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# 5. Syrian Intangible Cultural Heritage: Characteristics and Challenges of Preservation<sup>1</sup>

#### Nibal Muhesen

#### Introduction

The current chapter follows the general description of intangible cultural heritage as framed by scientific and legal writings such as the general UNESCO convention labeled ICHC. Although many of the concepts developed here are meant to be considered in the Syrian context, one cannot ignore the increasing importance of this topic acrosss the Arabic region, for example, in Egypt and Lebanon. In fact, the interaction between all components of heritage in the Middle Eastern context is far more complex than is accounted for in traditional Western frameworks. This is because across the Arab region, and in Syria in particular, heritage is a part of everyday life and cannot exist separately from it.

Intangible heritage is considered the first means of expressing the culture of the community because it originates in its local environment and is closely related to its composition. Intangible or immaterial heritage here does not refer to physical entities; it is seen as the repository of people's cultural identity and the reflection of their collective memory. Taking such an assumption as a starting point, a difference arises

<sup>1</sup> My sincere thanks go to Dr. Lilia Makhloufi and Dr. Ammar Abdulrahman for extending me this kind invitation and for their intellectual contributions to the debate on the topic. I am also grateful to my colleagues in Syria for their help.

between the physical and nonphysical aspects of heritage. The current study attempts to respond to this by drawing clear borders between the two following types of heritage:

- 1. The 'official heritage' existing under the shadow of official institutions and legally protected; this is perceived as being more material or physical, stable across time, durable and present in people's minds and in the official media outputs by institutions. Under this category comes the Authorized Heritage Discourse (AHD).<sup>2</sup> Notably, this study perceives tangible cultural heritage reflected in sites, monuments and urban agglomerations to belong to this type.
- 2. The 'folklore' related more to the German concept of Volkskunde, meaning the knowledge of nations. This could also be labelled 'public heritage', as opposed to official heritage, and is related to societies' emotional and social changes. Here, heritage manifests in a more fragile way than tangible cultural heritage. I perceive intangible cultural heritage to be the most representative of this category, where it is the faithful reflection of societal upheavals and can easily vanish or be relegated to oblivion in the face of conflicts, modernity and social changes. Its preservation is more complex than the protection of endangered sites or buildings.

# The scope and definition of Syrian intangible cultural heritage

At this stage, the scope of Syrian intangible heritage has to be defined and its distinguishing features explained. Indeed, this topic is governed by several factors:

 It is of purely local use and perception, made by people and for the service of people; moreover, it is part of the Eastern Mediterranean regional framework, and it is included under the universal and global values of heritage. In other words, it has both national and international dimensions.

<sup>2</sup> Laurajane Smith, *Uses of Heritage* (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 36.

- 2. Syrian intangible heritage expresses a unique and close connection between physical and nonphysical heritage as it appears in the concept of 'cultural spaces', such as mosques and churches, bazaars and *Khans Caravanserai*, which enshrine both official heritage through their monumental structure and public traditions and crafts via their public access.
- 3. It reflects the rich diversity of the religious, ethnic and cultural fabric of society, best conveying the concept of 'cultural diversity'—a key concept in the veritable melting pot that is Syria. This is why such heritage forms a common cultural identity for all Syrians from all parts of society.
- 4. It is surrounded by a substantial emotional dimension, which makes it sensitive and vulnerable to the encroachment of modernity and growth of capital.
- 5. It expresses living voices; many groups still adhere to it, and thus, it could be described as 'living heritage' par excellence where its elements interact with the daily lives of the population.
- 6. It boosts the national economy through the income generated by tourism activities.
- 7. It also plays an important part in the economy via its integral role in advancing the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Syria, particularly goal 11.4 on 'Sustainable cities and communities' in a direct sense, as well as goal 3 in an indirect sense.
- 8. It has a transnational aspect since many regions that are far from each other still share the same elements of intangible heritage, such as textile practices, metalcrafts, and oral storytelling shared by the coast and southern and northern Syria. Thus, heritage here cannot be delineated geographically.
- 9. It must be stressed that intangible heritage contributes significantly to the instrumentalisation of heritage as such, by generating a more diverse, inclusive and continuous cultural identity in the country; moreover, it is an element in the larger picture of the cultural revival in Syria after years of violence

and clashing narratives about heritage. It is clear that the preservation of old districts, mosques and traditional houses is also a means of preserving intangible heritage because these places are the holders of local crafts and traditions.

# Intangible cultural heritage in the international discourse

It is useful to define the initial concepts related to intangible cultural heritage as reflected in the international discourse. In fact, the concept of intangible heritage is contained in the text of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Heritage of United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO; called ICHC), which was adopted in Paris in 2003 and ratified and signed by Syria in 2005. In the convention, ICH is defined as follows:

The practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills—as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith—that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environments, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity.<sup>3</sup>

The agreement clarifies that heritage includes the following main categories: oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle for the expression of intangible cultural heritage, and performing arts and rituals. It also mentions arts and traditions of performances, social practices, rituals and celebrations, knowledge and practices relating to nature and the universe, and finally, skills associated with traditional craftsmanship. It is worth commenting on what is meant by 'preservation' in the Convention. Preservation refers to measures aimed at ensuring the sustainability of intangible cultural heritage, including

<sup>3</sup> UNESCO, Text of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (Ich.unesco.org, 2003), https://ich.unesco.org/en/convention

the identification, documentation, research, preservation, protection, promotion, visibility and transmission of this heritage.

Another important issue that has been stressed by researchers is that the ICHC has come to adjust the 'dominant heritage paradigm', since heritage was seen mainly from a Western perspective and the notions of intangible cultural heritage are associated with more non-Western frameworks of understanding and using heritage. By adopting the ICHC, the International Heritage Committee foregrounded living traditions and local crafts or oral traditions, leaving monumental structures and archaeological sites in the background.<sup>4</sup>

Depending on the ICHC text, intangible heritage is closely bound with cultural identity, which affects and is affected by intangible heritage and delineates its angles and scope. Moreover, intangible cultural heritage forms the shared memory that shapes the emergence of perceptions and forms of expression. Intangible cultural heritage also represents inherited knowledge and its continuity across the structures of society. Notably, in the text of the Convention, ICH is related to laws consistent with the Charter of Human Rights and rights covenants. In addition, the Convention observes safeguarding measures and procedures, including documentation and protection.

## Intangible cultural heritage in the local discourse

Although there is no clear-cut definition of intangible cultural heritage among Syrians, this study considers الشعبي التراث (public heritage) as the signifier of any discourse about intangible cultural heritage. In fact, the trend towards intangible heritage is recent in Syria; the efforts made in this field, as well as the official involvement in those efforts, are evident in the work of many official and non-official bodies, including nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) and associations, which inspire feelings of pride and optimism.

The efforts to document and preserve heritage date back to the 1970s, when the Ministry of Culture established an office of 'public tradition', understood in Arabic as التقاليد الشعبية. The interest in gathering the local

<sup>4</sup> Intangible Heritage, ed. by Laurajane Smith and Natsuko Akagawa (London and New York: Routledge, 2008).

crafts, arts and oral narratives or stories of each Syrian city was apparent in issuing journals dedicated to the topic (in Iraq first and then in Syria).<sup>5</sup> Such trends were also visible in earlier periods in the construction of museums or conversion of traditional Arabic houses into museums for folk traditions, such as the Azm Palace which was converted into a folk traditions museum in 1954.

Intangible cultural heritage, in Arabic called التراث الثقافي اللامادي, is the expression of a postcolonial narrative about community development and is intrinsically linked to the Syrian identity. It would be more appropriate for that identity to become inclusive of the whole community and to allow cultural, ethnic and religious pluralism. This would secure continuity and transmission over the generations and prevent distortion and breakage of the traditions.

One of the most active organisations in preserving intangible cultural heritage is the Syria Trust for Development, which contributes to the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage as an NGO accredited by UNESCO. This body is tasked with preparing forms for nominating intangible cultural heritage elements to UNESCO lists, participating in the documentation of ICH elements and developing the national inventory and its digitalisation, as well as implementing community-based projects to safeguard ICH, such as 'Syrian Handicrafts' and 'Living Heritage'. The efforts made by this NGO have had significant results on the international stage, including in relation to the elements inscribed on the UNESCO ICH list:

- Aleppo's traditional songs known as Al Qudoud Al Halabia were listed in 2021.
- The practices and craftsmanship associated with the Damascene rose, mainly practised by farmers and families in Al-Mrah village in rural Damascus, were listed in 2019.
- Shadow play, which is a traditional art consisting of handmade puppets moving behind a thin translucent curtain or screen inside a dark theatre, now practised mainly in Damascus, was listed in 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Abdulhamid Younes, *Folk Traditions* (Cairo: Cairo Publication House, 2007), p. 139.

<sup>6</sup> Syria Trust for Development, 'Cultural Identity and Living Heritage', 2021.

- The shadow theatre was also placed on the urgent conservation list in 2018.
- Falconry, associated with nature conservation, cultural heritage and social engagement within and among communities, was listed in 2016. Notably, Syria shares this element with other Arabic and non-Arabic countries, such as Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Italy.
- Crafting and playing the musical instrument *Oud* (the lute) was listed jointly for Iran and Syria in 2022.

It is also worth mentioning the work of a Syrian NGO called Homeland Document, which focuses on collecting war-related testimonies or records from various sections of Syrian society, forming a sort of database of conflict-related oral history—a step that will have an impact on the reshaping of both individual and collective memories. Also, several field studies were carried out by this NGO to document traditional local crafts, such as the Damascene mosaic profession, as well as ecclesiastical heritage, including elements such as architectural styles, rituals, manuscripts or religious hymns (cf. Homeland Document 2021).<sup>7</sup>

The Syrian cultural legacy has deep historical roots stretching back to ancient times, and many cultural landmarks attest to this, including the Umayyad Mosques in Aleppo and Damascus, covered markets, ancient churches, schools and castles. Before the Syrian crisis in 2011, the cultural monuments in many regions were visited by both local and international tourists and considered precious architectural and cultural pearls of Syria. Before the war, traditional houses were built in some Syrian cities that embraced a large part of the cities' traditions and memory, where documents, manuscripts, forms of popular art and traditions were displayed. Clear examples are the *Dar Ghazaleh* and *Beit Ajqbash*, which were both erected during the Ottoman period and were severely damaged in the recent conflict.

Syrian cities used to enjoy the benefits of the strong interest in intangible heritage felt by their inhabitants; Aleppo residents were known

<sup>7</sup> Homeland Document, *Oral History Recordings Projects in Syria* (Wathiqat-watten. org, 2021), https://wathiqat-wattan.org/category/oral-history

to be very interested in their city's culture and heritage, evidenced by the work of heritage committees and associations inside the city, which gathered its intellectual elite and made a concerted effort to document the traditions of the city, such as the 'adiyat (Annales of Aleppo). In Homs and Damascus, similar bodies tasked with preserving popular heritage also existed.

Damascus has famous sword and silk factories, the products of which made their way across both the West and the East, and Homs is well known for its ornamented carpets and looms. The skills of Syrian crafters have been popularised around the globe by many products, crafts and handicrafts. Intangible heritage or public heritage in Syria has many aspects, including the following:

- Local traditional industries, such as making laurel soap in the city of Aleppo;
- Silk and textiles, historically related to the famous old 'Silk Road'; many caravansaries dedicated to this type of commerce were dispersed across Syrian land, as in Damascus, Aleppo and Homs;
- Knitting arts, such as carpet weaving and embroidery;
- Local performing arts and dance, such as the *Al-Samah* Sufi dance widely associated with Aleppo;
- Various metal crafts, such as gold and silver crafting;8
- Performing arts, such as the various local musical arts, especially Al-Qudood Al-Halabia (local songs rooted in Andalusian music) and several *Inshad* practices (religious singing groups); Syria also has a rich and diverse musical heritage related to Christianity and liturgical music;
- Local oral traditions, such as folk proverbs and traditional stories;
- Inherited knowledge and experiences in the field of traditional architecture and building materials;

<sup>8</sup> Moheb Chanesaz, Ella Dardaillon and Jean-Claude David, *L'artisanat du métal à Alep: Héritage et postérité (Enquêtes réalisées entre 2004 et 2009)* (IFPO Press and UNESCO Publications, 2018).

- The art of glazing and inlay furniture and shells;
- Various wedding rituals, feasts and spiritual celebrations; many Syrian ethnic groups celebrate distinct festivals, such as the Spring festival in north-eastern Syria;
- Many elements associated with social engagement within and amongst communities; in Syria, heritage moves with people, transcending regional boundaries and resisting clear geographic delineation.

# Types of damage to intangible Syrian heritage

The destruction in recent years has had serious and devastating repercussions for various forms of intangible heritage across the country. Instances of damage can be categorised as full or partial, as they vary in severity and breadth. The following types of damage have occurred in several cities, with effects on intangible heritage:

- The destruction and burning of most traditional markets, places of worship and public spaces, which are incubators of intangible heritage;
- Most workshops, factories and craft shops have gone out of service and closed as a result of either looting or war;
- Loss of human capital due to immigration or people switching to other occupations;
- Weak financial support for traditional professions;
- Globalisation and mechanisation, which have pitted the survival of intangible Syrian heritage in many cities in a race against time;
- A lack of youth interest; rather than continuing the traditions
  of their forebears and ensuring the persistence and prosperity
  of traditional professions and local crafts, young people have
  gravitated *en masse* to other jobs that provide better income;
- Misleading interpretations and commentary on an academic level or provided by other influential sectors/elite actors of

society; public heritage has been characterized by the elite as backwards or *Baladi*, thus assigning it negative connotations.<sup>9</sup>

## Recommendations for reviving public heritage

The task of reviving Syrian public heritage is by no means an easy one. Syria is still gradually recovering from the pain of its recent past, and it is necessary to develop current and future policies and procedures regarding the protection and promotion of heritage, and intangible heritage in particular. The needs of local communities must be prioritised in a way that neither hinders construction and development nor overlooks the pillars of the country's identity, antiquities and rich diversity of living and renewable heritage. With this in mind, this study arrives at the following proposals to protect and preserve Syria's intangible heritage:

- Raising awareness of the importance of protecting this heritage through popular and governmental awareness campaigns;
- Securing the necessary financial support to launch related activities;
- Implementing and adapting the necessary legal protections;
- Amending the laws and regulations related to work, and granting licences to facilitate trade and handcraft activity, as the first stage of economic revival and the preservation of heritage skills;
- Continuation of research and academic activities at the highest level related to the inventory, study and documentation of the various forms of intangible heritage;
- Delegating the responsibility for documenting and protecting heritage in all its forms to several government agencies, rather than any one exclusively;

<sup>9</sup> This point deserves more attention from the experts, as the duality between public (*Baladi*) and official heritage (*Rasmi*) raises the important question of which social model to follow and underlines the eternal debate on authenticity (*Asala*) vs modernity (*Hadatha*). See Younes, *Folk Traditions*, p. 454.

 Promoting the objective historical and cultural value of Syrian heritage worldwide and counteracting false and harmful narratives that aim to distort the relationship of the Syrian people with their land and environment.

#### Conclusion

This research has sought to contribute to the growing debate about intangible heritage in the Arab region. The chapter has shown that the discourse about intangible heritage in Syria is historically situated, starting with the postcolonial context in which interest in heritage emerged and took shape, extending to the more nationalistic discourses which emerged in the period of the country's independence. It has demonstrated that intangible heritage entails an enormous emotional dimension on account of its integral relation to collective and individual memory, as well as multiple facets of a rich and composite cultural identity. It has aimed to underscore the fact that the preservation of public heritage is critical to the survival of affected communities and the transfer of knowledge to future generations in Syria. Furthermore, this research reiterates that any division between material and immaterial heritage in this context could be justified only to the extent that it facilitates the study and classification of their components. Through its diversity and richness, intangible heritage represents a sensitive intersection between the past, which echoes in the remains of sites of heritage, and the present, which is enacted in the daily lives of Syria's inhabitants.

The best-case scenario for the revival of Syrian intangible heritage would secure its future by allocating necessary funds to engage youth interest in traditional professions, whilst preserving the memory of the past. There should be a special focus on preserving oral traditions that translate the knowledge, memory, and local cultural and social identities of previous generations. Public authorities tasked with overseeing cultural heritage have to join forces with NGOs and civil society representatives. The successful protection and preservation of intangible heritage components would thus be a reflection of responsible and effective policies towards the cultural revival across Syria, including

in cities such as Aleppo. Such policies would likewise have tremendous economic and social benefits for affected communities.

It should be noted that compared with tangible heritage, intangible heritage in Syria has suffered relatively less damage and could be revived faster and with much less funding. As such, strategic investment in its preservation, including in reviving crafts and tools associated with local traditions, would lead to the revival of tourism, boosting the Syrian economy. In addition, protection strategies should be a primary focus in the course of reconstruction, and they should be carried out in tandem with a national strategy to raise awareness about the importance of Syria's intangible heritage. This would pave the way to position support for local populations at the heart of any discourse about cultural heritage in all its aspects in the country. Thus, this chapter advocates strongly for the close cooperation between public authorities and locals who must be reengaged with their heritage. The protection of this heritage, marked though it is by massive displacement and the sufferings of war, also holds the promise of securing a better future.

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