

God's Gift or Medical Risk? - Pregnancy, Birth, and Family Planning in the Sultanate of Oman

This paper discusses how cultural values and meanings of reproduction and family planning have changed in Oman during the past four decades. The presented findings are based on recent anthropological fieldwork in a Northern Omani town (2016-2017) and are grounded on a mixed-method approach combining quantitative and qualitative data.

Since the oil boom and the state building process by Sultan Qaboos in 1970 the Sultanate of Oman has undergone rapid demographic, social and economic changes. In the 1980s the birth rates in Oman were among the highest in the world, children were regarded as gifts of God and pregnancies not regulated. However, since the mid-1990s after the implementation of a national "birth spacing program" promoting larger birth intervals in the name of maternal and child health, the Sultanate has witnessed a dramatic and unique decline in its birth rates. In most demographic theories fertility decline is understood as a rational process driven by the desire for less children or smaller families.

My ethnographic findings challenge these assumptions. I argue that modern bio-medical discourses introduced through the state's health programs have framed childbearing into a medical risk. This dominant risk discourse motivates women to regulate their births, while the cultural meaning of children per-se remains largely untouched. The paper analyzes the birth spacing discourse of the Omani government and discusses how it has been both embraced and resisted on the local level through ethnographic case studies of married women belonging to different age groups.