

The Economic, Social, and Cultural Facts of Oman's Souks in Pre-Islamic Period

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Most historical sources point out that the period extending from the first century before Christ until the fifth century (BC), markets could play a very vital role in making progress and prosperity of economic life as important centers for polarizing trade together with a vital field of financial activity. Thus, they are regarded as a basic element in the flourishing of society because they were centers of buying, selling and striking bargains and transactions as well as they could distribute agricultural and occupational products. At that time, Oman's markets have come longways in their development, marketplace and they varied in their roles, or ways of organization, locations, kinds until they became very interrelated to all aspects of Arab lives including religious, cultural, economic and social. This research aims at identifying the basic facts and data of economic, social and cultural aspects of Oman's markets in pre-Islamic periods through reviewing historical sources and references in that connection.

Key words: *Markets, Oman, Pre-Islamic period, souks.*

Introduction

Man knew the idea of barter and trade-off since the dawn of human existence. This idea became deep-rooted for all trade transactions among all man-kind that came to be in its complete image through practicing the production according to people's needs and desires as well as organizing supply and demand deals in an organized and comprehensive framework. Thus, this idea was called the market. The markets could have a great impact on mankind existence in that one could associate their existence since man resorted to the barter and trade –off system to exchange his daily tools and instruments together with his livestock and cattle



as well as his needs of primitive clothes through markets before they became daily markets in the urban centers (Ibn Jaefer, 2007).

The word "souk" was dubbed of each place through which selling, and buying was done among people in the places that gathered around shops and stores as well as venders, trades and craftsmen. These souks represented the industrial and commercial centers in cities (Al-Darbush, 1989). The word "souk" is still dubbed of specific area in the city and its meaning refer only to the Place where permanent and temporal shops gathered or assembled as well. It was possible for the souk to be settled in the roads or the street outside the city or near one of the city gates (Hassan, 2004).

As a matter of fact, the word souk means that a group of shops and industries that are regarded as a center of commercial and industrial activities as well as they mean the simple souk that spread in the villages (AlKharbutly, 1966). In the Arabian Peninsula, souks had a great role that influenced all aspects of Arab lives including social, economic and cultural. These souks have been organized and set up as commercial institutions through which Arab population had changed from commodities barter into financial exchange. The souks had been developed through time and many towns had been built and thus these souks had become cultural and informative markets through which people could exchange cultures, poetry and different types of literature, getting knowledge of tribes and societies tidings (Al-Afghani, 1993).

The period extending from the first century till the fifth century (BC). Souks played a great role in flourishing economic life as important centers, of polarizing trade, and as vital field for financial activities. Thus, they could be a basic element in making progress and prosperity. Souks were centers of selling and buying, holding bargains (Ahmed, 2004). At that time souks have come longway in their development, marketplace and they varied in their roles, ways of organization, locations, kinds till they became very interrelate to all aspects of Arab life including religious, cultural, economic and social (Al-Kubaisi, (1978).

Over the ages, Oman was an important center of production, trade in Arab Peninsula. Souks in Oman had multiple roles such as economic social and cultural. The current paper deals with the economic, social and cultural facts of Oman's souks in pre—Islamic period.

Oman: Location and Importance

Oman is an Arab country on the Southeastern coast of the Arabian Peninsula in Western Asia (Abo Al-Alaa, 1988). Yaqut Al-Hamawi said "Oman is an Arab country located on the coast of Yemen and India between longitude of about 34 minutes and 30 degrees and latitude of about (19) degrees and 45 minutes in the eastern side of Hajar (Al-Sayaby, 1980). Souks had



varied concerning the reason bend its denomination (Al –Ani, 1977). Ibn Al Kalby held that Oman was attributed to Saba' Ibn Yafthan Ibn Ibraheem Al-khalil (PBUH) because he built Oman (Al-Qalqashandi, 1913). Oman facing both Arabian sea and Arabian Gulf, connecting North side to Bahrain and South side Al-Shahar and west side connecting Rub Al-Khali. It is naturally that its borders from the east and South Easter region connecting the sea (Al Wahiby, 2012).

Oman represented a base and of Arabian Gulf –holding a strategically important position at the mouth of Indian ocean, that is to say, it is located on the main road of blooming trade from China to cities locating on the two sides of the Gulf. Oman is a great city since it is the lands of the Azd tribes (Al-Sayaby, 1980). Oman had many important cities like Sahar, Muscat, Sur, Dibba and Dhofar.

The climate of Oman can be described as subtropical dry, hot desert climate with low annual rainfall, very high temperature. Oman occupies a vitally important strategic location and lying between latitudes (16-40) and (26-20) to the North and longtitude (51-20) and (59-40) to the east. This strategic location led to divide Oman into two climates. The first one is the North province of Oman and the second is Dhafar province in that it is hot and humid on the coastal areas and hot and dry in the interior with the exception of higher mountains which enjoy a moderate climate throughout the round. Rainfall is generally light and irregular in Winter (Al-Sayaby, 1980). As well as the seasonal climate of Southern province in Autumn marked by monsoon rain occurring regularly between June and September.

The geographical location of Oman's ports plays a great role in making the Omani cities an important center of commercial operations such as importing /exporting among well-known world markets in old age linking them into the world trade routes. This fact gave Oman a special standing with world trade. Oman's ports are distinguished for having large ports with great markets and trade. Thus, Oman's location makes it a gate of the first Arabian Gulf leading to India and the east Africa for this reason Omani people transferred most trade markets of African coast into Oman to be important to the given centers (Al-Qalqashandi, 1913).

Pre-Islamic Souks of Oman

There is no historical evidence of the emergence of souks of Oman; yet, the historical indicators dated back to ancient periods. The Greek and European sources showed that the well-known souks in Oman was "Dhafar souk" which was mentioned in the book *The Periplus of Erythrean*.

This book gave a detailed description of Arab caravan cities extending from India, giving account of its exports and imports. This souk was well-known for importing fabric, textile,



wheat, oil, sesame and exporting incense (Al –Ani, 1977). Whereas Arabic sources didn't give specific date or period that these souks were famous or popular in Arabian Peninsula generally in Oman, particularly in pre-Islamic period.

Al –Qalqashandy in his book (Subah Al-Asha) said that "as for Oman as one of the most important Arab souks in Pre-Islamic period (Al-Afghani, 1993) especially in the last two centuries in Pre-Islamic period; however, Oman was well-known for having a souk named souk of Oman that was mentioned in Pre-Islamic poetry and it was occupied by Persian domination since Persian occupied many Arab souks such as Hajjar and Al-Mashager (Yahya, 1979).

In a Pre-Islamic period, Arabs went to Oman to hold souks there since Oman was located between Persian and India and Abyssinia where commodities and goods form these kingdoms gathered altogether and barter and exchange had been held among the traders of Persian, Abyssinia, India, Yemen, The Hejaz, the Levant and Iraq. This souk remained well-known even after Islam (Al-Hamawi, 1955).

The prosperity of coast cities in the eastern shore of Arabian Peninsula led to flowing out of commercial commodities and goods in that period. Chief of these cities was Sahar that was called Oman base since many commercial activities flourished in Pre-Islamic period for this reason many visitors and newcomers had gathered there (Al-Masudi, 1983).

Sahar was one of the most distinguished souks of Oman in Pre-Islamic period where it was called a borough of Oman, hallway, and treasury of the East and the West (Al-Masudi, 1983). It was Oman's old towns due to its abundance of money (Al-Hamiri, 1978).

Countless traders visited it every year since it was famous for different trade and goods. Sahar supplied India and China with countless goods and commodities (Mutwali, 1970). Sahar was also anchorage for commercial ships where ships could assemble before setting out to the Gulf and discharge part of its shipment in this huge commercial center (Al-Serafi, 1961).

Sahar was a crossway for caravans passing by the South of Arabian Peninsula where there was a plain suitable for agriculture of crops and fruit. This helped many ships to supply by many foodstuffs before setting out in long journey (Al –Ani, 1977). According to Ibn Habeeb, who said," Sahar was a very important commercial center upon the advent of Islam and one of the most Arab annual souks before Islam (Al-Afghani, 1993).

Arabs in Pre-Islamic period held Sahar souk in the tenth until the fifteenth of Rajab was a big souk visited by many traders from remote countries (Al-Hamawi, 1955). One of the Omani



souks that was distinguished for its fame and standing was Hurmiz, as Al-Hamawi said," a city in the sea that had a bay locating on the Persian land "(Al-Maqdisi, 1906). It had many souks with many shops and a big store where products of India, China and Yemen were stored (Ibn Al-Athir,2008) as well as other areas (Shath, 2000).

The Economic Facts of Souks in Oman before Islam

It is hard to divide into separate sections between Oman's strategic location with its geographical and natural features and between the economic significance and standing that it enjoyed in the global level and it is hard to divide into sections the geographical features and economic facts of souks and commercial centers that originated in Oman in Pre-Islamic period or even in the post- Islamic period since Oman was one of the important areas in the ancient world. This fact stressed the importance of emergence of commercial souks in Oman. The historic sources pointed out that the commercial trade —of between Oman , Mesopotamia and the Levant dated back to a very early period , of the 3rd century BC in that these historic sources found out royal text in Akkad dated back to 2350 BC and to Serjun era saying that he established a kingdom involved areas extending from Miluca to the mountains of Cedar , and silver mountain on the Mediterranean sea .There were many flourished commercial centers such Miluca , Majan which is the old name for Oman , Dilmon , Mary , Iyarmoti and Ebla. The archeological discoveries showed that there were many prescription evidence in Ebla referring to commercial links between Majan and Dilmon and the Northern area of the Levant in the early bronze age.

Oman's ports and harbors had a vital importance in the domain of Arabian Gulf that reinforced the development of its souks and its commercial activities. Besides Oman had represented an important lifeblood for navigation between South-West Asia and the far East since Omani people had dealt with incense, spice and diamond since 3000 BC. Moreover, some Egyptologists pointed out that there was commercial and marine connection between the Arabian Gulf and the Red Sea dated back to 7000 BC (Al-Nabulsi, 1979). The Omani souks and ports had played a vital role in strengthening commercial relationships between the neighboring nations and districts just the case in Samahram port – Dhafar port and souk – that was founded in the first century BC, which many inscriptions and many ancient monuments showed that in Khor Ruri port near Dhafar where many ships were bounded to India from which incense was exported (Kulaib, and Ghalib, 2011).

The archeological evidence showed that the economy of Southern area of Arabian Peninsula was very flourishing and its souks and commercial centers were booming and prospering especially it depended fully on the trade of incense and religious sacred perfumes where incense was exported to Europe, Mesopotamia, the Levant since it was used in religious rituals and funeral ceremonies (Shath, 2000). Oman became a commercial center for



distributing priceless goods coming from India and Africa such as spice, and ivory that arrived by sea to Oman ports like Aden. Incense was transported to the North on the back of camels during the tenth century BC. The Greek historian Herodotus (425-485 BC) stated, "the Southern area of Arabian Peninsula was famous for incense, Myrrh, Cassia, Cinnamon and fun mastic where guarded by winged snakes with different colors (Ali Jawad, 1969). Herodotus pointed out that Phoenicians were acting as middlemen in trading spice and incense between Yemen, Oman and the Greek (Yahya, 1979) Oman importance and commercial role together with its souks and ports was clarified by Pilinus writing (23-72AD) and Istrabon Pilinus said, "some of spice and incense were produced in Yemen and Oman such as fun mastic, Myrrh, mastic, cistus as well as cinnamon and scutellum. It had been mentioned that fun mastic was collected twice a year due to its booming and marketability (Pitchard, 1955).

Since the second half of the first century BC where the Romans dominated and occupied the East areas of Mediterranean, Oman appeared as one of the most commercial centers and barters in the ancient world in which commercial welfare had been prevailed (Ibn Basal, 1955). The historical sources stressed that Oman witnessed remarkable, commercial, cultural advancement and progress where the rise of production reflected by economic and cultural uprising which led to the booming of trade in the Southern area of Arabian Peninsula in general and Oman in particular (Ali Jawad, 1969).

In addition to the commercial relationships that link Oman to India and South East of Asia and China. Oman also had close commercial relationships to the East of Africa since Omani people played a great role in narration and international marine trade as well as Omani people got a great experience from their works in marine trade (Yahya, 1999). It had been noted that Oman had a great strategic importance and location. This led both Persian and Rome to seek domination over Oman.

The Social Facts of Oman's Souks before Islam

The Oman souks, in addition to its commercial Functions, had also social functions since these souks were objects of communication, integration and acquaintance among tribes and other nations that arrived Oman for the purpose of trading and looked for other opportunities especially Oman was considered a strategic link between Persia, India and Abyssinia and other Arabian Peninsula.

The historical and archaeological sources stressed that the commercial relations between Oman and the rest of countries and Nations were not only limited to commercial agricultural barters rather they extended to social and cultural relations.



The historical sources quoted that many matrimonies had been done between the North of Arabian Peninsula and Omani people (Elizabeth, 1976).

The archaeological facts stressed that the commercial barter through lands or sea in Oman had been done in terms of social and urban mechanisms rather than commercial relationships. Perhaps, the marine products like diamond, and oysters were ones of the old goods of commercial barter (Kulaib, and Ghalib, 2011).

The commercial communication played an important role in forming the mechanism of religious, economic and cultural relationships among Omani society as well as the other Arab nations (Ali Jawad, 1969). The Omani sources took a great part in establishing a new type of national relationships between the population of Arabian Peninsula itself (Ali Jawad, 1969). The role played by Omani souks as a factor of unification and strengthening of tribal entity, on the other hand this created a contrast between the tribal values and individual trend represented by trade (Ali Jawad, 1969).

The historical facts held that Omani souks were but commercial stations and others were holy places for worshiping in specific seasons such as pilgrimage (Al-Shammari, 1977). The historical facts confirmed that Omani souks had immense role in shaping the social relationships between tribes together with the unification of these Arab tribes as well as reinforcing the unity of values, habits and norms (Ali Jawad, 1969).

The historical sources pointed out that Arab tribes protected and saved those who arrived in Oman since they believe that these souks were sacred places that should be protected, and those comers should be also safeguarded as well (Al-Afghani, 1993). People came to Oman for the sake of protection and security and these souks were annual (Al-Shareef, 1965) in which peace talks and arbitration held to solve disputes among tribes (Al-Afghani, 1993).

The Arab habits limited that these souks were held in inviolable months where aggression, invasion, fight, retaliation were forbidden as well as the inviolable months included four: Dhu Al-Qi'dah, Dhu -Al -Hijjah, Muharram and Rajab (Ali Jawad, 1969).

The Cultural Facts of Oman's Souk Before Islam

The Omani souks before Islam were headed for trade and social affairs as well as cultural and literary reasons. In fact, they were regarded as literary gatherings before Islam where poetry and self-esteem and many disputes settled down (Al-Afghani, 1993).

The seasons of commercial souks were not but seasons of literature, poetry and discourse where many tribes had been accustomed to in the Arabian Peninsula. Thus, the Arab tribes



had attempted strenuously to unify its principles, protecting its activities with the purpose of achieving different goals including poetry, trade and culture (Al-Afghani, 1993). One of the most important cultural facts of Omani souks before Islam was that it was a place of integration, co-existence and melting pot for nations and coming tribes to be influences by language, habit, values and religion (Al-Afghani, 1993). To pave the way for generalizing this language through the holy Qura'n after the prophet's mission (PBUH) and proclamation his Call (Al-Kubaisy, 1989).

The Omani souks paved the way to unify language and literature and they acted to eliminate differences among tribal mentalities. For this reason, no wonder that the Prophet Mohammed (PBUH) headed for souks to proclaim his Call (Al-Shammari, 1977). The Arab souks were pulpits for spreading cultural, social and economic values and all these facts helped to unify Arabs (Ubaid, 2000).

Oman had great orators and poets before Islam .Yet; their impacts and vestiges were faded away thus the old poetry that existed up to the modern time was poetry of Malik Ibn Fiham Al-Azdi and his sons, Al-Ashtar Al-Hamami, Al- Awaar Ibn Amro Al-Azdi, Al —Awas Ibn Zaid Manat Al-Abdi, Tha'laba Ibn Bakir Al-Azdi, Al- Jalandi Ibn Mustakbir Al-Azdi, Jawas Ibn Hayan Al-Azdi, Rabkha Ibn Luay Al-Qarashi, Sulaima Ibn Malik Al-Azdi and A'idh Ibn Selma Al-Azdi, Amir Ibn Tha'laba Al-Azdi, Al-Naji, Oday Ibn Wadaa' Al-Azdi, Oqba Ibn Al-Noaman Al-A'tki, Mazin Ibn Ghadhoba Al-Ta'ee Masliya Ibn Hazan Al-Hadani and finally Hana'a Ibn Malik Al-Azdi.

Conclusion

As previously mentioned, it is very clear that Oman, through ages, was a very great and vital center of production and trade in Arabian Peninsula. Oman souks were multifunctional places where Oman represented all the particulars of people at that time including the social, economic and cultural fields. The core study of the current research paper is that the social, economic and cultural facts of Omani souks in pre—Islamic period. The geographical location of Omani ports and harbors played a great role in making Omani cities great and important commercial centers among the old-world souks. This feature gave Oman a great standing in the international trade due to the Oman's port which contained a lot of souks, trade and commercial activities. The other reason was that Oman had great location which made it the gateway of the Arabian Gulf through India and East Africa as well as Oman had many great souks such as Sahar, Dhafar and Oman.

The most important economic facts of Oman's souks were that they participated in achieving economic developments reflected through the luxury of its people and the abundance. As for the social facts, they represented as objects of integration and acquaintance of tribes and other nations that arrived Oman for the purpose of trade and other opportunities.



As for the cultural facts of Oman's souks, they represented by its impacts on language and literature in which they were big fields for exchanging ideas, thoughts and consultations. They were also places for poetry, self—esteem and debate.

Furthermore, Omani souks took great parts in approximating viewpoints among Arab languages and dialects and they were means of linguistic communication and understanding in which they had great impact in unifying and edifying Arab language.

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