Protection of Tangible and Intangible Cultural Heritage Conference

'Amid ongoing narratives of displacement, how can online archives hold space for oral histories of displaced individuals?'

5th November 2023 12:00
Juan delGado and Sarah Barker
Al Sharq University

First Axis:
The privacy of heritage and possible ways to preserve it

- Studying the cultural peculiarity of a specific region
- The effect of armed conflict on the cultural elements
- Who is responsible for preserving the tangible and intangible heritage

Juan

Good afternoon, everyone, thank you for joining us today. We first want to thank the Al Sharq university for giving Qisetna the opportunity to contribute to this conference and creating the space for people to come together these days to discuss this important subject. It is a privilege for us to be a part of this event and we wish we could be there in person with you all.

I founded Qisetna in London in 2013 in response to the conflict in Syria. The intention of the organisation was to reframe the narrative of those being displaced through the practice of sharing stories. This meant encouraging Syrians of all backgrounds and denominations to capture their memories, producing a rich archive of different stories and memories. These stories are recorded and presented with an awareness of the individual identity, inclusivity, and diversity within the rhetoric of refugee narratives to provide space for the assortment of cultures that have come to physically inhabit Syria. Qisetna has always prioritised providing individuals with the space to explore their own sense of belonging and identity. By building an online platform that invites displaced individuals to share in whatever way they choose, resisting dominant institutional narratives and media stereotypes, the organisation aims to provide a source of collective experience, memories, and stories that can reach displaced individuals wherever they find themselves.

Over the last decade Qisetna has fostered a worldwide community of volunteers brought together with the goal of protecting Syrian oral heritage. Storytelling is a fundamental aspect of Syrian identity and culture which Qisetna hopes to support in their promotion of this international virtual community. As well as recording memories, Qisetna acts as a platform for outreach, advocacy, community involvement and research. This means that we actively contribute to collaborations such as the UNESCO Unite4Heritage project and have also produced our own storytelling workshops. We also feature the work of individual

artists, writers, actors, and others living and working in the diaspora through our InFocus project. The InFocus project has highlighted many different profiles over the past three years during the pandemic by bringing Syrians together remotely for conversations about their pasts and futures. These conversations feature a variety of individuals, from cultural producers like ***Jumana Al-Yasiri*** who curated the first world music festival in Damascus, to ***Hani Al Allaf*** who launched the virtual community Mashrou Wanaqba in 2017.

Qisetna strives to present and protect a platform for those who have been displaced to create and support their own communities both virtually and in person. The work of the organisation has stressed how important it is to protect oral and cultural heritage by involving displaced individuals themselves with the reproduction of their intangible cultural heritage following the widespread damage of many physical heritage sites and loss of collective ritual in the ongoing war. In the light of ongoing current conflict, it is becoming increasingly important to find ways to preserve the voices of current and future fractured and displaced communities.

Sarah

Thank you, Juan. My name is Sarah Barker, and I am a freelance writer, researcher and anthropologist based at Utrecht University in the Netherlands. I have supported Qisetna for almost 3 years by sharing the stories of creative individuals on their webpage and supporting their efforts to bridge into the academic sphere where the topic of cultural heritage becomes more and more important.

As of this week there are recorded to be 114 million people displaced globally. This movement of people, for whichever purpose or cause is a reality of our times. Those who are being displaced find themselves in new communities with different languages, cuisine, stories, routines and traditions. Several of the individuals that we speak to for Qisetna have spoken of their thanks that they have felt welcomed into these new spaces and supported. Nonetheless, their previous lives travel within them. Their memories, their songs, their stories, their heritage travel with them. It is important in this era of movement that we ask how cultural heritage can be protected and recorded when it is reduced to a memory carried only in the mind?

https://caravasarts.org/r2t/

The Qisetna archive invites and supports creative storytelling and accessible conversation, as well as the promotion of those who lived in Syria in their ongoing personal and professional pursuits through written articles, podcasts, videos, music, art, and interviews. Storytelling is a crucial feature of Middle Eastern oral tradition which is often minimised in historical accounts or research. Through our work, Qisetna seeks to show how important stories are as a foundation of knowledge and core component of cultural tradition. As physical heritage is lost, damaged, or destroyed it is fundamental to support forms of recording and preserving these lived experiences and archiving for future generations. The methodological approach to storytelling that Qisetna uses can contribute to the wider critical debate on cultural identity that is ongoing in socio-political consideration amid the

crises compelling displacement and migration internationally. This approach is demonstrated through the various research projects that have been initiated by Qisetna. One of which is a creative project in Raqqa entitled ‘Return to Tenderness’. The project aims to sustain and support intergenerational relationships in the area by involving young locals with the process of recording music and stories as told by individuals from the older generations. Through this collaboration the project aims to trace the musical and intangible heritage of Raqqa as presented on an online platform for viewers to enjoy around the world. This project aims to promote inclusive and honest exchange of the musical knowledge that has populated the land along the Euphrates River.

