Āl Bū Sa‘īdī-s to achieve that consolidation. “From the 19th century on,” historian Beatrice Nicolini writes, examining the second wave (1750-1898), “it was the blood-red flag of Oman that formed a tie, and not merely in the figurative sense, between the Omani enclave of the port of Gwadar in Makran-Baluchistan, the principal ports of Oman and the island of Zanzibar through the movement of peoples, precious goods and slaves” (2004, 4). Zanzibar was first considered as a capital city of the Omani empire in 1829, under the reign of Sa‘īd bin Sulṭān, who expanded Omani influence up and down the East African littoral some 960 miles in total (Ingrams 1931, 160-3). Though much has been made of the move, for our purposes what is interesting is that

127 See Nicolini (2004, 136-8) for an overview.
at some point in this period, Omani (or at least Arab) dances began to be performed by the Swahili-speaking populations in Zanzibar and its environs.

East African coastal peoples had, over the period in question, adopted and integrated many foreign influences within *ngoma* dance practices. As ethnomusicologist Kelly Askew notes, Swahili communities “developed aesthetic preferences for cultural borrowing and the appropriation of foreign elements” due to their historical role as intermediaries in Indian Ocean trade (2003, 611). These borrowings reveal how often music and dance have been associated with and constitutive of political power in East Africa (Askew 2003, 628). She examines *dansi* and *ngoma* (glossed as “modern” and “traditional” genres respectively) to show how such aesthetics “have clear economic utility” in the context of highly dynamic and multicultural trade networks (2003, 632). These dances in turn were linked with competing dance associations, themselves folded into the well-known East African urban moiety system, which acted as a “basic integrative device for urban settlements” (Ranger 1975, 20). In light of these social structures, Askew writes that

> music and politics thus combine to create a powerful mix of political action and agents in Swahili history and present-day practice. Through music, Swahili individuals have appropriated European [and Arab] symbolic and cultural capital for themselves, voiced their political agendas in song, debated political action, and used musical events as opportunities for education and organization. (2003, 630)

These factors lead Askew to conclude that “politicking itself constitutes a Swahili aesthetic principle. ‘To sing about’ (*kumwimbia*) someone, something, some event, some process and by so doing effect social change is no small matter” (2003, 631).

Tracing these shifting influences, Ranger writes in *Dance and Society in Eastern Africa, 1890-1970* (1975) that “in the early 1890s, the dominant influence [on East African dances] was
still Arab” (20). A British imperial officer, R. Skene, provides a valuable overview of Swahili dances from that period, published in 1917. Skene’s first entry is on “The Razha Dance”:

The Razha was originally a war dance practised by the Arabs in Arabia prior to starting out on a raid. It originated at Manga in Muscat, and is danced with naked swords, the object being to get the muscles of the sword arm into training. The Hatharmut or Hadramaut Arabs also dance it, but use daggers instead of swords. The dancers, who of course are all men, stand in two rows facing each other, or in one row. They advance slowly a few inches at each step, keeping time to the drumming. The sword is held perpendicularly in the right hand, the fore-arm being at a right angle with the body. While holding the hilt of the sword in a perfect balance between the thumb and the first and second fingers, the base of the hilt is given a smart blow with the wrist so as to make the blade of the sword quiver. Being highly polished and made of fine supple steel, the quivering blade reflects the light in a most effective manner. This can only be done with the long straight double-edged sword of Southern Arabia and not with the scimitar-like blade used further north, owing to the thickness of the latter weapon. The music for the Razha dance is supplied by a drum called a chapuo, cylindrical in shape, covered with goat skin on both ends. It is about eighteen inches long by eight in diameter, and is played on both ends with the hands, while hung across the waist of the drummer by a cord round the neck. A bass drum is also used, called a vumi of the same shape as the chapuo, but larger, being two to three feet long and fifteen inches in diameter. It is beaten in the same manner as the chapuo. Anyone who knows how to dance can join in. No refreshments are served. (Skene 1917, 413)

Ranger adds that in Zanzibar “it was performed by ‘the men standing in a row and jerking their swords in the same manner as Arabs jerk their swords, one of which may sometimes be seen in the hand of a Swahili dancer of the Chama’[another dance form]” (Ranger 1975, 20). Several features of this are worth commenting on. First, the name of the dance as reported by Skene is precisely that of the Omani razha, though he claims it “originated” in Muscat. This attribution is likely using Muscat as a symbol of Oman in general. Secondarily, the description of rows of dancers is very much in line with Wellstead’s 1837 description of a dance in Muscat, while the “shaking” of the sword blade is good evidence of a direct link with other descriptions of Omani
dance. Similarly, the pair of drums here resemble in both size and differentiation the kāsir and raḥmānī of Oman.  

An expert on taarab music in Tanzania, musicologist Janet Topp Fargion, adds that “before their introduction to taarab, Shaib Abeid [a member of the first taarab club] writes, [dance associations] played music known as kinanda cha marwas and tari la diriji, but their favorite was to sing nyimbo za raz-ha (raz-ha songs) and other Arabic songs at weddings and other celebrations” (Fargion 2016, 208). These dance clubs were “comprised of people of Hadrami descent” and she cites this fact, Skene’s description of kinanda (another dance), and R. B. Serjeant’s (1955) reports of a similar name, razīḥ, being used for a different dance in Ḥaḍramawt in Yemen, to conclude that the dance arrived from that region. While she also cites the entry on razḥa from Shawqi’s Dictionary, the evidence presented in this chapter seems to point to Oman as the origin point of at least the razha described by Skene.

Arabs were not the only groups to have their dances adopted and transformed in East Africa. Ranger documents that British, French, and German dances, marches, costumes, instruments, and musical ideas were all brought into the beni ngoma in various ways. What is clear is that each successive empire’s display of pomp and circumstance were, sometimes flatteringly, sometimes sarcastically, emulated in East African’s own dances. What makes this interesting is that razḥa was not only performed in entertainment, but also as a serious demonstration and recognition of state power by Arab colonialists. Some films of these dances

128 Note that Wellsted described the dance in Ga’alān as involving just one drum and in Muscat involving two. There is some evidence that this style of drum pair was adopted in Oman from Swahili drummers, much like the adoption of the shape, construction, and name of the misundū drum from Zanzibar in the Afro-Omani līwa, a popular African-derived musical practice in the Gulf.
are available, but they are difficult to accurately provenance.\textsuperscript{129} This is a major reason why East Africans seized on the \textit{razha} to emulate: just like the European military marches they adapted later, the \textit{razha} was a display of power. It functioned to display the authority, military might, and unity of the Arab colonizers. \textit{Razha} carried out a specific function, not only in battle, but in peace as well (what relative peace can be had in a government based on trading slaves and colonization).

\textbf{Conclusions}

This chapter presented an interpretation of \textit{razha} as a central expression of state power in Oman, uneasily validated by Ibāḍī Islamic jurisprudential opinion. The relation of state power and music is evidenced by the deep connections between religious interpretations of music within the theocracy and later Sultanate and in the central presence of \textit{razha} in the expansion of Omani state power down the East African littoral. Practicality and purposefulness seem to be an under-recognized heuristic that motivated the legal determinations of several ’Ibāḍī legal scholars discussed here. Organized sound, drumming, dancing, and the emotional products of those activities are too socially useful to condemn wholesale. This usefulness of this dancing and drumming to the state was made clear by its spread along the state’s lines of colonial conquest. So let’s turn to that now.

Chapter 6: The Gift of Rule: Legitimating the Authoritarian State with Razha and ‘Āzī

Music is more than a decorative art… it is a powerful medium of social order.

(DeNora 2000, 156)

States have a peculiar dual character. They are at the same time forms of institutionalized raiding or extortion, and utopian projects. The first certainly reflects the way states are actually experienced, by any communities that retain some degree of autonomy; the second however is how they tend to appear in the written record.

(Graeber 2004, 65)

How does the modern authoritarian Omani state assert itself as real, effective, and legitimate? And on what grounds can we interpret the performance of razha and ‘āzī as helping to constitute the state as such? How, in short, do state performances of razha and ‘āzī help constitute state hegemony? I’ve claimed that certain performance practices, the razha and the ‘āzī, have had variable but functional roles in legitimizing the political order of Omanis in the past and in the present. As I have shown in previous chapters, this legitimation is predicated on the function of the Generosity/Legitimacy mechanism: the perception that mutual obligations prevail between Omani Arab performers who direct praise and generous leaders who do good deeds by directing goods, services, and infrastructure to local communities. There is a recognition of mutuality between rulers and ruled, predicated on the adequate performance of the duties and obligations placed upon them. We have explored this relationship from several perspectives and with some problems in mind: from the perspective of performers, as engaging in the Omani/Arab ethos of generosity, how it both displays and undermines relations of dependency, and how it has articulated with Ibāḍī Islamic rulings on music. In chapter 3, our
focus was on individual leaders, logical targets for praise. Here, we trace the shift in this system from individuals to the abstraction of the state. Over the course of the 20th century, as many Omani and non-Omani ethnographers have shown, the social contexts of these performance practices have drastically shifted. These shifts have situated the *razha* and the ‘āzī as the two indigenous performance practices that have become most publicly associated with the modern state, its myth-making, and its project of legitimation. I propose that *razha* and ‘āzī have become so central to state ritual and the formation of the Omani state as a cultural entity because they *can* model the class relations that legitimate state domination.

Throughout this chapter, I offer a Gramscian, that is, a critical political economic approach to praise in order to show how this sense of mutual obligation takes on the character of an exchange relationship between rulers and ruled, and what this relation entails in the context of an Arab authoritarian state. “The State,” however, is a complex concept and requires considerable unpacking. In doing so, I propose a theoretical orientation to the state that sees its material and economic basis and the various ideological projects that reify it as *an object to be related to* as joined at the hip. “The historical production of the state” is, as anthropologist Fernando Coronil puts it, “a mystifying complex of practices and beliefs” (1997, 116). By taking on the useful ideas in the “nonrealist” approach embraced by recent ethnographers of the state (Krupa and Nugent 2015, 8-14) and addressing its weaknesses through a strict reading of Gramsci’s political economy, we can come to a richer understanding of the form, history, and development of the state as historically conditioned sets of relations and the practices and beliefs that sustain them. “States” are fully dual-natured: they are at once social and class relations between rulers and ruled, whose particular forms are historically and culturally mediated, and the complex of practices and beliefs that help frame and legitimate these relations, which are in turn
realized in institutions, apparatuses, and cultural forms. The state is a material and an immaterial existence at once, faces that reinforce and mask each other to produce an illusion of unity.

In Oman, the modern Sultanate took the character it did due to the mapping of particular historical class configurations onto political institutions in such a way that power was concentrated within a small group of elites, along with their ‘ulamā’ and merchant allies. These elites asserted a level of independence from their allies and constituents by placing themselves as virtually the sole beneficiaries of integration into global capital flows, the development of the extractive oil economy, and colonial support (Ayubi 1995, ch. 7; Al-Naqeeb 1990). In order to sustain this dominance, Gulf leaders now had the dual task of maintaining the pretense of valuing “traditional” social relations while developing a modern state apparatus that was wholly authoritarian and oligarchic. Anthropologist Maurice Godelier has hypothesized that class relations of state domination are often sustained through the development of an ideology of debt, specifically of obligation and exchange, and I offer some new perspective on his argument by tracing some modern applications of it (Godelier 1986, 13-15, 166-7; Graeber 2012; Yeh 2013).

I argue that this framing of elite giving as generosity is ultimately a form of governance as gift: the gift of rule. Just as gifts of gold require a reception and a response, so does the gift of rule, the gift of order, the gift of safety and plenty.

Based on my argument that this sense of mutual obligation is modeled in the performance of razha and ‘āzī, I show that relations of dependency are realized between the state/Qābūs and performers in state-sponsored events that are, in turn, taken as a model of state-society relations as a whole. I trace how these relations of obligation and exchange have shifted from local to national levels and from regional to state rulers in order to argue that this shift has had an important role in legitimizing the state through praising the Sultan, who has positioned himself
as a human proxy of the state writ large. In so doing, I focus on the role of the state and its structural and ideological formation in the 20th century in changing the sociopolitical context of these practices, effectively controlling and directing their potential legitimizing power. This is the critical bridge between performance practice and projects of legitimation undertaken by states. Performance of ẓaḥa and ʿāzī serve, in part, to mask the dependency relations that obtain in authoritarian contexts by framing them as exchange or mutual obligation, which both draws on historical ideals of authority and reasserts them.

Considering this proposal will prompt us to ask how we ought to understand these praise practices as a political activity in an authoritarian state without political parties, formal representation, a legislative body or any of the other trappings of modern state politics. Throughout, I show how some historically salient features of performance (such as praise, celebration, and legitimation) have continued to function in more or less similar ways within the modern state, while others (such as communication, martial excitation, and communal representation) have been downplayed, become superfluous, or have been quietly suppressed. Further, the rise of the significance of ẓaḥa and ʿāzī in public discourse and their inclusion in public state ceremonies is not coincidental, but part of a larger campaign of asserting the essential “Arabness” and “uniqueness” of Omani culture, the display of solidarity between rulers and ruled, and an attempt to form a kind of Omani nationalism that is deeply wedded to the state and its image of Oman. To frame this discussion within broader strands of political ethnomusicology and anthropology, I first synthesize some of the recent literature in the ethnomusicological and anthropological approaches to the state as an analytical category and interrogate some assumptions regarding the content and conduct of “politics” as a kind of activity. Next, I give an account of Omani state formation that focuses on the ways that these
approaches to the state help explain shifting social relations between rulers and the ruled and the ways that elites have shaped the context of praise performance. Finally, I elaborate the way in which the Omani state has implicated organizations of civil society in its strategic manipulation of generosity, praise, and dependency and the cultural ideals that have linked those practices and beliefs in the past.

To begin this final chapter, however, I want to present two situations. The first is the image that opened this dissertation: the monumentally successful ‘āzī that was presented to the Sultan during the 40th anniversary celebrations just outside of Muscat. The second is the controversy over the cultural “ownership” of the ‘āzī as negotiated between Oman and the United Arab Emirates. Looking at these two situations exemplifies the stakes of some of the questions this final chapter seeks to address.

a. The 40th Omani National Day celebration, 2010

The international success of the 2010 ‘āzī performance by Muḥammad bin ‘Alī al-Marzūqī for the 40th National Day was perhaps unexpected. Not only had every National Day celebration since the 1970s been celebrated with one or more ‘āzī-s performed by talented singers, but al-Marzūqī himself had been singing in a similar style (and in front of Sultan Qābūs) since his breakthrough performance in 1994 at the Eid celebrations in Ṣaḥam as a boy. However, the combination of a dramatic, strongly worded poem, the performance of a lifetime, a choreography of striking bravado and audacity, and an almost solemn intensity cultivated by the bare-bones presentation (especially when compared to the spectacularly over-the-top “operettas” that often accompany these celebrations in the Gulf) made this performance a genre-shaping one. In the words of an aspiring ‘āzī performer in Manaḥ, “now everyone sings like al-Marzūqī; everyone is just copying him rather than learning the right way.” The various videos of this
performance on YouTube have garnered hundreds of thousands of views and comments from all over the Arab world and beyond. Perhaps the most telling examples of its success come from the way in which ‘āzī-s all over Oman for a variety of occasions are now performed the way this 40th anniversary performance was choreographed, rather than in the older choreography. Rather than marching in a circle, for example, many groups now choose to remain still or march straight in one direction. For the 40th anniversary celebration, the ‘āzī al-Marzūqī led a few important poets and performers, all of whom contributed to planning and arranging the performance, and a huge square formation of choral singers behind him in a straight line towards the seated Qābūs, through a stage-set castle built to mimic traditional fort architecture. The square of choral singers behind al-Marzūqī were all members of different performance troupes from throughout the country who were interested in or experts in the ‘āzī. With each line, al-Marzūqī and the group behind him waved their swords and guns and marched a few steps toward the Sultan. They moved into an open space framed by thousands of armed guards, soldiers, police, wrestlers, and armed dancers. Between each hemistich, this larger group raised their guns and swords into the air, beat drums, and cried responses: wa-slimt! (Truly!) or Hāāā! Aḥmad al-Riyāmī, an ‘āzī from Manaḥ, remembered it this way.

Aḥmad al-Riyāmī: Of course, we were called and invited to join in the National Day celebration [in 2010], and we were eager to go (mutahamasīn). They called us from the Ministry of Heritage, I think it was…

Ḥamad al-Tawbī: Yes, it was.

AR: Right, so they said ‘we’re gathering all these groups together to put on the biggest ‘āzī, al-Marzūqī will give it (rāh yilqā‘u), and it is a qaṣīda by al-Masrūfī, who also wrote the ‘āzī for the,…’ what was it…
BJG: The Year of Heritage in 1994?

HT and AR: Yes, yes.

AR: So, when we got there, by God, there were hundreds, there were thousands. It was an ocean, and they all loved the arts. They had tents set up for us, food, bathrooms, prayer rooms, it was all there. All provided, all available (*mutawāffir kulluh*). They had tents, big tents, and we stayed there for several days, and we did rehearsals for a few days.

BJG: Did you get some money for going?

AR: Yes, there was some money. The arts cost money, you know.

BJG: Do you remember…

AR: Ah, well, a few hundred *riyāl* I think… I’m not really sure. They were generous gifts (*kānat āndiya*), as we say.

BJG: So, you got some generous gifts, did you have other reasons to go? Was it an obligation (lit. “upon you,” ‘*alayk*) like with the soccer pitch? Because of the generous gifts, I mean?

AR: No, no, no, the money was for participation, that was not the *reason* for participation… I mean, the money is not important.

HT: Yes, like this.

AR: So … [AR asks BJG to repeat question about whether the obligation was similar to the obligation felt at the opening of the soccer pitch in Manaḥ, BJG does so] Yes, yes it was similar (*yitishabah al-‘amr*). We have to represent ourselves; we recognize Oman and we are proud of it (*naftakhir bih*). That’s love of country, you know, love of Qābūs. This is not an invitation one ignores/forgets (*al-da‘wa mā yunsī*).

BJG: Of course. So, let’s watch the video… then I can ask…

AR: Yes, let’s go…
[We watch the video on a laptop. As we do, AR sings the lines and hums the melody for words he does not remember.]

HT: Did you see our brother in there, duktūr? He was in the group following.

BJG: No! Where were you, brother?

AR: [scrubs backwards through video, then points to screen] Here, look. I was thinner then, [laughs] (wazinnī kān khafīf). I think that’s me, it’s hard [to tell].

BJG: Were you there, O Ḥamad?

HT: Yes, but we were on the sides. He [Qābūs] gave us all rifles, real ones. F-A-L [pronounced as English letters].

BJG: Why were you not in the group following?

HT: Well, that group was for people who knew the ‘āzī, experts in the ‘āzī I mean. Aḥmad, he’s an expert. They all learned from each other, and we were on the sides, responding, I mean.

BJG: Wow, Aḥmad, that must have been really wonderful. Did you enjoy it?

AR: Yes, it was very beautiful. It inspired me to memorize the ‘āzī, to want to perform the ‘āzī as well. Everyone, I tell you, everyone who followed the ‘āzī that day remembers it. It was all legends, like the legends team (firqat al-Āsāṭīr, a soccer team that only fielded players who had “retired” from the official soccer club roster. The team had been the discussion of conversation beforehand.] there at the head, the ‘āzī [al-Marzūqī] the poet [al-Masrūrī] and that al-Tawbī who was too busy to be interviewed by you, [laughs]. They were all there. It was wonderful.

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131 HT is here referring to a standard British Commonwealth rifle, the **Fusil Automatique Legé**r (FAL).
BJG: And he memorized the poem and gave a beautiful performance…

AR: Yes, that is very important. It was his performance, but he did not sing live, it was a recording; it’s necessary because mistakes are not welcome in this kind of thing, [these things] require very precise timing.

The staging of this event is telling and can be fruitfully contrasted with other similar events. Generally speaking, one kind of state-sponsored event is composed of a selection of “traditional tableaus,” usually referred to in Oman as lawḥāt (“tableau” or “scene”). These typically include a variety of local dancers and singers performing lightly choreographed regional performance genres, such as women dancing al-barʿa in Ṭūfār or men dancing the al-rawwāḥ in Musandam, in a stadium setting. Such performances might also include equestrian displays, camel-riding, pounding wheat, a local giving a qaṣīda, or other elements of local folklore and material culture being presented to various governmental authorities. For example, the relatively uncelebrated National Day celebration filmed for TV in Nizwā in 1987 contained both razḥa and ‘āzī, but both were presented more or less in historically accurate ways and were not previously recorded and played over a speaker system. This led to a relatively quiet and human performance, as opposed to the almost overwhelming volume associated with similar celebrations throughout the Gulf. In 1987, the ‘āzī was conducted in the typical manner associated with the Dakhiliyya and Sharqiyya provinces, with the ‘āzī himself moving around the inside of a half-circle of responders, not facing a particular addressee. On the other extreme of civic celebrations, there are the highly choreographed ’awbirayt (“operetta”) spectacles so popular with Gulf autocrats. These typically involve elaborate fireworks, lightshows, tremendous

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132 It should be noted that this was perhaps the first planned National Day celebration after the completion of the nationwide folklore documentation project launched in the early 1980s.
screens, and through-composed, semi-narrative songs in the Mashreqi 'ughniyya mold that dutifully display well-mannered children, beautiful women, and chivalrous men delivering obsequious monologues in Classical Arabic. Such performances often present a highly edited version of the national myth, with flawless choreography and tremendous spectacle, but hold apparently little interest to any of the Omani viewers with whom I watched them. Exceptions, especially amongst men, were performances of ‘āzī, razḥa, or genres like murabba‘, a kind of rhymed verse delivered at a blistering speed. These were, they noted, undoubtedly performed by actual Omanis and not Iraqi, Palestinian, Jordanian, or Egyptian performers brought in as “ringers,” as Rasmussen (2012) puts it.¹³³

It was a thoughtful and powerful combination of these two types of staging that have been seen at national events before that lent such potency to the 40th anniversary ‘āzī. It was a blending of spectacular choreography and commitment to presenting actual Omanis engaging in performances that were meaningful to them. In terms of spectacle and choreography, the array of armed men in service of Qābūs were all aligned and facing him or marching by and saluting him, referencing the poetic line “we all are a razor-sharp sword in your hand” (we will address the full text later in the chapter). He had symbolically armed them, and they in turn recognized this and saluted him with those admittedly unloaded weapons. The invincibility of the Sultan was on display, unworried by the thousands of guns before him. Similarly, the performers were all given new uniforms, swords and weapons so that they would have an almost anonymous, non-localized or specific, presence: the Arab Omani everyman. Finally, the actual audio of the ‘āzī was pre-

¹³³ See Rasmussen 2012 and Rasmussen and Al-Harthy 2012 for a more detailed discussion of these events. Rasmussen downplays the importance of “traditional” art forms presented therein in favor of music composed outside of Oman for Omani celebrations. In my experience, Omanis have little interest in these composed songs.
recorded and edited to be of very high quality in terms of sound and performance. However,
these adapted elements do not completely overshadow the historical inspirations of the razha and
‘āzī. The streams of dancers were not, it should be noted, foreign dancers flown in for the event,
but were a broad spectrum of experienced Omani Arab men drawn from all over the sultanate to
perform the most masculine, belligerent, and ḥamās-inducing war-dance, the razha, in local
dialect and with local drummers, costumes, and drums. Duelers danced and leapt in between the
huge groups of marchers, interacted with the drummers and flashed and buzzed their Omani
swords as they passed the Sultan. With respect to the ‘āzī, al-Marzūqī presented a typical melody
and vocal timbre for an ‘āzī, which also retained the most common refrain type of the coast,
ṣubiyān yā kibār al-shiyyim (O, youths of the highest moral character). The combination of these
styles of choreography lended the performance both the air of traditionality and authenticity and
the direct, even overwhelming presence of the choreographed spectacle. In unison they were
profoundly arresting.

b. Who can throw the best ‘āzī? Contested ownership of performance practices in
Oman and the UAE

Certainly, the best evidence for the potency of the ‘āzī in representing the Omani state
and praising its leader is the fact that the performance was adopted by the arrangers of the 42nd
celebration of the foundation of the UAE in Abu Dhabi in 2013. Called “The Spirit of Union”
(which has been the brand of the Emirati National Day celebrations since the 40th anniversary
celebration in 2011), the 2013 ‘āzī performance in Abu Dhabi was based on similar
performances held in the UAE in the past. This year’s, however, included a round of razfa-s (a
dance similar to razha, but without drumming and usually performed in static facing lines) led, in
fact, by Muḥammad bin Zāyid al-Nahyān, the recognized crown prince of Abu Dhabi. The
performance was given by ‘Ayda al-Manhali, an Emirati popular singer who began his career singing shallat, a kind of sung poetry that includes drumming but no “music,” and who later transitioned to the world of Gulf pop. Al-Manhali’s ‘azii was only partial—he deleted the initial sayhat, or calls to the listeners; only sang two lines per cycle; the “wa-slimt!” response from the chorus only occurred after the first full line; and, finally, he did not use the typical beginning and ending line, “wa-muslimin tikabbir!” with the response, “allahu akbar!” Al-Manhali has gone on to give several more ‘azii-s since then, often at National Day performances throughout the UAE, as have performers like Hamad al-'Amiri and Hussayn al-Jassimii. In each instance, the performances have evolved slightly—take for example Hamad al-'Amiri’s 2017 performance at the “March of the Tribes” during the Zayid Traditional festival in Abu Dhabi, whose choreography was modeled more closely on the 2010 Omani ‘azii. This example was a processional ‘azii, but instead of taking a few steps and stopping for each verse, the groups never stopped walking forward, through the large faux fort architecture.

Omanis I spoke with about these performances were divided. Some took the fairly extreme position that the Emirates was “stealing” or “buying” the culture of Oman in a bid to give itself a history or a civilization that it “did not have.” Others were more pointedly disappointed at the failures of the Emirati to accurately portray the ‘azii, citing certain faults in performance that were, to them, unacceptable. Many criticized the vocal quality of the

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performances, the failure of ‘Ayda to memorize the poem (he instead read off of a piece of paper), the inclusion of female participants, and the fact that he was behind a lectern like a “businessman” [English word used].

Late in 2017, I sat down with several members of the ‘idāra (administration) of the Firqat al-‘Arabī in the guardhouse of a water pump station in ‘Izz to discuss some of these controversies. As my host sat down with a steaming pitcher of strong, clove-scented tea, the group around me had broken into a small chat about the new group being formed in Birkat al-Mawz. Having lived there for some time, I was asked if I knew about it. I hadn’t heard anything; I knew that the leader of the effort was related to the leader of a performance group in Nizwā, but I did not think that the group had been formed in any official way. The youngest member of the group held forth that they would undoubtedly play with their hands on “Bengali” drums, not in the appropriate Omani Arab way using a striker and a switch; others concurred. On that note of Omani authenticity, I asked the group if the razḥa or ‘āzī was present in the UAE. They actively denied this, though one pointed out that the UAE and Oman were once one land (balad) and one people (sha‘b) and therefore had to share one group of inherited practices (mawrūthāt).

Anticipating this little burst of nationalism, I had brought with me a YouTube clip of a news report from the Emirati news channel Dubai One on an art called al-taḥūrība or al-taḥūrayba performed by the Naqbī tribe from Ras al-Khaimah. The report clearly presented al-taḥūrība as a legitimate Emirati source of the ‘āzī-like performance at Emirati National Day festivities in the years prior. Other such reports have claimed the Žanjālī tribe from Fujairah as a basis, who perform an art called al-‘azwah. In any case, it is at least clear that the practice is or was present throughout the region in the recent past. Here is an excerpt of that conversation:
[After watching the video, in which an elder Naqbī is interviewed on the practice and several examples are shown. Some of the coverage is from a conference organized by the Ras Al-Khaimah government.]

**BJG:** So, how about that? What’s up with that? Have you ever heard of *al-tahūrayba*?

**Member 1:** Never.

**Member 2:** By God, this is a bunch of fakers, I think (*muqallidin*, ‘ataqad).

**Member 1 and 3:** [laughter]

**Member 2:** Believe me, brother. Believe me, these Emiratis will make it all up (*byakhtalaq kill shay al-‘imārātiyyīn*). The ‘āzī is Omani, 100%. It is only Omani and uniquely Omani. They don’t have a civilization (*ḥiḍāra*), so they perform the ‘āzī erroneously like this (*fa-ya‘āzū bi-l-ghalaṭ kidhā*).

**Member 1:** You’re right, I think it’s made up. It’s not true. I sympathize with this Naqbī fellow, listen to him talk about it—

**Member 2:** Don’t feel bad for him, brother, he’s just grubbing for cash (*mā t’ataf ‘alayuh yā ‘akhī, bass yatamaslah!*!)

**All:** [laughter]

**BJG:** Really, I don’t know what to think. Perhaps it’s just very very old.

**Member 1:** Like I told you, I’ve never heard the word “*taḥūrība.*” What does that even mean?

**BJG:** … I thought it was like when you say a “little bird” (‘*asfuwayyir* from “bird” (‘*asfūr*)136 … *taḥūrayyyyyyba*, like that…

**All:** [chuckle]

**Member 1:** Then what’s a *taḥūrba*?

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136 That is, producing the diminutive by placing a long ī before the final root letter.
BJG: ... By God, I do not know.

All: [laughter]

Member 2: [hitting Member 1] If the doctor doesn’t know, forget the issue.

Member 3: Seriously though, look what they are doing. They are much more famous than Oman, they can spread this celebration (qādirin ʿalā nashar h-al-iḥtīfāl), and if we don’t preserve these things…

All: [grunting agreement]

Later that evening, another group member joined us and I was urged to summarize the video of the Naqābī performance practice. I did so, and he concluded, “This Naqābī fellow got a lot richer after saying that!”

BJG: Do you think so? Did they give him a bribe or something (ʿāṭūhū rashwa walā shay)?

New arrival: Bribe? Well, of course, I mean, they pay off all their citizens… (yaksabū kull al-muwaṭanīn)…

BJG: Pay off?

NA: Yes, from what I’ve seen (mā shāshaytlī). Really, they pay them off, or else why would they stay? Why would he steal our culture?

BJG: I understand you, but is that not similar to when the Sultan gives at the National Day festivals (mūb hadhā mutashāba yawm al-sulṭān yaʿṭī fī ḥaflāt al-waṭanīya)? Money, I mean? That’s the same, he pays, you perform. He pays you off for a performance.

NA: [waving his hand] No, no, you’re mistaken. Listen, Oman is an old country (balad ʿarīq) and the Sultan is wise. He knows how to be a leader (qāʿid). There, it’s a young country, they need to buy off the citizens for them to participate (lāzīm yaksabū al-muwaṭanīn ʿalā shān mushārika). They have no history, nothing else but money…
BJG: True, being a good leader means you have to give…

NA: Believe me, brother, this is a different thing. I’ll give you an example—you know that big palm tree-shaped island out there in Dubai… what’s it called? [someone chimes in “Gumayrah!”] Yeah, Gumayrah, Yumayrah, whatever. So, when they made that, Shaykh Muḥammad, the money ran out, the investment. They could not complete it. So what happened?

BJG: I have no idea!

NA: Brother, Qābūs came and funded the whole thing. He funded it, and then gave it right back to Shaykh Muḥammad. He didn’t sell it, he gave it (mā yibī’uh, ya’aṭīuh).

BJG: Ah, so he was generous! He was showing…

NA: No, that wasn’t generosity. He was sending a message. He said, “We’re powerful. We have money and we know how to use it.” [The Emirati government] know[s] that Oman is much stronger than they are, even though they are richer. Everything in the Emirates is bigger, stronger, taller, true. But there’s no planning, no love of country (ḥubb al-waṭan) or anything like that, so they buy them off. My point is, if they take our culture and traditions, then we will step in (binadkhāl al-’amr).

The continued use and evolution of the ‘āzī and ‘āzī-adjacent forms in the UAE, sometimes rising to outright claims to ownership of the practice on the part of UAE authorities and researchers, has continued to intensify the rivalry between Omani and Emirati performers and citizens. These kinds of performances and claims offended many Omani performers I worked with, who remembered the 2013 Emirati performance with a certain ire and were happy to point out all of its flaws, according to their understanding of ‘āzī. This contestation of the ownership and “rights” to perform the ‘āzī was certainly exacerbated by the 2017 move on the part of the UAE to claim the ‘āzī via the UNESCO Intangible Heritage program, placing it on the
list of “Intangible Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding” under the sponsorship of UAE. This was in spite of the fact that the same practice was inducted into UNESCO’s “Representative List” of Intangible Cultural Heritage for the Sultanate of Oman in 2012. Further, Oman and the UAE have jointly filed to preserve several other performance practices, including al-razfa, al-‘ayyāla, al-taghrūda, and even Arabic coffee, the majlis, and falconry in the intervening period. Why would they not do so for the ‘āzī, or why would Oman not admit the UAE to the same practice at the later date? Why these states would compete over the authenticity of this particular practice seems clearer in the light of its use as a choreographed symbol of the power of the state and the display of popular legitimation couched in apparently traditional terms. Part of why Omani state authorities and Omani citizens value the ‘āzī is precisely that it is perceived as a uniquely Omani art, one that mythopoetically speaks to Omanis and their history even while it creates it. Note also who is making this argument: not politicians and state agents, but state citizens. As has been demonstrated in many other contexts, ordinary people take it upon themselves to replicate or innovate state ideological discourse. In the Omani case, performers situate themselves as uniquely able to performatively legitimate their state through the recognition of actual mutuality. Others simply play at the same game.

### c. Praising the Omani State

These two examples help to illustrate the importance of indigenous and historical performance practices to the modern state’s development and the stakes involved in performing

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137 In searching the lists of Intangible Heritage, I have seen only two similar examples of this kind of “competitive” inscription: between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan over the status of rice pilaf (Palav or Oshi Palov) in 2015-6 and an upcoming situation in which Malaysia and Indonesia appear to be claiming similar martial arts called silat which are to be reviewed in the course of 2018-9.
them to legitimize the state. Both are examples of people talking about the state and its characteristics, a practice that Akhil Gupta and others have identified as crucial to the ideological functioning of the state (Gupta 1995; Gupta and Sharma 2006; Nuijten 2003). The first lends credence to the idea that even within national performances, performers are deeply moved and continue to feel compelled to perform over and above proffered material gains. As we will see, state officials take advantage of these emotional and personal connections to draw people into particular configurations of relations of dependency with the “state” writ large. As the first example helps illustrate, the sense of obligation to the state on the part of performers is real, even if the concrete benefits received by them are difficult to articulate. This arrangement is no accident. The second example serves to demonstrate the intensity of the competition between state officials and institutions to lay claim to certain performance practices. It also exemplifies some ideas about the “rightness” of the behavior of leaders, with Qābūs acting in the right and Emirati leaders in the wrong. The practices in question are neither random nor the most representative of local history. Rather, they are specifically chosen and modified for their potential in modeling and disseminating state elites’ ideology of state-society relations and displaying Arabness and hegemonic masculinity (in Connell’s 2005 sense; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Further, it shows that some performers recognize that it is state agents who try to manipulate culture and history for their own benefit.

As is always the case, these practices are variously interpreted and meaningful to differently situated actors. However, to really understand how and why these arts have come to serve state power so closely, it is important to contextualize them in the recent political history of Oman. Importantly, we must do this without sacrificing an understanding of the cultural ideals and practices that have animated relations between rulers and ruled in the past. If these genres
have had some legitimizing power for various authorities in the past, they remain potent in the present within a strictly circumscribed ambit: legitimizing the authoritarian state. In the rest of this chapter, I examine the ways in which these performance practices help to model certain kinds of relations between rulers and the ruled, those which I have referred to as “ideals of authority” earlier.

To show how this shift from praising particular local leaders to the abstract and totalizing figure of the modern state has occurred, we need to understand the drastic social effects of state formation in Oman. As I have argued in previous chapters, part of the legitimacy of the modern state is derived from ideals of authority that were shaped historically and are reasserted and reinterpreted within modern praise performance. Here, I add an analysis of the development of the state that shows how its unique development has worked to support the continued relevance of praise while also sharply constraining its application. Such a situation retains the effects of praise while denying them to any institution save for the state/Qâbûs or its proxies.

To evidence this, the main historical trajectory I follow in this chapter is the centralization of the authoritarian state under the rulership of Sultan Qâbûs (r. 1970-present) and his father, Sultan Saʿīd (r. 1932-70). In Oman, this process of state formation and centralization has had a negative aspect—that is, closing off some alternatives, such as competing structures of authority, and sharply circumscribing certain types of performance—and a positive aspect, by supporting other alternatives, promoting certain forms of performance, social welfare, and development programs. It is important to realize that these are not separate or separable processes or projects, but rather results or effects of other policies and projects of Omani state formation. As such, this chapter is not a retelling of this history with a focus on “cultural” themes or cultural policy when such data is available. Rather, it is an examination of the ways in which
elite-led state formation has shaped the context in which *razhā*, ‘āzī, and other formerly political performance practices have changed and adapted to the contexts and consequences of state formation, and how these practices in turn have come to legitimate the Omani state.

**Seeing Something Like a State: Perspectives on State Theory**

States are complex phenomena. They are difficult to study, especially for ethnographers, because they are diffuse, historically conditioned, and exist in densely interwoven material and ideological linkages. This, in ethnographic disciplines, has tended to produce what Jonathan Spencer calls anthropology “within the state” rather than “of the state” (Spencer 2007). Rather than interrogating the phenomenon of the state as a form or concept, such ethnographies simply assume the state is what appears and documents life within it. Countering this is the research agenda that has been termed “the ethnography of the state” (Gupta 1995; Sharma and Gupta 2006). Why, however, should we focus on “the state” when we study music and politics?

First, this is a study of music as political behavior, and “the state” is often assumed to be the primary shaper of what constitutes politics in the contemporary world. This was not always the case, so showing this makes valuable room for critique of the state form and its politics (Amborn 2019).. Second, as we shall see, the state is a profoundly cultural phenomenon. Not only is it a developed political technology (cf. Robinson 1980) but it is also staffed and hence shaped by particular individuals. As such, it is affected by a variety of cultural norms, ideals, and habits that pre-exist it. As several scholars have also shown, this is manifested in the ways that elites often draw upon musical ideas, behaviors, or metaphors to characterize the state, its relations to its people, and its cosmic correctness (Brindley 2012; Guy 1999, 2005; Pasler 2009). Such mixed hermeneutics should be taken neither as coincidence nor as idiosyncratic. We have seen the deep and compelling interaction between notions of generosity, legitimacy, and praise.
Music and performance have long been social tools of elites, though each context of their deployment may bear unique insights into how states operate. Focusing on “the state” and its particularities—the class composition of its officials, the system of state apparatuses, its putative capacities, its cultural basis—in such contexts foregrounds the ways in which music and performance articulate with the display of power, authority, political legitimacy, and state violence. Studying music and the state with these two reasons in mind can help the study of music and politics in general to move beyond studying music as a means of asserting rights, building identities, or protest. Instead, a critical perspective on the contemporary state helps to contextualize such musical behavior squarely in terms of the relations between rulers and ruled, cooptation and coercion, and in a way that does not presume that the form of the state and its imposition of political leadership is natural.

A number of recent musicological monographs have engaged with the notion of the state and its agents as central to the production of music and performance.138 Studies by Askew (2002), Castro (2011), Foster and Gilman (2015), Guy (1999, 2005), Meeker (2013), Schauert (2015), and Stirr (2017) all focus on the role of the state and elites in attempting to legitimate state power by way of specific policies on music and its performance. State elites pursue various agendas and target performance practices with certain strategies in mind. While Guy’s research shows how minority elites have patronized a music associated with their own ethnic group to support the claims of the state they virtually control, Anna Stirr (2017) and Lauren Meeker (2013) have documented other cultural policy strategies in Nepal and Vietnam.

The scholar whose approach is best able to explain the interconnection between state and non-state agents, the delicate interlinking of coercion and cooptation, and the mutual reinforcement of ideological constructions and material social relations is Antonio Gramsci. While Gramsci’s approach to the state shifted over his career, his basic insight was that the “state” is not the thin veneer of political institutions (or simply an idea), but that it is rather “integral,” meaning that it “includes elements which need to be referred back to the notion of civil society (in the sense that one might say that the State = political society + civil society, in other words hegemony armored with coercion)” (Gramsci 1971, 263). Here we also see Gramsci’s second key insight: hegemony. As anthropologist Kate Crehan notes, hegemony is a much-contested term (2002, 99). “Hegemony for Gramsci simply names the problem,” Crehan concludes, “that of how power relations underpinning various forms of inequality are produced and reproduced” (2002, 104). It is the fitful and tenuous integration of the elements of civil and political society that helps define the development of certain capitalist states: religious scholars and their interpretations, musicians and their music, bankers and their logics are brought into temporary alliances with the army and the maintenance of borders, the delimitation of proper forms of political speech, police and the cries for law and order. This shifting alliance of interests is what Gramsci calls “hegemony”—the “‘spontaneous’ consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant influential group” (1971, 12). The Gramscian approach is dynamic and historical, offering an explanation as to how non-elites are drawn into the political, martial, and economic schemes of elites, but it also gives us a way of explaining why and how legitimacy and ideals of authority can develop in such a
way as to make claims on those same elites. Basic to Gramsci’s approach is the recognition that the “imposition” of the “general direction” of social life is “historically” caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production” (12). Class position is the basis of the ability to impose such a direction, but the successful imposition of the “general direction” subsequently increases the prestige and social power of the dominant.

What needs to be emphasized here is that focusing on social relations—in this case the political subjection of the ruled by the rulers—and how they play out—in the selective distribution of state-controlled goods, resources, and infrastructure—helps to give a material basis to our study of the state. Social and material relations interact with the development of the cultural and ideological practices and beliefs that characterize the relationship between state elites and those they govern, which in turn legitimize and normalize those relations. Rather than only looking to the effects of practices, new formal organization, culturally mediated conjurings of the state, or simple class cleavages, we need to triangulate and integrate these approaches. Concentrating on the suppression of alternative political projects (Bodirsky 2016) and the sheer, technical scale of state power to fund and administer expansive infrastructural development (Harris 2012) focuses our attention to ways that the coherence of the state is not merely a product of ideological projection or imagination. Nevertheless, the state is not just a fixing of social relations, but it also a rich site of ideological and semiotic potential. The structuring of this talk and the delimitation of the imaginable is crucial.

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139 This is especially the case if we consider Gramsci’s understanding of culture (cf. Crehan 2002).
The construction of state hegemony is a good way to investigate this complex character. State hegemony is reciprocally material and ideological—these are not different categories, but tactical resources. In the Omani case, material constraints such as state directed giving and the deliberate management of non-state giving help us to frame the selective representation of historical models of ideal authority and the solicitation of praise and understand their role in the overall production of state hegemony. Practices that bridge the apparent gap between material and ideological constructions of the state are crucial for understanding a fuller picture of the state as form. The position as sketched out above is clearly Gramscian, but not the “hegemony lite” version of Gramsci criticized by Crehan (2002). Rather, as Bodirsky points out, it is the “‘political economic’ Gramsci, who understood the making of hegemony as a process whereby a dominant group sought support from subordinate ones through both ideological and material means” (2016, 124). This approach allows us to recognize the structural uniqueness of the Omani state, whose wealth is extremely concentrated and whose “development” is substantially state directed, and how these material constraints interact to produce ideological opportunities, which in turn impose their own constraints on material relations.

In Oman, sung praise is the crucial bridge between the material and ideological, the rulers and the ruled, coercion and consent.

**The Gift of Rule: Political Economy, Reciprocity, and Hegemony**

How does this bear on our study of the Omani state, praise, generosity, dependency, and the gift? Returning to Godelier with the insights from Gramsci and the critics of the “ethnography of the state,” we can analyze how material social relations and state ideology are mutually constructed and mediated by performance. Godelier hypothesized that forms of social inequality like the state required a legitimating ideology, specifically, that rulers and ruled were
linked by mutual obligations inherent in shared conceptions of exchange (1986, 13-15). “The exercise of power must appear as a service rendered by the dominant to the dominated that creates a debt of the latter to the former” that is then repaid (14). Godelier proposes that the most important and telling part of this exchange is that material goods (food, money, labor, and so on) are rendered to the dominant, while immaterial, ideological “goods” (religious and magical ritual, for example) are rendered to the dominated (14, 77). This relationship is precisely reversed in Oman, as I have described it. Here, it is the expressive potential of sung poetry and dance that is controlled by status inferiors that is rendered as a service to status superiors as a response to their material generosity and fulfillment of their obligations to them. While “immaterial” goods are of course rendered by the state, such as feelings of safety and security, promises of development, safeguarding heritage, and so on, the reversal is compelling enough to warrant comment.

What Godelier has in mind here is a standard definition of taxes. Taxes are paid by the ruled to their rulers, who in turn propitiate deities, for example. Wilson has shown, however, that in the case of the SADR, the state-movement in Western Sahara has promulgated the notion that distribution is a form of reverse taxation wherein “the poor tax the rich” (2016, ch. 4). In the recent past, SADR agents had control over the array of rations given out by the UN and international relief agencies, but individual Sahrawis could make demands on those stores for their use. She documents how distribution functions as a mode of governance and makes the case that it was borrowed from practices that leaders of tribal structures developed. This is, for Wilson, an example of how supposedly wholly different political structures can make use of similar strategies in governance. In the case of the SADR and Oman, I would argue that it is not the particularities of exchange that should interest us, but the quality of the relationship
established. The institution of a structured relationship of dependence may be more important, ideologically speaking, than the actual direction and quantity of transfer, as Florence Weber noted with reference to the gift.

One of the values of adopting a Gramscian approach to the state and its legitimating strategies is that it does not arbitrarily separate “economic,” “political,” “ideological,” and “cultural” or “symbolic” factors. Rather, for Gramsci, there is no prying apart the “practical” from the “theoretical” activities with which the state “not only justifies and maintains its dominance but manages to win the active consent of those over whom it rules” (Gramsci 1971, 244). As Crehan puts it, the value of Gramsci lies in his simultaneous insistence on the “reality of fundamental, systematic inequalities” and the “complexity and specificity of the cultural worlds different people inhabit” without reducing it either to economic determinism or some irreconcilability of human experience (Crehan 2002, 7). With this expansive ambit, the Gramscian approach urges us to critically appraise other similar accounts of the legitimation of the Omani state, which may include analyses that focus on the “rentier state” hypothesis, international relations, political culture, or policy-oriented accounts. While Gramsci allows us a way to remain critical of these approaches, especially in their approach to the state, we can still appreciate the contributions they make.

This is perhaps especially important to studying the “state” in the Arabian Peninsula, as there seems to be a veritable cottage industry of developing new compound terms to precisely describe the state or political-economic system of this region. The terms quickly blossom out of control: Do rulers practice “patrimonial” or “aṣabiyyah capitalism” in the

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141 Niblock and Malik 2007.
“theopetrocracies”\textsuperscript{142} of the Gulf? Is the “eudaimonic legitimacy”\textsuperscript{143} enjoyed by “neo-traditional”\textsuperscript{144} or “post-traditional”\textsuperscript{145} “petro-Islamic”\textsuperscript{146} “rentier states”\textsuperscript{147} predicated on their “tribal ideology”\textsuperscript{148} or on “Islamic state capitalism”\textsuperscript{149}? This tendency to analytically isolate Arabian Peninsular states is particularly vexing when it clearly belies a bias that posits Arabs as so “different” from the rest of the world that they require new technical jargon to even understand their situation. Oman is unfortunately doubly cursed since it is at once a shining example of “non-democratic legitimacy” and touted as an example of “good Arabs,” neither too religious nor too belligerent. The notion that the character of these states is something unprecedented that requires new categories to explain implies that they have broken from some standard mold, rather than having their own specific history. Even their contemporary relation to their own history requires explanation, mired as it is in the same conservatism and backwardness that plagues their economy. The question, a classic “denial of coevalness” in Fabian’s (1983) terms, lingers in these works: how can they be “traditional” and yet so “modern”?

We can and should retain a measure of skepticism in the study of the “state” so described while still integrating their insights, instead of deliberately ignoring them as the “ethnographers of the state” so often do (as freeing as that might be). Ideally, the results of these studies help to

\textsuperscript{142} Khalil 1984.
\textsuperscript{143} Niblock 2006.
\textsuperscript{144} Rabi 2011.
\textsuperscript{145} Peterson 2004.
\textsuperscript{146} Ayubi 1995.
\textsuperscript{147} Beblawi 1987.
\textsuperscript{148} Davis and Gavrielides 1991.
\textsuperscript{149} Long 1976.
flesh out my performative approach. This is because, as Donald Kurtz notes in a study of Aztec Imperial legitimacy, “legitimating strategies do not follow one another,” meaning that they are not separately or sequentially implemented and then evaluated by elites (1991, 163). Rather, state projects of legitimation are an “everything and the kitchen sink” approach, taking place on many social and time scales, within many groups, and by various actors involving multiple techniques. It is important to not overestimate the importance of performance (or any one element) in the development of state hegemony, but to see these various projects as intertwined. Take, for example, the notion of qarāba\textsuperscript{150} that Paul Dresch and James Piscatori mention but do not elaborate on as a core component of the developing distinction between citizens and rulers in the introduction to their edited volume \textit{Monarchies and Nations} (2011). Maintaining qarāba, meaning “closeness,” means limiting the sheer number of claimants on an elite’s time and social and economic capital, which, as Shryock showed in Jordan, is an expression of both power and dependency. The ability of social elites to access state power is crucial to their status, which is, obviously, wholly dependent on that access. The clear way to manage this simultaneous weakness and strength is to avoid using that access. Limiting the number of claimants on the material benefits of your access to state networks requires limiting public activity, because norms of governance and respectability put a high value on generosity. When Peter Lienhardt first arrived in Kuwait to pursue his research in the 1950s, he noticed that “shaikhs no longer walked along the streets being greeted by people as they pass,” but instead were only glimpsed moving between air-conditioned cars and buildings, moving with “hurried dignity” (1993, 38). Managing

\textsuperscript{150} A similar notion was put forward by Enver Koury in 1978, analyzing social power in Saudi Arabia as taking the form of “circles” and “networks.” Power flowed from the inside to the outside, and so positioning oneself as close as possible to the source was a generator of prestige and access.
publicity and access is a performance of distinction, but also a practical adaptation to state
dependence. Analyzing *qarāba* as a cultural ideal that manages and models relations between
elites and non-elites fits well with my account in Oman, and adds more evidence to explaining
why elites do not dance and are separated from performers to the extent that they are only
addressed within explicit performative parameters. These “smaller,” more micro-level
explanations should ideally be illuminated by those on a larger scale. Taking a Gramscian
approach gives us an example of how they might be.

As I see it, performance is clearly an important part of legitimizing the state because it
models state-society relations, it has immense mythopoetic and affective power, and it displays
what is taken as a uniquely Omani heritage. It is therefore useful for shaping the boundaries,
shared history, emotional bonds, mutual obligations of rulers and ruled, and social relations of
material inequality of the contemporary authoritarian Omani state. “Perhaps the only necessary
first step” to the production and projection of state legitimacy, Kurtz continues, “is increased
state control over the nation’s economy” (1991, 163). State control of the economy in Oman was
firmly secured over the last hundred years with the help of the British and the discovery and
monopolization of oil resources, but projects of legitimacy have been manifold. In the Omani
case, *razḥa* and *ʿāzī* are one way in which relations are modeled and mythopoetically rendered as
essential to the state and *status quo*. State spectacle does not therefore display spontaneous
celebrations of the state. In many ways it simply cannot: the vacations days and the actual day of
celebration are not announced by the state until the last minute.¹⁵¹ Invitations for groups to
perform are likewise loaded: they are, as in the words of my friends in the interview in the first

¹⁵¹ This is likely an attempt to control who can plan huge festivities; if the day is unknown then
there will be few celebrations that compete directly with the state’s. There are also important
economic and workforce management reasons, which are not particularly interesting to us here.
part of this chapter, “not something to be ignored.” This is because they are both beneficial and carry a potential penalty in refusal, twinned notions that rely on material inequality. Spectacles do, however, motivate understandings of obligation and mutual dependence. Just as one is socially conditioned to stand at the national anthem, so some Omanis are conditioned to see praise and good deeds as reciprocally engaging one another, as properly existing in a moral economy. What I want to explore in the next section is that the image of the state as “giving” and “providing” may not actually require giving and providing equally or even consistently. Rather, the perception that the state can and does give may be enough to develop and sustain unequal relations.

If praise and generosity are reciprocal, they operate analogously to the logic of gifts. They produce relationships. The gift of the praiser is—broadly—legitimacy. The gift of the Sultan is—broadly—rule.

a. **Personalizing politics…**

In Oman, the form, idea, and practices of the authoritarian state have been directly linked to the personage of Sultan Qābūs. This has had direct effects on the organization and continuation of praise practices in the Sultanate. Outside scholars nevertheless debate the intensity of his authoritarian control, with some characterizing his rule as a kind of “hands-off paternalism,” while others describe it as a “personality cult” (notably Valeri 2009). Whatever its character, this theme is of interest to us insofar as we can show that this “personalization” of Omani authoritarianism has caused praise to become increasingly centralized and unidirectional—that is, directed not toward local or regional leaders but only to Sultan Qābūs, and therefore the human stand-in for the state itself. This has had the effect of symbolically collapsing the image of the modern state into the figure of the Sultan, so that praise of a person became praise of an
institution. Given the importance of address in praise poetry, such a symbolic shift bears importantly on the notion of legitimacy, both of the Sultan and the state form. This personalization has had the added effect of inculcating the sense of a personal relationship and mutual obligation that obtains between the Sultan and the ruled, which, in turn, leads to effusive, enthusiastic state praise performances. What state officials perhaps saw as an authentic expression of the popular will was, in fact, the performance of praise directed at the only praise target that remained: the Sultan himself.

The drastic monopolization of praise has come largely at the expense of the potential political authority of other competing forms of social authority: the Imamate, the revolutionary Marxist state, and the sociopolitical structuring role of tribal authorities. This is especially important when we consider that the re-formation of the Imamate in the early 20th-century directed at least some performers to produce an āzī for it, analyzed in the last chapter. These alternative structures, in the terms of Eric Gordy’s 1999 study of Milošević’s Serbia, were “destroyed,” leaving the authoritarian state as the only alternative. The structural shifts from a patchwork of quasi-independent tribal chiefdoms to a highly decentralized but structured imamate government to a massively centralized modern bureaucratic state entailed many changes in many performance practices. Such changes and shifts have likely spurred performers to make similar changes throughout Omani history, as the fortunes of governing structures have waxed and waned. For example, the formation of the modern state within an international state-system prompted performers and other governmental agents to adapt certain performance practices to align with state narratives of equality, progress, and development, part of a broader campaign to legitimize the state by reference to development and history (Phillips and Hunt 2017). While huge, spectacular displays on state holidays (planned, orchestrated, and
choreographed by non-Omanis, as Rasmussen and Al-Harthy 2012 document) have received some attention, these studies have largely ignored or downplayed the history and significance of the “traditional” genres displayed, why they have been chosen, and what they mean to certain Omanis. As the brief examples at the beginning of this chapter illustrate, ṭaḥra and ‘āzī are important sites for the demonstration and celebration of the reigning state’s relationship to its people.

Rather than giving an overview of Omani state centralization efforts, I want to focus here on the way that these efforts have worked to personalize politics and monopolize praise. There have been many such efforts, and the pattern I pick out here is one of many. One, however, bears specific mention: while I focus on co-optation of alternative authority structures by the state, it is necessary not to overlook that each of the cases discussed here involved organized state violence in many forms. The Imamate was invaded and occupied in 1955; tribally organized opposition was besieged, bombed, and exiled through 1959; and the Marxist revolutionaries in Dhofar were hunted, exterminated, and jailed from 1962-1976.

b. … and monopolizing praise

The most important process to monopolizing praise in the Interior was the “decline in importance of the tribe after 1957… and the corresponding decline in the role of the shaykh” as a result of increased state centralization efforts after the absorption of the Imamate (Peterson 1978, 101). As Uzi Rabi points out, Sultan Sa‘īd’s state-building attempts during and after the Jabal Akhḍar war (1957-59) were part coercion and part cooptation, but much effort was focused on breaking up tribal power blocs (2011, ch. 3). Sa‘īd’s dwindling control in the interior was due to the Imamate’s “system of monetary compensation (with the help of the Saudis)” and the Sultan’s own “tightfistedness” which had become “his trademark among the tribes” (108-9). In fact, by
1957 Sa‘īd had moved permanently to Salala in the southern region of Dhofar and until 1970 left Aḥmad bin Ibrahīm Āl Bū Sa‘īdī as his agent in Muscat “to distribute [the Sultan’s largesse]” (meager as it apparently was, Peterson 1978, 74). With the successful conclusion of that conflict, however, the Sultan took strong measures to curtail the potential political power of the tribes, largely by apportioning a larger military force to local wālī-s and by forcing out influential tamīma-s (such as those of the Shīḥūḥ in Musandam) (121-2). More effective was what Nazih Ayubi has called the “defensive strategy” of “segmental incorporation” whereby having defeated, disarticulated or persecuted social forces, political organisations and/or ideological orientations that represent a serious challenge to the regime, [state elites] then co-opt their members (individually or in divided segments if possible) into the regime’s own politico-organisational set-up. (1995, 234).

Sa‘īd accomplished this by not recognizing the authority of powerful tamīma-s like Sulaymān bin Himyār al-Nabhānī of the Bānī Riyām and instead directly dealing with the smaller units that composed that alliance, such as the leaders of the al-Siyābī, the al-Ruqaysh, or the al-Tawbī. Such contacts led to the direct state subsidization of a larger number of “lower-level” shaykh-s, granting them a measure of independence that undermined the necessity of inter-group alliances.

When Omanis returning from the hajj in Saudi Arabia relayed to the Sultan that Sulaymān bin Ḥimyar wished to return to Oman with his family, Sa‘īd put such incredibly onerous stipulations on him that it made return virtually impossible (142-3). This was a bid to put an end to powerful tribal alliances, such as Sulaymān’s Bānī Riyām, because they could potentially oppose the hegemony of the state. Instead, the state would deal with much smaller tribal groupings while simultaneously curtailing their effective power and limiting their social relevance (Eickelman

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152 Originating and concluding with British colonial violence, which, as Halliday put it, “both exacerbated the conflict between the interior and the coast and prevented its resolution” by refusing to recognize an interior state and imposing coastal rule in order to make the colony “pay for itself” (1975, 284).
1987, 199). Rather than turning to local authorities for subsidies, guidance, arbitration, and defense, smaller political units were all directed towards the central state. Under Qābūs, a similar policy of strong wālī-s, modern policing, and direct connections to smaller local units effectively prohibited strong tribally organized bodies to emerge. While leading, as Limbert’s interlocutors lamented, to a proliferation of shaykh-s, this proliferation ultimately served to make “the tribe” politically insignificant.

The elimination of alternative authority structures and the decline of the importance of shaykh-s helped pave the way for the state to begin to implement widespread, unidirectional distribution as a mode of governance. Especially in the reign of Qābūs, state development was made into perhaps the main interest of the state and was heavily centralized. As Jeremy Jones and Nicholas Ridout claim:

In order to secure the newly, but perhaps provisionally unified state, [Qābūs] would have to replace traditional tribal political structures, in which people looked to tribal leaders for all their basic needs—employment, justice, education—with a new administration organised around his own power. This would require a new conception of government: rather than an ultimate source of authority, to whom quasi-autonomous tribal shaikhs might turn at times of crisis or need, the sultan himself would have to become a provider of services, offer a responsive and day-to-day involvement in the lives of people scattered across extensive territories. (2015, 161)

Insofar as local leaders were able to distribute generously, it was with what the state had allotted them. Praise began to be directed not in many directions—to the Imam, to tribal leaders, to the Sultan, to generous patrons, local notables, and the like—but exclusively to the Sultan. Shaykh-s were no longer crucial members in a network of redistribution but were rather made dependent upon those same structures. The poems collected by the 1985 “folklore campaigns” by the Ministry of Information are as much a reflection of this efflorescence of praise for the Sultan as they are a symbol of its efficacy. An overwhelming proportion of the poems in the collection mention Qābūs in some way, recognizing him, for example, as the “patron” of the nahḍa, while
few if any mention other figures (1994). While there are new ‘āzī-s sung in the name of political candidates, we should not confuse this with opposition to that state or Qābūs—in fact, most of these begin by praising him.

This constriction in praise targets not only helped to monopolize praise but has helped to render praise of the Sultan as praise of the state. Recall that while the soccer pitch in Manaḥ was funded by Bank Muscat and only administered by the Ministry of Sports Affairs, Qābūs was taken as a symbol of good leadership for Khālid, the ministry patron, to follow. Bank Muscat and all the managers, administrators, and bureaucrats who actually paid for and organized the building of the pitch are not mentioned. Instead, they are folded into the figure of the Sultan, and hence the state, to whom all legitimate praise is directed. Praise on National Day, at hospital and university openings, for local infrastructural projects, joint weddings funded by real estate companies, and so on are not celebrated with effusive praise of the actual individuals involved, but instead the Sultan. Even local wālī-s are mentioned far less than the Sultan. This is a feature of rule and praise in the authoritarian state, not a bug. It is not a misattribution to praise the Sultan when ‘Aqār, the real estate firm, funds a joint wedding. The administrative tedium of rule, of giving, of development, are masked by the figure of the generous Sultan, from whom all things flow and to whom all praise is sung.

The ability to frame all development as coming from the state/Sultan and as fulfilling a mutual obligation to which the ruled must respond is a primary ideological achievement of the Omani state. Ayubi concludes that the first part of this achievement is based, in general terms, on an economic independence that allows elites to enjoy their advantages without incurring the social burden of taxation (1995, 235). By not demanding taxation, the generous rule of the Sultan becomes a gift that can never be repaid. “The ruling stratum,” he continues, “does not therefore
have to be “unpleasant” either to the owning classes by taxing their profits or to the working classes by extracting parts of their surplus labor,” allowing state elites great latitude in political mobility (1995, 235). Waterman’s study of jùjú in Nigeria, “a rentier state” (1990, 222), similarly hints that praise for local “big-men” and concomitant generosity served to obscure agonized class relations in Lagos (1990, 222-5). That all development is ultimately from the Sultan is a commonly held idea, even if it is factually false. It is materially predicated on the state’s unprecedented ability to direct funding and development, but a great deal of “development” is funded and overseen by private corporations.

In his 2018 dissertation, Robin T. Steiner argues that the notion of “corporate social responsibility” (CSR) has been introduced into Oman over the last few decades as a neoliberal intervention to help “roll back” the state (2018, 27). This CSR model puts part of the burden of development, distribution of subsidies, and providing welfare and services onto corporations that are seeking access to government contracts and other benefits. Especially in local development, corporations not controlled by the state have built schools, clinics, and wells as part of this CSR scheme as a form of “rent-seeking,” that is, acting to secure certain benefits from the state (56-7). Acting generously “render[s corporations] into worthy recipients of state support” (75).

However, as Steiner shows, CSR policies have not only eased the burden of the state but have also helped to extend the effective reach of its apparatuses and accomplish its agents’ goals (28, 78). In this case, we can clearly see why Gramsci urged us to see “the state” as composed of both the apparatuses of government and “civil society,” both working in tandem to reproduce state hegemony. In this case, it is the state as generous giver and provider (Steiner calls this “paternalistic”) and the populace as grateful receiver.
There are two further features of this personalization and monopolization that deserve comment. The first is that events like the ḥubb Qābūs festival in Manaḥ are held with a dual purpose, in terms of directing praise. They simultaneously display the faithfulness and the gratitude of praisers to the Sultan and the loyalty and effectiveness of the wālī. When al-Waḥshī organized the festivities, it not only displayed his close connections with and effective rule over the people of Manaḥ but also his own generosity and loyalty to the state/Sultan. Secondly, as noted in chapter 3, while generosity may seem a strange habit to attribute to states, it is easily attributed to rulers. Classicist Paul Veyne attributed this to people talking not of abstract qualities of leadership, but of the “personal qualities of the reigning prince” (1990, 37). We might also see a basis for this in the way Arabs of the Peninsula have often been recorded as distinguishing between the good traits of the ruler, al-ḥākim, and the reprehensible obscurantism, laziness, and stupidity of the state, al-dawla. Seeking and picking out the individual person as figurehead is a way of personalizing relations of domination while maintaining a skeptical view of government in general.

This skepticism can come in many forms. Christensen and Castelo-Branco noted in 2009 that many performers in Suḥār took issue with Yūsif bin Khāmis al-Maqbālī, the leader of the official state performance group, Firqat al-funūn al-shaʿabiyya li-l-wilāyat Suḥār. Despite the fact that he and another shaykh controlled who “may participate in any given state affair” along with the budget of fees that they may charge and what arts “represent” Suḥār, locals nevertheless “question his artistic competence” (2009, 206). While no such official exists in Manaḥ, similar struggles over who controls access to government largesse are constant. Before a particularly well-attended event for National Day in 2017, I witnessed the wālī invite all of the groups in Manaḥ to perform. The group from al-Maʿarā was to be at the head of the line of dancers that
welcomed guests, and was invited to drum. On the day of the performance, another group leader claimed that the wālī had in fact invited his group to be the head of the lines of dancers. The first group’s leadership reacted harshly, threatening to ask the wālī himself what he intended. Since the second leader would not relent, and insisted that he was, after all, the “mas‘ūl” or “agent” of the government on issues of the arts, the first group retreated to go pray. On the walk over, I talked with one of the leaders of the first group.

“I heard him claim he was the ‘agent of the government’ in Manaḥ, is that right?”

“No no no,” he replied, “there’s no role like that, no agent here. I’ve never heard of that; he’s just got a big head and wants to think he’s important. Even if he was, he would be bad… in reality, he would fit right in with the rest of those in the Ministry of Culture!”

c. ‘Mastering’ Personalized Relations of Dominance: ‘āzī, razha, and power

Anthropologist Catherine Bell has argued that early work on ritual and performance in political contexts maintained that it served to “express beliefs in symbolic ways for the purposes of their continual reaffirmation and inculcation” (2009, 182). What she has concluded, however, is that “the projection and embodiment of schemes in ritualization is more effectively viewed as a ‘mastering’ of relationships of power relations within an arena” that allows for the contestation and negotiation of them (182). Performance, especially performance like ‘āzī that is in so many ways ritualized, can also be conceived of in this way. I see these hypotheses as mutually sustainable: performance not only helps to turn beliefs into public symbols, but it also serves to demonstrate and integrate established social relations of power. Performance is a way of comprehending and acting out those relations.

Take for example the fi ḥubb Qābūs festival discussed in chapter 4. The purpose of the festival was to celebrate the health of Sultan Qābūs, but the performance itself was in front of
local and regional leaders, like the governor of the *wilāyat* of Manaḥ, seated on padded bleachers in the front row. The audience is both the Sultan, in a general way, but also those elites in the first row. Those are the elites who have some say over the everyday distribution of state resources, time, and attention, who broker contacts between companies and local communities, who direct generosity in certain ways. One reason why praisers perceive themselves as necessary is that they are seen as circulating praise and as therefore compelling and amplifying the generous giving practices of anyone who listens to them. The “farewell” *razḥa* they chose to close this event typified this message (see music example 6).

At the conclusion to the ceremonies at the *fī ḥubb Qābūs*, the gathered *razḥa* groups were clustered around the front of the bleachers where the audience and local notables had been sitting. The group needed a new *razḥa* to tactfully end the proceedings, and after some false starts, some of the members of the Firqaṭ al-‘Arabī started to sing out a *mulālā*’—a kind of unaccompanied melody set to vocables that outlines the coming *razḥa* poetry. After his fellow group members hushed the crowd, two groups began to form to sing the melody back and forth.

*Fī widā’ allah yā ‘aṣḥāb al-maruwwa’!*\(^\text{153}\)

*Jawdūkum wāfī min zād al-‘ajawwadī.*

*Li-tuwāda‘inā fī widā’ al-makhūwwa!*

*‘andukum shāyim wa sayīr al-bilādī*

Farewell! Go with God, O you exemplars of manly virtue!
Your generosity is ample and increases generosity yet more,
We take our leave in brotherly farewell;
You have amongst you one of great virtue, leaving our lands.

We should understand those whose “generosity is ample” to be those elites seated in the front row and state elites from anywhere else in Oman. The *razḥa*, like much praise, is a kind of wish.

\(^{153}\) *Al-maruwwa*’ is a term that, like chivalry, rolls many concepts and practices into one term. It is a “noble” way of being and includes comportments like high-mindedness, bravery, liberality, generosity, courage, and so on but with a distinctly masculine valence.
It presents behavioral ideals not by merely describing them, but by giving them an explicit positive valence. It’s not just that someone gave, but that giving “increases generosity yet more.”

It wasn’t just some petty bureaucrats who moved some money around or cut some deal, but “exemplars of manly virtue.” Finally, the singers firmly state their familial relation to those state elites in a “brotherly farewell.” Familial rhetoric is not only motivated by elites, but also subordinated classes. Of course, some poets parrot back the claims of the leader to be a kind of “father” to the nation, but Omanis at least when they perform this razha, invoke brotherhood.
Widā' allah (Farewell! Go with God)

1. Farewell! Go with God, O you exemplars of manly virtue, your generosity is ample and increases generosity yet more;
2. We take our leave from one another in brotherly farewell; you have amongst you one of great virtue, leaving our lands.
Music example 7. Widā’ allah, as performed by the gathered troupes of Manaḥ at the ḥubb Qābūs festival in Manaḥ

Returning to the 40th National Day ‘āzī, we can take a closer look at how social relationships with the state are manifested in state spectacle, and how this helps to cement state hegemony. Entitled “Wilā’ al-qā’id” (Loyalty of the Leader), the poem was written, edited, and recorded long before its display at the national day celebrations in Muscat in 2010. The addressee of the poem switches several times, from a general audience to Qābūs to Oman to the gathered performers.

[Provisional translation.]

Praise be to God, the Supporter / Unique, with none before him in anything.
Creator of all his worshippers / Bounty comes from his extended hand.

Pray on the best of mankind, the Prophet / Our mediator on the day of calling.
He is lucky who prays and fasts, / he is found in a bed of roses.

Time greets the land of the noble/generous / With pride from the first age.
Those who respect you are not ashamed / And no one is shined upon like [Oman or the Sultan].

Land of dignity and honor! / There is no equal to [Oman’s] actions;
Ready with sword and razor / at any prattler or jealousy.

Her sky is enveloped by full moons; / 40 in number completed,
All of them in delight and joy, / the happiness in them uncounted.

From the rising of the dawn / erupting on the low, illuminating the cowardly,
Our standard is amongst bright meteors, / the drum beating on it in preparation.

An eye raised [to] the zenith of the sky, / covering [Oman’s] beginning in light.
From [the Sultan’s] carrying it, animosity is diminished / and every mountain and lowland is illuminated.

You lead the deserts by [Oman’s] light, / despite idle chatter and vain delusions;
One who wished for her unveiling / from what in his eyes was a blight.

Oman, home of the most noble and generous! / To its progeny, the ages are young,
By the favor of the Lord of the Two Worlds / [Oman is] smiling with a face of happiness.

Oman, your ages [pass] in joy / and happiness drinks from your flower (warid);
You lead the deserts with a true light / How many of the thirsty drink from your watering place (wirad)?

Oman, my path is firm! / to you all shining faces attend; 
Your glory is as high as the winnowing winds, / it shines [hanging] on the peg-heads.

Yesterday gathered the mighty / and the proud in your land of lion's dens; 
From refined thinking: / a sword flickering from the sheath.

The erroneous opinion does not distract [them] / when they build resolute might; 
In the forenoon, you quenched [the thirst of] their swords / and by blood each raider arrives.

For our land he attended and began it; / the clouds of the greedy have melted away 
When you began to oppose them; / Swords [like thunder] responding to lightning.

Oman, O you might of the lion's den! / the people of magnanimity and generous gifts; 
The suspicions of the unbelievers have failed, / Your people, on high, remain strong.

We are sincere and faithful to your might, / O land of highest qualities! 
Though we be fathers or sons / The bond of our blood to [Oman or the Sultan] is a testament.

We came to you, O issue of the generous, / We came at your invitation to respond and fulfill your request. 
We all are a razor-sharp sword in your hand, / And the free 154 don’t turn away from a promise.

What we behold has witnessed hard times [lit., spittle]; / When your standard raises, 
We came to you, young and old / Your command compelling one and all.

Our Sultan is of noble lineage: / with pride [he is] the issue of the most noble. 
By you Oman has achieved high stations, / Amongst the highest you stand out alone.

Qābūs, Sultan of the lands / We all are witness to your justice. 
O, you who raised the wall-pegs / you are honored by your name being treasure and pillar and bond.

There are several themes in this poem that deserve mention. The first is that the generosity of the Sultan is emphasized in several places: comparing his generosity to a watering hole where many animals stop to drink, offering invitations to perform, and so on. The second is that the image of

154 Recall the discussion of hurūr in Chapter 5, referring to generosity, nobility, and freedom of action in one nominative.
Oman as a kind of transhistorical entity is contrasted with the Sultan and the modern state. For example, lines like “Though we be fathers or sons / the bond of our blood to [Oman] is a testament” is followed by a direct address to the Sultan, by saying “we came to you, O issue of the generous.” The bond of blood is with Oman, but the performers have come to sing praise for a particular leader, Qābūs. Another theme is the performers offering themselves as soldiers to violently oppose doubters and enemies, a blending of consent and force that speaks directly to the establishment of state hegemony. Vanpee (2014) argues that this offer of martial support is one of the key features of the obligations that the ruled owe to the ruler: military support. Dancers uniformly prefer to carry weapons when they dance, usually swords or rifles. Since carrying rifles is now often considered uncouth, some groups have replaced real rifles with wooden facsimiles, which both allays fears that they might be discharged and allows for more members to have access to them, limiting squabbles over who gets to hold the gun during the next dance. The second obligation, of course, is rhetorical support in the form of poetry and performance. The following line is a perfect example of the twinning of consent and coercion and the absorption of elite ideals by non-elites:

We came to you, O issue of the generous, / We came at your invitation to respond and fulfill your request.
We are all a razor-sharp sword in your hand, / And the free don’t turn away from a promise.

The promise here, of course, is violence in the name of Qābūs, acting to coerce some unnamed other. What makes it particularly powerful is that it was invited and freely given by the performers. Here, the poem presents the praisers as free, and, as free men, they would never betray a promise made—intimating that the Sultan, as a free man himself, would never do so either.
At the conclusion of the performance, al-Marzūqī makes it very clear to whom this ‘āzī is addressed: Sultan Qābūs. He does this by “improvising” a repetition in the declamation of the final line: “Qābūs, Qābūs, Qābūs, sultān al-bilād!” Such an expansion—the repetition is not a part of the text—is a powerful artistic decision, though it seems minor. Even though al-Marzūqī made and performed it months in advance, it is still a focal point of discussion when this ‘āzī is brought up in conversation (see music example 1).

In fact, after the performance, the poet al-Masrūrī and the ‘āzī al-Marzūqī gave a joint interview with Khālid al-Zadjālī, Oman’s answer to Katie Couric. After playing this final line, al-Zadjālī animatedly asked them, “Qābūs was written just one time in the text… but I don’t know, is this amendment an addition or enthusiasm (ḥamās): from Masrūrī or Marzūqī?” To which Masrūrī responds, “As I told you, this one is a blessing (rizq),” punning on al-Marzūqī’s name. Masrūrī continues by praising his performance, attributing the repetition to “impassioned feelings within him,” referring to al-Marzūqī, and that he performed as he felt it, without being requested to do it. Al-Marzūqī explains that it was a sincere expression, since al-Masrūrī “lived” the poem, believed in “every letter in it,” just as much as he wrote it. “I believed in every meaning to be found in it,” al-Marzūqī reflected,

I spoke it (qultuhā) and I expressed myself in it, I spoke it and expressed in it what was behind me, around me [the dancers and the national festivities]… I expressed myself in it by, what, I made those behind the screens present (istḥādar man khalf al-shāshāt). I spoke it and expressed in it to every person sitting in his house, who didn’t attend. I spoke it expressively for all Omanis and I made this meaning appear (istḥādar hadhā al-ма‘anā).

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Pausing, al-Marzūqī reflected that “amongst the greatest oaths for this nation is that we treat the Sultan reverentially, hospitably.” He stressed that even when the benefits of the Sultan’s actions are not initially clear, his wisdom would “dissolve the clouds” of doubt and shine through in time. He then went on to describe how he was especially pleased so many young people found meaning in the ‘āzī, since the Sultan had always strived to embody Omani tradition (ḥaraṣʿ alā an yagassid al-turāth al-ʿumānī). Here, al-Marzūqī places the reciprocal relations in a clear light. Omanis must treat the Sultan as they do in performance, as he is embodied in Omani tradition: hospitably.

The ‘āzī in 2015 (“Pride and Taking Strength in the Leader of the National Renaissance”) is a useful foil for some of these themes. In terms of imagery and performance, the two are similar (al-Marzūqī tried to reach for the same emotional impact by “improvising” a similar tonal expansion in the line “O hearer, understand,” for example). However, the closing line to each stanza is in the typical style of the Interior, wa al-ʿizz bi-Allah yidum, “The might of God is everlasting.”

Thanks be to God, the One and Only / The Everlasting, the Unique, the Steadfast. There is no equal to him, and no son / The Lord is the most high.

Pray on the Lord of mankind (i.e., the Prophet) / He who brought the Laws of peace, Who circumambulates the great Kaʿaba / In his ultimate ḥajj.

Glory to the land of the Noble! / Its sights are set higher than the high peaks; Between the planets and the stars / our flag shines upon its pole.

Oman, since long past times, / Glory has had in it its place; He has not conducted her in the wedding procession to the festival / For just anyone who professes to him his desire.

The loftiest mountain peaks / Give her high dues! This every desert has witnessed / the action of brave and valorous leaders.

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156 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fh6hGJ58PBM&spfreload=10
Past times will not be counted [It is not wanted [that] we count past times] / to the mighty, the people of action;
Outstretched necks witness / [that] we are razor-sharp swords for her [Oman].

Oman! the refined glory! / Her actions and beneficial deeds are the utmost.
What comfort follows hearing it, / reason overwhelms the lips.

Oman! O hearer, understand / From before Mālik bin Fahim,
You won from the high ones a share; / What we hear next is his call.

Oman! You of sound nature, / O land [in which] all the free are noble and generous.
O sun, undarkened by clouds, / In every land and in all space.

Oman! The rising of the sun attends her; / The brilliance of lightning does not compare.
The highest of the planets high above; / His generosity is likened to the highest.

[Oman] is raised up by it, the noble, the mannered; / A symbol of dignity and good manners.
He preserved integrity and the promise of security and safety / Against those who restrain his land or its open tracts.

All foes and the covetous, / In their necks [they carry] the indignities of debt.
They bend to Muscat in request; / the [giving] palm is the invitation of the Creator.

O, you who follow this image / Muscat calls to him, “yes!”
Even if he was blameworthy in the past, / We forgive the past and its evils.

Our Sultan is lordly origin, / offspring of Aḥmad bin Saʿīd
He of great wisdom and vision, / Chivalrous, God grant life to his fame.

O my lord, your command is a fortress / in all times.
The arm is yours, you are the guarantor of safety; / You are the shārīḥ and you have the wisdom of al-shirāḥ.

Qābūs, Sultan of the lands / O, giving generously is a mercy to mankind;
Every peak and valley / Cheers Qābūs and his devotion.

The most telling two lines in this ʿāzī are “All foes and the covetous / in their necks [they carry]
the indignities of debt. They bend to Muscat in request; / the [giving] palm is the invitation of the Creator” and what follows it, “O, you who follow this image / Muscat calls to him, “yes!” Even if he was blameworthy in the past, / we forgive the past and its evils.” This line, in the understanding of many of my interlocutors, was directed at the various protestors that took part
in the wave of Arab Spring protests in Oman, largely in the industrial port of Suhar. Others claimed that it was directed at the various governmental figures who were fired by Qabus in response to the protests. When I pointed out in later interviews that it could easily be referencing both groups, several agreed, but pointed out that indirection was a particular talent of good poets. Notice how the line is phrased, however: the foe is specifically demeaned for having “the indignities of debt” on his “neck.” Earlier in the poem, “outstretched necks” witnessed the violent power of the Omani state. Those who bear that debt “bend to Muscat” to ask for benefits and the generosity they receive in turn is likened to an invitation. Then, the poet specifically calls to the listener who “follows” this meaning and urges them that repentance is acceptable, and they will not be turned away. Muscat here is clearly a stand-in for Qabus, a giver of benefits and forgiveness, but also a potential source of violence. This meaning is emphasized by the turn directly to a verse that establishes Qābūs as a prestigious part of a long dynasty, and who has the “great wisdom and vision” that is required to be a good leader.

In fact, the entire 2015 ‘āzī is much more concerned with violence and generosity than the 2010 poem, which was deeply interested in the mythopoetic creation of Omani history. While lines like “the arm is yours, you are the guarantor of safety” make reference to the role of leaders in maintaining peace and public order, the next line is very warlike in tone. Recall that the idealized elected Imam came with certain contractual obligations, stipulations, or licenses. One type of Imam was the shārī, or “seller” Imam, one who “sells” his own life, who was granted full license to declare offensive wars against other groups and states. The line “you are the shārī and you have the wisdom of al-shirāh” is an explicit reference to Imamate leadership patterns, those

\[\text{For more on this, see Valeri (2013).}\]
that were deliberately and violently destroyed by the current Sultan’s father. Here, Qābūs is called the “seller” Imam, who has the wisdom of knowing how and when to fight.

I read these—similar to many of the other poems I have presented—as framing the people, the reciter, and performers as petitioners of the addressee. In this case, however, the addressee is the modern, authoritarian state in the guise of Qābūs. This I see as the recognition of a relationship of dependency that may not imply disrespect but does reflect deep material inequality. The recognition of this dependency is, in effect, a recognition of the ramifications of this material inequality. In her study on nabaṭī patriotic poetry, Vanpee notes that the term sinād, “pillars,”
is frequently used for both the ruler and the ruled in the context of their ‘ahd, their rights and obligations vis-à-vis each other. The support of the ruler is envisioned as protection from threats and enemies (hence sinād al-diyyār: “pillar of our abodes”) as well as material provision and caretaking. On the other side, the role of the people as sinād is understood, as giving moral as well as military support. This moral support takes the form of approval of the ḥākim’s rule and recognition of his national leadership. The people support the ruler militarily by providing manpower. The use of this same term for both parties in the ruler-ruled relationship demonstrates an understanding of the covenant as a reciprocal agreement with duties and expectations on both sides. (2014, 112)

Despite her reliance on terms like ‘ahd and bay’a, which many of my interlocutors considered old-fashioned and rather crude to describe present circumstances, her point translates well to the Omani case.158 Take, for example, the final line of the famed 40th anniversary ‘āzī:

قابوس سلطان البلاد,
نشهد لعدلك أجمعين
يامن تعليت الوتاد,
وتشرفت باسمك سند

Qābūs, sultaŋ al-bi lãd,

158 These older terms are still used in many “old” razhāt, however, which are still sung. For example: “Our line is a line strong of determination, in calamity we are all ready // We did not forget those old oaths [al-‘ahūd al-qadima], from the time of our ancestors, the first ones.”
Qābūs, Sultan of the lands! We are all witness to your justice. O, you who raised the wall-pegs, You are honored by your name being treasure and pillar and bond.

Here, the reciprocal and yet unequal relationship is clearly made with references to pillars and pegs of different sorts. The terms are *witād* and *sanad*. *Witād* in Omani Arabic usually refers to pegs that were hammered into the interior mud-brick walls of homes, castles, and forts in order to hang belts, jars, gowns, and so on. *Witād* function here as a locally relevant type of firm support, upon which other objects hang, here rendered as a metaphor for the state. *Sanad* is used three ways in Oman: it can mean “treasure,” a valued thing, or it can mean a “bond,” as in a promise or guarantee, but it is also the singular of the term *sinād* that Vanpee translates “pillars.” This is the crux of the line, the power it has as a lexical and grammatical act (Duranti 1994; Webster 2016, 2018). In discussing the line with my Omani friends, no one could say which term was best, but all recognized that all were apt. In previous attempts at translating this line, I tried to choose one of these terms and explain the others. I now think that choosing one translation of the term is not helpful.  

As Alessandro Duranti has shown in forms of Samoan political speech, *lāuga* in the *fono* council, such minor acts of lexical and grammatical choice in situations of heightened speech can have immense social power (1994). “Information flows” of dense conversation turn quickly to “moral flows,” the exchange of moral assessments (174-75). He explains this *moral-flow*

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159 Anthony Webster has given much more thought to the vagaries, goals, and values of translation than I have, but I am inspired by his example to not try and choose a single word to convey this dense and conventional layering of meanings (2018).
hypothesis by claiming that “in addition to cognitive constraints and requirements, (i.e., regulated in the information flow [of conversation]), discourse proceeds by building moral worlds, in which characters are introduced and assessed as examples of moral types, whose actions and attributes are either to be praised or to be condemned” (174). By making, evaluating, and assessing action according to these moral types (what I have called ideal models), fono speakers “redraw not only a political but a moral map of their community” (174). “Politics,” Duranti continues, “is about selecting the people that fit the descriptions of the icons created by the moral flow” (175). Duranti’s claim about the moral flow of information is helpful in the Omani case. The ‘āzī itself is a mapping of a moral type onto the figure of the Sultan, who in turn is praised for his continued fulfillment of obligations. The denseness of praise as a linguistic gift is an index of the power of the generosity that prompted it and the moral economy in which they are mutually embedded.

The Sultan is honored by calling his name a treasure, a bond, and a pillar upon which the moral economy rests just as he honors the praisers by keeping up his obligations. The state stands as a wall-peg, supporting whatever is hung there above the ground and in easy reach. The linkage between the ideas is clear: the bond is a promise, holding to a pledge, protected and valued as a treasured object, while the pillar holds something up. In this case, the actions are conflated. First, it is the raising of the wall-pegs (witād), which, following Vanpee, refers to the social obligations that constrain the ruler at the heart of the ruler-ruled mutual relationship. Second, the Sultan is honored by his fulfilling and holding fast to that pledge, making his name a “bond” to his people who in turn “bear witness” to his just acts. Finally, we can understand that this fulfillment of mutual obligations is a treasure, something to be cherished and from which to draw pride. The Sultan is the one who raised Oman to its current level, and it is his continued
pledge to do so that engenders such praise. This should be read as a claim to legitimacy based on the continued fulfillment of social obligations between rulers and ruled.

Despite the linguistic denseness, there is a kind of double masking taking place here. The first is that the performance is lip synched, staged, and heavily edited while nevertheless giving the impression that it is live, improvised, and spontaneous. The themes of voluntarism nevertheless run through these praises, as they do many others. The second is that the poem is presented as a genuine public address to the Sultan when it was in fact deliberately produced to give that image. While the Sultan personally may have had little to do with the planning, it was a small cadre of elites who sought to present these ‘āzī-s as somehow representing the people’s opinions and perspectives on the state/Sultan. While the poem may do this, we need to also recognize that it may have also formed the basis for ordinary people to form relationships to the Sultan/state and Omani cultural distinctiveness more firmly. These genres, charged with associations with tradition, armed manliness, and structured class relations, both present the class relations desired by elites and offer a way for subordinated classes to internalize, integrate, and naturalize these structures of inequality as part and parcel of Omani state society.

Poems like this offer an opportunity to help define persons in social, historical, and cultural space, and certainly help to sharpen the image of the social relations that define inclusion in the Omani state. This is not a trivial or unimportant function, especially in the current political climate that seeks to claim distinctive cultural heritages for each Gulf state, as we witnessed in the second opening anecdote. This is what was meant by the “mythopoetic” function of poetry from earlier chapters: the social relations modeled in the choreography and imagery of the poetry bring those social relations from material to ideological life. They draw lessons and moral implicature from the material relations of inequality and generosity to the social relations of
dependency, leadership, and legitimacy. At the same time, they furnish actors with emotionally invigorating symbols and connections that serve to solidify identities and affiliations.

Not all performances model mutual obligations with the state. Compare the remarks about money in the opening ethnographic description with another such episode, involving an Egyptian business owner trying to hire the same group for a short performance in Muscat. Trading WhatsApp audio messages back and forth, the group leader demanded over 500 OMR (1300.39 USD) for the performance, which the Egyptian thought was ridiculous. “The arts are not cheap,” my friend chided, winking at me. Here, the group leader was taking advantage of the lack of a relationship between himself and the Egyptian—the exchange of money would terminate their relationship, and so therefore was the only real reason to perform. Elites of this kind hire performance troupes to mark particular occasions and to be seen as patrons of Omanis and their culture, even if they themselves have virtually no interest or regard for it. I have witnessed many of these events, ranging from the opening of table tennis tournaments to opening shopping malls and auto dealerships. Steiner’s (2018) work helps us to understand why these kinds of events are similar to state spectacles, and yet why they do not inspire any sense of mutual obligation and focus on monetary exchange.

Similarly, for National Day celebrations, many civic bodies hire performance troupes to give an ‘āzī or even to make a film demonstrating their devotion and national pride. These events as well demand monetary recompense. One useful example of this is an ‘āzī video\footnote{Almawahib Adam. “Farha al-Saba‘in | Al-‘id al-waṭanī 47” [The Happiness of the 70s | National Day 47]. Online Video Clip. \textit{YouTube}. YouTube, 19 November 2017. Web. 19 Nov. 2017. \url{https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=15g7ypL2jA0#action=share}} prepared by civic leaders in Ṣuḥār in the summer of 2017 on the occasion of the Sultan’s trip to the coastal city. As the ‘āzī declares, “this voice is meant for the public / I verse this ‘āzī to spread it far and
wide.” The video then shows the huge new Sultan Qābūs mosque accompanying the line, “Pride dresses her, Ṣuḥār,” using the literal term for dressing oneself with clothing. The Sultan Qābūs mosques (jāmi‘) are an obvious example of the generosity of the Sultan and the directedness of his developmental projects. Most large cities now boast these huge buildings, similar in architecture and in purpose. Next, the ‘āzī continues:

We monitor your arrival every year / And the viewers, by God, are like a flood
To joyfully celebrate the coming / to the fertile land, never left to desolation.

Here, the poet presents Ṣuḥār as a land of plenty that has nevertheless been “dressed” by pride, meaning this Sultan or his guided development. Now, the people of Ṣuḥār await his yearly arrival and boast that they have not let their land become “desolate,” demonstrating that they do not take the Sultan’s gifts for granted. Typically, this ‘āzī lacks the beginning sayḥāt and the proper praise to God and the Prophet before expounding on the main theme, marking it as an example of a performance that is either more mimicked than based on expertise or shortened to appeal to modern tastes, as we saw with the Emirati case in the opening ethnographic examples in this chapter.

Short videos like this are common. I was invited to the filming of one in the Interior town of Ādam, in which the Firqat al-‘Arabī was hired to star in a local music video to be called “Farḥat al-saba‘īn,” “The Happiness of ’70,” referencing the year Qābūs seized power. Organized by some of the wealthier inhabitants of Ādam, the film was designed to be a reflection of the “spirit” of the town throughout the nahḍa. The razḥa and ‘āzī for the event were written and recorded prior to the event, and the Firqa from Manaḥ was largely expected to lip-synch to the song and be filmed. The location of the film was in the old town center of Ādam, in the shade.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GKagsdYNtRw
of the tremendous ghaf tree named Šubāra, surrounded by the old abandoned shelters of the families who now lived out near the ring road. The film crew, local to Ādam, welcomed the Firqa members warmly but quickly set to work getting light levels and setting up cameras. After briefly considering putting me in the film, they began playing the song through several loudspeakers and coaxing the group to dance.

Farḥat al-saba‘in min ’a‘āda,
Qādihā al-sultān min šāna’,
Wa-l-ʾāādi mā lahā qādar,
Fi haymat sultānnā wa-ʾumānnā

The happiness of ’70 once again!
The Sultan guided it from its first construction.
And enemies have no power,
in [the face of] the overwhelming love our Sultan and our Oman.

Music example 8. A razha composed for a praise video for the 47th National Day celebrations.

They began by using their drums, which led to a confusion over dance steps, specifically whether they were to dance with the song or the drums. The final cut of the song used hand-played drums rather than the striker and switch they filmed for the video. The solution to the dancing problem
was playing the recorded song even louder, since no audio was being recorded anyway. Soon though, the director called for a cut and demanded that something be put over a distracting electrical socket in the frame behind the group. A production assistant ran up and put a thermos in front of it, which drew a bark from the director:

“Not that, put something historical there! Put a sword or something!”

The assistant dutifully ran off to a corner where a number of historical objects lay in a pile. He quickly grabbed a broken jahla water jug and leaned it against the socket; this was deemed to be pretty good.

Later, when the actors came to perform the ‘āzī, I sat with a group of locals as they took in the whole performance. After a few aborted takes, the group was restless.

“Listen, brother, you’ve got to raise your voice,” one complained, turning to another, “tell him he’s got to raise his voice.”

The performer snapped back between takes, wiping sweat from his brow. “Shouting won’t do anything, it’s already recorded!”

“Anyway,” the peanut gallery continued, “you’ve got to raise the sword and shake it (‘izz wa-tihizz)! If you don’t do that, don’t call it an ‘āzī. Do it! You need to look strong, you just look hot.”

I asked him if he knew a lot about the arts: “No, not really,” he replied, “I just know he’s not doing it well.”

This was an interesting conclusion, because this ‘āzī was unlike any other I have seen. It was very produced, involving a range of vocal skills that are not historically part of ‘āzī practice and that trend more towards ānashīd styling. Second, while this ‘āzī also eliminated the ṣayhāt, two main singers traded lines back and forth, which, for most ‘āzī practitioners, would disqualify
it entirely. This was, to me, similar to the attempts of Emirati producers to arrange the ‘āzī in a way that was more modern and, perhaps, more amenable to current production standards. The poem itself praised the Sultan in typical ways, tracing him back to his ancestors and noting how his rule was a continuation of their pattern.

What these two kinds of productions reveal is the way that “civil” institutions (recording companies, singers, local elites) are involved in the creation and solidification of state hegemony in this context. Yet they lack the gravitas and sense of deep mutualism that animate performances directly patronized by the state. It is clear that few if any of the participants outside of the Firqat al-‘Arabī had much knowledge about the actual performance of razḥa and ‘āzī, but it had become enough of a symbol of national pride, expressed in “traditional” terms, that it could be mimicked with a certain verisimilitude. This leads to an important question. Why go to the trouble of making these videos if you don’t know how to perform the genres in them?

Along with Steiner’s work that shows these attempts to represent the elite patron as generous and deserving of state support, we should consider this a kind of ethnic boundary marking. Expressing a group’s or town’s patriotism and devotion to the Sultan/state in the form of razḥa-s and ‘āzī-s makes a certain claim about the links between the performers and the ethnic and social character of the state. In this case, the adoption of razḥa and ‘āzī as not only proper, but as “traditional,” paints Oman and the performers as an Arab state and renders public declamations of patriotism as masculine. Razḥa is demonstrably a public, male, and Arab performance genre that is addressed to worldly power. Razḥa-s, historically, were undoubtedly performed by men and by Arabs, and so this link is logical. But not everyone even heard these genres, let alone performed them—certainly not even all “Arabs” in interior Oman. The boundaries of modern Oman contain many groups who perform in many ways. Ādam, in fact, is
a town with a strong Bedouin element, and yet no sign of this is apparent in the video purporting to represent it. Afro-Omani practices are not subject to nearly the level of elite interest as *razha* but especially *‘āzī*, even though they command large audiences when performed. Similarly, Balochi performance practices have been virtually removed from the public eye (though this is partially at the request of the Pakistani government). The point remains that the political, public praise performance of *razha* and *‘āzī* make certain claims about the public character of the state, and the identity of the people involved in performance. They are, in part, making a case for themselves to be included in the privileged ethnic strata of the state. Elites in Ādam are staking a claim in the privileges of belonging to the state in its modern form—Arab, masculine, dignified, praising. And yet, Uzi Rabi shows that Sultan Sa‘īd, as late as the 1960s, claimed that it was simply a quirk of history that Muscat had Arabic as a *lingua franca*: he certainly considered himself to be more aligned with and similar to the Muslim states of India and Pakistan than the wider Arab world (2011, 118–9). Miriam Cooke’s (2014) recent work on the ethnic character of Qatar shows how social distinction and ethnicity are bound up together, as well: real Qataris are citizens and are Arabs, and are therefore claimants on state prosperity, while those of Persian descent (no matter how distant) are second-class.

This is partly on display in the video taken in Ādam. The actual performers, those knowledgeable about these practices, are rendered as a physical, human element of the stage dressing. The voices, poetry, drumming, and melodies that they are visually tied to are not their own. One member not present at the filming said he was worried that “real lovers of the arts” would see the group participating in the faulty *‘āzī* and think that they did not know how to do the real thing. When I asked why no one corrected them, he replied, “that’s not our place to enter into their production like that. They will do as they do.” The response I would have liked to have
given is that it was not their place to do as they liked with these performance practices. I would have liked to point out that those folks who made the video—who I am sure meant absolutely no harm, and acted only out of a sense of national pride and a desire to embrace their local performance practices—would never have done so if structural, material, and political developments had not made it seem beneficial. This highly centralized authoritarian state, predicated on distributive development, exhibits a tacit cultural policy that frames it as Arab, masculine, and traditional. Razha and ‘āzī have emerged quite specifically as national performance practices because they display these qualities as well as demonstrate the proper social relationship between the state/Sultan as generous giver and the people as loyal receivers.

**Conclusion**

James Ferguson (2015) has recently reflected on the importance of distribution to the future of global economies, as wage work becomes less and less stable and more and more scarce. He calls these “distributive livelihoods”—lives that are built not from waged labor, but from distribution. Citing work on distributive economies, guaranteed basic incomes, and “just giving money to the poor,” Ferguson shows how distribution might be a way of securing humane futures in inhumane times. Reading his work, however, one wonders what kinds of responses this distribution will bring—and if we have learned anything from reciprocity, it’s that giving impels a response, no matter the gulf. Ferguson’s hopes for a distributive politics are predicated on being open to surprise and induction, so let me make one such surprising induction here.

In Oman, relations of dominance and inequality are masked as relations of mutual obligation obtaining between the state/Sultan and subordinated classes through the selective reinterpretation and staging of a particular set of historically Arab and masculine performance practices. Relations of dominance are, in James Scott and Pierre Bourdieu’s terms,
“euphemized,” that is, framed as emerging not from domination but as from other social bases: leadership, protection, dependency (Bourdieu 1977, 190ff.; Scott 1985, 306-8). Razha and ‘āzī have had a similar role in connecting rulers and ruled in the past, and the historical imaginings of those events help to explain their adoption by authoritarian regimes in the present. Razha conjures notions of warfare and bellicosity, noble and heroic men, and the mutual bonds that the defense of the polity create in service of guaranteeing the continuation of a functioning social order. Likewise, ‘āzī turns on the formal mythopoetic confirmation of the links of mutuality that obtain between a generous ruler and his body of followers. In tandem, these arts are both a potential source of hegemony for the state, but a hazardous one. As Tochka and others have shown us, relying on performers to deliver the ideological message of the state is a risk. Performance forms have histories just as performers do. The proof of this is the way that performers use praise as a moment not only to praise, but to represent themselves, their community, and their moral universe.

By framing state projects of development as generosity, praisers play a crucial role in developing and propagating a relationship model that posits the state as generous giver and the people as a grateful receiver. For elites, state ceremonies display this tendency most accurately and with the least amount of pushback. As I documented in chapter 4, however, performers nevertheless present themselves as active, dignified, and powerful equals to the Sultan, in some communal moral sense. While the ultimate project of state hegemonic legitimation may be tentatively secured as a détente, Omani performers are not wholly “flattened” or encompassed or made dependent in the process. If chapter 3 showed us the potential of state giving to produce dependency, and chapter 4 documented the ways that performance waylays this potential, chapter 6 has shown us the ways that the Omani state has sought to assert itself as the one power
to which all others swear allegiance. This assertion has come partly by centralizing praise (which was a two-way process of state urging/staging and performers’ active solicitation of state agents and resources) and partly by the destruction of political alternatives. While the state may provide (for some), it does not provide a choice.

I have called this the gift of rule: the deliberate framing of political domination as a benefit. Framing development as generosity is one way this is accomplished. As Godelier pointed out, relations of domination are easier to accept when they seem like part of an ongoing exchange. While Godelier’s hypothesis is at least skeptical that this is anything other than a legitimating ideology (as we all should be), the Omani data presented here should give us just a moment of pause. Praise may offer a way of not just accepting this ideology of exchange as a given, but making it at least partially true, in the limited sense of being an actual material transfer of goods. What’s good about insisting on the actual material movement of goods is that it makes what elites think about that transfer unimportant: the giving is enough. Encouraging, developing, and urging the cultivation of generosity in the powerful, and the not-so-powerful, may be an important model for a future “distributive politics” on a larger scale. Opening palms with praise does not allow them to frame their giving as disinterested nor as altruistic, but as a responsibility and an obligation.

Inculcating generosity in elites through praise may be one of the “small arms in the class war” that was stored away too early. It’s a small, innocuous, and unassuming way of shaping the behavior of the people who have the potential to do the most good and the most ill. I don’t expect that all praise does this, but I think some can. When Omanis praise, they do not just receive the gift of rule, they animate various responses and returns to it. Of course, sometimes they don’t. But by asserting that this Godelierian exchange between elites and non-elites is not just naked
exchange but instead a *moral economy* in which equal participants are bound by networks of historically sedimented obligation, praise may constitute a genuine mechanism that operates on the potential dangers of dependency. It might offer a way to shape domination, to accommodate it while not exposing oneself to threat.

Nevertheless, the *détente* of hegemony is a neverending chain of move and countermove, action and reaction.

So praise, in the end, may not be much in the face of all that. But it is something.
Appendix A.

Arabic texts of the ‘āzī-s cited in this dissertation, arranged by approximate date of composition and performance.

1. The 1913 ‘āzī given at the election of Imām Sālim bin Rāshid al-Kharūṣī, discussed in chapter 5, including expository text.

قصيدة لفن العازي” يعود تاريخها إلى حوالي عام 1913 م عند بيعة الإمام سالم بن راشد الخروصي، وفيها ما فيها من روح الحماس والعزة الوطنية من هذا العازي:

سميت باسم المبتدئ
والقلب من همي بري
شاعت علماء الغافري (المقصود الشيخ حمير بن ناصر النبهاني الريامي، حيث كان يعد زعيم الحزب الغافري في السلطنة)
انه ندر وانصب امام

انه ندر وانصب الوف
وتزامن عبري وتنوف
حمير نهم ما حد ينوف
غير الأرامل والابتام

غير الأرامل اب حلال
وابرخ عليهم بالاموال
من الشارقة وبلد الشمال
 فوق البهط يلهم طعام
 فوق البهط اليهم شراه
يا بن حمد مالك نصر ( يشير الى السيد سيف بن حمد البوسعيدي الذي كان يحكم قلعة نزوى والذي اتحر
اثناء الحصار) 
وخلاف ايس من العمر
بيده شرب كاس الحمام

بيده شرب كاس الممات
ما تحكيه معصرات
تابع رسوم العاليات
خيل يقودونه بخطام

قالوا مغرب من سنين
ويحب نصر المسلمين
قالوا نعم متولمين
NAS على الطاعة ولام

NAS على الطاعة زهوب
وإستفتحوا بنوزى غروب
القلعة زمر فيها الهبوب
قامت تهدم من الدمام

قامت تهدم من الجدر

يا بن حمد مالك نصر ( يشير الى السيد سيف بن حمد البوسعيدي الذي كان يحكم قلعة نزوى والذي اتحر
اثناء الحصار) 
وخلاف ايس من العمر
بيده شرب كاس الحمام

بيده شرب كاس الممات
ما تحكيه معصرات
تابع رسوم العاليات
خيل يقودونه بخطام
خيل يقودون اسير
والجيش في الجامع بخير
ما حد عضيل ولا كسير
والنصر بالله والدوام

قيل أن صاحب هذا العازي للشاعر بريك بن حمود بن خصيب بن سليم بن مبارك بن خنجر بن عمران الرحبي (بيت ولاد سليم)

2. The 2010 ‘āzî delivered by al-Marzūqī and written by al-Masrūrī for the 40th National Day celebration outside of Muscat in 2010. There are a small number of mistakes in this written transcription that do not reflect the text from the actual performance.

ولاء القائد

تأليف الشاعر: محمد بن حمد بن علي المسرووري
آداء: محمد بن علي بن خميس المزروفي

الحمدلله المعين

فرد ولاقبته بدى
خلائق عباده اجمعين
والرزق من كفه مدد

صلوا على خير الانام
شفيعنا يوم الندا
محظوظ من صلى وصام
بلقاه في حوض الورد

حيا الزمان ارض الكرام
بالعز من عهد الأول
ياللي احتما بك ما يضام
خطى ولا يسناه ند
ارض الكرامة والشرف
أفعالها مضرب مثل
مصيونة بسقب وشفف
عن كل مهذار وحمد

يغشي سماها م البدر
وافي عدهن أربعين
كلهن على بهجة وحبور
والفرح فيهن ما يعد

من مطلع المشرق نشب
على الدنا ضح الجبين
راباتنا بين الشهب
تخفق بها الكوس وتعد

عين علت كبد السماء
تغشي مطالعها بنور
من حملها غيض العداء
وتثير كل جبل وهد

تهدي القيافي بنورها
من غير هذرات وغرور
حد تمن سفورها
من كان في عينه رمد

عمان دار الأكرمين
على ذراها الدهر شب
من فضل رب العالمين
متبسمة بوجه السعد

عمان دهرك في سرور
والسعد من وردك شرب
تهدي الفيافي في صح نور
كم حايض حوضك ورد

عمان دمتي في ثبات
لك حاضر زاهي الجبين
مجدك على في الدارات
سساني على روس الوتد

أمس حويتي الطايلات
والعز في أرضك عرين
من فكر عالي الدرجات
سيف تجلى من نجد

ما شاغل الرأي الوهم
لما بنوا عز مكين
تروي ضحى أسالفهم
من دم كل غازي وفد
ثنى العدوو يسحب خطاه
ذابت غيوم الطامعين
لما تبادت للجباه
أسياف من براق رد
عمان يا عز العرين
لأهل الندى والمكرمات
خابت ظنون الجاحدين
شعكب على العلياء وطد
إنا لعزك مخلصين
يا أرض عالين الصفات
آباء كنا أو بنيين
وعد دمانا له شهد
جيناك يا نسل الكرام
جيننا نلبي دعوتك
كلنا فينك سيق هذام
والحر ما يثبت الوعد
ما ننظره شهد الرضاب
لما تعلى رايتك
جيناك من شبيب وشباب
أمرك على الجمع وفرد
سلطاننا عالي النسب
بالعز نسل الأكرمين
نالت عمان بكم رتب
 نحو المعالي تنفرد
قابوس سلطان البلاد
شهد لذلك أجمعين
يامن تعلت الوتاد
وتمتعت باسمك سند

3. The ‘āzī given at the 45th National Day festivities in 2015, with the same poet and declaimer as ‘āzī 2, above.

فخر واعتزاز بقائد النهضة
تأليف الشاعر: محمد بن حمد بن علي المسروري
آداء: محمد بن علي بن خميس المرزوقي

الحمد لله الأحد
الدائم الفرد الصمد
ما له شريك ولا ولد
رب تعالى في علاء
والعز بالله يدوم

صلوا على سيد الأنام
اللدي أتى بشرع السلام
ما طاف بالبيت الحرام
عامر بحجه منتهاه
والعز بالله يدوم

المجد في أرض الكرم
نظراته أعلى من القمم
بين الكواكب والنجم
رفت علمنا والفناء
والعز بالله يدوم

عمان من ماضي الزمان
المجد فيها له مكان
ما زفها للمهرجان
كل من يحدث له صباح
والعز بالله يدوم

أعلى الجبال الراسيات
يملها رسوم عاليات
كل الفيافي شاهدات
فعل الصناديد الكماة
والعز بالله يدوم

ما با عدد ماضيات
لأهل الفعل والطابلات
يشهد رقاب العاصيات
إنا لها سيوفن مضاه
والعز بالله يدوم

عمان المجد الرفيع
غاية فعلها والصنين
و لي ما رضى تالي سمع
العقل يغلبها الشفاء
والعز بالله يدوم

عمان يا سامع افهم
من قبل مالك بن فهم
حازت من العليا سهم
التالي ما نسمع نداء
والعز بالله يدوم

عمان يا شأن سليم
يا أرض كل حر كريم
يا شمس ما يغشاه غيم
في كل أرض الله وفضاه
والعز بالله يدوم

عمان حاضرة شروق
ما يماثله لمع البروق
أعلى الكواكب فوق فوق
شأن إلى العليا نداء
والعز بالله يدوم
علا بها الفذ الشهم
رمز الكرامة والشيم
صان الأمانة والذمم
للم نصا داره وفضاه
والعز بالله يدوم

كل العدا والطامعين
في رقابهم نماذ دين
ثنوا لمسقط طالبين
والكلف للخالق دعاه
والعز بالله يدوم

باللي تبع هذا الرسم
مسقط تنادي له نعم
لو كان في مضيته ذم
نصفح عن الماضي وأساه
والعز بالله يدوم

سلطاننا من أصل سيد
من نسل أحمد بن سعيد
ذو الحكمة والرأي السديد
شمل وحي الله نباه
والعز بالله يدوم
يا سيدي أمرك مصان
في كل حالات الزمان
ذراع لك وانت الأمان
شاري ولك حكم الشراة
والعز بالله يدوم
قابوس سلطان البلاد
يا جود رحمة للعباد
كل الرواسي والوهاد
تهتف لقابوس وفداه
والعز بالله يدوم


سميت به رب الجلال
قيوم حي ولا يزال
وينثر سلام كالزلال
للضيف والجمع الرحيب

حببت يا نسل الكرام
شرفت أهلك والمقام
واهديتنا منك وسام
يا مبدع القول العجيب

يا مبدع قول وفن
يل هادئ الطبق اشجن
حن دارنا تعزف لحن

يا مبدع قول وفن
يل هادئ الطبق اشجن
حن دارنا تعزف لحن
منبشرة بك يا لبيب

اما سمعنا بخيتك
جيننا حضور في حضرتك
يا سيدي ذي طلتك
نفخر بها وبدون ريب

سيد وبن سيد بجد
انت يا خالد بن حمد
لو قمت بأفعالك أعد
قلمي ما ظنه يستجيب

كل دار تبني بالرجال
لما تتعاضد بالرجال
أما الكسل ماله مجال
لا من بعيد ولا قريب

هذه همم كل الشباب
خاضوا التحدي والصعاب
واللي ممشي درب الصواب
لا يمكن أفعاله تغيب

هذه عواندنا في منح
نحبي الرسوم اللي تصح
قابوس علمنا وتصح
قابلس للأمة طبيب

يا ديرتي المعرى سلام
نلتني فخر نلتني احترام
حولك رجالات نشام
هذا ماهو شيء غريب

والخاتمة أرجو العذر
والوقت بالسرعة يمر
لو كان لي زايد سطر
لعزيت إلى قرب المغيب
Appendix B.


The prosody of the Omani oral performance practices studied in this dissertation can be parsed using both qualitative meter (i.e., syllabic weight, stress, and rhythm) and quantitative meter (i.e., formal patterns of long and short segmental units). As Liebhaber (2010) points out, the divide in counting qualitative and quantitative metrics in Arabian poetics is “unsatisfactorily resolved” (163) and therefore requires some comment.

The relation between text, recitation, and melodic performance is complex and amenable to analysis. Rather than take up melody here as well, I focus on text and recitation. Following the lead of interlocutors, I analyzed poems either as recited or as sung.


In counting quantitative meters, I grouped segments into two categories: long (–) and short (u) by noting consonants (C), short vowels (v) and long vowels (V) following Caton (1984, 45-122) and others.

Long segments: CV, CvC, CVC, CvCC [CVCC]

Short segments: Cv [vC]

Breaking the poetic line into these segments does not respect word boundaries but instead focuses on the sound of the spoken line. As noted by Caton (1984) and Sowayan (1982, 1985) some typical features of recitation are the elision of the *al-* article, linking consonants across word boundaries, and vowel addition (anaptyxis) or deletion (catalexsis), among others explored below.

In order to analyze qualitative meters, I follow the stress patterns that I elicited and recorded or identified myself and verified in discussion.

Two stress weights occur a “strong” beat (rendered in CAPITALs) and a “weak” beat (rendered normally).

e.g., ṣa-BAHT ‘u-MĀN al-YAWM …

According to Bailey (1991), the number of weak stresses between strong stresses may vary widely and exhibit no obvious pattern. The focus is only on the strong stresses.

Liebhaber (2010) concludes that differences between quantitative and qualitative meters may be reduced to the difference between recitation and singing, but this conclusion may be premature because of the wide variety of changes that sung poetic lines undergo. Poems can sometimes differ drastically when they are recited or sung (a feature noted by many other Arabists). Long vowels can be elongated (e.g., salāāām) or shortened (fī > f-; ‘alā > ‘a-), consonants may be run
together (al-mu’azzam > l-ma’ẓam), tanwīn consonants elided in speech may sometimes appear (e.g., bi-‘ibir > bi-‘ibirin), and vowels may be systematically inserted (wa-l-ḥilla > awal-ay-ya-ḥilla-‘uh). Not all of these changes cause poetic lines to more closely correspond to quantitative meters, but may be attempts to align along different axes (rhythmic feel, dance steps, etc.).

3. Quantitative Meters.

As a quantitative example, all ‘āzī-s analyzed in this corpus use a form of the classic quantitative meter rajaz, whose basic four-segment foot can be rendered:

| – – u – | or | u – u – | or | – u u – |

(for this final variant see Shibi 2018)

*Rajaz* is by far the most commonly used quantitative poetic meter in the corpus I analyze. However, it appears in couplets of two feet each rather than the classical three. For example, the first line of an *‘alifiyya* or “alphabetical” ‘āzī:

الباء بطال المسلمين
إلهٰم عوايد من سنين
ياما وياما مجاهدين
فوج الخيول الصافنات

Al-bā’ biṭāl al-muslimīn,
‘Ilhum ‘awāyid min sinīn;
Yāmā wa yāmā mugāhidīn,
Fawg al-khayūl al-ṣāfināt!

The [letter] bā’: Bravest of the Muslims,
They have had their ways for years.
Over and over striving [in battle],
On their swift-footed horses!

Dividing the lines as above we find:

| – – u – // – – u – |
| CVC.  CVC  Cv  CVC //  CvC  CvC  Cv  CVC |

And so on:

| ‘il.  hum.  ‘a.  way. //  yid.  min.  si.  nīn. |
| yā.  mā.  wa.  yā. //  mām.  gā.  hi.  dīn. |
| Faw.  gal.  khi.  yā. //  laṣ.  šā.  fī.  nāt. |
Here we have two couplets of two feet of *rajaz* for a total of eight feet. Some notable analytical features are the linking of the final “mīm” of *yāmā* with the initial “mīm” of *mugāhidīn* and the elision of the short vowel “u” in the final foot of the third line. Final consonants join *al-* articles that follow them (e.g., between the feet of line 1 and 4). It should also be noted this is not CLA but Omani dialectical (*‘awā’id* > *awayid*; *fawq* > *fawg* written with a *jīm*; antique terms like *bīṭāl*; and colloquialisms like *yāmā wa yāmā*). Therefore, it is not necessarily the case that quantitative meters necessarily moved with retentions of a Classical speech patterns.

Anaptyxis is also common in quantitative meters. The 40th National Day *‘āzî*, for example, is fully composed in *rajaz* when anaptyctic syllables are added:

Qābūs, sulṭān al-bilād,
nashad li-‘adīlak ‘ajma’īn.
Yā man ta’alayt al-witād,
wa-tashharrafat bi-’ismak sanad.

Qābūs, Sultan of the lands!
We are all witness to your justice.
O, you who raised the wall-pegs,
You are honored by your name being treasure and pillar and bond.

| qā.  bū.  s(i).  sul. // ṭā.  nal.  bi.  lād. |
| – – –  u – // – – – u – |
| CV  CV  Cv  CvC // CV  CvC  Cv  CVC |

And so on:

| nash.  had.  li. ‘ad. // lik.  ‘aj.  ma. ‘īn |
| wat.  shar.  ra.  fat. // bis.  mak.  sa.  nad. |

In this case, a final short vowel “i” is added to the third segment (“s”) of the first line, which in written form simply ends the word *Qābūs*. These anaptyctic vowels are justified in Caton 1982 and in subsequent studies. This insertion makes the modified *rajaz* meter perfectly regular.

Catalexis is also common. For example, take this inherited *razha*, which also exhibits *rajaz*, but concludes with a three-segment foot:
Spread my greetings to the homeland and the encampments,
Like the soft rain drizzling down to you [and settling in] small, clear pools.
Tarab weeps [because] no one sings the poetic line,
It weeps to its heart and the people are lazy.

For example, a poem by Khalfān of the Firqat al-Ma‘amad discussed 258ff.:

First, God’s greeting to Qābūs the great,
He rules over us, overflowing with generous gifts and benefits,
Oman awoke today to blessed news,
   O God, his age great, years of might.

In this case, no perfect repeated quantitative patterns emerge due to repeated breaks and modified feet, but *rajaz* is a good first approximation.

\[
\begin{align*}
& u - u / u - u / - - u / - \\
& u - u / - - u / u - - \\
& u - u / - - u / - u - \\
& u - - - / u - u / - - u \\
\end{align*}
\]

4. Qualitative Meters.

If grouping segments in this way did not yield a pattern, I elicited recitations or sent recordings of my recitations to interlocutors to judge accuracy. This often resulted in an obvious qualitative pattern.

In terms of syllabic weight, a qualitative analysis of the last poem analyzed yields:

\[
\begin{align*}
'\text{a-} & \text{WAL sa-LÄM a-LLAH, li-QÄ- būs AL- } \text{mu-'}\text{AṬṬ}-\text{am} \\
y\text{a-} & \text{LĪ 'a-LAY- nā FÄD, bi-GÜD wa MAK-rū-MÄT} \\
\text{ṣa-} & \text{BAHṬ 'u-MAN al-YAWM, fī KHA} \text{B ri AL- nu-'}\text{ĀM} \\
\text{wa YĀ a-LLAH 'am-RU ma-DĪD sa-NĪN fī ŢĀ } \text{'}\text{i- LÄT} \\
\end{align*}
\]

Here, alternating syllabic stresses yield a clear rhythmic pattern of six stressed beats and payoff of a final additional stressed beat in the final line. This “additional” beat’s arrival is hinted at in the first line’s final unstressed beat, compared to the middle two lines concluding with a strong stress. Here, the quantitative meter and the qualitative meter present alternate analyses.

In cases where quantitative meter is wholly inaccurate, such as this *razha* analyzed in 419ff., qualitative metric structures are more parsimonious.

في وداع الله يا أصحاب المروة
جوتمكم وافي من زاد الأجوادي
لتوادعنا في وداع المخوة
عندكم شاييم وساير البلاد

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Fī widā' allah yā } & \text{'aşhāb al-maruwwa'}! \\
\text{Jawd} & \text{ukum wā'fī min zād al-'ajawwādī.} \\
\text{Li-tuwāda' inā } & \text{fī widā' al-makhūwwa!} \\
\text{'andukum } & \text{šāyim wa sayīr al-bilādī} \\
\end{align*}
\]
Farewell! Go with God, O you exemplars of manly virtue!
   Your generosity is ample and increases generosity yet more,
We take our leave in brotherly farewell;
   You have amongst you one of great virtue, leaving our lands.

In this case, the abundance of “long” segments precludes a clear or even implied quantitative pattern. Yet, following Bailey (1991) and Liebhaber (2010), a clear qualitative pattern emerges: four strong stress lines followed by three strong stress lines. The variable number of unstressed beats are typical of qualitative poetic meters.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{fī wi-DĀ‘} & \quad \text{-LLAH yā ’aṣ} & \quad \text{-ḤĀB al-a-ma} & \quad \text{-RU} & \quad \text{-wwa} \\
\text{jaw-du-kum} & \quad \text{WĀ} & \quad \text{fī min} & \quad \text{ZĀD al-a-ju} & \quad \text{-WA} & \quad \text{-dī} \\
\text{li-tu} & \quad \text{-WA-da’} & \quad \text{NĀ} & \quad \text{fī} & \quad \text{-DĀ‘} & \quad \text{al-a-ma} & \quad \text{-KHU-wwa} \\
\text{‘an} & \quad \text{-du-kum} & \quad \text{SHĀ- yim wa} & \quad \text{SĀ- yir al-bi} & \quad \text{-LĀ} & \quad \text{-dī}
\end{align*}
\]
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