

“Abuab”: Can Participation on Cultural Heritage Be a Tool for the Inclusion of Migrants in Different Societies?

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Abstract: In this article, we aim to demonstrate the use of cultural heritage as an instrument of social integration. We present different theatrical ideas to how cultural heritage could be used as a tool for social integration and intercultural dialogue. We explain our experience with the “Abuab” project, which is taking place in Barcelona since two years; this project works with the collective of Arab immigrants and refugees and tries to propose a methodology for the use of cultural heritage in social integration, which may be used in other cities in Spain and Europe and with other ethnic-linguistic groups. Finally, we conclude how defending and promoting the cultural differences in a society, might create knowledge and respect for the others and consider them as equals, helping to build stronger and cohesive communities.

Keywords: Social Integration, Refugees, “Abuab”, Intercultural Dialogue.

1. Introduction

It is not easy to speak about inclusion in our societies when such an unprecedented year 2020 happened. The Covid-19 pandemic brought with it a world health crisis, a deep economic and social

per il curatore: nella cartella relativa a questo articolo, ci sono molte immagini, ma solo di due vengono indicate la posizione e la didascalia. Pertanto, in questa prima bozza, abbiamo inserito soltanto due immagini: è corretto? in caso fosse necessario inserire anche le altre, indicare cortesemente dove e la rispettiva didascalia. Grazie

impact, which of course affected the way migration flows generally take place, influencing at the same time asylum seekers. With countries closing their borders and people getting isolated, solidarity amongst the others is just visible in the aim to tackle what has become a global issue in just a few months – a problem that it is increased by globalisation and, at the same time, ending with it and making us more individualistic.

Globalisation, with the help of the digital growth, brings with it also another major problem: generalization due to disinformation. If we take into consideration only data from the last three months – from September to November 2020 –, we have seen at least five different Islamist terrorist attacks in Europe – three in France, one in Germany and one in Austria. These have created, in a first place, the urge of the European leaders to propose tightening the borders' control, both from outside and inside the Schengen zone¹, which also means a call «for a tougher asylum regime for the continent and stronger border protection to help stop the spread of Islamist extremism»². Consequently, the already existent migration crisis in Europe has suddenly become a security debate leading to the suppression of freedoms of both migrants and European citizens. Although some leaders still push for cooperation between countries, the misunderstanding or wording used by some others has clearly increased the stigmatization of Muslims as a whole, pointing and classifying them all as defenders of the Islamist attacks. This raises another concern about how fast messages glorifying terrorism can spread in Internet, as well as the hate against migrants. Nowadays, it is relatively easy to comment, share and give our opinion online, even if sometimes one can be not really well-informed, or the news that one shares are fake or stigmatised. Therefore, the tough measures that are expected to be implemented will not

1. *EU weighs tighter border controls after Paris terrorism summit*, Deutsche Welle (11.11.2020), <https://www.dw.com/en/eu-weighs-tighter-border-controls-after-paris-terrorism-summit/a-55553916>.

2. Pancevski (2020).

only affect the physical and thus geographical borders but also the digital ones. As it says in the *Joint Statement of the EU home affairs ministers on the recent terrorist attacks*³ from the Council of the EU, «the Islamist attack on a teacher in France shows once again how important it is to combat online illegal content, terrorism propaganda, hate speech and disinformation». All-in-all, it is a way to treat the migrant population as something foreign to us, a group of people living in a parallel reality inside the same country, marginalised – or, as some people can mistakenly see, marginalising – from the rest of the citizens, which shows the importance to first integrate these groups in our society to better include them after.

Although there have been always migration flows, those are expected to – and are already – increase in the near future, due to several factors such as conflict, violence, political and economic crises, climate change and natural disasters, that bring with them food insecurity, brutal living conditions or the lack of a future prospect. In any case, migrations lead to deeper problems experimented by both the host country and the newcomers, who struggle to include the immigrants in a cultural contrasted local environment.

Nowadays, and farther from ceasing in the next few years, we live in the unfortunate reality of coexisting with a high number of forced displacements. If we look at the data provided by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in their annual *Global trends*⁴ report, it stands out that the globally displaced people now reach 79.5 million people, almost doubling the number from 2010⁵. Yet, this is just a part of the total migratory

3. *Statement of the EU home affairs ministers on the recent terrorist attacks in Europe*, Council of the European Union, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/11/13/joint-statement-by-the-eu-home-affairs-ministers-on-the-recent-terrorist-attacks-in-europe/>.

4. *Global Trends 2019*, UNHCR, <https://www.unhcr.org/statistics/unhcrstats/5ee200e37/unhcr-global-trends-2019.html>.

5. As it is reported in the *Global Trends 2019 report*, in 2010 41 million people were forcible displaced.

movements, which consists in 272 million people – or 3.5% of the world population – according to the International Organization for Migration (IOM) report⁶.

Unfortunately, not everyone can obtain a safe place where they can imagine calling a new home. There are still hundreds of thousands of persons without a permanent place where to stay or living under poor conditions without even the essential tools for a dignified life. The lack of any future prospect for most of them, which cannot even clarify their legal status and are pushed to “the country of nowhere”, makes the chances to achieve a better life even more tough. Nevertheless, even for those who flee to other countries seeking for a better future in socioeconomic and political terms, the inclusion to the new community can be hard. In either way, there is a loss of the sense of belonging, feeling that one is not connected with the language, habit, and traditions from the new place, neither anymore with the daily life they had in their home countries.

There is an obvious cultural contrast between immigrants and locals, which generates tensions on both sides, consequently increasing xenophobic and isolationist movements. The lack of involvement of immigrants often leads to their social marginalisation and can result in the development of attitudes that hinder peaceful coexistence and social cooperation⁷, failing again in recognizing intercultural mediation. The key element and the only way to succeed in building up respect for the differences in a globalized world are understanding, finding common interest that bring us together.

What mentioned above demonstrates the need to get the new arrivals to the EU countries to be more involved within the new society, therefore we are going to talk about this involvement through cultural heritage, which could be a very important tool to help migrants to integrate in the new society.

6. *World Migration Report 2019*, IOM, https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/wmr_2020.pdf.

7. Website “Abuab”, <https://abuab.org/en/>.

2. Social inclusion through cultural heritage

While there are several projects addressing these issues in every country, a special interest should be given to those involving cultural heritage and museums as a place of intercultural dialogue. The reason is that heritage is the best tool to offer a safe environment to weave a proper inclusion. The reason is because most of the objects we have in our museums would not exist without migration – nearly every object is an expression of transregional connection and migration⁸, either for its techniques, history, or thoughts. All we show is the result of migration and trade, and our heritage – a shared one at the end – is the vivid illustration of that. Cultural heritage can include the result of masterpieces and of different innovations in the past, through which the present can be explained as the result of a melting pot of cultures⁹. In addition, it is fundamental to build the identity of a person so it should also play an important role when trying to understand and get to know other identities. In fact, we live currently in a time where we cannot talk about having one identity anymore, but fluid, hybrid, or plural identities. Without realising it, we are extremely exposed to foreign cultures that unconsciously we assimilate their values making our identity change.

Additionally, when immigrants rediscover heritage elements from their own countries that are on display here, it can help them to recover self-esteem that is often lost due to their situation of helplessness. Enabling an understanding of the significance of the host country’s cultural heritage among the immigrant population can help to encourage their involvement in the construction of the host society¹⁰.

But the main problem is not the way we already have to integrate them in the host society, but a gap between the theory and the practice, the viability to implement these projects, usually due

8. Weber (2018).

9. Website “Abuab”, <https://abuab.org/en/>.

10. *Ibidem*.

to the lack of financial support, as both the social and the cultural sector struggle in getting funds.

Yet, there is another problem that should be addressed, which focuses more on the terminology used to talk about this phenomenon. Despite most of the projects refers to *integration* of the migrant community – being it the way we try to make them fit in our society – the truth is that we aim for the *inclusion* of them, we want to create an exchange, to build a relationship between both sides, to understand them, and make them understand us to be able to respect each other's culture, history, and past. Integration overlooks the difference between us and tries to make segregate communities adapt to what is considered normal – in this case, the host society –, while inclusion accepts that everyone is different but with the same rights and choices of the others: “one is respected for what he/she is although he/she is not like me”. Therefore, this project should include and affect both migrants and the host population.

One example of social inclusion through museums can be found in the *Multaka* project in Berlin, which was started with the purpose to develop connections between the Syrian and Iraqi refugees and their cultural heritage in the host country¹¹. While highlighting the importance of their cultural heritage for the host country, it allowed them to look positively to their culture, while learning the links between Germany's cultural heritage and their own heritage.

3. “Abuab” – Doors

The *Multaka* project responded to a necessity of trying to include the huge quantity of refugees that Germany took from 2015. However, it just opened the door to broader the subjects and start a new proposal to better include the increasingly number of im-

11. Sabrine (2020).



Figure 1. *Museu d'història de Barcelona.*

migrants arriving every year in the southern countries of Europe, especially Spain and Italy.

“Abuab”, or doors, is a project that aims to work on the use of cultural heritage as an instrument of social integration of Arabic-speaking refugees/immigrants, mainly coming from the Near East and North Africa. It has been proposed by the Institution Milà i Fontanals of the CSIC, Heritage for Peace and University of Girona, with the collaboration of University of Bologna, and will depend on the essential participation and collaboration of museums in the city of Barcelona – at the beginning – and other European cities. Therefore, the proposal aims to help to resolve a socio-political problem of great importance now, which is the conflict between Islamic fundamentalism and the West, by collaborating in the construction of a tool for mutual understanding that consists of encouraging intercultural dialogue on the values represented by cultural heritage. The aim is to have an impact on both the new-arrivals and the local populations. The former will

discover the values of the host society through their heritage creations, at the same time as they appreciate the heritage contributions that their countries of origin have made to the universal culture, promoting affective and cultural links of immigrants/refugees with the cultural heritage of the host countries. This dialogue can help to create complicity in the construction of a society undergoing change¹².

Although there have been some issues on starting a major project – lack of public financing, the Covid-19 pandemic and the closure of museums and heritage sites... –, some pilot tries have been carried out in the Catalan Pyrenees and in Barcelona:

- Group of immigrants of the neighbourhood “el Raval”, in Barcelona, visited the Ecomuseum of Esterrri d’Àneu, with the intention to promote museums as spaces of social coexistence.
- In Barcelona, several other groups of immigrants undertook a visit to the Romanic church of Santa Maria, visited a local fabric of cheeses, assisted in a conference about the importance of “Abuab” project, the immigration in history and the presentation of the work of some immigrants’ associations, listened to an intercultural concert between immigrants and local people. Moreover, they also took some guide tours in different museums, such as Museu d’Història de Catalunya, Museu d’Història de Barcelona, Museu Arqueològic de Catalunya, Museu Nacional d’Art de Catalunya (MNAC) and the Museu Etnològic i Cultures del Món.

Unfortunately, as mentioned before, the lack of resources and the scarce involvement of public institutions on undertaking all the activities, have limited the project to a few collaborating volunteers and, thus, less visits can be carried out. Nevertheless, the project seeks to expand soon and bring all the trial activities car-

12. Website “Abuab”, <https://abuab.org/en/>.



Figure 2. *Caixa Fòrum de Girona, 2019.*

ried out in Barcelona and the Catalan territory to other cities such as Madrid in Spain, Bologna, and Florence in Italy. The proposal is far from over and new activities for a better social knowledge of the identity of the newcomers are already being planned. “Abuab” will continue to take place in different European cities. We are planning to create common activities between migrants and local people. The activities will be in different languages, and will include traditional dinners, and concerts in the museums.

4. Final words

We can look at our cultural heritage in a nationalistic and individualistic way, thinking it is only part of our own culture. Nevertheless, the truth is far from this look – cultural heritage itself, and the objects stored in the museums of every country are part of a common

world heritage, which could not be explained without migrations and people's identities. Identities have never been unique nor static but have always changed and presented itself as fluid. Therefore, defending and promoting the cultural differences in a society, might create knowledge and respect for *the others* and consider them as equals, helping to build stronger and cohesive communities, made up of people not only humans. The actual crisis with Covid-19 demonstrated the need of more solidarity in our society and "Abuab" is a good example to confirm that solidarity could be through culture.

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