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Empty Orientalism and Social Amnesia: The Study of Commodification of History in the Sultanate of Oman

Senija Causevic

SOAS, University of London, sc83@soas.ac.uk

Mark Neal

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Title: Empty Orientalism and Social Amnesia: The Study of Commodification of History in the Sultanate of Oman

Author: Senija Causevic & Mark Neal

Affiliation: University of London, SOAS & Asian Institute of Technology

Contact: sc83@soas.ac.uk

Abstract:

Through the presentation of statehood of tourist policies, facilities, and activities in the Sultanate of Oman, this work in progress observes the act of obfuscating political history from the tourism gaze with a form of orientalism rooted in cultural heritage.

At the theoretical level we approach these matters from the perspective of Maurice Bloch's concept of 'Double Burial', Said's work on Orientalism, and Bakhtin's Heteroglossia, through which we frame this obscuring of political/military relativities with cultural heritage as 'empty Orientalism', a form of reflexive staged authenticity, socially constructed to enchant visitors and convince them that they are experiencing the 'real' Oman—a country of courtesy, tolerance, and infrastructural beauty, rooted in a rich culture.

Through discussing our recent research through semi-structured interviews with so-called 'key informants', and ethnographic research on tour guides, other 'front stage' ground-handlers, and tourists in Oman, this study addresses 'empty Orientalism' at four levels: the reasons for its imposition by the state, and how it is enforced; its performative realization by institutions, tour guides, and other ground-handlers; its experiential implications for tourists; and its political and existential implications for different sectors of Omani society. Key to understanding the imposition and performance of 'empty Orientalism' is the governmental policy of promoting tourism as a strategic industry in the country's economic development, and in its diversification away from petrochemicals. We seek to understand why this policy of history-less empty Orientalism is imposed, by highlighting the controversial role of such historical sites in tribal rivalries and feuds, the historical dependence of Oman on the slave trade, and two recent major civil wars—the Jebel Al Akhdar Wars (1954–1959) and the Dhofar Rebellion (1962–1975).

The obscuring of political and military history through empty Orientalism has, to a certain extent, been successful at the economic level, with increasing numbers of tourists coming to Oman and visiting historical sites. However, the historically rooted contradictions and conflicts in Omani society remain; and with the globalization and liberalization that goes with economic development, the exclusion of history from the commodification of historical monuments is becoming increasingly problematic to sustain.