Cultural Diversity in Saudi Arabia
Introduction

The concept of cultural diversity is driven by the idea of coexistence between more than one cultural form within the same community. It involves a wide variety of human values that offer a roadmap to the social, cultural, and institutional organization for contemporary societies. There is no doubt that cultural diversity is an inevitable global phenomenon across all societies because it acts as a driving force and opportunity to create competition toward innovation, which leads to intellectual action with multiple knowledge dimensions, including heritage, civilization, art, creativity, literature, and esthetics.

Cultural diversity is a driving force to development at the economic level and a way toward an intellectual, emotional, meaningful, spiritual, and more integrated life. It also affords a crucial advantage to reduce poverty and achieve sustainable development. At the same time, adaptation and recognition of cultural diversity, through the creative use of media, communications, and information technologies, in particular, contribute to developing a dialogue among civilizations and cultures and achieving mutual respect and understanding.
Global Conventions and Declarations of Cultural Diversity

- Convention for the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage (2001)
- Recommendation on the Safeguarding of Traditional Culture and Folklore (1989)
- Universal Copyrights Convention (UCC) (1952)
- Declaration on Race and Racial Prejudice (1980)
- Recommendation Concerning the Status of the Artist (1980)
- Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (1972)
- Declaration of the Principles of International Cultural Co-operation (1954)
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The UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity is a significant initiative that aims to make cultural diversity a peaceful force against self-centered and other exclusion. As cultural diversity reflects the values of mutuality, creativity, and innovation. It is also the energy that enables humanity to achieve peace and development, as it is an integral part of promoting the respect of human rights.

The UNESCO Declaration affirms that culture should be regarded as the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group and that it encompasses, in addition to art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions, and beliefs. Culture is at the heart of contemporary debates about identity, social cohesion, and the development of a knowledge-based economy.

Furthermore, the Declaration affirms that respect for the diversity of cultures, tolerance, dialogue, and cooperation in a climate of mutual trust and understanding are among the best guarantees of international peace and security, aspiring to greater solidarity on the basis of recognition of cultural diversity, of awareness of the unity of humankind, and of the development of intercultural exchanges.
Culture takes diverse forms across time and space. This diversity is embodied in the uniqueness and plurality of the identities of the groups and societies that make up humankind. As a source of exchange, innovation, and creativity, cultural diversity is as necessary for humankind as biodiversity is for nature. In this sense, it is the common heritage of humanity and should be recognized and affirmed for the benefit of present and future generations.

The UNESCO Declaration consists of 12 Articles that stress the importance of respecting cultural diversity in communities. The most important of these articles are as follows:

**Cultural diversity: the common heritage of humanity**
From cultural diversity to cultural pluralism

In our increasingly diverse societies, it is essential to ensure harmonious interaction among people and groups with plural, varied and dynamic cultural identities and their willingness to live together amicably. Policies for the inclusion and participation of all citizens are guarantees of social cohesion, the vitality of civil society, and peace. Thus defined, cultural pluralism gives policy expression to the reality of cultural diversity. Indissociable from a democratic framework, cultural pluralism is conducive to cultural exchange and to the flourishing of creative capacities that sustain public life.

Cultural diversity as a factor in development

Cultural diversity widens the range of options open to everyone; it is one of the roots of development, understood not simply in terms of economic growth but also as a means to achieve a more satisfactory intellectual, emotional, moral, and spiritual existence.

Cultural diversity and human rights

The defense of cultural diversity is an ethical imperative, inseparable from respect for human dignity. It implies a commitment to human rights and fundamental freedoms, particularly the rights of persons belonging to minorities and indigenous peoples. No one may invoke cultural diversity to infringe upon human rights guaranteed by international law nor to limit their scope.
Cultural Diversity in Saudi Arabia

The culture of Saudi Arabia is distinguished by its connection to the Islamic heritage and Arab traditions that are rooted in human history. Moreover, culture has always been connected to Saudi Arabia’s commercial center. The Saudi society has experienced vast developments over the years and has adapted its values, customs, and traditions to modern life. The Saudi people enjoy the richness of many civilizations and unique cultural diversity thanks to Saudi Arabia’s location in the center of important old trade routes. For more than 3,000 years, Arab merchants have been actively involved in a large trading network that extends from South Asia to the Mediterranean and Egypt. They also played a vital role in India and the Far East from one side and Byzantine lands and the Mediterranean on the other side.

The emergence of Islam in the seventeenth century AD contributed to the formation of the region’s civilization. Islam spread a hundred years after its origins in the Arabian Peninsula to reach the Atlantic Ocean in the West and India and China in the East. Islam has also contributed to promoting a dynamic education period in various fields,
including culture, science, philosophy, and the arts. Furthermore, over the course of fourteen centuries, pilgrims from all over the globe traveled to the Holy sites of Makkah and Madinah, enriching the region’s culture, as pilgrims came with ivory from Africa, carpets from the East and returned to their homelands with local goods.

When Saudi Arabia was established in 1932 AD, King Abdulaziz devoted his efforts to preserving Arab traditions and culture, and his sons followed the same path. The Saudi culture is characterized by unique richness, including, but not limited to, material and human heritage, traditions, civilized urban development, and sustainable growth in the visual, musical, and performing arts. These go hand in hand with trends of artistic production in publishing and literary and intellectual authorship. Moreover, Saudi Arabia is experiencing nowadays an increasing number of public libraries, museums, and cultural events that highlight its unique cultural diversity.

During recent years, it has become clear that the Saudi culture is developing in terms of clothing, arts, and customs to keep pace at the moment. Saudi Arabia has been always keen to develop and preserve heritage and cultures. As a result, it has established various institutions and bodies to be in charge of this responsibly. It has also introduced significant changes in a number of fields, including the cultural field, consistent with the UNESCO mission, where it is considered a founding member and a member of the executive board. Saudi Arabia’s cultural richness can be highlighted in the following elements:
The unique geographic location that enables Saudi Arabia to serve as an international business link during all ages.

The homeland of various empires and countries that have existed throughout human civilization.

The depth of civilization dating back more than a million years, as confirmed by Saudi Arabia’s antiquities and heritage.

The crossroad of cultures and bridge for cultural communication among peoples.

The cradle of Islam and the Arab race because of Makkah and Madinah.
Kingdom’s Folklore

Folklores refer to old generations’ legacies and societies’ cultural production, such as customs, etiquettes, values, material, cultural, and popular traditions, stories, legends, poems, games, songs, proverbs, celebrations, festivals, dances, arts, and crafts.

Saudi folklore is distinguished by a special character that combines originality with modernity, with the scent of the past and the magic of the future. Folklores are a crucial pillar of national identity, from which faith, traditions, authentic values, language, and ideas are driven.

Throughout history, the Arabian Peninsula has been characterized by geographical and tribal diversity and a plurality of regions, in addition to its vast geographical area. Following the unification of Saudi Arabia by the Founder, King Abdulaziz, this diversity has been further preserved. Saudi Arabia was characterized by the multiplicity and diversity of social patterns, customs, and traditions, which can be attributed to its geographical, environmental, and topographical factors. These varieties are generally expressed in dialects, housing patterns, clothing, food, games, dances, songs, and
other cultural patterns that have impacted and enriched Saudi society. Moreover, Saudi Arabia embraces several Islamic schools as a result of its geographical expansion and regional diversity at the cultural and historical levels. In the center, people follow the Hanbali School, whereas people in the West follow the Maliki and Al-Shafi’i Schools along with their offshoots from some Sufi groups. In the South (Asir, Najran, and Jazan), a diverse tribal and sectarian mixture includes followers of the Ismaili Shi’i, Al-Shafi’i, and Hanbali School. In the East (Qatif, Al-Ahsa, and modern cities), the Shiite School is followed by many people, including followers of Imamiyyah (the Twelver) and followers of other Sunni sects, such as the Maliki, the Shafi’i, and the Hanbali.

With the establishment of formal education, which has secured the right to an education to every individual and resulted in many schools, the features of the Saudi modern culture started to be formed in a way that links the past, considers the present and envisions the future.
Costumes in Saudi Arabia

Costumes reflect societies’ traditions, customs, and heritage. In the Saudi context, costumes embody individuals’ social and living lives. Forms of clothing and cosmetics vary across regions and environments within the same area. In this context, costumes are either locally produced, or the raw materials are imported, sewn, and embroidered. Before the embroidery machines arrived, women used to embroider their clothes by hand.

“Thobe” is the main dress for men and is characterized by its bright white color that fits the high temperature in Saudi Arabia in addition to Agal and Taqiya. On occasions, men wear Mashlah or Bisht (Abaya). For women, the most wearable clothing is Abaya, with the face covered. The forms of clothing and cosmetics vary from one region to another across Saudi Arabia.
In summer, men wear a loose-fitting dress that covers the whole body and reaches the bottom of the leg. The threads are pulled with a thread at the bottom called (Karkoucha). The Ghutra (headband) is white or striped, has a triangular shape, and is fixed by Agal. In winter, men wear “Farwa,” which is a wide and long robe woven from the skins and fur of sheep and decorated with some ornaments and shapes. It is worn over clothes in winter, especially in the desert. Women’s garments are long, loose, and come in one piece embroidered with silk and golden threads, such as the Hashemite dress and Darra’a. The headdress is made of black cloth, decorated with ornaments, and embroidered with buttons. It is embroidered from its front end and has an opening for the face, with the rest falling on the shoulders and back.
Men in Najran wear Mudhil, Gharw, aljunbiat, alhizam, altir, and albondoq. In contrast, women have their own beautiful clothes and ornaments, such as Almokamem, alkherqa, alsmt, allazem, aljaras, alkhros, almtal, ring, alhrz, and aldamaa.
Men in the Northern Borders wear garments that fit the high and low temperatures. The Almardon garment is characterized by its long and loose sleeves. It is worn in celebrations and shows. There is also the Arab garment that is decorated with buttons at the chest, Shemagh and Ghutra, to avoid the summer heat and winter cold. The dress for women is similar to the traditional Palestinian Jerusalemite dress, known as the Maqtaa, decorated with local embroideries on the chest and sleeves. Almesrah is a silk dress with reed patterns from the top to the bottom. Women wear Milfh, which is a head scarf, and Sheila, which is a black veil. Women’s adornments in Saudi Arabia vary from henna to golden or silver jewelry and handicrafts.
Folklore and Songs in Saudi Arabia

The Peninsula tribes used various methods to intimidate enemies and strike terror into their hearts. The most prominent method was singing in different tones with specific dances. This was passed down through generations and has become a folklore that reflects every region. “Unity and Community” are the most notable features of folklore in Saudi Arabia and are the pride of the Saudi people inherited from one generation to the next. They are accompanied by enthusiastic songs, games, and dances that express customs and traditions. Folk arts vary across regions and are characterized as follows:

Najdi Ardah in Riyadh and Qassim

The name is derived from the parade that the performers used to perform on their horses before entering the battles, in victories and holidays.
Majrör in Makkah and Madinah

The dancing band is divided into two opposite rows, both wearing the same garment known as “Alhwisi.” It is a white loose garment tightened by a belt with live ammunition. The band holds drums while singing. In the middle of the two rows, the drum holder sits and beats the drum, but he usually does not participate in singing.

Al-Ardah and Al-Ma’sha Al-Saif Al-Azzawi in Asir, Najran, and Jazan

Is a war dance performed on the coasts of Saudi Arabia from Madinah to Qunfudhah with swords and guns.

AlDahha in Al-Jawf and the Northern Borders

Also called ANfas Al-Fursan, this is one of the folk dances in the northern tribes of Saudi Arabia. It is performed in one or more rows during festivals and victories.

Daq Alhob, Alliewa, Alhasad, Alfariesa in Eastern Provenience

These are various forms of folk dances inspired by the magic waves of the Arabian Gulf Sea, palm fronds, and harvests for which the city of Al-Ahsa is famous. Wheels and drums are used under successive rhythms.
Traditional Food in Saudi Arabia

Each region across Saudi Arabia is famous for its special dishes that reflect the traditions and customs based on unique legacies. Saudi dishes vary by climate, nature of life, and plant quality in each area. This has created a wide and unique variety of Saudi dishes. Kabsa is one of the most famous Saudi dishes that is ranked as a gourmet dish worldwide. Each region across Saudi Arabia is famous for its various dishes, such as the following:

AlMaaarq in Madinah

Made of meat chopped into small pieces and cooked in a copper pot, mixed with spices, cumin, black pepper, and cinnamon.
**Khmer in Asir**

Made of wheat, barley or sorghum, grounded, kneaded, and fermented for some time, then served with vegetable soup.

**AlMakshosh in Hai’l**

Made of small loaves of hard wheat dough grilled on charcoal or ovens and served with ghee, honey, molasses, or sugar.

**(Qurs Al-Jamr) in Al-Qassim**

Is one of the most famous dishes in the Al-Qassim region in Saudi Arabia. It is made of a very large loaf of whole wheat flour bread. It is cooked in an underground oven from both sides. After that, the dust is removed from the loaf, cut into small pieces, and served with ghee and sugar.

**Al-Masoub in Makkah**

This dish has become famous recently. It is made of small discs of whole wheat, baked, and then served in a wooden bowl with honey, ghee and banana.
Vision 2030 Role in Promoting Cultural Diversity

Culture is an integral part of Saudi Arabia’s ambitious national transformation, as Vision 2030 highlights that culture is one component of life quality, a driver of economic growth, and an enabler to Saudi Arabia’s advancement in international rankings. It also affirms the importance for Saudi Arabia to increase its cultural activity by improving the local cultural sector to enhance Saudi Arabia’s cultural position and cultural role at the global level.
Vison 2030 seeks to improve the cultural ecosystem and to enable the cultural sector to realize its potential through several programs and mechanisms. This is an ongoing development process that exports the Saudi culture equipped with strong long traditions, history, and heritage to other nations while opening the avenues to other cultures under a mutual human and cultural framework.

Moreover, Vision 2030 is keen to achieve prosperity in Saudi Arabia through various cultural forms, enrich individuals’ lifestyles, contribute to strengthening the national identity, and encourage the world’s cultural dialogue by empowering and motivating the Saudi cultural landscape in a way that reflects the originality of the past and builds a future that is proud of its legacy and creates new and different opportunities for creativity and cultural expression.
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