

Online platforms as tools for authentic collaboration in the ICH of displaced peoples

The case of Qisetna: Talking Syria

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Introduction

Online interaction with heritage offers the opportunity for diasporic communities to engage with art, music and stories, bringing multiple benefits such as a sense of belonging, support for creative livelihoods, and a way to process difficult memories. It can also generate new, authentic connections digitally to combat the potential alienation of displacement. UK grassroots organisation Qisetna has been recognised by the National Archiving Award for its valuable contribution to the cultural heritage of displaced people, primarily due to its website which provides an archive of stories and interviews on various elements of Syrian heritage. In more recent years, Qisetna has turned the necessity of online interactions into an opportunity to connect Syrian people together from far across the diaspora in recording their memories and experiences. In such participatory projects, people take on agency in representing their own intangible heritage, and may be encouraged to understand the value, or even therapeutic role, of memories and stories.

Cultural heritage for understanding and resilience

Engagement with the heritage of minority groups, such as people arriving as a result of displacement, is influenced by political and policy factors. On the one hand, cultural heritage has played and continues to play a role in nation-building within the UK, presenting difficulties for migrant and refugee cultural identities who have been demonised in the national media, and until more recent years, unaddressed in heritage projects. Therefore, it is important that diverse cultural communities within the UK are represented authentically, ideally by their own agency. On the other hand, as a former member of the European Union, the UK has been influenced by EU cultural policy, which from the 1970s was founded on promoting a shared European culture (Calligaro 2014).

Critics have highlighted the modernist social engineering associations with this idea of creating European citizens by promoting “European values” through culture (Shore 2006). While this has been

limited in effectiveness and the identities of European countries and locales continue to have a large degree of heterogeneity, the prevalence of migrants and refugees requires an approach that draws more closely upon the Faro Convention, using cultural diversity with ICH to aid belonging and combat discrimination (Karampampas 2018). There are problems, however, when this focuses on “integration” rather than on the needs of migrants and refugees to feel connected to their cultural roots. In the case of displaced people, participation in heritage projects may play another, more therapeutic role in helping with the processing of change, disruption, alienation and loss.

A report commissioned by UNESCO in 2017 highlighted the importance of intangible heritage in particular, not only in overcoming potential distrust and conflict in “host” communities, but also in ensuring the wellbeing of Syrian refugees: “ICH provides a sense of belonging, mitigates psychological, social and economic resilience, and, in many cases, helps mediate conflicts by fostering intercultural communication and mutual appreciation” (Chatelard 2017). The comfort of familiar customs and rituals, an increase in cultural and social capital, and the opportunity to recover livelihoods are described as important benefits of working with the ICH of displaced peoples. NGOs and the media are named as important catalysts, which should work to safeguard, inform, facilitate communication, and empower, while building upon existing examples and involving community members at all levels.

Qisetna: Talking Syria

Qisetna (in Arabic قصتنا, “our story”) is a grassroots volunteer organisation that started in the UK in 2013 with the main purpose of connecting Syrians scattered across the globe through their common cultural and artistic heritage, in addition to providing alternative media narratives about immigration and refugees to those provided by mainstream UK media. The organisation began to collect stories from individuals in various states, for example under siege, travelling over borders or settled in new communities, to engage them in the documentation and preservation of their intangible and tangible heritage. Workshops, concerts, and exhibitions provide a further opportunity for engagement from artists, musicians or those with a story to tell. Some have provided an opportunity for long-time locals to connect with new Arabic-speaking residents,¹ with an emphasis on intercultural exploration of the arts, stories and cultural heritage, but with the therapeutic role of the arts and memory work in mind.



Fig. 1. Guzheng (Chinese plucked zither) played at an intercultural Qisetna storytelling workshop, Nottingham. (© Juan DelGado).

¹ For an example, see the video ‘Stories from a Treasure | A Storytelling Workshop produced by Qisetna’, available on YouTube.

Online interaction with heritage offers the opportunity for diasporic communities to engage with art, music and stories that stir memories of home, and can create new connections digitally. As the owners and producers of their own intangible heritage, individuals are encouraged to understand the value of memories and stories. A mixed network of cultural agents, artists and researchers who have experienced displacement give help, support, equipment, and a platform for people to contribute to the Qisetna website through stories and interviews. Finally, Qisetna is working with the University of East London to provide a repository of Syrian intangible cultural heritage for their archives, ensuring that heritage is preserved for civic use as well as research.

As an independent organization run by volunteers with limited resources, and often involving people in conflict areas, realising projects and taking advantage of opportunities can be a challenge. However, Qisetna offers authentic communication and collaboration by developing relationships with the custodians of their own ICH, using the internet as a tool to connect people through Syrian heritage. In 2022, Qisetna is organising and advising on projects with the art and heritage of displaced people, making partnerships for archiving work, facilitating film screening, music and discussion events, and arranging therapeutic storytelling workshops. It also aims to draw connections between the experiences of displaced people from different countries, exchanging knowledge and best practices, and making impact outside of the UK.

Online heritage engagement

Internet technologies are an important tool for connecting displaced populations with each other and with heritage work, to collectively remember and to celebrate shared culture. The digitization of cultural heritage has responded to a need to develop tools for preservation of heritage in conflict areas. Due to covid-19, the benefits of digital preservation and presentation of heritage reached a wider audience unable to physically access heritage sites or participate in cultural activities in person. The value of online platforms for displaced communities across the globe is therefore more visible. For such groups, the possibility to participate in cultural heritage activities may otherwise be geographically limited, whereas online interaction with heritage creates the opportunity to engage with art, music and stories across the diaspora that send one back to another time or place.

Qisetna's website contains: personal stories to which visitors are invited to contribute; overviews of upcoming and past workshops, conferences and festivals, many of which can be attended remotely; in-depth interviews with significant Syrian artists, writers and musicians across the diaspora, interviewed – often remotely – by fellow Syrians who volunteer with Qisetna. The latter, "Qisetna InFocus", includes examples of those who have adapted their artistic practice to the cultural environments of their new homes in the UK, mainland Europe, Turkey, UAE etc. In many cases, Anglo-American or European culture has always been an influence through mass media forms or teachers trained in a certain genre, which can become a benefit in aiding the sense of home in a new country.²

There are concerns that new media technologies threaten cultural heritage by disrupting the traditional sense of place. However, digital projects demonstrate that meaning attached to a location may be more important than the physical presence of the location (Malpas 2008). Therefore, digital media can recreate or evoke a sense of place. Reading personal stories or collectively remembering a

² See the Qisetna InFocus website for interviews with Orwa Saleh, an oud player in Vienna revelling in his dream of forming a rock band, and Bassel Hariri in London, who is creating a fusion of Arabic traditional music with Celtic, gypsy and jazz styles.

shared cultural background, whether in-person or online, can therefore be an important way to remember – and to process the memories of – a place that has been destroyed or left behind.

Conclusion

It is clear that cultural heritage has a vital role to play in the wellbeing of displaced peoples as well as aiding community cohesion. Much of the research on refugees in Europe has been criticised for not following up on promises to give back to the communities studied who may need support, while projects that work with the cultural heritage of displaced people do of course exist but are frequently underfunded or understaffed, leading to issues with making sustained impact (Shahla 2022). For considerate, non-extractive engagement with this heritage, to boost wellbeing and intercultural understanding, there should be more support for organisations that have a participatory, personal and authentic approach to engaging with the custodians of heritage across the diaspora, that makes use of access to modern communication technologies.

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