



Gulf Research Centre Cambridge

Knowledge for All

Workshop 8

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Cultural Heritage in the Gulf – Emerging Trends, Identity Politics, Challenges and Concerns

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Abstract

The workshop aims to address the topic of cultural heritage, national identity and State practice in the Gulf region from an interdisciplinary perspective. Cultural heritage is increasingly playing a role in the formation and preservation of identity narratives in Gulf States, including nation-building narratives, and cultural policy making initiatives aiming at identity preservation. The workshop will examine the correlation between heritage and identity, as well as between cultural practices, politics and applicable legal frameworks. It will further investigate the evolving relationship of Gulf states and societies to cultural heritage (museums, private collections, etc.) in the context of sociocultural, economic and political developments in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).

The workshop will focus on three main areas:

- The politicized role of cultural heritage in shaping overlapping and sometimes conflicting identities at the regional and local level.
- The effectiveness of the existing legal framework protecting tangible and intangible heritage in Gulf countries, and potential for reform.
- The growing problem of trafficking in cultural goods, terrorism finance, and changing regional attitudes to it.

Objectives and Scope of Workshop

Cultural heritage both material and immaterial is an important representation of a nation's cultural diversity and vital to national identity building strategies. An identity that is expressed by association -- to values, places, and people and tied to memory and power. Within Gulf societies in particular this identity has been undergoing rapid transformation in the past two decades, reshaped and reframed and in some cases redefined to match the ongoing social, economic and political change that these societies are also experiencing. Yet this heritage is increasingly coming under threat from ongoing regional conflicts resulting in an unprecedented surge in looting and trafficking in cultural heritage materials throughout the region. Furthermore, social media has led to the exponential growth of this illicit trade of antiquities where an international network of traffickers, traders and terrorists utilize online platforms for the auctioning and sale of cultural goods.

This workshop seeks to address a number of questions pertaining to the evolving relationship of Gulf states and societies with cultural heritage (museums, private collections, site, monuments etc). These include:

- How does cultural heritage affect the construction and determination of national identity in the Gulf region?
- How do different Gulf states use heritage for politicization, legitimization, and monetization?
- How are issues of decolonization vs politicization addressed by cultural heritage institutions in the region?
- What are the motivations, aims, purposes, goals of museums in the region?
- How is education contributing to raising awareness on the sociopolitical and economic relevance of heritage?
- What is the economic contribution, impact and benefit of cultural sites to tourism industries?
- What role are women playing in shaping national identity narratives through cultural heritage management and preservation; are women creating a powerful cultural hub in Qatar and elsewhere in the region?

- How deep are the legal challenges faced by the Gulf states in identity shaping, and maintain structures of equality and inequality?
- What type of ‘identity stresses’ and strains can be identified in the Gulf cultural landscape, and how do they translate into legal challenges?
- How can Gulf States manage to implement more efficiently the various cultural heritage treaties which they are parties?
- What are the challenges that Gulf States are facing in relation to heritage protection and preservation?
- What legal challenges can be identified in relation to fighting the phenomenon of illicit trafficking of cultural goods, artworks and antiquities by Gulf States? What encompasses the plethora of challenges faced by Gulf states which are interested in the protection and ethical restoration of cultural heritage sites?

Context

Arab Gulf states in the region have illustrated and symbolized their national collective identities with different representational strategies within their museums and cultural institutions. Across the Gulf region, numerous museums are opening, many of them exhibiting different themes and collections reflecting diverse agendas. While some museums serve to project the extreme wealth of their patrons, “vanity projects”, others have more substantial agendas such as capturing the essence of the past or contributing to ongoing identity narratives. Numerous museums in the region, attempt to capture this vestigial tribal past usually through a somewhat romanticized version of that past life. However, there seems to be a conscious effort to keep away from the negative aspects that life as well or at the very least present a sanitized carefully curated version of it. Many museums in region strive to achieve a balance between sanitizing the past, capturing its tribal essence, and not wanting to be reminded of the associated negative practices and hardship.

It should therefore come as no surprise to us that relationship between national museums and nationalism in the Gulf countries have generally framed this process as a top-down process, led by the state and the museum together. In addition, the selection of identities and narratives represented in GCC museums are always influenced by the state’s political agenda, and by social and cultural changes in the country concerned. Narratives promoted therefore tend to be highly politicized.

Local laws too are generally exclusive of community participation. Heritage selection processes are generally reserved to the ruling elites, perpetuating a model of extremely centralized form of cultural governance. The lack of awareness of the politicized representations of national identity sometimes stressed by museums, often results in representations remaining exclusionary.

Finally, the growing trend in acquiring cultural property, antiquities, and other collectible materials, has brought a number of legal and ethical issues to the fore in recent years. These include the efficacy of existing legal frameworks and the adoption/implementation of international laws and conventions protecting cultural heritage in the region.

Contribution the Workshop Will make to the Field of Gulf Studies

The key priority of this event is to offer a comprehensive view of recent sociocultural, legal, economic and political developments in the GCC with regards to the cultural heritage sector. The participants will identify different ways in which governments and institutions (both public and private) have used cultural heritage to promote political agendas, shape the public discourse on national and other identities and legitimize their rule, taking into account law, policy, and politics. Museums and heritage sites across the region in particular have been

heavily relied on to portray local history and addressed issues of identity in a manner deemed appropriate by rulers and governments. Yet these politicized representations of national identity are often outside the lived experiences of most citizens in the region, including many nationals of these states. A deeper understanding of this phenomenon and its wider impact on society as a whole needs to be better understood and investigated in light of ongoing stresses and challenges the region increasingly faces.

There are also numerous ethico-legal issues and challenges pertaining to the acquisitions of museums in the region with recent scandals breaking out regarding the purchase of trafficked looted items from active conflict zones. This workshop offers the opportunity to examine emerging looting and trafficking patterns of cultural heritage materials in the region, their connection to ongoing armed conflicts, and ways to address them through legal/legislative means.

Looking ahead, this workshop will also consider cultural heritage initiatives and explore future research projects and ways to engage academic communities in protecting, promoting, and interpreting national heritage sites in the Gulf region.

Draft Workshop Agenda with Potential Paper Topics Outlined

Part 1: The Politics of Cultural Heritage in the Gulf

- The politicization of cultural heritage.
- Role of museums in the region: motivations, aims, purposes, goals.
- Decolonization vs politicization of heritage sites and museums.
- The economic contribution, impact, and benefit of heritage to tourism industries
- The politics underlying the problem of trafficking of cultural goods and manuscripts in the region

Part 2: Heritage and Identity in Gulf States and Societies

- The issue of identity, and how cultural heritage affects the construction and determination of a national identity in the region.
- The role of museums in shaping and determining identity.
- Local architecture patterns and the preservation of identity narratives.
- The role of women in leading and shaping national identity narratives through cultural heritage management and preservation.
- Awareness raising and Education: the sociopolitical and economic relevance of heritage.

Part 3: Legal Challenges for Cultural Heritage in the GCC Region

- Legal frameworks in Gulf States, maintenance and safeguarding of tangible heritage, relevant challenges and potential for reform.
- Legal aspects and best practices in relation to the acquisition and purchasing of cultural goods and antiquities.
- Legal challenges in relation to heritage protection and preservation.
- Legal challenges related to looting and trafficking, as well as return and restitution.
- Terrorism funding and money laundering through trafficking of cultural goods.
- Trafficking of cultural heritage materials on social media platforms and social media regulation.
- Human Rights aspects of identity narratives in heritage preservation and safeguarding.

Publication Plan

The proceedings of the workshop will be transformed in the collective volume published in Palgrave MacMillan publishing house. The expected length of the volume is between 80 and 100 thousand words. The submission of the first drafts of the chapters to the book editor is expected on 30 September 2023. After the editors' revision, the authors will be given a month to make necessary corrections. The final drafts of the chapters are to be submitted by 15 December 2023. The final typescript is expected to be delivered to the publisher by 1 February 2024. This book is designed for a wide English-reading audience that will include researchers and academics interested in the topic of the GCC socio-economic and political development with a specific focus on the transformation of the Gulf hydrocarbon economies, social and political landscapes as well as post-doc students interested in GCC foreign and economic policies. The proposed book project also represents one of the first attempts to explain the impact of the COVID on the hydrocarbon economies of the GCC. Potential market competitors are mostly focused on the analysis of the socio-economic and political processes existed prior to the beginning of the pandemic.

Acknowledgement

By submitting this workshop proposal, the workshop directors acknowledge that they have read and agree to abide by the Workshop Director Guidelines and Publication Guidelines.