Modernisation of Athletics in Oman; between Global Pressures and Local Dynamics

Abdul Rahim Al Droushi, Sultan Qaboos University
Ian Henry, Loughborough University

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This study aims to:

1. Trace the emergence, development and current status of athletics in Oman,

2. Examine athletics modernisation process as product of modernity and authenticity debates, local and global
dynamics, and

3. Uncover how discourse on modernity and authenticity, global and local, have shaped/ constructed/legitimised
modernisation of athletics in Oman in different phases of contemporary Omani history.

Literature Review
Non-Western countries were not always given the choice in their path to modernity (Kumar, 1990). However, some
elements followed different paths to modernity and showed that there could be several routes to modernity
(Eisenstadt, 2000). Modernity and authenticity debates in the Arab-Islamic context have appeared in different eras
from the birth of Islam until nowadays. The current common image of modernity among Gulf societies is that they
are in a state transition from traditional to modern societies. Oman, as one of these states, lived harsher conditions
than any other country in the Gulf until the birth of “Omani Renaissance” in 1970.
The first participation in international competition by Oman’s national athletics team took place in the Gulf Athletics
Championships in the 1970s although the Oman Athletic Association (OAA) was established in 1982. Despite the
domination of football and field hockey in the first decades of the Omani Renaissance, athletics was able to attract
public attention and support thanks to the performance record of the national team in athletics during the 1980s and
1990s.

Methodology, Research Design and Data Analysis
This study is carried out through a qualitative approach that implements a biographical perspective. According to
Miller (2000), the biographical perspective is about the interplay between the actor and social structure and how the
individual has negotiated their path through a changing social structure. Giving the study’s nature and data collection
method, it utilises Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as data analysis method. It strengths lies in its nature of looking
outside of the text or talk to critically examine the social and political context of discourse (Sparkes & Smith, 2014).
The present study required an examination of actors’ work history in different sectors affiliated with the Omani sport
system. Interviewees were thus selected to reflect the experience of those with work careers covering significant
periods. Six respondents were chosen who work or worked as senior administrators, coaching staff, academics, and
athletes.

Results, Discussion and Conclusions
Modernisation discourse, with its positive statements about athletics development, remains the most powerful. The
power of modernisation discourse wins as the objections that were based on traditional and religious account are no
longer manifest even from conservative rural communities.

A range of challenges faces professionalisation of athletics. Most of these challenges result from global pressure to
address the requirements of modern sport. Omani outcomes of these pressures show a balance between the global
forces and the local resistance. Omani national team athletes participate in the Qatari and Emirati clubs tournaments,
which provide opportunities for professionalisation of individual athletes. Such an approach has complemented the
OAA capabilities and resources because it prepares the athletes for further international participation and helps
overcome the weakness in the domestic league.
Although the global pressure of marketing, professionalisation, and commercialisation is apparent, these imperatives have only local expressions because there are only local opportunities for success of average Omani athletes. This provides a good example of glocalism, whereby a local culture redefines the global culture product to suit its particular needs.