

# The Rich History of the Majlis

**NOON SALIH:** Take a moment and think of that place where you sit down with people to... take in the world. To listen. To learn. To rest. Maybe it's your living room today? A place from your childhood? Imagine that space in front of you.

Who are you meeting with? Friends? Family? Perhaps people you're getting to know for the very first time? Are you sitting on chairs, couches, or on the floor? And what are you eating or drinking? Dates, snacks, coffee, tea?

What sounds can you hear? What colors and shapes can you see? How do you feel in this space?

Our episode today begins in such a place, a women's majlis in the city of Al Ain, Abu Dhabi, in the year 1966.

**GHAYA AL DHAHERI:** She knew so many things about science, culture, finance, medicine, conflict resolution. She was even a matchmaker! So the women of our neighborhood would meet in her house.

**NOON SALIH:** This is Ghaya Khalfan Al Dhaheri, a storyteller and researcher of Emirati culture and heritage. Growing up, her grandmother's majlis was where she began taking in the world around her.

**GHAYA AL DHAHERI:** My grandmother, Sheikha bint Rakan, was an exceptional woman in her society. I would describe her as *faltat zamanha* — ahead of her time.

At the time, the women’s majlis would be held early in the morning, around 9 AM. This majlis was a social event — you did not miss it unless you were very sick or recently had a child. Each woman would come with a dish and a pot of coffee. They would bring dates, fruit, bread, lugaimat, kabab, khabeesa, aseeda, harissa — whatever they could find at home. And they would sit together.

They would share their knowledge, their experiences, their skills. They would discuss everything that mattered to Emirati women and their families at the time. This majlis was a school. They would teach each other handicrafts like sewing, weaving palm fronds, talli embroidery, medical practices...

## MUSIC

**GHAYA AL DHAHERI:** And there, in a corner in that majlis, you’d find me, a tiny little thing. My body and my mind would record every word and every letter these women said. I would watch each one present her topics as they passed the coffee around with grace and elegance, dressed in their finest attire and jewelry. And after they’re done talking and eating and having their coffee, they would pass around the perfume and incense like a ritual. We have a saying, “Ma ba’ad al oud g’oud,” “After the incense, we depart.” That’s when we knew. The day’s session was over.

And this was the women’s majlis in the Emarat that I truly believe was the first school I ever attended.

**NOON SALIH:** In Khaleeji culture, the proverb goes, “Al majalis madaris.” “The majalis are schools,” and what Ghaya just described was one of those schools that still exist today around the Arab world. In fact, Expos historically have been

modeled like a majlis: a space for people from all over the world to come together and learn, listen, and rest.

In today's episode, we look at the rich history of the majlis in the UAE and how its values have been instilled in the spirit of Expo 2020 Dubai. And everyone's invited.

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

### **[INTRO STING]**

**NOON SALIH:** Singular: majlis. Plural: majalis. The word comes from the Arabic root word "ja-la-sa," which means, simply, to sit. And its definition is true to that root.

**GHAYA AL DHAHERI:** Defining a majlis is not hard. A majlis is a place where people sit down to discuss and share any aspect of their lives.

**NOON SALIH:** The majlis has been a staple of the region for hundreds of years, with some attributing its origins to the Jahiliyya era when tribes would meet to discuss their affairs — that's before the year 610 CE. And while the majlis has changed over the centuries, one thing has remained the same: its role in creating a space for important conversations, like those that took place in the UAE in 1968, right before the formation of the union.

**GHAYA AL DHAHERI:** One of the very first meetings that led to the founding of the country happened in 1968 in Seih Al Sedira, between the late Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, the founder of the country, and Sheikh Rashid bin Saeed Al Maktoum, the ruler of Dubai at the time. They would go there during the winter and

hold a majlis in a tent, and invite their most trusted advisors to discuss what the union would look like.

Sheikh Zayed would also host majalis everyday across the land and listen to the people of the Emirates — Emiratis from every social class were invited. He would provide guidance on their day-to-day lives, and their majalis paved the way for the foundation of the union.

**NOON SALIH:** Now, you might be wondering, “What does a majlis look like?” And, frankly, there is no one single answer to that question, no magic formula. The majlis changes depending on when and where it’s held, and on the gender of its attendees. Ghaya was kind enough, however, to give us one example from her childhood: her father’s majlis, which took place in Al Ain in the 1960s.

**GHAYA AL DHAHERI:** What I remember is... I grew up in a very big house made of clay. It had 2 storeys, and there was a majlis on both. The bottom one was used during the winter, and the top one during the summer. It had so many darayesh — windows — on all sides. It had these elegant zwali, or carpets, and was lined with doshag, floor cushions. And it had mirrors. If you stood in it, you could see yourself from every angle!

And along the walls, you had rozena, these shelves where perfume, incense, and books were kept. My father had all kinds of books: A’ntara bin Shadad, The life of the Prophet Mohammed salah Allah alayhi wa salam, Ibn Taimiya, Ibn Al Kalbi. All lined in this rozena.

In the corners there were these lanterns: 3 lanterns, I remember, made out of the most beautiful colored wood.

Every 2 seats, there would be a small wooden coffee table that was engraved and colored. I remember red, green, purple, and white. And in the centre there would be a small fireplace called kwar. The coffee equipment would be kept there. And the coffee was never pre-prepared. It had to be made fresh in front of the guests and those attending. And it was all there, from grinders to serving pots, made out of the finest brass. Cardamon, saffron, rose water, nutmeg, cloves.

This was my father's majlis.

**NOON SALIH:** Of course, majalis change depending on their purpose. Ghaya spoke to us about the Sabla, a majlis for travelers from near and far to meet the people of a specific area; the Hadhra, a majlis that was held specifically by Bedouins; and the Barza, where a leader, scientist, or storyteller would speak to an audience. These majalis were held either in the shade of a large tree or that of the wall of a fort or palace.

No matter what majlis you sit in, however, there is a specific etiquette that is followed — an art form, almost.

Imagine you're arriving at Ghaya's father's majlis for the first time, in 1966.

**GHAYA AL DHAHERI:** First off, you have to ask permission to enter a majlis. You have to announce your arrival loudly and warn those inside. Someone has to come from inside the majlis to let you in. If the coffee is being passed around, you have to wait until people have finished their coffee and returned their cups to the server. It's hard to greet people who have unfinished coffee in their hands!

Next, those inside the majlis have to make space for you. Usually, it's children, young people, and locals who have to leave to make space.

You should not raise your voice, but you shouldn't whisper either. Your voice must be heard. And you should not bring up controversial topics unless those topics are the purpose of the majlis and are relevant to the people present.

## MUSIC

**NOON SALIH:** Coffee servers must follow specific rules as well.

They should shake their cups to announce that the coffee is ready, and serve leaders and elders first. They must serve in a clockwise direction. When you arrive, the server waits for you to get settled. They should be well-mannered, well-dressed, well-informed of local customs, and act as confidantes of the majlis. They shouldn't share what they hear or see inside this space. The servers' eyes and their focus are on the cup alone. It's an art form.

**NOON SALIH:** And if you sit down in a majlis today, nearly 60 years later, you'd see that art form hasn't really changed. At a time when social media and urban development can make it easy for people to stay in their own bubbles, the majlis brings people physically together. And there are so many examples of majlis in the UAE today - in fact, every home has its version of the majlis. A space for sharing knowledge, culture and experiences. Just like it has been throughout history.

**GHAYA AL DHAHERI:** There are so many cultures represented in the UAE today, and each of these cultures is specific. What we are doing today is maintaining our

identity while also infusing it with the experiences of others from those different cultures. And we're also incorporating innovation, technology, social media, artificial intelligence, and sustainability into our identity. The majlis is a perfect example of that mission.

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**NOON SALIH:** In 2015, the majlis was inscribed into UNESCO's list of Intangible Cultural Heritage, a distinct part of the UAE's national identity. It only makes sense then that Expo 2020 Dubai would be modeled after the majlis — a space to connect minds and create the future. In fact, one of Expo 2020 Dubai's most prominent programs is called the World Majlis.

**DR. FEDERICA BUSA:** What's special about Expo 2020 was the notion of "One Country, One Pavilion." And through the World Majlis, what we were trying to do, it's bringing together voices from, from everywhere to the table to locate the different facets of any particular topic.

**NOON SALIH:** This is Dr. Federica Busa, Senior Vice President of Visitor Experience at Expo 2020 Dubai and the head of the World Majlis Initiative.

**DR. FEDERICA BUSA:** So the World Majlis is our embodiment of our theme of "Connecting minds, creating the future," and if we don't put the different voices and different disciplines around the same table, then we're not going to get those insights that help us think differently.

**NOON SALIH:** The World Majlis Initiative is driven by Expo's ten thematic weeks, ranging from climate and biodiversity to space. These ten themes are looked at through the lens of Expo's three main subthemes.

**DR. FEDERICA BUSA:** We're currently hosting five majlis during each of the Expo's thematic weeks. So during Expo 2020, we'll be hosting about... over 50 World Majlis conversations, and in each thematic week, we look at the theme from the lens of opportunity, mobility, and sustainability. So let me give you an example.

## MUSIC

**DR. FEDERICA BUSA:** For space week, we had five World Majlis, one that was looking at the opportunity side of space. So looking at all of the different countries that are entering the world of space and what are their motivation, because we normally think of space as a domain for the big players. And now there's so many countries from around the world that are interested in space, because space is actually helping understand our life on Earth a lot better.

When we had been looking at the sustainability angle, we have asked the question of: "What can we learn from living in International Space Station, from astronauts who all have to be outside of Planet Earth with very, very constrained resources? Can we look, can we draw from any of those practices and technology to live a more sustainable life on Earth?"

And the third, which was really about technology and innovation. We've been looking at Hope and Perseverance, that lead us to discuss us reaching to Mars and beyond, and what lessons and what innovations can we draw to move forward



with our quest for space. All of this under a big, large umbrella: what if space could change the trajectory of humanity?

**NOON SALIH:** Each thematic week is also accompanied by a Women's World Majlis that highlights the role women play in topics relating to that theme, and a Next Gen World Majlis, which includes the voices of youth and university students.

### MUSIC

**NOON SALIH:** Ultimately, this is meant to be a welcoming space for people from all walks of life to be a part of the conversation, no matter their experience.

**DR. FEDERICA BUSA:** It's an informal place. When we sit, everybody is the same. And everybody's equal and everybody faces each other and everybody comes prepared to address the theme from their own point of view, from their experience. It's not scripted, there are no PowerPoint presentations, and it's a very freeflow conversation that is supported by, by a moderator that just helps manage the conversation, ensure that everybody has equal time to speak. But in a majlis, you also value... you're there to listen to other people and see how that listening aspect is - it's just as important as telling a story.

**NOON SALIH:** And the World Majlis is but a small example of how Expo 2020 Dubai has taken on the spirit of the majlis. But in practice, the World Expo, in and of itself, is a majlis.

**DR. FEDERICA BUSA:** What has deeply inspired me and everybody that comes to know a majlis is not only how the physical space works, which is inclusive to everybody and makes room for everybody. But it's also how it welcomes friends

and strangers; how it's both formal and informal; how it talks about things that are incredibly complex, because in the history of the majlis in the UAE, but across the Arab world, some big decisions, right? About the making of nations, the making of cities have been taken in a majlis. But it's also a place where you just build the friendship. And, and building the friendship in a common space is the first step towards conflict resolution, towards greater understanding, and towards finding common grounds.

**GHAYA AL DHAHERI:** Today, Expo's presence in the Emirates represents a world majlis attended by 192 countries, and each one of those countries has its own pavilion that is also a majlis — a meeting place. In this world majlis, countries share their cultures, achievements, and innovations, and the visitors learn from these different presentations.

And that is what happens in a majlis! If "Al Majalis Madaris," "The Majalis are Schools," then Expo is a majlis; it is a school; it is a university; it is an academy; it is everything that's important for a person's education and well-being.

## MUSIC

**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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