

**DISPLAYING THE NATION:
THE ROLE OF MUSEUMS IN THE EXPRESSION OF NATIONAL
IDENTITY IN THE SULTANATE OF OMAN**

by

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ABSTRACT

Despite its long history, since the accession of Sultan Qaboos bin Said Al Said in 1970, Oman has been active in nation building and the shaping of national identity. This thesis addresses the role of both public and private museums in the construction of the national identity of Oman. My research focused on six museums, but also drew on further examples from across the State, and sought to better understand how, through their collections, their architecture and physical presence, and their institutional roles in Omani civil society, they contribute to the representation of a national narrative. No previous studies have focused on the museums of Oman in this way. Through my examination of the presentation and narratives of museum collections and objects, and with interviews with museum directors, curators, cultural commentators and public users, I sought to explore the ways in which the museums assist in the production, representation and maintenance of the Omani identity.

Both public and private museums draw upon the notion of 'ancient' Oman to anchor its identity in historical continuity and focus on objects within their collections that seek to distinguish Oman from other States in the Gulf region. Museum narratives provide little conceptual space for either historical or contemporary contestation and debate. Unlike the debates of revisionism and decolonialisation taking place in Euro-American museums, there is little in Oman's museums that challenge the sense of permanence and stability. Oman's own colonial past is presented as relatively unproblematic and a foundational feature of an open, cosmopolitan society.

The target audiences for the museums of Oman are chiefly domestic and every aspect from their collections and interpretation, the architecture and siting of the buildings, to their role in supporting and showcasing archaeology, is directed to communicating the centrality of the nation. The national narrative is orchestrated through the governance of Oman's museums and a top-down and carefully controlled system of planning, management and funding that emerged with, and reflected views of, the late Sultan and the Al-Said Dynasty. Even the private museums have sought to court the patronage of the Sultan and the State. The museums of Oman symbolise, to a large extent, the political and moderate religious views of the long rule of Sultan Qaboos, but also his position as the moderniser of the country. From the perspectives of the museum managers and the local communities they mainly serve, the museums fit into a generally unproblematic discourse that celebrates the modernity and stability of the nation through its royal lineage.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BBM	Bait Al-Baranda Museum
BG	Bait Al Ghasham Museum
BZM	Bait Al-Zubair Museum
HM	His Majesty
LFM	Land of Frankincense Museum
MGM	Muscat Gate Museum
MHC	Ministry of Heritage and Culture
MHT	Ministry of Heritage and Tourism
NM	National Museum
SAF	Sultan Armed Forces Museum
SM	Al-Saidiya Museum

Chapter 1

1. INTRODUCTION

1.0. Background of the Study

The Arabian Gulf countries of Oman, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Qatar and Saudi Arabia have witnessed significant economic developments due to revenues from the oil industry since 1970, with this oil-based income creating the conditions for these states to modernise (Davidson, 2009, 2011). This modernisation is characterised by rapid urbanisation and development of their service sectors in recent decades, including architectural interventions that have challenged local vernacular architectural traditions. Within this development, tourism and heritage have become important, with a growth in number of museums as these countries seek to project their own national identities (Wakefield, 2015; Exell, 2016; Freer, 2020). This scenario has attracted debates around the identity positioning as well as the role and contribution of museums, including their collections and their architecture in developing the contemporary identity of the Gulf region in the late 20th and 21st century (Wakefield, 2015; Exell, 2016; Freer, 2020).

Like the other Gulf States, Oman has also invested in its museums over recent years. This study focuses specifically on the museums of Oman to explore the notion of national identity. Macdonald (2003) has argued, the museum as an institution is

inextricably linked to questions of identity at different levels, local to national. As a vehicle for what is designated to be important in social, cultural and political terms, the museum provides a lens through which we can examine larger questions that relate to how national identity is projected within and beyond the state and how it is practised and negotiated within it. Hence, the research will shed light upon the little explored notion of Omani identity in relation to museums.

This study of the Omani museums' setting investigates how museums have both been shaped by and have produced the framework of national identity in contemporary Oman. Although the national museums are overtly connected to the national identity, this research is not limited to studying only them; rather it sets out to explore the role of museums in the expression of national identity in a wider context, through studying a variety of public and private museums, which may also capture competing positions and narratives. This thesis focuses on the production of museum representations and the manner in which museums frame, disseminate and negotiate the collective identities in the nation-building process.

While this research started in 2016, my personal involvement began back in 2001 in the field of the heritage and museum sector in government services in the Sultanate of Oman. I am an Omani national, born and raised there. I have always been interested in museums and as a child I visited a number of museums with my family in Oman as well as in other countries. As a tourist, my passion and interest for museums grew. In Oman my professional involvement in the museums projects made me realise that the museums of Oman and the Arabian Gulf region form a part of their national vision to

reinforce their national identities, while simultaneously holding converging and diverging aspects. Even though in the Gulf countries 1970 can be referred to as the beginning of modernisation and the nation-building project, the focus on national heritage and the proliferation of museums was further amplified over the course of time. In context to this, I realised that even if each of these actions was motivated to present national roots that possess overlapping constituents and approaches, at the same time they assert distinct national identities and roles in the region.

In this regard, it can be seen for instance that this development of the museum projects reveals modern orientation and the global recognition gained by utilising foreign expertise and western-style museums in the Arabian Gulf States. However, branded projects like the Guggenheim and Louvre UAE are a distinctive undertaking that Wakefield (2015) highlights as being transnational in scope, being employed in the construction of a cosmopolitan identity through their architecture and collections. In comparison to this, Omani museums utilise an inwards orientation that relies widely on locally specific heritage and cultural objects to develop a distinctive national identity for both a national and an international audience, in which the museum institution, collections and architecture play a significant role. This insight led to the conception of this research, looking at the role of museums in the expression of the nation and understanding what specific elements of the nation's past and present in the contemporary museums are informing the Omani national identity, and what aspects are negotiated to position the Omani nation.

1.1. Rationale of the Study

There exists a wide range of mostly Eurocentric literature on museums and national identity that studies the relationship of museums with the nation-building process from their very inception as a public institution, as well as on new museum projects investigating national identity in particular nations and various issues relevant to identity debates in museums, such as those of Bennett (1995), MacDonald (2003), Hoggart (2001), Mclean (2007), Mason (2013), Knell et al. (2010), and Knell (2016). The 1970s saw the emergence and spread of museums across the Arabian Gulf countries, hence these countries are not new arrivals to preservation and promotion of cultural heritage, museum development and all its iterations. However, researchers such as Exell (2016) and Erskine-Loftus et al. (2016) highlight that the role of museums in the expression of national identity in this region is little understood in relation to the socio-political setup, state policy and a research perspective, and only recently has it received attention.

The relationship between museums and national identity portrayed in the existing literature is primarily Euro-American-centric, even though museums operate in varying political, national and cultural settings. The museums have been identified as part of an apparatus of nation-states through which the nation is represented as homogenous and inevitable through the projections such as ancientness, long history, colonialism and heritage of the nation. As it is this western exemplar that is used in the Arabian Gulf region, the relationship between the museum and state cannot be discounted in which the museums can project nation-states as homogenous, natural and inevitable

through their collections, architecture and institutional standing through the projections of nationhood, empire, power, and the patrimony of nation-states. However, there are also significant differences between Euro-American museum practices and those in Oman that this research intends to unfold.

Within the western canon of literature on national identity, which is linked to the framework of democratic politics, the museums are changing towards self-critical spaces in which the idea of the national narratives can be challenged and these are constantly being challenged by the changes that take place in society. These consequently get reflected in images of the nation and national identity projected in the museums, such as debates about de-colonisation and multicultural representations. For example, in the context of museum practices, one such museum exhibition that I visited was "The Past is Now", a temporary co-curated exhibition that ran at the Birmingham Museum and Gallery from October 28, 2017, to June 24, 2018. This exhibition focused on Birmingham and the British Empire, "can be thought of as an experiment in decolonising museum curation [...] to tell the story of the British Empire in England, in a specific Birmingham context and from the perspective of the colonised and not the colonisers" (Wajid and Minott, 2019: 28). In contrast, discussions within autocratic, more top-down and less democratic societies are challenging as the nation's identity comes from a more dictated approach primarily based on a pre-identified state-defined version of the nation's projection. Even though a less democratic or autocratic societal framework comes with its limitations on the extent to which raising criticism and debate is possible, this as such cannot be by default, considered a sign of discontentment with the projected national identity as the public

is attuned to a socio-political framework and they may actually be content with the projection of familiar histories told from familiar perspectives. Established and familiar projections can be comforting, and their disruption upsetting; for instance, although "the Past is Now" showed an overwhelmingly positive public response to the exhibition, it also raised "criticism and a backlash from constituencies who find the presentation of familiar histories of Empire told from unfamiliar perspectives, deeply uncomfortable" (Wajid and Minott, 2019: 34).

Researchers such as Erskine-Loftus et al. (2016: 4) highlight that the Eurocentric understanding of museums in the Gulf States region is insufficient because of "the differences in underlying principles and understanding within the Gulf States" such as aspects related to "the difference in understanding of the relationship between history and heritage, the questions of which history to support". Compared to the West, which constitutes a democratic framework, the Omani autocratic framework attracts little or no opposition from society. Further, even if Oman is the oldest existing political entity in the Arabian Peninsula, it is recent in its contemporary form as a nation-state, and hence it is at a different stage of the nation-building process than those in the West. Hence Oman constitutes different socio-political pressures from those of the West engaging in decolonisation practices. Hence, the inquiry into the role of museums in the projections of the nation concerns not only what and by whom it is presented in the museums but the way these projections are contextualised in their specific non-western Omani context.

Further, the museums of the Gulf Arabian region have generated a considerable

debate that touches upon numerous dimensions. For instance arguments that are related to utilising foreign museological and architectural systems and critiques on 'imported' models of cultural development; the use of 'branded' museums; the tension between vernacular and 'foreign' forms of cultural expression; the success or otherwise of culture-led economies; the political nature of museums and their role in the state-led initiatives of national identity construction, construction that supports the top-down discourse of national identity, politics of social exclusion and the extent to which these developments shape notions of national identity (Partrick, 2009; Exell and Rico, 2014; Al-Mutawa, 2016; Durovsik, 2016; Exell and Wakefield, 2016; Bounia, 2018; Akinci, 2020; Freer, 2020). However, the research on the museums of the Gulf region is in its early stages and this study will add to the literature on the museums and national identities of the Arabian Gulf countries. In a region where we still know little about the role of museums in the production of national identity, qualitative studies across multiple museums in Oman will contribute essential new knowledge to the ongoing debates and research endeavours in the field of museums, collections and architecture and their significant role in the expression of the nation in the Arabian Gulf countries.

The analyses of museums and national identity, specifically in the Gulf Arabian region, rely on top-down and constructivist orientation of national identity construction. By doing so, such identities and their interrelations are explained in terms of the pragmatic needs and role of political elites and thus focus on public and national museums as tools for nation building (McLean, 2005). This museum production-oriented research within this top-down dimension and the role of political elites, government bodies and national and public museums also focuses on various other agencies; such as the role

of collectors, private museums and heritage houses, to understand the contribution or aspirations of different agencies in context to the national identity projections. Further it also considers to some extent the ways in which the visitors and public relate to the projections of the nation within this top-down national identity framework. Hence, in this research, I use the same approach as others in the region and expand the existing research on national identity, museum making and its wider meaning by investigating the role of museums in the construction of national identity focused on Oman.

There is limited research on national identity building in Oman as a project of national unification (Valeri, 2009; Peterson 2019). For example, some studies have been carried out on national identity and state formation and its relation to education, politics, economics, geographies and foreign affairs (Kechichian, 1995; Nutz, 2013; Okawa, 2015; Al Handhali, 2019; Elgazzar et al., 2020). A few researchers have also started to explore the nature and construction of ethnic and cultural communities' identities (Kharusi, 2013) and the changing status of communities in Omani society within the new social and political construct (Peterson, 2004a; 2004b).

However, there exists no research that solely studies the role of museums in the projection of the nation and their relationship with the national identity framework exclusively focusing on the Omani context. Within the research on the Arabian Gulf region, Oman and Muscat are frequently mentioned by researchers to express a collective transformation of the Arabian Gulf region and the museum setting (Exell and Rico, 2014; Erskine-Loftus et.al., 2016; Exell and Wakefield, 2016), but the use of these as examples in a wider regional debate do not adequately represent the role of

Omani museums and their interlink with the national identity framework. Such studies that re-centre museum debates around the particular issues faced in this region tend to propose a set of implicit regional developmental assumptions that do not voice the distinct Oman-specific issues and the differences in the ethnic and cultural constitutions and histories, nationalistic drives and political motivations. Seen in the context of the Arabian Peninsula, Oman includes overlapping features but also distinct recognisable geographical, political and social structures that contribute to a particular national identity framework, such as the difference in the histories, ideas and approach to national homogenisation and cultural heterogeneity. The gap in the Oman-specific research on the relationship of museums and national identity, and the tendency in research and media of stereotyping Oman as part of an assumed typical Arabian Gulf model of cultural developments and national identity are misleading and limit the understanding of the Omani context and the regional positioning of national identity. Oman-focused research is significant because it is a pioneer study that will fill the missing context-based research gap in relation to the Omani setting, and thus also diversify the debate about museums and national heritage in the wider Gulf region.

To date, little research has examined the idea of national identity in Oman. Since the State's 'renaissance' (as officially termed) began in 1970, building a new national identity has been a central aspect of Sultan Qaboos' modernisation programme. As Valeri (2007) has argued, the early part of building an Omani identity focused on attempts to re-unite Omanis who returned from the former colonies in East Africa and the country's tribes and various ethnolinguistic groups. As with most nations, territorial changes over the course of a longer history complicate notions of the nation, and while

there is clearly a recognised Omani identity there are still parts of the Sultanate that offer some contestation to this; such as along the borderlands with the present UAE, that according to Valeri (2018: 604) are accompanied by the critical “question of alliance and belongingness to the national community”. Likewise, in the south of the country, where in the early years of the nation-building project Dhofaris contested the national narrative, issues erupt that according to Peterson (2004b: 269), cause some lingering “friction” based on sub-national distinctiveness of geography and culture. However, largely, the idea of the nation among citizens and the government of Oman has been stable, if not so well understood outside of the wider Gulf Region.

It is worth keeping in mind that central to the nation-building project is the simultaneous production and expression of the national identity, which in turn has a multi-faceted and complicated relationship with the nation and the state. What should be considered here is that identity is “produced, consumed and regulated” within a specific culture and socio-political context “whilst creating meanings through symbolic systems of representation” (McLean, 1998: 247). It should be remembered that the approaches to understanding any nation and its representations need to respect the museums' distinctive nature and context. Oman is a hereditary monarchy and the national identity is shaped, represented and consumed within this top-down framework. In Oman, since the 1970s, a clear sense of national identity has been continually fostered by national programs, policies and institutions. Peterson (2019: 9) highlights that Oman was unified under a “coherent national identity” post-1970 and the reign of Sultan Qaboos marked its beginning by building a sense of national identity consciously based on the cult of his personality. However, Peterson (2019: 8) also notes that “the core of Omani

identity through ages have revolved around several themes”, such as Arabness and Islam. These components of the Omani identity are “indelibly woven into the education and consciousness of all Omanis today” (Peterson, 2019: 8).

This notion of well-defined national identity in Oman also raises a question on the need and role of museums in Oman as several questions arise as to the ways in which the museums of Oman intersect with the identity of the state; such as: how and to what extent does Oman represent the continuity and relative stability of the state after and before 1970? What role do the content and architecture of these museums play in projecting the nation? To what extent do the museums of Oman continue to act as an instrument for the state? What, if any, aspects of museums communicate to different communities and to different ways of framing collective identity? Keeping in the context that museums are widely associated with the capacity to express the nation and to create a national identity in the past, this thesis sets out to find out if this is the case in Oman and what role the museums play in the projection of an Omani nation.

1.2. Research Aims and Objectives

In light of the above arising question that gives meaning to the idea of the nation, this research seeks to use the museums of Oman as a way of interrogating the construction of national identity and to explore how the museums project this Omani identity. The projection of national identity in Oman is a top-down process, and reflecting this premise this research is primarily focused on understanding the production side of the museum.

The key research question is:

- What is the role of Oman's museums in the construction of its national identity?

From this key question and taking into consideration the multiple dimensions of a museum a further series of other ones arise:

- What aspects of the museum are involved in the communication of the nation?
- To what extent and how is the content of the museum (collections and narratives) active in presenting the nation?
- To what extent does the physical structure and location play a part in shaping the national narrative?
- How is the agency of museums framed by the wider context of Omani societies' relationship with the museum as a public institution?

The study aims to expand the perception of the role of museums, by exploring museums through different perspectives to provide insight on museum projections of a nation, gaining a deeper understanding of the national identity expressed as a whole. Hence, I decided to carry out the research on case study museums in the context of three main angles: keeping in view that firstly the museums are repositories of collections and artefacts that are linked to national identity (Mclean, 1998) whose

meaning in the museums come together through their selection, arrangement and narratives (Hein, 2014). Secondly, the study considers the museum as architecture, as architecture has been a part of the nation-building discourse (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983), and museum architecture is specifically linked to national identity (Chung 2003; Jones: 2011). Lastly, to understand what aspects of the museum are involved in the communication of the nation, the study will also look at the museums as an institution which lie at the heart of the nation-building and national identity debates (Mclean, 1998) and are imbued with instrumental power with the capacity to inscribe and disseminate influential messages to the society (Bennett, 1995: 21). Hence this thesis explores how the museums organise and represent historical artefacts, archaeology, museum buildings and exhibitions as material evidence of a historically recognised, politically known, and culturally unique Oman. It looks into the stakeholders who influence decision-making in museums. Further, to a lesser extent, the research looked at the Omani visitor's consumption of the projections of the nation within this top-down framework to understand how is the agency of the museum framed by the wider context of Omani societies' relationship with the museum as a public institution.

A holistic understanding of the role of museum-making and national identity expression is gained through a framework of viewing museums via the above three main perspectives and focusing on the interrelation of various museum constituents. This is carried out by looking into museum development in its location context and conceptualising the museums as an outcome of dynamic production, intermingled with complex correlations of social and cultural influences, political power and the role of stakeholders.

The objective is to gain meaningful findings related to production-oriented research on the role of museums and their relationship with the representations of the nation and national identity projection. This is achieved by taking into account the museums projections of national identity through a combination of vantage points by focusing on those stakeholders involved in the museum-making process, such as curators, museum directors and in charge of museums with decision-making capacities, and how these decisions inform and shape the architecture, exhibits and narratives. As well as from the vantage point of an attendee by picking up on the exhibits, narratives, and architecture of these museums to understand the extent and the way in which the content of the museum plays its part in projecting the national identity.

The national identity is created and projected for consumption; hence it was deemed impossible to understand the production side without to some extent recognising the wider consumption of the national identity that is projected in the museums. Therefore, to a lesser extent, I also picked up on how Omani visitors receive the content of national identity projected in the museums. Also, some understanding of how visitors experience the national identity projections, along with contextualising what the production tries to do and actually does, can indicate avenues for more targeted research in future studies.

1.3. Overall Research Methodology

This research is an interdisciplinary study conducted through case studies of six museums in Oman, as it provided a practical set of cases of a scale that was feasible

to consider within the constraints of a PhD project. A list of museums attained from the Ministry of Heritage and Culture, which comprised eighteen nationally recognised museums, was used as the basis for identifying the case study museums. The first step was a preliminary elimination process based on excluding museums the subject area of which were not aligned to the research purpose or which were subject to temporary closure or relocation. The list was thus reduced to thirteen, and overall these museums collectively include various forms and themes of museums located in diverse parts of Oman that could support capturing a comprehensive picture of the role of museums in the expression of national identity.

Out of those thirteen museums, six museums were evaluated in detail and were looked at in-depth, namely; the National Museum, Bait Al-Zubair Museum, the Land of Frankincense Museum, the Sultan Armed Forces Museum, Madha Museum and Old Castle Museum. This set comprises private and public museums that include both national and other public museums just as the range provides museums from different regions of Oman. However, I also visited the remaining seven museums that are of small to medium sizes and included them to provide contextual information due to broader contribution that they had to offer to the discussion on how national identity is projected in the museums of Oman. This was decided as it allowed the study to maintain an understanding of the holistic role of the museums in the national identity reflected in the Omani setting that the research aims to achieve.

The research data was obtained from policy documents and archival records, a collection of information through interviews, field research and observations that were

documented using field notes and photography. Observation was used for exploring the case study museums' surroundings, spaces, architecture, collections, and interactions that happened in these spaces; such as guided tours, or what attracted visitors and how they responded to the museum architecture, spaces, displays and collections. Interviews provided in depth information and they were used to assess and clarify previous understandings attained from the other sources of data, as well as to fill the gaps that other resources would not cover. Interviews were conducted with museum curators, designers and directors directly involved in decision-making and discussions were carried out *in situ* with the museum visitors.

1.4. Outline of the Thesis

This thesis is structured into seven main chapters. **Chapter 1** puts forward the introduction that presents the background of the study and the chapters that follow are explained below.

Chapter 2 takes the form of an extensive literature review. This chapter outlines the theoretical framework for addressing the aim of the study and discusses the inter-relationships between nations, nationalism, national identity and museums. It begins with an analysis of theoretical discussions on the emergence of a nation, nationalism and national identity and the role of symbolism and cultural repositories in national identity projection, using key theorists such as Anthony Smith and Benedict Anderson amongst others. The chapter further presents a discussion on the theoretical relation of museums with collections, architecture and narratives. It also includes a discussion

on the complex and contested links between cosmopolitanism, cultural diversity, museums and the national identity, including its projections in museums.

Chapter 3 will help the reader to understand the context in which the research is set, by providing empirical background information. It contextualises Oman and the Arabian Gulf countries, with its main focus on the Omani setting. The chapter gives a broader outline of the national geographical and communal setting in which current politics and practices of constructing a national identity in Oman are brought to bear. Further, it describes the scenario of the museum and its architectural development; along with the prevailing notion of its relation to identity construction, both in the region of the Gulf in general and Oman specifically. In short, it outlines the contextual setting of the research on the museums of Oman.

Chapter 4 outlines the methodologies employed in this thesis; specifically that of the inductive qualitative case study. The chapter then locates the research within its disciplinary academic context, in particular as a social science study of the museums in Oman with a focus on the national identity framework. In this chapter I have described the selection process of the case of study museums. I have further explained the data collection techniques applied during the fieldwork that include semi-structured interviews and observations, and explained the approaches to data analysis. This chapter includes a discussion on some of the limitations of the project and concludes with a consideration of some of the ethical implications of the research process.

Chapter 5 presents the qualitative findings with an emphasis on the *historical* exhibits and demonstration of the nation in the museums of Oman. I explore the key themes that revolve around the prehistory and ancient past, which extend the continuity of the nation from the distant past to a contemporary background. The chapter provides a detailed analysis of the way the key identity elements of Arab and Islamic culture form a critical element of the Omani national identity framework, and how these identities are approached in the museums. This chapter is primarily focused on exhibits of shared elements and particular historical aspects that contribute to a sense of belongingness, through the projections of uniform belief, shared ancestry, common territory and collective heritage. In the process, I also identify how the projections of homogeneity are complicated within the presentations of the nation through the overlapping aspects that propose the ethnic, social and political heterogeneity. The analysis in this chapter shows how Omani museums present the internal differences and external influences that shed light on the different ways the museums frame collective identities, and negotiate and construct meanings of the Omani nation. The aim is also to illustrate the position of various internal and external stakeholders, as well as the particular yet intertwined inward and outward oriented purposes in portraying Oman.

Chapter 6 continues to investigate the qualitative findings with emphasis on the *contemporary* presentations and symbolic references of the nation in the Omani museums. This chapter begins with analysing the role the contemporary national symbols play in the national identity projections. It examines how contemporary references linked to national ideology and collective references that serve to unite the

Omani citizenry anchor the new political community and legitimise the political regime. The chapter analyses symbols that are central to the Omani museums in framing the Omani national identity: the person of Sultan Qaboos; the symbolic ideology of the 'renaissance' associated with his rule; and the symbolic architecture of museums. Discussion of these symbols of nations unfolds their overarching and complicated role, and highlights the contribution of various attributes of museums for nation-building and framing collective identities. In the process, the analysis in this chapter advances the discussion on enmeshed and constitutive national, local, universal, global and cosmopolitan characterisations of the nation that support the materialisation of a particular political vision. Furthermore, the complicated relationship of museums with contemporary representations of the nation through the creation of a continuity that contributes to project desired stories and social cohesion is considered.

Chapter 7 provides a conclusion for the study and answers the research questions. It presents the main findings of the research and connects them to previous literature. Moreover, it offers a set of recommendations to give directions for further investigations and research in the fields of nation, national identity and its relationship with the museum, its architecture, collections and narratives in the wider setting as well as that specific to Oman.

1.5. Conclusion

This opening chapter has provided the rationale and an overview of the study, which is driven by a research aim and objectives to produce a more in-depth understanding

based on fieldwork. Before the research findings can be presented, it is necessary to conduct a thorough literature review of the interrelated phenomena of nation, national identity, and museums.

CHAPTER 2

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0. Introduction

This chapter aims to explore the complex relationships between national identity and museums to understand the aspiration of museum developments in their quest for identity. This interrelation of museums, their collections, their architecture, and national identity formation forms a complex field, which calls for critical analysis. To study this relationship the literature review is primarily divided into three sections. First one is on the concepts of nation and national identity projections, the second one contextualises the link of the nation, national identity and national repositories and the third one is in context to the relationship of museums with the notion of nation and national identity. This background allows to explore the concepts by assessing the role of the museums in actively projecting a sense of nation. I consider the extent to which the literature on museums and national identity captures the way certain cultural repositories and symbols are prioritised over others within the museum and national identity matrix.

Two backbone discourses that establish the relationship between museum making and national identity are the ideas of nation and symbols. Hence, the first section aims at understanding the notion of nation and national identities, their relation to the museums and how they link with national symbolism and cultural repositories. To understand this

relationship, this section explores the key schools of thoughts on the nation and main theoretical strands within the discussion of nationalism. The section considers the relationship between the nation and national identity, as well as the processes and tools through which a sense of national identity is constructed and projected.

Since this research revolves around the role of museums, the next section is devoted to looking at the concept of the museums, their meaning and historical background. This section focuses on understanding the museum inception, development and the changing concepts of the museums. The research investigates and acknowledges the complexities and influences the museums contain to comprehend better the entangled relationship of the museum in the expression of the nation. The investigation explores the different influences, stakeholders and other aspects that play their role in the meaning of the museums and contribute to museum making and projection of the nation. It focuses on understanding the concept of museum, its perception and production bound to its various components and functions that include the collections, narratives and architecture and the various ways it is put to work. Therefore, this research aims to contextualise museum as something that interfaces with various components, boundaries, spaces and socio-political setting, which creates the meaning as a whole.

In short, this chapter attempts to focus on the wider discussions of national identity, museums and the current thoughts on the institution of museum, its collections, narratives and architecture to comprehend the research that focuses on the museums in Oman and their role in identity creation. This research conceptualises the museum

and its various elements as dynamic, complex and under constant production. The character and meaning created through various relationships of spaces, context and interactions gives a valuable dimension to the built environment and the better understanding of museum architecture and identity they reflect. Therefore, through a critical review of the existing literature, the chapter aims at assessing the meaningful role and influence museums creates in local, national and international scenes, thereby highlighting the purposes of museums and their role in national identity construction. The chapter concludes with a consideration of the most significant points that have arisen, and which will subsequently be used in analysing the museums of Oman.

2.1. Notion of Nation and National Identity

Museums are valued and accepted as representatives of the national identity. Mclean (1998: 244) highlights that the museum's "collections, and the presentation and interpretation of these collections, being inextricably linked to national identity" lie at the centre of the debates, in the fields of social and cultural studies. Further, Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) describe that architecture has been part of this course, without a doubt, the museums' buildings especially the high-profile and national museums are thus linked to the national identity. According to Poulot (2015), museums that are not even exclusively national have also been used as part of the national identity projects. Hence, their significance in articulating the national identity and the nation has been a subject of nationalistic debates and discussions. However, national identity is a complex phenomenon, which is not synonymous with the traditional or modern characteristics of a nation; it is to be viewed as an identity underlying the unity

in the diversity. Although at the first glance the term ‘national identity’—an identity associated with a nation—may seem simple to define; once viewed vigilantly, it is instantly revealed that expressing identity in connection to a nation is a complex and challenging phenomenon. While a range of research is available on this subject, a quick synopsis of the terms nation and identity is carried out in the following paragraph in order to establish what comprises the term national identity. Further, it would provide an understanding of the key issues of consideration that associates the discourse of national identity with the museums and their collections, narratives and architecture.

The word “identity” originated in the late 16th century and is derived from the Latin word “idem” meaning “same” (identity, 2018). Erikson (1974) is well known for popularizing the term “identity” due to the scholarly works he carried out on identity formation (see also Gleason, 1983: 914). He proposes to define identity as “a process located in the core of the individual and yet also in the core of his communal community” (Erikson, 1974: 22). Formation of identity is a consequence of both collective and personal features, hence, connecting the individuals with communities. It positions communities and individuals by giving meaning to who we are as a person and together. According to Brubaker & Cooper (2000: 1) the intensity of understanding and association to identity is a matter of perception, therefore, ambiguous in nature: “identity tends to mean too much (when understood in a strong sense), too little (when understood in a weak sense), or nothing at all (because of its sheer ambiguity)”. It is a loosely used reference that reflects the commonness as well as the distinctness of self and community. Nevertheless, identity is relational, and the difference is established by symbolic marking in relation to others (McLean, 1998). On one hand, the definitions

of identity reveal that it is open to various interpretations, and on the other hand, it is characterized as a trait that projects differences and similarities, reflecting its subjective nature. Hence, the term “identity” is a vague, impalpable, and multifaceted concept (Erikson, 1974; Gleason, 1983; Malesevic, 2006).

Further, focusing on the word “nation”, researchers have proposed various definitions that “range from those that stress objective factors, such as language, religion and customs, territory and institutions, to those that emphasise purely subjective factors, such as attitudes, perceptions and sentiments” (Smith, 2011: 11). According to Hobsbawm (2012), both subjective and objective definitions of the nation are unsatisfactory and misleading. A strand of modernist researchers assert that nations are a modern phenomenon, yet there also exists a segment of researchers who link the nations to immemorial or innate settings with historical and ethnic roots. In relation to national identity, the first segment of thinkers, modernists or instrumentalists, that view the nation as a modern construct conceptualise the national identity as a modern, political and outward phenomenon, whereas to the second segment of researchers, primordialists and perennialists, as Smith (2011) explains the kinship, ethnicity or historic roots are intrinsic to national identity.

Hence, the implicit and intangible nature of “identity” and “nation” cannot be denied. Moreover, connecting these terms together as the terminology “national identity” inevitably increases the abstraction of these terms. Therefore, it is important to approach this beyond popular definitions to understand the notion behind these concepts and their linkage to the position of museums in nations and the significance

of museums in projecting national identity. Theoretical perspectives of nations and their orientations provide a background on the association between national identity and museums. These theories can reflect on various perceptions on the role of museums in representing the nation. Key theoretical perspectives of the modernists, primordialists, perennialists and ethnosymbolists are discussed as each of these can have an impact on the understanding of the concept, form and function of institutional, collections and architectural components of museums.

Keeping in view, what Gourgouris (1996: 8) articulates: “What a nation is, pure and simple, shall always remain just another step ahead of our inquiry as to what it is”. Hence, this study will not attempt to provide a specific definition on a nation or national identity. Rather, it will explore the discourse on nation claims that articulates the usages, approaches, tools and concepts that frame and contextualizes the shaping of national identity and museum production. Broadly, the idea of nation is expressed in reference to two mainstreams conceptions of its creation: top-down and bottom-up. Most scholars would accept that these streams can be further divided into four main categories. The theorists from the top-down school of thought include the modernist's category who view nation construction as a recent political formation and an enforced process to attain cultural homogeneity, which entails the creation of fabricated or imagined unity. The perennialist and primordialist theorists have a bottom-up approach, they view the nation as an ancient, natural or biological phenomenon, and relate it to pre-modern roots. The next category of ethno-symbolism recognises the two-way relationship; but not necessarily a substituted view from below; between the various political “elites and the people, the non-elites or middle and lower strata”, that

they aim to represent (Smith, 2011, 61). Various perspectives within these schools of thoughts challenge the paradigms concerning the foundation, power and nature of nations, which is further discussed.

2.1.1. Modernist Approach

In the top-down approach, the state is seen as the agent responsible for creating a unified vision of the nation and national identity. In recent years, the modernist approach has been one of the dominant approaches, not only due to its sound theoretical framework on a popular ideology that shaped the political landscape, but also its capacity to be applied to other disciplines. In recent years, a growing number of studies have explored the notions of nations. Ernest Gellner (2006), Benedict Anderson (2016) and Eric Hobsbawm (2012) are the leading scholars of this theory and have contributed to many relevant studies of the nation. The theorists from this school of thought consider nationalism as an ideological and discursive construct to gain control over groups by projecting created identities.

For instance, Gellner (2006) believes the concept of the nation belongs to modern times and are invented to fill out the gaps created as a result of the transition of society from agrarian to industrial, where the state policies are concerned with standardizing and reducing the social conflict through unified identity creation. Further, Gellner (2006) points out that the principle which promotes the idea that the boundaries of a nation and its government should coincide. Hechter (2000) discusses the analytical typology flowing out from the concept of nationalism as collective action that enables

the congruency of state and nation. He believes that, in a state, nationalism is a conscious process of cultural homogenisation and assimilation of a multicultural and distinct population (Hechter, 2000). Kohl (1998: 223) further states that, nationalism “requires elaboration of a real or invented remote past”.

Hobsbawm (2012) views nationalism as a conscious exercise of social engineering where traditions are invented, through which the ideologies and symbols are manoeuvred for the sake of political power (Hobsbawm, 2012). In his opinion, the foremost character of a nation is cultural rather than the ancient foundation and historical longevity. He further proposes that the invented cultural resources and symbols of a nation can eventually turn into tradition (Hobsbawm, 2012). The idea regarding the invented tradition that proposes that the rulers channel and regulate those that are ruled (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 2012) is a typical social constructionist approach that gives the impression that the structure of such traditions is newly invented, however it overlooks the meaning and influence that is based on long-term historical and cultural connections.

Benedict Anderson is perhaps the most influential exponent of the modernist school of thoughts. His arguments differ from those who connect the nation and nationalism to inventions or fabrication in terms of falsity, by emphasizing that the concept of nation-building presumes an imagined community that entails real sentiment (Anderson, 2016: 6). According to him, the matter of distinguishing communities lies in how they are imagined and not in their genuineness or falsity. Hence, he argues that, a nation is “an imagined political community” (Anderson, 2016: 6). Imagined because, according

to him, the members of the society might never meet each other. However, an image of their community exists in their minds (Anderson, 2016: 6). For him, print media had an important role in this imagining, sharing and creating the fundamentals of national identity and nationhood.

Nationalism, as an ideology and a term, emerged in Western Europe; therefore, the contextual specificity is obvious. It is significant to notice that for modernist theorists, nationalism connected to modernism is directed by political elites with an aim to monopolise the identity of a nation. Theorists like Anderson (2016) and Gellner (2006) associate the rise of nationalism with the decline of religion and the rise in secularism. However, history is full of examples of the revival of religious movements that contributed to civil war and even the construction of new states. Thus, this indicates that the power of religious nationalism cannot be underestimated in the national identity project. For instance, India and Pakistan were literally a by-product of the rise of religious nationalism (Chatterjee, 1986; Juergensmeyer, 1993; Smith, 2003). Kaufman (2004: 11) also reminds us that a movement like the “Arab national movement” was not born out of the notion of secularism, and the same remains true for other Islamic nations and the Middle East. This western-oriented conceptualisation of nationalism is understood as a practice shaped by the elites; however, when attached to the function of various aspects of modernisation like secularism comprises limitations when projected directly onto other parts of the world.

Further, the modernist theoretical viewpoints mentioned above propose a social constructionist theory perspective (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). This conceptual

viewpoint provides useful insights into the dynamics of social phenomena; however, limitations lie in studying deeply rooted cultural manifestations of a nation. Hence, social constructionism is inadequate to distinguish between long-term historical processes and the newly constructed structure and components of any nation. In short, the modernists believe that the nation and the national identity are recent phenomena associated with a conscious process to achieve national unity and stability. This is perceived as an elitist and politically driven; top-down approach through the deliberate and conscious use of symbolism and imagery. For some, these cultural symbols are created, fabricated and invented, whereas, for others, they are elaborated and imagined. For the modernists, the process of national symbolism production is a significant constituent of national identity construction, through the use of elements such as censuses, maps and museums (Anderson, 2016). Nevertheless, their continued relationship with their pre-existing culture means less to them. It appears as if for modernists, modernity itself takes the form of a nation (Smith, 2011: 53). The modernist view is generally challenged for excessively endowing political elites and intellectuals with the role of the nation and national identity creation, which is, in reality, a complex phenomenon. As identified above, it further has its limitations in the assessment of deeply rooted cultural expression, and shortcomings in explanations of durable sentimental affiliation with nationhood and embodiment of a moral impulse that extends to sacrifice for the imagined nations.

Although the theories of modernism are powerful to understand and contextualise the nation as a modern construct, in a country like Oman traditional and historic connections are deeply rooted in the culture and society. Keeping this in context, to

view the nation merely through an angle of an imagined or invented society will be to overlook the nation's deeply rooted cultural expression generated through these ties. Approaches such as the primordial and perennial take account of the pre-modern connection of a nation. These approaches have failed to attract substantial support from the majority of scholars and modernists who oppose such propositions in a nation. However, ethno-symbolism is a paradigm that provides an alternative way of conceptualising nation that does not propose over emphasis on agency similar to primordial approach and views the nations as ethno-cultural in contrast to civic or democratic entities (Smith, 2008; Hutchinson, 2008). Further, as for modernists, national symbolism is seen as an important aspect in creating national consciousness, so is for ethno-symbolists. Nevertheless, for ethno-symbolists, the pre-existence of traditions and ethnic ties are an undeniable reality and a source to create a sound foundation. Anthony Smith is one of the most influential scholars of this paradigm and therefore his contribution is significant to this research. Many arguments of ethno-symbolism stem from the primordial approach, therefore, it is worth understanding this approach also before closely examining ethno-symbolism.

2.1.2. Perennial and Primordial Approaches

Perennial and Primordial approaches are the earliest theoretical paradigms of nations and nationalism. The idea of continuity of nations is significant for these approaches. Both theories support that the nation has no foundation without pre-modern roots and they are sometimes discussed under the umbrella of the primordial approach, but, they have some distinctions. Perennialists view the nation as a perennial and historic

phenomenon. This idea is generally based on empirical observations; such as archaeology or historiography, referenced by modernists as nationalist concepts, which Perennialists hold to provide the hard evidence on pre-existing nations. According to the continuous Perennialists' view, the nation exist from time immemorial and hold a long continuous history. This position acknowledges the pre-modern origins of a particular nation, and the discontinuity and ruptures in the process "are relativized by an emphasis on the slow rhythm of collective cultural identities" (Smith 2011, 54). The recurrent Perennialists, by contrast, believe that nations have a recurrent tendency to appear and disappear to reappear again, throughout history. Hence, the nation can come and go and the ideas may be expressed in different ways in different periods, yet the bond of nationhood exists within the same type of collective cultural identity that tends to reappear, even though it may be expressed in different ways in different periods of history (Smith 2011, 54-55).

The primordial approach was widely used before the modernist approach established its academic reputation. Primordialists see the nation with a standpoint where the historical outlook is substituted by the perspective of the nation as a naturally inevitable phenomenon. For Primordialists, the nations are organic and innate to humankind. Three basic orientations are viewed within this paradigm. First is the divine and inevitable, "that lie at the root of subsequent process and developments" (Smith, 2011: 55). Second is the kinship and genetic association that extends to the race and ethnic kinship connections where cultural symbols, such as language, religion and race signify the biological connection and a "cultural group is treated as a wider kinship network" (Smith 2011, 56). Extending the idea of kinship and cultural symbols to

ethnicity becomes viable in expressing the concept of treatment as their own kin to the member of society that belongs to the same ethnic or tribal background (Smith, 2011). However, it falls short to explain large-scale socio-political developments (Smith, 2011).

The third orientation is the idea of the formation of ethnic groups based on the shared cultural elements, such as language, religion, or territory. The attachment to the “cultural givens” which is the natural part of social existence assume the expressions of power that strengthens over time. Humans as individuals and as members of societies feel and believe in the innateness (inherited character) of ethnic communities or *ethnies* (the French word for ethnic communities) and nation (Smith, 2011). This creates a sense of durability, cohesiveness and intensity of attachment to the cultural collective identities. Nevertheless, this idea has its limitations in providing reasoning on why such attachments exist in some historical collectivises and not for others (Smith, 2011). The Primordialist and Perennialist school of thought exercise a bottom-up approach, which principally assumes that the states, bureaucracies and politics are a public expression of the pre-existing ethnic societies and cultural identities (Smith, 1996: 446). Theorists supporting the bottom-up approach believe that the national identity shared between the people is an expression that emerges out of the deeply rooted ethnographic reality and innate bonds (Couture, Nielsen & Seymour, 1998).

The majority of criticism against the Primordialist approach comes from the modernists raising a concern that fixed ethnic attachments leave no space for the possibility of multiculturalism or social change (Elle & Coughlan, 1993). According to some, the

Primordialists overlook the role of social interactions that also plays an important part in the construction of emotional ties by excessive stress on bond formation due to ethnic and biological factors (Eller and Coughlan, 1993). Other modernists merely disagree with the idea of a nation as an ancient phenomenon with a continuous past. Based on the social and political foundation of the modern world, they argue that nationalism is not possible before the eighteenth century and nations exist as an occurrence disconnected from their past. Hence, for them, if nationalism is modern so are the nations.

Although these theoretical approaches provide a difference of opinion, they are important in the context of the museums. Each of these highlights the perspectives on the conceptual approach in museums as well as the role and function of their collection, architecture and as an institution. Accordingly, the nation exists as a result of various intertwined and complicated processes and forces. Keeping this view if the nation is only grounded on a strictly top-down approach will mean to realise the full control is purely held by the elitist and political segment and so would be the shaping of the nation and the national identities. Similarly, the national authenticity in connection to the role of communities in a purely bottom-up approach is vulnerable to physiological reductionism (Ahmadi, 2009: 100-101; Anbarani, 2013: 66); by not considering other influences such as political factors in the origin of a nation and misperception of equating the ethnic-cultural authenticity with the national identities. Therefore, the ethno-symbolist perspective becomes useful under the discussion of political cohesion, identity and authority investigation in the Gulf region and specifically in the context of Oman, a modern nation with strong traditional ties.

2.1.3. Ethno-symbolist Approach

Ethno-symbolism is a significant category with an intermediary approach that offers cultural and historical perspective by providing another system of conceptual tools to study nation and nationalism by corresponding to some modernist views. Such as those related to the role of elites, ethnicity and symbolic components of a nation and pre-modern elements of history, myth and memories of a nation and nationalism (Smith, 2009; Anbarani, 2013). Hence Smith (2009) points out the significance of modernism in the development of national consciousness; however, he stresses that nationalist builders could not create a strong foundation for a nation in the modern era without the pre-existence of traditions and ethnic ties, such as the symbols of constitutive political myths and ethnic cultural roots. Hutchinson (2008: 2) is also an ethno-symbolist who also stresses the production of nations from ethnic roots and believes that national identity creation is not merely functional or instrumental but has a wider purpose. Further, Hutchinson (2008) contends that cultural symbols play a substantive role, which goes beyond their instrumental or aesthetical position, in the process of national identity formation. He views that national identities are “powerful and protracted experience, occurring well before the modern period, they are centrally involved in directing the pathways of modern society” (Hutchinson 2008: 2). He argues that the modernist view focuses on cultural homogeneity and they forget to emphasise and embrace cultural diversity and the historical continuity of the nation (Hutchinson, 2008: 2-3). Anthony Smith is perhaps one of the most prominent contributors to the ethno-symbolism paradigm. He proposes the following definition of the nation from an ethno-symbolists perspective:

Nations are regarded as named self-defined communities whose members cultivate shared symbols, myths, memories, values and traditions, inhabit and are attached to a historic territory or homeland, create and disseminate a distinctive public culture, and observe shared customs and standard laws (Smith, 2009: 49).

In the context of museums in the Gulf region, the ethno-symbolist paradigm would be suitable for understanding the process of identity expression as many of its explanatory tropes echo perennialist notions that view nations as a historical phenomenon with a long continuous history based on empirical observations and hard evidence such as archaeology and historiography on pre-existing nations. It also part follows modernists on key issues of symbolic recourses and long-term durability, ethnies and nation, elites and masses, and differences and reinterpretation as discussed above. Starting with the previously discussed views on the overtly top-down or bottom-up emphasis, in contrast, here the concentration is on the “interplay between elites and different strata, and the way in which their ideals and needs influence each other and help to shape the national identities and ideologies” (Smith 2009, 19).

For ethno-symbolists ignoring the nation before the eighteenth century would prohibit recognising the long-term antecedents and processes by which nations develop and connect to previous cultural and social structures. Nations exist in *la longue duree*, which refers to long term connections of the nation rather than being a result of a short-term historical structure or chronologically detached practice (Smith, 2009). The recurrence, re-appropriation and continuity between the past and present, which

inevitably becomes the future of nations, within the concept of *la longue duree*, are central to the concerns of ethno-symbolism (Smith, 2009: 39, 37). Here, continuity refers to tracing the origin of a nation and the potential continuity of the cultural forms and elements to existing for the modern national culture (Smith, 2009: 37). Recurrence refers to the perennials' view of nations as having historic roots but meets the criteria of the modernist idea of modern nations, which may have a pre-modern predecessor or recurrent ethnic successors. Further, re-appropriation is a rather modernist trend that involves the rediscovery and utilisation of elements of the ethnic past(s) by political elites into the concept of a modern nation. According to Smith (1999: 163), nationalists are not "social engineers or mere image-makers as modernist and post-modernist accounts would have it, but rather social and political archaeologists whose activities consist in the rediscovery and reinterpretation of the ethnic past and through it the regeneration of their national community".

Modernists marginalise the ethnic role, whereas a historical ethno-symbolist views it as central to the shape and character of a nation (Smith, 2009: 8). For the Ethno-symbolists ethnic communities or *ethnies* is a significant model to understand the nation that are constituted "by the sense of continuity, shared memory and collective destiny, i.e. by lines of cultural affinity embodied in myths, memories, symbols and values" and not by physical descent (Smith, 1991: 29). Nations as a historical phenomenon that emerge from particular collective pasts and shared long-term memories constitute an ethno-history. Ethno-history is a theme central to the ethno-symbolist paradigm which refers to narratives and interpretation of the members of the community in comparison to the dispassionate narration of the professional historians

on the ethnic community's past. This happens when the nationalist historians produce bias historic accounts to create an ideal history instead of a type of history that is supposed to be a neutral statement of facts. In nations, the ethnic past is "rediscovered as the golden age and appropriated for modern political ends" (Smith, 2009: 37). Ethnic pasts rediscovered such as celebrating and positioning golden ages, create a framework through which the community make sense of their community and its positioning in the world and the process shape the nations (Smith 2009: 37).

It is notable that the elements that distinguish ethnic groups over time are symbolic and cultural, not demographic or political, keeping this in view, the cultural constituents of membership propose flexibility and a degree of absorbency of the ethnic community compared to those based on close genealogy linkage. However, modern nations tend to propose ethnic purity and constitute a process of removal or disregard of foreign elements in the quest of an authentic past to achieve cultural homogeneity. Further, the idea of continuity as discussed above also relates to the question of how far back in time one can trace the history of a given nation that emphasises the prevalence of cultural elements like territory, traditions, language and practices, and the ability for these elements to relate to the modern culture in a nation. This proposes a view of the nation "deriving from the 'ancient social formation of the *ethnie*', where the term 'ethnic' represented those elements of a group's culture that derived from its origins and history" (Smith, 2003: 188). For ethno-symbolists, it is "the myth of a common and unique origin in time and place that is essential for the sense of ethnic community, since it marks the foundation point of the group's history, and hence its individuality" (Smith, 1981: 66).

The ethno-symbolist paradigm brings forward the importance of collective cultural symbolic reservoirs and institutions that has some company with modernist on key issues like symbolic resources of nation. The museums are not only a valuable platform of expression and preservation of such cultural repositories through their functions but are a significant symbolic element in its architectural form, and hence representative of national identity. In the idea of Modernists, nations and nationalism are a product of the modern state produced by political elites. Museums, when seen from a modernist and political perspective, would be a means to achieve a unified vision of national culture reflected through national identity. However, it is worth noticing that this task cannot be expected to be determined only by its mechanism of producing this vision by a singular faction without constraints, as it is largely a result of complex ethnic factors, multi-faceted realities of a nation's past and present, cultural influences and nationalistic impulses.

The ethno-symbolism that adopts the mid-way approach proposes that idea of nation and nationalism routes from the pre-modern era and argues that nation and nationalism have ethnic and historical roots. As such, the national identity framework that is nominated by the state cannot be only reduced to arbitrary inventions and fabrications in the name of creating hegemony of political elites beyond constraints and limitations that arise out of symbolic origins of the nation within the pre-existing culture and roots of the nation. Smith (1990: 178) reminds us that any production and grafting of new elements onto the existing national identity require a cautious approach as “the new traditions must evoke a popular response if they are to survive, and that means

hewing close to vernacular motifs and styles". National symbols as resources of national identity construction entail historic bonds and sentimental connections that create the strong bases for a sense of unity and national image. These symbolic resources possess value and meaning to an extent that they get associated with the nation and its territory. The above discussion prompts an existing challenge between the paradigms about nature, routes and origin of a nation. Further, an emphasis on the role of ethnic myths, memories, symbols and traditions also raises a question about the routes and processes of nation formation in different eras within their specific context and, consequently, the configuration of its projection in the national identity framework. Keeping in view the arising query, the next sub-section explores various perspectives on the conceptualisation of nation formation and starting points.

2.2. Routes to Nation

A key area of debate within theories of nation and nationalism is the origin of nation and the historical period in which this form of political and social organisation originated. In this regards Caspar (2011) inspired by the ancient example of Rome, argues that the origins of nationalism can be traced back to the European Imperialism of the Middle Ages. This work reflects the view that nationalism as a phenomenon has its roots in the ancient world (Roshwald, 2006). In general, however, the literature has tended to characterise nationalism as an effect of modernity and the European Enlightenment, one which spread widely across Europe towards the end of the eighteenth century.

In academic circles, the modernist approach to nationalism studies is largely recognised. Many scholars agree with the orthodoxy that nations and nationalism were developed in Western Europe and America in the eighteenth century. Kedourie (1993: 1) in this respect firmly states that "Nationalism is a doctrine invented in Europe at the beginning of the nineteenth century [...] These ideas have become firmly naturalized in the political rhetoric of the West which has been taken over for the use of the whole world". Hobsbawm (2012) argues that we should view nations and nationalism as new political and cultural inventions in modern times. It is not possible to have a fuller understanding of nations and nationalism without putting them into a modern context. Regardless of their differing perspectives, modernists see nationalism as a result of the creation of the modern state. The concept of nationalism was born with contemporary society's traits such as centralised administration, structured communication, standardized education system, established borders and popular identification. Following the stages of modernity, these general features of nation-states expanded from Europe to the rest of the world.

Modernists such as Koundoura (1998: 74) hold that "[t]he concept of nation and an awareness of nationhood were first legitimated in the period of the French Revolution". For Kedourie (1971), nation and nationalism are not only instrumental. The shift from religion to nationalism is the end of a pluralistic world replaced by homogenisation (Kedourie, 1971). Hence, for Kedourie (1971), the nation is a secular, modern, and invented ideology. The French Revolution introduced a new conception of legitimacy, which posed a challenge to Europe's other absolutist monarchies. Thus, both the ideas of nation and nationalism for modernists are recent and were unthinkable before about

the time of the French Revolution. During that time [French Revolution], "the ideal of the sovereignty of the people was fused with the drive to cultural homogeneity, to forge self-determining nations of co-cultural citizens" (Smith, 1999: 6).

In short, the modernist approach offers a powerful explanation of nations and nationalism, which makes other theorists unable to avoid discussing it or having a theoretical dialogue with it in their works. Even Smith (2009) in the ethno-symbolist method approach to nationalism studies that are inclined to provide cultural and historical views, does not deny that modernism plays an important role in the formation of national consciousness. However, in this regard, Smith (2009: 6, 8) points out that under such assumptions, the nation is inconceivable as a product of modernity, and for them to view such societies as nations is to indulge in "retrospective nationalism". Smith (2009) stresses that nationalist builders could not build a solid foundation for a nation in modern times without the pre-existence of traditions and ethnic ties, such as symbols of constitutive political myths and ethnic cultural roots. What is significant in this context is that theories of nationalism all tend to focus on the construction of national identities as a process that operates through a specific relationship between past and present.

Regarding this Smith (2003) stresses three main routes of nation formation. The first route to nation formation is centred on an aristocratic or educated elite as in the example of the history of most of the Western European nations (Smith, 2003). In such routes of nation formation, there is rarely an attempt to uphold any cultural or social linkage with the middle or lower classes and the culture and symbols of the ruling

class are asserted with limited penetrable boundaries. The second route to nation formation is what Smith (2003) relates to Central and Eastern Europe, and later in the Middle and Far East and parts of Africa. In this route to national identity, Smith (2003: 47) highlights:

Native intellectuals and professionals rediscovered and re-appropriated a selective ethno-history out of the pre-existing myths, symbols and traditions to be found in the historical record and in the living memories of 'the people', the mainly rural lower strata. This latter-day return to an 'ethnic past' (or pasts) is a corollary of the nationalist quest for 'authenticity'.

Such routes of nation formation have defined boundaries that contribute to association of the members to the nation and possess higher permeability at various levels of society. Land too becomes an important symbol of the ethnic community and can become an influential symbol of the ethnic and in the national identity founded on such type of ethnic ideas. This allow the elites to apply the influence of vernacular culture and historical links with the homeland to generate nationalist sentiment, however such are moulded to a form of authorised or official nationalism that indorse the legitimacy of the elites through the use of what Hobsbwam (2012) refers to as invented traditions. Anderson (2016: 114) reminds that the difference between the inventions of the official type and those of other types of nationalism is "usually that between lies and myths".

The third route in the formation of nations that Ethno-symbolists have identified relates to countries like United States of America, South Africa, New Zealand and Australia

where the members of different communities had migrated and according to Smith (2003: 194) “this has encouraged a ‘plural’ conception of the nation, which accepts, and even celebrates, ethnic and cultural diversity within an overarching political, legal and linguistic national identity”.

Furthermore, Smith’s discussions as a supporter of ethno-symbolism take account of the nations as a modern construct, in the sense of adding another layer of meaning to the pre-existing identities in the process of a nation formation. Ethno-symbolists consider the cultural elements of symbols, myths, memories, values, rituals and traditions are crucial to the analysis of ethnicity, nations and nationalism. These cultural elements provide a set of unique symbolic elements, such as, language, religion, traditions and institutions, which make them distinctive and also differentiate them from other communities- as seen by the members of the community and by those of other communities (Smith, 2009: 25). The shared cultural repository creates a sense of continuity with the past generations and the emotional connection strengthens with the widespread acceptance of collective symbols; such as flags, national anthems, national holidays and cultural forms such as “landscape and architectural heritage” that continue to exert a strong influence over various aspects of society and politics (Smith, 2009: 37, 38). Collective symbols “create and sustain communal bonds and sense of national identity”, their meaning may change over time, however, these forms remain relatively fixed (Smith, 2009: 25). The power of the nation, therefore, lies in these cultural symbols of historic roots and not only “in ways which popular living past has been and can be rediscovered and reinterpreted by modern nationalist intelligentsias”

but also the strength and intensity of connections these resonate to the community (Smith, 1999: 9).

It is also significant to consider that although this modernist perspective marks a significant departure in nationalism studies, their arguments still attract criticism. Post-colonial theorists Parekh (1995) and Chatterjee (1986) criticise the modernist approach as a type of Euro-centralism. It oversimplifies the nation-building processes in non-European countries and views them as passive consumers of the European model without their own translations, re-interpretations and colonial resistance.

In this regard, a perspective from outside non-western discourse would be that of Al-Farabi (870-950 CE), one of the prominent philosophers of classical thinking who presents the theory of the perfect state with an ultimate goal of reaching the ideal life and ideal political system (Walzer, 1985). He offers an approach towards the idea of collective identity groupings that pre-date the emergence of the modern European nation proposing an outlook on the intersection of spirituality and religion with governance. Al-Farabi's approach is motivated by his Islamic thoughts. It provides an outlook to the collective community that differs from the secular approach as it is directly related to the elements of the divine and spirituality (Netton, 1992). According to Al-Farabi, perfect communities fall under three categories small, medium and larger communities. Researchers are of the view that the medium category of Al-Farabi's communities can be correlated to a nation (Birdisli, 2019). Al-Farabi converges this idea of Islamic thought with political collaboration and solidarity and emphasises traits such as national culture, geography, and language that associate to the idea of the

nation (Birdisli, 2019). Al- Farabi explicitly mentions the role of these criteria in inducing internal cohesion within the nation and external differentiation with respect to other nations (Sulaiman, 2003).

Sulaiman (2003) harvested the notion of nationhood by al- Farabi in context to the religious disposition, shared language and social character and correlated it with the national identity, religion and language. Researcher Sulaiman (2003) views the national identity projection in Arab Islamic countries as tied to the intricacies of Arab, Arabic and Islamic character. Sulaiman (2003) highlights that the Arabic language connects to Arabs of the pre-Islamic era and points out that the emphasis on Arabic in the Quran further echoes the privileged position of Arabic in Islam and Arabs. This reflects the disposition of the Arabic language as the language of Arabs of Pre-Islamic Arabs as well as the positions of the intricate linkage between the Arabs, Islam and Arabic. Sulaiman (2003: 66) emphasise that it is “not surprising that Arab nationalist discourse in the modern period has resorted to language, owing to its resonance in Arab culture, as the mainstay of an Arab national identity”. This view can be correlated to the idea of the modernist approach based on an assumption of cultural and social homogeneity within a nation employing language. However, not only the language but also religion endorse the significant role of Islamic religious identity within the projections of a nation. Religion as a component of the identity framework remains in contrast to the modernist’s idea of the rise of the nations connected to fill the gap arising from religion. Hence, it is notable that the historical context that has shaped the ideas about the relationship between religion and nation that reflects on the national identity framework differs from the western-oriented conceptualisation of nation.

It is notable that each of these approaches discussed above have their limitations and advantages in explanations of a nation. It is an ongoing debate, with no singular consensus on the meaning of nation. These paradigms provide a flexible concept rather than a concrete positioning of a nation and its identity construction, which at times appear to constitute overlapping zones. Some of the perspectives within these approaches might appear a better fit and suitable for certain areas and countries, whereas others might be less convincing. For a museum study in a country such as Oman, an ethno-symbolic study that views nation as a historical and cultural production sheds some significant light on the link of a nation, national identity and its symbolic repositories that generate a feeling of national belongingness and long-term connections through traditional and historic continuity. In comparison to the focus on the impulse constituted around the nation and its ethnic past that the ethno-symbolist paradigm comprises, equally, modernist theories can shed light on the mechanism of the expression of the nation through the contemporary museums as a product of modernity and a contemporary project.

2.3. Nation, National Repository and National Identity

As seen above the researchers have tried to define and explain the notion of nation and national identity through different perspectives and theories. Central to the project of nation-building is the simultaneous production and expression of the national identity which in turn have a multi-faceted and complicated relationship with the nation and the state. National identity, according to Breuilly (1993), is defined by the interaction

between culture and national identity. National identity is a distinctive element of a nation that incorporates the imprints of historical, ethical, and political aspects that make up the continuously shifting and contradictory aspects of national identity (Breuilly, 1993). The central feature of this idea is the exclusivity and the appeal to a shared culture, which transforms any conception of national identity through the notion of nationalism in which membership is defined “in terms of narrowly based common culture, nationalism tends to be xenophobic, authoritarian, and expansionist” (Breuilly, 1993: 270).

Other researchers like Habermas (1995) connect national identity to citizenship and participation in the national polity. According to Brubaker (2004), in a civic form of nationalism, a nation is formed by the collective will of the members who wish to become politically organized through a state apparatus. Kymlicka (1995), adding to this view, considers that civic nationalism by attempting to recognising cultural distinctions highlights its aim towards inclusivity. However, Kymlicka (1995: 17) points out that “a civic nationalism that makes a claim to respecting cultural differences does not guarantee that the state will not engage in coercive assimilating policies”. As a result, cultural diversity and national identity have a complicated relationship, pointing to both progressive and authoritarian sides of nationalism, indicating its problematic character and ramifications, which will be studied further in the context of national identity and its relationship to museums.

The utilization of symbolic repositories in the articulation of national identity is central to the aim of nation-building. Supporting this notion is Cerulo’s (1995: 15) argument

on the use of national symbols such as anthems, icons, monuments, flags and currencies that is use for the creation of a nation-state to “crystallize the national identity”. Walsh (1992: 15) has also demonstrated how specific historic and cultural repositories, such as national buildings, museums, monuments, and castles, are utilised to represent the nation, and as a result, national identity cannot be comprehended outside of the nation's symbolic needs. To strengthen and unify citizens, such national symbols are projected as belonging to all citizen and not limited to the elitist class. Endorsing this point Anderson (2016) and Kolsto (2006) stress that national symbols such as flags, currency notes, and coins serve as symbols of a state's political and financial structures that subtly reinforcing political philosophies and mandates. Edensor (2002: 69) explains that the iconic sites provide “symbolic stages upon which national identities are played out” and hence symbolise official power that provides visual spaces that proclaim national rule. Edensor (2002) further asserts that national identities are reflected in a variety of material cultures, including clothes, food, and particular national commodities, and that some of the commodities represent and may support collective consciousness and national identities.

Connor (1994) views nation-building as an effort to match the nation with the state, consequently leading to what Kuzio (2000) suggest is a way that the political elites in the nation-state utilise these efforts to propose the continuous existence of the civic nation. Whereas according to Bloom (1990: 52) national identity “describes that condition in which a mass of people have made the same identification with national symbols – have internalised the symbols of the nation”. Nation-building understood as the work of elites “propose a series of identity markers that people can accept -

consciously or unconsciously - when choosing an identity and the elites' capacity to listen to the people and take up some of the markers that are proposed at the local level" (Polese and Horak, 2015: 461). Polese and Horak (2015) propose a less elite-centred view by highlighting the role people may play in which the elites are certainly in charge of constructing an official narrative, however, the people themselves decide whether to feel part or not, of the national community. According Ventsel (2000) perspective on nation-building is also created, enacted, and participated by individuals or organisations of people where national identity construction occurs through the perpetuation of national songs, popular art, singing, and dance which occur despite a possible lack of support from state authorities and institutions. If such acts by people and the organisations of people can project national identity, then something similar can be said for the collections that are collected and exhibited by individuals and non-governmental organisations and their role in nation-building, which may occur in the absence of support from the government.

Regarding the symbolic references and nation-building Hobsbawn and Ranger (2012) explain how particularly in the nineteenth century new cultural practices were converted into traditions and how their origins were forgotten and romanticized over time. They show how ancient materials were used to create and construct invented rituals with deep significance that were and continue to be crucial to nation-building (Hobsbawn and Ranger, 2012). Polese and Horak (2015: 458) further stress that the "new tools and strategies, [are] invented and performed by both state and non-state actors". For instance, they highlight the correlation between the personality cult and

the process of national identity construction where this symbol is a state production, which, however, requires people's acceptance and identification with the symbol.

Several studies have been carried out on the way a personality cult can be constructed and their role in the nation (Althusser 1976; Koch, 2016; Plamper 2012; Polese and Horak, 2015; Tucker 1979). Koch (2016: 330) highlights that "like any proper tale, nationalist storylines invariably have a beginning. Set in a particular time and place, this origin story typically involves the founding fathers as the central protagonists – or perhaps only one father of the nation as the singular hero". For Linz (2000: 23) it is a way elite attempt to "fill the emotional vacuum created by secularization with political rituals and liturgies derived from or inspired by religion". Juergensmeyer (1993: 53) further asserts the complexity of the symbolic system pointing out that elites sometimes strategically use religious symbols and discourse to avoid religion from building an "alternative power base" and to "provide religious legitimacy for the state". Clearly, the elites draw upon a range of ethnic, religious, and national symbols to legitimise their control.

According to Koch (2016: 5) cults of personality project "an intense production of a charismatic leader's image-as-icon to be variable across a regime's life". Koch (2016) and Polese and Horak (2015) discuss certain attributes that are constituted around the cult and symbolic personalities. For instance, Koch (2016) highlights that the personalistic icons come to a fuse with the dramatic transformations and developments during their rules. Polese and Horak (2015) stress that a personalistic figure as a national symbol often correlates to ideological conceptions such as the Golden Age

and Great Renaissance in the case of Niyazov and Berdimuhamedov of Turkmenistan, respectively. According to Koch (2016: 22) similar to the “abstract values like freedom, democracy, stability, or progress that dominate ideological discourses elsewhere, the icon at the centre of personalistic regimes is a charismatic individual who symbolizes all that is good in the nation. But in the world’s varied systems, democratic and authoritarian alike, politics is ultimately about who gets the authority to represent what is good”. However, Koch (2016) points that not all leaders such as Hitler, Stalin, Mussolini are favourably remembered by their later countrymen and successors whereas others such as the president Sheikh Zayed of Abu Dhabi.

Personality cults can even be consumed much beyond the leader's life, allowing for the creation of a "personality cult by proxy" (Adams, 2010; Schrift, 2001; Plamper, 2003). However, in such a scenario in making claims to continue the legacy of the preceding leader, the succeeding leaders make a deliberate effort to preserve certain elements of the leaders' vision. However, the succeeding leaders may choose to distance themselves from specific criteria to position their own legitimacy and in the search of new national identity (Koch, 2016, Polese and Horak, 2015). For instance, Polese and Horak (2015) and Glyptis (2008) discuss the use of a proxy personality cult in Turkey after the 1930s, resulting in the development of historical memory and identity based on the figure of Ataturk, and Lipovsky (1996) points to the way Central Asian republics have built their new national identities.

There exist diverse perspectives on the mechanism, sources and utilisations of symbolic resources and its projection in the national context that can afford valuable

insights to the concepts of national identity. This can allow to comprehend what are the major constituents of national identity that are fostered and how it is built around Oman specific cultural and socio-political circumstances. It is notable that a variety of symbolic resources and mechanisms are used to express the national identities that aim towards a solid foundation of a nation intimately related to both ethnic groups or historical associations and the state or contemporary locale. The Arabian Gulf States and particularly Oman seek to characterize the collective identities of their citizens through the support of a wide range of cultural heritage resources and repositories symbolic of the nation such as museums. Springbourg (2008: 2) also reminds that in context of Arabian Gulf Countries the association of the state and politics to the society and culture is not merely a top-down relationship, considering that in these countries the “political systems and states are also shaped by cultural forces welling up within a society” (Springbourg, 2008: 2).

On one hand, Oman, its national identity and production of museums as contemporary forms where the role of the state, its policies and constructive mechanism align to modernist approach that at large constitutes of a top-down model and thereby are directed towards creating unification and autonomy through unified national identity markers. On the other hand, the treatment and endorsement of a traditional past by means of cultural elements, such as museums, by utilising both the material (artefacts) and symbolic forms (the aesthetics), have an ethno-symbolist perspective. Knowing that the cultural reservoirs pose a potential to represent a long-term continuity of heritage roots and their innate links to the defined territory, the national identity expression, by using these reservoirs, constitutes what Smith (2009) accounts for as

an act that constantly reproduces and reinterprets values, memories, myths, symbols, and traditions of a nation. Keeping this in mind, the research seeks to carry out an analysis taking into account the insight of theories of the origins of nationalism and nation as discussed above, such as those that exclusively view nation to some extent as a product of primordial ethnies (Smith, 1991) as well as those that consider the nation and national identity as invented or imagined and a product of modernity and a politically expedient of political elites (Anderson, 2016; Hobsbawm, 2012).

2.4. The Museums Institution, National Identity and Nation

The museums have been used in the past to illuminate the national identities and as repositories of national history, national culture and symbolic resources cannot refrain from their role of protecting the nation. As Kaplan (1994) highlights, since their inception, the museums have been used to house a national heritage, thereby fulfilling national ambitions by creating a national identity. She explains how museums have contributed in the formation of national identity and the promotion of national objectives and the symbolic significance of the projected that represent the nation embodying the idea of nation for the people (Kaplan, 1994).

In modern museums, the usage of collections formulates the central idea of the museums. They make collections the primary component that supports the learning, education and entertainment process and not the other way around (McLean, 1994). Al-Mulla et. al. (2014: 4), further point towards the extensive character and complexity of the role the contemporary museums play by stresses that the representation of the

nation through the museums constitutes various aspects “including economics, government and politics, international relations, citizenship and population, as well as the more obvious heritage, history, museum, architecture, and socio-cultural aspects”.

Kaplan (1994) emphasises the fact that museums are social institutions, the products and agents of political and social change. Thus, periods of significant growth in museums can be related to upsurges of nationalism and the desire to strengthen the sense of national identity. According to Knell (2010) museums functions as an idea and set of social spaces, never only collections or buildings. Knell (2010) emphasises that the national museum in different national settings cannot be considered as a nation doing the same thing. Knell (2010: 6) pointing towards the contextual significance and role of national museums explains, “The national museum as it is locally produced reflects local conditions of nationalism and wealth, international connections, identity, competition, individual and corporate interest, political and economic relationships, the ideological possibilities of culture, a network so appropriation, and diplomatic efforts and so on”. Keeping this in mind homogenised view of considering museums function alike in the projections of a nation is thus misleading. McIntyre and Wehner (2001: xiv) further draw attention to the complexities contemporary museums, especially that national museums face in trying to “negotiate and present competing interpretations of national histories and national identities”. McLean (2005: 1) adds that “the national museums are implicit in the construction of national identities, and the ways in which they voice or silence difference can reflect and influence contemporary perceptions of identities within the national frame”.

The museums are appropriated to represent national identities through the usage of traditional and cultural objects and symbolic forms. National consciousness is shaped by developing a sense of national autonomy and the realisation of imagined communities through the process of national symbol construction (Anderson, 2016). Museums as elements of the ideological process are powerful institutions that can help concretise the imagined construct of nations (Anderson, 2016). They project the influence and social control through their architectural and physical forms, which possess an unquestionable credible presence (Anderson, 2016), and the cultural repositories fulfil various social and political purposes (Smith, 2009).

Museums are influential and to some extent acts like temples and sanctuaries, enabling a convincing level of acceptance in the public (Duncan, 1991), that glorify the culture and nations as they have long been at the forefront of representing cultural values and morals (Bennett 1995). However, there are a few aspects that have to be kept in mind related to complex reality and the conceived authority that are, the representations, histories, narratives, and displays in the museum are a result of various choices and negotiations that rely on cultural assumptions of the actors involved in the production of the museums (Lavine and Karp, 1991). Further, museums are not neutral institution existing in a void, rather, they emphasise and echo the society in which they exist (Lavine and Karp, 1991). Another important aspect is that the museum visitors are not entirely passive (Hooper-Greenhill, 2006). Hooper-Greenhill (2006) points out various possibilities of how the museum audiences may receive the message disseminated through the museums. The visitors may or may not receive the message narrated by the curators and similarly the visitors based on their

own understanding may or may not agree to what is being expressed through these heritage platforms (Hooper-Greenhill, 2006).

However, Rosenzweig and Thelen (1998) argue that the public trust the museums more as compared to other historical sources such as books, teachers or professors as the past endorsed in the museums is validated through the use of supporting collections and exhibits. Karp (1991) also highlight that museum visitors widely recognise the museums as a neutral platform. Various dynamics are at work that attribute to visitor's perception; however a wide range of visitors view the museums as politically neutral entity with capacity to instil and educate (Cameron, 2007). This trust in the objectivity of the museums gained from the validation of past through use of artefacts and exhibits (Rosenzweig and Thelen, 1998), and perceived neutrality of the institution allows the museums to reinforce their instrumental power (Karp, 1991) that can impact or shift the public's way of thinking (Cameron, 2007).

Regarding the role of Museums in the Gulf States, According to Akinci (2020), museums in this region continue to serve as institutions of national identity. Even if state-led initiatives play a significant role in how national identities are shown in Gulf museums, "they are not immutable and can offer a complex and at times contradictory displays in the way nation is presented" (Akinci, 2020: NP). Akinci (2020) emphasize that in the Gulf museums and heritage projects, the citizens that belong the pre-nation backgrounds, including Persians, Baluch, Africans and Indians, have been omitted and represented as Arabs, while Bounia (2018) stresses that the ethnic diversity in the Gulf is side-lined in favour of narratives centred on the Bedouin Arab origin and heritage in

the national museums. Oman has several national, public and private museums and even though the majority of the Omani citizens belong to Arab background, a portion of Oman citizens also originate from outside the region. Thus, this discussion is useful to understand the broader context of the Gulf region that constitutes state-sponsored production of national identity that originates out of the particular socio-political context in which the museums of Oman exist.

In the western discourse, the mobilization of the nation-state as the custodian of the ideas of the museum makes a common feature of the European cities during the end of the nineteenth century. The national and public museums provide a space in which the state can articulate the nation and project national identities that would focus on nation-building and imagining. Erskine-Loftus (2012: 4) stresses that “within the western academic discourse museums have been defined as an apparatus of the nation-state with their collections components of the myths of nationhood, empire, power, and the patrimony of nation-states, and through which the nation-state was represented as homogenous, and envisaged as natural, inevitable and with a long history”.

Further, Erskine-Loftus (2012: 4) reminds that in the Gulf Arabian region "this western iteration of the museum that has been used" in the “relationships between institutions and the state should not be discounted”. Hence, the western academic discourse is significant to the understanding of the role of museums that strives towards the projection of homogeneity in the expression of nation expression. Keeping this in view, before discussing the cultural diversities and cosmopolitanism that propose complexity

in the projections of unity and homogeneity, I will briefly review the history and origins of the museum, the significant and changing roles and influences of museums and their collections.

2.4.1. Museum Evolution and the Role of Collections in Museum Making

The key function of the museums revolves around the collections and exhibits. According to McLean (1994), museums are fundamentally object-based that depend on the collections they possess or acquire. Exhibits and collection are the central focus of museums and it is valuable to touch upon this subject in the discussion of museum production and evolution. The collection is a loosely used term in daily life, yet, in perspective of the specificity of the collection practice, “it serves to identify a distinct type of object-oriented activity in which items are selected in order to become a part of what is seen as specific series of things, rather than for their particular use-value or individualised symbolic purposes” (Macdonald, 2008: 82). Further in context to museums according to Hein (2014), the dissemination of meaning is particularly important, consequently, any meaning that is disseminates through the collections thus comes from the context of their selection, arrangement, and narratives in which they are presented and the way the visitors engage, understand and infer the meaning of the displayed.

Early museums existed and evolved through various categories; initial forms of museums as laboratories or cabinets of curiosity are widely viewed as a precursor of museum collections and are discussed to have progressed from disorder towards

rationality (Macdonald, 2008). In addition, the evolution of museums reveals a noteworthy position of collectors and their collections. The collector's aspirations present an interesting phenomenon where the worth of collection in the eyes of the collector exceeds its associated value beyond its basic function (Benjamin, 1970). The very act of the possessing, the innate affiliation and memories connected creates the comprehensive significance to the collector. Collections have a capacity of transferability of the legacy and they are windows to the past consisting of the associated memory that pierce through boundaries of chaos and order (Benjamin, 1970).

The European curiosity cabinets and laboratories, a phenomenon dating back to at least Renaissance, took a form of a room or rooms containing an assortment of objects, and their varying emphasis served a variety of purposes. These supported the scholarly works in various disciplines through the natural and artificial collections that were the objects of value and interest housed in one place (Abt, 2008: 121). This is similar to the museums that house the selected collections under one roof. However, the cabinet at its inception provided a personal space of study and reflection (Crane, 2000; 67) and displayed the owner's power and position revolving around his representative self (Abt, 2008: 121). Likewise the custodians of museums through the collections housed within the museums also exercise the characteristics of power, politics and legitimisation.

These sixteenth-century European curiosity cabinets were private facilities that held valuable and worthless objects, which were rather objects of interest to the collector,

with little attempt to classify them and they were usually connected to a personalised version of a background story (Alexander, 1979). The key element of fascination was that each guest was assisted by the owner, providing the contextual story about the collections (Alexander, 1979). This phenomenon in which the selected objects are linked to the story associated with them speaks of the role collection, storyline and the narratives play in museums at any time. The creation, existence and the survival of the collection, as well as the course and act of acquisition, all suggest the real meaning to the acquired, for a collector (Benjamin, 1970). Initially created as private collections amassed by elites through conquest and exploitation, museums have since developed their role to conserve cultural heritage and to educate the public.

Collections that are constituted in modern museums and reassembled in these spaces have however surpassed this constricted perception of collection. Initially, these were controlled private facilities, open to selected guests and closed to the general public as “a product of the renaissance, a product of an aristocratic and hierarchical society which believed that art and scholarship were for a closed circle” (Hudson, 1977: 7). Towards the end of the eighteenth century, various factors congregated to influence changes that caused such collections to be opened to the public and leading to the museums as the public institution that we know today (Bennett, 1995). Bennett (1995) points out that the French and American revolutions had produced an environment that, towards the end of the eighteenth century, came together to influence the development of what can be inferred as the public museums as identified today. Since the nineteenth century museums hold instrumental power, they moved into the public sphere and “they formed vehicles for inscribing and broadcasting the message of

power (but of a different type) throughout the society” (Bennett, 1995: 61). The source of power that museums convey comes from their capacity to characterize and classify peoples and societies, which are presented through the exhibits that focus on representing people and the role these institutions play (Karp 1992: 1).

Tony Bennett’s “The Birth of the Museum”, initially published in 1995, studies the museum history and positions the modern, nineteenth century museums as a form disciplinary tool with the power of cultural governance of the population working together with “new cultural technologies designed for this purpose” (Bennett, 1995: 21). Bennett (1995) views the new museums as tools of government control and reshaping social life through spaces where visitors were observing, as well as being observed. The previous function of museums that placed them discreetly for aristocratic purposes through “high cultural forms and practices” were assuming a new social and political purpose (Bennett, 1995: 25). Bennett (1995) expresses a change in the role of museums that connected the sphere of culture to government logic and a form of power deployed through a “range of legal and symbolic resources” (Bennett, 1995: 22). Thus, the museums in history have observed a shifting notion and changing trends and concepts, which have moulded the museum institutions of today, in which according to Bennett (1995: 24) “civilized forms of behaviour might be learnt and thus diffused more widely through the social body”.

The museums have transformed in context to their nature through its concept and social space. Bennett (1995:24) stresses that the representation practices were altered though “the governmentalization of culture” in which the museums are drawn towards

communicating and instil specific ideals, cultural norms and social progress to the visitors (Bennett, 1995: 24). These transitions were seen in the museums especially in the public museums, in their display forms and exhibition practices in which the objects and collections are selected and re-arranged according to concepts of evolution, linear time, and categorization. A famous example is that of the Northern Antiquities, which opened in Copenhagen in 1819 under the direction of CJ Thomsen, “who had organized its materials under his newly devised Three Age system of successive Stone, Bronze, and Iron periods” (Kohl, 1998: 228), in an attempt to create a systematic, evolutionary and continuous myth of national origin that was applied to archaeological material. These myths of national origin that predated the American and French revolutions were elaborated using several sources, especially through the archaeology and artefacts found within the demarked territorial borders in the emerging nation-states (Kohl, 1998).

Kohl (1998: 228) further highlights the association between the development of archaeology and nation-building “by the use of which the roots of countries were extended back into the mists of the prehistoric past”. In regards to the history projected in the museums, it is relevant to note what Featherstone (1991) points out that in a nation there is no singular history, only different histories. Mclean (2007) thus suggests that acknowledging this means negotiations in the selection and constitution of an authorised collectively held past occurs in the national identity construction. McLean (2007) further argues that national identity is relational and symbolic marking is created to establish the element of unity and uniqueness from others. Hence, museums employ various types of collections, display strategies and narratives and Mclean (2007: 248-

249) therefore stresses that “in order to give meaning to an object, museums often relate it through display and interpretations” that are connected to form the elements of national identity. These elements that are “created to celebrate the nation, whether in a local, national, or international level, are indicative of this institutionalising of power, and with it the legitimising of selected representations of national identity” (Mclean, 2007: 248-249).

Museums can be compared to theatrical settings that add a performative dimension to the meaning that the objects and architecture already possess. Garoian (2001) exerts the performative character of museums and states that the museum functions as the stage for which narratives of history are written and enacted for the visitors. Hence, similar to theatrical scripting and scenography, national identity projections are created within specific settings or atmospheres of the museums for public consumption. In context to the representational practices that give meaning to national identity in the museums, Lavi (2013) highlights the performative nature of the museums and views the projections of a nation as staged and created through the construction of a chronological narrative.

The notion of performativity also proposes that national identity is continually constructed and that the national identity presented in the museum is a product of the repetitive performance of the set of practices. Lavi (2013) highlights that the insights arising from the performance theory suggest that national identity is the result of repeated acts. Lavi (2013) further exerts that as such, it cannot achieve absolute stability and coherence, and considering that it is an act of duplicating; thus, it is never

possible to execute a perfect reproduction, “only to execute meticulous attempts to recreate the imagined national identity”. Keeping this in view, national performativity is constantly faced with challenges of change and adjustments or even failure that necessitate the repetition that will lead to the next performance Lavi (2013) and thus is the performativity of the national identity in the museums.

The projection of the nation in the museums is scripted and staged to meet the institutional goals and ideals of a series of stakeholders that range from the political elites and museum professionals. For Patraha (1996: 99) museums operates as "a performative site in the sense that the architect, the designers and the management of the museum produce representations through objects and so produce a space and a subjectivity for the spectator". Harbison (1977: 145) views this practice of scripted showcasing of the museum as the "museumifying" of cultural history. Similarly, Mitchell (1994: 87) argues such historicism, "confirms a dominant sequence of historical periods, a canonical master-narrative leading to the present moment, and which seems incapable of registering alternate histories, counter-memories, or resistance practices". Garoian (2001) points out that from artists who author the presentations and setting of the collections to the collectors who acquire them and the researchers who document their historical significance and narratives is a practice decided by an elite troop of professionals and stakeholders and thus is the national identity creation and maintenance in the museum space.

Identifying the complex and contradictory relationship that interconnects the projections of the history in the museum to the viewers, Garorian (2001) identifies that

the risk-taking and challenging narratives and exhibits on the part of the museum can "enable viewers to turn history onto itself and interrogate its ideological terrain". On the other hand, Knell (2010: 4) argues that even if "external commentators have recognised the performative qualities of the museum [...] the museum's practitioners have remained true to the moral necessity of didacticism and the possibility of neutral, or acceptable, authoritative truth". Based on this positioning "the public and professionals alike continue to imagine the museum as neutral, authoritative and trustworthy" (Knell, 2010: 4). In this respect, Austin (1962: 102) identifies three characteristics of performatives which can be applied to museums, which can be distinguished as "what is said", "how it is said" and "how we are affected". Thus, what is presented in the museum determines the content for consumption and how the museums present and narrate determines the extent of dialogue that content creates with the museum and the visitors. It is the act of saying that will have a certain effect on the feelings and thoughts of the visitors. This performative character of the museum thus contributes to a dialogue between the visitors and museum artifacts, narratives and architecture.

Garoian (1999: 235) broadens the idea of the performative nature of the museum and the role of visitors and views that the museum's projections "re-positions viewers as critical participants and enables their creative and political agency within museum culture". In doing so, museums become a source to imagine and perform for visitors, creating a critical dialogue between viewers and the museum. Garorian (2001) highlights that the viewer agency's personal and social knowledge and experiences introduce critical content to museum experiences. Viewers participate in the museum

by observing, examining, or critiquing the institutional context of the museum. In this way, the viewers become part of the performance and by performing at the museum, viewers bring their personal identities into play with the institution's dominant ideologies and national identity projections.

Museums, galleries and heritage organisations might engage in activist practices with the explicit intent to act upon inequalities, injustices and environmental crises (Sandell and Kreps, 2019: xxvii). In context to the social role of museums, Sandell and Nightingale (2012: 3) view that museums can contribute to a fair and just society if they "act upon inequalities", nurturing a belief in their "constitutive, generative character". According to Sandell and Nightingale (2012: 3), museums have the capacity "to shape as well as reflect social and political relations, and to positively impact lived experiences of those who experience discrimination and prejudice". However, Murta (2019) points out that changing roles of museums as social and activist institutions cannot be isolated from the political context. According to Murta (2019), during the 1960s and 1970s, the struggles of a range of movements, such as civil rights, the Feminist Movement, civil unrest in Europe, antiracist struggles and decolonisation contributed to the reconceptualisation of museums. Hence museums may be faced with challenges to break away from the traditional practice to a socially oriented museology approach that encourages active participation that serves the community in meeting the challenges of the present (Kinard, 1971: 151).

Based on the above discussion, the museum can be understood as a public space aimed at nurturing social cohesion for building national identity. In nurturing the social

cohesion and presentation of a nation, the museums thus adopt various museological approaches. Moreover, it can be seen that the socio-political circumstances that museums exist in play an essential role in the approach toward the presentation of a nation the museums adopt. For instance, in the context of the Gulf Arabian region, Freer (2020b: NP) identify that “heritage in the Gulf is almost exclusively managed by apparatuses linked to the central state, with limited grassroots initiatives emerging under a rubric of state control”. It is noticeable that even though Murta (2019) recognises that the idea of museums focused on everyday life is not recent, not all museums will involve in the reconceptualisation process, which is an ongoing phenomenon. This background on changing roles of museums intertwined with the socio-political context is useful under the discussion of the projection of national cohesion and identity as it can support understanding the extent the museums of Oman relate to or foster such ideas of reconceptualising the museology such as the notion of decolonisation.

Further, speaking about the changing nature of museums McLean (2007) highlights that museums “are implicit in the social and political agendas of 21st century” where the response to identity is approaching issues such as that of diversity and engagement in political recognition. When seen from the point of view of political elites the function of a museum is to exhibit a collective unified view of national culture and histories, conceived out of the cultural and symbolic elements and those histories that give the state its justification for independent political existence. However similar to McLean (2007), Hoggart (2001: 13), pointing towards the complications of such projections, states that “an important component of our collective memory, is not simply

of our sense of national identity and unity, if we have those, but of diversity". Politics and culture as well as unity and diversity, therefore, can be seen as inextricably linked, but it is an uneasy, contradictory relationship, which is the subject of discussion in the next section.

2.4.2. Contextualising Museums, Nation, Cosmopolitanism and Cultural Diversity

Bennett (1988) states that national unification stems from the consolidation of different social groups that come to serve as a symbol of national unity resulting from the careful positioning of previous divisions and ruptures. Anderson (2018) explains that a version of the past and a vision of the future is developed out of several possible options to reflect the country and its unity in the projection of national identity. Nevertheless, the focus on unity in national identity construction equally entails the notion of diversity that requires unification. Hence, when museums represent notions of what the nation is, they embody narratives of national identity in a way that can confirm to present a particular origin of the nation's past and present (Mozaffari, 2007). On the one hand, this points to the tension and the relationship between cultural diversity and cosmopolitanism with unity and national identity. On the other hand, this highlights the potential of the social role of the museum alongside the political one and their contribution to the way they deal with issues like migration, diversity and cosmopolitanism in influencing social cohesion.

Cultural differences within the national background are significant in understanding the forces at work within a particular country. An important part of projecting the nation and its identity in the museums includes the expressions and the framing of cultural differences within the national setting. Researchers in the west highlight that the museums are progressing towards a more inclusive approach since the late 1960s by giving attention to subjects like ethnicity, cultural diversity and multiculturalism (Coombes, 2004; Lagerkvist, 2006). Pointing towards the characteristic of various culturally and ethnically diverse groups, Coomb (2004) highlights that museum exhibits provide a useful way to represent a range of issues and ideas, hence expanding the idea of the expression of a nation. According to Parvis (2007: 17), cultural diversity may comprise various attributes such as “culture, ethnicity, class, gender, religion, age, ability, language, weight, style, idea, income, orientation, geographic location and many more aspects which make people unique”. However, Parvis (2007) reminds us that cultural differences within the national setting are critical and controversial in nature owing to the limitations in the understanding of cultures, complexities of ethnicity and complex correlation of culture to ethnicity. For instance, Geertz (1973: 89) emphasises the idea of culture that includes “a historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols”. Whereas, Ugboajah (2008) sees it as a way of existence and patterns of behaviour shared by the people that are acquired and transmitted from generation to generation, however, not hereditary biologically.

Hall (1997) considers that defining culture is difficult as no consensus on the understanding of the term exists. According to Hall (1997) in the modern social science context, culture refers to anthropological features of a social group, a community or a

nation. This advocates one of the earliest articulations of the meaning of culture that constitutes a broader ethnographic sense of a complex whole such as knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society (Tylor, 2010: 1). This definition is useful for this research that is not a study on multiculturalism or cultural diversity in the nation, but which, however, will identify how the museums feature the diversity of cultures, social groups and communities in the presentations of the nation that consist of various cultural elements.

Societies have long been multicultural, but the use of multiculturalism as a term in social and political discourse is relatively recent. Ivison (2001) explains that multiculturalism is the state of a society or the world in which there are several distinct ethnic and cultural communities that are considered civically relevant and it entails a system or strategy that encourages such a community. This concept keeps in view that nations are not internally homogenous entities, but are comprised of cultural differences and diversities. However, Ivison's (2001) idea of the multicultural demands political relevance entailing a difference which puts in contrast, the idea of a nation that encourages multiculturalism in its political strategy, and those that pronounce a singular state religion and ethnicity within the legal state system. Conversely, this also suggests that the projection of nation is tied to the complexities of socio-cultural and political realities.

Pitchford (1995) has shown how the Welsh heritage, museum and tourism sector successfully narrates the story of Wales' conquest by the English. This example is significant in the sense that Wales is expressed as a nation distinctive from the

dominant culture of Englishness, by projecting a self-image as others in relation to the dominant cultural hegemony of England. Pichard and Morgan (2008) argue that England attempts to create a single homogenous national identity exemplifying its touristic promotional material that does not promote Wales as culturally and linguistic distinct. Further, culture and heritage in the nation can have different relationships to notions of national identity in different countries. For example, Viking culture is promoted with the local context such as being a part of York's identity in England, whereas it assumes a vital position in the projection of Norwegian national identity (Halewood and Hannam, 2001). Pitchford (2008: 102) argues that the symbolic elements of heritage that are selected to present the national and ethnic identities are embraced to produce a "comforting nostalgia". These selected elements must be "exciting but not challenging, dramatic but not accusatory" (Pitchford 2008: 102). Johnson (1999) stresses that heritage and culture in projections of a nation are carried out by re-branding and re-packaging history to fit certain ideologies, and therefore, to construct certain identities. Hence, the expression of a nation entails "a selective process in which complex value judgments are exercised in order to filter those elements of heritage that are to be retained from those deemed no longer important" (Williams, 2009: 236).

According to Banks (1996: 39) ethnicity is an innate characteristic of human identity and ethnic differences exist from birth which are passed over generations. For supporters of Ethno-symbolism, the term ethnicity is recent, however, the idea of kinship, group solidarity, and common culture attached to it is not (Hutchinson and Smith, 1996). As a social reality, ethnic diversity has a close relationship to cultural

diversity although not similar. Keeping in view Fearon, (2003: 214) stresses that “ethnic groups can be used to produce cross-national measures of ethnic diversity, ethnic structures, and cultural diversity”.

Hutchinson and Smith (1996) reflect on the contentious nature of ethnicity; however, they also suggest there is no essential connection between ethnicity and conflict. This points towards the significance of how the element of ethnicity is approached, as the sensitive characteristics of ethnicity can problematize the exhibitions of ethnic diversity. In other words, the presentations of diversity or cosmopolitanism in museums can potentially perpetuate both positive and negative implications. Negative implications being when it is used to marginalise or stigmatise a certain group, whereas conversely, connoting cosmopolitanism in context to openness and worldly characteristics of a nation or a community in contrast to isolated and remote can suggest a positive connotation. Gosden (1999) argues that there exists an association between ethnic identities and material culture and hence ethnicity can be identified as an ethnographic cultural marker. As discussed earlier, Smith (2011) also emphasises the idea of ethnic groups and their correlation to shared cultural elements or symbols. The cultural symbols and exhibits play a significant role in the expression of these correlations in the museum. Symbolic cultural references and material culture, thus, would be noteworthy elements of museum displays which make them elements of significance in analysing how the internal diversities and communities in museums of Oman are approached in the presentation of nationhood.

Ethno-symbolist researchers like Smith (2011) widely view language, religion, territory, material culture and cultural practices as symbols of culture, however, the relationship among these is not straightforward and direct (Welsch et al., 1992). They further stress that the grouping of these traits is strongly correlated with geographic proximity, regardless of linguistic affinities. When assemblage of similarity is adjusted for the effect of distance, diversity in material culture appears unrelated to the linguistic relationships (Welsch et al., 1992). Further, regarding the material culture as Johnson (1980: 173) points out “belief and value, as well as norm and role, can be conveyed through objects” that asserts a close relationship between materiality and culture. This relationship according to Johnson (1980: 173) is “integral to the socio-cultural transmissions”. Such transmissions in museums appear to serve particular purposes as well and contribute to both explicit and implicit messages.

On one hand, the material culture that symbolises the people’s way of life and customs can be identified in a material way that can be used to present a community. On the other, certain cultural traits or artefacts have capacity to signify an entire nation. Fetterman (1989) explains the strength of material culture and the symbolic relationship with the culture and highlights that the cultural symbols can evoke patriotic feelings. He exemplified symbols such as a flag that can represent a whole nation, or a cross or a menorah that can signify an entire religion. In a thesis on heritage and representation in culturally diverse societies focused on the Colombo National Museum in Sri Lanka, Rambukwella (2014) argues that no nation is without diversity and the presentations of a nation should accommodate culturally diverse societies. He suggests to include a pieces of high cultural quality in a unique manner from every

cultural group, “so that everyone can feel that they are voyaging through their own culture somewhere in the museum” (Rambukwella, 2014: 70). The use of cultural materials due to their symbolic significance of representing cultures and communities is thus valuable to understand both explicit and implicit positioning of cultural diversity in the expression of national identity. Keeping this in context, the observations on ways the museums position and select artefacts and material culture will shed light on how the national discourse that emphasises unity accommodates the element of internal diversity in museums that widely exhibits such cultural objects.

Not all museums approach the elements of heritage and cultural diversity in the same way. The presentations range from simple expressions of celebrating diversity to complex issues such as responding to the inequalities in cultural and political spheres. For instance, Figueroa (2011) suggests that museums like the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, The National Australian National Museum and Museum of New Zealand, *Te Papa Tongarewa*, attempt to further the role of reparation and presentations of cultural diversity. The National Museum of Columbia attempts to tune into the changes that have brought about multicultural legislation since the new constitution was signed in 1991. Hence, prompting that various underlining socio-political factors and institutional motivations play a role in how the museums approach cultural diversity. Nevertheless, in her thesis, she reminds us that such presentations are not beyond contestation (Figueroa, 2011). Hence, this demonstrates the complications and tensions that the presentations of cultural and ethnic diversities and the expression of the nation encompass. However, she stresses that the museums are continually grappling with the issue of how to recognise and present cultural diversity

and there is a need for museums to revise the ways of celebrating and presenting diversity (Figueroa, 2011).

Mason (2013: 41) in her discussion on national museums and the expression of cosmopolitanism, however, suggest that the “museums operate as clusters of cultural practices and constellations of material culture comprising many different intersecting ontological scales”. For her, it is more useful to “find ways to shine light on the differences that already exist within a nation” rather than “positing accounts of diversity, migration and cosmopolitanism as somehow out of national representations” (Mason, 2013: 41-42). Mason’s (2013) idea of expressing a nationally focused cosmopolitanism, although set in context of the European museums is relevant to the research context of Omani Museums, keeping in view that the presentations of the nation in museums also demonstrate various parallel and overlaying features of national, local, global, transnational, universalism and cosmopolitanism in varying degree. She highlights that the nations are not without their own internal heterogeneity and diversity and museums hold the implicit and explicit evidence of such variances which “combine contradictory and competing discourses of nationalism in different parts of their displays and collections” (Mason, 2013: 41).

Ideas like universalism, globalisation and the local have a complex relationship and at times co-exist with cosmopolitanism. A number of divergent trends exist around these terms. Some researchers view the notion of global as superseding the notion nationalistic conceptualisation of the nation (Habermas, 2001; Breen and O’Neill, 2010). However, others argue that such views on the idea of the nation and national

identity that proposes a discrete state of existence from the idea of the nation connected to cosmopolitanism and globalisation are problematic in the expression of the nation (Calhoun, 2004). Hence on one hand, some researchers widely advocate the discussions of the nation to move “beyond the national” orientation towards the post-national, featuring globalisation, cosmopolitan and international tendencies of the nations (Beck and Grande, 2007; Held, 2010). On the other hand, for Assayag and Fuller (2005: 2) globalisation is embedded within the local experience and at the national level. Also, for Herandes- Duran (2011) nationalism is not superseded by the post-national expressions but is a historical process that exists as a parallel phenomenon.

Delanty (2006) highlights four categories of cosmopolitanism: moral, cultural, political and critical, that hold particular significance in interpretations in the museums and the presentations of a nation. Moral cosmopolitanism constitutes the universalistic elements of humanity and ethics that aim towards an inclusive version of the human community (Delanty, 2006). This approach includes classical thinkers’ ideas, such as Kant, who emphasize the shared universal rights among human beings and universal hospitality (Held, 2010). The hospitality, the right to be welcomed in foreign territory, however, is conditional to the arrival of guests in a peaceful manner (Corradetti, 2017). For Kant the idea of cosmopolitanism is bound to the idea of presenting and being heard “within and across political communities” (Held, 2010: 68). Political cosmopolitanism is related to the issues related to citizenship and international human rights (Delanty, 2006). Cultural cosmopolitanism is concerned with the idea that the cultural fabric and the people’s identities have been reconfigured by the effects of

global media, mobility, and multiculturalism (Delanty, 2006). Held (2002: 58) exerts that “cultural cosmopolitanism should be understood as the capacity to mediate between national cultures, communities of fate and alternative styles of life”.

Based on Held’s idea of cultural cosmopolitanism, Delanty (2010) proposes a critical cosmopolitan approach that focuses on encounters with others that he has applied to European heritage and identity. According to Delanty (2010: 17):

Critical cosmopolitanism approach with respect to cultural phenomena, in brief, concerns a methodological emphasis on: (1) the identification of openness to the world, (2) self-transformation in light of the encounter with the other, (3) the exploration of otherness within the self, (4) critical responses to globality, and (5) critical spaces between globality and locality.

Researchers such as Beck and Grande (2007: 16) exert that there is a need to rethink the concept of nationhood in the light of cosmopolitanism. Nevertheless, at the same time, they view nationalism as a successful means to underpinning and unifying “collective difference with universalistic norms” (Beck and Grande 2007: 16). Beck and Grande (2007: 16) propose the idea of nationally rooted cosmopolitanism, in which “the cosmopolitan must be conceived as the integral of the national and must be developed and empirically investigated as such”. Although these theories have limitations and do not particularly point towards the museum context, they do provide a basic framework that can be useful in understanding various perspectives and

elements of cosmopolitanism resonating in the Omani museums that make up the nationally focused presentations.

Mason (2013: 47) examines cosmopolitan presentations in national museums by studying “issues commonly identified with the globalisation, post-nationalism and cosmopolitanism- migration, diversity, mobility, exchange and hybridity”. Studying the issues commonly presented in the museums that are frequently identified with the ideas of cosmopolitanism set within the national identity projections will be a useful approach for my study that views the expression of the nation in the museums. Mason (2013) in her study has demonstrated how the overly national accounts in the Museum of Scotland also create particular accounts of differences through their expression of long-standing history and cultural exchanges. Material culture and cultural history arrangements offer the potential of being exploited to serve various social and political purposes. For example, Scotland focuses on a national perspective and in contrast the Museum of European Cultures “set up a deliberate tension between the museum’s interpretation and cultural object” (Mason, 2013: 60). Mason (2013) highlights that it is important to acknowledge the specific social, cultural, historical, and political context as museum displays about “unity and coherence also contains centrifugal forces that problematize a conventional national narrative if presented in a particular way” (Mason, 2013: 48). Museums ultimately present complex concepts of national identity, which alongside the attributes of unity and oneness also entail aspects commonly identified with cosmopolitanism, such as cultural diversity, external contacts and migration that both coincide and clash. Hence, the investigation of the displays and interpretations organised out of the possible sets of projections would offer a better understanding of

the ideas and issues of cosmopolitanism that are held fast and those that are discounted in the process. Moreover, a significant constituent of the museums is the architecture and the structure in which these institutions function and the collections are housed, hence the following section studies the relationship of museum architecture and the national identity.

2.4.3. Museum Architecture in Perspective

Architecture and monuments are among the tangible expressions that embody national myths and symbols that facilitate the creation and shaping of shared collective identity that Mukerji (2012) reminds are employed by elites to transmit political discourse. Throughout the history, specifically following the nineteenth century political regimes and have deployed the use of cultural icons such as public building, exhibition centers, art galleries and museum spaces to reflect and endorse their political visions and values directed to create or activate a shared sense of national identity of a civic population (Jones, 2011: 49). Museum architecture that house the collections and institutional values has been used in the same way as other national symbols, such as flags and national anthems and are thus crucial to the national identity expression. According to Jones (2011: 51), such symbols attribute an impression of a “united, coherent group moving together through history towards a common future” and this has been particularly important to the process of portraying the population as a continuous and natural entity in a shared route to the future.

The influence and role of the museums in the national identity representation are significant, as Mclean, (1998: 252) stresses that “through museum we can come to deeper understanding of identities and notably national identity”. Museum architecture both as form and function constitutes various elements such as interior, exterior, spaces layout and architectural features. Newhouse (1998) discusses the shifting ideas and changing roles of the museums, as well as their shifting architectural styles and trends pointing out that museums’ architecture has drawn out to comprise a variety of forms, such as purpose-built, reused, renewed or renovated buildings. The museum’s architecture envelopes the museum’s space and functions where people gather to see the objects and experience the museum’s activities which are founded on a particular value system derived from the institutional requirements and considerations. Endorsing this idea is McLeod (2013: 20) who emphasizes that “the museum architecture embodies the texture and life of museum as institution”. Further prompting both the intertwined and convoluted relation of the museum architecture with various constituents of the museums she stresses that a museum building is where “the world of architecture and museums collide” (McLeod, 2013: 7).

Pointing towards the museum’s contemporary nature and its influence Giebelhausen (2008: 42) exerts that the museum architecture is a highly symbolic form, “a place both sacred and blatantly modern”. Discussing the development of national museums in Europe, Elgenius (2015: 145) links the progress of the new museums to the formation of the nation-states, stating that museums are “strategic markers of nation-building introduced at pivotal times”. Elgenius (2015: 148) also acknowledges that the manner in which this is being done enables these institutions to “transfer and visualize the

nation into the present". In the Gulf Arabian region researchers note that since the 1970's the museum architecture in the region continue this association to the nation-state production (Exell, 2016, 2018; Erskine-Loftus et al., 2016). However, "the strategic use of symbols in identity and recognition politics, which is in turn connected to debates and struggles about membership, nationality, ethnicity, citizenship and integration" reminds of the complicated relation of the museum's architecture with the national identity discourse (Elgenius 2015: 146). Keeping this in view, analyzing the role of museums architecture can offer insight into the ongoing nation-building process and the way architecture symbolizes the nation and renegotiates the idea of membership and belongingness to the nation through such visualizations.

The architecture and museum building have been particularly important in the process through which the national community is presented as a continuous and natural entity on a shared course to the future (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 2012). Museum architecture, however, not only creates the physical spaces in which museums operate, but it also lends meaning to the collections and activities that take place in these spaces of encounter (Boast, 2011). Chung (2003: 230), endorsing the impact of museums architecture, stresses that the exteriors of museums can sometimes send out even more powerful statements than their contents. Additionally, the choices made during the museum architecture design and production influence the museum experience. Jones (2011, 85) argues that the role of architecture is not limited to the form and elements of the building or what is placed in it but also entails how the building is experienced. According to Psarra (2005) the architectural decisions, layouts and circulations affect the overall museum functioning and influence the visitors. Falk and

Dierking (2012: 28) further stress that the physical museum building has an impact on how visitors move, experience and remember it. Keeping this in view, museum architecture can be viewed as a socio-cultural production that encompasses various social relations (MacLeod, 2013: 7). Clearly, a museum building is a product of various types of agencies, influences, and approaches that in turn entails a close and complex relationship between museum creators, including various social actors, such as decision-makers, designers and users.

Kapplinger (1997: 6) highlights that the architecture is as much a display as the exhibits. Extending this idea Gielbelhausen (2006: 41) stresses that “the architecture is the museum” and argues that museum architecture is a highly symbolic building type and pointing towards the multifaceted and complex role of architecture states that:

[It is] the architectural configurations that give museums meaning. Architecture determines the viewing conditions both conceptually and physically. It not only frames the exhibits but also shapes our visitor's experience.

Giebelhausen (2016) also point out that the development of purpose-built museums is a recent creation of the mid-eighteenth century and in his study further highlights shifting aspects of the museum architecture and evolving new aesthetics based on the changing social, cultural, political, scientific and economic precepts. Giebelhausen (2016) explains that the purpose-built museum architecture was a product of architectural competitions, initially conceptual exercises which were not intended to be built, but later on, such competitions became the heart of museum development

(Giebelhausen, 2008: 42). In Gulf countries, high profile museums, symbolic of the nation are being constructed with the involvement of foreign experts (Exell, 2016b). Poulot (2015) reminds us that inviting well-established and experienced architects to build museums is not new, as even in the nineteenth-century architects were invited to build museums in various European countries of the time (Poulot, 2015).

Museums architecture, particularly high-profile developments; have been utilized and continue to be used as symbols that are utilized to “flag” the nation (Jones, 2011: 52), which intends to support the expression of the nation. Further, these iconic structures can be utilised to infuse ideas about the nation into everyday life through tourism and commodification and anchoring them in the vernacular and as a part of everyday routine, and therefore objectifying, naturalising, and strengthening their appeal (Billig, 1995). As discussed above the museum architecture is connected to the national image, identity projection and socio-political context. However, they also constitute various overarching aspects such as economic effects in relation to commercialisation, globalisation and tourism. MacLeod (2013: 1) highlights:

Governments all over the world are recognizing the power of culture, and particularly cultural buildings to spark international interest, speak of economic investment and growth – regardless of the realities – to generate tourism in post-industrial centres and to make global and local statements about national and sub-national identities.

It is notable that the Gulf region museum architecture in the twentieth century that house public and private collections constitute both western-style developments and the local forms in relation to the architecture and the assemblage of collections (Erskine-Loftus et al., 2016). In the context of the Arabian Gulf region, Exell (2016: 42) describes the museum as a "symbol of modernity" and argues that the museums particularly the public and national museums have become the instruments for the production and legitimization of the state. She further argues that such museums "form part of a broader heritage industry which connects the ruling family to the country's past", (Exell, 2016: 42). Keeping the above in mind the extent to which the public and private museum serves to contribute to this notion that oscillate between the western-style or the local styles production and the modernity or traditional orientations would be significant in understanding the expression of the nation in context of Oman.

2.5. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have critically reviewed the literature on the relationships between nation, national identity and museums. These are essential in developing a theoretical context for understanding their intersections in the case of Oman and the role of museums in relation to the projection of the nation. The literature reviewed in this chapter suggests that museums, especially the national and public museums, are inherently modern and the national identity projection in them is a highly politicized construct that is used to fulfil national ambitions. However, private museums equally entail the tendency to project the nation which may or may not be supported by government.

It is highlighted that if a nation can be viewed as imagined or fabricated, it can also be conceptualised as rooted in the ethnic and territorial past creating evidence of the nation's enduring character, continuity and legitimacy as a sovereign entity. Keeping this in mind, the analysis holds in a productive tension the theories of the origins of nationalism and nation as discussed above. This include those that view nation as a product of primordial ethnies (e.g. Smith, 1991); as well as those that consider the nation and national identity as invented or imagined and a product of modernity and a politically expedient of political elites (e.g. Anderson, 2016; Hobsbawm, 2012).

I have established that the concepts of nation and national identity are a complex phenomenon which can be viewed as either a top-down project by political elites or as the expression of primordial social, cultural and ethnic groups. This chapter has shown that each perspective has its strengths and weaknesses. Keeping this in mind, the purpose of the museum from the perspective of political elites is to display a unified vision of national culture that supports the state's justification for independent political existence. Although the state and museums are modern constructs, in framing national identity, they make use of cultural, vernacular, and ethnic aspects that represent and signify the long-term continuation of myths, traditions and symbols of ethnic communities and their connection to the specific geographic territory. I have identified that the political elites are in charge of constructing official narratives and symbols. The top-down governmental and elitist approach that defines the national identity references needs to be complemented by a popular perspective from below. The people have the agency to relate to the national symbols or feel a part or not of the

national community. Further, the chapter discusses how the institution of a museum and its specific constituents, such as museum collection, narrative and architecture are linked to the national identity. In this chapter, I have also identified how the national identity framed in the museum is complicated that constitutes intermingled and multifaceted associations and influences of various stakeholders such as governmental agencies, museum designers, museum professionals and the public, who impact the decision-making in museums and thus the projection of the nation.

The performative characteristics of the museums have also been identified in the literature review. Museums, especially national museums, provide scenography and a stage for performing the national identity scripted by political elites and professionals and enacted for the visitors. The role played by the set, scripts and actors add performative dimension to objects, narratives, space and architecture of the museums. Even though visitors are consumers of the identity projection, by observing, examining or critiquing the museum, they participate in the museum. In this way, the viewers become part of the performance and bring their identities into play with the projections of the nation.

The literature review also suggests that the nation and national identity literature is predominantly Eurocentric and proposes a western iteration of museums and the notion of a nation. I have shown that different museums have different agendas and highlighted the changing roles of museums which is an ongoing process. However, the discussion also points out the extent and the way museums approach (re) conceptualise the projection of nation and create a sense of belongingness and social

cohesion intertwined with the socio-political context of the museum. Keeping this in mind, recognising the overarching aspects and differences in the projections of the nation that the museums of Oman have to offer will be significant to grasp an understanding of the Omani-specific context. Therefore, to further shed light on the setting in which the Omani museums play their role in the reflection of the national identity, I will discuss the context of Oman in the next chapter.

Chapter 3

3. CONTEXT CHAPTER

3.0. Introduction to the Museum Scenario in Arabian Gulf Countries

As briefly identified in the introduction chapter, since 1970 there has been tremendous economic growth in the Arabian Gulf countries due to income from the petroleum industry and the oil-based revenue that created conditions for these states to modernise (Davidson, 2009). Rapid urbanisation growth and ambitious projects that have challenged local vernacular traditions have been a consequence of such developments. This shift has also resulted in a significant surge in museum development projects throughout the Arabian Gulf countries (Wakefield, 2015; Exell, 2016). The extraordinary advancements in the Gulf region and the significant attention towards the museums have sparked considerable debates on national identity and the role of museums (Wakefield, 2015; Erskine-Loftus et al., 2016; Exell, 2016).

The last few decades have witnessed a number of new high-profile developments of museums in this region, such as: The National Museum of Bahrain in 1988; the National Museum of Kuwait in 1983; the Museum of Islamic Art in Doha in 2008; the National Museum of Oman in 2016; the Louvre Abu Dhabi in 2017; the National Museum of Qatar in 2019; and ongoing projects like The Guggenheim UAE to open in 2022. The national museums spread around the Gulf region are institutions with the capacity of articulating the unity in the state, and pinning down national identity by

creating continuity of the nation and social cohesion among the diversified population with various identity affiliations to the tribes, regions, and ethnicity (Erskine-Loftus et al., 2016). Nevertheless, the controversies around iconic museums such as the Louvre Abu Dhabi and the National Museum of Qatar from their inception are connected to branding and global aspirations of these countries, which are echoed further through the involvement of '*starchitects*' and massive budgets. Specifically, the national museums in the region assume multiple roles: as a platform that disseminates a government's message that inspires unity and long-term continuity of the nation; illustrates the government's commitments to their citizens to maintain national identities on global platforms; and creates awareness amongst the foreign communities about the history of the nation (Al Qassami, 2016). Exemplifying the Muscat Gate Museum of Oman and the Sheikh Faisal bin Qassim Al Thani Museums in Qatar, Erskine-Loftus et al. (2016: 3) state that "conversely, several Gulf states are home to museums which, though not using the title 'national', nevertheless portray and project the nation through their collection and subject matter".

A number of debates and arguments revolve around the new museums in the Gulf and in a commentary on "identity and culture in the 21st Century Gulf", Al Qassemi (2016: 31) argues that "The Gulf States are in a race against time, with demographics and rapidly accelerating globalization of their youth challenging efforts to preserve traditional identity. In this struggle, national museums have emerged as major battlefields". Wakefield (2015: 27) suggests that the "Gulf reflects attempts to negotiate national, regional and international identities, and the buildings designed by architects from across the world reveal aspirations for global recognition". Nevertheless, in

Museum Development in the Gulf: Narratives and Architecture, she also sheds light on the particularity of policies and visions related to museum development, and suggests that the museums and their architecture can reveal a lot about the distinctive identity positioning aspirations of each of these countries (Wakefield, 2015). Although from a generalised view point, the museums of the Gulf countries are attached to their identity defining efforts following the oil boom, nevertheless the museums in each of these countries are a result of multifaceted factors and influences which define their distinctive aspirations. The concept of *Omani identity* has not always been consistent in the Sultanate of Oman, which has historically created a series of rifts in the country, eventually leading to the civil war of the 1970s (Valeri, 2009). Following the establishment of the state under the former Sultan, Qaboos bin Said, whether purposefully or unintentionally, he built a widespread identity based on his persona, creating a cult-of-personality that is still nurtured by national policies and strategies (Valeri, 2009).

Oman is an important case to study considering it is the oldest existing political entity in the region with limited economic resources and despite of having diverse population it has managed to create a national community. Hence, considering that Oman is comprised of its contextual factors, such as its historical, social, political and cultural aspects, thus it becomes imperative to understand the country's setting before any further discussions on the museums of Oman.



Figure 3-1 Map of the Sultanate of Oman.
Source: Nations Online Project

3.1. Oman on the Map

The Sultanate of Oman is one of six Arab countries which make up the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Geographically, as in Figure 3.1, Oman is located in South West Asia on the south-eastern coast of the Arabian Peninsula. Its land boundaries include the United Arab Emirates, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia; whereas its coastline is shaped by the Arabian Sea and the Gulf of Oman, forming the coastal borders on the north-east, overlooking the strategic Strait of Hormuz, at the entrance to the Persian Gulf. According to the most recent available figures, in 2018 the population of Oman was about 4.7 million out of which approximately 45 percent were expatriates (NCSI, ND). The official language of the country is Arabic, and Islam is the widespread religion of the country and the official religion of Oman. The population of Oman is heterogeneous, consisting of an ethnic and religious mix derived in large part from a history of maritime trade, tribal migrations, and contacts with the outside world (Metz, 1993; Peterson, 2004a, 2004b).

3.2. Oman and the Arab Gulf Countries

Oman, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Bahrain are all Arab states on the Persian Gulf that share certain characteristics and for the purpose of this research any reference to Arabian Gulf countries point to this region. Nevertheless, the geographies and historical influences extend to other Arabian countries like Iran and Iraq on the same coastline and regions such as the Indian subcontinent spreading from the Gulf of Oman towards the Arabian Sea. In general, the Arab Gulf states share the

same broad historical experiences which include religion, language, area, and tribal affiliation. Over the years, various factors have influenced the development of the countries of the Gulf of Arabia, contributing to their positioning in the world. The key factors are the Arabian Gulf geography, elites and ruling families, merchants, language, tribes and religion (Metz, 1993). The overall influence of each factor over various Arabian Gulf states varies from one country to another, which in turn has contributed to the different effects that have shaped the particular state and its society.

The Sultanate of Oman has a particular culture and history that distinguishes it from its neighbours (Metz, 1993). The specific character of Oman is a consequence of the geographical, historical and sociological background of this nation and its society. According to Funsch (2015: 2), “the Sultanate of Oman, while remaining grounded in its traditional roots, has pursued a policy of political and social modernization, combined with cultural and religious inclusion that uniquely positions it as a moderating influence on the twenty-first-century world political stage”. A number of studies provide a useful understanding of Omani culture and its historical development (Metz, 1993; Peterson, 2007; Valerie, 2009). Neal et al. (2007: 295) highlight the strong tribal roots and foreign imprints on the country and proposes that Oman is “Islamic tribal society”, with elements of “traditional aspects of paternalist leadership” and “pervasive, rational values” underlined with “expansion of bureaucracy with oil expansion”. A number of Omani and Arab cultural attributes may overlap, whereas a few remain purely Omani. To understand Oman, it is vital to address the key factors that played an important role in characterising this nation. Hence, this section aims to give an idea of the main

historical influences and most significant factors in Omani society that have contributed to the formation of this nation as it stands today.

3.3. Religious, Tribal, Geographical and Lingual Influences in Oman

3.3.1. Religious Influence- Islam and Ibadism

In the seventh century since Oman responded to the invitation of the Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him), Islam became the most widespread religion in this region. Similar to the other Arabian Gulf countries, Oman also considers Islam as its way of life (Ali, 1996). The three main sects that prevail in the Islamic world are Sunni, Shia and Ibadi. Oman is the only Arab country which since the early Islamic era has largely practised Ibadism and became the historical centre of this sect (Peterson, 2004a). The Ibadi School, while in the minority in other parts of the world, is the predominant sect in Oman. Along with the Ibadi sect, Oman has Sunni and Shia sects as well.

In contemporary Oman, some regions are a mix of all three, constituting diverse neighbourhoods in Oman where Sunnis, Shi'is, and Ibadis all live on the same street, whereas other areas may be more saturated in one type of sect (Goshey, 2019). Historically these sects were segregated into their area pockets of singular sect accumulation in one area. However, in the contemporary set up the groups are getting more dispersed, integrated and mixed. On a social level, Islam is part of the local lifestyle; Omanis of different sects pray in the same mosques, enter into business

partnerships together, and study side by side from elementary school through university (Goshey, 2019).

The Ibadi movement is one of Islam's earliest movements, founded less than fifty years after the death of Prophet Muhammad. Oman has historically witnessed a stronghold of the Ibadi movement and rulership of Ibadi leaders, known as Imams, contributing to Oman's power struggle between Sultans and Imams (Metz, 1996). Throughout much of its history, Oman was divided and Ibadism has been politically empowered in the mountainous interior of Oman (non-coastal areas) as compared to the coastal region of the country until the 1970s when Oman was consolidated under the reign of the Sultan Qaboos, which is further discussed in the section on historical influence.

Arabian Gulf region is the birthplace of Islam and the religious practice has had an everlasting impact on its societies and the region's politics. Islam and Arabic bounds the region with other Arab Muslim countries. Today, Oman is the only majority Ibadi Muslim nation in the world. The sectarian composition sets Oman apart from other Islamic countries. The peaceful co-existence of different sects positions Oman apart from the ultra-conservative form of Islam or the complexities of sectarian-based conflicts and unrest that exist in other parts of the Arabian Gulf region.

Moreover, even though Ibadism has influenced the country in subtle but distinctive ways for centuries, Oman's constitution and modern political position among Arab and Muslim countries have never been characterised in the context of Ibadism (Valeri, 2009: 74). A significant influence of Ibadism on contemporary Oman is the aspect of

tolerance. In the Ibadi sect, the reasoning of Islam is based on the idea of tolerance towards others, including the other sects of Islam and non-Muslims. This attribute is visible in the country's political framework and foreign policy, which adopts a peaceful and diplomatic approach to maintaining relationships with its neighbours and on international platforms.

In contemporary Oman, Islam formulates a distinctive position at both social and political levels. The Omani constitutional religion is Islam and the majority of the population of Oman are Muslims. Oman upholds the idea of peaceful religious and sectarian coexistence resulting from a moderate yet orthodox interpretation of the religion, effective laws that guarantee and protect religious freedom and the avoidance of violence and conflict, which has a rich influence in the Omani society (Goshey, 2019).

3.3.2. Tribal Factors

Like other Arabian Gulf countries, Oman is a highly tribal-based society. The tribe procedures and values influence daily lives and family rituals. Historically, due to the lifestyle needs and conditions of the desert, it was difficult to survive alone, therefore, families used to join together as tribes. Even now Omani society is considered to be essentially tribal in nature (Neal et al., 2007; Peterson, 2007). Typically, smaller clans root out of the mother tribe and their administrative structure will consist of individual local sheikhs and a chief arbitrator from the mother tribe. Each tribe will have its *Sablah* or *Majlis*, which is an advisor on the tribe's own affairs.

Previously the Gulf countries and Oman had faced civil clashes due to the tribal interests such as domination of water, land or internal rivalry. In the 2nd century BC, two Arabian tribes called Yamani and Nazaari moved from the south-west and centre of the Arabian Peninsula to Oman. Their arrival is associated to the Arabian attribute of tribalism in Oman. The Yamani were able to expel the Persians from Oman and the influence of these two ethnic groups continued throughout the history of Oman. These two tribes diverged into two polarised political division of the *Hinawis* (of the Yamani), and the *Ghafiris* (of the Nezaari) (Metz, 1993). The conflicts between some groups continued into the twentieth century also and throughout history, these tribes changed positions and formed various alliances against foreign invaders.

According to McKiernan and Al-Ismaily (2007: 94), there are more than three thousand tribes in Oman and there are elements of variances in how they behave as a result of their links with the tribe and associated values. Social status and economic standing can be identified through certain *Qabilah*, the tribe names (Al-Moharby and Khatib, 2007). When the Sultan Qaboos became the ruler of Oman the old tribal system was still prevalent in the society. It was a challenging task to establish a unified nation in the presence of tensions between the tribes due to previous disputes. The tribal sheikhs were peacefully convinced to cooperate in state affairs; the ruling family and the leading tribes collaborated in nation-making, and Oman emerged as a new unified stable nation.

3.3.3. Lingual Influences

According to Peterson (2004a: 32) “Ethnic boundaries in Oman are not, generally speaking, defined by territory, occupation, or even class, but rather by language or sect, or both”. Following 1970, Arabic became the official national language and part of the education system. Modern standard Arabic is taught in schools. In the contemporary context, because of the modern education system the majority of Omanis speak Arabic. However, the population of Oman consists of a religious and ethnic mix as a result of historical maritime trade, tribal migration and external connections (Metz, 1993). Although Arabs constitute the majority, Omanis may also differ in terms of their mother tongue which resonates from their origins or historic links. Apart from Omanis that speak Arabic, there are major Omani groups that speak the Baluch language, Swahili (Zanzibari) and Khojki (Lawati).

Baluchi is the mother tongue of the Baluch people from Baluchistan in western Pakistan and eastern Iran. Baluchi speaking Omanis are concentrated in Muscat and the Al Batinah coast (Metz, 1993). The Omanis that are of African descent or have historical relations between Oman and Zanzibar and East Africa often speak Swahili and English, but not always Arabic (Metz, 1993; Kharusi, 2012). Swahili is widely spoken throughout northern Oman. The Khoja community who were initially mostly involved in trading were originally concentrated in Matrah and are said to reflect the historical ties between Oman and the Indian sub-continent (Metz, 1993). Other than these, other endangered indigenous native languages spoken in Oman are Shahi and Kumzari in Musandam; Harasusi spoken by a limited number of nomads in central

Oman; and Mahri, Jabali (also called Shahri), Habyot and Bathari in the Dhofar region (Moseley, 2010; Jones, 2015). Currently, Omanis may also be fluent in English, Hindi and Urdu, reflecting the cultural and historical ties with external communities.

3.3.4. Geographical Aspects

The Sultanate is bordered by the Gulf of Oman, the Arabian Sea, and the Rub al Khali (Empty Quarter) of Saudi Arabia which contributes to Oman's remoteness, as it forms a barrier between Oman and the Arabian interior. The Hajar mountain parallels the coast of the Gulf of Oman and forms another barrier, as it creates a belt between the coast and the desert stretching in an arc south-eastward from the Musandam Peninsula towards Sur (Ras al Had) in the Sharqiyah region. Historically, Oman was connected to the rest of the world by the sea, providing access to foreign lands and linking the coastal towns of Oman. The positioning of Oman that has contributed to the seclusion of the country has also contributed to attract foreign interest due to the significance of the sea-route trade. The location of Oman on the eastern edge of the Arabian Peninsula provides a strategic position at the entrance to the Persian Gulf, which has attracted intrusions from western powers. For instance, the British presence in Oman, particularly in Muscat, was at a peak between 1798 and 1920, as Oman was the ideal place for the United Kingdom to maintain its position as a dominant empire in the Indian Ocean (Owtram, 2004).

The factor of the geographical isolation of Oman from its neighbours, has enabled it to develop a distinctive culture and traditions which have survived hundreds of years. At

the times when the European powers came to dominate the region, culturally they did not have a significant influence. The vast interior of Oman remained insular as the coast was targeted during the foreign occupation and invasions. For instance, the Portuguese invaded the Omani coasts in the 16th and 17th centuries until after a century they were driven out of Oman; and then later, due to the civil war over succession, the Persians invaded Oman in the 18th Century [1737 CE] and were driven out in 1749 CE (Peterson, 2019). Further, as the country's coastal region had remained the point of interest for foreigners, the interior of Oman was mainly free of direct control and, in various periods, even had autonomy from Muscat's (the coastal region) authority. Rabi (2007) stresses that this situation has resulted in the country falling into two largely self-contained divisions: the coast and the interior. The coast was open to cultural influences from outside, while the interior, which was most of time ruled by the Ibadhi Imams, was intensively tied to tradition and tribalism (Rabi, 2007).

The name of the country was the Sultanate of Muscat and Oman before the 1970s, which is indicative of the prominence of Muscat as a significant city of the state and the prevailing political, cultural and geographical variances of these self-contained regions. However, in the contemporary period, the remote portion of the state specifically the interior region of Oman, became a prospective zone for oil discoveries. The Musandam Peninsula is a part of Oman adjacent to the Strait of Hormuz and is a vital sea route for world crude oil coming from the Gulf nations (Metz 1993; Brewer et al. 2007).

The contemporary Oman is divided into eleven *muhafazat* (governorates): Muscat, Musandam, Al-Buraymi, Dhofar, South and North Al-Bathinah, Adh-Dahirah, Ad-Dakhliyah, South and North Ash-Sharqiyah and Al-Wusta for administrative purposes. Each consists of several *wilayat* (provinces or towns). The *wilayat* is managed and represented by a wali (a governor). Geographically, Oman has a diverse range of topography that includes the mountain ranges, deserts, coastal areas and fertile lands.

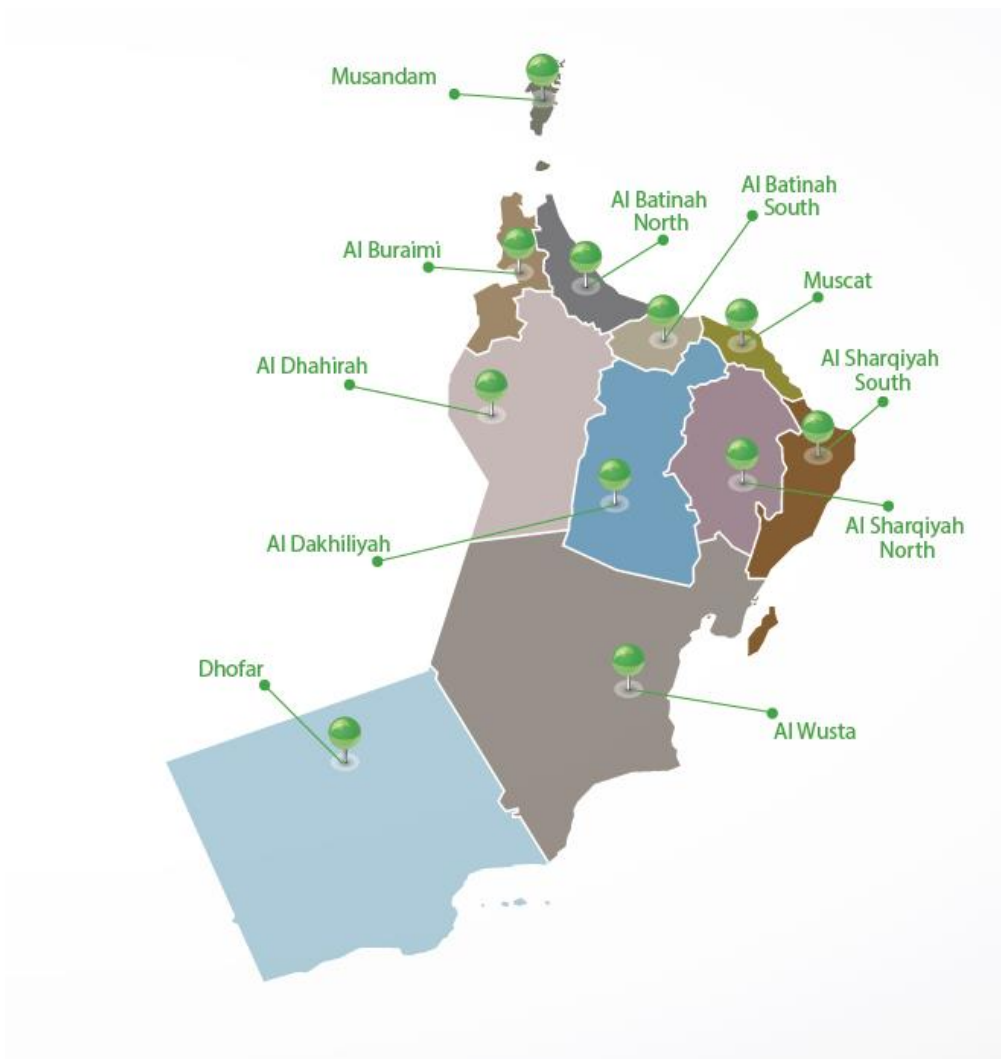


Figure 3-2 Map of Oman showing the Administrative Divisions – Governorates (Provinces) of Oman

Source: Oman 2019, Ministry of Information (2019: 41)

The natural features of Oman divide the region into: the coastal areas whose inhabitants have long derived their livelihood from the sea and sea-based trade (Muscat, Muttrah); Batinah coast plains where farmers depended on wells and water *afraj* systems (irrigation system); the central desert a habitat of Beduin; the Oman interior, comprising Al Hajar mountains - Jabal al Akhdar (Green Mountain), its foothills, and desert fringes; Musandam peninsula occupied by mountain dwellers of the Musandam region; the barren coastline south to Dhofar, Dhofar in the south and the offshore island of Masirah (Metz, 1993). Broadly, Oman can be divided into five distinct geographical regions: coastal region and Batinah coastal plains, Al Hajar Mountain, desert areas, the Dhofar and the Musandam Peninsula (Petersen, 1996: 212).

Muscat is the capital of Oman and the majority of the population of Oman is concentrated in Muscat. It is the metropolitan region of Oman and historically it was a prosperous trading centre and an influential regional city. The diversity of the natural environment and regional location influences the natural division and cultural adaptations. Among all the diversification of various regions of Oman, the individuality of the Musandam, Al-Buraimi and Dhofar are prominently distinct. Dhofar governorate is a mountainous region in the far south-eastern part of Oman and is separated from other parts of the country by more than 800 kilometres of desert. It is characterised by its tropical climate and it is the only area in the Arabian Peninsula that experiences the summer monsoon (Petersen, 1996: 212). It is a “geographically and culturally distinct region [...] and the people of the mountains speak several south Arabian languages” (Peterson, 2007: 34). Musandam is located in the northern region of the country which projects into the Strait of Hurmuz; while Al-Buraimi lies in the north-western corner of

the Sultanate. Generally, Musandam and Al-Buraimi can be characterised together as both of them border the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Their distance from the capital makes them closer to the UAE which has subjected the people to an Emirati influence as well, for example in dressing and Arabic accent.

3.3.5. Historical Influence

Oman was among the first Arab countries to embrace Islam in the first generation of the Islamic era. The first Imam in this region was selected as the ruler in 748 AD. Until 1506, Oman succeeded to remain relatively free of foreign control and the Abbasids who controlled only the north coast (Valerie, 2009). The Portuguese occupied this land in the 16th century for almost a century before being pushed out in 1650. Some traces of defence forts built during this time still stand near the coastal area. Imam Ahmed bin Said laid the foundation of the present dynasty, Al Bu Said Dynasty in 1744 and succeeded in uniting the country. He rose to power and was able to end internal disputes and civil wars. Later in the beginning of the nineteenth century, the ruler of the country assumed the title of Sultan to encompass his authority as both a spiritual and political leader. The Sultan of Oman extended his rule to Zanzibar and the eastern coast of Africa in the early nineteenth century. At that time, Oman was the strongest empire in the Arabian Peninsula. Oman's power extended to control portions of the East African Coast, the Indian subcontinent, and much of the coasts of Iran and Gwadar in Pakistan (Valeri, 2009).

Around the end of eighteenth century, Europeans started to increase their interest in the Gulf; such as the Dutch, the French and the British establishing their influence through the trading companies like the British East India Company. Oman was never formally colonised by the British but from the mid-nineteenth century they started to influence the country's affairs owing to the British interests in securing the sea routes between Europe and India. The British signed several treaties with sultans of Oman over four generations, as well as pacts with the tribal leaders on the other coasts of the Gulf, which were under the nominal control of the Sultan of Oman.

With the emergence of the new Ibadi Imamate in the interiors of Oman, the country was divided into two regions: Muscat and the coastline were ruled by the Sultan, and the interior was ruled by an elected Imam, a religious leader. The Imam was removed from power after the conflict in the 1960s. From then the Sultans and Imams of the interior tribes clashed continuously until the supporters of the Imamate were put down. The Sultan Said Bin Taimur came to power and regained control of the interior. During this period Oman was isolated with limited development and only a handful of education, health and basic services. This period ended on July 23rd, 1970, Sultan Qaboos bin Said replaced his father and assumed his rule of the country (Peterson, 2019; Valeri, 2009).

Sultan Qaboos bin Said Al Said became the new ruler and he immediately targeted the education, health and development infrastructure. The name of the country was changed from Muscat and Oman to the Sultanate of Oman to symbolise its unity and solidarity. Further, the citizens who had fled the country were called upon with a

promise of a new era of development and prosperity. His extensive modernisation program together with investments in natural oil and gas resources opened Oman to the contemporary world and towards an era of economic prosperity. He is referred to as the father of the country (Peterson, 2019). His charismatic personality along with his image as a saviour of the country - from the unbalanced regime of his father - contributed to his power. He solidified his status as a national hero in 1974, following his success in the Dhofari war, civil clashes that occurred due to the government's conflict with Marxist rebels in the Dhofar governance (Chatty, 2009; Valeri, 2009; Peterson, 2019). He is recognised for unifying the diverse elements of the nation under the Sultanate of Oman, combined with proper utilisation of the oil resources for the development of the country (Petersen, 2019).

3.4. The Built Environment of Oman

The mainstream ideology characterising the built environment of the Gulf countries can be divided into two extreme philosophies: futuristic attitude and traditional approaches (Al-Naim, 2005). According to Al-Naim (2005: 105) “while the first group rejects historical heritage, the second considers the past as the only valid evidence that should be considered to shape the present. However, both consider the use of technology as a necessity that cannot be avoided”. Hence, two basic positions of the local architecture concept result out of the challenge: a quest for roots, and that of staying at pace with time. The two prevailing factors of traditional connection and futuristic vision are a source of tension and challenge in the expression of architectural style and particular identity.

The diverse climate and topography across the Sultanate has contributed to Oman's various vernacular typologies. The built structures in the interior and mountainous are made up of stone and adobe (mud-bricks). The coastal areas are mostly characterised by *Areesh* houses, made up of light and perforated materials, commonly palm tree leaves, to catch sea breezes. Nevertheless, assorted influences on the architecture of Oman near the coasts also exist due to the exposure of Oman to foreign cultures as an important trade route and significant seafaring nation. Desert areas were mainly occupied by nomadic tribes that used temporary tents and shelters.

The vernacular built structures of Oman historically utilised natural materials such as stones, *sarooj* (mud mortar), corals, palm trees and acacia trees. Further, its strategic location and extensive coastline has also contributed to commercial, political and military contacts with several empires and civilisations throughout the history of the country, which led to the construction of numerous defensive structures. Therefore, in spite of the climatic and geographical differences in Oman, the robust defensive fortifications are a common element in most of the country (Nutz, 2013).

The year 1970 marks a shift in the built infrastructure of Oman due to the change in local peculiarities that influenced the architecture, such as the arrival of new materials, technologies and changing lifestyles. The modernisation programs followed by rapid developments began to challenge the local vernacular architectural traditions. The architecture has passed through a vast transformation since the end of the 20th century starting with the reign of Sultan Qaboos. Nevertheless, despite the influence of the radical transformation due to the oil boom, Oman is observed as a case of an

interesting model of a sustainable approach towards building a modern society without disregarding the traditional culture and heritage in various manners (Hegazy, 2015).

In an attempt to control the haphazard development of buildings, policies related to the typology of buildings were first created in the early 80s. The regulations related to typology, facades, colour and height of buildings were devised as tools to maintain a contextual design. The earliest of these regulations came into action in 1981 from the Ministry of Regional Municipalities, Environment, and Water Recourses (Hegazy, 2015). The laws constrain the designs to follow certain typology and it is stated in the building regulations “that building specifications and architectural design should be a combination of Omani, Arab, Islamic and contemporary style & character” (Building Regulation, 1992: 6). According to the building guidelines “the architectural design of facades/elevations of residential and residential-commercial buildings shall be according to the local, Arabs or Islamic style.” (Building Regulation, 1992: 23). Since 1981 the buildings’ regulations have been modified, but this article remains part of the building regulations in an attempt to direct the development so that it reflects the Omani-Arab style and pays homage to the existing heritage and culture. The basic idea of Omani architecture is “not in favour of the high rises that abound in the neighbouring Gulf States. With a few high-rises limited to 10-floors only in the city, one never feels cramped as compared to being in modern day glass and cement cities. The lower buildings here are not just squat square brick structures, rather a medley of arches, seductive curves, gleaming tiled courtyards and clean straight lines” (Ministry of Tourism, 2014: NP).

Based on the above discussion and observation, the three main characteristics related to architecture of Oman which are immediately visible are that: the laws restrict high-rise building, promote regulation of the image of architecture through policies to maintain a certain image and harmony, and use elements of local/Omani style and colours of facades and restrict certain foreign elements. Yet this aspect of using Omani architectural features only, marks the preliminary point in maintaining the harmony of the urban character and not the end product; as architecture projects of the country are more flexible in approach, which can be seen in utilising the mechanism and concepts behind traditional architecture for more minimalistic symbolic architecture, especially, when it comes to landmark buildings. For example, the Sultan Qaboos University project established in 1986 with an initial build-up area of 250,000 square metres not only uses the features of traditional Omani and Arabic-built form through the use of castellation, arches etc., but also attempts to use some of the mechanics behind historical building approaches and principles that primarily corresponded to the environment, climate and available technology and building materials. These can be seen in the consideration of placing the opening on the north and south faces avoiding the direct entry of sun light, use of courtyard systems and keeping in account of flow of the breeze in the cooler months for the residential blocks (Sultan Qaboos University, 1990).

Such attempts are perceived as an interesting route towards cultural sustainability and in keeping with the continuity between its heritage and contemporary architecture. On one hand, it is argued that this “national style” characterised by crenellations, fake arches above windows and doors, and a colour range from white to dark brown is

“imposed by formulaic codes which proffer an easy architectural ‘way out’” (Al Harthy, 1992: 106). On the other hand, it is viewed as an effort to balance tradition and contemporariness of Oman, and that “the aim to build a modern society did not compel this historic country to neglect its heritage or cultural principles” (Hegazy, 2015). Yet there appears to be a consensus on the view that there is capacity to explore a balance that extracts from the architectural system of the past and its logical connection to the present that takes into account today’s materials, standards and lifestyle (Al Harthy, 1992; Hegazy, 2015).

3.5. The Omani Museums Setting

Following the renaissance, the massive developments, long-term investment plans and rapid construction growth were expected to have consequences on the culture, heritage and the living patterns of the Omani people. The emphasis on development of the nation was tied with moving forward, but did not compromise the national heritage and rich history. Hence, from the very beginning, the nation-building plans by government were firmly linked to the Omani identity in relation to its significant past and traditions. Since 1970, Qaboo's annual speeches defined the vision for the nation, presenting policies and providing a framework to set the course for the nation-building and internal stability. In the first anniversary speech Sultan Qaboos (1971: 16) stated:

Our [internal] plan is to build our country and provide all its people with a prosperous life. That will be achieved only when the people share the burden of responsibility and help with the task of building. We have opened up opportunities for our citizens to

achieve this end, and we shall strive hard to establish just, democratic rule in our country within the framework of our Omani Arab reality, the customs and traditions of our community, and the teachings of Islam - which always light our path.

While addressing the citizens in 1972 on the Second National Day celebration speech Sultan Qaboos (1972: 19) stated:

Our principal 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 20th Century, and to see the Omani citizen living in happiness and dignity in his land.

The focus on heritage and culture is evident through his speeches from the early stages, but the formal piece of legislation in terms of cultural and heritage preservation was announced with the creation of the formal Ministry in 1976 which was responsible for the heritage and the culture affairs of the country. They were included within the responsibilities under this Ministry in 1979. This Ministry was called the Ministry of National Heritage and Culture (MHC), and later came to be known as the Ministry of Heritage and Culture. Alongside other heritage and culture tasks, this Ministry supervises a number of existing museums, supports private museums, and manages new museum projects' development. In 2021 the Ministry of Tourism was dissolved, merged with the Ministry of Heritage and re-named as the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism.

	Museums	Date of Inauguration	Ownership type	Location
1.	Madha Museum	2018	Private Museum	Musandam
2.	National Museum	2016	Public Museum	Muscat
3.	Bait Al Ghasham Museum	2016	Private Museum	Al-Batinah
4.	Al-Saidiya Museum	2014	Public Museum	Muscat
5.	Old Castle Museum	2012	Private Museum	Ash-Sharqiya
6.	People & Place Museum	2011	Private Museum	Muscat
7.	Sayyid Faisal Bin Ali Museum	2009	Public Museum-Transferred to the new National Museum	Muscat
8.	Bait Al-Barandah Museum	2006	Public Museum	Muscat
9.	Land of Frankincense Museum	2001	Public Museum	Dhofar
10.	Muscat Gate Museum	2001	Public Museum	Muscat
11.	Bait Adam Museum	2000	Private Museum-Temporarily closed	Muscat
12.	Currency Museum	1999	Public Museum	Muscat
13.	Bait Al-Zubair Museum	1998	Private Museum	Muscat
14.	Sohar Fort Museum	1993	Government Museum-Temporarily closed	Al-Batinah
15.	Children Museum	1993	Public Museum	Muscat
16.	Omani-French Museum	1992	Public Museum	Muscat
17.	Sultan Armed Forces Museum	1988	Public Museum	Muscat
18.	Natural History Museum	1985	Public Museum	Muscat
19.	(previous) National Museum	1974	Public Museum-Earliest museum of Oman – permanently closed	Muscat

The national vision and strategies explicitly identified the significance of museums, heritage, citizenship and national identity (Oman National Vision 2040, ND). The most

recent flagship project of government is the National Museum of Oman opened in 2016 in Muscat. A small museum in 1974, a precursor to the National Museum was the first museum in Oman created by the government, and since then several public and private museums have come about. Oman has eighteen existing museums, which fall under three main categories in terms of the ownership and responsibilities: museums under the Ministry of Heritage and Culture; those under other government bodies; and private museums owned by citizens and private institutions. There are three purpose-built museum projects in the pipeline, at various phases of pre-design or design. Further, in terms of museum structures and architecture, the museums in Oman range from purpose-built museums to reused, restored, extended or rebuilt structures.

It can be seen in table 3.1. Most museums are located in Muscat, the capital; nevertheless, there are efforts to spread museum development projects in other governorates of Oman. We can observe from the table that initially the government's focus on establishing museums was concentrated in the capital and the Governorate of Muscat, which is also the most populated region of Oman. Although the first museum out of Muscat's Governorate, the Sohar Fort Museum opened in 1993, followed by the Land of Frankincense in Dhofar region in 2001, which were government initiatives, others are private initiatives and most of which were established in the last decade. However, the interest of the government in spreading the museums across Oman is evident from the fact that the renovation of the Old Castle Museum, as well as the construction and museology of the Madha Museum was funded and carried out by the government following which the museums were handed over to their rightful owners. Also, in Oman there exist a number of heritage and cultural sites, museums, heritage

villages, forts and castles, including those listed as World Heritage Sites in other governorates. Since 2010 the Ministry of Heritage and Culture has enlisted the Omani heritage private houses and museums that offer valuable individual contributions to showcase many of the nation's heritage treasures that are viewed as vital to the preservation of the national heritage (Ministry of Heritage and Culture, ND). The Ministry has devised a system of registering and licensing these private museums in light of the general policy regarding heritage houses, museums and exhibits.

In short, the rapid economic development in Oman brought with it a need to capture and preserve history, culture and tradition. Initiatives to sustain and preserve heritage and culture led to various projects, including museum projects. Since 1970 the national identity has been a crucial part of the modernisation programme and so are the museums as part of national policies, the first of which came into being in 1974. However, it is clear from the table 3.1 that initially 1970s and 1980s Oman had three museums, following which there has been consistent growth in the museums of Oman, with around five to six museums being established every decade.

Moreover, a notable aspect is an increase in the role of private initiatives in the last decade that hints at the awareness and interest of the private sector towards museums as well as increasing aptitude in public motivation to preserve, promote and showcase Omani heritage and culture. Museums are considered as spaces where the national identity is created and expressed, and this research advances the understanding of the distinct identity aspirations articulated in the museums of Oman and how the unity

in the diversity is captured and negotiated by the museum projects in the process of national identity expression.

3.6. Conclusion

In this chapter I have discussed the background information on Oman. This was carried out by highlighting specific historical, cultural and political factors that have influenced the country's contemporary settings, as it is vital to understand the circumstances in which the national identity is reflected and consumed. Even though the Arabian Gulf states share the same broad historical experiences and contemporary characteristics such as the Islamic religion, Arabic language, shared geographical area and prevailing tribal factors in the society, in this chapter I have specifically shed light on the particularity of Omani circumstances that have contributed to its Oman-specific and distinguished characteristics. The key factors discussed in this chapter are the religious, tribal, geographical, lingual, and historical factors that have contributed to shape Oman and its society. Finally, I have provided an overview on Oman's built-environment, and the museums' settings contextualised within the contemporary political background that will be significant for the analysis process, to help understand the specific context of the national identity aspirations expressed in the museums.

CHAPTER 4

4. METHODOLOGY

4.0. Introduction

In this study, the key research question is to understand the role that museums play in expressing national identity. In this chapter, I will explain the rationale for selecting the research philosophy that has driven this study, particularly in terms of data collection and interpretation. The methodology of the study is based on insights from the literature review in Chapter 2. Specifically, the paradigms and theories of the nation serve to provide an analytical tool to understand the relationships between national identity and museums. This research uncovers the role of museums in constructing national identity from three key perspectives: the collections, architecture and institutions. The study will also consider the ways the visitors receive or consume this identity produced for them, as it is not completely possible to look into production without considering the consumption side for which it is being constructed. Hence in this study focused on the production of national identity, considering the wider role of the visitors to some degree will support to investigate aspects of museums that are involved in the communication of the nation and the way the museums are framed by the wider context of Omani societies' relationship with the museums.

With an objective to examine the role of museums in the projection of national identity that is shaped and represented within this top-down framework for consumption, it was

necessary to adopt a research methodology that allowed capturing of each of these related areas of enquiries and their integration into a flexible working method that would lead to a meaningful interpretation. In this chapter, I will provide the rationale for the research philosophy and paradigm used in the study and discuss the suitability of a qualitative approach to the research design, data collection, and data analysis. I will also explain the methodologies I have chosen to study the museums and the case study approach and how these have informed my research methods' selection. Additionally, the procedures employed in the fieldwork, the ethical considerations involved, and the research limitations are also discussed in this chapter.

4.1. Research Philosophy and Paradigms

The research philosophy indicates the way the researchers gather facts and think about knowledge development leads to the selection of an epistemological approach that needs to be adopted. Two philosophical research trends positivism and phenomenology are the dominant methodological approaches within social sciences research (Silverman, 2005), each of which stands for different ways of developing knowledge by considering an understanding of society and examining the social world.

Each of these philosophies implies different sets of underlying assumptions about the type, scope, and intent of social enquiry (Silverman, 2005). Positivism's core tenet is that the external social world is a singular, self-consistent factor that can be interpreted and evaluated using objective methods and measurements (Silverman, 2001). Positivism uses a deductive method. Leedy and Ormrod (2001) highlight that the

deductive method uses a representative sample of a population to prove a hypothesis based on previous theories. In social sciences, its application is limited because the objects of study are societies, relations, points of view and transformations and objective methods cannot provide depth to the study seeking knowledge that is socially constructed.

On the other hand, phenomenological philosophy emerged in the early twentieth century as a reaction to the dominance of positivism, as it was considered that analysing the facts from an objective point of view and excluding the values or the interpretation of the subjects is misleading. Phenomenology applies an inductive approach. The inductive approach utilises a small sample of a particular context to develop a theory by exploring and discovering unknown factors or testing new ideas in a specific context. Phenomenology focuses on the meanings that subjects offer to social phenomena and relies on this subjectivity that is fundamentally constituted by the ways in which subjects view and experience them. This subjectivity allows for comprehension and the creation of distinctive patterns fitted to a particular surrounding (Silverman, 2001).

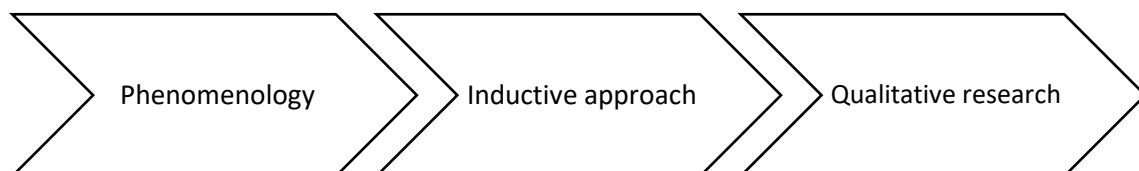


Figure 4-1 Identification of the research approach

The adoption of the phenomenological framework allows for the understanding of the museum as a social construct. This research will have a qualitative method with an inductive approach that will allow the analysis to be based on the perception of experiences and realities and to understand the phenomenon of national identity construction and projections within the museums as they are perceived by the social actors. The positioning of the research approach concerning the selected paradigm for this study is summarised in Figure 4.1.

4.2. The Research Approach and Methodological Assumptions

Methodology is "the strategy, plan of action, process or design lying behind the choice and use of particular methods and linking the choice and use of the methods to the desired outcomes" (Crotty, 2003: 3). It aims to describe, evaluate and justify the use of particular methods (Wellington, 2000). Qualitative and Quantitative analysis are two separate paradigms that investigate the world in different ways (Holliday,2002). Positivism is generally associated with quantitative data collection methods, while phenomenology is associated with qualitative data collection methods. In contrast to quantitative research, which emphasises measurement and calculation to expose an assumed precise truth, this study will rely on qualitative research material that is uncountable and widely used to study social variances since society is made up of multiple realities (Moore, 2006). Further, the qualitative approach allows the researcher to explore social phenomena in their natural state and enter the study without any assumed theory (Mason, 2002).

According to Filipucci (2009: 320), qualitative methods are used to document and analyse views, behaviours, and motives of those involved in the heritage process; therefore, the use of qualitative methods of inquiry is a corollary of this way of conceptualising museums. Consequently, a qualitative method is applied to achieve this study's objective of understanding the museums in which the national identity is presented by those involved in the production that is made visible and offered to the public. Hence the research methodology called for a strategy or plan of action that would allow me to use particular methods to attain the required data and information on the production process. To achieve the outcome that focuses on the projection of national identity in the museums, the methodology needed to enable me to see what elements, ideas, and constituents are being offered to the public and how they are projected through museum displays, architecture and narrative. Further, it was important to understand how and why the decision-makers made particular choices to understand the motives and views of those involved that informed the projections of national identity in the museums. Furthermore, it was kept in view that the plan of action, to some degree, allows me to see the effect or relationship these reflections of the nation in the museums may have on the consumer of this production, as it was not possible to look into the production side without considering the consumption of the reflected to some extent.

Keeping the above in view, the qualitative approach chosen for this study uses a phenomenology methodology to understand the holistic role of Omani museums in the expression of the nation. In context to the museum-oriented research, an inductive approach will allow for an opportunity to infer theoretical concepts and patterns to

disclose the relationship between the national identity and the museums from observed data in its specific Omani context. Hence, a phenomenology that uses an inductive method is employed in this study that will allow for comprehending the process of human experiences and contributions in terms of the human and reality relation that the museums entail.

However, in order to decide the choice of approach and the methodological framework to study the role of museums and national identity, it was considered what Cerda, 2013 highlights that not only does there exist a variety of approaches, but many of them have ambiguous boundaries with unclear limits. Further, the selection of methods should link up to the desired outcome. As phenomenology can be used to examine the interactions between people and phenomena, this research approach will support to study of the ways those involved in the production of Omani museums envisaged and projected the components of national identity in the museums (through narratives, objects, institutions and architecture) and how this relationship that is created through various means such as decision making, selection of objects, design or storylines had shaped, transformed or contributed to the projections of national identity presentation at the museums. Further, it will support examining to a more limited degree the way this projection of nation is consumed within the top-down framework and how the museum visitors see objects, narratives, architecture and exhibits and enter into a productive relationship with it and a certain meaning or reality is generated.

A case study approach will also be used in this study, which is characterised by a deep understanding and explanation of a phenomenon (Anadón, 2008). "The case is a

unique instance, an integrated and typically well-defined and bounded system (Spencer, 2011: 50). The case study provides phenomenological data and in-depth information on complex situations (Spencer, 2011). "The essence of a case study, the central tendency among all types of case study, is that it tries to illuminate a decision or set of decisions: why they were taken, how they were implemented, and with what result" (Schramm, 1971, cited from Yin, 2017: 14). The contemporary action of museums through their institutional role as well as the design, exhibits and narratives are highly associated with the intentions embedded in the decision making in a specific temporal context; which is explored in the analysis to elaborate the process of the museum making related to their role in the national identity projection. Further, according to Yin (2017: 12), a case study design should be considered when the focus of the study is to answer "how" and "why" questions. Therefore, the case study methodology was considered preferable and deployed to support the research and analysis suited for examining how and why specific decisions made contributed to the expression of national identity in the museums contextualised in the contemporary Omani context.

Further, as this research attempts to get a holistic understanding of the role of the museums in the projection of the nation in their given social, cultural and political context, the case study of museums in Oman's setting is carried out by examining the expression of the nation in museums across the country. Yin (2017: 55) describes that multiple case studies can be used to either predict "similar results (a literal replication)" or predict "contrasting results but for predictable reasons (a theoretical replication)".

Stake (1995) uses the term ‘collective case study’ when more than one case is being examined.

Study Reference	The Studies	Author	Key aim of Study
A	The relationship between Heritage, Tourism and National Identity: The case of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan	Suleiman Farajat (Farajat, 2012)	To understand how heritage and tourism are used to construct a Jordanian national identity.
B	Myths and memories: The role of national museums in representing national identity in post-colonial era	Richard Harris (Harris, 2002)	To understand the aspects of the museums and their contents that seem most saliently to indicate, explicitly or implicitly, attitudes toward national identity.
C	Museums and nation Building: The role of museums in the national development of Costa Rica	Karyl A. Robb (Robb, 1992)	To examine the relationship between culture and development and understand the relationship of the museum with the development and nation building process.
D	Engaging object visitor encounters at the museum: a phenomenological approach	Oonagh Quigley (Quigley, 2019)	To investigate the characteristics of museum visitor engagement and to develop a useful method for such an investigation.
E	Representing Indigenous Peoples of Taiwan: The Role of Museums	Shih-Yu Chen (Chen, 2017)	To understand the role of museums in representing the indigenous people and indigenous identity.
F	World Heritage and community change: The case of Santa Cruz De Mompox, Colombia	Nancy Rocio Rueda Esteban (Estaban, 2021)	To analyse how the World Heritage designation changed an isolated community such as Mompox and affected it.

Table 4-1: Examples of qualitative, Phenomenology, Case study and mix of approaches adopted in that studies contextualising the heritage or museum venues and national identity.

Hence, keeping this in mind, a set of museums spread across Oman were included as case studies to enable us to understand the similarities and differences in the projection of the nation. In examining the connection between national identity, museum and cultural heritage-related studies, several have employed a qualitative, phenomenology and case study approach, whereas others have considered a mix of these approaches as their research methodology, as identified in Table 4.1 and further discussed in the next section.

4.3. Setting and Limitations of the Research

The studies identified in Table 4.1 have employed a qualitative approach to the research related to national identity and museums. Studies A, B and C employed case study methodology, study D adopted phenomenology, whereas studies E and F used a mix of both phenomenology and case study approach. However, other qualitative studies may employ different approaches in their research design. One example of this is the study by Lee (2007) on 'Behind the scenes at the National Museum of Korea', that investigated the museum's role in constructing notions of Korean national identity and used ethnographic research methodologies. In the case of ethnographic research, Van Maanen (1995: 23) points out that "what we continue to look for is the close study of culture as lived by particular people, in particular places, doing particular things at particular times". Ethnography methodology was not employed in this research but is another method that can be used in museum studies. According to Tucker (2014: 341), such an approach can enable to study of "how museums create knowledge and what visitors take away from the presentation".

According to her, “taking an ethnographic approach allows one to observe how the messages conveyed by exhibits are shaped from the moment of inception through various levels of development by the social forces that comprise a given museum’s culture” (Tucker, 2014: 350). However, she also highlights that “such an approach may be best suited to a museum as a whole” and is also carried out in selective museum areas or galleries and requires for the researcher to get involved in the life of the museum (Tucker, 2014: 350). This methodology tends to provide an in-depth outlook and is usually employed on a singular case or selective museum gallery, such as that carried out by Lee (2007), who conducted an ethnographic study on the Archaeological Gallery in the New National Museum of Korea. In another single study by Handler and Gable (1997), a museum was selected and the investigation was carried out by immersing themselves in the life of the museum, working from the premises of the Colonial Williamsburg Museum in the study on *The New History in an Old Museum: Creating the Past at Colonial Williamsburg*. These approaches are not employed in this research, keeping in view the limitations on the time and extent of the research involved in understanding the holistic role of museums in national identity projection, which also required considering a range of museums, such an approach was not considered suitable. While this provides the reasoning for not selecting an ethnographic approach, it also suggests a limitation of this study and indicates future possibilities of carrying out an in-depth study on a singular or selected gallery in the museum of Oman, utilising ethnographic methodology.

Moreover, different studies that explore the relationship between national identity, museums and heritage venues employ different research methods depending on the nature and objectives of the research. Some research combines qualitative and quantitative methods, as in study C in Table 4.1, or only qualitative research, such as in studies A, B, D, E and F in Table 4.1. I have chosen only the qualitative method for my research as it is the most suitable and does not require quantifiable elements. For example, compared to the study C in table 4.1., which considers visitor's attendance at the Costa Rica Museum, my research is focused on and hence limited to national identity expression in the museum rather than how many visitors attend the museum or how many of them are impacted by such projection. Such limitation of my research also points towards another possible option for future research.

Further, the studies may use a sample of a single heritage and museum venue, as in study A in table 4.1 or multiple museums across various countries, like in study B or a model of one country and its museums, such as carried out in study C and E, in table 4.1. For my research, I use a model of one country and its museum owing to the nature of the research that considers the Omani museums from the three perspectives of collections, architecture and institution to achieve a holistic understanding of its role in identity projection.

Study D in table 4.1 adopt qualitative and phenomenology approaches, which is primarily focused on the visitor's experience. Hence, the observations and interviews are directed to the visitors and meaning-making is constrained to understanding the visitor's relationship with the museums. In comparison to that, the key focus of my

research is the production side of museums; however, consumption is taken into account to only a certain degree. Hence, the phenomenology approach in this research supports exploring the implication of the wider role of consumption of the national identity projected through the museums, which is recognised as a smaller component of the study. Therefore, I decided to employ both approaches, similar to the combination of approaches adopted in studies E and F in table 4.1. I adopted the phenomenology approach as I have considered how the community receives it within the broader context of Omani society, as it was not possible to look into the production side without looking at it to some extent. Further, the case study approach was also used to get a deeper understanding of the phenomenon and to deploy appropriate methods for data collection concerning the top-down production and the contextual setting of museums. I further explain how the combination of phenomenology and case study approach guided my research.

It is common to use multiple or combined methods in research, and there are several descriptions for this technique: multiple methods, convergent methodology, combined methods or triangulation. "Organizational researchers can improve the accuracy of their judgments by collecting different kinds of data bearing on the same phenomenon" (Jick, 1979). However, here I do not mix qualitative and quantitative methods, instead a combined or mixed-method in this research refers to the methodologies employed in museums in conjunction with methods from other related disciplines, which allows looking into the relationship between the national identity and the various constituents of the museums; collections, architecture and the institution; as well as the ways the expressions intersect and reflect the interests of the various stakeholders and the

visitors. For instance, phenomenology can be used to examine the interactions between people and phenomena, however, to understand the production of the national identity in museums that called for a deeper understanding of the role and perspective of the stakeholders and thus case study approach was considered. This was carried out keeping in view that a case study approach can provide the capacity to understand how the decisions are made in context to the projecting the nation in museums and how these decisions shape the exhibits, narratives and architecture. I focused on getting this information from those involved in the process, which is in contrast to studies focusing on visitors, where interviews and observations only target the visitors. However, further the museum spaces; collections and architecture; and the productive relationship of the visitors were observed by me, which enabled me to understand the ways the identity is projected for consumption within the top-down framework. However, particular characteristics, different strategies and emphases were chosen to support the research during the fieldwork. Such as, for observing the type of architecture, I focused on its exterior and visual attributes and the opinion of the visitors on the architectural typology, whereas for collections, I observed the artefacts and the method of display and how the users interact with these elements.

The selected methodology allowed me to describe the experience of national identity production in a museum considering the perspective of how the museum's projections of national identity took shape based on the decisions and actions of those involved in the production process. The selected methodology also supported the outcome from the vantage point of walking through the museum and picking up on the exhibits, objects and narratives that contribute to the national identity. Moreover, I was also able

to tap into the ways the visitors enter into a productive relationship with the museum objects, narratives and exhibits within this top-down frame of national identity projections in the museums. The combination of methodological approach through the combination of vantage points discussed allowed for examining the role of museums and any arising productive tensions in national identity creation and maintenance.

As Denscombe (2003) points out, different methodologies could improve the quality. In Chapter 5, this takes the form of observing the historical projections of the nation in the museum in relation to the contemporary perspectives: ethnic background, cultural setting and deeper or more recent pasts bounded to and from the perspective of modern-day Oman. In Chapter 6, this study takes the form that analyses the contemporary projections of the nation – the role of the renaissance in the formation of the nation projected in the Omani museums.

The multiple or combined research methods and techniques have several advantages, the most important of which is that they provide detailed information by “adding depth to the description of the social meanings involved in a setting” (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1994: 198). Adopting appropriate methods provide overlapping information, making it possible to check results from more than one viewpoint. This is advantageous and allowed for triangulation of the research findings, as different methods can cross-examine and fill in each other’s gaps.

4.4. Positioning and Rapport

Debates about reflexivity and researcher positioning have highlighted the difficulties that can arise during fieldwork and the problematic negotiations that can occur when the research shifts between viewpoint and subject positions (McIntosh, 2010). Further, according to Duijnhoven and Roessingh (2006: 124) researchers must continually consider the aspects of their identity they have to highlight or conceal, as well as what they want and what is best for their study. Hence, such decisions often reflect the researcher's position on various actors or classes.

My personal interest and professional involvement in the field of heritage and museums since 2001 in Oman has been the key reason that activated my interest in this research and the selection of the research topic. My experience in the Ministry of Heritage and Culture working on the assigned heritage and museum projects and reporting to the high-profile policy and decision-makers of the Omani museum industry has been an advantage. During the process I attained professional experience in managing projects including museums that comprise complicated processes and influences of stakeholders. Hence, my previous experience related to the museums was beneficial during the fieldwork as I understood the internal process of the government services and working relationship with the Department of Museum and the Directorate of Heritage at the Ministry of Heritage and Culture. This led to easy access for the interviews with the decision-makers, museums managers and officials involved in the field of research, as well as friendly casual discussion with the officials and museum managers.

My position and involvement in particular heritage and museum projects at the Ministry of Heritage and Culture in Oman could be seen to create a situation that Yin (2017) calls as production of “potential biases”, a problem that he relates to the participant observation. In this situation, according to Yin (2017), a researcher is likely to become a supporter of a certain group or hold an advocacy role, which is against the commonly accepted social sciences rules. If so, the same bias approach is likely to be anticipated as a researcher because of my professional involvement in museum projects and position in government services.

To avoid personal bias, I had not depended on using my personal experience to define the processes relevant to the museum-making process. Instead, I used it to identify the right people and the processes, thus basing my analysis on the information gained during my fieldwork. For example, even though I was involved in several heritage projects and partial involvement in the National Museum’s design process, I was aware of the complexity of choosing the museum design and the involvement of various stakeholders in the design process. However, rather than basing the analysis on my previous experience and knowledge, I used that experience to raise relevant questions during my interview. I based my analysis on the information obtained during the interviews and that available in the book on the National Museum that identifies the design and process of selecting the design of the façade given to me during my fieldwork. Further, throughout the course of my fieldwork and research, I did not hide my association with the Ministry. However, I had clearly identified my positioning for the fieldwork as a researcher rather than an employee of the Ministry of Heritage and Culture to prevent from being categorized into some pre-set official standpoint.

My professional involvement with the museum industry has been advantageous, as it provided guidance in identifying the right individuals involved in the museum making process and to attain the relevant documents and information. In particular, for an outsider who is not involved with the museums making process in Oman that comprise of the complicated dynamics of decision making and the process of discussions/meeting in the government it is not easy to uncover these only by reviewing the documentation and the archive available for public use. Being aware of the processes and workings of the Ministry of Heritage and Culture benefited me to gain access to more insider's data. It also enabled me to attain information that would have demanded much more time to trace and clarify the decision-making interactions among various stakeholders involved in museums making process and its relationship with the projection and interpretation of the national identity.

However, during the course of the research, I experienced multiple constraints that impacted the effectiveness of my research programme, such as, time limitations, personal obligations, financial considerations, and unforeseen circumstances caused by Covid-19, which had a negative impact on my writing stage. Anxiety around the unknown circumstances and future due to Covid-19 has severely disrupted planned research activities. This created unstable and unsettling circumstances such as unexpected travels out to home country for unknown timeframe and later back to United Kingdom called for a need to make alternative arrangements to deal with completing my PhD. every time the circumstances changed. Combination of inadequate work conditions, personal challenges and care obligations and a

generalised sense of intellectual isolation had made the PhD. work particularly difficult and slow.

4.5. Fieldwork and Selection Process of the Case Study Museums

In the second year of my PhD in June 2018, I started to identify case study museums and collected preliminary data on museums in Oman. The Ministry of Heritage and Culture in Oman provided me with a list of museums. This list included the names and contact information of eighteen museums in Oman. The document outlined the museums of Oman falling under the responsibility of the Ministry and other public organisations, as well as identified the private museums and heritage houses holding museum licences. I used this list of museums physically handed over to me by the Museum Department of the Ministry of Heritage and Culture in 2017 as the basis for identifying the case study museums, keeping in view that the Ministry of Heritage and Culture (now the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism) is the main body responsible for supervising, managing and developing museums under its responsibility. It is also the only authority responsible for allocating licenses to private museums and heritage houses. This list was useful for narrowing down the museums for the case study.

The fieldwork was conducted from July 2018 to October 2018 and from January 2019 to March 2019 in Oman. Initially, for the case study research, I started to visit the museums in Muscat, the capital of Oman in the North of Oman. Accordingly, in 2018, I conducted fieldwork on the museums in Muscat. This was carried out keeping in view that the majority of museums were located in the Muscat governorate, as in Figure 4.2

and included a number of public and private museums that gave me a range of museums to study the projections of the nation.



Figure 4-2 Map showing concentration of museums in Muscat

Source: Google Maps image, edited by author

However, using an inductive approach towards research often requires adaptations to original plans. This also occurred in regard to the selection of the case study museums. Keeping in view that the research is aimed at providing a holistic view of the national identity projected through the museums of Oman, I realised that merely selecting the museums from the capital and single governorate [province] of Oman would limit the study. This would have limited the research to an area of Oman and thus, not serve the purpose of the research that intended to capture the holistic perspective of reflecting the nation. Hence, the first phase of the fieldwork in 2018 was extended and the second phase was carried out in 2019 to include museums from different regions of Oman that allowed to fill out this gap in the initial fieldwork.

During my initial visits to the Omani museums, it was noticeable that the terminology museum itself was problematic. Although some Omani museums are clearly situated as museums, such as the National Museum, others are open to wider interpretations.

A museum is a term loosely used by the authorities to highlight not only the museums but various natural and heritage experiences in forts, vernacular villages and castles. Moreover, the terms museums, galleries, exhibition hall and cultural centre are observed to be used interchangeably by organisations and the public. For example, in the presentation related to Omani archaeology at the conference of Museums of Arabia in London 2019, the archaeology exhibition galleries in Oman were referred to as museums in the presentations.

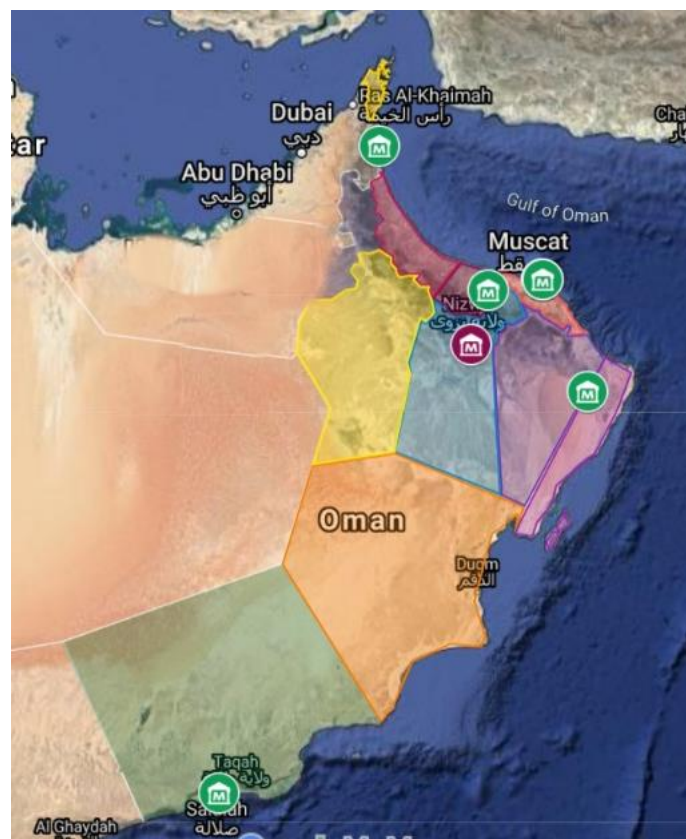


Figure 4-3 Identification of case study museums' regional distribution.

Source: Google maps image, edited by the author

In addition, government officials had their own views on what should be referred to as a museum. For example, during a discussion on Omani museums, a public official in

the museum field mentioned that “I don’t consider Muscat Gate Museum a museum, in my opinion it is a gallery”. Whereas, in one more discussion with another public official it was highlighted that “Oman should have museums in every region, such as Muscat Gate Museum as I think it is a good example of a museum representing both the region and the nation”. Hence, the list of the museums provided by the Ministry of Heritage and Culture helped to identify my preliminary visits that, in turn, supported to narrow down my case study museums, as there exist discrepancies in what institutionalises as Omani museum due to the ambiguity in what is termed as a museum in Oman by officials and the public.

Consequently, some museums in this list were not included in the study for specific reasons. Such as, I visited the Said Faisal Museum which was closed and at the time of visit it was an empty building. I was informed that collections from this museum were moved to and displayed at the National Museum of Oman. Another example is the Children's Museum that was not included in the research as upon visiting it, it was clear that the nature of the museum was scientific. The Children's Museum comprises the exhibits such as the walls of optical illusions to presentations like displays of bones in a human body and thus was not considered aligned to the purpose of this research, which is primarily focused on the nation and national identity expression. I also visited the Omani French Museum, and I decided not to include it in the research after reflecting on the nature of the museum, which is focused on diplomatic relations, characterising the constituent of soft power. Therefore, it was not considered aligned with the main aim of this study, which focuses on the inwardly oriented role of the national identity projected museum. Further, some private museums mentioned in the

list were temporarily closed. However, efforts were made to gather relevant information, for example, upon my request to visit the museum, the owner of the Old Castle Museum agreed to make an exception to open the museum to support my fieldwork which was temporarily closed for the public at the time of visit. Another case was that of Abu Adam Museum which was closed for renovation, although the owner has allowed me the visit, the status of the museum did not allow for the collection of usable data.

Out of the eighteen museums and the preliminary process of elimination I was left with thirteen museums for consideration in my research, as seen in Tables 4.2 and 4.3 collectively, eight of these museums are public museums and five are private museums. The central theme of these museums varies from education to art, culture and national, which give a variety to study the role of museums in Oman in the expression of national identity that comprises diverse collections ranging from Omani heritage and culture to private collections. Further, this set of the sample also gives a range of different sizes, from iconic to modest-sized and varied compositions of buildings from singular to complex of buildings. In short, these museums collectively include various forms and themes of museums located in different regions of Oman that can support capturing a comprehensive picture of the role of museums in the expression of national identity.

Out of those thirteen museums, six museums identified in Table 4.3 are evaluated in detail. The key driver to selecting these was that the set of the selected museums provided me with a range of large to medium museum sizes and the sample constitutes

museums from the most recent to those built in the early phases of the Omani renaissance. This set comprises private and public museums that include both national and other public museums, as well as a range provides museums from different regions of Oman.

Table 4-2 The list of case study Omani museums studied in-depth

No.	Name of Museum	Type	Responsible organisation	Governorate [Province]
1.	National Museum	Public Museum	Independent Board of Governance	Muscat
2.	Sultan Armed Forces Museum	Public Museum	Sultan Armed Forces	Muscat
3.	Bait Al-Zubair Museum	Private Museum		Muscat
4.	Land of Frankincense Museum	Public Museum	The Office of the Advisor to His Majesty the Sultan for Cultural Affairs	Dhofar
5.	Madha Museum	Private Museum		Musandam
6.	Old Castle Museum	Private Museum		Ash-Sharqiya

However, I also visited seven remaining museums identified in Table 4.3 that were small to medium in size. For example, Muscat Gate Museum and the Currency Museums are small museums established in a small hall each. The Bait Al-Ghasham Museum is a restored house, and its architecture is on display. Compared to the sample of six key museums selected, these museums had limitations in what they offer due to their limited size and content. However, I did not dismiss them entirely in my analysis and included them due to the broader contribution that they had to offer to the discussion on how national identity is projected in the museums of Oman. This was

decided as it allowed to maintain the understanding of the holistic role of the museums in the national identity reflected in the Omani setting that the research aims to achieve.

Table 4-3 Museums considered to provide contextual information

No.	Name of Museum	Type	Responsible organisation	Governorate [Province]
1.	Natural History Museum	Public Museum	Ministry of Heritage and Culture (now The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism)	Muscat
2.	Bait Al-Barandah Museum	Public Museum	The Muscat Municipality	Muscat
3.	Currency Museum	Public Museum	The Central Bank of Oman	Muscat
4.	Muscat Gate Museum	Public Museum	Royal Court Affairs	Muscat
5.	Al-Saidiya Museum	Public Museum	Ministry of Education	Muscat
6.	People and Place Museum	Private Museum		Muscat
7.	Bait Al Ghasham Museum	Private Museum		Al-Batinah

Besides, Oman had three museums currently underway, which were at various phases of development during my fieldwork. These are the (new) Natural History Museum, the Maritime History Museum and Oman Across Ages Museum. Both the (new) Natural History Museum and the Maritime History Museum are in initial design and museological development phases, respectively, whereas Oman Across Ages Museum was in construction phase at the time of my fieldwork. Therefore, these museums are not considered in the analysis due to limited data available on them owing to their current status. Viewing museum-making as an ongoing process offers limitations to this research regarding the future outlook of the evolving museum setting

of the region. This limitation also offers potential for future research projects that can shed light on ongoing endeavours of identity-making by including the latest museum projects in Oman.

4.6. Data Collection Methods

Methods are “the techniques or procedures used to gather and collect data related to some research question or hypothesis” (Crotty, 2003: 3). Yin (2017: 113) stresses that there are six common sources to collect data in a case study that are, “documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observations, participant-observation, and physical artifacts”. These key methods often function together that can produce a multi-evident angle and data sources which are further discussed in detail. The main research methods used in this research are documentation and archives, observations and open-ended interviews which are discussed in detail below.

4.6.1. Documentation and Archival Records

Documentation and archival records research includes various forms of documents that range from private records to administrative documents, related literature, formal studies, progress reports, newspaper articles, photographic records and images, personal documents, and websites and online publications. For understanding the context of study, the documents collected in my fieldwork included policy and strategy documents, official reports, brochures, museum books, publications on Oman, museums articles both online and in magazines. I gathered most of the official

document from the Ministry of Heritage and Culture and from the government's database available online, such as the websites on Vision 2040, Ministry of Heritage and Culture, Ministry of Information and Ministry of Tourism websites. Also, I collected the museum brochures available for general public in the museums.

Sometimes the participants provided me information on the relevant policy documents and books or articles on particular museum. For instance, the Director General of Museums at the Ministry of Heritage and Culture provided me with a copy of the Omani Heritage law (revised draft). The Director of Collections Department at the National Museum informed me about a book published on the National Museum that included in depth information about the National Museum development process. Similarly, the Directors of the Land of Frankincense Museum and the Sultan Armed Forces Museum gave me copies of the books on their museums. The owner and collector of the Madha Museum as well as the Director of Al Saiddiya Museum showed me articles published on these museums and allowed me to take copies for this research.

These relevant documentation supported to frame the understanding of the museum sector and helped to produce further contextual data. Furthermore, cross-examination of these materials was necessary to double-check the accuracy of the information and data collected through other methods, such as those collected during interview. This also helped me to fill out any gaps in the information and data. For instance, even though I didn't have an opportunity to get an interview with the Director-General of the National Museum who was actively involved during the design and construction phase of the National Museum project, the book on National Museum had a detailed account

by the Director-General of the National Museum on the design and architectural phases of the project, which helped to fill out the gap and provided in-depth information on the subject matter.

4.6.2. Observations

Observations were carried out to examine the objects, architecture and narratives and to a lesser extent the way the visitors and staff interact with the museum setting. In my fieldwork, I used two forms of observations: non-participant and participant observation. The non-participant observation was used to understand the physical environment of the museums under study and the social interactions and activities in the museum spaces. Initially, before I visited the museums, the information and data available through sources like articles and newspapers provided me with initial data on the institution's history and information on the museum that supported in setting the background for my visits.

In my initial visits to the museums, I felt like a visitor and generally experienced the museums following any directions or recommendations provided to me by the staff or where such was not available I tried to find my way through the museum like any visitor would. For example, in the National Museum, the support staff recommended me to start with a theatre film that provides a snapshot of the idea of Oman that is intended to support the museum experience and suggested then, to begin with the prehistory section. I followed the recommendation, which was a means to gain insight into the intentions of the museum's institution and its outlook on the consumption of the

produced national identity. On the other hand, when I visited the Land of Frankincense Museum I just continued my museum visit finding my way by myself through various sections and galleries. In my initial visits, I studied the museums' surroundings and took photos of the physical environments and collections to understand the different narratives and ideas being portrayed. In my initial visits, I usually focused to gather broader information on the main galleries, themes, on types of exhibits such as the collections of the Pre-history Gallery in the National Museum is archaeology or the gallery display of material culture like Omani dresses and jewelry in Bait Al- Zubair Museum.

Informational materials, such as signs, imagery, information boards, and brochures used in museums are also valuable research tools for analysing the narrative (Culler, 1988; Rakic and Chamber, 2008). In this research, the observations included reading the labels, captions and descriptions in the museums as well as studying the brochure information and illustrations that helped me to gain an understanding of the perspective of the nation that was projected through the museums' narratives.

The initial visits supported me to help shape the visits that followed, which were more focused on in-depth observations, and these visits were also beneficial in sequencing my observations. I went around the museum and looked at the narratives of the gallery, such as the key gallery descriptions, the labelling and the narratives of displays and objects. These non-participant observations in the museums were used to understand the choices of the objects and arrangements of the galleries and the exhibits since material culture and collections play such a critical role in the museums. I studied the

storyline presented and the way the exhibits and objects are arranged; for instance, I observed if they are arranged thematically or in an evolutionary way, to understand particular patterns and methodologies museums employ to represent the national identity.

Not only that, but I also looked for what was avoided, such as artefacts and archaeological that are found in the land of Oman were exhibited, but the archaeology from countries was not presented. I also examined which artefact, collection and version of the story or aspect of history are emphasised through their positioning, narratives and arrangements in the museum. Similarly, I looked at the architecture and focused on observing the setting and type of architecture and the particular image it intends to portray, such as elements like if the design shows continuity to the past or whether it is a contemporary design or a blend of traditional and modern design. The image and typology of museum architecture or buildings supported me in understanding particular formations and methodologies employed by museums to represent the nation through architecture.

Further participant observation is an important fieldwork method for determining how visitors perceive the museum's role and relate to the projections of the nation and position their own identities. In particular, the technique helped me understand how the museum users, both the visitors and staff, comprehend their particular viewpoints in context to the projected identity. The observations on the mutual interactions between the museum objects and architecture and the behaviours of visitors that occurred at the selected museum spaces were recorded, such as the conversations with Omani

visitors or how visitors responded to or reacted towards specific displays and information. The museum personnel and their dealings within the museum setting were also observed, for instance, guided tours provided by the museum staff, owners or the staff guidance that indicated the intended messages they wanted to transmit to the visitors on the museum experience. For example, I observed the exhibits popular among the visitors for taking pictures or the displays the guides preferred to spend time explaining a certain exhibit or object, which gave me input on what ideas of the nation they were focused on.

Hence the research included casual visits to the museums during the initial stages of fieldwork and then thorough visits to carry out detailed observation. These findings guided and informed my interviews as they supported to direct my question in the context of that particular museum. This also enabled me to fill out gaps on, for example, how and why a particular theme was chosen. For example, based on my observation in the museums, I directed my question regarding the three-aged system used at the National Museum that filled in the gap about the process and intention of the museum stakeholders behind adopting the particular system. However, the interviews also informed me further and I visited the museum again for any additional targeted observation required that enabled me to fill out any remaining gaps. This also allowed me to compare the interview information or any additional finding during the interviews with their actual projections within the museum.

The museum officials or managers of the case study museums were informed of the observations being carried out for a doctoral research project during the formal visit to

each museum. The interactions or discussion with the visitors were casual, I always informed the visitors about my purpose of visit and took permission on if it was acceptable for me to take note of their viewpoint and only if it was acceptable by them I would note down their opinion with their permission. The utilisation of the observations as research method aimed to capture a sense of what was intended to be shown in the museums and to some extent how the various visitors comprehend and position their collective identities in relation to the projected image and identity of the nation.

Field notes and photography was used to keep records of the observations. During my fieldwork, I took notes on every activity in which was involved, from visiting museums to the interviews. In these notes, I did not only describe what I saw, such as the arrangement and content of collections, exhibitions, narratives, built-structure and design, but also my own findings and feeling toward the settings, interactions, actions, conversations and interviews. The field notes were primarily handwritten, with a few exceptions. In addition, where handwriting was not possible, such as when I was doing direct observation, a digital camera was often used to record spatial events or circumstances. Photography was used to keep records of the museums' galleries and exhibits, architecture and layouts as well as, surrounding and certain actions of the users, that I reverted back to a number of times during the analysis process. Hence, photography was used as a way of keeping museums records for later reference, it also complemented the field notes and supported to save the observation immediately and spontaneously. A digital camera and digital camera phone were used to capture architectural and exhibits information, and spatial events. The people were not included as a part of the photographs. Although they were unavoidable for example in

the case of panoramic views, the photographs avoided focusing on particular individuals. Any photograph that shows a recognisable face has been used in the dissertation with permission.

4.6.3. Open-ended Interviews

For this study, I used *in-depth open-ended* interviews to understand the perspectives, roles, and influences of various stakeholders. *In-depth* interviews, according to Veal (2006), are especially useful when a limited number of individuals are involved in the phenomenon being studied or when it is important to examine the perspectives of various stakeholders. Further, the interviews in this study used open-ended questions. *Open-ended* subject-oriented interviews are frequently used to understand people's perspectives and feelings (Bryman 2008). When participants are engaging in open-ended interviews, rather than an interviewer incorporating certain assumptions into the interview, they will feel more motivated to express their thoughts and feelings. According to Cook and Reichardt (1979) conducting open-ended interviews is a process of exploration, and since the answers are not intended to fit into any predetermined category, there is always the possibility of receiving an unexpected response.

When I began my fieldwork, I thought that finding a suitable interviewee who is also willing to participate may be challenging. However, that was not the case and the persons contacted for the interviews showed willingness to participate. I utilised my previous knowledge, preliminary visits and observation stage to identify and connect

to the suitable interviewees (key informants/ key stakeholders). I initiated my fieldwork by approaching the Ministry of Heritage and Culture as this Ministry is the key authority involved in the role of managing heritage and museums, and my experience with the ministry enabled me to utilize my existing professional network to begin my fieldwork. I started with casual discussions that supported identifying my initial interviewees which were followed by submitting formal requests for carrying out the interviews for my research. Following this the snowball-sampling technique was employed to tap into suitable candidates through referrals of the possible interview candidates involved in the museum making scenario of Oman.

Interviews were carried out with those stakeholders who occupied high positions, had more decision-making capacities and had an important role in the museum making process in Oman. This included, the Undersecretary of the Heritage at the Ministry of Heritage and Culture, the directors and owners of the museums and those that were involved in the curation, design and collection. Hence, the participants chosen as interviewees were largely defined through their official positions within the museums and the wider museum sector. The interviews were carried out with the personnel's listed in the table 4.3.

The main issues covered in the interviews were: (a) the role, responsibilities and ambitions of each of the museums, their collections and curation and the architecture and its design; (b) involvement of stakeholders and challenges facing them; (c) the ambitions and challenges in the museum making process; and (d) how each view the role of the museum in the expression of the Omani national identity.

<i>Table 4-4 List of key interviewees</i>	
Nos.	Interviewees
1.	Undersecretary of Heritage at the Ministry of Heritage and Culture (Currently the Minister of Heritage and Tourism)
2.	Director of Collections Department of the National Museum (Also directed the curation of seven of the National Museum Galleries during the museum's development phase)
3.	Director of Learning and Community Outreach Department at the National Museum
4.	Director of Land of Frankincense Museum
5.	Director of the Bait Al-Ghasham Museum
6.	Director of People and Place Museum
7.	Owner and Collector of the Old Castle Museum
8.	Owner and Collector of the Madha Museum
9.	Museum Curator and Exhibitions Manager of Bait Al-Zubair Museum
10.	Director of the Sultan Armed Forces Museum

In Appendix A, it can be seen that the semi-structured questionnaire with open-ended questions that allowed for in-depth interviews included several introductory questions that almost all participants could answer. For example, to better understand the stakeholders and museums stance on Omani identity, I asked participants what they thought their idea of Oman and Omani identity was and how they expected the museums to depict it. Most of the questions were open-ended, and I allowed interviewees to express themselves as much as they wanted. The interviews were therefore open and relaxed, allowing them to feel comfortable sharing their experience and knowledge. Also, my personal position in the sector helped me to establish rapport with the informants. I also added focused questions based on my previous experience

in the field. For example, due to my involvement in museum projects, I already knew that the architecture of the museums had to meet certain design conditions thus I directed my questions to gain full information on the process and role of the various stakeholders involved. The follow-up questions were based on the previous answers or their contexts, and I skipped those that I thought were no longer needed, such as those that drifted from the topics or had already been answered.

All interviews were carried out in the English language except for the interview with the owner and collector of Madha Museum, which was translated from Arabic to English. The interview with the owner of the Old Castel Museum was partially in English and partially in Arabic. The interview was translated into English. However, most of the interviews were conducted in English because the museology, museum design and construction documents are developed in English primarily because international museology consultants or architectural firms are appointed or involved in the process. The language also becomes the bridging language for museum works that connect international contributors with national stakeholders. Being aware of the curatorial and architectural processes that are carried out in English owing to my previous experience in the field I had therefore conducted the interviews in English. All interviews were recorded and I had transcribed them later. Further, I was also taking notes during the interviews. I also had casual discussions with the visitors, guides and staff of the museums that I approach casually during my visits to museums. These discussions did not follow any formal format, and rather I took notes of this informal discussion sometime during the discussion and as soon as the casual discussion ended. The casual discussions had no limit of time and content and it merely depended on the

informants' interest and willingness to carry on a conversation. Sometimes I had just a mere exchange of sentence with a visitor and in other case the visitors may indulge into long conversation and share their experience and feeling about the museums and Oman. Another example of casual discussion is the notes I took of the casual conversation and discussions that was also carried out while the Director of Currency Museum was giving the tour of the Currency Museum.

4.7. Data Analysis

To explore the research questions, it was necessary to analyse the material I had collected during my fieldwork. This consisted of photographs of case study museums, onsite observations, information collected during the informal and casual discussions, audio recordings from interviews, written notes of interviews and discussions, transcripts of interviews and observations and related publications and information, such as brochures, books on the museums, museum articles, press statement and online publication and websites.

The museums, their collections, narratives, built forms and their presentations and interpretations widely explored in the field of sociological and museum studies are linked inextricably to the national identity (McClean, 1998; Jones and MacLeod, 2016). Therefore, the data analysis concerning the museum observations guiding this research is that the content, displays and the forms of the museums can provide valuable insights to the concepts of nation and national identity held and, by means of the museum's collections, its narratives and architecture, projected either consciously

or unconsciously by the authorities of these institutions. Further, as Hooper-Greenhill (2000) stresses, museums make visual statements through their visual representations; such as through their exhibits, collections, designs and built form. Hence, for analysis, the writing and narratives form the part of the material for analysis, in the same way museum can be seen as a form of a script, however, it is more than a written text because of its performative nature and the elements that are staged and can be visualised.

This approach toward the analysis of the content of the museum was applied to the aim and observational framework of the research, which in this case is the representation of national identity. Certain museums, objects, or aspects of museum's collections, narratives and architecture came to be the part of the analysis as compared to the others in term of their national identity significance concerning their cultural, historical, political and social backgrounds and context of Oman. My position as an internal participant in the Omani museum industry and external involvement as a researcher helped me to allocate such narratives within the right context. This allowed me to contextualise the content and narratives produced and reproduced by members of the official and museum community or on their behalf.

For processing the data, I went over all of my field notes, the interviews and casual discussions and compared them to audio recordings and photographic images to ensure to accurately represent the observations and circumstances. Apart from the defined questions within the interviews in which the answers can be compared, there were questions asked to the specific interviewee as well as existed the statements that

were expressed during the casual discussions. This meant that, I needed to consider most of those responses within its unique context and interviewees' characteristics. I had kept my field notes and the casual discussions notes in handwritten format. However, I had transcribed all completed interviews and typed additional conversation details by adding notes to highlight circumstances or aspects that needed to be recorded but was not articulated verbally. This provided a workable format that allowed me to refer to visible text instead of listening to the recordings while analysing and writing.

According to Ely et al. (1991: 150), there are two types of contents that researchers can look for when analysing texts. The first is the type of content that contains meaning that can be seen to run throughout all or most of the data being analysed (Ely et al., 1991). The second are those statements of meaning that can be in minority but can have a strong emotional or factual impact (Ely et al., 1991). Hence In this analysis, the primary data were analysed using this method as by recognising such themes, we can better understand how they work, as such data can reveal convergences and similarities or divergences or differences.

4.8. Ethical issues

According to Denzin and Lincoln (2000), the ethical code in research has traditionally focused on three main aspects. The first is *informed consent*, which refers to the need for researchers to seek and receive consent from research participants after carefully and truthfully briefing them on the study's intent and scope (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000:

662). The second is related to the individual's *right to privacy*, and the need for the researchers to protect the identity of all subjects participating in research and the last one concerns all participants which is related to the *protection from harm*, whether it is physical, emotional, or otherwise (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000: 662). As a result, in order to ensure the ethical needs are considered and avoid any harm to participants and the wider community this research was guided by the principles set out by the University of Birmingham's ethical standards. All materials used in the fieldwork, such as recruiting the research participants were subject to review by the University's research ethics panel, such as the recruitment/ participation letter (Appendix 2) and the participant consent form (Appendix 3). The fieldwork for this study began following the University of Birmingham ethics panel's approval.

During my fieldwork, I accessed and investigated the physical spaces and activities of the museums that everyone could access during my observations. As a result, there was very little chance that the information I recorded on those occasions could have caused harm to any particular person. Since obtaining consent is required for carrying out interviews, research consent forms were sent or given to the interviewees before the interviews, detailing how the interview materials will be processed and accessed. It also had a request for their permission to use the information gathered during their interviews, and their willingness to be identified in the study. Another ethical concern I had kept in view was the need to present accurate study findings and to ensure that the full range of data found is analysed, even if that data does not support the research's central hypothesis.

4.9. Conclusion

In this chapter I have described the theoretical approach underpinning related to research philosophies, and the methodological and analytical strategies in the study. I have provided the justification and rationale for the qualitative research approach and case study research methodology; that were considered suitable and adopted for achieving the objectives of this research that examines the relationship of museums and national identity. I have also outline why certain tools and methodologies were not considered suitable for this research and in the process and I have identified the limitations of this research and ideas for future research endeavours. In addition, in this chapter, I have described the key methods employed for data-gathering, which include documentation, open-ended interviews and observations. I have provided information on the ethical implications of the research and I have also described the researcher's subjective position and how it supported the process especially to identify and establish rapport with the interviewees. In the next two chapters I will present the findings from the fieldwork that has contributed to the analysis of the projections and the complexities of the relationship between the museums and the national identity in Oman.

Chapter 5

5. HISTORICAL REPRESENTATIONS OF THE NATION IN THE OMANI MUSEUMS

5.0. Introduction

This chapter deconstructs the projection of the past in Omani museums that reflect and shapes contemporary Omani values and identity. In the museums, the presentations of various aspects of the past play a significant role in anchoring the contemporary nation-state through the projections of shared history and long-term heritage; which evokes Anderson's (2016) notion of "imagined communities", an image of the past that can be collectively imagined and shared by the people of the nation. The multi-layered distant past of Oman is substantial in the framing of this imagined past and the expression of national identity.

In this chapter, I explore the key themes that revolve around the prehistory and ancient past, which extend the continuity of the nation from the distant past to the contemporary background. As the research aims and objectives are directly linked to the frame of national identity encompassed within the museums, therefore, this chapter will further consider the approach towards the Arab and Islamic identity in the museums, which form the rudimentary part of the projected Omani national identity. This chapter is primarily focused on exhibits of shared elements and particular historical aspects that

contribute to a sense of belongingness through the projections of belief, ancestry, territory and heritage. It is noted how such presentations cultivate legitimacy by assimilating the nation as one that on one hand, creates a sense of unity, and on the other, attempts to differentiate those who belong to the nation from those who are outsiders.

It is identified in the literature review that the focus on unity and cohesion in national identity equally entails the notion of diversity that requires unification. I have highlighted in the literature review that the museums in their presentations encompass explicit and implicit elements of heterogeneity, and the manifestation of national homogeneity is therefore problematic and challenging. The presentations of the nation in the Omani museums are thus problematised through the projections of various elements of Omani local diversity: encompassing various regional, geographical, communal, architectural, ethnic, traditional, and cultural differences. Consequently, the analysis in this chapter also turns on addressing how this is dealt with in the Omani museums.

In the process, it is also identified how the museums approach those overlapping aspects that are usually associated with cosmopolitanism, such as internal diversity, migration accounts, external influences and universal values in the representations of the nation (Mason, 2013). Such observations provide an insight into the characterisation of internal differences alongside the projections of a coherent and singular national identity, and shed light on the different ways the Omani museums frame collective identities and negotiate and construct meanings of national identity. Also, the aim is to illustrate the role of various internal and external stakeholders, and

the various overlapping inward and outward-oriented purposes the national identity framework serves.

5.1. The Role of the Histories of Archaeology in Presentations of the Antiquity of Oman

The display of collections and their narratives inextricably linked to the national identity are central to the projection of the historical expression of the nation in Oman in the museums. A number of Omani museums contribute to the image of ancientness through the exhibits of remote history, fossils, geology and terrain, archaeology, rock art and the supporting interpretations. For instance, the Bait Al-Baranda Museum and Natural History Museum exhibit fossils and geological records to illustrate the antiquity and longevity of the Omani terrain and hence that of Oman. The use of archaeology that supports the national identity's expression founded on empirical evidence aims to serve various nationalistic purposes, which is a widely used phenomenon in the Arabian Gulf countries. Similar to those in Oman, the Sharjah Archaeology Museum and the National Museum of Bahrain present various collections of the past that emphasise their long-term existence based on the exhibits that prompt the nations' long history. More significantly, such exhibits serve to propose a specific idea of the national longevity and contribute to legitimising particular contemporary identity claims based on the past. A well-known example from the Middle East region is the use of material from the past, specifically the Iron Age and Biblical archaeology, to illuminate the history of Judaism and endorse the Israelite Kingdom to justify Israeli identity (Petersen, 2005).

During my museum visits it was noticeable that in Omani Museums, the remote histories, particularly in context to archaeology plays an integral part in situating the Omani prehistoric and ancient past, which according to Kohl (1998) is widely employed in the nation-building process. In the National Museum and the Land of Frankincense Museum, the displays of archaeological collections and supporting narratives project the ancientness of the nation that serve to suggest continuity between ancient cultures and the contemporary nation-state. Other public museums, such as the Bait Al-Baranda Museum and the Muscat Gate Museum, do not present actual artefacts but reinstate the similar notion of ancientness through the means of various references to the archaeology and archaeological sites. Further, I observed that the museums that actively project archaeological findings, around which the story of Oman is articulated, are government-owned, and use archaeology as a form of hard evidence to present a pre-existing nation, prompting a nationalist concept that supports the national identity expression founded on empirical evidence. According to Smith (2011: 53), this not only projects the nationalistic conception but also strengthens the national identity through the exhibits of "the tangible remains of the distant material cultures". Further, the government agencies, more specifically the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, play an important role in collecting, monitoring and presentations of archaeology (interview, Minister of Heritage and Tourism). The government as the leading sector makes it largely a top-down process in relation to excavation, presentation and interpretation of archaeological discoveries and artefacts.

The private collection of archaeology and rock art presented in the Medha Museums is a distinct case as the archaeology endeavours in the Gulf Arabian region are

primarily carried out under the government's control. However, the development that included the design, construction, cataloguing of artefacts and collection of the Medha Museum was supported by the government. The development of the Medha Museum is a unique case that presents a combination of official interests and private efforts. This museum not only reinstates the idea of the ancientness of the Omani nation but also adds another layer of aspirations of community particularly non- government individual's ambitions towards the expression of Oman. The underlining impulse behind the private collection of Medha and the motivation of the government in the development of Medha Museum will be further explored in the upcoming discussions.

To put a context to archaeological excavations in Oman, the barriers to entry are incredibly high as the archaeology is primarily regulated by and through the government. All the archaeological activities are channelled through the government organisations of the Ministry of Heritage and Culture and the Office of the Advisor to His Majesty the Sultan for Cultural Affairs (Draft Cultural Heritage Law, 2019). This clearly points out the official control over the archaeological activities and thus the national identity discourse. It is stipulated in the Cultural Heritage Law, Article 39, that, "it shall not be permitted for any person from Oman or from abroad to undertake archaeological surveys and excavation works except after taking a licence from the Ministry of Heritage and Culture in the manner specified in the regulations" (Draft Cultural Heritage Law- Oman, 2019: 19). Under such a scenario, the archaeology in Oman, similar to the other Gulf States, is prone to the wider influence and authority of government; as Kohl (1998) reminds us that archaeology is particularly vulnerable to

state pressures through direct and indirect control over archaeological activities, even in the most democratic countries like the United States of America.

Petersen (2016) highlights that archaeological expeditions provide material, both as collections and as narratives, for the National Museums of the Gulf, and Oman is no exception. A wide range of archaeological expeditions are carried out by foreign archaeologists. Archaeological sites open to other nations to work on come with challenges for the state to control their own narratives. In Oman, the use of government-sponsored archaeological discoveries and artefacts are the principal material sources around which the story of Oman is projected in the state-sponsored museums, specifically in the projection of the prehistoric and ancient past of the country. Hence, the above contextualises the parallel undertakings of Oman and the other Arabian Gulf Nation-States related to the procurement of raw material for museums as resources for national identity expression.

However, I noticed that the museums only display the archaeology that has been excavated from Oman. This exclusive use of inward-focused archaeology is in contrast to exhibiting the archaeology of others, which is a common practice in several western museums. For example, the British Museum presents archaeology and artefacts from Egypt and Rome. Even though in presenting the others, “some experts have speculated that by amassing treasures from around the world, Western museums were expressing a continuous domination of the west” in the projection of the nation (Goode, 2007: 13). Nevertheless, the British Museum highlights it as a contribution “in bringing together under one roof the cultures of the world” (British Museum, ND: NP). Omani

museums differ in context to the nature of the content of the exhibits in this contested model of Western museums, carried out in several high profile Western museums that house objects from different parts of the world, embodying the notion of universal museums that intend to represent the world as a part of a single global or universal history.

Similarly, Omani Museums, by projecting the 'archaeological exhibits of Oman', differ from the new developments of museums in the Gulf Arabian Peninsula, like the Louvre in the United Arab Emirates, that follows the western model of the universal museum, presenting archaeology of other regions and cultures in an effort to "bring(ing) different cultures together" (Louvre Abu Dhabi, ND: NP). In doing so, such exhibits function as the manifestations of the Gulf's cosmopolitan ambitions and utilisation of a universalistic approach that prompt a dissimilar approach to that of Omani Museums in the selection and presentations of archaeology and histories of the past in the expression of the national identity and the relationship of Oman to the world.

I put forward my inquiry to the Director of the Collections Department of the National Museum during the interview on my observation regarding the use of inward-focused archaeology, and she confirmed and emphasised that "in this museum, everything on display is from Oman, nothing came from overseas, and the only things that came from overseas are displayed as part of the trade with Oman". I have observed a similar approach of selecting and presenting collections from Oman in other Omani Museums as well. The local collections and artefacts centre the concentration of presentations on Oman, giving an inwards-focused emphasis on the projection of national identity.

The discussions with some of the visitors at the National Museum and the Land of Frankincense Museum revealed that they have comprehended a clear message of the ancientness of Oman, legitimising claims relating to its existence over millions of years. For Omanis, the exhibits of antiquity instead (re)endorse the predetermined notion of the Omani nation. An Omani visitor said, "we have a long history and Oman is one of the oldest surviving nations of the Arabian Peninsula. The National Museum shows a good overview of our long history". I observed that the National Museum and The Land of Frankincense Museums project Oman's rich history through exhibits and narratives from the earliest human settlement in the Oman Peninsula to the present day. However, it was noticeable that the displays of continuity and longevity that appear natural and seamless looking constitute certain elements of its past that have been selectively appropriated in the museums to present the official discourse of the state. The discussion on the key themes intends to unpack the ways the historical expressions of the nation are shaped in the museum and the purposes they serve in the expression of national identity.

5.1.1. Assembling Antiquity in Public Museums – Continuity and Rupture

While discussing the museological frameworks adopted in the presentation of the histories of archaeology and the role of various stakeholders, Mouza Al-Wardi, who was in charge of curating more than seven galleries at the National Museum, and the current Director of Collections Department, highlighted the complexities in the creation of the storyline that intended to "cover the significant elements related to the history of Oman" (interview, Director of Collections Department NM). She pointed towards the

intertwined role of the local and international agencies concerning the interpretation of the archaeological objects. Further, in the interview, Mouza Al-Wardi expressed a great deal of focus on the missing information related to the archaeological material due to the lack of published materials on the archaeological collections held with the Ministry of Heritage and Culture before displaying it at the National Museum. She highlighted that the “gap was covered by the involvement of several archaeologists and experts, both national and international” (interview, Director of Collections Department NM). Nevertheless, the value and interpretation of the archaeology material by curators and archaeological professionals was carried out under the supervision of the official decision-makers of the Ministry of Heritage and Culture. Hence, the official ideological positioning that places the Omani prehistoric and ancient roots as significant to the presentations of national identity that are staged in the museums are a direct consequence of the top-down approach and the Ministry’s role of ownership, protection, narrations and presentation of these assets in the museums, constitutes the influences that complicate the process of the projections of the meaning of the nation.

As discussed in the literature review, the idea of continuity in nations creates momentum in tracing their origins and therefore constitutes significant value in the projection of a nation. Correspondingly, it is noticeable that the notion of continuity is an essential factor for identity projection portrayed in major Omani museums that are performed through the construction of a chronological narrative. For example, I saw that the National Museum and the Land of Frankincense Museum attempt to display a systematic and singular timeline to present the past. I realised that the national

performativity in the museums is constantly faced with challenges of change and adjustments when Mouza Al-Wardi informed (Interview, Director of Collections Department NM):

Initially, we wanted to start the display of the past, beginning from the early ages, flowing with the time, but we did not manage to do that because of the constraints, as the galleries had already been designed and two spaces [first two galleries of the Prehistory and Ancient past] had been already dedicated to the World Heritage Sites.

Generally, the idea that came across during the discussion with the Director of Collections Department was that it was important to project all the "significant topics of the history of Oman" (interview, Director of Collections Department). Hence, here the elements of national identity projection, such as prehistory and ancient history, were not in question; rather the arrangement of these attributes, for example, presentation of continuity versus categorical arrangements. In addition, the question was not whether the World Heritage Sites should assume significance in the museum presentations. The World Heritage Sites are considered significant in the presentation of Omani heritage, providing a supposedly uncontested collective past that re-appropriates cosmopolitan ideals of universal values speaking to humanity and humankind. Therefore, they are given key importance through their presentation, narratives and position in both the National Museum and the Land of Frankincense Museums. This discussion highlights the aspirations of portraying the continuity of the nation. Hence, the interview illustrates the significance given to the presentation of

Omani history in a continuous way that creates a sense of immemorial nationhood, a perspective of the perennial theoretical paradigm, but also the realisation that presenting it is not without its challenges and constraints.

The above examples cue a range of complexities behind the neat projection of the national identity within the museums. In the case of the National Museum, negotiations and selections were made based on the architectural limits related to the pre-designed World Heritage Sites' and the thematic Gallery of "Prehistory and Ancient History". As MacLeod (2013: 7) also reminds us, a museum building is where the domains of "architecture and museology collide". The new team was appointed on the project after the construction had already started. Therefore, the project was halted for one and a half years "to restudy and redesign galleries", as explained by Mouza Al-Wardi (interview, Director of Collections Department NM). She explained that due to the architectural constraints "we couldn't start the Prehistory and Ancient History Gallery in chronological order [as initially anticipated], and applied the timeline to the main Prehistory Gallery from Stone-Age to the Late Iron-Age". The interview also reflects on the competing aims to emphasise the sites of World Heritage Status, as well as the perceived value and importance of exhibiting the sites of Universal Value in the presentation of the nation. Hence, in museums like the National Museum and the Land of Frankincense Museum more than one narrative are in play to legitimise the national identity.

Furthermore, the discussion with the Director of Collections Department at the National Museum, Mouza Al-Wardi points to the fact that government museums are a result of

a myriad of ambitions, choices and a varied degree of influences at various levels. She explained:

When we worked on the storyline we did not work alone, we had experts. Generally, this storyline was approved by His Highness [HM Sultan Haitham Al Said], the current Sultan of Oman and the Minister of Heritage and Culture at the time] in the end. However, we always kept His Highness up to date. His Highness always knew what was happening in every step of the project" (Interview, Director of Collections Department NM).

Hence, museums' displays are not solely arranged as a result of the decisions at a macro level; some choices are also being made at a specialised and micro level. For example, the previous team that designed the project had dedicated two galleries of the Museum to the Aflaj system: an ancient irrigation system of water management, some 3000 of which are still active today in Oman and five of Omani Aflaj were awarded World Heritage Status. Whereas the new team had reduced the gallery to one and introduced the coin gallery. Mouza Al-Wardi explained, "Oman is quite rich in history and we wanted to make sure that major elements are covered" (interview, Director of Collections Department NM). Museum-making is a complex scenario subjected to various influences, choices and decisions, making such presentations of the nation a problematic and intricate phenomenon.

Similarly, the emphasis on the chronology and change-over time was decisively shaped by officials involved in the project of the National Museum and the Land of

Frankincense Museum to represent the history of Oman, and which does not come without its challenges. In the presentations of the nation, the use of chronological and evolutionary displays in the quest for presenting continuity is not an uncommon approach employed in museums. In the main and the third gallery of the “Prehistory and Ancient History Gallery” of the National Museum, the exhibits are arranged based on the three main archaeological periods: the early Palaeolithic (2,000,000-3100 BCE); the Bronze Age (3100-1300 BCE); and the Iron Age (1300 BCE-629 CE) (The Ancient History and pre-history Gallery introduction panel, NM). The Bronze Age is arranged in the middle of the hall spreading out and merging to the Iron Age and Palaeolithic Age at each end of the hall, respectively. Similar to the National Museum, the Land of Frankincense Museum also utilises the three-aged archaeological system to present "Oman in the early times" in the “History Hall” (Section Title, Land of Frankincense Museum). However, I noticed that there are differences in the range of chronological periods in the three-aged chronology presented in the National Museum and the Land of Frankincense Museum. These observations cue that the national identity presentation results from repeated acts through which it is (re)produced in the museums. However, the performance of national identity in the museums as an act of duplicating cannot achieve absolute stability and coherence and correspond to Lavi's (2013) assertion that when replicating the idea of a nation in the museum, it is never possible to execute a perfect reproduction. The reasons for the discrepancy between the timeframes related to the division of the chronology of ancient and prehistoric Oman become apparent as the discussion moves forward.

Mouza Al-Wardi implied that she faced several challenges in creating the galleries and "one of them was determining the chronology of the Omani history". The concept of dividing pre-historical ages into a three-aged system presentation is a European invention. Consequently, presentation of archaeology within the three-aged system had to be attuned to the Omani context as a structure was required that reflected the cultural and historical background applicable to Oman (interview, Director of Collection Department NM). According to Mouza Al-Wardi, it took several meetings and consultation with both national and international experts, but still, there was no agreement between the periodic ranges of the chronological ages. This points to the complexities in consideration of the application of international museology practices and standards, which have been largely developed in Western contexts, as well as the aspirations of local practitioners and specialists. Mouza Al-Wardi explained:

I took the chronological division in Oman from each team and created a singular chronological timeline for three main periods of Stone, Bronze and Iron-age periods and ensured that there were no overlaps in the periods, which was approved and agreed by all the experts and the heads involved in the process (interview, Director of Collections Department NM).

It is apparent that the use of a systematic approach and fixed timelines in approaching the presentation of the past was a conscious decision of the authorities around which the objects, narratives and storylines were positioned to stimulate the idea of a continuous, historical and natural evolution of Oman. Moreover, it was an important task, as according to Mouza Al-Wardi, "it was quite difficult to select objects when there

is no fixed chronology". While there was a tangible workability value of the chronological approach in presenting the prehistory and ancient history of Oman, as highlighted by the Director of Collections Department, however, by doing so they contribute to the development of a localised museological version of the past through the introduction of their own vocabulary, adapting to factors that were contextualised to the Omani setting.

5.1.2. Private Initiatives in the Presentation of Antiquity of Oman

Alongside the government's endeavours of systematic excavations of archaeology, exists private initiatives, where individuals have created private collections, responding to the rapid modernisation of Oman by gathering objects ranging from fossils to stone art, manuscripts and other material culture. Private collections have resulted in publicly accessible museums that range from locally shaped techniques to standard western museums displays with objects in showcases supported with labels and interpretations.

The Medha Museum is a consequence of one such non-elitist and personal initiative of Mohammed Salim Al-Medhani, a collector who decided to collect objects and archaeological artefacts in the Medha region for around four decades. The collector and owner of the Medha Museum, Al-Medhani explained that his efforts focused on the local artefacts and archaeology that could have been lost at the hands of development after 1970 in Medha, and stated, "At that time several objects were found, some were lost whereas some I was able to collect" (interview Collector/ Owner of

Medha Museum). His initiatives prompted his nostalgic desire to capture the material evidence before it disappears at the hands of new developmental plans. It is ironic that the oil economy and local infrastructure which "greatly facilitated the works [...] of archaeology of this otherwise inaccessible region" (Petersen, 2016: 97) also contributed to measures of rescue, and the loss of valuable heritage and objects, and as Al- Medhani claimed, "some was lost". He further added, "I was persistent in stressing its importance to the officials that these findings are of historical value" (interview, Collector/ Owner of Medha Museum). His collection that includes a diverse range of archaeological, heritage and historical exhibits, now exhibited in the Medha Museum, has emerged out of a reaction to Oman's rapid growth following the oil boom.

The collector, Al-Medhani, is proud to have saved the "assets that belong to the Omani Nation in order to present the long history of Oman for the consumption of future generations" (interview, The Owner of Medha Museum). When I spoke to Al-Medhani, it was clear that the idea of representation of Oman through his collection is predominant in his mind and every time I questioned him about any of the artefacts exhibited at the Medha Museum, his instant response was that "it is Omani heritage or it is Omani". A majority of the exhibits presented at this museum are from Medha, but based on the collector's response, it is clear that for him these collections are representing the Omani nation, making the national context primary.

Hence, the state is not the only agency that is promoting the ancient continuity of Oman, the underlining motivations behind this museum for the government and collector alike are to represent the historical legacy of Oman through the collections

and artefacts. Further, this also points towards the desire of non-governmental individuals and the community to play their role in the expression of the nation. The community supported Medhani's endeavours and asked the government for a museum to house his collections. Ultimately, a discussion raised by a few young Omanis on Twitter concluded in a grant from the government to develop the Medha Museum. Even if the underlining motivations of the government and the community propose overarching notions of representing Oman, this suggests a process that constitutes an interplay between elites and Omani society; in which, as Smith (2009: 19) points out, "their ideals and needs influence each other and help to shape the national identities and ideologies". In this case, the interplay between the elites and government agencies and the community supports the non-government individual initiatives towards projecting the nation. This highlights the contributions of the Omanis to project the nation and their ambitions to be projected as part of Oman.

These motivations and efforts that attempt to represent Oman and Medha through the collections take an imperative position in the case of the Medha Museum, considering that Medha (part of the Governorate of Musandam) is an enclave surrounded by the United Arab Emirates (UAE). It is the only territory between Oman and the UAE which does not have a barrier and no borders to the UAE. Besides, Oman as a geographical and cultural entity included the Oman Coast, also known as the Trucial Coast or Trucial Oman until the independence of the United Arab Emirates in 1971 (Peterson, 2019). Consequently, these regions that have recently embodied separate political boundaries lack both cultural and social distinctness. Hence, the initiatives of the collector and the government are vital for raising a significant testimonial appropriated

for modern political ends that asserts a 'political community', the main tenet of the modernist paradigm, through the archaeological and traditional exhibits that endorse long-term national connectivity, creating a sense of a particular collective past. This is in contrast to the assertion of 'otherness' based on a 'distinct cultural community' attributed to the nation in the perennial paradigm (Smith, 1998). Keeping in mind the geopolitical sensitivity of Medha and in general, the strategic location of the Musandam Governorate, the Medha Museum and its collections not only promote a shared past and common heritage in the manifestation of the nation, but produce an implicit statement that reasserts territorial claims, a message of national authority and a testimonial of belongingness of the Medha and Musandam Governorate as a part of Oman.

Hence, keeping in view the discussions in this section, the museums that present the archaeology, are platforms to portray the national identity around the archaeological material and their interpretations that link contemporary Oman with its longstanding history, and promote the ancient and glorious past through the use of archaeology and discoveries of the past. However, they also articulate the local and regional concerns and anxiety that is a result of rapid changes and a need to display the past. Both the private and the public collections and displays of the past in the museums of Oman are a product of modernity and globalisation, which present a certain localised notion of time, historical discourse and important ruptures; this will be accounted for in the upcoming discussions.

5.2. Displaying the Virtues of National Identity

The museums of Oman encompass certain impressions and themes of the past in positioning the discourses of national identity that encompass particular claims about the origins of the nation and what the nation is or what it is not. Smith (2009) points out the importance of not discounting the pre-modern roots of the nation to achieve a sense of belongingness and long-term durability, by connecting to previous cultural and political structures. These potentially serve assorted purposes in strengthening the national identity through the choices of subjects, exhibits, narratives, layouts and arrangements. The museums of Oman overemphasise specific pre-modern roots such as prehistoric roots associated with Magan, the rediscovered ancient civilization of the fourth millennium BC, as well as Arab Islamic roots that conversely de-emphasise certain pre-nation roots such as ethnic variations and communal migration histories. Hence, the projections of the pre-modern roots of the nation is not a straightforward and uncontested process. The museums of Oman in the search of homogeneity the museums of Oman idealise certain aspects of past and previous cultures and contain within their presentations a number of historical processes tied to local and global complexities, which both encompass and challenge the historical reality.

This section identifies the key themes and virtues of the nation that receive prominence in the museums and formulate the fundamental features of the national identity of Oman. In the process, I also point to the competing discourses and overarching ideas of the nation associated to concepts like universalism, cosmopolitanism and globalisation that have a complex relationship and at times co-exist with nationalism

which sets up a tension between the seamless looking presentations of the singularity of origin portrayed through representations of antiquity. Examples include the competing presentations on issues related to being a part of world community, ethnic identities, external contacts, migration and how they are embraced in the museums to produce the expression of the nation. Below I identify the foremost components of representations of the nation observed in the museums that reinstate the origins of Oman as central to the expression of the nation.

5.2.1. Exhibiting the Nation's Antiquity

In the search for a “usable national past” (Berger 2015: 14) a number of public museums through their presentations of the past origins and longevity, evoke the notion of the perennial school of thought by placing firm holds on historical foundations providing an insight into the lives of the early inhabitants of this region. In such a presentation of the prehistoric past, the Omani nation is generally presented as a group of human associations with a shared past supported with displays of artefacts and narratives. Such associations link the collective past of the nation in parallel to that of the world and human history, endorsing shared ancient human features derived from cosmopolitanism connected to its ideas of ‘the world citizenship’ rather than the notion of what sets humans apart in different groups and cultures (Nussbaum, 1997; Diogenes Laertius, in Kleingeld and Brown, 2014). For instance, I noted that it is explicitly stated in the introduction to the section on "Oman in Early Times" of the Land of Frankincense Museums that "in many regions of Oman different settlements date back to the beginning of the human civilisation" (Section Introduction Panel, LFM).

Similarly, Bait Al-Baranda has dedicated a hall to the "Earliest Human Settlements in Muscat" which highlights that "for ages, Muscat has been a great place to live [...] from as early as 10,000 BC [BCE]" (Gallery introduction Panel, BBM). Such projections of remote archaeology offer advantages by equipping the contemporary nation with an unproblematic collective past that advocates that the "roots of countries were extended back into the mists of the prehistoric past" (Kohl, 1998: 240; 228). Such claims that constitute within them competing attributes of a 'national' character that exhibits a connectivity to the land and ancient population and the 'universal' values that extend to shared human associations coexist in the museums. However, in contrast to the universal ideals of belongingness to the world, in this case the local membership, the nation remains significant in the expression of national identity.

In the same way, during my as I walked through the exhibitions I realised that a number of public museums present several World Heritage Sites in Oman that "transcend national boundaries and [are held] to be of common importance for present and future generations of all humanity" (UNESCO, 2019: 20). The World Heritage Site (WHS) listing as a key benchmark of western heritage values has been critiqued in the literature over the last few decades due to the lack of relevance of its categories to non-western heritage forms (Smith, 2006; Harrison, 2013; Winter, 2013). For instance, in the example of the Saudi Arabian World Heritage Site of Mada in Salih, the listing is criticised due to its links to a broader prehistorical discourse and limited relationship with local Islamic history, which according to Exell and Rico (2014) holds within it negative connotations for the local community. In contrast to such concerns related to deviation from key national and local identity references, such as those of Islam in the

case of Saudi Arabia, in Omani Museums, such a distant past openly projects previous religious, social and cultural aspects of the nation which may produce competing sociocultural pasts.



Figure 5-1 *The Land of Frankincense Museum, The History Gallery, (from left to right) 1) Engraved head in Limestone, 2) Incense burner with decoration of animals and design that resembles the tiara of the Mesopotamian divinities and 3) Statue of lion. All dated to the Iron Age, displayed as new finding in 2008 from the World Heritage Site of Sumhuram in Oman. (Photo by the author)*

The National Museum and the Land of Frankincense Museum provide references to the temples and ancient rituals when exhibiting the archaeological sites in Oman, including those listed as World Heritage Sites. For example, when I was walking through the History Gallery of the Land of Frankincense Museum, I saw that the temples, worship places, deities and ancient cultures displays unrelated to

contemporary societies are included in the exhibition of the Sites of the Frankincense Trail, which is inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in recognition of the importance of the frankincense trade present. For instance, the ancient temples displays in Figure 5.1, exhibit archaeological objects with animal and human impressions and carvings dating from 2nd century BCE to 4th Century BCE which are in contrast to the use of non-figurative forms that predominates the Islamic style. The Sumhuran Archeologically Gallery that presents the findings and information on the Sumhuran World Heritage Site in Oman exhibits a hypothetical model of the ancient temple in Figure 5.2. Such appropriations of the distant past that tend to lay out how contemporary Oman is identified in the past are contextualising an evolving and evolutionary scenario of the nation.

Moreover, I noticed that the narratives linked to the ancientness further articulate competing characteristics of the nation, by making their being Oman-specific parallel to the sites of universal value and by doing so make the Omani context equally significant. These narratives endorse a characterisation of cosmopolitanism that appropriates ancient Oman within a positive portrayal, referring to the openness of Oman as a result of the past interactions between local and global entities and between different cultures. Such appropriations endorse the foundations of a contemporary political dimension of international relations and diplomacy that cues a continuity of openness associated to the relationship between Oman and other nations and hence, contributing to an outwardly focused national image. For instance, the listed World Heritage Site of Baat exhibited in the National Museum is said to indicate “Oman’s first civilisation” and “the networks that bound them together with Mesopotamia, Persia and

Indus valley civilisation” (Prehistory and Ancient History Gallery, NM). Similarly, in both the Land of Frankincense Museum and the Oman National Museum narratives highlight the long-distance trade and links to other civilisations as seen in Figure 5.4 exhibited in the Land of Frankincense Museum.

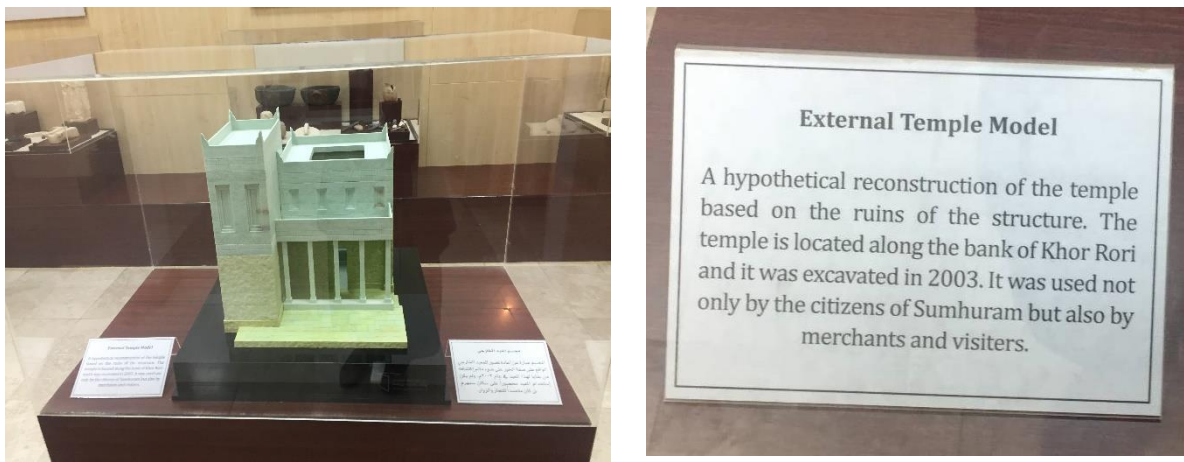


Figure 5-2 The Sumhuram Archaeological Gallery, display of External Temple Model, a hypothetical reconstruction based on the ruins of the external temple located at a World Heritage Site of Sumhuram in Oman.

Source: Author.

Figure 5-3 The Sumhuram Archaeological Gallery, Caption of the “External Temple Model” in figure 5.2.

Source: Author.



Figure 5-4 The Land of Frankincense Museum, The History Gallery, The map of The Frankincense long-distance trade routes- Circa 3rd millennium BCE.

Source: Author.

Reflecting nationalism as a feeling that one's nation is superior to others and with the potential of antique roots underlining the strengths of the nation in comparison to others (Smith, 2004; Schatz et al., 1999), certain settings in the museums highlight the national prominence in comparison to other countries. As I walked through the prehistory section of the National Museum, a hand axe (Circa, 2,000,000) found in Oman stood out among other objects, and it was elaborated in the description that it is "the oldest man-made object [...] ever found in the Arabian Peninsula" (Object panel, National Museum). I also noticed that this ancient axe was the first object of the "Prehistory and Ancient History Gallery" introduced by the museum guide Halima Al Mamani during a guided tour of the National Museum. She explained, "*here is the*

oldest object we have in the National Museum, and it is also the oldest object in the Middle East which goes back to 2 million years" (National Museum Guide, 2019).



Figure 5-5 The National Museum, Prehistory and Ancient History Gallery;

Label: Prehistory, Hand-axe: The oldest man-made object, flint stone, Circa 2,000,000 BCE;

Part description: Stone hand-axe is the oldest man-made object ever found in the Arabian Peninsula, estimated to be 2 million years old [...] vital evidence of the movement of early human populations [...] a reminder that many of the Oman's desert landscape were fertile, habitable places in prehistoric times.

Source: Author.

Figure 5-6 The National Museum, Prehistory and Ancient History Gallery;

Label/description: what is it? No one knows what this object is [...] What do you think?

Source: Author.

Though the use of supporting narratives, the displayed axe, along with other archaeology as material evidence in this section indorses Oman as one of the oldest habitats for the earliest known human groups of the region. However, the identification of the axe being the oldest in the Gulf region already points out a distinguished feature of Oman in comparison to the other Gulf States. Just being the owner of the oldest existing object simulates a certain level of supremacy and that Oman has the oldest object prompts a claim for the most prolonged existence in the region. Extended Omani history becomes a source of stimulating the national identity expression that allows for a feeling of pride and glorification in relation to others.

In contrast to this, a uniquely exhibited artefact in Figure 5.6 in the “Pre-history and Ancient Gallery” of the National Museum, is left to the visitor’s interpretation with no guiding narratives; instead, a question is posted asking: “what is it?” Like other exhibits, this artefact points towards the antiquity and longevity of Oman. Nevertheless, this raises the significance of the narratives in the museums and the expression of the nation. As such this non-descriptive exhibit of the past stimulates a contrast to the exhibits of antiquity supported by narratives that enfold various overreaching notions and messages, contributing to more than just projecting roots of the nations “extended back into the mists of the prehistoric past” (Kohl, 1998: 228). Clearly, as pointed out above through the re-appropriation of the distant past in the museums, the lifeless objects become endowed with national meaning that encompass within various selective and overlapping notions of national, local, global, universal attributes embedded within presentations of the nation that are both contesting and contributing to the nationalistic framework.

5.2.2. Appropriating Ancient Magan for Contemporary Oman

The government-driven efforts, research and archaeological excavations aimed at compiling information on the Magan have led to an organised narration of the Magan civilisation. The official efforts and processes of positioning the Magan as Oman include the initial initiatives of the Ministry of Heritage and Culture in hosting an international symposium in April 2004, aimed at summarising existing information on the Magan. According to Valeri (2009: 141), the political motivation for this conference was to reassert “Oman’s roots from Magan”. The notion of Oman as Magan is articulated in official narratives at least since the late nineties, which precedes the archaeological discoveries in the context of the Magan civilisation in the country. These studies drew the identification of contemporary Oman together with ancient Magan from the ancient textual resources. A Ministry of Information 1995 publication on the achievement of Oman recounts major episodes in the Omani past and milestones that have marked the way to the contemporary era. This publication highlights the notion that Oman was Magan based on the references of the region “in hundreds of Sumerian and Akkadian scriptures” (Ministry of Information, 1995: 21). Hence, as Omani ancient heritage, the Magan civilisation is thus inherently a modern concept that is rediscovered as a response to the need for the political legitimacy of the contemporary nation-state. Much like in Jordan the ancient site of Petra is a suggestive way of expressing the legitimacy of state power by establishing an imagined relationship between Nabatean past and the Hashemite present (Farajat, 2012).

The archaeological excavation and scholarly studies concentrated to rediscover the Magan have played a vital role in displaying and validating the expression of contemporary Oman as ancient Magan, which is presented in the Land of Frankincense Museum and is also elaborated in the theme-based section on “Magan” in the National Museum. In comparison to the Land of Frankincense Museum, the National Museum has adopted a focused approach in projecting the Magan through a dedicated storyline. For example, in the National Museum, the Magan civilisation is spread across the Bronze Age such that it stands out as the Magan civilisation. Whereas in comparison to this, in the History Hall of the Land of Frankincense Museum additional panels are placed close to the Bronze Age artefacts as added information on copper mining and no further connotation of Magan is made. In addition, both the National Museum and the Land of Frankincense Museum present references of Magan as Oman in their Maritime galleries. Keeping in mind that there is a difference of almost nine years between the inaugurations of these two museums, the further developments in research and archaeological findings on the Magan civilisation have reflected in the presentations in the National Museum. This has resulted in a more comprehensive and focused storyline in the National Museum where direct connotations are made to the Magan civilisation and the archaeology to validate the claims of ancient Omani roots as Magan.

In the “Ancient and Prehistory Gallery”, the presentations of the transition from the Stone Age to the Magan era in the National Museum presents a shift from the prehistoric lifestyle. The storyline and exhibits in this section of the “Prehistory and Ancient History Gallery” highlight the advancements in the lifestyle of this peninsula

during the Magan civilisation. This is achieved through the titles and narratives in this section boldly highlighting the Magan civilisation. Further, it was visible that Oman and the Magan civilisation are approached in a way that as you move around, the Magan civilisation in this museum can be read interchangeably as Oman. Also, making direct connotations to Magan as Oman is a panel in the “Maritime Hall” of the Land of Frankincense Museum that exhibits “Magan trading routes” overlaid on a map of contemporary Oman as in Figure 5.7. Similarly, the Bronze Age section of “the Ancient and Prehistory Gallery” at the National Museum is full of such connotations. In the “Maritime Gallery” of the Oman National Museum as well ‘Oman’ is expressed as the modern state name for ‘Magan’, as ‘Iraq’ is for ‘Mesopotamia’, following a similar pattern to the description of the Magan trading routes presented in the Land of Frankincense Museum in Figure 5.8. A replica of a cuneiform tablet at the “Maritime History Gallery” of the National Museum informs that the “tablet lists the materials needed to build a fleet of boats which could sail from Ur, a Sumerian city-state in Mesopotamian (Iraq) to Magan (Oman)” (Object label- Maritime Gallery, NM).

In the National Museum, a number of artefacts are displayed to present the Magan, that aim to illustrate the richness of Omani cultural heritage and history. Examples are the oldest known incense burner, imported materials such as pots, pottery and jars, as well as the description panels that instil the ideas of an ancient Arabian way, strategic significance and extensive exchange, inclined to create a historical continuity to the Arabian Peninsula by pointing out the ancient Arabian ways. However, ancient Omani roots outshine the wider Arabian context as the exhibits are focused on the projecting

of Magan – an ancient civilisation explicit to Oman, creating a sense of nationhood that according to Smith (2004: 17) grows out of “we” opposed to “them”.

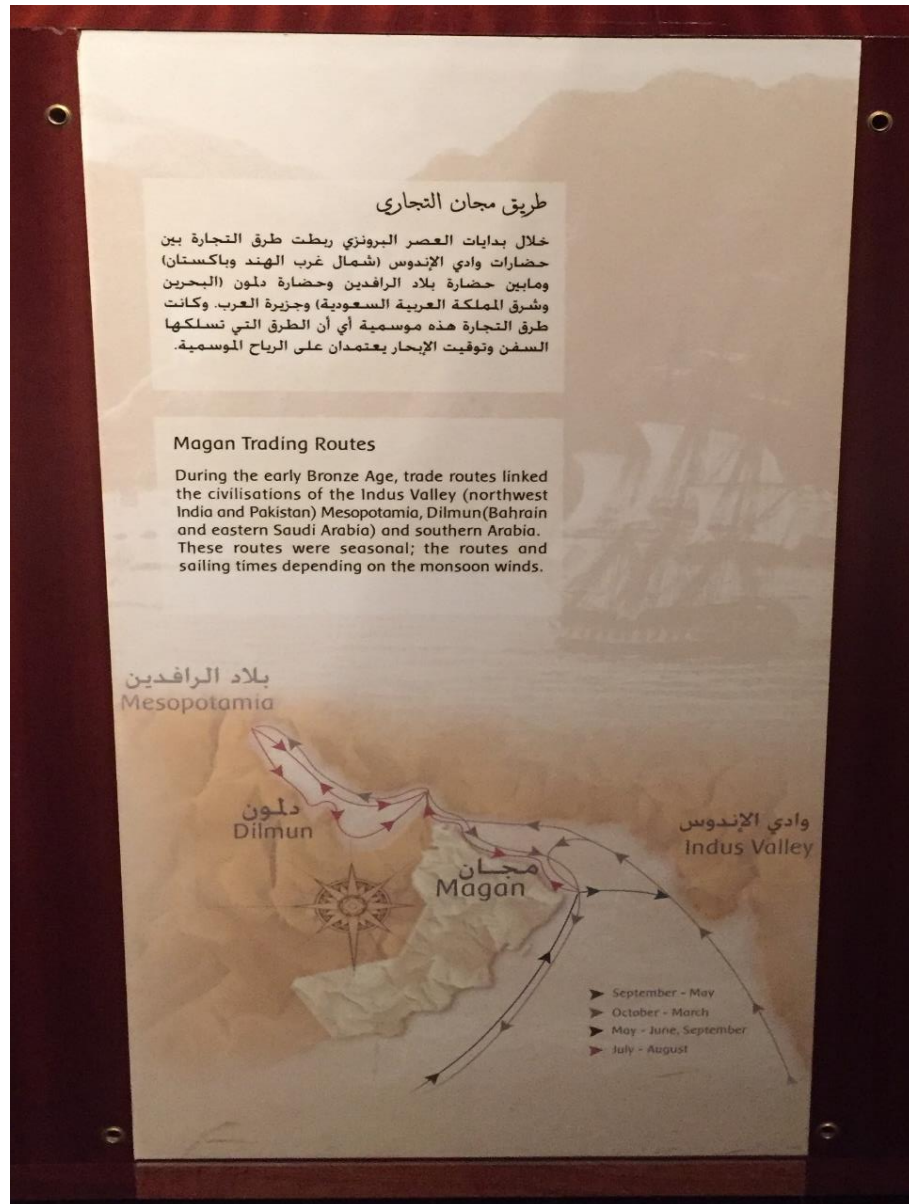


Figure 5-7 The Land of Frankincense Museum, The Maritime Hall, A panel mapping the Magan trading routes with description.

Source: Author.



Figure 5-8 National Museum, Pre-history and Ancient Gallery, Full size reconstruction of Magan Boat

Source: Author.

Archaeological exhibits like the ancient seals are displayed in the National Museum and include the seals of the Magan civilisation along with those of Indus and Mesopotamia excavated from the archaeological sites of the Middle Bronze Age. These exhibits serve to present testimony to the importance of Magan, highlighting the commercial contact between the Magan and other civilisations. In addition to the archaeological remains, projection of the Magan civilisation is developed and maintained through other means, to fill out gaps in the storyline. For instance, along with other cuneiform references and exhibit, the prototype of a Mesopotamian cuneiform tablet in Figure 5.9. with literary text mentioning Magan with the translation “that celebrates the fabled riches of Far-off Magan” is reproduced and exhibited (object label, NM). This endorses the significance of Magan, elevated by its validation from

external sources from other civilisations of significance. In addition, a model of a Magan boat, a full-size reconstruction, figure 5.8, is introduced in “the Pre-history and Ancient Gallery” at the National Museum. A miniature model of a Magan boat is also presented along with other models of “Omani vessels” under the sub-title of “the maritime routes of Omani Ancestors”, at the “Maritime History Gallery” of the National Museum (Object label, National Museum). It is narrated that the Magan boat “sailed the waters of the Oman Sea and Arabian Gulf, carrying large cargoes to possibly as far as Mesopotamia and Indus Valley” (Object label, National Museum). Consequently, structuring beyond the archaeological findings provides a cohesive storyline that pins what Oman was known as in ancient times and its origins of seafaring characteristics.



Figure 5-9 National Museum, Pre-history and Ancient Gallery, Exhibit replica of Mesopotamian cuneiform tablet

Source: Author.

As seen above, in the National Museum and the Land of Frankincense Museum, the Magan civilisation is contextualised in cuneiform texts, raw material and trade and maritime relations. These presentations propose “the history [of Oman] presented at the intersection of cultures” as highlighted in the official narratives issued by the government (Ministry of Information, 2018: 28). This, in turn, attributes to strengthening the national identity projection, keeping in view that the maritime and trading nature of the nation are important attributes of Omani identity that place Oman as “a maritime leader at the centre of hugely important trade routes linking to ancient China, India and Mesopotamia” (Ministry of Information, 2018: 28). Moreover, such presentations of interaction with peoples of different lands, creating trade relations, and having had extensive regal exploits, contribute to what Funsch (2015) views as a melting pot narrative shared among Omanis, and are sustained throughout the museums, contextualised within various epochs and themes. Hence, on one hand, such narratives implicitly prompt the cosmopolitan character of the nation in context to openness related to foreign encounters. On the other hand, it promotes a past of symbolic value that is shared by the community with a diverse population due to its long history of different ethnic groups mixing and moving in and out of Oman. Hence, such narratives are significant features of the nation-building exhibits that propose a collective recurring past that Omanis of different background can relate to and as Elgazzar et al. (2020: 18) claim “whether of Baluchi, East African, Persian, or Arab heritage, all Omanis value the history of the nation as a major sea-faring power and adhere to these ancient feelings of being a nation”.

As it can be seen from the earlier discussion, the presentation of the Magan is purely focused on creating a testimony that presents territorial historical links between Oman and the Magan civilisation. The projections and description in the National Museum suggest that Magan communities that existed prior to the contemporary nation-state enjoyed social, economic and commercial prosperity. The historical context of such narratives in actuality indicates the existence of a theoretical rupture between the Magan past and contemporary Oman. For instance, when we study the narratives they are rich in explaining the findings and their origins, whereas the socio-political elements are missing or trivial, such as the political system, the social system, traditions and rituals; hence, the historical context to support such narratives embodies a rupture between the Magan past and contemporary Oman. Such historical distinction between these two periods is of the least significance in the presentations. In addition, I noticed that the National Museum and the Land of Frankincense Museum do not present any narratives of pre-historic biological ancestry related to the Magan civilisation. Hence the National Museum and the Land of Frankincense Museums presents Magan as a rediscovered past which is linked to the geography or territory of ancient Oman to project a sense of continuity and belongingness, elements vital to the national identity projection.

Oman is not the only Arabian Gulf country that has attempted to position its past in conjunction with previous civilisations. There appears to be a similar sort of pattern that has attracted initial research founded on the references of ancient civilisations in the region, mostly based on the evidence of ancient texts and sources such as cuneiforms (Petersen, 2016). Archaeological sites related to ancient civilisations such as Dilmun,

Umm-en-Naar and the Magan civilisation, assume significant positions in the projection of the ancient roots of Bahrain, UAE and Oman respectively to present a distinct culture. Similar to the Oman National Museum that presents the finding from of the Magan civilisation, the Bahrain National Museum houses a rich collection of artefacts from the ancient Dilmun (Jeong, 2016), just like the Abu Dhabi Louvre presents artefacts from the Umm-en-Naar archaeological sites (Langton, 2019).

The focus of the presentation of ancient civilisations in the Museums of the Gulf draws on the factors of distinction, such as the positioning of Magan as contemporary Oman and Dilmun as contemporary Bahrain; whereas UAE marks Umm-en-Naar as the ancient capital of Abu Dhabi. However, as discussed in the literature, the nations are fluid, and in ancient Oman, the geographical borders would have included 'Trucial Oman', which now is under the umbrella of the UAE. Potts (2001) has confirmed that the archaeological excavations and surveys have identified Magan with Oman as well as parts of UAE (Umm-en-Naar). However, the presentation of ancientness projects a neat display of ancient links which maintains a silence on the overlapping characteristics, complexes and commonalities of the ancient civilisations that knitted together the ancient Arabian Gulf, and explicitly focuses on elements that set them apart from each other. In other words, the past is re-appropriated for modern ends by discounting the fluid characteristics of ancient territories and civilisations of the Arabian Gulf, in the presentation of a distinct self, compared to others, and endorsing political sovereignty by establishing a link of a rediscovered past to the contemporary Oman.

5.2.3. The Projection of the Arab Identity and Positioning of Non-Arab Communities in the Museums

The Arab identity is an active element of the Omani national identity. The Omani constitution, Chapter one, Article 1, defines that "the Sultanate of Oman is an Arab, Islamic, Independent State with full sovereignty" (Basic Statute of the State, 1996). In the museums too, it is explicitly identified as a crucial part of the Omani nation. The introductory film at the National Museum appropriates the characterisation of Arabness by explicitly narrating the links of the Omani civilisation to the high point of arrival of Arabs, through claims that around 1000 BCE "our people arrived, the Al Azd Arabs from the South. It was a dawn of a new identity" (Film, the National Museum). Such expressions of the ethnic identification are central to the character of an Omani nation that in accordance with Smith's idea (1986: 32) is formed out of a pre-modern *ethnie* that inoculates "shared ancestry myths, histories and cultures, having an association with a specific territory, and a sense of solidarity".

Embedded in the Omani territorial and migration histories, the "Prehistory and Ancient History Gallery" also introduces the arrival of Arabs and exhibits the archaeological findings from the heritage sites of Arab occupation to highlight the strong Arab hold in Oman. The first gallery, the "Pre-Islamic Gallery" at the Sultan Armed Forces Museum, is also dedicated to the arrival of the first Arabs in Oman and their victories against Persians. One of the panels on this subject in the Sultan Armed Forces Museum describes:

The immigration of Azd to Oman under the leadership of Malik Bin Faham, following the collapse of the Ma'rib Dam in North Yemen, strengthened the Arab presence in Oman leading to the end of Persian rule in the country.

Generally, the researchers agree on the Azd Arab migration marking the beginning of Arab roots in Oman (Peterson, 1990; Valeri, 2009; Wilkinson, 2010). However, pointing towards the complexity of the straightforward presentations in the museums is the research of Wilkinson (2010). He highlights that Azd migration took place in waves connected to the diaspora of Arabs both from North and the South (Wilkinson, 2010). It is noticeable in the presentations that the exertion of Arab roots focuses on the earliest diaspora of Azd that arrived from the South. Situating prominence on the origin of Arabs based on the earliest migration in Oman as compared to the process of Arab migration in Oman has its advantage in the presentation of the nation. Doing so links the Arab diaspora which surpasses the ethnic and tribal complexes, keeping in mind that the roots of the tribal system is a product of the Arab arrival, and the Arab tribal genealogy is a complex subject matter (Wilkinson, 2010).

Such exhibits are in line with the modernist view of the nation as a political phenomenon in which the national identity projection is widely focused on the idea of homogeneity in the national identity framework (Anderson, 2016). Moreover, they also conform to the treatment of the nation as a cultural phenomenon where the ethnic conception of national identity contributes to unity and homogeneity (Smith, 2003). Within the contemporary nation-building, the Arab identity is used to unify and create a feeling of belonging to a common ancestry, which remains above the tribal and local

allegiances that people were used to referring to in the past. This also creates a projection that breaks away from the tribal variations, which remains important for uniting the citizens for modern political ends.

While the majority of the population of Omanis are Arab, contemporary ethnic backgrounds and differences in Oman, such as Persian, Baluch, Indian and other ethnic backgrounds as identified in the context chapter automatically get discounted within the claims of Arab identity when associated to ethnic claims. Hence, even though the Arab identity connected to the ancient past attempts to present a timeless character to unite the citizens, contesting such ideas are the various non-Arab ethnic identities that exist in the society, which do not conform to the projections of homogeneity. In the context of the ethnic presentations in the Omani museums, such exhibits of differences are usually observed within presentations of other elements of the nation; for instance, the projection of the collective identities in the displays of geographical and cultural variations, or maritime and trading influences. Such exhibits propose challenges to the accounts of homogeneity that are central to the expression of Oman national identity. However, these exhibits of diverse culture remain in contrast to the generalised claims of official side-lining of the ethnic diversity in the Gulf, in favour of narratives centred around “Bedouin Arab origin and heritage”; which various researchers like Partrick (2009) and Al-Mutawa (2016: 22) view as dismissing the cultural diversity and hybridity in the region in order “to promote a pure’ Arab history, culture and present”.

Smith (2003) associates this route to the national identity founded on ethnic conceptions in the quest of authenticity through rediscovered and appropriated

selective ethno-history and revival of ethnic symbols for the countries of the Middle East. However, in the museums of Oman the presentations widely propagate cultural diversity, both public and private museums contribute to presentations of a variety of cultures and traditions prevailing in Oman. Within the theoretical framework of national identity such conceptualisation of the nation providing an overarching framework that celebrates the ethnic and cultural diversity is widely associated with countries like the United States of America, Canada and Australia that are composed of culturally different immigrants that make up the population (Smith 2003). However, in the Omani museums, various communal diversities are projected in parallel to the dominant Arab ethnic identity, encompassing cultural differences and various other non-Arab communities owing to the geographical variations, historical migrations, seafaring and trading history. The Minister of Heritage and Tourism also emphasised in the interview that the various aspects of Omani diversity, such as cultural, geographical and architectural diversity “should be exhibited, celebrated and passed on to the young generation” (interview, Minister of Heritage and Tourism). Therefore, the national identity framework in Oman is treated as a wider political or cultural phenomenon focused on elements of singularity and homogeneity, and limits the understanding of the routes to its formation, unless the understanding is grounded on how diverse ethnic and cultural identities are institutionalised or negotiated within the framework of the nation.

Nevertheless, in the context of the stories of migration and distinct ethnic backgrounds, the most explicit identifications are made in the Arab migration history that conforms to the major discourse of the Arab identity of Oman. The narratives and presentations in

several museums embrace the connections to the Indian Ocean and the Omani extended empire that implicitly propose the background to the influences and varied communities in Oman.



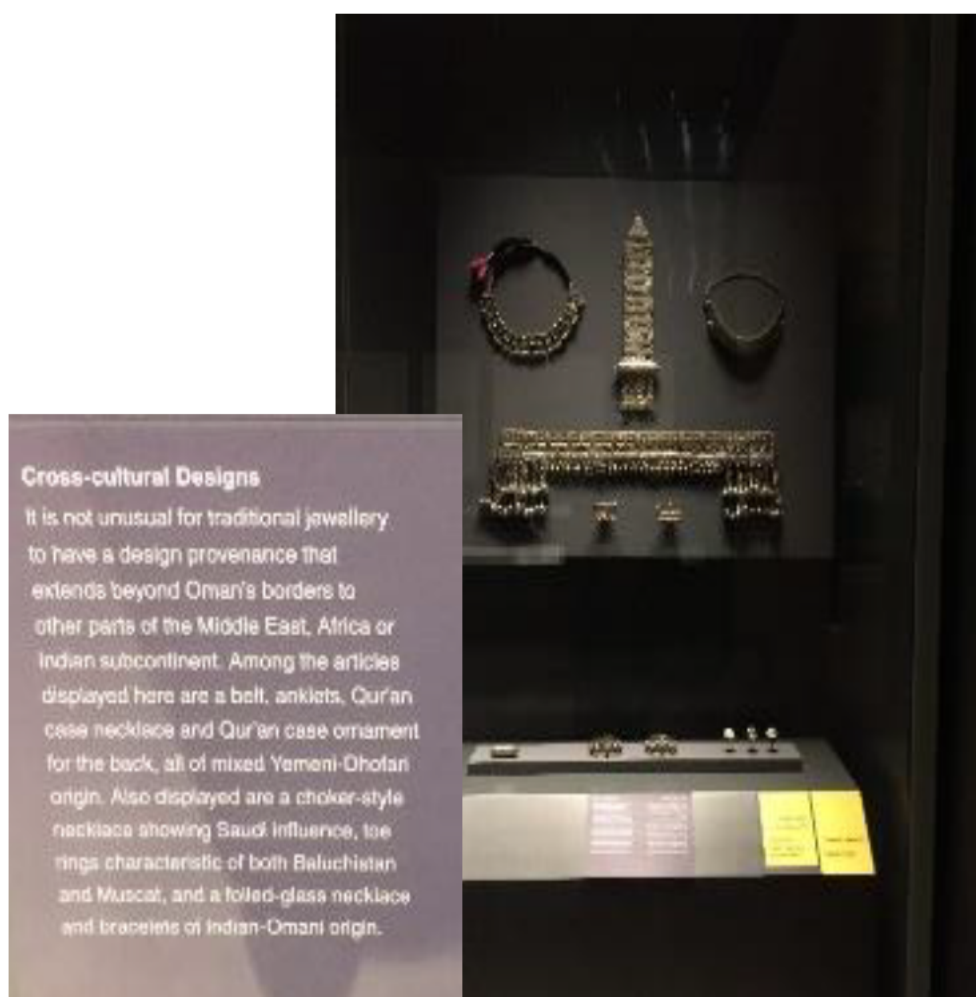
Figure 5-10 National Museum of Oman, The full-scale reproduction of balcony of Hajj Mal Allah Muradani's house that belongs to the enclave of Sur Al-Lawatia within the town of Matrah.

Source: Author.

However, it is notable that it is carried out by side-stepping the stories of migration and ethnic difference. Instead, the projection of various communities in the museums encompass carefully selected elements and narratives; for instance, I observed that the National Museum exhibits a full-scale reproduction of a balcony of the Sur Al-Lawati in Figure 5.10., an exhibit of distinctive quality and symbolic significance of this community. The description of this exhibit highlights that “The balcony belongs to the enclave of the Sur Al-Lawati within the town of Mattrah, home of the Khoujah or Al-Lawati clan of the merchants” (Object description Panel, NM). It further explicitly narrates the cosmopolitanism linked to interactions and influences of external culture that propose a “long association with the settlements of Iran, Yemen, East Africa and the Indian Subcontinent’ (Object description Panel, NM). Even though the exhibit implicitly stands for the “traditional divisions in towns and villages of distinct quarters of single or like ethnic, linguistic, sectarian, or tribal inhabitations” (Peterson, 2004: 50), no direct connotations to such differences are pointed out in the presentations of the community which are no longer confined to traditional dwellings and locality in the contemporary setting.

The Baluch constitutes the largest non-Arab community of Oman. The presentations of the Baluch in the National Museums in the “Oman and World Gallery” is contextualised within long-term trade relations, attributing the longevity of the “Baluch-Oman relations ranging back to 3000 BC” (Oman and Baluchistan timeline, NM). Like the National Museum, the Sultan Armed Forces Museum also presents the narratives of Gwadar as part of the extended Omani empire for 174 years and exhibits documents about selling Gwadar to Pakistan in 1958. Even though the Omani empire extension

to Gwadar facilitated the movement of people from Gwadar to Oman in search of work and settlement, which may suggest a rationale for the presence of Baluch in the region (Peterson, 2004), this or any other migration account is not explicitly identified in the museums.



*Figure 5-11 National Museum of Oman, Oman and World Gallery, Display title: Historic ties, Traditional silver jewellery and the world, Sub-title: Cross-cultural designs
Source: Author.*

Such presentations of the historical background of long-term relations with Gwadar and the trading history that became a subtle indicator of the historic setting contributed to the presence of these communities, interwoven in historical accounts. Moreover, such presentations serve overlapping purposes that also contribute to the outwardly focused projection of longevity of international relations and expression of Omani historical sovereignty. Further, it is noticeable that even though the migration accounts are not explicitly identified, the exhibits at the National Museums and Bait Al-Zubair Museum present explicit identification of cross-cultural influences. For instance, the National Museum presents cultural designs with supporting narratives that describe various influences, including that of the Baluch in Figure 5.11. Such presentations contextualised in historical ties suggest a subtle and measured approach to the presentation of the Baluch-Omani community.

The story of Sheikh Al-Zubair Bin Ali is significant to the Bait Al-Zubair Museum. This private museum that belongs to and is run by the Al-Zubair family highlights that Sheikh Al-Zubair served three contemporary Sultans as a minister and advisor; however, the museum does not prompt references to his identity as a non-Arab, nor does the museum provide any reference to, as Valeri (2009: 35) identifies, the meaning of his “Baluch origin” in the nation-building project. This museum can be categorised as a cultural museum that projects the diverse cultures of Oman including the projections of elitist and local culture. During a casual discussion, one of the team members at Bait Al-Zubair Museum stated: “there is a story hidden behind the family name. Did you notice that in the name of Sheikh Al-Zubair bin Ali, there is no surname, they are Baluchi, but this is not made obvious”. This is not to say that communities negate their

backgrounds in search of assimilation; however, such examples do cue compliance of the communities to social change and the quest of finding their place within the contemporary Omani identity.



Figure 5-12 Bait Al- Zubair, Balushi dress (left) and Lawati dress (right) worn in Muscat.

Source: Author.

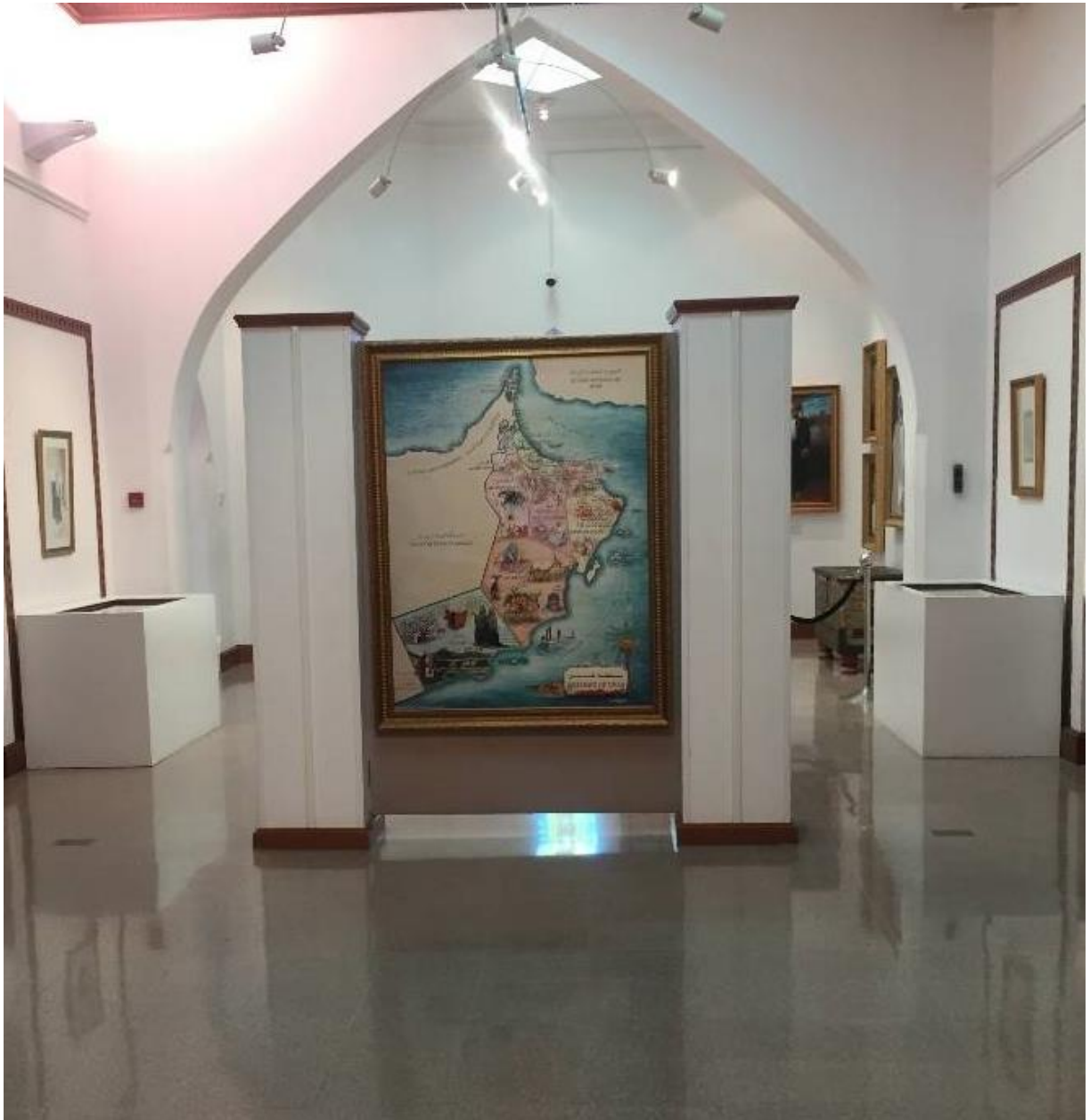


Figure 5-13 Bait Al- Zubair, Colourful pictorial map of Oman depicting regional highlights.

Source: Author.

In Oman it is not difficult to assess the non-Arab background based on the family/tribe name and the employees of Baluch origin that I met at the museums willingly informed me that they are of Baluch origin if the topic arose. The guides at the Bait Al-Zubair and the Sultan Armed Forces Museum said that they can speak around 3 to 4 languages, including English, Arabic, Persian, Baluchi and Urdu emphasising that they are Baluchi-Omani. Such findings suggest a push and pull between the ethnic and historical associations of the past and that of the contemporary national sociocultural setting and identity framework. Born and raised in Oman they have enculturated features of national culture such as the proficiency in Arabic language that is an identity marker of belongingness to an Arab nation, as well that of the ethnic cultures such as the native Baluchi. However, this also shows tension in positioning their national identities due to incompatibility of the community's ethnic origin of Arab ancestry within the key national identity, that contributes to redefining a sense of belongingness as well as shedding light on the prevalence of what Kharusi (2013) identifies as the existence of the notion of multi-hyphenated identities in Oman; such as Arab-Omani, Zanzabari-Omani and in this case Baluch-Omani that is prevalent in the Omani society as a social reality.

The most common way and explicit acknowledgement of the various communities of Oman in museums is through the use of cultural, traditional and geographical exhibits. The Bait Al-Zubair Museum presents a map of Oman that is a popular spot for visitors. This colourful map of Oman, shown in Figure 5.13, highlights the various regions with visual glimpses of the significant elements of the regions. The regions within the totality of the map of Oman reinstate the expression of unity in diversity. I observed that

several visitors spend some time at this spot and it is also a popular spot for the guides to explain about Oman and its diversity. The exhibit stimulated discussions on Oman's cultural, traditional and geographical diversity and encouraged discussions amongst the visitors that led them to discuss and identify the regions and the regional activities they have seen and those they want to visit. Another prominent theme was the projection of culture through the display of material culture like Omani dresses and jewellery that support the narratives of differences of various local communities and expression of cultural diversity, which was observed in various museums, such as the National Museum, the Bait Al-Zubair Museum, and the Bait Al-Baranda.

The significance of presenting the local and regional constituents within the projection of the national whole to the visitors was indicated in the discussion with the Director of Natural History Museum. The Director explained the concerns of the Omani visitors on the geographical map in the first gallery of "Oman- The Land of Contrast". She said that "Several visitors have raised this question on the geographical map in the first gallery of "Oman- The Land of Contrast" as to why their region is not represented. We have to explain to them that this is a geographical map of Oman, all regions are part of this map, however, labelled according to the geographical divisions instead of administrative division of Oman" (Interview, Director of Natural History Museum). This shows that the visitors are trying to locate and position themselves within the presentations of the nation. Moreover, the Omani audience's quest to locate themselves at the local and regional level within the national setting hints at the significance of positioning the presentations of regional and cultural diversity to allow

the audiences to position themselves within the framework of national identity, to contribute to the sense of belongingness to the nation.

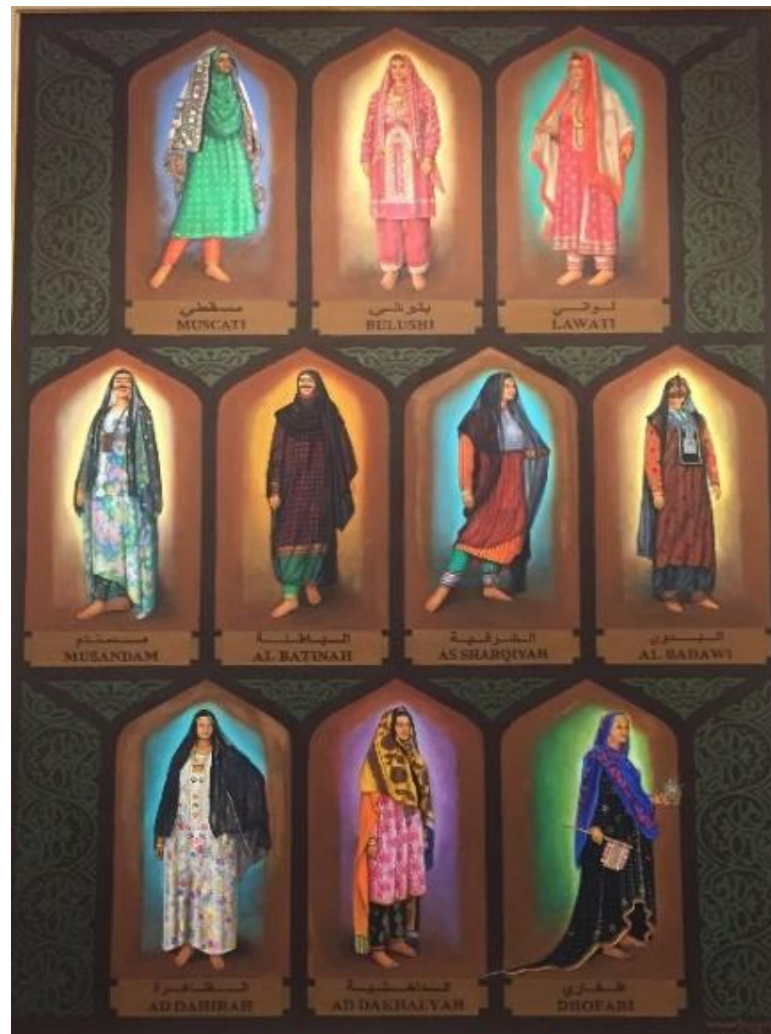


Figure 5-14 Bait Al- Zubair, Framed painting of women dresses from various regions of Oman

Source: Author.

The Bait Al-Zubair Museum displays a painting of the traditional dresses from various regions and communities of Oman, Figure 5.14. However, the diverse attires composed in the frame come across as different shades of a rich and diverse nation

as opposed to the segregated units. This painting and the “jewellery and attire section” present women’s attire from *Muscati, Balushi, Lawati, Musandam, Al-Batinah, Al-Sharquiya, Al-Badawi, Al-Dahira, Al-Dakhiliya* and *Dhofari* and reflect the cultural differences through the display of traditional dresses in Oman. The dresses displayed at the Bait Al-Zubair Museum cover different regions and communities, providing a widespread projection on the diversity of Oman. Such presentations interwoven in the idea of the locality are based on the presentation of cultural differences through the arrangements of material culture and traditions. Moreover, they are contextualised within the national context by explicitly pointing out that “Omani women have distinctive colourful national dresses that vary from region to region”. While such exhibits celebrate the cultural and regional diversities of the nation, none the less they elude the complexities of local and ethnic differences in the expression of national identity. Left out of focus are thus those internal differences that deviate from the Arab Islamic context the national identity is built around, keeping in view that the communities such as Baluch and Lawati do not conform to the Arab identity viewed in context to its ethnic origin.

The Bait Al-Zubair Museum also presents the Omani men’s traditional attire from diverse regions of Oman, highlighting the differences between male attire across various regions. Moreover, the museum displays Al-Dishdasha, the contemporary Dishdasha, Figure 5.15, “the Omani National Dress” as symbolic of the national identity, and in the presentational set-up highlights the unity in the diversity. The presentations, on the one hand, provide the input on the different regional dresses and the other asserts the national oneness through the exhibit of the particular national

style dress worn which forms the part of daily lives of the people of Oman. Such presentations even though they embrace the richness of cultural diversity, are widely inclined towards the notion of unity in diversity.

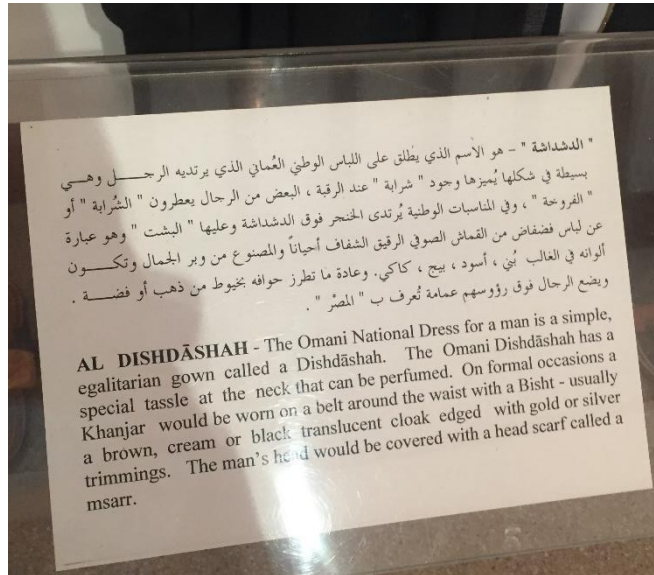


Figure 5-15 Bait Al- Zubair, Al-Dishdasha, The National Dress of Oman for men and the close-up of the description

Source: Author.

Even though private museums display diverse cultural materials from various communities, most are presented without distinctly pointing towards the regional distinctions and are rather explained as “presenting Omani diverse culture”, as highlighted by the owner of Old Castle Museum. Even though the private museums have expanded the range of regional and cultural exhibits, the distinction of the various communities and their cultures comes across as a natural and necessary condition for the joint life of different people in the nation. However, the aspirations of the government are to highlight various cultures and traditions that the society

encompasses. It was clearly expressed by the Minister of Heritage and Tourism during the interview that “the current and future aspiration of the government is to have more specialised museums and private museums that project particular and regional dedicated subjects” (interview, Minister of Heritage and Tourism).



Figure 5-16 The Bait Al-Baranda Museum, A model creating a scene of “The battle of Sallout between Malik bin Fahm and the Persians”

Source: Author.

The Sultan Armed Forces Museum, the Land of Frankincense Museum and the Bait Al-Baranda Museum provide references to the Malik Bin Fahm legend, in Figure 5.16 that is based on Omani sources to cement the Arab identity and the idea of unity. The projection of the museums of Oman through the references of the legend of the Malik Bin Fahm attempt to produce a powerful differentiator that highlights the magnificent

and distinct pre-Islamic Arab past of the nation. The Sultan Armed Forces Museum exhibits a panel that highlights:

The battle of Sallout occurred between Persians and the Azd under Malik Bin Faham in Sallout in Interior region. The Persians brought a number of elephants to the front of their battle line. The Azd came out victorious in the battle, which marked the end of Persian occupation.

In the presentation of Arab Identity, The Sultan Armed Forces Museum and the Bait Al-Baranda Museum emphasise the Battle of Sallout, which resulted in the ousting of the Persians. A model recreating the scene from the Battle of Sallout is exhibited at the Bait Al-Baranda Museum supported by extracts from Omani sources of the legend. Presentations of such unique, glorious moments attribute towards a collectively imagined 'glory of the past'. Such exhibits of triumphs and a successful past prompt an Arab ethnic past extended for contemporary ends that contribute to the future of the nation, looking back at a glorious and proud past. Similarly, in the expression of national identity and its linkage to the contemporary ends, the Armed Forces Museum identifies the Arab victories and explicitly highlights their link to the contemporary national ends. The final panel of the "Pre-Islamic Gallery" directly outlines the significance of the Sallout battle and the subsequent triumphs of Arabs in the region "that led to final Arab victory" and "liberation of Oman" (Panel Pre-Islamic Oman Gallery, SAF Museum). This panel explicitly dictates the consequent derivatives and mainstay elements of national solidarity in the projection of national identity.

Not only is the notion of unity both implicitly and explicitly projected in the museums, but also direct advantages are identified; while making it explicit to the museum audience, both creating a sense of belongingness but also including them as part of nation-building as they observe the exhibits. Five successful outcomes of the Arab victories are summarised in this text based panel in the Sultan Armed Forces Museum. The first and the foremost of them is the “confirmation of Oman’s Arab identity”, followed by “achievement of Omani unity”, the “Arab forces to protect the country” from foreign aggression, “security, stability and peace” and “economic prosperity” (Panel Pre-Islamic Oman Gallery, SAF Museum). These elements match with the contemporary national narratives and identity philosophy that draws on the concepts of unity and political independence, peace, and economic prosperity. In this case, the projection of the nation explicitly highlights the Arab identity imbued within arrival, foothold and triumphs of the Arabs. Such a presentation in the projection of the nation does not only provide a summary of the golden past but is an attempt to pave the way for a collectively imagined shared destiny through an exhibit of a directed message and variables appropriated for the contemporary end. Hence, within the holistic outlook of the placement of various elements of national identity in the Omani museums, the notion of unity is more in line to the projections of the nation as compared to the expression of homogenising widely associated to the frame of national identity, both in the characterisation of national diversity and monolithic projections of the nation (Kedourie, 1971; Gellner, 1983).

However, in a more general sense, a meaning attributed to ‘Arab’ is a person from any Arabic-speaking country (Phillip, 1967: 2). Hence, each museum of Oman is

demonstrative of the Arab nature in relation to the meaning associated with the Arabic language. Arabic is the national language of Oman. The narratives presented in the Omani museum such as the text in labelling and descriptions are in Arabic. The Arab-Omani identity correlated with the Arabic language, inevitably extended to the Omanis whose main language is Arabic, and was partly attributed to the socio-political structure following 1970 when Arabic became the official national language and subsequently became part of the education system and the main spoken language of the country. This served as a means of uniting the citizens of a country in which a variety of languages are widely spoken, for example, Swahili, Baluchi, Urdu and Khuzi, which are side-stepped in the museums' presentations.

Avoiding references to communal and regional languages, the museums focus on the contemporary nation building framework that encompasses the common bond of language that played a significant role in the assimilation of diverse groups in Oman following 1970. Meanwhile, the narratives in the Arabic language implicitly bind Oman to the Arab-speaking countries, they also characterise the boundaries between the foreigners and the citizens and set the distinction of Omanis from non-Omanis based on the Arabic language. However, in most of the museums of Oman, the Arabic texts are accompanied by English translations that shed light on the aspirations of the museums to appeal to both national and international audiences. The institutional ambitions of awareness and education particularly target the locals alongside the foreigners and tourists, as several directors from both private and public museums also stated during my interviews. The discussion with Zahra Al-Lawati, the Director of the Learning and Community Outreach Department at the National Museum, reflected

debates around the local relevance of museums and the target audiences. She commented, "Unlike some of the museums in the Gulf, we make sure that we keep in touch with the local Omanis. When we plan, we have it in our mind that we should target the local communities and the Omani students". Stressing the ways the domestic audience participation is targeted, she added that "we celebrate the national occasions here, we make sure when Omanis enter the museum, they can find where they came from and can see a representative object that tells them something about the place or region they belong to". Thus the museums target the domestic audience and clearly, the inward-oriented projections in the museums are planned and decisively directed towards the locals by staging the locally-oriented displays and architecture by those in charge of the museum-making process.

Meanwhile, references to various local languages are side-stepped. However, surrounded within the elaborate representations of the extended Omani empire and the rule of the Busaidi Dynasty in Zanzibar, the current ruling dynasty, is a touch screen installed in the "Oman and the World Gallery" at the National Museum. The interactive touch screen provides a detailed account of Swahili culture, including a description of the Swahili language, and information on Swahili literature. Such exhibits provide an impression that the royal family holds together the nation and ensures continuity in the face of some diversity. Further, the narratives on the Swahili language highlight that: After Arabic, Swahili is the most widely spoken language on the African coast [...] it is regularly spoken in Oman by the Omani of Afro-Arab descent.

On one hand, referring to Afro-Arab descent absorbs the Swahili community within the wider frame of Arab identity. On the other hand, it simplifies the community presentation, which contributes to the continuity in the expression of Arab identity of the nation, “while many Zanzibari possesses some African Blood, some may not” (Peterson, 2004: 47). Hence, in doing so it puts into the foreground the Arab Swahili background and glosses over the disparate ethnic groups among the community, such as non- Arab Swahili and the decedents of slaves with an African background in Oman who speak Swahili as well. Largely, the exhibits of the museums also shed some light on motives of avoiding ethnicity and migration issues, which are imbued with the potential to position the diversity of communities. However, this is also associated with sensitivity to stir up undesirable pasts or those with a tendency to evoke discriminatory implications of cosmopolitan expressions that propose distinction of ethnic groups and cultures (Hutchinson and Smith, 1996). This can be seen as:

reviving an ethnic historicist vision of the nation to redirect traditionalists and modernists away from conflict and unite them in the task of constructing an integrated distinctive and autonomous community, capable of competing in the modern world” Hutchinson (1987: 34).

5.2.4. Islamic Identity and Contextualisation of Other Religions in the Projections of the Nation

Islam is one of the key elements of the national identity. The usage of Al Hijri dates in all the museums of Oman is probably the simplest but most obvious element that

endorses this notion; it refers to the dates according to the Al-Hijra calendar, the Islamic calendar that depends on the movement of the moon. However, this is usually supported by conversions to the Gregorian dates that reflect the adaptations of localised factors through the introduction of their own vocabulary within western-style productions and the aspiration to target multiple audiences through references that can relate to both the local and international audiences.

For the arrangements of the presentations of Islam, the museums in Oman can be divided into two main categories: those that present a categorical projection; and those that present arrangements that implicitly attribute to the Islamic aspect of the nation. In the categorical projections, Islam is presented as a defined period, generally categorising the continuity of ancient Oman and Arab identity towards Islamic identity; however, it also evokes a critical archetypal moment and change in the history of Oman. The National Museum, the Land of Frankincense Museum and the Sultan Armed Forces Museum have dedicated galleries on Islam. These museums employ western expertise to construct the displays and standardised narratives with the assistance of western consultants. These presentations utilise a western museological approach in organising the exhibits by employing western-style arrangements of museum displays. Such as utilising typical western-style display techniques with objects in showcases supported with labels and interpretations, ordering the otherwise chaotic reality and abundance of potential museum objects and artefacts through systematic and evolutionary projections. Other museums like Bait Al-Baranda Museum also highlight the arrival of Islam in dedicated panels; whereas the Muscat Gate

Museum presents panels on mosques and their architectural features highlight Islamic characteristics.



Figure 5-17 Bait Al-Zubair Museum, Quran and Quran-stand is a part of recreation of Omani lifestyle in the Majlis (guest lounge) displayed in the top shelf of left side niche.

Source: Author.

Figure 5-18 Bait Al-Zubair Museum, Close up of the display of Quran and Quran-stand in figure 5.16.

Source: Author.

The second category of museums is those private museums that implicitly evoke the existence of Islam in society. Here the presentation of Islam is not the primary purpose of the arrangements. In these museums Islam is reflected within the arrangements of cultural displays and exhibits of local lifestyle of society. For example, the museums such as the Bait Al Ghasham Museum and the Bait Al-Zubair Museum (Figures 5.17

and 5.18) exhibit the Quran stand or *Rehal*; an X-shaped wooden stand used to place holy books during recitals. It is displayed as a part of the arrangement that recreates an Omani lifestyle set-up in the historic dwellings that “allows to step back in time and experience how Omanis lived” around 100 years and 200 years ago, respectively (brochure Bait Al-Zubair Museum; brochure Bait Al Ghasham Museum).

Similarly, the Place and People Museum and the Old Castle Museum exhibit material culture that points towards the influence of Islam in society, such as jewellery with Islamic inscriptions, frames of Quranic verse, mirrors with etched Quranic verses or pictures of a Mosque or Ka’ba (place of holy pilgrimage for the Muslims). Such exhibits that arise out of the commonplace role of Islam in society and a consequence of “the whole complex of beliefs” assumptions, habits, representations and practices (Billig, 1995: 6). Billig (1995: 6) puts it as being “produced and reproduced at the level of mundane daily activity and exchange”. Such exhibits and practices in the private museum also prompt the non-western and local forms of exhibitions and display practices existing in Oman and are quite common in the Arabian Gulf, a region widely criticised for using and producing western-style museums, raising the question of the relevance and viability of these museums in the Arabian Gulf context (Exell and Wakefield, 2016).

The constitution of Oman displayed with pages of the first six articles is exhibited in the Renaissance Gallery at the National Museum. The first article affirms the socio-political significance of Oman as “an Islamic Arab Country” (Basic Statue of the State, 1996, clause 2). The Omani constitution also stipulates that a successor to the throne must

be a member of the royal family, as well as a "Muslim, mature, rational and the legitimate son of Omani Muslim parents" (Basic Statue of the State, 1996, clause 5). Hence, the constitution of Oman and its presentation in the National Museum underlines the depth of the religious affiliation at various levels of society. It highlights the position of Islam at the common and social level, as well as at a particular national strata and elitist level, raising the importance and sensitivity of the religion in the projection of the nation and the national identity. In Oman and other Arab Islamic nations, as also pointed by Kaufman (2004), Islam formulates a prime and active element within the political arena and social structure that consists of a largely Muslim faith population. The above exhibits of Islam deviate from the ideas of modernist theorists like Anderson (2016) and Gellner (2006) that associate the rise of nationalism and the constructions of national identity with the decline of religion. These observations propose that such modernist ideas of nation and western-oriented conceptualisations of framing national identity connected to ideas such as secularism remain misleading and problematic when applied in Oman. The same remains true for other Islamic nations and raising the example of the Middle East Kaufman (2004: 11) exerts that movement like the "Arab national movement" was not born out of the notion of secularism.

The displays of historical continuities in the museums hold within them ruptures compartmentalised as various historical evolutionary transitions. In this case, they are marked by the categorical display of Islam as the distinct facet of the Omani history that encompasses within it the dramatic rupture marked by the religious transition of the society imbued within the aspirations of historical and cultural continuity. The

Sultan Armed Forces Museum sections on “Oman before Islam” focus on the presentations of the Arab identity, which discreetly includes the postulate of before and after Islam. In the search for continuity, this section is followed by the section on the arrival of Islam, “Oman and Islam”. The titles of the sections in the Sultan Armed Forces Museum, the National Museum and the Land of Frankincense Museum present a similar style of evolutionary manifestation. The Land of Frankincense Museum also has a section dedicated to Islam, the “Conversion to Islam” in its History Hall and the "Splendour of Islam Gallery”, following the formative stages presented in the museum covering the prehistory and ancient history.



Figure 5-19 Land of Frankincense Museum, The display of replica letter of Prophet Mohammad carried by the companion of the Prophet to the people of Oman.

Source: Author.

Figure 5-20 Close-up of the display of replica of the letter of Prophet Mohammad in the figure 5.19

Source: Author.

Smith (1991: 25) highlights that the shared memories and the feeling of continuity are based on the notions entertained by generations about their cultural destiny. When applied to the presentation of national identity, in context to the values and symbolic impression of Arab continuity, the nation further evolves in the juxtaposition of Islamic values and so does the notions that are entertained in the museums of Oman. As one moves out of the Prehistory Gallery and enters the “Splendour of Islam Gallery” in the National Museum, already the call of *Azan* (sound effects of the call to prayer) is playing at the gallery. The *Azan* resonates the religious inclination and practices of the society carried out on a daily and mundane level and becomes a reminder of the evolution and that the nation is imbued with the Islamic identity. The historical appropriations of Arab ethnicity and the conversion to Islam provide overlying characteristics where the arrival of Islam exerts the religious context that adds to the nostalgic notion of Arabness and Arabic identity interwoven with Islam.

Almost similar to the projections of Arab identity rooted in the distant past, the Islamic identity is attributed with a far-off past of the Omani context. Endorsing the foundations of the Islamic identity of the nation is the letter of Prophet Mohammad carried by the companion of the Prophet “to the two brothers Jaifar and Abd, Sons of Julanda. The joint rulers of Oman at that time” in Figure 5.19 (exhibit label, The Land of Frankincense Museum). The National Museum, the Land of Frankincense Museum, the Bait Al-Baranda Museum and the Sultan Armed Forces Museum exhibit a replica of this letter which assumes a symbolic value that “marked a turning point in the History of Oman” (exhibit label, Land of Frankincense Museum). This letter symbolises the call of the Prophet to the people of Oman and underlines the Islamic foundation of Omani society;

It was noticeable that it assumes importance as an exhibit which was reflected in the way it was positioned in the museum positioning in the museums. As seen in Figures 5.19 and 5.20, this replica letter with a translation is placed on a standalone display case at the centre of the section on “Conversion to Islam” in the Land of Frankincense Museum. The letter is the first element of the Islamic timeline presented in the “Splendour of Islam Gallery” in the National Museum and the first exhibit that was introduced by the museum guide at the National Museum in the gallery. In the section “Oman and Islam” at the Sultan Armed Forces Museum, the text of the letter is engraved on a mirror, making it prominent and different to other panels of the gallery. The repeated usage of this exhibit and its arrangement point to the symbolic value of this in the expression of Islam as a core part of the national identity.

Emphasis on the peaceful trait of the Omani nation that voluntarily accepted the Islamic faith without seeing the Prophet Mohammed is the characteristic element that is stressed in the narratives regarding the arrival of Islam. The role of Omanis in peaceful acceptance followed by “the steady and irreversible propagation of Islam” is explicitly highlighted in the narrative of the museums, such as the Sultan Armed Forces and Land of Frankincense Museums. The guide Halima, while giving the tour of the National Museum explained, “The Omani people are the first people that converted to Islam without any war” (guide, National Museum of Oman). The peaceful conversion to Islam in the museums adds to the official narratives of the tolerance, friendliness and peace-oriented approach of the Omanis. Such attributes also contribute to the outward-focused image of Oman, which is concentrated on the notion of a moderate foreign policy, friendly diplomatic relations and the contemporary political role of Oman

as a mediator and supporter of peace initiatives in the region. Explicit claims of moderation and tolerance are asserted in the National Museum, which emphasises that, "Islam's message of tolerance and moderation guides us to this very day" (Film, National Museum). Hence, the Islamic presentations in the museums uphold the socio-political component of identity projection that contributes to the contemporary political ends, complimenting the wider national identity framework reflecting "tolerant Islamic values as the basis for Omanis to deal with globalisation and its variables and to interact with other societies of diverse cultures and values" (Oman Vision 2040, ND: NP).

It is significant to note that the narratives and exhibits of Islam in the museums do not evoke any Islamic divisions or role of the sects. As seen above, Islam, and being a follower of Islam (being a Muslim) takes precedence in the extension of religion in Oman compared to the sectarian division of Islam. In the presentations of the faith of the Omanis, who are variously adherents of Ibadi, Sunni and Shi'a sects of Islam, neutral exhibits focus on the arrival of Islam and the first mosque in Oman presented in the Sultan Armed Forces Museum that transcends the complexities of Islamic sects within the society. This is important, keeping in view that the Islamic sects are widely considered sensitive and problematic in the pursuit of unity and tendency to evoke conflicts in the region (Hutchinson 2005). For instance, the 2011 Arab Spring protests in Gulf were "defined by the government as sectarian, in particular in Kuwait – an uprising of the Shi's against dominant or ruling Sunni" (Exell, 2016: 52).

The Sultan Armed Forces Museum explicitly refers to Ibadism in the gallery of “Oman and Islam”. It is the only museum that highlights any religious sect directly positioned within the presentation of Islam. Such presentations are in contrast to the assumption that narratives of “Arab Sunni orthodoxy reflect the new national narratives” of Arabian Gulf countries such as Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar and to some extent the UAE (Exell, 2016: 143). The Sultan Armed Forces Museum highlights that “the Ibadhi [Ibadi] doctrine which predominates in Oman has been compared to a bird: its egg was laid in Medina, it hatched in Basra and flew to Oman”. The panel is a reminder that Oman is the historical centre of this sect and a prominent sect in Oman (Peterson, 2004a). This panel on “Ibadism in Oman” narrates a brief historiography on the arrival of Ibadism in Oman, contextualised around the organisation of the defence and political stability, the narratives are rather inclined to exert the stronghold of the Ibadi State of Oman and emphasise Omani political statehood which reinforces political longevity.

The Abbasid state twice sent against the Ibadist state of Oman [...] campaigns failed in the attempt to annihilate the Ibadist state, which became stable and acquired full statehood in the third century of Hijra (exhibit panel, Sultan Armed Forces Museum).

During the guided tour, once we arrived at the panel, the guide raised a rhetorical question asking me “Are you aware of the *madhab* (sects) of Islam in Oman? like Ibadi, Sunni and Shia”. He further started to explain, “the Ibadi is the main madhab in Oman. We also have Sunnah and Shia. The country is open to all religions and Madhabs. Here in Oman, all Muslims pray in the same mosques, they are not allowed to discriminate and make separate mosques”. The focus of the guide was to highlight

the element of tolerance and the unity amongst religious diversity rather than promoting the differences of *Madhab*. Also, he highlighted the social and political inclination of dealing with the diversity and thereby underscored that the nation is projected as mature and enlightened in dealing with religious diversity. Such presentations also point to what Valeri (2009:128) recognises as “more than symbolic pre-eminence” of Ibadiism in Oman, which is also commonly identified with the tolerant factor prevalent in the society both on a political and social level. However, it was noticeable in the recently published book on the Sultan Armed Forces Museum does not include the information on Ibadism in the section that describes the exhibits of Oman and Islam. Keeping this in view, and considering that sectarian divisions are either side-stepped or subtly touched upon in the recent developments like in the National Museum, such observations also point to a subtle shift in the approach that refrains from the identification of the singular sectarian identity of Ibadism in the presentations of Islam.

Consequently, the presentation of Islam in the museums of Oman in the quest of instilling a sense of belongingness is built around a rather timeless expression of Islam. The common presentations include narratives and displays that highlight the advent of Islam in Oman, and the role of Omanis in the spreading of Islam, attributing to its seafaring culture and the contribution made by Omani scholars to Islamic doctrine. Both the Land of Frankincense Museum and the National Museum also highlight the contributions by Omani scholars to Islamic doctrinal sciences, natural sciences, and Arabic language and literature that can instil pride in the citizens. Aspects such as “Immigration of the Omani ruler to East Africa led to the spread of Islam in the seventh

century CE” contribute to showcasing the role of Omanis in the spread of Islam (description multimedia screen, National Museum). Clearly identifying the approach of the presentations of Islam in the National Museum, Al-Wardi, the Director of Collections department, pointed out that the presentations highlight “how Islam changed the country and how it is involved in our daily life through the presentations of the objects correlated to Islamic faith”. Hence, the section in the “Splendour of Islam” gallery presents traditional Omani arts that “examine(s) Oman’s earliest design motifs that trace the artistic influence inspired by Islam” in the evolution of calligraphy, geometric, floral and Arabesque decoration and the depiction of living and the aesthetics and design of the mosques.

The presentations discussed above provide some reflection on what researchers such as Valeri (2009: 128) highlighted about the positioning of Islam in the Muslim Arab state of Oman, where according to him the “Sultan Qaboos never could and never wanted to make Islam a trump card in his process of legitimacy building”. Historically, Oman has witnessed a stronghold of the Ibadi movement and rulership of leaders of Ibadi Islam called Imams, which also contributed to the power struggle between the Sultans and Imams in Oman. Keeping this view, the focus of the Muslim character both of the Sultan and the society emphasised in the museums also hints at Valeri’s (2009: 128) point in which he emphasised that “The authorities consider that they are not protected against the emergence of an opposition movement evoking the Ibadi Imamate legacy or more generally any ideology invoking political Islam – to challenge the regime”.

The power of religious nationalism cannot be underestimated in the national identity project; history is full of examples of the revival of religious movements that contributed to civil war and even construction of new states. For instance, the religious movements ranging from the Protestant revival in America, to the Shi'ite revolution in Iran, the Sunni revival in Egypt, and the Hindu and Muslim revival in India and Pakistan were literally a bi-product of the rise of religious nationalism (Chatterjee, 1986; Juergensmeyer, 1993; Smith, 2003). The projection of Islam in the museums avoids highlighting the political legitimacy adherence related to religious doctrine. This may leave an opening for overt religious elements that can bring more explicit theological interpretations to political life. The exhibits and displays that promote the characteristics of tolerance in the nation explicitly connote the Muslim setting of society or are linked more implicitly to the specific Ibadi context of the Omani society, locate Oman as religiously moderate, which sets Oman apart from other Islamic nations with an ultra-conservative form of Islam. For example, the alignment of the modern state of Saudi Arabia to Wahhabism, an ultra-conservative form of Islam within the Sunni sect, where other moderate strands of Sunnism were restricted. In addition, the presentation of Islam in the museums of Oman is not a recent shift in the strategy of "simply reverting to what we followed - a moderate Islam open to the world and all religion" as in Saudi Arabia (Prince Mohammed of Saudi Arabia, 2017: NP).

As identified in the context chapter, Oman is not only the hub for the population that comprise Islamic faith and the constitution of Oman announces the non-discrimination of citizens on account of sects or religion. The Land of Frankincense Museum

highlights the correlation and acceptance of other religions in Islam by projecting the *Ayat* (Verse) from the Quran:

Verily The Faithful, those who are Jews, Christians, Sabians and whoever believes in God and the day of Judgement and do the righteous good deeds shall have their reward with their Almighty God, on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve.

Hence, the message of tolerance extends not only to endorse an enlightened Oman that accepts various Islamic sects, it further extends to endorse the tolerance and acceptance of Non-Muslim faiths in Omani society. Other faiths are accommodated within the identity frame that magnifies and upholds the Islamic identity, where other faiths and sects are recognised and accepted within the characteristics of tolerance. The National Museum's film is an example of the national identity the museums aims to project under the juxtaposition of Islam, religious differences, tolerance and heritage. In the film, the National Museum, within the backdrop of the changing scenes that project persons of different faiths is superimposed a narrative that emphasises "the universal value of the Omani identity" (film narratives, National Museum of Oman).

The museums do not refrain from presenting other religions. For example, the National Museum presents an historic Bible and a chalice used for communion here in Oman by late 19th century Christians. The Bait Al-Zubair likewise exhibits some scriptures from the Bible. The Land of Frankincense Museum also presents sites of religious values that can be attributed to religious tolerance and, arguably, also present and promote a two-way association and acceptance of non-Islamic faiths and Islam in

Oman. For example, the model of the Tomb of Prophet Job in ancient Oman highlights the Pre-Islamic sites of religious value. The narratives point out the mentioning of Prophet Job in the inscription of the Holy Quran as well as presenting references from the Old Testament. The Director of Collections at the National Museum stated that:

At the end of the day Oman is very well known for tolerance, we are quite keen on getting and displaying the objects that represent various communities and religions. We have two objects on loan, the Bible and goblet. Actually, the image of the Hindu temple and the plan is also a temporary loan from the community, we approached them and we worked with the local communities. The community members also approach us with objects and exhibits.

This discussion reflects the top-down aspiration of explicit presentations of openness and tolerance, and the role of the local community who desires to contribute to the national identity presentations. These contributions to present their communities consequently reflect on their contribution to the nation. Moreover, such presentations contribute for both inward and outward purposes in portraying the Omani nation.

The historical long-term trading links are widely narrated in the museums that promote an outwardly focused projection of the nation, through their exhibits of longevity that legitimise the contemporary diplomatic relations. In this way, the museums put profound emphasis on the idea of cosmopolitanism in relation to external encounters, and the diversity of cultures owing to this historical past. This also contributes to the inward-focused projection of cosmopolitanism that emphasises a variety of cultural and

religious identities. The religious differences and migration histories are somewhat enmeshed and smoothed out within the presentations of openness and historical happenstances that are both inwardly and outwardly focused.

The narrative and exhibits in the “Oman and India section” of the “Oman and the World Gallery” draw attention to the contribution and longstanding presence of Indians that clearly seeks to draw attention their role in Oman. This section acknowledges both the ties and the role of Indians in the making of the nation by emphasising their contributions in various fields such as trading, and science; highlighting the internal diversity and cosmopolitan characteristics of Oman. For instance, in relation to the trade contribution of Indians in Oman, it is narrated that “Ratansi Purshottam came to Muscat [from India] in 1855 CE to join the business of his great grandfather, who had an establishment in Oman” dating to early 19th century CE and further explaining that in “1867 CE he had established his own firm and dealt in variety of goods as a leading importer and exporter”.

However, the presentations might not suggest that there are still Omanis with an Indian background unless as tacit prompts for those who have previous knowledge of the social backgrounds and communities of Oman and know that some families of Indian background have been established in Oman for six or seven generations, and that a few of these have Omani nationality today (Valeri, 2009). The tactical presentation of the communities reminds us of Smith's (1986) idea of selection and repackaging in the construction of histories of nations that suits particular political or other circumstances inclined towards promoting comforting cultural styles and themes.

During my discussion with various Omani visitors, I noticed that Omanis of various backgrounds referred to gaining information on Omanis as 'self'. In contrast, those of a Hindu background explicitly pointed out it was a good chance for them to know more about Oman and Omani as 'others'. For example, an Omani of Indian background, a university student, informed me, "Visiting the museum is an opportunity for me to know about Omanis". She added "I am Omani but I am not Arab-Omani, I am of Indian background and we follow traditions and ways close to Hindu and Indian culture". This stimulates what Peterson points out, that the "majority of Hindu families are unlikely to assimilate, not only because their religion is so markedly distinctive, but particularly because of their close ties to India and lack of Omani passport" (Peterson, 2004: 51). This is in contrast to the Baluch or Lawati communities, who have in many ways mixed with society due to their Muslim background, fluency in Arabic and intermarriages amongst various Omani communities. The above discussion reflects how various communities are projected, celebrated and the ways the expression of a nation resonates to the particular communities. It also prompts a difference in the degree of cultural assimilation of particular local communities within contemporary Oman that is problematic in the projection of a nation as a project of national unity. This raises attention to components and references of a contemporary nature that make the national collective identity imaginable for contemporary citizenry of various historical backgrounds, with different desires or possibilities of cultural assimilation into the national identity framework of Oman will be considered in the next chapter.

5.3. Conclusion

I have shown in this chapter that projecting national identity is a critical component of museums and government efforts in Oman. In an effort to reconstruct the relationship between citizens and the nation, museums are using historical representations in a variety of ways to establish a comprehensive sense of national belongingness aimed at contemporary political ends. The national identity frame bounded in the historical representations reproduces particular national, local, universal, global and cosmopolitan characterisations of the nation that serve both overarching inward and outward focused nationalistic ambitions and purposes. The discussion on museums in Oman reveals the complex relationship of western practices and specialists, and the influence and role of different local voices, practitioners and specialists who contribute to shaping the national identity framework.

The public museums widely employ archaeology in situating the Omani prehistoric and ancient past. Such remote histories equip the contemporary nation with an unproblematic collective past that on one hand advocates a collectively imagined past creating a sense of belongingness and unity, and on the other is arranged to provide distinctness from the neighbouring countries. I have shown how the museums, also the private museums, are consumed with providing directions to the question of what Oman was known as at various times of history, and in turn serve to suggest continuity between ancient cultures and the contemporary nation-state. Significant to the presentation of the nation is the projections of longevity and continuity. The seamless-looking presentations of continuity and evolutionary displays contain within them

narratives and exhibits selectivity compartmentalised as various epochs and themes; these endorse the rudimentary yet selective elements and characterisations of national identity.

It is identified that in particular the public museums of Oman emphasise the Arab and Islamic identity as two basic elements of national identity. The Arab Islamic identity in these museums is endorsed through simplified, linear systematic projections of the Arab Islamic origin contextualised to Oman. It can be seen that the ways in which the museums are approaching the various attributes of a national identity are shifting; such as the presentations of the Arab Islamic character of the nation, that in the earlier public museums primarily focused on presentations of this character, and now include exhibits of Islamic influences in society. For example, the National Museum provides interpretations of material culture in relation to Islam in daily life. Meanwhile, the private museums complement the idea through exhibits of the material culture of everyday settings, which endorse the Muslim character of society at a banal and commonplace level. This characterisation in the projections of the nation not only accommodates the Arab and Muslim ethno-history of the majority of Omanis that belong to this group and endorses the elements of continuity, the attributes of Arabs, Muslims and tolerance, but also contributes to the self-presentation of the dominant political authority of the ruling monarchy.

Although the presentations of Arab Islamic origin that contribute to a sense of homogeneity are also maintained in other Arabian Gulf countries, the distinctiveness of the Arab Omani identity in the museums is tied to the distant past and origins in the

context of Oman, and downplays and glosses over the historical and contemporary sectarian and tribal divisions in the pursuit of unity. Such projections form the basis of the national identity frameworks of Oman that return to the ethnic past in the quest for authenticity, which Smith (2003: 194) associates with Middle Eastern nations founded on ethnic conceptions. However, I have shown that the expression of the nation in Oman is not similar to the framework of national identity projection of a singular local culture in the pursuit of oneness. Even though Smith (1995) associates the pluralist concept of nations that accept and celebrate ethnic and cultural diversity within the national framework with countries like Australia and the United States, such adaptations in Omani museums hints at an undertaking that celebrates cultural diversity. Considering Oman's historical hybridity in the routes of nation formation, this prompts duality of the route to a national origin – a hybrid that constitutes Smith's idea of "*ethnie*" as well as "plurality", owing to the long history of different ethnic groups, religious sects, and tribal factions and their mixing, moving and migrations throughout the region.

In Oman, the aspiration to presentations of communal diversity is not a move in the face of changing dynamics resulting in a recent shift in the nation-building strategy. Further the projection of cultural diversity in the Omani museums are inwards focused which differs in essence to the development of museums that are grounded in the symbol of universalism, a global cosmopolitan project and focuses on the projections of the culture of the world rather than cultural inclusion. Moreover, they serve various overreaching purposes, such as by promoting an inwards focused attribute of national identity that celebrates the heterogeneity of Oman minus the complexities aimed at

creation of a united and cohesive society. It also contributes to the outward projections in context to the historical narratives of openness, tolerance, external encounters and foreign links that add to the contemporary national image that meets the political ends of contributing to a positive diplomatic image and international relations. Meanwhile, the public museums which widely present cultural diversity through the exhibits of the private collections that arise as a response to rapid modernisation, complement the projections of heterogeneity. These museums actively exhibit material culture used by the Omanis that reflects on the local cultural diversity connected to various traditional lifestyles and occupations, as well as aspects of cosmopolitanism related to interactions with external culture and consumption of foreign products.

The museums of Oman propose a hybrid national identity framework that simultaneously projects a homogenising characterisation through the assertion of the key ethos of one religion and one ethnicity, as well as appropriating an extended ethos of heterogeneity through the displays of local and cultural diversity that is historically bounded to past migrations and geographical histories. By doing so the museums of Oman combine contradictory and competing discourses of nationalism within the national identity framework. It is shown that the museums in the projection of heterogeneity emphasise specific aspects like diverse Omani attires, geographical and traditional variations, and downplay local histories of migrations and explicit ethnic references. Such projections of cosmopolitanism, in the sense where local and regional cultures remain different, prompt selectivity and negotiations; however, they also signal an attempt to utilise this diversity positively as a part of the nation-building project, rather than viewing it as a discrete state of existence that is from the idea of the nation.

In addition to the core of Omani identity projections that revolve around the identified key historical themes, the Omani model of national identity includes various significant contemporary symbols of the nation. The next chapter will consider in detail the complexities and specific purposes of contemporary representations in the projection of the nation, and to what extent these serve to anchor the social cohesion and propose to legitimise the rule of Sultan Qaboos and the current regime.

Chapter 6

6. CONTEMPORARY REPRESENTATIONS OF THE NATION IN THE OMANI MUSEUMS

6.0. Introduction

In the last chapter, I focused on the historical representations of Oman and examined how the museum, through expressions of longevity and continuity, served to anchor and legitimise an identity for the nation of today. Even though Oman exists as a geographically and culturally recognised entity constituting an Eastern Arabian region that can be traced back millennia, the nation-state of Oman as of now is merely half a century old. Alongside the narratives of ancientness projected through the museums is an identity framework that promotes one nation, one race, and one religion as the key ideological concepts that emphasise national unity. These notions embrace specific contemporary references to a modern nation.

This chapter focuses on how the museums in Oman contextualise the presentations of contemporary national references and symbols linked to national ideology, and collective references that serve to unite the Omani citizenry, anchor the new political community, and legitimise the Omani regime so central to Omani national identity. As identified in the literature, Walsh (1992) and Cerulo (1995) emphasise how the nation-states are characterised by symbols such as museums, public buildings, anthems,

icons, flags and currencies; thus, I will study selective national symbols and their role in the national identity framework. The projections of national icons and references such as the person of the Sultan and the symbolic ideology of the 'renaissance' from 1970, are analysed in this chapter.

The first Omani museum was established following the formation of the nation-state in 1970; which makes museums in Oman a product of modernity and a part of a contemporary national project. The museum buildings have been used, similarly to other national symbols, to provide the impression of a "united, coherent group moving together through history towards a common future" (Jones, 2011: 51). This chapter is also concerned with the symbolic role the museum architecture plays in the expression of the nation, keeping in mind that the museum developments and architecture are a product of the contemporary nation-state. In the process, it advances the discussion on how the particular national, local, universal, global and cosmopolitan characterisations of the nation in museums play their role in materialisation of a political vision that aims for "a society that is proud of its [national] identity and the [national] culture that reinforces citizenship" (Oman national vision strategy 2040, ND: NP).

6.1. Contemporary Symbols of Oman

Central to the presentations of contemporary Oman, the museums contain the symbols of the contemporary nation. A distinctive undertaking of the National Museum is the overt identification of the 'national symbols of Oman' and referencing the frame of nationalism and the importance of the symbols. It is stated that:

Symbols of state are the elements that represent a nation, its people and its past and present. They embody a nation's goals, values, history and culture, and the growth of a nation's identity can be traced through their evolution over time. Such symbols are by design, highly recognisable. They are inherently representative of all citizens and central to the celebrations of patriotism and unity. Beyond their various official uses, symbols of state often acquire popular significance as affirmations of nationality or as decorative forms (exhibit label, Renaissance Gallery, NM).

The above narrative clearly identifies the intentions and practices of national symbols and their production in the contemporary nation, putting forward a framework of nation-building practises that have sought to account for the way nationalist practices in Oman are performed through the use of symbols. The constitutive role of national symbols of a nation-building project narrates a frame that intends to consolidate the disparate citizenry, building an emotional bond and create a sense of belonging. It is noticeable in the above official narrative promoted by the state within the juxtaposition of the nation and its people, state and nationality, and past and present, it promotes the changing nature of the symbols by highlighting their evolutionary aspect and their invented character, identifying them as designed to be recognisable. By suggesting both an 'evolutionary' and a 'designed' nature the narrative proposes a hybrid of 'natural continuity' and 'conscious production' of the symbols that contribute to shaping the national identity. By doing so they endorse the modernist viewpoint in which

Hobsbawm and Ranger (2000) emphasise the invented nature of national symbols and traditions for political reasons, created to ensure continuity with the past.

The above narrative puts emphasis on the *popular symbols of state* that are *inherently representative of all citizens of the nation* affirming that nationality supports Cerulo's (1995: 15) argument on the use of national symbols to "crystallize the national identity". Further, it explicitly points out the symbols being directed towards civic bonding between people whose "membership in a geopolitical entity is unfettered by ethnic or culture" as Verdugo and Milne (2016: 5) highlight; connecting the Omanis that can imagine a national community with one another, made of people that as Anderson (2016) points out may not interact with one another. In national identity building, such symbols are inclined to build an emotional bond that ties its members, surpassing all religious, social or cultural differences as they are presented and perceived as belonging to every individual and not a specific ethnicity, community or a singular class. The national symbols are directed to all nationals that are inclined to endorse unity and political legitimacy.

As identified above, a strong political and social significance and the common popularity of such symbols intends to reinstate a form of 'imagined community' that sets the stage for assemblage and bonding of the citizenry of the contemporary nation-state, regardless of the backgrounds of those citizens. Moreover, in making the process explicit to the museum audience, the National Museum also directly invites them to be nation builders as they observe the exhibits. This also proposes that the actors involved in the museum production perceive museums as entities that constitute

power, where visitors are not considered passive consumers of knowledge but have the potential to actively participate in the national building project. Even though this points to the influential role of an elite that proactively defines the national identity frame, it also contains the association of a visitor's role, and therefore points to the positioning of various actors in the nation-building framework of Oman that constitutes roles and participation of both producers and the consumer agencies.

The narratives in the "Renaissance Gallery" highlighting the aims, practices and nature of the symbols in a *state representing a nation*, prompt an effort in the nation-building, that as Conner (1994) points out, tends to match the nation with the state and as Kuzio (2000) adds subsequently, leads to civic-national building. In other words, symbols of a contemporary geopolitical construct endorse the modernist viewpoint that suggests a membership where the identification of members and their belongingness founded on shared civic values and citizenship is 'representing' those members whose belongingness is characterised by continuity and driven by historical and cultural constituents that relate a perennial viewpoint as discussed in Chapter 5. To what extent the expression of national symbols resonates with the identified role of the symbols in the proposed frame of the nation will be further discussed through observations on selective national symbols of Oman projected in the museums.

The National Museum explicitly endorses and identifies that "the national symbols of Oman include His Majesty the Sultan Qaboos bin Said Al-Said, the National Emblem, the National Anthem and the Statute of the State" (National Museum, description on the symbols of State). Identification of the role of the national symbols in the National

Museum also shows that the national identity expression in the museums cannot be understood outside the symbolic needs of a nation. The architecture of museums is used in the same way as other national symbols, asserting the nation and its continuity to the past, as a tangible expression of Oman in both purpose-built high-profile museums and the vernacular architecture that houses museums. Several Omani museums, both public and private, exhibit various national symbols such as flags, stamps, coins and currencies, that Anderson (2016) and Kolsto (2006) identify as representative of a country's political and financial system, implicitly reinforcing political ideologies. In the following sections I will discuss a few national symbols in detail to understand how such symbols of the nation entwine with the museums of Oman and the purposes they intend to serve in the expression of the nation.

6.2. The Role of Personality Cult in Nation-making

The first national symbol that I have selected to explore is the symbol of the person of Qaboos. It was an obvious choice grounded on the prominence and novelty in relation to his positioning as a contemporary symbol of Oman. Not only is Sultan Qaboos identified as the symbol of the state along with other national symbols, but the labelling of "symbols of the state" in the National Museum is also supported by the portrait of Qaboos; as seen in Figure 6.1, which further re-endorses the key position and significance of the symbolic value of this symbol to the nation's identity frame. Moreover, as identified earlier, in Oman one cannot escape the image of the late Sultan Qaboos which is prominently displayed in both public buildings and private institutions. Besides, various other major urban achievements are named after Sultan Qaboos,

such as the Sultan Qaboos Highway, the Sultan Qaboos Hospital, the Sultan Qaboos University, and the Sultan Qaboos Mosque. The museums are no different; the museums of Oman through various exhibits and narratives endorse Qaboos as the contemporary symbol of the nation and the leader that the Omanis equate with contemporary Oman, as the founding father of the nation.

Clearly, Sultan Qaboos Bin Said Al-Said is visually inscribed in the national culture of Oman, similar to the way in which other iconic leaders are identified as a father of the nation; such as the President Saparmurat Niyazov and Sheikh Zayed that are considered the founding fathers of Turkmenistan and Abu Dhabi respectively and are visually inscribed in the national fabric (Paasi, 1996; Koch, 2016). It is also common to see the portrait of Sultan Qaboos in both private and public museums, which reinstates the legitimacy of the political regime that revolves around one key leader, and even following the death of the Sultan Qaboos on January 10 2020 such exhibits continue to re-endorse him as the father of the nation and founding leader symbolic of contemporary Oman. In Oman Qaboos has emerged as what Hobsbawm and Ranger (2000) identify as a new symbol of the nation, as part of the state-building project. As identified in the literature review regarding the significance of personality cults as instruments of nation-building, the analysis further explores how the museums project the image of the leader as a new symbol of the nation, the extent to which the symbol is subjected to the push and pull of being fixed or changing and how what Koch (2016: 1) refers to as “the constructed nature of charisma” is reproduced in the museums and to what end.

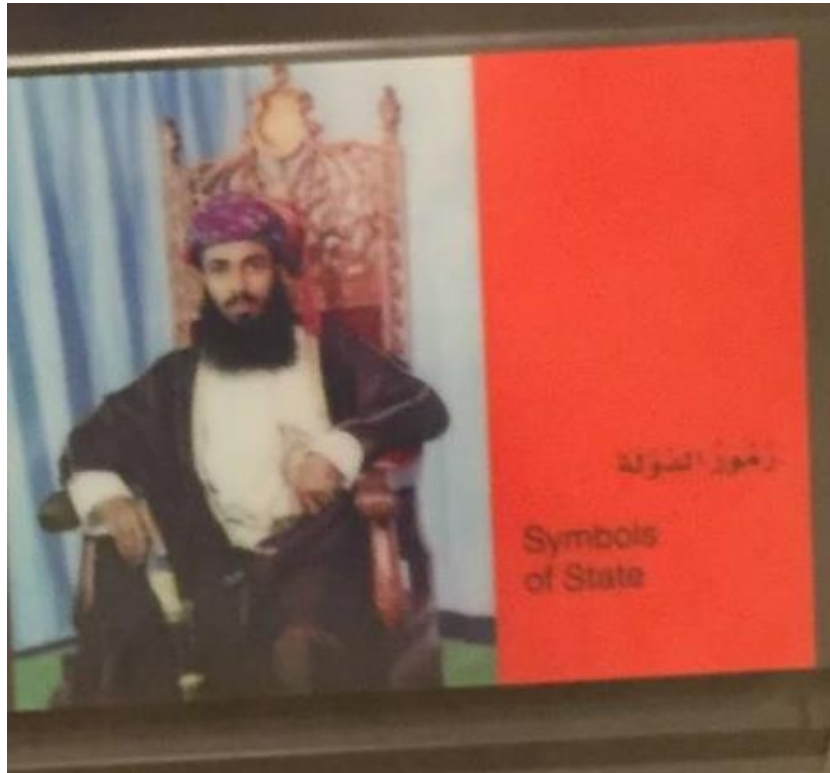


Figure 6-1 The National Museum, Renaissance Gallery, The image carrying the title “Symbol of State” consists of a portrait of Sultan Qaboos on his throne
Source: Author.

In Oman, the displays of His Majesty the late Sultan Qaboos’ portraits coupled with particularising significant people or events of national significance, such as the museum’s inauguration activities further endorse the person of Sultan Qaboos, his role as the father of the nation, and projections of his political legitimacy, on the part of the state. For instance, the National Museum highlights that the “first government-run museum” that opened in 1976 was inaugurated by “H.M. Sultan Qaboos bin Said”, which is projected on a multimedia interactive screen in the “Renaissance Gallery” (Renaissance Gallery, NM). This first museum does not exist anymore, as it has been replaced by the new flagship National Museum that opened to the public in 2016.

However, the presentations of the event, supported by pictorial references of the inauguration by the late Sultan Qaboos, show the first museum in Oman as a significant step related to national heritage and culture. Such initiatives, on one hand, indicate the perceived significance of the role of museums, which since their inception are intended to instil a sense of pride and source of motivation for the forward march of nation-building in contemporary Oman. On the other hand, they stress the political legitimacy by connecting the inauguration ceremonies with occasions of national importance that are carried out by the Sultan or his representative dignitaries. For instance, the opening of the National Museum coincided with the Sultanate's 45th National Day celebrations.

The cornerstone of the most recent high-profile museum project, the Oman Across Ages Museum project, currently under construction, was also set in place by the late Sultan. The reminder of these events that are carried out by the Sultan or other royals and high-profile representatives of the government in the Qaboos era are often placed at the entrance of public and private museums and thus endorse the legacy for the museum institutions. In this way, all the museums endorse the late Sultan, who in turn endorses the museums that articulate political legitimacy by connecting the museum development's milestones to significant national symbolic dates, creating a loop that feeds on itself. Patronage of the ruler is a significant element, however it is not unique to Oman as similar tendencies can be viewed in the governmental and cultural institution of other countries as well, such as Jordan, UAE, Turkmenistan (Farajat, 2012; Koch, 2016).

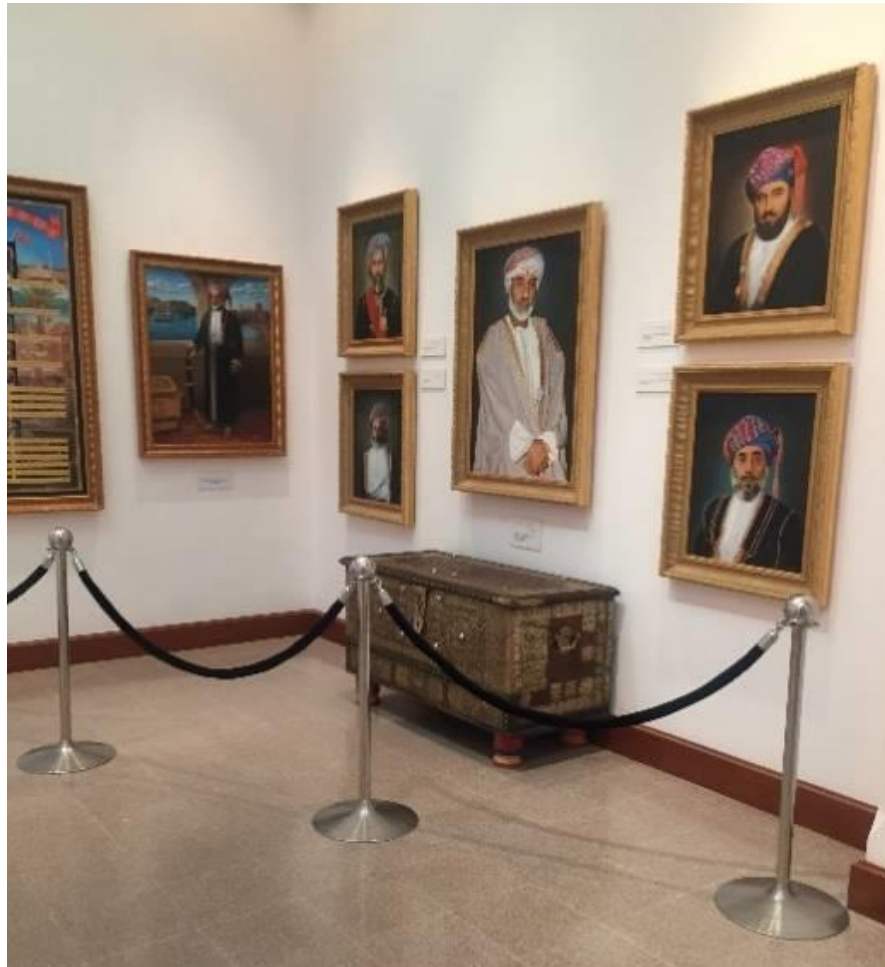


Figure 6-2 Bait Al-Zubair Museum, the exhibit of the Late Sultan Qaboos Al-Said and the rulers of Oman and the family tree. The frames on the on the front wall present the Al Busaidi rulers that constitute a direct royal lineage to the rulers of Oman to the late Sultan Qaboos up to his great-great grandfather that include: Late Sultan Qaboos Bin Said Al-Said (centre), Sultan Said bin Taimur Al-Said (top right), Sultan Taimur Bin Faisal Al-Said (bottom right), Sultan Faisal Bin Turki Al-Said (top left) and Sultan Turki Bin Said Al- Said (bottom left) and Imam Said Bin Sultan (the frame on extreme left)

Source: Author.



Figure 6-3 Sultan Armed Forces Museum , Plaque on the opening of the museum

Source: Author.

Figure 6-4 Bait Al Ghasham Museum, Plaque on the opening of the museum

Translation: During the reign of Sultan Qaboos Bin Said, may Allah protect and preserve him, Bait Al Ghasham was opened under the patronage of His highness Asaad Bin Tariq Bin Taimur Al Said, the representative of His Majesty The Sultan.

Source: Author.

It is important to keep in mind that these presentations in museums were arranged under the reign of Qaboos and the fieldwork was carried out before his death. Keeping in view the contextual circumstances and drive of the original intent, on one hand in museums like the National Museum there appears a decisive strategy to endorse Qaboos as the ruler and the icon of the nation. Whereas, on the other hand, the relationship with the Sultan and the royal family is both viewed and projected as a matter of significance for the museums that instil pride and any link to the ruler is

assumed to be of greater value creating a cyclic effect in museums endorsing the Sultan and the Sultan endorsing the museums. For instance, referencing the exhibit and highlighting the attractiveness of the rather simple displays of the rulers of Oman in Figure 6.2, becomes of greater value once complimented by the storyline explained by the guides. A museum guide at the Bait Al-Zubair Museum pointed out that:

We differentiate ourselves as a cultural heritage museum but what mostly attracts the visitors' attention is when we tell them the story of the link of Sheikh Al Zubair with the Sultans and the royal family. [The museum building was the family home of Sheikh Al Zubair in 1914, the museum opened in 1998 founded by the Al- Zubair family]. That is why we start our tour in front of the Portrait of Qaboos and the royal family tree. It is the home of Zubair, '*Bait Al-Zubair*'. When we inform the visitors that Sheikh Al Zubair bin Ali served three former Sultans as a minister and advisor, they get surprised and this triggers their interest and they start to ask question.

Clearly, the discussion points to the Bait Al-Zubair Museum's institutional approach that has the patronage of the ruler in the forefront through the active projections of life stories and displays. This is in contrast to a museum like the Bait Al Ghasham that exhibits the inaugural plaques in Figure 6.4 and portraits of the leader in the museum that situates the patronage of the ruler at the background of the museum. The museum is dedicated to Omani vernacular architecture and traditional techniques of construction remain the main focus. In comparison, the inaugural plaque at the Sultan Armed Forces Museum in Figure 6.3 that was opened under the patronage of the Sultan, and also puts the Sultan in the foreground in its exhibit and narratives.



Figure 6-5 People and Place Museum, Exhibit of a typical room in an Omani house in 1970's
Source: Author.



Figure 6-6 Old Castle Museum, The Main Gallery, exhibiting collection of mixed age material culture
Source: Author.

Similarly, other private museums also project various portraits of Sultan Qaboos that endorse him as the icon of the nation, as well as exhibits of other sultans and royals that promote a sense of loyalty to the government and Qaboos. For instance, as it can be seen in Figure 6.5, the People and Place Museum, a private museum that intends to provide a glance at the typical Omani houses and living styles during the 1970s, exhibits frames and mirrors with the portrait of the Sultan Qaboos that were in common use in private homes following the rule of Qaboos. It can be seen in Figure 6.6 that a number of such frames are also exhibited in the main exhibition room of the Old Castle Museum. The assorted collection of *Khanjar* (daggers), a prominent symbol of Oman, is also widely exhibited in both private and public museums endorsing the key national symbols that are explicitly identified in the narratives pointing out the symbols of state in the National Museum.

As Koch (2016) has highlighted, regimes produce the image of a coherent figurehead as an icon-of-the-nation that seeks to promote a singular vision to be attained among the masses and the elites. It can be seen that the national symbols inscribed in the material culture of everyday life and at a mundane level come to be part of the exhibits. Such exhibits that re-endorse the national symbols highlight the intertwined role of everyday nationalism and national identity production at the state level. It confirms the state-driven approach and top-down power and role. However, the engagement and representation that occurs at various levels highlight that even if, according to a modernist view, it is an elite-driven phenomenon, it is also accompanied by the role the community plays through their popular participation and acceptance of the national symbols that determines the strength of the symbolic references and contribute to the

success of the nationalist framework. It is significant to notice that along with the formal exhibits of the leader as a personified symbol of the nation, such exhibits of the domestic level contribute to the impression of national unity. Even though Brubaker and Cooper (2000) rightfully remind us that studies of identity are too often focused on the construction from above, such objects of everyday life that endorse national identity are not limited to the ethnic and vernacular category that attribute to the role of non-governmental museums and individual collectors in the national identity framework. Both public and private museums are playing their roles in the endorsement of the national symbols and the identity framework comprises symbols that are being re-produced and re-presented by both the agencies. This is seen in the example of colourful frames and mirrors with the portrait of the Sultan Qaboos; both celebrate and endorse the father of the nation and state-sanctioned symbols of the nation through objects used at a common and banal level during the early 1970s, exhibited in the private museums in Figures 6.5 and 6.6.



Figure 6-7 The Old Castle Museum, Display frame - the father of the owner and collector of the museum shaking hands with the [late] Sultan Qaboos

Source: Author.

The Old Castle Museum has a room dedicated to the “Personal Collection” of their family where along with various belongings of the family and information on the fort, the gifts from Sultan Said Bin Taimur to his grandfather are exhibited. As it can be seen in Figure 6.7, the room also exhibits pictures of His Majesty the Sultan Qaboos and other dignitaries including pictures of his father shaking hands with His Majesty Sultan Qaboos Al Said. The owner, while giving the tour of this room highlighted the role of his grandfather that “he presented this castle to the government of Sultan Said Bin Taimur Al Said [the father of Sultan Qaboos] to be used as the headquarters of the *Wali* [the governor] of this *Wilayah* [district]”. This is also pointed out in the summary on the history of the old castle in the words of the owner exhibited in this room. Such projections through exhibits also endorse Sultan Qaboos and his political legitimacy in the private museums, and add to an expression of the loyalty to the government and their role in nation-building. This was clearly seen in the summary in the Old Castle Museum, which highlighted the efforts and sincerity of his grandfather towards Oman and particularly the government:

In fact, it was the first building in Oman to raise the flag of the Government of Sultanate of Muscat and Oman in the East of Oman at that time when the situation was very unstable. This step was taken as a confirmation of sincere efforts towards the government that has not been easy on him. There has been a lot of troubles and attempts against his life (exhibit of the summary of the Old Castle, The Personal Gallery, Old Castel Museum).

Such projections of long-term loyalty to the government in private endeavours adds another layer to the expression of the nation and introduces the role of private organisations and individuals in the nation-making project, extending the patronage to the father figure or icon of the nation. Moreover, the above descriptive exhibit of the summary on the old castle provides a perspective highlighting the challenges faced by the people and point towards their role in the nation-building project. Further, it also saliently hints at the power struggle in the region during the civil unrest that prompts realisations that different versions and stories of the nation exist and that some of them remain untold. This reflects the limitations of the museum's contributions toward the presentation of alternate histories in the projection of the nation, which are contextualised in the nation of patronage and elitism. The same is true in for example the United Kingdom (SWLondoner, 2021), and around the world, museums are still patronised by the educated elite that propose a framework of politics premised on actors negotiating the distribution of power within society. The elites and social actors entrench themselves within a dominant position in the political, social and economic structure for adhering to established institutional patterns and in exchange for state patronage.

Another side of the nation making was also pointed out by an Omani visitor in his early 50s, working in a higher managerial position with a research background related to the heritage of Oman, during my discussion with him on the projection of a nation in the Armed Forces Museums. The Armed Forces Museum sheds light on the role of the army and government, and encompasses within it various accounts of civil unrest, wars and the stories of victory that led to a unified Oman. He pointed out that:

We feel proud as the museum projects the historical wars and victories, from those from the past like Salute and Portuguese to the more recent ones until 1975 like Jabal Akhdar war. We are proud that Sultan Qaboos united the country. It is good, but the museum presents one face of the story.

Further explaining about the Jabal Al-Akhdar war that occurred due to conflict between Omani forces of the Sultan of Oman aided by British soldiers and forces of the inland Imamate of Oman backed by Saudi Arabia, he added, “we have two faces of this war. We have another side that is of [the] Imams, and Imams they believed in something. The museum shows the government side”. The discussion pointed towards negotiations in projecting the nation in the historic narratives surrounding the Sultan’s regime and showing that the projected image of the person of Qaboos follows a state-sanctioned narrative. This reminds us of what Rolf (2013: 79) has pointed out, that in the quest of legitimacy and national identity building governments re-educate the citizenry to unite “into the system by means of symbols and ideology and suppress all competition”.

It is seen above that both the earlier and new developments of museums endorse Qaboos. Valeri (2009) and Peterson (2019) emphasised that it was a conscious decision by the Sultan to strengthen the sense of national identity through a cult of personality of Qaboos. Sultan Qaboos assumed the role of a core symbol of contemporary Oman, as Omanis associate him with the contemporary changes and developments in Oman. Keeping in view that the establishment of the nation-state

more directly correlates to the accession of the throne of Qaboos, the popularity of Sultan Qaboos as the father of the nation remains fairly stable since 1970 amongst the changing generations of Omanis: around 90 percent of the current population have known no other leader than the Sultan Qaboos until Qaboos died in 2020. Peterson (2019: 9) has pointed out that “in the early years of his reign, Omanis universally and spontaneously remarked that before Qaboos there was nothing and that everything happened after he acceded to the throne”.

Moreover, during my research, I witnessed the reaction of the Omanis following the death of Sultan Qaboos. The young and the elderly, whether Omani civilians or government forces such as the police and army personnel, had their eyes full of tears. The newspapers and media described how the heart-wrenching loss of Sultan Qaboos came as a shock to people and “Everyone was in tears” (The Nation, 2020, np). Koch (2016) notes that not all the leaders as a symbol of a nation that are successful in fostering a personality cult are remembered favourably, for instance Hitler, Stalin and Mussolini, who can be contrasted with other leaders, such as Sheikh Zayed of Abu Dhabi. As Qaboos was a leader favourably remembered, genuinely liked and respected by a vast majority of Omanis, it was not surprising to see visitors taking pictures with the throne of Sultan Qaboos positioned right at the beginning of the "Renaissance Gallery" in the National Museum during my fieldwork. In line with Plamper's (2012: 222) view on the constituents of a cult of personality in a leader, the Qaboos leadership was "anchored in popular sovereignty" clearly targeted to the entire population, not only the well-to-do or just the ruling class.



Figure 6-8 The National Museum, Renaissance Gallery, The display on the “Symbols of State”- visitors taking their picture in front of throne of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos.

Source: Author.

In my discussions with several Omanis during my fieldwork, when I used to mention my visits to the museums, several times I was also asked the question if during my visit I saw His Majesty's (Sultan Qaboos') first throne. For example, during a discussion in a gathering, a retired Omani woman in her early 60s said, "I want to go to the National Museum, especially to see the first chair [the throne] of His Majesty". As pointed out earlier, this showcase in Figure 6.8 that displays the first throne also exhibits a number of the most prominent "symbols of the state", the national flag and the sultan standard, the national emblem, the text of the national anthem and the statue of state (the Constitution of Oman), representative of contemporary Oman equated to the Renaissance era. This display was one of the most popular spots in the National Museum for visitors, especially Omanis, and I observed that they appeared keen to have their pictures taken in front of these eminent symbols of the nation, thereby inscribing themselves visually in the same symbolic framework in their commemorations of the museum visit. Qaboos as such embodies symbolic value that Smith (1991) identifies as a way to propose the existence of a civic nation, bonded by acceptance of values and principles other than history, language, and ethnic belonging.

Hence as seen above, Sultan Qaboos, a leader and founding father, is a new symbol representative of contemporary Oman that came about as a decision of the Sultan Qaboos. This symbol, continually projected in all the Omani museums, is a well-established and recognised symbol of the nation anchored in the popular sovereignty and acceptance of the mass population. This symbolic reference and message it disseminates have been relatively consistent throughout, which in turn gets reflected

through the museums. For almost half a century, the people and the nation have not witnessed any other leadership, and the symbol of Qaboos appears fixed in this moment of Omani history. However, the legacy created around this symbol contributes to a sense of change and evolution. For instance, his legacy of being a founding father of Oman is linked to being the father of a very ancient nation, which is staged in museums, as discussed in chapter 5. Further, since Omani museums and the nationalistic architecture style that they utilise were born post-1970, they directly correlate to the symbol of Qaboos. The same is showcased and performed in and through museums and their architecture. For example, using prehistoric and ancient history exhibits in museums and museum architecture that use traditional typology when coupled with the symbol of Qaboos, which is projected in the museums in an evolutionary and systematic manner, endorses the symbol with a sense of continuity and change. Hence, the symbol of Qaboos as the father of the nation is not a standalone symbol; his legacy presented in the museums is also correlated with material inscriptions and other symbolic repositories, such as museum architecture and the symbolic ideology of the renaissance, which are further discussed in the following sections.

6.3. The Symbolic Ideology of Renaissance

The next national identity symbol chosen for this study is the conceptual ideology of the Renaissance. The public museums of Oman give ample significance to the Renaissance era that begins with the accession to the throne of Sultan Qaboos and marks the beginning of the new era and the Sultanate of Oman as a nation-state. The

predecessor to the current ruler, the late Sultan Qaboos is associated with the dawn of the nation, following July 23, 1970, the date of Qaboos's accession to the throne, which is officially termed 'the Renaissance Day' (*Asr Al- Nahda*). Studying the role of the *symbolic conceptual ideology* proposes to capture another aspect of the frame of symbolic systems, which is different in its form compared to iconizing a person or object as a symbol of the nation, in an attempt to shed some light on various aspects and types of national symbols.

Further, the frame of the nation that composes the personalistic figure as a national symbol often correlates to ideological conceptions such as the symbolic concepts of the greater renaissance and golden period as in the case of Turkmenistan (Polese and Horak, 2015). Such Ideological concepts according to Polese and Horak (2015) frame the new period that serves to cement the personal self of the leader and the political authority. In Oman too, the symbol of Qaboos amalgamates with the concept of the Renaissance. The National Museum and the Land of Frankincense Museum have sections dedicated to the Renaissance that both endorse and are patronaged by Qaboos and further "commemorates the new era" "guided by the unifying vision of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos Bin Said" (introduction panel of the Renaissance Gallery, NM). Other museums place a similar emphasis on the Renaissance era; for instance, the Sultan Armed Forces have a gallery dedicated to "the reign of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said, The Supreme Commander"; the coin and currency section in the currency museum is dedicated to the era of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos; and there are descriptive panels on the reign of Sultan Qaboos in the Muscat Gate Museum. In these the term renaissance is prominently used to highlight the "splendid transformation" in

Oman “during the years of the Renaissance” (Gallery on the reign of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said - The Supreme Commander, SAF Museum).

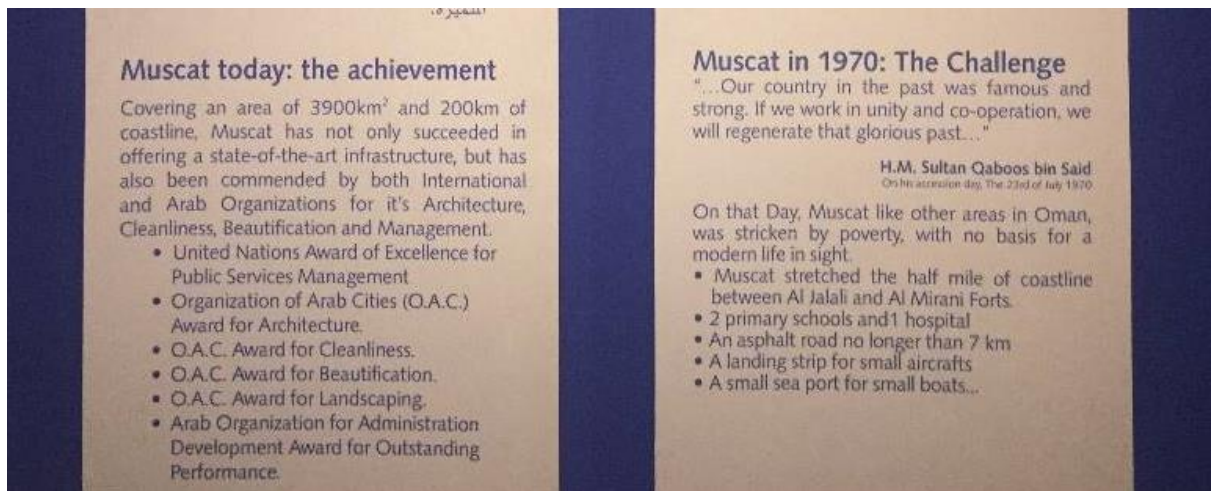


Figure 6-9 The Bait Al-Baranda Museum, comparative panels on the civic advancements and achievements in Muscat (the capital of Oman) before and after 1970

Source: Author.

The presentations of the ideological concept of the contemporary Renaissance in Oman are grounded in its modern development and civic advancements. The Bait Al-Zubair Museum presents several frames with pictures of Oman before 1970 that provide a visual reminder and encourage a comparison of Oman before and contemporary Oman after the Renaissance; such presentations, along with highlighting the civic advancement, also express the changes and progress of the nation. A similarly idea is created in the Bait Al-Baranda Museum that presents two panels situated beside each other, one narrating Muscat today and the other identifying

the challenges faced following 1970, as it can be seen in Figure 6.9, reminding the visitors that,

On this day [in 1970] Muscat like other areas in Oman was stricken by poverty, with no bases for a modern life in sight. Muscat stretched the half-mile of the coastline [...], [with] 2 primary schools and 1 hospital, [and] an asphalt road no longer than 7 km.

In contrast, the other panel highlights that Muscat today covers “an area of 3900 km² and 200 km of the coastline” and offers “a state-of-the-art infrastructure” (panels on Muscat today and Muscat 1970, BBM). Such exhibits project the “dramatic shift to a new era of peaceful, purposeful modern development”, as highlighted in the narratives in the introduction to the “Renaissance Gallery” at the National Museum. (introduction panel, Renaissance, NM). The above discussion also points to a push and pull factor between the projection of national symbolic references as fixed and evolutionary, where the message of ideology tied with the symbols of Qaboos endorse a relatively fixed message that correlates to the era of ‘the renaissance, an era of prosperity and civic reforms, however, also contributes to a sense of change through the narratives of progression of the nation through the presentations of before and after 1970.

Also, keeping in view the concept of *Nahda* that revolves around the rupture of the past characterised by isolation and socio-economic challenges in comparison to a prosperous welfare state following the 1990s, such exhibits reinstate the success and advancement of the contemporary nation-state. This is similar to the portrayals of the

rule of Sheikh Zayed in Abu Dhabi and Niyazov in Turkemanistan that according to Koch (2016) constituted a nationalistic framework in which the personalistic icons come to fuse with the dramatic transformations and developments during their rules. Similarly, in Oman, such exhibits within the juxtaposition of the past and present, emphasise the Renaissance “characterised by a deepening and strengthening of national unity and identity”, appropriated as “one of the most influential epochs in Omani history” (introduction panel, Renaissance Gallery, NM).

Similarly, in line with the official narratives, the Land of Frankincense Museum emphasises the significance of Oman’s Renaissance. It is stated:

In 1970, after a period of long isolation, Oman turned a new page in history when His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said succeeded his father and led the Renaissance that inspired dramatic changes in all aspects of life.

On one hand, researchers like Valeri (2009: 133), a political researcher who has written extensively on political legitimacy and nation-building in the Gulf states and especially Oman, identify that the “Omani national identity is basically built on the negation of the country’s pre-1970 history”. On the other hand, Kechichian (2010: 163), a researcher on foreign affairs who has written extensively on power and succession of monarchies especially in Oman and Saudi Arabia, emphasises the actuality of the circumstances presented in the official narratives of the isolated and dire conditions of post-1970, highlighting that “many remember the dire socio-economic conditions before Qaboos acceded to rulership”. Hence, the exhibits and narratives of the stark difference of post-

renaissance compared to the Renaissance era prompt the socio-political legitimacy built on the dramatic changes that followed the accession of the reign of Sultan Qaboos. However, keeping in view the current demography and bearing in mind that more than 90 per cent of the current population in Oman has not personally witnessed these pre-1970 dire conditions, narratives and illustrations of past and present placed side by side are a significant reminder set to revive the past that reinstates the contemporary renaissance. This shows the paradox of building the collective memory based on the tragedies that must be forgotten and yet we still need to be reminded of them continuously (Anderson, 2016: 137).

An interesting fact related to the concept of *nahda*, the Renaissance in Omani history is its aspect of recurrence. The most elaborate discussion on the recurrent aspect of the history of Oman and the recurring ideology of the Renaissance is narrated in detail by Wilkinson (1987) in his book on “Imamate Tradition of Oman”. Wilkinson (1987) points to the Ibadi concept of *nahda*, the renaissance of the Imamate’s re-establishment after periods of strife to reunite the territory under religious authority. Similarly, the “Civilization in Making Gallery” of the National Museum that includes the timelines highlighting the significant events related to Omani ancient capitals points to the Imamate period “known as the stronghold of Islam for its numerous scholars and the renaissance of the religious movement” (description, Civilization in Making Gallery, NM). Hence, the claim that contemporary renaissance and continuous history, through its enhanced and elaborate narratives, presentation and exhibits, implicitly tend to both supersede and subsume the earlier conceptions of the Renaissance within the story of evolution and progress. It is identified in the previous chapter that constructions of

national identity in Oman are not a consequence of the decline of religion, which diverges in this context from the western-oriented conceptualisation of frames of national identity attached to ideas of secularism. The above further endorses the observations presented in the previous chapter that the national identity frame while maintaining Islam as the key identity ethos grounded in the national culture, however, does not strive to derive the political legitimacy from adherence to a specific religious doctrine or religious movement.

From the earliest days of the modern Omani Renaissance, Oman has maintained its intense focus on education, a role that Glener (1983) correlates to the new standardised system of mass education in early nation-building in Europe during the 19th century. On a multimedia screen (Figure 6.10) in its Renaissance Gallery, the National Museum shows excerpts from the speech by Sultan Qaboos in 1976 on the occasion of the 6th National Day of Oman (celebrated on the birthday of Sultan Qaboos), that highlights that “education must be our utmost priority”. Education plays a critical role in Oman in creating a united vision through the reproduction of a unified national language and dissemination of cohesive histories, myths and memories. This idea is central to modernist theorists that Gellner (2006) in his theory of nationalism identifies with nation-building, where the agencies such as mass media and the public mass education system, funded and controlled by the state, undertake the task of ensuring a common public mass culture.

In 2019 the Oman National Identity Forum organised by the Sultan Qaboos Higher Centre for Culture and Sciences particularly focused on spreading the values of

national identity amongst the members of society, especially the children, and concentrated on the role of the educational institutions in solidifying national values (Oman Observer, 2019). Such endeavours “aimed at reinforcing the pillars of national identity” both highlight the conscious efforts of reinforcing the national identity through diverse channels and political interest and endorse the significant role of the educational institutions in strengthening the national identity (Oman Observer, 2019: NP). Omani national narratives further explicitly highlight the strategic objective of the Omani media that include “the promotion of national unity, loyalty to the homeland and His Majesty the Sultan and the advancement of the society” (Ministry of Information Oman, 2016: 137). The museums, specifically the public museums, present the authorised historical narrative, which is codified in textbooks and other media.

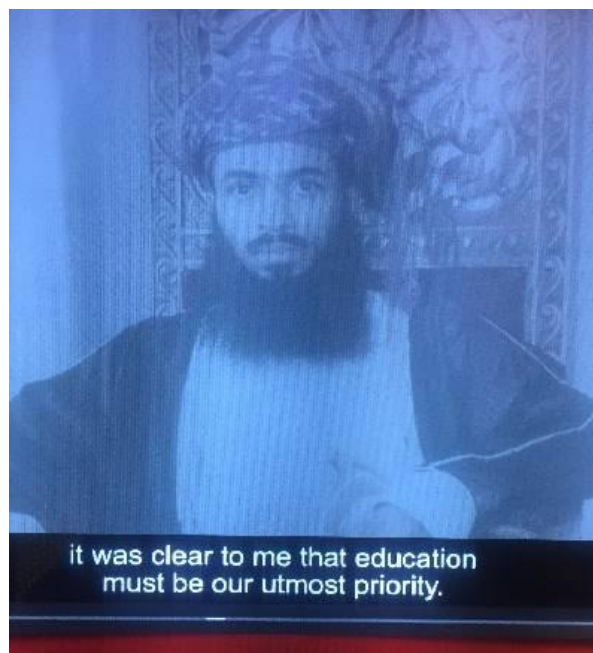


Figure 6-10 The National Museum, Renaissance Gallery, multimedia screen display the plays the excerpts from the speech by Sultan Qaboos in 1976 on the occasion of the 6th National Day.

Source: Author.

The renaissance represents modernity that brought about a change in civic lifestyle improvements and economic growth, it is measured based on a social and living standard that revolves around modern commodities, infrastructure, and education and health systems. In the first speech in 1970 on the day of accession Sultan Qaboos reminded the people of Oman that, “our country in the past was famous and strong” Sultan Qaboos (1970: 7). Sultan Qaboos (1970: 7) committed to a new era which “regenerates the glorious past” and achieves “a respectable place in the world”. Excerpts from the speech state:

Yesterday it was complete darkness and with the help of God,
tomorrow will be a new dawn on Muscat, Oman and its people.
(Sultan Qaboos, 1970: 7).

The museums endorse the regeneration of the glorious past; for instance, in the Sultan Armed Forces Museum it is narrated that Oman has “recovered her splendours of ... and more than that” (panel description in Gallery on the reign of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said- The Supreme Commander, SAF Museum). Hence, as explained above, the museums use assorted means and mediums to project the civic advancements that contextualise the Renaissance as a distinctive epoch, striving for continuity with the glorious past and presented in the museums discussed in the previous chapter concerning their projections of historical representations. However, clearly by identification of the time before renaissance as darkness the renaissance era thus contributes to endorse Qaboos’s as the one who brought the dawn.



Figure 6-11 The National Museum, Renaissance section, Touch screen showing particular social and economic indicators – tab on education indicator 1970

Source: Author.

Figure 6-12 The National Museum, Renaissance section, Touch screen showing particular social and economic indicators – tab on education indicator 2010

Source: Author.

The National Museum explicitly presents statistical information that highlights the advancements in the infrastructure, health and education system. Touch screens in the Renaissance section of the National Museum present several social and economic indicators, highlighting the prosperity Oman has experienced across five decades from 1970 to 2010 CE. For example, the social indicator on education highlights that there were 16 schools with 909 students in 1970 which in the second, third, fourth and fifth

decades reached 388, 800, 1,053, and 14,040 schools; with an increase in students to 94,800, 356,000, 499,900, and 569,300, respectively. The indication of the increase in figures represents the expansion of education correlating to contemporary achievements that reinstate civic developments.

Such presentations remind us of the first wave of nationalism in Europe that positioned significance to education as the apparatus of national-identity building. Guibernau, (2004: 139) points out that the “relevant feature of the French Revolution was the emphasis it placed on education, creating, as a result, the first comprehensive system of national education to raise new generations of virtuous and patriotic citizens”. In line with this idea and impact the education system can contribute to the frame of nationalism, the museums like the Saiyyidiyah Museum, a museum primarily focused on presenting the system of schooling and education, reinstate the role of education in contemporary Oman. Highlighting the significance of this museum in presenting the role of education, the Director of this museum explains that the museum “presents various stages of education in Oman” which is housed in the “first purpose-built school for formal education”. The museum exhibits the history of education that until 1970 consisted of Quranic schools, and when Sultan Qaboos came to accession, there were only 3 primary schools (Information panel, SM).

It can be seen in Figures 6.11 and 6.12, that in Oman Education is both the apparatus of articulating cohesion as well as the indicator of the success of the monarchical regime of Qaboos and the contemporary Oman, where education continues to be a priority in nation-building project since the first decade of the renaissance, as

represented in the presentations of the museums. Here we see similarity in the role of education in the frame of nation and nationalism, as an ideological impetus that transformed Europe in the 19th century that according to Guibernau, (2004: 20, 86) and Baradat, (2009) grew out of the idea of awakening while raising the patriotic citizenship and unity. This was carried out by the dissemination of a singular language and history through education based on a standardised curriculum, especially in 'national' subjects like literature, geography and history (Guibernau, 2004: 20, 86; Baradat, 2009). However, this framework of nationalism in Oman is in contrast to being a device that according to Guibernau (2004: 20, 86) was useful in "refocusing a people's loyalty away from monarchy". The nation personified through symbols and rituals in Oman re-creates a sense of loyalty to the monarchy and the legitimacy of Qaboos. Education has become the apparatus of anchoring the framework of nationalism and conceptualisation of the renaissance, uniting citizenry through Arabic as the medium of study and government-sanctioned history through singular curricula intended to anchor the new identity that is bounded to the monarchical political framework. However, in the museums, education is presented as an indicator of the success of the regime and the renaissance era that correlates to the symbolic legacy of Qaboos.

The narrative of the introductory panel at the "Renaissance Gallery" explicitly identifies the al-Busaidi dynasty as a fundamental constituent of contemporary nation-making that "commemorates the Renaissance together with other key elements of Oman's modern history from 1744CE to the present day, focusing on the rule of the al-Busaid Dynasty". Centralising the national identity on the person of Qaboos is in contrast to

the neighbouring Gulf countries, in the sense of appointing the personality of the cult on a single person in comparison to focusing more widely on the ruling families. For example, in Oman the streets, airports, hospitals, universities bear the names of Qaboos, in comparison, the neighbouring Gulf Arabian countries' major projects bear the names of various senior figures of the ruling family. The concentration of the cult on a single person, on one hand, monumentalises the image of Qaboos. On the other hand, both scholars and the media highlighted concerns arising about the future of the country in the most personalised of all Gulf monarchies. This has been widely identified as problematic, as Peterson (2019: 10) points out that “the danger in any cult of personality lies in the mortality of the leader. The other Gulf monarchies have robust families to keep their cults alive”. Keeping these concerns in view, the museums of Oman play a distinguishing role by attributing the continuity of the political legacy to the royal family situated in a past transposed within the modern history of Oman, which draws out the legitimacy of the ruling family and contributes to the stability of the political future.

In this context, the explicit emphasis on the al-Busaidi dynasty constitutes motivations parallel to drives of founding the cult on the ruling families as in the neighbouring Gulf countries that assert the continuity of the political legacy and the legitimacy based on the continuity of the ruling dynasty. Such exhibits of the al-Busaidi lineage that assert the political continuity provide a sense of long-term legitimacy to the leadership of Qaboos, further promoting the way for the political future, and drawing from the past legitimacy of the ruling family. Endorsing political authority based on political continuity is not specific to Oman and limited to presentations in Omani museums, for instance

Maffi (2009) points out that the construction of the modern Jordanian national identity has been linked with the history of the royal and the Hashemite elite to justify their political authority. The National Museum of Jordan promotes Jordanian history where the projection of the Hashemite legacy is reinforced to play a central role in the creation of Jordanian national identity (Maffi, 2009).

The museums through their presentations further endorse the al-Busaid and their political legitimacy by highlighting the historical role and achievements of the al-Busaidi dynasty. For instance, the al-Busaidi timeline in Figure 6.13 includes a selection of exhibits that highlight various achievements, such as laying of the hospital foundation stone by Sultan Faisal bin Turki al Busaidi, exchanges of diplomatic notes, letters and official correspondence. In this way, the exhibits promote the positive role and achievements of the al-Busaidi Dynasty in nation-making, such as their outward-oriented role in the diplomatic relations and their inward-oriented role of bringing about civic improvements. Other public museums also give ample significance to the al-Busaidi dynasty within their museums setting and their dedicated galleries. For example, the Bait Al-Baranda Museum and Sultan Armed Forces Museum have dedicated galleries on al-Busaid. The early al-Busaidi era is presented through picturesque projections of a collection of their international correspondences, gift exchanges, agreement and newspaper cuttings that highlight the diplomatic achievements, such as with the United States, Britain, India and France supported by audio narratives on the history of the Busaidi dynasty at the Bait Al-Baranda "al-Busaid Gallery". Such elements juxtaposed within the exhibits of the ancient and historical traditions of seafaring and trading, and the role of the Busaidi Dynasty, endorse the

virtues of openness and longevity of foreign relations, projecting a notion of cosmopolitanism in relation to the foreign encounters which portray the Omani nation as mature and enlightened in dealing with other countries.



Figure 6-13 The National Museum, The Renaissance Gallery, The Al Busaidi Dynasty Timeline
Source: Author.

Qaboos at the centre of the personalistic regime and Renaissance period “guided by the unifying vision of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos” (introduction on the Renaissance, NM) can be seen as what Koch (2016: 22) identifies as a "charismatic personality who symbolised all that is good in the nation” in contrast to the “abstract values like freedom, democracy, stability, or progress that dominate ideological discourses elsewhere”. The official narratives published by the Ministry of Information (2016: 6) promote the narrative of national development, and the achievements of Oman and highlight that

“Oman and its people are reaping the benefits of security, peace and stability, as His Majesty’s wise policies lead them on to ever greater heights and attainments”. This is similar to what Kechichian (1995: NP) asserts: that “His [Qaboos’s] idea of Oman has been realized” in the making of the nation. As such the inward and outward-focused contemporary accomplishment that embodies renaissance equates to Sultan Qaboos’s achievements during his rule in Oman. In other words, within the frame of national identity the builder of the Omani Renaissance – His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said – literally symbolises all that is good in the nation.

6.4. Museum Architecture as a Symbol of the Nation – Anchoring Unity through Museum Architecture

The final symbol of the nation selected for analysis in this chapter is the museum architecture that is used within a complex process of nation-building and political dynamics that go into producing the image of the nation to facilitate the creation and shaping of shared consciousness and collective identity. The museum architecture as a symbolic order and the vision of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos reinstate the legitimacy of the regime and the leader underlining a complex interrelation of museum architecture with *the symbolic concept of renaissance* and *Qaboos as the icon of the nation*.

This section hence furthers the discussion on the significant symbols of the nation and their intermeshed confluence that contributes to the frame of a nation. It also expands the discussion in the previous chapter that identified the historical and vernacular

structures and architectural elements, such as the exhibits that reflect the ancient architecture, religious architecture and communal architecture organised in the museum. I have shown that such exhibits produce competing and overarching ideas of nation that have been used in specific ways to facilitate the creation and shaping of specific national identity expression. This has been carried out through the projections that inoculate specific ideas of a nation that ranged from asserting the core constituent of Islamic identity to celebrating diversity, stimulating universal value and emphasising cosmopolitan influences within the frame of national identity. The discussion in the previous chapter reflected on the diversity of architecture and specific forms of architecture that according to Smith (2003) intend to bring together people belonging to a particular community it represents. Keeping in view that the museum architecture serves “as a strategic marker of nation-building” (Elgenius, 2015: 145), this section explores the role of both the new developments and vernacular museum architecture that house the contemporary museums and their role in the expression of the nation.

It has been identified in the context chapter how architecture has been given profound attention in the creation of a distinct national image of Oman through architectural policies incorporating pre-set options of certain architectural features and other limitations to the architecture and the built environment. An example is the use of certain architectural features such as arches and crenellations found in the local architecture such as forts and castles of Oman, as a strategy that Morgan (1999) identifies as re-constructing the national identity through shared repositories of images and objects to shape collective memories and identities. Similarly, restrictions are imposed so the height is closer to the native architecture skyline or at least far from the

tendencies of the neighbouring Gulf countries that stand out for their iconic skyscrapers.

A combination of “Omani, Arab, Islamic and contemporary style and character” based on the preamble of the municipal order has given birth to an architectural typology that is commonly regarded as a typical Omani style and architectural landscape (Building Regulation, 1992: NP). Although no exact references are made in the policies as to what constitutes an amalgamation of “Omani, Arab, Islamic and contemporary style” and even though the process remains on-going, in the “intervening decades, this question seems to have been at least partially answered, and defensive imagery is front and centre” (Nutz, 2013: 82). Even though the buildings are contemporary in nature, in a way that intends to propose a modern nation and speak of economic investment and growth of the country, the emphasis on the Arab Islamic elements resonates with the intentions of endorsing a continuity to the core ethnic ideology, as identified in the last chapter, that reinstates the Arab and Islamic identity.

In Figure 6.14 the purpose-built museum proposes a specific typology creating resemblance through the use of typical architectural elements that include the combination of “local, Arab or Islamic style” (Building Regulation, 1992: NP). The use of this vocabulary in the museum’s architecture becomes a reminder of the nation’s past and a significant constituents of national identity, creating an historic expression of the nation that serves as a unifying sign. Architecture and the buildings of the museums in this way have become part of the national identity framework through

which the community is presented as a continuous and 'natural' entity on a shared course to the future (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983).

Figure 6-14 Examples of Architecture of Omani Museums showing the use of typical Architectural vocabulary employed in various purpose built museums in Oman
Source: Author.



National Museum - Muscat- Public Museum
Opened on 2016



Muscat Gate Museum – Muscat – Public
Museum - Opened in 2001



The Land of Frankincense museum –Dhofar-
Public- Opened in 2007



Madha Museum – Musandam – Private
Museum - Opened in 2018



Natural History Museum – Public Museum –
Opened in 1985

The museums in Oman, as visible in Figure 6.14, draw on an amalgamation of specific Arab, Islamic and Omani features that reflect a specific style, commonly referred to as the “Omani style of Architecture” and is what Smith’s (1990: 178) considers as a nationalistic tendency of hewing close to the “vernacular motifs and style” in the pursuit of survival and recognition of the new traditions and symbols. For instance, the Natural History Museum inaugurated in 1985 is one of the earliest museums of Oman that is still functional. It is situated in the extended part of the Omani-Islamic style main building of the Ministry of Culture and Youth (previously Ministry of Heritage and Culture) Complex. In Oman, the early Natural History Museum and the recent iconic National Museum, as well as others in Figure 6.14, constitute specific selective features that intend to reflect the Omani style architectural typology through the typical use of architectural elements like arches, castellations, and fire holes, earthly and white colours smoothing over the diversity and connoting unity.

This is also explicitly pointed out in news media; for instance, The Oman Daily Observer (2018: NP) identifies the nationalistic architecture of some prominent buildings and highlights the National Museum as an example of “Omani-Style Architecture”. Moreover, this particular style of architecture is commonly recognised by Omanis as distinctive Omani architecture. The utilisation of common architectural elements in daily life also makes them the significant focus of the collective identity, which brings it into the sphere of what Billig (1995) calls “banal nationalism”. While discussing the building of the National Museum an Omani visitor in his forties pointed out that:

I think the Omani style architecture compliments the surroundings and represents the country well. When anyone will see the building, they will know that we are a modern society connected to our heritage. This is good about this design.

Clearly, not only this visitor recognised the Omani architectural style but also viewed the building as a statement of Omani-ness to 'others'. In the discussion I had with various visitors, clearly, the architecture of the National Museums was seen as 'modern and traditional' at the same time. The National Museum is a modern building that reflects Tsai's (2015) idea of a careful selection of particular visible cultural elements to create a symbolic link to connect the current nation with its previous ethnic roots in the nation-making project. Further, cultural projects that indicate modernity and growth reflect on a national image that is not merely inward-focused, as they make global statements about national identities that according to Macleod (2013) induce international interest, reflect on economic strength and attract tourism.

The National Museum is "Oman's flagship" project which is explicitly identified on the Oman National Museum Website (National Museum, NP: ND), this indicates the significant role of a museum as a landmark that is used to "flag" the nation (Jones, 2011; Exell, 2018). Even though Exell (2016) points out that the museums of the Gulf, especially the landmark museum developments, are inclined to communicate the national brand to the world and furnish new icons for the contemporary nation, the Museums in Oman are in contrast to museums like the Louvre Abu Dhabi, the Guggenheim, and the Zayed National Museum in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) that are designed by "starchitects" that contribute to the discourse of globalisation founded

on transnational architecture (Exell, 2016). In contrast to these, Omani high-profile museums, such as the National Museum of Oman, express an inward-looking approach through the incorporation of the vernacular architectural vocabulary, conveying a robust architecture blending traditional and contemporary aesthetics in a modern museum. This hybrid approach towards architecture is also different from the recent development of the Qatar National Museum design inspired by the desert rose, a crystalline desert formation, which had no previous national association and as Bounia (2018: 213) emphasised, has emerged as a “new symbol of the nation”. These museums are utilising architectural vocabularies to assert a specific symbol of national identity within their context-specific nationalistic discourse. The architectural approach in the purpose-built Omani museums is comparable to the museology approach in these museums, identified in the previous chapter as constituting an inward-focused projection of the nation while employing a western framework of museum production by employing western expertise and western-style display and design techniques in museums. However, giving rise to localised versions of museology and architecture by employing locally shaped techniques and features to standard western-style production of museums contextualized to the Omani setting.

The museums in the above examples show a tendency in the Arabian Gulf region to utilise western and acclaimed international firms in the design of their museums. Critical to the discussion of the museums is the criticism of the Arabian Gulf museums in borrowing a western model of museum production led by western professionals, architects and designers that Durovsik (2016) argues is an approach that tends to portray the Arabian Peninsula as a region empty of material heritage or considered as

cultural dissonance. However, this criticism that views the museums of the Arabian Peninsula as a product of oil revenues and western architects devoid of substance delimits the understanding of the production of the museums in the Gulf region, which takes place within a rather complicated national and contextual perspective creating overt challenges to the western models of museum architecture and design.

Even though the National Museum in Muscat is designed by a British-based firm, Jasper Jacob Associates, the museum design was carried out in consultation with various Omani and international stakeholders. During my interview, the Director of Collections at the National Museum pointed out that His Majesty Haitham Bin Tariq Al Said, the current Sultan and at the time the Minister of Heritage and Culture “was involved in every step of the project and also visited the museum during the construction time”. The decision-making in relation to the museum architecture is an overly top-down process in Oman. However, the words of His Majesty Haitham Bin Tariq Al Said point to the significance and efforts that went into the design of the National Museum:

Decades of planning ensued, growing from tentative discussions to drawn up plans [...] The planning, design and construction of the museum we see today involved an enormous number of moving parts, experts from Oman and around the world convened both in the Sultanate and abroad to begin creating something we knew to be ambitious (His Majesty Haitham Bin Tariq Al Said, 2020: NP).

The architecture of the museums is a result of a carefully thought-out process and decision-making related to the conception, design and development of the museums. Since the inception of early museums in Oman, the use of specific elements that have generated an Omani architectural style in these museums presents a measured move by the government to present a singular typology of architecture. The Secretary General of the National Museum, Jamal Al-Moosawi, highlights that immense thought and reflection went into what would “best express the Omani character” (The National Museum, 2019: 30). This architectural approach is overtly identified as “a tangible expression of the modern Omani character” in the book on the National Museum (The National Museum, 2019: 30). It supports Exell’s (2016: 43) argument that the new museum's developments continue the traditional association between museum buildings and nation making and serves as “a symbol of modernity”. Further, the above highlight that even though the museum designers and architectural team are western, the design criteria are not only defined through design requirements proposed by the Ministry of Heritage and Culture, but are also pragmatically followed to achieve the desired results.

For instance, the National Museum building’s external appearance was a result of a number of conceptual iterations, drawing on “the Omani and regional vernacular influences” (The National Museum, 2019: 30). This reflects on the strategy to use the museum architecture in contemporary Oman as a symbol of the nation and the perceived significance of the museum architecture in the expression of the national identity. The exterior of the museum is the result of a collective consultation between the Ministry of Heritage and Culture, the Royal Estates Affairs (representing the Royal

Office of the Sultan) and the main consultants who according to Secretary General, Jamal Al-Moosawi “collaborated closely on the question of what the image of the museum wanted to project to the outer world” (The National Museum, 2019: 30). The profound value of the museum's architecture is evident from the number of refinements and the painstaking process, resources and time attributed to the design of the museum. The design was refined over a period of five years from 2005 and three different options of façade were presented to the Ministry of Heritage and Culture in 2006 for selection (The National Museum, 2019). The external appearance underwent the final revision in 2010 (The National Museum, 2019). The design that “combined tradition and modernity” was “produced for, and approved, by His Majesty the [late] Sultan” (The National Museum, 2019: 32). The extreme focus on the design under a top-down decision-making process points towards the political ambitions of the local authorities to profess local interpretations of Omani-ness in the architecture of the museums. Hence, as Durovsik (2016) points out, while the works of western museums’ designers and architects can be read as “orientalist constructions”, the process as discussed above accounts for more than a mere sanctioning of the designs proposed by the western interpretation of the notion of Omani-ness or the orient, and rather aims to achieve the museum architecture as an image of Omani identity.

Conversely, ‘Omani and vernacular influences’ encompass an amalgamation of religious and cultural influences and historical references. The museum architecture that forefronts the Omani character proposing unity and coherence comprises within it the characterisation of cosmopolitanism, linked to historical interactions and cultural influences, as also identified in the previous chapter on the historical references of the

nation. Endorsing the continuity from the past is the discussion on the architecture of the National Museum explicitly reminding us that, “arts and crafts of Oman have been subject to many different influences over the centuries and have been shaped to a great extent by trading links that the country established over millennia throughout the Middle East, East Africa, Asia, the Mediterranean and Europe” (The National Museum, 2019: 32, 33). Further, it is explicitly identified that “the various styles that had found their way into the country were actively studied and assimilated” by the government that resulted in the tangible expression of the modern Omani character (The National Museum, 2019: 33). It is explained that:

Aesthetics for the public buildings that have developed in Oman since 1970 [...] is the traditional style that draws inspiration from a number of sources – Timurid, Ottoman, Persian, Moroccan and Mughal, to name a few. The style is perhaps best illustrated, rather than described. (The National Museum, 2019: 33).

Architectural features of the National Museum are explicitly appropriated to elements they have in common with the “traditional Ibadi mosque”, “earlier Omani buildings, “ancient Mesopotamia”, the “Islamic world” etc. that propose historical cosmopolitan influences as contributory to the Omani style of architecture. Even if the purpose-built museum architecture forefronts Omani-ness and oneness, the expression of cosmopolitanism contextualised within the historical trading and seafaring nature as such becomes a part of the nation-building framework, rather than a discrete state of existence appropriated to a contemporary identity project.

New museum developments which can be seen as a projection of unity based on the singular coherent stylistic approach. However alongside these new developments exist several museums that project a variety of architectural styles that endorse the expression of cosmopolitanism in relation to foreign encounters and influences and internal cultural diversity. A number of museums are housed in various heritage houses, forts and castles, reused and renovated local structures. These museums encompass within them different vernacular forms of Omani architecture that reflect various regional, geographical, and cultural differences. In some, the vernacular architecture, heritage buildings, forts and castles that house the museums form part of the display; whereas in the others like the Bait Al Ghasham Museum the architecture is the display. Also, the museums project architecture in the form of models, components, panels, photographic references and so on as a part of their display that reflects on assorted types of Omani architecture. An example is the full-scale reproduction of a balcony at the Sur Al-Lawati, as discussed in the previous chapter, which is explicitly identified as “a distinguished style of architecture found on the coast”, a reflection of the long association with external cultures and settlements (description panel on the full-scale reproduction of Haj Mal Allah Murdadani’s house *Rochen*, [a balcony at Sur al-Lawati], NM).

The Director of the Bait Al Ghasham Museum, situated in the interior of Oman and projecting the restored building itself as the display, explained that Oman is a nation that holds within it cosmopolitan influences. Emphasising the strategic location of Oman and links to the neighbouring countries, he added that the Omani empire extended “to some parts of India, South Africa, creating the great history, so all of this

makes Oman ... So we now have [the influence of] mixed cultures such as Indian, Persian, African". As discussed in the chapter on the historical representations, this points out that Omani museums' architecture cannot be viewed as disconnected from the past and has contributed to cosmopolitan influences, linked to foreign encounters, and given shape to the various Omani architectural forms in various regions. Similarly, the Director of the People and Place Museum stated that the "architecture of this museum is different from others as it resonated the specific typology of Omani architecture that developed in Muttrah [the seacoast of Muscat, Oman] as compared to that present in the interior of Oman".

The Director of the Bait Al Ghasham Museum, further highlighting the diversity of architecture in Oman, stated that architecture of other museums and regions like "Muttrah and Sur Al Lawatia [the dwelling of the traders at the sea coast] are different in design due to various influences". He explained further that "Bait Al Ghasham represents *authentic Omani* architecture". The significance of being Omani takes precedence as compared to regional context and the perception of limited external influence form the basis of the recognised authenticity. Discussions have highlighted the celebration of cosmopolitanism in context to the outward influences and maturity in dealing with the idea of cosmopolitanism; however, they also hint that the measure of purity and authenticity of Omani-ness, in this case of the museum architecture, is driven from the idea of inward-looking characterisation and the perception of the nation.

6.5. Conclusion

I have shown in this chapter that the museums of Oman utilise contemporary representations of the nation directed towards uniting the *citizens*, irrespective of their background or ethnicity, to establish a comprehensive sense of national belongingness aimed at contemporary political ends. The museums present new and invented symbols of the nation that endorse the new nation-state. The contemporary symbols of the nation operate to serve social cohesion and legitimise the regime and the rule of Sultan Qaboos.

It is identified that there exist a push and pull factor between the nature of symbols as evolving and changing or evolving nature or fixed. In the case of Oman, the contemporary symbols are invented traditions that generate reasonable fixed message which support the realisation of the elitists' nation-building project aimed at uniting the citizens, however they tend to create a sense continuity and change by including components that resonate to the notions of Arab, Islamic, ancientness, historical and traditional character of Oman. Hence, the careful grafting of historical and traditional elements is carried out in the pursuit of receiving popular response, recognition and survival through the use of elements of the nation that are familiar or relatable to the public. Further, I have shown that by introducing locally shaped techniques and features to standard western-style production museums, localised versions of museology and architecture are being formed and employed in the Omani museums.

In the discussion, I have shown that within the frame of the nation, the symbolic legacy of ethnic identity is engraved in national symbols, such as the museum architecture, and reminds us of the continuity and recurrences of 'ethnic phenomena' that contribute to myths of common origin and ethnic attachment. Such as observed during the analysis, the new developments in museum architecture endorse Arab Islamic context by hewing close to the vernacular and traditional elements; however, 'invented' in nature that represents a particular architectural form representative of contemporary Oman. Such symbolic references conform to Smith's (2003) Ethno-symbolism paradigm that aims to uncover the symbolic legacy of ethnic identity and shows how the nations rediscover and reinterpret their symbols, traditions, myths and memories. Conversely, the frame of national identity also constitutes new symbols of the nation with purely contemporary origin, such as the symbol of Qaboos and the Renaissance that conceptualised the dawn of the contemporary era and Oman as a nation-state. However, alongside the projections of the distinctiveness of the Renaissance era and the leadership of Qaboos, the museums play a significant role in establishing a sense of continuity that endorses political legitimacy and draws from the past legitimacy of the ruling family, museum architecture and other symbolic repositories that are coupled together to give meaning to the symbolic legacy of Qaboos.

The high-profile and purpose-built museums also form a significant symbol of the nation that envelopes both 'vernacular and modern' characteristics and endorses the idea of oneness and unity at the core, serving to emphasise the traditional continuity and expression of modernity that frames an inclusive national identity. The modern Omani architectural style of the museums, emblematic of the contemporary Oman that

intends to anchor the national community and sense of their belongingness, has been carefully selected by the authorities to become the symbol of the nation, reflecting on the image and positioning of Oman both regionally and globally. Museum architecture that favours inclusive national identity and signifies contemporary Oman is a result of a top-down approach that tends on the one hand to downplay the social distinctions; and on the other hand, endorses Omani Arab identity. However, cosmopolitanism and cultural diversity in the frame of national identity are not presented as a discrete phenomenon to the nation formation. They as such form an extended ethos of national projections even though they emphasise unity through the symbols that create a sense of belongings amongst the civic population. Nonetheless, they also celebrate the vernacular diversity and historical cosmopolitan influences linked to foreign encounters, and regional differences, as two sides of the same coin.

The contemporary symbolic references within the frame of national identity projected in the museum are a direct consequence of a top-down approach, both public and private museums are playing their roles in the endorsement of the national symbols. Clearly, the identity framework comprises symbols that are being re-produced and re-presented by both the top-down agencies such as elites and the government and agencies such as the non-governmental agencies and individuals. Therefore the research validates the view in line with the modernist paradigm that endorses the influential role of power groups and elites that proactively defines the national identity frame.

I have further highlighted the positioning of various actors in the nation-building framework of Oman projected in the museums that constitute roles and participation of both producers and consumer agencies. It was observed that the actors involved in museum production perceive museums as entities that constitute power. In context to those involved in the production, the influential role of elites proactively defines the national identity frame. However, the visitors of these museums are not considered passive consumers of knowledge but with the potential to actively participate in the national building project as they observe the exhibits, as shown in the example of the National Museum.

In contrast to the rigid top-down view on the nationalistic framework, Smith (2003) points out that the top-down governmental and elite approach needs to be complemented by a popular perspective from below. The observations in the chapter highlight that the visitor's role of acceptance or rejection of the national symbols can determine the strength of the national identity framework. During the discussion on the person of cult, I have shown the favourable response of the community to Qaboos as the icon of the nation; hence, such acceptance by the community can support the realisation of the elitists' nation-building project aimed at uniting the citizens and by doing so strengthen the national identity framework projected in the museums. It was observed that the museums explicitly focus on the state-sanctioned version of nation and national identity symbolic references. Further, Omani visitors seemed to identify with the narratives of the nation and related positively to the key symbols of the nation presented in the museum. Moreover, they do not challenge the national identity symbols projected in the museums under the top-down process. Also, it was seen that

the visitors in the quest for self-identification with the projections of the nation try to locate themselves at the local and cultural level within the frame of national identity presented in the museums.

Chapter 7

7. Conclusion

7.0. Introduction

Oman's vision is aimed at citizenship and identification with the nation; while heritage and culture are recognised as priorities in the national strategy documents (Oman National Vision Strategy 2040, 2019). Also the museums in Oman give significance to the presentations of the nation, as the Minister of Heritage and Tourism also emphasised during the interview, having “museums that reflect the national identity” are a part of the national mandate (interview, Minister of Heritage and Tourism). Keeping in mind the significance of the national identity framework and its projections in the museums of Oman, my overall aim has been to examine the role of museums in the expression of national identity in Oman. As McLean (1998: 252) has asserted, it is “through museums, we can come to a deeper understanding of identities, and notably national identity”. What makes Oman an interesting case is that despite its relatively recent presence as a nation state, it is one of the oldest continually existing political entities of the Arabian Gulf region and has existed for several millennia as a recognized geographical and cultural entity in Eastern Arabia.

As identified in Chapter 3 development of Oman has not always been uniform; with internal conflicts, civil unrest and war until the consolidation of disputed boundaries

was resolved, and disparate populations was united under the late Sultan Qaboos bin Said. Oman in this sense was unified under a coherent national identity under his reign. Since the 1970s the consequent national identity formation, Sultan Qaboos bin Said has been a notable element of the newly formed state, continually fostered by national programs, policies and institutions, including museums. A small museum in 1974, a precursor to the National Museum, was the first in Oman created by the government and since then several public and private museums have come about that contribute to the nation-building project. As this study recognises museums as a product of modernity and a part of the contemporary national project in Oman, they are an institution that determinedly promotes a sense of shared identity and values among its citizenry of diverse backgrounds.

I have explored the museums in terms of three key lenses of refraction: their collections and central narratives; their architecture and physical structure; and institutions and their wider role towards the community and society. This framework has been useful for comprehending what has been needed to achieve the main objective of understanding the role of museums in the expression of the nation. In the process of exploring the museums of Oman I have examined the stakeholders who influence decision-making in museums, including governmental agencies, museum designers, museum professionals; as well as the role of collectors, private museums and the public. The research pays special attention to the specific interrelations of stakeholders with the museum production that contribute to the museum making and the national identity expression, to gain a holistic understanding of the role of the Omani museum setting in the projection of Oman.

The establishment of museums as a project of nationalism has been prioritised in several Gulf States. Although the notion of the nation has remained relatively stable in Oman following the 1970s, it is less recognised outside of the wider Gulf region. This research seeks to open up the relationships between the Omani identity and its museums to understand the aspects of museums involved in the communication of the nation. The research examines the way the content and architecture play their role in the projection of a nation. Besides, it analyses the framing of the agency of the museum by the wider context of Omani societies' relationship with the museum as a public institution.

The research adopts an inductive and qualitative approach that is conducted through a series of case studies, which focus on a selected number of museums across Oman. A combination of phenomenology and case study approach is applied to achieve the outcomes of the research. The examination includes the National Museum, public museums, private museums and heritage houses assigned with museum licences, to identify any competing or complementary positions and narratives in the presentations of the nation, and to understand the wider role of museums in Oman.

7.1. Contribution to Knowledge

This research is primarily located within the area of the literature related to national identity, and its relationship with museums and their various constituents – collections, narratives, institution and architecture that was examined in Chapter 2. Keeping in view

that most previous studies related to national identity and museums have been Euro-American centric in their nature, the fundamental contribution of the research to the original knowledge is an extension of the area of enquiry through this research that analyses the particular ways the museums of Oman have come to express the nation of Oman. By understanding the ways and extent, Omani museums engage with the debates of conflict, contestation and decolonisation that are taking place in Euro-American museums and the extent museums of Oman continue to be the instruments state. Additionally, recently there has been growing interest in studies on the nation and its relationship with the museums in the Arabian Gulf context that has opened up debates on the formation, projection or understanding of national identity in this region. However, the research is currently in its early phase and this research is adding to the understanding of the role of museums in the Arabian Gulf countries that constitutes region-specific underlying principles and understanding concerning the ideas of vernacular and contemporary culture, religion and secularism, ethnic identities and national communities and therefore to the idea of nation and national identity. As Prösler (1996: 23) stresses, “many contributions to global museological discourse betray an unreflective Eurocentrism, together with a set of implicit developmental assumptions with respect to tradition and modernity, cultural identity and national culture”.

There is no previous research that studies the role of Omani museums and their relationship with the national identity projection. This analysis extends the research on the subject and re-aligns museum and national identity debates around the particular issues faced in the context of the Omani museums’ setting. This is carried out by

voicing the Omani-specific context related to distinct characteristics and the differences in the ethnic and cultural constitutions and histories, nationalistic drives and political motivations.

Most of the research on the museums and their relationship with national identity, as well as that in context to the Arabian Gulf museums, applies a modernist approach that theorises the nation in terms of a top-down approach that focuses on the role of the elites and the government. Firstly, this results in the study of public and national museums in the application of a national identity framework that overlooks the role of the private agencies, limiting the understanding of the national identity building. Therefore, this study analytically extends the knowledge on the role of collectors, private museums and heritage houses and their involvement that contributes to the national identity framework. Secondly, this also constitutes limitations or overlooks the primordial and perennial school of thought which emphasises a context that assumes that the politics and national identity projections are tied to the expression of pre-existing ethnic societies and deeply rooted ethnic bonds (Couture, Nielsen, and Seymour, 1998, Smith, 1996). Hence, in the top-down dimension that assumes the national identity as a simple political creation, this analysis furthers the understanding of the national identity symbolic references associated with pre-modern ethnic and cultural components in context of Oman. Therefore, the analysis presented in Chapters 5 and 6 is deliberately based on insights from the two subjects that influence the projections of the nation; relationship of pre-modern past of the nation and the representations of modern (contemporary) Oman in the identity projection that has extended the area of study on the national identity production. This consequently

contributes towards a productive tension during this investigation of nation-building, in light of theories of the origin of the nation that associates the symbolic references with pre-modern ethnic and cultural factors, as well as those that consider the nation as a modern construct and the national identities as constructed by elites and a product of modernity.

The remainder of this section is further divided into five sub-sections that present the findings of this research on the role of three main elements of the museums, even though these constitute overlapping elements. The first section deals with the extent and the ways the content displayed in the Omani museums actively presents the nation. This section considers the role of museums as collections and main narratives, and consequently, as arising from the analyses contribution of the selections and the omissions, the exhibit and storyline strategies and their function as a projection of national origin[s] and symbols of national identity. The second section is concerned with understanding the extent the physical structure, architecture and design play a part in shaping the national narrative. This section deals with museums as architecture emerging from the aspects of architecture recognised in the analysis, such as style and types of architectural forms, their varied arrangements and the selective use of architectural features in the interior and exterior of the museums that contribute to the expression of national identity. The third section discusses the aspects of the museum that are involved in the communication of the nation. In particular, in context to the institutional standing, it is concerned with the specific and mutual contribution of the public and private museums in reflecting the national identity. The fourth section presents the agency of museums framed by the wider context of Omani societies'

relationship with the museum as a public institution. As recognised during the analysis to a lesser degree, this section presents the findings on the ways visitors locate themselves on various cultural, local and regional levels within the national framework presented in the museums. In the fifth section, in light of the shifting political scenario and ongoing and future museum developments in Oman, I suggest the possibilities for the expansion of the research. The final segment of this chapter provides the concluding remarks on the overall range of contributions of the collection, architecture and institutional standing in the reflection of national identity.

7.1.1. The Contribution of Museum's Content in Representing the National Identity

Oman as a nation-state is a recent creation; however, it has an ethnohistory that both predates and legitimates the present nation. In reflecting Omani national identity, the museums of Oman, particularly the public museums, adopt an ethno-symbolist approach towards the nation. The national identity project that is associated with ethno-symbolist notions is scripted and staged in the museums under a top-down process that include stakeholders ranging from political elites and museum professionals. As analysed in Chapter 5, it is not difficult to see that the museums content on the Omani nation is based on and created out of pre-existing cultural foundations and ethnic ties; which supports Smith's (2008) arguments that trace the nation in the historical record in search of ethnic and cultural origins in the formation of a nation. The ethno-symbolic framework to nationalism defined by Smith (2009) in terms of delineated themes of *longue duree* and continuity, ethno-history and ethnic memory, cultural resources of

pre-existing cultural and ethnic communities applies to the Omani museums' context.

The collections and narratives in the public museums of Oman match the historical nation to the contemporary territory, which according to Conner (1994), is significant in a nation-building project that contributes to the longevity and continuity of the nation. Such theatrical settings in the Omani museums add a performative dimension to the contents giving it the meaning of attachment to the shared historic territory, which, according to Smith (2011), is a significant constituent of a self-definition of a nation and its community. It was seen that museums like the National Museum and the Land of Frankincense Museum, in the way the presented content, directly associate Omani identity with Omani archaeology and history. This is carried out in the museums by projecting Oman as a modern state with ancient Magan roots; through direct references such as “Oman in early times” in the Land of Frankincense Museum (section introduction panel, LFM); and through maps making claims on the historical territory as in the example of panel exhibits of Magan trading routes overlaid on a contemporary map of Oman (panel Magan trading routes, LFM) as identified in Chapter 5.

In the museums, within the Omani national identity framework, the nation is presented as what Smith (2003, 2009) highlights as rediscovered, authenticated and appropriated aspects of the past. However the theatrical scripting and scenography of the national identity projections to are shaped under a strictly top-down within Omani settings or climate of the museums intended to simulate a sense of belongingness in Omani visitors. This is carried out in the museums by the curators, museologists and directors

with the decision making capacity involved in the selection and scripting by identifying local archaeology that utilised in creating a sense of continuity and longevity of the nation. Further, the museums endorse an uninterrupted, rediscovered and authenticated past through the exhibits of archaeology discovered within the boundary of contemporary Oman, and the performance of national identity that is shaped through systematic presentations and evolutionary arrangements of collections in the museums. In the museums, these projections are based on a particular idealised past where through the narratives the lifeless objects become endowed with national meaning encompassing various selective and overlapping national, local, global, and universal notions. For instance, the prehistoric past that contributes to a sense of belongingness through the presentation of an uncontested national collective past also offers a past of the universal value of shared human association. Further, such projections assert otherness based on a selective past, such as the Magan as Oman, as compared to Umm-en-Naar as UAE and Dilmun as Bahrain, as analysed in Chapter 5.

Furthermore, through their displays and narratives the public museums of Oman emphasise the Arab and Islamic identity as two basic elements of the national identity of Oman that consists of a largely Arab and Muslim population. These displays downplay and gloss over the historical and contemporary sectarian and tribal divisions in the portrayal of national unity. Such projections of the origins of specific components of the national identity framework propose a myth of descent, cultural affinity and ethnic community and “marks the foundation point of the group’s history, and hence its individuality” (Smith 1981: 66), which according to Smith (2002: 28) are a source of

“cohesion and solidarity required for the task of modernisation”.

It has been identified in the analysis that the museums proclaim the roots of the collective past that extend from the ancient past to the contemporary renaissance. These presentations encompass within them ideal-type constructs of determinative periods of the nation’s presence and selective origins that propose the Omani nation’s formation as continuous and consisting of different epochs with particular significance. Keeping this in context, it was clearly observed that the museums of Oman, in the projections of the nation through the use of displays and narratives, are significantly tied to the question of the route(s) and origin(s) of the nation. In this regard, I have shown in the analysis that museums, through their content, emphasise the Arab Islamic origin that contributes to a sense of homogeneity. The distinctiveness of the Arab Islamic Omani identity in the museums is created through the contextualisation of the distant past and the origin in the context of Oman. Smith (2003) associates such routes with nations such as those in the Middle East that establish ethnic conceptions as the basis of the national identity frameworks which return to the ethnic past in the quest for their authenticity. However, representations of national identity in Omani museums also widely propagate cultural diversity, and it is shown in the discussion that both public and private museums contribute to the projection of various cultures and traditions prevailing in Oman. This contradicts a general understanding highlighted in research on Gulf identity, linked to monolithic representations of the nations of the Arabian Gulf countries that are considered to side-line ethnic diversity in favour of narratives centred around ‘Bedouin Arab origin’ in an attempt to create national cohesion (Al-Mutawa, 2016; Partrick, 2009). The framework of national identity

projected in Omani museums does not propose a singular local culture carried out by including exhibits of various traditional and geographical content.

Through the use of collections and narratives, the museums of Oman combine contradictory and competing discourses of nationalism within the national identity framework. These museums propose a hybrid national identity framework that simultaneously projects a homogenising characterisation of the nation and appropriates the nation to an extended ethos of heterogeneity. The homogeneity is projected through the assertion of the primary and key ethos of one religion and one ethnicity whereas, nation's heterogeneity is reflected through the displays of local and cultural diversity that is historically bounded to past migrations and geographical histories. The cultural and geographical diversity is exhibited and celebrated in the museums, which was also pointed out by the Minister of Culture and Tourism. Rather than the nation being constituted as a homogeneous cultural and geographical diversity, in the museums of Oman it is seen as a rich resource. This approach is full of internal contradictions; however, these resources are used selectively to stage the national identity under the top-down model to meet the political ends that maintain the sense of belongingness and contribute to the political discourse in a constructive way. The way the heterogeneity is performed and staged in the museums of Oman constitutes an emphasis on specific aspects, like diverse Omani attire, geographical, cultural and traditional variations, and downplay others, such as local histories of migrations and explicit sub-ethnic and cultural markers. Smith (2003) associates the pluralist concept of nations that accept and celebrate ethnic and cultural diversity within the national framework within settler countries with a colonial past like Australia and

the United States. Oman's historical hybridity in the routes of nation formation prompts a duality of the route to its national origins. The frame of national identity of Oman projected through the museums is a hybrid route to the nation that constitutes Smith's (2003) idea of the *ethnie*, as well as an emphasis on plurality owing to the long history of mixing, moving and migrations of different ethnic groups, religious sects, and tribal factions.

7.1.2. The impact of the physical structure in shaping the national narrative

The symbolic legacy of Arab and Islam constituents that are appropriated to the ethnic attachments are engraved in the Omani national identity framework. These elements are projected in the museums through their content, and these are also inscribed into the museum architecture. Hence, while the frame of a nation constitutes myths of common origin and ethnic attachments bounded in historical representations, the national symbols also include contemporary symbolic references that are both invented and new. The museum architecture in Oman promotes what Smith (2009) highlights as the continuities and recurrences of ethnic phenomena that contribute to myths of common origin and ethnic attachment. The purpose-built developments of museum architecture endorse an Arab Islamic context by using the vernacular and traditional elements that contribute to a sense of longevity and connections to ancientness. However, this architecture symbolic of contemporary Oman used in museums is invented in nature that utilises particular nationalistic architectural typology that originated and spread post-1970s as a result of government policies that guaranteed the use of the Arab Islamic and traditional architectural components.

The architecture of museums in Oman is used as a significant and powerful symbol that as Jones (2011: 52) points out, is used to “flag” the nation. This is seen by the significant importance given by the actors involved in the museum-making to the architecture and architectural features. Specifically, the selection process of public and high-profile museums design is an extremely top-down decision-making process, where design is carefully selected to express what the Director General of the National Museum referred to as a reflection of “Omani character”. It was identified during the analysis that the design of the National Museum is a combination of traditional and modern components, which was a decisive top-down choice to have an inward-looking approach by incorporating vernacular architectural vocabulary and contemporary aesthetics. The approvals are carried out at the topmost level, such as identified in the analysis regarding the approval of the external facade design of the National Museum by the Sultan of Oman (The National Museum, 2019: 30). The architectural method in the purpose-built Omani museums uses an inward-focused approach; however, it adopts a western museum production framework. As a result, localised versions of architecture have emerged by using regionally shaped techniques and features of western-style museum production of museums contextualised to the Omani setting.

As the museums in Oman project a typical nationalistic style that reflects Omani character, the museums as an architectural symbols appear to be fixed and unchanging across almost half a century. However, using traditional elements also gives the impression that the architecture has evolved over time. Further, in context to that frame of national identity, the architecture of museums also contributes to the

symbolic legacy of Qaboos and the concept of a contemporary renaissance as these museums and their architecture were born post-1970s. The symbol of Qaboos, coupled with architecture, material inscriptions and other symbolic repositories of museums, create a sense of evolution and connection to the past. The architectural developments of the purpose-built museum blend the modern with the traditional features to create an archetypal architectural typology that embodies a typical Omani character directed towards uniting the Omani citizens, irrespective of their background or ethnicity, to establish a comprehensive sense of belongingness to the nation.

The modern Omani architectural style of museums utilises a particular Omani style of architecture which was also recognised by the Omani visitors, as identified during my interviews; hence, museums are emblematic of the contemporary Oman that intends to represent Omani-ness and anchor the national community and their sense of their belongingness. The purpose-built museum architecture forefronts Omani-ness and oneness; however, the expression of cosmopolitanism contextualised within the historical trading and seafaring nature is consciously identified and incorporated in the architectural features, as seen in the example of the National Museum. Furthermore, assorted museums with vernacular styles of architecture specifically re-used and renovated structures, are spread across Oman and endorse various indigenous architectural styles. Similarly, the use of architectural elements in the museum's interior emphasises specific communities, such as the balcony replica representative of the Lawati community incorporated in the National Museum. Thus, the diversity of architectural expression becomes a part of the nation-building framework, rather than a discrete state of existence appropriated to a contemporary identity project.

7.1.3. The aspects of Omani museums that are contributing to the communication of nation

Even though some museums in the region pre-date the contemporary Arabian Gulf States, in Oman, the first national museum, the precursor of the new National Museum established in 2016, came into being following 1970 as a product of the modern nation-state. Through the institutional agendas, projections of architecture and the presentations of collections and supporting narratives, the National Museum of Oman corresponds to the prescribed state ideological agenda of dominant modernist discourse and national identity, contextualised in the national and political cohesion and civic progress.

In the Omani context, museums represent a significant project in the nation-building process, and as part of future vision plans these museums are devices that project a particular idea of a nation and social cohesion. The discussion on Omani museums, particularly the national and public museums, demonstrates the continuing viability of constructivist model of a nation's identity that is understood in terms of a top-down, elitist project of cultural homogenisation and national unity. As pointed out above, the museums present an official nationalist display of the leader and founder of the modern nation-state of Oman, Sultan Qaboos. He is the symbol of the nation, and this symbol underpins the political legitimacy of the leader as part of a wider process of mobilisation of particular symbols for generating national narratives. It is shown in the analysis that the ideology of the renaissance, assertion of civic advancement and projections of architectural developments as a symbolic reference for the modern state bounded to

the person of Qaboos are contextualised within the Omani national identity framework. Further, the museums of Oman become a means by which the state implies an ethnic background and primordial national origin proposing continuity from the distant past, which is further tied firmly to the Arab Islamic past and, in turn, as identified above, reflected in the museum architecture and collections. The Arab Islamic past establishes a significant connection between the Arab Islamic present that the majority of Omanis belong to; and hence, the presentations of the ruler of the Arab Islamic background and the ruler of an ancient nation not only establish a connection between the national past proudly remembered, as emphasised in the presentations, but also with the political legitimacy of the ruler that resonates with the majority of the citizens.

When studying the role of museums in the expression of national identity, a national museum assumes a natural focus considering that the idea of a national museum suggests a national context, and considering the particularity of this type of museum as being the museum of and for the nation. For this reason, understandably the debates on national identity in context to Arabian Gulf museums widely focus on the relationship of the nation-building project to the national museums (Exell, 2016). However, merely focusing on the national museums limits the understanding of the national identity framework. The museums in Oman, not only the national museums, are inventions, productions or constructs which are completely modern and constitute both public and private museums. I have found in my research that even if the national museums are overtly related to the nation-building project, the different types of museums, be they national and public or private and local museums, even though they constitute characteristically different approaches towards the projection of architecture,

exhibits, collections and display strategy, all contribute to the framework of the nation and thereby play their role in the nation-building project.

I have shown in the analysis how the national and public Omani museums represent and project selective histories, social cohesion and affiliation to the state with a disparate population. These museums employ selective pasts, for example, as identified earlier, the decisive use of archaeological discoveries and heritage collections that appropriate the nation's past and origin for contemporary political purposes. Through the use of linear, systematic, and at times categorical projection of the nation, these museums create a national story that appears so authentic as to be inevitable. These museums are utilised both as state tools of legitimisation and indexes of modernity.

The majority of the private museums, in contrast, are focused on displaying the diverse cultural artefacts and regional architecture representative of various communities and regions that indicate an alternative response to modernity and contribution to nation-building. In this context, these museums propose a different approach and institutional agenda directed towards preserving and projecting cultural diversity, heritage and traditional characteristics. For instance, by preserving "the Omani heritage," as highlighted by the collector and owner of the Madha Museum, presenting "Omani diverse culture", as pointed out by the owner of Old Castle Museum, and projecting the "Omani traditional and vernacular" architecture as stressed by the manager of Bait Al Ghasham Museum. However, the private museum's initiatives clearly show overarching agendas of projecting the nation of Oman. Holistically these presentations

complement the extended ethos of cultural diversity and cosmopolitanism linked to foreign interactions and trade presented in the national and public museums that contribute to the national identity framework. These contribute to the "aspiration of the government" to have "specialised museums and private museums that project particular and regional dedicated subjects", as pointed out by the Minister of Heritage and Tourism during the interview (interview, Minister of Heritage and Tourism).

The Omani museums accommodate regional and ethnic diversities within the extended Omani ethos of cosmopolitanism and social diversity composed within the museums as identified in Chapters 5 and 6. The Omani museum setting and government endeavours have intensified the expression of social diversity by including regional museums and private museums that are representative of variations and contrasting social set-ups and communities. As clearly identified by the Minister of Heritage and Tourism during the interview, the museums in Oman hold "the same objective, task and responsibilities [that] have [been] divided among different entities", and "all private and public museums" play their role in the projection of the nation, hence these are explicitly included within the frame of nation-building by the state. The high-profile museums and other public museums that explicitly support the state-sanctioned national ideology, as well as the private local and heritage museums which identify with particular communities and specific geographical contexts, are packed together as a master historical experience of the nation that upholds the notion of a nation that proposes modernity and tradition, national culture and cultural diversity, contemporary and vernacular as two sides of the same coin.

It has emerged from this study that the expression of the nation and national identity are extended to serve various overlapping social, economic, cultural and political interests. For instance, I have noted that the museums promote and project representations of cultural diversity and tolerance, which are the key portals to the futuristic orientation of the national vision that accommodates national interests like tourism, diplomacy, trade and industry contextualised with overarching interests of the promotion of heritage, culture and national identity. Hence the extended characterisation of the nation's cultural and regional diversity, the values of tolerance and a cosmopolitan background projected in the museums through both implicit and explicit claims of openness, moderation, tolerance and diversity also support the promotion of a national image that fosters uniqueness in the expression of the nation and is used as a competitive advantage for the promotion of tourism. The presentations of the nation, such as those of cultural diversity and cosmopolitanism deviates from the methodical narratives of one nation, one religion and one identity, which are presented in the public museums and most prominently evident in the private museums constitute within them internal contradictions. However, these constituents are decisively selected and utilised by the government as resources to include within the national identity framework. Different political and social agents further utilise these resources in various projects within a specific politically sanctioned national discourse; for example, to contribute to tourism purposes that encompass cultural and geographical diversity as their calling point.

Even with the strong contemporary and political origins of museums in Oman, their function is to reinforce and reinstate the national identity, rather than their widely

conceived primary role of constructing the national identity, as attributed in the literature (Kaplan, 1994). As discussed in the analysis, the Minister of Heritage and Tourism expressed in an interview that Oman is one of the oldest political entities in the region and “the museums merely reflect that fact in many ways” (interview, Minister of Heritage and Tourism). Portraying the roles of museums in this way also naturalises the narrative of longevity and continuity that coincides with government views and identity politics; and thus, instead of shaping the nation, museums support the role of projecting and reaffirming the national identity. The museums in Oman are thus a part of the wider political mechanism of the Omani nation-building project, the earliest of which was perhaps the standardised language as well as political and historical references in the textbooks in the early 1970s. Museums contribute to validating this state-sanctioned past and the national identity framework through the use of artefacts, exhibits, architecture and narratives. These resources complement the wider circuit of the nation-building framework, consisting of a variety of components such as the education curriculum, television broadcasts and published media that had played the primary role in constructing the national identity and Omani museums continue to endorse and validate these through their projections of the nation.

7.1.4. The framing of the agency of museum by wider context of Omani societies’ relationship with the museum as public institution

Although the national identity framework constitutes a particular inward and outward-oriented expression of the nation, it is essentially an inwardly focused framework staged through a predominantly single didactic official narrative. The display of local

collections, artefacts and archaeology and the use of '*Omani-style*' architecture in the museums centre the concentration of presentations on Oman that express an inward-focused frame of national identity principally directed towards the locals. It was identified in the analysis that museums particularly target the local audiences alongside foreigners and tourists. This was also reinforced during the interview with the Director of the Learning and Community Outreach Department at the National Museum, the target audiences for the Omani museums are primarily domestic, which is maintained through the museum content and activities by using familiar and relatable presentations of the nation.

The Omani museums exist in an autocratic political framework and attract little or no opposition in society. Museums in Oman are not engaging in debates of conflict, contestation and decolonisation that Euro-American museums linked to the framework of democratic politics face. In the Euro- American museums, the idea of the national narratives can be challenged, and these are constantly being challenged by the changes that take place in society which are consequently reflected in images of the nation and national identity projected in the museums. The Omani museums project the Omani colonial past enfolded in the presentations of the Omani empire in the 18th century and projections of cosmopolitan influences, linked to foreign encounters, trade and openness.

For Omani visitors, these museums are not problematic spaces, and as recognised in my analysis, they do not see museums as the agents of the state; instead, they see museums as a space that projects the familiar Omani history and symbols of Oman

that they identify with and were interested to see. This was clearly observed in the analysed examples of discussions with the Omani visitors. Omanis are not challenging these presentations and not everyone while visiting the museum is going through the heart-throbbing experience of challenging the narratives of the national identity framework projected in these museums. These issues related to the museum spaces are more problematic for academics rather than for the public of Oman and propose a counterpoint to Euro- American museums, which are widely recognised as problematic institutions in need of revision. Even during the analysis, it was noticeable that as compared to the general Omani visitors, the Omani visitor with an academic background delicately identified the other possible version of history in regards to the official account of wars and history presented in the Oman Armed Forces Museum.

Museums in Oman are political instruments that uphold a vision of the nation that has already been defined and leaves little room for alternate interpretations, especially in the public museums. Although these museums present coherent narratives that appear to exclude any alternatives, I have shown in my research that the analysis points towards different versions and stories of the nation which remain untold. This was also mentioned by an Omani visitor at the Sultan Armed Forces Museum that “we have another side [of the political history] that is of [the] Imams, and Imams they believed in something”, which is not shown in any museum. The National Museum, however, takes a very neutral approach; for instance, it identifies the Imamate period as the renaissance of the religious movement which is presented as a fact. However, the National Museum does little to encourage this version of history as compared to the significance given to the contemporary renaissance era. These museums,

specifically the public museums, present the authorised historical narrative, which is codified in textbooks and other national media.

The actors involved in the museum production perceive museums as entities that constitute power, where visitors are not considered passive consumers of knowledge but have the potential to actively participate in the national building project. This was seen for example in the case of the National Museum, where the frame of the nation was explicitly projected pointing to the intention of directly inviting the visitors to be nation builders as they observe the exhibits. This top-down model of Omani national identity projection in these museums, accessible to the public, links the political state and the nation. However, Museums become a source to imagine, create and perform for the visitors as these projections equally entail a process in which the visitors see themselves and position their own collective identities in these museums within the frame of the nation that intends to play a uniting and binding role.

The museums' projections encourage an image of Oman that suggests its longevity, specifically it urges Omani visiting citizens to uphold a sense of pride and a national identity originating from the longevity of the nation's past and the symbolic references to contemporary Oman. Alongside this, however, I have found out that the visitors actively try to position themselves in the projections of the nation in the museums. In doing so the Omani visitors bring their personal identities into play with the institution's dominant ideologies and the national identity projections. I have shown that the Omani museum visitors try to locate themselves at the cultural, local and regional level within the projections of nation in the museums that contributes to their sense of pride and

feeling of belonging to Oman. Particular communities also donate their collections that represent their community. The citizens and communities, especially those that do not directly identify with the central national identity narratives of Arab Islamic identity, search for recognition and position in the presentations of museums that validates their contribution to the nation. Instead of constructing identity, the visitors were seen to quest for self and reaffirmation of their role and position within the framework of the nation projected in the museums that consecutively contributes to their sense of belonging to Oman.

Smith (1986) asserts that even movement does not eliminate the cultural, religious and traditional imprints as the communities are inseparable from a particular habitat and ethnic background. This research also shows the ongoing collective attachments of citizens are rooted in ethnic, cultural and particular habitats that maintain their collective identity, alongside being bounded with Oman as citizens. For instance, for the Omani visitor with an Indian background visiting the museum was an opportunity “to know about Omanis” which proposed that the Arab Islamic origin is used as the yardstick for their understanding of Omani-ness. An idealisation of pure Omani origin rooted in an Arab Islamic Omani background illustrates unresolved tensions between ethnicity and citizenship. Even though the wider identity framework promotes unity and a sense of belonging to Oman, contextualised in the historical cosmopolitan projections and the contemporary representations and symbols of the nation, which are intended to bind the citizenry together in a single imagined community, this hints at the prevalence of multi-hyphenated sub-national identities, such as Arab-Omani, Indian-Omani, Baluch-Omani and Zanzibari-Omani identities.

7.1.5. The Limitations of the Research and Future Research Prospects

During my research, the Omani political context changed with the death of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said on January 10th of 2020 and the succession of the throne by His Majesty Haitham bin Tariq Al Said. However, the fieldwork of this research preceded these significant political changes. Hence, this research is limited as it does not comprise the considerations of any arising shifts in the national identity projection in the museums as a result of these new political circumstances. Although it asserts the fluid and changing nature of the nation and national context which is constantly evolving, it also raises questions about the prospective shift in national identity and its constituents specifically for the Omani citizens. This is said keeping in mind that, as identified in this research, Qaboos served as the most influential contemporary symbol of the nation; through the cult of personality he cemented the Omani identity but after almost 50 years of rule he is no longer physically present.

Thus, this causes us to wonder about the prospective differences in the rule and circumstances of the new Sultan Haitham that can contribute to a shift in the nation-building project, as well as the prospects of challenging the existing national identity framework. Additionally, policies and strategies such as the Vision 2040 were years in the making before Qaboos's death, the turning point for these policies and how national identity will shift and thus their presentation in the museums will further unfold in Sultan Haitham's reign. This opens up prospects to extend this research on national identity and the role of museums, and as also pointed out in the literature, national identity

incorporates the imprints of historical, ethnical and political aspects that make up the continuously shifting and contradictory aspects of national identity (Breuilly, 1993). As the museums in history have been observed to have a shifting notion and changing trends, this opens up a wide range of prospects for future research, especially in regards to the changing socio-political context of Oman. Hence, keeping in view that a nation and its national identity is fluid, dynamic and evolving, some observations are outlined below that identify the recent changes in the museums and the shifting projection of the nation in these museums provides the capacity for future research prospects.

In February 2020, the original letter with the will of the late Sultan Qaboos recommending “Sayyid Haitham bin Tarik” as the new sovereign of Oman was added to the National Museum in the Renaissance Gallery. The letter in the handwriting of the late Sultan assumes a highly significant value that ensures continuity to the previous symbols and regime, which in turn strengthens the proclamation and sovereignty of the new ruler. Such presentations not only contribute to the respect of the father of the nation, but also as Koch (2016: 21) identifies, explicitly set out a claim to continue his legacy and with that the “right to define the meaning and significance to his legacy”. The current regime overtly claims to continue Qaboos’ legacy and the directions laid out by the late Sultan Qaboos, pronouncing the continuation of the ideology, laying down an ideological path for Oman of “a renewed renaissance” (Times of Oman, 2020, NP; Oman Observer, 2020, NP). In his first speech to the nation in January 2020, HM Haitham Al Said outlined his intentions to continue to follow the same course that the late sultan adopted. HM Haitham Al Said stated intentions to

“pursue his [Late Sultan Qaboos] rightful legacy” further adding “May Allah grant us success in pursuing his course and accomplishing the objectives that he wished to be realized for this great nation”. Hence, this points towards the current regime intending to extend the nation-building path which upholds the nationalist vision attributed to the person of Qaboos. This also means that the personality cult can be extended well beyond the leader's life, endorsing the emergence of what has been described as personality cult by proxy (Plamper 2003, 2012; Adams, 2010); which is a potential subject for future research in context to the shifting nature and context of the national identity framework. This is also seen in the examples of other countries; as Glyptis (2008) points out, there appears to be a link between the personality cult by proxy used in Turkey based on the figure of Ataturk following 1930, and similarly the case in Abu Dhabi following the death of Sheikh Zaid who is also considered as the father of the nation.

The museums in Oman give significance to the presentations of the nation and national identity that forms part of the national mandate. Keeping in mind that the change in the regime has brought about certain observable modifications in the presentations of the museums, there is potential to extend the research considering these recent shift that propose enhanced significance, shifting character and political role of the museums. For instance, changing dynamics of Omani museums environment can be observed considering the announcement in July 2021 to shift the Al-Saidiya Education Museum to the National Museum (Times of Oman, 2021). Another example is that the exhibit 6.2. in the Bait Al-Zubair Museum has already been reconfigured and the portrait of HM Sultan Haitham Al Said has been introduced alongside the portrait of the late

Sultan Qaboos Al Said. Keeping in view these shifts and additions to the museums since 2020 that occurred during the write-up stage, as well as any further changes that are anticipated in the future this research can be extended. There is a potential to extend the research in this direction as the process of the political changes is perpetuated in the presentations of the museums in different ways. For instance, in Turkmenistan following the demise of Niyazov in 2006, during Berdymukhamedov's era alterations appeared, such as the slow removal or relocation of Niyazov's status (Koch, 2016). In contrast, an upcoming Sheikh Zayed Museum in Abu Dhabi "celebrates the life and achievements of the founding father of the nation [late Sheikh Zayed al Nahyan]" which is a deliberate action that tends to both celebrate and reinstate positive light on certain aspects of the leader through various mediums (Zayed National Museum, ND: NP).

The changing political dynamics in the museums is also reflected in the announcement under the royal directives of HM Sultan Haitham Al Said "to set up a special section dedicated to the late His Majesty Sultan Qaboos [...] in the memory of the historic personality of the late Sultan [...] to serve as a living memory of the legacy of the late Sultan" (Oman Daily Observer, 2020: NP) at the Renaissance Gallery of the National Museum. Hence the Renaissance Gallery that intended to emphasise the legitimacy of the reign of Qaboos is being reconfigured to celebrate and endorse the memory of the late Sultan. Thus, the role of the museums in Oman that was to explicitly recognise the frame of nationalism, identifying Sultan Qaboos as the symbol of nation is also changing. These changing dynamics of the politics that are reflected in the proposed section point towards a reconfiguration of the personalistic system and its projection in

the national identity framework. The new configuration thus attributes to the legitimacy and positioning of the new ruler in the projection of the nation, and further endorses the political role and significance of Omani museums in the reflection of the national identity. However, it is too early to predict the extent to which these changes will alter or challenge the existing national identity framework and its projections in the museum. This points to the limitations of this research as well as the prospects of future research. A further strand to pursue is the role of upcoming museums in the national identity construction as there are three Omani museums in the pipeline: the Maritime Museum, the New Natural History Museum and the Oman Across Ages Museum. One of the key findings highlighted in this research is that since the inception of the early museums a specific Omani architectural style is being employed in purpose-built Omani museums, which is a measured move by the government to strengthen the Omani identity. However, there is a distinction in the architectural approaches of the new development project of the National Museum and the under-construction monumental project of the Oman Across the Ages Museum. This museum building does not have typical Omani Arab-Islamic style architecture. The minimalist architectural form of this museum embraces the land. The lead consultant of the project explains that the landscape based concept “crafts a museum bred out of the earth of Oman” (COX Consultants, 2014). The concept design of the Oman Across Ages Museum is a competition based project and the selected design breaks away from the previous design concepts like that of the National Museum. Even in this design, projection of Oman is the key attribute, even though the architectural design is approached through an inference from the land of Oman in comparison to the typical Omani architectural typology to reflect the national identity. All the above mentioned developments raise questions

about the future direction of the national identity framework, such as: do the new museums engage in a new form of national identity projection, and what implications do the changes in the socio-political climate have for the role of museums and their contribution or negotiations to the national identity framework?

7.2. Concluding Remarks

As seen in the above conclusion there is no simple approach to respond to my research question that looks at the role of the museums in the construction of national identity, because when we refer to the term 'museums' we are referring to three different elements, the collections, the architecture and the institution. In my concluding remarks, I propose to discuss the general positioning of museums and the scope of the contribution of these elements of the Omani museums in the national identity projection that has stemmed from my research.

As identified earlier, Omani museums originate and exist in a particular socio-political context of the Sultanate of Oman that is the oldest continually existing political entity in the region and historically recognised geographical entity; however, Oman as a nation-state is merely half a century old. This is significant in understanding the current position of the national identity framework reflected through the museums. Keeping in view that Oman is at its early stage of development, for example as compared to the West, which has contributed to the explicit focus on the national identity and the particular and grand style of celebrating the nation. In Oman, the museums are utilised by the state as a vital part of projecting the national identity and overt work is carried

out in shaping the projection of national identity and reflection of the nation through these museums. As compared to the museums of Oman and the Gulf, the museums of the West are old institutions and in the past they have carried out the greater part of their work in creating national identities; while their current efforts are not explicitly concentrated in overtly shaping and projecting the nation and the national identity. Hence the museums in Oman are now playing a similar role of projecting national identity, which was previously seen in the western museums following the first wave of nationalism in Europe. According to Bennett (1995), that wave produced an environment for the development of public museums where they fused with the drive for national homogeneity and unity. However, Oman is at a different phase of nation-making and constitutes a different socio-political context as compared to the West; and consequently it displays specific agendas in regards to nation-building which are explicitly identified in the strategy documents and observed in the museums.

The most visible expression of museums is their architecture, specifically its exterior, as it is a part of the museum which through its built presence is obvious from the outside to both the users and non-users of the museum. The architecture and indeed the museum buildings have been particularly used in a similar way to other national symbols (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983), which reinstate a form of imagined community (Anderson, 2016) and provide an impression of a “united, coherent group moving together through history towards common future” (Jones, 2011: 51). The utilisation of common architectural elements consumed and seen in daily life comes into the sphere of what Billig (1995) calls “banal nationalism” and also provides significant focus on collective identity-building. Although the purpose-built museums

constitute “a specific grammar of national identification” (Berger, 2015: 27) that reflect a typical Omani style architecture, in other museums, there is slightly different architecture. These variations reflect the period, region and type of museum architecture; for example, some are a hybrid of modern and traditional, others more vernacular architectural forms, which contribute to the national identity framework.

It is seen that collections are an important component of the Omani museums and play a significant role in communicating the national identity. As McLean (2007) highlights, the key functions of museums revolve around the collections and exhibits; in the museums of Oman collections continue to be the main focus of the museums. However, the collections have to be seen alongside the narratives, the exhibition, the selection and the prioritisation of the objects and storyline. As Hein (2014) also points out, any meaning that is disseminated through the collections comes from the context of their selection, arrangement, and narratives in which they are presented; this was clearly observed during my analysis. The Omani museums employ different types of collections, display strategies and narratives in order to give explicit and implicit meaning to objects that are connected together to form the elements of the national identity. In line with McLean’s view (2007) on the capacity of museums in creating symbolic meaning, in the museums of Oman too through the use of collections the meaning is created to establish the element of unity and uniqueness from others. However, the museums also use the cultural artefacts and collections as resources to portray the nation as cosmopolitan, outward focusing and capable of managing diversity in a constructive way.

The least visible, however, the most influential aspect of the museum is the institution of the museum because it is connected to the contemporary nation-state, the Sultan and the wider policy framework. Power constituted within the institution and consequent inclusion of various public and private museums within the institutional framework is intended to compliment rather than produce diverging notions and versions of the nation and national identity. This is different from the museums in the western context, as not all museums are linked together under the wider state policy and that is seen in case of Oman and shown in the analysis. However, much more nuanced, the museums' institutions as elements of the ideological process are powerful and provide support to concretise the imagined construct of nations (Anderson, 2016). They project influence and social control through their architectural and physical forms, which possess an unquestionable credible presence (Anderson, 2016), and their cultural repositories fulfil various social and political purposes (Smith, 2009). McLean (2005: 1) highlights that the way the museum institutions "voice or silence difference can reflect and influence contemporary perceptions of identities within the national frame" and as it was clearly observed in the analysis that the museums are tied into the state-sponsored policies and narratives of national identity that attempt to promote a sense of unity and belonging. In the more connected world, and owing to the perceived power and influence of the museum institution, the museums in Oman continue to contribute to nation-building and play their role in representing the national identity.

APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Interview Format

Interview Questions for Museum Professionals

Thank you for talking to me.

Before we start the interview, I would like to ask that since you are interviewed as a museum professional, would you mind that you and your institution will be recognized by name in my research? Also, this interview will be recorded, however, if there is any point that you would like me to stop recording please feel free to ask.

As mentioned before, my PhD research is concerned with the role of museums in national identity representation. Since you are working in the museum sector I am very grateful that you will share your experience and perspective on the issue.

Background

How long have you been working as a museum professional?

When did you start to work in this museum?

What is your role in the museum?

The museum and the institution (director/ decision maker of museums)

Tell me about this museum.

What is the mission/vision/aim of the museum?

What are the main roles of the museum?

Could you give me examples?

What do you think the greatest success of the museum (notable features and services)?

What are the main challenges you face? Could you give me an example? How do you attempt to solve these?

What are the future ambitions of the museum?

How do you see the role of the museums of Oman compared with other museums of the region?

The museum and the exhibition (director/ decision maker of museums/ curators)

What are the main sources of collections in the museums?

What was your aim when you were organizing the display?

After it has been put up, did the reception of the exhibition differ from your expectations? What were the reasons?

What sort of identities (if any) does this museum represent?

How (if at all) do the exhibitions express the identity of the nation?

Is there any challenge when the museum put expressions of the nation on display?

Could you give me an example? How do you attempt to solve these?

The museum and architecture (designer, architects, director/decision maker of museums)

How would you describe the advantage of having this museum at this location instead of somewhere else?

What are the main events of making/remaking of architecture and landscape of this museum?

In your opinion what are the major changes in the museum following the occupation of building?

How does the architecture bring up the characteristics of the museum?

What were the key challenges of the design and construction phase?

What are the main challenges of the occupation phase?

Could you give me an example? How do you attempt to solve these?

Which identities do you think that the architecture expresses? How and with what effects?

Thank you very much again for talking to me, it was a pleasure to interview you and learn from you. If there is anything you would like to add please feel free to contact me.

Interview Questions for the Community and Museum Visitors (Adults only)

Before we start the interview, I would like to confirm that your name and identity will not be disclosed unless otherwise agreed in the consent form. Also, this interview will be recorded, however, if there is any point that you would like me to stop recording please feel free to ask. My PhD research is interested in understanding the role of museum in national identity representation. I am very grateful that you could share your experience and perspective on the issue.

What is your age, gender, profession, level of education, nationality and language?

What is your purpose of visit?

Do you visit local museums, national or international museums or all of these? And why?

What type of museums do you enjoy visiting?

How many museums have you visited in Oman?

Do you think museums are important for Oman and why?

Can you explain what museums mean to you?

What do you consider to be the main role of museums? – (entertain or educate or facilitate learning or represent country)

What is your opinion about the role of this museum?

In your opinion what identities (if any) is this museum is trying to express? (national, international, regional)

What do you think architecture of this museum is trying to express? And why?

What is your opinion about the architecture of the museums in Oman?

Which exhibits and hall do you like the best in the museum? And why?

What do you think museums should display to represent Omani identity?

How do you see the museums of Oman in relation to the gulf museums or other international museums?

What do you think about the interior of this museum?

What elements of the museum do you like the best?

Which elements of the museum do not interest you? Why?

Thank you very much again for talking to me, it was a pleasure to interview you and learn from you. If there is anything you would like to add please feel free to contact me.

Appendix 2: Participation Request Letter

Ironbridge International Institute for Cultural Heritage
University of Birmingham
Edgbaston, Birmingham, B152TT

Dear Sir/Madam,

I, Arooj Al Raee, am a PhD researcher at the University of Birmingham. My research investigates the museum making process through a case study of the Omani museum setting. This qualitative study across multiple museums in Oman will allow adding positively towards the research endeavours in the field of museums, architecture and their significant integration in the region. This research looks at the museum evolution process in Oman and pays special attention to the identity expressed through the museums.

Overall, this interdisciplinary research attempts to gain meaningful findings for the field of museum production. It attempts to fill out the existing gap as there is no previous research focused on museums in Oman. It is further expected to add practical value to the fields of museum. The dissertation, which aims to provide new knowledge on museum making through a holistic view on this process as a continuous phenomenon in the specific context of Oman will be made available for you if you wish to.

I appreciate and recognize your commitment and involvement with the museums. I would like to request for an opportunity for an interview, in reference to my research topic. Therefore, this is to request for your confirmation on the interview and suitable meeting date, time and venue. Following which the interview details could be discussed further accordingly. The interview may last about one hour. It will be a great honour if the research could involve your perspectives.

Yours Sincerely,

Arooj Al Raee

Appendix 3: Consent Form

The role of the museum in the expression of national identity in Oman

I, the researcher, would like to thank-you for your time and appreciate that you agreed to speak to me. My name is Arooj Ayub Al Raee. I am a PhD researcher at the University of Birmingham. I am carrying out a research project that is looking into the role of museums in the expression of Identity in Oman.

This form outlines the usage and options in relation to recording your interview in audio format. This interview is expected to take approximately 45 minutes. I, the researcher put forward the next section for your review to sign off (if you agree) and request you to select an option that is suitable for you.

Yours sincerely,

Arooj Al Raee

Email:

The copyright of assignment and the consent for the interview

I, the interviewee, by participating in this research interview, give my consent for the material from the interview to be used in the following ways:

- Use in PhD thesis.
- Possible use in publications, including in print or internet based.
- Possible presentations, conferences, lectures or talks.

I, the interviewee, understand that there is no payment due for my participation in this research and my consent can be withdrawn at any point during the interview or within one month. Further, I, the interviewee, fully understand that the data will only be used for the research and associated activities, and will only be accessed in relation to this research and will not be disclosed to any third parties. The researcher cannot alter any of the above conditions without a consultation and agreement of the interviewer on any proposed alterations.

Kindly, in relation to the anonymity please select a suitable option the following:

1. I agree to disclose my name in the research publications YES / NO

2. If NO, I am satisfied that my name will be removed from the interview transcript, even though this may not guarantee complete anonymity? YES / NO

When a non-disclosure is requested by the interviewee, the name of the interviewee will not be mentioned in the research or its results. However, in some cases, the institution of the interviewee may be presented or related contexts may be discussed in the research. Therefore, with this information, the interviewee might be identified by people who are familiar with the discussion subject.

Sign

Date

Print name

Organization

Address

Telephone

Email

8.0. References

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