



Gulf Research Centre Cambridge
Knowledge for All

Workshop 3

Representing the Nation – the Use of Heritage and Museums to Create National Narratives and Identity in the GCC

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Abstract

A review of recent international media coverage of museums in the GCC states would strongly suggest that museums are new institutions in the region housed within a western-styled cultural package, with international collections primarily aimed at attracting tourists. Therefore, national museums have been dismissed as a 21st century phenomenon in the Gulf, though many museums pre-date independence and were tools of social and political cohesion.

This workshop will focus on and investigate the region's manifestation of the 'national museum', its relationships to heritage (collections and festivals), and growing use as a tool to represent and project desired histories, education, soft power, and social cohesion. Museums and other exhibitionary media have increasingly become spaces where the State may present and forge identities through the symbolic use of tangible and intangible culture. The economic growth of the region has allowed for the recent proliferation of museum re-creation and heritage revivalism, which has also contributed to government-highlighted aspects of education and tourism growth. With the importance placed on museums and heritage as part of multiple State's 'future vision' plans, and therefore their use to produce and project political meanings and desired social cohesion, this area of research has wide ranging consequences.

Pertinent aspects for investigation include: purposes and narratives of GCC national museums; relationships to society, culture and government; creation of desired histories; political meanings; impacts of the Arab Spring and governmental changes; how nation is portrayed through exhibitions; purposes of heritage projection; uses of heritage and museums to consolidate and project power.

Description and Rationale

The 1970s saw the emergence and proliferation across the Arabian Peninsula of 'national museums', institutions aimed at creating social cohesion and affiliation to the state within a disparate population. Through the combining and display of history, ethnography, anthropology, archaeology, photography and other media, national museums aimed to project, and actualise, a linear, coherent and stable history of, and for, the population. These museums aimed to create what Benedict Anderson has called an 'imagined community,' a community of people who perceive themselves as part of the new nation that transcended other existing identities of tribe, family, or ruler. Through the creation of a continuity of 'the nation', even including the pre-modern/pre-nation, a national story may be told which appears so authentic as to be inevitable.

The strategic activation and use of material culture as a constructed national identity and history is not new, and has a long background in European museums. Through the use of the legitimising authority of the museum, collected heritage is authenticated and the authority of having value due to the choice to preserve it: "particular ideas of the nation are created and embedded in the exhibitionary forms of a range of cultural practices and institutions, such as tourism, museums, expositions and heritage displays" (Evans 1999: 2).

The aim of this workshop is to investigate why, how, for whom, and to what end, this is occurring in GCC national and heritage museums as well as closely associated exhibitionary sites.

Today, many of those museums are going through re-imagination and are being joined by new museums, all aimed at the projection of national self, both internally (as national cohesion and education) and externally (projection on the international stage) through

predominantly a single didactic authoritative though passive narrative. For some of the GCC states – most notably UAE and Qatar – with high expatriate population numbers, national museums and their exhibitions offer a vehicle for the enhancement of national identity, through a media – the museum – which is understood internationally as both legitimizing and authoritative. Through this meaning-making media the concept of the nation has been activated in order to represent the past, and in some instances the present, at the same time as it is commodified and monetarised for its role within tourism and consumption. The merging of the authoritative ‘museum’ with the idea of identity cohesion has resulted in museums which though named ‘national’ are rather local or regional, such as in the UAE (National Museum of Ras Al Khaimah and the Al Ain National Museum).

Concurrent with the growing use of museums as vehicles for the diffusion of specific histories, is the use of heritage and exhibitionary practices outside the museum, particularly through the proliferation of archaeological digs and sites open to the public, and heritage festivals. Based on GCC citizen attendance numbers, heritage festivals attract far larger numbers than heritage or national museums, which may be attributed to the greater participatory nature of the festivals. Often seen within western literature as homogenous, national identity within each GCC state is not necessarily well established. Heritage – both authentic and created (such as camel racing) – may be a powerful and binding tool for the strengthening of the ‘nation’, as seen in projects such as the UAE 2008 Year of National Identity. Museums idealise certain aspects of the past, Bedouin culture for example, and actively exclude certain histories, people or occurrences, to create narratives of tradition that both encompass and challenge historical reality. Although the museums and heritage exhibitions represent identity creation by consensus, they also reinforce a specific notion of heritage and history that is useful and important to contemporary political power.

Heritage and ‘tradition’ is constantly being redefined, and the use of heritage and museums for political purposes is a primary concern for museum professionals. In the region, it has been suggested that ruling elites attempt “to transform mythologized historical traditions into nationalist symbol[s] in a way that justifies . . . power” (Fromherz 2012: 158). Through the use of internationally understood culturally designated sites, specific and often narrow histories and identities can be represented, and ‘a’ national heritage identity and traditions projected.

Within this workshop the wide-ranging use of these exhibitionary forms of national identity projection within the GCC would be considered for their motivations, implications (current and future), possible historical backgrounds, official and unofficial meanings, and meanings for both the user/visitor and the multiple creators (government, museum, staff, external organisations). Presentations may take a state-specific or multi-state view, and the inclusion of participants from multiple disciplines is encouraged in order to uncover convergences which would not usually occur in subject-specific discussions.

Scholarly Contribution

The representation of the nation via heritage and museums brings together multiple aspects of regional study, including economics, government and politics, international relations, citizenship and population, as well as the more obvious heritage, history, museum, architecture, and socio-cultural aspects. This workshop offers a forum for bringing together contributions that would otherwise not occur within the individual areas of study, which may therefore inform a broad range of subjects.

There exist publications examining the western iteration of the national museum, its founding ideas, histories, and relationships to power, education, identity, and populations (e.g., Boswell & Evans 1999). However, there currently exists no academic research or publications on the relationship between museums, heritage and nationalism in the GCC. The use of Eurocentric research in this area is ineffective and misleading, due to the differences in underlying principles and understandings within the GCC – aspects such as differences in the idea of nation and national, the notion of the ethnic past or ethnics (Smith 1999), the different understanding of the relationships between history and heritage, and the question of which history to support – tribal, emirate. As has been stated, “many contributions to global museological discourse betray an unreflective Eurocentrism, together with a set of implicit developmental assumptions with respect to tradition and modernity, cultural identity and national culture” (Prösler 1996: 23).

In addition to the questions of what it means to be a nation or national in the GCC, there exists little research on the use of heritage, heritage festivals and similar aspects on the formation, projection or understanding of national identity, nor the outcomes or ramifications of this. Further, the studies that do address these categories do so in isolation from one another, rather than across an emirate, country, or the GCC region.

With the current proliferation of national museums (new and re-imagined) and heritage museums, festivals and sites, there is a need for informative, thoughtful and objective research and study of this area, particularly for professionals working in the region and the growing number of subject-related university programs.

Anticipated Papers

This workshop seeks submissions from scholars and researchers, as well as those working in the region’s museums and heritage sites, and postgraduate students. The inclusion of participants from subject areas that may not normally partake in a ‘museum’ discussion – including cultural diplomacy, soft power, cultural tourism, economics, government, and psychology – is also encouraged.

Although research on this area has been conducted, particularly in Europe, submissions should concentrate on the GCC states. Submissions may take a theoretical or historical approach, however the presentation of empirical research and ‘hands-on’ qualitative research is also greatly encouraged. Due to the lack of presentation and publication outlets for museum-related research in the region there exist research projects in the

region with no public release; it is therefore hoped that this workshop will encourage the sharing of existing and on-going research with a broader Gulf Studies audience.

Workshop Director Profiles

Mariam Ibrahim al-Mulla is an art historian, and holds an M.A. in Art History and a Ph.D. in Museum Philosophy. She is a curator at Qatar Museums Authority, having held the position of director of Qatar National Museum (1999-2001), curator at the Orientalist Museum (2001-2003), and curator and member of the Project Group for the Costume and Textile Museum (2003-2005). She has organised and participated in various Qatari cultural exhibitions, locally and overseas. She has presented on heritage, culture and museums, and writes articles for newspapers, journals and books on Qatari culture and heritage. Her published work includes contributions to “Reimagining Museums: Practice in the Arabian Peninsula,” and the forthcoming “Museums and the Material World: Collecting the Arabian Peninsula,” both published by MuseumsEtc.

Pamela Erskine-Loftus has worked in museums for over 15 years and has held senior museum positions including as a curator with Qatar Museums Authority, founding Head of Interpretation and Education at Sharjah Museums Department, UAE, and at the Museum of Modern Art in New York as Manager of the Department of Education. Pamela holds a Ph.D. in Museology in the Arabian Peninsula (ICCHS, University of Newcastle), and a Master’s in Museum Studies (University of Leicester) with a dissertation with distinction on the effects of the 1991 Gulf War on art museums in Kuwait and Iraq. She is the editor of, and contributor to, “Reimagining Museums: Practice in the Arabian Peninsula” (MuseumsEtc., 2013), and “Museums and the Material World: Collecting the Arabian Peninsula” (MuseumsEtc., spring 2014). In 2011 she created the online crowdsource platform MAPcollective (www.mapcollective.org), for sharing resources on museum practice, museology, and museums in the Arabian Peninsula.

Victoria Penziner Hightower is an Assistant Professor at the University of North Georgia—Dahlongega. She received her Ph.D. from Florida State University in 2011 and holds two Master’s Degrees in History (Florida State University, 2004) and Near Eastern Studies (University of Arizona, 2006). Her research focuses on the pearl trade, history, nationalism, and heritage in the UAE. Recent publications include: “Pearls and the Southern Persian/Arabian Gulf: A Lesson in Sustainability,” *Environmental History*, 18, no. 1 (2013): 1-16; “We Were Never Weak in the Old Days”: Gender and Pearling in the Southern Gulf Emirates, 1870-1950, *Liwa: Journal of the National Center for Documentation & Research*, 4, no. 8, (2012): 5-17; and “Pearling and Political Power in the Trucial States, 1850-1950: Debt, Taxes, and Politics,” *Journal of Arabian Studies*, 3, no. 2 (December 2013).

Selected Readings

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