

# AAINews

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## The Letter From the Country of Sindbad: Are Omani nationals hardworking?

It has been almost six months since I arrived in Oman's capital, Muscat, in April this year. The burning heat of June has long gone, and now mornings and evenings are quite comfortable, although during the day the temperature still rises to 35-36 degrees Celsius. Oman is one of those oil-producing countries in the Gulf region whose oil deposits are expected to be exhausted before long. Convinced that the country should not rely on crude oil production only, Sultan Qaboos of Oman is trying very hard to promote the diversification of domestic industries. Compared to other oil producing countries in the region, such as Saudi Arabia and UAE, in Oman the percentage of nationals in the total population residing in the country is high (Omani nationals 1,700,000 and non-nationals 600,000), while its GDP per capita is almost one fourth of that of neighbouring countries. Therefore, there is a strong sense of urgency in the country that more nationals have to work even if the pay may be relatively low. In this context, the Omanization policy is being promoted to increase the employment of nationals rather than expensive foreigners, and this movement has been initiated in government offices. It is said that already the percentage of Omani nationals among government employees has reached over 90%. On the other hand, in the private sector the process of Omanization is moving slowly, if at all, and the percentage of Omani nationals in the entire private sector is said to be merely 20-30%. Some argue that this is because the pay scale of the private sector, which is targeted at Indians who provide the main workforce in the country, is far too low for Omani workers. This may or may not be true.

Enough of the introduction. What I wanted to report about today is that Omani nationals around Muscat are very hardworking. The photograph on the right hand shows a work scene in a field in the midst of extreme summer heat. The Omani people in the photo are manually preparing a field of mangrove nursery. For them it must be hard and dirty work, but still they seem not to mind and to be committed to the work, thinking that Omani nationals should be able to do any job. On the other hand, around Salalah, a major city in the southern state of Dhofar, this kind of attitude is less obvious. Here most people still tend to think that Omani nationals should not engage in such kinds of dirty work. In the same photo, the assistant section chief is wearing the traditional hat of Oman which is called the Kumma. If you wrap the hat with a piece of cloth called masal and wear dishdashah, you are fully dressed in the traditional Omani style. This wrapping cloth, masal, as used in Oman is not so long as that used in other Arab countries, and the former gives a more formal, sharper impression. Sindbad of the Thousand and One Nights is believed to have come from Sur or Sohar in this country. For seamen like him this shorter type of headgear must have been convenient for working on board ship at sea. Even an elderly traffic safety worker labours very hard in the unbearable heat as if to say there is no other choice. The cost of living in Oman turned out to be higher than I had expected, probably almost the same or slightly higher than in UAE. This may be because most everyday items have to be transported from Dubai. With the low payment (about 120,000 yen per month for a new graduate working in a government office) and the high cost of living, the life of people in Oman is not that easy. However, many people, if not all, are very willing to learn something, and some people try to promote their own careers by first investing to obtain some qualifications. Every day I learn a lot from those who consider labour to be part of prayer. And I wish all the best of luck to those joke-loving, cheerful people of Oman.

(By SHOJI in Oman, October 2000)

