Chapter 20
Concluding Remarks: Regionalizing Oman Beyond Conventional Metageographies

Steffen Wippel

20.1 Opening Up Spatial Containers to Complex Regional Contexts

The initial statement in this volume, that in politics, media and even academia the study of human agency and social relations is still often limited to the two spatio-scalar dimensions of the territorial nation-state and (quasi-)continental world-regions, is also true for the southeastern part of the peninsular landmass that stretches between the northwestern part of the Indian Ocean, the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea and the Syrian Desert. Political, social, economic and even cultural activities are mostly inscribed into the territorial boundaries of the state called the "Sultanate of Oman", which in turn is itself regularly subsumed as an allegedly self-evident part of the "Arab world" or the "Middle East (and North Africa)".

Even history is being realigned to the territory of the state, whose current form and name have only been consolidated since 1970. Yet, in the past, like other pre-modern states, for certain periods Oman constituted an empire with blurred, fluctuating frontiers, changing allegiances and loyalties, overlapping and graded areas of power, partly extending to distant lands across large waters (Fig. 20.1). Inheriting a relatively weak state and a neither clearly defined nor thoroughly controlled territory, modern Oman experienced a difficult national process of integrating previously quite autonomous regions, dispersed (and, to this day with Musandam, territorially non-contiguous) parts[1] and of various social and ethno-linguistic groups, including those that immigrated or remigrated over the last decades.

[1]The last Omani "overseas" possession, Gwadar, on the Makran coast of what is now Pakistan, was relinquished in 1958.

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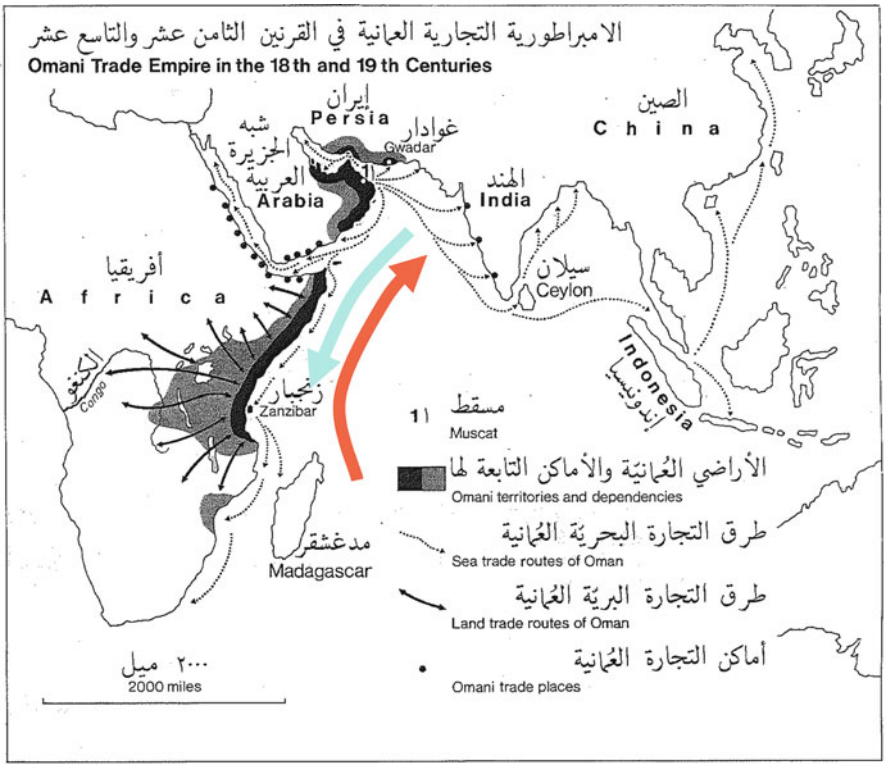

Fig. 20.1 The Omani Empire in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. *Black*: Territories and dependencies. *Grey*: Territories under strong Omani influence. ⟵ Prevailing monsoon winds in winter ⟶ Prevailing monsoon winds in summer. By courtesy of Fred Scholz, Berlin (Source: Scholz (1980: 102). Supplemented by the author)

Assertion of continuous territorial control was particularly difficult. In contrast to other non-Western parts of the world, the territorialisation of the Arab Peninsula was not completed during colonial times (Gabriel 1999). Only the discovery of oil and the contracting of exploration concessions increasingly called for the definition of borders since the 1930s. But agreements and demarcation were slow and produced a number of conflicts. The Buraimi border crisis that culminated in the 1950s (cf. also Kelly 1956; Steinbeck 1962, 1965; Al-Sayegh 2002), Saudi interference in other local conflicts and the Dhofar War from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s, demonstrate that tensions between Oman and its immediate neighbours also included conflicts about territorial sovereignty and delimitation.[2] Besides, covert imaginations of a prolonged nation actually reaching into the "Trucial Oman" cut off by the British still seem to circulate (Al-Sayegh 2002; Valeri 2007: 348). Finally,

[2]For these conflicts, please consult the general literature on Oman mentioned in the introduction to this volume.

state borders were not entirely determined until the early 2000s.[3] Even more, the previously open border zones increasingly become more severally monitored and securitized, such as in the Buraimi area, where the UAE recently built a fence along the border. As a quite young state, it is comprehensible that Oman for a long time and to this day shows reluctance to abandon sovereignty (as in the case of the Gulf monetary union) and engages in "shallow" regional integration (such as in the Indian Ocean scheme).

Yet, this volume endeavours to show the diverse facets, the multiple dimensions and the continuous flux of the regionalisation processes of which Oman, its people and society are part. Several authors point to the political fiction of a united and homogenous state as well as highlighting endeavours to create such a national unity (e.g. Pradhan, Valeri, Chatty, Verne and Müller-Mahn, Al-Mahrooqi and Tuzlukova). They illustrate that it will not be sufficient to regard Oman from the sole perspective of either a national or regional container, which concentrates on processes, developments and interlacements within well-defined, closed and contiguous geographical entities. Instead, authors demonstrate multiple passages, relations and links to the "outside" world as well as Oman's belonging to, involvement in and orientation towards manifold regional contexts. However, regions and scales are often difficult to define, just as exact attribution of concrete places, activities and life conditions proves to be problematic. Whereas both regions and scales are repeatedly in motion, some regional settings are starting to sediment and to be institutionalized, even if geographical outlines, e.g. of regional organisations, also regularly shift or are disputed. At the same time, "fuzzy" shapes contrast with the difficult task of finding adequate categories and names to designate "regions" without fixing them permanently.

Contributing to this is not only the central state as a unitary actor, but also a large number of diverse individual and collective social agents within and outside the state and the country. They are part of and act in a large range of political, economic, social and cultural fields and are of various geographical and social origin. They often present themselves in multiple roles simultaneously or change fields of action over time. Regularly, several social fields and material, institutional and symbolic dimensions are closely interrelated, and institutionalised and informal activities complement and interpenetrate each other. Yet they do not necessarily shape congruent spaces, but often show spatial mismatch.

Contributions to this volume also show the importance of discourses and symbols in the building of regions. Historical aspects matter, too: evolutions of the past open out into contemporary development paths; and recourse to historical interconnections strategically ties, substantiates and legitimises current ones. Reference is thereby often made to the historical Omani land and sea empire from before modern

[3]Borders with Saudi Arabia were not agreed upon until 1990 and the border agreements with Yemen and the UAE were not signed until 1992 and 2002 respectively (demarcation with the UAE was finalized in 2008). Maritime boundaries were delimitated with Iran in 1974, with Pakistan in 2000, and with Yemen in 2003 (UN 2010).

territorial states were established. But when historical links are continued or revived, mostly it is now other, new actors, such as multinational companies, state or regional institutions and transnational migrants, who are involved in their re-emergence and consolidation.

Finally, region-making can be regarded from different conceptual angles, from different observers' and actors' viewpoints and with quite different foci and underlying questions. Contributions to this book take a wide range of approaches and open up a lot of new perspectives on regionalisation processes in and around Oman. Whereas some of the present papers concentrate on institutional forms of regionalisation, highly formalized flows and attempts at interstate regulation, many others focus on the translocal character of places, people and their activities, relations and networks, which are quite often informal and transgress territorial borders by trying to evade state control. Regionalisation takes place not only through harmonious cooperation, but also through diverse conflicts; at the same time flows, interconnections and spaces encompass delimitations, oppositions as well as power asymmetries.

In the next paragraphs, this concluding chapter will sum up the emerging multiplex social geographies from above and below, as demonstrated in the previous chapters, first with respect to different regional contexts and scales, then from the perspective of the diverse social actors and fields that participate in region-building.

20.2 A Multidirectional and Multiscalar Regionalisation Process

The processes of regionalisation studied in this volume point in different geographical directions and occur on multiple spatial scales. Very often, the previous chapters refer to the Gulf region, mainly the Arab part of it, and sometimes to the Arabian Peninsula. In the past, the Gulf already featured centres of interregional trade (Pradhan) and was part of Oman's maritime empire and network of trade routes (Dietl, Nicolini). In more recent times, the Gulf economies have been important partners and hubs for the Sultanate's external economic relations (Wippel) and a main destination for migrants, e.g. from India (Pradhan), Zanzibar (Verne and Müller-Mahn) and Oman (Benz). For the last 30 years, the Arab side of the Gulf has become more and more institutionalized in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), which fuses economic and security dimensions and increasingly shows a "differentiated" type of integration (Zorob, Dietl, Wippel). For Brandenburg, the area constitutes a regional university landscape. Common matrimonial practices create similar health problems and foster exchange and cooperation on these issues (Beaudevin). But as already demonstrated for the Middle East and the Arab world (Wippel, in Chap. 1), the controversy about the "right" name for the "Persian" or "Arab" Gulf (Krause 2001) – or even its geographical extension (Zorob) – is subject to strategic considerations and reveals again the political sensitivity of allegedly value-free geographical designations.

Implicitly or explicitly, Oman is also regarded as a part of the Indian Ocean region (historically, see e.g. Nicolini). Wippel shows how institutional links, economic flows and strategic communication contribute to its constitution. According to Brandenburg, Oman should make use of its location in the heart of the Indian Ocean to become a regional hub for higher education. He especially points to its potential role for East Africa. This part of Africa in particular is mentioned as part of Oman's former transcontinental empire and trade connections, which extended along the coast and far into the hinterland (cf. also Nicolini, Dietl). Even diseases remind us of such historical links (Beaudevin). In this context, there is special interest in the relationship with Oman's former political and economic centre, Zanzibar, itself regarded as a commercial and cultural node in regional and global networks (Nicolini, Verne and Müller-Mahn). Verne and Müller-Mahn extensively investigate family, business and imaginary ties between remigrants to Oman and their former home, Zanzibar. "Zanzibar" stands not only for this island of relatively small size, but also for Oman's wider historical interests and presence in Eastern Africa. Asia, the other metageographical world region linked by the Indian Ocean, is mentioned mostly in economic contexts (e.g. Wippel) and itself divides into subregions. Among them, Central Asia was part of historical trade relations of the Gulf economies (Pradhan) as well as being included in the wider trans-Hormuz trade and future transport networks (Benz).

In contrast to these regions, the authors rarely bring up the subject of belonging to the "Arab" (or even "Muslim") world. Beaudevin points to common health problems and the role of "Arabness" in social status. Faculty has been imported from Arab countries, and Gulf universities are models for the other Arab countries. Egypt in particular was a traditional destination for studies abroad (Brandenburg) and a refuge for Zanzibaris after the revolution (Verne and Müller-Mahn).

Finally, from the Western world, colonial powers, such as the Portuguese and the British, arrived in the Indian Ocean and the Gulf areas in earlier centuries (Pradhan, Nicolini, Benz). Rather early, Indian traders already mediated exchange with Great Britain, the United States and Germany (Pradhan). Zanzibaris emigrated to Europe (Verne and Müller-Mahn), and in the health sector Europe is linked with Oman by training and expertise (Beaudevin). In particular the US and the UK are main destinations for studying abroad. In turn, the higher education system in the Gulf region is mostly modelled on the Anglo-American pattern (Brandenburg). Al-Mahrooqi and Tuzlukova point to the English-speaking world as a discontinuous and nearly globally-spanning linguistic macro-region.

As this volume focuses on "regional" processes and entanglement, bilateral relations are not in the centre of interest. Yet, they can also produce, initiate, counter or be part of regionalisation trends (for Oman's network of bilateral agreements cf. Wippel). Thus, several articles refer to formal interstate and informal transborder links and concomitant or competing region-building.

Besides Zanzibar, an "independent" political entity only until 1964, India is certainly among the most important references, due to the long history of interconnections, their multifacetedness and complexity. Pradhan actually sees Omani-Indian relations as (part of) a multiple regionalisation process. This not only concerns links

between the two countries, specifically with areas along India's western coast, but also integration into far larger, plurilocal migration and sea trade networks. In the field of health, India is a source of medical practices and staff as well as, together with Pakistan, a destination for therapeutic journeys (Beaudevin); in the education sector, it is a major origin of faculty (Brandenburg).

Another important counterpart is Iran, and especially its coastal areas, too. Nicolini refers to historical links with Persia. For Dietl, historical ties, past military support and common interests count in making Iran a main political partner for Oman, whereas Benz concentrates on the intense trade and social links between Musandam and the opposite coast. With respect to regional organisations, Iran provided a main motivation to found the GCC (Zorob). In the IOR-ARC, Iran and India are among the most engaged members, together with Oman (Wippel).

Among the nearby countries, the United Arab Emirates (and particularly Abu Dhabi) also has a special role for Oman as an associate in the GCC, a direct neighbour, relations with which are sometimes ambivalent (Zorob), an important trade partner (Benz, Wippel, Zorob) and a main destination for students (Brandenburg) and migrants (Benz). The UAE is also part of the translocal desertscape of the Harasiis (Chatty), together with the southern edge of Saudi Arabia. The kingdom itself is a second economic partner among the Arab Gulf states (Benz, Wippel), but above all a neighbour rather feared for its interference in domestic affairs and attempts to dominate the GCC (Dietl, Zorob).

More distant, "interregional" relations exist with the United States. Zorob studies the common free trade area, with wider Middle East aspirations behind it, and its interferences with the Gulf project; Dietl regards the US as Oman's central (and disputed) political partner that ultimately will impact on other regional relations.

Several authors in this volume study mainly intranational processes and describe the multiple internal regional antagonisms and cleavages. As already mentioned in my conceptual chapter, this includes in particular spatially reflected binary oppositions – traditional and contemporary, observed and alleged – within Oman; at the same time, the close social and economic interaction, and even symbiosis, between these different spaces is demonstrated (cf. also Chatty, Beaudevin, Nicolini). In this context, Mokhtar investigates the economic and demographic strengthening of littoral areas. Abdelghani studies the regionalisation of retail trade, in particular in the capital area. In contrast, private universities contribute to reducing regional imbalances (Brandenburg). Valeri looks at the de-autonomising of infranational solidarities and legitimacies that have become subordinated to the central state; administrative territories, repeatedly reorganised (Fig. 20.2) and superseding tribal areas, themselves became arenas for regional identification and socio-political protest. At the same time, the power of the sheikhs became more territorialized, yet outside their areas of origin.

Finally, other authors look at transborder regions, such as Musandam (Benz) and the Jiddat il-Harasiis (Chatty), and their ambivalent relations with the contemporary territorial nation-state, including links with other parts of Oman. For Dietl, a geopolitical area emerges that centres on the Strait of Hormuz. In her historical study, Hoffmann-Ruf rewrites the regional micro-history of a rural community with

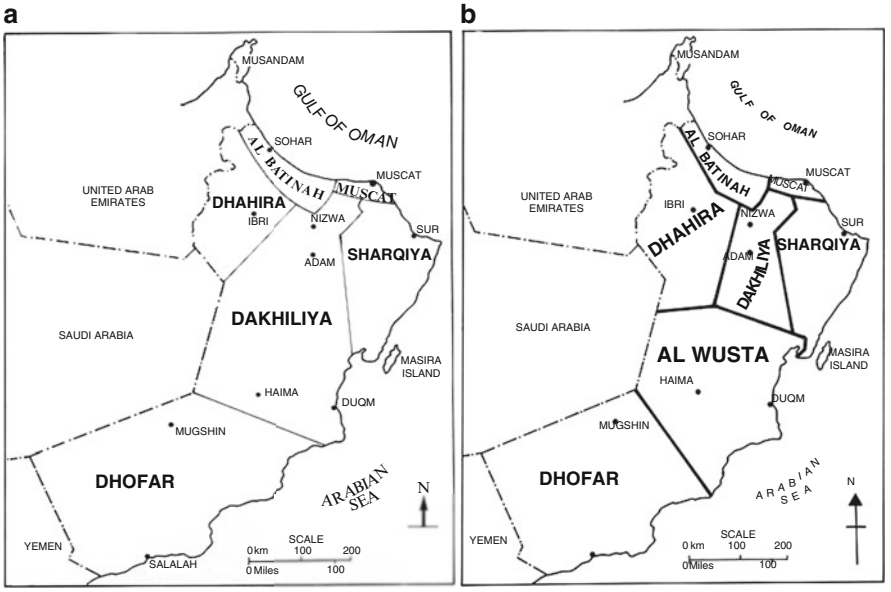

Fig. 20.2 Administrative division of Oman prior to and after 1991. **a**) Oman prior to 1991. **b**) Oman after 1991 (Notes: Al-Buraimi was created from parts of al-Dhahira in 2006. In 2011 al-Batinah and al-Sharqiya were divided in two Northern and Southern governorates each. By courtesy of Dawn Chatty, Oxford)

fluctuating translocal links. Additional authors have a strong focus on translocal and transnational connections in a wider context, too (Pradhan, Verne and Müller-Mahn, Beaudevin). Historically existing links and moves often became transnational when territorial borders were drawn and nation-states were established.

Regional belonging, however, is not unidimensional. Some authors emphasise actors' and places' location at the interface between several world regions, exemplifying Oman's multiple regional orientations. Nicolini thereby underlines Oman's historical situation at the crossroads between East Africa, the Gulf and Western India, with people pouring in from different directions and trade networks reaching far into the respective hinterlands. Similarly, Verne and Müller-Mahn point to the multidirectional links of Zanzibar; and for Pradhan, the Gulf economies are old trade hubs between the Fertile Crescent, the historic Silk Road and India. Geostrategically speaking, Dietl situates Oman today between the Arab Gulf states and the Iranian landmass. Institutionally, Oman is simultaneously embedded in the GCC, GAFTA and IOR-ARC (Wippel, Zorob), and Omani self-marketing emphasises the country's multi- and interregional location (Wippel). Brandenburg, finally, shows an entangled regionalisation process in higher education between the Western and the English-speaking world and the Gulf region.

Given Oman's special location and history, the interpenetration of sea and land is underlined as well. Thus, Nicolini insists on the reciprocal and common influence of land and maritime factors, whereas Verne and Müller-Mahn's seascape in fact

reaches far into the coastal hinterlands of Africa and Oman. But also contemporary Oman shows a close interconnection – and often opposition – between the coast and the interior (Mokhtar, Abdelghani, Beaudevin).

The contributions to this volume moreover show the multiscalar and multidistant character of regionalisation processes in which Oman is involved. Thus, for example, Al-Mahrooqi and Tuzlukova investigate the interdependencies between national, regional and global culture. Beaudevin integrates flows within Oman, therapeutic journeys abroad, and the exchange of personnel and findings and reconstructions of genealogical origin with even more distant countries. And local tribal communities long ago showed relations reaching from the immediate neighbourhood through other regions of contemporary Oman to faraway places in East Africa and today's Saudi Arabia (Hoffmann-Ruf).

20.3 A Great Variety of Geography-Making Actors and Fields of (Inter)Action

A great variety of actors, with switching and shifting roles, and a wide range of fields of activities and interaction, of discourses and imaginaries and of types of flows contribute to the multilayered and multidirectional regionalisation processes investigated in this volume. Even actors having the same "national" background come from widely diverging social settings, act in different social fields and have diverse motives to do so. In this context, other geographical perspectives emerge in this section, e.g. on specific Omani "trade" or "migration regions" besides those in other social fields and from other local standpoints.

As already mentioned, "states", that represent governments and official authorities and are often equated with respective rulers, their policies, strategies and activities in a regional perspective are still an important object of study (e.g. for Dietl, Zorob, Wippel) as well as state intervention in other actors' everyday life (esp. Chatty, Valeri). However, in many chapters more differentiated groups and actors appear inside the "state" with eventually diverging interests and positions, such as the security apparatus (Nicolini, Verne and Müller-Mahn), the administrative and development bureaucracy (Valeri, Chatty) and ministries of health and education (Beaudevin, Brandenburg). Others investigate the changing influence and contacts of sheikhs as additional political leaders and their ambivalent relationship with central authorities (Hoffmann-Ruf, Nicolini, Valeri).

From a state perspective, political fields are at the forefront of regionalisation. Here, we often have to do with the making of geopolitics and geoeconomics. Security issues are of primary concern: whereas Nicolini addresses past wars and conflicts in the northwestern Indian Ocean, Verne and Müller-Mahn have to start with revolution in and expulsion from Zanzibar and Dietl basically concentrates on geostrategies around the Strait of Hormuz. Conflicts in the Gulf area also form the background for trade relations and motives for regional cooperation (Benz, Zorob). People from the Indian subcontinent have long been recruited into Omani military

and police forces (Pradhan). Problems and attempts to achieve control over modern Oman's territory are considered by Valeri and Benz.

In the economic realm, over the last years Oman's cooperation and integration policies concentrated on the Gulf, the Arab world, the Indian Ocean rim and the US (Zorob, Wippel). The regional dimension of monetary policy is shown in the Sultanate's renouncing position towards GCC monetary integration (Zorob) and in effectively overlapping currency zones in Musandam (Benz). Infrastructure development – inland road networks (Abdelghani, Mokhtar), Indian Ocean ports (Wippel), planned ferry lines to Iran and transport corridors to Central Asia (Benz) – is an essential physical basis for regional movement and integration. Strategic positioning of Oman in the context of the Indian Ocean and major contemporary sea trade routes takes place in the marketing and branding of the country with the aim of legitimising and promoting trade, tourism and transport policies and projects (Wippel). Finally, regional profiles of domestic policies in areas such as health (Beaudevin) and education (Brandenburg) are related to the Gulf, the West and India, among other regions.

Also regularly participating in regionalisation processes are other economic actors such as seafarers, traders, businessmen, bankers, carriers, consumers and retail traders (Pradhan, Benz, Verne and Müller-Mahn, Nicolini, Benz, Abdelghani). In regard to trade in the past, Oman's position in the triangle of the Gulf, the Indian subcontinent and Eastern Africa is considered in particular (Nicolini, Pradhan). Contemporary trade extends, in varying degrees (also depending on commodities and measurement methods), to all regions adjacent to the wider Indian Ocean, but there are also considerable economic links with Western Europe and the USA (Zorob, Wippel). Transstate trade networks stretch from Musandam to both sides of the Persian Gulf and – to a degree not yet investigated – also towards Central Asia (Benz, Dietl), whereas translocal business ties are being re-established between Oman and Zanzibar (Verne and Müller-Mahn). Regional flows of money take place in direct investment, primarily between Oman and Western countries, Arab Gulf economies and India (Wippel), in Gulf aid (Zorob), in financial support for relatives in Zanzibar and in migrants' remittances, e.g. to India (Pradhan).

Social relations form quite different spaces. Family relations, involving multi-form exchange, are the basis for a renewed Oman-Zanzibar relationship (Verne and Müller-Mahn). Nicolini mentions the marriages arranged to establish good relations between different countries' rulers in the past. Migrants play another important role in translocal processes linked with Oman. Besides Verne and Müller-Mahn's focus on the Zanzibar-Omanis, who are refugees and remigrants, others consider work migration in its regional dimensions, with people coming to Oman mainly from Asian and Arab countries: Pradhan, in particular, investigates Indian migrants of different ethno-religious, socio-professional and regional origin in the past (cf. also Nicolini) and present, whereas the Omani university and health systems offer employment opportunities for a wide range of expatriates (Brandenburg, Beaudevin). In modern times, Omani workers have also left for neighbouring Gulf countries (Benz). Illegal migrants from Iran and South Asia transit via Musandam to the UAE or, if blocked, stay in Oman (Dietl).

Other regular, often seasonal movements are engaged in by tribe members, for example, by the Harasiis moving nomadically between Oman and the UAE (Chatty) and in Musandam moving between the coast and the mountains as fishermen and peasants (Benz). Others investigate historical tribal areas in and beyond the contemporary al-Dakhiliya governorate (Hoffmann-Ruf) and the disrobing of the political content of traditional tribal territories all over the Sultanate (Valeri). In parallel to that, these tribes, together with other ethno-linguistic groups, show changing roles and activities in the processes of nation-building, modernisation and globalisation. They are markers of ancestry, but also of health issues (Beaudevin). Pradhan and Verne and Müller-Mahn consider the Indian expat community's and the Zanzibaris' ambivalent links with contemporary Omani society in translocal and multi-ethnic places, such as Muscat or Oman in general, respectively.

Tourism – in particular from Western and Gulf countries – constitutes an important element in economic regionalisation processes (Zorob, Wippel), and tourism facilities are being built to help develop remote parts of Oman (Benz). Due to migration and tourism, consumption patterns in Oman are subject to multiple influences of cuisines of the East and the West, and regular shuttling for shopping takes place between the hinterland and Muscat (Abdelghani). The medical landscape emerging from the treatment of genetic diseases includes several flows of patients, staff and expertise: they go from the Omani countryside to the capital and to and from the Indian subcontinent, the Gulf and Europe, and they encompass imaginations of opposing national regions and ancestral links with Africa and Asia (Beaudevin).

The cultural field comprises moves for purposes of higher education: this includes students and faculty, consultants and investors, as well as ideas and role models, shifting mainly among Oman, the West, the Gulf and India, and potentially East Africa and other Indian Ocean countries (Brandenburg). Language and the media serve communication, information and the promotion of Omani culture, especially with expatriates and tourists within Oman and in the wider English-speaking community (Al-Mahrooqi and Tuzlukova). News exchange is also an essential basis on which social relations between Zanzibar-Omanis and their relatives in Eastern Africa are maintained (Verne and Müller-Mahn).

Finally, "external" actors and powers have an important role in regionalisation, too. Not of Omani descent, they can interfere from outside Oman as well as be directly present inside the country. Colonial powers, such as the Portuguese and the British, who arrived in different centuries in the Indian Ocean and the Gulf areas (Pradhan, Nicolini, Benz), and the US administration (Dietl, Zorob) have played important roles. International agencies, NGOs and experts (Chatty) and multi- and transnational companies, e.g. in retail and extractive sectors (Chatty, Abdelghani), intervene to different degrees and in different places. Even the transnational and partly elitist Zanzibar-Omani community displays traits of being outsiders (Verne and Müller-Mahn). Yet, a clear division between actors internal and external to a region becomes quite difficult, and even inappropriate, when we consider transnational and translocal entanglement and regional contexts with blurring and intersecting shapes, limits and scales.

20.4 A Need for Further Investigation from a Regional Perspective

The present volume shows the multiform, multidirectional and multiscalar regionalisation processes in, across and around contemporary Oman. Despite being quite extensive, this publication cannot be exhaustive. More insights already exist – sometimes implicitly rather than explicitly – in other publications, but in many more respects Oman and the Gulf area still need to be explored from a frankly regional perspective; micro-, transstate and translocal approaches are of special interest. For example, Omanis' shopping tour destinations include Dubai and thus display a transnational element; piracy recently arising off Oman's coasts is of transterritorial character, too; and maritime and overland infrastructure, now more urgently under construction or in the pipeline, will help to foster regional linkages. In contrast, previously intense cross-border relations in the twin-city of Al Ain–Buraimi have obviously been affected by the recently erected border fence. In other terms, Valeri (2007: 336 ff.) points to growing influences from and embedding in the Arab-Muslim world, whereas e.g. Mühlböck's (2010) study on the transnational links of clans and tribes between Dhofar and Yemeni al-Mahra and Hadramawt could not be integrated in this volume.

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