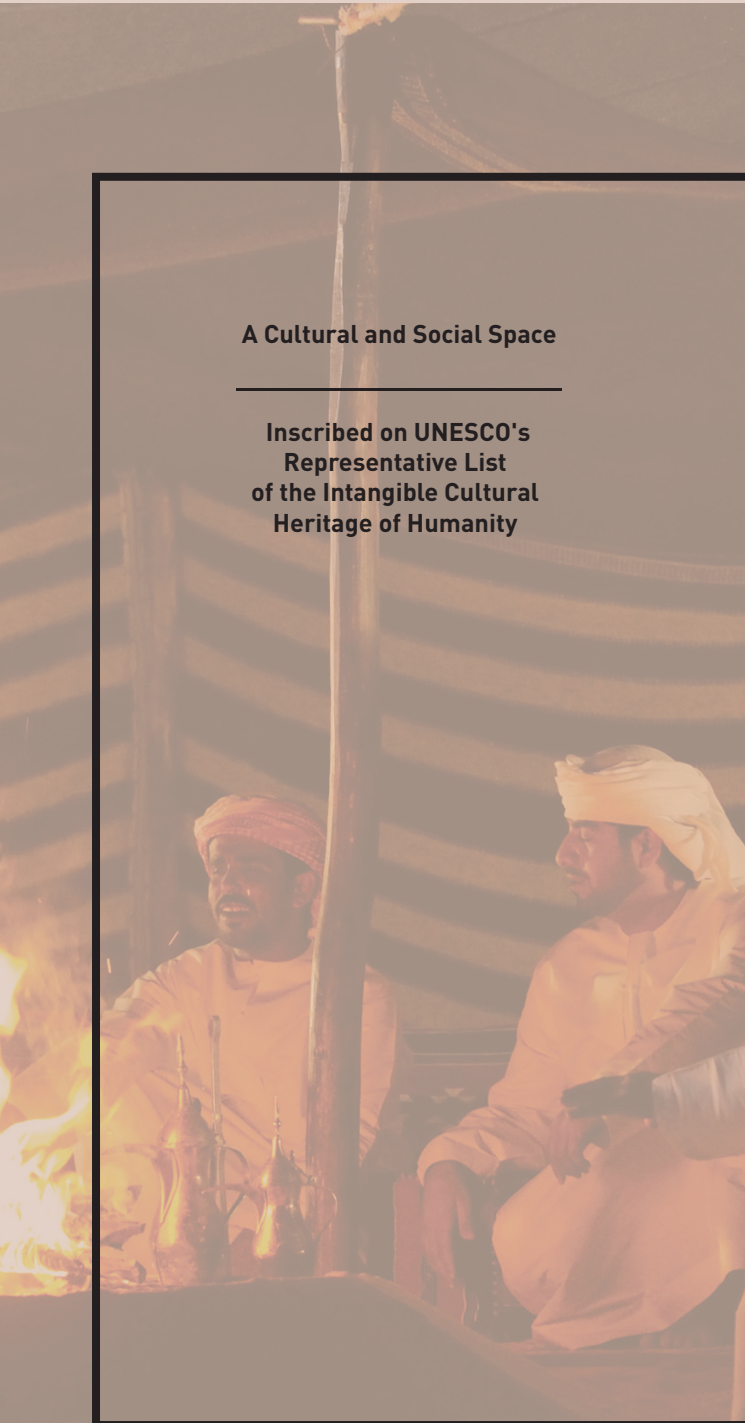


2015

A Cultural and Social Space

**Inscribed on UNESCO's
Representative List
of the Intangible Cultural
Heritage of Humanity**

Majlis



Majlis





Introduction

The Emirati Majlis (literally meaning council or assembly) is part of the social life and manifestations of solidarity and interaction, hospitality customs and habits, and generosity among the people of the UAE. It is a tradition for elderly people and sage chieftains to run a guesthouse, which is considered a forum for the people of the tribe and all those who gather therein to discuss the daily affairs and matters of their lives, and relay news and stories. These gatherings or guesthouses are called barza according to these specifications. The chieftain is said to be barez if he is sitting in his barza, and each member of the tribe and community is entitled to attend this social forum, to give his point of view on certain matters. The owner of that guesthouse, or Majlis, is responsible for paying all of the expenses of the guesthouse with his own money, although in some cases the tribe members cooperate together to cover these expenses. It is worth mentioning that these reception areas, guesthouses, or councils are common in many Gulf countries, where they are known by different names. In Kuwait they are called Al-Diwaniyah and in Saudi Arabia Majlis, while the Bedouin gathering or council is called Bayt Al-She`r (house of hair). In the UAE, on the other hand, it is called barza, or Al-marms, or Al-mayles (instead of Majlis).

It should be noted that there are political, social and cultural entities and institutions that bear the name Majlis (meaning council). In the UAE, there is the Federal National Council, while in Kuwait there is the National Assembly, and the Council of Representatives or Shura council in other countries. So the term Majlis (council or assembly) is used in many countries to denote a variety of political and cultural forums.

As for the term barza, it refers specifically to the sheikh, chief of the emirate, or principality council, because the sheikh sits in a prominent place, either inside his palace or in a nearby open space. He receives the complaints and demands of the people and resolves them. All of this takes place in the framework of a constructive dialogue that is distinguished by honesty, openness, freedom and ingenuity.

The United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Sultanate of Oman and Qatar have been able to include the Majlis on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, through a joint international report that these countries submitted, because it enjoys these social values, and as it is considered a significant aspect of heritage. It has been an integral part of the human heritage of these peoples since December 2015.



The Distinctive Characteristics of the UAE's Majlis

The Majalis (councils, as Majalis is the plural form of Majlis) have received great attention from the people of the UAE for a long time, due to their significance in achieving interaction and communication among the members of the society, especially between the ruler, the leader of the tribe, and the community. The owners of Majalis give special care to their construction, decoration, and furnishing, selecting a special location for them within their palace or house, as it is custom to establish an entrance separate from the rest of the house, with an external door in order to provide more freedom to women as they enter and exit from the house.

In fact, the UAE environment with its natural resources is reflected in the construction and furnishing of the Majlis. In the past, it used to be furnished with soft wicker mats and embroidered sofas and cushions, as well as a water jug and a box for small coffee cups. As for the Majalis of chieftains and merchants, their furniture was more luxurious with sofas, lounges, carpets and opulent curtains.

The Majlis may be a Bayt Al-She`r near the house of the sheikh, in the middle of the neighbourhood, or in the tents of the nomads. In its simplest form, it may be a barn surrounded from three sides by leaves of acacia, or Prosopis juliflora, to protect it from wind and sand.

The Majlis may also be constructed in the shadow of large acacia trees, with the lush shade they provide, to which people retire in the afternoons. This underscores the relation between the Majlis and the nature of the Bedouin, the lover of nature and its aspects and features: the land, the moon, and the stars.

Types of Majalis in the UAE

Majalis in the UAE are classified under different categories according to certain criteria:

1/ Types of Majalis according to their environment

- Majalis of the coast dwellers. Often constructed from plaster and mud, or arbour and bower, or in the form of a sunshade or canvas under which men sit. A boat might play the role of the Majlis for divers after they are finished with their diving. In this form of Majlis, they talk about types of ships, fishing or diving, the hardships they are facing, sales, the pearl trade and other topics of interest to them.
- Majalis of the Bedouins of the desert. These consist of two types: those held in the open air, called barns, where the nomadic Bedouins sit in the open air around the fire and coffee jars and pots, and the Majalis of the Bayt Al-She'r, which is held in a tent made of goat hair.
- Majalis held in mountainous deserts, valleys and mountains. The dwellers have their special guesthouses and gathering places in which they manage their daily affairs, especially with regard to honeycombs, goat herding, the location of antelope, hyena and wolves, as the people gather together to chat around valleys, water springs and flood plains.



2/ Types of Majalis according to occupation

The occupations and professions of the residents of the UAE are reflected in their gathering places and the subject of their talks. There are Majalis for elderly chieftains, sheikhs, pearl merchants and fishermen, and others for people interested in hunting, folklore and poetry.

- Majalis of Merchants. Open to all, especially divers, with the aim of raising funds for their journeys and providing their families with basic foodstuffs, such as rice, flour, coffee, etc. Moreover, they are characterised by significant activity during the pearl fishing and diving seasons, especially at the end of the diving season, as they could negotiate over the prices of pearls. The same is true during the sales that flourish in the month of Ramadan, and after Friday prayers, where traders gather in one individual's house for lunch and discuss their work. They might discuss disputes that may arise between the divers, or between them and the traders. They might also discuss general news about the sea, and relevant stories and tales about the perils faced by divers and their boats. In fact, these gatherings are often accompanied by recreational activities, entertainment, the recitation of poems, stories, puzzles, etc.
- Majalis of Justice. These councils specialise in Shari'a Judiciary and all affairs referred from chieftains' councils and Majalis of merchants to the judges. The Emirati society has known many of these councils under the names of many judges. These councils have not only settled disputes and decided various issues, but they have propagated religious knowledge and awareness through the teaching of Islamic studies. The gates of these councils were traditionally opened early in the morning until the noon prayer, and then reopened during the period from afternoon ('asr) prayer until evening (maghrib) prayer.
- Majalis (Barza) of the Elders. Traditionally, every chieftain or sheikh of the UAE has his own Majlis or council, which is a public forum where the community members gather to discuss their matters, chat about their affairs and break news. This is known as barza, so it would be said that 'the sheikh baraza, or has a prominent presence' if he was in his barza. It might be inside or outside his palace. All issues are resolved orally therein. These Majalis have always played an important role in social and economic life, and in formulating important resolutions in each emirate, as they comprise a number of members of the ruling family, dignitaries, tribal chieftains or sheikhs, judges, high-ranking traders, and scholars. Every member of the emirate is entitled to attend the barza, to give their viewpoint and present their own case. It is customary for the visitors of these councils to wear the Emirati dress, which is deemed appropriate to meet with the sheikh or the official, especially the ghutra (a light cloth headdress) tied with an aqal (a black, rope-like headband).



