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# Frankincense's Ritual Uses in Oman: An Anthropological Study\*\*

## طقوس استخدام اللبان في سلطنة عُمان: دراسة أنثروبولوجية

**Abstract:** This study investigates a set of inherited practices which have persisted in the Sultanate of Oman despite social and cultural changes in Omani society. More specifically, the study focuses on the custom of censening, the act of perfuming one's body, clothing, and surroundings by exposing them to aromatic smoke produced by the burning of frankincense. This represents both a daily ritual and a ceremonial practice, whether individually or communally. The research relies on a combination of field observations as well as random and semi-structured interviews with Omani men and women in the provinces of Al Batinah North Governate. The study discusses the importance of frankincense in Oman, its uses, and the social, cultural, and religious perceptions that govern the daily and ceremonial practices associated with it.

**Keywords:** Frankincense; Censing; Incense; Rituals; The Sultanate of Oman.

**الملخص:** تبحث الدراسة في الثبات الظاهري لبعض الممارسات الموروثة في سلطنة عُمان، التي حافظت على حضورها بالرغم من مظاهر التغيير الاجتماعي والثقافي في المجتمع العماني. وتركز على عادة التبخير اليومي والاحتفالي الفردي والجماعي باللبان العماني، أي تبخير الجسد والملابس والمكان. وتعتمد على الملاحظة الميدانية، وعلى عشرات المقابلات العفوية، وعلى مجموعة أخرى من المقابلات الموجهة مع العمانيين والعمانيات، في ولايات شمال الباطنة. وتبين الدراسة أهمية البخور في عُمان، وتبحث في استخداماته المختلفة، وتصورات المجتمع العُماني الاجتماعية والثقافية والدينية التي توجه ممارساتهم اليومية والاحتفالية المرتبطة بهذه المادة.

**كلمات مفتاحية:** اللبان؛ التبخير؛ البخور؛ الطقوس؛ سلطنة عُمان.

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The first condition for understanding a foreign country is to smell it.

Joseph Kipling<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

There is a striking contrast in Omani society between keeping pace with global transformations and development and preserving inherited practices, symbols, and rituals related to clothing, dwellings, folk art, or daily and ceremonial rituals, such as the *Qaranqashūh*<sup>2</sup> or the *Sha 'bāniyya*.<sup>3</sup> This is a notable aspect of a society characterized by a powerful presence of the past that nourishes the collective memory, and where the past constitutes an anthropological structure upon which the present is built, while the present retains elements of the original, and in the words of Michel Maffesoli, the primitive past.<sup>4</sup>

Despite developments in the Omani traditions over time, the use of traditional perfumes remains a defining feature of Omani culture. There are numerous types of traditional Omani perfumes, such as Omani incense, *al-dihn*, *al-makhmariyya*, *al-'ūd*, *al-'anbariyya*, *al-wars*, *al-ma'mūl*, *al-maḥlab*, *al-mukhallaṭ*, *daggat al-ballūsh*, and *daggat al-'arāyis*. However, the universal and enduring centrality of frankincense in Omani daily life is unmatched. Although its use has witnessed radical transformations, especially since the early 1970s, such transformations have not diminished the importance of these customary practices.

Most publications on this topic are of a commercial, touristic, and documentary nature.<sup>5</sup> Academic scholarship covers topics that fall within the biological sciences domain, analysing the chemical and physical compositions of frankincense and highlighting its medical benefits and uses,<sup>6</sup> such as its anti-inflammatory and anti-carcinogenic properties,<sup>7</sup> which would explain its use in ancient medicine to treat inflammatory diseases.<sup>8</sup> Anthropological research on frankincense, however, is scarce. The only source that falls under this category is an article in Arabic by Fahd bin Mubarak al-Hajri, "The Frankincense Tree from a Mythological Perspective," which addresses the mythological dimensions of frankincense and some of its uses in Oman's Dhofar Governorate.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Stephen Wooding, "Olfaction: It Makes a World of Scents," *Current Biology*, vol. 23, no. 16 (August 2013), pp. 677-679.

<sup>2</sup> The *Qaranqashūh* is an annual ritual which takes place on the eve of the 15th of the month of Ramadan. Omani families prepare for the event, and children roam the neighborhoods, knocking on people's doors and collecting gifts and sweets. Saud ibn Salem al-Ansi, *al-'Ādāt al-'Umāniyya* [Arabic] (Muscat: Ministry of National Heritage and Culture, 1991), p. 91.

<sup>3</sup> The *Sha 'bāniyya* is an annual ritual that takes place on the 14th of the month of Sha'bān, when children come out in their finest Omani costumes, while Omani families prepare for the occasion by buying gifts and distributing them to the children when they knock on their doors.

<sup>4</sup> Michel Maffesoli, *Niẓām al-Ashyā': al-Taṣkīr fī mā Ba'd al-Ḥadātha*, [Arabic] Saud al-Mawla & Rana Diyab (trans.) (Doha/Beirut: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2020), p. 208.

<sup>5</sup> See: Christopher Baker, "Omani Incense 'More Precious than Gold and Cures All Diseases'," [Arabic] *BBC Arabic*, 19/8/2019, accessed on 1/5/2023, at: <https://bbc.in/3pg0eph>; Muhammad Tayfour, "Hawas al-'Iṭr Qadīm, wa-l-Bukhūr Awwal Ṭuqūsihi," *al-Iqtisadiyya*, 25/2/2016, accessed on 1/5/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3chw8e5>; Mustafa al-Hadi, "al-Bukhūr fī al-Adyān," *Kitabat*, 10/12/2020, accessed on 5/1/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3XPrAS3>; "Tangible Cultural Heritage," Oman National Commission for Education, Culture and Science, accessed on 5/1/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/35tchbl>; "Lubān al-Dhikr: Aham al-Fawa'id wa-al-Khurāfāt," *WebTib*, accessed on 5/1/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3HLmfV>

<sup>6</sup> See, for example: Ali Ridha Mustafā Al-Yasiry & Bożena Kiczorowska, "Frankincense-Therapeutic Properties," *Advances in Hygiene and Experimental Medicine*, vol. 70, (2016), pp. 380-391; Kai Huang et al., "Review of the Chemical Composition, Pharmacological Effects, Pharmacokinetics, and Quality Control of *Boswellia Carterii*," *Evidence-Based Complementary and Alternative Medicine* (2022).

<sup>7</sup> Mina Khajehdehi, Mohammad Khalaj-Kondori & Behzad Baradaran, "Molecular Evidences on Anti-Inflammatory, Anticancer, and Memory-Boosting Effects of Frankincense," *Phytotherapy Research*, vol. 36, no. 3 (2022), pp. 1194-1215; and al-Yasiry & Kiczorowska, "Frankincense-Therapeutic Properties."

<sup>8</sup> H. P. Ammon, "Boswellic Acids (Components of Frankincense) as the Active Principle in Treatment of Chronic Inflammatory Diseases," *Wiener Medizinische Wochenschrift*, vol. 152, no. 15-16 (2002), pp. 373-378.

<sup>9</sup> Fahd bin Mubarak al-Hajri, "Shajarat al-Lubān min Manzūr Mithūlūjī," [Arabic] *al-Waṭan*, 18/2/2018, accessed on 5/1/2023, at: <http://lnk.in/f3dN>

Notwithstanding the paucity of research on this topic by Arabs in general<sup>10</sup> and Omanis in particular, there is a rich global store of resources concerned with the anthropology of the senses,<sup>11</sup> including the work of a number of psychologists, sociologists, and anthropologists concerned with the sense of smell.<sup>12</sup> This anthropological research, based on fieldwork carried out among Omani men and women in the provinces of Al Batinah North Governate, demonstrates the role of smell in creating a rich world of symbols and meanings,<sup>13</sup> and of being a source of knowledge among Omanis.<sup>14</sup>

It considers frankincense censing practice as a complex ritual with symbolic effectiveness based on the collective belief in the power of frankincense. This contrasts markedly with the attitudes of philosophers such as Aristotle and Immanuel Kant, who disparaged the sense of smell and its functions, particularly given its connection to the animalistic<sup>15</sup> and the instinctive,<sup>16</sup> as well as Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Henri Bergson, who ruled out the possibility that the sense of smell could access various dimensions of beauty.<sup>17</sup>

## Historical, Mythological, and Religious Origins of Censing with Frankincense

Historical and anthropological sources agree that incense was the first form of perfume in human history.<sup>18</sup> They also agree on the symbolic values associated with incense due to its importance in people's religious life in ancient times and its link to "worship, sanctification, honour, surrender, recognition, divine gift, praise, obedience, sacrificial offering, uprightness, protection, virtue and purity".<sup>19</sup>

Dictionaries, lexicons, and other sources, both in Arabic and other languages, are replete with references to incense, which is defined both linguistically and idiomatically. The classical Arabic lexicon, *Lisān al-'Arab*, defines incense (Arabic: *bukhūr*) as "that which is turned to vapor or smoke, such as aloeswood and the like,"<sup>20</sup> while Ibn al-Jazzar describes it as "a perfume that remains in the fire and does not burn quickly".<sup>21</sup> Western encyclopaedias define incense, especially holy incense, as "an aromatic resinous substance of Eastern origin which emits a distinctive fragrance when burned".<sup>22</sup>

Frankincense is extracted by slashing the bark of various species of *Boswellia* trees. It is burned in religious ceremonies<sup>23</sup> to appease the gods and combat unseen hostile forces. For this reason, the inhabitants of ancient Egypt referred to it as "the perspiration of the god who fell to the ground, because it purifies and adorns, as well as delivering a person from evil forces".<sup>24</sup> Thus, incense has been linked to symbolic

<sup>10</sup> Worthy of note, however, is the rare work that has been done on the phenomenon of perfuming from a socio-anthropological point of view, such as the research of Believers Without Borders by the Tunisian Hajar al-Turki, "al-'Uṭūr fī Ṭuqūs Madīnat al-Mahdīyya," [Arabic] YouTube, 6/4/2018, accessed on 5/1/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3qF4u3b>; and Nacef Nakbi, *Magie et sacre de l'odeur: La tradition des encens en Tunisie* (Tunis: Nirvana, 2016).

<sup>11</sup> David Le Breton, "Pour une anthropologie des sens," *VST-Vie sociale et traitements*, vol. 96, no. 4 (2007), pp. 45-53.

<sup>12</sup> The writings of anthropologist David Howes alerted me to two basic attitudes to the sense of smell. The first attitude, which is one of contempt, "ranks smell as the lowest with respect to the efficacy of the senses because it is the most animal-like". As for the second, contrasting, attitude, "it views the sense of smell as an important source of knowledge". For more detail, see: David Howes, "Le sens sans parole: Vers une anthropologie de l'odorat," *Anthropologie et sociétés*, vol. 10, no. 3 (1986), pp. 29-45.

<sup>13</sup> Wooding.

<sup>14</sup> Catherine Rouby et al. (eds.), *Olfaction, Taste, and Cognition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

<sup>15</sup> Annick Le Guéner, "Olfaction and Cognition: A Philosophical and Psychoanalytic View," in: Rouby, et al. (eds.), pp. 3-15.

<sup>16</sup> Sigmund Freud, for example, confined the sense of smell to instinctive sexual practices and the yearning for gratification. See: John P. McGann, "Poor Human Olfaction is a 19th-Century Myth," *Science*, vol. 356, no. 6338 (May 2017), p. 7263.

<sup>17</sup> Annick Le Guéner, "Cité-Culture," produced by Jacques Magnol, *Radio Cité, Geneva*, 27/5/2005.

<sup>18</sup> Annick Le Guéner "Les parfums, des temples égyptiens aux temples de la consommation," *Mode de Recherche*, no. 11 (January 2009), pp. 9-15.

<sup>19</sup> Ahmed Hijazi, *Mawsū'at al-'Uṭūr wa-l-'Ināya bi-l-Jamāl* [Arabic] (Amman: Dar Usama for Publishing and Distribution, 2000), p. 23.

<sup>20</sup> Muḥammad ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-'Arab* [Arabic] (n.c.: n.p., n.d.), entry for *b-kh-r*.

<sup>21</sup> Ahmad ibn al-Jazzar, *Kitāb fī Funūn al-Ṭīb wa-l-'Uṭūr* [Arabic], al-Radi al-Jazi & Faruq al-Asali (eds.) (Tunisia: Ministry of Culture and Heritage Preservation; Tunisian Academy of Sciences, Literature and Arts, 2007), p. 89.

<sup>22</sup> See the National Center for Textual and Lexical Resources: "Entrez une forme," CNRTL, accessed on 1/5/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3qXqHJP>

<sup>23</sup> "encens," *Larousse*, accessed on 1/5/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/2Z97Pfl>

<sup>24</sup> Qais Kazem al-Janabi, *al-'Iṭr 'Ind al-'Arab: Dirāsa Tārkhīyya Fikriyya* [Arabic] (Beirut: Dar al-Intishar al-Arabi, 2015), p. 36.

meanings since the earliest civilizations, especially those of the ancient Near East<sup>25</sup> and its religions, as there was a prevailing belief among the inhabitants of Mesopotamia that “the gods rejoice in sweet fragrances”.<sup>26</sup> Among the ancient Hebrews, prayers for forgiveness were associated with the smoke of incense, which was believed to be “the vehicle by which human prayers are conveyed to the gods”.<sup>27</sup>

These sources infer the value and sanctity of incense from how it is described in the Bible, both the Old Testament and the New Testament,<sup>28</sup> most specifically in Exodus, Chapter 30,<sup>29</sup> and the Book of Revelation, Chapter 8.<sup>30</sup> Numerous studies also link the use of incense and sacrificial rituals. According to Charles Bannati, “the sweet-smelling fragrances reach the worshipers as a result of the burning of the sacrifice presented as an offering to the gods”.<sup>31</sup> However, God’s command to Moses in the Old Testament reveals that incense was originally an independent ritual based on a gift of incense to the gods, especially in relation to “the holy divine incense, which God required of all generations of Jews until the Day of Resurrection”.<sup>32</sup> Incense may also form a part, or stage, of other rites, such as rituals of purification and sacrificial offerings.

Perfume was used in the form of incense 5,000 years ago when the sacrifices burned were offered by religious sects as gifts to please the gods,<sup>33</sup> who love perfume and will not accept prayers, supplications, or acts of worship unless they are accompanied by fragrance.<sup>34</sup> Accordingly, the pious individual in most ancient religions could not live without incense, because “it dedicates the space to God, enabling the worshipper to experience the complete sanctity of the place and to sense the divine presence in that place”.<sup>35</sup>

Of the numerous constituents of incense described by historians,<sup>36</sup> frankincense is the best known, the most sacred, and the most widely used. In his book *The Lamp of Darkness in Explanation of Service*, Ibn Bakr describes the order in which the various components of incense were used.<sup>37</sup> Frankincense was used alongside sandarac and Indian and Javan agarwood, each of which was used “in a known amount without excess”. The sacredness of these components is sometimes explained on the basis of the purity of the tree from which they are collected, and at other times based on the property by which they exorcise unclean spirits, thus thwarting the purposes of practitioners of black magic.<sup>38</sup> According to Yaqut al-Hamawi,<sup>39</sup> the

<sup>25</sup> “Perfumes were an integral part of purification processes among the people of Mesopotamia. The ritual of burning incense was performed daily in the temple by special priests. The burning of incense also accompanied the processing of chanting incantations, as incense was believed to drive out evil spirits”. See: al-Janabi, p. 36.

<sup>26</sup> Seton Lloyd, *The Archeology of Mesopotamia: From the Old Stone Age to the Persian Conquest*, Sami Saeed al-Ahmad (trans.) (Baghdad: Ministry of Culture and Information, 1980), p. 36.

<sup>27</sup> Hijazi, p. 24.

<sup>28</sup> The Old Testament mentions the following command of the Lord to the Prophet Moses: “Make an altar of earth for me and sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and fellowship offerings, your sheep and goats and your cattle” (Exodus 20:24), and “Make an altar of acacia wood for burning incense” (Exodus 30:1). See al-Janabi, p. 40.

<sup>29</sup> Its basic idea is related to God’s command to make an altar on which to burn incense: “Aaron must burn fragrant incense on the altar every morning when he tends the lamps” (Exodus 30:7).

<sup>30</sup> We read in the Book of Revelation 8:3, “Another angel, who had a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense to offer, with the prayers of all God’s people, on the golden altar in front of the throne. And the smoke of the incense rose with the prayers of the saints from the hand of the angel before God”.

<sup>31</sup> Charles Bannati, *The Story of Customs, Traditions, and the Origin of Things*, Marwan Masloub (trans.) (Riyadh: The New National House for Publishing and Distribution, 1996).

<sup>32</sup> “Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘Take fragrant spices—gum resin, onycha and galbanum—and pure frankincense, all in equal amounts’” (Exodus 30:34).

<sup>33</sup> Hijazi, p. 22.

<sup>34</sup> Samah Hamza, *Ṭuqūs al-Naṣārā fī Diyār al-Islām*, [Arabic] Part 2 (Tunisia: Maskiliani for Publishing and Distribution, 2021), p. 534.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> See, for example: Ibn al-Jazzar, p. 27.

<sup>37</sup> Ibn Bakr al-Qibti, *Miṣbāḥ al-Zulma fī Ḍāḥ al-Khidma*, Part 2: *Rasāmat al-Shamāmisā wa-l-Ruhbān wa-l-Rāhibāt, wa-l-Ma‘mūdiyya wa-l-Salawāt wa-l-‘Yād* [Arabic], special edition prepared by the monk Rev. Samuel al-Siryani (n.c.: n.p., 1992), p. 166.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 166.

<sup>39</sup> Yaqut al-Hamawi, *Mu‘jam al-Buldān* [Arabic] (Beirut: Dar Sader, n.d.), p. 60.

frankincense tree is found in the Dhofar Mountains.<sup>40</sup> It is harvested by making incisions in the bark of the tree in particular seasons and with particular tools,<sup>41</sup> releasing a milk-like liquid which solidifies upon exposure to the air.<sup>42</sup> The frankincense tree attracted ancient travellers,<sup>43</sup> who spoke of its importance in the commercial exchanges and cultural interactions that connected Oman to the outside world for thousands of years BC.<sup>44</sup> According to these travellers, the first recorded use of incense dates back more than 4,000 years, to the time when certain murals were made by ancient Egyptians,<sup>45</sup> who imported frankincense from the Arabian Peninsula for religious rituals and embalming the dead.<sup>46</sup>

Given the historical centrality of frankincense, the ancient caravan trade route came to be called the Incense Road or the Frankincense Road, which is home to the most famous cities of the Dhofar Province, known as the land of frankincense.<sup>47</sup> Because of the historical importance of the frankincense trade from ancient times to the Middle Ages, the Incense Road was included in the UNESCO list of World Heritage Sites in the year 2000.<sup>48</sup> Frankincense has been exported from regions such as Sadah, Hasik, Rakhyut, and Dhalkut to the Arabian Peninsula, Egypt, India, and Yemen. Some cities, such as Samharam and Khor Rori, dating back to the first millennium BC, were established specifically for the purpose of exporting frankincense to other parts of the world, such as southern Iraq, ancient Egypt, and numerous European countries.<sup>49</sup> Dhofar's fame in the past was linked to "its production of frankincense, which sat on the throne of legends and became the principle offering in places of worship. Thanks to frankincense, roads were opened and kingdoms known as 'the kingdoms of frankincense' were established".<sup>50</sup> Nonetheless, the importance of this research lies not only in the long history enjoyed by the phenomenon of burning frankincense, but also in its continuity among the Omanis in its social, ideological, and economic dimensions.

## Research Methodology

To examine the practical aspects of censuring with frankincense, the paper relies on a field study conducted in the Al Batinah North Governorate,<sup>51</sup> using direct observation spanning a period of two years (2020-2022). During this study, numerous random interviews and 26 semi-structured interviews were conducted on themes related to Omanis' practices and perceptions of frankincense.

<sup>40</sup> The frankincense tree grows in a few other regions of the world, perhaps the most important of which are Yemen, Somalia, and parts of India and Pakistan. See: "Frankincense," *Britannica*, accessed on 1/5/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/41Z5vCO>

<sup>41</sup> The instrument with which the bark of the frankincense tree is cut is called a *mangaf*.

<sup>42</sup> See: "Frankincense," *Britannica*.

<sup>43</sup> Such as the journeys made by Ibn Baṭṭūṭa and the Italian traveler Marco Polo in the eighth century AH/fourteenth century CE.

<sup>44</sup> Muhammad al-Mundhiri, *Ṣilāt 'Umān al-Khārijīyya wa Ab 'āduhā al-Siyāsīyya wa-l-Ḥadārīyya* [Arabic] (Muscat: Muscat Library, 2018), p. 34.

<sup>45</sup> al-Hadi.

<sup>46</sup> Support for this is found in papyri containing instructions for embalming rituals, including "rubbing the head of the corpse with frankincense". Saber Jabra, *Tārīkh al-'Aqāqīr wa-l-'Ilāj* [Arabic] (Cairo: Hindawi Foundation for Education and Culture, 2015), p. 69.

<sup>47</sup> The Land of Frankincense, one of the oldest archaeological sites in Dhofar, includes several sites along the Frankincense Road, from the spacious valley dotted by the wild frankincense trees which produce this important commodity, to the places where it is stored, to the seaport from which it is exported to the ancient commercial ports that have long provided points of contact between Oman and other human civilizations. The archeological site of the Land of Frankincense includes Shusr, Wadi Dawkah, Al-Baleed, Khor Rori, and the port of Samharam. See: "Tangible Cultural Heritage," Oman National Commission for Education, Culture and Science, accessed on 1/5/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/35tchbl>

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Baker.

<sup>50</sup> Salem Shammās, *Dawrat Ḥayāt al-Insān 'Abra al-'Ādāt wa-l-Taqālīd bi Muḥāfaẓat Ḍufār: Dirāsa Maydāniyya* [Arabic]. (Muscat: Ministry of Heritage and Culture, 2007), p. 33.

<sup>51</sup> Located along the coast of the Sultanate of Oman, Al Batinah North Governorate consists of six wilayats [provinces] with Sohar in the center, and including Liwa, Shinas, Saham, Al Khaburah, and Al Suwaiq.

**Table (1): Social Characteristics of Respondents**

No.	Sex	Age	Occupation	Bedouin/Urban <sup>52</sup>
1	Female	54	Coordinator in an educational institution	Urban
2	Female	42	Beauty salon owner	Urban
3	Female	22	Student	Bedouin
4	Female	30	Academic Researcher	Urban
5	Female	60	Traditional perfume vendor	Bedouin
6	Female	27	Coordinator and graduate student	Urban
7	Female	33	Shopping mall employee	Bedouin
8	Female	47	Sanitation worker	Bedouin
9	Female	22	Graduate student	Bedouin
10	Female	30	Traditional perfumer	Urban
11	Female	32	College professor	Urban
12	Female	28	Teacher	Bedouin
13	Female	54	College professor	Urban
14	Female	62	Retired	Urban
15	Male	46	Retired	Bedouin
16	Male	58	Farm owner	Bedouin
17	Male	20	Student	Bedouin
18	Male	62	Retired	Urban
19	Male	46	Taxi driver	Urban
20	Male	28	Merchant	Bedouin
21	Male	27	Teacher	Urban
22	Male	33	Traditional perfumer	Bedouin
23	Male	25	Retired	Urban
24	Male	29	Student and freelancer	Urban
25	Male	38	Professor	Urban

Source: prepared by the researcher.

The study also relies on audio-visual materials provided by media outlets and government agencies. This diversity of research tools resulted in obtaining a significant amount of qualitative data on frankincense-related practices in Oman. It employs a sociological approach to analyse the data since frankincense-related practices are forms of social interaction among Omanis. An anthropological approach was also utilised as it studies “peoples’ inventions, tools, devices, weapons, styles of housing, types of clothing, means of adornment, arts and literature”.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>52</sup> The word "Bedouin" in the study is used to refer to inhabitants of rural areas located in mountainous and desert regions.

<sup>53</sup> *Dominique Maingueneau, Key Terms in Discourse Analysis*, Muhammad Yahyatne (trans.) (Beirut: al-Dar al-Arabiyya li-l-Ulum, 2008), p. 11.



## Manifestations of Frankincense in Omani Life and Related Practices

The moment visitors set foot in Muscat International Airport, they are inundated with non-verbal communication, as the fragrance of frankincense emanates from all directions.<sup>54</sup> This olfactory message is intensified by visual stimuli, such as pictures of frankincense trees and the sight of the smoke rising from censers. Social life in Oman is a “woven tapestry of practices and accumulated traditions and customs, some inherited and others acquired through processes of acculturation”.<sup>55</sup> However, what is notable is the manifold ways in which the presence of frankincense manifests itself in Omanis’ daily practices.

Though linked to a single source, namely, the frankincense tree, frankincense comes in numerous varieties. Omanis share a common ability to distinguish among these varieties, including the Najdi, the Shazri, the Sahli, the Sha‘bi, and the Shahri. They also share a preference for the Hawjari variety, named after Wadi Hawjar in Dhofar. The globules of frankincense vary depending on where the tree grows, the way in which it is harvested, when it is harvested, its size, and the multiplicity of colours.<sup>56</sup>

Frankincense figures prominently in Omani households. As one respondent said: “No Omani household would be without frankincense.”<sup>57</sup> Most interlocutors buy an entire year’s supply when in Dhofar, the fountainhead of frankincense, to obtain the best quality. One of the female respondents said:

Every day after the sundown prayer, I have to burn frankincense that I’ve bought from Salalah. I buy the authentic kind, which we can recognize from its appearance. The authentic frankincense is a greenish colour, and it’s larger [than other types]. I buy enough for a whole year, as it doesn’t go bad.<sup>58</sup>

Frankincense is connected to various aspects of Omanis’ daily and religious lives. The practice of censuring with frankincense is widespread in private and public spaces, such as homes, hospitals, shops, educational institutions, and workspaces.<sup>59</sup> One respondent described her practice of burning frankincense every morning when entering her office and before embarking on any work, saying: “I can’t start my day without burning frankincense. Once I smell its fragrance, especially oriental frankincense, everything changes, including my state of mind and the workflow.”<sup>60</sup>

Utilizing the collected data, the different methods of using frankincense are identified, reflecting the power of its presence in Oman. The following are some of the most important such methods:

### 1. As an Infusion

The practice of soaking frankincense in warm water overnight and drinking it in the morning or throughout the day is undoubtedly linked to folk medicine and its approaches to prevention and treatment. The interviews reveal a strongly held belief in the effectiveness of drinking a frankincense infusion, particularly on an empty stomach. The practice’s benefits range from treating and purifying the body to fortifying and protecting

<sup>54</sup> The Oman Airports Company, which manages airports in Oman, has launched an initiative to introduce visitors to Omani frankincense by distributing pallets that spread its pleasant fragrance throughout the place. It has placed 45 devices at Muscat International Airport, twelve devices at Salalah Airport, and six devices at Duqm Airport, which diffuse the aroma of frankincense around the clock in cooperation with the Omani Ulban Company, which offers a product extracted from Omani frankincense in keeping with international specifications and medicinal uses important to consumers in their daily lives. Through this initiative, the company aims to revive the heritage of Omani frankincense with modern technologies, introducing Oman as the land of frankincense, and catapulting this Omani product to world fame. “The Airports of the Sultanate of Oman Receive Visitors with the Scent of Frankincense,” *Raya*, 12/04/2023, accessed on 1/5/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/40ecoyH>

<sup>55</sup> Said Abdali, *al-Siḥru fī Tunīs min Ajl al-Māl wa-l-Sulṭa wa-l-Jins: Dirāsa Sūsiyūlūjīyya-Anthrūbūlūjīyya* [Arabic] (Tunisia: Mediterranean Publishing House, 2018), p. 172.

<sup>56</sup> Some is yellowish, some greenish, and some whitish.

<sup>57</sup> A. B. (28 years old), author interview, Saham, 12/3/2020.

<sup>58</sup> M. A. (33 years old), author interview, Liwa, 2/19/2021.

<sup>59</sup> During the Covid-19 pandemic, frankincense burners were seen in every section of the Raffah and Badr Al Samaa hospitals, as well as the “Lulu” and “Nesto” shopping centers in Sohar.

<sup>60</sup> F. S. (27 years old), author interview, Sohar, 11/11/2021.

the soul. All interviewees agreed that steeped frankincense is useful for treating infections, especially respiratory infections, and strengthening the body's immunity. Consequently, the demand for it skyrockets during the winter with the spread of viruses. Aunt Saleha, a traditional perfume vendor in Sohar's "Soug al-Harim" noted that "people's interest in buying frankincense doubled during the Covid-19 pandemic".<sup>61</sup> Particularly the type intended for soaking in water, which needs to be either the Dhakar or the Hawjari variety. Thus, one respondent stated: "Frankincense is good for infections, especially when there is phlegm and coughing. We use it especially in winter and when viruses are going around. It's helpful even for little children and infants".<sup>62</sup> Another said:

One day my chest was hurting, and I had a productive cough. My mother told me to drink an infusion of Dhakar frankincense. I drank it, and to be honest, I got better. The phlegm was reduced, and the cough subsided.<sup>63</sup>

This belief may have been influenced by the experiences of parents and grandparents, as well as by modern research which has demonstrated the benefits of frankincense as an anti-inflammatory, containing powerful acidic anti-inflammatory substances.<sup>64</sup> Findings of a field study titled "Putting Folklore to Use in Combatting Covid-19: The Omani Experience as a Model," further indicate the centrality of frankincense for sterilization and as a preventative measure.<sup>65</sup> It kills viruses and bacteria, helping to treat respiratory illnesses and breathing difficulties.<sup>66</sup>

The interviews revealed some differences between males and females regarding reasons for drinking a frankincense infusion. Most of the female respondents agreed on the benefits of frankincense for maintaining a beautiful complexion. According to a one respondent, women consider it a "natural collagen".<sup>67</sup> Others pointed out the importance of frankincense water in promoting fertility and reproductive health, as women who wish to conceive are advised to drink a frankincense infusion to increase their chances of bearing children. One female respondent stated: "If a woman wants to get pregnant, she should drink an infusion of Hawjari frankincense twice a day, first thing in the morning and before bed, on a regular basis for at least forty days".<sup>68</sup> Many respondents also recommended that nursing mothers who want to increase their milk production drink frankincense water.

As for the male respondents, most of their answers centred on the importance of drinking frankincense water to strengthen immunity and treat infections. One of the respondents said: "Drinking a frankincense infusion every day with ginger and turmeric is excellent for immunity".<sup>69</sup> According to another, frankincense water is important in the treatment of "all diseases".<sup>70</sup> A perfumer in Sohar described his daily regimen of soaking frankincense in water every night and drinking it in the morning, stating that it is "beneficial for everything, and it protects from everything. Glory be to God, when I start my day with frankincense, I feel immune to everything".<sup>71</sup>

<sup>61</sup> S. M. (60 years old), author interview, Sohar, 11/12/2020.

<sup>62</sup> A. H. (46 years old), author interview, Shinas, 28/1/2022.

<sup>63</sup> S. F. (30 years old), author interview, Al-Suwaïq, 21/10/2021.

<sup>64</sup> See, for example: Mulgeta Lemenith & Demel Teketay, "Frankincense and Myrrh Resources of Ethiopia: II. Medicinal and Industrial Uses," *SINET: Ethiopian Journal of Science*, vol. 26, no. 2 (2003), pp. 161-172.

<sup>65</sup> Hajar Harrathi, "Tawzīf al-Turāth al-Sha' bī fī Muwājahat Kūrūnā: al-Tajriba al-'Umāniyyah Namūdhajan," [Arabic] *Majallat Ādāb al-Rāfidayn*, vol. 53, no. 92 (March 2023), pp. 475-499.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> S. K. (42 years old), author interview, Sohar, 5/2/2021.

<sup>68</sup> Z. H. (54 years old), author interview, Sohar, 13/12/2020.

<sup>69</sup> G. A. (20 years old), author interview, Sohar, 7/5/2021.

<sup>70</sup> S. M. (58 years old), author interview, Al-Khaboura, 24/9/2021.

<sup>71</sup> N. B. (33 years old), author interview, Al-Khaboura, 24/9/2021.



This type of frankincense use in Oman is not without its magical elements, as apparent from many of the interviews. One respondent mentioned giving frankincense water to someone who recites [the Qur'an] over it, "and then we drink it, and it's extremely helpful".<sup>72</sup> The interviews also indicated that individuals experience a heightened need for frankincense during times of stress. A student respondent explained that he and his classmates drink a frankincense infusion regularly when revising for exams due to its benefits for memory and processing information and as protection from "anything that might harm them".<sup>73</sup> One student described her passion for frankincense by saying:

I feel frankincense is extremely useful and necessary, as it cleanses and protects against anything that might harm a person [...] I use frankincense when I feel upset and when I feel that someone envies me [and thus wishes me harm], or when something isn't normal in the house, such as an argument for no reason. [When that happens], we mix it with black seed and resin.<sup>74</sup>

Another explained his regular practice of soaking frankincense in water every night and drinking it the morning as "heeding the advice of his elders".<sup>75</sup>

## 2. As a Spray

The interviews indicated the widespread practice of spraying frankincense water on various parts of the body, on spaces within the home, and on household objects and, among women, that of spraying it on their faces and bodies due to its cosmetic value.<sup>76</sup> One respondent stated:

Hawjari frankincense is placed in a bottle of water for eight hours if it is to be drunk. If it stays there for more than eight hours, it is used to cleanse the skin, and disinfect refrigerators and the house to get rid of insects, especially in the winter.<sup>77</sup>

Rose water is added to ensure the efficacy of spraying frankincense on the face. One respondent explained: "Rose water and frankincense water are necessary. The method is to take the rose water and put frankincense in it. Then you spray it on the face".<sup>78</sup> Another respondent, explained that she always keeps both frankincense water and rose water in her office, as she sprays them on her face to moisturize it, and to give herself a sense of relaxation and contentment.<sup>79</sup>

This deeply rooted belief in the efficacy of frankincense may explain some Omani companies' move toward manufacturing in this area. Salem al-Rawahi, Chairman of the Board of Directors of Al-Asliya Integrated Enterprises, stated:

Using frankincense extract, we have produced substances that keep the skin healthy and beautiful. We are currently exploring the possibility of producing various medicines from frankincense, and we are studying the effectiveness of frankincense oil and frankincense water in treating tumours and cancers.<sup>80</sup>

<sup>72</sup> N. S. (47 years old), author interview, Shinas, 28/1/2022.

<sup>73</sup> A. R. (22 years old), author interview, Liwa, 19/2/2021.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Kh. N. (27 years old), author interview, Shinas, 28/1/2022.

<sup>76</sup> Numerous studies and laboratory experiments have shown that frankincense contains antiseptic and therapeutic substances. On a project to extract a substance from frankincense that can be used to treat cancer, see: "Interview with Dr. Ahmed bin Sulaiman al-Harassi, Assistant Dean for Studies and Scientific Research at the University of Nizwa," YouTube, 11/5/2013, accessed on 5/21/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/45iFj8o>

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> M. K. (30 years old), author interview, Sohar, 19/3/2020.

<sup>79</sup> Sh. F. (30 years old), author interview, Al-Suwaiq, 21/10/2021.

<sup>80</sup> "Al-Rawahi: The products manufactured by 'Al-Asliya Integrated Enterprises' have undergone extensive quality-assurance testing," *Al-Reyahi*, 3/1/2017, accessed on 1/5/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3huARiT>

He justifies this industrial approach to frankincense based on scientific research which show that frankincense contains components that “remove all ulcers, whether internal or external, by being drunk or applied topically.”<sup>81</sup>

Omanis use frankincense as an insect repellent and household disinfectant. Noting these uses, manufacturing companies have “produced solutions that kill cockroaches and other household pests. Unlike chemical pesticides, these frankincense extract-based solutions are natural, safe substances that do not cause health problems for humans and are environmentally friendly”.<sup>82</sup> However, Omanis have acquired an olfactory taste that goes beyond the material functions of frankincense to give its aroma a spiritual and aesthetic dimension that manifests itself in their daily practices. Thus, they cense their homes regularly, noting that frankincense serves as an “air freshener,” and that it “restores the spirit” and “soothes the heart”.

### 3. Oils for Daubing, Wiping, and Massaging

Most of the interviewees stated that frankincense oil is used for therapeutic purposes, such as treating wounds, infections and skin conditions, and for massages to help a person relax before bedtime. One respondent said: “When I apply frankincense oil, that’s it – all the fatigue goes away”.<sup>83</sup> Another stated: “Frankincense oil is quite useful for massaging a patient’s body, as it has a healing power that generates relaxation and refreshment”.<sup>84</sup> Another added: “When I start to feel uncomfortable from sitting too long at the computer, I do a massage with frankincense oil, and the pain goes away. It’s excellent for muscles and joints. I tell you this from experience”.<sup>85</sup>

One of the respondents revealed the symbolic aspect of this practice, saying: “A person should rub down with frankincense oil at night. If they do this, nothing can come near them.”<sup>86</sup> He means that rubbing with frankincense oil alleviates pain and brings about an overall sense of relief.<sup>87</sup> However, this relief relates not only to the body, but also to the spirit, because it “provides spiritual refreshment and renewed vitality”.<sup>88</sup> Commenting on the magical effect of frankincense oil, one respondent said:<sup>89</sup> “It’s a known piece of wisdom among us that if you plant a neem tree in front of your house and rub yourself with frankincense oil, no one who practices black magic can come near you”.<sup>90</sup> As for respondents who had been through childbirth, they advised the pregnant woman to prepare frankincense oil for the postpartum period, and to massage herself and her newborn every night,<sup>91</sup> due to their belief in the power of frankincense oil to protect against all harm.

These purificatory dimensions of frankincense oil have been influenced by the ancient myths and beliefs that once prevailed in the Arabian Peninsula, particularly “rituals of anointment”<sup>92</sup> conducted by Christians under Islamic rule,<sup>93</sup> or the act of rubbing with scented oil as a rite of passage in many cultures. For example, kings could not be crowned in ancient Egypt, clerics could not be ordained as priests, and

<sup>81</sup> Hijazi, p. 136.

<sup>82</sup> “Al-Rawahi.”

<sup>83</sup> A. Q. (54 years old), author interview, Al-Suwaiq 21/10/2021.

<sup>84</sup> M. M. (29 years old), author interview, Al-Suwaiq 21/10/2021.

<sup>85</sup> A. Q. (54 years old), author interview, Al-Suwaiq 21/10/2021.

<sup>86</sup> M. K. (60 years old), author interview. Al-Khaboura, 24/9/2021.

<sup>87</sup> Hijazi, p. 25.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>89</sup> A shade-producing tree which the respondents took care to plant in front of their homes in the belief that it protects against sorcery, jinn, and demons.

<sup>90</sup> Z. Sh. (54 years old), author interview, Sohar, 13/12/2020.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> See: “*Sirr al-Masha min al-Ihdāth ilā al-Ta’šīl*,” [Arabic] in Hamza, pp. 503-528.

<sup>93</sup> The Church concerns itself with the sacrament of anointing with holy oil, a rite which qualifies “the Christian convert to attain the sacrament of the Eucharist and membership in the Church [...] The Eastern Church calls it an anointing, because the newly baptized are anointed after their baptism with fragrant oil”. Ibid., p. 504.

the dead could not cross over to the other world without perfumed oils.<sup>94</sup> Belief in the efficacy of sacred perfumed oils is not unique to Omanis or other inhabitants of the Arabian Peninsula. Rather, it is a universal phenomenon whose roots can be traced to ancient times, where “anointing with aromatic oils was a basic requirement for purification and holiness”.<sup>95</sup> Indeed, anthropological studies have shown that this practice extended in antiquity to “primitive races, where people would saturate their bodies with scented oils, believing that their bodies had come to share in these oils’ supernatural properties”.<sup>96</sup>

#### 4. Crushing and Grinding

This research also documents the advantages of using “*na’imi* frankincense,” a local term for frankincense which has been crushed or ground. The uses of *na’imi* frankincense vary based on what it is mixed with and how it is crushed or ground. Numerous respondents noted the efficacy of ground frankincense in making a variety of concoctions. For beautification, for example, a soap is made from ground frankincense mixed with roses or olive oil.<sup>97</sup> For example, one respondent preferred *makhmariyya*,<sup>98</sup> made from *na’imi* frankincense, as it is beneficial for the scalp in her opinion. As one of the respondents remembered: “Baluchi women make a mixture for the hair from frankincense powder that contains *’itr al-ḥaṭab*<sup>99</sup> and *’itr al-ṭūla*.<sup>100</sup> A little of it is dissolved in water to kill fungi”.<sup>101</sup> Some uses of crushed frankincense are based on therapeutic methods derived from folk medicine to treat reproductive health issues. As one respondent said:

Some Baluchis use frankincense in a mixture for women who can’t get pregnant. They mix frankincense with ingredients such as turmeric and salt, forming little beads that a woman places in her vagina five days before her period and three days after her period.<sup>102</sup>

However, the most common use of ground frankincense is its mix with various aromatic substances, especially resin, to burn as incense.

#### 5. Chewing

The interviews revealed that frankincense is used as a delicious chewing gum, which is beneficial because of its mucilaginous properties and ability to disinfect the mouth and treat gum and teeth diseases. This custom dates back to early human history. For example, women in ancient Egypt would “chew frankincense in order to perfume their breath”.<sup>103</sup> Respondents chewed gum to get rid of unpleasant odours and treat ulcerations of the tongue or gums, firmly believing in the disinfectant and antiseptic properties of frankincense. As one respondent said: “I buy frankincense gum from Salalah and put it in the refrigerator. My sons chew it, and their wives really love it”.<sup>104</sup> Some Omani university students enter the examination hall chewing frankincense, which they view as a sedative that reduces tension.

<sup>94</sup> “*Sirr al-Masha min al-Ihdāth ilā al-Ta’šīl*,” p. 530.

<sup>95</sup> Hijazi, p. 26.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> This is based on the testimony of a respondent who mentioned the many frankincense-based soaps available at beauty salons.

<sup>98</sup> *Makhmariyya* is a mixture of aromatic substances prevalent in Oman and the Gulf in general, some of which are for the body and others for the hair. After being mixed, the aromatic substances are kneaded into an ointment or fragrant cream, of which there are many types depending on the ingredients used. It is usually made in the home.

<sup>99</sup> *’itr al-ḥaṭab* is a perfume extracted from aged agarwood.

<sup>100</sup> The term *’itr al-ṭūla* refers to any of a number of types of perfume, including musk, frankincense, and lotus, which are purchased by a measure known as a *ṭūla*.

<sup>101</sup> Z. Sh. (54 years old), author interview, Sohar, 13/2/2020.

<sup>102</sup> S. M. (60 years old), author interview, Sohar, 11/12/2020.

<sup>103</sup> Muhammad Fayyad & Samir Adib, *al-Jamāl wa-l-tajmīl fī Miṣr al-Qadīma* [Arabic] (Cairo: Dar Nahdat Misr for Printing and Distribution, 2000), p. 114.

<sup>104</sup> Z. Sh. (54 years old), author interview, Sohar, 13/2/2020.

## 6. Burning

Burning and censing with frankincense are the most common frankincense-related practices in Omani society. All respondents, male and female, of all ages and social strata, stated that they engage in the practice of censing on a regular basis. Frankincense may be burned raw, as is required on occasions such as childbirth. On other daily or festive occasions, it can be mixed with aromatic ingredients such as roses, aloeswood, sandalwood, and musk. It can also be dipped in various types of aromatic oils which cause its colour to change. If dipped in saffron oil, frankincense will turn yellowish; if dipped in lavender, it will turn violet; and if dipped in aloeswood oil, it will turn brown and be referred to as *masqī* frankincense.

## Censing with Frankincense in Oman: Representations, Ritualization, and Persistence

Anthropologists have defined ritual as a set of “rules by which a group’s practices are regulated, either through observances which it considers sacred, or through the organization of its social and symbolic activities in accordance with observances carried out in regular times and places”.<sup>105</sup> With this definition, anthropology has decoupled ritual from the religious sphere, which once bound it to religious observances, thereby expanding it to include worldly practices with their various component activities. “From an anthropological perspective, humans are ritualistic beings par excellence, just as they are symbolic beings”.<sup>106</sup> As such, they adhere to various repeated, organized movements, actions, and statements that are common to all the individuals with whom they interact, and which impact most of their collective and individual practices. These movements and actions come in different forms commensurate with the purposes that prompt social actors to engage in them.<sup>107</sup> The approach adopted in this study to classify practices related to censing with frankincense as rituals is based on their prevalence and regularity in Oman. Notwithstanding certain differences in timing and motivation, all interviewees engage in censing with frankincense.

Frankincense censing practices are subject to a set of rules “which are translated by the group’s verbal and kinetic symbols, thus achieving the goals of communication and satisfying basic symbolic needs”.<sup>108</sup> These practices are regulated according to conditions, criteria, and rules without which symbolic exchange could not be achieved. The manner in which censing is practiced in the context of “recurring dramatic scenarios that vary depending on different modes of interaction and cultural systems”<sup>109</sup> is also identified. Anthropologists have classified rituals into multiple types and patterns, including religious, magical, and worldly; individual and collective; and daily and ceremonial.<sup>110</sup> However, closer reflection on practices related to censing with frankincense reveals that this ritual is complex as all these classifications overlap. As such, this ritual is based on both individual and collective practices that are undertaken in specific contexts which provide those who engage in it with symbolic meanings. The symbolic effectiveness of these practices is based on the belief in the power of frankincense, and on the fact that these practices exhibit the key features of ritual, namely, repetition, participation, and regularity, as well as the symbolic power related to each of these features.

<sup>105</sup> Munsif al-Mahwashī, “al-Ṭuqūs wa-Jabarūt al-Rumūz: Qirā’a fī al-Wazā’if wa-l-dalālāt Ḍimna Mujtama’ Mutahawwil,” [Arabic] *Insāniyāt*, vol. 14, no. 49 (September 2010), pp. 15-43.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>107</sup> Segalen Martine, *Rites et rituels contemporains* (Paris: Éditions Nathan, 1998), p. 8; Mitchell Dinkin, *Dictionary of Sociology*, Ihsan Muhammad al-Hassan (trans.) (Beirut: Dar al-Tali’a for Printing and Publishing, 1986), p. 176.

<sup>108</sup> al-Mahwashī, p. 18.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>110</sup> For more on the concept of ritual and its role, approaches thereto and classifications thereof, see: Jean Maisonneuve, *Les conduits rituelles*, Coll. Que sais-je?, 3rd ed. (Paris: P.U.F., 1999), pp. 1-19.

The question then arises: How are these features manifested in practices related to censuring with frankincense, and in what meanings and symbols?

## 1. Repetition

Observations and the interviews reveal that, as the theory of ritual would predict, Omanis repeat the action of censuring with frankincense on successive occasions according to a precise time distribution.<sup>111</sup> Respondents perform the ritual of censuring with frankincense at differing levels of frequency, which can be classified into three types according to Alexander Haggerty Krappe's division of rituals<sup>112</sup>:

### a. Rituals Related to Hours, Days, and Seasons

All respondents linked the act of censuring to a specific time, whether it was a day or a specific hour, mostly morning and sunset. One of the respondents said: "Frankincense is always in the house, which we cense with frankincense every morning and right before sunset. Frankincense is a basic essential in Omani homes".<sup>113</sup> Another said:

Frankincense is necessary every day, morning and sunset. When we are distressed or sense that someone envies us, there has to be frankincense with the mixture for treating envy. That's right. The women make it, and we all know the recipe. It contains alum, rue, and black seed, depending on the family.<sup>114</sup>

People who cense with frankincense consider it a disinfectant that can protect them and bring blessing. Despite repeated mention of the two times, morning and evening, there is a consensus on evening, sundown in particular, as the time most closely associated with the repetition of this practice. One of the respondents said: "We cense the house every day after sundown, because it is a custom, and besides, it's a good disinfectant".<sup>115</sup> Another respondent said: "Frankincense is necessary every day, especially at sundown. It's a necessity for us Omanis".<sup>116</sup> In addition, observations confirm a consensus on sundown as the time when censuring is repeated. During sundown, the smell of frankincense rises and emanates from every house in Omani neighbourhoods. What, then, is the secret behind adherence to specific times for the repeated act of censuring with frankincense? And what does it symbolize?

As noted by al-Mahwashi, this collective involvement of individual families and the entire neighbourhood in inhaling the scent of frankincense generates a sense of purity and sacredness in the collective imagination and creates an excited mental state accompanied by intense feelings of community.<sup>117</sup> This sense of excitement and community can only be achieved in the context of a collective experience at a specific time and place characterized by the warmth of the home. This conclusion is supported by anthropological and sociological studies which show that organized and joint practices convey a sense of "living together, achieving organic unity, renewing ties, and contributing to the harmony that builds up the collective body".<sup>118</sup> The ritual of censuring with frankincense enables members of the community to rekindle their sense of unity as they inhale the scent together. This brings with it a symbolic gratification, which "further confirms the nature of individuals as social beings".<sup>119</sup> Indeed, there is no society that does not

<sup>111</sup> Al-Mahwashi, p. 20.

<sup>112</sup> Alexander Haggerty Krappe, *The Science of Folk-Lore*, Rusdhi Salih (trans.) (Cairo: Dar al-Katib al-Arabi for Printing and Publishing, 1967), p. 417.

<sup>113</sup> Z. Sh. (54 years old), author interview, Saham, 12/3/2020.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Kh. N. (27 years old), author interview, Shinas, 28/1/2022.

<sup>116</sup> A. N. (46 years old), author interview, Liwa, 19/2/2021.

<sup>117</sup> Al-Mahwashi, p. 24.

<sup>118</sup> Siham al-Dabbabi, *Ādāb al-Sulūk fī al-Turāth al-'Arabī* [Arabic] (Tunisia: The Tunisian Book House, 2021), p. 9.

<sup>119</sup> Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life: The Totemic System in Australia*, Randa Baath (trans.) (Doha/Beirut: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2019), p. 483.



need to strengthen its collective consciousness.<sup>120</sup> The fact that the time of this ritual coincides with the evening *adhān*, or call to prayer, further increases its symbolic significance and the sense of sacredness it arouses. As one respondent said: “The sundown call to prayer and the frankincense both reinforce the warmth of the home after a day of hard work outside the house”.<sup>121</sup>

The ritual's repetition at this time, symbolic as it is of sacredness and togetherness, also creates an “impression of strength and confidence”.<sup>122</sup> The mother of a 15-year-old boy said: “My children really love the smell of frankincense. My son gets dizzy if we don't burn frankincense in the morning before he goes to school”.<sup>123</sup> This educational element of the ritual and the associated perceptions help to cement it in the individual and collective memory. Anthropologists explain individuals' yearning to repeat such ritualistic practices, which imbue their daily lives with an individual and collective order, as a desire to establish an intimate connection between their daily existence and the world of their ancestors.<sup>124</sup>

Sundown maybe chosen for these practices because of the protection people seek for themselves, their homes, and their broader environments at this hour, when “the forces of the daytime turn into forces of darkness, as a result of which this hour signals danger”.<sup>125</sup> One respondent said: “I really feel that it purifies the place every day. We need to burn frankincense before the sundown prayer. Then automatically the house becomes clean, and it drives out evil spirits”.<sup>126</sup> Another respondent added: “We burn frankincense two to three times a day. It's necessary in the morning and at sunset, since it purifies the house and keeps evildoers away”.<sup>127</sup> These testimonies show the purificatory dimension of the frankincense censuring ritual based on the symbolic removal of “the ill effects of contact with ritual uncleanness that occurs, whether through touch, sight, or even speech”.<sup>128</sup>

However, the interviews show that this practice is particularly obligatory on certain days. One respondent said: “On Fridays, we have to burn frankincense”.<sup>129</sup> Another said: “Since I was a child, I've known it was necessary to burn frankincense on Thursday night. I didn't know why, but ever since my father was alive, this is what we've done”.<sup>130</sup> In the Arab Islamic collective imagination in general, and the Omani collective imagination in particular, Friday is associated with the most important Islamic ritual, the Friday prayer. Thus, the religious dimension of censuring is evident, as it intersects with one of the sacred rituals in Islam, one that gives believers a sense of comfort as they find themselves in a state of transcendence and purity, both material and spiritual.

Most striking is the intensity of Omani involvement in these repeated practices in a society whose activities have undergone major changes due to the effects of the industrial and technological revolution.<sup>131</sup> Some anthropologists and sociologists have offered an explanation for this phenomenon, the gist of which is that in the face of the rapid changes to which societies are now subject, an adherence to ritual practices serves as a tool “to fill the gap and correct the imbalances resulting from said changes by resisting the overwhelming tendency to hurtle forward in a continuous linear fashion”.<sup>132</sup> This is a functional explanation which may need more through theoretical research for which this study may serve as an introduction.

<sup>120</sup> Al-Mahwashi, p. 27.

<sup>121</sup> M. A. (33 years old), author interview, Liwa, 19/2/2021.

<sup>122</sup> Durkheim, p. 483.

<sup>123</sup> J. Sh. (54 years old), author interview, Sohar, 13/2/2020.

<sup>124</sup> Jean Cazaneuve, *Sociologie du rite* (Paris: P.U.F, 1971), p. 28.

<sup>125</sup> Siham al-Dabbabi al-Misawi, *al-Wilāda fī Tūnis: al-Ṭuqūs wa-l-Rumūz* [Arabic] (Tunisia: Dar al-Junūb, 2021), p. 19.

<sup>126</sup> A. H. (46 years old), author interview, Shinas, 28/1/2022.

<sup>127</sup> Kh. K. (62 years old), author interview, Shinas, 28/1/2022.

<sup>128</sup> Abdullah Ibn Muammar, “al-Anthrūbiyyā wa-l-Ṭuqūs,” [Arabic] *al-Fikr al-Mutawassīfī*, vol. 8, no. 1 (2019), p. 153.

<sup>129</sup> M. A. (33 years old), author interview, Liwa, 19/2/2021.

<sup>130</sup> A. N. (46 years old), author interview, Liwa, 19/2/2021.

<sup>131</sup> A variety of inherited practices in Oman have been studied by numerous researchers with a focus on the past-present dichotomy in Omani society. See, for example: Amal Sachedina, *Cultivating the Past, Living the Modern: The Politics of Time in the Sultanate of Oman* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2021).

<sup>132</sup> Al-Mahwashi, p. 39.

### b. Rituals Surrounding Birth and Marriage

The data collected reveals that frankincense is present in most rites of passage, particularly birth, marriage, circumcision, and death, with some differences among practices as per occasion. These rites are major human milestones that undoubtedly call for ceremonial ritual. The Omani women interviewed only use frankincense in their birth rituals, and throughout the postpartum phase. One respondent stated: “One of our customs is to celebrate the newborn and take care of the new mother by burning frankincense for forty days and nights after sunrise and before sunset [...]”.<sup>133</sup> Another said:

Most of the time we use frankincense after childbirth to cense the place and the baby's clothes to protect the child and the mother from envy and the evil eye. The house is censed before sunset so that it will be a safe, burden-free environment for them for forty days.<sup>134</sup>

The frankincense ritual following childbirth takes place according to formal standards and rules which help to support and enhance its symbolic effectiveness. Among these rules is the insistence that frankincense be authentic and pure, unmixed with any other perfume. For forty days, the mother and her newborn inhale nothing but pure frankincense, which can protect them in this delicate state.

The testimonies of women who have undergone childbirth reveal a deeply rooted belief that guides their behaviour as though it were an unbreakable law, namely, the belief in the protective power of frankincense. Frankincense and its scent are also a sign announcing and confirming the occurrence of a birth in the neighbourhood. One respondent said: “I know when there's a newborn in the neighbourhood from the fragrance of rue and frankincense”.<sup>135</sup> Regarding frankincense's powerful presence during circumcision, another respondent said: “Frankincense is necessary so that no one will be envious”.<sup>136</sup> During a marriage celebration, it complements other aromatic ingredients that go into wedding incense. One respondent said: “We put frankincense with all kinds of aloeswood to stabilize it”.<sup>137</sup>

### c. Rituals for Warding Off Harm

Many of the interviews reveal that the lives of the respondents are closely connected to the world of the supernatural, and to a deeply rooted belief that they share this world with unseen beings. Therefore, they attribute most of the visible and invisible diseases that afflict them to unseen worlds. Moreover, frankincense is the principal means of protection and the key tool to ward off the harm caused by practitioners of black magic, jinn, and demons. One female respondent said:

We use frankincense as a treatment when someone has something like the evil eye or [suffers the effects of] envy, and we add alum to it; it is also burned for its scent during black magic practices to summon jinn and demons.<sup>138</sup>

According to the respondents, incantations are used for prevention or treatment by means of certain Quranic verses or litanies of remembrance recited in the morning and evening, and which may differ according to the type of illness or injury. A person may perform an incantation for themselves with the help of a member of the Islamic clergy. In either case, frankincense constitutes an essential element of the incantation ceremony. Frankincense is often given to a clergy person to recite some Quranic verses over it, after which it can be censed. One respondent said:

<sup>133</sup> Kh. K. (62 years old), author interview, Shinas, 28/1/2022.

<sup>134</sup> M. A. (33 years old), author interview, Liwa, 19/2/2021.

<sup>135</sup> M. A. (33 years old), author interview, Liwa, 19/2/2021.

<sup>136</sup> Z. Sh. (45 years old), author interview, Sohar, 8/10/2021.

<sup>137</sup> N. M. (28 years old), author interview, Saham, 3/12/2020.

<sup>138</sup> A. H. (38 years old), author interview, Al-Suwaiq, 21/10/2021.

We buy Dhakar frankincense specially to protect people from diseases. We soak it in hot water and drink it at any time – it offers many benefits. When we want to protect somebody from the evil eye, we cense the person with frankincense, preferably someone will have recited the Qur'an over it [...] So we take it to the sheikh, who makes a protective amulet based on the Qur'an, and we cense with the frankincense.<sup>139</sup>

The ritual of censing with frankincense is governed by a preoccupation with unseen powers which determines the time at which it is performed and its verbal, material, and kinetic components. Whenever individuals feel tense or fearful of evil forces, they resort to the use of frankincense for prevention and protection. Anthropologists have confirmed that ritual practices are reinforced “when the group’s anxiety intensifies, especially when its members are suffering confusion and turmoil”.<sup>140</sup> Through repetition, frankincense-burning practices “consecrate the permanence of the event and make it possible to recover the mythical past that brought them into existence”.<sup>141</sup> This repetition of the rules governing the practice of censing points to a predilection for reliving the past, reminiscent of what Mircea Eliade referred to as “the eternal return” to the time of origins, to the time of beginnings.<sup>142</sup>

## 2. Participation

The ritual of censing with frankincense has two dimensions: individual and collective. The individual dimension relates to practices and special situations that require individuals to engage in censing with frankincense without adhering to a collective time such as moments of anxiety or need. However, what is relevant is the collective experience, when a large number of people cense with frankincense at the same time, it acquires “social expressive value”.<sup>143</sup> As one respondent mentioned:

Every Thursday night we cense with frankincense. My mother is very conscientious about this weekly custom because she says frankincense purifies the house. The neighbours also cense their house with frankincense every Thursday night, especially with the Hawjari frankincense, which they like very much, and when they do so, we smell it.<sup>144</sup>

Thus, members of the family are involved in inhaling the scent of frankincense. This goes beyond individuals to Omani society, since the ritual also originates in common cultural perceptions. One of the respondents stated: “When I travel, I take frankincense with me in my bag, as I always like to smell it”.<sup>145</sup> Another said: “My children love frankincense, and when they travel, even to study, they take some with them”.<sup>146</sup>

This cultural consensus indicates that the shared olfactory experience constitutes the most important element of censing with frankincense. The participation of individuals in inhaling the scent of frankincense is like an “olfactory banquet” at which they gather, and where food is replaced by the aroma “consumed” together at sunset. This shared act of consumption has clear implications. According to Durkheim, “communal meals create an artificial kinship between those who attend them [...] and food can produce the same effects as a common descent”.<sup>147</sup>

The field research shows that sunset is the most popular time for censing with frankincense for people from all walks of life. After a busy day, everyone is united by inhaling the scent of frankincense despite

<sup>139</sup> S. M. (60 years old), author interview, Sohar, 11/12/2020.

<sup>140</sup> Al-Mahwash, p. 31.

<sup>141</sup> Noureddine Tawalbi, *al-Dīn wa-l-Ṭuqūs wa-l-Ṭaghayyurāt* [Arabic] (Algeria: University Publications Bureau, 1988), p. 34.

<sup>142</sup> See: Mircea Eliade, *Le mythe de l'éternel retour* (Paris: Folio Essais, 2001).

<sup>143</sup> Tawaheri Miloud, *al-Muqaddas al-Sha'bi: Tamaththulāt, Marja' iyyāt, wa Mumārasāt* [Arabic] (Beirut: Dar al-Rawafid al-Thaqafiyya, 2016), p. 198.

<sup>144</sup> M. A. (33 years old), author interview, Liwa, 19/2/2021.

<sup>145</sup> A. S. (22 years old), author interview, Saham, 12/3/2020.

<sup>146</sup> Y. Sh. (62 years old), author interview, Al-Suwaiq, 21/10/2021.

<sup>147</sup> Durkheim, p. 438.

the many social differences among them. It serves to purify from all forms of contamination with the seen and the unseen, while bringing households and entire neighbourhoods together, in a unity that signals the safety, warmth, and intimacy of home. Thus, the smell of frankincense creates a sense of belonging and collective togetherness. The fragrant smell of frankincense emanating from every Omani home before sunset is reminiscent of a call for solidarity. These are significant moments which charge the individual and collective alike with a sense of Omani identity, in which relationships are renewed, differences are healed, and breaches are mended. This may be a form of social control that binds memory to the scents of one's ancestors. Seen in light of the findings of anthropologists in their study of ritual, Omanis' daily practice of censuring with frankincense at sunset help us to understand this eternally repeated rite as a tool that enables them to cope with a present racked with crises generated by the contradictions of an ever-spreading cultural globalization.<sup>148</sup>

## Conclusion

With a focus on frankincense-related practices in Oman, this study traced their historical, mythological, and religious origins, concluding that they are rooted in the myths and beliefs of ancient Arabian Peninsula. The centrality of frankincense and related practices in Omanis' lives is notable. These practices are not arbitrary, but they are rather a series of practices that have taken on the features of organized rituals, including repetition, participation, regularity, complexity, and powerful symbolism. The analysis of these rituals revealed their efficacy and symbolism in the imagination of the Omani community, whose members stated unequivocally that the regular practice of burning frankincense, censuring one's clothes and body, combats distress, anxiety, and illness, and drives out evil spirits.

These findings are merely an introduction to a complex Omani culture that calls for further investigation. Ironically, Oman has always been a society of maritime commerce open to all foreign societies, both influencing and being influenced by them. Today, the impacts of these external influences have grown due to commercial and political globalization. However, Omani society, or at least the microcosm thereof represented by the research participants, has demonstrated a remarkable ability to knead these influences in its cultural sphere, such that it preserves its artistic and aesthetic heritage as it relates to the sense of smell and the aroma of things and people. At the same time, however, this society develops its heritage by internalizing the new. Thus, there are perfumes that derive their scents from frankincense, houses that eliminates insects by frankincense-based manufactured substances that are environmentally friendly. Individualism promoted by the social division of labour is being resisted with an olfactory banquet featuring the aroma of frankincense morning and evening. Similarly, souls racked with tension due to the breakneck speed of modern life are being calmed by a variety of frankincense mixtures. From an anthropological perspective, all of this presents a delectable array of future research possibilities.

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<sup>148</sup> Many researchers have relied on the Omani model for the study of the tradition-modernization dichotomy, viewing this model as a unique and successful combination of tradition and modernization. See: Linda Pappas Funsch, *Oman Reborn: Balancing Tradition and Modernization* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

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