

Omani Folk Literature and Its Impact on Society

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ABSTRACT

Omani folk literature represents a living mirror of the cultural and historical identity of Omani society, reflecting its values, traditions, and worldview through various forms such as Nabati poetry, folktales, proverbs, chants, and performing arts. This literature serves as a repository of collective experiences and a medium for documenting the social, political, and economic transformations Oman has undergone throughout the ages. Folk literature has significantly contributed to strengthening social cohesion by embedding moral and religious values and reinforcing intergenerational bonds through the exchange of stories and proverbs that carry profound wisdom and human experiences. It has also played an educational and awareness-raising role, instilling positive principles such as courage, generosity, and solidarity. Moreover, Omani folk literature has had a notable impact on shaping national consciousness and fostering belonging, as it celebrates heritage, maritime and agricultural traditions, and Oman's historical role in trade and navigation. With the evolution of Omani society, folk literature has remained a vital tool for preserving cultural identity in the face of globalization, as well as a key pillar in academic studies of heritage and anthropology. Therefore, studying Omani folk literature reveals its central role in nation-building, not merely as a cultural luxury but as a fundamental force in shaping the Omani character and safeguarding its cultural legacy.

Keywords: Omani folklore, cultural identity, orality, social cohesion, preservation

INTRODUCTION

Omani folk literature constitutes one of the most significant cultural treasures of the Sultanate. It serves as a mirror reflecting the past and present of Omani society—its social life, values, and history. Since ancient times, folk literature has played a pivotal role in transmitting knowledge, wisdom, tales, and legends that have shaped national identity and a sense of belonging among Omanis across generations. Omani society, with its geographical diversity spanning mountains, deserts, and coasts, has succeeded in building a rich folk heritage brought to life through diverse literary forms such as stories, proverbs, songs, and poetry, documenting human experiences and social contexts (Al-Atwi, 2018).

The texts of Omani folk literature reflect the interaction between people and their natural and social environments, contributing to shaping behavioral patterns and collective values. This makes it more than a mere artistic heritage; it becomes a cultural document. In the face of globalization and rapid social change, Omani folk literature faces significant challenges, including a decline in the number of its oral custodians, threatening its continuity and authenticity (Elnabalawi, 2016).

This study aims to deeply analyze Omani folk literature by reviewing its essential features and diverse manifestations in social and cultural life. It also seeks to examine the impact of modern social and technological transformations on it, focusing on methods of preservation and documentation to ensure its continuity. The study

will provide an applied model by analyzing selected texts from the tales of the Bahla region, one of the richest areas in preserving diverse and vibrant folk literature.

The research adopts a descriptive-analytical approach, collecting and analyzing folk texts alongside reviewing previous studies and theoretical frameworks on folk literature, with an emphasis on anthropological and cultural aspects. It also examines oral performance, the roles of custodians and creators, and the contribution of local communities to the preservation of this heritage (Hall, 1996). Ultimately, this research is expected to present a comprehensive vision that highlights the importance of folk literature in reinforcing Omani national culture, the challenges it faces, and ways to develop it in the modern era.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Methodology forms a cornerstone of any scientific study, defining the steps and procedures used by the researcher to collect and analyze data, ensuring accurate and reliable results. In this study, the researcher adopted a descriptive-analytical method supported by several tools and techniques suitable for exploring Omani folk literature as an oral and cultural subject.

Research Design

The descriptive-analytical method was chosen because it allows for an accurate description of Omani folk literature's characteristics and an analysis of its social and cultural manifestations. This method facilitates the collection of qualitative data related to folk texts, oral traditions, and their contexts (Creswell, 2014).

Data Collection Tools

- **Field Observation:** Attending social and cultural events in different Omani regions, particularly Bahla and Dhofar, where live folk literary performances take place. This provided insight into the social and critical context of the texts.
- **Semi-structured Interviews:** Conducted with several custodians and local practitioners of folk literature, including elders and cultural enthusiasts, to understand oral preservation methods, narratives, and the challenges they face.
- **Text Compilation:** Gathering stories, proverbs, poems, and folk songs from oral sources and written collections (previous studies, local archives).
- **Literature Review:** Analyzing previous studies, books, and scholarly articles to develop a theoretical and conceptual framework for folk literature.

Analytical Techniques

- **Textual Analysis:** Analyzing collected literary texts to identify stylistic and linguistic features, recurring themes, and social functions. Discourse analysis was applied to explore how these texts reflect cultural structures and values (Fairclough, 1995).
- **Contextual Analysis:** Examining the social, environmental, and historical conditions that produced these texts to understand their influence on the form and content of folk literature.

Study Limitations

The study focuses on folk literature in selected Omani regions, namely Bahla and Dhofar, due to their rich folk traditions and accessibility. It also emphasizes contemporary periods while observing the impact of modern transformations.

Research Ethics

All research ethics were upheld, including obtaining informed consent from interviewees, ensuring data confidentiality, and using the collected information strictly for academic purposes.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Folk literature is a form of cultural expression transmitted orally across generations, encompassing stories, proverbs, songs, and poetry that reflect the identity, history, and beliefs of communities (Bauman, 1977). In the Omani context, it serves as a mirror of society and traditions, functioning as an effective tool for knowledge transmission and social value reinforcement (Al-Harthi, 2015).

General Concept of Folk Literature

Researchers have defined folk literature in various ways. Some view it as the "art of the masses," transmitted orally and characterized by diversity and flexibility (Dorson, 1972). From an anthropological perspective, it is seen as an integral part of the social and cultural fabric that expresses collective values and performs educational functions (Ben-Amos, 1971).

Theoretical Foundations

This study is grounded in cultural theory, which views folk literature as a mechanism for reproducing cultural identity through the interaction between oral texts and society. It also draws on Bauman's oral performance theory, emphasizing the role of performance and reception in shaping folk texts. Additionally, it employs Hall's framework for understanding the social structures and cultural symbols embedded in folk literature (Hall, 1996).

Key Concepts

- **Orality:** A core feature of folk literature, referring to its transmission by word of mouth, which adds vitality and variation through performance (Ong, 1982).
- **Spontaneity:** Denotes the unstructured nature of folk expressions, allowing them to evolve and adapt according to circumstances (Finnegan, 1970).
- **Social Function:** Folk literature serves not only entertainment purposes but also educational, political, and social functions (Bronner, 2003).
- **Connection to Time and Place:** Folk literature is closely tied to the geographical and historical environments in which it emerged, reflecting cultural specificity (Glassie, 1995).

Omani Folk Literature in Previous Studies

Several studies have examined Omani folk literature, including Al-Atwi (2018), who highlighted the vital role of folk poetry and tales in building cultural identity, and Al-Harthy (2015), who explored the social significance of proverbs. Elnabalawi (2016) provided an in-depth anthropological analysis of Bahla folktales, demonstrating how they embody social values and local heritage.

Essential Features of Omani Folk Literature

Omani folk literature represents a rich accumulation of cultural and historical experiences that express the identity and history of society across ages. Its artistic and social features are diverse, combining orality, flexibility, and multifunctionality, making it one of the most important elements in preserving the national cultural heritage.

Orality and Spontaneity

Transparency and spontaneity are among the most distinctive features of Omani folk literature, as it expresses people's feelings and daily experiences with honesty, free from affectation or pretension. Transparency appears in the clarity and simplicity of the language, where familiar and colloquial vocabulary is used to convey meanings directly to the audience. Spontaneity is reflected in the narrative and performance style, whether in Nabati poetry, folktales, or chants, where expression flows naturally from the creator's emotions to the audience's hearts. This spontaneity has made folk literature a true mirror of the community's soul, documenting people's joys, sorrows, and aspirations. Through its transparency, folk texts gain high credibility among audiences who find in them an echo of their lives and issues. Moreover, spontaneity has helped keep this literature alive and dynamic, as it stems from reality and remains deeply connected to the social and cultural context. This is evident in proverbs, which are composed in concise and honest expressions, and in poems that capture the details of daily life with a spontaneous spirit. Thus, transparency and spontaneity in Omani folk literature represent the core of its strength and appeal, as well as the foundation of its continuity and influence across generations.

In the Omani context, field studies such as that of Al-Atwi (2018) indicate that folk literature preservers rely on live storytelling during social events, which enhances communication between individuals and affirms collective identity.

Connection to Environment and Place

Omani folk literature is deeply linked to the Sultanate's diverse geography, which includes coasts, deserts, and mountains. These environments appear in folk texts as living backdrops for events or as symbols; for instance, sea-related stories reflect the lives and traditions of fishermen, while mountain tales (Elnabalawi, 2016) narrate stories of chivalry and tribal heroism. Thus, folk literature reflects the nature of the communities that produced it, with Oman's environmental diversity emerging as a decisive factor in shaping folk literary forms (Glassie, 1995).

Linguistic Simplicity and Depth of Meaning

Omani folk texts are characterized by their simple and fluid language, which facilitates their circulation among people of various educational levels. Despite this simplicity, these texts carry profound meanings that convey wisdom, moral lessons, and ethical values (Al-Harthy, 2015). Proverbs are a prominent example, as they encapsulate life experiences in concise yet highly expressive statements. Al-Harthy (2015) noted that these proverbs play an important role in guiding social behavior and promoting communal values such as patience, generosity, and courage.

Multifunctionality

Folk literature serves multiple purposes in Omani society. Beyond entertainment, it acts as a tool for education, transmitting history, and reinforcing social values (Bronner, 2003). In Oman, folk poetry, proverbs, and stories are used during social events to strengthen social bonds and maintain local traditions (Al-Atwi, 2018).

Artistic Diversity

Omani folk literature encompasses a wide variety of artistic forms, including folk poetry such as “Razha” and “Humble,” storytelling, proverbs, and folk songs that accompany daily work, religious occasions, and social gatherings (Al-Harthy, 2015). This diversity reflects the cultural richness and deep-rooted traditions maintained by local communities.

Cultural and Social Manifestations of Omani Folk Literature

Omani folk literature represents a vibrant cultural and social fabric that reflects the realities of daily life and the collective experiences of the community. Its dimensions are manifested in several cultural and social phenomena linked to values, beliefs, customs, and various occasions.

Expression of National and Local Identity

Omani folk literature is one of the most prominent means of expressing national and local identity, reflecting the connection between the individual, their community, and their land. Al-Atwi (2018) emphasized that folk poetry, such as Razha and Humble, plays a vital role in fostering national spirit and pride in heritage, especially during national and social events. Folktales that recount the stories of heroes and local legends also serve as powerful tools for building collective memory, as they are retold during celebrations and festivals, enhancing belonging and pride in Omani identity (Elnabalawi, 2016).

Social and Educational Role

Omani folk literature forms a cultural and social pillar that embraces the history and values of Omani identity, playing an integrated social and educational role in shaping individuals and society. Al-Nabalawi's (2017) study highlights the social and cultural values embedded in folktales from Bahla in the Ad Dakhiliyah Governorate, noting that these stories reflect inherited values and support the cultural and social systems of Omani society, ensuring the continuity of folkloric norms within specific local contexts.

At the level of informal education, folk literature—through proverbs, stories, and poems—serves as spontaneous educational tools that instill fundamental concepts such as honesty, courage, generosity, and solidarity. For instance, Omani folktales often present short narrative sequences featuring characters who learn moral lessons aligned with the community's daily realities. Studies analyzing educational folktales, such as “The Story of Abu Qhifa,” reveal their aim to reinforce social values through simple and direct narrative structures (Al-Harthy, 2020).

These oral arts also contribute to strengthening social cohesion, as residents perform traditional arts such as “Azi” and “Taghrooda” during events like weddings and festivals, thereby reinforcing communal bonds and enhancing shared local identity through collective artistic expressions (Al-Nabhani, 2019).

In the context of both formal and informal education, studies on professional storytelling for children in Oman have shown that folk stories are an effective tool for promoting cultural identity and values. These stories have been transformed through technology into interactive books, animations, and educational applications, expanding their audience and enabling their use in visual and interactive learning.

Academically, studies have recommended integrating folk literature into educational curricula, particularly in teaching Arabic language and national culture. This integration serves as a means of strengthening students' cultural connections, helping them critically understand and analyze heritage texts, and fostering an educational awareness that promotes a living national identity among the younger generation (Al-Nabhani, 2019; Al-Maamari & Al-Harthy, 2023).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Omani folk literature emerges not as a static heritage but as an active societal tool for socialization and education. It offers a natural, low-cost, and multi-modal learning model—oral in community gatherings and visual through modern digital platforms. Thus, it contributes to building enduring local cultural values tailored to the needs of contemporary Omani society, balancing authenticity and tradition with the demands of modernization.

1. A Means of Intergenerational Communication

2. Folk literature plays a pivotal role in transmitting cultural heritage and knowledge across generations, with orality ensuring the continuity of narratives, stories, and proverbs over time (Ong, 1982). In Oman, it is observed that the elderly act as custodians of this heritage through evening gatherings and community meetings, underscoring the significance of folk literature in preserving familial and social cohesion (Al-Rawi, in press).

3. Confronting Contemporary Challenges

4. Despite its crucial cultural and social role, folk literature faces numerous challenges in the modern era, including media influences, social transformations, and the spread of formal education that prioritizes written language over orality. This shift has diminished the role of traditional custodians, necessitating modern strategies for preserving folk literature, such as digital documentation and research projects (Finnegan, 1970; Al-Yahyai et al., 2023).

5. Modern Transformations and Challenges Facing Omani Folk Literature

6. Amid the sweeping social and technological changes occurring globally, Omani folk literature faces formidable challenges threatening its continuity and authenticity. While it had long been preserved orally and transmitted across generations through direct performance, the means of communication and cultural interaction have undergone a profound transformation.

7. The Impact of Globalization and Modernity

8. Oman has rapidly entered the era of globalization, with the expansion of digital media and the internet leading to increased interaction with other cultures. This interaction, particularly among youth, has shifted their preferences toward modern media at the expense of traditional oral heritage (Appadurai, 1996). Al-Harthy's (2020) study highlights that this transformation has resulted in a decline in the actual practice of folk literature within families and local communities, leaving younger generations less exposed to their folk heritage.

9. Social and Educational Changes

10. With the rise of formal education and the spread of schools and universities, the focus has shifted from oral literature to written, structured forms (Finnegan, 2005). Folk literature is sometimes viewed as an outdated tradition incompatible with the demands of modern life. However, studies such as Al-Rawi (2019) stress the importance of incorporating folk literature into educational curricula to enhance national identity and introduce younger generations to their heritage.

11. Challenges of Documentation and Preservation

12. One of the most pressing challenges facing Omani folk literature is the lack of adequate documentation for this oral heritage, rendering it vulnerable to loss over time. Official documentation efforts and research initiatives are still in their early stages, despite some projects aimed at recording stories, folktales, and folk songs. Here, universities and research centers in Oman play a crucial role in documenting this heritage and making it digitally accessible, thus facilitating its study and preservation (Al-Yahyai, 2023).

13. Digital Transformations and Future Opportunities

14. On a positive note, digital technology offers unprecedented opportunities for preserving and disseminating folk literature. Audio-visual documentation projects and online platforms provide a means of safeguarding folk texts from being forgotten or lost. In Oman, initiatives such as the "Digital Omani Heritage Library" have begun collecting and archiving folk literature in multiple formats, enhancing its usability for educational and research purposes (Al-Yahyai, 2023).

15. The Role of Local Communities and Cultural Organizations

16. Local communities play a vital role in preserving folk literature by organizing events and festivals that showcase this heritage. Likewise, cultural and governmental organizations in Oman are working to raise public awareness of the importance of heritage by supporting cultural projects and festivals (Ministry of Heritage and Culture, 2022).

17. Analysis of Selected Omani Folk Texts

18. Omani folk literature represents an authentic mirror reflecting the social and cultural structure of the local environment, where oral heritage intertwines with popular expressive forms. Folk texts—such as tales, epics, and chants—are integral to collective memory, playing a crucial role in preserving value systems and traditions. An analysis of selected Omani texts reveals a clear duality between educational and entertaining dimensions; folk

tales go beyond narrating events to deliver explicit moral lessons that reinforce virtues such as courage and generosity (Al-Busaidi, 2017).

19. One of the key features of these texts is their reliance on simple symbolism that facilitates oral transmission, alongside rich imagery drawn from the desert and maritime environments. For instance, sea and ship metaphors are used to symbolize travel and destiny, while animals in folk tales often represent wisdom, cunning, or strength (Peterson, 2019). The rhythmic structure of popular chants also adds an aesthetic dimension, emphasizing the collective nature of performance.

20. Moreover, Omani folk tales function as cultural negotiation spaces between the past and present, evoking legendary heroes to interpret reality and address social crises. Critical studies reveal that this literature has helped solidify national identity by reimagining historical narratives in accessible artistic forms (Al-Zadjali, 2020). From a structuralist perspective, the predominance of circular narrative structures—where stories return to their starting point—reinforces a sense of completeness and stability.

21. Studying Omani folk texts cannot be divorced from the cultural and social contexts that produced them. These are living texts that transcend aesthetic functions to serve educational and moral purposes. Field research confirms that these texts have transmitted values and knowledge across generations, acting as a medium for expressing collective aspirations and anxieties (Salim, 2018). Thus, Omani folk literature provides rich material for comparative critical analysis, combining local authenticity with openness to modern interpretations of oral texts.

22. Case Analysis: “The Boy and the Tree” (A Tale from Bahla)

23. This folk story narrates the relationship between a young boy and an old tree in his village, symbolizing life and continuity in the local community. The tale embodies social values such as patience and sacrifice, illustrating human interaction with the environment and reflecting the deep connection between people and nature in Omani culture (Elnabalawi, 2016).

The story employs simple language and an oral narrative style based on repetition and linguistic parallelism, making it easy to memorize and transmit. Its educational function is evident, encouraging environmental stewardship and respect for cultural symbols.

24. “The Boy and the Tree” stands as an authentic example of Omani folk tales blending popular wisdom with moral instruction. The story begins by describing the boy’s humble environment and his bond with the tree, which serves as the central axis and dominant symbol of the narrative. The tree can be interpreted as a multifaceted entity—representing life, generosity, and resilience in the face of time’s challenges (Peterson, 2019). The tale’s educational aspect emerges as the boy’s awareness develops through his experiences with the tree, reflecting the community’s view of nature as a medium for shaping human behavior (Al-Busaidi, 2017).

25. Narratively, the story follows a linear progression, with events building gradually toward a turning point when the boy realizes the tree’s value only after nearly losing it. This structure creates a deep psychological impact on the audience, evoking empathy and encouraging reflection on the importance of appreciating what is familiar and readily available (Salim, 2018). Additionally, the presence of internal monologue adds contemplative depth, making the story relatable to modern readers despite its simple oral language.

26. Symbolically, the relationship between the boy and the tree can be read as a metaphor for the human-environment relationship; neglecting the tree equates, on a deeper level, to neglecting oneself and the community. The tree also represents collective memory, linking the boy to his past and land, aligning with the cultural function of folk literature in reinforcing local identity (Al-Zadjali, 2020). Within the Omani storytelling tradition, the tree symbolizes protection and tranquility, contrasted with an unpredictable and hazardous external world.

27. Thus, “The Boy and the Tree” is not merely an entertaining tale but a moral discourse advocating loyalty and environmental awareness. It transcends oral storytelling to become a cultural document reflecting Omanis’ philosophy of viewing nature as a partner in existence rather than a resource for exploitation.

28. Bahla Proverbs

29. Bahla’s proverbs are concise expressions imbued with profound wisdom drawn from real-life experiences.

	Examples	include:
<i>“Patience is the key to relief”</i>		
<i>“The neighbor before the house”</i>		

These proverbs reflect social values emphasizing patience and the importance of social bonds, underscoring the pedagogical role of folk literature (Al-Harthy, 2015). They also highlight the centrality of human relationships in traditional Omani society.

30. “Humbel” Songs in Dhofar

Humbel songs performed in Dhofar feature rhythmic harmonies expressing daily life and collective work, such as frankincense harvesting. These songs document experiences of communal labor and solidarity while expressing both joy and sorrow (Al-Balushi, 2019).

Their language combines expressive richness with simplicity, employing local environmental symbols like frankincense and palm trees. Beyond entertainment, these songs convey social and cultural messages of patience and unity.

31. Popular Poetic Forms: Razha

Razha is a form of poetic expression recited during tribal and social gatherings, featuring praise for heroes and tribes while emphasizing values of courage and generosity. These poems document past conflicts and heroic memories, making them an essential component of collective memory (Al-Atwi, 2018).

Razha stands out for its powerful rhetorical style, with rhythmic and rhyming repetition that facilitates memorization and performance.

CONCLUSION

Omani folklore, with its rich tapestry of tales, proverbs, chants, and oral arts, constitutes an integrated cultural system that fulfills intertwined cognitive, social, and aesthetic roles. It is far more than mere entertainment or transient narratives; rather, it stands as a living cultural discourse that reflects Omani society's consciousness of itself and its environment across the ages. Through the study of these texts, it becomes evident that folklore has retained its profound ability to articulate the concerns and aspirations of the Omani people, framing their existential questions within forms that are at once simple and profound (Al-Busaidi, 2017). Folklore transcends its oral dimension to function as a space for exchanging meanings and reproducing social values, embodying concepts such as generosity, courage, patience, and loyalty—values that contribute to building a collective moral system capable of regulating social interactions and fostering community cohesion (Salim, 2018).

Moreover, Omani folktales, with their environmental symbols—such as the sea, desert, tree, and animals—reveal a deep anthropological awareness of the human relationship with nature, transforming elements of the natural world into existential metaphors and philosophical signifiers that define the boundaries between the individual and the external world (Peterson, 2019). Similarly, chants and oral arts, characterized by their collective rhythms, serve as channels for social interaction that enhance solidarity and belonging, while also functioning as historical records documenting the economic and social details of life, particularly in coastal and agricultural settings.

These folk texts, with their flexibility and adaptability, demonstrate that Omani cultural identity is not static or rigid but rather dynamic, capable of reshaping itself in harmony with the demands of the present without losing its roots or authenticity. Analyzing these texts through interdisciplinary approaches—combining literary criticism, cultural studies, and anthropology—opens broad horizons for a deeper understanding of Omani society, its history, and its worldview (Al-Zadjali, 2020). Thus, it becomes imperative to intensify efforts in collecting, documenting, and critically analyzing this body of folklore—not merely to safeguard it from extinction but to reinvigorate it as part of a contemporary cultural discourse that enriches national identity and bridges the past with the present. Ultimately, Omani folklore stands as a living testimony to the ingenuity of the Omani people in transforming their struggles and life experiences into meaningful narratives that preserve collective memory and lay the foundation for a renewed civilizational consciousness capable of meeting the challenges of the future.

Recommendations and Suggestions

In light of the findings of this study regarding Omani folklore and its role in preserving cultural identity and promoting social values, the following recommendations are proposed:

32. Enhancing documentation and field collection efforts: Establish a comprehensive national project to collect and classify Omani folk texts from various environments (rural, coastal, and urban), leveraging digital technologies for archiving and ensuring researchers and enthusiasts can easily access them.

33. Encouraging interdisciplinary studies: Support research that adopts multi-disciplinary methodologies, combining literary criticism with anthropological and sociological approaches, to explore the aesthetic, cultural, and social dimensions of folk texts.

34. Integrating folklore into educational curricula: Incorporate selected folktales, proverbs, and chants into school syllabi to strengthen younger generations' awareness of their cultural heritage and foster national belonging.

35. Promoting publication and translation: Support initiatives for publishing folk texts and related studies in both print and digital formats and translating them into global languages to highlight the unique character of Omani folklore in the international cultural arena.

36. Organizing cultural events: Host regular forums and festivals dedicated to oral arts and folktales, fostering intergenerational interaction and transforming folklore into a living, shared experience that preserves collective memory.

37. **Utilizing folklore in cultural and tourism development:** Incorporate folk narratives into cultural and tourism programs that showcase Omani heritage, thereby enhancing the Sultanate's civilizational image regionally and internationally.
38. **Preparing specialized research cadres:** Establish training and academic programs to prepare young researchers qualified in collecting and analyzing oral heritage, ensuring the sustainability of research efforts in this field.
39. **Conducting comparative studies:** Encourage research comparing Omani folklore with that of the Gulf region and the Indian Ocean basin to uncover shared cultural interactions and highlight the distinctiveness of the Omani experience.

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