

Identity هوية Identität

By Khawla Al Awadhi

The origin of the term, and how is it defined?

The term Identity originally comes into English via Middle French “identité, ydentité, ydemptité “the quality of being the same, sameness,” and from Late Latin identitās (inflectional stem identitāt-) “the quality of being the same, the condition or fact that an entity is itself and not another thing.”

In the English dictionary, it is defined as “the condition of being oneself or itself, and not another”.

In Arabic, it translates to *Hawiya* (هوية). The word *Hawiya* originates from “*Huwa* “ (هو) which means He or It, as in the person or object. In the dictionary, *Hawiya* is defined as:

حقيقة الشيء أو الشخص التي تميزه عن غيره .

Haqeeqa, (or fact) means the truth of someone or something, distinguishing it or them from another.

As a native Arabic speaker, if I were to translate the term to my language, I would also use the same term that is found in the dictionary; *Hawiya*. It is not one of those words that can be translated into different words in my opinion. However, my definition of the term would be that it is the unique blend of experiences, beliefs, values, and relationships, that shape a person, and set them apart from another.

Identity & reflection on SAWA Journey:

I was brought up and educated around the importance of national identity. It is something that I hold dearly and it has a significant and direct impact on who I am today personally and professionally.

Our identity in the UAE is our heritage, our customs, traditions and values. It is seen in the way we dress, the language and dialect we use, and the way we celebrate. It is visible in our arts and crafts, poetry and music, food and places. It also goes beyond what can be seen with the eyes. It is our beliefs, our religion, practices and our values. The things we value deeply and live by such as family cohesion, respect and tolerance.

Visiting Sharjah Museums as part of the SAWA Phase 1 felt incredibly natural and familiar to me. This is because Sharjah is my home, and Sharjah Museums are my workplace. I work as Head of the Museums Affairs Section at Sharjah Museums Authority. When the program took place in Sharjah, I felt like a host welcoming everyone from outside the UAE to Sharjah and our museums. I enjoyed sharing some of our identity and heritage with the group.

For instance, throughout the program, there was an emphasis on the concept of “*Majlis*”, which in English would translate to Council. The way I see it, the concept of *Majlis* is deeply rooted in our tradition and identity here in the UAE. Essentially, a *Majlis* is a sitting room or space where a group of people, friends, family or a community, would gather to discuss different matters, to check on one another, to celebrate, share concerns, stories, and resolve disputes.

From my memories as a child, I remember the *Majlis* being a very special place, one that was open to us as kids only during important and big occasions and gatherings. A typical *Majlis* in the UAE would normally smell like *Oud* (incense burner). There would be fruits, dates, and Arabic coffee and tea on the tables. Portraits of important figures such as the ruling family are usually fixed on the

wall. The seating would either be on the floor with rugs and cushions, or on couches.

During the SAWA program in Sharjah, I enjoyed hosting the *Majlis* for the SAWA group at Bait Al Naboodah Museum. Serving our guests Arabic coffee, which is a must in any UAE Majlis, and discussing the different traditions and celebrations we all have in our different countries was very amusing. We got to talk about *Hagg Al Leyla*, which in the UAE is the day we celebrate knowing that the holy month of Ramadan is coming soon.

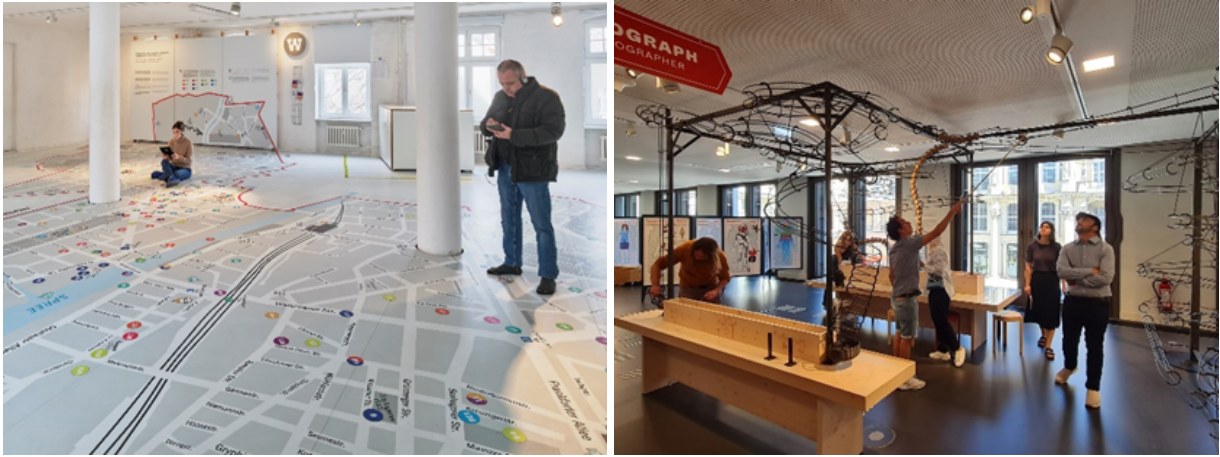


Simply by walking through Sharjah Museums or the cultural and historical places in Sharjah, areas like the Heart of Sharjah, people can already tell a lot about the city, its history, present, people, and identity. That in my opinion is what places like museums are built for.

SAWA in Berlin

Phase 2 of SAWA in Berlin was a different experience. This was my first time visiting Germany. I have been introduced to different European cities and identities through my personal travels and connections, but Berlin was a special experience. I was the guest there, and I was pleased with the way the Berliners hosted us and shared their city's history, culture and identity with us.

Walking through the streets of Berlin can also tell you a lot about the city's identity. I remember looking at the different infrastructure, buildings and visible history leading up to the division between the east and the west. I visited Berlin's museums and exhibition spaces and learned about what matters to its people. Visiting places like the Humboldt Forum and FHXB Museum helped build my understanding of the city and its history. I enjoyed experiencing the different curatorial methods used to tell the stories in both spaces; the audio recordings of people telling their stories, the display of collected personal objects and hand-written messages was very powerful.



On our day trip to visit the Spreewald Museum, I got the opportunity to see a glimpse of my national identity in Berlin, specifically when we experienced the special *Majlis* in the open air in Lubbenau. It was very different from the *Majlis* I know in terms of location and set-up. There were no cushions to the wall or on the floor here, no Arabic coffee, and it wasn't a closed sitting room. Instead of the usual incense burner scent, the place smelled like nature, grass and rain. Nevertheless, it was an enjoyable gathering and it served the same purpose a typical *Majlis* would, to build relationships and connections, and keep a good dialogue going.

Whether in Sharjah or Berlin, and despite being from or holding different identities, coming from different countries, age ranges, and backgrounds, our differences were embraced in the SAWA program. We were able to openly share our opinions, and voice our thoughts, aspirations and struggles in the museum context. The program creates this safe space for all special identities to fit and blend in so well.

