Egyptian Journal of Archaeological and Restoration Studies (*EJARS*)
An international peer-reviewed journal published bi-annually
www.ejars.sohag-univ.edu.eg

Original article

THE SUBJECTIVE VALUE OF TRADITIONAL OMANI SILVER JEWELLERY AMONG BEDOUIN WOMEN: A ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY

Al-Ismaili, A.

Art Education dept., College of Education, Sultan Qaboos Univ., Muscat, Oman
**E-mail address: alismaili@squ.edu.om*

Article info.

Article history:
Received: 1-5-2025
Accepted: 8-3-2026
Doi: 10.21608/ejars.2026.511063

Keywords:
Omani silver jewelry
Bedouin women
Subjective value
Intangible cultural heritage
Material culture
Ethnographic research

EJARS – Vol. 16 (1) – June 2026: 177-185

Abstract:

This study examines the subjective value of traditional Omani silver jewelry among Bedouin women in North and South A'Sharqiyah, highlighting meanings that extend beyond material worth. Although previous research has focused primarily on the objective, market-oriented appraisal of Omani silverwork, the lived experiences and emotional, spiritual, and social attachments that shape women's relationships with their jewelry remain largely undocumented. using a social ethnographic approach, this research draws on fieldwork conducted in 2015, including participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and photo-elicitation with sixteen Bedouin informants. The findings indicate that traditional jewelry functions as an embodied archive, carrying memories, identities, and artisanal knowledge. Participants articulated a range of subjective values—such as healing, protection, scent, weight, and narrative attachment—reflecting the role of jewelry within social relations and local cultural practices. The study also identifies prevalent misrepresentations of Omani jewelry in museum displays and media photography, underscoring the importance of culturally informed documentation. By centering Bedouin women's voices, this research contributes an original perspective to the study of Omani material culture and intangible heritage. It argues for rethinking appraisal practices to include historical, cultural, and affective dimensions, offering insights relevant to heritage preservation efforts in an increasingly globalized context.

1. Introduction

Of the traditional handicrafts of Oman, the work of the silversmith is best known [1]. Skilled craftsman has traditionally employed a range of techniques to produce intricate jewelry with designs instantly recognizable as Omani and passed down over multiple generations. It is commonly assumed, however, that the manufacture of Omani jewelry is an exclusively male domain. This marginalization can be attributed to two key factors that have historically obscured women's creative roles in the production and preservation of traditional jewelry. Firstly, Bedouin women[(a)] have traditionally worked with perishable materials such as leather, which they combined with silver to create hybrid pieces. As the leather components decay, only the silver remains, erasing evidence of their craftsmanship. Secondly, many traditional Bedouin jewelry items are bespoke and created for personal use. They circulate mainly among women within close-knit communities rather than entering the public marketplace. Although such pieces may appear materially modest, their perceived "lower value" fails to account for the deep subjective meanings they hold for their makers and families. Neither does it factor in the social capital that can accrue from groups of women jointly engaged in the creation of culturally important artefacts [2,3]. According to Ahde-Deal, "Pieces of jewelry often act as mediators between people, generations, and eras" [4]. Thus, Bedouin women play a vitally important role in shaping the subjective value of traditional Omani silver jewelry, as the primary wearers, makers, and owners of this type of jewelry. Jewelry can be assessed through two means: subjective and objective value [4]. Subjective value is determined and constructed through personal meaning and attachment; thus, an otherwise modest object may hold significant sentimental value depending on the owner's associations with it. As Ahde-Deal [4] notes, subjective value reflects the personal and culturally shaped meanings that individuals attach to an object through memory, use, and embodied interaction, making its significance deeply emotional and symbolic. In contrast, objective value is based on an item's tangible properties—including the cost of materials, craftsmanship, and market price. Multiple scholars have assessed the objective value of traditional Omani jewelry [1,5,6]. However, the subjective value of these items—how women interpret, use, narrate, and emotionally invest in their jewelry remains largely unexamined in existing scholarship. This gap forms the core research problem of the present study: the absence of documentation

on how Bedouin women construct and negotiate the subjective meanings of traditional jewelry as part of their lived heritage. To my knowledge, however, subjective value has not been addressed. Accordingly, the goal of this research was to understand the subjective value of Omani traditional jewelry among a group of Bedouin women, both *hadher*[(b)] and nomadic. The study further aims to highlight the cultural significance of these values and to demonstrate how subjective meanings contribute to the continuity and preservation of Omani jewelry traditions.

2. Methodological Studies

2.1. *Study design and research timeline*

An ethnographic, qualitative study was conducted to identify subjective values associated with traditional Omani silver jewelry among Bedouin women. Ethnography is a form of qualitative research involving the researcher's active participation in and observation and interpretation of obtained data [7]. The purpose is to collect and interpret oral knowledge and to describe the beliefs, behaviors, and social interactions of different cultures [7,8]. This design was appropriate because subjective values cannot be separated from the social and cultural mores of the Bedouin people and their environmental context. Indeed, Richardson and Dorr asserted that tribal and regional structures directly influence craft industries in Oman [9]. Fieldwork commenced in July 2015 in the Governorates of North and South A'Sharqiyah, where an initial scoping trip allowed the researcher to establish a foundational understanding of traditional Omani silver jewelry before beginning systematic data collection. Data were gathered through participant observation and semi-structured interviews. Interviews with key informants were conducted between 18 July and 31 August 2015.

2.2. *Research motivation*

As a Bedouin descendent myself, one of my personal motivations for this research was to rediscover my own family heritage. The impetus sparked from the empty box in which my grandmother—a nomadic woman who married a non-nomadic, settled man and now lived in a village hundreds of miles from her original hometown in South A'Sharqiyah—had once kept her jewelry, most of which she had sold off twenty years ago, except for one necklace. This personal encounter highlighted the broader issue of loss—both material and symbolic—and reinforced the need to document the meanings embedded in traditional jewelry before they disappear.

2.3. *Snowball sampling recruitment technique*

The only criterion for the sample was that the Bedouin women originated from North and South A'Sharqiyah Governorates. Respondents were selected using snowball sampling. This approach focuses on recruiting informants with a particular set of knowledge, skills, or characteristics by starting with one or two initial respondents who thereafter refer the researcher to others [10,11]. Situated within link-tracing methodologies, this strategy leverages existing social networks to expand access to participants who may otherwise be difficult to reach due to cultural, geographic, or social boundaries [12, 13]. The method assumes interconnectedness among members of the target population, allowing recruitment through circles of acquaintance [14]. Its main advantage lies in its effectiveeness with small or hard-to-reach populations [11]. Figure (1) illustrates the snowball sampling process used in this study, with colors representing different villages and links showing relationships among participants.

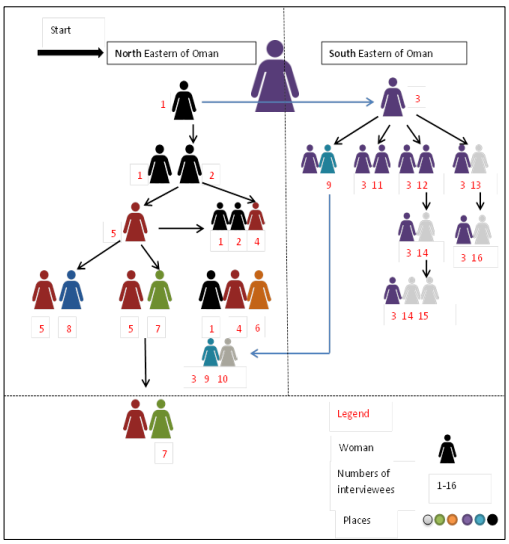

Figure (1) visualization of the snowball sampling method utilized in the present research.

For cultural reasons, the women preferred not to divulge their identities; hence, neither their names nor specific villages have been reported. Identification codes (e.g., W1, W2, etc.) are used to distinguish informants. However, I can disclose that W1, my initial respondent, was my grandmother. She guided me to W2, a woman who had previously bought some of her jewelry. Unfortunately, W2 had sold this jewelry two years beforehand[(c)]; this posed a challenge because it meant that neither of my first two informants had any traditional jewelry left. Simultaneously, it provided insight into the extent to which such jewelry was still considered a tangible asset—valued more for its financial worth than sentimental reasons. An immediate benefit of W2, however, was her extensive social network; she arranged meetings with W4 and W5, women who lived in the same area. W1 also introduced me to W3 from A'Sharqiyah South who, in turn, introduced me to W9 from the same region. Thereafter, W9 introduced me to W10 from A'Sharqiyah North. Eventually, I recruited 16 women to act as informants for my research. Despite logistical challenges—including limited phone access among older women and long travel distances—the sampling method proved effective in reaching women knowledgeable about traditional jewelry, whether through ownership or craftsmanship. As shown in fig. (2), they were all strongly interconnected through friendship networks. It should be noted that there is no guarantee that these women were either the best informed or most expert in terms of their craft knowledge; moreover, a different group of participants might have reported different findings. Additionally, liaison proved rather difficult. Several of the older women had no phones, and so messages

had to be relayed indirectly. Moreover, due to the remote location, logistical difficulties frequently hindered our meetings, with some women having to travel considerable distances. Despite these limitations, snowball sampling presented numerous strengths. It facilitated the identification of women knowledgeable regarding traditional Omani silver jewelry, whether through past or current ownership. Secondly, it enabled contact with women still practicing traditional jewelry-crafting techniques. It also yielded diverse participants from different communities and varying economic statuses, offering unique narratives, perspectives, and varied approaches to storing, collecting, and valuing their jewelry.

Figure (2) a set of traditional Omani silver jewelry being displayed as an important piece of family heritage.

2.4. *Photo-elicitation*

Collier coined the term 'photo-elicitation' for the technique of inserting a photograph into a research interview [12]. This allows for the creation of a point of commonality between the researcher and the respondent, facilitating communication [13], and creating a platform for the respondent to share his/her knowledge. During field research, I used photos and objects to prompt discussions with participants, encouraging them to recall memories related to their jewelry and share relevant narratives and experiences. I placed the objects and photos in a box, including real jewelry pieces[(d)] sourced beforehand from a silver market. I was careful to choose photos and objects originating from Eastern Oman. I used previously published photographs displaying traditional jewelry as worn by Bedouin women in Oman [15]. Moreover, during the data collection process itself, I collected more objects[(e)] from the participants which I used in later interviews. Utilization of the photo-elicitation technique allowed for the establishment of trust[(f)] between myself, as the researcher, and the participants. The use of photo-elicitation significantly enhanced rapport-building, allowing participants—initially hesitant—to share personal jewelry pieces and stories once they recognized the cultural significance and respectful intent of the research. Studies on the conservation of Omani textile heritage further emphasize that misrepresentation or improper handling—whether in museums or photographic documentation can obscure the cultural meaning embedded in traditional objects [16].

2.5. *Ethical considerations*

Sheffield Hallam University granted ethical approval for this study. All informants provided informed written or verbal[(g)] consent and their anonymity and privacy was ensured. Photographs of individuals and specific pieces of jewelry were taken only with express permission of the participant/owner. Most photographs included in this research were taken by myself, the researcher, during the fieldwork and interviews. Where necessary, permission to reproduce photographs from other sources has been obtained. Ethical sensitivity was particularly crucial given cultural norms regarding privacy, modesty, and the handling of personal adornment items.

3. Results

3.1. *Differences based on jewelry ownership status*

The key characteristics of the participants are shown in tab. (1). Eight women no longer owned their own traditional Omani silver jewelry, three owned some of their jewelry, and five still owned most of their jewelry. Differences between these three groups of women are elucidated below.

Table (1) summary of the participants

	Group	No.	Ethnicity	Region of origin
1	*No longer owned their own traditional Omani silver jewelry*	8	Hadher	Eastern Oman (Governo-rates of North A'Sharqiyah and South A'Sharqiyah)
2	*Owned some of their own traditional Omani silver jewelry*	3	Bedouin (born settled, but still known as Bedouin)	
3	*Owned most of their own traditional Omani silver jewelry*	5	Bedouin (born nomadic, now settled)	

The 1st group, those who no longer owned their own jewelry, admitted to having sold their collections to traders or at markets frequented by tourists (e.g., Nizwa Market). Loss of the jewelry, perceived as representing an intangible heritage, was significant; several women equated it to the loss of their family heritage. At no time did traders consider the jewelry's heritage, craftsmanship, or cultural significance when setting a price; instead, worth was based entirely on the current market value of the weight of the silver. Some only now realized that the market value of their jewelry exceeded the price offered at the sale, indicating that they had been taken advantage of by the traders. For *the 2nd group*—those who retained only part of their jewelry—sales typically occurred gradually, largely due to the financial burden of the annual Islamic Zakat[(h)] required for silver items, which increased according to the weight of each piece. Thus, some owners had been obliged to sell jewelry to avoid paying unaffordable amounts of charity every year. It should be noted that, because the charity amount due is based on weight, silver jewelry components might be disassembled during the weighing process. Other participants expressed that jewelry was viewed as a source of family wealth and was sometimes used for dowries, or its sale precipitated by financial difficulties[(i)]. Cultural and religious motivations also influenced their decisions; several women emphasized that such jewelry should be bequeathed to future generations, reflecting their view of these items as family heirlooms. *The 3rd group* of women who still owned most of their jewelry were of markedly higher social status. They were very interested in keeping their jewelry, viewing it as their family heritage and objects of physical memory. Such women had sufficient income to comfortably afford the annual charity for silver items. At the same time, their decision to retain ownership of their jewelry was rooted in the personal value and meaning they attributed to these items. In one case, W10 admitted that she regretted having sold

her *shaabook*[j] to a private collector who displayed it in his private museum in North A'Sharqiyah. The same man had asked W11 to sell her *nis'ah*[k] to him, but she had refused. The third group was also motivated by Islamic law; several women claimed that they would not sell their jewelry because such items should be bequeathed[l] to future generations. Others reported keeping jewelry for display purposes during heritage festivals, fig. (2). Overall, six informants strongly rejected the notion of selling any jewelry they still owned, especially their silver pieces. They felt guilty; the jewelry not only reminded them of their own life stories and experiences, but also represented part of their cultural heritage to be handed down to subsequent generations.

3.2. *Subjective values associated with traditional Omani silver jewelry*

Fourteen subjective values, fig. (3) were associated with traditional Omani silver jewelry, discussed in the following subsections.

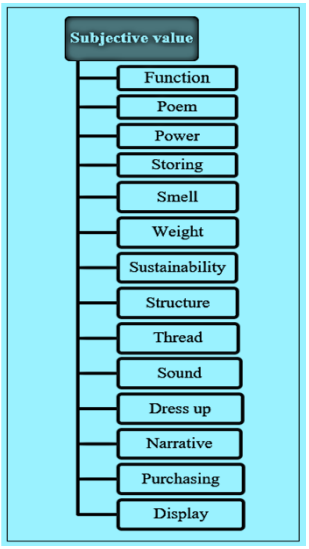

Figure (3) illustration summarizing the subjective values attributed to traditional Omani silver jewelry by the participants.

3.2.1. Function

For certain pieces of traditional jewelry, the form of the item was tied to its purpose within the local sociocultural context. For example, an *akam* is a piece of jewelry worn underneath the chin, hooked on either side of the face into the veil[m] wrapped around the head, fig. (4). In contemporary versions, the traditional thread has been replaced by a metal chain, shifting the item from a functional accessory to a purely decorative object.

Figure (4) an akam, a traditional Omani silver hair-fastening ornament used to secure the headscarf.

3.2.2. Poem

Several instances of representation of traditional jewelry in Bedouin songs were identified. Relevant passages are provided below, first in the uncommon local Arabic dialect followed by the English translation[n] :

يا أمي غابت نطلتي علوي حصن البلوش
ويا سعد من لقطها لقط خزين قروش
لقطها ولد سليمة سفافة العقوص
بتسف لي حديدة وبتسف لي شابوك
بلبسهم يوم الغية غية بنات حبوش
والجوذري مفروش يوم العريش مشيد
يوم الكرمة مغطاية وفيها الزبادي يفوح
كمة أخوي حريرية بطويها وأشلها
زريها باجي باجي مثل النخل متلاجي
نخلكم وانخلنا نخل هالصالحين

O mother, I lost my anklet somewhere near Al Balush Tower
Happy is the one who has found it as he has found a fortune.
It was found by the child of Salimah, the hairdresser
She will weave for me hadida[o] and she will weave shaabook[p].
I will wear them on the wedding day, the wedding of Haboosh[q] girls.
When the bower is built and the godhari[r] is laid as a carpet,
When the bowl is covered and the yoghurt spills out of it,
My brother's kummah[s] is made of silk, I will fold it and take it with me.
Its embellishment shines like the fruit of the palm tree
Your palm trees, ours, or the palm trees of good people.
{1} (W9, 2015)

وحنيحنن بعمورة واشتريت لك منثورة

I bought for you two items: al hanhun[t] with Amor and manthora[u]. {2} (W5, 2015)

عود الشكل لاوي ومحلاش يالفضة في صدور البداوي
عود الشكل لاوي ترخص الفضة ويدوربها شاوي

The branch of the Ziziphus tree[v] is twisted. O Silver, you look pretty on the chests of Bedouin girls
The branch of the Ziziphus tree is twisted. Silver will become so cheap that a shawi[w] may move around wearing it. {3} (W7, 2015)

وأكثر فؤادي يختشيبة لابس حرز وحنون
وأكثر فؤادي يختشيبة وأشوفة مزين ومزيون

My heart is more nostalgic for she who is wearing the necklace called "Hirz" and "Hanhun"
My heart is nostalgic when I see her fully adorned.
{4} (W5 and W7, 2015)

Several of these passages echo themes of loss and regret frequently found in traditional Arabic poetry. Another intriguing aspect is the uncommon use of the term *shaabook*[x] in the first passage to refer to the headdress; moreover, although *hanhun*, *manthora*, and *hirz* are common jewelry terms, it is unusual to see them grouped together like this. In the third passage, an optimistic narrative emerges, envi-

sioning a time when even poor shepherds can afford to wear silver. Several passages also refer to silver jewelry's sentimental and decorative attributes, localizing its significance to the local sociocultural context by illustrating its placement "on the chest of Bedouin girls".

3.2.3. Power value

Several participants bestowed healing and protective attributes to their silver jewelry, associating it with the ability to cure illnesses or safeguard against misfortune. One participant treasured an empty silver box that had originally contained hirz, valuing its perceived protective qualities. Indeed, despite contemporary reliance on modern medical services, belief in silver's healing properties persists within Bedouin communities. W14 owned a Hahnun-style necklace from which several Maria Theresa dollars had been removed, fig. (5), after another woman requested the silver to treat her daughter's illness. These practices demonstrate that the value attributed to such jewelry is not related to "power" in the political or social sense, but rather reflects deeply rooted cultural understandings of healing, blessing, and spiritual protection. In this context, silver jewelry functions as a symbolic and embodied object whose significance is formed through belief, touch, and sensory experience—an interpretation consistent with anthropological perspectives that describe adornment as a mediator of emotional and spiritual meaning [4]. Collectively, these accounts reveal that what might superficially be interpreted as 'power' is more accurately understood as a culturally grounded Healing and Protective Value, embedded in Bedouin women's lived experience and transmitted across generations.

Figure (5) a hanhun-style necklace composed of silver elements and Maria Theresa thalers.

3.2.4. Storing

Participants described traditional and modern methods of storing jewelry. Historically, hadher women hung pieces on wooden or stone hooks, while Bedouin women used tree branches or tent structures. Despite moving to modern homes, many retained these practices, underscoring their cultural attachment to inherited rituals of storage and safekeeping. Some participants stored their jewelry in al Mndoos chests—traditional dowry boxes—while others used cloths, handmade pouches, or plastic bags.

3.2.5. Smell

Certain items of jewelry were imbued with specific scents. During an interview, W8 handed me her headdress(y); These scents served as sensory markers linking the jewelry to personal memories, feminine identity, and daily rituals.

3.2.6. Weight

W4 remarked on the fact that, forty years ago, Bedouin women used to walk for long distances wearing a full set of heavy jewelry; she claimed this practice had caused a "mark of culture" on her body. Similarly, W5 had large holes in her ears from having worn heavy earrings. These "marks" represented a willingness to endure physical discomfort to wear these items. Thus, physical endurance became part of the jewelry's subjective value, reflecting beauty ideals and embodied cultural identity.

3.2.7. Sustainability

One participant, W7, reported that the gradual disappearance of traditional handicrafts and industries in her neighborhood motivated her to maintain and preserve these traditions herself. She tanned her own leather, from which she handcrafted *kohl* (eyeliner) pots, money pouches, milk containers, and jewelry (i.e., *shaabook*).

3.2.8. Structure

Structure was an important attribute of traditional silver jewelry. One informant indicated that she had once disassembled a necklace to weigh its silver components(z); however, reassembly of the necklace into its original shape necessitated an expert. This underscores the intricate technical knowledge embedded in traditional jewelry-making.

3.2.9. Thread

Most Omani silver jewelry is made up of multiple components linked by thread. Several *hadher* interviewees had contacted Bedouin women to add thread to their jewelry, enabling attachment or removal of individual components at will. This allowed the incorporation of additional materials into jewelry, including silver, leather, beads, bone (animal teeth), coral, shells, and old foreign coins (e.g., Maria Theresa dollars, Indian rupees). Such components were assembled to produce different types of jewelry (i.e., *digg*- and *shibgat*-style necklaces). Thus, the work of "threading"(aa) was highly valued because it allowed the wearer to customize the shape and form of their jewelry and hybridize the components based on his/her individual tastes. The thread was also relevant to the idea of jewelry as an embodiment of personal narrative. One informant used a single thread to keep together earrings gifted by her ex- and current husbands. In another case, threads in one necklace had been twisted and woven by a single Bedouin woman, considered an expert in this practice. Several participants lamented the loss of this handmade threading tradition(bb). The practice offered multiple benefits to the owner, for instance, by allowing silver components to be secured individually. It was performed so that the thread would remain hidden, giving the impression of a new decoration. It also allowed for the secure storage and transportation of various items, such as rings(cc), during nomadic journeys. Additionally, it was also used to create clasps(dd), potentially with decorative beads. Threading also functioned as a medium for weaving personal narratives—for example, combining items inherited from different family members onto a single thread. The *shaabook*-style headdress has the most complex

clasp design, since two leather threads—one on top and the other underneath—must be braided together in such a way that the item fits the wearer's head without falling.

3.2.10. Sound

In some Bedouin jewelry, thread was also used to fix movable silver components, preventing them from colliding with each other and making sound, necessary to conform to Islamic rules[(ee)]. The presence or absence of sound carried symbolic meaning within Bedouin social and religious contexts.

3.2.11. Dress-up

One consistent theme—precipitated by the photographs presented as part of the photo-elicitation aspect of this research—was the misrepresentation of traditional Omani silver jewelry in media, deviating from historically accurate/culturally appropriate wearing practices. More than half of the participants[(ff)] criticized the way in which anklets were displayed in several photographs, particularly those in which the photographer, to display the jewelry to it best advantage, had carefully posed the model, fig. (6-a) [11]. Traditional Omani anklets were also incorrectly displayed or positioned in photographs of exhibits from the National Museum of Oman, fig. (6-b) and the British Museum[(gg)], fig. (6-c).

Figure (6) **a.** a person wearing a traditional Omani silver anklet. The anklet is worn incorrectly because it is not partly hidden underneath the trousers (*Reproduced with permission from Morris and Shelton, 1997*), **b.** traditional Omani silver anklets incorrectly displayed at the National museum, Oman, 2016, **c.** traditional Omani silver anklets incorrectly at the British museum, UK. (*Reproduced with permission from the British museum, 2011*)

In all cases, anklets were incorrectly displayed as being worn on the ankles, below the hem of the sirwal[(hh)], rather than partly beneath the hem to restrict the movement of the trousers. Informants further observed that the anklets were frequently misaligned; the widest and most decorative sections should face each other, figs. (7-a & b). Similar errors were noted in the display of traditional Omani silver earrings, which appeared in a hidden pendant position in both a National museum exhibit and in Morris and Shelton's publication, fig. (7-c) [11]. According to the informants, these earrings were typically worn in a more open form and would have been covered by a headscarf or veil when women were outside the home. Recent conservation studies on Omani material heritage have emphasized that such misrepresentation—whether in museums or published imagery—can obscure culturally significant wearing practices and distort the intended meaning of traditional objects [16].

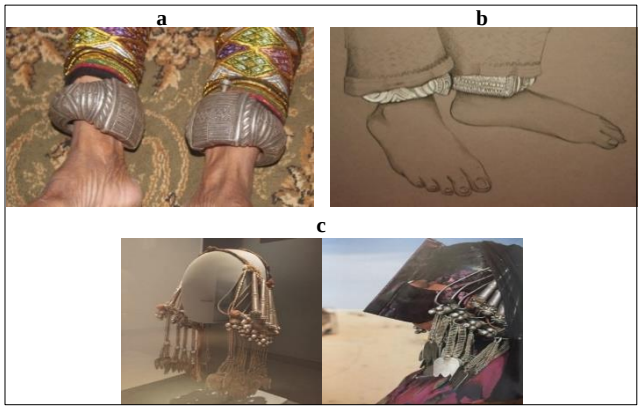

Figure (7) **a.** the correct traditional position for wearing Omani silver anklets, **b.** the correct way to wear traditional Omani silver anklets, with the anklets partly showing underneath the trousers (paper, pencil, and colour), **c.** traditional silver Omani earrings incorrectly displayed at a. the National museum, Oman, **d.** the same in a publication (*Reproduced with permission from the National museum, Oman, 2017, and Morris and Shelton, 1997*).

3.2.12. Narrative

Most jewelry pieces owned by the Bedouin women were accompanied by individual narratives, stories, or personal histories. For example, W5 told me the story behind one of her bracelets: "*I remembered when I was five years old. My family asked me to go to a pasture with the animals. I was wearing a bracelet called* ***banjeree****. I lost it during my work. I kept going back to the same area to look for my* ***banjeree****. After fifty years, I found it in the same area. The top part had become red from the sun but the silver parts, which had lain on the sand, never changed"*. (W5, 2015). In another example, W2 owned two pieces of jewelry purchased from two different women. The first was an elbow bangle from a woman whose husband had travelled to Kuwait for work[(ii)]; she had sold it to support her family financially until his return. Another example was a *hirz* necklace, sold to her by a woman who needed money to feed her children. In both cases, W2 indicated that she had associated these items with their previous owners and had bought them because she wanted to help.

3.2.13. Purchasing

Building upon this, several participants owned pieces of jewelry bought from other women in their communities; for example, W5, W10, and W6 had each bought a necklace from other women living in their respective villages. These exchanges reinforced social bonds and ensured that meaningful pieces remained within culturally cohesive networks.

4. Discussion

This study explored the subjective values associated with traditional Omani silver jewelry among Bedouin women who historically crafted, wore, and preserved these items. Prior research suggests that the popularity and perceived value of traditional silver jewelry in Oman declined foll-owing the country's rapid modernization after 1970. Women increasingly favored lighter gold designs, while rising silver prices encouraged many to sell their jewelry as scrap metal. Traders typically evaluated pieces based solely on the weight of the silver, disregarding craftsmanship, cultural meaning, or hist-

orical value [6]—a trend that contributed to the disappearance of many heritage items. The present findings, however, demonstrate that despite these external pressures, many Bedouin women continue to ascribe deep sentimental, symbolic, and cultural value to their jewelry. Their attachment to these pieces reflects not only personal memory but also intergenerational heritage. Several participants expressed regret over past sales influenced by financial need, social pressure, or lack of awareness of true value. Such narratives reveal how subjective value—rooted in memory, identity, and family history—often persists even after the physical object is lost. This aligns with anthropological literature emphasizing that jewelry can operate as a "mediator" between generations, carrying emotional and social significance beyond its material form [4]. Reciprocal practices of buying and selling jewelry within Bedouin communities further reinforce the role of jewelry as a social asset. These exchanges keep pieces circulating locally and sometimes shape distinctive regional styles. Yet, with increasing reliance on commercial jewelry shops, such locally embedded forms of exchange and creativity have diminished [1]. The erosion of traditional pastoral life, along with the decline of handicrafts such as leather tanning, has accelerated the loss of artisanal knowledge, particularly threading and hybrid-jewelry tech-niques once mastered by Bedouin women [17]. These interpretations align with Alesmseeliah's [18] findings that Bedouin women serve not only as makers of adornment but as central cultural agents who encode, preserve, and transmit identity through traditional craft practices [16]. Participants also identified structural, functional, and sensory values—such as sound, scent, weight, and storage practices—that are largely absent from previous scholarship on Omani silver jewelry. These findings contribute new insights into how jewelry ope-rates as a multisensory and socially embedded object. Recent conservation-focused research on Omani material heritage similarly demonstrates that storage practices, environmental exposure, and improper handling directly affect the long-term preservation and cultural meaning of traditional objects. The narratives collected highlight previously undocumented forms of intangible heritage, including individualized threading methods, embodied memories, and spiritual beliefs associated with silver's protective or healing qualities. The use of photo-elicitation further enabled participants to critique inaccurate museum and media representations of Omani jewelry. Many noted that traditional items were displayed incorrectly—particularly anklets and earrings—revealing how insider cultural knowledge is essential for accurate documentation. This underscores the importance of collaborative heritage practices in which community voices guide interpretation, rather than relying solely on external or Western perspectives, echoing Said's critique of orientalist representations. While subjective value is difficult to quantify, this study shows that it is central to understanding how women evaluate, preserve, and emotionally engage with their jewelry. These findings challenge the conventional emphasis on objective value—weight, cost, and material composition—which dominates commercial assessments. Recognizing subjective value is therefore essential for developing culturally informed approaches to heritage preservation, museum display, and jewelry appraisal in Oman.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that traditional Omani silver jewelry embodies a complex set of meanings that extend far beyond its material or commercial value. Through ethnographic engagement with Bedouin women, the research revealed how these pieces function as carriers of personal memory, social identity, and intergenerational continuity. Rather than being valued merely for their silver content, the jewelry items are deeply embedded in women's lived experiences—shaped by narratives of inheritance, loss, mobility, craftsmanship, and spiritual belief. The fourteen subjective values identified in this study illustrate how function, scent, sound, structure, and even methods of storage contribute to the emotional and cultural significance women attribute to their jewelry. These findings offer new insight into the intangible dimensions of Omani heritage, particularly the undervalued creative and technical contributions of Bedouin women. The use of photo-elicitation further revealed the limitations of external museum and media representations, underscoring the need for documentation grounded in local knowledge. Integrating community voices into heritage interpretation is therefore essential for preserving accurate understandings of traditional adornment practices. Recognizing these subjective dimensions can inform more culturally sensitive approaches to heritage preservation, museum display, and jewelry appraisal. Safeguarding traditional Omani silver jewelry requires valuing not only the material object, but also the memories, skills, and identities that women continue to embed within it.

Endnots

(a) A pastoral, migratory tribespeople who historically lived in desert regions of North Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, and the Levant.2 In Oman, Bedouin communities have traditionally lived in the interior of the country, migrating into the desert during the rainy winter season and to coastal areas in summer.3

(b) An Arabic word for a historically settled community, as opposed to nomads (i.e., traditional Bedouin).

(c) Because she needed money to go to *Hajj*, the traditional Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca.

(d) Including rings, *kohl* sticks, a *hirz*-style necklace, and other types of necklaces.

(e) Including a necklace gifted to me, a bracelet bought from W3 who had found it in a *wadi* (a dried riverbed), and a headdress bought from W11. All of these items were gifted/sold to me without undue influence, with the owners stating they were happy to contribute these items for the purpose of this research.

(f) For instance, in one interview, upon seeing the photos taken by Morris and Shelton,[8] the participant expressed some surprise that documentation existed for such old jewelry; this prompted her to initiate a discussion on this topic and to name the specific pieces of jewelry visible in the photos. Afterwards, the participant felt sufficiently comfortable to present her own pieces of jewelry, some of which she had owned for approx. 50 years. She claimed that she had not worn the jewelry for most of that time and it was clear that the silver had tarnished. In addition, another benefit of this approach was that many of the participants (specifically W1, W2, W3, W5, W6, W7, W9, W10, W11, W13, and W16) informed me that some of the items of jewelry shown in Morris and She-

lton's photos[6] was worn and/or displayed incorrectly;[8] they then demonstrated culturally correct ways of wearing such items, an important finding.

(g) Only in the case of two elderly participants not physically capable of writing/signing their names.

(h) This is known as *Zakat* in Arabic, referring to acts of obligatory charity. It forms part of the third pillar of Islam: "My mercy encompasses all things, but I will specify it for the righteous who give Zakat" (*The Holy Quran*, Part 7, Surah Al-A'raf Ayat, Verse 156).

(i) As was the case in one such instance when I purchased a piece of jewelry during an interview.

(j) In traditional Bedouin craftmanship, two types of headdresses made of leather and silver are commonly known: the *shabkah* and the *nis'ah*. The third group explained that there are actually four types of leather-and-silver headdresses: *shabkah* (or *manisa*), *shaabook*, *nis'ah*, and *nisfiy*. According to Sheikh Khalfan Al-Hashmi, founder and owner of the Old Castle Museum, a private museum housing a large collection of Bedouin cultural artefacts in Al-Kamel, such headdresses were widely worn in North and South A'Sharqiyah.[25] There exist slight differences between these types: the smallest headdress, the *nisfiy*, is worn at the front of the head, while the second type, the *shaabook*[xi] **Error! Bookmark not defined.**, covers the upper half of the head. The third type, *nis'ah*, is worn on the lower half of the head, while the final, largest type is called a *shabkah*, referred to in English as a 'net' in previous publications.[6,9] However, *manisa*[xii] was the preferred name for the *shabkah*-style headdress among the interviewees.

(k) Several of the Bedouin women explained to me that the name for the *shaabook*-style headdress originally derived from the Arabic word *tashabik*, meaning "entanglement", a reference to the complex weaving technique used in its manufacture.

(l) This term is an amalgamation of *shaabook* and *nis'ah* according to several of the interviewees (W14 and W10), as well as Sheikh Al-Hashmi, founder of the Old Castle Museum.[25]

(m) Later, she sold it to me for the purpose of this research.

(n) Islamic law states that Muslims with wealth worth bequeathing must draw up a will, a legal document to signify the intentions of the testator (the maker of the will) with regards to the distribution and inheritance of his/her assets after death, following the payment of any debts and funeral expenses. Specifically, individual bequests may not exceed one-third of the testator's wealth.[26,27]

(o) Muslim women, including Bedouin women, traditionally wear a veil as a head or face covering when outside of the home for religious reasons.

(p) Credit for translation is due to Al-Sarmi (2017).

(q) A type of headpiece of jewellery

(r) A type of headdress; see footnote xi.

(s) Referring to a specific tribe.

(t) A piece of clothing.

(u) A traditional cap worn by Omani men.

(v) A type of necklace.

(w) Another type of expensive necklace.

(x) A genus of tree common in Arab regions.

(y) See footnotes x, xi, and xii.

(z) Ambiance and protective power.

(aa) She claimed it had not cost a lot of money, despite it clearly being an antique.

(bb) So as to fairly distribute its value among her heirs, in accordance with Islamic requirements; see footnote xv.

(cc) A practice performed in a manner more akin to of twisting and weaving than embroidery.

(dd) For example, in the case of the *manthura* necklace. Tra-ditionally, the individual silver pieces of this style of necklace were linked together with handmade thread; however, modern versions are much altered, with a new gold chain design linked together by machine. This change has a significant drawback—while the length of the traditional silver *manthura* can be extended as required, usually becoming longer as the wearer gets older, new designs are fixed in length so that the wearer must either replace it or buy another one in the future if she desires a different size.

(ee) Traditionally, Bedouin women wear a complete set of ten rings, with one ring worn on each finger.

(ff) Multiple threads were wrapped together in such a way to provide a natural clip for closure.

(gg) Referring to scripture: "And they must not stamp their feet on the ground in order of their hidden adornment be known" (*The Holy Quran*, Part 18, Sūrah An-Nūr, Verse 31).

(hh) Specifically, W2, W3, W5, W7, W9, W10, and W14. In particular, W3 explicitly stated that the way in which the anklets were displayed contravened Omani customs, while W7 remarked that the photographer evidently had no background knowledge of Omani jewelry; W10, upon seeing the photograph in question, immediately tried to demonstrate how this type of anklet should be worn.

(ii) The participants viewed a photograph taken of a display from a 2011 exhibition titled *Adornment and Identity: Jewelry and Textiles from Oman*.

References

[1] Hawley, R. (2000). *Silver: The traditional Art of Oman*, Longman, London.

[2] Encyclopedia Britannica. Bedouin. *https://www.britannica.com/topic/Bedouin* (10/11/2025).

[3] Berns, M. (1993). Art, history, and gender: Women and clay in west Africa. *The African Archaeological Review*. 11: 129-148.

[4] Ahde-Deal, P. (2013). *Women and jewellery: A social approach to wearing and possessing jewellery*, Ph.D., Design dept., School of Arts, Design and Architecture, Aalto Univ., Helsinki, Finland.

[5] Bornhorst-Winslow, C. (2012). *The important role played by household crafts in the lives of nineteenth-century*

women in Britain and America, MA., Humanities Program, Wright State Univ., Dayton, USA.

[6] Forster, A. (1998). *Disappearing treasures of Oman: A fascinating story and illustrated guide to recognizing, buying and restoring antique Bedouin artefacts*, Archway, Clevedon.

[7] Denzin, N. & Lincoln, Y. (2011). *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research*, Sage, California.

[8] Barbour, J. (2007). Leader paradoxes and critical ethnographies. *Academic Exchange Quarterly*. 11: 117-123.

[9] Richardson, N. & Dorr, M. (2003). *The craft heritage of Oman*, Vol. 2, Motivate Pub., Dubai.

[10] Patton, M. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods*, Sage, California.

[11] Vogt, W. (1999). *Dictionary of statistics and methodology: A nontechnical guide for social sciences*, Sage, London.

[12] Spreen, M. (1992). Rare populations, hidden populations, and link-tracing designs: What and why? *Bulletin of Sociological Methodology*. 36: 34-58.

[13] Thomson, S. (1997). Adaptive sampling in behaveoural surveys. *NIDA Research Monograph*. 167: 296-319.

[14] Berg, S. (1988). Snowball Sampling. In: Kotz, S. & Johnson, N. (eds.) *Encyclopedia of Statistical Sciences*, Vol. 8, Wiley, NY, pp. 528-532.

[15] Morris, M. & Shelton, P. (1997). *Oman adorned: A portrait in silver*, Apex Pub., Muscat.

[16] Alesmseeliah, A. (2024). The role of Omani Bedouin women in shaping the identity of the traditional headdress. *Jordan J. of the Arts*. 15 (1): 377-389.

[17] Al-Ismaili, A. (2019). *Interpreting the traditional jewellery of Bedouin in Oman through contemporary jewellery practice*, Ph.D., Faculty of Arts, Computing, Engineering and Sciences (ACES), Sheffield Hallam University, Sheffield, UK.

[18] Alesmseeliah, A. (2024). The role of Omani Bedouin women in shaping the identity of the traditional headdress. *Jordan J. of the Arts*, 15 (1): 377-389.