



PRESERVING CULTURAL HERITAGE IN KUWAIT

12 DECEMBER 2022

Kuwait University

CONFERENCE REPORT



INTRODUCTION

UNESCO, in partnership with Kuwait University, organized on December 12 a conference on Preserving Cultural Heritage in Kuwait.

The conference aimed at shedding light on the different aspects of Cultural Heritage and its current state of preservation in the State of Kuwait. The conference offered a venue to explore the opportunities and challenges related to Cultural Heritage in the State of Kuwait and provided a venue for networking opportunities and to create new projects and partnerships. The sessions focused on documentary heritage as well as intangible and tangible cultural heritage and their role in promoting innovation and creative industries.

The full conference sessions can be accessed on:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bGg7OYJhINc>

The list of speakers included:

- Sheikha Bibi Al-Sabah, Chairwoman of the Board of Directors of the Kuwaiti Sadu Society
- Fackson Banda, Head of the Memory of the World Secretariat, UNESCO
- Ahmed Bin Rashid Al-Shahi, Representative of Memory of the World National Committee in Oman
- Alanoud Al Khamees, GCC Memory of the World Representative in Kuwait
- Yousif Al Suraie, Undersecretary of the Ministry of Information for Broadcasting Affairs
- Sheikha Al Kharsan, Head of the Department of Restoration and Preservation at the Center for Research and Studies on Kuwait
- Hasan Ashkanani, Professor of Archeology and Anthropology at Kuwait University
- Ali Ghulom Ali Alrais, Private collectors and owner of large archives collections
- Mansoor AbdelWahab Khorchid, Founder of Kuwait Montage
- Rasul Samadov, Programme Specialist for Culture at the UNESCO Office for the Gulf States and Yemen

OPENING SPEECHES

In his opening speech, Assistant Dean for Student Affairs at the College of Social Sciences at Kuwait University, Dr Mohammad Al-Sahli said that the College organized this conference to shed light on social and cultural topics. He added that Kuwait is keen on keeping their national cultural identity through preserving their books, voice records, pictures and various tools as well as personal efforts from institutions in charge of preserving heritage items. Dr Mohammad Al-Sahli included "We need to amplify our efforts to preserve our heritage at all levels to include the local community, the private collectors, and experts in Kuwait and of the international community."



On the other hand, Anissa Harfouche, Programme Officer on behalf of the Director of UNESCO GCC and Yemen office, said that UNESCO aims to engage more with Kuwait, in particular in the framework of cultural heritage preservation as this is one of the core mandates of UNESCO around the world. She introduced the results of a UNESCO Arab-region survey done in 2019, through which more 20 millions documentary heritage were registered as being preserved in Kuwait. Anissa Harfouche explained that "Without access to a lot of data, we do not fully understand yet what is the state of this heritage and how we can better preserve it. That is exactly why we are here today, we are very happy to have this collaboration with Kuwait University with the aim to better understand what is the state of heritage preservation in Kuwait, who are the main stakeholders and actors, what are the challenges you are encountering and how we can better work with you to better protect our heritage together."

From his end, Hassan Ashkanani, professor of archeology and anthropology at Kuwait University explained that the conference aims to shed light on different aspects of cultural heritage, its state of preservation specifically in Kuwait. He included "In particular, the conference will explore documentary heritage, with a focus on audiovisual heritage, as well as intangible and tangible cultural heritage, and their role in promoting innovation and creative industries." Hassan Ashkanani explained that he sees this is a needed collaboration to put strategies and agreements that aim to better preserve the country's cultural heritage, and studying the risks facing the different types of heritage.



SESSION 1

Community-based safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage: methodologies and perspectives in Kuwait

The sessions began with a presentation of the “Al Sadu Educational Programme” which was recently inscribed in the Register of Good Protection Practices by UNESCO. Sheikha Bibi Al-Sabah, chairwomen of the Al Sadu Society, shared this inscription is the first from the Arab region on the Register of Good Protection Practices, and the first national inscription for Kuwait.



Sheikha Bibi Al-Sabah presented the different programs developed that aim to raise awareness of the traditional Sadu weaving among the younger generations. The programs work on preserving the crafting skills and ensuring the knowledge is being disseminated in the community. Focusing specifically on the inscription process of the Al Sadu Education Programme, she mentioned that this effort began with creating a complete archive about Al Sadu, and making it accessible to researchers in the field.

The transmission of intangible cultural heritage is ensured through the education programs which contributes to the strengthening and promotion of creative industries. In her presentation, Sheikha Bibi Al-Sabah highlighted the importance of adopting a community based approach to preserve the country’s intangible heritage. she mentioned “Preserving the heritage skills contributes to the development of the traditional crafts production and preservation of the creativity of the nation’s past and the skills of its people”.



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“Through the safeguarding of these rich aspects of our cultural heritage, we are not only preserving our past wisdom but also assuring our solid future journey and development.”

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Sheikha Bibi Al-Sabah

*Chairwoman of the Board of Directors
of the Kuwaiti Sadu Society*

SESSION 2

Ensuring preservation and access to documentary heritage: Introduction to the UNESCO Memory of the World Programme

The panel presentations introduced the work of UNESCO with regards to documentary heritage protection. Alanoud Al Khamees, Representative of Kuwait in the Gulf States subregional Committee for the Memory of the World highlighted the importance of the Memory of the World (MoW) programme in particular with regards to Kuwait cultural and documentary heritage. She explained that in 2012, Kuwait joined the MoW and the GCC committee. She shared that there is a great interest in cultural heritage, and since joining the MoW, Kuwait participated in several capacity building and conferences activities that contributed to building a national team to map documentary heritage and see how they can be listed part of the International Register. She added that “the National Council for Arts and Culture collaborates with different entities in Kuwait, including governmental and non-governmental organisations, to better preserve the heritage”.

Ahmed Bin Rashid Al-Shahi, Representative of MoW National Committee in Oman, shared the experience of Oman in inscribing the manuscript “Maden Al Asrar Fi Elm Al Behar” in the MoW International Register. He shared that the first step was preparatory and involved reaching out locally and internationally to understand how to unite efforts. The second stage was forming working groups to prepare the submission file. The committee was then tasked to work on capacity building, lead the preparation of the submission, among other tasks related to MoW and documentary heritage in Oman.

The committee proposed 7 files which were diversified in topics. In parallel, they launched awareness raising activities among the public and the researchers on the importance of the MoW Programme and the International Register. Ahmed Al-Shahi added that “the role of the MoW goes beyond the submissions and inscriptions, but also expands to capacity building and raising awareness on documentary heritage and its importance on different fronts.”



Dr. Fackson Banda, head of the Memory of the World (MoW) Programme, gave an overview about the MoW Programme and International Register. Dr. Banda explained that there are 3 objectives to the MoW Programme which include: **identifying, preserving and ensuring universal access to** documentary heritage. He explained that “These objectives found coherent expression in the 2015 Recommendation concerning the preservation of, and access to, documentary heritage including in digital form.”

Dr. Banda then explained the recommendation and its five key areas to include identification, preservation, access, policy and cooperation. The strategic actions of the Programme span from organizing workshops, to publications, prizes and awards, research and education and managing the MoW International Register. Dr. Banda shared that there are currently 527 inscriptions from around the world, and specifically mentioned that only 2% are from Arab region. He encouraged Kuwait to be engaged and stimulate interest in submissions to the International Register.

The questions and answers discussed further the possibility of Kuwait listing documentary heritage items on the International Register. The speakers expressed a strong willingness to cooperate together to have an inscription from Kuwait.



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“The Memory of the World Programme was set up in 1992 as a vehicle with three key objectives: Identifying documentary heritage, preserving it and enhancing universal access to it.”

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Fackson Banda

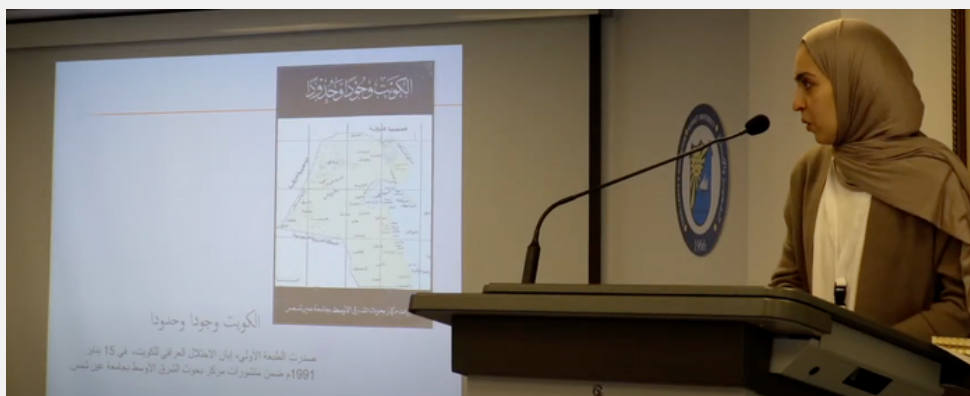
Head of the Memory of the World Programme

SESSION 3

Documentary heritage preservation in Kuwait

This session discussed the current state of documentary heritage preservation in Kuwait and the strategies put in place to better preserve it. The discussions started with a presentation from Dr. Yousif Al Suraie, Undersecretary of the Ministry of Information for Broadcasting Affairs. Dr. Al Suraie explained that Kuwait has large collections of audiovisual heritage that are of utmost importance to the country and the region. He shared an overview of the history of audiovisual heritage in Kuwait to include early music and media industry, and important moments in history that are preserved through these collections. He expressed that these collections must be preserved for future generations, as they tell the memories of the country and its people.

Sheikha Al Kharsan, Head of the Department of Restoration and Preservation at the Center for Research and Studies on Kuwait, provided an overview of the history of the Center and the role that it played in mapping and documenting the impact of the Iraqi invasion on Kuwait. She included that the items formed a large database that is open to research. Sheikha Al-Kharsan explained how the Center provides restoration and preservation services, she specified that the team examines the documents received with advanced technologies and identifies the appropriate approaches to their restoration or preservation. She precised that “the Center also digitizes collections so they can be easily accessed.”



Dr. Hasan Ashkanani, Professor of Archeology and Anthropology at Kuwait University, focused specifically his presentation on the efforts made to trace the documentary heritage items and their connection in history. He mapped the different types of museums in Kuwait that hold archival materials to help advance research on this topic. The methodology adopted includes doing in person interview to validate the data and do several local and international visits to confirm the information. He formed a team to support the research process on different aspects. In total, they were able to document in 5 years around 3,778 archival items. During the recent pandemic, they collected an additional 11,000 items, classified according to locations and topics.

The discussions focused on the need to safeguard the diverse and many rich collections of the country. Among the issues discussed are how to reach the youth and children as well as the role that heritage can play in advancing their knowledge, how to increase the representation of Kuwait's rich heritage locally and globally, the importance of community awareness raising through education, and the benefit of preserving the country's heritage on a national level.

SESSION 4

The role of private collectors in preserving heritage in Kuwait

The session was introduced by Dr. Hasan Ashkanani, who shared that there are more than 2,000 private heritage collectors in Kuwait. This session focused on the important role in Kuwait of private collectors in ensuring the preservation of documentary heritage. It discussed the challenges private collectors are facing in this endeavour and the possible solutions and way-forward to support further preservation.

In his presentation, Ali Ghulom Ali Alrais, a private collector and owner of the largest archival materials on Sheikh Ahmed Aljaber and Sheikh Abdullah Alsalem AlSabah, shared an overview about his collections and stressed on the role of teaching history about Kuwait at the university and school levels. He explained that he has the valuable documents unfold the history of Kuwait and the dynamics of the society, and these hold important knowledge worth sharing. He said "The documents that are held by Kuwaiti families tell the rich history of Kuwait and that of the region entirely." He also added that through publishing books about these collections, the knowledge gathered from studying these collections could be disseminated to the public. He presented several documents and shared how the information discovered from studying these items are linked to the history of Kuwait.

Dr. Mansoor AbdelWahab Khorchid, presented his project "Kuwait montage" that is a unique service in the country that digitizes audiovisual heritage collections. He provided an overview on how the project started, with a personal interest to digitize his private collections, which then expanded to digitizing the collections of the community. He shared that the risks facing audiovisual collections range from poor storage, material degradation, climate impacts, dust, mold and other natural factors. He also included that among the top challenges is the technological obsolescence, as digital innovation advances it becomes a greater threat on this type of heritage, because a lot of recorded media depends on playback machines that are no longer manufactured or that use different voltages and power specificities. He advocated for the digitization of audio heritage collections at all levels to ensure the rich memories of the country are preserved for future generations.



SESSION 5

Protection of cultural and natural heritage. Lessons learned from 50 years of the implementation of the UNESCO 1972 Convention.

During this session, Rasul Samadov, Programme Specialist for Culture at the UNESCO Office for the Gulf States and Yemen, discussed UNESCO's World Heritage Programme. He presented the different Conventions to include the 1972 World Heritage Convention. He explained the concept of Outstanding Universal Value which means the cultural and/ or natural significance is so exceptional that it transcends national boundaries and is equally invaluable to present and future generations of all of humanity. He explained that the Convention links together in a single document the concepts of nature conservation and the preservation of cultural properties.

Rasul Samadov explained that the nomination should contribute to at least one of 10 criterion, which he presented in details. Among the criterion is that the sites should represent a masterpiece of human creative genius; exhibit an important interchange of human values, over a span of time or within a cultural area of the world, on developments in architecture or technology, monumental arts, town-planning or landscape design; among other issues. He also included that the properties nominated under certain criteria must satisfy additional conditions related to authenticity or integrity.

He highlighted the importance of doing comparative analysis when selecting sites and provided an overview on the process, from Outstanding Universal Value to the inscription. Additionally, he introduced the List of World Heritage in Danger which includes a list of 52 properties. He also presented the advisory bodies including IUCN, ICOMOS, and ICCROM. Rasul Samadov illustrated his presentation with examples from the ongoing projects in the field of Cultural Heritage, their achievements and outcomes that are managed by the UNESCO GCC and Yemen office.



FINAL SPEECHES

The final speeches of UNESCO and Kuwait University highlighted that the conference contributed in better understanding the current situation of cultural heritage in Kuwait. Specifically, Anissa Harfouche, Programme Officer representing UNESCO shared "Today we have learnt that there is indeed a lot of heritage present in Kuwait and you also have the capacity to preserve it, it is now up to us all to coordinate our actions and put our efforts together to better preserve this rich heritage."





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