

# Cultivating “Omani ambitions”: Entrepreneurship, distributive labor, and the temporalities of diversification in the Arab Gulf

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*Despite substantial investments in the diversification and development of their economies, Oman and other Arab Gulf states have yet to experience structural changes that meaningfully reduce their dependence on oil. Pointing out that the “problem” of oil dependence has never existed independent of a development apparatus attempting to solve it, this article explores how developmental discourses and institutions in Oman produce unintended (but nevertheless salient) distributive effects. With scholarship on the region dominated by work on the rentier state that dismisses the importance of developmental institutions and the labor of citizens in systems of rent distribution, this article proposes a new framework that investigates how rentier development operates as a discourse in ways that shape the allocation of resources and the behavior of citizen-subjects. Through the lens of an Omani entrepreneur named Mohammed and the organizations and individuals who encouraged and supported him, this article draws on insights from the anthropology of development to describe how efforts to transform mind-sets and instill entrepreneurial dispositions generate not a structural change in Oman’s economy but distributive arrangements that enable citizens to earn livelihoods and support through the enactment of virtues that resonate with the state’s development narratives.*

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With oil reserves dwindling, the Omani state has invested heavily in the creation of a diversified economy capable of maintaining Oman’s prosperity after the end of oil. Yet, in Oman, the “problem” of oil dependence has never had an existence independent of the development apparatus working to provide its solution. This article explores how subsidized investments in development—locally understood as the modernization of infrastructure, organizations, and persons as well as growth in the economic sense—have generated a series of distributive effects in Oman that, while often unintended and unrecognized by policymakers and bureaucrats, are nevertheless socially and politically salient. Focusing on the events and excitement following an intensified interest by the Omani state in inspiring and supporting citizen entrepreneurs (announced in a national symposium in 2013), this article explores how rentier development operates as a discourse in ways that shape the allocation of resources and the behavior of citizen-subjects.

Our story begins in late March, just after sunset. Dressed in a beige sport coat, I arrived at The Wave, a luxury development on the outskirts of Muscat, for the 2014 Entrepreneurs’ Jubilee gala dinner.<sup>1</sup> The Entrepreneurs’ Jubilee is one of many events in Oman aimed at promoting SMEs—an acronym turned buzzword for Omani citizen-run small and medium-sized enterprises.

A podium stood on a stage overlooking the marina. Behind it, a gigantic screen rose flanked on either side by colossal placards featuring logos of some of the event’s sponsors, a list of which included BMW, a chain of local

movie theaters, and His Majesty Sultan Qaboos (Oman’s head of state). Spacious round tables with ebony tablecloths decorated with candles, ivory napkins, and lilies in tinsel-covered vases rested at the foot of the stage. Dressed in *dishdashas* and *masars*, jackets and slacks, *abayas* and gowns, the audience mingled as waiters delivered juice in long-stemmed glasses. To the left of the podium on a platform overlooking the crowd sat an alpine white BMW sedan, matching the linens, with a savannah leather interior.

“Ladies and Gentlemen,” an announcer’s voice interrupted in English, her words resonating across the loudspeakers, “tonight is about sharing business acumen. Tonight we celebrate innovation. Tonight we honor distinction. Tonight we salute ambition. And tonight is about making dreams come true.” The audience applauded. A prepared video played on the gigantic screen behind the podium.

The Entrepreneurs’ Jubilee, billed as an opportunity to enable young Omani entrepreneurs to network, gain publicity, and seek financing, was described by its organizers as “a hunt to find the most promising entrepreneur in the nation.” Announced at an info session during a state-sponsored Small and Medium-sized Enterprise Exhibition two months earlier, the Jubilee had been advertised in local newspapers and in a roadshow traveling throughout the sultanate. Young, “budding” Omani entrepreneurs were encouraged to apply. Out of the applications received, ten nominees between the ages of eighteen and thirty were selected to participate. Arriving early that morning, the contestants were placed in groups, each of which was assigned a successful local business owner as a mentor. Over the course of an hour, each group worked together to “solve” a “business case” provided to them on a laptop computer. Next, the established and “budding” entrepreneurs were given a crash course in sailing and then, in their teams, were asked to complete a series of yachting challenges. “The idea here,” one organizer explained, “is to test the attitude of the person, the charisma, the communication, the all-around personality [of each entrepreneur through] the sailing event and case study” (fieldnotes, February 19, 2014).<sup>2</sup>

At the conclusion of the sailing challenge, the established entrepreneur mentors evaluated each of the enterprising young Omanis they worked with on the basis of “entrepreneurial” dispositions—their leadership, teamwork, risk-taking, and communication skills. Based on these evaluations, the top three contestants were then invited to present their business and tell their “motivational story” to an audience of angel investors, state officials, and local business leaders at the Jubilee’s gala dinner. The winner of the event, selected by VIP judges in the audience, was to be crowned Oman’s “Most Promising Entrepreneur” and was to serve as the brand ambassador for the next year’s Entrepreneurs’ Jubilee.

An aerial drone circled, capturing shots from overhead, as each of the three finalists took the stage and shared their stories. The first opened a CrossFit gym; he aspired to train local coaches and to spread health throughout the sultanate. The second, a vibrant woman in a sparkling gold hijab, ran a tourism business that took Omanis and visitors on excursions in a refurbished *dhow*—a traditional boat reminiscent of Oman’s pre-oil heritage. The final contestant, a young man in a turquoise *masar* named Mohammed, took the stage last with confidence and grace.

“In 1963, one of the histor[ic] famous speakers ... Martin Luther King [Jr.] said, ‘I have a dream that one day my kids will go to school without the consideration of color,’” Mohammed said, speaking slowly and with conviction. Describing the election of former U.S. president Barack Obama as the culmination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s famous “I Have a Dream” speech, he continued, “In 2010, I said the same thing with related modifications. I have a dream that one day I am going to be a great motivational speaker. And I have a dream that one day I am going to purchase my dream car which is none other than the Lamborghini Reventón LP640.” The audience broke into applause, and the man next to me started to cheer. “And one day I have a dream that I am going to be a millionaire” (fieldnotes, March 29, 2014).

Mohammed continued, describing his initial success starting a catering business in 2010. “And I am willing, *inshallah*, in the future, to [get] millions after millions in order to help people and to be a real example for all of these entrepreneur[s] in our country and all over the world.” Quoting American motivational speaker Les Brown, he added, “Because life is not easy. Life will let you down. And if you want to have tomorrow things that others don’t

have, you have to be willing yourself to do things today that others will not do.” As Mohammed stepped down from the stage, the audience applauded.

Despite his memorable speech, Mohammed did not win. Amid the clapping and congratulations, the “budding” and established entrepreneurs posed together on stage beneath the event logo. An elaborate buffet — with a platter of salads, succulent roasted lamb, three curries, and miniature personal chocolate cakes — opened. With violin music playing faintly in the background, the lights were turned low in honor of Earth Hour,<sup>3</sup> leaving guests engulfed in the soft white headlights of the display BMW as dimmed car commercials fluttered across the gigantic screen.

To an uninitiated onlooker, the events of that evening were curious. The pageantry, the reality-show-like competition for investor attention, the unsettling equation of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s famous dream for racial justice with Mohammed’s dream to one day be a millionaire, were examples of a kind of glamour, an idolization of entrepreneurial virtues present in many of the events I attended and the conversations I had with Omani friends and colleagues during sixteen months of ethnographic fieldwork in Oman. As Miriam, a prominent Omani entrepreneurship expert critical of all of the glitziness, put it,

I tell entrepreneurs, do not get carried away by how many awards you achieve and do not get carried away by how many interviews and newspaper and magazine covers you do. The only thing that matters, at the end of the day, is what [are] your sales? ... Forget about the awards ... forget all of that, [it is] like smoke that comes in front of your vision and doesn’t let you see clearly. (interview, April 1, 2014)

While Miriam viewed such entrepreneurial glamour as a distraction, this article takes it up as its focus. Rather than approaching the glamour of the Entrepreneurs’ Jubilee or the efforts of citizens like Mohammed to cultivate ambitious, entrepreneurial dispositions as signs of a neoliberal class of “flexible citizens” (Kanna 2011) who oppose their nation’s dependence on oil and the alleged rentier mentalities of many of their fellow citizens, this article argues that such diversification efforts in Oman, and the citizen-subjects they cultivate, contribute to a broader project of rentier development. Taking entrepreneurship as a cultural practice grounded in the particulars of political and economic context (Kelman 2018; Marshall 2018), this article examines how investments aimed at creating a “culture of entrepreneurship” in Oman have generated an ecosystem for the distribution of rents that enables citizens to compete for and obtain distributive livelihoods.

## The discourse of rentier development: Temporal statecraft and distributive labor

In 1970, in the wake of the discovery of oil in Oman, Sultan Qaboos succeeded his father in a British-orchestrated coup that launched a period of continuing oil-funded development and prosperity known locally in Oman as *al-nadha* (the renaissance). Although oil modernization in some ways continued patterns of governance that date back to Oman’s experience as an informal frontier of the British Raj (Onley 2007), the state’s growing oil-funded development apparatus brought with it a new construct — what I describe here as the *discourse of rentier development*. Scholars of the Arab Gulf, building on the work of economist Hossein Mahdavy (1970), have used the concept of the rentier state to describe the impact of external rents on the politics and economies of the region’s oil-producing countries. This literature’s tropes, themes, and frameworks (as well as oversights) have shaped expert and popular understandings of the “problem” of oil dependence in Oman and other states of the Arab Gulf. While such research has offered useful insights into the patterns and structural characteristics of oil-producing states, accounting for events like the Entrepreneurs’ Jubilee requires us to examine how the apparatus of oil-funded development actually functions, producing outcomes that are neither intended nor recognized but are nevertheless central to the preservation of existing systems of social control.

In Oman, like other states of the Arab Gulf, economic development has been heavily shaped by oil extraction. For theorists of development, one of the primary impediments to the economic growth and modernization of so-called developing countries has traditionally been the absence of capital for investment in local economies and their infrastructure (Escobar 2012, 40). In this respect, Oman and other Arab Gulf states are anomalies as “developing countries”: Oil revenue has created a situation in these states in which governments have a surplus of capital to invest in development and a shortage of local labor and industry on which to invest it. The problem for the emergent Omani state, in other words, was not raising capital to pay for the construction of things like roads, bridges, airports, schools, hotels, hospitals, and shopping centers but of finding a workforce and business community capable of building and staffing them. And, instead of waiting for a workforce and business community to emerge from the activity of a local market, oil revenues made it possible for workers, businesses, and the infrastructure they provide to be effectively purchased abroad and imported.

In this sort of development, state funding in the form of various subsidies is used to expand the economy in ways that rely on government generosity rather than market activity to fuel growth. To explain how this works, it is useful to consider the example of Oman’s labor economy, one of the many sites in which the Omani state uses subsidies to drive growth. Government-funded development projects and Oman’s growing private sector have generated an increasing demand for both skilled and unskilled workers. But rather than constructing a market capable of linking this new demand for workers with a supply of potential citizen-employees, the state instead subsidizes both the supply of labor available to local businesses and the demand for Omani employees. On the business end, the state permits businesses to import foreign workers whose wages are often half to a third of those commanded by Omani citizens, effectively subsidizing their labor expenses. As of November 2018, foreign workers in the country on a temporary basis made up approximately 89% of Oman’s private-sector workforce and 44% of Oman’s total population (National Centre for Statistics and Information 2018). With foreign workers undercutting the wages of citizen-employees, the Omani state grants a second subsidy to citizen-workers, providing them with privileged, highly paid employment opportunities in the government and the private sector. When subsidies such as these inflate both the supply of something and the demand for that thing, the outcome is an economic arrangement in which the forces of supply and demand are uncoupled from one another and each is independently fulfilled by the state. This might best be understood not as a “market” in the traditional sense but as a state-centric distributive arrangement in which the forces of supply and demand come to depend on the allocative decisions and generosity of state institutions rather than on market mechanisms. While state subsidies are productively used in many market economies, what interests me in this article are the processes through which combinations of competing subsidies in states like Oman come to drive economic growth in place of more traditional market pressures.

Beyond the pragmatic reality of subsidy-driven development, Oman’s political economy has also been shaped by the analytical frameworks used to describe and analyze the “problem” of oil dependence. Beginning with the work of Mahdavy (1970), scholarship aimed at describing the rentier state has explored the political and economic implications of natural resource revenues on oil-producing states like Oman (Ayubi 2008; Beblawi and Luciani 1987; Chaudhry 1997; Crystal 1995; Gause 1994; Kropf and Ramady 2015; Rolf 2008). In a context in which the state itself (rather than a specific social class) owns the means of production, not only is the government able to provide services with little or no taxation but—rentier scholars argue—the state itself becomes the center of “kaleidoscopic configuration of dependence” that allocates and distributes rents to the local population through the provision of jobs, subsidies, and government contracts (Khalaf and Hammoud 1987, 352), often in ways that stifle the development of democratic institutions and processes (Al-Farsi 2013). Furthermore, by creating an environment in which “getting access to the rent circuit is a greater preoccupation than reaching productive efficiency” (Chatelus 1987, 111), such scholars have long argued that rent-based distributive arrangements inhibit the growth of a productive economy and generate an apathetic “rentier mentality” among citizen inhabitants (Beblawi 1987; Kropf and Ramady 2015).

The rentier state as described by scholars like Beblawi and Luciani (1987) and Gause (1994) might best be understood not as a totally accurate depiction of the political economy in a place like Oman but as a series of tropes, themes, and frameworks that have come to inform commonsense understandings of oil dependence throughout the Arab Gulf. While a great deal of scholarship has critically dismantled many of the assumptions and problematic conclusions of early rentier scholars (e.g., Herb 2014; Hertog 2010; Krause 2008; Smith 2015), what interests me in this article is the pragmatic work and social effects done by such talk of oil dependence. Given the role of the rentier state framework as a *de facto* analytic through which policymakers and journalists understand Oman and the Arab Gulf (Smith 2015, 82) and the prevalence of concerns about rent seeking, entitlement mentalities, and the absence of ambition and productivity among many of my Omani interlocutors, it is useful to approach the popularized specter of the rentier state as a discursive artifact operating within a broader regime of rentier development.

Anthropologists of development have increasingly shifted their focus from studying the people being developed to studying the apparatuses doing the developing. Instead of taking the plans of developers at face value, such work treats the real social effects of development as a question open to empirical investigation, allowing researchers to explore development's unintended and often unrecognized outcomes as well as how such outcomes contribute to existing constellations of social control (Ferguson 1990). Engaging in this sort of analysis has required researchers to be attentive to the ways that development institutions produce their own discourse, a discourse that shapes the thoughts and actions of policymakers by framing problems in specific ways and by providing a universe of concepts and acceptable statements out of which interventions can be derived. By focusing on development as a discourse, anthropologists have explored how developmental institutions operating within different social and political contexts generate locally specific outcomes that often reinforce established relations of power (e.g., Escobar 2012; Ferguson 1990; Li 2007; Firat 2016).

Building on this framework, I propose that rentier development in Oman might best be approached as a discourse—a local variant of development discourse shaped by the specific social and political context of Oman's oil-funded, state-guided program of modernization. Focusing on the *discourse of rentier development* has two advantages over classical rentier state theory in describing Oman's political economy (and, specifically, the events of the Entrepreneurs' Jubilee): First, it allows us to move beyond analyzing the political and economic effects of rent distribution and on to exploring how such outcomes actually come about within the functioning of a development apparatus; and second, it enables us to examine how distributive livelihoods are secured in competitive environments that reward the cultivation of virtues and forms of selfhood valued by development institutions and the Omani state. It is helpful to consider how each of these two advantages contributes a perspective (and, ultimately, an analytical framework) missing from classical theories of the rentier state.

First, while rentier state scholars (e.g., Ayubi 2008; Beblawi and Luciani 1987; Crystal 1995) have carefully examined the role of state institutions and ruling families in distributing and circulating rents, development—if it is addressed by rentier scholars at all—has most often been treated as a secondary effect of oil rents and not a force in the creation and maintenance of distributive arrangements. Pointing out that the income of resource-rich states is independent of the performance of their local economies, rentier scholars have often treated economic development dismissively as “one of the various ‘luxuries’ the state can buy with its oil income” (Luciani 1987, 70) or simply as one of many distributive mechanisms that states can use “to ‘depoliticize’ social relations and create a source of legitimacy for the regime” (Ayubi 2008, 235). Even insofar as oil-producing states like Oman are rhetorically focused on developing their societies, citizens, and economies, rentier scholars have tended to treat such efforts as veneers through which to conceal the distribution of rents. As a result, the distributive effects of development in Oman have generally been assumed to be ends in and of themselves rather than a necessary outcome of a variety of development that operates through combinations of state subsidies rather than market processes. Instead of assuming that the distributive outcomes of government programs are evidence of hidden, ulterior motives (such as a desire to secure political support through the distribution of rents), I propose it may be helpful to treat such distributive outcomes as

an empirical problem, “an anthropological puzzle” (Ferguson 1990, 17) requiring attention toward the actual work of the discursive and institutional apparatus doing the developing.

Unraveling the *discourse of rentier development* involves being attentive to questions of time and temporality. Development discourse, as anthropologists have long pointed out (Escobar 2012, 78; Ferguson 1997), depends on the construction of temporal difference, what Johannes Fabian (2002) has called the “denial of coevalness.” To develop is not simply to change one’s behavior or circumstance but to recognize such change as a movement forward in time. Development, in this sense, generates the perception of a time lag; it allows us to view certain contemporary societies, individuals, and practices as indicators of progress (signs of a future yet to fully arrive) while viewing others as anachronisms (relics of a past yet to be modernized). As a discourse, then, development is a story about time: It carries with it an imagined future and a “projective past” (Bhabha 2004, 361), which—while often different from the lived experience of a place’s inhabitants—is the hypothetical past of developers, the past against which development unfolds.

In the *discourse of rentier development*, the rentier state—the crude specter of the oil-dependent society, economy, and mind-set described and popularized by the rentier state literature—operates as oil development’s imagined past. Unlike the projective primordial pasts of many other development and colonial projects, the rentier past of development in Oman is imagined to be more recent, dating to the early days of oil extraction. The process works something like this: Subsidy-driven development produces a series of consequences (resembling the so-called externalities of market-based transactions). Instead of interpreting these consequences as the predictable outcomes of a variety of development that operates through state subsidies rather than market processes, the *discourse of rentier development* makes it possible for policymakers and state bureaucrats to view these consequences as features of an oil-dependent past—features that require additional development in the form of subsidy-driven investment to outgrow. In other words, rather than viewing the consequences of subsidy-driven development as effects of development by subsidy, the rentier framework allows these consequences to be recast as *characteristics* of a rentier “type” of society and mentality, anachronisms that are the preconditions for further development.

In Oman’s labor economy, for instance, the Omani state subsidizes the labor expenses of local businesses by providing businesses with access to an inexpensive foreign workforce and subsidizes the employment of citizens through the creation of privileged employment opportunities. Each of these subsidies has consequences—as the wages of citizens are undercut by the imported workforce of businesses, citizen-employees are rendered uncompetitive; as privileged employment opportunities are provided to citizens (often without much work to do), citizen workers suffer from low productivity. Rather than interpreting such uncompetitiveness or low productivity as a predictable effect of a specific regime of subsidies, the discourse of rentier development allows such dispositions to be recast as *characteristics* of the same sort of rentier society or mentality that required such subsidized investments in the first place—as preconditions for future development.

To many in Oman and the region (Moritz 2015; Oman Economic Review 2013), events like the Entrepreneurs’ Jubilee, the government’s Oman 2020 and 2040 plans, or the plentiful development-oriented articles regularly printed in Omani newspapers (e.g., Al-Maḥrizī 2019; *Muscat Daily* 2019; Singh 2019) make it seem as if Oman is at a turning point—a rentier state long dependent on oil revenues and subsidized state spending that seems to be just now on the cusp of becoming a diversified and productive knowledge economy. Yet the liminal present of Oman’s diversification narrative might be best understood not as an indicator of a radical change that is just now occurring but as an effect of the discourse of rentier development. While Oman is expected to exhaust its oil reserves in as little as fifteen years if current production levels are maintained (Ministry of Oil and Gas 2013), as anthropologist Mandana Limbert (2010, 167) has pointed out, the crisis posed by the exhaustion of Oman’s oil reserves is not new: projections of the end of oil—usually on a timeline of about twenty years—have been a near-constant feature of Oman’s oil-funded development. Likewise, efforts to prepare for the exhaustion of the nation’s oil reserves



through economic diversification, reducing the nation's dependence on expatriate labor, and building the human capital of citizens are state objectives that date back to Oman's earliest development plans (Looney 1994, 107–8). While elements of the state's development project have morphed over time—shifting, for instance, from a focus on providing Omanis with government jobs to creating jobs in the private sector to promoting self-employment and citizen entrepreneurship—such changes do not constitute a radical break between an oil-dependent past and a development-oriented present that is just now focused on diversification. Instead, Oman inhabits a perpetually transformative present moment in which the forecasted arrival of economic modernity encourages the nation's oil-funded development apparatus to invest continuously in the future.

Second, despite its focus on the distribution of rents, rentier state literature has relatively little to say about the labor and social processes actually involved in competing for and receiving distributions. Building on a tradition that has tended to treat distribution and distributive livelihoods as morally suspect, scholars have often written about the rentier state in ways that highlight the absence of production rather than the presence of distribution. Such an approach ultimately defines rentier economies and their subjects not by what they are but by what they lack, namely, economic productivity. For instance, as rentier scholar Hazem Beblawi (1987, 52) argues, when citizens receive an income or wealth through channels of rent distribution, such monetary rewards are experienced as an isolated social fact—a windfall or an entitlement—rather than the outcome of “a long, systemic and organized production circuit” that compensates for work or risk taking.

The fact that citizens can receive an income without doing productive work has led rentier scholars to ignore the kinds of work that citizens do and how that work is necessary for securing distributive livelihoods. Ferguson (2015) has introduced the fruitful concept of “distributive labor” to describe the kinds of practical and social work that goes into securing distributive outcomes. Making, negotiating, and contesting the social and affective claims on income and wealth, he asserts, form a significant part of the day-to-day life of many individuals and communities living in poverty along the fringes of the world economy (Ferguson 2015, 96). As these communities illustrate, material dependence is not a passive condition; rather, it is an achievement—the “valued outcome of long, hard social labor” (Ferguson 2015, 97). While the specific strategies and material circumstances of Omani recipients differ from those of the impoverished communities described by Ferguson, applying the concept of distributive labor to Oman allows us to understand distribution as something more than merely the absence of production. By being attentive to the tactics and methods that citizens use to earn distributive outcomes and livelihoods, we can develop an understanding of Omani citizens not as passive recipients of oil rents but as competitors who struggle against one another to earn distributive rewards by following rules and meeting expectations of the development apparatus. Here the discourse of rentier development establishes a distributional game that rewards future-inflected dispositions like ambition, hard work, self-discipline, and entrepreneurial zeal with distributive benefits.

While classical accounts of the rentier state have focused on the effects of rent distribution and the supposed lack of economic productivity in states like Oman, an analysis of the discourse of rentier development allows us to understand how distributive outcomes actually come about through the workings of a development apparatus. For policymakers and the Omani public, development involves subsidized investments in modernizing things, people, and organizations away from a rentier past and toward a diversified future—often in ways that unintentionally produce the anachronistic features of oil dependence that reappear as the preconditions for future development. Such an arrangement creates a competition in which citizens foster rewardable “mind-sets” through participation in economically oriented regimes of practice that resonate with the state's temporal narrative of development and generate subjects who are materially empowered as they are politically disenfranchised. Using subsidized investments to reduce a dependence on subsidies, Oman's development apparatus faces the Sisyphean task of chasing a diversified future that continues to lurk (as it always has) just over the horizon.

## Omani ambitions: Generating mind-sets, dreams, and national belonging

Several days after the Entrepreneurs’ Jubilee, Mohammed and I met in a café and chatted over shared plates of lamb rogan josh, chicken masala, and garlic naan. What is the relationship, I asked, between Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s dream for racial justice and your dream to become a millionaire? Mohammed had watched videos of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s famous speech on YouTube. While he didn’t fully understand the context of continuing racial inequality in the United States, Mohammed found Dr. King’s passion and words inspiring. “What I believe is that each one of us has a dream,” he told me. “You have a dream. I have a dream. But when it comes to reality, we need someone to encourage [us,] to tell us, ‘Believe in yourself.’” (interview, April 6, 2014).

Then, Mohammed told me the story of his dream. Several years earlier, he had attended a speech by the locally renowned motivational speaker Sheikh Khalfan al Esery. Speaking to a crowd of Omani students at Sultan Qaboos University, Sheikh Khalfan had told the audience, “I want each one of you [to write down] three big dreams that you want to accomplish in [your] life.” Mohammed, along with the other students, wrote down three dreams. After hearing some of the students’ dreams, Sheikh Khalfan continued, “When you were writing your dreams [did you hear] a hidden sound? [A sound whispering,] ‘Oh, come on! Are you crazy? [That] is silly. People will laugh [at] me ... I can’t say that. [That] is not possible.’” Pausing, Mohammed continued his recounting of Sheikh Khalfan: “Now I want all of you to say shut up to that hidden sound and to write bigger dreams than before.” So Mohammed wrote three new dreams, raised his hand, and shared them with Sheikh Khalfan and the audience. “I want to be a millionaire. I want to purchase a Lamborghini Reventón LP640. And I want to be a great motivational speaker.” “Fantastic. Perfect,” Sheikh Khalfan replied. “Now I would like you, each morning, to repeat these things [to yourself] in front of a mirror” (interview, April 6, 2014). That was four years ago. Mohammed keeps two photos of a Lamborghini in his car dangling from the rearview mirror to remind him of his dream. He showed them to me proudly on our drive home.

Among the Omani entrepreneurs and employees with whom I spoke, experiences and ambitions like those of Mohammed were not unusual. While dreams of becoming a millionaire may, for some North American and European readers, carry a certain stigma and unseemliness, it is important to recognize that such discourses of ambition carry different meanings in Oman. For individuals like Mohammed, fostering ambition is both an act of distributive labor and a means of securing virtuous belonging in the national community. Insofar as Oman’s diversified future appears to depend on the transformation of mind-sets and mentalities rather than institutional structures, cultivating entrepreneurial dispositions associated with rentier development’s imagined future is a means both to present oneself as worthy of distributive support and to make a patriotic contribution to the nation’s development.

The late Sheikh Khalfan al Esery — whose speech inspired Mohammed — could probably best be described as an Omani folk hero, an icon of the ambition, motivation, and hard work that many of my Omani friends and colleagues worked to cultivate. An Islamic scholar, member of Oman’s State Council, human development expert, top engineer in Petroleum Development Oman, life coach, motivational speaker, and radio personality, Sheikh Khalfan was widely known for his annual Ramadan radio programs in English and Arabic, during which he addressed topics ranging from time management and entrepreneurship to proper Islamic ethics and conduct. His lectures and radio programs were widely recorded, shared, and discussed by many of my Omani friends and colleagues, who, like Mohammed, were inspired by Sheikh Khalfan’s perceptive intellect, humble demeanor, and commanding and compassionate voice.

I met Sheikh Khalfan in his home in a suburb along the outskirts of Muscat. Too ill to stand from his reclining chair, he graciously welcomed me and a small entourage of friends and family whom he had invited to listen in on our discussion about his life’s work and the critical task of inspiring Omani ambitions.

For Sheikh Khalfan, Oman’s future diversification and development face the challenge of transforming a number of “wrong mind-sets” of Omani citizens, specifically Omani youth who grew up in the oil era. “The newer generation,



unfortunately, was spoiled,” he told me. “They are into that entitlement mentality. [It is a mentality that lets them think,] ‘Once I graduate and have a job, I am done. I don’t need to develop. I don’t need to produce. As long as I have a job and show up every day, I can survive’” (interview, June 14, 2014). According to Sheikh Khalfan, this apathetic mentality is the result in part of “self-limiting beliefs” that stifle the ambition of many young Omanis. “I believe that our youth need a lot of direction,” he explained. “They need a lot of encouragement and support, and they can do a lot; if only we raised their self-esteem, we make them feel worth it, we make them feel like they can achieve something in their lives.”

Although he readily acknowledged that state-guided employment policies—such as the provision of minimally productive jobs to citizen-employees and the prohibition against terminating Omani workers without due cause—have had negative effects on national productivity, for Sheikh Khalfan, the primary impediment to Oman’s long-term diversification is the mentality of its inhabitants. Echoing tropes of the rentier state framework described earlier, Sheikh Khalfan framed the unintended consequences of subsidy-driven development as instances of an oil-dependent type of society, state, and mentality that requires additional subsidies and investments to reform. Development here is articulated as a challenge not of ending protectionist policies toward citizen workers or private-sector businesses but of national inspiration, motivation, and training made possible through widespread investments in Omani workers, businesses, and entrepreneurs. In this context, entitlement mentalities, apathetic mind-sets, and self-limiting beliefs appear as anachronisms, the rhetorical preconditions for the kind of diversified, productive development that the Omani state, local economists, and Sheikh Khalfan himself are striving to create. For Sheikh Khalfan and many others, Oman’s productive, diversified future depends upon transforming the private personal dispositions of citizens through introducing future-oriented ambitious, entrepreneurial, risk-embracing mind-sets that inspire hard work, a passion for achievement, and an interest in personal development.

An important component of proper, future-oriented ambition for many of my Omani friends and colleagues is the cultivation of a desire for wealth, a desire understood as the opposite of a kind of apathetic contentment associated with entitlement mentalities. During our discussion of Omani ambitions, I asked Sheikh Khalfan whether he considered greed and the cultivation of monetary ambitions to be an Islamic virtue. “In Islam, we say that ambition is a virtue ... but [in] being ambitious ... one ought not to compromise or betray [one’s] values” (interview, June 14, 2014), he explained. In this respect, he said, monetary ambitions are not only healthy but also Islamically virtuous:

When God speaks to us, he doesn’t speak to us in the language of poor people, the language of poverty. He speaks to us in the language of the wealthy ... of abundance. There are many verses [in the Quran] where God is encouraging people to spend. Spend in the cause of God, in charitable work. ... Dare I ask ... who can spend generously, and who can give away to a community in abundance? Is it a rich person or a poor person? A rich person. So God is speaking to us in the language of the richness, of abundance. And he wants us to spend as if we are ... millionaires. ... You hear about the filthy rich, I say no, you can be cleanly rich. So one of my goals is to be a millionaire. I made that goal in the year 2006. I began to educate myself, the street smart, the book smart, and the financial smart, and within three years I made a million. ... So, if you ask me “what is your mission in life?” my mission in life is very simple, to show the world that you can live the values and still be successful. (interview, June 14, 2014)

Dreaming of becoming a millionaire and working toward it, for Sheikh Khalfan, are virtuous acts that allow him not only to be financially successful but also to showcase the benefits of ambition, hard work, self-discipline, and entrepreneurial zeal to his surrounding community. By transforming his own mind-set, nurturing his ambition, and becoming wealthy, Sheikh Khalfan can serve as an example and inspiration to other Omanis, such as Mohammed, whose hard work and ambitious mind-sets, it is thought, will help to launch Oman into a diversified, post-oil future.

For Mohammed and Sheikh Khalfan, as well as many of my Omani friends and colleagues, the cultivation of ambitious entrepreneurial dispositions that resonate with the imagined future of rentier development is a patriotic act, a means to modernize the nation and to transform the selves of individual citizens into the righteous recipients of development’s prosperity. Such a framing depends upon themes borrowed from literature on the rentier state: By framing oil dependence in Oman as an instance of a type of state, economy, or mind-set that requires additional investment to outgrow, the discourse of rentier development makes it possible to understand diversification as a challenge of mind-set (rather than an institutional) change.

## The distributive circuit of rentier development: Labor and reward

What is the connection between sailing a boat and running a business? I asked Mohammed as we waited for our teas to arrive after dinner. It is about your personality, he explained:

They [are] evaluating you. ... How are your leadership [skills]? Your communication skills? Your teamwork skills? ... These skills are [what they look for] in the sailing. Because sailing is teamwork. It is leadership. It is following instructions. It is working together. ... They told us, “We don’t care about your business because what we believe is that the leadership should be in the entrepreneur. Whenever the entrepreneur has the leadership skills, he can manage any type of business, he will succeed. But if he doesn’t have any of these leadership skills, how can [he]?” (interview, April 6, 2014)

For Mohammed and the other participants of the 2014 Entrepreneurs’ Jubilee, the sailing event and case study were opportunities to engage in distributive labor through the presentation of mind-sets and attitudes that resonate with the imagined future of the state’s development narrative. Here entrepreneurial dispositions like those advocated by Mohammed and Sheikh Khalfan are steps along a distributive circuit that links evaluations of presumed economic potential with distributive rewards. For a nation always about to be made modern, such distributive circuits are a mechanism to craft selves who not only are patriotic and entrepreneurial but also understand themselves as the utopian inhabitants of a yet-to-arrive future.

To explain how such distributive circuits actually work, it is useful to examine how Mohammed’s business engages in distributive labor and is evaluated and provided with distributive rewards. Mohammed runs a small catering services company that he started with a colleague, an Omani partner. Mohammed’s idea was to create a business that provided a link between customers who would like to have their events catered and a female Omani cook—another colleague of Mohammed’s—who prepared food in her home. Mohammed’s business took orders from organizations wishing to have events catered, relayed those orders to his cook, and picked up the food and delivered it to customers. Together with his partner, Mohammed registered his business; developed a menu; purchased cutlery, hot plates, uniforms, candles, and other equipment; and printed and distributed menus primarily to government ministries and training centers, which were his main customers.

As a result of state-guided efforts to promote SMEs, an extensive distributive ecosystem exists to subsidize, finance, and provide “development” to citizen entrepreneurs like Mohammed. A host of government-funded entities, such as the Public Authority for Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises, Al Raffd Fund, the National Business Centre, and Sharakah, provide citizens with entrepreneurship training and workshops, assistance in developing business plans, incubation spaces, and financing for entrepreneurial projects. This state assistance is complemented by private-sector programs, such as Zubair SEC, Oman India Fertilizer Company’s The Cell program, Shell’s Intalaaqah program, and the Cisco Entrepreneur Institute of Oman, that provide material assistance, training, and support to citizen entrepreneurs as part of their respective company’s social responsibility. By presenting themselves as good corporate citizens, these development-oriented social responsibility programs enable their

parent companies to position themselves as preferential candidates for government contracts and tenders. In this sense, providing distributive rewards to citizen entrepreneurs is a form of distributive labor for Omani businesses; it allows them to secure distributive support of their own.

Mohammed received training and support for his catering business through a private sector-funded entrepreneurship program. “Our job [is] to put them through ... an entrepreneurship boot camp,” Miriam, one of the directors of Mohammed’s program, told me (interview, April 1, 2014). We give them “two months of nonstop workshops [focused on] completing [a] feasibility study ... and then they pitch their ideas to [a] panel.” Out of the thirteen citizen entrepreneurs in Mohammed’s cohort, nine, including Mohammed, were awarded funding at the conclusion of the program. “The idea was, instead of giving them a loan, let’s just give them a grant. That is, you know, corporate social responsibility money, it is only 10,000 Omani riyals [\$26,000 per candidate], which is a grant, it is not to be returned,” Miriam explained.

Like many other Omani-run SMEs, the primary customers of Mohammed’s catering business are government ministries and organizations contracted by the state to provide services. However, in addition to subsidizing the *supply* of Omani entrepreneurs by providing training, advice, and start-up capital to citizens working to start their own businesses, the Omani government subsidizes the *demand* for the citizen-run SMEs by mandating that 10% of the value of government contracts and purchases be allocated to local SMEs and that private-sector businesses hired for major projects also allocate 10% of the value of their subcontracts to patronizing citizen entrepreneurs (*Oman Economic Review* 2013). Subsidizing both the *supply* of Omani entrepreneurs and the *demand* for their services effectively creates a situation in which state- and private-sector sponsors pay to produce rent-seeking businesses—businesses that use distributive investments of one sort to seek out distributive investments of another. Had it not been for the widespread opportunities for training and financial support provided by the Omani state and private-sector organizations, Mohammed may never have started a catering business. Likewise, if it was not for regulations requiring government organizations and the private sector businesses they contract with to purchase the goods and services of Omani SMEs, citizen entrepreneurs like Mohammed might not have a demand for the services they provide. Insofar as Mohammad struggles to find customers for his catering business, the lack of demand for his services may be taken as a sign, not of movements of a local market, but of the state not “doing enough” to force, encourage, or coerce organizations to patronize and help develop citizen entrepreneurs like himself.

Mohammed’s business clearly requires substantial work. Phones need to be answered, orders need to be taken, food—prepared by his female Omani cook—needs to be loaded onto a truck and delivered to customers’ events, and plates and dishes need to be cleaned up afterward. But in an important sense, Mohammed’s success both in obtaining financing and training for his business and in securing customers depends not simply on being the purveyor of a good or service but on being an “Omani entrepreneur”—embodying a specific set of subsidizable dispositions such as ambition, passion, and self-discipline—awaiting development. A certain portion of the work Mohammed puts into his business might best be understood as distributive labor related to the cultivation and presentation of temporally inflected dispositions that allow him and his business to become the supple recipients of development. Mohammed’s experience resonated with that of other citizen entrepreneurs with whom I spoke: in the context of Oman’s distributive ecosystem for the promotion of SMEs, it is nearly impossible for citizen entrepreneurs to remain untouched by the support of such distributive circuits.

For Miriam and other purveyors of support for entrepreneurs like Mohammed, selecting suitable candidates is a challenge of evaluating candidates’ *potential* for (rather than actual) success. “You try to identify who is the best deal, who you are going to bet on,” Musa, a South Asian economist involved in providing support to Omani entrepreneurs, explained to me; they “have a windfall coming [and] everyone wants their pound of flesh. [It] create[s] another, different kind of problem” (interview, September 24, 2013). In this context, evaluating citizen candidates for support involves making assessments on the basis of personality and character traits—dispositions, attitudes, and mind-sets that, it is thought, predict whether candidates will be successful. As Miriam put it, sponsors need to differentiate

between ambitious, passionate, hardworking citizen entrepreneurs with dispositions associated with development’s imagined future and “wanna-preneurs ... the so-called entrepreneurs [who] just appeared when all of this support showed up” (interview, April 1, 2014).

Development—for Omani citizen entrepreneurs and their sponsors—is a process in which distributive labor (in the form of the cultivation and presentation of ambitious, entrepreneurial, future-oriented dispositions) is undertaken in exchange for distributive rewards (in the form of access to capital, training, and customers). Within this distributive circuit, a citizen or enterprise that “develops” is one that expands its own potential by growing subsidizable skills and dispositions; an organization that “develops others” is one that evaluates presumed economic potential and links it with distributive rewards. In this respect, the success of Oman’s program of national development appears to depend, not on the establishment of market-based institutions capable of generating a genuine demand for citizen-employees or the services of Omani entrepreneurs, but on a sufficiently generous circuit of distributive labor and reward capable of sustaining the nation’s march into the future.

For Mohammed and citizens like him, securing distributive support from sponsors and “receiving development” involves significant work, and in particular, it requires the cultivation and enactment of the dispositions recognized as subsidizable by Oman’s development apparatus. These subsidizable dispositions are determined by a discourse of rentier development that offers a universe of concepts and acceptable statements to guide developmental interventions as well as a temporal framework that understands development as a task of transforming the projective, rentier past of oil dependence into a diversified, post-oil future. In an environment characterized by continual investments in utopian futures, it is the dreams of economic modernity that sustain the social and political arrangements of the present.

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## Notes

- 1 With the exception of Sheikh Khalfan Al Esery (who gave me permission to refer to him by name), all participants and events quoted or described in this article have been given pseudonyms.
- 2 All interviews were conducted in Muscat, Oman.
- 3 Earth Hour is a movement started in 2007 in Sydney, Australia, in which participants turn out their lights for an hour at a specified time to raise awareness about climate change.

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