

## THE WEAVERS' EXPLORATION IN ABU-DHABI'S WESTERN REGION

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### KEYWORDS

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### ABSTRACT

*This document outlines the initial findings and achievements of a pilot project aimed at Emirati heritage revival via micro-entrepreneurial development of women as home-based weavers in the Western region of Abu-Dhabi. The project was initiated by the Khalifa fund for Enterprise Development in partnership with Abu-Dhabi Culture and Heritage Authority.*

*The document starts by explaining the impact of the fast prosperity of the UAE onto the local community's way of life, and new competitive market challenges that forced the traditional crafts to become extinct in a very short period of time. Today the hardship of the local community to keep pace with the big socio-economic jump that the country has witnessed in only 4 decades, has made identity preservation a national urgency.*

*The findings of an intensive field assessment of Bedouin women, and the field pilot project that helped them find the bridge to their new reality, brings more than social inclusion and business opportunities.*

## BACKGROUND

The socio-economic development in the United Arab Emirate and the country's progress that took place in less than 40 years is equivalent to 400 years of transformation in other nations. As a result, no other country has a wider generational gap, especially in the way of life between grandmother, mother and daughter here in the UAE. As one grandmother summarises it: 'I used to live in a tent made by my own hands, and we had only one plate for the whole family to eat out of, now we do not know what to do with all this space at home and we have a kitchen with over 100 plates and 2 servants and a cook. We were struggling to live in the past, now it is a different kind of struggle.'

History in the UAE can be traced back to 800BC and life in the Arabian Peninsula changes as the eco-system changes – altering the character of the land. As Bernard Lewis mentions in his book 'The Arabs in History':

*"According to this, Arabia was originally a land of great fertility and the first home of the Semitic peoples. Through the millennia it has been undergoing a process of steady desiccation, a drying up of wealth and waterways and a spread of the desert at the expense of the cultivable land. The declining productivity of the peninsula, together with the increase in the number of the inhabitants, led to a series of crises of overpopulation and consequently to a recurring cycle of invasions of the neighboring countries by the Semitic peoples of the peninsula. It was these crises that carried the Assyrians, Aramaeans, Canaanites (including the Phoenicians and Hebrews), and finally the Arabs themselves into the Fertile Crescent."*

Today Abu-Dhabi, the capital, is on the list of the 20 most expensive cities to live in worldwide, and Dubai, the trading capital, is on the list of the top 50 tourist destinations worldwide; the airports of both towns are some of the busiest in the world.

Thanks to the leadership of Sheikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al Nahyan, and the discovery of petrol in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there has been a complete transformation of the way of life in the UAE in a miraculously short time. The country went from desert and huts weaved from palm tree leaves to highways, buildings, hotels, airports and impressive malls filled with stores from every international high street and fashion brand. Not only did the country prosper infrastructure-wise, but Sheikh Zayed also treated the country's citizens as his own children, and ensured everyone got a house, education if they wished, top healthcare services and government jobs were granted. The distribution of wealth has been managed efficiently and fairly, which is the reason for today's citizen's loyalty and pride of their founding father. This loyalty creates the needed socio-political stability, which is key for further development and prosperity.

This rapid socio-economic change made keeping pace with change a challenge to the local community. Bedouin women, who used to make everything they used in their daily lives with their own hands, suddenly did not have to spin wool nor weave their home necessities and family clothing. Instead of the Bedouin tribes having to travel in search of water with their animals they are now housed, and water is found by turning on the tap. Now only petroleum companies wander around the desert in search of petrol – petrol that has made crafts, heritage and traditions as hard to find as water used to be before its discovery in only 3 decades.

## HERITAGE PRESERVATION & THE SOCIAL CHALLENGE

Not only has the big jump in standard of living threatened the livelihood of Emirati heritage, the influx of workers that were suddenly needed to build buildings, clean streets, teach in schools, doctors for the hospitals, experts for government ministries etc came from almost every country in the world, and created business for their fellow expatriate nationals who started restaurants, and imported objects from their own culture, (such as crafts, textiles, performance...). These often came from countries that had much slower transformation rates, and hence their own culture adapted as the people of that culture changed.

This made the cultural objects of the expatriate community much more ready for the local consumer, as it had already been adapted to enter the targeted life of today's open and selective consumer. For a cultural object to be marketable it goes through a transformation over time, as the tastes and colors and designs transform to keep its place in the evolving markets of today. Unfortunately for the Emirati craft object, it did not have this privilege, and hence became threatened and even extinct in a very short period of time.

Heritage preservation became a concern, and the first attempts to encourage Emirati craft women in the Western region of Abu-Dhabi (where there is the highest concentration of women weavers and palm tree basket makers) to continue practicing their skill, was a program through the Emirati women's union about 40 years ago. They provided monthly salaries to the women who wove in their homes, and took whatever product was produced that month. The salary was fixed, and was independent of the quality or market acceptance of the product. Once the product was taken it was stored in the women's union storage and showroom, or presented at local shows.

Though there was neither incentive for product innovation nor any quality surveillance, the program did keep the women practicing a skill that they had learnt down the generations, however, its sole goal was to preserve heritage through giving artisans a reason to keep practicing the skill and of course it was also a sort of wealth distribution. Market access, marketing, product development and trading was not part of the initiative, and this is probably why it was not sustainable and the project was stopped about 20 years ago.

About 2 years ago, and out of increasing concern for the livelihood of the Emirati heritage, the Abu-Dhabi Culture and Heritage Authority was initiated. They took the cultural foundation as their offices, displayed an excellent collection of elements from the old way of life and kept a small store for visitors – mainly expatriates and tourists. The Emirati craft items that they sold were collected from artisans from the Western region, and the artisan was given the price she asked for. Sales were modest, but the product supply was modest also. The quality of the craft product degraded as the artisans' life continued adapting to the country's prosperity and the gap between the imported crafts for sale in shops and malls and their own product seemed to be too wide to bridge.

Cultural vitality and heritage sustainability should be considered as part of socio-economic sustainability programs, as this would mean taking into consideration the local community's social and environmental concerns, and hence ensure a long lasting impact and solid basis for the country's continuous economic growth. It might sound beneficial to adapt other countries successful experiences in heritage revival to the UAE, but adapting would mean taking into account the uniqueness of UAE socio-economic evolution, which would probably result in developing unique programs.

Despite the fact that the Bedouin way of life is becoming near to extinct in the vast Western desert of Abu-Dhabi, the Bedouin values of right and wrong and their human warmth is still an integral part of their identity and so are the teachings they pass on to younger generations. This made fieldwork easy and tough at the same time.

Easy, because knocking on their door brings with it new friends and opens not only one door but also every house in the little town would welcome you as a visiting distant relative once the first house accepted you. And then there are no more barriers; they share their concerns, issues and express gratitude to their Sheikhs. They show a lot of commitment to being a part of the initiatives to preserve their identity as they also long for it. At the same time, field investigation is hard because, their sense of hospitality and openness forces all sorts of human to human barriers to vanish so fast (as if it never existed) and the personal gets in the way of the professional – which makes people development and artisan coaching take the form of friend to friend chats rather than of formal structured trainings or workshops.

The careful assessment of Bedouin women weavers' life status in the Western region has shown that even though there is no financial urgency to produce or to get involved in trade, as thanks to government generosity they all have very comfortable homes, the husband has a government job (mostly a basic job such as border police or army officer) and school is free for the children. Most seem comfortable with the minimum, but in today's competitive work place and especially the quality of expatriates that have been attracted to hold positions in both private and public sector all over the UAE – giving your child just a public school education, gives him or her just a basic knowledge of foreign languages and not enough skills to get into universities. This does not build a solid basis for a strong national economy. Today, unemployment is high in the Western region of Abu-Dhabi and holding a university degree is not very common.

As the standard of living in Abu-Dhabi continues to rise, and the job market becomes more and more competitive and open to both highly skilled expatriates as well as the local community; the local community becomes more and more fragile within their own nation. The need for the local community to become part of a strong private sector, and hence the decision making process, has never been more urgent.

Heritage revival through micro-entrepreneurial development of women weavers is only a small element of a whole infrastructure of heritage object traders, suppliers of raw material, and, most important of all, a new way of thinking. The local community today, only sees itself as a consumer or a trader of foreign goods, and not a producer or market supplier.

## **THE WEAVERS' EXPLORATION**

Khalifa Fund for Enterprise Development is one government institution that made developing initiatives to improve the social inclusion and economic participation of the local community a priority and an integral part of all its objectives. Heritage revival through micro-entrepreneurial skills development and market access opportunity creation is one of Khalifa Fund's objectives. To reach this objective, an intensive field research to analyse the situation of Bedouin women weavers, in the Western region of Abu-Dhabi, was the first step. The results led to the development of a methodology for a national pilot field project aimed at creating business opportunities for the women weavers, which could be seen by some of them as a good enough incentive to become self-employed through their weaving. As one of the women puts it: 'people only come to the Western region to search for petrol, and you came to search for weavers and looms!'

Through interviewing hundreds of women in isolated small towns in the Western region, it was clear that the perception of a government project always implied some sort of distribution of wealth. Some even expected to get paid for attending an informative workshop about the project idea. It was challenging to make the women artisans understand that importance of self-development to become self-employed. It was obvious that every woman we interviewed was anxious to be part of the Khalifa Fund project but at the same time there was some sort of confusion. We explained that our role was to show them how to use their skills to produce marketable products, with certain design and quality specifications. In previous government programs, they have been rewarded simply for being artisans, and have never experienced producing for the market nor has anyone ever evaluated the quality of their products.

Selecting the right team for this pilot project was a crucial factor in its success and more challenging than was expected. Even when 20 women artisans were finally selected from 4 towns in the Western region no one could have predicted whether the weavers would go along with the project till the end or not. The program, which had no financial reward, included awareness workshops and training sessions, and required specific production delivery deadlines, specific quality standards and specific designs – an experience that none of our women had ever had.

In today's way of life, it is hard to imagine the hardship of the Bedouin woman; only a few decades ago she had to spin her own wool, which she then used to weave the hut, the clothing and the furniture; she had to take care of the children, husband and animals, as well as the cooking, milking and planning to keep everyone from hunger, and then there was the continuous journey planning from one place to the other; our pilot project created nostalgia for the old laborious way of life for the artisans.

When they started working with us there was a lot of uncertainty about project goals, but once they started they felt some sort of dignity and pride. This came from feeling that they had found a way to contribute to their country; a country that flew too far away from them, in all senses of the word, and in many directions. Through the challenge of producing the products they weaved for the pilot project, they saw a way of paying back their generous country. Through preserving heritage and the livelihood of its culture they found a way to be part of the speedy developments around them. As they attended the workshops and attentively absorbed all the color coordination instructions, product measurements and proportions, finishing and lining of bags, table runners and all sorts of products demanded in today's market but not part of their lives; and as they interacted with the product design consultant, they found a way to be finally part of the economic wheel, and not just standing outside and watching it move.

A lady in the border town of Sila took her wool to be used for the weaving that was asked of her to the sea to clean it before spinning it. She went to the sea with 3 other women relatives, and they spent the whole morning cleaning and drying the wool in the sand. The little incident was the talk of the town, as the last time women were seen cleaning wool at the sea in Sila was in the 1960s. A lady in Ghayathi who is known all over town to be the best 'zarabil' maker (thick rough wool socks worn by Bedouins to protect the feet from the heat of the sand, made by one needle crochet type of work) was asked to make a small hand bag using the same technique. She explained that it was impossible for her to make such a shape, and it would take her about 2 weeks to finish the bag. Two days later, the bag was done and she was the proudest bag maker. Despite the fact that women in the Western region do not like to be photographed, due to the conservative culture, our bag lady asked us to take photos of her with her first crochet bag. 'Khannaga' is a strip of colorful braided threads, used to decorate camels and sheep, which also helps identify who they belong to. A group of women were asked to make the 'Khannaga'

type of work to make smaller shapes to be used as bracelets; the new use of 'Khannaga' and the colorful designs, made teenage girls in Ghayathi into making them during their summer school break, and they were creative enough to produce their own color coordination's and shapes.

Of course not all 20 artisans selected in the pilot project were motivated all along the project. Some were less willing to challenge themselves into making shapes and designs that were not traditional. Those were mainly women above 60 years old. But about 14 women out of the 20, saw the importance of self development and will now be trained to become master producers and production supervisors to other women weavers from their home, in their community. This will help create jobs for more women in the Western region, and will increase production capacity, which is essential for the market penetration of Emirati handicrafts.

This project does not only intend to create self employment opportunities for women artisans, but supporting micro-entrepreneurs will also be essential for the sustainability of the program; the daughter that calculates prices, the niece that designs the web site, and the son that delivers the products to the capital, are all essential for continuous business growth and heritage integration into the country's commerce. At the same time, and even with an increased number of weavers, the Emirati handicrafts will remain rare treasures, unique pieces for those in search of the not so distant local Bedouin way of life that is nearing extinct.

## **INVOLVING THE YOUTH**

The younger generation's involvement in the national heritage revival initiative is key to ensuring a long lasting presence of the Emirati cultural vitality. To achieve this the Khalifa Fund for Enterprise Development, organized an annual contest, called 'bring the past to the future'. The contest was organized with the regional Vocational Training Institutes and Abu-Dhabi Heritage and Culture Authority. The contest was the first of its kind, and it rewarded the young Emiratis who could find the mysterious balance between the old the new and attract the consumer of today. The winner had to present a commercial product inspired from local heritage. The product had to be Emirati in production and of natural raw materials. The contest was meant to demonstrate that the cultural product could be a source of self-employment as well as a practical experience of the importance of design and creativity to keep the inheritance alive.

Before launching the contest several awareness workshops were planned with the students. These showed examples from other cultures where handicrafts are a respectable part of the business sector, which demonstrated that there is a market for it both locally and internationally worth investing in. They became aware that even they themselves could contribute actively in keeping the Emirati culture alive.

The youth are the link that communicates, consumes and understands the markets of today, and understands the limitations of their mothers and grandmothers. For this reason reviving the old and forgotten could only be possible by getting the young generation interested in innovating, creating, designing using elements from their own identity, and helping local crafts migrate from the past to the world of today's consumer.

The contest was a practical experience that got students into researching – analyzing what is Emirati and what is not, researching raw material sources, networking with producers, analysing market gaps, and at the same time developing their entrepreneurial spirit. They were full of Emirati pride, they worked with producers and consulted

designers, they prepared presentations, catalogues, prototypes and pricelists then stood comfortably in front of a selection committee to defend their ideas, and started dreaming of the future that the experience brought with it.

Before this contest took place, students did not want to get a degree in design because it does not help get a government job. This contest proved to them that entrepreneurial development and funding institutions are head-hunting young designers like themselves to bridge the gap of market potentials and are ready to provide the necessary support for it. The challenge to create the link between the past and the present appealed to many and meant a lot to those students that felt the gap between the country they belong to and know today, and the country they belong to but only know through the stories of their parents and grandparents. Creating the bridge between the two worlds seemed, not only a good cause, but also a market opportunity to be seized, and an opportunity to prove oneself in self-employment rather than struggling in the very competitive government sector.

To everyone's surprise, after the contest, the students requested that the institute looked into teaching the old production techniques, such as weaving, palm leave basketry and pottery. And the institute is now looking into including the national identity graphics and colors into the design curriculum.

## **DEVELOPING PARTNERSHIPS FOR SUSTAINABILITY**

The Khalifa Fund for Enterprise Development is the first government institution in the UAE that has taken a self-employment creation strategy to revive heritage. All the previous attempts to keep crafts men and women producing were via salaries and/or donations or wealth distribution techniques. Khalifa Fund for Enterprise Development did not just perceive producers as workers, but as potential entrepreneurs who could be equipped to help themselves by seizing the opportunities once available. The business growth opportunities are best seized if all concerned government institutions are aware of the socio-economic issues that hinder growth, work together and openly discuss and implement the necessary legislative reforms.

Initiating a business sector cannot be achieved by only one government initiative through a field project. For this reason, Khalifa Fund has launched the necessary advocacy work to ensure sector sustainability. Of all those involved the national archive is an important partner in documenting the undocumented national heritage. The universities should include the documented heritage in an academic manner into their teachings to ensure that students could identify an Emirati cultural object from all the foreign cultures that have invaded the countries shopping outlets. The chamber of commerce should become concerned with creating the business opportunities for local micro-entrepreneurs, as they do for other sectors. The women's union and family development association should initiate advocacy work on women's home-based business issues and provide regional business centres or workshops to help women artisans excel in their fields. The Abu-Dhabi Heritage and Culture Authority, and the Tourism authority should market education around local culture and history and how to access it. The Western Region Development Council should provide the necessary logistics in the Western region to ensure business sector growth. The Ministry of Economy and Planning should instigate legislative reform concerning the home-based business licensing. There needs to be awareness programs in schools and universities to promote the spirit of producer rather than consumer. Awareness programs targeting government institutions, should be initiated to create awareness around the importance of field work , to reach out to citizens no matter where they are in the UAE territory. Khalifa Fund for Enterprise Development, has initiated some of this advocacy work with the launch of the pilot heritage revival project to ensure results sustainability.

## SUSTAINABILITY CHALLENGES

The project described in this document is different from all other government initiatives in Abu-Dhabi, since it is the first of its kind in equipping artisans to be able to initiate a micro-enterprise, and arm them with the tools to understand the market and create business opportunities for themselves, rather than looking at heritage revival by applying wealth distribution techniques. However, the real change in the implementation strategy is the involvement of the concerned local community in the implementation process through awareness and people development.

Nevertheless, a government initiative's implementation strategy is always a function of the decision makers in the concerned government entities that implement them. Unless there is a critical number of government decision makers that believe in the same initiative strategy, from all concerned government entities; sustainability will remain a function of the initiative initiator or the government entity driving the initiative.

The other crucial sustainability element that was lacking in most of the previous government initiatives is an exit plan. The culture of government dependency, without any requirements or quality examinations of the deliverables, does not encourage growth and prosperity, in fact it makes any efforts to implement any sort of standards very challenging. Hence the deliverables degrade with time and dependency becomes a right, and sustainability of efforts to make the local community part of economic growth a bigger and bigger challenge.

Government initiatives or plans for socio-economic development should have a clear exit strategy planned from the start, or at least the initiatives' implementation strategy should change, as the society adapts and continuously measures impact on the local community to change implementation strategies depending on field impacts. Even with wealthy economies, where it might not seem to make sense to plan exit plans for government initiatives, it is still key to building a solid economy that becomes more and more dependent on its diverse private sector.

A national 'label' or 'stamp' has been discussed, which would help identify a 100% hand-made Emirati product made from natural raw material, inspired from local heritage and of a good quality. This will become a challenging initiative for local artisans and a driver to keep their products at the top of market expectations. To ensure the sustainability of such a 'cultural product certificate', the specifications will need to be clearly defined and communicated, the quality standards will need to be communicated to all producers and heritage will need to be documented and accessible. This will mean that, once more, all government institutions with a concern for heritage revival will need to be part of the 'label' identification process, and a mixed committee should be formed. The exit strategy for such a delicate process, which will have an impact on local identity, should be treated with very high importance, while taking into account the social impacts of 'labeling' or 'not labeling' a product. Today social habits and the friendly, tribal preference culture is sometimes border-line corruption when it comes to selecting artisans that can or cannot take up the rare business opportunities that exist.

A key success factor in a national identity branding launch, is local identity pride, local identity trust and believing in the local identity's potential to have its position in today's very competitive local market. The fast and wide socio-economic jump and the fast and wide gap it has created between the old Emirati way of life has shaken the spirits of the local community to the point of only perceiving themselves as consumers and not producers.

Another big challenge in local government initiatives is execution speed. Launching a brand does not require much time, when the strategy is defined and the resources are available; but launching a national brand initiative, where people development is a key factor, is a long-term process. Culture is people science, and people are influenced by several social, economical, psychological and cultural influences. This makes heritage revival a long-term process.

The presence of cultural elements (handicrafts, poems, music, performance, food, perfumes) is a sign of a healthy nation with people proud of their roots, no matter how fragile their existence may be within their community. Heritage revival through entrepreneurial skills development, does not only have socio-economic impact on Bedouin women in the Western region, but it also initiates a whole new way of thinking as well as trust in the local producers of products that will find their niche place in today's market of high street and fashion brands, and boost national pride. This will have a wider positive impact on other business sectors, and, if successful implementation continues, will improve local communities contribution to the national economy.

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## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

In June 2007, Khalifa Fund for Enterprise Development was created as an independent agency of the Government of Abu Dhabi, to cultivate entrepreneurship and catalyse the development of the UAE Small & Medium Enterprise sectors. The fund's vision is to be a world-class model for fostering entrepreneurship and developing globally competitive SME's and its mission is to fuel entrepreneurial mindsets and drive the growth of globally competitive SME's, with the active participation of Emirati nationals, in support of a sustainable national. Leila Ben-Gacem, leads the heritage revival and micro-entrepreneurial development initiative at Khalifa Fund. Previously, Leila was an independent micro-entrepreneur export consultant, where she designed projects aimed at improving the socio-economic status of artisans, through international trade opportunity development. Before starting her own consulting firm, Leila worked with Hewlett Packard Medical products division, where she held several positions, such as Business development for Europe Middle-East and Africa for Hewlett Packard Germany, and later Business Manager in Libya. Leila holds a BS degree in Biomedical Engineering from Boston University.



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