

Diasporic Syrian Heritage in London- From Academia to community engagement

Hiba Alkhalaf (King's College London) in collaboration with the Young Foundation and Hikayetna - Our Story



EVENT SUMMARY

The event, titled "Diasporic Syrian Heritage in London," is an integral part of the Undisciplined Spaces program at King's College London. This event is rooted in ongoing research focusing on the sustainability of cultural heritage, identity, and local communities, with a specific emphasis on the Syrian diasporic community in London.

The researcher is driven by a keen interest in delving into the elements that compose the identity of British Citizens with Syrian Heritage within the diasporic community in London. Questions arise regarding how these elements are chosen and how they resonate with the ongoing conflict in Syria since 2011. The objective is to elevate this research beyond mere theory, actively engaging in co-sharing and co-producing knowledge in collaboration with the community.

This collaborative effort extends through a partnership with [Hikayetna - Our Story](#), a non-profit community organization based in London and spearheaded by the Syrian journalist and media consultant Sulaiman Othman. The community partner's mission is to unite the Syrian community through art, culture, and empowerment activities and training.

From research to public event

My primary research revolves around cultural heritage, community, and identity within the contexts of crisis, conflict, and peace. This focal point addresses a vital subject that aligns seamlessly with the current dialogues on migration, inclusivity, and diversity in both academic circles and the nation at large. The traditional understanding of heritage, rooted in specific physical, cultural, and social contexts, is undergoing a redefinition propelled by the dynamic forces of migration that significantly contribute to shaping our contemporary understanding of identity.

Simultaneously, I actively participated in the Undisciplined Space program at King's College London in collaboration with the Young Foundation, funded by the AHRC Impact Acceleration Account (IAA).

As part of this program, we initially began as a collaborative group of researchers exploring the themes of wellbeing and sustainability within the context of heritage, identity, and immigration in the UK. However, after encountering a few hurdles in developing a clear project idea over several weeks, I found myself taking the initiative and independently planning and implementing the project. Seizing this opportunity, I decided to align my ongoing research on heritage and identity to encompass the diasporic Syrian community in London.

In collaboration with the community organization, Hikayetna - Our Story, I embarked on what can be described as an 'experimental endeavour.' This initiative not only fostered meaningful connections between heritage and the Syrian community but also laid the foundation for a small network of individuals who share a profound passion for cultural heritage.

The Workshop

The event was designed for half a day targeting various Syrian people with different settlement statuses, refugees, British citizen with Syrian heritage, students.... etc. We had selected [the Levant book shop](#) to host the event, a space that gives one a sense of Syrian home and identity at the heart of Park Royal in London.

The event was structured into three distinct segments, each delving into both tangible and intangible aspects of heritage: a heritage workshop facilitated by a young Syrian artist, musical performances, and a culinary experience. Participants were warmly invited to attend the event and encouraged to bring items from their own heritage, which they regarded as integral to their identity and wished to pass on to the next generation—those individuals who are of British-Syrian heritage. The three sessions are:

1. Unlock the Past: Heritage Workshop

Central to the event was the "Unlock the Past" heritage workshop, an immersive experience that allowed participants to explore the depths of Syrian heritage while sharing their insights, stories, and personal experiences. The workshop commenced with a blank canvas featuring a bold black outline of Syria's map. In pursuit of an interactive approach, every attendee was encouraged to contribute by inscribing an element that evoked memories of home and encapsulated a part of both Syrian heritage and personal identity on the map. Additionally, participants were provided with pre-printed photographs portraying various tangible and intangible facets of Syrian heritage, which they arranged outside the confines of the map.

Facilitated by the young Syrian artist, Alaa Shasheet, the attendees collaboratively crafted a distinctive collage that vividly represented the intricate tapestry of Syrian society. This collage seamlessly melded tangible and intangible elements of Syrian cultural heritage, thereby spotlighting the profound richness of this cultural legacy.

2. Melodies of Home: Musical Session

The 'Melodies of Home: Musical Session' at the event took attendees on a captivating journey to the heart of Syria, courtesy of the enchanting live performances by exceptionally skilled Syrian musicians. These melodies, delivered through traditional instruments like the Oud, Qannoun, and Nai by Louai Alhenawi and Roskar Nasan, not only captivated the senses but also wove a historical narrative for each composition. The musicians thoughtfully provided a background for every melody, adding a layer of depth to the experience.

This segment went beyond mere entertainment; it resonated deeply with the audience, fostering a profound and enriched understanding of Syrian culture. The combination of masterful musical performances and the historical context shared by the musicians created a truly immersive and enlightening experience for all in attendance.

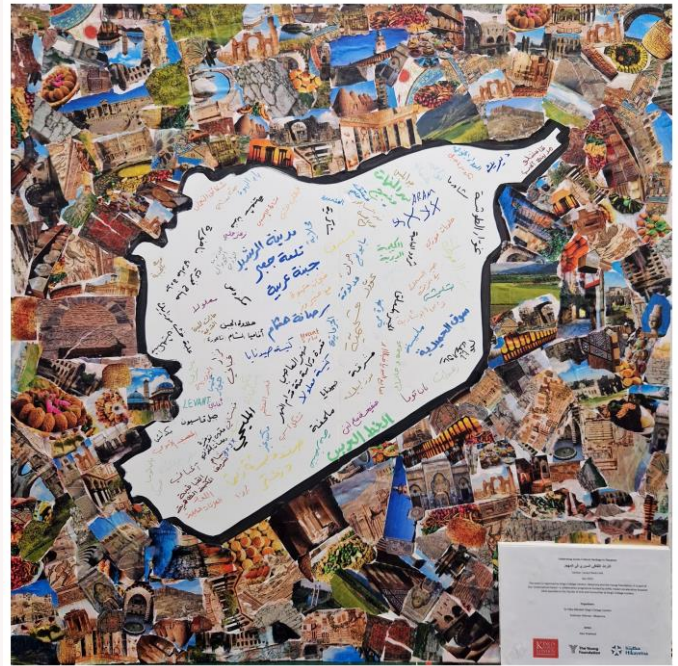


Figure 1: Outcome of the Workshop - A Collaborative Collage Created by Participants with the Facilitation of the Artist.



Figure 2: a display cultural heritage artifacts provided by participants: a Tapestry Hand Embroidery of Damascus signifies artistic heritage



Figure 3: Segment of the Musical Session - The Musician Provides a Historical and Cultural narrative of the Melody.

3. Flavours of Tradition: Syrian Traditional Lunch

A delectable traditional Syrian lunch awaited attendees during the 'Flavours of Tradition' segment. Hosted at the 'Levant Book Café,' the venue itself was a tribute to Syrian heritage, boasting various heritage elements like fountains, hand-made crafts, furniture, mosaic boxes, and wall art. Guests savoured an array of dishes that mirrored family gatherings, including the Fatteh, Labneh, and tapas-like breakfast, providing a taste of Syria's gastronomic delights.

In addition, a Syrian filmmaker, Yosuf Aljundi, was documenting the event and had interviewed selected participants. One of the event's unique and heart-warming aspects was the invitation for attendees to bring items or photos symbolizing their heritage and identity, with the intent of passing these cherished possessions to the next generation. Four of the participants had brought items of heritage with them and shared their stories. For example, a Tapestry Hand Embroidery depicting the historic city of Damascus, symbolizing the rich artistic traditions of the region.

Another item is a handmade crochet scarf, crafted from a type of wool no longer produced in Syria, represents a familial heirloom passed down from the participant's grandmother. These items underscore the personal and collective significance of cultural heritage, serving as physical embodiments of history, craftsmanship, and intergenerational transmission of cultural values.

Upon reflection, the event emerges as a cultural milestone that brought geographical and generational divides. The fervent engagement of the community underscores the profound importance of cultural preservation and celebration within the diaspora. This collective enthusiasm not only highlights the intrinsic value attributed to cultural heritage but also reaffirms the role of such events in fostering a sense of unity and identity among dispersed populations.

In general, a total of twenty-two attendees were present, including four members from KCL and the community partners. Additionally, six extra individuals participated in one segment of the workshop.

The questionnaires distributed at the start of the workshop proved to be instrumental, sparking engaging discussions and fruitful brainstorming among participants concerning their definition of cultural heritage. The questionnaire prompted reflections on the main elements of heritage that individuals wished to pass on to the next generation as an integral part of their identity and heritage—such as handmade crafts, specific food, social relationships...etc. Participants also shared personal stories about cherished heritage items from their homeland, considered valuable and irreplaceable (mosaic boxes, copper coffee pot, rosary, specific books....), as well as items they carried with them throughout their immigration journey (pictures of demolished houses, jasmine seeds, house keys, heirloom jewellery and items).

Workshop output

As the workshop concluded, attendees were invited to share their feedback through evaluation sheets to gauge the workshop's quality. The overwhelming sentiment was one of satisfaction, with equal emphasis on all three elements of the workshop. Nearly everyone expressed a desire for similar events in the future. Attendees also offered insightful suggestions for engaging the Syrian diasporic community in the UK with heritage, ranging from transforming the event into a weekly club addressing different facets of heritage each week to organizing workshops on specific traditional crafts (Aghabani, mosaic...etc). There was also a call for expanding these workshops to include kids and younger generations as part of an educational and awareness campaign.

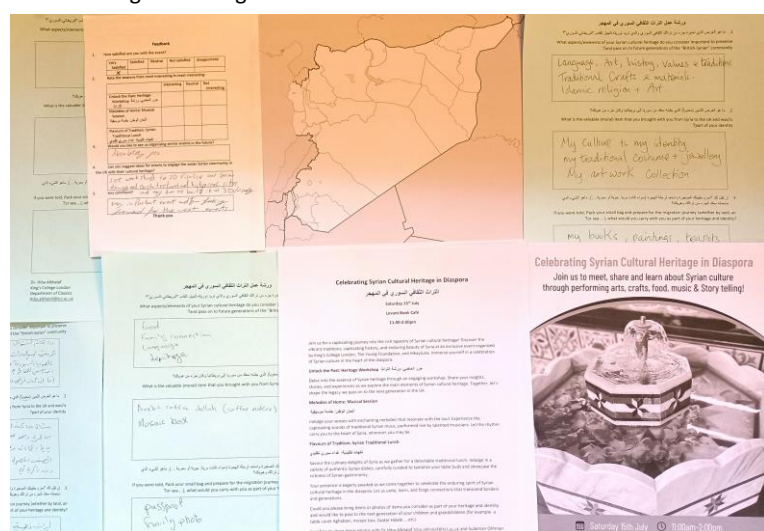
Two particularly noteworthy suggestions led to further correspondence: the creation of a Cultural Syrian Community Group with weekly events and the organization of an introductory course for the younger generation, introducing Syrian heritage in a creative way through arts and technology. In addition to the valuable feedback received, the tangible outputs of the workshop include the co-production of creative artwork using the collage technique, summarizing both tangible and intangible elements. Furthermore, a film documenting the key aspects of the workshop, including participant interviews, is [now available online](#).



Figure 4: a handmade crochet scarf from now-unavailable Syrian wool, a familial heirloom from the participant's grandmother, highlights the intergenerational transfer of culture.



Figures 5: Segments of the Flavours of Tradition Session.



Figures 6: a collection of questionnaires and feedback forms returned by participants, serving as a tangible representation of attendee engagement and responses within the event.



Figure 6: The end of the Event - participants display the final collage, which illustrates an attempt to mapping parts of tangible and intangible elements of Syrian Cultural heritage

Lessons learned from the event

Throughout the process of planning and implementing this event, a clear and essential theme emerged: the need to cultivate the skills required to extend research beyond the walls of academia and nurture genuine partnerships with community organizations grounded in trust. While academic research serves as the foundation for knowledge creation, its true power shines when it escapes the confines of the ivory tower and directly influences the communities it aims (and claims) to support. Building relationships founded on trust and mutual respect empowers researchers to gain a profound understanding of real-world challenges and aspirations. This, in turn, facilitates the exchange of knowledge and collaborative problem-solving, yielding solutions that are not only pertinent but also sustainable over the long term. Such partnerships bridge the divide between theory and practice, ensuring that research findings translate into tangible benefits for society. By embracing community engagement and striving for lasting impact, we unlock research's full potential to bring

about positive change in our communities, ultimately fostering a more inclusive and prosperous future for everyone.

-Be Resilient: Venturing beyond academia to engage with the local community demands flexibility and an absence of pre-fixed plans imposed on the community partners. Community engagement is a two-way process that should generate mutual benefit. However, striking a balance is essential to ensure the event aligns with your research goals without diminishing your role or questioning your ethics.

-Be Culturally Sensitive: Recognize that some community groups are vulnerable, and certain research topics are culturally sensitive. Initiating contact with such groups requires an understanding of the wider context and a sensitive approach to individuals. In my initial contacts, I observed a degree of reticence among various community groups, stemming from apprehensions regarding their potential reduction to mere subjects of academic inquiry—a sentiment rooted in their prior experiences.

- **Be Genuine:** Successful engagement with the local community is built on mutual trust and respect. This foundation facilitates the process and lays the groundwork for long-term collaboration. Genuine intentions are key to establishing meaningful connections and securing a constructive influence on the community.

Future Plans

Following the execution of the workshop "Diasporic Syrian Heritage in London," the trajectory of the research initiative includes a new critical dimension:

- *Deepening Research on Identity and Heritage:* The researcher plans to further explore the factors that shape the identities of British citizens with Syrian heritage, particularly how these identities are influenced by selected cultural elements and their connection to the ongoing conflict in Syria. This involves a detailed examination of identity construction within the diaspora and its implications for cultural sustainability.
- *Community Engagement and Knowledge Production:* There is an ambition to transcend traditional academic boundaries by fostering a participatory research environment. This includes organizing more workshops and events that facilitate knowledge co-sharing and co-production with the Syrian diaspora in London. Such activities aim to empower the community through active engagement and mutual learning.
- *Collaboration with Hikayetna - Our Story:* The partnership with Hikayetna - Our Story, led by Sulaiman Othman, is expected to strengthen. We have developed few ideas for future collaboration that became part of a joint project proposal that was recently been submitted, which includes events, and workshops that leverage storytelling and heritage elements within the Syrian diaspora in the UK.

- *Expanding the Scope of Research:* While the current focus is on the Syrian diasporic community in London, there is potential for expanding this research to include other diasporic communities, exploring broader themes of cultural heritage, identity, and sustainability in a global context.
- *Dissemination and Impact:* The researcher intends to disseminate the findings and insights gained from this workshop and ongoing research through academic publications, conferences, and public seminars. The goal is to not only contribute to scholarly discourse but also to inform policymaking and community practice, thereby amplifying the impact of the research on both an academic and a societal level.
- *Sustainability Initiatives:* A key objective is to develop and implement initiatives that support the sustainability of cultural heritage within diasporic communities. This could involve creating digital archives, storytelling platforms, and educational programs that preserve and celebrate Syrian culture and heritage.

By pursuing these future plans, the researcher aims to contribute to the understanding and preservation of diasporic cultural heritage, fostering a resilient and vibrant community identity among British citizens with Syrian heritage in London and beyond.

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For further information:
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Or visit: www.kcl.ac.uk/artshums/research/impact