The Senses of Water in an Omani Town

Abdulrahman, one of my landlord's elder sons, came over for dinner one night early in my stay in Bahla, a town in the interior (Dakhiliya) region of the Sultanate of Oman where I was conducting fieldwork. He asked if I had seen the zaygra, a well whose water is pulled up by animals. As I had not, the following afternoon, Abdulrahman and his wife and two of their children came to pick me up to see the well. My landlady, who also had never seen this particular zaygra, decided to come too. We piled into Abdulrahman's pickup truck and drove to the other side of town. When we arrived at the well, there was no one there. Abdulrahman walked toward the well; we all followed. As we got closer, he turned around and proudly proclaimed that this was the zaygra. After circling the well several times, we all piled back into the truck and headed home: a short trip to show the anthropologist and the women something "traditional."

A few weeks later, I was in the capital city, Muscat, and went to visit an American historian. He asked if I had seen the zaygra and whether I would be willing to take pictures of it for someone who was building a model of one for a museum in Muscat. I agreed to help, and when I returned to Bahla a couple days later, I walked back to the well, which still stood quiet and unused. This time, though, two young children, seeing me walking around the well, ran out and explained that their father, Hamad, was the owner of the well. Soon the owner came and I introduced myself, explaining that I wanted to take some pictures and measurements. He said that I was welcome to look around but that I should really come back that afternoon when he would have it working. When I arrived in the afternoon, I saw a group of men sitting near the path that a bull and donkey were using to pull up the water from the well. One man was walking the bull and Hamad, the owner, was walking the donkey.

As I walked toward the men, Hamad looked up and on seeing me, tied the donkey to a rope that ran along the path. He came over and welcomed me to the zaygra, which I had seen a few days before as well as that morning—though not in action. Without me needing to ask, Hamad began to explain the different parts of the well: every little part, he insisted, has a name. He listed the parts so quickly that I felt I wasn't supposed to learn them, only recognize his expertise. I jotted everything down

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as quickly as I could, thinking that the exhibit organizers in Muscat might find the names useful. He also began to explain the reasons he had rebuilt the well a few years earlier: first, he said, the youth, *shibāb*, do not know anything about the past and second, he missed the sound of the turning wheel. Listen . . . all you can hear is the sound of the mechanical pumps. We stopped talking and in fact, all around I could hear the quick fire of mechanical pumps. He was tired of that sound, he added. He said he comes here in the afternoons and irrigates his fields the old way and the other men come and sit, enjoying the outdoors. After our conversation, Hamad returned to work and I continued to take pictures, draw, and measure. I soon noticed that on the steps on the side of the well were four or five small tape recorders.

I finished as the sun was setting, and Hamad kindly offered me a ride home, saying he would pray later. The call to prayer came, and all of the other men started to leave for the mosque. We walked quickly to Hamad’s car, got in, and as he started the engine, he pushed in the cassette: it was the sound of the *zayna*. The screeching sound of the turning wheel played on, and I realized that all those other tape players were making similar recordings.

I could not stop thinking about Hamad’s rebuilt *zayna* and the tapes he and the other men might listen to in their cars or about the model, soon to be built, from my snapshots, untrained drawings, and inaccurate measurements. The juxtaposition of the two projects suggests that Hamad in particular was struggling with how to remember his past, how to present his past to future generations, and, ultimately, his recognition of the limits of official memory. Hamad’s struggle over how to remember and how to represent his past emerged, however, not from his encounter with trauma and the limits or workings of “cultural anesthesia” (Feldman 1994), as many scholars examining the politics of memory have illustrated, but from a mundane confrontation with nostalgia, a nostalgia that was spilling over and moving beyond the stills of national visual representations of heritage.

This essay presents three ethnographic moments from my research in Bahla to explore discourses and perceptions, sensory regimes and memories that are struggled over and entangled in shifting technologies and practices of water distribution in an Omani town. In these ethnographic moments, the transformations of the last thirty years in Oman become apparent neither as fixed emblems of “progress” nor as simple incommensurabilities with “traditional” practices, but rather as complex tensions. A changing water distribution system is entangled in a host of shifting discourses and practices—about the past, about religious modesty, and about ownership—and these entanglements reveal and have engen-
dered tensions in the ways people speak about and confront their memories and their relations with each other.

Following Nicholas Thomas (1991, 3), I use the term *entanglement* not only to move away from "the notion that indigenous responses or practices are to be explained through some clarification of an alternate cultural order" but also to emphasize, here, the ways that responses to new water distribution technologies are enmeshed in a multitude of other discourses and practices: the politics of nostalgia, gender, education, religion, class, and labor. On the one hand, water distribution technologies are entangled in discourses about and policies of development and tradition: the politics of the necessary installation of pipes and mechanical pumps as well as the remembering of past values. In Oman, water distribution practices fall squarely between naturalized assumptions that development (in the form of piped water, mechanical pumps, and sprinklers) is necessary for the fulfillment of successful statehood and notions that older forms of water distribution are emblems of Oman’s past values and knowledge. At the same time, however, previous and new forms of distribution are also entangled in shifting forms of and struggles over the meanings and policies of authoritative knowledge, religious ethics, and the economy of an oil state. Embedded in a variety of globalized discourses and policies—including development, heritage, Islam, and labor—are memories and sounds, the appropriateness of sight and bodies, and the meanings of ownership and belonging that become the sites of everyday tensions.

The Development of Water Technology in Oman

It is hardly necessary to highlight the importance of water and water distribution in Oman. Except for the southern, Dhofar region, which receives the tail end of the later summer monsoon rains from the Indian Ocean, the country is extremely arid. Annual rainfall in northern Oman ranges from 20 millimeters a year in the desert regions to 300 millimeters a year in the mountains. Instead of rainfall, people in Bahla rely on wells and a network of underground canals, or aflaj (in the singular, falaj), which probably date from before the advent of Islam in the seventh century A.D.¹ Not all wells and canals work all the time, and Omani histories tend to describe the establishment or destruction, the prosperity or demise of a town, in terms of the state of its canals. Contemporary Omani histories mention how at the beginning of this century, the governor of Bahla restored three of the town’s five canals, suggesting that they had been badly damaged or inoperable during the reign of the previous governor. Today, three of the five are still in use. Until the late 1960s, local wells and

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canals provided water for drinking, bathing, and irrigation for the town, distributed according to customary and religious law and a complex system of water-share ownership, rents, auctions, and rotations.

With the exportation of commercial crude oil beginning in 1967 and especially with the 1970 British-organized coup d'état, the Omani government began extensive development projects, including school, hospital, and road construction and creation of a new water distribution network. The drive for development, fueled by oil revenues and supported by a new state determined to establish itself as modern and distinct from the previous regime, is evident in most of the early statements of the young sultan, Qaboos bin Said al-Bu Saidi, as well as the policies and projects of the new government. Sultan Qaboos bin Said al-Bu Saidi, who deposed his father, Sultan Said bin Taimur, in a coup d'état on 23 July 1970, pointed to his father's inability to control an expanding war in the southern Omani region of Dhofar and especially his father's slow response to development possibilities as the reasons for the change in government. The post-coup state used and continues to use the language of development not only to claim that the nation is founded on the building of modern infrastructure but also to contrast itself with the supposed isolation and backwardness of the previous era. Constant official declarations hail the government's achievements in bringing modernity to Oman and Oman to modernity.

References to oil as the source of revenues for development projects under Qaboos are conspicuously absent from official discourse on the birth of the nation, a silence that seems to imply that the resources for development had always existed but that the former sultan was simply too stubborn to use them for the benefit of the country. In the place of oil, the wise decisions of the present sultan stand as the source and force of the changes in Omani fortune. The silence about oil's role in providing the funds for certain kinds of change has created a sense in Oman that development, measured by the existence of particular types of amenities, is a universally desirable and necessary condition of statehood and that a legitimate state leader can single-handedly bring about these changes—irrespective of sources of revenue. The "miracle of the renaissance," which is how the Omani state refers to the changes in Oman since the 1970 coup, both ignores the fact that a huge influx of capital enabled the new state to embark on massive infrastructure projects and naturalizes the projection of change. The seeming paradox of coupling Sultan Qaboos's exceptional policies, abilities, and wisdom with the naturalized course of Oman's progress (diverted briefly by Sultan Qaboos's father), is itself the "miracle" of Oman.

There is no doubt that a lot changed in Oman in the first years after
the coup. According to commonly quoted statistics, whereas in 1970 there were 3 “modern” (that is, non-Quranic) schools in Oman, by 1980 there were 363 such schools; whereas in 1970 there was 1 hospital, by 1980 there were 28 hospitals; and whereas in 1970 there were 6 kilometers of asphalt roads, by 1980 there were 12,000 kilometers. The dramatic transformations in infrastructure are evident also in the amount of building supplies and equipment imported to Oman in the first years after the coup. From 1970 to 1972, the amount spent on imports of cement increased from 125,000 Omani rials (1 OR = $2.65) to 576,000; on other building materials, from 286,000 to 1,456,000; and on machinery and parts, from 232,000 to 1,799,000.

Water policies and distribution were of primary concern to the young post-coup d'état state. The new state began its initiatives by sponsoring surveys and research projects with the United Nation’s Food and Agricultural Organization, Renardet-Sauti-ICE, an Italian engineering company, as well as the Centre for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies at the University of Durham and by establishing government ministries to manage water distribution, initially for the capital area and then for the rest of the country. The early research projects and ministries were concerned with documenting and establishing inventories of the wells, canals, and water levels throughout Oman. The development of water policies also meant laying down pipes in the capital and opening and subsidizing a new market for selling pipes, pumping equipment, and pumps throughout the country. By 1973, most of the houses in the capital area were connected to a piped water network.

A 1973 Middle East Economic Digest report on Oman (MEED 1973: 25) announced that the forthcoming five-year plan (to begin in 1975) would be a great opportunity for suppliers of irrigation equipment: “Development schemes likely to be included in the forthcoming five-year plan are large-scale irrigation projects (of interest to suppliers of pumps, pumping equipment, pipes and irrigation equipment).” Not surprisingly, all the advertisements accompanying this early 1970s English-language magazine article on Oman are for banks, suppliers of building equipment, or Omani trading companies that are agents and distributors for these suppliers. Supported by research projects as well as state subsidies of equipment and encouragement of new irrigation practices (not to mention the change in the economy itself), diesel and electrical pumps, sprinkler systems, and hoses quickly entered the Omani market and soon became part of the landscape of small towns and villages.

Certainty and determinism about development and about the necessity of improving water distribution and irrigation are evident in the literature and statements of the new state: Oman’s progress depended, in part,
on the "modernization" of irrigation practices (which assumes that surface irrigation systems, such as the aflaj, incur high water losses) and would be measured by the numbers of people who had water piped directly into their homes. The Omani state is not alone in looking to water distribution as an indicator of successful development. The United Nations, for example, has long calculated the percentage of people within a given settlement who have water piped into their homes as one of the determining factors for categorizing communities into "rural" or "urban" (see United Nations 1998). Similarly, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) is increasingly including water privatization as a condition for loan agreements.7 Recognizing the importance of access to water for determining progress and yet also recognizing that Oman's statistics would not be as favorable if calculated according to piped water into homes, Oman's own 1993 census (Sultanate of Oman 1993) enumerated, instead, the percentage of people who had easy access to clean water. Recently, however, the Ministry of Water Resources appointed a consortium led by ABN Amro, the Dutch banking group, and including the U.K.-based law firm Denton Hall as well as the U.K.-based technical consultants Mott MacDonald Ltd. to assist in the privatization of water and provide the technical support for new water distribution systems. Mott MacDonald Ltd., in particular, is working to design and construct supervision for new wells, pumping stations, tanker points, towers, reservoirs, and 215 kilometers of new pipes to serve twenty-one towns and villages in Oman. These "necessary" moves toward the development of water distribution systems, however, encouraged by international development organizations and administered by a consortium of multinational corporations, have confronted and continue to confront other forms of water distribution in Oman—forms with complex histories and practices—not to mention the Omani state's own recognition of the ancient water system as an emblem of historic knowledge and practice.

The constant emphasis on progress, achievement, and development has not meant that the past is ignored. On the contrary, in Oman, as in many parts of the world, progress is almost inevitably accompanied by the language of tradition: although the previous era is vilified, the spirit of age-old values and memories of ancient glories are heralded as both necessary to and constituent of contemporary Omani society. The past, as a spirit and a value, is said to continue in the new era. The spirit of the past, expressed in terms of hard work, religious piety, seriousness of purpose, purity, and ascetic grandeur, is relegated to the realm of "culture." Although at times contradictions and tensions emerge in official articulations of this relationship between development and tradition, for the most part an unsteady and continually shifting equilibrium has been main-
tained: the spirit of the past rather than the mechanics of its hardships, continues in the age of prosperity. And it is this seemingly successful balance of the discourses of development and tradition that stands at the heart of Oman’s distinctiveness in the Arabian Peninsula. According to the state, unlike the other countries of the Persian Gulf, Oman has retained the culture of religious purity and village humility. Unlike the other Gulf states, Oman has not squandered its oil revenues. Water systems and the zaygra and falaj in particular stand as common emblems of the great and difficult past.

Hamad’s Zaygra

While Hamad’s and the museum’s interest in the well are not surprising given the national attention to past values, Hamad’s personal quest to relive the past, through bodily reenactments and sounds on a cassette, reveals that a simple emblematic fascination with the past cannot adequately fulfill local struggles to come to terms with personal memories and the changes in Oman in the last thirty years. As Jonathan Boyarin (1994) notes, memories are neither strictly individual nor collective and it is precisely this in-betweenness of memory that allows for its complexity. Both Hamad and the museum were attempting to capture a reenactment: Hamad, by working with his re-creation and continuing to listen to its sounds; the museum, by preparing a static miniature and presenting it to foreign visitors and Omani residents in the capital area. Modernity’s duality of nostalgia and fascination with technology were evident in Hamad’s longing for Bahla’s not-too-distant past: he both rebuilt the old well and listens to its sounds on his car stereo. Like Hamad, the museum also is playing with nostalgia and technology, hoping to teach the sophistication of “ancient” indigenous practices while at the same time illustrating the everyday hardships of the previous, pre-coup era. However, while the museum presents a static well, a “remnant” in miniature of tradition whose spirit should continue in the time of “progress,” Hamad creates a more dynamic reenactment than a simple relationship between tradition and progress would allow.

The sight of the museum’s miniature would hardly have been enough for Hamad. He needed to recapture the past. However, even the rebuilding, the bodily reenactment, was not enough. He had to continue to listen, surrounding and enveloping himself in his car and through his car stereo with sounds of the screeching wheel. The landscapes of memory are not only visual, Hamad’s recording reminded me, but saturated with sounds. These encompassing background sounds, Hamad hoped, could be recap-
tured through individual listening on his car stereo. The inadequacy of the museum to capture the loss, the failure of the national discourse of tradition to be a consolation are evident in Hamad’s need to rebuild and listen to the sounds of the well. On the one hand, the model in the museum and the tape of the sounds of the well were similar: both rarefied forms in enclosed spaces. On the other hand, however, moving through the town in the car highlighted Hamad’s need to be completely surrounded as he, alone, moved through space. Even his desire to provide a collective memory experience, for the youth, resulted in his own listening in the car.

Hamad’s insistence that the other men would often spend their afternoons there reliving their past alerted me to the possibility that their presence at the well was not as customary as he would have liked. Although Hamad claimed that the men had made the well their usual meeting spot in the afternoon, no one had been there on my previous visits. It was most likely that the well was not a usual meeting spot where the men came to enjoy nature, “the outdoors,” but rather that the men occasionally came to watch and that my visit was simply an occasion to put the well on show and for the men to bring their tape recorders. The men’s choice of this particular day for recording the well suggested that recapturing the sounds was a recent interest and that they did not often have the opportunity to record. Perhaps these men would keep the tapes as mementos, souvenirs, and future documents for their children.

Even Hamad himself did not always use the animals to water his fields. At the end of the animal path was a mechanical pump and well. Neither was in use at the time of my previous visits, but when I visited several months later, Hamad had both the mechanical pumping well and the zaygra working. When I asked him about it, he said that he does use the other well but that it runs out of water after fifteen minutes. On that visit, the mechanical well was being used and ran the entire time I was there, which was about an hour. It is very possible that the mechanical pump well does run out of water more quickly than the zaygra since it pulls up much more water more quickly than does the animal pulley system; it did not, however, that last time I visited.

Hamad’s claims—that he often used the zaygra, that the mechanical pumping well ran out of water after fifteen minutes, that the men had made this their “usual” afternoon gathering spot—revealed more than simple inconsistencies in his story; they revealed his desires, desires that the technology of water distribution had, along with all the Omani discourses about progress and tradition, stirred and that no model in a museum could even possibly begin to fulfill. The technology of diesel and electric pumps, of pipes and of sprinklers, had almost erased the sounds of his youth. In turn, the new youth, who were the supposed audi-
ence of Hamad’s project, were neither visiting the well nor listening to the tape. The well and the tape were for Hamad himself, on a personal quest. The zaygna, a sanctioned and authentic image of Oman’s past on the one hand, conjured up sounds for Hamad that he needed to capture and that were beyond the sensory production in the museum.

The Bathing Room

While the zaygna was, in a partial way, becoming part of a national project on heritage, other water-related memories were being denied. We, the regular group of five women neighbors, were sitting in front of Rayya’s house one afternoon having our usual coffee and dates. Rayya’s daughter, Amina, was there that day as well: she was home for the week because of a university holiday. We began to talk of the magasi, the women’s wash and prayer room that separated the patio where we were sitting from the main road. This room, abandoned like many others around town, sits over a canal, a falaj, with running water. Inside there is an area to pray, with a mihrab marking the direction of Mecca, and an area to bathe, with a ledge to sit along the canal. “Do you ever use it, Rayya?” I asked. “No, it’s too cold for me. Even when it’s hot outside, in the summer, it’s cold, and in the winter, it’s freezing. Only the old woman across the street still uses it,” Rayya said. “Who used it ‘before?’”’ I asked. “We all did,” Rayya answered. “All together?” Amina interjected. “Of course all together; if you needed to bathe and someone else wanted to bathe, we’d bathe together. And when we prayed, we’d pray together.” Amina looked disturbed and protested, “but bathing together, that’s harâm,” that’s forbidden. Rayya looked uncomfortable. Her daughter had studied Islam in school, she knew how to read the Quran, she knew how to read legal texts: she would probably know if it was harâm. “But it’s between women,” I interjected, trying to make the older women feel better about their practices. “That’s right,” Rayya said. “It isn’t forbidden if it’s between women.” She sounded tentative—still unsure of herself and uncertain of our religious authority. Now it was Amina’s grandmother’s turn. Frustrated with all the restrictions she sees being imposed by the religious youth she said: “everything is harâm now.” Now the extremely private space of the bathroom in the house, with its piped water and hot and cold taps, is the place to bathe, alone.

Whether Amina had actually read or heard any specific religious statement against women bathing together is not necessarily important, except that her knowledge would have come from her experiences at the national university where generic Islamic ethics and principles were being shared.
and explored. Amina was absorbing features of a globalized Islam, one that assumes generalized precepts and contexts for those precepts. Her certainty expressed a general moral ethic, part of the increasingly shared Islamic universe espoused and assumed by many university students, a moral ethic tied to a discourse of religious modesty as found in the university.

What was remarkable about Amina's statement, more than her access to this kind of information and discussion, was that her shock and certainty that these women's activities would be karâm came after only several months at the university. Amina had grown up in front of the magáši, and yet her reaction suggested that this was the first time she had actually considered what women did inside. It was as though Amina, who had lived in the house near the magáši her entire life, had not until that moment thought about the fact that women bathed together there and that this bathing would, in any way, conflict with a religious ethic. This sudden realization both defined something as immoral and revealed her fear at the thought of seeing other women's bodies. Living communally at the university must have raised questions for Amina about whether it was appropriate to see other women's bodies or how much of another woman's body it was appropriate to see. The mere thought of seeing "naked" bodies of women not part of the nuclear family was just as fearful or abhorrent as seeing a naked man. This was a new control of sight, no longer geared only toward men but toward all adults.

Amina's shock that women would even have thought to bathe in the same room ran counter to what the other women sitting on that patio would have assumed was appropriate and remembered as part of their cultural past. In this moment, Amina and the older women were struggling with what objects would become sites of authentic Omani tradition. This struggle over whether the magáši was authentic to Omani traditions, however, also implicitly carried with it struggles about what was appropriate to feel and see as well as what could be remembered. The authentication of objects, as C. Nadia Seremetakis reminds us, is also an authentication of the senses associated with those objects: "Crucial to any process of authentication is the moment when certain objects are selected over others as sites of social anchorage. This results in the discarding and marginalization of sensory values, meaning and emotions attached to discredited materialities" (Seremetakis 1994, 136). While for the older women, the magáši carried with it sounds, sights, and a sense of community that they considered an important part of their past, for Amina, it only suggested a seeing that should have been forbidden.

Rayya had said that the water, in that arid weather and in the shade of the wash room, was cold. Rayya was remembering the feel of that cold
*falaj* water— the spray, splash, and dipping that was part of bathing—and this is what she was acknowledging as integral to using the *magāzi*. Rayya was not concerned about what parts of other women’s bodies were forbidden to see; what mattered was the feel of that water and the memory of a way of bathing, of communal life. Her concern about modesty, as well as the concern of the other women sitting on the terrace that morning, was that they not be seen by men walking outside the room. It was not only Amina who was drawing on religion to authenticate particular practices: Rayya had coupled praying with bathing. Rayya mentioned how the women used to bathe together just as they used to pray together. This was no longer what women did; they no longer shared either of these activities. For Rayya and the other women, praying together was just as much a part of their memories of the past as was bathing together. In evoking the past of the *magāzi*, Rayya was evoking a past about community, about a mixing of religion and sociality. Both bathing and praying, activities now performed alone in the singular spaces of individual rooms, were signs of their communal past.

Amina’s certainty and concern about the limits of acceptable distance between the women revealed more than the discrepancy between her assumptions about religiously prescribed modesty and those of the other women sitting on the patio; they also ensured that the lines of privacy would be closed even tighter. Amina’s assumed authority to speak against the memories and experiences of the older women, as well as their willingness to relent to her objections, signal the degree to which they have all, except perhaps the grandmother, interiorized the state’s legitimation and heralding of Amina’s “new” knowledge. The enclosed washroom was clearly conceived as protected and distinct from the public space of the road, which is what mattered to the other women on the patio. But while it held the possibility for the articulation of a gendered heritage, the bathing room offended young Amina’s university-educated sensibilities.

**The Water Cooler**

As Amina was insisting on the necessity of individual bathing, her next-door neighbors, my landlords, were struggling over how to manage the ownership of water. One day in the early spring of 1997 as I walked to my house, I saw that a group of men was digging up part of the street and laying new pipe. I soon learned that the government was going to begin piping drinking water to this part of Bahla.

In the twentieth century, from the restoration of the canals until the
introduction of piped private water in the mid-1970s, canals provided the water for washing, bathing, and irrigation while wells provided drinking water. This division of water labor has not been absolute, however, and wells were and are also used for the irrigation of lands not connected to the main canal system. Among these various categories of water use, the only type of water that, until the early 1970s, one would have had to purchase was for irrigation; even then it was argued that it was not water itself that was owned or purchased, but water-time. While one could own or purchase water-time for irrigation, washing, bathing, and drinking, in particular, were, by moral and religious recommendation, free and open to the community.

As I was occasionally reminded in Bahla, sharfa, the term generally translated as "Islamic law" or the "right way," also technically means access to a source of pure water. The Prophet Mohammed is known to have said that people hold three things in common: water, pasture, and fire. In another account, Mohammed is recorded to have said: "The man who holds back water from another will have God's mercy held back from him" (see Varisco 1983, 369-70). This is not to say that no one can own water; the general rule is that water belongs to the person who first exploits it, to he who undertakes the enterprise of digging or carrying it. However, one can only use what one needs and cannot make a profit from selling the rest. Therefore, if someone builds a new canal, that person—in effect—can own only the water from that well or that canal that is needed for drinking, bathing, washing, and irrigating the fields (two ankles deep, according to the Prophet); the rest must be given away or sold at the cost of upkeep of the canal or well. Speculating is illegal, and portering water is acceptable only if one does not profit from it. These, however, are some of the basic formal prescriptions, and most people and towns have tended to follow the spirit of the Prophet's sayings rather than attempt to apply them systematically, especially since in many towns water is not owned by an original founder but in corporation, organized around the figure of the 'urf.¹¹

In Bahla, time rather than quantity regulates the system of the purchase of water from the canals for irrigation. One man, an auctioneer and water canal organizer known as the 'urf or "specialist," controls the water distribution system. He is responsible for knowing who or which mosque owns how much water-time as well as when and where it should be receiving water. Individuals and mosques own certain amounts of water-time within a cycle of about two weeks. The twenty-four-hour schedule of the day begins with sunrise and is divided into thirty-minute units called athar.¹³ To maintain the fairness of when a mosque or an individual receives water, each cycle includes two rotations of its own,
alternating between day and night. In other words, if someone owns time, thirty minutes say, during the day in the first rotation of the cycle, his or her thirty minutes of water-time will be allocated to the night during the second rotation. Whatever is left over from the ownership of water-time, which usually is about one-third of the total time available, is auctioned off for that cycle. The proceeds of the auction, or *maqûd*, go toward the maintenance of the canal. The *ārif* receives about $3 for each auction as well as a small salary from the Ministry of Religious Endowments. He is not supposed to make a profit from this work of water trade; I was told that the son of another *ārif* had made his father stop auctioning water because he believed his father was profiteering. Therefore, even though one must buy water-time to irrigate fields, no one is supposed to make a profit directly from water.

Unlike Wittfogel’s “hydraulic society,” here water—as the main means of production—is not controlled by a centralized power. Certainly, while the rich are more easily able to buy permanent water-time or rent water-time for a particular cycle, ownership of that time quickly becomes divided through inheritance. Furthermore, rent prices are generally difficult to fix by the *ārif* because of the auction and the prohibition against making a profit. Rather, the main beneficiaries of water-time are the mosques, the religious endowments of which cannot be divided and which can rent out the water-time they do not use. Like the Balinese Subaks that J. Stephen Lansing, Clifford Geertz, and Robert C. Hunt and Eva Hunt have described, however, even with the mosques, the degree of centralization is ambiguous (Lansing 1987; Geertz 1972; Hunt and Hunt 1976). The emphasis of water law, as an ideal, is clearly placed on providing water, especially drinking water, for the community.

In the early 1970s, when pipes and pumps entered the Omani market in a pronounced way, the town’s water distribution system dramatically changed. Although irrigation water from the canals continued and continues to be divided and distributed more or less according to a system of auctions, rotations, renting, and time ownership, other methods of water organization also became possible—other ways of “owning” water became possible. From the mid-1970s, when pipes were brought to Bahla, much of the water for household washing, drinking, and bathing began to come from privately owned wells in town. Residents of each house would decide whose well water they wanted and would pay that well’s owner to lay down the pipes and deliver water. From the mid-1970s to the early 1990s, users paid a flat monthly rate, which fluctuated the most during times of drought. In the early 1990s, the well owners decided to install meters so that consumers would pay according to how much they used.

Although it might be expected that paying for water for washing,
drinking, and bathing would contradict the emphasis on communal access in law and custom, some people explained that they were paying not for the water but for the pipes and for the service into their homes, just as they would have paid a porter. Further, the canal water, which could not for legal and moral reasons be tapped by pipes, was still available for washing and bathing. Paying for piping into homes did not in itself seem (at least for almost thirty years after the pipes were installed) to cause much consternation. In abiding by the moral recommendation to provide free drinking water, however, many families put a thermos of water and a plastic cup outside their houses for anyone passing by. Although willing to pay for the delivery of water into the house, exclusive ownership of that water, especially drinking water, continued to be a matter of negotiation. While by far the most laws and legal rulings on water are concerned with irrigation and with establishing fairness of access, it is, above all, drinking water that is subject to the most adamant statements and understandings about providing for the community. It is drinking water, in particular, that should never be held back.

Now the government was bringing piped water, and no one seemed to be willing to pay for another supplier except for the owner of the house where I was living. My landlord bought a new electric water cooler and placed it near the main entrance to the house. He drilled a hole through the cement wall around the house for a faucet to be available from the road. He then hired someone to build a small cement area underneath the faucet on the ground so that the water dripping from the faucet would not create a pool of mud. Finally, he hung a new plastic cup on the faucet. The new water cooler was ready for the inhabitants of the house and for anyone walking by. Although others in the neighborhood had been providing drinking water from plastic thermoses and clay jugs, there was a difference here: this was the “new” water and it could flow continuously. My landlord would now be paying three separate water suppliers: the argh, for “rented” water-time to irrigate his small plots of land and backyard; the local well owner, for the delivery of washing and bathing water in the house at a metered rate; and the government, for the delivery of drinking water, also at a metered rate. Soon, however, my landlord’s “good deed” of providing the new drinking water to the neighborhood turned sour. My landlord’s children, in particular, began complaining that it was always a mess in front of their house and that “people” were not simply drinking a bit of water but “taking” a lot of their water to their own homes. It became apparent that entangled in these complaints was a problem of class tensions. The “people” my landlord’s children were complaining about were migrant laborers and young boys from former-servant families.

Although the shift in the mid-1970s to paid private water or, more
accurately, paid local distribution from a private well for washing and bathing seems to have been acceptable in terms of moral and legal ideals (at least from the perspective of the late 1990s), the status of drinking water was more tenuous. By placing thermoses and jugs outside their homes, many families strove to maintain a blurred line of ownership to provide for the community. In the late 1990s, ambiguities of morality and charity were being played out again, as some boundaries continued to be negotiated and others reinforced: my landlord broke a large hole through the cement wall around his house in order to provide the expected drinking water to the neighborhood, and yet the children resented some of the people who were drinking that water. The uneasy status of migrant laborers in Bahla (integral to and yet separate from what constituted the public community) and tensions between former-servant and “free” families were being played out through the dynamics of community obligations and ownership.

The arrival of the government drinking water, piped to the house in the new hoses from tankers brought from Muscat or from new wells dug by the Mott MacDonald Ltd. consulting group and kept cold in the extreme Bahla heat by a continuously running electric cooler, certainly qualified as an event in the neighborhood, marking a further shift in the organization of water distribution. The water no longer came from local wells, either brought to the house on foot or pumped through pipes; it came from elsewhere. Drinking water had become a commodity derived from unknown origins, “bought,” “owned,” and “distributed” by the household, its value to be calculated in terms of quantity rather than time. If the privatization plans of the ABN Amro consortium are implemented in accordance with new IMF policies, this “government” water will soon be privatized. This is not to argue that the new piped water caused divisions within the community or that there were no tensions before it but, rather, that it made even more possible the children’s assumption that they owned certain amounts of the drinking water (after all, they were paying for the quantity that was being used). This possibility, combined with the continuous flow from the water cooler and the tensions revolving around the migrant laborers and between different classes of Bahlawis helped to reveal and to aggravate discord in the neighborhood. The children were expressing the practical tensions seemingly erased in the Omani state’s discursive elaborations about development and tradition.

The tensions surrounding the water cooler, however, were not only between the children of the house where I was living and migrant laborers or the children of former-servant families. The conflicts emerging here were also between my landlord and his children. The falaj in front of the house reminded the father about the importance of dividing water fairly,
about forms of water distribution requiring that drinking water be accessible to everyone, that everyone be able to taste the new, cold government water, and finally that he did not “own” water, only water-time. My landlord was not rejecting new technologies: he embraced the arrival of government water and bought a brand-new electric cooler. Nevertheless, by placing the water cooler near the entry and breaking a hole in the wall around the house, my landlord was also setting an example for his children to learn about providing drinking water. The children, however, saw water in terms of the amounts for which they were paying, the meter that would mark how much was being taken.

Conclusions

Water is a constant image on Omani television: clear river beds, pools of glistening water, and flowing canal water mark moments between programs. These pure and soothing images are safe reminders of the past as well as markers of the present. They signify “tradition” and the values and sophisticated ancient technologies of village life, seemingly distant from the glitz and oil money of the capital, Muscat. These images also touch on “progress” and the relatively new amenities of piped water, mechanical pumps, electricity, and television as well as on the wisdom of a state that recognizes and supports national treasures and resources. While the discourse of the state, in its smooth official messages, plays with an unproblematized relationship between tradition and progress, people in the town of Bahla are confronted in practice with the complexities of changing relationships emerging around and through changing water distribution systems.

The reconstruction and occasional use of the old-style well signaled local nostalgia for a past time, an unfulfillable desire no matter how hard Hamad tries. National attention to Omani heritage supports and justifies Hamad’s project for rebuilding the well, although perhaps not quite in the ways he would like. He receives no funding for his project, nor do references to the great engineering and spirit of the past capture all the experiences and memories that he wants. Hamad spent his own money to build the well and occasionally irrigates his fields using it. His professed goal of teaching the youth who have no memories of a time when farming was an integral part of daily life in Bahla only begins to touch on the emotions and desires of his project. More accurately, Hamad is trying to relive the past in some ways, enacting an older ethic and enclosing himself in the sounds that accompany that ethic.

As Hamad struggles to capture the past through the well, a nationally
recognized emblem, Amina and her mother also struggle over what artifacts, and the senses associated with them, should be remembered. The argument between the older women and the young university student revealed their difficulties in establishing particular artifacts as authentic. The older women were proud of their bathing and prayer room; it stood for a time when people shared more, and it conjured up memories of dipping and splashing cold water, of praying and bathing together. But for Amina, the thought of seeing other women’s bodies made her feel fear and shock. Using the magāṣi was not a practice she could or wanted to understand. Here, in the discussion over the bathing room, the women were also negotiating the lines of privacy. The shifts in the boundaries of private and public, however, should not be seen as simply moving in one direction, toward privatization: it is in fact only the public position of a university student that allowed Amina to claim a restricted privacy. Amina’s authority in proclaiming what was proper or improper conduct and her assumptions about spatial control derived from the public recognition of her schooling and her place in a newly founded university system. Entangled in the general “Islamic” principles that have become common among many students were generational struggles over what could appropriately be seen, revealing shifting assumptions about space, bodies, and gender.

While private space was being negotiated in the discussion of the bathing room, private ownership was being disputed in the events after the installation of the water cooler. The quick installation of the water cooler was also a sign of social status, which required its partial redistribution to the neighborhood. This gesture, however, was undermined by concern that others were taking advantage of the family’s generosity. Water ownership, now expressed in terms of quantity rather than time, was possible because drinking water could be owned and calculated by a meter; it was a commodity and was being distributed through pipes and made available to the neighborhood through a continuously flowing electric water cooler. My landlord, an older man who would go to the auctions and who often told me that his sons did not even understand how the falaj was organized, went out of his way to provide for the neighborhood. On the one hand, his act was geared toward his neighbors, to establish his generosity and his status. On the other hand, it brought out tensions with his children: the falaj invoked an ethic for the father about ownership that the technologies of piping and meters, of electric coolers and tankers, seemed to be overturning.

The three different moments discussed here highlight how the need to negotiate the novelties of progress engenders an entire spectrum of accommodations, conflicts, and debates. Also, however, they enable one to detect the entanglements of different discourses, such as those of the past,
gendered modesty, religion, and class. Changing water distribution prac-
tices, made possible by oil revenues and encouraged by discourses on
development, have naturalized the introduction of pipes and electric cool-
ers, diesel and electric pumps, as a necessary part of development. These
particular technologies, however, have also come at a time when people
are confronting issues of migrant labor, shifting social relations, diver-
gent religious ideologies, and the importance of retaining emblems of
Oman’s great past. Perceptions and assumptions, conflicts and struggles
about ownership, bodies and modesty, authentic artifacts and senses, all
emerge as people both embrace and confront what it means to live with
the technologies of development that seem so natural.

Notes

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1. This is not to say, of course, that the system of water distribution has been
the same since the seventh century A.D. Rather, I wish simply to note that the
origins of these canals probably date to this early time (see Wilkinson 1983,
177–94).

2. Coronil (1997) similarly discusses the relationship between oil, the state,
and magic. However, while the Venezuelan state presents itself as the unified
master over nature that can magically (without productive labor) turn oil into his-
torical progress, in Oman, the sultan is often presented as creating historical
progress without oil, not to mention the productive labor necessary to turn oil
into money.

3. These numbers are from the Omani Statistical Yearbook. For an excellent
critique of this discourse on progress, see Friderich 1986. While much contem-
porary discussion tends to blame Sultan Said bin Taimur for the stagnation of the
Omani economy and the closedness of the society in the pre-coup era, Friderich
illistrates that the accusations against the former sultan are either exaggerated or
false. At the same time, however, Friderich also unfortunately shifts blame from
the sultan to the inamate tradition of the interior.

4. These trade figures are from MBED 1973, 16.

5. Water management now falls under two administrative arenas: the Min-
istry of Water Resources (MWR) is in charge of water resources assessment while the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries (MAF) is in charge of irrigation.

6. For a recent quantitative study of falaj water use in Oman that argues against the assumption of unnecessarily high water loss in surface irrigation, see Norman, Shyaya, al-Ghafari, and McCann 1998.

7. For more details on the recommended and suggested water privatization policies, see, for example, the IMF *Letters of Intent and Memoranda of Economic and Financial Policies* for the following countries: Angola, Benin, Guinea-Bissau, Honduras, Nicaragua, Niger, Panama, Rwanda, São Tomé and Príncipe, Senegal, Tanzania, and Yemen.

8. Most women in Bahla belong to neighborly groups that meet every morning and occasionally in the afternoons. Women often go, with their groups, to visit other women and groups throughout the town.

9. While officially before marks a generic pre-coup d'état time when there were no schools, hospitals, or roads, when there was no electricity or piped water, it is also a time of living memory for these women sitting on the patio. For Amina, Rayya’s daughter home from the university, it is a time learned through constant official reminders, family stories, and my questions.

10. John C. Wilkinson (1980) argues that the change since the early 1970s from falaj to wells for irrigation marks a shift from communal to private ownership and practices. The problem with Wilkinson's conclusion is that in Oman wells have long been used to irrigate lands that were not connected to the underground canal system: rather than being pumped, the water was pulled by animals.


12. Although my research focuses on Bahla, this system of water distribution from canals is similar in other towns of Oman as well as in other areas of the Middle East. For an analysis of distribution in Morocco, for example, see Hammoudi 1985; for Tunisia, see Attia 1985.

13. Other units of water-time division in Bahla are: Ba'ada (twelve hours or twenty-four åthår), Rabija (three hours or six åthår), Qama (seven and a half minutes or one-quarter åthår), and Daqqa (one minute). A twenty-four-hour day, therefore, has forty-eight åthår. Individuals can own units of time as small as a quarter of one minute, and there is no limit to the amount of time an individual can own, although water-time, like all property, must be divided upon death.

14. Most ethnographic studies on water focus on the relationship between social structure and water rights. For a review of some of this literature, see Mabry 1996.

15. In his 1978 article on Bahla, Fredrik Barth argued that produce from Bahla, such as dates, cannot be sold for profit in Bahla. While it is possible that this ethic was practiced in the late 1970s, all those that I asked claimed that there were never restrictions on selling produce from Bahla in Bahla. If it were the case that individuals could not make a profit on selling dates in the town, perhaps one could make the argument that one should not purchase or rent water-time for irrigating the date palms that would then be sold. See Barth 1978. On Islamic water law, see n. 11.

References

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