OMAN – THE ISLAMIC DEMOCRATIC TRADITION

Hussein Ghubash

Translated from French by Mary Turton

Oman – The Islamic Democratic Tradition

Oman is the inheritor of a unique political tradition, the *imāma* (imamate), and has a special place in the Arab Islamic world. From the eighth century and for more than a thousand years, the story of Oman was essentially a story of an original, minority, movement, the *Ibāḍi*. This long period was marked by the search for a just *imāma* through the *Ibāḍi* model of the Islamic State.

The *imāma* system was based on two principles: the free election of the *imām* leader and the rigorous application of *shūrā* (consultation). Thus, the *imāma* system, through its rich experience, has provided us with the only example of an Arab-Islamic democracy.

Hussein Ghubash's well-researched book takes the reader on a historical voyage through geography, politics and culture of the region, from the sixteenth century to the present day. Oman has long-standing ties with East Africa as well as Europe; the first contact between Oman and European imperialist powers took place at the dawn of the 1500s with the arrival of the Portuguese, eventually followed by the Dutch, French and British.

Persuasive, thorough and drawing on Western as well as Islamic political theory, this book analyses the different historical and geopolitical roles of this strategic country. Thanks to its millennial tradition, Oman enjoys a solid national culture and stable socio-political situation.

Dr Ghubash is the author of several books and the U.A.E. ambassador to UNESCO. He holds a PhD in political science from Nanterre University, Paris X.

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Transcription system according to the Arabic alphabetical order

a	أ	ḍ	ض
b	ب	ṭ	ط
t	ت	dh	ظ
th	ث	ʿ[ʿain]	ع
j	ج	gh	غ
ḥ	ح	f	ف
kh	خ	q	ق
d	د	k	ك
d̲	ذ	l	ل
r	ر	m	م
z	ز	n	ن
s	س	h	ه
sh	ش	w	و
ṣ	ص	y	ي
		ʾ[hamzah]	ء

Notes

Arabic long vowels: *ā*, *ū*, *ī*.

The *tā' marbūṭa* has been transcribed by the letter '*t*', but only in the annex.

Most common words such as Qur'ān, Sunna, Sultanate etc., have been kept in their Europeanised form, and sometimes anglicised. The same applies to the names of some recognised persons, towns or countries, like Muscat, Abu-Dhabi, Bahrein, etc.

The *ʿain*, and the *hamzah*, they took the form of an accent: ʿ(= ʿain) and ʾ(= *hamzah*).

Ibn (*bin* or *ben*) means 'son of'.

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Introduction

The history and culture of Oman (*'Umān*) have a number of original features and are very often misunderstood. From the second century of the Hegira (AD eighth century) and for a span of more than a thousand years, it was essentially the story of an original movement stemming from a minority Islamic doctrine, the *Ibāḍi* (Ibadhite) movement. This long period was marked by the search for a just and efficient *imāma* (imamate) through the *Ibāḍi* model of the Islamic State.

Very early on, the Ibadhite movement identified its doctrine and ideals. Having upheld the principles of the *shūrā* (consultation) and the free election of the *imām* – the principle of *al-ijmāʿ wal-taʿāqd*, 'consensus and contract' – this movement could see itself as the true heir of the system of the Rashidi caliphs (AH 11–40/ AD 632–661) with special reference to the period of Abū Bakr and 'Umar ibn al-khaṭṭāb.

For the *Ibāḍis*, the Rashidi State represented the ideal and exemplary period of the Islamic State after the death of the Prophet Mohammed. For them, as for others, it was the sole point of reference for Islam and the Ibadhite movement derived its vision, legitimacy, principles and the constitutional laws for establishing an ideal Islamic state and society from it, through the creation of the *imāma* system. So, from the first *imāma*, that of al-Jalanda bin Masʿūd (AH 135/AD 751), Omani history and culture rested on three fundamental and unchanging principles.

The first principle established the system of authority, or the *imāma* system; this was built on *al-ijmāʿ wal-taʿāqd* (consensus and contract) and on the principle of the free election of the *imām*, and was itself based on the principle of *shūrā* (consultation). This first set of principles was to form the fundamental basis of the 'Omani democracy', an ethically and spiritually inspired system, which can be more accurately called 'Omani Islamic democracy'.

The second principle is identified with the actual concept of the homeland: *al-waṭan*. The removal of the Ibadhite movement and its *'ulamā'* (religious scholars) from Basra to Oman, and the transfer of part of the Islamic intellectual centre in Mesopotamia towards the end of the first century AH, rendered Oman the '*spiritual home*' (*al-waṭan al-rūḥi)* of the *Ibāḍis* and a place of refuge for Muslim Arabs fleeing the oppression of the Abbassid authorities. In other words, the concept of a homeland took shape at an early stage among the Omanis.

The third principle, that of independence and sovereignty, became a reality with the separation of Oman, first from the Umayyad state and then from the Abbassid state in the latter half of the second century of the Hegira.

These three principles, applied and practised over twelve centuries, forged Omani history and culture, and were instrumental in moulding the psychological component of the Omani character. Oman was distinguished too by its written history. At a very early stage, Omani historians took the initiative of chronicling the events and achievements of their homeland in the service of the ideals and principles characteristic of the country and of 'Omani democracy': *shūrā*, the *imāma*, sovereignty.

Islamic democracy would thus constitute one of the mainstays of Omani history and distinguish the political culture of the country. So an in-depth treatment of this question implies reflecting on the concept of democracy itself.

Democracy and *shūrā*

Democracy is a human and cultural value. However, when the question of democracy is raised, the model that most often springs to mind is western parliamentary democracy. A democracy that, through its constitutions and modern institutions, guarantees civic and political liberties and, especially, personal freedom.

This concept of democracy usually harks back to a political philosophy peculiar to the modern western state. The question then arises whether, outside the strict framework of modern political theory, there exists a democracy of a different order, a democracy that differs from the western model. Are there other societies or human experiences that have satisfied their demands for justice, equality and law within a democratic framework of their own?

Perhaps no other phenomenon has required so much effort to determine its nature and identity as democracy. In political theory, it has been identified essentially with a set of processes aimed at achieving political, social and economic justice and with an elective parliamentary regime that guarantees the rights of the citizen through direct or indirect participation in the election (demand for representativeness), while preserving the common good of the nation. It has been defined theoretically in this same process as 'government of the people, by the people and for the people'. Still others have seen democracy as the rule of the majority over the minority, although this simplistic definition has been firmly refuted, for it is undeniably the case that the majority of the people never rules the minority, even in modern democratic systems. In this connection, Jean-Jacques Rousseau notes 'Taking the term in its strictest sense, a true democracy has never existed and will never exist. It is contrary to the natural order that the large number should govern and the small number be governed.'[1]

But in our opinion, the most appropriate definition is that of Alexis de Tocqueville: 'According to the true meaning of the words, [democracy consists in]: a government in which the people plays a part, whether larger or smaller'. And he specifies 'Its meaning is intimately linked with the idea of political liberty', while asserting that 'liberty is not what peoples whose social status is

democratic chiefly and constantly desire. What they love with an undying love is equality'.[2]

Moreover, if we consider democracy to be a set of laws established in line with a country's particular culture, traditions and values, we may advance the idea that this is the essence of democracy, of whatever kind. Montesquieu observes in this regard:

> In general, law is human reason, insofar as it governs all the peoples of the earth; and the political and civil laws of each nation must be just particular cases to which that human reason has been applied. They must be so peculiar to the people for whom they were formed that it would be a great stroke of luck if those of one nation could suit another.[3]

If each society has its own special character, its traditions, convictions, values and a culture of its own, that means that each society also possesses its own vision of what it needs if it is to achieve fulfilment through the justice, equality and security of its members. Hence we may infer, in the case that concerns us here, that Arab and Muslim societies – each in its own way and according to its historical and cultural characteristics – have been able, even forced by circumstances, to secrete and construct their own democracy.

In the final analysis, and if we distance ourselves from the current strictly legal definition, Western democracy does not necessarily provide an exemplary alternative to the way other societies function. That does not, of course, mean that we should not profit as far as possible from the positive and negative features of Western experience – insofar as they are relevant to each country – since different cultures and experience are the heritage of all mankind.

But does not democracy, by its very nature, require a secular system of government? And is not the secular a *sine qua non* of the sovereignty of the people, of their power and their freedom? The concept of the secular is not univocal. In the field of politics it refers in particular to the separation of the temporal from the spiritual, of Church and State. A secular power structure, then, presupposes chiefly: first, that the state's legislative sources are not based on divine law but on temporal (positive) law, and second, following on from this, that no religious institution is able to influence the management of the state.

In this form, the concept of secularism emerged only late in western Europe, where, every nation royalty (sometimes said to be by divine right) exercised direct control over the Church, until the French Revolution made secularism (religious neutrality) one of the foundations of citizenship and then secularised power by first separating Church and State.

Meanwhile, in this modern Western world, religious and spiritual values have yielded pride of place to reason 'natural law' and man's material development. By thus subjecting human relationships to reason, man has achieved sovereignty and became 'master' of his destiny. For him, humanity and the world are no more than a historical projection.[4]

Secularism is the product of the history and culture of Christian Europe. If secularism was a pre-condition for the advent of European democracy, it was not

necessarily so for Arab-Islamic 'democracy' and in any case it was certainly not so for the 'Omani democracy' that we are discussing here. If the course of Islamic history has not been the same as that of Europe, it must also be recognised that the role of Islam has not been defined institutionally in the same way as Christianity, which has been so to speak embodied in the Church and its clergy. Islam has never, strictly speaking, known priestly power. That is why the question of secularism has never arisen in Muslim culture. And yet the question of the separation of powers is still of paramount importance in an Islamic State.

So in Islam, the State is not theocratic. The position of caliph has never been seen as divine and according to the *sunna*, the caliph must be freely elected by the community, the people. The relationship between the caliph and the people is defined and determined by a contract (*'aqd*) characterised by allegiance (*bay'a*). The caliph thus derives his legitimacy from the people, and those who grant legitimacy can also withdraw it. The *umma*, or community, is the source of legitimate power in Islam.

Furthermore, the delegation of power in Islam is plainly set out: 'O believers, obey Allah and obey the Apostle and those in authority among you.'[5] But if believers must obey those in authority, they in turn must above all, consult the community, the *umma*. 'So . . . consult them in the conduct of affairs.'[6] The Koranic precept gives legitimacy to the collective power of the *umma*, the community, and so to its sovereignty and its freedom.

The precept: 'Obey those in authority among you' is always subject to the proviso: if they govern you in accordance with the law. The 'virtue of justice', *al-'adāla*, is one of the fundamental requirements of the caliph. In this respect, the exercise of legitimate power is founded on 'justice' (*'adl*), regarded as the observance of the Koranic precepts.[7]

Rashid Rida observes that power to legislate exists in Islam; this power has been sanctioned by God, entrusted to the community and is exercised, subject to consultation, by all those who have won recognition for their learning, their judgment and their ascendancy. Power, in fact, belongs to the community, since, on any matter on which it is possible to consult the community and on which it adopts a unanimous stand, its decisions are binding.[8]

According to 'Abduh, Islam has no other authority but the power to enjoin good and forbid evil. Yet that power is delegated by God to every Muslim.[9] For every man is God's caliph on earth. Addressing his Emissary, God in fact said: 'We have sent you forth in truth, as a bearer of good news and a warner'.[10]

The famous *khutba* (speech) delivered by Abū Bakr after he was proclaimed caliph is highly significant from this point of view: 'Now I have been placed over you to govern you. I am not the best man among you. If I follow the straight path, assist me; if I wander, show me the right way again.'[11]

Islamic political theory definitively precludes any form of theocracy, whether embodied in a clerical party or in a sovereign by divine right. The temporal, relative and contractual nature of power is, on the other hand, clearly set out. Although temporal, it is not necessarily secular; on the contrary, it is accountable – in principle – to a community of believers. It is this very accountability to a

people defined by religious affiliation that can open the way to a democratic system. It is indeed the basis of democracy.

This being the case, the question is whether religion is able to make the citizen-believer sufficiently aware of his responsibilities to produce genuine political life and democracy. To this question Islamic political theory and the experience of the Omani Islamic democracy have given an affirmative answer. Omani democracy really did constitute a living embodiment of Islamic democracy.

Aside from the important part played by the principles of *shūrā* (consultation) and *ijmā'* (consensus) in the social harmony and unity of the people, the practice of consultation in itself affirms the citizen's place and acknowledges his true value, as well as that of his representative, the *imām*. Both thus assume responsibility and human dignity: two key concepts for the unity and stability of the *umma*.

The presence and role of Islam in society are of the utmost importance, not only for keeping a watchful eye on the power of the state, but also as the most important source of social and moral values.[12] Indeed, in Islam and contrary to the habitual outlook of western thought, the notion of a free man will appear as a legal, rather than a metaphysical concept, based primarily on a very strong and unwavering sense of the absolute equality of rights between all the members of the Muslim community. All believers are equal before the law because they are brothers.[13]

Virtue, justice, equality, consultation and consensus thus form the basis of Islam. A people that entertains these values, as an ideal cannot be a people without sovereignty, freedom and democratic aspirations. Are not the principles of justice and equality the characteristics and foundation of democracy? Furthermore, social equality, which underpins the message of Islam, is an essential basis for political equality. 'And if you judge between people, judge justly'.[14]

The firm belief remains that religiously inspired authority is incompatible with democracy. Can democracy, as generally understood, be identified with Islamic principles, in particular the *shūrā*? On this point, the Islamic religion provides several answers, including the verse: 'Their affair being a counsel among themselves'.[15]

It is known that the Prophet Mohammed himself set great store by rigorous application of the *shūrā* principle. Rashid Rida notes that the Prophet made the principle of consultation the legal basis for the general public interest.[16] In the words of the Prophet: 'Neither God nor I have need of it; God gave it as a mercy to my community. He among them who takes counsel shall not lack wisdom, and he who abandons it shall not lack darkness'.[17]

Recourse to consultation is therefore a necessity for the development of the *umma*, a pre-condition if society is to achieve wisdom. It is also a guarantee of the values of justice and equality. And it is above all an essential requirement for the proper functioning of political power in Islam. That is why the *shūrā* is both a mercy and a necessity in order for men to live in peace and dignity.

Furthermore, the Prophet had told the Muslims 'You are the best judges of the affairs of your temporal life [here below].'[18] We may point too to the famous statement he made to Abū Bakr and 'Umar: 'If you unite concerning a certain

matter, I shall not go against you.'[19] The essence of these remarks is that the Prophet himself accepts the opinion of the majority. 'I am but a man like you'.[20]

What wisdom inspired the Prophet to leave the management of the *shūrā* to the *umma* without laying down any rules? According to Rashid Rida, the *shūrā* system has to evolve so as to adapt to the development of the *umma* in its various social aspects and general interests. Still according to Rida, if the Prophet had laid down permanent rules, the Muslims would have applied them even against the general interest.[21]

In the Islamic context, from the end of the Rashidun caliphate and the beginning of the Umayyad state, the implementation of the principles of consensus and contract (*ijmāʿ wal-taʿaqd*) was in fact suspended. And later, in certain periods of Islamic history, the Arab caliphs themselves would be appointed by the Ottoman military (Turks). The *Ibāḍis* of Oman, on the other hand, continued to apply these principles within the *imāma*, that is to say the state, for all matters from as early as the AH second century (AD eighth century). In other words, the practice lasted for twelve centuries in Ibadhite Oman, with interruptions due to circumstances that we shall be examining in this book.

Now, if we accept that full application of the principles of consultation and free election of the leader of the *umma* – consensus and contract – is proof of democracy, the *Ibāḍi imāma* of Oman may be held to be the longest democratic experience in the history of mankind, and is the more noteworthy in that, for the Omanis, this experience has served as an ideal, even a myth, for the greater part of their history, to the point of being identified with that history.

In short, it can be argued that the essential difference between East and West is, in fact, cultural and comes down primarily to a question of ethics. We know that, in the West, man is now deemed to find fulfilment by asserting his individuality, by his actions and by achieving personal happiness. This is supposed to guarantee modern democracy. In the East, self-fulfilment is conceived only through realisation of the aims and demands of the community or membership group.[22]

As a result of this view, there is now virtual consensus that the question is not whether Western democracy can be applied in Muslim-Arab countries, but rather, which democratic forms are best suited to those societies and what is the fundamental purpose of democracy. Democracy should not be restricted to an electoral system beginning and ending with purely political boundaries without engaging man in his essence and soul. In other words, democracy should also be ethical. If we study its history closely, the autonomous Omani model seems to pre-figure that form of democracy.

However, before describing the development of the Omani experience in broad outline, we must point out that it is not the intention of this work to limit its account of the *Ibāḍi imāma* system to a comparison with 'Western democracy'. Moreover, the *Ibāḍi imāma* does not conform to the same criteria and requirements as its Greek and Roman predecessors and the Western systems that came after them. Any such attempt at comparison would be as demeaning as it would be anachronistic. For it is precisely due to its originality in its day that the *Ibāḍi* experience is of value. In order to understand this, it is preferable to resituate the

'founding act' of Omani spiritual democracy in the Islamic context which saw the emergence of that democracy and inspired its expansion.

Omani Islamic democracy

From its inception, Omani democracy set out to obey as faithfully as possible the values of a moderate, tolerant Islam and the noble Arab traditions. To that end it was structured in the framework of the *imāma* around seven basic pillars:

- the principle *of al-ijmāʿ wal-taʿāqd* (consensus and contract) and *al-shūrā wal-bayʿa* (consultation and allegiance),
- the principle of the free election of the *imām*,
- *al-dustūr*, the constitution,
- *al-majlis*, the institution of the *imāma*,
- the principle of the independence of the law and of equality before the law,
- the law of *zakāt* (legal alms),
- the suppression of the army in time of peace.

Alongside these fundamentals are other basic elements: for example, the tribal component of Omani society as a political institution and a political society; this institution has played a positive role in supporting the *imāma* system and ensuring its continuity. Mention should also be made of the administrative and legislative self-determination (ahead of its time) of the regions, which submitted to the central government of the *imāma* only as a last resort or in affairs that concerned the whole country. This set of principles and factors has gradually given shape to a 'general will' in the culture and values of Omani society, helping to define the actual framework of the political culture of the nation.

In the management of affairs of state and of society, the *imāma* system is based on implementation of the *shūrā* principle, which constitutes a continuing and mandatory law. This principle of justice and equality reflects the spirit of political power in Islam; it aims at the unification of the nation and of society through effective participation by the citizens. It also aims to realise the principle of consensus.

Finally, the *imāma* system is based on the free election of the *imām*. And if the constitution does not stipulate that the *imām* must belong to the *ʾulamāʾ*, although that is preferable, it does require him to be a man of integrity, religiously and morally upright and virtuous, regardless of the colour of his skin or of the tribe and the family or society to which he belongs. These are the conditions of *al-bayʿa* (allegiance). The *bayʿa* represents *al-ʿaqd*, the written contract between the *imām* and the *umma* presented by the *ʾulamāʾ*, *ahl al-ḥall wal-ʾaqd*, 'those who can make and break'. The *bayʿa* is thus a constitutional and contractual text, mandatory for the *imām* and bearer of the general will of the *umma*.

The Ibadhite constitution is the first of its kind in the Arab and Islamic world, indeed, one of the first in the world. The first foundations of this constitution were laid down in the second half of the AH first century (AD seventh century). It is

thought to have been drafted, and then added to in the AH fifth and sixth centuries and it provided a general framework for the *imāma* and its institutions. It enabled them, in the course of time, to settle how they should function. And, despite its simplicity, it met the needs of society, the *imāma* and the nation. It has become the true expression of the spirit of Omani Islamic democracy.

The *majlis* (councils) of the *imāma* were also the first of their kind to be established in the Arab and Islamic world, as early as the second half of the first century AH. They consisted of a *majlis* of the *ʾulamāʾ* (senate), which was also called the supreme council, then *al-majlis al-ʾām* (general council) and traditional local *majlis* in the regions and towns. Within these institutions, the chief role belonged to the *ʾulamāʾ*, known in history by the name of *ahl al-ḥall wal ʾaqd* (those who can make and break), who formed a permanent assembly with legislative powers in the country. It is worth pointing out that this group played a pioneering role in the first Islamic state, that of the caliphate (AH 11–40 / AD 632–661). Their activity was later paralysed by the advent of the Umayyad, and then the Abbassid states. But in Oman, this group which assumed responsibility for the maintenance and extension of the *imāma*, continued to play a vital role for almost twelve centuries. These *ʾulamāʾ* were the leaders of society and its conscience.

So we shall give pride of place in this account of Omani institutions, not to their juridical or constitutional nature, but to the way they function and the various roles they have assumed. Despite the absence of detailed and precise constitutional frameworks to regulate them, these institutions have proved to be consistent, durable and effective. Over a period of time they have created a model of communal life and have also set out the conditions necessary for political participation in power. They have guaranteed harmony, too, between the leaders and the population. They have not only ensured the legitimacy of the *imām* and the continuity of the *imāma*, they have also, by their very existence and function, stood as one of the foundations of Omani democracy.

The *imāma* system is founded equally, it must be said, on the tribal component of Omani society. It is important to draw attention to the fact that this tribal institution, which intellectuals – and more particularly Arab intellectuals – have often failed to understand, is the prime political institution (the one most inspired by, and attached to liberty). That, of course, is why it has welcomed the principles of consensus, contract, *shūrā* and the free election of the *imām* and has found them satisfactory. It is also the source of the *ʾurfs* (common law). And this tribal institution has likewise been seen to be the repository of democratic values that are practiced even in the most mundane affairs of everyday life.

It is important to stress this, for the tribal framework is the place where the characteristics of political society first find expression; it is at the tribal stage that all, or almost all individuals start to take part in consultation and collective decision-making in matters that concern them. This is in harmony with the logic of *Ibāḍi* thought, which requires centralisation only in specific circumstances. But it should also be pointed out that when there is a lack of tribal balance in the *imāma*, the tribe then generates a corporate spirit that can lead to the fall of the *imāma* itself.

As for the *imāma* system, which represented a kind of continuous expression of the caliphate State, it offered an ideal of the Islamic State. The *sharī'a* (legal code based on the *shar'*, 'revealed law')[23] was the main source of its legislation; however the rigorous application of the principles of consensus and contract had ensured the separation of legislative and executive powers, thanks to the *'ulamā'* which, throughout history, had formed a permanent legislative assembly in the state.

To conclude this introductory account of Omani democracy, we must emphasize that the political responsibility of the individual and his community in the *imāma* system is a significant factor. For, the almost total submission of the individual to his community does not imply that he enjoys no status as a citizen and a free man. Quite the contrary, this submission to the supreme ideal represents an affirmation of his citizenship and individuality as a quite separate person in a society that is held to be completed only through his person. By thus submitting himself, a man can even attain a higher form of humanity, according to this logic. By the same token, this submission does not imply the negation of individual freedom but rather its affirmation, since individual freedom can only be achieved here by the achievement of collective freedom.

Any attack on such an individual-citizen is an attack on his community, on his society itself. In his voluntary renunciation for the good of the community, the citizen finds a kind of personal honour. The more he gives of himself, the more he is fulfilled. These objectively democratic values evolved by Omani society cannot be understood by anyone unaware of their interaction with the social, moral, cultural and even spiritual values stirring deep in different members of the social corpus.

So democracy came into Oman with the *Ibāḍi* doctrine, in other words, with religion. This form of democracy, the first of its kind, is embodied in the *imāma* system – moderate, constitutional, capable, through the constitution – of ensuring the continuation of democracy and seeing it gradually take root in Omani culture. And this form of democracy has, in its turn, ensured the continuity of the *imāma* over a span of twelve centuries, although not without interruptions.

Oman and the challenges of her modern history

Geography often determines politics and sets its mark on history. Throughout ancient and modern history, Oman's strategic situation has imposed different historical roles, at times even burdens, on its population. And if, from Antiquity, the Omanis have played a fundamental role as intermediaries between the civilisations of Mesopotamia, Asia and Africa, during the colonial period, Oman became one of the most coveted countries, and the Omanis had to confront the expansions and challenges of the imperialists.

At the dawn of the sixteenth century, the end of a period of decay extending over almost four centuries and marked by the absence of a unified *imāma*, the first contact between Oman and the European imperialist powers took place with the arrival of the Portuguese in the Gulf region. The Portuguese were motivated, by their own admission, by the spirit of the Crusades and the idea of a 'reconquest' of the East, and

they saw in Oman, because of its favourable geographic situation, the ideal fulcrum for their domination of the Gulf and their strategy directed towards the East. In relation to Oman, an Arab Islamic country, the politico-religious discourse of the Portuguese justified savage military action and a century and a half of occupation.

For its part, the Ibadhite movement, still inspired by the ongoing myth of constructing an ideal *imāma* for the Islamic State, would struggle for centuries to regain its cohesion. With remarkable perseverance, it managed to maintain the practice of the election of *imām*s in the interior of the country and finally, at the beginning of the seventeenth century, its efforts were crowned with the installation of the Yaʿrūbi *imāma* (1624–1741) to rule over the whole country and to put an end to the Portuguese occupation, liberate the region of East Africa and found the Omani–African State.

From the beginning of the seventeenth century, several waves of colonialists, Dutch, French and English, succeeded each other in the Gulf region. This military and politico-economic expansion was inspired by a long-term strategy. It rested on a colonialist ideology that saw the European presence not just as beneficial and necessary for the colonial powers, but as a civilising mission *vis-à-vis* the occupied peoples. This ideology did not merely fail to recognise the difference, the autonomous civilisation and the independence of those peoples, it categorically denied them.

As for the English, who had only recently achieved their own national identity, they were not in a position to identify the concept and demand of 'other' peoples' independence, still less to recognise and respect their values. For them, as for the other colonial powers, the peoples of the Gulf, like other emerging countries, were seen primarily as backward and so deserving only to be dominated.

From the mid-eighteenth century, Oman was to live through a period of decisive socio-political change: the transition from the *imāma* system to that of the sultanate. While this change in the Omani regime and in the internal political context was going on and a new national and cultural identity was taking shape, Oman had to suffer the backlash from the colonial conflicts between France and England. Thus the signing of the treaty of 1798, the first agreement between an Arab country and Great Britain, was one of the results of Napoleon Bonaparte's expedition to Egypt.

So the beginning of the nineteenth century proved decisive for British strategy. Great Britain gained almost complete control of the shipping lanes of the Indian Ocean and the Gulf. She was thus able to establish her colonial domination over the ports of India and a large part of eastern Asia, and to put an end to the Omani-African State. With all these developments, Oman was to enter into a period of marked decline.

Meanwhile, the first British strategic equation was becoming clear: in order to keep hold of India and eastern Asia, it was essential to lay hands on the Gulf, the strategic access route. It was only with the discovery of oil at the beginning of the twentieth century that the Gulf took priority over the other colonial stakes.

The Ibadhite movement was the only patriotic force able to face up to this increasing ascendancy. It had become almost standard that whenever those in

power reached an impasse, the general will of the Omanis found expression in regrouping around the Ibadhite movement, which offered a steadfast historical alternative. Serious attempts to revive the country were made along those lines, notably the revolution of ʿAzzān (1869–1871) and later, al-Kharūsi's long revolution (1913–1920).

In order to preserve her hegemony, Great Britain put an end to the first attempt and contained the second with the signature of the treaty of al-Sīb (1920), by which the country was divided into two parts: the '*imāma*' of Oman' in the interior and the 'sultanate of Muscat' on the coast. Although the unity of a 'state', the *imāma*, had been recognised, this treaty nevertheless tended to isolate it and led in time to its disappearance.

If the question of democracy is one of the essential aspects of this book, it is not the only one to claim our attention. We shall attach particular importance to analysing and assessing the fertile soil of this democracy, namely the Omani civilisation, the *Ibāḍi* civilisation, taking time to study the roots and foundations of *Ibāḍi* thought. This research will focus, too, on the experience and achievements of the Ibadhite movement – the *imāma*s – on its evolution, the challenges and trials it has encountered, the causes of its unusual longevity as well as of its ultimate failure in our own day, under the pressure of British colonialism.

Given that Omani history is, for the most part, the history of the Ibadhite movement, in the context of the *imāma*, we shall have to study and portray Omani political history as a whole, so as to trace the course of the movement through the various historical stages.

It must ultimately be acknowledged that, although much has been written about Oman, most of it has been content to deal with certain periods or special aspects of Omani history, for example, the Ibadhite movement alone, or the history of the sultanate, or, again, the history of Oman and Great Britain and so on. Moreover many of these works have been written by colonial historians like Lorimer, Kelly and others, and start from a colonial perspective. Without disregarding their contributions, we have tried to present another point of view, more objective and more scientific.

We would point out, while on that subject, that Arab historians, and more especially those who have dealt with Islamic history, have failed, whether from ignorance or by design, to mention and still more to emphasise the importance of the *Ibāḍi* experience in Oman. So it will be for us to insist, among other things, on the fact that this pioneering experience offers a rare heritage to Islamic thought and culture.

The specific nature of this book and the demands of objectivity and method have led us to have recourse to various sources, which have mostly not been much used or even known; among them French and English diplomatic archives, most of which are used for the first time here.

The literary contribution of the Ibadhite movement has until recently been unrecognised, by both Arab and foreign specialists; however it appears today that the Ibadhite movement was one of the richest and most fertile in Islam in the literature of ideas, whether in the field of legislation and jurisprudence, in matters

concerning the history of the caliphate and the schools and groups issuing from it, or, again, by its written testimony to the historical process of the *imāma* in Oman and the history of Ibadhism in certain Arab regions. This is all attributable in the first place to the contribution of the Omani *'ulamā'* (scholars).

Finally, this study will be chiefly concerned with the modern political history of Oman, from the beginning of the sixteenth century to the end of the 1960s (the advent of Sultan Qābūs in 1970). It will develop the political dimension in the framework of international relations and, more precisely of Franco-British antagonism, while trying to clarify both Anglo-Omani and Franco-Omani relations.

Last of all, we would remind readers that the chief aim of this work on Oman is to propound an in-depth study of the Islamic experience in Oman, both as a system of power and as an Arab-Islamic democratic heritage. It is true that the *Ibāḍi* position, notably on the question – which as we shall see is fundamental – of the arbitration of Ṣiffīn (AH 37/AD 657) and the 'exit' of the Khārijites, differs from that of other schools, the Sunnis and the Shi'ites. These few divergences of opinion and doctrine, however, must not make us forget that the path traced by the Ibadhism of Oman is an integral part of Islamic history. The *Ibāḍi* experience in Oman, original and pioneering as it is, draws its very inspiration from Islam, and as such concerns every Muslim. More than that, it is an original contribution to the history of the democratic ideal and its progress.