

Problems and Challenges of Cultural Heritage in Alexandria, Egypt

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Abstract—Alexandria was the capital of Egypt during the Graeco-Roman period and the first port and commercial centre in Egypt since its building till present. It owns a wealth of tangible and intangible heritage that was formed throughout ages and by a variety of contributors. Yet, that rich heritage is not fully used and the tourism the city receives is not compared to what it deserves. This is due to many problems and challenges that face the use of heritage. The present paper aims to shed light on some of these problems and challenges such as documentation problems, lack of collaborative work between authorities, neglect of intangible heritage, lack of awareness, insufficient role of museums to promote heritage and lack of enforced legalizations. Identifying these problems and challenges is important to solve them.

Index Terms—Alexandria, awareness, challenges, tangible and intangible heritage.

I. INTRODUCTION

Alexandria was founded by Alexander the Great in 332 BC on a limestone ridge that separated the Mediterranean Sea from Lake Mariout. Over the next three centuries (the Graeco-Roman period) the city was used as a capital, thus, it gained political importance and was a centre of trade and scholarship. By the Arab conquest, the importance of the city decreased, but then, it retrieved its importance in the Fatimid and Ayyubid eras. The golden age of the city during medieval times was during the Mamluk era since the Mamluks controlled most of the international trade in the world and Alexandria was a major port on trade routes between the East and West. Merchants preferred to live in Alexandria to supervise their trade; especially that the Mamluk sultans gave them privileges that encouraged and facilitated their stay. The Ottomans followed the steps of the Mamluks and welcomed foreign merchants to stay in Alexandria and pursue their business. Due to the important location of the city it was the first target of the French occupation in 1798 and the British invasion in 1882 and from it the last king of Egypt was expelled after the revolution of 1952[1].

II. TANGIBLE AND INTANGIBLE HERITAGE OF ALEXANDRIA

The long history of the city blessed her with a fortune of rich, diverse and manifold heritage that represents all eras. It is hard to list the entire heritage but mentioning the main aspects of such heritage will help us realize the problems that

will be discussed later.

A. The Tangible Heritage

The tangible heritage of Alexandria includes many archaeological sites such as: the Roman Amphitheatre, al-Shatbi tombs, Kom al-Shokafa catacomb, al-Ras al-Soda temple and Tigran tomb from the Graeco-Roman period [2]. The sites also include the walls of the city, al-Attarin, mosque and Citadel of Qaytbay from the Islamic period [3]. The Ottoman, modern and contemporary eras resulted in many mosques such as: Timraz mosque, Yehia Basha mosque, Abo al-Abbas mosque, al-Bousiri mosque and Yaqout al-Arsh mosque. Moreover, many official buildings were built such as the Court-house and al-Montaza palace in addition to private palaces such as that of Asaad Basili, the palace of Fatima Hider and the palace of princess Faeka [4]. Foreign architects of the 20th century such as Mario Russi also left their works in Alexandria reflecting the European influence in architecture and contributing to the heritage of the city [5]. Among the important tangible heritage of the city too are the submerged remains of Ptolemaic Royal Quarters and underwater ruins of the ancient light-house, the Pharos [6].

B. The Intangible Heritage

The intangible heritage of Alexandria is also very varied. The manifestations of the five domains of intangible heritage could be seen in Alexandria [7]. They include the dialect of Alexandria which contains many Italian, Greek, Moroccan and Turkish words, the Sufi practices and events especially those related to Abou al-Abbas al-Moursi in addition to the special songs and dances of fishermen and the music of Sayyed Darwish. It also includes some traditional craftsmanship such as gold jewelry and fishing nets. Above all, the intangible heritage of Alexandria is marked by its unique cuisine which is famous for various sea-food dishes. Such cuisine was also influenced by Moroccan, Italian and Greek dishes which were introduced by those communities that settled in Alexandria. As a result, the Alexandrian cuisine is Mediterranean in nature and features [8].

Although Alexandria has such a long history and immense importance that resulted in a fortune of tangible and intangible heritage, that heritage is not yet fully used or benefited from in the field of tourism. The city is not receiving as many tourists as it should and is not occupying the appropriate position in tourism, adequate to its heritage. According to the ministry of tourism statistics in 2015: the city owns 4416 rooms of various types (1 to 5 stars) yet it received 92,000 tourists in 2015 and most of them visited only the archaeological sites of the city. The average length of stay was only 2 days and the average spending was between 40 and 60 dollars per day. That means the heritage

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of the city is not well used for the benefit of tourism.

The study of heritage in Egypt is newly introduced; therefore, the publication in the field is still limited. Most of the books and articles focus on presenting or describing the existing heritage of Egypt. Part of the publications also dealt with the problems that faced the Egyptian cultural heritage after the 2011 revolution; especially looting and destruction of archaeological sites and museums [9]. The present study is focusing on a particular city- which is Alexandria- discussing its heritage, problems and challenges facing that heritage and how to solve these problems. It aims to highlight these problems and challenges as a first step to solve them.

III. PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES OF CULTURAL HERITAGE IN ALEXANDRIA

There are many threats facing heritage in Alexandria, on top of which are the marine erosion, acidic wastewater and heavy rains. The acidic wastewater has devastating effect on both submerged archaeological sites and other on-land sites such as the catacomb (Fig. 1).



Figure 1. Catacomb of Kom al-Shokafa catacomb with wastewater on the ground.

There are many other problems and challenges that hinder the full use of the heritage of Alexandria for the benefit of tourism and socio-economic development. The aim of the present study is to define and highlight these problems and challenges as a first step to suggest solutions.

A. Documentation Problems

One of the major problems of heritage in Alexandria is the neglect of authorities to document all aspects of heritage in the city. The registered sites by the Ministry of Antiquities are only the main Graeco-Roman sites in addition to the Citadel of Quaytbay. Other sites such as the royal palaces at al-Montaza [10] and Ras al-Tin are owned and managed by the presidency. The bigger problem is with the buildings that are owned by the government and not registered as a heritage. Those include old banks (such as The Egyptian Central Bank- Bank of Alexandria) official buildings (such as The Old Stock Market of cotton at Mina al-Basal) and old hospitals (the Italian hospital, the Hospital of Nariman [11], the hospital of Ismael and the hospital of Gamal Abd al-Nasir). All these buildings are still functioning- each in its field- thus they face architectural deterioration and if preserved; the preservation is done according to market standards not following the scientific archeological

preservation standards. The problem is even worse with many other buildings in down-town area and the quarters of the city that were inhabited by foreign communities such as Sporting, Stanly and al-Ibrahimia. Such buildings are privately owned and used for residential proposes. The heirs of some buildings sold them- searching for profit- and new owners pulled them down out of ignorance of their importance (Fig. 2).



Figure 2. The villa of the architect Aldo Ambron that was used as house of the great British author Lawrence Durrell demolished.

Due to the neglect to document all these buildings for a long period, many changes occurred to their original shape, in other cases, deliberate damage was done by the owners of some buildings in order to destroy them.

In 1985, Dr. Mohamad Awad, architect and lecturer at the Faculty of Engineering- Alexandria University, founded the *Alexandria Preservation Trust* which aims at the preservation of the building environment of the city. This private organization worked on preparing a list of historic buildings in Alexandria that need protection and the list was adopted by the governor of Alexandria in 1999. Alexandria Library then led the role to document the historic buildings by establishing *Alexandria and Mediterranean Research Center (AlexMed)* which aims at documenting and researching the heritage of Alexandria and the Mediterranean [12]. Dr. Mohamad Awad was chosen to be the director of center and thus his list was more developed and in 2008 Alexandria Heritage Catalogue was approved. The center is doing appreciated efforts in documenting the heritage, yet, the collected data is available for researchers and the dissemination process is not sufficient at all. The center should be collaborating with official authorities that can benefit from the documentation to act a further step for preservation. The evidence to what I'm saying is that despite the existence of that list of threatened buildings, many building were destroyed after 2011 revolution and no attempt of the government was made to protect them.

The problem with intangible heritage is even worse because of its non-materialistic nature. The Alexandrian dialect that was highly influenced with the Italian community living in Alexandria is not documented. The diverse heritage of the foreign communities including their lifestyle, their memories, their popular places for social gatherings, their cuisine, their traditions and customs...were also never documented. Moreover, the traditional songs and dances of fishermen in Alexandria together with the traditional customs are only preserved in the memory of the old generation. The music of the famous Alexandria composer Sayyed Darwish

had better luck; since his lovers and his relatives were keen to preserve his heritage. But still, those are individual efforts.

Although AlexMed also cares for the intangible heritage of Alexandria, the efforts to document it is far behind. Some projects adopted by the center focused on food or the memories of the foreigners in Alexandria but the whole intangible heritage of the city is not yet documented.

B. Lack of Collaborative Work to Promote Heritage

Despite the wide variety of Heritage in Alexandria there is no authority to manage that heritage with institutional organized methodology. Management of tourism in Alexandria is run by two main governmental authorities; General Authority for Tourism Promotion and Ministry of Tourism. The latter includes Museum sector, Archeology sector and Resort sector and they all have their offices in Alexandria. In addition, there's the Egyptian Travel Agents Association and The Egyptian Hotels Chamber. Each of these authorities works in its own field not in collaboration with the other authorities. As for cultural heritage in particular, they don't have a collaborative plan to work on and not even a vision for the future of heritage in the city.

On the other hand, there are some culture centers and initiatives in Alexandria which work individually to protect, present or promote cultural heritage of Alexandria. Among the governmental culture centers; *al-Anfoushy cultural center*, *Qasr al-Tazawoq* and *Qasr al-Horyia* are the most active centers in presenting the traditional performing arts of Alexandria. Other International culture centers are interested in preserving and presenting the heritage of their own community in Alexandria such as the *Greek Cultural Center*. Moreover, there are some NGOs and initiatives that work in the field of culture in general and part of their interest is to promote cultural heritage such as: *Arkan Culture Center NGO*, *Torraha NGO* and *My Society initiative*. While, others initiatives focus only on heritage such as *Save Alex Initiative* which was started in 2012 to face the demolish of old buildings that are part of the heritage of the city and *Alexandria Preservation Trust* which was founded by Dr. Mohamad Awad.

All these authorities and bodies should be working in one framework with a collaborative plan that specifies the role of each party.

C. Neglect of Intangible Heritage

Exactly like the buildings that face the threat of deterioration or even destruction, intangible heritage of Alexandria is facing the threat of neglect that would eventually cause its disappearance.

The problem with intangible heritage is severe because its disappearance means the disappearance of identity. The intangible heritage fosters the feeling of belonging and continuity and thus plays a vital role in defining the national identity. It is a mentality and way of knowing and seeing, therefore, it includes music, dances, food, oral traditions, skills, knowledge...and many other manifestations [13]. If the traditional songs and dances of fishermen together with the music of Sayyed Darwish were seen as old fashion and were replaced with modernize western music, if the traditional Alexandrian cuisine was replaced with fast food,

if the Alexandrian dialect disappeared, if the traditions and customs were abandoned that means the Alexandrians are losing their identity. Till now, the intangible heritage of Alexandria is only preserved in the memory of the old generation and only few efforts were done to document that heritage [14]. Even its presentation is only done by those who are still practicing it in their daily lives. That means; if the neglect to that intangible heritage continued and that heritage was not fully documented, we might lose that wealth of intangible heritage and the new generations of Alexandrians will be deprived of their identity.



Figure 3. A traditional dance of fishermen in Alexandria.

D. Insufficient Role of Museums

Alexandria has 8 functioning museums which are: The Graeco-Roman Museum, the National Museum, The Jewelry Museum, Mahmoud Saeed Museum, Hessin Sobhy Museum, Maritime Museum, Kafafy Museum and The Museums of Alexandria Library. These museums vary in type, collection and managing authority. Moreover, Alexandria University also owns a group of 7 museums that are mostly used for research purposes. The museums of Alexandria have many problems since most of them focus on the preserving and researching the collection rather than interpreting the collection, most of them don't have an active website and they generally lack the link with the society.

In fact, the museums that are not seen or felt as part of the daily life of society will not survive [15]. In order to survive, they should play social, cultural and educational roles to communicate with the society. With the wide variety of collections, the museums of Alexandria can play an essential role in the interpretation and presentation of the heritage of the city. The UNESCO highlighted the need to include the intangible heritage as a central component of museums [16]. If the museums in Alexandria followed that recommendation, they can fill the gap in documenting, preserving and presenting the intangible heritage of the city. They can focus on the information, knowledge and skills not only the objects they exhibit. Thus, they can create a meaning and context to the objects and can be part of the preservation of the heritage.

The main barrier between museums and people is the lack of interactive activities and events that can engage the society. As a result, museums are perceived by common people as places for tourists and specialized historians, archeologists, artists or at least highly-intellectuals [17].

That means, museums need to enforce their social role, provide interactive activities to various segments of the society and change their message as cultural engaging centers.

E. Lack of Awareness

I believe that lack of awareness is a major challenge facing cultural heritage in Alexandria. As mentioned, there are many authorities, cultural centers, research centers, NGOs and initiatives that work in the field of heritage but they couldn't build awareness among common people of the meaning or importance of heritage. Some of such bodies focus on research rather than the awareness although it is part of their mission; such as *AlexMed*. Some others start awareness campaigns as reaction to threats to certain places or buildings rather than acting with a general scope before the threat occurs; such as *My Society* and *Save Alex*. A third group of bodies doesn't consider awareness part of their mission even; such as governmental bodies. Sadly, schools and universities are not playing any role at all in raising the awareness for heritage and its importance.

As long as communities don't know their heritage, they won't be able to preserve it or benefit from it [18]. Even if the government used top-down policies to preserve and use heritage for the development of societies and tourism, the efforts would be useless if awareness in the society was not achieved and if the community inclusion was not created. A participatory approach should be adopted to create awareness and connect communities with professionals in documenting, preserving, presenting and managing heritage.

F. Lack of Enforced Legalizations

There are many laws in Egypt related to the protection of heritage including: Act 117 of 1983 amended by law 12 of 1991 for the protection of Antiquities, law 144 of 2006 for the Protection of Architectural Heritage and law 119 of 2008 for Unified Buildings. Yet, we still need strong punishments for those who violate the laws. Alexandria governorate should enforce those laws and stick to their implementation. Moreover, valuable compensations should be offered to private owners of heritage buildings to persuade them to protect the buildings not destroy them. The intangible heritage still needs laws and legalizations to protect from loss and destruction.

IV. CONCLUSION

The cultural heritage of Alexandria faces many problems and challenges that are threatening the heritage to extinction; especially the intangible heritage. As a result of such problems; the heritage of Alexandria is not well-preserved, the awareness of the Alexandrians of the importance of such heritage is not achieved and the development of the heritage to secure socio-economic benefits for the society is not attained. Accordingly; the heritage of Alexandria is not fully invested for the benefit of Tourism.

That means; if the above-mentioned problems and challenges were approached and solved, so many benefits for the society, tourism sector and for the heritage itself could be recognized. Some recommendations to solve these problems are:

- Intensive work should be done on the documentation of the heritage by preparing a complete file on each historic and significant building. It should include all the

information about it together with maps, old photos, recent photos, drawings and report about current status. The intangible heritage should also be documented the same way.

- A data base about the heritage should be established and should be available to policy makers, experts, researchers, stakeholders and common people.
- A strategic plan for preserving and promoting the heritage of Alexandria should be made; unifying the efforts of all bodies working in the field of cultural heritage. A clear role and duties for each party should be highlighted to benefit from them all.
- The messages and missions of museums should be discussed and reformulated. The social, educational and cultural roles of the museums should be enforced and highlighted. Museums should be more inviting and engaging for the society through innovative activities, events and programs that can best present the heritage they preserve.
- Awareness campaigns should be prepared to raise the awareness of the society of the meaning, aspects and importance of heritage. The campaigns should focus on the role of the community as owners and protectors of their own heritage. They should also focus on the importance of that heritage for the creation of a unique identity and for the economic development of the society so people can feel related to the heritage and gaining from its protection.
- Laws and legalizations should be enforced and authorities empowered to implement them to protect the heritage.

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