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Traditional Omani Crafts approaches to identity

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Abstract. The purpose of this study is to identify how landscapes, places, and geographical forms of land influenced craft making identity by addressing Omani crafts enterprises in urban and rural areas. This has been done by interviewing local craftspeople and analysing their responses as a qualitative data collection method using open-ended questions to seek reliability and credibility in the study. The interviews in this research were mostly conducted with participants belonging to ten enterprises under the management of the Public Authority for Crafts Industries (PACI), Department of Art Education and the Handcrafts Centre. Consequently, this study highlights the importance of studying the influence of landscapes, places, and geographical forms in shaping local people's crafts identity by investigating their craft industries in rural and urban areas.

Keywords. Places, Identity, Material Culture, Crafts, Oman

Introduction

Landscapes, places, and geographical forms of land influence craft making and help to shape the identity of territories (Richardson and Dorr, 2003). This issue was a central concern discussed by Richardson and Dorr in their documentation study in 2003. The physical geography of Oman can be generally divided between mountains, deserts, and sea, each of which has had a deep influence on the development of the lifestyle of Omani people and on the development of the craft industries as well (Richardson and Dorr, 2003, Vol. 2, p.12). Thus, landscapes and geographical diversity represented in rural and urban areas played a central role in defining the identity of the crafts of the Omani people. In fact, it is especially important to investigate the differences between rural and urban environments and their influences on crafts communities and villages (ibid). In fact, the reader should bear in mind that the study covered data collected basically in 2012, but the researchers reviewed newer data from 2015 to 2018 according to some of the PACI updated Annual Reports. The published Annual Report in 2018, for example, showed that no significant increase was found in the number of rural crafts centres. Actually, because of the worldwide financial crisis in 2016 and after, the PACI reduced its support to establish new crafts centres. This study puts emphasis on the importance of landscapes, places, and geographical forms in shaping local people's identity by examining their craft industries.

1. Crafts As Material Culture: The Influence Of "Place"

What we know about landscapes/geographical diversity, within anthropology, is largely based

upon comprehensive studies that investigate how geographical diversity can influence people's identity and lifestyle. A large and growing body of literature, such as the contributions of Christopher Tilley (2006) who stressed the relation between place and identity; Barbara Bender and Margot Winer (2001) who explained the people's contributions to place and landscapes (chapter 8, pp.133-147); Kate Ronan (2011) who focused on place and memories; and the general contribution of Doreen Massey (2005), has investigated this subject.

In his study, Duska Hocevar (2000) examined, in part, issues of cultural landscape, ethnic groups and boundaries, and anthropological concepts of boundaries. Hocevar's anthropological study is far from the main topic of this research (i.e. crafts), but similar to Richardson and Dorr's perspectives. His study asserted the importance of the territory's cultural diversity. Eric Hirsch and Michael O'Hanlon's (1995) investigated the influence of cultural and physical surroundings on local peoples. The strength of Hirsch and O'Hanlon's study lies in its contributions having been provided by anthropologists and art historians.

In fact, one of the most important contributions (related to this part of the research) is Christopher Tilley's (2006) perspectives about identity, place, landscape and heritage. According to Tilley, landscape and places are frequently qualified as "structure of feeling through activities and performances which crystallize and express group identities" (p. 14). Using anthropological background within his investigations, he expressed perspectives about identity and material culture (pp.7-32). In order to assert the importance of place, landscapes, and territories in relation to cultural identity, he stated that "When we think about social or cultural identity we inevitably tend to place it, put it in a setting, imagine it in a place. Ideas and feelings about identity are located in the specificities of places and landscapes in what they actually look like or perhaps more typically how they ought to appear (representations in guidebooks, postcards, tourist brochures and so on)" (p.14). He also emphasised that landscape and place are frequently acknowledged as a structure of feeling, through activities which come together and express group identities to the other (outside world). One main criticism of Tilley's work, however, is that it stresses tourism and the tourist's perceptions and motivations more than man-made artefacts and their relations with place and landscapes.

Furthermore, social and anthropological research and studies stress the social impact on urban and rural crafts communities, and the majority of them concentrate on challenges for crafts in rural areas. Examples are Karen Yair (2011), who investigated rural crafts development in England; Isabelle Clark-Decès' (2011), who studied Indian rural communities; Imogen Racz (2008), who focused on contemporary crafts, a study which is considered to be the most comprehensive contribution to urban and rural crafts in recent years; Jacob Eyferth (2006) who investigated the challenges that faced rural crafts communities after World War II; and Ian Hunter (2010), who explored the creativity of craftspeople in rural areas. All of these investigated rural and urban crafts challenges within social and anthropological contexts.

In Oman, as part of geographical landscapes influences, water played an essential role in terms of developing crafts industries. Richardson and Dorr claimed that Omani's arid conditions have affected craft industries, where Omani styles of water storage and management were essentially requirements to face climate conditions, especially in the summer (2003, vol. 2, p.12). The positive consequence of Oman's geographical landscapes and its diversity is that it gave Omani craftsmen plenty of materials options and some limitations for suitable methods of production (ibid). Richardson and Dorr did not cover that last fact in their book, thus they did not fully acknowledge the significance of crafts contribution towards shaping identity in society, and they only considered the influence of geography, landscape and nature on craft objects.

Nevertheless, investigating the issue of crafts and their contribution to shaping identity by addressing the issue of rural and urban diversity in Oman can be established through the

documentation project of Richardson and Dorr (2003) where they provided a complete volume (Volume one) to explore the importance of place, landscape, and geographical differences in the special thematic and artistic characteristics of crafts in Omani provinces. Disconnections and long distances between Omani territories (Oman's area is more than 309,000 km² with a population of nearly four million according to Census 2020, which means its territory is larger than the UK with a population of over 62 million) became a real obstacle to forming a notable identity for craft industries. Hence, tourists and even citizens sometimes cannot recognise a national theme in Omani crafts (PACI, 2007).

In Musandam (a peninsula located in northern Oman next to the Strait of Hormuz in the Arabian Gulf), Richardson and Dorr provided an example of the nature of the region's people and the influence of geographical landforms within that province on its unique architecture, the bait al-qufl (literally "house of the lock") style of houses (vol. 1, p.61). They asserted that the Musandam people have constructed these types of houses to express the relationships between the residents of the peninsula and their permanent unfriendly nature and climate and of the importance of household provisions, equipment, and instruments for survival (ibid).

However, what Richardson and Dorr fail to do is to draw a distinction between the contribution of crafts as tangible/intangible objects to form the province's identity and the contribution of the province and its nature and geographical landscapes to influence crafts industries making. The following example they provided, about pottery industries, showed that both the land and crafts are influencing each other. They asserted that pottery reflects people's identity in Musandam, when they classify pottery industries into two types according to different cities and their people (Vol. 1, p.72). In what they called Julfar ware, pots in the city of Julfar are characterised by broad shoulders and heavy rims to represent "storing", where people there used these large pots for storage purposes in the aforementioned "Houses of the Lock" (ibid). The other types are called Lima and Al Alama ware, and because residents in the city of Lima traditionally migrated during the rainy winter months, their pots are small and very light so as to be easier for them to carry when they travel (ibid). This notion becomes understandable when we think about their use of the hand-turned wheel, and this custom is only applicable to Lima as portable equipment is required during travelling time.

The geographical isolation of Musandam has given rise to a distinct set of cultural customs, most notably the crafting of a small-bladed axes or jirs, with few similarities to the rest of Arabia today (Richardson and Dorr, 2003, Vol.1, p. 78) (Figure 1). The most remarkable thing about jirs is that rather than using it primarily for ceremonials, some people still use jirs today to protect themselves against dangerous feral animals and snakes and also sometimes to help them in walking and clumping mountains (ibid).



Figure 1. Small-bladed axe (jirs) considered as the most identifiable handcraft related to the Musandam peninsula. © Ministry of Information, Oman.

In the Batinah region (coastal plain) geography and people's identity have their own special characteristics that have influenced the craft industries distinctly. The palm tree has directly influenced this region's crafts, with Richardson and Dorr mentioning five main crafts industries, including palm-frond boats, plaited-fish traps, date-palm architecture, plaited-strip basketry and palm-fibre ropes, based on the palm tree and its parts (2003, Vol 1, pp.86-87).

Batinah pottery usually has stronger bodies than pottery produced in other areas. The thickness of Musilmat village pottery, for example, measures only half the thickness size of Bahla (in the Ad Dakhiliyah region) pottery, but it is stronger because of the sand added to the clay (ibid, p. 118). The only explanation available for this is the strong wind in the area, as Batinah water jars are usually hung up; this meant they were exposed to the frequent wind which is usually stronger in the coastal areas (Batinah) than in the interior areas such as in Ad Dakhiliyah. This was confirmed already 105 years ago when the traveller S. B. Miles mentioned it in his remarkable article *On the Border of the Great Desert: a Journey in Oman*, published in 1910.

The division between coast and interior makes the Al Dakhiliya region easily distinguishable from other Omani territories. Politically, religious Imams ruled this area until 1954, when, with British assistance, the Sultan's army defeated the last Imam (Wilkinson, 2006). This has driven Richardson and Dorr to associate craftsmanship with the architecture of bastions when they discussed crafts industries in the Al Dakhiliyah region (vol.2, p.130). The craftsmen communities within the fortress towns (such as Nizwa and Bahla) are extremely specialised in structure, but are nevertheless distinguished for their industries' shared solidarity and cooperation (ibid, p.131). In the society of the interior, craftsmen seem to work in one workshop, and they exchange their crafted products among themselves. Indigo dyers use earthenware vats, sweets (halwa) makers use large copper vessels, and palm-frond mats makers use iron tools. Crafts have contributed to define the people's identity in this citadel society, and Richardson and Dorr confirmed that "craftsmanship has continued to maintain the citadel towns as strongholds of traditional artistry" (ibid, p. 131). This part of Richardson and Dorr's study confirmed that crafts contributed in shaping society's identity. They believed that pottery, for example, lost its importance in Omani people's life in the second half of the 20th century, but Bahla pottery withstood this change, as evidenced by the local production of ceramics to today (vol. 2, p.147). Richardson and Dorr state that Bahla pottery "is characterised by various classic forms" (vol.2, p.147), which seems to be evidence of the deep historical identity of this industry, but it also proves that Bahla pottery lost its function, and as a result this type of pottery disappeared from people's everyday use. In fact, the efforts of the Ministry of National Heritage

& Culture helped to preserve pottery by encouraging tourists to visit Bahla , and this strategy played a role in allowing this industry to survive through being sold at souvenir markets.

Generally, crafts in Al Dakhiliya are still influenced by the structure of the fortress towns of Bahla and Nizwa, and that has formed the craftsmen's identity. On the other side of the mountains, Al Hajar Al Shirqi and Al Hajar al Gharbi have their clear influence on craftsmanship in these territories. Richardson and Dorr pointed out that in the Al Hajar Mountains, the natural plantations, mountain terraces, and livestock have influenced types of crafts with rosewater distillation (Figure 2), shepherd weaving, donkey trappings, and bee-keeping being the most flourishing crafts industries in this region (vol. 2, p.178). Jabal Shimsis, the highest peak in the area, has provided evidence of how climate can influence people's craft types, especially when comparing its people's lifestyle with the Himalayan people's lifestyle. Jabal Shims is the only place where Omani people can see snow for more than two months, and the character of this, according to Richardson and Dorr, creates similarities between the crafts of Omani artisans in this area with Himalaya's crafts industries (ibid).



Figure 2. Flowers are planted on a large scale in Jabal Shims in the interior area of Oman for rosewater distillation. © Ministry of Information, Oman.

To summarize, regarding the issue of identity, most studies in the field of crafts have only focused on showing the impact of landscape, nature and geographical forms on developing crafts industries. In other words, research to date has tended to focus on the geographical impact on crafts, rather than crafts' contribution to identity. Below, this research will therefore relate the influence of landscape, nature and the land's geographical form in crafts making to how that, in turn, contributes to shaping the societies' identity.

2. Craftspeople As Source Of Considerable Data:

Based on the research's major objectives and its comprehensive ambitions, this project utilized a phenomenological paradigm and qualitative inductive approach using interviews and secondary sources for collecting data. Moreover, this approach provided a justification for the samples of crafts and pottery enterprises and different opinions of the participants used in the data collection process.

All elements of qualitative research are apparent in every part of this research, where the researchers dealt directly with Omani crafts enterprises and their artisans, and responded to their narrative declarations rather than authenticated statements, subjective information rather than objective facts, unstable knowledge rather than fixed data, and narrative talks instead of tabled statistics.

Interviews are mainly valuable for reaching the "story behind a participant's experiences"

(McNamara, 1999). Kvale supports this belief when he maintains that the main purpose of interviewing participants is seeking the meaning behind the interviewees' statements (Kvale 1996). Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln defined an interview as "two (or more) people are involved in this process, and their exchange leads to the creation of a collaborative effort called Interview" (2005, p.696).

Interviews for this study took place in the summer of 2013 in Oman. The interviews occurred both face-to-face and from a distance (via telephone). At one extreme, the interview conducted would be tightly structured, with a set of questions requiring specific answers (whereas semi-structured questions were used especially with lesser educated artisans and potters in mind), but most interviews were very open-ended, taking the form of a discussion. The interviews were recorded in a variety of ways, such as taking notes, audio recording, and tape recording (the researchers gave priority to ethical issues for the recording stage, according to Sultan Qaboos University regulations and the Scientific Research Council in Oman). According to the agreement between the researchers and the interviewees, the sound recording were not published in any form for the interviewees' safety and responsibility, as they were working in governmental crafts centres (PACI). The table (1) below shows the enterprises of participants who were involved in interviews:

Table 1. Ten training enterprises (belonging to the PACI) and educational institutions, with more than 45 participants from different categories involved in this project.

Name of the enterprise	Private/ Government	Type of craft	Number of participants	Wilayat/region
The Public Authority for Crafts Industries (PACI)	Government	Administration	7	Muscat/Capital Area
Weaving Training and Producing Centre	Government (PACI)	Textile and weaved crafts	5	Sama'il/Ad Dakhiliyah
Silk Weaving Training and Producing Centre	Government (PACI)	Silk weaving centre	4	Ibri/Ad Dhahirah
Copper Training and Producing Centre	Government (PACI)	Cupric crafts	3	Nizwa/Ad Dakhiliyah
Pottery Training and Producing Centre	Government (PACI)	Pottery and advanced ceramics	6	Bahla/Ad Dakhiliyah
Khanjar and Silversmith Training and Producing Centre	Government (PACI)	Silversmith and Khanjar	5	Muscat/Capital Area
Carpeting Training and	Government (PACI)	Carpets	3	AsSuwayq/Al Batinah

Producing Centre				
Handcrafts Centre (for pottery)	Private	Pottery and advanced ceramics	3	Muscat/Capital Area
Distilling Perfumes Training and Producing Centre	Government (PACI)	Perfumes	3	AlJabal Al Akhdar/Ad Dakhiliyah
Ceramics unit – department of Art Education – Sultan Qaboos University	Government Education Enterprise)	Ceramics	6	Muscat/Capital Area

For each interview, the major purpose was the questioning of the identified participants about place and landscape influences on their craftsmanship and identity, rural and urban crafts, and their challenges when taking advantage of rural crafts. Furthermore, the interviews intended to investigate this subject within specific social and cultural contexts, where these would contribute to shaping people's identity through the geographical diversity in crafts in Oman.. The rationale of this research was to interview participants at the PACI headquarters, including executives, and the craftspeople participating in its various craft centres about their opinions and personal viewpoints regarding the geographical impact on crafts industries and on the national identity of the country. The interviews gave targeted samples of interviewees the opportunity to present personal accounts with respect to helping the research to further its purpose regarding identity and crafts challenges. Interviewing different samples of participants, such as craftspeople, supervisors, and PACI headquarter executives, provided enough data to be used in the discussion and analysis section. In fact, through this part, the researchers tried to also use published documents and statistics (e.g. geographical distribution of crafts industries in Oman between rural and urban areas) to support and examine the participants' arguments. More than the educational differences, the social and regional backgrounds of participants, such as their socioeconomic status, were accounted for by the researchers through the interviews. The participants' stories and narratives regarding crafts, geographical structure, and identity provided rich information, but much of the information was very repetitive, so it was logical for the researchers to be selective in reporting their findings. For some participants, the relationship of craft with identity is affected by the ability of the PACI to deal with the physical geographical impact on crafts industries in the vast Omani area. For other participants, these geographical circumstances made rural crafts responsible for forming the identity of crafts industries, more so than urban crafts. Christopher Tilley's (2006) drew a direct connection between landscapes and social identity and their relation to modernity and traditions. Richardson and Dorr (2003) also contributed directly to this issue with the investigation of Omani craft relationships to Omani geographical landscapes and provinces, as already mentioned above. In fact, the above discussions filled a gap in the interview process as the participating interviewees did not provide rich information about the social and cultural impact of geography on crafts industries, as they tended to concentrate more on rural and urban economical and managerial matters.

Regarding the issue of geographical impact on crafts industries, many interviewees believed that Omani society was similar to other societies in that the move from rural to urban areas had affected Omani's traditional crafts negatively, and, as a result, national identity has been changed. As explained by the participants, craft identity (traditional or developed) is a reflection of and for society's identity. They added that a rural area's characteristics, materials, artistic themes, and even their functional purposes influence crafts. But, according to some participants, this caused some disadvantages for rural crafts industries where consumption, marketing, the number of customers, technologies, media and crafts galleries, and festivals were very rare. To illustrate this point, he supervisor of the Distilling Perfumes Training and Producing Centre (DPTPC) located in Al Jabal Al Akhdar in the Ad Dakhiliya governorate, observed that his center seemed very isolated (rural) from the PACI headquarters and claimed that, "Everything is available only in the capital Muscat; crafts centers in other provinces and states face challenges to market and to provide materials." Regarding crafts identity, another group of participants went further when they claimed that traditional crafts in rural areas influenced people's identity more so than people in urban area. They presented justification for this claim when they mentioned that people in rural areas are still using their craft objects in their daily life more so than urbanites. Documents published by PACI confirmed that the authority concentrated its projects in urban areas with only one in 15 centres located in a rural area (PACI, 2010). In investigating the overall role of craft in relation to identity across the crafts sector, some participants from the Copper Training and Producing Centre (CuTPC), the Khanjar and Silversmith Training and Producing Centre (KSTPC) and the Distilling Perfumes Training and Producing Centre (DPTPC) confirmed that it is very important to take advantage of rural areas' crafts industries to backup the absence of crafts industries in urban areas. A more sophisticated understanding of the role of crafts in the identity of people, and the qualities of the diversity of geographical landscapes, was displayed by the participant from the Silk Weaving Training and Producing Centre (SWTPC), who believed that there existed no craft centres in rural areas in Oman. He asserted that, for example, the SWTPC in Ibri (a state in Ad Dhahira Governorate) is closer to Dubai (having the best markets and suppliers for craftspeople) than the KSTPC, which is located in the Omani capital of Muscat. A craftsman working in the (CuTPC) claimed that, "it is very important to support craftspeople in the rural areas because they only have the ability to preserve the cultural identity of traditional Omani crafts." Overall, interviewees generally believed that there is a positive connection between crafts, geographical landscapes, and identity on the one hand but that rural and urban location also had an impact on the other. The above results and arguments were not very encouraging. When questioning the participants about the landscapes and identity within social and cultural contexts, the researchers found that in their answers the majority of participants focused on the economic impact of landscapes. This is one reason to refer to secondary data in the discussion stage to make up for weaknesses (or shortages) in the primary data, which concentrated mostly on rural and urban issues.

3. Developing Strategies In Crafts Enterprises In Urban And Rural Areas:

Craftspeople and their relations with their places (territories) can play a social and cultural role in and around shaping part of their identity. As established in the interview findings, participants concentrated mostly on rural and urban communities and their characteristics. After analyzing both sets of data (primary and secondary such as published documents), it is important to discuss the positive and negative impact of rural and urban areas on craft industries, where both rural and urban crafts needed to be managed in order to successfully develop the craft industry in the country. The main challenge regarding this issue is that, if the PACI concentrated its future craft projects in urban areas (central cities of provinces), it will cause a negative impact

on developing rural areas. In contrast, when the authority concentrates its projects in urban areas, craftspeople and their enterprises will enjoy stronger domestic markets, tourist customers, better export potential with proximity to ports, participation in festivals, and being under direct supervision of the headquarters of the PACI. Also, contrary to economical and managerial studies, the majority of sociologists and anthropologists have given place, landscapes, and geographical impact, in developing rural areas in general and rural crafts in particular, more recognition (e.g. Yair, 2011; Daskon, 2010; Tilley, 2006; Clark-Decès, 2011). Before going further in discussing the issue of crafts in rural/urban areas, it is essential to define the rural/urban concept. Regarding the United Kingdom, Peter Bibby and John Shepherd (2001) defined 'urban areas' as those with more than 10,000 inhabitants and all other settlements as part of a 'rural' domain (p. 5). Richard Morrill, John Cromartie, and Gary Hart (1999) confirm the same under/over 10,000 people per square kilometre benchmark to define rural/urban in the United States. But there are exceptions around the world. In the Philippines, for example, urban areas are defined as "all settlements with a population density of at least 500 persons per square kilometre" which include "at least six commercial, manufacturing or similar establishments; at least three of the following: a town hall, church or chapel..." (Tacoli, 1998).

Rural crafts are represented in Oman by those craftspeople who create their crafts individually. According to the interviewees, individual craftsman in Oman face several challenges, including marketing their crafts, developing their skills, updating their contemporary artistic knowledge, and finding materials. There is also a more important issue related to the development of rural crafts. As asserted by UNESCO (2010), the "intangible cultural heritage," i.e. traditional knowledge and inherited skills, associated with craft making is considered an essential part of traditional craftsmanship. Isabelle Clark-Decès' (2011) demonstrates that rural crafts, in particular, play a larger role in preserving this type of intangible culture (p. 187). According to Clark-Decès, rural crafts became a symbol for the "people's daily struggle", "traditional nation," and "self-sustainability" and were central to Gandhi's move towards Indian independence in which he used handicrafts to support the achievement of his national ambitions. Chandima Daskon (2010) reinforces this view of intangible cultural heritage by demonstrating how rural communities are maintaining their culture, their own identity, their technologies, and their wisdom.

Unfortunately, there is very little in the literature on the social and cultural impact of 'place' in Oman. Dawn Chatty spent 1981-2004 studying Jiddat Al Harasis' (in the Empty Quarter Desert in Oman) nomadic culture, and her publications (1991, 1995, etc.) in this period present a comprehensive image of rural areas and their peoples' life, including their craft making. These studies do serve to emphasise the importance of rural crafts in preserving the intangible cultural heritage of traditional craftsmanship.

Furthermore, it is very important to recognise that the lack of a realised understanding of the relationship between place and intangible cultural heritage exists among the craftspeople themselves. While it is hard to imagine "the complexity of people's lives, historical contingency [and] motion of change" (Bender, 2001, p. 2) outside of recognised places and landscapes, the power of social conditions in isolated (rural) areas in developing crafts industries was not accounted for within the perceptions of craftspeople. Interviewees generally see the advantages and disadvantages of their place, landscapes, and geographical diversity regarding their craft making material requirements in a beneficial light. Unfortunately, during the interviews, they gave less recognition to the social and cultural aspects of identity and intangible culture.

Another issue is that while these studies on understanding social and cultural lifestyles of people in isolated areas became reference documents in the hands of the PACI executives, the findings of this research showed that the authority sometimes did not take advantage of the data. For

example, PACI intend to establish a new centre for textiles in Hayma', which has a nomadic culture (PACI, 2010). However, Hayma', an urban centre, is located far from the nomadic peoples it was to serve. Thus, it would replicate the case of the Carpeting Training and Producing Centre (CaTPC) in the city of Al Musana'ah where Bedouin craftswomen (weavers) move daily from their nomadic to urban environments. Evidence indicates that this could influence their ways of production skills, materials, designs, colours, etc, i.e. their intangible cultural heritage.

In fact, PACI established nearly all of its crafts centres in urban and semi-urban areas and only a few in truly rural areas. For example, centres were developed in Sohar, Ibri, Nizwa, Bahla, As Suwayq, Sama'il, Al Burami, and the Capital Area, with each of these wilayats harbouring more than 10,000 people and considered urban areas (National Census, Ministry of Economy, 2010). In Dhofar, in the south of Oman, the authority preferred to build its centres in smaller wilayats, such as the Leather Training Centre in Thumrayt, the Coconut Palm Tree's Leaves Craft Centre in Shalim, and the Coconut Peel Industries Centre in Rakhyut. No centre was built in the central city of Salalah. Wilayats such as Shalim and Rakhyut may be considered at least semi-urban areas (ibid). As a result, Omani crafts centres were established in urban areas, and according to the aforementioned statistics and analysis, by 2018 there was only one craft centre built in a rural area. In reality then, Omani crafts in urban areas have few problems, at least in terms of providing facilities, training programmes and the direct supervision of the authority, but absolutely all of this support is missing in rural areas. In other words, PACI is facing a very real challenge in developing crafts in rural areas.

In contrast to Omani craftspeople and craft enterprises decision makers, who only focused on the economical weaknesses of isolated areas (mountaineers, nomadic communities, etc.), sociologists and anthropologists consider rural communities as an identifiable culture, comparable to concepts such as "global culture; popular culture; urban culture; rural culture; young culture; pop culture; modern culture; western culture; traditional culture; drug culture; and cyber culture etc." (Daskon, 2010, p.42). In other words, in contrast to worldwide campaigns working hard to revive "rural crafts communities" as a social and cultural reaction against the weaknesses of globalization (cf. for instance Hunter (2010), Creative Rural Communities, which reported on UK interventions to preserve rural communities' identity and crafts), it is disappointing that PACI ignored rural crafts' unique characteristics and identity, even though the authority had documented small and rural communities' crafts statistically.

It is very important to control the gap between individual craftspeople in rural areas and the PACI crafts centres in order to face the negative geographical impact on the countryside's craftspeople, especially since it is impossible to develop small centres or micro-enterprises for every small group of craftspeople in the country. Rural crafts will continue to struggle, at least in terms of marketing, until they have the support and structures to allow them to have their products distributed in urban markets. Therefore, it is worth considering the concept of "Artisan Clusters," a policy mostly used in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and elsewhere, as a strategy to solve the disconnection between rural craftspeople and urban communities, markets, and organisations. Tamal Sarkar and Sukanya Banerjee (2007) define "Artisan Clusters" as "geographically concentrated (mostly in villages/townships) household units producing handicraft/handloom products. In a typical cluster, such producers often belong to a traditional community, producing the long-established products for generations" (p. 3). Belleza, Keeler, Talvitie and Frankli (2003) assert that the artisanal cluster incorporates many of the most essential elements to "become competitive and dynamic" (p.16). These "Artisan Clusters" could connect craftspeople in rural areas with the central crafts enterprises of PACI. The strategy would then need to be discussed further within cultural, social, anthropological and

intangible heritage contexts.

Conclusion

Crafts objects always reflect their original places. Sometimes, this perception was asserted indirectly in social studies such as D J Parkin, (1999), when he stated that “in the place away from home, the objects that people can bring with them become basic symbols and a starting point to re-establish or redefine personal and collective origins” (p.303). It seems to be that PACI has to deal with this part of Omani society within their social and cultural structures (contexts), especially when the concept of ‘crafts villages’ has declined in the last few years. It is true that the idea of “craft villages” seems to be absent in Oman today, where craftspeople are divided between working individually or under the umbrella of PACI craft centres, and this can be a barrier to creating craft clusters in the country. Still this strategy, which is used successfully in many countries, can provide a framework even for individual craftspeople in small towns such as Bahla (potters) and Nizwa (silversmiths) to create micro-clusters. Rather than improving competition between craftspeople, clusters help to form local identities for small towns and will contribute to shape the country’s identity in relation to the crafts industries (ibid, p. 17). “Artisan Clusters” as a managerial and concrete implication should not be separated from local social, cultural and intangible heritages aspects.

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