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Invisible veterans: defeated militants and enduring revolutionary social values in Dhufar, Oman

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Abstract

Those who have participated in organized political violence often develop distinctive identities as veteran combatants. But what possibilities exist to produce a veteran identity for "invisible" veterans denied public recognition or mention, such as politically repressed defeated insurgents? Everyday socializing during or after political violence can help restore social worlds threatened or destroyed by violence; an examination of "invisible" veteran defeated revolutionaries in Dhufar, Oman, shows how everyday socializing can help reproduce a distinctive veteran identity despite political repression. Ethnographic fieldwork with veteran militants from the defeated revolutionary liberation movement for Dhufar reveals that while veterans (who are a diverse group) no longer publicly reproduce their political and economic revolutionary ideals, through everyday same-sex male socializing some veterans reproduce revolutionary ideals of social, especially tribal and ethnic, egalitarianism. These practices mark a distinctive veteran identity, and indicate an "afterlife" of lasting social legacies of defeated revolution.

Keywords

Dhufar; everyday socializing; Oman; revolution; social egalitarianism; veterans

Introduction

Participation in organized political violence creates lasting material and social legacies for veteran combatants. Insights into how state authorities, veterans and other citizens create former combatant identities have mostly emerged from contexts in which there is some official recognition of ex-fighters: as veterans of a state-backed army or of a former armed movement turned political party. But if we are to understand – as the contributions to this special issue aim to do – how multiple actors in the wake of organized political violence produce a distinctive veteran identity, we must also ask how veterans do so in contexts of official "invisibilization" – such as defeated insurgents and revolutionaries living under a government which forbids public recognition or mention of their existence. What, for instance, of ex-insurgents who have been forbidden a continued public presence in forms such as an opposition party or veterans' association? How do such officially "invisible"

veterans also produce a distinctive identity, and what factors affect such efforts? Clearly, a tension exists between the tendency for veterans to experience and reproduce lasting bonds, and the forbidding of public recognition for these invisible veterans.

By examining how, even in adverse circumstances of official invisibility, veterans maintain a distinctive identity, this article explores insights into important questions about veterans and societies emerging from political violence. Firstly, the *kinds* of distinctive qualities that veterans can maintain, and the *means* available for them to do so, will be affected by official invisibilization. Where "visible" veterans have produced wide-ranging political and gendered subjectivities, invisible veterans' production of distinctiveness may indicate which elements of veterans' identity and values endure through time beyond defeat. In particular, where invisible veterans are defeated revolutionaries, the extent to which they produce a veteran identity suggests how revolutionary values and programs generate legacies beyond defeat. Secondly, focusing on the production of a distinctive identity for invisible veterans helps bring to light counterhistories (Thompson 1963) that reflect the points of view not of dominant power holders (such as victorious state authorities), but of those who have been marginalized (e.g. by military and political defeat). Such counterhistories illuminate everyday experiences of those living under a political and social order which they sought to overthrow.

To investigate how invisible veterans produce a distinctive identity, I analyze everyday socializing of former militants of the liberation movement from the Dhufar region of southern Oman. Founded in 1965 and defeated in 1975, this movement changed names (and political orientation) over time. For simplicity I echo the widespread practice of Dhufaris (both former militants and other residents of Dhufar) and refer to "the Front" (*al-jabha*). The Front espoused a program of social revolution, including the promotion of social egalitarianism, evident in education, social and marriage policies (Takriti 2013: 107-131). The ideological and practical support for the Front from combatants and non-combatants blurs the boundaries between armed and unarmed participation in political violence; in discussing the Front I therefore use veteran to refer to both former armed and unarmed militants. Since defeating the Front, the authoritarian government of Sultan Qaboos bin Said has allowed no mention in public discourse of its erstwhile adversary, nor can ex-revolutionaries form a political party or veterans' association. Additionally, Sultan Qaboos' rule has combined strategies of, on the one hand, heavy investment in Dhufar's economic development as a means of winning former opponents' "hearts and minds" and, on the other hand, cooptation and political repression of potential dissidents including veterans of the Front (Valéri 2015 [2009]).

Despite the official invisibility of the Front's veterans, forty years after the Front's defeat some former revolutionaries demonstrated through everyday socializing their continuing valorization of social egalitarianism, a value which the Front endorsed. Veterans' attachment to social egalitarianism jarred both with prevailing social hierarchies in Dhufar, and with the wider hierarchical patronage networks underpinning power relations in the absolutist and authoritarian monarchy of the Sultanate of Oman. Through everyday enactments of social egalitarianism, some veterans reproduced a distinctive identity as veteran revolutionaries, even when no official recognition was possible.

In arguing that defeated militants reproduce social revolutionary values I do not suggest that Front veterans reproduced revolutionary political values such as a

desire to capture the state. Their reproduction of social egalitarianism – alongside related kinship practices and informal, unofficial commemorative acts (Wilson N.d.) – nevertheless has wider, subtle significance. In standing out as a disruption of prevailing social hierarchies, these practices show how defeated revolution can have a social "afterlife" of continuing significance, influence and legacies. This afterlife of defeated revolution extends in the Dhufari case to recurring platforms of progressive politics in forms such as innovative electoral leagues (Wilson 2016a) and Oman's longest Arab Spring protests (Worrall 2012).

These arguments concerning veterans' everyday lives and the social afterlife of revolution reflect my own interpretations of former Dhufari revolutionaries' lives. Mention of the Front is extremely sensitive in Oman; this necessarily constrained interlocutors' willingness to discuss past connections with the Front with me. Here, as in other sensitive research contexts, leaving certain things and questions unspoken can be an important part of fieldwork (Malkki 1995: 51). I let interlocutors set the boundaries of discussion and of their willingness to share or withhold their own interpretations. Consequently, I alone am responsible for my interpretations and arguments here. For the sake of anonymity, I have changed biographical details of some interlocutors, use pseudonyms for some, and sometimes use impersonal descriptors ("an interlocutor") as a way of further unlinking observations and interlocutors.

I draw on fieldwork in 2013 and 2015, including five months (in 2015) when I was based in Dhufar's capital, Salah. I made connections through chains of acquaintances that led to my informally meeting 26 veterans and more than 20 family members. I conducted participant observation and informal interviews in spaces such as homes, cafés and workplaces. According to interlocutors' preferences we spoke in Arabic or English.

In what follows, I first assess the significance of everyday life for veterans of organized political violence. Then, after introducing the war and its legacies in Salah, I describe the scope, and limitations, of ex-revolutionaries' everyday socializing for producing revolutionary values of social egalitarianism. I conclude by reflecting on the relevance of these quotidian practices for veteran identities, revolutionary legacies and post-war political life.

Veterans, political violence and everyday life

Whether they serve in state-backed armies or insurgencies, those who have participated in militarily-organized political violence often feel strong social bonds for peers that may last for years after unrest has (officially) ended (e.g. Coulter 2009; Schafer 2007; Wiegink 2013). The existence of such ongoing bonds lends intensity to others' perceptions of former combatants, and to the experience of being a former combatant.

Governing authorities may fear that veterans will mobilize as an oppositional political force, and/or that any difficulty in readjusting to life outside armed service poses a wider threat to peace and security (Schafer 2007: 11-15). To allay such fears, governing authorities deploy both material and discursive strategies. Programs for material redistribution, ranging from Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration schemes to welfare packages (Bennett 1996; McMullin 2013), seek to provide for former combatants' material welfare. At the same time, collective, often state-endorsed narratives, situate veterans within national discourses, for instance

as national heroes (Metsola 2010). States may not have the last word about public recognition for veterans, though, since veterans mobilize through political parties as well as formal and informal associations (Sindre and Söderström 2016; Sprenkels 2018).

For former combatants, there are many consequences of service ranging from trauma (e.g. Edmonds 2016) to the development of new, not necessarily military, political and social subjectivities. The protest march of some West African veterans of WWII contributed to anti-colonial mobilization (Israel 1992), while some Senegalese WWI veterans developed novel gender relations as they returned from war and helped their wives in the kitchen (Lunn 1999: 232). Not all veterans go on to develop new political identities (Killingray 1983), and changes – for instance in gender relations – may fail to prove long-lasting (e.g. Vince 2016). On the other hand, the possibilities for social transformation as a result of engagement in political violence can affect veterans' spouses and children too (Kilshaw 2009).

Insights into each of these areas – the bonds between former combatants, governing authorities' material and discursive interventions to control fears about veterans, and former combatants' own mobilizations as well as their experiences of potential social and/or political change – have predominantly arisen from studies of "visible" veterans. That is to say, the former combatants in question have some degree of public visibility. They may be veterans of a state-backed armed force, or an armed group that occupies a post-war role, such as a political party or veterans' club. There are degrees of such public visibility: veterans whose service attracts social stigma may experience diminishing recognition for their veteranhood (van Roekel and Salvi forthcoming), or states may recognize veterans in ways which support dominant national narratives (Metsola 2010; Vince 2016).

The tendency to focus on publicly "visible" veterans, and to neglect veterans who are publicly "invisible", partly reflects the normalization of categories that state authorities endorse. In addition, former combatants denied public mention may fear that speaking about their experiences will attract reprisals from the state or in the form of (further) social stigma (Thiranagama 2011). Research with such veterans thus presents ethical challenges concerning the potential risks for interlocutors. I sought to address these concerns in a number of ways, and particularly by focusing on Dhufari veteran revolutionaries' practices (such as everyday socializing) that were part of the public domain.

"Invisible" veterans are nevertheless an important category through which to probe understandings of each of the aforementioned areas of veterans' lives. By invisible veterans I mean former combatants who engaged in organized political violence, but who in certain contexts of post-war life, such as when living as defeated ex-insurgents in their home country, gain very little, and in some extreme cases, no public mention or recognition. Qualities of invisibility and visibility are not mutually exclusive, but are contextual (Verdery 2018: 283-5). Veterans who are invisible in the public domain have degrees of visibility in other spheres, such as among peers and relatives. But when veterans live under a state which forbids them the possibility of forming an opposition political party or veteran association, or any other public form of recognition such as a memorial monument or place in national narratives, they acquire a high degree of invisibility in the public domain.

In Oman, the government invisibilizes veterans of Dhufar's Front in the public domain. While Oman's authoritarian government curtails the freedom of association and expression of all Omanis, for Front veterans it is not only an organization such

as a political party that is out of the question, but also any formal association whatsoever. Even public debate about government violence during the war is out of bounds: the Omani writer Abdullah Habib, who wrote on Facebook in 2016 that the government should reveal the location of the graves of executed revolutionaries, was sentenced to three years in prison (Global Voices 2016). The sale of scholarly books that discuss the legacies of the Dhufar war is forbidden in Oman, interlocutors informed me.ⁱ This public invisibility overlaps with various degrees of visibility beyond the state's influence over the public domain. Veterans of the Front are "visible" in Dhufar to themselves, their peers and state-backed security forces who surveil them and co-opt them through secretive pay-outs. Dhufar's revolution and its legacies are also visible within and beyond Dhufar in publications that Dhufaris access and discuss. These include scholarly accounts (e.g. Al-Amri 2005; Jabob 2010), literary texts (e.g. Ibrahim 2000; Al-Zubaidi 2013) and memoirs (e.g. Al-Zubaidi 2014) published outside Oman, as well as online discussion (e.g. Al-Shahri 2012). But in dominant public discourses in Oman, Front veterans are invisible in that a hostile state allows them no official public recognition or mention.ⁱⁱ

Paying attention to the "invisibilization" of defeated veterans allows us to compare the material and discursive strategies through which state authorities pursue the recognition as well as the silencing of different categories of veterans. A focus on invisible veterans' production of a distinctive identity, despite repression, underscores the limitations of state authorities' interventions. Such an analysis also highlights those elements of veteran identity – and in the Dhufari case those aspects of revolutionary values and legacies – that endure beyond military defeat. One means through which Dhufari ex-revolutionaries created a distinctive veteran identity and a lasting social legacy of revolution was by enacting social egalitarianism through everyday interactions.

Everyday practices, such as quotidian gestures, choices of words, ways of greeting and interacting or avoiding others, are important means for normalizing and reinforcing power relations and incumbent hierarchies (Bourdieu 1991). In the extraordinary contexts of political violence as well as its aftermath, daily interactions can acquire new meanings. Everyday interactions promoting respect and social egalitarianism that are distinctive to armed insurgents can legitimize militants in the eyes of local civilians and even inspire new recruits (Shah 2018). Conversely, insurgents who infuse everyday actions with violence can traumatize civilian onlookers and victims (e.g. Coulter 2009). In the aftermath of political violence, everyday practices problematize the very notion of being "post-war". Former combatants may continue to experience rejection from family members and former neighbors (Coulter 2009; Wiegink 2013); the use of public spaces such as cafés may recreate social segregation, which mark the very lines of difference that underpinned the recent conflict (Jeffrey 2013); daily life and interactions may contain myriad reminders of recent violence (Hughes 2013); everyday life may also become a new frontier of resistance to, rather than support for, the post-conflict settlement (Stefansson 2010).

Yet even as everyday practices may harbor hostility in societies facing current or recent political violence, they afford other possibilities. During the second Palestinian intifada, some West Bank Palestinians turned to the ordinary obligations of kinship as a means of preserving a sense of everyday life despite the threat of violence (Kelly 2008). Similarly, those seeking to move on from political violence in India may eschew the pursuit of a transcendental experience to overcome trauma,

preferring instead a "descent into the ordinary" (Das 2006). Mundane gestures and practices can at times help rebuild a sense of a social world that is, has been, or risks being destroyed by violence.

The possibilities for everyday practices in the shadow of political violence either to foster hostilities, or to bring within reach a life beyond violence, raise the question of a hitherto less examined scenario. Could everyday practices help preserve a social world that came into being through a subsequently defeated armed insurgency and its attempts to change social life? Everyday practices, by virtue of their ubiquity and mundanity, are harder to repress than insurgency or explicit oppositional activism. Quotidian practices are thus potential means through which even invisible veterans might reproduce distinctive values, a veteran identity, and lasting legacies of defeated revolution. For former combatants and militants (as well as others whose lives have been changed by war), identities and subjectivities that they have cultivated during and after war "cannot just be resolved or cast away" (Thiranagama 2011: 12). In fact, those who participated in political violence but failed to achieve the social change to which they aspired, may nevertheless have experienced lasting personal transformation (Thiranagama 2011: 184) – an effect observed in settings ranging from urban Bengal in the wake of 1970s Maoist militancy (Donner 2009) to Egypt in the wake of the Arab Spring (Fernández-Savater et al. 2017). For some former Dhufari revolutionaries, despite official invisibilization everyday practices were one means of producing a distinctive identity linked to their valorization of social egalitarianism.

Dhufari transformations

Once renowned for the production of frankincense, and still famous for its cool monsoon weather from June to September, Dhufar is located at the southern edge of what, from 1970, became the Sultanate of Oman. The name Dhufar has referred to a region of changing historical scope (Morris 1997); today the term is used for the southernmost province of the Sultanate of Oman, and I use the term in that sense here.

Historically, families from Dhufar's coast, mountains and desert interacted for trade, for transhumant relocation during the monsoon and its aftermath, and for marriage. These interactions reproduced prevalent social stratification. Dhufar's social hierarchies partially mirror those of northern Oman, the Gulf and the Middle East (e.g. Abu-Lughod 1986; Limbert 2010), distinguishing between settled and transhumant, noble and dependent, free (e.g. tribute claimant) and unfree (e.g. tribute payer or slave). In Dhufar such hierarchies intersect with distinctions between Arabic speakers living in coastal and desert zones and speakers of South Arabian languages – Shāhri, Mahri and Hobyot – in mountain, desert and coastal areas. Each of these communities distinguishes among elites and non-elites (see Tabook 1997).ⁱⁱⁱ Coastal Arabic-speaking elites include *Kathiri* tribes and *Sada* (who claim descent from the prophet Muhammad) and tribes with Somali origins. Non-elite Arabic-speaking coastal dwellers include tradespersons, descendants of slaves (*'abīd*) and client fishing families (*baḥara*). Speakers of south Arabian languages include elites (*Qara*) in mountain and some coastal areas, their former subordinates (the *Shāhra*), mountain-based *Kathir al-Jabal* tribes, and desert-dwelling *Mahra* tribes. Other desert dwellers are Arabic-speaking Bedouin *Bait Kathir* tribes. As elsewhere in the Middle East, common practice allows women to marry within or

above, but not normally below, their social status. Some elites – in Dhufar the *Sada* – nevertheless avoid intermarriage for their womenfolk with other elites. The programs of Dhufar's Front promoting social egalitarianism contested these deep-seated social hierarchies.

The political and religious history of Dhufar differs from that of predominantly Ibadhi Muscat and the interior of Oman. It was only when Dhufari tribal leaders invited the then Sultan of Muscat to resolve local power disputes in 1879 that Dhufar, whose population is Sunni, became a protectorate of the Sultan of Muscat. Sultan Said bin Taimur, who ruled from 1932 to 1970, treated the protectorate of Dhufar as a personal fiefdom where he encouraged few economic and educational opportunities for residents. Many young men fled Dhufar to pursue work and education in the Gulf. There, some joined George Habash' Arab Nationalist Movement, eventually resulting in the formation of the Dhufar Liberation Front (DLF) in 1965 (see Takriti 2013: 49-83). Although all adherents opposed the rule of Sultan Said, these revolutionaries – as elsewhere (Scott 1979) – participated for different reasons. Motivations ranged from independence for Dhufar to Arab nationalism and Marxism. The Marxists assumed leadership in 1968 under the title of the People's Front for the Liberation of Oman and the Arabian Gulf (PFLOAG). The turn toward Marxism intensified the Cold War internationalization of the counter-insurgency against the Front. Britain, Jordan and Iran all provided military support for the counter-insurgency, which intensified after the 1970 coup in which the British maneuvered for Sultan Qaboos bin Said to replace his deposed father (Takriti 2013: 160-193).

At the height of its military power in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Front held most of the mountain and coastal territory of Dhufar excluding the coast around Salalah. In its areas of fluctuating territorial control in Dhufar, as well as at its base in Hawf, Yemen, the Front pursued programs for social change (Takriti 2013: 107-131) that attracted international attention (Halliday 1974: 361-92; Trabulsi 2003). Echoing Marxist and Marxist-inspired liberation movements of the period, the Front sought to foster a more egalitarian society by promoting literacy and educational opportunities, emancipating previously subordinated groups such as women, slaves and those of client status (e.g. *Shahra* and *bahara*), rejecting tribalism, and encouraging inter-marriage across social groups.^{iv} As one veteran recalled to me: "the important thing was to encourage the idea that people were equal". This valorization of social egalitarianism extended to the Front's Popular Liberation Army. From the commanders of the three military regions to the fighters who made up the companies, platoons and section subdivisions, all received equal pay (Takriti 2013: 115). Egalitarian rhetoric and practices did not prevent the emergence of an elite leadership, however, which forged policy and, facing internal dissent in 1973, proved willing to resort to violence to eliminate rivals (Takriti 2013: 264-67). It is beyond the scope of this article to assess revolutionary programs' effects, limitations and contradictions during implementation; yet it is striking that, just as the revolution produced contradictions between egalitarian rhetoric and a new elite, in the wake of defeat veteran revolutionaries' interest in social egalitarianism also produced contradictions.

Dhufaris from all social backgrounds participated in the Front – elites, non-elites, town-dwellers, transhumant pastoralists, fishermen, slaves, men, women and children. The scale of participation is difficult to estimate, yet one interlocutor suggested that in some areas of Dhufar, "nearly everyone" had been connected to

the Front. In terms of armed combatants, according to a British army report (Takriti 2013: 115), there were approximately 1000 fighters in the Front's Popular Liberation Army in 1970. Estimates of the proportion of women fighters (who were rare before 1968) ranged from 5 % to 30 % (Takriti 2013: 122). In the revolutionary schools located in Hawf, Yemen, by 1973 the estimated number of pupils ranged from 500 primary school pupils and 320 in the intermediate school (Jacob 2010: 184) to a total of 650 male and 350 female pupils (breakdown across schools not specified) (Takriti 2013: 122).

Additionally, Front militants represented the movement diplomatically in sympathetic countries, broadcast radio bulletins from Egypt, graduated from the revolutionary intermediate school and undertook secondary and tertiary education abroad (e.g. in Iraq, Syria, Libya, the USSR and Cuba), served as judges settling disputes and conducting marriages, and introduced new crops into Front-controlled areas of Dhufar (Takriti 2013: 116-123). Revolutionaries even introduced new forms of clothing: one former student at Hawf recalled to me some women's skepticism at being encouraged to wear brassieres, which the women compared (disapprovingly) to the cloth bags placed on lactating camels to limit calves' access to their mother's milk. These activities were carried out with intensity, discipline and a sense of support for and participation in an overarching struggle, according to both contemporary accounts (Takriti 2013) and recollections (Jacob 2010). Here, as in other armed insurgencies, the lines between direct participation in armed combat and indirect implication therein blur. In this sense, it is helpful to think of those who took on roles within and beyond armed combat as "veterans" of the Front.

When Sultan Qaboos took power in 1970, his launching of Oman's modernization, which he dubbed its "renaissance" (*nahda*), and his intensification of the counter-insurgency war, led to the emergence of the first Front veterans – those who switched allegiance to support Sultan Qaboos. Members less inclined toward the socialist project left the movement, drawn by the new Sultan's promise to bring progress. The government also offered money to militants who left the Front and swore loyalty to Sultan Qaboos. This money increased if a fighter changed sides bringing a weapon (al-Amri 1996: 160), and these former combatants were sought after for the pro-government paramilitaries (*quwat al-firqa*) formed from 1970. These paramilitaries still exist today, and are in a sense the publicly "visible" Dhufari veterans of the war. The Front's repression of internal dissenters in 1973 also encouraged defections.

After Sultan Qaboos declared victory over the Front in 1975, the Front's leaders and remaining fighters withdrew to attempt to regroup in the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen. The movement operated in exile until its last conference in 1992, the same year its final cohort of university students returned to Oman (Jacob 2010). In various waves from the 1970s to the 1990s, members of the Front gradually abandoned the movement and returned to Oman. The Sultanate offered them differing levels of material handouts, the existence and values of which remained undisclosed in public. Dhufari interlocutors considered the value of these handouts, and the underlying reasons thereof, to be a sensitive topic. Without discussing individual cases in detail, some interlocutors explained that handouts varied according to factors, including a veteran's former role in the Front, his/her relationship to the Sultan's patronage networks and timing of return: the more time went by, the less support a former Front member received – unless someone had had a high-level role in the Front.^v This redistribution – one element of wider

strategies of counter-insurgency patronage in Dhufar – reinforces the invisibilization of the Front's veterans thus persuaded into political docility. The ubiquitous renaissance discourse further invisibilizes Front veterans and the counter-insurgency war, as direct mention of either is avoided – as if the national clock had been reset in 1970 with the accession of Sultan Qaboos (Valéri 2015 [2009]).

Many Front veterans now live in Salalah, which has transformed from a cluster of villages pre 1970 to a city of some 172,000 (Omanis and foreigners) in 2010 (Sultanate of Oman 2013). All Dhufar's social groups, including those from the mountains and desert, are represented in post-war Salalah alongside a population of some 64,000 non-nationals, predominantly South Asians. Locals associate many of the city's districts with a particular tribal or ethnic group. As Salalans drove me round the city, they pointed out with which areas various groups – the *Bait Kathir* bedouin, the *Mahra* tribes, blacks, *bahara*, Somalis – were associated, sometimes because the national government had given them land and housing there after the war. Although some Front veterans also received land and housing, there was no area in the city associated predominantly with veterans of the Front. Yet within this landscape, through mundane socializing, veterans reproduced revolutionary social values, including social egalitarianism.

Veterans and everyday socializing

Former revolutionaries' diverse trajectories of becoming veterans spawned new kinds of diversity among ex-militants. Some veterans have found (or returned to) favor with Sultan Qaboos. For instance, Yusif bin 'Alawi, a former diplomat with the Front, has served as minister responsible for foreign affairs since 1997. Another veteran, whom I call Khalid, invited me in 2015 to visit him in his expensive Salalah residence located on the extremely prestigious row of mansions of some of the Sultan's (Dhufari) maternal relatives.^{vi} Khalid would have had the status of being a slave to the Sultan prior to 1970 (although other veterans and not Khalid himself explained this relationship to me).^{vii} Even among veterans who worked together professionally upon their return, hierarchies lurked. On another day Khalid took me to drop by what he referred to as his "office", a large commercial building in central Salalah where queues of young men waited to apply for loans, sweating despite the best efforts of the air conditioning. There we bumped into Bakhit, a fellow veteran whom I had previously met in 2013, and who recognized and greeted me. Before long, Khalid set out to take me for a drive to see his home in the mountains – leaving behind Bakhit perspiring as he faced paperwork and queues of clients. Khalid could spend the day at leisure, but Bakhit had to work.

In contrast to Khalid, other veterans received relatively little support from the national government. Friends described one marginalized veteran to me as "poor". The distribution of material benefits to veterans shapes post-conflict politics (Schafer 2007); unsurprisingly, some Dhufaris opined that the differences in handouts to former revolutionaries were a "divide and rule" strategy that successfully created tensions among Front veterans.

If some veterans were part of the political and economic elite of Sultan Qaboos' Oman, other veterans engaged in networks of their own making. In a context where gatherings in public spaces are gendered, with men more likely to socialize in public while women tend to gather in private spaces such as homes, Front veterans' publicly visible networks included everyday male socializing.

Dropping by

Some male veterans frequented regular "drop-in" spaces where former Front members would visit and were likely to meet one another. During my 2013 visit, one such space was a bookshop. On each of my visits, former members of the Front – sometimes a cadre, sometimes fighters, another time a pupil from the school – called by, and usually entered into long coffee-fueled conversations.

In 2015, this bookshop had closed. Different acquaintances suggested to me that it faced financial difficulties.^{viii} Given my interest in consulting books about Dhufar, several interlocutors recommended to me that I visit a public library that was due to open during February 2015. The opening of this library made the national news (Times of Oman 2015), including a national TV news broadcast that I watched. Local scholar 'Abdulqader al-Ghassani donated 12,000 books to found Salalah's first public library. The library became one of the regular places where I would go to read from its extensive collection on Dhufar. I often got into conversation with other visitors since my unusual presence as a foreign woman alone made something of a talking point. In this way I met several former members of the Front, who also dropped by the library. A mutual acquaintance would explain someone's connection to the Front, often in a later conversation.

The very existence of such spaces as the bookshop, and later the library, as drop-in places where the informal network of the Front continues is significant in a national context where there is no official public mention of the Front. It is no foregone conclusion that the Omani government would tolerate such spaces, but the fact that it did indicates that it did not consider them to be spaces of political criticism. But these spaces were socially distinctive. The acquaintances who visited and greeted each other in the bookshop and the library (all of whom were men) occupied diverse positions in Dhufar's social landscape ranging between elite, non-elite, town, mountain, historically free and historically unfree. Both the absence of dissident politics and the presence of social diversity were characteristic of a second kind of space for veterans' everyday socializing: all-male evening social gatherings.

Evening gatherings

Across the Gulf, the influx of oil and gas wealth has created new opportunities for same-sex socializing (Limbert 2010). Where in Oman's northern mountain interior all-female gatherings for drinking coffee have become a daily feature (Limbert 2010: 46-81), in Salalah, nightly all-male gatherings are the norm. A man of middle age or older will typically be out of his marital home between sunset and around eleven pm, meeting his friends at his regular gathering spot, known (in local pronunciation) as his *galsa* (literally "sitting"). Men may also occasionally visit other gatherings as an invited guest, dropping in on known acquaintances. Given Dhufar's warm climate outside the monsoon season, in Salalah these gatherings are usually in the street. Groups of men sitting outside were one of the sights through which friends driving me through the city would point out the residents associated with that area: "See? This is where the Somalis sit", a friend might tell me as we drove by. One interlocutor summed up the special quality of his gathering to him. One evening, after we had visited his home and greeted a wide array of relatives, once we arrived at his *galsa*, he gestured toward the men gathered there and said "this is your family". He thus modified a common way of welcoming an outsider when he emphasized members of his *galsa* (rather than his literal family) as key givers of hospitality.

I observed many *galsa* gatherings in the street, and attended five different gatherings as a guest. I soon observed that, like the gatherings that friends driving me through the city pointed out, a *galsa* brought together regular members from one, and only one, of Salalah's traditional social groupings. In multiple visits to a *galsa* of town elites, for instance, I only once met a "mountain" man who was a guest invited for me to meet him. In its social homogeneity, then, a *galsa* in Salalah differs from the heterogeneity observed in women's informal daily gatherings based on neighborhood in northern Oman (Limbert 2010; Wikan 1982). One day, I asked an interlocutor whether the Front had a *galsa*. This person replied: "Of course they do; they sit every night in [a district of Salalah built in the 1990s]". After making inquiries through other acquaintances, I found a contact who made arrangements for me to be invited to sit with the Front's *galsa* on two nights.

On the night of our first visit, my host for the evening and I drove to the area in question shortly after sunset. After my host made a few calls to check the place, we found the group of men (who numbered 12 at the height of the gathering) sitting in the open space between three blocks of flats, gathered around a long set of plastic tables not far from a café which supplied refreshments. At the distance of some 15m, we could see that some of the men were very old. My host discerned several figures from the leadership of the Front.

When we walked over, my host moved from person to person in the group, greeting everyone by hand. I followed his lead to do the same, and at this close contact saw how some of these men physically embodied a history of armed revolutionary struggle. One man was only able to move and greet with his left hand; someone later explained to me that his disabled right hand was the result of a war wound. Another man had several fingers missing, which I also learned was a war injury. Another man rested a pair of crutches by his chair, his swollen legs leaning on an improvised footstool under the table. Age as well as war had weathered these men.

In my two visits to these veterans' *galsa*, the regular attendees offered me the opportunity to ask them questions, but they also had many questions for me. In their capacity as former diplomats of the Front, two of the men there had visited the site of my earlier research project: the refugee camps run by the Polisario Front liberation movement in Algeria, where I had traced the legacies of a revolution as it had continued over three decades (Wilson 2016b). The diplomats' visits had taken place after Dhufar's Front had gone into exile. With some astonishment, one former diplomat asked me "are they [the Polisario Front and the refugees] still there?". The contrast with their own situation was palpable. These men – like almost all Salalans whom I observed in public – were immaculately dressed in pristine freshly laundered and pressed robes. A few meters away, their shiny cars of recent models awaited them for their journey home. This gathering was far from a space of material poverty, such as the men themselves would likely have experienced in the course of war and exile, and such as they would have encountered in their visits to Polisario Front's refugee camps. Nor was the gathering a space of social isolation. During one of my visits, a smart four wheel drive car pulled up and a young man stepped down bringing fresh camel milk sent by a relative to the *galsa* – an indication of the multi-generational networks in which veterans participated. Alongside a middle-aged man who joined the gathering – who had been a student at the revolutionary school and then in the USSR – there was another man there of a similar age who explained that he had no connection to the Front, but enjoyed the company and intellectual quality

of the conversation. A characteristic of this gathering, then, was not only the ever-present possibility of surveillance (clear in some of the veterans' polite reluctance to engage with me), but also social connectivity.

In a city strewn with all-male evening gatherings in the streets' cafés, this gathering might have looked ordinary (with the possible exception of the high representation of war invalids). In fact, though, this *ga/sa* was extraordinary – and not only in the fact of its mere existence in a wider context of the repression of evidence and memories of the Front. Crucially, this was the only *ga/sa* that I saw, or that was described to me, where the regular members hailed from heterogeneous social backgrounds. As others explained to me afterwards, those present spanned town elites, mountain elites, former slaves, fishermen, town non-elites and mountain non-elites. Where the Front had espoused social mixing in the hope of promoting greater social egalitarianism, these former members maintained this spirit 40 years on. In contrast, habitual attendees in the other gatherings that I observed, or heard about, hailed from one social status. To clarify, social mixing between diverse groups, such as elites and non-elites and mountain-dwellers and city-dwellers, occurs regularly in Salalah in formal spaces such as workplaces and universities, as well as formal social gatherings such as weddings and funerals. But informal social gatherings in Dhufar, at least of mature males, are usually specific to one social status.^{ix} Informal social segregation may be more pronounced in Salalah than in northern Omani cities, as some black Dhufaris whose ancestors would have been slaves explained to me. In separate instances of "off-stage" conversations with no third person present, two black interlocutors expressed to me their view that life in Dhufar was more racially and socially segregated than in northern Oman and elsewhere in the Gulf. One black woman, Amira, explained that she wished to migrate to northern Oman where she believed that there was less racial discrimination than in Dhufar. Amira also recounted the surprise of a black Kuwaiti friend of hers, Khulud, who was living in Salalah and ask "Why are the blacks always with blacks and the whites with whites?". Amira had replied: "That's what it is like here, the blacks [sit] with the blacks and the whites with the whites. They don't mix".^x

In such a context of daily informal social segregation along tribal, ethnic and racialized, as well as gendered, lines, when veterans of the Front – itself a socially heterogeneous movement – maintained socially diverse networks by dropping in on one another in the library, and gathered nightly in a socially heterogeneous group, they reproduced the Front's erstwhile valorization of social egalitarianism once reflected in policies such as the promotion of inter-marriage and social mixing in armed battalions, schools and work projects. In doing so, they subtly mark a distinctive identity as veterans of the Front. In the words of one veteran who acknowledged former militants' willingness to socialize without regard for Salalah's habitual informal segregation: "we [the people from the Front] don't care if someone is black or white, red or yellow".

The scope and limits of distinctive social egalitarianism

To what extent is the enactment of social egalitarianism in Salalah distinctive to veterans of Dhufar's revolution? In the Oman of Sultan Qaboos, in theory all Omanis are equal with respect to being citizens and subjects of the state. Social mixing certainly does occur in schools, dormitories, and places of employment. Nevertheless in Salalah, as elsewhere in Oman and the Gulf monarchies more broadly, both official claims of formal equality, and practical experiences of

cooperation in places of work and study, exist in tension with internal hierarchies in everyday lived experience (Limbert 2010). Former revolutionaries' valorization of social egalitarianism is all the more distinctive in the context of hierarchical patronage networks in Oman (in which Front veterans are nevertheless also participants), and especially in Dhufar which has been the target of extensive counter-insurgency redistributive patronage policies. Oman is an absolute monarchy where relationships of patronage see the Sultan and members of his government bestow favors on subjects. Such structures of patronage assume and create relations of social hierarchy, rather than egalitarianism (Piliavsky 2014). In these contexts, the socially egalitarian values of veteran revolutionaries stand out. In the words of one interlocutor, Nabīl, who spoke from a position of feeling no close ties to the Front, but with a tone of kindness: "their culture is different" (*thaqāfat-hum ghair*). If veterans did have a different set of cultural values, in particular in their appreciation of social egalitarianism in the context of Salalah's everyday informal social segregation, then veterans' practices of everyday socializing marked this distinctive identity.

The fact that, in an authoritarian monarchy that suppresses political dissent and mention of the war, Dhufar's revolutionary veterans could socialize informally together at all highlights that the government did not find cause for concern in these practices. But in other contexts the underlying dynamic – namely the possibility of Dhufaris forging connections across traditional social hierarchies – was suspicious in the eyes of these authorities. In 2013, Dhufaris from diverse social categories – elites, non-elites, city-dwellers and mountain-dwellers, blacks, and fishermen – formed a Council of Dhufar with the aims of promoting and celebrating Dhufar's rich cultural life.^{xi} Someone familiar with the initiative explained to me that the then Advisor to the Sultan on Cultural Affairs, 'Abdul 'Aziz al-Rawwas – himself a former member of the Front associated with those dissatisfied with the turn toward Marxism – shut down the Council, forbidding it from further activity. The everyday socializing practices of veterans are not in themselves political, but the underlying principles at stake can, in other contexts, have political implications.

The intervention of this Advisor, himself an ex-revolutionary, is a reminder that only some veterans engaged in the kinds of socializing – and the valorization of social egalitarianism – described here. How widespread were these practices, and were they limited to ex-revolutionaries' socializing amongst themselves? Given the sensitivity of seeking out people with connections to the Front, my experiences are restricted to interactions with a small number of veterans and their relatives. The majority of veterans whom I personally met were male. Although I collected stories about female veterans, I only talked at length with two both of whom avoided talking about the Front with me. No one I spoke with, male or female, mentioned regular gatherings for female veterans (although at formal gatherings, such as veterans' funerals, female and male veterans alike congregated). In general, female veterans often face higher barriers to gaining social acceptance in post-war civilian life (e.g. Coulter 2009). Dhufari researcher and journalist Mona Jacob, who met many veterans whilst writing her study of the revolutionary schools (Jacob 2010), suggested that Dhufari female veterans used meticulous piety as a way of negotiating social acceptance even as they combined this with high levels of education and workforce participation.^{xii}

The socially egalitarian-leaning everyday practices of male veterans were not restricted to the library and evening gatherings described here. One veteran, for

instance, berated me for having adopted the locally preferred word for "woman", *harīm*, chiding me that it associated women with restrictions given the root meaning of *h-r-m*, "forbid". These words echoed the Front's attempts to promote gender egalitarianism by banning the word *harīm* (al-Amri 1996: 140). Another indication of veterans' ongoing interest in gendered egalitarianism manifested itself in stories I heard about veteran men asking for news of unrelated veteran women – an inquiry that, outside the Front's more permissive social codes, would be an offensive suggestion of intimacy with unrelated women. Through a variety of everyday habits, then, (male) former militants marked their distinctive identity as veterans by continuing to endorse various forms of social egalitarianism – ethnic, tribal, racial and, to an extent, gendered.

Front veterans were distinctive, then, but it should not be forgotten that they also shared common practices with Dhufaris unconnected to the Front. Former revolutionaries networked among themselves (and presumably with others) for reasons other than to maintain revolutionary social values, such as in the pursuit of material benefit for oneself or one's family. When one veteran whom I got to know at the library learned of my acquaintance with the economically privileged Khalid, he used this renewed connection to speak on the telephone with Khalid and ask for help in seeking work for his unemployed son. Veterans of the Front could also resemble non-veterans in reproducing hierarchical social relations. When I observed veterans interact with servants from the Indian sub-continent, their manner could be as distant as that of the majority of Dhufaris whom I observed in such situations. Despite the Front's international renown for the promotion of gender egalitarianism, some female veterans also complained that male veterans' commitment to gender equality did not prove long-lasting after the revolution (Miranda Morris, personal communication). While the lives of some of Dhufar's ex-revolutionaries evince lasting legacies of revolutionary values of social egalitarianism, this impact is partial, patchy and incomplete – as can indeed be the case for victorious revolutions (Vince 2016: 174). In revolutionary movements as well as among their veterans, discursive and practical commitments to social egalitarianism meet limitations and can allow exclusionary practices to persist.

Conclusion: unravelling invisibilization

Organized political violence changes and reshapes lives – of victims, survivors, witnesses and bystanders, and participants. As they build post-war lives, former combatants of armed groups, whether state-backed or state challengers, navigate potentially conflicting needs and desires for continuities and ruptures with their identity as former fighters. In the case of invisible veterans denied public recognition or mention, such as former members of Dhufar's defeated liberation Front, these challenges take on specific dimensions due to the impossibility of mobilizing in formal associations and making claims publicly. Some male Dhufari former revolutionaries nevertheless found in everyday socializing – dropping by the library and nightly gatherings – a means of reproducing revolutionary social values of social egalitarianism that marked a distinctive veteran identity. In a context of national politics shot through with hierarchical patronage networks, and deep-seated Dhufari social hierarchies comprising ethnic, tribal, racialized and gendered distinctions, these practices were recognizably distinctive to other Dhufaris as a "different culture".

Not all former revolutionaries were motivated, or equally able, to participate in acts of everyday socializing that marked social egalitarianism. Both constrained tolerance for women's socializing in public in Salalah, as well as a wider pattern of potentially higher social costs for women veterans to reintegrate into civilian life, meant that women veterans had fewer opportunities to engage in the kinds of daily socializing addressed here. Ex-revolutionaries might endorse social egalitarianism in some areas of everyday life and not in others. For those men who did socialize in the library and the nightly gathering, I found no indications of continuing engagement with revolutionary values of a political nature that would call into question the authority of the current government of Oman. The absence of a political message that might be of concern to the authorities in Oman does not, though, preclude there being wider implications of these everyday socializing practices for understanding societies in the wake of political violence.

The first of these implications is that "ordinary" actions can have extraordinary meanings. The nightly gathering of male veterans of the Front was an ordinary form of socializing for mature men in Salalah. But this gathering achieved an extraordinary form of social mixing that transgressed dominant hierarchies. If everyday interactions can have extraordinary effects, ranging from legitimizing insurgency (Shah 2018) to helping rebuild social worlds threatened by political violence (Das 2006; Kelly 2008), Front veterans show how everyday life can help maintain a marginalized social world that came into being through subsequently defeated armed struggle.

Second, the fact that some of Dhufar's former revolutionaries can reproduce distinctive platforms for social egalitarianism in everyday socializing disturbs prevailing narratives that emphasize the perspective of a victorious post-war authoritarian state. Defeated Front veterans produced distinctive social values that contrasted with national, patronage-related hierarchies and local, social hierarchies. Even authoritarian states with a strong security apparatus cannot fully control and suppress the post-war cultivation of new social arrangements that emerged during wartime. Attention to the social implications of everyday mundane practices brings to the fore counterhistories of post-war life from the point of view of the defeated. This sketch of a counterhistory of Dhufar's defeated revolutionaries suggests future avenues for research into the legacies of the Arab region's recent defeated revolutions and protest movements.

Third, this case extends debates about the importance of wartime connections forged between combatants and militants in post-war life. Veterans' networks shape post-war life, providing resources for daily and social survival (Wiegink 2013), political participation (Sindre and Söderström 2016) and electoral politics (Sprenkels 2018). In Dhufar, Front veterans' networks also reproduced social values that the insurgency's leadership previously endorsed. This suggests that values once supported in insurgent leaders' political ideology can continue to have post-war salience after political and military defeat. Those values that lend themselves to reproduction through everyday, ordinary practices may be among the legacies most feasible for invisible veterans to maintain. Where these veterans are ex-revolutionaries, their reproduction of revolutionary social values shows one way in which defeated revolution has ongoing legacies, or a social afterlife of enduring values.

Fourth, the strategies through which post-war states make specific categories of veterans visible, such as through material benefits and (often nationalistic) narratives that dominate the public domain, are strikingly similar to the state's

strategies of invisibilization. Dhufar's veteran revolutionaries – whatever their current relationship to the Sultan of Oman and his government – could situate themselves on a scale of variable (though secretive) material handouts from the government. The differences in these handouts – which could see one veteran living in a mansion and another struggling to rent a small apartment – likely undermined potential solidarity between veterans, thus contributing to ongoing internal divisions and veterans' invisibilization as a potential unified group in national politics. Meanwhile, the dominant narrative of Oman's national renaissance clogged up the public domain, invisibilizing the Front and the ideas which it endorsed. By extending analysis to address invisible as well as visible veterans, we can better understand how the post-war state, and other actors, use discursive and material resources to manage veterans' degrees of visibility and invisibility.

Finally, what are the implications of veterans' reproduction of social egalitarianism for Dhufaris? Although there is no platform of political dissent associated with Front veterans, the fact that they lived among other Dhufaris and maintained connections that cut across dominant social hierarchies means that they conveyed – subtly – a public expression and example of social ties that contravened dominant social hierarchies. In recent years, Dhufar has seen other platforms emerge which also questioned dominant hierarchies, such as the electoral league which elected the first popularly elected black Omani to the Consultative Council (Wilson 2016a), and Oman's longest-lasting Arab Spring protests (Worrall 2012). Protestors in Salalah in 2011 included veiled references to the war in Dhufar in their chanting (Valeri 2011: 5). Through extraordinary events such as protests and innovative election results, as well as ordinary events such as daily socializing, the experiments during wartime to make new kinds of social worlds continue to affect and inspire post-war lives.

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ⁱ There could be exceptions to the prohibition of the sale of books about the Dhufar war. A book that interlocutors told me had previously been unavailable for purchase in Oman (Al-Amri 2005) was nevertheless on sale at a book fair in Salalah in 2015.

ⁱⁱ Interested in assessing how veterans can mark a distinctive identity in a context of no public recognition or mention, I focus on Front veterans' invisibility. Front veterans shared other characteristics, such as that the government has co-opted them. The terms of co-optation varied from some Front veterans holding ministerial portfolios to others being marginalized dependents of the state. Whatever the manner of their co-optation, a key challenge to veterans reproducing a distinctive identity was their invisibility – the imperative to avoid direct mention in the public domain of their existence and of the legacies of the war.

iii On the modern forms of South Arabian languages, see Morris 2007.

iv On marriage practices in the Front, and later legacies thereof, see Wilson N.d.

v I was not able to learn about the extent to which gender was also a factor influencing veterans' access to material support from the Omani government. Women are entitled to forms of state support in Omani national policies, such as distributions of housing and land.

vi All single names given for interlocutors are pseudonyms. For public figures I use two names e.g. Yusif bin 'Alawi.

vii All slaves are formally emancipated in the Oman of Sultan Qaboos. The Front had also banned slavery (Takriti 2013: 122). Those (such as Khalid) who were slaves to Sultan Said, and attended Qaboos while he grew up in Salalah, can remain closely connected to him, as can their relatives.

viii No interlocutor commented on whether political factors played a role in the closing of the bookshop.

ix Dhufari youths, both male and female, may mix with a wider range of people than their elders. Both an informal gathering I attended of undergraduate males, and another of recently graduated females, were socially mixed. Perhaps significantly each took place in non-urban spaces (the mountainside and the beach of a small town).

x Non-black Dhufaris sometimes also experienced the north of Oman as a more socially permissive space than Dhufar.

xi See <http://munagaboob.blogspot.com/>, last visited 31 May 2018.

xii As I explore elsewhere (Wilson N.d.), both male and female veterans nevertheless undertook occasional extraordinary acts to demonstrate their valorization of social – including gendered – egalitarianism.