

## **The Nomadic Artists of the UAE bring their mythical expressions to the Rhine.**

**By: Dr. Yousif Aydabi\***

With the onset of the twentieth century, the crucial states entered into a new era of stability both in the town and the countryside... the city and the suburb... in the coast and in the oasis... people enjoyed a better quality of life; better economically, politically and culturally than before, and it ushered them into the modern age. Soon, education in its contemporary sense started in Sharjah in the year 1903, after being confined until then to traditional teachings: the Quran (The Holy Book), the Sunnah Al-Nabawiya (the teachings of the prophet Mohammad PBUH) and some linguistic and mathematical studies. Education was initially restricted to males until 1938, when the first female stepped into the classroom and seized the age's power tool of choice... Soon it spread across the sheikhdoms to Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Ras Al-Khaima, and then Ajman but only to enter into a depression in the late twenties-early thirties because of economic reasons and a lack of organization. Its latest renovation came in the fifties with the aid of the Kuwaiti government and schools for boys and girls became commonplace throughout the sheikhdoms.

The quantum leap in education, however, only took place after the formation of the United Arab Emirates in 1971. The Geography of the UAE, its mountainous-terrain and desert-environment, all helped in making possible the economic, political and military, as well as the cultural aspects of life. Merchant Ships and desert convoys crossed paths at the cities of UAE, particularly Sharjah, Dubai and Khor-Fakkan... The maritime trade brought what the West and East had to offer, while the desert paths supplied the products of the peninsula and the Fertile Crescent. Both, in turn, made possible the cultural contact and communication with the pioneers of the educational renaissance in Egypt, Mesopotamia, Persia and Hijaz in the twenties and thirties, leading to the birth of a new generation that would blaze that trail in the UAE. Judges, teachers, poets and merchants all pushed forth the procession of education with the sheiks and in their event and news-rich assemblies. Arabian journalism was able to find fertile grounds in such a scene and with the participation of all those took its first baby steps in Sharjah in the 1920s. The ambience of the twenties and thirties was thus orientated to allow for the enhancement of intellectualism and the progress of culture as a whole and was complemented by the pearl trade that reached India and the near East and as far as France and England in Europe. The Sharjah Airport that was operational in the thirties also lend a hand to the cultural assimilation with Europe, the radio marshaled the public, journalism aided the blossoming of creativity, the readily available means of transportation were able to break the isolation crucial states had long locked themselves in; the means of communication were able to build bridges and break barriers, physical and metaphysical...

Education modernized the local culture that was based on the oratory assemblies of Nabati poetry, Folklore and material traditions... The arts were applied and decorative, traditional folk crafts, a musical heritage, and architecture that used plaster, palm leaves, imported wood and mountain rocks, and implemented the Arabic Islamic, Farsi, Indian and Yemeni traditions that converged in the region, from the Persian Badjeer (wind-tower) to the Yemeni domes, and from the structural style of bazaars to Islamic architecture with its arches and empty spaces, which also conserved the local architectural heritage.

We could not find a single singular artist whom we can explore! What has been found, the artifacts and heritage, functioned solely to preserve the values of old

and the ideology of the group... it left no space for individualism except in the narrow sense of academics and only as the decree presumed by what went into the labor of crafts and architecture. But with the advent of modern education, from the fifties up until the eighties, appeared an artistic movement labeled by the names of numerous innovators in painting, ceramics, sculpture, engraving, even photography, cinema, theatre and architecture, to initiate the revolution from the realistic traditional art to postmodernism.

As the production of art since the dawn of the century, the last century rather, and till the fifties, had depended on the historical position of the local culture that allowed art, in its decorative and applied manifestations, into the crafts, local industries, and traditional architecture for it to supply an identity to the society, so too the society endorsed, sustained and fortified the traditional and popular arts and integrated them into its financial system, just as it incorporated the oral traditions into the assemblies of tribal leaders and politicians setting off the progress of verse in its colloquial and pure vernaculars. Modern Education took art into a more open scope, an Arabian international latitude that expanded its established local cultural range to national-international grounds, creating a new saga of imitation, creativity and inspiration. New artistic characters emerged, and a new multiplicity and variety came to being, until we reached the dominion of different schools of art that elevated it to what Europe had for long known... this brought back the issues of heritage, modernity and identity, issues that were negotiated within the overall constitution of society and, historically, through religion. The issues of identity, heritage and modernity appeared and brought with them controversy amongst the artists, leading them to a point of escape from their own society, a transmigration from their own to an adoption of the other, the alien, the western... issues of modernism, postmodernism, globalization and internationalism sprouted from the almost ripe tuber of UAE art...

Similarly the state of the audience underwent an evolution from a single traditional perspective to more variegated sets, the hybrid (cosmopolitan) audience... The standards inscribed to art were prescribed by its market, they were applied, decorative, ornamental, architectural and craft-influenced... mass arts... and here they are transforming into individual art; art has moved from its local and regional confines into the international scene. It has change the audience from the type that was protective of art to the type that is capable of producing it, from photocopying machines to flesh and blood creators.... The problem of identity floated to the surface when the audience inquired about the metaphysical essence, the meaning, more than examining the physical body, the form of the artwork. The attitude changed again to the local trend versus the international influence... the issue of globalization quickly surfaces in oil-producing cosmopolitan societies, the likes of those in the Arabian Gulf.

The current arts in the UAE look forward towards being the expressions of (Nomadic Artists) searching for a development of arts that transcend nationalism and geography. A team of UAE artists has emerged- in their forefront is Hassan Sharif, who provoked artists the likes of Hussein Sharif, Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim, Mohamed Kazim, Abdullah Al-Sa'adi... as well as a group of poets- lead by Ahmed Rashid Thani, Khalid Badr Obeid, Nujoum Al-Ghanim, Adil Khuzam, Ibrahim Al-Mulla... and many others in the fields of cinema, theatre, narrative and novel, who emerged with the purpose of redefining the arts of the information age in the UAE; to go beyond tradition and heritage and forge art that respects the third-world individual, art that a first-world individual could also have a taste for; art that globally befits and

benefits the allegorically ever-shrinking globe. Such an art could jump with the cosmopolitan society into universality, it could stay away from politics and government, away from the narrow-minded utilitarianism and the MNCs... away from globalization and capitalism... it could aim at having its expression in the present, to be present, ready, open to the people and coming from them, affecting them and effected by them- flowing from the local cultural atmosphere to momentarily free the international human being from the chains of capitalistic globalism. Such was their vision, the likeness of the (Nomadic Artists) to the (Inhabitants of Myth)... in its international sense, myth spreads from its local symbolism (and its more immediate pedagogical function) to a universal statement of individuality.

Hassan Sharif and his Robin-Hood-esque bandits metamorphosize into a universal link with unifying common artistic values, although very different and individual in artistic inclinations. They bring an art that aims at universal human unison, creating a world-wide-web of art that is present and impacting on this new age, partaking in what parallels a globalization for the poor, a globalization of cultural multiplicity, one that revives that ancient dialogue between cultures, yet does not compromise the internal integrity and individuality of arts- Local issues with various universal modes of expression: various trends, numerous multiplicities; a larger space of freedom and democracy for the arts and a movement from the periphery to various places... to variety. In the words of Archibald MacLeish: a poem should not mean/ but be...

That is the way Hassan Sharif and his group understood, in the context of modern UAE art, the issue of the visual dimension of the picture (compared to the understanding of dramatists to the phonetic dimension of language). It is not the task of the artist to unfold an explanation of the artwork, it is by nature absolutely inexplicable ... Reading the work becomes a personal affair, between the perceiver and the artwork, in their solitude, in their imaginary seclusion and isolation, a space invented by us that is full of our cultural imprints and that allows us to understand, only us... Hence the reading of the UAE is different than the reading of Germany, and both are but a glimpse of the never-ending story that is art: a universal partnership of vision, from the I to the us of all of us and representing a new internationalism that declines an economic globalization of art (which could bring a chauvinistic dimension).

Hassan Sharif and his group come to the German audience from a modern nomadism in the UAE, bringing with them universal myths dripping with the sand and salt of their homeland... they offer their artwork as hecatombs for a universal partnership of Arts with the desire for heralding today's rendition of the muses' new ode to earth's unfortunate children: Can their art mix, as Dionysus did to make sweet wine, with the waters of the Rhine in this new millennium?!  
Ya!!

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