

Heritage and Tourism. Globalization and Shifting Values in the United Arab Emirates

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Cultural heritage was a major factor in the formation of politics and identity for nation-states. Yet in Europe, a gradual overcoming of old nationalism has paved the way for its postmodern iteration, where it is interwoven with tourism, the market, leisure, and entertainment. As such, monuments, museums, and archaeological sites have become important elements to thematize tourism and consumption. Over the past decades, some rich Middle East countries—including the United Arab Emirates—have adopted a similar use of heritage: it has been used to build or reinvent national identity, and to pro-

mote recreational and tourist activities. Dubai and Abu Dhabi are two significant cases. Their intangible heritage helps to build local identity and to attract tourism, together with the cities' luxurious hotels and their ultra-modern shopping malls. Moreover, city administrations have even invited some major Western museums to open local branches, to increase tourism and confirm their new status as global cities.

Keywords: Heritage; Museums; National Identity; Postmodern Society; Tourism; Middle East; United Arab Emirates

Sand, Skyscrapers and Heritage

"It is strange to imagine that 20 years ago Sheikh Zayed Road, Dubai's main thoroughfare, was mostly sand" ("Dubai Expo"). These words, from the official website of Dubai Expo 2020, are a proud celebration of the extraordinary and rapid transformation of one of the two main cities of the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Features from sand to incredible and stylish skyscrapers designed by the most-courted star architects in the world, the site continues, show how Dubai has become "one of the world's most modern urban landscapes." At the same time, beyond the obvious and understandably self-celebrative tone, we may notice an interesting concept of the past. The new amazing Dubai appears to be built on sand—i.e., in the traditional Western view, on nothing. What was there before skyscrapers? Only sand. The site, of course, avoids emphasizing this Westernizing image and immediately presents a particular idea of heritage which, by mixing past and present, gives a strong idea of a winning continuity. "From the Persian Royal Road to the Han Dynasty's Silk Road, from the trading posts of the 19th century to the hypermodernity of today's UAE, people have always converged here" ("Dubai Expo"). The strength of the local heritage is related to its immateriality: the abstract

idea of “crossroads” becomes a conceptual basis allowing us to interconnect tradition and change, history and contemporaneous life. In such a perspective, hypermodernity—deprived of any possibly controversial meaning—appears to be a necessarily historical destiny of this region and a sort of intangible heritage, which presents itself through the materiality of huge and futuristic buildings.

The reference to the Silk Road is quite interesting. Under its harmless historical aspect, it evokes a traditional image of the East, built through centuries of literary and more or less mythical representation, dating back to Marco Polo and arriving directly to colonial and postcolonial Orientalism, including some current sophisticated narratives marked by contemporary “political correctness” (such as, for instance, the Silk Road Project and ensemble of the acclaimed French-American cellist Yo-Yo Ma). But the Emirates’ Silk Road is something different, as the “Heritage” section of the same website explains: “A new Silk Road that connects rapidly growing economies, such as India, China, Brazil and the African continent. Safe, inclusive and cosmopolitan, Dubai is now one of the world’s top ten urban tourist destinations” (“Heritage”). (In 2013 it attracted more than ten million visitors, the population of a megacity.) Thus, an image dear to the Western



Figure 1: Between tradition and modernity. Abu Dhabi skyline.

Source: Abu Dhabi Tourism Culture Authority.

tradition has become a celebration of a new modernity—one that includes European and North-American citizens as mere tourists and consumers.

Yet, this relationship with the past is not uncontroversial. Any urban transformation so deep and rapid reflects social change, which necessarily entails cultural change. This “road”—directly open to hypermodernity, global business, and international tourism—may create problems in a society with Islamic values respectful of tradition.

Not all countries have the spatial opportunity of the Maldives, which has built a successful tourist industry by gating international tourism in resort islands, which maintain quite an effective separation between inhabitants and tourists, local values and tourist practices, and “traditional” heritage and the new, themed heritage of the resorts (Melotti, “Cultural Heritage”). Dubai and Abu Dhabi are built upon hypermodernity, and this mix of worlds and cultures has a constitutive character. The site “Dubai for Tourism” exalts this nature,

which apparently makes Dubai “a unique destination that is both a dynamic business centre and a tourist paradise, offering more attractions, shopping, fine dining and quality hotels” (“Dubai Tourism”).

If the Maldives, in the tourist imagery, are a “tropical paradise” where you can live in your luxurious resort as a “new Robinson Crusoe” with your personal Mr. Friday, the Emirates present themselves as a “shopper’s paradise.”

Here, according to the mainstream of contemporary consumer society, and to the trends of postmodern experiential tourism, it is the shopping (at least in the expectation of the local Department of Tourism and Commerce Marketing) that defines the core of the tourism experience in Dubai, and hence the tourist image and identity of the country. “From the timeless tranquillity of the desert to the lively bustle of the souk, Dubai offers a kaleidoscope of attractions for visitors” (“Dubai Tourism”). With this image shedding some light on the local idea of heritage, wilderness is interestingly defined as “timeless”: the past seems to disappear—or rather, to become something continuous, which helps to tie together tradition and today’s reality.

But, of course, hypermodernity has already arrived: the “lively bustle of the souk” shows precisely a process of folklor-

ization and thematization of local heritage. Everything is a potential tourist attraction, and may be sold as a tourist highlight: “from rugged mountains and awe-inspiring sand dunes to sandy beaches and lush green parks, from dusty villages to luxurious residential districts and from ancient houses with wind towers to ultra-modern shopping malls” (“Dubai Tourism”).

Malls and Museums

Heritage and business appear indissolubly linked in a typical postmodern relationship, which is presented as a historical connection. The section devoted to “Heritage” in the Dubai Expo website, after a quick reference to the local history that “dates back to 5,500 BC,” explains how “archaeological evidence suggests those earliest inhabitants engaged in trade with their neighbors—a trait that remains vital to the country’s identity today” (“Heritage”).

In other words, the ultra-modern shopping malls would be the endpoint in a long historical process. It is a sophisticated kind of theming: one has not even to use architectural elements to suggest, underline, or reinvent a tie with the past, as happens elsewhere; one may simply present a modern building as a piece of history.

Of course, the mall is not only a sign of the new local identity; it is also a meaningful institution of modern and contemporary Western society, where a large part of the history of globalization has been written. Shopping malls, as spaces of hyper-consumption where “we the people” may form and affirm our identity as global consumers, are monuments to Western and global society. Yet malls have also played a fundamental role in the development of UAE tourism. These huge and amazing spaces for consumption have been part of a policy aiming at promoting tourism and increasing the number of its destinations by creating and advertising a modern system of amenities and attractions (Henderson). In fact, the Dubai Mall—the “mother of all malls,” as was ironically but aptly defined by a well-known tourist guidebook (Walker et al. 294)—forms a brick in the new UAE global heritage, bridging the gap between worlds as the ancient Silk Road once did.

The other huge shopping center in Dubai, the Mall of Emirates, hosts Ski Dubai, “the city’s most incongruous attraction” (Walker et al. 298). With its five ski runs and ice sculptures, the facility satisfies other aspects of tourists’ and consumers’ multi-experiential demand. The insertion into a global system of habits of leisure and consumption deeply affects the whole envi-



Figure 2: Snow in the desert. Ski Dubai in the Mall of the Emirates, Dubai.

Source: Diego Delso, Wikimedia Commons.

ronment and creates a new heritage: in this interconnected world, sand can magically become ice. But it would be a mistake to ascribe the existence of this space to only the madness of the leisure industry, or to a will to demonstrate financial power and technical skill.

The snow conserved and displayed in the mall of this desert country comprises a local treasure, as do the alien Elgin Marbles jealously preserved in the British Museum. In Europe and in the United States, archae-

ological remains and masterworks of art have for centuries been regarded and used as tools for social and political identity, able to display the power of the local bourgeoisie or even of the nation: private and public collections were factors of class and national identity. National museums, such as the British Museum or the Louvre, were the real temples of modernity, where citizens were educated on their collective (often imperial and colonial) history, through the collective worshipping of the past and celebration of their powerful

nations, which were able to collect, conquer, or buy relics from any part of the world and any culture. The presence of alien pieces in the museums was proof of control exerted over other countries and other cultures.

In postmodern society, which has to some degree attempted to overcome colonial and national scenes, spaces of identity and political negotiation have shifted elsewhere. Malls are some of these new spaces, deserving of mobility and tourist gaze, which as temples of leisure and consumption display through merchandise a system of values for contemporary society. But this expression has probably already been surpassed. Over the last years, despite the global financial crisis that partially affected even these rich countries, the Emirates have placed a higher bid.

Abu Dhabi and Dubai have decided to reshape themselves not as typical great international cities, but rather as “global cities” (Sassen). Therefore, they have entered into competition with some of the most complex urban systems such as London or New York.

This process entails an effort of urban planning, beautification, and marketing (Spirou), based on the model of other big cities. Of course, in a general process of globalization where many centers and

many peripheries are mutually interconnected in a dynamic and transcultural way, many elements of the framework are, at the same time, models and imitations. Although the Emirates created their own model, they also absorbed some traditional Western ideas—such as the leading role of museums in urban planning policies, which implies a specific concept of heritage.

However, since the mid 1980s, the governments of the Emirates—and particularly the government of Dubai—have shown not only an awareness of the leading role of tourism in this process, but also a strong capacity to leading this, especially as concerns the relationships between urban beautification and tourism development (Henderson 91, 96). In only two decades, this has made of Dubai and Abu Dhabi a sort of “double global city” and a major international tourism destination.

Heritage and culture play a large role in urban renovation; yet, this process may cause problems for conservation of heritage. In the Emirates, the encounter of global and Western models with local and Arabian traditions has aroused identity issues (Boussaa; Szuchman; Khalaf, “Globalization and Heritage Revival”) and has given birth to a conservation lobby. Government bodies were aware of the danger, even for tourism, of shaping unat-



Figure 3: Building a global city. The new cultural district of Saadiyat Island.

Source: Tourism Development & Investment Company, Abu Dhabi.

tractive cityscapes too similar to global models, and instead supported forms of heritage revival (“*ihya’ al-turath*”) and urban renovation and beautification that united contemporary design and traditional style (Henderson). But this process, far from being a form of resistance to globalization, is exactly its usual result. Preserved and restored heritage, embedded in newly shaped urban spaces, becomes a sophisticated form of urban decoration and a tourist attraction, as a form of his-

toric thematization. According to Khalaf, this heritage revival—though part of the process of globalization—remained a national and ideological enterprise with symbolic meaning (“Globalization and Heritage Revival”). In any case, Abu Dhabi and Dubai, thanks to their financial strength, have been able to create a truly stunning system of new buildings and attractions that not only compete with the main international models, but have even become new models.

In this effort to implement the double-global-city system, Abu Dhabi has assumed the role of cultural district. As buildings that contain history, museums play a specific role, assuring a strong material and conceptual continuity between tradition and innovation, heritage and modernization, local patterns and global models. In this specific context, they seem to be able meet both the needs of new urban spaces and calls for stronger attention to the past.

Abu Dhabi has built a cultural district on Saadiyat Island to host local branches of the Louvre and the Guggenheim—two of the most prestigious museums in the world, the former in the old Europe and the latter in the New World.

The Louvre is the prototype of national museums which, during the modern age, have helped to create and strengthen national images and to affirm an idea of museums as tools of “civilization.” Nowadays, it is a magnet for new global cultural mobility, able to attract many millions of visitors every year, and proof of the power of the big museums in defending the international position of a country.

The Guggenheim, which developed far away from the royal, revolutionary, and Napoleonic allure of the Louvre, represents the glory of modern private entrepreneurship, able to obtain the same

success as the great old European institutions and even to transform the image and destiny of towns facing the post-industrial crisis. This is the case of the Bilbao branch of Guggenheim, inaugurated in 1997. This museum was thought not as mere cultural infrastructure, but as a symbol of a city open to creativity, luxury, leisure, and fashion, and as a powerful actor in urban regeneration (Esteban).

Both the Louvre—with its colonial, encyclopedic, “universal” collections of objects from all ages and countries—and the Guggenheim, with its collections attuned to the urban gaze of the new bourgeoisie, are huge, impressive institutions, impossible to imitate in this day and age.

The Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums (Abungu; Opoku; Melotti “Archaeological Tourism”), as significantly signed by both these museums in 2002, confirms that in a post-colonial world it is no longer possible to build similar collections, because nearly all states now defend their heritage. But, as Abu Dhabi shows, there is a device to avoid this difficulty: money. Abu Dhabi in 2007 made an agreement with France to pay \$1.3 billion to use the Louvre brand for thirty years, and the expertise of its curators for ten

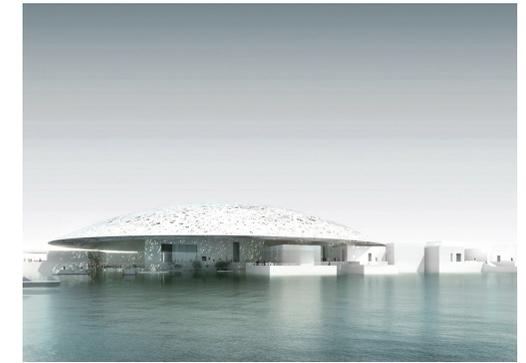


Figure 4: Heritage and starchitects. Rendering of Jean Nouvel's Louvre Abu Dhabi.

Source: Tourism Development and Investment Company, Abu Dhabi.

years, to exhibit some of its masterpieces. The construction of the new museum will cost an additional \$654 million.

The franchising of great museums is a clear sign of post-modernity. In a society where culture itself is a mere commodity to be consumed, museums can easily become nothing more than brands. Even more postmodern, if possible, is the idea that the container is more important than the content: the design of a museum and the name of its designer seem to overshadow its collections.

Thus, French starchitect Jean Nouvel designed the Louvre Abu Dhabi and a Canadian starchitect, Franck Gehry—who had already conceived the aforementioned Bilbao Guggenheim—designed the Abu Dhabi Guggenheim. That which through a

long cultural process Western culture has defined as heritage and art worthy of being collected and included in museums thus arrives in the Emirates and helps to create its new heritage.

The new branch of Louvre in Abu Dhabi is expected to play a delicate role in the crossroads of worlds and cultures, local and global, Arabian and Western. This has been captured by the official website of the Louvre, which presents the new institution as a “universal museum in the Arab world” with a “global vision of the history of the art” (“Louvre Abu Dhabi”). Now the design represents the core aspect of the museum, which is supposed to be an iconic building able to generate tourism by itself and thereby confirm the position of Abu Dhabi among the global cities. Its design combines “modern architecture and inspiration drawn from the region’s tradition” (“Louvre Abu Dhabi”). The museum, which uses elegant effects of light and shadow, “is covered by a white dome 180 metres in diameter, which is an emblematic feature of Arabian architecture, evoking the mosque, the mausoleum and the madrasa” (“Louvre Nouvel”). Local heritage and traditions reappear and thematize the building in a sophisticated way. Arabian and Islamic traditions, according to a typically post-modern approach, are

not “models,” but immaterial sources of “inspiration.” Thus local identity is paradoxically enhanced thanks to the process of globalization.



Figure 5: Culture in franchising. Rendering of Franck Gehry's Guggenheim branch in Abu Dhabi.

Source: Abu Dhabi Tourism and Culture Authority.

The national and local issues connected with the ideas of heritage in Europe and North America seem to have been completely overcome. The Abu Dhabi Guggenheim will devote a section to Middle-Eastern contemporary art, as an obvious tribute to local interests and values—but its American brand suggests its focus. The project, as the official Guggenheim website openly confirms, is “the creation of a vibrant cultural destination for visitors from around the world” (“Guggenheim Abu Dhabi”). Tourism, at least for the moment, has replaced any kind of na-

tionalism. The island, which hosts these museums, is thought to be a “world-class leisure, residential, business and tourist centre of global proportions” (“Guggenheim Saadiyat”). Culture, business and leisure (namely: museums, beaches, natural reserves, hotels, residences, architectural icons, waterfront, and sport facilities) are only different aspects of the same well-coordinated policy of urban planning and tourist marketing.

The Emirates lucidly use both modern and postmodern Western ideas of heritage as effective tools of marketing—addressed to Western imagery and consumers’ behavior—to promote local interests.

The Heritage Village: Living History Before and After the Oil Era

In such a context, what about EAU heritage? Surprisingly, the approach is quite traditional, though consistent with the tourist framework. In Abu Dhabi there are several historical monuments and an interesting archaeological museum. Yet, the tourist highlight is the Heritage Village, an open-air museum with replicas of old buildings and living-history activities, which “gives us an insight of the lifestyle and traditions of Bedouin and other cultures” (“Heritage Village”). We have to mention that in Western imagery (especially if related to Grand Tour and Oriental-

ism) Bedouins are the object of a romantic gaze which, together with the local processes of social marginalization, helped to construct “Bedouinness” and a World Heritage narrative, in a time when “Bedouinness in much of the Arab World had been or was being elevated to a marketable heritage” (Peutz, “Bedouin Abjection” 338; Saidel). On the other hand, this staged Bedouinness has sanitized some historical problems. Even the old “insecurity outside towns, on account of Bedouin raids” (Abdullah) has been transformed into vibrant weapons-dance exhibitions.

In the Village, of course, we are in the field of staged authenticity: traditions are crystallized in an otherworldly tourist space where, according to many websites, real life becomes “living exhibition” and the past blends with the present of non-urban inhabitants.

Heritage villages, as expressions of ethnic tourism, are often criticized by scholars for their lack of authenticity—tourism-oriented, politically corrected, sanitized, and frozen in time—and for the kinds of relationships among natives, tourists, and local authorities that they usually entail (al-Oun and al-Homoud; Bos-Seldenthuis; Timothy; Khalaf “Globalization and Heritage Revival”). In some cases, as happens in Bali, they are even part of a strategy of heritage management aiming at protect-

ing the “real” traditions from tourist impact by creating special spaces and special events reserved for tourists.



Figure 6: Shopping in the Heritage Village.

Source: Abu Dhabi Tourism Culture Authority.

In this context we can single out some particular local dynamics. The futurist Emirates have, to use Bauman's term, a “liquid” relationship with their past: they proudly enhance their history and invest in heritage (mainly at the level of higher education), but lack a nationalist approach and are not less (or even more) proud of their present and future. Heritage, in a coherent postmodern way, is approached as a resource worthy of being used in tourism, marketing, and urban policies. There is not the romantic and nostalgic look at heritage as something to be preserved, as typically happens in Europe. In the present case, the past is rather frozen in order to

create a better and easier product for the market. Furthermore, there are no issues related to local traditional identity, or at least they are not significant. The Village reenacts for tourists a Bedouin heritage that is perceived as archaeological remains, since the modern Bedouin culture is seen to be among the skyscrapers and not in the tents. In the Village, there is no local Bedouin community to be exploited by the tourist market. The villagers stage a nostalgic image of the country corresponding to the typical Western view of heritage, affected by a global, de-intellectualized attitude toward history and local traditions (a crucial point).

Western (and also Asiatic) tourists, as foreigners, usually do not know local history and generally lack the intellectual tools to decode local cultures. Coming from a post-political (and often post-nationalist) society, they are ever less educated on history and usually possess very little knowledge on even their own national history. In such a context, edutainment and living history—together with simple experiences of culture and leisure in heritage villages—may be effective means of spreading historical knowledge (Melotti, “Il ruolo emergente”).

There is no longer a problem of “staged” authenticity, because under the new aver-

age level of knowledge about heritage and history, an almost general acceptance of new, hybrid forms of authenticity and a general preference for edutainment have actually changed the relationship with the past.

A similar discourse may relate to new Chinese tourists (so cherished by the website Dubai 2020 and its “Silk Road” narrative). The Chinese attitude toward heritage and authenticity is different from the Western attitude and is, if possible, even more “liquid.” Reconstruction is a basic tool in Chinese heritage management, and it is deeply rooted in the Chinese tradition. Furthermore, as coming from quite a science-oriented and China-centered culture, the Chinese rarely have strong knowledge of alien cultural systems. Thus, their relationship with tourist-staged or themed activities tends to be friendly.

In such a context, why should the Emirates create a specific heritage narrative for the tourist market? And why should they risk creating domestic and international disputes by providing a more “solid” historical profile to their heritage? The global language of edutainment and themed activities, together with the more traditional language of heritage villages, are enough. They are also, above all, apt for any kind of visitor, regardless of religion or culture.

In this ahistorical context, heritage may be easily rewritten. Even the recent past may become archaeology, according to a local narrative where the division between pre-history and history coincides with the discovery of oil. In the Heritage Village you may see, as explained in many websites, “how people used to live before the oil era.” According to Picton, this division of history and culture “before” and “after” the oil era would reveal a “misleading, elitist and immobile” attitude that opposes “past” to “present” and “local” to “global” in a nostalgic way. On the contrary, it is a strong narrative where oil, as a metonymy for modernity, plays a central role and everything becomes heritage in a hyper-compressed view of history. At the same time this division overcomes the traditional distinction between Islamic and pre-Islamic culture, and imparts historical depth to a rather recent past.

Any heritage activity is carefully listed: “visitors can view” some mud-brick houses, a traditional mosque, a demonstration of falconry, they can take a camel ride and, of course, they can go “shopping in a traditional market,” “sample a typical Bedouin meal” and “buy original items” (“Heritage Village”). Material and immaterial heritage are mixed, in a folkloric context, with shopping and the new experiential culture.

The presence of falconry, a traditional activity which since some years was much advertised by the local tourist authorities, is particularly interesting (Khalaf, “Perspective on Falconry”). UNESCO, in parallel with new attention to immateriality being paid also by tourists and consumers, has recognized falconry as a “living human heritage” and has inserted it in the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (“Falconry”). Together with camels and coffee pots, falconry has become an icon in tourist heritage commodification and new consumerist culture (Szuchman 38).



Figure 7: Between heritage and tourist gaze. Falconry in Abu Dhabi.

Source: Abu Dhabi Tourism & Culture Authority.

In the context of the Village, with its reenacted traditional working activities, everyone and everything—from humans to animals—appear entrapped in the cage of

living heritage. This presents an obvious danger. Moreover, the crystallized reality of the Heritage Village defines a precise system of relationships among heritage, tourism and urban policies. History and traditions are part of a complex system of consumption—which, exactly as the two world-class museums in Saadiyat Island do, concurs in defining cultural and leisure aspects.

Not by chance, the Heritage Village is built on an artificial island, as are the huge hotels of Dubai (Palm Island) and the luxury and museum district of Abu Dhabi (Saadiyat Island). From an anthropological point of view, the “island” is an extremely meaningful reality in itself: it is a functional space that gives visual and experiential consistency to the “liminality” and “otherness” of the tourist and museum experiences—which, exactly as in ancient passage rites, must be symbolically isolated from normal everyday life.

As many blogs explain, the Village offers “a gorgeous view of the skyline—mixing traditional Arabian architecture and pure modernity—that lines the Riviera-style Corniche” (“Journey”). Through urban planning, the past and present are attentively juxtaposed in a mix where heritage, invention and theming appear strongly blended. The elegant waterfront of the town itself, which many sites stress as being in

French-Italian style, is a sign of this new global, atemporal, a-spaced, and cross-cultural heritage.

This confirms the strength of the local approach to heritage, based on a substantial convergence of tradition and modernity, where each element contributes to create a solid (but “liquid,” in Bauman’s sense) urban system.

A similar situation may be found in the Heritage Village that was founded 1996 in Dubai. Its physical separation from the city seems to perpetuate a clear distinction between Dubai’s past and present (Shusterman). However, a scholar who studied it some years ago testified its quick transformation: from “a modest exhibit of archaeological and ethnological relics and silent replicas of traditional life,” it soon became a more interesting and interactive museum with re-enactors and living history (Khalaf, “Globalization and Heritage Revival” 39). According to him, this village is now a “cultural complex of invented tradition” (20) and a “monument of national nostalgia” (28), designed “to provide a sense of identity for the imagined national community” (20) of the Federation established only in 1971. The village performs educational activities aimed at strengthening the national feeling and at glorifying the political leadership in the occasion of

the National Day. But it would be a mistake to consider these as old-style nationalist manifestations. The post-modern, globalized, and consumption-oriented context in which the village is embedded helps limit this use of heritage, as also occurs elsewhere (Melotti, “Turismo culturale”; “Power of Senses”). Indeed, the village is more a tourist attraction than a political device, as appears in its celebration of the Dubai Shopping Festival. At least according to its website, this festival, organized by the Dubai government since 1996, has become “world famous [...] as a shopper’s paradise” (“Dubai Shopping”).

Another website presents the activities carried out as follows:

Throughout Dubai Shopping Festival, the Heritage Village hosts a fascinating schedule of exhibitions, such as traditional cookery, shipbuilding and desert living skills showing you how Dubai’s residents lived, while a variety of stallholders offer you the chance to take home a souvenir of your visit. (“Dubai Heritage Village”)

In this age of global consumption, such a use of heritage is not the same as it was in the old European emperors’ time.



Figure 8: Frozen culture. A mannequin in the Hatta Heritage Village.

Source: Geordie Armani.

This experiential mix is also present in other regions of the Emirates. On the Hajar mountains, Hatta, an old village in a “picturesque setting” (“Hatta Heritage Village”), was converted into a heritage village that, according to local websites, “provides a fine example of traditional style village architecture” (“Hatta”) with its mosque, watchtowers, and houses made of stone, mud, reeds, and palm tree trunks. “Touring this site, visitors are able to see how the structures of the past were created, how the people of Hatta Heritage

Village protected their neighborhood and learn about the daily dealings of the Hatta Village people” (“Hatta Heritage Village”). This approach is quite traditional: a restored village and fort transformed into a monumental area, where the beauty of the surroundings contributes to the tourist experience.

Particularly interesting is the case of the Emirate of Sharjah. The town hosts a beautiful Heritage Museum, which “conserves and displays the rich traditional customs

and culture of Sharjah as a source of pride and inspiration to Emiratis and to visitors” (“Sharjah Museum”). This clear declaration illustrates a conservative approach: mannequins replace living history, but tourists can be gratified by the quality of the collection and the elegant setting.

But the most interesting point is Sharjah’s urban policy, where heritage plays a pivotal role. A Heritage Area has been established in the interior of the Heart of Sharjah, the largest historical preservation and restoration project in the region. This project, “planned over a fifteen year period, to be completed by 2025, seeks to revitalize the heritage district as a vibrant cultural destination by unravelling a glorious past: restoring historical buildings, constructing new structures following traditional Sharjah architecture and transforming them into hotels, restaurants, cafes, art galleries and markets, where the current generations and the future generations can experience Sharjah’s cultural and social fabric” (“Heart of Sharjah”). The contemporary, liquid, post-national approach to heritage is quite evident. Heritage and market proceed together. The idea is to transform a central part of the town into a cultural and tourist district through restoration, reconstruction and new construction. Oliver J. Picton, who carried out an interesting research in the Sharjah heritage

area in 2004, during the first phase of the project, remarks the complex level of interchange between heritage valorization, reinvention of tradition, educational purposing, and tourist commodification. According to him, the Sharjah heritage area—like other similar spaces in the Emirates—crystallizes local culture and helps to create a national feeling (Picton). However, whereas in the Dubai Heritage Village (managed by the Department of Tourism, Commerce, and Marketing) history and local culture are increasingly commodified, the Sharjah heritage area (managed by the Department of Culture and Information) hosts activities less addressed toward international tourism and more characterized by “educational, political, nostalgic and carnivalesque discourses” (Picton 72). These activities, which to Western visitors might seem “superficial and inauthentic,” would appear “very real and objective” to the local people and could effectively contribute to keeping their traditions alive (Picton 79).

In this view there would be a coexistence of a sophisticated “postmodern” gaze of the Western tourists, annoyed by the omnipresent staged authenticity, with a “modern” (or rather, a pre-postmodern) gaze of the local visitors, still interested in the staged authenticity. Of course, this is not strange, owing to the lively complex-

ity of contemporary society and the different speeds in globalization processes. Yet, such a reading does imply an “Orientalist” view.

The Souq al-Arsah (Courtyard Souq) is part of this experience. Lonely Planet presents this in an interestingly ironic way: “one of the oldest souqs in the UAE (which in this case means about 50 years). [...] Despite a thorough facelift, it’s still an atmospheric place, even though vendors now vie for tourist dirham [...] in air-conditioned comfort” (Walker et al. 312). A balance between tourism, heritage, and shopping is not easy to reach. Moreover, despite that souq’s claim of promoting local heritage, most items on sale as well as most vendors there came from outside the Emirates, at least at the time Picton carried out his research.

In that area is also the humble Sharjah Heritage Hostel, housed in a restored historic courtyard building. This is a real relic of “normal” tourism in a country whose tourist reputation pays dues to expensive hotels and where Arabian “authenticity” is sold at high prices (as for instance at the One&Only Royal Mirage, with its Arabian court and Moorish-style palace).

The Hearth of Sharjah project entails a process of crystallization and commodification of heritage, which can be read together with a similar process carried out

by themed hotels and resorts: history has become a mere experiential and emotional setting for tourist and leisure activities, inside a global process of convergence between archaeological sites, historic monuments, museums, theme parks, educational areas, hotels, and other leisure places (Melotti, “Archaeological Tourism”). In this context, the inscription of Sharjah heritage district on UNESCO tentative list appears appropriate.

Heritage Dynamics

Another point deserves attention: the heritage proposed to tourists is usually Islamic. Arabian and Islamic elements are even used to thematize tourism, though this could be regarded as offensive and in potential conflict with religion. Some Islamic monuments are included and advertised in tourist activities, such as the Jumeirah Mosque in Dubai or Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque in Abu Dhabi, which are amazing monuments that attest to the global urban completion of the two cities, together with the Yas Marina F1 Circuit, the Ferrari World Theme Park, and the above-mentioned world-class museums.

In contrast, the rich pre-Islamic culture of the country is more or less invisible. Despite the tempered character of local Islam, here we may find a trace of con-

fluct in relation to some aspects of the past.

In the Middle East, the relationship between archaeology and national policies has often been conflicted. For a long time archaeology had been read as a Western practice, strongly connected with colonialism and imperialism: Western archaeologists, educated in the cult of the ancient great civilizations, tended to believe that nothing original would come out of the Islamic world and reserved their attention mainly for the roots of Western civilization (Goode). This caused suspicion against archaeology and deepened the gap between the Western idea of heritage and local political (and religious) agendas.

Post-colonial nationalism renewed interest in the past and led to a diffusion of local schools of archaeology. Controversial but charismatic figures, such as Saddam Hussein, succeeded in using the Western image of the ancient great civilizations, yet from a regional repertoire, in order to strengthen their power and image. Adopting a well-known European model, Saddam became the new Hammurabi, just as Mussolini presented himself as a new Augustus. At the same time, thanks to archaeology, he succeeded in balancing Islamic nationalism founded on other historic and cultural models (Bah-

rani; Fales; Melotti, "Archaeological Tourism"). In general, however, the relationship with pre-Islamic archaeology remains conflicting and—in a turbulent framework of wars, revolutions, and crises—heritage appears to be deeply embedded in political debate and turmoil. From Afghanistan to the Maldives, from Iraq to Egypt, this periodically leads to attacks against museums, monuments, and archaeological sites (Stabile and Dal Maso; Arango; Melotti, "Cultural Heritage").

The Gulf area, once under the influence of the Ottoman Empire, differs in its archaeological tradition from other neighboring states that were more affected by European colonialism. Therefore, archaeology does not share this negative image and is not necessarily in opposition to local and national values.

The birth of scientific archaeology is tied to the discovery of oil (1938 in Saudi Arabia, 1958 in Abu Dhabi, and 1966 in Dubai), which entailed the arrival of skilled foreign workers in Saudi Arabia and in the Gulf countries. Abu Dhabi saw its first excavations in 1959, led by a representative of the British Petroleum, at the site of Umm an-Nar Island, which dates back to the third millennium BC. National and multinational companies contributed to the archaeological excavations, in order to better their image (Potts 193). These activities helped

to excite in the local elites an interest in archaeology, regarded as proof of modern, sophisticated behavior. Urban development was respectful of this heritage, also because halting building activities at the archaeological sites and defending the archaeological remains despite personal economic interest was considered a manifestation of sensitivity that assured prestige (Potts 193).

On the other hand, involvement of the oil companies in the local scholarly dynamics in the Gulf region and Saudi Arabia contributed to defining a mainly oil-oriented knowledge, which eventually concentrated on investigating tribal politics, Islamic politics, and leadership. Wahhabi Islam "became an object of study only to provide background about those who ruled in its name and were ready to be patronized by superpowers" (al-Rasheed, "Time of Oil"). Archaeology remained a sophisticated elite interest, depending on local dynamics of pride, while ethnography provided comprehension of local equilibria.

The historic and political context of the EAU is different from that of the other Middle East countries. Created in 1971, the federation is quite young and its member states are rich countries, to which oil has insured economic independence and international respect. Moreover, the govern-

ing elites appear solid and stable. Nationalism is not a primary element of this nation-state; thus heritage, though contributing to national identity (Saeid, Arifin and Hasim 2888), is not used in an overt nationalist way.

Oil and heritage are closely tied together: the wealth generated by oil has assured the strength of the power elite, which has implemented policies oriented toward preserving political assets. In this framework, the defense of tradition and its reinvention—along with, more recently, the policies of heritage conservation—effectively take on the function of ideological tools (Picton; Khalaf, “Globalization and Heritage Revival”). According to Saeid, Arifin and Hasim (2888), “preservation of cultural heritage inheritance [...] represents a fundamental pillar of the modern State of the United Arab Emirates.” This view is authoritatively confirmed by one of the most quoted phrases uttered by Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan al-Nahyan, the founder and first President of the federation: “History is a continuous chain of events. The present is only an extension of the past” (“Sheikh Zayed in quotes”). In other words, there are no contradictions between history and development, and the present appears solidly built on the past. A subtle view, which in the Emirates has favored the spread (and acceptance)

of studies and activities connected with history and archaeology.

The processes of modernization and urban renovation, based on wealth, have raised identity issues—which, far from calling into question the socioeconomic system, helped increase attention to heritage conservation (Boussaa). As a matter of fact, heritage is used to balance the speed of modernization and, at least in the last two decades, to enhance tourism and urban beautification.

The general attitude toward ancient history in the region seems positive. The discovery in 1992 of a Nestorian monastery (which proved an ancient Christian presence in the area) was well accepted by Sheikh Zayed. Also archaeological remains testifying to ancient relationships with the Persian kingdom and Iranian cultures have not provoked problems. The only potential cause of conflicts related to heritage, according to Potts, was the discovery on the Oman peninsula of some remains tied to Harappa, an ancient civilization born in the area of modern Pakistan: Indian and Pakistani workers, which in the Gulf area live in difficult conditions, could have claimed to be the real founders of the civilization of their exploiters (Potts 196). But most likely, at least at the

moment, heritage does not appear to represent an enticing narrative for the Pakistani workers who are building the new Emirates.

Szuchman (32) stresses the role played in these identity processes by the reinvention and continuous display of Bedouin culture: Emirati citizens, characterized by “multiple identities” (Arab, Muslim, tribal, and national), would be invited to imagine an idealized and ahistorical past due to alleged cultural isolation; and foreign workers and resident expatriates (who represent the 82% of the entire population) would be reminded of their presence as mere guests in the country.

In short, the Emirates—strongly embedded in a post-national world—have shown a lucid postmodern use of heritage, conceived as an effective marketing tool in their relationships with Western societies. This does not mean that the Emirates do not pay attention to heritage or are not proud of their ancient history. On the contrary, archaeology and heritage studies are quite present in their universities, and heritage has become an important instrument for international networking. The Abu Dhabi branch of New York University (NYU), for instance, offers an important program on museum and cultural heritage studies, based on “the notion of an internationally and cross-

culturally 'shared heritage' of material culture" ("NYU Abu Dhabi"). Its courses deal with issues such as "How do those who live in 'the Middle East' relate to their past(s), and what discourses do they draw on to represent and authorize it today? How is 'the past' recovered, commemorated, embodied, erased, marketed and consumed in the modern Middle East?"

Precisely in this higher education milieu, often characterized by a presence of foreign (mainly Western) scholars, we find a new anthropological and sociological interest in heritage dynamics. The main idea, according to Peutz, is to overcome a "secondary orientalism," which "considers the majority of the Arabian Peninsula without 'culture' and without 'history' in comparison to the Arab States of North Africa and the Eastern Mediterranean" ("Perspectives from the Margins"). Moreover, there is a tendency to revamp anthropological research to overcome a prejudicial approach opposing "kaleidoscopic" Yemen, a supposed primitive and colorful space good for ethnographic research, to the "monochrome" Gulf area, regarded as a space good only for business (Carapico; Peutz, "Perspectives from the Margins"), or only due to interest in the sociocultural dynamics relating to exploited foreign workers.

It would be a mistake to assume that the Emirates have completely surrendered to Western imagery and heritage. The Arab countries of the area have deeply understood the political (and touristic) value of their own heritage, and are utterly attentive to heritage policies. Not by chance, in 2010 neighboring Bahrain, under the auspices of UNESCO, established the Arab Regional Centre for World Heritage (ARC-WH), an autonomous and independent regional institution aiming at defending and promoting Arabian and Islamic heritage. Similarly, Saudi Arabia has actively promoted its archaeological and historical sites, pre-Islamic ones included, and has obtained the insertion of many of them in UNESCO World Heritage List.

Of course, the Emirates are also interested in UNESCO's activities, and actively try to obtain the inclusion of some sites in the World Heritage List (the "cultural sites" of Al Ain were included in 2011, and other seven sites and monuments were entered onto the tentative list between 2012 and 2014). This acknowledgement usually contributes to the tourist success of a destination and, even more importantly, helps to define its international image and the international role of its State. In other words, efforts at international recognition represent a tool for forming postmodern national identity.

Many heritage sites in the UAE celebrate World Heritage Day with educational and tourism activities. This confirms the inclusion of the Emirates in the new globalized world, which is increasingly dominated by supranational agencies, and also shows its interest in being recognized as a modern refined country, able to understand the significance of the UNESCO World Heritage List. Thus, beside the traditional political celebrations such as National Day and new tourist events such as the Camel Race Festival (Khalaf, "Poetics and Politics") or the Dubai Shopping Festival, the country celebrates World Heritage Day with a mixed political and touristic approach, consistent with a contemporary notion of heritage and the "liquid" culture of the country.

On the Dubai Customs website we may trace the traditional approach:

The [2014] WHD celebration sustains Dubai Customs' efforts to implant and promote national identity, being conscious that nations derive their identity from the heritage that runs deep in the veins of their citizens and the culture that is profoundly rooted in history. ("Dubai Customs")

Yet according to the list of planned events, we may find the usual tourist "festival" approach, as also Picton remarked.

Nevertheless, according to Szuchman, archaeology seems to be in a “precarious situation” (42): the new museum culture “sequesters the pre-Islamic past, while celebrating more recent and familiar notions of history and heritage” (45): the important archaeological area Umm al-Nar, located on an island together with an oil refinery and a military installation, is off-limits; most of the seven Emirates have no laws on trafficking and commerce in antiquities, and UAE has become a hub for the international illicit market in antiquities; many citizens are unfamiliar with the ancient history of the country and, even at a higher-education level, seem to have poor knowledge of local archaeology (42-44). Also worth mentioning is the attention paid by other Arab countries in the region to European cultural heritage in Europe (versus that “exported” abroad). In 2014, the Kuwaiti Sheikh Ali Khaled al-Sabah announced planned investments to assist in preservation of European archaeological sites and monuments such as Pompeii and the Colosseum; Sultan bin Salman bin Abdulaziz, board president of the Saudi Commission for Tourism and Antiquities, has signed an agreement with the Municipality of Rome for the restoration of museums and archaeological monuments in the city and for the organiza-

tion of exhibitions of Italian archaeological heritage in Saudi Arabia. In this complex strategy, heritage effectively becomes an instrument of international political and economic negotiation: a sort of common language on which to build other relationships (even in a Europe impoverished by the current crisis, heritage remains an important point on political agendas). Among other things, heritage means tourism and the tourist market. This is accompanied by a strong business policy, such as the 2014 purchase by Etihad, the national airline of Abu Dhabi, of Alitalia, the main Italian airline.

This approach to heritage, with its ability to mix market and culture, business and archaeology, in a more lucid and effective way than many European countries, marked as they are by more conservative ideas of the past, also provides a frame for the new Islamic marketing. The Global Islamic Economic Summit, which took place in Dubai in 2013, undertook to intercept the economic growth of Islamic countries and their middle class formed by consumers respectful of Islamic culture. According to Jonathan Wilson, editor of the *Journal of Islamic Marketing*, the immaterial heritage of halal culture is becoming a global brand (Zecchinelli).



Figure 9: New heritage and tradition. Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque, Abu Dhabi.

Source: Abu Dhabi Tourism and Culture Authority.

Another famous phrase by Sheikh Zayed confirms the role of heritage in the Emirates: “A nation without a past is a nation without a present or a future. Thanks to God, our nation has a flourishing civilisation, deep-rooted in this land for many centuries. These roots will always flourish and bloom in the glorious present of our

nation and in its anticipated future” (“Sheikh Zayed in quotes”). Beside a genuine pride for history, here we may trace a “modern” use of history and heritage: the founder of new state appears to build a common history for his new political unit. The reference to God ensures a transcultural tie between different experiences (in time and space) and contributes to building a common heritage. But the construction of a national identity, in a context of quite homogenous cultural and social bases and general acceptance of this new asset, do not entail a nationalist approach.

Upon his death in 2004, Zayed himself immediately became a part of heritage: as a founding father, he was buried beside the stunning Grand Mosque in Abu Dhabi, which had been erected by him and named after him. This huge mosque, considered a “visual pleasure” (Saeid, Arifin and Hasim 2891), was built between 1996 and 2007 to become, according to Zayed’s will, a new monument and a central piece of his heritage vision, mixing the past and present. Nowadays, it is the main religious center and one of the tourist highlights of the country. As explains the website of Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque Center “the father of the UAE,” who “aimed to establish a historical Mosque,” “has cre-

ated an Islamic monument” (“Sheikh Zayed”).

Even his aphorisms have become part of the country’s heritage. For some years visitors at the Abu Dhabi international airport were welcomed by the two previously mentioned phrases by the late Sheikh, which reveal a new “postmodern” and liquid approach mixing national identity, infrastructure, and tourism. Heritage had already reached a different phase: no longer a tool of national identity, rather an international business card for the country and something to be exposed to the foreign tourist gaze.

Building a New Global Heritage

This complex and dynamic process also involves hotels and resorts. We have already mentioned the sophisticated Arabian style of One&Only Royal Mirage in Dubai. Its website is assertive: “This is Dubai. Here on the shores of the Gulf, a wonderful place of intricate arches, domes and towers, infused with rich green courtyards and vibrantly colourful gardens” (“Royal Mirage”). Nature and themed architecture contribute to creating the Oriental and Grand Tour atmosphere that tourists appreciate. Cultural heritage plays a fundamental role in this process: “Bedouin lore tells of a magical place of supreme hospitality rising out of the sand”



Figure 10: The new heritage. Arabian Court at One&Only Royal Mirage Hotel, Dubai.

Source: One&Only Royal Mirage, Dubai.

(“Royal Mirage”). The real local community disappears, substituted by an abstract, timeless image built through centuries of travel reports and novels. But this local heritage must be “hospitable” to be accepted by the paternalist gaze of international tourism. This is a global international process, which also plays out elsewhere, for instance in the Maldives or the Bahamas. Hotels themselves belong to international groups that use the same marketing techniques everywhere. Tourists, too, move from one resort to another, search-

ing for supposed local authenticity, which is accepted only if it conforms to a global model of tourist “otherness” (Melotti, “Archaeological Tourism”; “Cultural Heritage”). “This is a wondrous place, composed of three distinctive environments—each flowing into the next to ignite the senses” (“Royal Mirage”). The center of the tourist experience is constituted by emotions: this sensorial tourism seeks the authenticity of emotions, which assures the authenticity of the experience and, indirectly, contributes to giving authenticity to the themed environments. This is the new heritage.

We face a process of heritage-making, where models and languages are global and globally interconnected. This process appears particularly rapid in Dubai and Abu Dhabi, accompanying the rapid growth of these two global cities. It is not a mere surrender to alien models. It is, rather, proof of deep and creative involvement in a global process. Heritage is a tool for culture-based marketing and, at the same time, a lively element able to transform and penetrate the dynamics of the new society. The crystallization is only apparent: heritage is living and transforming, together with society and the urban landscape.

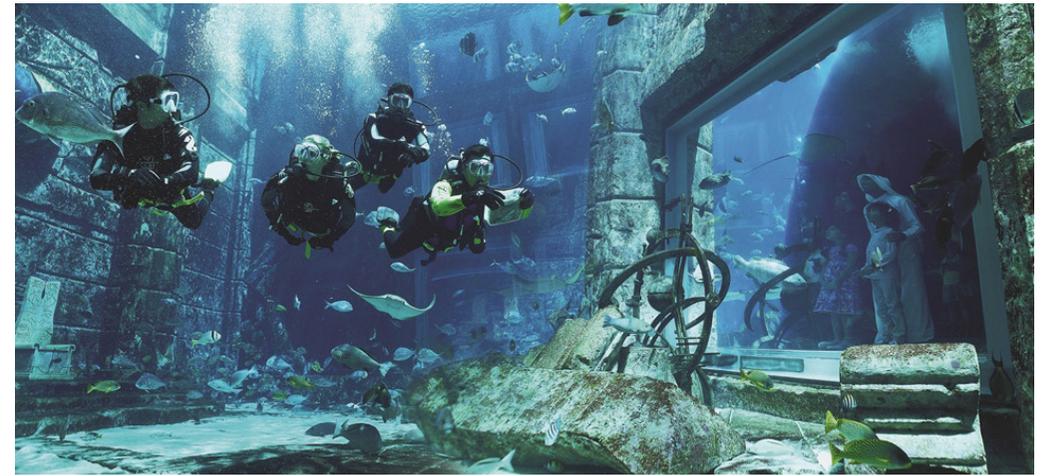


Figure 11: A postmodern archaeological site. The Lost Chambers at Atlantis Hotel The Palm, Dubai.

Source: Atlantis Hotel The Palm Dubai.

An interesting case of this is the Atlantis Palm Hotel, opened in Dubai in 2008 (Melotti, “Underwater Tourism”). It is the “Arabian” version of a hotel previously built in the Bahamas by the same multinational company, with the same Atlantis theme and the same aquatic attractions. The core of the hotel is the Lost Chambers, a huge themed aquarium, where you can “live out your own Atlantean adventure” and explore the “mysterious ruins of Atlantis, lost for thousands of years deep beneath the sea” (“Atlantis”).

The website, in a playful way, asserts that during the construction of the resort, a complex series of passages were unco-

vered, thought to have been buried for thousands of years by the waters of the Arabian Gulf. Upon further investigation, an ancient street system was discovered and the theory came into being that these were in fact remains of the Lost City of Atlantis.

Archaeology returns to the Emirates through the front door. If pre-Islamic heritage related to historical great civilizations of the past may raise controversies, the myth of Atlantis—conceived of as the basis for all world civilizations—does not. The idea of Atlantean remains under the artificial Palm Island inserts the Gulf in the mainstream of the Western imagery and

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places it at the same “archaeological” level. The whole world, from the Bahamas to the Emirates, appears to be based on the same civilization, which would have paved the way to a contemporary lively and vibrant globalization.

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