

NATIVE ARTS & CULTURES FOUNDATION

Forging Global Alliances to Share Native Arts and Cultures

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I had the pleasure of attending Culture Summit 2018, Abu Dhabi. It was an inspiring 4 days of presentations, discussions, and performances with people from over 90 countries who are passionate about the potential of culture to improve our world. I was invited to participate on a panel titled “Arts and Arts-Related Education in Marginalized and At-Risk Communities.” It was very humbling to be there and I shared a Hawaiian chant to greet people and express my appreciation. When speaking briefly about the challenges and trauma indigenous people have experienced in the U.S., I later learned that many of the participants were not aware of these issues. They were eager to hear about the work of the Native Arts and Cultures Foundation; how dedicated artists and communities are working together to perpetuate our culture, build more resilient communities, and reclaim Native truth through the arts.



Rising from this flat desert land steeped in centuries of history, a gleaming metropolis of skyscrapers and modern architecture has been built. Sheik Zayed Mosque, one of the world’s largest, is a pristine white structure with 82 domes, over one thousand columns, and the world’s largest hand knotted carpet. This is a sacred place where more than 40,000 Muslims gather to worship during Eid, a celebration festival similar to the meaning of Christmas for Christians.



We toured the Louvre Abu Dhabi, which appears to just rise up out of the Arab sea and houses a collection with over a thousand art pieces under a spectacular dome of overlapping geometric lattices. The museum traces the history of civilization from its origination in East Africa to China and Central America in gallery rooms filled with original maps and high tech visual displays. Artworks included a statue with two heads which was discovered in Jordan and had been carefully buried over 8500 years ago. It is considered to be one of the earliest monumental statues in human history.



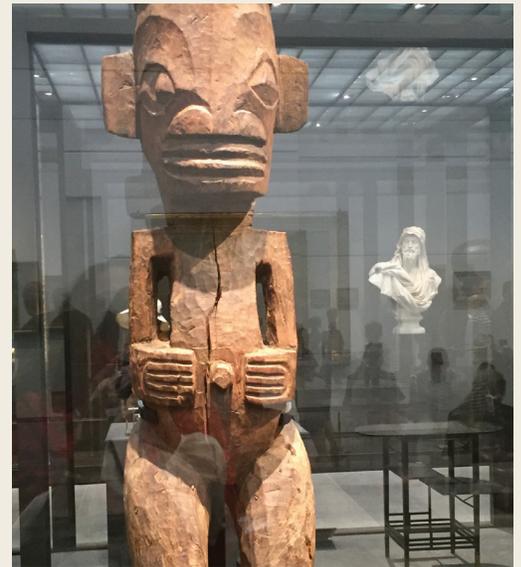
Walking through the vast museum space was like a history lesson of civilization from its beginnings to modern day punctuated with

precious artifacts and priceless art. However, indigenous peoples of what is now the United States, and Pacific Island history and art civilizations were missing, except for one tiki post totem from the Marquesas Islands dating back to the 1800's. Granted, I wasn't able to tour all of the museum, and I left wondering if I had missed something, or if, as elsewhere, we were once again invisible and erased from people's memories.

I met many caring and committed people who I know will be lifelong friends. Spending time with artists and people from the middle east and so many other parts of the world was an illuminating experience for me. There was Alia Malek, our panel moderator, who is an American born Syrian journalist and author, whose mannerisms and high energy reminded me of my niece. She is a smart, beautiful, contemporary Arab young woman who is dedicated to writing about her original homeland of Syria and dispelling the myths and bias about Arab people. Fellow panelist, Zaid Souqi of Jordan comes from the technology sector. He is now bringing his experience and knowledge to a new nonprofit initiative working with children in Palestinian and Syrian refugee camps through artmaking and entrepreneurship. His home country of Jordan has generously received more than 2 million Palestinian and 1.5 million Syrian refugees from these two war torn countries, the most of any other country in the world.

I learned how the words "preserving or perpetuating culture" are not always a good thing depending on where one is from. For example, one woman who is considered a cultural revolutionary in her homeland of Rwanda fled to Congo during the genocide and was raised in exile after losing both her parents. She returned after the genocide to create opportunities for healing and hope through theatre and arts and has since founded the first women's drumming group with 150 members. She broke a cultural norm, the taboo of drums being played exclusively by men. So, she told me that deeply ingrained aspects of culture have been holding women back, and that culture should evolve and change as necessary.

I was moved to tears by a documentary film on Kailash Satyarthi which follows his life's work to stop child slave labor in India. Kailash is an Indian national hero and Nobel Peace Prize winner whose son was kidnapped, forced to work in a child slave labor camp, and died before Kailash could rescue him. Kailash has since made it his life mission to help other families find their kidnapped children who have been taken to these horrific child labor camps in India and elsewhere.



He has begun the 100 Million Campaign, <http://100million.org/>, a lofty but attainable goal in his mind, asking for 100 Million people worldwide to make a pledge and act to end child slavery and trafficking and ensure every child is free, safe, and educated.

Then there was Tcheka, a self-taught musician and singer from the Cape Verde islands off the northwest coast of Africa whose songs lament about life in the islands and his Native culture.

It didn't matter that I couldn't understand the language that he sang in because his guitar and voice conveyed haunting emotion and depth. One evening, several of us got together to hear Tcheka sing more and ended up having a jam session where all of us sang something from our own culture. It was a spontaneous and beautiful time that reminded me of backyard parties back in Hawaii where friends and family gather, play music, get up and dance a hula or sing.

There are many other artists I met including Afra Atiq, Wu Tong, Aakash Odedra, Karim Wasfi, Tania Leon, Raida Taha, and so many more that brought their stories, culture and art to the Summit.

I returned back to the USA committed to furthering relationships and valuable discussions that were made at the Summit. Certainly, the theme of the gathering, *Unexpected Collaborations: Forging New Connections Between Heritage and Innovation, Near and Far, Creativity and Purpose* was attained. Always advocating for the Indigenous Nations of the USA and Native arts and culture, seeds have been planted to arrange some art and cultural exchanges where our Native artists can share their work in Abu Dhabi and also learn more about Arab culture and arts. I was able to briefly meet HE Mohamed Khalifa Al Mubarak, Chairman, Department of Culture and Tourism, Abu Dhabi, who said he was aware of indigenous peoples in the USA and wanted to learn more. In addition, ideas have surfaced in working groups and between participants that were presented the final day of the Summit for follow up and action. This is a great beginning to global intercultural awareness and education, and forging alliances.

