

H.E. Zaki Nusseibeh Address to the International Council of Museums “Intangible Heritage, Museums and Contexts of Rapid Change, such as the UAE”

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Introduction

It is a real privilege for me to stand here before such a distinguished group of participants to offer a perspective on the challenges museums face as they navigate profound change. Social, economic, political and technological transformations alter the context in which museums operate. The question is not simply how museums should adapt; it is not enough only to reflect transformations. Museums have the power to influence the direction of change. Museums are institutions of leadership.

At this international symposium you are preparing for your 2025 conference. I would like therefore to raise some of the points I believe could help inspire reflections on the questions and issues that will be important to discuss next year.

We need, perhaps, to begin by reflecting on a vital but often overlooked aspect of culture’s dynamic: intangible heritage. As we look toward the future of museums in rapidly evolving communities, I would like to consider how intangible heritage could be used as a tool to bridge past and present, to preserve the essence of who we are, and to express actual and potential responses to changing conditions.

To illustrate my argument, I will speak about the significance of intangible heritage to the understanding of Emirati culture. I will outline some of the actions taken within the United Arab Emirates’ cultural sector and by government. I will then return to a global focus on intangible heritage, with a personal view of some of the challenges and future opportunities that beset museums across the world.

Intangible heritage

Let me begin by putting some definition to the concept of intangible heritage.

Intangible heritage is a vital aspect of the cultural identity of any nation. It concerns behaviour and habits in a given context. It is contained in sounds and actions. It is the gift of generation to generation. It is made manifest as performance, practice, rituals, and the process of craftsmanship. It is expressed as intuition, insight, and know-how about the physical, natural, and social world we inhabit. It is human practice: the essence of what makes us what we are.

Let us consider intangible heritage in relation to what is tangible.

I will use the example of a footprint in the sand. When we regard this physical evidence, our primary response is to ask why those footprints are there. We ask, was he hunting, was she dancing, where exactly was this person going, and why? We turn to think about the meaning of the footprint in relation to the changing of seasons, the search for resources, or the need for connection. These are questions of intangible heritage.

The same questions would have different answers should the context be different. A footprint in sand and a footprint in the snow have different causes and consequences.

The object of *comparative* intangible heritage is the human practices that led to a footprint in the sand and a footprint in the snow. The different answers reveal two distinct cultures: one of the desert, and one of the ice caps.

The physical trace is not enough. To understand it, we must ask about behaviours and habits, performances and processes, spirituality, insight and intent.

As we contemplate this, it becomes clear why museums are essential to safeguarding intangible heritage. Museums must do more than display objects. They must explain their lived being.

The greatest challenge, however, is how to curate human practices that leave no footprint. What are the intangible traces that are the essence of a community, its traditions, and its values?

The challenge for museums

Historically, museums have primarily focused on collecting and preserving physical artefacts. The museum tradition is to display silent, static objects. The audience looks, does not touch, and does not speak.

But culture is alive. What use is a pot without the taste of the meal it once cooked? What use is the cover of a book without its narrative?

Furthermore, where are the *invisible* threads that wove together the fabric of this society? Where is the heartbeat of the community, the rhythm of its traditions, or the melody of collective memory?

For museums, intangible heritage encompasses curating the “why,” “how,” thought, and emotion behind

human interaction with the physical, natural, and social context, capturing the essence of community behavior, the responsive dimension of humanity, and the ephemeral yet essential elements that define cultural identity.

This is no small task for museums to deal with. Intangible heritage requires museums to be custodians of lived experiences.

How can museums participate in this quest? What are the challenges, answers, and possibilities? These are some of the central questions, perhaps, that require your attention.

Intangible heritage and the cultural identity of Emirati people

In the UAE, our culture is seldom explained with reference to artefacts. For Emiratis, our culture is the story of our interaction with our environment. Our culture lies in our response to the natural world: the heat, the sands, the absences of food or water or people, the fears and the promise of the sea. Our identity lies in the experience of insecurity and the ability to survive.

Our story lies in practices – the poems, dances, and traditions – that speak to the quest for survival, connection, and dignity. Our heritage lies in what was passed down: the knowledge, values, and resilience that have shaped who we are.

The UAE’s tangible heritage is small compared to our intangible heritage, for simple reasons. In subsistence or nomadic communities in harsh environments, physical objects were only made, bought, or carried if they had practical purpose. Otherwise, these objects would be a meaningless burden to transport, or they would be a frivolous expense.

So yes, we have cooking pots, animal skins, and hunting equipment. But this is not our cultural heritage. Our cultural heritage is what we did with these objects and why. The important questions are, “What was the practical purpose – and so why was it bought, retained, and carried?”

Furthermore, our cultural heritage is not reducible – and it should not be reduced – to its manifestations and physical evidence.

Therefore to understand Emirati cultural identity, we ask, "What resided within the man?" "What methods did women have to give expression to the meaning of their days and aspirations?"

Thus, Emirati heritage is alive in the poetry of Nabati, the dance of the Al-Ayyala, the ritual of coffee. It is the art of falconry, and the tradition of camel racing. These practices form authentic emblems of who the Emirati are. Their meaning is the Emirati response to the environment, the embodiment of a rite of passage, the practical knowledge, and the values essential to existence such as courage, loyalty, and honor.

UAE museums

In the UAE we are blessed with a rich diversity of grand and dignified museums devoted to tangible traces of our own and other nations' heritage.

However, as I have outlined, it has long been evident that the priority for Emirati museologists is to curate culture via intangible heritage.

Therefore, we consider museums as living institutions. They are the lungs and heart of intangible heritage; they give breath and life to our human practices.

For example, Sharjah Art Museum not only exhibits classical and contemporary artefacts but also hosts performances, music, artist talks, and live craft demonstrations. This creates dynamism and an interaction with the public. It provides a lived experience and the memory of Emirati culture.

Similarly, the Museum of Islamic Civilisation in Sharjah frequently holds special exhibitions that showcase the arts of music, calligraphy and craft but articulates their relationship to Islam and Islamic culture.

The Sheikh Zayed Heritage Festival in Abu Dhabi is an excellent example of how tangible and intangible heritage can be integrated. It features exhibitions on UAE history alongside demonstrations of traditional practices.

Our museums also serve as research centers that ask the community about their knowledge and memories of customs and festivals.

Government participation

The UAE government recognizes the profound duty it holds to safeguard our living culture. Moreover, the UAE has led efforts to preserve our intangible heritage, our human practices, as dynamic forces that shape our future.

The UAE government finds opportunity to create the policy and funding environment for intangible heritage both nationally and internationally.

For the moment I would like to focus on the UAE's international efforts.

The UAE strives to register, in the attention of the world, elements of its intangible cultural heritage. We have succeeded with UNESCO to have formal recognition of emblematic aspects of our identity by their listing on the UNESCO 'Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity'. I will give you some examples:

- Al-Taghrooda: This traditional form of Bedouin chanted poetry represents the oral traditions that have shaped our cultural landscape for centuries. It was recognised in 2012.
- Al-Ayyala: This traditional performing art, typically a weapon dance performed at weddings and celebrations, embodies the spirit of our festive traditions. It was recognised in 2014.
- Majlis: The majlis is the heart of our community life, where ideas are exchanged, decisions are made, and social bonds are strengthened. It was recognised in 2015.
- Gahwa: The preparation and serving of Arabic coffee is a simple act, yet deeply ingrained in Emirati daily life – a symbol of our hospitality and a cornerstone of social interactions. It was also recognised in 2015.
- Falconry: Falconry represents an ancient tradition with deep roots in Emirati culture, connecting us to our desert heritage. It is not just a sport but a symbol of Emirati resilience and connection to nature. It was recognised in 2021.
- Arabic Calligraphy: This art form is not merely about writing; it is about conveying the beauty and grace of our language and culture. It was recognised in 2021.
- Camel Racing: This practice is not just a sport but a social event that brings communities together and celebrates our historical relationship with these desert animals. It was recognised in 2020.

Heritage may be endangered by its obsolescence owing to rapid social change and contexts for living. Heritage may also be endangered by conflict and environmental hazards.

The UAE has also taken urgent measures to protect endangered elements of our intangible heritage within the UNESCO register of intangible heritage in need of safeguarding. Two examples are:

- Al Sadu: This traditional weaving skill represents the ingenuity of our Bedouin ancestors in creating beautiful textiles from simple materials. It was listed by UNESCO as an element of intangible heritage in urgent need of safeguarding in 2013.
- Al Azi: The art and oral tradition of performing praise, pride, and fortitude in poetry encapsulates the values and history of our people. It was added to the urgent safeguarding list in 2017.

The Franco-Emirati inspired organisation, ALIPH, expresses the two nations' mutual commitment to the conservation of heritage – both tangible and intangible. The acronym ALIPH stands for "A Heritage of Humanity in Crisis". ALIPH aims to safeguard cultural heritage in the context of the dangers of conflict, climate change, and neglect. ALIPH acts to document, restore, and protect. Importantly, for intangible heritage, the initiative also emphasizes community involvement in the preservation process. This encourages continuity in the human practices that form intangible heritage and empowers communities to take ownership and pride in its ownership and stewardship.

Moreover, ALIPH advocates the importance of cultural preservation in fostering peace and resilience. In a world where all cultural heritage is increasingly at risk, ALIPH stands as a beacon of hope, uniting diverse stakeholders to protect the legacies of the past so that they are available to future generations.

Intangible heritage, the UAE, and rapid social change

The theme of your conference next year focuses on rapid social transformation. What are the challenges and opportunities for museums in this context?

Again, the UAE is a useful source of reference.

Rapid social transformation is the hallmark of the UAE. At the time of its foundation in 1971, we were a little-known society of small tribal groups – Bedouins, farmers, fishermen and merchants – dispersed over harsh and arid terrains. Yet we were fortunate to have a visionary leader, the late Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, who recognised that if people came together, they would build a modern and prosperous nation. Sheikh Zayed worked with the community to build the infrastructure necessary to human wellbeing: schools, hospitals, houses, water and sanitation, transport, and cultural institutions. Investment in human wellbeing led to a higher quality of life and built the foundations of modernisation. In only a few decades, the UAE transformed into an advanced, sophisticated, and stable nation which today has prominent global presence.

Our context has changed beyond recognition.

However, throughout this rapid transformation Sheikh Zayed placed great emphasis on the curation of traditional cultural heritage. What was for the most part intangible heritage was the foundation around which we held on to, and reinforced, our cultural identity.

Today we continue to strive for the balance between the preservation of heritage and the embrace of modernity. Both now inform, describe, and inspire a cultural identity that is neither fossilised nor left behind. Heritage and modernity fit together.

Intangible heritage, the world, and rapid social change

In the context of rapid social change, it is surely intangible heritage that is most affected. I can think of two reasons for this:

First, as our context changes, our human responses to it change. Our human practices change. Today in the UAE few women weave within Bedou communities, and poetry is not the only means we have to record and communicate our pride in others.

Second, even if our human practices remain universal – *to travel, to sing and dance, to find connection* – their manifestations change. Their trace changes. We no longer leave footprints in sand or snow; *we leave exhaust fumes, we have zoom conferences, and we have email.*

Therefore, as we look to the future, I believe that our nations, our museums, and our museum professionals, must retain steadfast focus on curating intangible heritage so that it can be used to explain, enrich, and make common connection between past, present, and future, and make comparison with civilisations across the world.

Intangible heritage and global museums: challenges and opportunities

Let us now think of challenges and strategies for nations, museums, and museum professionals in the context of rapid social change.

Museums around the world face a pivotal challenge: How do we preserve living culture in a world of rapid change? Our continued investment in cultural infrastructure must not eclipse attention to what is immaterial, even if to do so is more complex and resource intensive.

Let us think of some strategies.

1. Museums must continue to ensure continuous professional development and support innovation and risk taking, forging new methods and spaces to showcase our heritage.
2. Museums must find ways to present intangible heritage without stifling its living, evolving nature. The focus must be on remaining relevant in terms of the medium and the substance.
3. Museums have a vital role to engage younger generations. We should assist the education sector to include intangible heritage and its significance in the curriculum.
4. Museums will need to use hands-on, high-tech, and interactive learning experiences; this is the norm for the current generation living in a digital and kinetic environment. We must embrace virtual reality and artificial intelligence: these are tools to bring alive and to preserve human practices. Our use of digital technologies has the advantage of enabling us to curate to global audiences.
5. Museums must continue to collaborate with international organizations and other countries in our curation efforts. This helps professional development and contributes to global cultural understanding.

6. Work on intangible heritage requires close collaboration with source communities. The true custodians of our intangible heritage are those who practice it. There are several implications and opportunities:

- a. Elders are placed in positions of integrity and vitality as they share their knowledge, practices and skills.
 - b. Elders can discuss the present for its connection to the past.
 - c. When we work with source communities we build value into our intangible heritage.
 - d. We must, nevertheless, navigate ethical issues around ownership, and representation.
7. Museums must advocate for the policy environment that protects both tangible and intangible heritage.

Conclusion

Ladies and gentlemen. As we stand at the crossroads of rapid technological and economic progress, we must remember that intangible heritage is not static. It is living, dynamic, and constantly evolving. It shapes our worldviews, influences our values, and guides our decision-making.

Furthermore, intangible heritage is a resource that we can use to create dialogue around the questions of human practices. It helps us make global connections between cultures, to examine differences and, above all, to highlight the common elements that bind us.

In the context of our museums, our intangible heritage becomes a compass. It guides us toward the future. Museums can use intangible heritage to remind us of where we come from, to foster a sense of identity, and to help us navigate an increasingly complex world with purpose.

As Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan wisely said, 'He who does not know his past cannot make the best of his present or future.'

In this rapidly changing world, our heritage is an anchor to who we are and a beacon that guides us toward the future.

Thank you 