Think Place: Geographies of National Identity in Oman

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THINK PLACE: GEOGRAPHIES OF NATIONAL IDENTITY IN OMAN

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelor of Arts with Honors in Asian and Middle Eastern Studies from the College of William and Mary in Virginia,

by

Gretchen Nutz

Accepted for

(Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)

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Director

Williamsburg, Virginia
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Acknowledgements & Preface

In the summer of 2012, I arrived in Muscat, Oman with funding from several university grants to study national narratives and how they are communicated to tourists in preparation for writing a senior honors thesis. I began by studying my surroundings and conversing with my Arabic instructors and my host family, one of many Omani families that had returned from living in East Africa within the last few decades. Through some connections from my home university, I also began meeting with government officials involved in tourism and heritage along with various people who had commercial or scholarly interest in heritage tourism in Oman. I kept asking myself and others, how do the Omani government and private citizens think about what it means to be “Omani” and for this place to be “Oman”?

The turning point in my six weeks of field research came when my host brother generously allowed me the use of his car whenever he was out of town. Now independently mobile, I began exploring museums, forts, and traffic circle monuments on days off from Arabic class. After many hours in that little Toyota, I began seeing connections between what I was gleaning from interviews, tourist brochures, and tourist sites and what I was seeing from the car window or on foot. The fort motifs that seemed ubiquitous in the urban landscape resonated with narratives I heard about Oman's traditional culture and centrality within historical trade routes. I visited mountains and wadis that reminded me of what tourist brochures said about Oman's natural wonders. Ideas about being Omani seemed to take physical form.

I owe the inspiration to consider the role of landscapes and especially the built environment in national discourses to my adviser, Professor Sibel Zandi-Sayek, and her class Cities in the Modern Middle East. She also spent countless hours helping me with everything from developing a research proposal and finding funding to refining my arguments. I am grateful also to Professor Anne Rasmussen who shared invaluable advice and personal contacts from her research experience in Oman and then served on my thesis committee. Professor Salih Can Aciksoz also served on the committee and particularly helped me consider my theoretical framework beginning with the thesis's first chapter. I am also much indebted to Professor Don Rahtz and Mrs. Lois Critchfield for first challenging me to think about Oman's national “brand” in an elective marketing class and then connecting me with numerous Omani officials and scholars who contributed significantly to my research.

Gretchen Nutz
May 3, 2013
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Introduction

“Communities are inseparable from particular habitats,” writes nationalism scholar Anthony Smith in *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, and even movement does not eliminate a place’s “imprint on their liturgy, education or oral traditions.” Civilizations, whether primitive or advanced, face challenges and opportunities associated with occupying a physical environment, and the resulting encounters impact both people and place. While many scholars have written on the modern (as well as ancient) phenomenon of diasporas who maintain a collective identity apart from their claimed homeland and seemingly independent of locality, many people still find themselves attached to bounded nation-states. This attachment provides material for the ongoing construction and adjustment of collective identity.

Nation-states typically depend for their existence and continued authority on appropriating a particular physical space as a forum for enacting their social and political order as well as an anchor for legitimacy. For this reason, the theories of scholars such as Benedict Anderson and Eric Hobsbawm regarding the determinism of modern nations and their narratives are invaluable. Ultimately, the nation-state contends with the claims of neighbors, other potentially averse interests in the territory, and the challenges posed by climate and environmental features. Yet the state especially is not merely reactive but often actively guides collective narratives to support its agenda.

It is the challenge of managing a national space or physical environment, in addition to dilemmas of competing societal and political forces, that moves the state to assert a coherent national narrative supporting its existence as a unique and independent

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entity. While scholars have debated the nature of nationhood or this sense of national identity that may underpin a nation-state, historian Alon Confino posits that it should be thought of in terms of collective memory, the construction of which entails “collective negotiation and exchange between the many memories that exist in a nation.”

Thus, while state actors may have influence over this negotiation, they still operate in a discourse which includes previously-constructed memories. Benedict Anderson famously describes such negotiation as creating an “imagined community.” “Imagined” is, according to Anderson, the appropriate adjective “because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.” The imagination required for any large collective to shape an identity thus becomes especially integral for the modern nation-state seeking to forge shared narratives from the ethnic, regional, linguistic, or other sub-collectives within its population. As Smith suggests, it derives narrative elements from the physical environment as a trait common to all, a symbol of the national collective that touches every individual member and sub-group. He helpfully directs our attention to materiality in the construction of narratives, and particularly the power of landscape in making collective identity imaginable.

Nation Building Imperatives

The Sultanate of Oman is a nation-state containing multiple imagined communities and diverse collective memories interacting with one another, but ultimately it is seeking to establish political sovereignty in a particular physical environment. Like

other nation-states, Oman draws upon its physical environment in imagining its collective identity and distinctiveness. As Anderson notes, the “political community” of such a nation-state is “imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign.”\textsuperscript{4} The exercise of sovereignty through this imagined political community in Oman, according to current conceptions of nation building, rests upon three imperatives: the nature of the nation must be unique, national interests must take precedence over other internal interests, and the nation must be politically independent and sovereign.\textsuperscript{5} Before considering how Oman's government and people construct national narratives around the physical environment, it is important to consider how these three imperatives weigh on this particular nation-state.

**The Nature of The Nation Must Be Unique**

When Sultan Qaboos bin Said came to power in 1970, he and his government faced an especially urgent necessity to articulate Oman's unique national character. The new administration was poised to make a drastic break with the isolationist and anti-development policies of Qaboos's predecessor, and it needed to define the new nation-state in such a way as to justify both the existence and goals of the new regime. Marc Valeri, a political scientist who has written extensively on political legitimacy and nation building in Gulf states and especially Oman, suggests that Qaboos “inherited a territory without a state” and needed to establish “the definition of a new collective identity” which would be “able to gather together all the ethno-linguistic groups present on Omani territory.”\textsuperscript{6} Similarly, anthropologist Mandana Limbert writes from her recent ethnographic work in the interior Omani town of Bahla that people in Oman—both

\textsuperscript{4} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{5} Takeuchi, “Nationalism and Geography in Modern Japan, 1880s to 1920s,” 104.
private individuals and government officials—describe an additional urgency to develop effective national narratives because of the temporal and frenzied nature of this particular phase in Oman's history. In 1985, then Minister of Education Yahya bin Mahfoudh al-Mantheri told the Associated Press that Oman's pressing question or problem is time (al-mas'alā mas'alat al-qa't).

In the decades since 1970, the government has aggressively pursued modernization, and with this modernization Oman has become increasingly globally integrated. Limbert recalls that, “Within ten years, Oman went from being one of the most isolated states in the world (in league with Albania, Nepal, or North Korea at various moments in the twentieth century) to being an internationally recognized and economically interconnected petro-state.” An anecdote from my research on Oman's traffic circle monuments illustrates why globalization and the influx of outside influences increases the challenge of creating a unique national character. Many of the nearly ubiquitous traffic circles in the capital city of Muscat encircle sculptures or monuments of some form. According to one account of the initial development of Muscat's road systems, a Chinese businessman offered local committees a book of monument designs which featured elements he considered “Omani.” Particularly in the early days of Oman's reinvented nationhood, there was supposedly little agreement about what cultural or other symbols best represented Oman, and thus decisions were guided by pictures from an enterprising non-Omani capitalist.

A book that articulates official narratives about the unique nature of Oman with

\[7\] Limbert, In the Time of Oil: Piety, Memory, and Social Life in an Omani Town, 9.
\[8\] Ibid., 6.
particular comprehensiveness is the late Sir Donald Hawley's *Oman*. Though Hawley was a British ambassador to Oman, Omanis have ratified his book as an apt portrayal of their history. A senior official at the Ministry of Heritage and Culture gave me an updated version of this picture-laden book, recommending it as an excellent introduction to Omani national identity. Another British ambassador, Richard Muir, contributed to this new 2011 edition, but acknowledged extensive assistance from various Omani government ministries,\(^9\) confirming other reports I heard that the book captured official Omani views. This paper will cite Hawley's book extensively, beginning with a quote from the chapter on Oman's history that concisely introduces the narratives by which Oman is asserting a distinct national nature.

Influences from south and north Arabia, and Yemen, from Mesopotamia and Iran, and from the Indian subcontinent and Africa came together in the ancient past to mould the Omani nation. But it is perhaps above all the sea which has given Oman's history its special consistency and drama. As merchants, sailors, explorers and missionaries of Islam, the Omani people have, since the very earliest days, headed out across the seas to shape the future of their nation.\(^10\)

Thus, Sir Hawley presents his overview of Omani history by emphasizing Oman's geographic location and its concomitant legacy of maritime activity, which will receive further examination in the first chapter.

**National Interests Must Take Precedence and The Nation Must Be Politically Independent and Sovereign**

In various ways, official Omani narratives appropriate the physical environment in asserting the precedence of national interests over other internal interests and the state's political independence and sovereignty. Within “Omani” society lies a significant amount

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9 Hawley and Muir, *Oman*, Acknowledgements.
10 Ibid., 30.
of ethnic, racial, linguistic, and religious diversity that must exist in some tension with national interests and identity as the next three chapters explore. Sultan Qaboos described some of these challenges at the time of his ascension to power: “Many of our gifted sons and daughters fled (the country) in despair to make a life for themselves in other lands, and we were faced with a war waged against our people with utmost cruelty by the surrogates of those same evil forces which have reduced so many millions in this world to a life of misery and slavery.”

The Qaboos regime wrestled with a myriad of external pressures inherited from his predecessors. In the above reference to “evil forces,” Sultan Qaboos probably meant the Marxists that allegedly inspired Dhofarics to rise against the Sultan in the mid-twentieth century, but by being vague he may have also wished to reference recent Saudi, British, or even Arab nationalist attempts to manipulate political alliances within Omani territory. Indeed, the previous Sultan, Sa'id, instituted extreme isolationist policies and avoided infrastructure expenditures to avoid becoming economically or culturally subservient to the British, though he relied on their help to neutralize the armed internal rebellion known as the Jebel Akhdar war in the 1950s. At the same time, Valeri points out that many of Sultan Sa'id's policies were predicated on his fear that uncontrolled development and Western influence would empower his domestic critics, as he believed had happened in Egypt and elsewhere in the Middle East. Thus, he curtailed “foreign dress,” restricted the import of media and medicine, and after 1965 denied entry permits to journalists and other visitors. He also refused to expand dismal health care and

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11 Maamiry, Whither Oman, vii.
12 Valeri, Oman: Politics and Society in the Qaboos State, 28.
13 Ibid., 39.
14 Ibid., 52.
education systems. Coupled with economic hardship stemming from, among other factors, Oman's recession from maritime trade during the 1800s, these social conditions undermined the legitimacy of his national government. Sultan Qaboos alludes to this in the quote above as the “despair” that drove many Omanis abroad and which he had to alleviate in legitimizing his own regime.

Official Omani narratives claim that the Omani nation-state has such historical legacies and portent for future good that it is worth both elevating above regional identities and preserving against regional power flows. Indeed, official narratives assume that the nation-state's dominance is the natural consequence of its geographical position and environment. Thus, Oman's identification with a landscape and, as geography and heritage studies scholar David Lowenthal posits for any nation-state, a glorious past anchored in that landscape, “serves as an assurance of worth against subjugation” and “bolsters a new sovereignty.”

Development of Omani national narratives

Physical place provides a focal point for dissecting the development of Omani national narratives under the Qaboos regime. Valeri notes that Oman, “Traditionally on the fringe of the Arab world,” has under Qaboos pursued two potentially-conflicting objectives: “to find its place in that region, while underlining its originality.” I would add that in trying to establish regional connections while distancing itself from regional counterparts, national narratives have focused on asserting—via various allusions or connections to landscape—Oman's superiority in terms of longevity, diversity, openness,

15 Ibid., 67–68.
16 Hawley and Muir, Oman, 64.
17 Lowenthal, The Past Is a Foreign Country, 44.
18 Valeri, Oman: Politics and Society in the Qaboos State, 77.
and preservation of traditional culture. Anthony Smith emphasizes that nation-states may construct versions of history to suit particular political or other circumstances, but they usually do not do so in a vacuum. They usually select and repackage existing myths and stories, and keep the accepted cultural styles and themes.¹⁹

Focusing on how place is appropriated in national narratives reveals that the construction of these narratives is complex and far from seamless. Within “Omani” society lies a significant amount of ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity that exists in tension with national interests and identity. The Omani government, for example, emphasizes the country’s longevity and traditional culture as a link to a safer, legitimizing past while downplaying more recent history of division and struggle. Place is key to establishing those links. The process of constructing national narratives around place and creating links to a favorable past is fraught with all sorts of challenges and tensions to which I will give close attention in the following chapters.

In this thesis I will examine three significant geographies within Omani national identity construction in separate chapters. Specifically, official and private voices within Oman look to Oman’s location, natural environments, and defensive architecture in the built environment to define and differentiate their country. The first chapter will examine how, in raising conceptual boundaries between itself and other nation-states, Oman ironically emphasizes its connectedness. Its sense of “edgeness” in terms of geographic location becomes centrality as it emphasizes its role as a crossroads. In the second chapter I will explore how Oman's remarkable variety of natural environments and features are used to distinguish it from its neighbors in the Middle East and has become a

national symbol in a way that is unique in the region. Finally, the third chapter will
discuss how the Omani government is creating a recognizable urban identity using
defensive and other cultural motifs that reference Oman’s role as a crossroads and its
natural environment while memorializing myths about longevity and traditional culture.

Research Methods

This paper draws from a variety of source materials which provide glimpses into
fora where narratives take shape, including both government-sponsored and private
sources. No single official or unofficial voice can truly monopolize Omani narratives, and
thus this paper will attempt to show how constructions of Omani national identity are
made coherent and the challenges of doing so. Observations from tourist sites and
museums visited over the summer provide many examples of how landscape figures into
the story of Oman that government-sponsored tourist sites articulate to visitors. Both
pictures and tourist materials (such as brochures) have aided this analysis. Government-
ponsored publications, books, and websites as well as interviews with government
officials in the Ministry of Heritage and Culture and the Ministry of Tourism provide
another source of national narratives.

Other sources include interviews with private individuals and personal
observations from living and interacting with Omanis for six weeks during the summer of
2012. It should be noted that these interviews were limited primarily to educated, young
Omanis living in the capital city of Muscat and originally from one of three regions in
Northern Oman (Batinah, Sharqiya, and Dakhliya). The views they articulated were
relatively consistent with one another and with government narratives, while providing
additional insights that may or may not be unique to their demographic.

Beyond these primary sources of narratives, a number of scholars inform my analysis through publications on Omani history, culture, and society. These will provide background and sometimes alternative readings on the official narratives of Oman. While only a few scholars, most notably Marc Valeri and Mandana Limbert, have directly tackled questions of national identity formation in Oman, their analysis will be useful as well.
Chapter I: On the Edge—Location in Omani National Identity

Introduction

Dear brothers, the role played by the people of Oman in maritime navigation is as old as the history of this ancient country. Historians agree that Omanis were amongst the first to ride the sea, from the time that ship and mast were known to mankind. Their familiarity with the sea stems from the geographical location of Oman. Located at the junction of sea routes, where commercial caravans from east and west met, Oman was considered a safe haven from the perils of the sea, and its towns known as abundant provisioners to their needs, and a place for a safe and peaceful exchange of goods.

It has been said that trade is the purveyor of civilization. The ambulant merchant carries, along with his commodities, his beliefs, thoughts and traditions, to spread wherever he goes, and then returns home with thoughts, beliefs and traditions which have taken root in him from that country. The people of Oman benefited from these links. This country was a gathering centre for merchants from different countries, and as a result, the minds of the Omani people were enlightened, their horizons widened, their abilities strengthened. These are the characteristics which enable the contemporary Omani to step forward towards achieving the goals of the auspicious renaissance under the wise, able and resolute leadership of the loyal son of Oman, leader of its path, His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said.20

In November of 1990, the Sultanate of Oman welcomed scholars and delegates from UNESCO to the International Seminar on the Silk Roads. In his introductory remarks, the Minister of Heritage and Culture, His Highness Sayyid Faisal Al Said, offered the above comments on the significance of Oman's location. Only twenty years into the “renaissance,” as the period following Sultan Qaboos bin Said's rise to power is called, this international gathering came at a time when Oman was still rushing to catch up with the developed world after more than half a century of social and economic stagnation and isolation. In those two decades, the Qaboos government had faced the

challenge of articulating a national identity and story that could unite and direct what had been a fractured and oppressed people.

What is fascinating about the above excerpt is how the speaker highlighted Oman's location as key to understanding Oman's relative significance, diversity, development trajectory, governance, and foreign policy. In doing so, he appealed to narratives of longevity, maritime expertise, peacefulness, and cultural exchange and appropriated them to propel present national goals. The Minister's comments introduce the main threads of this study on the importance of location in Omani national identity. Moreover, many of the private individuals I spoke with in Oman echoed these narratives, at least in part.

Location offers a valuable lens through which to study how Omanis, both government officials and private citizens, explain Oman's distinctiveness and justify its contemporary policy. After analyzing how Omani officials and many others think of Oman as an historical center of trade, I will explore elements of Oman's cultural exchange with East Africa and the Indian subcontinent to better understand the limitations and tensions of these narratives. I will then review of centrality and exchange relate to other claims within national narratives, leading to a brief look at how such claims are used to support contemporary economic and foreign policy.

**Positioning Oman At The Center**

Oman is located on the edge of several designated regions including the Arabian Peninsula, the Middle East, the Indian Ocean, and the Monsoon Triangle. While nation-states typically establish or confirm physical parameters to aid in the process of
differentiation and identity construction, Oman takes an interesting approach to this differentiation. In many Omani's perceptions, geography has made marks on Omani culture as well as ideas of what it means to be Omani. Moreover, the Omani government articulates its contemporary regional and global policies in terms of geography and historical exchange. As I will demonstrate, such voices argue that Oman's location on the “edge” actually puts it at the center of cross-regional and even global exchange.

When the Minister told those gathered for the International Seminar on the Silk Road that Oman's seaward orientation “stems from the geographical location of Oman,” he called up a number of historical associations within Oman's collective memory. Oman borders the Republic of Yemen on its south-west, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to its west, and the United Arab Emirates to the north. However, its over three thousand kilometers of eastern coastline faces the Indian Ocean, and the Ministry of Information says it “dominat[es] the oldest and most important sea trading route in the world between the Gulf and the Indian Ocean.”21 Oman, according to the Ministry, “is also criss-crossed by the old north-south and east-west overland Arabian trade routes.”22 Oman has greater affinity with East Africa and the Indian subcontinent in terms of geographic proximity and historical exchange than most other modern nation-states in what is now conceptualized as the Middle East. East Africa and India have interacted with no other Arab community to the extent they have with Oman.

The role of Oman's natural environment in its cultural and identity construction will be treated more fully in the next chapter, but it is worth mentioning here that it also

21 Oman 2009-2012, 12.
22 Ibid., 12.
plays a part in directing Oman's gaze toward the sea. The expansive desert on Oman's western frontier forms its default (though ambiguous and historically contested) border with Saudi Arabia. Historian Calvin Allen, Jr. argues that, “...Oman has long been virtually an island unto itself” surrounded by the Rub' al-Khali ("Empty Quarter") desert, Wahibah Sands, Gulf of Oman, and Arabian Sea. He goes on to say that, “Thus isolated from the rest of Arabia by geography, Oman evolved independently from its neighbors.”

While Omani narratives do not typically reiterate Allen's claim of isolation, they often emphasize that geography channeled Oman's energy into sea-based trade and other maritime preoccupations. Certainly the deserts had something to do with this, but it is likely that Oman's position relative to continents was more decisive in that fusion Anthony Smith describes between a community and its habitat. In Smith's understanding, even the displaced—such as Omani merchants who settled in foreign lands—usually retain memories of a habitat that “continues to suffuse their collective consciousness by its imprint on their liturgy, education or oral traditions.” For Omanis, the habitat's centrality within trade and exchange routes had such an imprint on their culture.

Officially sanctioned narratives frequently highlight centrality's imprint. Sir Donald Hawley's highly-regarded work on Oman begins with this point: “For thousands of years Oman lay along the sea trade routes between East and West. Oman was the link between Arabia and Africa. Oman's sailors were known in the ports of the world; her merchants to the world's seafarers.” Omani historians recall with pride the Omani

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24 Ibid., 50.
26 Hawley and Muir, Oman, 7.
navigator Ahmad ibn Majid who wrote the classic Arabic manual on navigation and probably guided Vasco da Gama in his famous 1498 voyage from Mozambique to Kerala.27 Oman's location on an East-West axis was certainly significant. The Arabian Peninsula served for centuries as the point of entry for all manner of goods and ideas passing from China, India, and the rest of Asia to the Mediterranean and vice versa.

In addition to the role of “link between Arabia and Africa,” as Allen describes Oman's geographic position, Omanis see themselves as a linchpin for the entire Indian Ocean. In one of my interviews, a senior official at the Ministry of Heritage and Culture echoed this sentiment after describing geography as one of three main components of Omani national identity, and as something that gives meaning and expression to what it means to be Omani. He compared the Indian Ocean to a large carpet connecting Oman to the rest of the world. Primarily because of the Indian Ocean exchanges, Oman, he proudly asserted, has known globalization before the word was invented.28 That Indian Ocean “carpet” had a unique advantage in the centuries before steam-powered sailing. Monsoon wind patterns made possible the efficient, predictable passage between Oman, East Africa, and the Indian subcontinent.29

Exchange with East Africa and The Indian Subcontinent

Many official and private voices in Oman stress that the country's proximity and access to other regions had tangible consequences for its cultural formation. As the previously mentioned official at the Ministry of Heritage and Culture asserted, cultural interaction and the mixing of peoples have contributed to a distinctive Omani national identity.

27 Ibid., 45.
28 Personal Interview, MH1.
29 McPherson, The Indian Ocean, 4.
identity. This official also confirmed my own experience that a dinner guest in an Omani home will likely enjoy a mixture of cuisine from Asia, Africa, and Europe, illustrating the cultural diversity that modern Omanis have inherited.

East Africa had a particularly strong impact on Omani culture through trade and shared governance. Marc Valeri links this relationship back to geography, saying, “The Swahili-speaking populations have formed a ‘middlemen mercantile’ Muslim society whose historical shaping is intimately linked to its geographical position, at the interaction between mainland African civilizations on the one hand, and the continuous waves of migration among the Arab world, Asia and the East African coast on the other.”

Today, thousands of such Swahili-speaking Omanis or their parents or grandparents have replanted their lives in Oman after living in Africa, usually Tanzania. Based on field studies, Marc Valeri estimates the number of “back-from-Africa” Omanis at 100,000 in a population that totals about 2.8 million. For the most part, these Omanis or their ancestors migrated to East Africa in one of two waves. The first occurred with East Africa's colonization starting in the seventeenth century. At the end of the nineteenth century, Omanis began leaving their homeland again, but this time because of socio-economic drivers, as East Africa promised better economic opportunities than struggling Oman.

The former group had a significant impact on the formation of East African cultures, exemplifying the truism that cultural exchange is rarely unilateral. Swahili culture looked to its interactions with Arabs for cultural definition, relying for example on

30 Personal Interview, MH1.
32 Ibid., 486.
33 Ibid., 481.
this legacy of exchange for its origin myth. Particularly during the era of Omani colonization, Swahili elites often relied on their supposed links to Arab forefathers to differentiate themselves from other Swahili-speaking peoples.\textsuperscript{34} Early Ibadhis took their teachings to East Africa in the eighth century, thereby spreading a minority religious persuasion common to both Oman and East Africa.\textsuperscript{35} Hussein Ghubash, the UAE ambassador to UNESCO who has written about Oman’s Ibadhi tradition, believes the link between the two places to be so strong that, “In fact, East Africa can be considered as a historical, political, doctrinal and even a national extension of Oman.”\textsuperscript{36} In evidence of identity's contingency, Omanis in Africa also took a modified sense of identity based on their location, often “consider[ing] themselves at the same time ‘Omani’, ‘Arab’, ‘Zanzibari’ and ‘Swahili.’”\textsuperscript{37}

Throngs of Omani expatriates in East Africa returned to Oman at Sultan Qaboos's call for them to return and help build the new nation-state. They brought much needed technical and administrative knowledge, though Valeri notes that they nonetheless found they needed to prove that they were true Omanis. They were not a homogenous group, but they had a common vernacular of Swahili.\textsuperscript{38} Historian John Peterson writes that the children of those returning, who had often been “born in Oman and educated in Omani schools, speak Arabic fluently but they remain distinct from non-Zanzibari Omani children because of the more liberal and cosmopolitan cultural traits of their families.”\textsuperscript{39} These “traits” would become part of the cultural fabric of modern Oman even as these

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 482.  
\textsuperscript{35} Ghubash, \textit{Oman – The Islamic Democratic Tradition}, 20.  
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 45.  
\textsuperscript{37} Valeri, “Nation-Building and Communities in Oman Since 1970,” 485.  
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 481.  
\textsuperscript{39} Peterson, “Oman’s Diverse Society,” January 1, 2004, 47.
African Omanis struggled to find their place in its society.

Regardless of their time of or reason for departure, the Omanis who returned to their homeland for trade or permanently brought much of their adopted culture with them. To illustrate this hybridity, consider “traditional” dress. When you ask an Omani man what he thinks it means to be Omani, he will likely mention the traditional men's dress. This costume typically includes a distinctive style of dishdasha and one of two types of head gear: the masar (a type of turban) or the kumma. The former is considered the true mark of Omani-ness and is used in formal settings. But on the streets and in all sorts of everyday contexts, men wear the kumma, which is an embroidered cap that came to Oman from East Africa. Thus, East African exchange introduced a piece of clothing into Omani culture that many Omanis now consider symbolic of their national identity. In one sense the kumma may visually represent that collective myth and memory of exchange with East Africa, yet at the same time its more recent appropriation as part of Omani national dress is an “invented tradition,” to use Hobsbawm's term.

Oman's location at the northern corner of the Monsoon Triangle and Indian Ocean has also facilitated extensive exchange with the Indian subcontinent. Perhaps the most noticeable historic impact of this proximity is the presence of an Indian merchant class within Oman. Peterson posits that “It should not be surprising that Oman’s window on the Indian Ocean and its long trading links with the Indian subcontinent should have given rise to the presence of Indian merchants in Muscat for many centuries.”

Obviously, Oman's location and the role it claimed as a center of trade would have

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40 Fair, “Dressing up: Clothing, Class and Gender in Post-Abolition Zanzibar,” 72 and 87.
encouraged the rise of such merchant groups. Two predominant groups of Indian-origin Omanis whose members have often (but not exclusively) assumed this role are the Hindu and Lawatiyya.

Hindu, and especially Banian, Omanis established many of the trade links between Oman and their homeland during and following the Portuguese occupation of Muscat that ended in the seventeenth century. One such Hindi merchant, a Banian named Narutim, helped Omani forces retake Muscat from the Portuguese in 1650, according to Omani chroniclers.\(^{42}\) When Naval officer J.R. Wellsted came through Muscat in the 1830s, he noted that the city appeared to have more Banians than any other Arabian city. He also observed that they had achieved prominence in importing Indian grain, textiles, and piece goods as well as in the trade of Gulf pearls.\(^{43}\) While the political instability of the early twentieth century led many Banians to leave Oman, a few families remain. One such family, the Khimji Ramdas, continues to occupy an important position in the Muscat economy and in elite society. According to Peterson, “The connection of the Khimji Ramdas family with Oman apparently derives from a family member who … set up business in Muscat, approximately 125 years ago, to export dates and import various goods.”\(^{44}\) Khimji Ramdas continues to be a household name. When I needed to replace a specialized battery charger, shopkeepers directed me to the Khimji showroom in Ruwi, the heart of Muscat's Indian and merchant district. When I mentioned this to my host family and friends, everyone recognized the name and associated it with various leading commercial enterprises in Muscat.

\(^{42}\) Peterson, “Oman’s Diverse Society,” 38.
\(^{44}\) Ibid., 39.
The Lawatiyya have also attained a significant role in Oman's economy. Their current influence on trade and commerce is symmetrical with their history in Oman, for they have long held positions as influential merchants. According to Peterson, “The Lawatiyya (singular, Lawati or Lutyani) community—apparently of Indian origin, at least in the main—is the largest of Oman’s three Shi’a groups.” Whether because of their Shi’ite faith, Indian ethnicity, or mercantile social status, the Lawatiyya drew notice from various Omani chroniclers. Omani historian Ibn Ruzayq wrote that some elite members of the Lawatiyya community met the first sovereign of the Al Bu Sa’id dynasty upon his arrival to the capital in the 1740s. Members of today's Lawatiyya community have enjoyed significant success as merchants and even government officials in Oman. Indeed, some of the first female Omanis to receive upper level government appointments were Lawatiyya.

In addition to these two groups, it is worth noting that the largest non-Arab ethnic group in Oman, the Baluchi, also traces its origin to the Indian subcontinent. Baluchi regions of Iran and Pakistan border the Indian Ocean opposite Oman. Europeans who traveled to Oman as early as the sixteenth century mentioned Baluchi living in Oman; however, they probably began arriving much earlier. They are concentrated along the Batinah coast north of Muscat. Many originally came for employment as mercenaries. Recent estimates place the current number of Omanis of Baluchi descent at around 200,000.

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47 Ibid., 41.
48 Ibid., 43.
49 Ibid., 36.
In the quote at the beginning of this chapter, an Omani minister said that Oman's location made it a “gathering centre for merchants from different countries” and that the resulting exchange had strengthened Oman. He may have been thinking of Oman's Indian merchant communities and East-African migrations, but these exchanges do not account for all of the ethnic, linguistic, religious, and cultural diversity within the small country. One might say that the variety in Oman's population parallels the variety in Oman's natural environment, a topic which will be discussed in the next chapter. For now it is sufficient to note that Oman's population is far from homogenous, and that its geographic location at the meeting point of various regions has facilitated a large part, though not all, of this diversity.

**Location-Centric Claims within National Narratives**

Besides exchanging people and cultural traits with other regions, official and private actors make a number of claims related to their location in articulating national identity. The very notion that Oman is a both a place and a people vis-a-vis other landed people groups and, according to history books, has been since ancient times, supports its recent reemergence as a sovereign, unified nation-state. The fact that so much collective memory highlights Oman's physical location relative to other “homelands” helps to confirm its status as a separate and distinct place and people. Repetition is powerful, so even repeating the idea of an Omani state goes a long way to establish its reality. German Studies scholar Michael Geisler calls this phenomenon “overdetermination,” noting that the repetition is particularly powerful when members of the collective receive the narratives from a plethora of sources,\(^5^1\) such as the historical accounts, official speeches,\(^5^1\) Geisler, “National Symbols,” 120.
and national monuments that voice this notion in Oman. However, talking about Oman in relation to places that are not Oman gives the narrative a sense of broader truth, an independent reality. Answering the question of “What is Oman?” by telling its history of exchange with other places implicitly assumes that Oman is a place and a people with a set role or position in relation to other peoples and places.

**Longevity**

The fact that this role and relative position features in Oman's ancient historical narratives supports claims of Oman's longevity. Anthony Smith explains that, “In the myths of the community its origins reach back into a mysterious and primordial time.” Hawley, for example, asserts that “Oman's trading tradition reaches back not centuries but millennia.” On November 18, 1972, the second National Day following his ascension to power, Sultan Qaboos articulated this history to support his development goals, asserting that, “Our principle aim is to restore the past glories of our country. Our aim is to see that Oman has restored its past civilization and has occupied its great position among its Arab brothers in the second half of the twentieth century...” This “past civilization” and “great position” could refer to Oman in the heyday of maritime trade that European travelers recorded. It could also refer to Oman's more ancient history, that is, its reportedly sophisticated social systems and trade routes of the Bronze Age. In either case, longevity is significant. As Smith would argue, the people of Oman may view their community and its tie to the homeland as ancient or pre-ancient and extend that sense of belonging to the nation-state.

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54 Ibid., 14.
In fact, Omanis may feel an unusually high impetus to do so given the relative youth of their nation-state. Allen says that Omanis relish the longevity of their civilization vis a vis their larger neighbor, Saudi Arabia. “Today, the Saudis occasionally criticize Omanis as 'non-Arabs'; but to Omanis, the Saudis—with their relatively young 200-year-old kingdom—seem unsophisticated arrivistes.”\(^55\) I did not hear this sentiment about Saudi Arabia in my discussions with Omanis, perhaps because of their politeness, but a number told me that they do identify with the place because of its long history of civilization. One young man from the Batinah region, a student at Sultan Qaboos University, cited this longevity and the diversity of cultures and regions within Oman as reasons that Omanis “love their heritage.”\(^56\)

**Emblematic Exports**

Besides highlighting the longevity of their role in trade and exchange, official narratives also make particular exports, such as frankincense, emblematic of the people and place, though these receive less emphasis. Historically, the frankincense trade exploited the fact that southern Oman was for millennia the only place known on earth to produce the aromatic tree sap. UNESCO has recognized a collection of sites in southern Oman as World Heritage Sites because it “represents the production and distribution of frankincense, one of the most important luxury items of trade in antiquity from the Mediterranean and Red Sea regions to Mesopotamia, India and China.”\(^57\) The official Museum of the Frankincense Land claims for Oman “the main role in giving the tree its value through the trade of frankincense.”\(^58\) The museum also reports that the Dhofar area

\(^{55}\) Allen, “A Separate Place,” 50.  
^{56}\) Personal Interview, PBA2.  
^{57}\) Land of Frankincense: Description.  
of Oman was known in ancient times as “the frankincense coast.”\textsuperscript{59} In an English language guide to Oman published biennially, the Ministry of Information likewise explained that “Frankincense from the Dhofar governorate helped promote cultural contacts between nations.”\textsuperscript{60} This claim for the Oman's legacy in promoting cultural interaction appeared as a caption to a colorful map illustrating traditional trade routes (Image 1.1).

As a maritime trade center, Oman also became famous for the manufacture of traditional dhow sailing ships, which many Omanis see as a symbol of their history. As early as the tenth century with the writings of Arab Geographer Mas'udi, people recognized the skill of Omani shipbuilders.\textsuperscript{61} Today, the dhow factory in the coastal city of Sur still employs craftsmen who build traditional dhow ships by hand which visitors can observe. From my visit and others' accounts, most of these craftsmen are non-citizens who have come from India or Pakistan. This seems to exemplify a key tension: even as the government seeks to highlight heritage relics such as the dhow, the historic dhow factory must resort to training and employing non-Omanis to continue the tradition. Oman nonetheless maintains its reputation as the source of traditional dhow ships and counts among its customers Qatar and King Abdullah II of Jordan.

Both private and official voices claim that the dhow as a national symbol. One Omani, an Arabic instructor from Batinah, told me that the traditional ships in Sur and the northern Batinah coast are symbols of Oman, repeating the story that Jordan, Syria, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates look to Oman as the bastion of this craftsmanship.\textsuperscript{62}

\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., 113.
\textsuperscript{60} Oman 2009-2012, 39.
\textsuperscript{61} Hawley and Muir, Oman, 33.
\textsuperscript{62} Personal Interview, PBA1.
Another one of my Arabic instructors from the Sharqiya region said the boats are a symbol of Oman “because Omanis went so many places” and its historically prominent role in maritime trade distinguishes it from other places in the Arab world. The government helped promote such memories by sponsoring the highly-publicized voyage of a new dhow, Jewel of Muscat, from Oman to Singapore in 2010. The project's website detailed the history of trade between Oman and East Asia as well as the traditional methods of shipbuilding and navigation employed. In an initial press release, a Ministry of Foreign Affairs official enthused about the opportunity “to tell the world about this exciting project, our rich maritime heritage and the historical links between Arabia and the Far East.”

**Openness and Tolerance**

Another common claim is that Oman's location and history of exchange has contributed to a narrative of openness and tolerance. Most tourist brochures and websites about Oman tout its hospitable culture. For example, a brochure promoting investment in Oman's tourism sector states that tourism development in Oman “reflects the Sultanate’s historic, cultural and natural heritage and ethos of traditional hospitality.” When I asked Omanis what differentiates their culture, nearly all mentioned hospitality and friendliness towards outsiders. One of my Arabic instructors told me, “When I meet someone in Oman, I see it in their eyes. If I stop on the road, he will ask me if I need help, and then ask me to his house for coffee and vegetables. Or even if he has nothing in his house, he will ask me.” A university student from Batinah connected this cultural openness with

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63 Personal Interview, PSH1.
64 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Launch Press Release.”
65 Destination Oman, 3.
66 Personal Interview, PBA1.
Oman's history of exchange and trade. For this individual, Oman's relationships with Africa, India, China, Iran, Pakistan, and later the West were highly definitive. He reminded me that Omanis were the first Arabs to visit America, going on to say that “We do not want conflict with any person or country, but we also don't want anyone to come and cause problems in Oman.”

This final statement points to the reserve and privacy that Omanis still value, despite their purported openness. It also reflects the tension in Oman over expatriate laborers, which in 2010 helped to account for the nearly 30% of the population that is considered expatriate. The capital city of Muscat, the university student from Batinah told me, is not a good place to get a picture of Oman because of the number of expatriates from America, India, Zanzibar, and elsewhere. This person suggested that visitors should go to other regions with fewer expatriates because they are more normative and better represent Oman. While I and most Westerners I knew felt welcome in Oman, that openness did not extend to people who appeared to be of Indian origin, though these do most of the menial jobs in Oman. On several occasions, Omanis cautioned me about interacting with Indians or Pakistanis and expressed resentment over their presence in Oman. For whatever reason, the actual sentiment towards these particular outsiders runs counter to narratives lauding openness and exchange.

Indeed, exchange and a centralized location have their disadvantages for building national solidarity as outsiders participate in or seek to exploit the locational assets. Ghubash suggest this is not a new challenge for Oman. He notes that “Throughout

67 Personal Interview, PBA2.
68 Economist Intelligence Unit, Oman: Basic Data.
69 Personal Interview, PBA2.
ancient and modern history, Oman's strategic situation has imposed different historical roles, at times even burdens, on its population,” especially when “the Omanis had to confront the expansions and challenges of the imperialists.”

**Ibadhi Character**

The claim of tolerance and openness is connected to another common element in official and unofficial narratives: Oman's tolerant religious character. Omanis proudly assert that their homeland was one of the earliest regions outside of the Hijaz to embrace Islam. But aside from these early affiliations, Oman's religious identity is closely connected to a minority sect of Islam, Ibadhism. According to one Ministry of Heritage and Culture official, the successful establishment of Ibadhism remains one the most significant events in Oman's history, especially in retrospect as the land of Ibadhism is now synonymous with the land of Oman. More importantly, this official claimed that Ibadhism fostered a culture of tolerance and balance in Oman. He thus connected Oman's geographic location, Ibadhism, and culture of tolerance.

The land along the eastern stretch of the Arabian Peninsula has been associated with Ibadhism almost from that movement's beginning. Ghubash in his seminal work, *Oman-The Islamic Democratic Tradition*, describes this formative relationship.

The removal of the Ibadhite movement and its 'ulema' (religious scholars) from Basra to Oman, and the transfer of part of the Islamic intellectual centre in Mesopotamia towards the end of the first century, rendered Oman the 'spiritual home' (al-waatan al-ruuhhi) of the Ibadis and a place of refuge for Muslim Arabs fleeing the oppression of the Abbasid authorities. In other words, the concept of a homeland took shape at an early stage among the Omanis.

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71 Personal Interview, MH1.
Ultimately, years of struggle between Ibadhis and Abbasids confirmed Ibadhism as the Omani persuasion and a symbol of their independence. A late eighth century renaissance of Ibhadism after Abbasid suppression was centered in the interior city of Nizwa.\(^{73}\) External meddling led to a split over succession that divided the Ibadhi community for centuries until a single Ibadhi leader emerged in the seventeenth century. Nāṣer ibn Murshed came to power in 1624, and, after uniting the two factions, freed Oman from the Portuguese and launched an era of expansion and plenty in Oman.\(^{74}\) This heroic memory of Ibadhism ties it to Omani national identity and homeland affinity in national narratives.

The reason that Oman became the home of Ibhadism may have been geographic. Allen recounts that “Located on the fringes of the Arab empire, Oman became a refuge for religious dissidents.”\(^{75}\) Valeri suggests that Oman, and especially the interior of Oman attracted Ibadhi leaders seeking to escape the Abbasids who controlled only the northern coast.\(^{76}\) Today, Oman is the only nation-state with an Ibadhi majority, and it has thus become a sort of Ibadhi homeland for dispersed Ibadhi communities such as those in Algeria.

The claim that Ibadhism has fostered tolerance in Oman is limited by historical and contemporary tension between religious groups. Because of Oman's location and history of exchange, Shi'ite and Sunni communities also call Oman home. Such diversity poses a potential challenge for the government in preserving peace and national

\(^{73}\) Ibid., 21.
\(^{74}\) Ibid., 22.
\(^{75}\) Allen, “A Separate Place,” 52.
\(^{76}\) Valeri, Oman: Politics and Society in the Qaboos State, 11.
solidarity, particularly as its neighbors experience tension between citizens of different Islamic sects. Given this challenge, it is not surprising to hear officials assert that one of Oman's distinctives is religious tolerance. This claim attempts to differentiate Oman from countries where minority sects are oppressed as well as preempt such strife in Oman. In my interviews, a number of private individuals asserted this idea, saying, as as my friend from Sultan Qaboos University did, that “religion is peaceful and there is not war in Islam in Oman.” Yet, the fact that Ibadhism split Oman for many years and that tension persists between the different Islamic sects within Oman shows the limitations of this claim.

**Contemporary Positioning**

Narratives of centrality and exchange underpin much of the Omani government's current diplomatic and trade policy. Location-based narratives may in fact be more effective in articulating such policies to outsiders than in unifying Omanis themselves. Officials have taken the claims surrounding Oman's location, such as centrality and openness, and appropriated them in positioning contemporary Oman. Lowenthal's notion of “the past as a foreign country” is relevant here. He said that in eighteenth century Europe the “past gradually ceased to provide comparative lessons, but came to be cherished as a heritage that validated and exalted the present.” Likewise, the view of Oman's historic position at the center of cross-continental exchange offers validation for a reinvigorated foreign policy based on geopolitical interests.

Since the 1970 “renaissance,” the Omani government has sought to build cross-

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77 Personal Interview, PBA2.
regional connections along historical lines. In his article entitled “Omanibalancing,” political scientist Marc O'Reilly recalls that “Once in power, Sultan Qaboos repudiated his father's disinterested, isolationist stance. ... the sultan plunged himself and his state into regional and global affairs.” Rather than a break from the past, Oman's leaders articulate this new policy as a revival of Oman's traditional position. Hawley, for example, notes that “Oman sees the wider Indian Ocean as a region of traditional links in which it should also now play a significant role.”

Obviously, the challenges of occupying a point of convergence include keeping strong opposing interests in check. O'Reilly describes the state's strategy here as “Omanibalancing,” a term he coined to describe modern Oman's version of omnibalancing. Another political scientist, Stephen David, defines omnibalancing as the process by which third-world nation-states align themselves to other powers in order to balance both external and internal threats. Under Sultan Qaboos, the Omani government has had to balance many threats, both internal and external. According to O'Reilly, these include an “international political economic world order biased in favor of the economic superpowers and their trading blocs, a narrowly defined export strategy, a Malthusian population explosion, undue reliance on expatriate labor, a lackadaisical work ethic, corruption within the government, and a severe water shortage.” One Ministry of Heritage and Culture official alluded to some of these internal threats by mentioning that Oman is blessed not to have too much wealth (therefore retaining its self-reliant culture),

79 O'Reilly, “Omanibalancing,” 73.
80 Hawley and Muir, Oman, 25.
82 O'Reilly, “Omanibalancing,” 71.
and yet the rapid development of Oman has also created marked inequalities in wealth.\textsuperscript{83} Another official from the Ministry of Tourism said that the sultan unites a diverse citizenry by treating every group and tribe such that all have equal rights and responsibilities.\textsuperscript{84} Externally, the sultan's solution has been a deft balancing of regional powers against each other. O'Reilly explains, “If, for instance, the Saudi Kingdom, the regional hegemon in the Arabian Peninsula, tries to pressure Oman, Muscat can remind Riyadh of Omani relations with Iran (a Saudi nemesis), the GCC, the United States, and maybe even Israel...”\textsuperscript{85}

Oman's geographic location between Iran and Saudi Arabia, two of the largest regional powers, makes this strategy particularly appropriate as well as providing a narrative that explains Oman's diplomatic policies. Hawley reiterates this narrative, describing Qaboos' foreign policy as “pragmatic, based on geo-strategic realities rather than temporary ideological positions.”\textsuperscript{86} These “geo-strategic realities” extend beyond simply the Middle East, as Hawley also notes when he refers back to Oman's historic exchanges with Africa: “Oman's ancient connection with East Africa has been revived in recent years. Modern contacts between Oman and Tanzania, Kenya and South Africa are encouraged, and Oman joins others in sending aid to African countries struck by natural disasters.”\textsuperscript{87} These renewed connections with East Africa certainly support Oman's narratives about its historical role in the Indian Ocean, and may also constitute some of the “regional as well as international friendships” that the sultan's administration has

\textsuperscript{83} Personal Interview, MH1. 
\textsuperscript{84} Personal Interview, MT1. 
\textsuperscript{85} O'Reilly, “Oman/balancing,” 75. 
\textsuperscript{86} Hawley and Muir, Oman, 24. 
\textsuperscript{87} Ibid., 25.
deemed vital to its interests.\textsuperscript{88} Other specific geo-political strategies include seeking economic and military collaboration with the West and cultivating trade with Iran and other Gulf countries.\textsuperscript{89}

Relations with Iran are of particular interest to Omani foreign policy, if for no other reason than they set Oman apart from most other Arab states. When I asked what differentiates Oman from other countries in the Arab world, an official from the Ministry of Heritage and Culture mentioned the impact of geography, history, and religion, but then illustrated his point about geography by talking about Iran. Oman, he said, cannot afford to ignore that Iran is a large, immediate neighbor, and is there to stay. Therefore, Oman's links with Iran are critical.\textsuperscript{90} While the details about Oman's official policies toward Iran are difficult to unearth, Western scholars have observed the economic implications. O'Reilly notes that because of Western sanctions, Iran has provided Oman with a sheltered market in which to nurse its infant industries.\textsuperscript{91} He also quotes an official news release in which Oman's Minister of Commerce describes Iran as the “principle” market for Omani exports.\textsuperscript{92}

Beyond just Iran, it is no surprise that one of the driving interests in Oman's pragmatic geo-political strategy is building economic networks based on geographic proximity and the memory of Oman's historical position as a center of trade. Some of the most interesting manifestations of this contemporary positioning are maps marked to show Oman's position within both historic and contemporary trade pathways. For

\textsuperscript{88} O'Reilly, “Omanibalancing,” 71.
\textsuperscript{89} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{90} Personal Interview, MH1.
\textsuperscript{91} O'Reilly, “Omanibalancing,” 77.
\textsuperscript{92} Ibid. Footnote 49 cites Oman News Agency (Muscat) press release, 5 January 1997.
example, an investment guide for the Salalah Free Zone, an international industrial
development in southern Oman, touts Oman's prime location with a map of the
Equatorial Trade Route. This map highlights Oman's access via the Indian Ocean to
South and East Asia, Europe, and North and South America (Image 1.2). Along with this
visual aid, the guide also reminds potential investors that “The globally strategic location
of Salalah is unrivaled by any other free zone” and is “The key to unfettered access to
over 1.6 billion consumers in the Middle East, East Africa and the Indian Ocean Rim.”93
These and other documents targeted at potential investors are particularly interesting
applications of Oman's national narratives. They reveal the great extent to which the state
articulates its national “brand” or identity in terms of the country's location at the center
of historical and (hoped-for) contemporary trade routes.

Location-oriented narratives appear throughout discussions of Oman's economic
development strategy. O'Reilly speculates that the sultan drew his economic strategy from
“Oman's days as a commercial empire and concluded that his country should increase its
level of trade regionally, including with Iran, with which it once exchanged many
products.”94 The Sultan seemed to confirm this speculation when, addressing a public
audience on National Day in 1996, he explained the rational for joining the Indian Ocean
Rim Association for Regional Cooperation (IOR-ARC).

...the Indian Ocean has always been the main gate for the Omanis, through
which they headed for its littoral states and for the world. Today, we are
linking our shining current time with our deeply-rooted past within the
framework of this new grouping which comprises states which are linked
with historic trade ties, common trade interests, and similar development
objectives that make it imperative for them to coordinate their efforts

94 O'Reilly, “Omanibalancing,” 76.
posed by the accelerating economic developments in the international arena.  

Notably, the sultan stressed not only Oman's historic role within the Indian Ocean region, but also the role that body of water has played in Oman's history as the “main gate” through which Omanis connect with the rest of the world. In this statement, he projected a vision for the Omani people by directing their attention to familiar narratives about their outward orientation and participation in regional and global exchange. Similarly, Minister of Development Muhammad bin Musa al-Yusuf has argued that "Our country occupies a really central point for the whole Indian Ocean and we feel a lot can be done with such an important position."  

Conclusion  

Location is a valuable focal point for understanding how private and official Omanis construct and articulate their national identity. The Omani government uses location to explain much of its foreign policy and economic development strategies, especially where Iran is concerned. Oman's relations with Iran, like its positioning vis-a-vis its other neighbors, help it assert a distinct national identity based on a cross-regional centrality. In terms of balancing both external and internal pressures, these interpretations of Oman's location prove highly useful.

Oman's foreign policy builds on other narratives also related to location

96 Ibid., 80, ft. 70, quoting from Lancaster, "Oman Survey: Meeting the Challenge," p. 28.
and centrality, which find voice in both official and private contexts. The historical memory of cultural exchange allows the state to assert a collective unity despite obvious diversity within its population, especially with the “back from Africa” Omanis and Indian-origin merchant communities. Similarly, the memory of a historical leadership role in maritime and other trade legitimizes and strengthens notions of national pride and affinity. Moreover, without the idea that Oman's existence relative to other peoples and places stretches into the ancient past, Oman's position on the global stage would be weaker given how recently it emerged as a unified nation-state. Finally, Oman's identification as a tolerant, open, and religiously distinctive (Ibadhi) nation frees it to align with outsiders based on “geo-political” rather than ideological considerations.

It is not surprising that location is key to understanding contemporary conceptions of Omani national identity. As Anthony Smith makes clear, physical place is a powerful tool in creating a sense of national identity if for no other reason than each individual can see, touch, and traverse this same piece of earth that someone has designated as their country's homeland. For officials and many private Omanis, that dirt and sand is loaded with significance, particularly in its location relative to others. They see their location at the edge as endowing them with a position of centrality.
Images

Image 1.1: Waqqaf, Daad Younis (photo editor). In Ali bin Mohammed Za'abanoot, Oman 2009-2010 (Muscat: Ministry of Information, 2009), 39

Chapter II: A Natural Constant—Natural Environments in Omani National Identity

Introduction

The German scientist and nationalist philosopher Henrik Steffens once observed that “nationalism was not simply the outcome of ideas and socioeconomic forces but of lived experience that forced people to redefine their world and their landscape in national terms.” Part of that lived experience is interacting with the physical environment one calls home. Individuals, especially, in agricultural or other traditional economies, often come to define themselves by the rocks, trees, and animals that play an integral role in their way of life. Steffens argues that nations develop collective awareness by likewise interacting with their environments and thus creating an identity relationship with the landscape. As Anthony Smith would say, those patterns of work and leisure which create distinctive culture are the result of constant interaction with one's environment. Consequently, people often appropriate natural features for symbols and identifiers in their collective narratives, as discussed in the first section of this chapter.

Natural diversity has both tactical and conceptual value for the Omani state. Pragmatically, a variety of ecosystems can provide a useful array of natural resources when governed by the same national infrastructure. The Omani government's current plan for economic growth, articulated in a document entitled Vision 2020, repeatedly emphasizes its natural resources and geographic location as its two most significant competitive advantages. In a case like Oman, variety can bolster a sense of distinctiveness when the “others” against which it contrasts itself, specifically other Gulf

98 Ibid., 67.
and Arab nations, possess relatively homogenous natural environments. Moreover,
similar to thinking about one's nation in terms of its historical activities and location vis-
-ua-vis other nations, nature-based narratives are a means of confronting the “constant
change and innovation of the modern world” while still seeing some aspects of society as
unchanging and consistent with the past.101 Significantly, official narratives also laud
Oman's natural diversity and discuss that diversity as a mirror of the country's
heterogeneous culture. The middle portion of this chapter will explore how voices within
Oman appropriate nature to assert these and other narrational themes.

States face the challenge of directing existing individual and collective affinities
for particular environmental features towards a national identity. Where diversity of
natural environments might once have divided people groups with their diverse cultural
adaptations as discussed in the final section of this chapter, a state such as the Sultanate
of Oman often tries to envelope these varieties in a single national identity. Hawley says,
“Until the 1970s it was usual to consider Omanis as falling into six main categories,”
including inhabitants of coastal areas who have long derived their livelihood from the sea
and sea-based trade, Batinah coast farmers depending on wells, interior farmers
depending on aflaj, Bedouin in the central desert, Shihuh or mountain dwellers of
Mussandam, and Dhofaris in the south.102 Moreover, when Sultan Qaboos came to power
in 1970, a war for the independence of Dhofar, the southern region of Dhofar
distinguished by its summer climate, was in full swing. In the 1960s, Marxist
revolutionaries had mobilized existing independence movements in Dhofar into what

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became a violent rebellion. In creating the “Sultanate of Oman,” Qaboos not only needed to quash this rebellion but also draw the people of Oman's many diverse communities into a cohesive national entity. Official national narratives that deal with Oman's internal diversity should be viewed in this context.

**Nature As A Symbol**

This chapter and the next will look at the role of various symbols in the construction of Omani national identity, beginning here with the natural environment. Geisler has provided a valuable introduction to the theory of symbols as tools of national identity. According to him, “National symbols fuse the nation, as a cultural, historical, and ideological construct, to the state, an empirical reality; this is their single, most important function.” Natural environments are at once tangible while still offering a symbolic construct as the idealized homeland, particularly for those who reside in urban areas. In this sense, nature as both a grand metaphysical construct and a tangible reality functions as a particularly potent symbol connecting the state to the nation. Geisler adds that, according to Émile Durkheim, symbols also stabilize community relations. Without symbols, connectivity fades as soon as people are not in physical contact with each other.

To the extent that Oman's natural environments become a unified conceptual symbol rather than simply a set of disparate locales, they may be used as such a nexus. In doing so, they decrease “the enormous complexity of communication by using a concrete sign as a kind of shorthand for a web of interrelated concepts, ideals, and value

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103 Allen, “A Separate Place,” 60.
104 Geisler, “National Symbols,” 112.
105 Ibid., 111.
While perhaps not a “concrete sign” in the same sense as the defensive imagery discussed in chapter 3 of this study, Oman's natural environments may serve as a symbol in the sense that they simplify communication about what Oman is and how it is different from its neighbors. One need only flip through a picture book or tourist brochure to see how images of the natural environment offer a streamlined narrative of Omani national identity (see for example Images 2.1-2.6).

The idea of looking to nature as a national symbol seems to have gained popularity in Europe in the eighteenth century. European artists and philosophers began associating natural landscapes with national identities, seeing scenery “as an expression not just of nature but of a natural process of national development incorporating the individual and giving the individual identity.” The fact that landscape art had come into vogue in the seventeenth century about the same time as cartography was also significant as the two reinforced each other in creating popular conceptions of territorial identity. This was especially true in countries lacking a strong unifying government and its attendant national imagery as Oman did when Sultan Qaboos came to power.

Beginning with the ascent of landscape art, natural environments have often been thought of as pure and removed from human manipulation. But as the American environmental historian William Cronon suggests, when one thinks about the remotest “wilderness,” it is important to remember that human culture has left imprints on even that landscape. In Oman, aflaj canals and irrigation systems testify to how human society may alter such remote landscapes, as discussed later in this chapter.

106Ibid., 112.
108Ibid., 60.
Nature in Omani Self-Descriptions

Oman's deserts, mountains, coastline, monsoon region, unusual geological properties, and wide range of rare plants and animals all feature prominently in Omani self-descriptions, especially government-sponsored international publications. A significant portion of the articles featured in the Journal of Oman Studies (published by The Ministry of Heritage and Culture since 1975) focus on nature in Oman or human interaction with the natural environment of Oman. These officially-sanctioned titles include “The palm-frond house of the Batinah,” “Adaptation of Man to the Environment: the Arabian Experience,” and “Sea Turtles and Dolphins: Aspects of Marine Animal Exploitation from Bronze Age Ra's al Ḥadd, Oman.”

Omani government agencies involved in promoting tourism place particular weight on the beauty and diversity of Oman's natural attractions. While Oman's infrastructure development has to this point primarily relied on oil revenue, the government has expressed a goal of diversifying the national economy and cited tourism as a key growth industry.110 Oman faces the challenge of differentiating itself from other tourist destinations. One solution has been to emphasize that Oman “has it all” in terms of nature. As one Western expatriate who is running a tour company explained, Oman's tourism product is about the natural resources of the country rather than what people have done in the country.111 The branding enterprise seems to be taking effect, for Muscat won the “Arab Capital of Tourism” designation for 2012. In an official press release, the Ministry of Tourism gushed that “Muscat will be the starting point from where the

111 Personal Interview, TI1.
visitors will branch out to explore the numerous sights and places to visit all over Oman encompassing the coastal, mountainous & agricultural topographies that sets the country apart from any other.”

Oman's natural diversity dominates its tourism marketing. Arriving at the Muscat airport or visiting the Natural History Museum, visitors can collect free Ministry of Tourism brochures on different regions of Oman including the governorates of Dhakliya, Dhofar, Batinah, and Musandam (see Image 2.7 for map). This reflects the perception that Oman, a country with roughly the same land area as the state of Kansas comprises distinct locales. The two most common images to appear on the covers of these brochures are forts and natural landscapes, highlighting the unique offerings of particular regions.

Of the brochures readily available, the only one that covers all of Oman opens to a spread of images highlighting Oman's natural wonders. Entitled “Oman: A promise of magic,” the first two pages boast of “pristine beaches, encircled by soaring mountains,” the Arabian Oryx Sanctuary that is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, the rare turtle breeding spots, and the “hidden treasures” of some of the world's largest underground caverns (Image 2.1). Other two-page spreads depict Oman's mountains, wadis, beaches, deserts, and Khareef (summer monsoon) region (Images 2.2-2.5). Later in the brochure, a desert spread shows Bedouin camps and sand dunes in what is perhaps a quite stereotypical snapshot of Arabia (Image 2.6). Interestingly, this spread follows the others, as if to acknowledge this as the stereotype of Arabia while claiming that Oman's mountains, wadis, beaches, and monsoon region raise it to a level above other Arabian

112 Alkhamyasi, Muscat: The Arab Capital of Tourism 2012.
113 Central Intelligence Agency, “Oman.”
114 Ministry of Tourism, Sultanate of Oman.
countries.

The Omani Museum (currently under redevelopment) offers another glimpse of official narratives connecting national identity to natural environments. The Ministry of Heritage and Culture sells a guidebook to the museum, and its first section is entitled “The Land and its People.” This section of the guidebook introduces Oman by talking about its natural environment.

The Sultanate is one of the greenest parts of Arabia. The great area of the country and the variety of terrain—from regions affected by the monsoon to mountains over 3,000 m high and to sand desert and fertile coastal plain—ensures a wide variety of products and an abundant surplus for export.115

An official involved with planning the new Omani National Museum said that “The Land and its People” will be the first gallery visitors pass through. It will present a conscious connection between the environment and the people, focusing on the diversity and multiculturalism of Oman.116

As political theorist Timothy Mitchell observes about the World's Fairs, such exhibitionary displays create “a remarkable claim to certainty or truth” by virtue of “the apparent certainty with which everything seems ordered and organized.”117 I asked an official in the Ministry of Heritage and Culture about the ministry's prime objectives for its museums. He assured me that the ministry is conscious that museums are a leading force in shaping Oman's national identity for both Omanis and expatriates. He revealed that there was significant debate within the Ministry as they were setting up the story line for the new National Museum since it will help to direct the formation of the next

115 Ministry of Heritage and Culture, The Omani Museum, 10.
116 Personal Interview, MH2.
generation's identity. They ultimately chose to organize the museum's exhibits using both a historical timeline and thematic approaches and will include various types of art to represent Omani culture.118

Other existing museums emphasize natural environments as symbolic of Oman. The Natural History Museum resides in the Ministry of Heritage and Culture's office complex and operates under the Ministry's oversight. A Ministry of Tourism website says this museum is “considered one of the major Omani museums,”119 and this certainly comports with my impressions. This was the only museum under the auspices of the Ministry of Heritage and Culture that was open when I was there in the summer when most tourists and many locals avoid Muscat because of the heat, suggesting that natural history is considered a high priority within conceptions of Omani heritage.

One of the museum's four major galleries creates a connection between the modern nation-state and its pre-historic natural environments. Labeled “Oman Through Time,” this room dedicated each of its walls to a distinct pre-historic era and included rock and fossil samples from Oman's territory in that time period. One sign asserted, “Fossils help tell the story of our heritage since life began.” I could not help thinking that seeing a rock or fossil from 800 million or more years ago and naming it a piece of Oman lends that ever helpful sense of longevity. No one would suggest that the area of pre-historic millennia was congruent with the current borders and terrain of the modern Sultanate. Yet, as in many national museums around the world, including these ancient natural artifacts in a government-owned museum seems to root the modern to the ancient

118 Personal Interview, MH2.
119 Ministry of Tourism, “Travel to Oman,” sec. “Natural History Museum.”
and to the physical place itself. Interestingly, this room was developed with funding from Petroleum Development Oman, the national oil company (of which the government owns a majority share), in 1995.

Another gallery in the Natural History Museum emphasized the variety within and among the regions of Oman. A map of Oman's ecological regions oriented the visitor to the relative location of the “Northern Mountains,” the “Wahiba Sands,” and the “Dhofar Pediment,” among others. Each successive display focused on one of these regions and included a scenic backdrop and either samples or some representation of the local wildlife, rocks, and cultural artifacts apparently made from local natural resources. The overriding impression of this gallery is that Oman has great diversity, both ecologically and culturally as people have adapted to diverse environments. The positioning of material culture against the backdrop of each region's natural environment suggests that culture has developed organically from the natural environment. However, much of the pottery and other items likely reflect tastes and technology developed over centuries of trade and exchange. The room also fosters a notion of totality from disparate parts. Although regions and their distinct natural environments have at various periods in history been completely distinct politically, they are now enfolded into a national whole. Here again, it is useful to remember Mitchell's observation that the apparent certainty of a grouping creates a sense of reality, a sense that this is how the world is in fact ordered. The museum's other displays focused primarily on the rare animals indigenous to Oman, such as the Arabian Tahr and White Oryx.

120 For image see “Displays showing the major natural of Oman” by Khalid Al Kharusi at http://www.mydestination.com/oman/attractions/111875/natural-history-museum.
Another museum in Muscat, Bait Al Baranda, offers a complementary education about Oman's natural history, though it focuses specifically on the capital area. In 2006 the then Minister of Heritage and Culture founded the museum but, according to the website, it is now under the Muscat Municipality.\(^{121}\) The museum's interactive exhibits and special events indicate that its target audience includes local children\(^{122}\) as well as adults, and is thus an instrument to inculcate national identity in the next generation of Omanis. At least one fourth of the museum's exhibits focuses on the unusual aspects of Muscat's ecosystems. Perhaps the most interesting and well-known aspect of Oman's curious geology is the presence of obducted oceanic crust. The museum explains that normally, when the ocean floor shifts and expands, it will slide under continents in a process known as "subduction." In Oman, however, the ocean floor has slid over the edge of the continent and formed mountains. According to the museum brochure, "This [obduction] is a very rare and unusual process... . Geologists from all over the world flock to Oman, to study rocks that formed deep beneath the ocean floor."\(^{123}\) With the aid of computer graphics, other exhibits highlight and explain alluvial fans, wave-cut platforms, sink holes, and sand dunes as well as the evolution of local flora, fauna, and wildlife.\(^{124}\) The emphasis that this and other major museums place on natural environments will likely play a role in shaping both domestic and international conceptions of Oman.

**Appropriating Nature in Narrational Themes**

Knowing that the natural landscape figures prominently in Omani national

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122 Ibid., "Events."
123 Bait Al Baranda, n.d.
124 Ibid.
identity, it is important to consider the specific narrational themes it is used to present. This is the point at which the lived experiences in an environment become the raw material for those national claims or “invented traditions” that Eric Hobsbawm expects a modern nation-state to assert in self-justification or legitimization. At the same time, the process of narration also shapes the way in which those lived experiences are remembered. Some claims will sound familiar from the official and private narratives already described in this chapter as well as those in other chapters.

**Longevity**

The first such reoccurring theme is longevity. By displaying natural artifacts in the pre-historic room in the Natural History Museum, Oman may be following the example of other, relatively young nation-states like America and Australia that lean on the antiquity of their natural environments\(^\text{125}\) to legitimate the country that “has always” existed in one form or another. For this reason, Hobsbawm notes that “continuity with a suitable historic past” is of particular value for the new nation-state.\(^\text{126}\) The “past” of the natural environment, especially when ancient, offers kind of unfettered continuity.

Contemporary voices can highlight the existing natural landscape and trace its history back thousands of years with little worry that unpleasant memories will surface and undermine national narratives. Omani public school curricula, like displays of ancient rocks at the Natural History Museum, help channel attention away from the problematic history of the last century towards Oman's ancient past. Elementary students study mostly ancient history in which “common themes are Oman's Islamization, its

\(^{125}\text{Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country*, 54.}\)
\(^{126}\text{Hobsbawm and Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*, 1.}\)
relations with the Persians, and the maritime empires.”\textsuperscript{127} Upper grades focus on international history, leaving scant room for exploring Oman's experience in the twentieth century prior to 1970.\textsuperscript{128} By guiding Oman's next generation in an act of collective forgetting, the state corroborates Ernest Renan's idea that “the essence of a nation is that individuals have many things in common, but also have forgotten many other things.”\textsuperscript{129}

\textit{Natural Diversity as a Differentiator}

While nature and longevity themes may help Oman's government establish legitimacy and forget its recent past, official and private voices also stress natural diversity as a differentiator. Popular stereotypes of the Arabian Peninsula or the Middle East more broadly tend to dwell on images of desert and desolate terrain. One can certainly drive for hours in Oman and feel that this stereotype is justified, but Omanis like to emphasize that there is so much more. Given the challenge of enfolding diverse and often localized loyalties, official narratives have emphasized Oman's natural diversity as a reflection or metaphor of its national character. When I asked an official at the Ministry of Heritage and Culture what place a visitor could visit to understand Oman, he went broader and suggested seeing the land itself, traveling around, and meeting people. Why? Because different areas of Oman have different types of people.\textsuperscript{130}

In some of my interviews with private individuals from the northern regions of Oman, people indicated that they see nature as distinctive feature of Oman. Again, I asked, “If there is one place a visitor could visit to understand Oman, what would it be?” I followed by asking what two or three places might best introduce a visitor to Oman.

\textsuperscript{127} Valeri, “Oman,” 145.
\textsuperscript{128} Valeri, “State-Building, Liberalization from Above and Legitimacy in the Sultanate of Oman,” 145.
\textsuperscript{129} Renan, “What Is a Nation?,” 51.
\textsuperscript{130} Personal Interview, MH1.
One young professional man from Batinah (the northern coastal region) affirmed his personal pride in Oman's variety of natural environments, saying “Oman has everything. The people are kind, but this is not what to see. It is the sea, the mountains, wadis, desert. There is not one place.”

A young woman from Sharqiya (the coastal region south-east of Muscat) who was an Arabic instructor at my school said that Oman's variety of environments is something that makes it different from other places in the Gulf. While the rest of the Gulf is mostly desert, she noted that Oman has mountains, beaches, and deserts.

Nonetheless, private individuals sometimes do not recognize the diversity of Oman's natural environments as a national symbol, and thereby show the limits that official instruments like museums and brochures have in determining collective narratives. An instructor at an Omani tourism college confirmed that the natural environment in Oman is a huge part of the tourist draw—largely because it is much richer than elsewhere in the region. However, while Omani students at the tourism college reflect a strong sense of cultural identity, their identification with the natural environment seems relatively muted. This is possibly because few of them, and few Omanis in general, have traveled much between the different regions of Oman. Most students at this particular school hail from Dhakliya or the Muscat area. Indeed, few of the northern Omani individuals with whom I spoke mentioned Dhofar's very distinct monsoon climate when they talked about Oman's natural environments. The monsoon transforms southern Oman into what many in the Gulf see as a tropical paradise from May to September each year.

131 Personal Interview, PBA4.
132 Personal Interview, PSH1.
133 Personal Interview, SC1.
year. Significantly, it “touches nowhere else in Arabia.”

Perhaps Omnis in northern Oman see Dhofar as a place to visit rather than a place to belong, and thus they do not identify with it as a part of their homeland.

_Environments Shaping Culture_

Another theme in official Omani narratives echoes Lowenthal's and Anthony Smith's ideas that communities develop their unique characteristics by interacting with their environments. British architectural historian Stephen Kite writes in the Ministry of Heritage and Culture's _The Journal of Oman Studies_ that it is the limits of the natural environment—the topography, the scarcity of water and cultivatable land—that defines “Oman's traditional settlements and urban organizations.”

Amidst the challenges of nature, Omnis have hewn “microworlds” for themselves as illustrated by “the architected landscapes and field terraces of Jabal al Akhdar, the creation of the _aflaj_ and the related levelling and lowering of whole field systems.”

Other Omnis likewise describe the natural environment as a significant part of their national identity precisely because it has shaped their culture and traditions. An official at the Ministry of Heritage and Culture explained that Oman wished to share its culture with tourists, and that means sharing the natural landscape. For example, the coast is a part of Omani culture because through it many Omnis earn their livelihood fishing. Other environments have allowed cultivation of different foods. Communities in Jebel Akhdar (see map in Image 2.7) have built much of their culture around particular foods they produce from the plants peculiar to the mountain.

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136 Ibid.
137 Personal Interview, MT1.
from Sharqiya told me that Omani architecture has long followed distinct patterns that accommodate the natural environment. Houses made from mud could stay cool in summer and warm in winter, and windows were traditionally placed near the ceiling to release hot air.  

According to one government tourism website, “Mountains constitute a large percentage of the environment of Oman,” a thought that architectural historian Stephen Kite has developed into a metaphor for Omani society. The mountain ranges in Oman, according to Kite, bring order to what might otherwise be a chaotic landscape. Oman's landscape is what Norberg-Schulz might call a “cosmic” pattern where the features and limits seem intense and definite. Kite sees this intensity and pattern in the “absolute natural order, the intensity of light” as well as “the macro-structuring of the landscape by the mountain chains of Jabal Al Ahkdar and the Hajar ash Sharqi, and the dramatic confrontation of the mountains with the monotonous extent of the desert foreland.” Somewhat like national borders, Kite also believes that the “the mountain ranges operate—on a regional scale—as macroscale walls that demarcate recognizable settings of vast dimensions.” The Hajar al Gharbi and the littoral demarcate the Batinah region, for example, while Muscat and Mattrah are both snuggled between mountains and the coast (see map in Image 2.7).

A number of tourist brochures introduce the relationship between Oman's various regions by describing their mountains, as Kite does, as borders but not dividers. For

138Personal Interview, PSH1.
139Ministry of Tourism, “Travel to Oman,” sec. “Mountains of Oman.”
140Kite, “The Poetics of Oman’s Traditional Architecture: Towards an Aesthetic Interpretation,” 134.
141Ibid., 135.
142Ibid.
example, a brochure on Dakhliya notes that “the area is distinguished by the Hajar mountain range... . The region stretches from Fanja, at the foot of the mountains some 33 km from Muscat, south through Izki and Manah, to beyond the [town] of Adam on the fringes of the desert.” Kite goes on to trace the theme of enclosure he sees in the natural landscape through patterns of order in rural Omani culture and specifically architecture. These ideas resonate with the descriptions in tourist brochures.

One of the more distinctive ways that many officials and private citizens see their culture as developing in concert with the environment is the ancient irrigation system of springs and canals known as the aflaj. Even calling the aflaj “canals” is misleading, according to an expert from the University of Nizwa, because the system actually encompasses three major spheres: the technological sphere encompassing the canal creation and maintenance and distribution of the water; the human sphere which includes the society, the villages that draw from the canals, the administration, and the relationships of village to village and person to society; and the environmental sphere since the type and structure of the canals vary with the local climate and type of soil. As one individual from Batinah told me, the aflaj are very important to Oman because other countries don't have them. In fact, Iran has also had aflaj for thousands of years. While official sources do not claim that ancient aflaj are unique to Oman, the aflaj encapsulate the sense of a “traditional culture” that official narratives exalt as distinctly Omani. Individuals may not realize that other places like Iran possess such ancient systems as well.

144 Personal Interview, SN1.
145 Personal Interview, PBA4.
Aflaj are significant because they represent a key to the ordering of what the government calls traditional Omani society. Ethnographer Mandana Limbert sheds light on this ordering through her account of aflaj use in the interior town of Bahla. Like many towns especially in the north of Oman, the town relied on wells and aflaj canals for its water through the 1960s. It was “distributed according to customary and religious law and a complex system of water-share ownership, rents, auctions, and rotations.”  

Because not all canals produce constant flow and because a community depends on them for survival, “the water system becomes, in many ways, emblematic and an index of the status of a community.”  

In the last few decades however, the Omani government has invested in infrastructure to modernize water distribution. This threatens more traditional means such as the aflaj, which are also closely tied to social practices and heritage. 

Thus, official narratives that praise Omani traditions and heritage are coming into tension with those that celebrate Oman's modernization. Even more significantly, the modernization of water systems replaces a means of local, communal identity with standardized, national infrastructure echoing efforts to nationalize identity as well.

Traditional dress, especially the light-colored dishdasha for men, is another symbol of adaptability and belonging in Oman. A Ministry of Information website explains that ,“The national dress for Omani men is a simple, ankle-length, collarless gown with long sleeves called the dishdasha.”  

The Omani government takes this seriously, as evidenced by dress codes for places like the officially-sponsored Royal Opera House, which requires “formal or business [dress] including suits or dinner jackets

147 Ibid.
148 Ibid., 120.
149 National Dress - Men.
for men and conservative dresses below the knee for women. Dishdasha and Massar for Omani [men].”

An official at the Ministry of Tourism explained that the dishdasha requirement is a way for the government to preserve Oman's traditional culture and for citizens to represent themselves as Omanis. He observed that when he travels abroad people know that he is Omani because of his dress. It is significant not only because it is distinctive but also because it reflects how Omanis interact with their environment, especially how they adapt to the hot weather. A museum director however emphasized the former point, saying “We look different and act different. This is why tourists like us—we are pure. Oman is the only nation that represents the actual Arab culture.” He explained that unlike the dishdashas of other Gulf countries, Omani dishdashas are not variations of Western-style dress shirts with collar and cuffs but have their own distinct styling. In his understanding, the dishdasha was about creating a cultural distinction between Oman and the West as well as between Oman and other Gulf countries. It does not seem to resonate with the official narratives of location-based exchange or natural and cultural diversity. Indeed, the claim that Omanis remain “pure” Arabs contradicts those narratives, showing yet again the complexity and tension among national narratives in Oman.

While it may be practical apparel for the climate of Oman, the dishdasha as part of the Omani national dress is an invented tradition by Hobsbawm's definition. Hobsbawm explains the distinction between invented tradition and custom with an example: wearing a symbolic uniform hat may be an invented tradition whereas wearing a helmet while

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150 “Box Office Guidelines - House Policies.”
151 Personal Interview, MT2.
152 Personal Interview, S2.
riding a motorcycle could be considered a custom. The former carries significance beyond the immediate practical considerations.\textsuperscript{153} Nation-states, he says, often employ “ancient materials” to “construct invented traditions of a novel type for quite novel purposes.”\textsuperscript{154} The light-colored dishdasha is ancient material in the sense that it harkens from a previous era of “traditional” Omani culture, but its recent designation as part of the national uniform is something of a novel purpose. And while the light color and garment design may be well-suited to the local environment, these features have taken on a significance beyond “immediate practical considerations.”

The same museum director who told me that the dishdasha illustrates that “Oman is the only nation that represents the actual Arab culture”\textsuperscript{155} conditioned his claim by noting that many Omani women are now choosing to wear the abaya which is not “traditional.” One certainly has to wonder why, if Omani clothing is about adapting to the environment, Omani women usually wear the abaya, a full covering of synthetic black fabric, in public. The museum director acknowledged this inconsistency and noted that in parts of Oman's interior, women do not wear abayas and that this differentiates Oman from Saudi Arabia where all women supposedly wear abayas.\textsuperscript{156} It seems however that most Omani women have adopted the wider Gulf trend of wearing abayas in public, perhaps signifying that this manifestation of their identity is tied more closely to prevailing Islamic and Gulf fashion ideas than to national affinities. It is noteworthy that several museums in Oman highlight the varieties of women's dress found in Omani

\textsuperscript{153}Hobsbawm and Ranger, \textit{The Invention of Tradition}, 3.
\textsuperscript{154}Ibid., 6.
\textsuperscript{155}Personal Interview, S2.
\textsuperscript{156}Personal Interview, S2.
communities before the abaya became fashionable in recent decades.\textsuperscript{157}

**Natural and Regional Diversity**

Official and many unofficial narratives highlight Oman's natural diversity and may use it as metaphor for the diversity of Oman's population. As one of many factors that have shaped cultural development in Oman's different regions, some associate nature with cultural diversity, but not always. Natural landscapes seem to be particularly important to narratives of the interior Dakhliya region. Given that many people live from agriculture and fishing, one young professional man told me that nature is definitely an important symbol of the Omani people. Having grown up in Muscat, he discovered while studying in the interior town of Nizwa that he had grown up somewhat removed from this symbol. He recalls that his classmates there would ask him how he could be Omani: he was from Muscat and did not fish or farm and could not even differentiate between species of fish or varieties of dates.\textsuperscript{158} As these narratives suggest, Oman has an agricultural tradition stretching back five millennia partly because, unlike Saudi Arabia, it receives summer rainfall from the Indian Ocean monsoon.\textsuperscript{159} Urbanization may be weakening the affinity Omanis feel for their natural environments, but this gentleman partly addressed this by noting that even though many Omanis now work in urban offices, they tend to return to their villages on weekends.\textsuperscript{160}

Nonetheless, the local conception of national identity that this man encountered in the interior is a limited one that excludes those who have lived in urban areas for

\textsuperscript{157}See for example “The Female Attire Collection” at Bait Al Zubair, \texttt{http://www.baitalzubairmuseum.com/2004.htm}.
\textsuperscript{158}Personal Interview, PBA4.
\textsuperscript{159}Allen, “A Separate Place,” 49.
\textsuperscript{160}Personal Interview, PBA4.
generations or earned livelihoods in commerce or other urban occupations. Similarly, in conversations with Omani acquaintances, I would frequently hear that such-and-such a person was “Omani Omani,” as opposed to those who were considered less than full Omani by virtue of their family history. Despite this idea that some citizens were not “real” Omanis, the actual population of the current state comprises a wide variety of ethnic, linguistic, religious, and socioeconomic categories. Those who differentiated between “Omani Omanis” and “Zanzibari Omanis” or “Baluchi Omanis” also tended to hail from the interior of Oman. Yet, this cultural hierarchy does not eliminate the reality that Oman's population is diverse.

Kenneth Olwig, a landscape theorist who studied under David Lowenthal, alliterates a common assumption reflected in the “Omani Omani” discourse: “The native of the nation is thus defined by nativity in this natural landscape.” In many nations, certain groups with stronger or longer blood connections in the territory claim superiority over more recent immigrants. Given the divisive power of such assumptions, it is not surprising that, “To a certain degree, the Omani national discourse also embraces the country’s history of overseas empire and connections to the Indian Ocean rim and thus reinforces the Omani identity of some of these groups (especially the Zanzibaris).” Despite this element of the national discourse, Peterson notes that “some groups of immigrant origin (even if immigration occurred centuries ago) have sought to strengthen their claim to Omani identity by asserting Omani Arab tribal origins.”

Dakhliya illustrates the reality of localization confronting the national

162 Ibid.
164 Ibid.
government’s efforts to use natural environments as a national symbol. Limbert writes that the people of Bahla, an interior town, often pulled from local rather than national memories to interpret their history, relying on things that they or those near them had personally experienced.\textsuperscript{165} This is not surprising given that Dakhliya was a separate religious and political entity, an Imamate, between the eleventh and seventeenth centuries.\textsuperscript{166} Even in recent centuries, Muscat’s control over the interior was spotty, and in the mid-twentieth century the Sultan required British military assistance to defeat tribal militias in the Jebel Akhdar War.\textsuperscript{167} Rather than downplay the region’s distinctiveness, national narratives have employed it in articulating Oman’s national character. Limbert notes that “various modes of the state’s self-representation (such as textbooks, monuments, and national histories) have encouraged the view that the interior region is unique for being the site of the nation’s special religious heritage... .”\textsuperscript{168} This may legitimize local claims connecting national identity to local, natural landscapes.

More than Dakhliya, the southern region of Dhofar perhaps best illustrates parallels between natural and cultural diversity in Oman and the way this diversity figures into national narratives. Dhofar has the most unusual of Oman’s natural landscapes. Each summer, this southern corner of the Arabian Peninsula welcomes monsoon rains that transform its semi-deserts into tropical vistas. Moreover, the surrounding environmental features, including the Arabian Sea to the south and two deserts on its north side, make this region much like an island, according to Peterson. He explains that “The distinctiveness of Dhufar’s people has been determined by the region’s

\textsuperscript{165} Limbert, \textit{In the Time of Oil: Piety, Memory, and Social Life in an Omani Town}, 12.
\textsuperscript{167} Ibid., 52.
\textsuperscript{168} Limbert, \textit{In the Time of Oil: Piety, Memory, and Social Life in an Omani Town}, 4.
complex geography” and also “its history, and its relatively recent connection to Oman.”\(^{169}\)

The physical barriers—primarily the intervening deserts—dividing Dhofar from the regions of northern Oman have lent Dhofar a degree of cultural and often political independence.

The modern Sultanate of Oman is a union between the historical Oman of the north and the southern region of Dhufar, with the two areas separated by hundreds of kilometers of gravelplain desert. Although there have always been connections between the two parts, historically their cultural orientations and trading links have followed different courses.\(^{170}\)

Muscat “annexed” Dhofar in 1829 but exercised only nominal control until 1879 when an expedition retook the region’s capital city of Salalah.\(^{171}\) Nonetheless, Allen notes that until the reign of Sultan Sa'id (father of the current Sultan), the region continued to be only “loosely bound to the rest of Oman.”\(^{172}\)

Dhofar's historical separateness fostered the survival of diverse linguistic communities. “It can be said that at least 12 languages are spoken as a first language—or as the language of parents—by indigenous Omani citizens,”\(^{173}\) and the majority of these indigenous languages are found in Dhofar.\(^{174}\) Some of these language groups, such as the Al-Qara who form the largest community on the mountain Jebel Dhofar, are believed to have originated outside Oman. The Al-Qara may have arrived in Dhofar some five to seven centuries ago from Yemen. They speak a Southern Arabian language similar to ancient Southern Yemenese languages and distinct from modern Arabic (which came

\(^{170}\)Ibid., 255.
\(^{171}\)Ibid., 257.
\(^{172}\)Allen, “A Separate Place,” 60.
from Northern Arabia).  

Besides the linguistic variations, many Dhofaris come from minority religious groups. The majority of Omanis are Arab Muslim (either Sunni or Ibadi) but there are small religious minority groups scattered throughout the country, especially in Dhofar. These groups distinguish themselves by either language or religion or both. Further complicating their relationships with other Omani communities is the fact that they may not ascribe to the traditional Arab tribal structure.  

The communities in Dhofar also display a significant degree of socioeconomic variety. Until recently, most Dhofaris worked in “Fishing, herding, and the cultivation of coconuts, papayas, bananas, and cereals.” Nonetheless, many found themselves relegated to lower social strata. These include khuddam or descendants of slaves or other Africans and bahhara or an “indeterminate group distinct in race from the Africans” who tended to occupy lower social rungs than even khuddam. Several intermediate groups in Dhofar including the Al-Shahra and Al-Mashayikh carried the designation of “da'if” or weak, denoting a lower social status that restricted intermarriage and military participation. Some of this differentiation has persisted as da'if “are still said to serve as mediators in the mountains and to care for shrines and mosques,” though some members of the Al-Mashayikh have attained influential positions in universities, the military, or other government institutions. Peterson attributes this social mobility to the Dhofari

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175 Ibid., 261.
178 Ibid., 255.
179 Ibid., 266.
180 Ibid., 262–263.
181 Ibid., 263.
Tribal associations remain, though government policy has removed much of their practical significance in Dhofar and elsewhere in Oman. While tribal identity persists especially in Dhofar, “the ability of the tribe to protect its members and territory has diminished” largely because the national and local government now makes the rules and provides social services. Indeed, social services and other economic investments seem to have been a key part of the national government's strategy for winning the former rebels over to the Omani nation-state. In the years following the war, Dhofar was home to only 10-25% of Omanis, but it received as much as 40% of the national budget. One consequence of this "hearts and minds" campaign is that over half of the population of Dhofar are estimated to rely on government salaries, whether their own or a family member's. The national government may also win some points because Qaboos's mother was Dhofari, though he is the only member of the royal family with such a direct tie to Dhofar.

Despite the national government's best efforts, Dhofar remains a distinct culture and, for many, a distinct entity that parallels the distinctiveness of its summer weather. Peterson attributes this lingering “friction” in part to “cultural differences,” noting for example that “Dhufaris are more direct and forthright in their words and manner.” Rather than including Dhofar within the Omani collective, some northern Omanis, for

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182 Ibid., 266.
183 Ibid., 267.
184 Ibid., 268.
185 Ibid.
186 Ibid., 257–258.
187 Ibid., 269.
example, refer to the Dhofari governor's office in Muscat as “the Dhofar embassy.”

**Conclusion**

One of the United States' many nationalist hymns, “America the Beautiful,”

begins and ends with praise for the country's diverse natural landscapes. The lyrics imply

that “spacious skies,” “mountain majesties,” “amber fields of grain,” and all else that lies

“from sea to shining sea” symbolize American national spirit. The song suggests that

these images unite Americans in a common sense of pride and belonging while

celebrating the diverse natural features and associated ways of life within their borders, to

the neglect of less bucolic aspects of American culture.

The Omani government and many private Omanis seem eager to create a similar

anthem. Narratives that point to natural diversity as emblematic of Oman support claims

of both scenic and cultural distinctiveness. Natural diversity currently dominates Oman's

tourism materials, and may shape the collective psyche over time, especially as regional

identities and affinities with local landscapes decline because of urbanization. Private

citizens may eventually extend such reoccurring themes as longevity, distinctiveness, and

cultural formation to thinking about not just their local environment but about Oman's

environments as a whole.

One possible indication of Omanis' evolving perceptions of their national

distinctiveness and collective story may be the new National Museum. Though currently

still under construction, an official at the Ministry of Heritage and Culture told me that

the museum will have a designated area where visitors tell their own stories and

perceptions of Oman. While the museum has an official timeline, this area will allow

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188 Ibid.
visitors to express what they think are important points in Oman's story. Museum curators will monitor and study the narratives left by visitors, using them to add new versions of Oman's story in a two-way process of narration. This will be unique in the region. Most Omanis have heard only a narrow telling of Oman's story, and this museum hopes to change that. It will be interesting to see if Omanis use this forum to articulate their pride in Oman's natural diversity as a key element in their cultural formation or as something that differentiates them from other countries in the Gulf and Arab world. Perhaps even more critical for national unity will be whether they use this diversity as a metaphor by which to embrace their cultural diversity or keep silent about it.

189 Personal Interview, MH3.

Image 2.2: “Mountains: Exhilaration and adventure.” In Sultanate of Oman (Muscat: Ministry of Tourism, n.d.).
Image 2.3: “Wadis: Lush green oases.” In Sultanate of Oman (Muscat: Ministry of Tourism, n.d.).

Image 2.4: “Seas: Gulf of Oman & Indian Ocean.” In Sultanate of Oman (Muscat: Ministry of Tourism, n.d.).
Image 2.5: “Deserts: The sands of time.” In Sultanate of Oman (Muscat: Ministry of Tourism, n.d.).

Image 2.6: “Khareef Season: Turning the land green.” In Sultanate of Oman (Muscat: Ministry of Tourism, n.d.).
Chapter III: Fusing Landscapes—Defensive Imagery in Omani National Identity

Introduction

Anthony Smith opines that national narratives often create a “fusion of community and terrain through the identification of natural with historical sites.”190 This fusion occurs bilaterally. On the one hand, nature becomes a player in a collective's construction of their history and is seen as helping to shape their culture and existence. Additionally, historical sites, especially ruins, in a sense become part of the natural landscape as they “fuse with a surrounding nature and become one with the habitat.”191

Today the Omani government is creating a recognizable urban identity using defensive motifs that evoke memories of culture and natural environments. As discussed in the previous chapter, many official and unofficial Omanis see their natural environments as significant features in their history and cultural evolution. Forts, castles, and towers punctuate these starkly defined natural landscapes.192 As the national government has shifted from the isolationist policies of Sultan Qaboos's predecessor, increasing interaction with other modern cultures and peoples elevated this “fusion of community and terrain” to new significance. To counter the homogenizing effects of globalization and modernization, the government culled defensive imagery from the landscape as a set of symbols that avow Oman's enduring cultural authenticity.

This appropriation of defensive imagery in national narratives becomes particularly clear in the context of Oman's burgeoning tourism industry. After having been closed to nearly all outside visitors, the recent push to market Oman as a tourist destination

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191 Ibid., 185–186.
destination has encouraged the Ministry of Tourism and other government agents to articulate Oman's distinctiveness in coherent narratives. As a result, a visitor or potential investor in the tourism industry learns quickly that, for example, Oman is unique because of its long history as a center of trade, a legacy which is visually preserved in its defensive architecture.

The significance of Oman's forts in its tourist appeal becomes obvious when one begins to appreciate the degree to which these structures define Oman. “What was, before, merely a landscape, comes into existence—becomes a discernible place,” according to Kite, who previously highlighted the role of Oman's mountain ranges in forming boundaries and clear patterns within Oman. He argues that the “macroscale natural enclosures are accented by man-made structures—watch towers, forts, gateways and the enfilades of third millennium tombs” Of all the structures embedded in Oman's rural landscape, including the much older tombs that Kite mentions, the sheer number of defensive structures makes them “a defining feature.” The following pages will first discuss the definitive presence of defensive imagery in both the landscape and tourist materials and then examine how such imagery is appropriated to support specific claims about Omani culture and history. Finally, I will explore how the government is transposing this imagery to create a distinct urban landscape.

Symbols of A “Traditional” Culture

A defining feature in a nation's physical landscape carries tremendous potential as a symbol. Geisler notes that in the last few centuries nation-states have replaced tribal or

193Ibid., 138.
194Ibid., 135.
other local political forms, but lacking the advantage of physical immediacy, nations must rely on symbols.\textsuperscript{196} Images of defensive structures now adorn Omani national currency, stamps, and postcards,\textsuperscript{197} much like other nation-state symbols such as the monuments of Washington, D.C. or the pyramids of Egypt.

Omani forts have appeared as symbols in a wide range of visual culture in Oman. Limbert asserts that “The centrality of forts and fort imagery in Oman cannot be overemphasized,” and credits this overdeterminism to the national government which “has not only supported the reconstruction of forts, but has also built and encouraged fort imagery and fort characteristics to appear as features of office buildings, private homes, mosques, bus stops, telephone booths, and even water tanks”\textsuperscript{198} (see for example Images 3.1 and 3.2). Another observer has noted that, “The fort in Oman has become synonymous with Omani culture and history, much as has the kumma, the embroidered hat, and the ubiquitous sign of masculinity, the khanjar.”\textsuperscript{199} This writer attributes the forts' potency as a national symbol to what Benedict Anderson has termed "infinite reproducibility:" the flexibility by which post-colonial governments have appropriated as national culture the material culture that colonial regimes would have rarefied in museums.\textsuperscript{200}

The contemporary reproducibility of Omani forts and defensive imagery belies the power of globalization and modernization to eradicate an urban landscape's sense of locality. Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish has lamented that preserved forts “are no

\textsuperscript{196} Geisler, “National Symbols,” 112.  
\textsuperscript{197} Valeri, “State-Building, Liberalization from Above and Legitimacy in the Sultanate of Oman,” 146.  
\textsuperscript{198} Limbert, \textit{In the Time of Oil: Piety, Memory, and Social Life in an Omani Town}, 22.  
\textsuperscript{199} Willis, “History, Culture, and the Forts of Oman,” 143.  
more than attempts to protect a name that does not trust time to preserve it from oblivion. Anti-forgetfulness wars; anti-oblivion stones. No one wants to forget. More accurately, no one wants to be forgotten.”

On a national level, Oman's government fears such forgetfulness in the homogenizing rush of globalization and modernization of urban infrastructure. Problematically, as Oman began building modern infrastructure, the government tended to rely on foreign expertise and building capability. Thus, outside agents have often had the power to shape Oman's urban landscape according to their perceptions of how Omani culture should be transposed in the built environment.

A local expert on material culture relayed to me an anecdote about traffic circle monuments that illustrates this tension. Supposedly, in the frenzied infrastructure building of the 1970s and 1980s, an enterprising Asian businessman developed a catalog of designs for traffic circle monuments that he deemed reflective of Omani culture. Municipal authorities would choose from these preset options, and the result can be seen in traffic circles today, many of which contain crenellation or other defensive motifs (see for example Image 3.4). Similarly, a number of iconic buildings built in the early years of Qaboos's reign were designed by non-Omanis. “In other words, the grand buildings of Muscat that are the glue of the city’s urban identity are basically what foreign architects imagined Omani architecture should be” and not necessarily what Omani officials or individuals imagined it to be.

However, the process of interpreting Oman's past and cultural heritage continues, for as Lowenthal writes, “we continually reshape memory, rewrite history, refashion

201 Darwish, Memory for Forgetfullness, 15.
202 “Oman: Constructing Authenticity.”
relics.”^{203} To paraphrase Lowenthal, the Omani past as we know it is partly a product of the present energy to find and perpetuate its authentic Arabian heritage.^{204} The consultancy firm Deloitte completed an analysis in 2008 of Oman's tourism development, and a journalist with access to the report summarized it by saying “Oman, unlike its gaudy and superficial Gulf neighbors, is a destination for 'culture-seekers.'”^{205} Assuming that Oman's draw as a tourism destination is “culture,” accommodating sufficient numbers of luxury-seeking tourists requires modifying “authentic” architecture. The incentive to do so is strong, for such tourists are projected to contribute approximately $5.8 billion to Oman's economy by 2018.^{206}

Oman continues to fight for a balance between undifferentiated modernization and “authenticity.” Quotes such as this one from His Majesty Sultan Qaboos Bin Said reprinted in a brochure on Oman's restored forts and castles suggest success.

The desire to build a modern state which adopts the methods of science and technology did not force this historic country to neglect its glorious heritage. It has consistently combined this heritage with modernization. To this end it has established its extensive modern infrastructure while, at the same time, it has carefully preserved the precious evidence of its past.^{207}

Sir Hawley was similarly optimistic: “A visionary and a perfectionist, [Qaboos] put his personal stamp on all development and his early intervention to prevent architectural desecration and bad taste resulted in the harmonious nature of both public and private buildings.”^{208} In October of 2012, the Ministry of Housing organized a “Symposium on Preserving Local Traditional Urban Character.” Official news agencies reported

204 Ibid.
205 “Oman: Constructing Authenticity.”
206 Ibid.
207 Ministry of Tourism, *Experience History: Visit Oman’s Forts and Castles*.

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statements from both officials and eminent guests celebrating Oman's success in differentiating its urban landscape. One attendee was quoted as saying "Oman is unique from the rest of the world in terms of architectural engineering. When I arrived in Oman I felt that the Omani identity is unique from the rest of the Arab and world cities." Many travel writers echo the impression that Oman's combination of traditional architecture and rural landscapes make it the only remaining place to experience the true Arabia, which may explain why the Arab League named Muscat “Arab Tourism Capital 2012.” Such sentiment seems to be exactly what the government hopes to evoke in both Omanis and visitors as it uses defensive architectural styles to limit the effects of modernization and globalization while capitalizing on the tourist income they enable.

Given the role of Oman's forts and castles in differentiating Oman, it is not surprising that they receive special attention in officially-produced tourism literature. The Ministry of Tourism publishes numerous brochures that introduce visitors to specific regions, and most emphasize local forts and castles as points of interest. A more general brochure boasts that “Hundreds of forts, some recognized on UNESCO's World Heritage list as monuments of global importance, dominate the skyline of the country” (see for example the forts depicted in Image 3.5). A brochure focused specifically on forts and castles says, “Much of Oman's history is echoed in the mud brick, stucco and stone of its defensive architecture.”

One of my first hints that forts and defensive imagery were a significant part of Omani national identity came not from official publications but from a privately-owned

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209 “Symposium on Preserving Local Traditional Architectural Design Kicks-off.”
210 “Oman: Constructing Authenticity.”
211 Ministry of Tourism, Sultanate of Oman.
212 Ministry of Tourism, Experience History: Visit Oman's Forts and Castles.
museum in Muscat called Beit al-Zubair. As a cultural heritage museum, Beit al-Zubair is a forum in which “the past can be ordered and domesticated” creating “a coherence foreign to the chaotic and shifting present.”\textsuperscript{213} The museum is housed in what was once the private home of the highly-influential Zubair family. The museum's website explains that the museum's collections are based on the Zubair family's original treasury of Omani artifacts, “which is considered to be the finest that is privately owned.”\textsuperscript{214}

What is interesting is how this museum prioritizes forts and weapons in presenting Oman's material culture and uses them to tell the story of Oman. When a visitor enters the main house, she encounters a long central hall on which are anchored other rooms devoted to specific collections. Down the center of this hall sit several models of Omani forts and castles. Two canons guard the hall's entrance. Scores of firearms hang on the walls. The oldest of these firearms are matchlocks which arrived in Oman in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Later, rifles became common and were adorned with locally-worked silver, at which point they were “considered Omani.”\textsuperscript{215} Hawley has also written that firearms were a significant part of Oman's material culture, noting that “For many generations guns have been a weapon, ornament and source of interest to the Omani man. In fact, a gun had become until recently virtually an emblem of manhood.”\textsuperscript{216}

Once the visitor takes in these initial introductions to Oman's defensive imagery, she might enter the first display area to the right, which houses a collection of khanjars, or traditional curved daggers. Other displays of male dress, female dress, and household

\textsuperscript{213}Lowenthal, \textit{The Past Is a Foreign Country}, 62.
\textsuperscript{214}“Oman: Land of Legend.”
\textsuperscript{215}“The Firearms Collection.”
\textsuperscript{216}Hawley and Muir, \textit{Oman}, 180.
items follow in the succeeding rooms. It is as if the collection intended to introduce the visitor to Omani culture in stages: the distant and formidable forts and long-distance weapons followed by the close range but still public personal daggers and male dress. Only at the end of the hall does one encounter the more intimate aspects of Omani culture with the household items, jewelry, and female dress. Elsewhere in the museum lie art, stamp, and coin collections.

The khanjar, which appears on the Omani flag, is worthy of some brief consideration here. In introducing its large collection, the museum website explains the khanjar's cultural significance.

The khanjar is worn on a belt around the waist and reflects manhood, social standing and an engaging cultural heritage. In the past it was worn on a daily basis for protection, while today it is a national symbol, worn only at times of celebration or formality, or as protocol demands.217

It is interesting to consider why this artifact has been preserved and appropriated as a symbol of Oman. The idea of local craftsmanship is significant, but common sense would also suggest the dagger is a symbol of strength and perhaps independence. As an “invented tradition,” to use Eric Hobsbawm's terminology, this rather violent looking artifact has clearly achieved high visibility in Oman's official pomp and circumstance. As such, it may be risking its own longevity. I once asked an Omani young man who had spent all of his school years in Tanzania if he ever wore a khanjar. Considering himself hip and modern and possibly somewhat removed from Omani culture given his years in Tanzania, he laughed at the idea that he would ever wear something he considered ceremonial and primarily for old men of high rank. “Maybe at my wedding,” was all he

217 ”The Khanjar Collection.”
conceded.218

Conceptual Appropriations of Defensive Imagery

*A Civilized Heritage*

The Khanjar Collection at Beit al-Zubair highlights one of the puzzles of defensive imagery in Oman: that rather than symbolizing violence even in a defensive context, forts and weapons are often considered representative of memories far more benign. Indeed, forts, as well as khanjars and rifles, are often linked to themes of civilization and traditional community. Like many tourist publications, the official brochure for forts and castles emphasizes the structures' non-military uses. “Beyond offering protection, these monumental structures have played a vital role in defining Oman's history, serving as points of convergence for political, social and religious interaction, and as centres for learning, administration and community activity.”219 One woman from Batinah assured me that people in Oman love forts. The reason given however was not a show of military might but rather that they functioned as residences for community leaders and sometimes housed schools.220

Many descriptions of individual forts and castles accent their non-military functions. Jabrin Castle in Dakhliya, for example, is “Probably the finest and most picturesque fort in Oman and one of the few designed as a residence.”221 Nizwa's fort, though known for its gigantic circular tower, likewise retains memories of older, civilian purposes. Though Nizwa, at one time the capital of the Imamate of Oman, was “the most

218Private Interview, PM1.
219Ministry of Tourism, *Experience History: Visit Oman’s Forts and Castles*.
220Private Interview, PBA3.
heavily fortified”^222 city in what is now Oman, still “the residential and administrative component of the complex is understood to predate the tower by several centuries.”^223

Like Nizwa for the interior Imamate, many castles and forts functioned as regional strongholds, and still recall longstanding divisions within what is now the united Sultanate. This makes the national government's restoration program even more significant. Despite the fact that these forts once represented regional rivalries, the national government's restoration, in bestowing a semi-uniform sense of newness, has shifted their meaning to represent solidarity and a shared Omani heritage.\(^ {224} \) Perhaps because restoration has established a perception of national ownership, “These forts, despite their origins, are seen as an integral part of the presentation of a distinctly Omani history, providing material proof of Omani history and culture.”^225 The restoration efforts certainly, as John Willis points out, fit Richard Handler's observation that nations are compelled to substantiate “their existence and their worth to the entire world by cherishing their property.”^226

While evincing national ownership of heritage sites, restoration programs also blur the boundaries between Oman's and its forts' varied pasts. In conducting her ethnographic research, Limbert observed that people in Bahla used both local and national memories to interpret their history, often relying on things that they or those near them had personally experienced.\(^ {227} \) For example, she noted a difference between how

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\(^ {222} \)Ministry of Tourism, *Experience History: Visit Oman’s Forts and Castles*.  
\(^ {223} \)Groves, *Nizwa Fort: Experience History*.  
\(^ {224} \)Willis, “History, Culture, and the Forts of Oman,” 142.  
\(^ {225} \)Ibid., 141.  
\(^ {227} \)Limbert, *In the Time of Oil: Piety, Memory, and Social Life in an Omani Town*, 12.
locals remembered the past associated with the nearby Jabrin Castle and how this past contrasted with the more generic history narrated for visitors. The inscriptions in the castle provided few specific dates and little else to locate the “restoration” in a particular historical moment. Limbert's companion, on the other hand, expected to visit Jabrin Castle as it had been in her childhood, inhabited by the local ruler.\textsuperscript{228} In articulating a generic but unified national past, perhaps the restorations aim to create something that can be nostalgically appreciated by all, rather than located in specific local memories. As Lowenthal suggests, “A past nostalgically enjoyed does not need to be taken seriously.”\textsuperscript{229}

“\textit{Never Been Colonized}”

Another theme that Omani forts support in national narratives is the claim that Oman has never been truly colonized. A visitor hears this claim frequently from Omanis proud of their current and historical independence. One writer locates Oman's defensive structures at the center of this history.

As strongholds of heritage, the forts and castles of Oman are emblematic of a proud nation with a tumultuous history in which courage and loyalty prevailed. The advanced nation we know today was made possible in part by the vigilance of these ancient bastions as guardians of the land and its shores.\textsuperscript{230}

Omani historical narratives highlight the Yarubi era in which many of its forts were built or expanded. In the seventeenth century, the Yarubi dynasty rose to power in Oman and expelled the Portuguese. Profiting by the power and wealth of the maritime trade recently dominated by the Portuguese, the Yarubu rulers built the forts of Nizwa and Jabrin and restored aflaj irrigation systems. Allen suggests that “The Ya'aribah imamate (1624-1749)
is regarded by Omani historians as the restoration of the medieval ideal of the kingdom of God on earth."

Several Omanis reiterated the era's significance in my interviews, arguing for example that Oman's expulsion of the Portuguese prevented them from taking control of other Gulf countries. When places like forts become associated with significant events such as the Yarubi success they often take on symbolic meaning.

The trouble is that many of Oman's forts, especially those on the coast, remain the primary vestiges of the century or so when Portuguese forces controlled Oman's maritime activities and thereby dominated trade in the Indian Ocean. A few churches and smaller relics also survived, but Portuguese forts and watchtowers are far more visible. Granted, the Portuguese were interested only in maritime opportunity and thus did not bother to attempt colonization. Nonetheless, as Willis notes, Oman's forts reflect “both a history of interior warfare and of European imperialism.”

Willis suggests that one way officials reconcile the Portuguese legacy with their own narrative of independence is by explaining that the Portuguese usually just added to existing defensive structures. “They have thus taken the colonial legacy and legitimized it by its absorption into a greater Omani identity.”

Khasab Castle exemplifies how such structures dating from the Portuguese era are incorporated into the canon of Omani national sites. The castle overlooks the strategic Strait of Hormuz from the Musandam Peninsula, that tip of Oman that is isolated from the rest of the country by a stretch of United Arab Emirates territory. A brochure recalls

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232 Private Interview, PBA4.
233 Lowenthal, “European and English Landscapes as National Symbols,” 17.
235 Ibid., 142.
that the castle “was built in the 17th century by Portuguese invaders seeking dominion over regional maritime trade,” but clarifies that the castle's “massive central tower [is] thought to pre-date the castle itself.”\textsuperscript{236} Another explanation that makes such forts symbols of Omani independence is that though the Portuguese built some of today's iconic forts, Omanis also used many of these strongholds in ultimately expelling the outsiders, as a Ministry of Tourism official suggested to me.\textsuperscript{237}

\textit{Long and Well-Preserved History}

Like in narratives centered around Oman's location and natural environment, narratives that appropriate defensive structures often emphasize Oman's extensive and well-preserved history. Oman's forts thus function similar to other nations' historical sites, such as the Egyptian pyramids, which “bear witness to and express a sense of unique identity based upon a claim to a valued terrain in virtue of age-long residence and possession.”\textsuperscript{238} Owning a past confirms a nation's present existence and identity, and many connect with such a past “through attachment to natal or long-inhabited locales.”\textsuperscript{239}

Many of Oman's forts and castles represent “long-inhabited locales.” A tourist brochure says that Rustaq Fort in the Batinah region was “Originally constructed on Persian ruins circa 1250 CE,” though the first Yarubi Sultan rebuilt it in 1650 CE.\textsuperscript{240} Most locals say that the Bahla fort, known as “Ḥiṣn Ṭammāḥ,” bears the name of the town's pre-Islamic Iranian ruler. Certainly, parts of the fort predate Islam.\textsuperscript{241} Limbert notes that the chronological specifics are less important for Omanis than the fact that “the

\textsuperscript{236}Ministry of Tourism, \textit{Experience History: Visit Oman's Forts and Castles}. 
\textsuperscript{237}Personal Interview, MT1. 
\textsuperscript{238}Smith, \textit{The Ethnic Origins of Nations}, 187. 
\textsuperscript{239}Lowenthal, \textit{The Past Is a Foreign Country}, 42. 
\textsuperscript{240}Ministry of Tourism, \textit{Experience History: Visit Oman's Forts and Castles}. 
\textsuperscript{241}Limbert, \textit{In the Time of Oil: Piety, Memory, and Social Life in an Omani Town}, 22.
Bahla fort is proof of the town's antiquity.” Likewise, Hawley connects Nizwa fort's famous tower to the UNESCO world monuments at Bat. These round towers date from the third millennium, and a particularly large one was “an early predecessor of Nizwa's great round tower.”

**Centrality within Historical Trade Routes**

A final conceptual use of forts, the claim of centrality within regional and global trade, draws on the forts' role in guarding ports and inland trade routes. Patricia Groves explains that Oman's “Strongholds of Heritage,” as her book title refers to Oman's forts and castles, were part of “widespread defensive systems [that] once protected the nation's maritime and overland trade” and are concentrated at key points along the coast and passages inland, mostly in the north. On the coast in Dhofar, Sadah Castle defended the region's “lucrative incense trade.” In northern Oman, some areas were more strategically important for trade than others, and thus had more forts and watchtowers. For example, a brochure on the Dakhliya region suggests “The multitude of forts and watchtowers in the Sumail area testify to its historical importance.” Some forts and castles were apparently also used as guesthouses for important travelers passing through on a nearby trade route. One such structure is Naman Castle, which a brochure calls one of “the many achievements of the political and economic renaissance that took place in Oman under the Ya'aruba Imams (1624-1741 CE).”

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242 Ibid., 23.
243 Hawley and Muir, *Oman*, 32.
245 Ministry of Tourism, *Experience History: Visit Oman’s Forts and Castles*.
247 Ministry of Tourism, *Experience History: Visit Oman’s Forts and Castles*.

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as an attempt to assert a distinctively Arab identity. Paradoxically, “Omani culture thus becomes static and monolithic, qualities which do not sit well with Oman's maritime tradition or its historic relationship with East Africa, and certainly not with the large numbers of Indians, Pakistanis, East Africans and others who have lived in Oman for some time.”

**Defensive Imagery for the Urban Landscape**

As suggested at the outset, Oman's forts and castles do more than accent their original landscapes and remind tourists of Oman's culture and history. They also provide a powerful repertoire of “traditional” imagery for an increasingly urbanized and globally exposed nation. Of course, those structures that remain next to newer construction provide the sense of continuity seen in Egypt where pharaonic ruins and modern apartment complexes stand side by side. But even a cursory tour of Muscat suggests that the presence of forts in the landscape has also provided inspiration for the forms and styles of newer structures.

In 1992, the Municipality of Muscat issued a local order that all architecture in the capital city should adhere to “a combination of Omani, Arab, Islamic and contemporary style.” The preamble of this order, No. 23/92, specifies that this regulation is based on a royal decree from Sultan Qaboos. Order 23/92 did not, however, specify what décor motifs would be congruent with Omani style, or the referenced amalgamation of “Omani, Arab, Islamic and contemporary style.” In the

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250 “Oman: Constructing Authenticity.”
251 “Local Order No. 23/92.”
intervening decades, this question seems to have been at least partially answered, and
defensive imagery is front and center.

In October of 2012 at the Symposium on Preserving Local Traditional
Architectural Design, Housing Minister Sheikh Saif bin Mohammed al-Shabibi
confirmed that “the historic forts and monuments are physical evidences for the
uniqueness of the architectural personality” in Oman. An official at the Ministry of
Tourism likewise emphasized that protecting heritage visually is one of the Sultan's prime
concerns. For this reason, regulations control architectural style, even directing designers
to match the color of building facades to the natural environment. In 2011, new
regulations designated zones for high-rise developments, thus restricting the number
and location of buildings that might overwhelm more traditional vistas. The allowance of
high rises reflects the reality of rapid urbanization in Oman as, for example, the Muscat
area's population exploded from 40,000 in 1970 to 500,000 in 1990. At the same time,
the new zoning laws seem to be an attempt to control the effects of this metamorphosis.
Aurel von Richthofen, a scholar at the German University of Technology in Oman who
has studied the urban planning of Muscat, writes that Oman's urban transformation
“induced dramatic, irreversible environmental and cultural changes” which spawned “a
new urban form, a departure from tradition and a denial of the climatic conditions.”
Despite Omani narratives of harmony and adaptation to the natural environment, the
rather frenzied transition from a rural, agricultural society to a modern, urban one seems
to have taken its toll on the landscape.

252 “Symposium on Preserving Local Traditional Architectural Design Kicks-off.”
253 Personal Interview, MT1.
254 Valeri, “State-Building, Liberalization from Above and Legitimacy in the Sultanate of Oman,” 144.
Nonetheless, Oman's capital city of Muscat has successfully created a distinctive urban look, and defensive motifs are one of the easier constants to identify. These motifs reflect what Groves names as “the characteristic features of Oman's military architecture”: “crenellations, towers and carved doors.” Crenellations in particular are “seen as a distinctive and iconic architectural detail that is almost essential to the identity of a building as a fort or castle” and “have become a signature feature inspiring a variety of contemporary interpretations in the civil and religious architecture of today.”

Limbert observes that, “As visual evidence of Oman's strength and grandeur, the crenellations associated with forts have provided a proud theme in contemporary Omani architecture.” Even the Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque, “Oman's finest architectural monument,” employs a crenellated parapet in the main prayer hall reminiscent of Oman's forts and castles. Many government ministry buildings are laced with crenellation and other defensive motifs. Likewise, one of the Sultan's residences was designed in “homage to Oman's traditional architecture of the interior, in the style of a fort at 'Izz near Nizwa.”

The Bustan Palace is an iconic luxury hotel, built to host the 1995 summit of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in Muscat. Its opulent attempts at traditional motifs led one commentator to suggest that “if Oman had a contender for a building on the..."
Vegas strip, it could be the Bustan Palace.”264 Hotel guests are treated to ocean views via “rows of shaded, arched windows—commonly found on buildings in Muscat,” while “its turretted, circular structure” suggests another familiar fort motif265 (Image 3.7). Far from unique, the Bustan's windows, turrets, white facade, and crenellation mimic fort motifs found throughout the city of Muscat. Even many residential air conditioning units hide beneath covers with window cutouts similar to the Bustan's266 while turret-like plastic water tanks stand sentry atop most homes (Image 3.2). In my own travels, I observed at least two different styles of bus stop in the countryside, both crowned with crenellation and sporting stone or stucco facades (Image 3.1). All of this creates in concert “a continuous visual link from shopping malls to houses.”267

Defensive motifs also appear in landmarks such as traffic circle monuments. People say that part of the test to become Omani includes reciting the names of traffic circles along Muscat's main highway. In fact, much of Muscat is dotted with traffic circles, and most are anchored by some sort of monument or public art. These have functioned as landmarks since their construction during the frenzied road-building campaigns in the early decades of Sultan Qaboos's reign. The Sultan Qaboos highway between Muscat and Seeb was one of the first major road-building projects.268 Valeri comments that “All major contemporary urban achievements bear the Sultan's name” and calls this road, as Muscat's primary highway, “a metaphoric hyphen.”269

As the city takes in more and more of the towns sandwiched between the coast

264“Oman: Constructing Authenticity.”
265Ibid.
266Ibid.
267Ibid.
268Hawley and Muir, Oman, 16.
and the Hajar Mountains, overpasses or “flyovers” are gradually replacing many of the traffic circles that used to interrupt highway travel. One such flyover, located where the Sultan Qaboos highway passes the area of North Hail, transposes the fort tradition rather explicitly. Crenellation runs the length of the bridge as well as around the top of each of the towers at its four corners. Additionally, each tower has doors that appeared to be carved wood, as well as two canons. Reportedly, the traffic circle that previously stood there was known for the fort-like structure at its center (Image 3.3). “Keepsakes... substitute for abandoned landscapes” and may thereby connect modern urban vistas with “traditional” antecedents.

Traveling the highway farther up the coast towards Sohar, one still traverses several circles with large monuments, and several of these exhibit defensive motifs. The Sahwa or “clock tower” circle, so-called because its gigantic main tower has a clock on each of its four sides, was once the landmark that welcomed drivers entering Muscat from Nizwa or Sohar. The highways now bypass it, but the circle with its crenellated clock tower and surrounding maze of smaller walls and circular towers remains nearby. (Image 3.4). Valeri suggests that such monuments at the entries to large cities solidify a sense of national heritage, noting that in Oman they often “represent animals and traditional objects of daily life, such as oryx, daggers, coffeepots, and frankincense burners.”

Going back toward the historic part of Muscat and Mutrah, one passes through “Muscat Modern Gate,” a fresh yet imposing structure that stretches across the highway

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at the point where the old city gate once stood. Sultan Qaboos's father, legendary for his paranoid regulations, used to order the gate closed every day at nightfall. One woman, a former school teacher, mentioned both the gate and the Sahwa (clock tower) traffic circle in response to my query about things that are symbols of the Omani people. Today, the Muscat Modern Gate reinforces a national mystique of defensive strength and cultural heritage, though it no longer inhibits travel at any time of day (Image 3.6).

Though this study has focused primarily on the incorporation of defensive imagery in public space and architecture, it is worth noting that private space in Oman has also come under its touch. No doubt some degree of this appropriation happens by individual choice, but the government has helped it along as part of a broader effort to create a uniformly “traditional” look in the urban landscape. Aurel Von Richthofen at the German University of Technology in Muscat has studied Muscat's urban planning, which since 1970 has been transformed “from a sleepy port town with 20,000 inhabitants to an urban conglomeration stretching 60 km with a population of one million.” With this metamorphosis came a degree of homogenization thanks in part to laws such as the 1981 Royal Decree 81/84 that gave every Omani citizen the right to a plot of land. Such a decree naturally requires land plots to be roughly equal, which, together with building regulations, produced a “uniform architectural typology” that Von Richthofen dubs the “palace on the plot.”

By providing government-backed loans to home builders, the Oman Housing Bank is another vehicle through which the government guides private architectural

272 Personal Interview, PBA3.
273 Von Richthofen, “Muscat Capital Area - Urbanism at the Intersection of Politics and Space.,” 2.
274 Ibid., 9.
275 Ibid.
trends. The Bank imposes a set of guidelines dictating basic colors and architectural styles for new residences. Originating from the Ministry of Land Affairs, these guidelines specify, for example, “rounded edges and fleeting towers originating in traditional adobe construction” and “flat roofs with balustrades reminiscent of old forts.” Likewise, the placement of glass windows and use of pastel colors should also create an exterior congruent with traditional houses made of adobe or stone, which likewise share aesthetic themes with “old forts.”

**Conclusion**

Forts and other defensive imagery figure prominently in the landscapes of Oman. Most obviously, forts, castles, and watchtowers punctuate the physical scenery. Metaphorically, they also accent the landscape of national narratives. Defensive imagery has emerged as a symbol within the panorama of ideas that defines and differentiates Oman. Without the familiar crenellations and towers, Omanis might find it difficult to image their country as distinct and significant in a modern and globally integrated world. The forts are, as Mahmud Darwish wrote, “anti-oblivion stones” providing tangible reminders of Oman's long history of civilization and relative independence.

As public architecture continues to transpose crenellation and other defensive motifs for the urban landscape, it offers a vivid illustration of Eric Hobsbawm's notion of “invented tradition.” The practice of preferring these motifs as traditional and authentic “automatically implies continuity with the past.”

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276Ibid., 10.
277Ibid., 9.
278Ibid., n. 16. citing Ministerial Decision No. 40/81 issued by the Ministry for Land Affairs and Muscat Municipality.
279Ibid.
Stable and invariant, this appropriation to “novel situations” like a changing urban landscape “take the form of reference to old situations”\textsuperscript{281} in which the crenellated balustrade and light-colored stone or stucco might have signified a Portuguese watchtower, a regional stronghold, or a center of local social organization. As a means of marking the urban landscape, this invention has been quite successful.

By fusing defensive imagery from the old into new urban landscapes, the Omani government is recreating the past as a bulwark of the “traditional heritage” that it says differentiates Oman. Lowenthal suggests that “Not only is the past recalled in what we see; it is incarnate in what we create.”\textsuperscript{282} Oman's past is incarnate not only in actual forts and castles but also in the Bustan Palace, water tanks, and other visual creations of modern Omanis. Lowenthal goes on to posit that humans seek this incarnation because “Familiarity makes surroundings comfortable; hence we keep memorabilia and add new things whose décor evokes the old.”\textsuperscript{283} Omani architectural décor evokes the old fort or castle image well enough that my contact who had grown up in Muscat and studied in Nizwa pointed to this as a key difference that separates Oman from other Gulf countries. This man suggested that Oman has more heritage than its neighbors and has managed to incorporate that heritage into modern development as evidenced in the style of architecture. “If you go to Dubai, you don't see buildings in Arab style” but “if you show me a picture of buildings [such as the Ministry buildings], I will know it is from Oman.”\textsuperscript{284}

\textsuperscript{281}Ibid., 2. 
\textsuperscript{282}Lowenthal, The Past Is a Foreign Country, 39. 
\textsuperscript{283}Ibid. 
\textsuperscript{284}Personal Interview, PBA4.
Images


Image 3.5: Ministry of Tourism, Experience History: Visit Oman's Forts and Castles.” Muscat: Ministry of Tourism.

Epilogue

This study has sought to demonstrate that physical place may be used to anchor national narratives, and that, in the case of Oman, it offers a particularly useful lens for exploring constructions of national identity. While such narratives are in constant flux as they are imagined and re-imagined by both official and unofficial Omanis, they draw a sense of stability from physical place. Place is integral to constructions of Omani national identity, but as a lens it also reveals the limits and challenges of forming unified, coherent narratives for a newly-imagined collective that consists of many diverse and sometimes adverse subgroups.

Further research could examine the degree to which private citizens adopt and modify official narratives centered around place. Just as people from the Dakhliya region might affiliate more strongly with certain aspects of the natural landscape, so residents of other regions not included in this study might be more enthusiastic about particular features of their landscape. Likewise, it would be useful to explore how Omanis who affiliate with ethnic or religious minorities such as Sunni Baluchi or Shi'a Lawatiyya appropriate or challenge narratives of centrality, exchange, and internal diversity. It would also be helpful to compare narratives of urban dwellers to those living in rural areas.

Another way to take this study further would be to examine how both official and unofficial agents are resolving or mediating the tensions that exist within narratives. The Omani government touts Oman's history of centrality and exchange and yet such hybridity runs counter to claims that Omanis are “pure
Arabs” and retain traditional Arab culture. National identity is about creating a difference, and yet part of Oman's national narratives claim that Oman is different by virtue of its openness and hybridity while other aspects reflect exclusionary impulses. Official and private voices may find they cannot ignore these disparate claims, especially when they encounter them in the context of practical issues such as expatriate labor and ethnic or religious tension.
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