

Qiestna: preserving Syrian oral heritage

Sarah Baker

Qiestna: preserving Syrian oral heritage one story at a time

*Sarah Barker*¹

In *Wandering Old Damascus...*, Alaa remembers how she would walk to buy cups of lemonade to take home to her grandmother. She describes how the streets would carry a heavy scent of jasmine and oranges mixed amongst 13,000 years of history laced into the Roman stones.

In *The Smell of Nostalgia*, Tasar recalls her mother working hard in the heat on summer evenings over her clay furnace around sunset preparing fresh pies for the passers-by on the street. She thinks of her mother's fervent desire to give and feed those around her with pride now every time she sees 'made in Syria' on products in her local shop in the Netherlands.



Photo from *The Smell of Nostalgia*, Qiestna.

In *Syrian coffee shops*, Amr recalls finishing his master's thesis, sending job applications, and eventually meeting his wife within the familiar coffee shops that were such a fundamental part of the Damascene life. He describes how the waiters would have specific roles, which meant

¹ Sarah Barker, smbarker30@outlook.com, Qiestna: info@Qiestna.com

that asking for coffee, shaii, or zhourat from the waiter providing backgammon cards would be useless.



Photo from *Syrian coffee shops*, Qiestna.

In *Aleppo's Markets*, Yasser fondly remembers when his father would tell him stories. He described how the sellers in the souq's would share their trade whilst working in the small spice stalls inside the larger Mdayene market.

These are tiny fragments of some of the memories collected and preserved from the stories of refugees. Each of these is part of a wider piece that has been curated and published by [Qiestna](#), which is a digital archive dedicated to preserving the cultural heritage of Syria.

Since 2013, Qiestna has worked to create a communal platform where Syrians who have been displaced across the world can share their stories. The purpose of the project is to support displaced individuals in reconnecting with their cultural heritage through the practice of sharing memories and stories. It has been noted that the next chapter of Syria's revolution will be digitised through the creation of online archives that could one day hold the regime accountable (Vice, 2021). In their award-winning work, Qiestna focuses on participatory contribution and collaboration in building a virtual platform that sustains displaced refugees located across the world in connecting with their oral heritage. Storytelling is a fundamental element of Syrian identity and culture which Qiestna wants to support through their promotion of an international community. Traditional archive formats are involved in this intention, but the use of an accessible virtual platform enables individuals to access and contribute remotely from wherever they are. This inevitably creates challenges with regards to language barriers,

collating material formats, and negative media narratives. Nonetheless, Qisetna works hard to maintain an active and creative engagement in the depiction of histories that move away from the representations of trauma given by the mainstream media.

The project has developed into an archive that preserves Syrian heritage through individual recollections. Furthermore, Qisetna operates not only as a platform for storytelling but in the initiation of projects involving outreach, advocacy, community involvement and research. The project acts as a catalyst for storytelling workshops, exhibitions, seminars, film screenings and other events that strives to create a community where Syrians can share and be promoted in their own work.

Qisetna is a place for memories, preservation and connection that aims to support individuals with reclaiming their cultural heritage. Within the scope of Qisetna's intention and work lies the reality of individual identity and narrative. Qisetna strives to move away from the rhetoric of labels and politics to provide a space for the assortment of cultures that have come to physically inhabit Syria. The priority is to provide individuals with the space to explore their own linguistic, social, and national sense of belonging and identity. The project is based in the United Kingdom and spearheaded by Juan delGado and Dima Mekdad with the support of a diverse voluntary staff. All published content is translated into Arabic or English with the hope that further languages will be available soon. Qisetna is active in their support of inclusivity and diversity in their efforts to unpin the complexities of individual identities within refugee narratives.

References

Aleppo's Markets by Yasser Fallaha, 28 March 2021 (<https://www.Qisetna.com/aleppo-markets/>)

Syrian coffee shops - our cultural identity by Amr Al-Faham, 22 April 2021 (<https://www.Qisetna.com/syrian-coffee-shops/>)

The Next Chapter of Syria's revolution will be digitised by Mohammed Rasool, 11 March 2021 (<https://www.vice.com/en/article/jgqzz3/syrian-archive-war-crimes-database>)

The Smell of Nostalgia by Tasar Isskreeh, 2 May 2021 (<https://www.Qisetna.com/the-smell-of-nostalgia/>)

Wandering Old Damascus for frozen lemonade by Qisetna, 9 June 2019 (<https://www.Qisetna.com/frozen-lemonade/>)