

Circles of Knowledge Religious Learning, Pious Past, and Alternative Sociality AISHA, A STUDENT AT A TEACHER'S TRAINING COLLEGE, first mentioned the summer classes a week before they began. Aisha's presumption of holding classes in the schools, although in line with a general emphasis on the pursuit of knowledge in Oman, seemed to have raised an institutional question of who would be willing to take "responsibility," supposedly, for the "safety" and, more likely, the content of the girls' and women's discussions. Having young women leave the town walls regularly for two hours made too many people nervous. It was probably better, I suggested to Aisha, trying to lessen the blow, since it would be harder for the girls to reach the schools. At least this way, the girls could walk to the class. Aisha's determination to hold the classes in a formal setting, ideally in the school building and by EBSCOhost – printed on 12/20/2022 1:00 AM via SULTAN QABOOS UNIV. All use subject to <https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use> 66 necessity in the sablas, and her refusal to host them in someone's house is an indication of her self-conscious intention to break with the social roles and places usually reserved for unmarried, local young women and girls. Aisha and her colleagues also assumed that if they held their classes in their homes, people, including the girls themselves, would not take their intellectual goals seriously, not to mention that they might be interrupted by young siblings, parents, grandparents, or neighbors. The conceptualization of a separate space for their intellectual endeavors suggested an idea of institutional education as necessary to learning. As part of a complex next to the library, the meeting room seemed a good place to hold the classes. A struggle for space was not limited to the case of the class. Before the summer classes, the library next to the sabla opened for the town. Besides private collections and the school libraries, it was the only library in town. It was more convenient than the school libraries, however, because it was set within the walls and open to everyone. The library was a tiny room covered in bookshelves and filled with the usual list of Ministry of National Heritage published Omani history books, collections of hadith, law manuals, biographies of the Prophet and his companions, dictionaries, literature and poetry, children's books, school textbooks, and some magazines, as well as cassettes and video tapes of sermons. There were also folders with legal opinions (fatawa) of Shaykh Ahmed al-Khalili, the leading religious scholar (nationally sanctioned through his position as Grand Mufti), and research projects by local students on Bahlawi scholars and Omani history. In the middle of the room was a plastic table and chairs where the visitors to the library could write and read as they did at school. The library was open for women three hours a week on Friday mornings, which, Aisha said, was not enough time for all the women and girls who wanted to use it. Sometimes the tiny library got so full on Friday mornings that everyone had to stand, holding books up in front of them. Aisha explained that she had written a letter to the organizers of the library asking that they provide a second time for women, but this request was also denied. This time, it seemed that her demand that more time be set aside for women to use the library was less a question of who would take responsibility for the girls, and more a problem that Aisha was transgressing boundaries expected of young women.¹⁴ The Meetings Aisha held her classes three times a week: Saturdays for Qur'an, Mondays for hadith, and Wednesdays for Ibadi history, from 8:00 to 10:00 or 10:30 in the morning. Each Saturday, Monday, and Wednesday for two months, the group of approximately twenty-five girls met in front of the metal sabla door. Each morning, we shook hands and waited for Aisha's younger sister to

arrive with the key. I knew two of the girls from lower Bahla, where I lived, and recognized most of the others from the library: Aisha told me they were from her neighborhood. About fifteen of the girls wore black abayas over their dresses and black scarves covering their hair.¹⁵ The other ten girls wore colorfully patterned dresses and scarves. Five of the fifteen in black abayas also wore black socks, but no one's face was covered. Aisha and her sister both wore the black abayas, headscarves, and socks. The different styles of covering not only marked modesty, but the way in which the sabla was perceived, its place in town, and the girls' activities there. Some of the girls wore abayas any time they left their houses, others when they went to school or beyond the boundaries of their neighborhoods, and yet others wore abayas when going to particular places, such as the meeting room, for a talk or class. How the women related to the spaces they were passing and going to partially dictated their dress codes. Abayas come in many different styles, from the more fashionable to the more simple. All the young women and girls who wore abayas to the class wore the plain style, without sequins or sharp angles. To school, young women also wore overcoats in either black or muted tones, signaling a kind of professionalization that older women did not exhibit through their style of dress. None of the girls wore these overcoats to the summer class, indicating that this was not really school. The socks were particularly important for identifying the degree of covering that a woman might consider religiously recommended. Only young women wore socks, however, indicating their different approach and interpretations of Islam as well as their unwillingness to engage in agricultural work. Although some of the girls wore colorfully patterned dresses and headscarves, none wore the shorter knee-length dresses and colorful pants that are seen as the traditional dress of interior Oman. These were clothes that their grandmothers might wear. The changes in approach to dress and dress codes could be read as part of a shift in religious discourse

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All use subject to <https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use> 67 more generally, as I mentioned earlier: whereas older women, as women, necessarily wore headscarves, younger women instead wore particular emblems to index their religiosity.¹⁶ As religion took on a particular place in everyday life, headscarves became indexical of religiosity. In addition to the differences in approach to religion, there was also a mix of former-servant and free families, as well as girls from different economic backgrounds. When Aisha's sister would arrive with the key, she would open the metal door and we would enter, following Aisha and her colleague, Mawza, to the one corner of the room where there were plastic mats. The sabla was a large room with wall-to-wall carpet, divided in half by a low wall against which people could sit and still be within the same room together.¹⁷ There were two air conditioners and several ceiling fans. Sometimes Aisha would bring a tape recorder for us to listen to a Qur'anic recitation or a lecture from a famous scholar. Once in the room, she would put down the tape recorder, close the windows, and turn on the fans and air conditioners. The girls would sit in a semicircle with their backs to the long wall of the rectangular room and the low dividing wall. Aisha and Mawza would sit at one end of the semicircle, along the wall at the end of the room, and I would usually sit at the other side, farthest away from the two teachers. Occasionally, I would move to sit closer to Aisha and Mawza, since my own tape recorder would not always pick up their voices above the hum and whirr of the air conditioners and fans. Even though the teachers did not assign a seating arrangement, the girls tended to sit in the same

place every class, usually next to the girls with whom they had arrived. At the library the Friday before the classes began, I saw Aisha ask some of the girls whether they were going to attend the class. Her questioning had an air of pressure and it is possible that some of the girls sensed the moral burden of attending the class. In addition to expanding their religious knowledge, Aisha said, through summer study, the girls could improve their grades at school. In either case, because of an ethic of furthering their religious knowledge for its own sake or because they wanted to improve their grades at school, the girls would not be wasting their summer vacation if they attended. While Aisha put some pressure on the girls, I doubt that parents pressured their daughters to attend. I knew that the girls from lower Bahla were responsible for watching their younger siblings and I suspect this was the case with most of the other students. Parents tended to discourage their daughters from being away from home in the mornings when they did not have to be at school, especially since that was the time their mothers visited neighbors. The combination of self-motivation and peer pressure was evident in the girls' behavior in and attitude towards the class. Although by the end of the two hours, the girls would fidget and chat, they were, for the most part, very attentive and serious. Instead of devoting the entire two hours to one of the three topics (Qur'an, hadith, or Ibadi history) as they had planned, Aisha and Mawza usually spent the first hour on one of these and the second hour listening to taped lectures, watching videos, playing quiz games, or simply giving lectures. Sometimes, however, they would discuss two of the main themes in one class and then spend the next class on a video or lecture. There was not much general discussion, although occasionally Aisha and Mawza would open the class to asking questions about a particular issue from one of their discussions, lectures, or videos. On the one hand, these were most certainly "classes" where students learned from teachers who controlled the stream of discussion, who lectured, and who would sit at one end of the semicircle, against the wall at the end of the room. Arguing that the new state schools purposely worked to produce secular citizens, the young women insisted that religious knowledge must be pursued independently--and in the forms of "traditional" education--lest they forget or not learn what it means to be good Muslims and good Muslim women. The desire to pursue traditional education, however, was complicated by the fact that these women simultaneously admired and saw as unauthoritative older generations of Bahlawis. Similarly, although critical of state-school education, the structure of the study group and the pedagogic methods of the group drew heavily from the religious studies classes at the new state schools, and from the new education system in general. Indeed, the teachers derived and established their authority from pedagogic methods borrowed from the state schools: lectures, direct question-and-answer techniques, and high-involvement repetition strategies being three of these methods. Their experience of attending the state schools, therefore, conferred on the EBSCO Publishing : eBook Academic Collection (EBSCOhost) – printed on 12/20/2022 1:00 AM via SULTAN QABOOS UNIV AN: 327454 ; Mandana Limbert.; In the Time of Oil : Piety, Memory, and Social Life in an Omani Town Account: s6513814.main.ehost 60 Copyright 2010. Stanford University Press. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law. young teachers authority to hold such study groups and to demand respect for their religious knowledge in the first place. Perhaps most significantly, these women believed that they needed religious classes to learn

about Islam and Ibadism, suggesting a distinctive and shifting understanding of the process of cultivation of good personhood. While there is a long history in Ibadism and Islam in general that emphasizes the cultivation of good personhood and proper community through study, this emphasis on the necessity of formal classes is distinctively recent, and not simply the continuation of age-old Ibadi traditions. Indeed, the various schools and branches of Islam have historically emphasized different paths to proper piety, depending on particular notions of the origins of human goodness and the role of human reason in achieving piety. Many Bahlawis maintain that individuals are discreet, autonomous beings, born good (fira) and quite responsible for their actions and beliefs. Contemporary (as well as classic) Ibadi doctrine, while emphasizing that God is the creator of all human acts, is thus not absolutely predestinarian. Many Ibadis emphasize the individual capacity to reason ('aql) as paramount to the human achievement of goodness and proper Islam. The emphasis on individual reason means that while learning from others and texts and performing the acts of religious obligations ('ibdt) are critical for becoming and being a proper Muslim, individual and God-given capacity to choose and to reason, it is argued, confers on the individual the ability to distinguish good from bad. It also enables the individual to deduce from the Qur'an and hadith correct interpretations of such obligations when there are textual discrepancies.¹ This approach, it should be noted, is distinct from other theological and legal interpretations that suggest that humans learn deductive reasoning and must rely on literal readings of God's words and hadith, rather than on a possibly flawed human and individual ability to reason, in order to fulfill God's aims and expectations.² The difference between what are called rationalism and traditionalism is a classic distinction in Islamic theology and the subject of countless texts of Islamic scholarship. This distinction was evident in Bahla as many people insisted that humans, both men and women, are reasoning beings. Suffice it to say that to the extent that individuals are understood to require literal readings of the Qur'an in particular, they are considered inherently less capable of relying on their individual (and according to the rationalists, God-given) abilities to reason.³ At the same time, what constitutes a pious person in the Bahlawi and Ibadi context is hardly a fully autonomous individual who becomes fully pious simply out of his or her own conscious volition (or even reason). According to many Bahlawis, humans also inherit--through blood--qualities from their parents, they are potentially controlled and inhabited by spirits, and, most important here perhaps, their piety is not fully self-produced, willed, or reasoned. Learned and textually based theology or ritual is necessary for the fulfillment of becoming a good person.⁴ However, whether this learned piety can evolve from everyday interactions or must emanate from classes and individual study marked the difference between younger and older generations. The second process this chapter examines is the ways women and girls in these Bahla study groups were struggling with how to speak of themselves, as good humans as well as gendered and sexual beings. Although the women felt entitled to demand space outside their homes for their classes and were, in fact, encouraged to study by national and "religious" discourse that valued knowledge, much of the talk within the study groups revolved around limiting their own and other women's movements. In addition to direct question-and-answers, schoolteachers in Oman (in the state schools as well as in the summer classes) employed another method, encouraging students to engage in a topic; a method similar to Deborah Tannen's "high involvement repetition strategies" (Tannen 1989). Teachers would begin an

utterance, then slow down and raise their voices slightly before the end of the utterance. Slowing down and EBSCOhost – printed on 12/20/2022 1:00 AM via SULTAN QABOOS UNIV. All use subject to <https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use> 65 raising their voices would key the students into finishing the phrase. Some or all of the students would shout out the last words of the sentence in unison. This method was particularly effective after the students had heard the phrase or topic already. The students would have heard the phrase already either because they had read the chapter with the teacher in class before or because they had completed their homework. Homework usually consisted of copying out verses from the Qur'an or hadith reproduced in their textbooks and then answering a series of questions at the end of the section. Sometimes the teachers simply made a statement and then immediately repeated it, slowing down near the end so that the students could finish it. The students were expected to complete the sentence they just heard. These two methods of engaging the students in the class material--direct question-and-answer adjacency pairs and high involvement repetition strategies--were distinct from the modalities of teaching in the Qur'anic schools and more advanced study-circles in Bahla. In many ways, Aisha's study group was unlike the classrooms of the school year. The students were less formal with the teachers, there were no grades, they all sat together in a semicircle on the floor, and they only focused on religious education. At the same time, however, there were clear similarities both in terms of the style of instruction and the content of the lessons. The classes were divided into Qur'an, hadith, and Ibadi history as distinct categories of religious knowledge. Although the style of the classes both invoked the traditional approach of the study group and, in some ways, replicated the assumptions of the state schools, Aisha and her colleagues did make a claim as to where their allegiances stood and what their goals were for organizing these classes. It was clear that their goals were to rescue religious education and to make the students recognize that they could or should study Islam outside the confines of the new schools, and yet also outside their homes. A Question of Place Aisha held her classes in her neighborhood sabla or meeting room. Her neighborhood, like most in Bahla, was walled with close, mud houses, narrow alleys, and neighborhood gates (although by the late 1990s these gates were always open). This sabla was a cement room next to the new town library, in the courtyard just outside the entrance of one of the neighborhood gates. The courtyard stood at the edge of the neighborhood: it was not quite part of the old neighborhood and yet it was clearly attached. The courtyard, housing the new library and the meeting room, hinted at a separation between a space of more official gatherings and the daily gatherings of men and women in their neighborly groups: the new library and the meeting room were two neighborhood institutions distinct from other daily activities. The new library and sabla were also separate from the mosque. Some of the mosques in Bahla used to have small libraries and schools either in or next to them. Until the early 1980s, most of Bahla's Qur'anic schools were set in rooms attached to mosques or held within mosques.¹² At the beginning of the 1980s, the Ministry of Islamic Affairs and Religious Endowments began building Qur'anic schools in separate buildings on religious endowment property, corresponding to an approach to education as an activity distinct from prayer and parallel to "secular" schools outside of the town walls.¹³ Sablas were usually reserved for men's gatherings such as mournings and speeches. Indeed, not being social could be a symptom of "possession." I described that despite such expectations, sociality was not ahistorical,

but tied to shifting economic conditions as well as to changing ideas about religiosity. Not only were the primary aspects of visiting (time, coffee, and dates) newly available, but younger people saw sociality as an impediment to proper religiosity. In this chapter, I explore the ways that several groups of young women harkened to an idealized Ibadi scholarly tradition to structure new forms of sociality—organized around religious study—in opposition to the visiting practices of their mothers, grandmothers, and sisters, and in so doing helped shape new notions of religiosity. Although the number of young women and girls who, during my fieldwork, actively participated in these study groups was small (about seventy-five students altogether) the standard created by these gatherings and the local discourse around them affected people far beyond the small groups directly involved. Rather than socializing with and belonging to neighborly groups, Aisha, Mawza, their fellow teachers, and their students were constructing a moral universe in which one would belong primarily and explicitly—and at times in divisive ways—to a religious community of students, scholars, and what they understood to be a pious public. This chapter focuses on two intersecting processes in the activities of the study groups. First, this chapter illustrates how young teachers in Bahla defined, invoked, and drew from different forms of education, thereby producing a new religiosity. By invoking local practices and well-known histories of study circles among Ibadis as well as by critiquing the new state schools, the teachers and students were expressing their deference to and admiration for "traditional" religious authority and knowledge. While these intellectuals have insisted that Islamic learning and teaching is comprised of both everyday experiences and particular schooling practices, their policies center on formal schooling, where most demand the "integration" of different schooling styles such that all fields of a "modern" school would be "approached from an Islamic point of view" (Roald 1994: 59, 94–95). Although Aisha and her colleagues also considered it essential that modern schools conform to "Islamic points of view," they were, unlike the groups and people that Roald described, much less opposed to what they saw as traditional schooling. As Saba Mahmood (2005) has argued, "agency" in liberal and radical feminist analysis and politics has often been incorrectly conflated with "resistance." These women did not encourage "public piety" in the form of large gatherings in public spaces (Deeb 2006) or in the form of attending classes in mosques (Mahmood 2005). In fact, these women actively

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