

Creating a Cultural Renaissance

ARCHIVE

[Football fans cheering “Ole Ole Ole”]

NOON SALIH: Our episode today begins... not in a football stadium. It begins in what is today known as Spain, 1300 years ago.

At the time, North African Muslims ruled that part of the Iberian Peninsula. They spoke Arabic, which had a huge impact on the Spanish language.

Now, they had a tradition to have celebrations that included a lot of dancing. And it was customary for them to shout “Allaaah!” when a dancer was performing in an inspired and moving way - a way of saying, “Wow!” And, to this day, Arabs still do that.

Somewhere along the way, the sound of the word “Allah” transformed into what is now “Ole” in the Spanish language. It’s a common exclamation for any situation that gets people cheering. Whether it’s a bullfight, or a flamenco performance, or yes, a football match.

Throughout history, different cultures have informed each other in ways that create new forms of communication, of expression, of existence. Everything from the Mexican taco to contemporary pop music is the result of cultural fusion and, in a way, it feels like the potential for these combos is endless.

So what happens when you bring 192 unique countries together in the same place?

AMNA ABULHOUL: What we really intended to do is... We got a mandate of, "How can we make Expo a cultural renaissance?"

NOON SALIH: This is Amna Abulhoul, Expo 2020 Dubai's Executive Creative Director. You might remember her as the mastermind behind Expo's mascots and the Opening Ceremony. But she also oversaw programming across the site, with the goal of bringing about a "cultural renaissance."

AMNA ABULHOUL: And this is something huge of... can we do it? We don't know, but with the collaboration of all the countries, I think it's a platform that it could be grown organically. It's exactly like a Lego of 192 pieces coming together as a bouquet. That's how I would describe it.

NOON SALIH: In this episode, we take a look at how different cultures are coming together at Expo 2020 Dubai, creating cultures beyond the 192 unique ones represented. How does this cultural fusion reflect the world we live in today?

I'm Noon Salih, and this is Inside Expo, an official podcast of Expo 2020 Dubai, where history is being made.

[INTRO STING]

AMNA ABULHOUL: What is really interesting is... I didn't do anything. I just created the platform and I was watching. What was interesting is... it's nice to bring cultures

together, but what's even nicer is to see them organically merge.

What you can see is, between pavilions, the hosts that are neighbors; they talk to each other. They are never neighbors around the world. They're neighbors here.

You can see with Thailand Pavilion. They have a mini stage outside, and then there is the Polish Pavilion beside it. And there was one time where you can see both cultural stuff coming outside, but they synchronize and not clash.

And this is, in an ideal world, we would say this is a creative director's job or a staging director who kind of made it happen. But I would say, "No." In World Expo, this is the first time in my life I would see things happen organically, like weaving — like a hair braid. It just happened.

NOON SALIH: Expo's vision then was to provide a space for experimentation between different cultures. We asked Amna to take us through some of those spaces, beginning with one of Expo's musical initiatives, Jalsat Nights.

A jalsa is basically a music jam session. Musicians come in with their instruments and, simply, play. At Expo, this Arabic tradition is reimaged by opening the jalsa to anyone, from any country, to play any instrument.

AMNA ABULHOUL: Jalsat is really new for anyone outside the region. But what we wanted to do is... we call in international participants. We gave them what a jalsa is, and we told them, "There are this type of music pieces. There is strings, there is etcetera, etcetera." Countries already identified based on what we provide them as a sample with, "Yes, we want to participate."

NOON SALIH: The first jalsa happened on October 12th, 2021 with Saudi singer Aseel Abu Baker and... an unexpected guest.

MUSIC

AMNA ABULHOUL: We wanted to bring a typical jalsa, and this typical jalsa is bringing a person from the Gulf to sing a typical song that is nostalgic. But what we added is we got a performer from Vietnam and she was using an instrument which is called Đàn Bầu. It's more than a thousand year old. It's a string bass. It's like a qanun.

NOON SALIH: By the way, the Vietnamese artist's name is Lê Giang.

AMNA ABULHOUL: What was beautiful is... she was wearing a traditional yellow Vietnamese dress, sitting between the Arab musicians. And she started solo. They picked up organically. There was no rehearsal. She just had the music note of the qanun and she did it. I think that was the highlight of... "Yes, let's do it."

NOON SALIH: Besides the monthly jalsat, Expo's music program also includes Expo Beats. This festival brings together international artists under a specific genre or theme, like City Beats or Tribal Beats.

But perhaps the biggest musical fusion of all is the national day ceremonies, which are hosted daily at Al Wasl Plaza. In one situation, they even led to a dance fusion!

AMNA ABULHOUL: There was one performance on the main stage. Because every national day we give the main stage of Al Wasl to the country and they do their performance. One of them was Bahrain National Day. What was interesting, they were performing, it's like a jalsa style. But I noticed in a corner, someone was

dancing solo. And then someone else joined them. And then it became like a salsa dance. And then I went to this couple, I was like, “How did you manage?” They said, “It's the same beat.”

I was like, yeah, these are the moments that no camera can capture. No microphone can capture. No radio. Nothing. It's the visitor's eye that will capture it and becomes the memory of a lifetime.

NOON SALIH: These kinds of organic fusions — these ‘memories of a lifetime’ — can be found all over the site. Go to the Earth stage in the Sustainability District, and you might catch a Shami debkeh happening at the same time as a tap dance performance. Spend some time at Jubilee Park, and you can grab a meal at Alkebulan, the African Dining Hall, or Rising Flavors, a restaurant that highlights chefs from the region. Visit the MENASA — Emirati Design Platform space next to Al Wasl, and you'll see how local and international artisans are reimagining traditional Emirati crafts.

This kind of cultural fusion is really unavoidable around the site. The good kind of unavoidable.

MUSIC

AMNA ABULHOUL: What Expo has is really something for everyone. For the person who imagines. The person who is a stiff, I would say, doesn't have emotional, even movement... Expo will move them.

NOON SALIH: Cultural fusions don't just happen in site-wide programming, however. In fact, they're happening within individual pavilions. To showcase that, we go to the country where our episode started: Spain.

Here's Carmen Bueno, Curator and Deputy Commissioner-General of the Spanish Pavilion.

CARMEN BUENO: This Expo really reflects that spirit of Expos as a space of conviviality, as a space of sharing, as a space of opening the eyes — mainly of the visitors, but also, of all the Expo community and of a whole country. And I would say, especially in this case, of a whole region, over the themes and the situations.

MUSIC

NOON SALIH: If you enter the Expo through the Sustainability entry portals, you can immediately see the Spanish Pavilion's orange and yellow cones in the near distance. This design is a combination of the Spanish Plaza and the Emirati wind tower, the Barjeel. It was designed by Spanish architects, Amann-Cánovas-Maruri.

CARMEN BUENO: In our tradition, sharing community life in open air is very important and the plaza is the place. The plaza, square, is the place with this type of conviviality takes place. And here we have done it under the cones, which make the experience nice for everyone, because the cones create a lower temperature than outside. And also with the functionality of the towers of wind in this region of the world, the Barjeel, that's it. In which hot air is going up through the highest part of... in this case a cone, not a square like the Barjeels. And cooler air stays in the space because there is a circulation of air.

NOON SALIH: In the shaded plaza, you'll come across a sphere that has Spanish words written alongside their Arabic translations. If you can sound both the Spanish word and its Arabic translation out, you'll realize that they sound... very similar.

CARMEN BUENO: The Spanish language is the second native spoken language in the world. And it's a very relevant language, second language in internet and in social media. If we are talking about "Connecting Minds," which is the basic theme of Expo, our language is a main tool of the connection of minds nowadays.

NOON SALIH: Remember, besides Latin, no other language has had as significant an impact on the Spanish language as Arabic. And this display is proof of that.

CARMEN BUENO: For instance in Spanish, arroz. I think that in Arabic is pronounced very, very similar, aroz. And it means rice. Okay. Or mandil, which is the name of our restaurants, by the way. Mandil is a very common word in Spanish, which means the tissue that you put to protect yourself. And it's basically used in the kitchen. That's why we use it for the name of our restaurants, and it sounds exactly the same in Arabic, mandil.

NOON SALIH: But the similar words aren't the end of the cultural fusions at the Spanish Pavilion — they're also happening on the programming level. Flamenco dance, which is often performed in the Plaza, has its roots in Indian and Arab cultures. During the Spanish National Day, a Sevillian band called Accademia del Piacere performed ancient Baroque music, which has Arab influences.

MUSIC

NOON SALIH: But one cultural fusion that's quite inspirational, actually, involves a little-known board game.

CARMEN BUENO: Many people say, "Why do you devote such a big space to chess?" Well, we choose chess precisely as another example of how the mixture of cultures and the historical traditions still are present today.

NOON SALIH: It was the Muslims of Northern Africa who brought chess to Spain. The earliest surviving book of chess was actually written by a Spaniard, and today, the Spanish take their chess playing very seriously, even including it in schools.

CARMEN BUENO: Spain is leading a movement of using chess as a transversal tool for education. It's not as... it's not so much as learning to play chess, but using chess to learn, to think, to develop emotional intelligence, develop strategic thinking and this type of things. And that's why we organized the first digital international chess tournament for schools. We had in fact over 200 schools from 53 countries participating during the months of pandemic.

And then we had a beautiful activity here in the month of November, when the winners of the first steps... There were 12 schools from 10 different countries, came here and played the finals physically. So it was a beautiful moment.

MUSIC

NOON SALIH: From the Spanish Pavilion, we walk over to the Japanese Pavilion in Al Forsan Park.

YABUNAKA AIKO: You may feel something very, very Japanese, but it's inspired by meeting with other countries.

NOON SALIH: This is Yabunaka Aiko, Secretary-General of the Japanese Pavilion. If you listen closely, you'll notice cultural fusion happening in real time. We interviewed Aiko at the Japanese Pavilion, as the Indian Pavilion was celebrating its national day right next door! Okay, back to the Secretary-General.

YABUNAKA AIKO: So throughout the pavilion, actually, we're talking about Japan, but we're talking some parts similarly that came from your country. So it will be interesting for you to see your country's way of inspiring Japan.

NOON SALIH: The pavilion's façade is a fusion between Islamic design elements — namely, arabesque — and Japanese origami. It was conceived by famous Japanese architect Nagayama Yuko, and also draws upon energy saving systems from both Japanese and Arab cultures.

YABUNAKA AIKO: When she first thought the arabesque, she thought some similarities with the asanoha, or the origami folding paper. So this is why she wanted to have a mixture of both countries because we're having a Japan Pavilion at Dubai. So at the entrance, we wanted to show that we may be different, but we have a similarity and if we mix it together, we have something more even beautifully. So that's why we wanted to do it as the façade at the very entrance of our pavilion, showing that we as Japan are here in Dubai. And this is what Expo is all about: meeting each other.

NOON SALIH: When you enter, you are greeted by one of 80 pavilion hosts, all wearing the same uniform that has unique patterning on it.

YABUNAKA AIKO: If you carefully, carefully look at our uniform, you will see the circle, the square, the triangle.

NOON SALIH: And if you listened to our “Hidden Stories” episode, you’ll remember that those three shapes are the same ones used for the different districts at the Expo.

YABUNAKA AIKO: If you see it very, very carefully, you will see a shape of heart. And a heart and a heart moving, which means the UAE and Japan is mixing again together. And then if you focus more on the triangle or the square part, you will see the arabesque pattern again. And then if you focus and see on the circle side, you will see a Japanese cherry blossom pattern.

It's a simple thing, but if we mix it together and if we see it from a different way, you can see things differently. So we are inspiring you to see it your way when you come through our pavilion.

NOON SALIH: In fact, cultural fusion is at the heart of the Japanese Pavilion’s theme: “Where Ideas Meet.”

MUSIC

NOON SALIH: These cultural aspect, it's very important that we heritage it. But it's also important that it is heritaged by a lot of people around the world and they're doing their own interpretation and they're doing their own performance and in somewhat sharing their culture and their ideas. And I think this is what culture is all

about. It's something very, very identified as one country's culture, but it's important that how it inspires others and it's performed with others as well.

MUSIC

NOON SALIH: We looked at cultural fusions in just two pavilions out of the nearly 200 at Expo. But here's some quick math for you. If you pick any two of the 192 countries represented at Expo and combine their cultures, you could have nearly 18,000 unique cultural fusions, and that's assuming that any two cultures can be combined in only one way. But the reality is that cultural fusion is around every corner, from the huge musical performances on the Jubilee Stage to the smallest ice cream cart by the Saudi Arabia Pavilion — which has great cardamom ice cream, by the way.

Really, the possibilities for surprise are endless. It's a constant redefinition of culture, or a cultural renaissance, as Amna put it.

AMNA ABULHOUL: It's really hard to explain what the feeling of culture is in Expo, because this is the first time I see the world having one unique culture, coming all together. Because we're all the same. What differs is the type of clothes, the unnecessary border and oceans between all of us. But we all speak with each other in culture. As of now, we are about to achieve the cultural renaissance, which is the mandate that was given to us. And let's hope we really achieve it by 31 March.

NOON SALIH: Inside Expo takes you behind the scenes at Expo 2020 Dubai, sharing our stories and others across the 170-year history of this global event. Learn more by visiting [VirtualExpoDubai.com](https://virtualexpodubai.com).

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