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### *Genealogy, Status, and the Politics of Marriage in Oman*

Mandana Limbert, Queens College

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#### **Abstract**

This paper explores marriage practices and debates in the Sultanate of Oman. In particular, it focuses on the ways that shifting ideas of Arabness in the twentieth century underlie and have helped shape the choice of marriage partner as well as religious and national restrictions on marriage. The paper suggests that marriage between “Arabs” and so-called “servants” (*akhdām*) has both enabled and restricted social mobility in Oman. The possibility and prevention of social mobility through marriage has often been enacted through people's acceptance and practice of the rule of sufficiency (*kafā'a*), which dictates that women may only marry men of equal or higher status. This rule has historically enabled servant women to marry “Arab” men, thereby (theoretically) providing not only some social mobility for themselves, but most importantly for their children who, by the complimentary notion of patrilineality, are generally accepted as “Arab.” Many Omanis (in Oman as well as East Africa) have, however,

considered the reverse to be unacceptable and illegal: that is, Arab women may not marry servant men. The possibility for social mobility through marriage rests in part, however, on the meaning of being "Arab." I argue that with the modern nation-state, Arabness in Oman has changed from being a caste or class category to an ethnic or racial one, thereby shifting away from patrilineality and occupation as determining Arabness and toward language, territory, and phenotype as its determining and evidentiary qualities. As such, higher status "Arabness" has both expanded to include those who speak Arabic and who live within the territory of a proclaimed Arab state, and yet also restricted to those who are said "to look" Arab.