AFAC Field Visit to Yemen March 2012



The Arab Fund For Arts and Culture الصندوق العربي للثقافة والفنون – آفاق



Yemen is one of the countries that send the least number of applications to AFAC's open calls for proposals. Not surprisingly, the number of grants attributed to Yemeni artists, writers or filmmakers

Introduction

is correspondingly small; only three since 2007 - 2 literature grantees and 1 in Regional

MINISTER DE COMPANY

T

Events. Nadia Kawkabani's novel "My Sana'a" is a work of historical fiction, which revisits the tumultuous period of the Yemeni civil war during the 1970's. "Booklet in a Brochure" by the Cultural East Foundation features an anthology of prominent Yemeni and Arab writers. The "Youth Skill Enhancement Course for Yemeni Vocalists" is a voice training workshop for female singers in Yemen seeking to further Yemeni musical culture.

In its effort to make its funds available to the largest number of applicants in the Arab region, and to explore the realities and needs of diverse Arab populations, especially those in remote and neglected peripheries, AFAC decided to conduct its first field visit to Yemen. The weeklong trip took place from the $9^{\rm th}$ –15th of March 2012. The new political climate seen throughout the region, together with the recent political changes in Yemen, was an additional incentive to take a closer look.

minimum

Often, we are told that one of the reasons why AFAC does not have many Yemeni applicants is the "difficulty in accessing the Internet, the chronic power cuts and the complexity of filling

Cultural life in times of conflict

out your online applications." So, in preparation for our trip over, our bags were filled with printed applications forms and

a USB stick with electronic versions of the forms, side by side with our program brochures and booklets. We were reluctantly considering making an exception to our strict rule about accepting applications only online. However, once we arrived, were relieved to hear from Malak Shahar, our coordinator for the trip, that things have dramatically improved recently. Electricity was back on, and artists are now fully connected to the World Wide Web. We were able to confirm this later during our field visits to Sanaa, Taiz and Aden.



Malak is a Yemeni journalist that worked for the Yemeni Times, before consulting for various NGO's in Sanaa. Malak was surprised to hear about the purpose of our visit. "Most projects that come our way in these difficult times for Yemen are related to aid, education, political reform and infrastructure development," she said. The quote, originating from an Iraqi patron of the arts: "band aids and stiches may heal our physical wounds, but we need culture to heal our soul" left her half-convinced.

The next morning, we met with Adnan al-Sakkaf, manager of an association called "Cultural and Knowledge Exchange Association", alongside four of his fellow organizers at their center. Newly re-located on 50th Street, south of the capital city, the building is still under construction and is currently co-located with "Agora", a café popular with young university students and artists. CKEA was established three years ago, as Adnan and his friends were disenchanted with the lack of cultural offering in Sanaa and the scarcity of creative initiatives



by public institutions. "We wanted to encourage our young people to show and share their work with others. Yemen is a conservative society and art is largely not welcomed. So, since 2009, we have hosted more than 150 gatherings including poetry readings, photography exhibitions and film screenings." Adnan added, "our visitors are growing in number, necessitating a better venue." He proudly showed their latest acquisition, a \$500 sound system donated by one of their members.

Sibai al-Sulaihi, an engineer and MIT graduate, is the improvised architect for the center. "We run on our own private money. We meet every Thursday. The quality of the place was not a priority, so long as we gathered and shared ideas. But now we are trying to improve on that."

He then shared the following story: "When the presidential election held in February resulted in the appointment of the single-candidate Abdurabu Mansoor Hadi as new president of the country, Adnan was so excited that he posted Hadi's picture on the center's Facebook page. The association members were quick to protest because they did not want political implications to taint their arts and culture space. Adnan removed the picture. Nevertheless, the fact that the president had changed, no matter how symbolic the nature of the change may be, seems to have heralded a new era of optimism for everyone. This has been encouraging, inspiring change, and increasing the trend towards artistic expression, no matter what the political reality is."

About forty artists of all ages attended a first presentation of AFAC's mission and description of its general grants and special programs. The session was followed by questions and answers. When I asked about who were the cultural players on the ground, Adnan spoke of few parties involved in culture, saying that "they contribute little and cannot be compared with our work."

Al-Suhaili countered: "Let's stop flattering ourselves and tell the truth to AFAC. There are governmental, or semi-governmental institutions for arts around but they lack initiative. The al-Afif and Manara foundations for example, are partially funded by public money but Yemeni society doesn't welcome arts enough to allow artists to express themselves freely."

"The problem is far more complex than one can thinks," adds Fahd Shuraih, a 23 year-old theater writer, producer, artistic director of theatrical group called 'Gulf of Aden', "the current political situation in Yemen has not helped a lot." Coming from a southern governorate like Aden, it is difficult for him find support to make and present a play. "I have to come up to Sana'a to take permission; this has been the case since the secession attempt in 1994." Shuraih explained that "the people of the south are marginalized." Shuraih says the authorities have refused some of his plays. "On one occasion, the ministry of culture gave us a partial grant for one of our plays called 'Red Card.' They then asked us to include specific political statements and when we refused they withdrew their financial support. We still managed to produce the play with support



from our friends and families. We want freedom to soar with our ideas now, this is the priority now."

No matter how complicated cultural life is in Sanaa, Taiz or Aden, the situation is far worse in smaller towns outside these three major cities. "Cultural initiatives are not supported by the government. On the contrary, they are put down and resisted," says Abrulrahman Al-Madhaji, director of Demt's Cultural Center.

Issam al-Suhaili, an administrative assistant for the EU mission to Yemen and a semi-professional photographer says: "Other cultural players are the European embassies, specially the French and German cultural centers. But they are mainly concerned with propagation of their values and languages; we are neglected." Issam is passionate about photographing Socotra in his free time and flies there every year on his vacation. Socotra is an island off the coast of Yemen, unique for its fauna and flora and declared by UNESCO as a world natural heritage site in 2008. "When the ministry of tourism commissioned a book of photography, it contracted six European photographers." This phenomenon is exactly the kind of situation that AFAC seeks to alleviate by funding Arab artists directly and giving them the resources they deserve.

Ammar Najjar, director of Cultural East Foundation, a former AFAC grantee, said: "What we need on the ground is capacity building so that we can help small institutions become professional and learn how to acquire funds." This was echoed by Wadad Badaoui, who had applied to Mawred al-Thaqafi's Abbara program (for training of cultural managers across the Arab world) got accepted but missed her training due to the uprisings last year. Ammar urged AFAC to "concentrate more on grassroots initiatives versus funding the elite."

In the afternoon, AFAC's grantee Nadia Kawkabani offered us a tour of the old city of Sanaa. She expressed her frustration with the dire state of renovation of the old city. "Corruption and misappropriation of foreign funds allocated to renovation is endemic." We have worked on renovating an old market house, a 'Samsara,' to revive old craftwork and transmit skills to the next generation. Money was used to renovate the building and a number of commercial shops have opened on the premises instead."

On the next day, we visited the French Cultural Center in the Hadda district to meet with director Joel Dechezlepretre and cultural officer Mohamad Abouchar. We were surprised to know that the cultural department of the center once had 11 full-time employees on-board, but has now shrunk to a mere 2-people staff. Obviously, culture has been neglected. Mr. Dechezlepretre who has been active in Sanaa for the last four years, mentioned that the Louvre is about to host an exhibition dedicated to Yemen. He also said that he pushed for a couple of Yemeni artists to be part of an arts exhibition about Arab visual artists in Beirut. "We constantly have to remind Paris of this part of the Arab world," he said. Thinking about the challenges that foreign institutions face, Mohamed pointed out the following: "Corruption, the difficulties in following up from a distance, the lack of professionalism in financial management and lack of discipline in time management are going to be your major obstacles. You need to make connections with local institutions, such as al-Afif, who can support you on the ground."

That afternoon, a larger group attended a second presentation and workshop dedicated to explaining AFAC's evaluation process and the application-filling process. To demystify applications for grants, we asked a young volunteer to submit an online application for a literature project of a collection of poetry writings and we projected the process on a large screen. The two-hour workshop seemed to have achieved its objective, as our content manager in Beirut reported that several applications coming in from Yemen have already been recorded on AFAC's portal.

A poet and writer attending the workshop, Nabil Al-Qanes, said that funding AFAC offers to applicants from Yemen, "the first step, and the most difficult one, to get their projects started." He spoke of a recent meeting he and his fellow authors and poets had with Yemen's new Minister of Culture and described their great dismay when the new minister announced that the ministry will only be ble to fund the publication of two books this year. "We are now desperately in need of more support," said Al-Qanes.



The next day, we took a 30 minutes flight to Taiz, the "cultural capital of Yemen," and hosted our meeting with local artists and writers at the Al-Saeed Foundation for Sciences and Culture. The foundation supports mainly scientific and education projects but part of its efforts goes to local artists and writers; its library includes 10,000 books.

General Manager Faisal Saeed Fare said: "We are trying our best to modernize this institution, in spite of the conservative policies we are known for. We want to build exceptional relations with other people as we live in a world growing faster than ever; we want to shorten the gap."

Journalist and writer Ahmad Shawki has created a group called the 'Naked Poets' (Alsho'ara al-Arateet) was also lamenting the poor state of cultural production in Yemen. He and his group

Taiz, the cultural capital of Yemen

are also known as the "Street Artists" as they deliver poems and talk about social and political problems in the streets, taking public space as their platform. "Art

production and consumption were badly affected during last year's political turmoil," he said. After years of efforts, many members in his group finally gave up on their artistic work in favor of other more reliable businesses. "Art does not give you food," says Shawki.

Fekry Al-Kassem is one of the first writers to join the "revolution". He surprisingly states: "In Yemen, guns are what matters not art. It is difficult for writers and artists to thrive when society does not appreciate you or your work. We were in much better shape fifteen years ago. Things got worse after 1994, with a decline in civic values and the rise of tribalism and conservatism. The political setup played a prominent role in this regression."



When we asked him about past and current projects, he described the intense efforts he put into a series of "Street Theater" performances in and outside Taiz in 2011. "This has taken a lot of my energy and I am not ready to continue this way," he said. Fekry is now writing the script for a TV series with known Yemeni filmmaker Khadija al-Salami. The fiction series documents the day-to-day life of a widow living in an apartment building with a military man, a shop-owner, a young-married couple, etc. dwelling on the contradictions and conflicts endured by various tranches of Yemeni society in the wake of the so-called revolution.

Mohamed Shughun, an Oud player and composer from Hudayda, student of the music conservatory in Cairo talked about the difficulties of getting his work out to a public outside the narrow boundaries of his home town. "Can AFAC help with distribution?" he asked.

It was not long before the inevitable topic of qat-chewing came up. Undeniably, the mass production and consumption of qat has produced social and economic problems in the country, but the good and bad of it is hotly debated everywhere, including within the artistic community. Malak refers to the incident when Yemeni adversaries reunited peacefully over a session of qat-chewing on the afternoon of the dramatic Day of Anger in February of 2011 after the first squabbles of the morning. "Qat reunites Yemenis, not ideas or principles," she said with sarcasm.

Faisal Saeed Fare insists on inviting us to lunch and taking us around Taiz's Tahrir square. A group of young activists still camp in the square, demanding real changes from a regime still firmly in place even with the change of the figurehead. "Fekry and many of the artists you met this morning were active on these streets throughout the events," he said. We reflected on the intricate and complicated relationship between arts and politics, and the kinds of literature produced in the Arab world during these tumultuous times. I cited George Orwell from his "Frontiers of Art and Propaganda":

The writers who have come up since 1930 have been living in a world in which not only one's life but one's whole scheme of values is constantly menaced. In such circumstances detachment is not possible. You cannot take a purely aesthetic interest in a disease you are dying from. In a world in which Fascism and Socialism were fighting one another, any thinking person had to take sides, and his feelings had to find their way not only into his writing but into his judgement on literature. Literature had to become political, because anything else would have entailed mental dishonesty. One's attachments and hatreds were too near the surface of consciousness to be ignored. What books were about seemed so urgently important that the way they were written seemed almost insignificant.

And this period of ten years or so in which literature, even poetry, was mixed up with pamphleteering, did a great service to literary criticism, because it destroyed the illusion of pure aestheticism. It reminded us that propaganda in some form or other lurks in every book, that every work of art has a meaning and a purpose — a political, social and religious purpose — that our aesthetic judgements are always colored by our prejudices and beliefs. It debunked art for art's sake.

Without reaching an agreement on whether Orwell was right or if the same thought applied to what is happening in the Arab world, we thanked our guests and left Taiz by bus en route to Aden, the third destination on our trip. Just before leaving, we couldn't avoid noticing a subtle change to the commemorative plaque at the entrance of the al-Saeed center. Someone must have noticed me taking pictures on my way in and thought it would be a good idea to cover up the name of former president on my way out. A white sticker band was perfectly placed over his name. We wondered how easy it is to white-out a name with a sticker while keeping the plaque in its apparently still rightful place. The impact of these changes still needs time to unfold.



We were met upon arrival in Aden by Adnan al-Khader, a colleague of Fahd Shuraih, and member of the theatre group "Gulf of Aden." Adnan volunteered to be our guide during our

Aden, birthplace of Arab cinema?

stay. A famous actor and one of the 15 members of "Gulf of Aden," Adnan attracted crowds of cheering boys as

we walked through the old part of town. We heard about Aden's long tradition in cinema, how it hosted the first cinema of the Arab region back in 1904, and screened the legendary Egyptian movie "al-Asfour" when government censors prevented it from being shown in Cairo.

Marwan Mafraq, another member of the band who works in administration, explained how the cinema industry died in the 90's. According to him, a strong conservative current sweeping through the country has demonized the genre as one that is incompatible with family values. Eight busy cinema theaters slowly died down and a creative and vigorous industry disappeared into oblivion over the course of a decade. Marwan, Adnan, Fahd and their colleagues, together with a group of other theater directors and producers are exerting all efforts to substitute this gap with theater production. "We conducted the first commercial theater performance in Aden last year, and the old cinema hall was full again. People are hungry for more of the same, and we shall respond to that," said Adnan.

AFAC's presentation took place in a former movie theater transformed into a wedding hall. We got interrupted a few times by electricity cuts but still managed to engage in a threehour discussion about AFAC's programs, vision, limitations and conditions.

A second meeting took place at the more traditional and government-funded Gameel Ghanem Center for Fine Arts. The audience included an older group of artists. Many complained about the degradation of cultural life after unity of North and South. They complained about the lack of funds for any substantial meaningful cultural activity such as festivals, exhibitions and productions. I went through a detailed description of AFAC's evaluation methodology based on rating applicants on the quality, innovation and relevance of projects. Still, Fu'ad Huwaidi, an actor and theater director, complained that the three previous AFAC grants went to Yemenis from the North. Gameel Mahfoodh, a theatre

director, replied that the artists, photographers, actors and writers from the South should be treated on equal footing and that they should prove to AFAC's jurors that they really deserve the grants. "Focus on quality and do not beg or ask for help," he advised his colleague, "We will prove that our projects are good enough to get a grant." Meanwhile, Sahel bin Ishak, deputy director said the center is ready to partner with AFAC in their granting activities in Aden.

We continued meetings with artists and in between talks and discussions on artistic projects we hiked to the Seera fortress and the spectacular crater rim overlooking the old town, before flying back to Sanaa. In Sanaa, we met again with Adnan al-Sakkaf who introduced us to human rights activist Raja' al-Masaabi. Raja' has fought a successful battle to include clauses protecting persons

The role of public institutions, and the way forward

NO KAO KAO KA

with disabilities within the country's constitutional laws. "They thought it was all about charity; we were talking about basic fundamental rights," she

said. When I asked Raja' whether the situation today is better, she shook her head and gave us a lesson in Realpolitik. "We work with anyone in power to make sure our rights are preserved. We were friends with the former government, and will be friends with the new one. This is the only way we can move forward."

We went on to meet with three important cultural figures in the country over a qat majlis at the house of a known visual artist, Hakim al-Aqel. Abdel-Karim Thabet and former cultural minister Mahmoud Abubaker al-Maflahi (in office between 2007 and 2011) joined us soon after.

Hakim, in his late fifties, has acted as advisor to former minister of culture al-Maflahi. He has helped create 15 Art Houses (Buyut el-Thaqafa) throughout the country, the latest of which opened recently in Aden. Art Houses are funded by the government, and employ each a director, technical manager and housekeeper. Hakim walked us through his studio and showed us his collection, mostly large colorful canvases of figurative paintings. "We have a strong tradition of visual arts in Yemen. I have been exhibited in Europe, and other Arab countries; but young Yemeni artists have little chance to be seen anywhere today."

We asked former minister al-Maflahi why the cinema industry was so weak. "Today, we have one operational movie theater, the "Ahliya", showing sporadically Indian movies. We wanted to concentrate on re-invigorating the industry of cinema and searched for funds but didn't find any. Even United Nations bodies could only give us few thousand dollars here and there. I wish we heard of AFAC earlier," he said.

He continued: "We did an excellent job - we helped more than 170 NGO's. The two important institutions that worked in parallel with us were el-Afif and al-Saeed institutions. It is better to support NGO's rather than doing the work we do as government. We also consolidated efforts in four semigovernmental bodies, supervised by the minister of culture, but in essence independent: The Commission for Archeology; Commission for Historical Cities; Commission for Books and Commission for Cinema."

We must have looked a bit skeptical, for he added quickly: "We created the structure, but there were no means, no proper working conditions".

Abdel-Karim Thabet offered a more sober description of the state of culture in Yemen. Abdel-Karim is a UNDP project

manager with a PhD in social sciences and economics from Nürnberg in Germany and a post-graduate doctorate from Ohio, USA. He is also responsible for supporting social cohesion projects in the agency, and in that capacity gives a few thousand dollars to few cultural projects in the country "every once in a while." He said: "A Social Fund for Development body was created, with support from the World Bank, and made independent from the government to avoid corruption and interference. It initiated a range of projects, rather slowly, but with good initial results. I admit that culture was never a priority."

In his assessment of the cultural arena in Yemen today, Abdel-Karim mentioned five major avenues through which culture is supported:

- 1. Governmental structures: these are numerous public cultural centers which are weak, neglected, underfunded and ineffective.
- 2. Foreign cultural centers: the three most active ones would be the French, British and German centers. Their activities seem to be slowing down today.
- 3. Semi-private associations: the two major ones are el-Afif and al-Saeed, founded by large business magnates, supported partly by government funding.
- 4. Small associations: emerging spontaneously in response to the vacuum elsewhere; These will play a major role in the future.
- 5. Internet cafes: a new concept to Yemen, they are becoming the new centers for culture consumption by young people. There are 5 of them in Sanaa all together today. People find books, share videos, play and listen to experimental music there.

Abdel-Karim concluded: "There are about 5 million young graduates in Yemen, half of which are jobless. It is important to cater for their needs, and besides finding them jobs, culture is important and a substitute for other harmful activities."



Wrapping up

- It is readily apparent that local groupings and individuals are struggling to find their way out of stagnation, to cater for the needs of a growing and young audience, hungry for a richer cultural life, in their own original and individual ways.
- This is taking place at a time of continued conflict when arts and culture seem like a superfluous luxury, with a markedly weakening support to culture from local and foreign sources.
- What roles can AFAC and other institutions play, beyond simple grant-making, remains to be determined. We have heard of a number of interesting cultural projects during our short stay and expect to receive some good proposals for the general call and AFAC Express, but:
- Besides providing support to individual projects by artists and writers, capacity building, training, and support for nascent institutions is going to be essential; and
- A major issue is the lack of spaces for cultural experimentation and consumption, certainly a task much beyond AFAC's modest means.
- The timing for such interventions can't be more appropriate, given what seems to be a new openness.

Mentioned Names

• Nadia Kawkabani – author and former AFAC grantee.

Red I

- Malak al-Shahar journalist
- Adnan al-Sakkaf manager of Culture and Knowledge Exchange Association
- Sibai al-Suhaili engineer and cultural practitioner
- Fahd al-Shuraih theatre production
- Abdul Rahman al-Madhhaji director of Demt Cultural Center
- Issam al-Suhaili amateur photographer
- Ammar Najjar director of Culture East Foundation and former AFAC grantee.
- Wada al-Badaoui cultural practitioner
- Joel Dechezlepretre Institut Culturel director
- Mohamad Abouchar Institut Culturel cultural officer
- Nabil al-Qanes poet
- Faisal al-Saeed Fare manager of Al-Saeed Foundation for Science and Culture
- Ahmad Shawki journalist & poet
- Fekry al-Kassem writer
- Mohammed Shughun oud player
- Adnan al-Khudur theatre producer
- Marwan al-Mafraq theatre producer
- Fu'ad Huwaidi, actor and theater director
- Gameel Mahfoodh theatre director
- Sahel bin Ishak cultural practitioner
- Raja' al-Masaabi human rights activist
- Hakim al-Aqel visual artist
- Abd al-Karim Thabet UNDP project manager
 - Mahmoud Abu Bakr al-Maflahi former minister of culture in Yemen



