"Tribal Modern": National Identity and Belonging in the Sultanate of Oman

The Omani nation represents one of the youngest populations worldwide. Almost two thirds of the society are younger than thirty years, born and brought up in the (post-)modernisation era from 1970 onwards. Sultan Quaboos bin Said, the “father” of this young nation, established the widely recognised political stability of the country. Furthermore, he aims for the unification of the nation under the umbrella of one Omani national identity.

Yet, this is challenged by the still effective tribal structures and the variety of social groups of different ethnic and geographic origins. Social unrest has been simmering since 2011 and popular frustrations are calling into question the politics and the social contract of the current regime. Furthermore, entangled realities and growing contradictions of traditional and modern lifestyles defy the current system. Finally, social conservatism is rising amongst the local population to distinguish itself more decisively from the high number non-nationals. The aspirations for a national identity (beyond the still effective “tribal fabric” and Arabness) are also spurred by concerns about cultural marginalisation and economic competition between nationals and foreigners.

These confrontations within cultural pluralism and the aspirations of the younger generation of Omanis will be discussed and analysed against the background of the modernisation process and the rising topics of international labour and the contemporary migration regime in the Gulf.

Veronika Cummings is a human geographer, specialised in critical social and cultural urban geography. Before her appointment as a professor at the University of Mainz in 2017, she was a Senior Research Fellow at the Middle East Institute at the National University of Singapore from 2015-2017. Before that, she was working as a Visiting Assistant Professor at the German University of Technology in Muscat (Oman), and a postdoctoral researcher at the working group of cultural geography at RWTH Aachen University (Germany). She received her PhD at the Faculty of Philosophy at the University of Passau (Germany) in 2009 for her research on the production of social and spatial inequalities in Salvador da Bahia (Brazil). She graduated in Geography, Sociology and Botany at the University of Würzburg (Germany) in 2003, and holds a bachelor degree of the Université de Caen (Normandie, France).

Her current research covers social, cultural and political aspects of international migration, trans-locality, and contemporary cosmopolitanism. She is particularly interested in the way young nations like Singapore and the Arab Gulf States, especially the Sultanate of Oman, are dealing with diversity, national identity, and globalisation.

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