

UAE: DEBATE GROWS OVER MODERNITY'S EFFECT ON ARAB VALUES

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Abstract (Abstract): "What is in fact true is that most of the Arab nations, especially the UAE, are building for the future, while keeping one eye on past glory. It is a heady blend of tradition and modernity and that augurs well. The promotion of this blend is a very important step, not only for the UAE and other Arab countries but also for the whole world that is being threatened by cultural changes brought about by globalisation," Ahmed Salah, an Egyptian art critic, told IPS.

"In the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, these efforts assume importance because the population of nationals is comparatively less. The presence of a sizeable foreign manpower force usually brings in its own culture and lifestyle. It is natural therefore that the focus is to accentuate Arab heritage in an attempt to preserve its national identity and stand out amid the inflow of foreign labour," Ahmed added, citing examples such as the Heritage District in Abu Dhabi, Heritage Village in Dubai and the museums in Sharjah.

According to Mohammad Khalaf Al Mazrouei, director general of the Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture and Heritage, "Globalisation may be considered as a threat when it leads to homogeneity. The rich cultural legacy and inheritance of Abu Dhabi is the best guarantee to hold tightly to values. With pressing issues confronting the future of the people of the UAE, we cannot but embrace modernity while preserving traditions."

Full text: DUBAI, Feb. 27, 2007 (IPS/GIN) -- Although many Gulf State observers think that the United Arab Emirates (UAE) is ignoring tradition for modernity, others disagree.

They point to an entire 'cultural district' off the coast of Abu Dhabi, celebrations for the eighth biennial of the Sharjah Art Museum and the array of Arab icons placed prominently in art galleries and festivals.

In a region that is witnessing rapid modernisation, aided by huge returns from high oil prices, the UAE is taking proactive steps to make its mark as the cultural hub of the Middle East.

Sharjah (one of the seven emirates in the country) has always been referred to as the cultural centre of the UAE, but now Abu Dhabi and Dubai are coming up fast.

Abu Dhabi recently announced that the biggest of the Guggenheim Museum chain would soon be located in its cultural district at Saadiyat Island and international auction house Christie's will host its first international modern and contemporary art auction in Dubai.

Critics, however, say that Arab countries are aping Western traditions and that many urban Arabs are copying, buying, adopting or being stimulated by Western cultural traditions. They add that Middle

Eastern landscapes exhibit several examples of heavy influence of Western traditions and that most major Arab cities are hybrids of Islamic, Arab, and Western legacies in the fields of culture and commerce.

At the signing of an agreement with the Guggenheim Foundation, Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahayan said the museum would help transform the emirates into a "world-class cultural destination."

Guggenheim Abu Dhabi -- designed by the internationally acclaimed architect Frank Gehry -- will be the latest to be funded by the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, which has set up museums in New York, Venice, Bilbao, Berlin and Las Vegas.

The museum will form its own major collection of contemporary art and exhibit masterworks from the Foundation's global collections and be built on the Island of Happiness. Other projects for the District include building a Louvre -- a huge translucent dome filled with fountains to be designed by a Frenchman, Jean Nouvel, a performing arts centre and a maritime museum.

"We believe that the Middle East is one of the world's most important emerging regions in terms of contemporary culture," Guggenheim Foundation's director Thomas Krens said at the signing ceremony.

Elsewhere in the region, Qatar has started building museums and preserving archaeological sites. The Supreme Council for Culture, Arts and Heritage is building four major museums while Doha Bank will part-finance a Museum of Islamic Arts project, which will house a selection of the finest treasures of Islamic art, a library, commercial facilities and national gallery archives.

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The emphasis on culture is also aimed at adding a local flavour to encourage tourism, a key sector in the economic diversification plan.

In Dubai, construction projects that promote a blend of modern and traditional styles get faster approval from the municipality. Dubai has also set up a Cultural Council that coordinates with culture experts, encourages them in activities that promote art, poetry and other traditions and initiates cultural exchange programmes with other countries.

"This is a fruitful orientation. Throughout the world, there is a trend for the promotion of cultural tourism. Culture and heritage are positive assets to tourism, and tourism can contribute to raising awareness regarding the necessity of preserving and protecting cultural heritage. The policy followed has been successful in this so far. Tourism will not affect our values, culture and traditions," Mazrouei told IPS.

Art critic Salah added: "Basically most tourists visit the Gulf countries because of the warm climate in winter and modern attractions like shopping malls, festivals and desert safaris. But they also visit heritage centres to get familiar with our history. By prominently showcasing our cultural traditions, it is possible that we would even have tourists coming to study our heritage."

Mazrouei argued that the more people feel that their culture is endangered the more they will do to revive it. "The solid foundations on which our citizens stand are rooted in centuries of cultural development. As for the Western influence, we will adapt what's appropriate to our values and culture. There is no threat."

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