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## **Intangible Cultural Heritage as a Tool for Community Empowerment: A Case Study of the Date Palm Festival in Siwa Oasis, Egypt**

### **Abstract**

This paper investigates how minority communities may be empowered through safeguarding their intangible cultural heritage, and developing internal and external values. A newly initiated festival called Date Palm Festival is used as a trigger for the community to recognize their heritage as identity. Data was collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews and qualitative questionnaires with the key community members that was analyzed using content analysis. Results show that the festival presents an opportunity for the Siwans to recognize and value their intangible cultural heritage, as their culture began to gain social, economic and environmental value. The findings also suggest future improvements for the festival in at least three areas - community empowerment, women's participation, and the power balance between community and the government.

**Keywords:** *Intangible cultural heritage, Community-based tourism, Community empowerment, Minority, Oasis community, Egypt*

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### **1. Introduction**

Cultural heritage is essential in representing the national or regional identity. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) divides cultural heritage into two categories; tangible heritage such as architectural works, sculpture, and intangible heritage including oral traditions, performing arts, and rituals. There is also natural heritage such as cultural landscapes, physical, biological or geological formations (UNESCO,

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2019), but the focus of this study is on cultural heritage. In order to protect the cultural heritage from being destroyed or illicitly exported, the Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property 1970 was ratified by 137 Member States of UNESCO. Cultural heritage also has an economic value since tourism based on cultural heritage sites has now become a global industry and is considered the largest tourism sector (Timothy & Nyaupane, 2009).

As a case in point, Egypt is one of the first countries to join UNESCO in 1946. During the 1960s, Abu Simbel in the southern part of Egypt was the first international campaign for UNESCO to safeguard heritage, which caught global attention. After making peace with Israel (Standl, 1989), and registering many destinations as world heritage sites, international tourist arrivals to Egypt started to rise. The significance of international tourism to Egypt has been recognised since 1975, when the nation became a member of The World Tourism Organization (WTO). Since then, the government has made substantial effort to increase Egypt's ranking in the international tourism market. According to the data provided by the World Bank in 2016 between 1996 and 2016, the number of international tourist visitors in Egypt decreased due to numerous terrorist attacks during the late 1990s, such as the Luxor massacre in November 1997 killing 58 foreign tourists, the Sharm El Sheikh bombing in 2005, and political instability in Egypt following the 2011 mass protests (Elshaer & Saad, 2016).

Due to the environmental factors such as water scarcity, 99% of Egypt's population is concentrated in 5% of total area of the country. This also leads to concentration of tourism in major destinations. The data from Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics shows that the hotels occupancy is concentrated in the main tourist destinations such as Cairo, Alexandria, Luxor, Hurghada and Sharm El Sheikh (Capmas, 2018). It is clear that tourism activities in Egypt are concentrated in destinations where historical and archaeological monuments are located and in coastal resort areas where marine sports can be enjoyed. However, community cultural heritage of the oasis community such as in Siwan, which is the focus of this study, has not been the focus of Egypt's tourism development. There are exceptions, such as the Bedouin cultural heritage, but this is also located inside one of the most popular tourist destination in Egypt, Sharm El Sheikh. Over the past twenty years, The Egyptian government is trying to diversify tourism destinations and stimulate regional economic growth and employment opportunities (Shaalan, 2005). The Siwa Oasis in the western desert was one of the destinations attempting to grow its international tourism market over the last two decades (Daher, 2007).

Despite the Egyptian government's intention to leverage tourism as an economic strategy to enhance the nation's economy, there is a gap in the research conducted on tourism development in Egypt. A study conducted by Afifi (2008) demonstrates that between 1975 and 2008 most of the tourism-related research at Egyptian universities are focused on tourist demand and marketing sectors. Most of the Ph.D. theses completed deal with a "general topic" such as marketing, development and planning without focusing on specific tourist destinations in Egypt. Only seven out of fifty-five studies included more remote areas like Sinai and the Red Sea regions. Thirdly, there is a lack of research on natural and cultural attractions, with only one out of the fifty-five Ph.D. theses researching about the Siwa Oasis (Afifi, 2008). These gaps identified in tourism research on Egypt indicate there is an urgent need to identify tourism opportunities for the minority communities in more remote destinations, and tourism's role in empowering local communities economically, socially and environmentally.

This paper presents a case study of one of the Egyptian minorities communities, Siwa Oasis Community (Siwa, hereafter) located in the western desert of Egypt. The purpose is to examine the role of tourism in empowering the local community. A focus is given to the power imbalance in promoting tourist destinations with more focus given to only a few types

of tourism segments. This is a political issue. The indifference to the local community needs, cultural identities and environment is another focus. For example, some of the marine resort destinations in the Red Sea such as a small fishing town Hurghada, has become one of the most popular marine resort destinations in Egypt. Lack of control and management of tourism development there has caused serious environmental damage to a vast area of coral reef, as the artificial beaches were constructed by hotels (El-Gamily et al. 2001). Siwa was chosen because since it has recently been opened to the Nile valley region and is rapidly becoming a tourist destination. Consequently, the community is experiencing rapid social, economic and environmental changes in recent years. This paper aims to identify the importance of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), examining how acknowledging and safeguarding ICH might help empower the minority communities. A newly initiated festival, Date Palm Festival, is examined as another way for the community to recognise the heritage as part of their identity, and how specific ICH may contain a connection between the community and their natural environment, as a key for sustainable development.

## **2. Literature Review**

### ***2.1. Sustainable tourism in remote areas***

The term “community” is defined in a wide range of disciplines including geography, economic and sociology. Community is commonly characterized as a group of people who share the same cultural features, interests or beliefs within a geographical region. Members of any given community may share similar characteristics, having established systems of cultural norms, values, identity, or religion. However, Telfer and Sharpley (2016) argue that “Communities are not homogeneous. They made of individuals and organization who may have different values, aims and objectives” (p.117). Most of the sustainable development policies include the community as a cornerstone for sustainable development and correspondingly sustainable tourism literature also places community as a central ideology (Richards & Hall, 2000).

Communities exist in urban spaces, rural or isolated locations, and today even virtually. The community of this study is an indigenous community called Siwan community located in an isolated rural location. Ethnically they are considered as ‘minority’, with a small population and farming is its main industry. The remote and isolated area of the Siwa Oasis is difficult to access due to the lack of transportation infrastructure. In developing countries, a community like this might suffer from marginalization not only socially but also, politically and economically. That said, it is argued that tourism can generate direct income for such a community in poor countries with high percentage of poverty (WTO, 2004). In general, developing countries are beginning to open those communities to tourism development with the promise of economic benefits, which has implications especially for women and youth. Additionally, rural areas where cultural capital is easily noticeable through music, arts and wildlife, are perceived as an asset of great value for tourist industry. The governments of developing countries target those communities by tourism developing strategy in order to enhance the economic level and social welfare. While those communities may lack economic and human capital, they are rich in cultural capital, thereby providing an opportunity to develop tourism in a sustainable way. Developing tourism in these communities can help the tourism developing process by targeting the local needs and integrating the local community in decision-making process. In other words, community members need to be empowered through tourism development process. Empowerment, it is argued, is not only the result of “economic gains” but recognition of cultural heritage and associated identity based on a long history.

### ***2.2. Sustainable Tourism***

Sustainable tourism is defined by World Tourism Organization (WTO) and United Nations

Environment Program (UNEP) (2005) as “Tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, and the environment and host communities” (p. 11-12). It is widely accepted that sustainable tourism, as a driving force for economic growth, can help to lessen poverty and promote social equality. It may also contribute directly and indirectly to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (WTO, 2015).

Sloan et al. (2009) define sustainable tourism as a type of tourism that manages the entire resources to meet the socio-economic and aesthetic needs of people and communities while maintaining and conserving cultures, ecological stability, biodiversity, and other living beings. The concept of sustainable development includes community participation and calls for the protection and improvement of quality of life for local communities and minimizing the negative influences of tourism development (Milne & Ewing, 2004). Sustainable tourism therefore is a form of tourism designed to minimize the negative impact on the destination, while optimizing benefits to the destination. However, the use of the term sustainable tourism has been criticized, as sustainable tourism labels like ecotourism or cultural tourism have been perceived as simply marketing tools rather than a development model (Linson & Getz, 1996). Butler (1999) argues “it is almost impossible to have a form of tourism that does not have an impact upon the location in which it occurs” (p. 12). Butler (1999) shows that only a small scale tourism sensitive to the local environment and culture carried out by and for local residents could be called a sustainable form of tourism. Planning tourism based on the needs of the local community and utilizing local subsistent activities and associated culture in tourism is referred to as green, agri-, or blue tourism. For example, a case study by Khakzad (2017) about a fishing community in Brunswick, North Carolina demonstrates how fishing materials vital for fishing communities can be used for promoting the culture or heritage. Another example is an agricultural based in tourism, where the opportunities for the agricultural area is promoting the tourism sector by using the landscape as a core of the tourist attraction.

Tourism development that utilizes local subsistent activities in rural, remote or isolated areas can be referred to as community-based tourism (CBT). CBT is a form of sustainable tourism where local tourism is developed in innovative ways by local people, local associations and government (Hatton, 1999; Matutano, 2012). CBT is particularly popular in remote rural area throughout the Asia-Pacific region (Ashley & Garland, 1994). A range of definitions exist for CBT, including rural tourism or agro-tourism in many regional communities around the world, especially Latin America and Asia. In some cases, CBT may take a form of eco-tourism (Asker et al., 2010). Eco-tourism is responsible activities for places of natural beauty in a way that helps local people and does not damage the environment. For example, visiting remote communities to experience a new culture or to enjoy nature can aid in community development through the purchasing local handicrafts and utilizing locally owned restaurants. Häusler and Strasdasin (2003) connect CBT with ecotourism, rural tourism, ethnic and cultural tourism in the way of utilizing the local culture as tourism resources. CBT can also be linked to indigenous tourism, in which indigenous people are directly involved in management or having served as the essence of the attraction (Hinch & Butler 1996). An indigenous culture may be expressed to tourists in the form of performance and souvenirs, which attracts debate over cultural authenticity and ethics. The focus of CBT may vary depending on the resources the community has, and the area and kind of tourism product they can offer.

While tourism can have a positive impact on the local community such as raising the local culture, economic benefits and skills development, it can also have negative impacts such as overuse of limited resources (e.g. water, land), commodification of culture, homogenization, and economic loss. Widening of income gap and subsequent conflicts may occur within the community. Impact of tourism on local cultural resources is also an

important issue, and a clear focus should be given in tourism management on the local level where the impacts are more evident (Harry, 2009). As culture becomes the attraction, there is a necessity to safeguard the local cultural and avoid unwanted negative consequences.

### ***2.3. Importance of Protecting the Intangible Cultural Heritage***

Literature has defined heritage in several ways. Ashworth et al. (2007) define heritage as “what human beings inherit from the past and utilize it in the present” (as cited in Timothy, 2015, pp.238), which includes tangible and intangible heritage. Tangible heritage includes buildings, archeological sites, museums, while intangible heritage comprises of culture, music, dance, beliefs, and handicrafts. In 1994 The Nara Document of Authenticity argued there is an essential need to preserve the cultural identity of cultures of minorities and also that the protection and enhancement of cultural and heritage diversity should be actively promoted as an essential aspect of human development. Subsequently, UNESCO (2003) enacted the convention for the safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), defining it as follows:

Intangible Cultural Heritage means the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artifacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity. For this Convention, consideration will be given solely to such intangible cultural heritage as is compatible with existing international human rights instruments, as well as with the requirements of mutual respect among communities, groups and individuals, and of sustainable development (UNESCO, 2003).

From the definition, it is clear that the importance of the intangible cultural heritage is not only preserving the national/ regional character but also its intrinsic values such as mutual respect among communities, promote social cohesion and sustainable development. Furthermore, Kato (2006) argues that ICH plays a vital role in nature conservation and how the local community act towards their surroundings, thereby maintaining the integrity of their own place. A focus on ICH and its relationship to the natural environment provide people with a sense of identity and continuity.

### ***2.4. Empowering Community through Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage in CBT***

Many rural communities are now facing various problems such as economic, social and environmental problems. In developing countries, like Egypt, many rural areas are suffering from poverty, pollution, unemployment, poor public infrastructure and many other issues (Elmenofi et al., 2014). Those areas might still have tourism developing potential due to the cultural and natural resources they have that can be linked to intangible cultural heritage. As an attempt to overcome rural area's problems, especially in developing countries, many have turned to tourism development. However, research has shown that when tourism development is approached as a top down strategy that does not care for specific needs of communities, local people express great stress (Wang & Wall, 2005).

Cultural tourism is no longer limited to visits to museums, but has expanded to include gastronomy, handicrafts, and their associated history, stories and experiences. Usually, economic necessity is the driving force for tourism growth. Harry (2009) states that “tourism may affect demographic characteristics, social structure, and relations, economic activities, social values and attitudes, culture and lifestyle, built environment and use, environmental

resources, natural ecosystem and cultural heritage” (p. 49). Therefore, it is necessary to be attentive to the social and cultural impacts on communities. Murphy (1985) emphasizes the need for each community to relate with tourism development according to local needs. According to the Council of Europe during the Faro Convention, well-managed culture heritage can be a key aspect of community development (Pietro et al., 2017). Nasser (2003) has similarly put forward the idea of sustainable tourism for heritage sites should be managed based on the balance between socio-cultural needs, economic gain and the protection of heritage resource.

Sebele (2010) research shows how during CBT project development in Botswana many of local people lost the access to natural resources and the benefits did not reach the majority of community members. He also emphasized that the community needed to acquire managerial and entrepreneurial and marketing skills with support from the government, private sector and NGOs. In the village of Bngunkerto, Indonesia, the local government supported the local community to change growing their crops in the higher quality and started an agritourism site for tourists. Ecotourism can only be successful when it promotes empowerment; the local community has the power to control tourism development and tourism benefits local people equitably (Scheyvens, 1999). However, as communities are not homogenous, and interests in economic, social, cultural or personal benefits will vary among the community. They are individuals and organizations with different opinions, which may lead to conflict and power struggle. Richards and Hall (2000a) argue that communities can often be treated as relatively homogenous, with little of internal conflict. In the form of CBT, local people are involved in decision-making and taking control over the community resources.

In tourist destinations where the local community is the main attraction for tourist, the community not only needs to agree with the constant attention of tourists but also the potential co-modification of their culture (Boissevan, 1996). However, ownership and control over tourism development in the form of CBT can contribute to enhancing the intangible cultural heritage of the local community as the community’s identity, and lead to sustainable tourism development (Kato, 2006).

There is an urgent need to empower the local community by valuing its intangible cultural heritage in order to achieve the desired goals of sustainable tourism. Isolated remote area need the power to protect their own culture because opening these destinations to unplanned tourism development might cause damage on the host community, both socially and economically. Therefore, there is an obligation to achieve power balance between the outsiders (tourist, government, investors) and local community (local government, local NGOs, tribes leaders). As CBT is a framework for community development to be owned and managed by the community (Hatton, 1999), there is a chance for economic and social empowerment (Butler et al., 2012; Manyara & Jones, 2007; Scheyvens, 1999). Additionally, CBT strives for social sustainability based on respect for the local culture (Telfer & Sharpley, 2016). Therefore, CBT can provide an opportunity for strengthening and safeguarding the intangible cultural heritage of the community. By safeguarding the intangible cultural heritage of the local community, sustainable development may be achieved.

### ***2.5. Siwa Oasis and Tourism Development***

An oasis is a fertile spot in a desert where water is found. From a geographical perspective, an oasis is formed from underground waters rivers called aquifers. Natural springs bring the water to the surface, or wells are created to harvest water. The location of this study is the Siwan Oasis, Map 1. Siwan Oasis was isolated for a long time due to its location. Until the asphalt road was built in the 1980s connecting Siwa oasis to the Mediterranean coast road, arduous camel tracks were the only means to connect Siwa oasis with the outside world. Irrigation in the Siwa Oasis is traditional surface irrigation. Siwa Oasis has two main aquifers

the upper one is the Miocene formation, and the lower one is the Nubian sandstones. The upper aquifer is tapped through 226 natural springs spreading all of the depression of Siwa Oasis, and the lower aquifer is tapped through 150 wells of ground water (Abd El-Samie, 2000 & Shatanawi, 1991). Siwa Oasis is considered to be one of the oldest oases in Egypt. Since its history dates back to the ancient Egyptian period, it was known as “Penta or Tha”, as the name was found in one of the reliefs of Edfu Temple near Luxor. The Siwan people are a minority in Egypt. They consider themselves as part of the true indigenous people of North Africa. They call themselves “*Imazighen*” meaning noble and free people. Imazighen or Berber indigenous groups still comprise large communities in North Africa, stretching from the Atlantic coast to Siwa oasis in Egypt. Siwan people today speak the Berber dialect and speak Arabic as the second language. Agriculture is the main industry of the local economy. However, that percentage has decreased in Siwa town due to the rise of other economic activities. The cultivated land is estimated to be about 3,370 acres. Dates from palm trees are the main agriculture crop of Siwan, followed by palm tree, olive, lemons, figs, pomegranates and citrus fruit (Fakhry, 2005). In addition to agriculture, there are associate manufacturing industries such as drying dates and olive oil production. However, tourism is increasingly playing an important role in the development of the Oasis over the last two decades.

Tourists consider oases as one of the best destinations due to their location in the middle of the desert, which represents a unique environment. Among these oases, Siwa Oasis offers a unique environment. Siwa Oasis distinguishes itself from other oases for its historical and archaeological features such as the old town Shali, the spring of sun, Jable el Dakrur, as well as its customs, tradition, and folklore that remain among the community. There several types of tourism activities in Siwa Oasis. One is safari tourism, considered as the main tourism segment in Siwa, and another is cultural tourism as Siwa Oasis has tombs and temples dating back to the Greek and Roman eras. Health tourism also exists, for example, “steam baths” in sand, although this is still a limited market.



**Map 1:** Siwa Oasis.

Source: Case studies in Egypt: Marsa Matrouh, Al Alamein, Siwa Oasis (Matrouh Governorate). Rady, 2011.

## 2.6. Case Study Date Palm Festival

Date palm trees have a significant meaning for the Siwan culture heritage. Siwan has been reliant on dates not only as the principal source of income and nourishment, but the Siwan people also use palm trees in the construction of their houses. The leaves are used to make baskets and plates. Dates are not only valued by Siwan people, but also by most of the Muslim people region. Dates trees were mentioned in the Quran more than any other trees, referred to as “Nakhla” and its fruit is called “Tamer”. Also, The Prophet Mohamed said

“Break your fast by eating dates as it is purifying.” Therefore, for Siwan people not only do dates have cultural value but also contains religious values.

The Siwan life revolves around a deep connection with harvesting of dates and palm trees. They keep caring for palm trees throughout the year, fertilizing and trimming until the harvest season in October. After the harvest, they dry it, save some for their family and sell the rest to earn money. They also earn money from using the trimmed leaves in making furniture and other handcrafts.

Although the Siwan culture has been influenced by modernization, the Siwan people still preserve Siwan cultural practices, and in particular, by the Siwan women who find great pride in old traditions. Especially the handicrafts such as baskets, which it is made from palm trees leaves, and has different shapes and different functions. The relationship between the date palm tree and the Siwan society is clear, the men care for and harvest the trees to sell its fruits and women used the leaves in handcrafts.

The idea of Date Palm Festival begun between 2010 and 2014 when a group of Siwan date growers, under the leadership of the Siwa Community Development and the Environmental Protection Association (SCDEPA), participated in a competition in the United Arab Emirates called Khalifa International Prize for Palm Trees Agricultural and Innovation. The SCDEPA offered to host this competition in Siwa to improve the quality of the date industry, which was suffering last few years from many problems in the Oasis. The aim of the festival is to improve the dates' industry in the Siwa Oasis especially, and in Egypt more generally. Egypt produces 18% of the global production of dates, and 23% of Arab production of dates. Egypt occupies the first position in the world and Arab world in the production of dates. Beginning in 2015, The Date Palm Festival takes place annually from 27th to 29th of October. This is a new festival in the Siwan festivals calendar, and features Siwan culture within it. The Date Palm Festival has been organized by the local government in cooperation with national and international authorities such as the Ministry of Agriculture and Land Reclamation, Matrouh Local Governorate, the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the International Dates Palm Network (DPGN) and the Taziri Eco-Tourism Village. From Siwa Oasis there is a local sponsor, the Siwa Association for Society Development and Environmental Protection (SCDEPA) (Siwa Festival, 2017). The festival lasts for three days. The first day is the opening ceremony with traditional performances from Siwan culture such as singing and dancing. The second day is the fair trade event where small growers of dates can sell their products and festival committee members evaluate them to announce the winner of the festival prize on the third day. During the third day, in addition to announcing the festival prizes, there are lectures and workshops for date growers to explain the latest scientific studies on date palm trees and how to recycle the waste from gardens to protect the environment.

### **3. Methodology**

This study is exploratory research, as there is a need for collecting detailed information about the Siwan community, their experiences and values concerning The Date Palm Festival. The case study approach was chosen as it enables “the research to place people, organizations, events, and experiences in their social and historical connect, also the limitation of data resources” (Jennings, 2001, p. 346). The data collection of this study is developed over two visits to Siwa Oasis with the aim understanding the effects of the Date Palm Festival over a two-year period, between 2016-2018. The empirical work that forms the basis of this research is qualitative in nature.

#### **3.1. Data Collection**

The data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews following the qualitative research process provided in Jennings (2001). Jennings (2001) recommends the researcher should ask more questions for further clarification on the matter, further extend responses to emphasize the need to ensure that the research results are value-free and without biased based on well-tested empirical evidence found on the ground. In this study, thirteen people were interviewed, including key community members (community leaders, tribe elders, tourism policy makers). Although small in number, the range of people selected was appropriate for the purpose of this study, and the data obtained is regarded sufficient in reaching data saturation. There was a culturally specific consideration that influence the population sample, being that women were not easily accessed for cultural reasons; speaking with male strangers is prohibited. Although it was not within the scope of this study, this will be discussed in the concluding section of the paper as one of the future investigation topics. It is also the case that the study focuses on local community's perspective and does not involve that of tourists, domestic or international.

### 3.2. Survey Overview

The beginning of May was chosen to do the interviews with the community member before they get busy in Ramadan fasting and the harvest season. The interviews were conducted with thirteen of the key community members. The interviewees were selected from two groups: one was the local people chosen randomly, and the other was businessmen and government officials who have good knowledge about the Date Palm Festival. This allowed the researcher to explore two types of perspectives on the new festival. The very low response from Siwan women in this research was expected. The Siwan community is a conservative society; "woman talking to a man" is still a taboo for the majority of the Siwan community.

**Table 1:** Interview Codes.

	No	Origin	gender	Occupation
G1: official	1	Local	Male	Manager of Siwa tourist information center
	2	Local	Male	Manager of SCDEP Association
	3	Local	Male	Manager of Native Siwan Association
	4	Local	Male	Public relations manager at Siwa oasis city hall
	5	Local	Male	Manager of the Center of traditional industries development
G2: local	6	Local	Male	Teacher, owner of a small dates palm trees garden
	7	Local	Male	Safari driver
	8	Local	Male	Manager of primary school
	9	Local	Female	Housewife and a trainee at the center of handicrafts development
	10	Local	Female	Trainer at the center of handicrafts development
	11	Local	Male	Manager of dates palm tree factory
	12	Local	Male	Electrician technician, owner of a small dates palm tree garden
	13	Local	Male	Bazar owner

The interviews contained thirteen questions, seven questions about the festival to describe how it started, its benefits, how it was, and current problems they were facing. The

other four questions were about the general condition of the Siwan cultural heritage and how or if it has changed, and how they see the Date Palm Festival. The last two questions were about tourism in the Siwa Oasis and its role in safeguarding the Siwan cultural heritage. The other series of interviews with local community members contained fifteen questions; eight questions regarding the festival: what the festival means to them and questions regarding their opinions and how they see the Siwan cultural heritage during the festival. Other five questions were about how they see the Siwan cultural heritage, and the last two questions were the same as the official interviews. Interview participants were recruited from two groups: officials of Siwa Oasis totaled five participants, interview code G1: X. There were eight local participants with the interview code G2: X (see Table 1). Due to the semi-structured nature, the interview flow varied among participants. All interviews were conducted face to face in their workplace. The interview duration was between 45 minutes to 55 minutes. The two sets of questions were in the Arabic languages and translated from Arabic into English by the researcher as he is native Arabic speaker. After transcription of all interviews, the comments were coded and divided into categories: community, handcraft, date festival, government, youth, environment and Siwan cultural heritage. All of these comments respond to multiple questions.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. ICH as a Tool for Economic Empowerment

Siwan had been living for centuries in a semi-isolated state making it relatively more difficult for the Siwa Oasis to develop tourism or any other industry. Also, the Siwa Oasis has been marginalized due to its location, which is more than eight hundred kilometers away from the capital of Cairo. In an interview on Sky News Arabic a representative of the Siwan community exclaimed “No one cares about Siwa, sometimes they ask where it is, and they always make us feel like if we are not Egyptians” (Sky News Arabic, 2014). The Siwan feel that the governments neglect them and do not care for their needs.

During the three days of the Date Palm Festival there is a trade exhibition aimed at helping small local growers to have a fair price for their products, as it brings the consumer into direct contact with the producer. It is a very important for local people who have a small field to go and participate in this festival. In the past, local growers could not market their own dates, and they were often victimized by the major producers in Siwa who bought dates from them at a low price. (G2, 7).

The Date Palm Festival helped in improving tourism industry in Siwa, Siwa Oasis and its products have been promoted. This led to an increase in the number of domestic tourists who want to visit Siwa and know more about its cultural heritage. As interviewee (G1, 3) mentioned:

*“Recently we have domestic tourists, and we are happy with that because they spend more time in Siwa than the foreigners, and also they buy souvenirs more than foreigners, so the Siwan now are benefiting more than in the past.”*

Additionally, the festival contains Siwan intangible cultural heritage elements, and it became a new attraction for tourists. Therefore, it opened a new chance for Siwan people to work in tourism and date factories, which could impact the residents’ income positively, as mentioned in the interview by G2, 8, below,

*“There is an excellent opportunity for women. In Siwa most of the married women don’t work. But this festival opened a chance for them to work from home and sell their handmade products during this festival.”*

Interviewee G2, 11 further explains:

*“In the Siwan community it is shameful for women to work outdoors but here in our factories females work in a private area, and more than 70% of employees in the factors now are women. With the growth of date’s productions, the participation of Siwan women has been increased.”*

Women in Siwa oasis are receiving positive benefits from the festival.

#### **4.2. ICH as a Tool for Promoting the Sense of Belong and Identity**

Siwan people have a strong sense of belonging to the land, culture and nature of their region. When the organizer was looking at making the festival an international event and bringing together all the date producers together this allowed the outsider participants bring their own cultural heritage too. According to interviewee G1, 1, the first year of the festival in 2015 was more exclusively for the Siwan community than the second year in 2016. This festival takes place in the Siwa Oasis, and for Siwan date producers, therefore the Siwan community members believe it should be clear for the government and organizers of the Date Palm Festival that the festival is for promoting the Siwan culture, tourism, and local date palm products. Since this festival takes place in the Siwa Oasis, the Siwan heritage should be represented without it being affected by others culture.

According to interviewee G1, 5, Siwan youth wanted to gain the skill to organizing such kind of events:

*“Local participation in organizing the festival is limited in few tasks such as traditional parade which done by young boys and girls. The company, which was responsible for the festival, could not employ them (Siwan youth). In the second year, the company asked the Siwan to help them with the festival, but on a limited scale.” (G1, 5)*

However, the participation level is low and is controlled by the organizer as G1, 3 mentioned:

*Unfortunately, the organizing company controlled everything and only let Siwan youth perform minimal tasks such as cleaning. The Siwans do not comment nor give advice concerning what this company do or does not. However, he warned that if the company continues to act in this manner, the Siwans will reject the festival.*

It seems that the organizer controls everything in this festival; however, the Siwa oasis people are negotiating regarding this point.

#### **4.3. ICH as a Tool for Sustainability**

The natural environment has a strong cultural meaning in the Siwan society, for example, the traditional way of building houses, utilizing the surrounding natural resources. They mix sand with salt and water to build walls for their houses, this material is called karshif. They use palm tree trunks to support the roof and palm leaves to cover the roof of their houses. Given that they have insufficient amount of sources in the oasis, for instance, barren soil, the Siwan people rely on dates from palm trees for almost everything in their life. Unfortunately, due to increased urbanization, which has taken place in the oasis over the last two decades, the Siwan are now building their houses using concrete and steel. The same thing is happening in the handicrafts sector, baskets and furniture, which were made by the Siwan from palm trees that are disappearing from the oasis. However, flourishing tourism in Siwa Oasis has encouraged Siwan people to produce the traditional handicrafts again, as interviewee G2, 9 mentioned as below:

*“When the number of tourists decrease, everything in Siwa goes down especially handicraft, and when it increases again, the handicrafts flourish.”*

Whatever is left from the palm tree plantations is treated as waste, which the farmers burn and causes air pollution. The festival encourages the Siwan to reuse the waste from palm trees plantations not only to make handicrafts, but also produce some organic fertilizers, which the organizer of the festival taught them to do. G1,2 clarifies this point when he says:

*“We are organizing lectures to small growers to teach them how to reuse all the waste of his farm to produce organic fertilizers. After this course, we will have another course about how they can raise the quality of the palm dates.”*

Siwan society is a traditional society, tourists should respect the Siwan culture. That is why he recommended creating a list of “what tourist can do, and what they should not do”. The environment should be protected to provide sufficient resources to meet the needs of the residents of the community. Teaching the Siwan how to reuse the waste in their farms has served to protect the environment and safeguard the Siwan intangible cultural heritage as well. Interviewee (G2, 6) mentions:

*“In case of Siwa oasis, the number of domestic tourists increased in last three years, especially during the Date Palm Festival time. and because the safari tours are the main attraction in Siwa, that might impact the environment negatively,”.... “During the safari, tourists throw cans and trash at the desert, so we have a group of youth after domestic tourists leave, they go to collect trash.”*

Therefore, selling handicrafts, which is made from palm tree leaves is a way for the Siwan people to rediscover their traditional wisdom.

## **5. Conclusion, Implications, and Limitations**

The findings show that the festival organizer attempted to utilize the Siwan intangible cultural heritage to promote the Date Palm Festival domestically and internationally, using the name of Siwa Oasis in the title of the festival, the traditional performance of Siwa Oasis and handicrafts. The findings indicate the Date Palm festival benefits youth, women and safeguards processes of ICH in the Siwa Oasis. Question remains however whether or not the community empowerment is achieved through this festival.

The festival evidently opened doors for local small scale dates growers to market their products through the fair trade at reasonable price. It is argued that fair trade fights against poverty in developing countries and brings the consumers into a contact with the producers (Telfer & Sharpley, 2016, p 136). Therefore, the festival is said to have achieved economic empowerment for local growers, giving them agency from the control of local elites, who had controlled the price of dates for long time.

Although, the festival helped in growing the handicrafts industry in Siwa Oasis and open doors for women to work at date factories, it failed to create a chance for Siwan women to participate in the festival. While Siwan women are considered as the guardians of Siwan cultural heritage (Fakhry, 2005, p. 38), the conservative character of Siwa Oasis community prevented Siwan women from participating directly in this festival. Instead, they turned to sell their handmade products in bazars in cheap price (G2, 9). However, women participation in the festival is vital as women are considered as the guardian of the cultural heritage and tradition of Siwan. This means Siwa Oasis women have the cultural knowledge needed to enhance the local tourism product (Van der Cammen, 1997) and to avoid over commodification.

Through this festival, the ICH became a new attraction for tourists, with potential in attracting more tourists who interested in the local culture of one of the Egyptian ethnic minorities. It is also widely understood that tourism can have a negative influence on the environment (Andereck et al., 2005). Hatton (1999, p.13) states that “ensuring the security of the natural environment, plus redevelopment of cultural heritage, is critical for the development of the industry.” However, through the lectures that took place during the festival, the Siwan started to go back to the traditional way of recycling the wastes from their farms by making handicrafts or furniture from date leaves. This gives more employment opportunities for women in making handicrafts and for youth in cleaning and collecting the waste from farms. Also, the flourishing of the handicrafts industry during the festival might, as Scheyvens (1999a) argues, “enhance the self-esteem of community members due to the outside recognition of the uniqueness of their cultural, their natural resources and their traditional knowledge” (p.247).

The comments show that the organizer of the festival program did not consult with Siwan community enough, there is a conflict might happen between local and the organizers, government due to this top down strategy. Based on the Arnstein's typology of citizen participation (1969), the Siwan community still remains at the bottom of the participation ladder, which is like being trapped at the bottom rung. For further development as CBT, it should be recommended for the festival organizers to provide more room allowing the Siwans to participate in the event to prevent the possibility that the organizers may be rejected by the community. This can be done by providing the Siwans (small growers, youth, and women) with an opportunity to participate in future. The community should be an active participant in this developing process, which can be achieved with the support of the NGOs and local groups.

There is a growing recognition that the success of tourism development depends on the local community participation throughout the development process. Tourism can be a strong socio-economic driver especially in a remote area due to the limitation in resources. This study has focused on how a newly initiated festival has a connection with the ICH of a local community can empower a minority community through the acknowledgment of safeguarding and maintaining their intangible cultural heritage. ICH arguably contains a connection between the community and their natural environment, a key for sustainably.

Through the data analysis, the study identified three ways to empower this minority community. First, ICH as a tool for economic empowerment. Before the festival, the main tourism activity was safari, but after the festival the ICH of Siwa Oasis became a resource for tourism development in the region. Tourism was shown to play a role in developing Siwa Oasis and enhancing the standard of living of community residents by generating employment for youth and women, and also by increasing the revenue of the local business. There is a positive relationship between tourism economic impact and residents' sense of material wellbeing (Kim et al., 2013).

Second, as most of the interviewees mentioned that the organizer has more power than the local people, it is evident that Siwa Oasis people are struggling to have the right of decision making in organizing this festival. Interviewee G1, 3 warned if the organizer continues to act in this manner, the Siwan will reject festival. The lack of economic resources and organizing skills might be barriers for them. The potential in utilizing ICH as a tourism resource is that the community would also gain more power as they develop this knowledge and skills. There are only a few of the Siwan who work in tourism, as the majority of them are farmers. The festival is a good chance for the Siwan to gain skills in how to manage and how to represent their own culture. The sense of belonging with the date palm tree which Siwan people possess could aid this process. Also to assert that the tourism benefits all community, the local government and the organizer of this festival should support the local people in gaining more skills in marketing, entrepreneurial and management.

Third, ICH was found to be a driver for Siwan to perceive the atmosphere of Siwa Oasis, and direct tourism and tourist behaviors to respect the Siwan cultural. Those findings can show how ICH and its safeguarding progress is useful for the local people. The potential of ICH as a key for sustainability can reduce the negative impact of tourism on this semi-isolated society.

It should be noted that the term community-based tourism is still new in Egypt as the government's policy favors mass tourism development to popular destinations built through foreign investment. Consideration for these isolated local communities is rare. However, the researcher has found the Date Palm Festival can be the trigger for starting CBT in the Siwan community. Such as a small scale CBT with authentic engagement with local community is sought by today's tourists. The festival also presents an opportunity to the Siwan to recognize and positively utilize their intangible cultural heritage, as demonstrated in the range of cultural products such as souvenir and cultural performance. While the festival does not yet give a chance to the Siwan women to participate fully due to cultural factors, they still can work as much as it is allowed by society and they have a freedom to accept or to decline work. The impact of the Date Palm Festival has opened doors for increased women participation and employment. Women today are not only working in handicrafts but also in the dates factories. Such opportunity for participation and decision making itself is a step forward in empowerment.

This research is limited to a specific area which is Siwa Oasis. It should be noted that women were not easily accessed for cultural reasons. Further research is needed to investigate the current research agenda further, as women empowerment around the world is an urgent task as stated in SDGs. Future research agenda include investigation into tourism and gender roles in middle east communities; how to empower the community to advance tourism by focusing on the sense of belonging, regional identity and social cohesion; and finding what is the culturally appropriate avenue for Siwan women to participate in tourism development. Further exploration may be carried out with Siwan people, which is hoped to be relevant to other remote isolated communities around the world.

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