THE MENTAL IMAGE OF OMANI IDENTITY IN THE ENGLISH PRESS (1875–1950)

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Abstract. This study explores the perceived image of Omani identity as reflected in the English press during the period 1875 – 1950. This was a pivotal era that coincided with the peak of the Omani Empire and its prominent regional and international influence. The study examines how English newspapers covered Omani affairs through a content analysis of selected leading newspapers and magazines. The primary objective of this study is to reveal the ways in which these English newspapers articulate and represent Omani identity. It seeks to uncover not only the types of topics deemed significant by these publications but also the perspectives they adopt when discussing events and cultural practices. Using a descriptive analytical method, the research identifies two primary themes: cultural heritage and geographical landmarks. Findings indicate that the image of Oman portrayed in the English press was predominantly positive or neutral. Coverage emphasized the Omanis' pride in their cultural and religious identity; notably, sultans and their entourages were consistently depicted in traditional Omani attire during both official and unofficial events, reinforcing the perception of Oman as a nation rooted in its heritage. Furthermore, the press gave considerable attention to natural and historical landmarks, highlighting the beauty of Omani architecture and the country's distinctive geographical and political position. The study concludes that the English press helped shape a largely positive impression of Omani identity for Western readers, presenting a balanced portrayal that respected Omani customs, traditions, and cultural distinctiveness. Finally, it recommends a comparative study of contemporary media coverage to determine if this image has evolved in light of recent global political and media transformations.

Keywords: Perceived Image, Omani identity, English press, Oman, content analysis, Omani Sultans, migration to East Africa

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1. Introduction

Researchers concur that every society possesses a distinct identity that sets it apart from others. Grounded in cultural, linguistic, and religious foundations, this identity provides individuals with a sense of communal belonging. It shapes their understanding of who they are, their societal affiliation, and how they relate to others, both within and beyond their own community. Furthermore, societal identity is shaped not only by culture but also by political and economic circumstances, as well as interpersonal interactions, all of which contribute to defining its features (Ozer, Gamsakhurdia, & Schwartz, 2024).

The Arab world is no exception. While it possesses its own distinct identity, the region's history of social, political, cultural, and economic upheavals complicates this definition. Observers may conclude that there are multiple, and at times divergent, perspectives regarding the nature, scope, and boundaries of Arab identity. This has led to the hypothesis that several identities coexist independently, often lacking a unifying bond.

Arab identity has been the subject of extensive debate and diverse interpretations, reflecting the complex relationship between the Arab individual and the diversity of global ideas. Any study of this topic must acknowledge that the Arab individual is situated at the intersection of multiple layers of belonging: ethnic, racial, ideological, religious, and sectarian. This multidimensional reality is historically rooted and persists in the present (Agzar, 2023). As Abu Anza (2011) notes, identity encompasses intricate, overlapping dimensions that interact with thought, language, customs, traditions, values, and political ideologies.

One of the most frequently debated issues in Arab identity studies is whether an individual's primary allegiance lies with their regional or religious identity (Agzar, 2023). This debate gained significant prominence following the 2011 Arab Spring and the subsequent rise of terrorism. Proponents of regional identity argue that it should remain distinct from a broader Arab identity, emphasizing that each state possesses its own unique political existence and national character.

In this context, political identity is defined as a set of values and loyalties toward a political, social, linguistic, religious, or ethnic unit; it acts as a fundamental component of the political self (Gentry, 2018). Consequently, political identity in the region should be viewed as a product of the specific political circumstances the Arab world has undergone, an expression of collective need shaped by its environment. Gentry (2018) notes that this identity frames not only state policies but also the broader political context. As societies progress through stages of political development, media and journalistic discourse play a prominent role in shaping how the 'other' views them, influencing policy and forging stereotypical images for good or ill.

Indeed, media in all its forms has become integral to daily life. It acts as an active partner in addressing historical and societal issues, playing a crucial role in shaping perceived images and cognitive awareness (Rais Ali & Medjahed, 2024). Topics such as identity, heritage, and culture, once confined to academic circles, have increasingly entered public discourse (Boutora & Belkhiri, 2025). Politicians strategically employ linguistic tools in speeches to mould public opinion for specific objectives (Hammack, 2014), highlighting that the ability to influence the masses is closely tied to the control of media instruments (Al Amer, 2005).

1.2. Problem Statement

This study examines the image of Omani identity in English media discourse from 1875 –1950, an era marked by the Omani Empire's strength and active policy influence. The research is significant given the media's power to direct public opinion and construct impressions of state policies. Rais Ali and Medjahed (2024) emphasize the symbiotic link between media and history, noting that media serves as a vital tool for documenting historical events. Historically, the English press has been a dominant global force in shaping international perspectives.

The study addresses the following research questions: RQ1: What key issues did the English press cover regarding the Omani Empire? RQ2: How was Omani identity portrayed in English journalistic discourse?

1.2. Research Objectives and Significance

The principal objective of this study is to determine how the English press viewed Omani political identity. Within this broader aim, the study seeks to understand the specific image held by British media regarding Omani politics and the Omani people. The specific objectives are twofold:

- **RO1:** To identify the theoretical framework and previous studies examining political identity and the formation of perceived images regarding Omani policy.

- **RO2:** To analyse the perceived image—whether positive or negative—that the English press constructed regarding Omani policy. This involves examining how Western, and particularly British, media portrayed Arab and Islamic events in the Middle East.

The significance of this study rests on several key factors:

- **Strategic Relevance:** Oman's distinctive geography and strategic regional position have historically compelled it to play an active role in regional events. The country's political influence and its measured handling of significant events further elevate its importance as a subject of study.

- **Media Diversity:** The diversity of perspectives within the English press, stemming from differing political affiliations and ideological orientations, makes the analysis of this journalistic material especially revealing. It allows for an assessment of the degree of consensus or divergence among these outlets in forming an image of Omani policy.

2. Literature Review

Linguistically, the Arabic term for identity, al-huwiyya, derives from the root huwa ('he'). Terminologically, it is defined as 'the essence of a thing and its attributes by which it is distinguished from others, through which its personality appears, and by which it is known when asked: "Who is it?" or "What is it?"' (Abu Anza, 2011, p. 35). Despite its frequent use in academic and public discourse, the concept remains clouded by ambiguity. Al-Amer (2005) notes that while many social groups employ the term, their definitions vary significantly. Identity is often viewed as more ideological than scientific, tied to race, language, and religion, meaning its definition shifts across societies. Nevertheless, Ozer et al. (2024) argue that no society exists without a distinctive identity, one determined by religious, historical, geographical, and social factors that bind individuals together.

Identity is also inherently political; it emerges from specific circumstances and evolves through historical stages (Al-Amer, 2005). This perspective emphasizes that identity is mutable rather than fixed, influenced by both internal dynamics and external interactions (Collier & Thomas, 1988). This fluidity makes the study of 'perceived images' particularly

significant, especially for nations with substantial geopolitical influence. English-language dictionaries define an image as a 'shared perceived representation among members of a group indicating that group's orientation toward a particular person or object' (Turkestani, 2004, p. 282). Similarly, in Arabic lexicons, tasawwur (representation) implies 'the presence of a thing in the mind,' while dhihn (mind) denotes a readiness to apprehend knowledge (Turkestani, 2004, p. 282).

The concept of the 'perceived image' emerged in the early twentieth century within social psychology before expanding into public relations and media studies (Turkestani, 2004; Shams, 2005). Today, it is central to how individuals interpret reality. As Harzallah and Attia (2020) observe, individuals construct these images based on cultural norms, religious values, and personal experiences, which in turn shape their attitudes, whether positive or negative, toward the world.

Arab and Western media studies have devoted significant attention to the ways in which traditional and digital media shape perceived images of influential nations. Much of this research focuses on the portrayal of Arab and Islamic countries that share linguistic, cultural, and religious identities. For instance, Boutora and Belkhiri (2025) investigate how broadcast discourse frames public opinion through a comparative analysis of Al Jazeera and Al Hadath's coverage of boycotts linked to the Zionist entity. Their findings highlight that media discourse significantly shapes public opinion both locally and globally.

However, when examining Western media, the dominant image of Arabs is overwhelmingly negative. Shams (2005) characterizes this portrayals as one defined by stagnation, backwardness, terrorism, and hostility toward Western civilization. Earlier studies, such as Stockton (1994), confirm a systematic bias against Arabs and Muslims. While Western, and particularly American, media narratives became notably unstable and negative following the September 11 attacks, the rise of terrorism, and the Arab Spring, this trend traces back to the 1980s (Fahlman, 1985). These narratives have popularized Islamophobia, widening the cultural gap and complicating social acceptance (Croucher, 2013).

This framing has entrenched specific stereotypes. Arabs and Muslims are frequently depicted as 'bloodthirsty' or hostile to democracy. A comprehensive analysis of Time and Newsweek (1991–1993) found that coverage was predominantly negative, depicting Arabs as materialistic, ignorant, and obsessed with wealth and sex (Hashem, 1997). Similarly, coverage following the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing focused heavily on Middle Eastern terrorist groups (Al-Saeed, 1997). This association with violence persists across borders; studies of British, German, and European television (Nada, 2000) and New Zealand newspapers (Kabir & Bourk, 2012) reveal a prevalence of images emphasizing violence, oppression of women, and intolerance.

Beyond general stereotypes, researchers have examined specific national images. Turkestani (2004) surveyed Canadian students regarding Saudi Arabia, finding that 54% associated the Kingdom with terrorism and restriction of thought, while only 36% viewed it as a country one could 'deal with.' Al-Amer (2005) found that major US newspapers often portrayed Saudi identity as exclusionary and suppressive. Interestingly, the online sphere offers a slightly different picture; Al-Shahri (2005) found that 61% of Google search results presented Saudi Arabia positively in terms of economics and religion.

In summary, existing literature suggests that Western journalism largely perpetuates negative stereotypes of Arabs and Muslims, emphasizing intolerance and opposition to democratic values. Against this backdrop of enduring negative imagery, this study aims to understand how these broader patterns may have shaped the specific perceived image of Oman in the English press.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a descriptive-analytical approach combined with content analysis. As defined by Shams (2005, p. 67), this method represents 'a systematic effort to obtain data, information, and descriptions of a media phenomenon in its current state,' aiming to establish a foundational evidence base. By describing the phenomenon as it exists without imposing external interpretations, this approach aligns with the study's objective: to identify the image of Oman formed among European, and specifically English, audiences. The study seeks to determine the nature of this perceived image, whether positive or negative, and examine the premises underpinning it through an analysis of English journalistic discourse from 1875 to 1950. As Shams (2005) notes, journalism both reflects societal perceptions and serves as a medium for transmitting values and promoting perceived images.

While studies of political media discourse vary widely, ranging from analyses of leaders and rhetoric to psychological examinations of speech (Hammack, 2014), this study focuses specifically on how journalists treated Omani affairs. Researchers have employed diverse analytical lenses, but this inquiry employs content analysis to examine how English journalism framed issues related to Omani political identity.

The analysis centers on media content published in the English press, selected due to Britain's prominent role in Arab political affairs during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The study investigates articles and news reports to understand their thematic characteristics and how they highlighted political roles that influenced perceptions of Oman. It further explores how these narratives shaped public opinion and contributed to the construction of Omani political identity.

The specific outlets analyzed include *The Illustrated London News, The Graphic, The Geographical Journal, National Geographic, The Sphere,* and *The Bystander Magazine.* These publications were among the most influential English-language outlets of the period, chosen for their extensive coverage of global political developments.

4. Findings

The findings provide a comprehensive analysis of Omani migration to East Africa, drawing on historical perspectives, representations of Omani leaders and sultans in English-language media, and depictions of prominent Omani landmarks. First, the findings indicate that Omani migration to East Africa can be traced back to at least the first century AD, with a marked increase following Sayyid Said bin Sultan's decision to relocate his capital to Zanzibar in 1832. This relocation significantly strengthened political, economic, and cultural ties between Oman and the East African coast.

Second, the portrayal of Omani leaders in English newspapers highlights their deliberate efforts to preserve and project a strong Omani identity, particularly through the consistent use of traditional attire during public appearances and official visits. Media coverage of royal receptions demonstrates that sultans such as Barghash bin Said consciously embraced traditional dress, thereby signaling pride in their heritage and reinforcing cultural continuity in international contexts. These findings centered on two principal themes:

1. **Cultural Heritage:** Encompassing public appearances, the reception of official delegations, visits to Europe, and migration.
2. **Geographic Landmarks:** Including forts, desert landscapes, flora, maritime vessels, and water systems.

Regarding cultural heritage, the press frequently highlighted the Omani presence in East Africa. *National Geographic* (1952) traced this migration back to the first century CE, noting that it intensified after Sayyid Said bin Sultan relocated his capital to Zanzibar in 1832. The article described the territories under his control and Zanzibar's urban landscape, characterizing it by scattered Arab houses, mosques frequented by Ibadi adherents, and the distinct dress of women who covered their entire bodies.

Significant attention was given to Omani sultans, particularly regarding their ceremonial appearances and state visits to Europe. Photographs consistently underscored the importance these rulers placed on traditional attire as a marker of identity. For example, *The Illustrated London News* (9 March 1889) featured a reception at the Sultan's palace in Zanzibar, showing the Sultan in full regalia: a Sa'idi turban, *bisht* (cloak), white *thawb*, and *khanjar* (dagger).

This adherence to traditional dress persisted during international travels. During Sultan Barghash bin Said's visit to England in 1875, the press documented his tour of Birmingham and Manchester. Reports described him as an 'Arab prince' inspecting factories, while accompanying images in *The Illustrated London News* and *The Graphic* depicted him and his entourage in traditional Omani garb. In contrast, later coverage showed Sultan Ali bin Hamud of Zanzibar adopting European clothing during an unofficial visit to England (*The Sphere*, 1905).

Attention to dress extended beyond the sultans to include tribal leaders and the general public. *The Illustrated London News* (1889) portrayed Sheikh Mubarak bin Rashid Al-Mazrou'i in regal dress, complete with sword and turban, conveying authority. Similarly, the magazine featured the merchant-leader Tippu Tip (Hamid bin Muhammad) in a white *miṣr* and *dishdasha*. Overall, the press distinguished between two styles: a royal form characterized by a red turban and *bisht*, and a popular form featuring a white turban and cane.

The press also featured Oman's natural and architectural landmarks. *National Geographic* (1911) showcased Al-Rustaq Fort and Bahla Fort, noting the latter's 'Wind Tower' cooling structure. Later, in 1950, *The Geographical Journal* highlighted the aesthetic quality of the Omani desert, publishing photographs of pristine sands, native flora, and Bedouin life. These visual depictions, alongside reports on migration, contributed to a deeper understanding of Omani influence. By highlighting Omanis as adept traders and esteemed leaders, the press fostered a favourable British perception of Oman as a stable, honorable, and strategic partner in regional affairs.

Overall, the findings present a comprehensive analytical overview of Omani migration to East Africa and its representation in English-language media, illuminating the intricate interplay of history, culture, and geography in shaping British perceptions of Oman. The origins of Omani migration can be traced back to at least the first century CE, with a significant intensification following Sayyid Said bin Sultan's relocation of his capital to Zanzibar in 1832, which in turn fortified political, economic, and cultural ties throughout the region.

English-language publications accentuated Oman's cultural heritage by depicting sultans, tribal leaders, and merchants, with a particular focus on traditional attire as a salient marker of identity, authority, and cultural continuity during public ceremonies and international visits. Figures such as Sultan Barghash bin Said were frequently portrayed in full traditional dress, signaling a strong adherence to cultural traditions; however, subsequent representations began to reflect gradual cultural shift

5. Discussions

This study aimed to identify the principal domains addressed by the English press and to ascertain its perspective on Omani identity. The results reveal two primary themes: cultural heritage and geographic landmarks. Findings indicate that the perceived image of Oman in the English press was predominantly positive or, at times, neutral. Across all forms of coverage, whether focusing on the nation itself, its sultans, or its natural features, media outlets consistently portrayed Oman in favorable terms. A closer analysis of press coverage reveals a sustained emphasis on Omani identity, with particular attention to the cultural and religious characteristics of the Omani people. A central pillar of this positive image was the sustained

emphasis on Omani cultural and religious identity. The press frequently highlighted traditional Omani attire as a visible marker of pride, worn by sultans, leaders, and citizens alike during both formal and informal occasions. This visual reinforcement contributed to a distinct and recognizable portrayal of Oman in the Western imagination.

This focus on attire aligns with the understanding that collective customs are foundational to identity. As Ozer et al. (2024) note, collective customs, such as dress codes and social norms, play a crucial role in distinguishing communities and promoting internal cohesion. It is widely regarded as a distinctive marker that differentiates Omanis from other communities. Worn in both formal and informal contexts, traditional dress functions as an expression of cultural pride and continuity. This finding aligns with previous scholarship, such as Al-Azri, Al-Hinai and Al-Busaidi (2020), who emphasize the role of traditional clothing in reinforcing cultural identity in the Arab world, arguing that dress serves as a tangible link to heritage and communal belonging. In the Omani context, these traditions serve as a fundamental aspect of national character, binding individuals to their material and spiritual heritage. Traditions often acquire a quasi-sacred authority that makes them resistant to abandonment; they are transmitted across generations as an ancestral legacy (Nugroho & Hardilla, 2020). Customs and traditions—especially those related to attire—emerge as fundamental elements of cultural identity. Societies are often distinguished by their customs, which embody core cultural values and social norms. El-Saadani (2018) highlights that customs exhibit both stability and adaptability in response to changing social conditions and may be categorized as individual or collective practices. Collective customs, including social etiquette, modes of interaction, and dress, play a crucial role in reinforcing social cohesion and distinguishing one community from another.

Traditions also serve as a vital connection between individuals and their past, encompassing both tangible and intangible heritage. They often acquire a sense of sanctity and authority, making them resistant to abandonment. Traditions consist of cultural elements transmitted across generations, characterized by enduring continuity. This understanding is consistent with Lipset's (1990) argument that traditions form the foundation of social stability and foster the communal bonds necessary for societal cohesion. Furthermore, while individuals may possess the agency to question or selectively adopt certain customs or tradtions (Al-Juraibi, 2005, 2009; Jameson, 2007), the consistent adherence to traditional dress by Omani figures signalled a unified and resilient identity to the outside world. This favourable portrayal not only reinforced a positive cultural image but also shaped Britain's perception of Oman as a valuable strategic partner, undoubtedly influencing diplomatic relations and collaborative initiatives in the broader geopolitical landscape.

Nevertheless, the study acknowledges the dynamic nature of cultural identity. Customs and traditions significantly shape individual identity regardless of their perceived validity or personal acceptance (Al-Jaraibi, 2005, 2009). Individuals may selectively accept or reject certain practices based on personal beliefs or religious considerations. The concept of cultural negotiation illustrates how individuals adapt cultural elements to align with contemporary identities, while Jameson (2007) underscores the resulting flexibility and fluidity of personal identity.

In conclusion, this study contributes to the understanding of Omani identity as represented in English-language media by situating these portrayals within broader theoretical discussions of culture, tradition, and identity. By engaging with existing scholarship, the findings highlight the complex interplay between tradition and representation, particularly in contexts shaped by migration and globalization. This underscores the need for further research into how cultural identities are constructed, negotiated, and perceived in an increasingly interconnected world.

6. Conclusion

This study aimed to identify the perceived image of Omani identity constructed by the English press. To achieve this, the research analyzed a selection of English newspapers covering Omani affairs between 1875 and 1950. Using a descriptive analytical method, the research identifies two primary themes: cultural heritage and geographical landmarks. These themes indicate that the image of Oman portrayed in the English press was predominantly positive or neutral. Coverage emphasized the Omanis' pride in their cultural and religious identity; notably, sultans and their entourages were consistently depicted in traditional Omani attire during both official and unofficial events, reinforcing the perception of Oman as a nation rooted in its heritage. Furthermore, the press gave considerable attention to natural and historical landmarks, highlighting the beauty of Omani architecture and the country's distinctive geographical and political position. The study concludes that the English press helped shape a largely positive impression of Omani identity for Western readers, presenting a balanced portrayal that respected Omani customs, traditions, and cultural distinctiveness. Finally, it recommends a comparative study of contemporary media coverage to determine if this image has evolved in light of recent global political and media transformations.

From the theoretical and practical implications' perspective, the study advances scholarship on cultural identity by demonstrating how traditional attire and customs function as enduring markers of identity within migratory contexts. The findings support cultural identity frameworks that emphasize the persistence of symbolic practices despite geographical displacement, reinforcing the view that material culture plays a central role in maintaining continuity and a sense of belonging among diasporic communities. By foregrounding clothing as a visible and recurring marker of identity, the study provides empirical support for theories of identity retention and cultural resilience.

In addition, the study contributes to media studies by highlighting the role of English-language media in shaping perceptions of Omani identity. Media representations are shown to influence not only external understandings of Oman and its people but also broader cultural narratives surrounding tradition, authority, and authenticity. These findings align with existing research on media representation and cultural stereotyping, underscoring the media's capacity to reinforce, negotiate, or challenge dominant cultural discourses.

The findings also engage with theories of cultural negotiation by illustrating that Omani identity is not static but is dynamically constructed through the selective preservation and adaptation of traditions. The continued emphasis on traditional customs reflects a process in which individuals and communities actively negotiate their cultural identities in response to historical, social, and global influences. This challenges essentialist conceptions of tradition and supports more fluid, process-oriented models of cultural identity.

In addition to the theoretical implication, a practical perspective of the study highlights the importance of cultural preservation initiatives that support the documentation and promotion of traditional Omani practices. Policymakers and cultural institutions can draw on these insights to develop heritage programs that sustain cultural continuity across generations and geographical boundaries. The study also underscores the need for strategic media engagement. Cultural policymakers and diplomats may leverage English-language media platforms to promote nuanced and accurate representations of Omani culture, thereby countering stereotypes and enhancing Oman's cultural visibility and soft power in international contexts. The findings have implications for education and public awareness. Incorporating discussions of migration, cultural identity, and media representation into educational curricula can foster intercultural understanding and encourage critical engagement with cultural narratives in both national and international settings.

Finally, the study points to the value of community-based initiatives aimed at empowering diasporic Omanis, particularly younger generations, to engage with their cultural heritage. Programs that facilitate cultural expression and intergenerational dialogue can strengthen identity formation, promote cultural pride, and address challenges associated with identity negotiation in increasingly globalized environments.

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