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OMAN

CULTURE NAME

Omani

ALTERNATIVE NAMES

Various peoples in Oman use regional names such as Dhofari, which identifies them as being from the southern region of Oman, or Zanzibari, which identifies them as having close links with East Africa and at one time Zanzibar.

ORIENTATION

Identification. Although Oman has existed as a distinct nation for several thousand years, the modern state—the Sultanate of Oman—is a creation of the last two centuries. The traditional territorial concept of Oman was altered in this period by the independence of the northwestern part of Oman as the United Arab Emirates and the absorption into the sultanate of the southern region of Dhofar. Although the names of both Oman and Dhofar are clearly of great antiquity, their original meanings and sources are uncertain. While most northern Omanis share a common Arab, Muslim, and tribal culture, the people of Dhofar remain culturally distinct and often feel culturally closer to neighboring regions in Yemen to the west.

Location and Geography. The Omani culture owes much to the geography of the country. The cultural heartland lies in the interior, in the valleys of the mountainous backbone which parallels the coastal plains and the interior plains. Seas to the north and east and deserts to west and south have served to isolate the country from the outside world. At the same time, Oman's presence on the Indian Ocean has fostered a long maritime tradition which has enriched the culture through the settlement of many Baluchis (the Indo-Iranian people of Baluchistan) along the northern coast and the interaction with East African cultures. Traditionally,

Oman's capital was located in the interior but Muscat (Masqat), now the principal seaport, has served as the capital since the beginning of the nineteenth century. Northern Oman is separated from southern Dhofar by several hundred miles of desert, which results in the cultural distinctiveness of the Dhofaris.

Demography. Oman's only census (1993) revealed a total population of 2 million, of which 1.5 million were Omanis. There were 175,000 residents of Dhofar. Census figures were not broken down into ethnic or linguistic categories, although it can be estimated that several hundred thousand Omanis were of Baluchi origin. About half the Omani population belongs to the Ibadi sect of Islam and a similar number belong to mainstream Sunni Islam. There are several small communities of Shia Muslims. Population growth is estimated at nearly 4 percent per year.

Linguistic Affiliation. Arabic is the principal language spoken by Omanis, who have spoken it since the immigration of Arab tribes nearly two millennia ago. The Omani dialect generally is close to modern standard Arabic, although coastal dialects employ a number of loanwords from Baluchi, Persian, Urdu and Gujarati (two Indo-Aryan languages), and even Portuguese. The mountain peoples of Dhofar, as well as several small nomadic groups in the desert between Dhofar and northern Oman, speak a variety of unique South Arabian languages that are not mutually intelligible with modern Arabic. Minority groups speak Arabic as well as their own languages at home, and English is widely spoken as a second language.

Symbolism. The national symbol employs a pair of crossed *khanjars*, the traditional daggers that all Omani men wore until recently (and still wear on formal occasions). This symbol is integrated into the national flag and appears in nearly all government logos.



Oman

HISTORY AND ETHNIC RELATIONS

Emergence of the Nation. Oman has a very long history and was known as Magan to ancient Persian and Mesopotamian civilizations and was an important producer of copper and ornamental stone. The Arab tribes in Oman adopted Islam during the lifetime of the prophet Muhammad (c.570–632) and forced the Persian colonizers to leave. Since then, Oman has generally remained an independent Arab and Ibadi/Sunni Muslim entity.

National Identity. The Omani national identity has evolved from its predominant Arab language and culture, its tribal organization, and Islam. Oman withstood attempts by classical Islamic empires to subdue the country, and the Portuguese invasion of the sixteenth century was confined to coastal ports and was terminated by national Omani resistance in the mid-seventeenth century.

Ethnic Relations. Although the dominant cultural group in Oman is Arab and Ibadi/Sunni Muslim, the culture has been very tolerant of other groups. Ethnic, sectarian, or linguistic conflict rarely occurs in Oman although tribal disputes are not unknown.

URBANISM, ARCHITECTURE, AND THE USE OF SPACE

The contemporary urban character of Omani culture has strong ties to Indian Mogul architectural style. This is manifested in the seafront white-washed two- and occasionally three-story residential buildings that line the road along the harbor of Matrah (Muscat's sister city). It is also seen in the style of some mosques and minarets with their slim and ornate shapes, as well as in public buildings such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs building in Qurm. Other contemporary constructions are more eclectic in style.

Earlier architectural styles found in the towns and interior cities of Oman, such as Nizwa, Ibri, Ibra, and Bahla, reflected a pared down and simpler cultural expression and use of space that was consistent with Ibadism, a relatively austere form of Islam.

Private residences reflect the culture's concern for gendered space. Most Omani homes have formal rooms for men and their visitors, while women generally socialize in each other's private quarters. When people meet to mark various rites of passage, such as births, marriages, and deaths, the celebrations are marked by clear gendered space. It is women who visit other women on the occasion of a birth in a family. Marriage rituals entail elaborate celebrations for women only, for men only, and when space is open, with segregated sitting areas. Deaths are similarly marked by gendered use of space, with only men attending the actual burial of a body.

FOOD AND ECONOMY

Food in Daily Life. Omani cuisine revolves around rice. The morning meal is not significant, often consisting of bread or leftovers from the day before,

and tea. The main meal of the day is in early to mid-afternoon. It is generally a large dish of rice with a thin sauce often based on tomato or tomato paste and meat or fish. Pork does not exist in the Omani diet as it is prohibited by Islam. The evening meal is generally very light, sometimes consisting only of fruit or bread and tea. The influence of Indian cooking is very strong. A variety of Indian restaurants are found throughout the country. In the capital area, there are a number of Western fast-food establishments, as well as a variety of French, Italian, Japanese, and Chinese restaurants.

Food Customs and Ceremonial Occasions. Dates, fresh or dried, are important to the diet and to the ritual of hospitality. Equally important is *helwa*, a sweet confection based on clarified butter, honey, and spices. Both are served to guests with strong, bitter, and often cardamom-scented coffee. During Ramadan, the Islamic month of fasting, Omanis refrain from eating or drinking between sunrise and sunset. They break their fast with coffee and dates followed shortly thereafter by a ritual meal, often shared with family and close friends, of elaborate foods heavy in oils and spices.

Basic Economy. A large percentage of Omanis live in rural areas and many others own land and property in the countryside even though they live and work in the towns. Many of those in the countryside are self-sufficient farmers and fishermen. Live-stock production is the basis of agricultural activity in the center and south of Oman, with fishing along Oman's long coastline coming a close second. Nearly one-third of Omani's nonoil exports come from agriculture and fisheries. Oman imports more than half the vegetables and dairy products it needs and just under half the beef, eggs, and mutton.

Land Tenure and Property. All land is officially owned by the state. Some land has been recognized as privately held and in the late twentieth century the government pursued a policy of providing all Omanis with private parcels of land for residences and farms. Shared property rights or land use rights are held by custom and are generally tribal in origin. Hence much of the interior semiarid and arid lands are used by nomadic pastoral tribes. Although their territory is no longer recognized as theirs by the state, it remains uncontested by local inhabitants and other tribes.

Commercial Activities. Agriculture and fishing are the traditional economic activities in Oman. Dates and limes, make up most of the country's exports. Coconut palms, wheat, and bananas are

also grown. Cattle are raised in Dhofar. Fish and shellfish exports create a steady income of roughly \$40 million (U.S.).

Major Industries. Oman is an oil-producing nation and revenues from petroleum products have been the backbone of Oman's dramatic development over the last three decades of the twentieth century. But oil resources are not extensive and natural gas reserves are becoming more prominent, with liquified natural gas exports expected to provide significant new income in the early twenty-first century.

Trade. After oil, petroleum, and liquified gas, fish and shellfish account for the majority of Oman's export trade. The fish and shellfish are sold mainly to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, although some of this fresh product finds its way in refrigerated trucks further north. Dates and limes are also exported.

Division of Labor. Both men and women engage in agricultural activities: men work the date gardens, while women tend to the fields of wheat, barley, and alfalfa. Men go out in fishing boats or dive from the shore, while women often mend fishing nets. Children take on domestic agricultural and fishing tasks at an early age, nine being a common age for starting. The elderly are greatly respected and are often relieved from any physical work, but their opinions and ideas are eagerly sought by the middle-aged and young.

SOCIAL STRATIFICATION

Classes and Castes. Omani culture does not have a caste system, but it does operate in a hierarchy based on family connections (tribal ties), relative wealth, and religious education. At the top of the pyramid is the sultan and his immediate family, the Al-Sa'id. This is followed by a large tribal group, the Al-Bu Sa'id. Prior to the discovery of oil in the country, the wealthiest group (class) was arguably made up of the merchant families, many of them Indian in origin, language, and culture; a particular Omani community, mainly of Hyderabad origin, also accumulated some wealth through trade in foodstuffs. Certain families and tribes had built reputations for religious learning and mediation skills, and they often represented the government in the interior of the country. In the late twentieth century, wealth spread somewhat and a few more Omani families joined the ranks of the extremely wealthy. Oman has a small but growing middle class while the vast majority of its population out-



A crowded market in Fanja. The vast majority of the population outside of the capital area are engaged in subsistence agriculture, fishing, or animal husbandry.

side of the capital area are engaged in subsistence agriculture, fishing, or animal husbandry.

Symbols of Social Stratification. Dress in Omani culture is a "badge," one highly visible and prominent marker of ethnic identity. Among Omani nationals, dress is finely tuned to reflect each person's region of origin or ethnic background. Women's clothing and, in particular, the choice of face covering and head cloth advertises membership in a particular tribal, ethnic, or language group. Men's clothing, consisting of a long, ankle-length shirt (locally called a *thawb* or *dishdashah*), is also amenable to the expression of tribal and regional belonging through variations in the style of the collars and sleeves. Head covering is required of men as well as women.

POLITICAL LIFE

Government. Oman is a sultanate (a type of monarchy) with a sultan as the head of state and head of government. His position is hereditary within the Al Bu Sa'id family. There are few checks on the power of the sultan and his decrees form the basis of law. He appoints a council of ministers and can dismiss ministers without reason. There is no prime minister.

Leadership and Political Officials. Senior members of the sultan's family routinely receive important government positions. More distant members of the family serve as ministers, other government officials, and the equivalent of governors throughout the country. Other ministers and senior government officials are chosen by merit and family or tribal connections; Muscat merchant families are overrepresented. There are no political parties and a limited electorate chooses candidates for the Majlis al-Shura, an indirectly elected consultative council dealing with social issues.

Social Problems and Control. The legal system is derived from a combination of Western and Arab civil codes with the *Shari'ah* (Islamic law) used in family matters such as marriage and inheritance. The Royal Oman Police covers the entire country and is responsible for traffic, criminal investigation, firefighting, the coast guard, and immigration. Crime is infrequent although the capital area has seen a modest increase in burglaries and there is some drug and alcohol abuse. Civil disobedience is unknown and there is complete respect for the law and state institutions.

Military Activity. The armed forces of Oman were created to counter several insurrections beginning

in the 1950s. Since the mid-1970s, however, there has been no unrest in Oman and the security forces are geared to protect against potential external threats. Oman continues to maintain a relatively large military establishment in part to provide employment for its people.

SOCIAL WELFARE AND CHANGE PROGRAMS

Social welfare is still basically a family and kin network business. The old, the handicapped, the disabled, and the disadvantaged are looked after by a network of relatives. Since the 1970s, the government has worked hard to establish a social welfare service to promote stability and security for families in a rapidly changing social environment. The Ministry of Social Affairs, Labor, and Vocational Training takes responsibility for making monthly payments to the elderly, the widowed, the divorced, and the disabled. Special attention has been given to training the mildly disabled, especially the young, through special government centers.

NONGOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS AND OTHER ORGANIZATIONS

Oman has very few nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Perhaps as a reflection of security concerns, it remains very difficult to acquire formal government recognition of NGO status. The first NGO to be created in Oman in the 1970s, the Omani Women's Association, was integrated into the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor in the early 1980s. The Association for the Welfare of Handicapped Children, which was founded in 1990, runs a number of centers for the care and rehabilitation of disabled children and has acquired a semiofficial status. The Oman Charitable Organization (also known as the Oman Benevolent Society), was created in the late 1990s by royal decree to provide assistance to the needy. Other NGOs include sports clubs, literary associations, and university cultural centers.

GENDER ROLES AND STATUSES

Division of Labor by Gender. Gender roles are shaped by the demands of the economic realities of peoples' lives. In the desert interior of the country, women contribute very actively to economic activities associated with livestock raising and have significant social and political power. In the agricultural oasis settlements, the economic role of women is not as active and this is reflected in reduced social and political power. Women's roles in religion re-

flect the formal restrictions of Islam. In urban centers and towns, however, many women serve as teachers in Islamic pre-schools, the *kuttaib*.

The Relative Status of Women and Men. Women have significant authority within the family unit and make strong contributions toward family decisions regarding various rites of passage. Outside the kin group, however, women have little authority or privilege. From the early 1990s, the government has made great efforts to include women in government. Women were nominated to run for election to the consultative council in 1997, with two obtaining seats, and several speeches of the sultan emphasized the importance of integrating women into public life.

MARRIAGE, FAMILY, AND KINSHIP

Marriage. Marriages are normally arranged. The preferred marriage is to a cousin. First choice is to a patrilineal cousin, and second choice is to a matrilineal cousin. Even the well-educated elite of the country, university medical students, express a preference for their families to arrange marriages for them. Love matches are very infrequent, as marriage is viewed more as a contract between two families with the major aim being to produce offspring for the next generation. In polygamous households (more common among the wealthy, but not restricted to them), the first wife tends to be a close cousin and the second wife a younger, less-close relative. In the past, men tended to take on additional wives—Islam permits up to four—but in recent years, men have tended to divorce first wives and remarry, often leaving divorced women destitute and reliant on the government for support.

Domestic Unit. The domestic unit is generally an extended three-generation nuclear family; residence is usually patrilocal, with the husband's family. Although many nuclear family units reside in single residences, individual family members keep in constant contact with each other through either daily visits or regular telephone calls. It is not unusual to find families of eight, nine or ten persons living in one household. The eldest male has the greatest authority in the family while an elderly female usually takes responsibility for allocating tasks within the household.

Inheritance. The rules of inheritance are entirely governed by the *Shari'ah* (Islamic law), which lays down the percentage of an estate that each relative may inherit. In descending order of shares, this moves from the direct descendants (sons, wives,



A group of Bedouin eat a meal. Omani cuisine revolves around rice.

daughters, and husbands) to cousins and more distant relatives. These rules apply to fixed property and capital. In the interior among the pastoral tribes, women often pass on their share of certain large livestock (camels) to brothers or sons, in exchange for informal welfare security in their old age.

Kin Groups. Omani culture is organized around the kin group as a large extended family or tribe inhabiting a particular valley or set of hamlets. There are also dispersed kin groups, the pastoral tribes, who move around with their livestock in search of grazing land in a territory normally regarded as theirs to use. Life revolves around the kin group in the interior of the country, while in the urban centers the extended family or tribe is the hub and locus of much activity and networking.

SOCIALIZATION

Infant Care. Omanis do not separate the infant or child from family rhythm or routine. The newborn child remains exclusively with her or his mother for the first forty days after birth. After that the infant sleeps, eats, and plays at her side, and is nursed on demand for two years. Infants are not offered particular stimulation, but soothed and calmed and encouraged to watch rather than interact.

Child Rearing and Education. After the age of two, Omani children are encouraged to behave like miniature adults, taking on duties or hospitality toward guests at a very young age. They are only reprimanded, ever mildly, occasionally with a tap across the back of the legs. They are socialized to look to their peer group. Punishment for unusual or unacceptable behavior is often offered as: "What would your friends say?" Girls are circumcised with little ceremony at or just after birth and boys are circumcised in later childhood with some celebration of their entering an age of "reason."

Primary education for both boys and girls is encouraged. In the later intermediary and high school years, however, attendance by girls, particularly in rural areas, declines, largely due to a persistent pattern of early marriage. Many boys also leave school before the end of their secondary education in order to seek jobs, thus contributing to a large low-skill sector of the workforce. The government also operates a number of vocational training institutes.

Higher Education. In 1986, Oman opened its first university. Built upon a combination of American and English models of higher education, the first colleges were of medicine, engineering, science, Islamic studies and education, and agriculture. In the

1990s, several more colleges were opened including a faculty of commerce and economics and a faculty of *Shari'ah* and law. Enrollment in the university is nearly equally split between male and female students. It was only in 1993 that, under pressure from elements in the private sector and the government, the university administration decided to deny women admission to two colleges, engineering and agriculture. In the late 1990s, the government sanctioned several private colleges that emphasized business curricula.

ETIQUETTE

Omanis are very polite and formal in public. Upon meeting, formulaic greetings must be exchanged before a discussion can ensue. To do otherwise would be considered rude. Although men and women may interact in public, their contact should always be chaperoned or in the open. Even educated elite women often find it necessary to be chaperoned by a male relative at public events, parties, or receptions. Omanis tend to stand close to one another as Arabs do, and it is common for friends and relatives of the same sex to hold hands. Two or more men or women entering a doorway at the same time always try to persuade the others to enter first, although a man always invites a woman to enter first. On the other hand, forming lines in shops, banks, and other public places is not a cultural trait, although women invariably are encouraged to go first.

RELIGION

Religious Beliefs. Nearly all Omanis are Muslim, divided nearly equally into Sunnis and Ibadis with a small percentage of Shia. A few families of Indian origin are Hindu but there are no Omani Christians or Jews. Omanis tend to be careful in their observance of religious obligations. Most carry out the prescribed five prayers per day and many men go to nearby mosques to perform them. Most Omanis observe the dawn-to-dusk fasting required during the Islamic month of Ramadan, and it is against the law to eat, drink, or smoke in public during daylight hours in Ramadan. In addition to formal religious beliefs and practices, superstitions are common and some folk rituals are practiced.

Religious Practitioners. There is little formal religious hierarchy. The government appoints the *mufti* who serves as the country's highest Islamic authority. Traditional religious educators, known as sheikhs, are trained by the Ministry of Awqaf



View of Muscat city buildings along the Gulf of Oman. Oman is a sultanate, with a sultan as the head of state and government.

and Religious Affairs and teach in Koranic schools throughout the country. Religious judges (*qadi*) are appointed by the state to serve in *Shari'ah* courts. There are also religious healers (*mutawi'*) whose services are called upon by the population, often to deal with mental illnesses.

Rituals and Holy Places. All Omani Muslims are obliged to fast during Ramadan. One of the pillars of Islam, this period of abstinence lasts twenty-nine or thirty days. This month is also one of celebration and prayer and is followed by two important festivals, one immediately after the period of fasting, *Eid-il-Fitr*, and one sixty-six days later, *Eid-il Adha*. Many Omanis undertake the *haji*, or pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca (in Saudi Arabia), if they are physically and financially able. Because of the austerity of Ibadī Islam, there are no specific holy places in northern Oman; there are, however, some venerated tombs of "saints" in Dhofar.

Death and the Afterlife. Omanis are pragmatic when it comes to dealing with sickness. They will try modern medicine but if that fails will turn to traditional healers. Traditional herbalists, bonesetters, and exorcists have a thriving practice, especially in the interior of the country. Many look

to the cold and hot properties of foods for curing sickness (a common practice in Islamic belief). Spirit possession, often among women, is addressed through *zar*, or exorcism, ceremonies, which frequently involve the community in the curative process.

SECULAR CELEBRATIONS

National Day takes place on 18 November, the birthday of the sultan, Qabus ibn Sa'id. This is the principal nonreligious celebration of the year and includes a major pageant, a profusion of fireworks around the country, and the sultan's annual policy speech. Armed Forces Day (11 December) is the occasion for a large banquet hosted by the sultan for his officers, senior government officials, and the diplomatic corps. The Islamic, but not the Christian, New Year's Day is an official holiday.

THE ARTS AND HUMANITIES

Support for the Arts. The government provides some limited assistance for the arts through subsidies to such organizations as the Omani Arts Society. Most artists, however, either hold full-time jobs or come from well-to-do families.

Literature. In the past, literature was confined to religious treatises and histories. Like other Arabs, Omanis gave great importance to oral traditions, including poetry and an emphasis on genealogical roots. The Ministry of Information has sought to revive these traditions through folk programs on radio and television. In the last decades of the twentieth century, a small number of authors published works of fiction and poetry.

Graphic Arts. Traditional Omani handicrafts are in decline although periodic attempts are made to encourage their production. Notable handmade products include silver and gold jewelry, woven baskets, goat- and camel-hair rugs, swords and *khanjars* (daggers), and large pottery water jugs. Drawing, painting, and photography have become popular forms of expression in educated circles, although artists still tend to avoid representation of the human form as per Islamic convention.

Performance Arts. Local instrumental and vocal music is very popular, as are songs from other Arab countries. Traditional performers still provide songs and dances at events such as marriages. The Ministry of National Heritage and Culture maintains a small national theater. Arab entertainers are well

known throughout the country and many educated Omanis enjoy Western performance arts.

THE STATE OF THE PHYSICAL AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

Physical sciences, particularly earth sciences such as geology and hydrology, are popular subjects for study and research in Oman's university and in a number of government ministries. The social sciences, however, are not as well represented. Economics and sociology are taught at the university, but anthropology, political science, and psychology are not.

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