Integrity النزاهة Integerität

By Ibrahim al Balushi

I often found myself wandering through museums across the cities in which I used to live or travel in, indulging in the culture and arts akin to reading open poetry. It wasn't until I started working in the museum field, that I thoroughly enjoyed the process of creating this open display of poetry in sharing art and culture. Yet, it was only until the wonderful SAWA experience that I got to understand and read between the lines of poems; what lies hidden between every letter.

One of the central understandings I gained was how the museum narrative is more important than the displays, where every item displayed and every story told has great significance. Incomplete information (whether intentional or not) can remove certain elements of the story and – as the SAWA experience highlighted – an incomplete truth could become a lie, diluting the integrity of the narrative. For example, a significant lack of information from other perspectives/minority groups weakens the overall story and lets down many in the overlooked society. This effect then encroaches into other fields indirectly outside of the institution, which in turn keeps the same status quo of each of the subjects involved through decades, if not centuries.

To give a personal experience of this encroachment, I, as an Arab, who grew up like many others in the SouthWest Asia-North Africa (SWANA) region, where we are exposed to international media; such as Hollywood movies and computer games. In my experience, I watched as people who look like me, speak like me, pray like me, are being labeled "bad guys"[1] in movies, while those same SWANA natives needed to be eliminated in games. And as I grew up, I noticed the absence of our own voices and perspectives in the global media. It created a void that was

filled with repeated biases[3] and perception through every major event, especially one that currently serves a deeper wound in the SWANA region.

This also invokes a deep sense of empathy and self reflection, on ourselves and on others; of what other perspectives and voices we, ourselves, refuse or even ignore. It was only finding books like Edward Saïd's *Orientalism* and Diana Darke's *Stealing from the Saracens: How Islamic Architecture Shaped Europe* that I first managed to understand our own place in the world, and later on through my background of design and traveling did I understand how every basic shape, colour, or even term has several different meanings to different people. And most importantly, how humanity has collectively built each other up from the dialogues of theology, science and mathematics, where there is no true "linear" progress as museums tend to display, like lines of intertwined poems woven from diverse contributions of civilisations across us.

This understanding of the power of the narrative and its effect across the globe could only be achieved within institutes or museums that intentionally practice integrity.

Defining Integrity

Integrity, I believe, is the honest aim of pursuing truth in its fullest form. While each truth varies depending on perspectives and gaps of our knowledge, integrity requires us to honour these differences and setbacks within our storytelling.

While integrity means having strong moral principles, to define it, one needs to find the roots and to clarify the meaning:
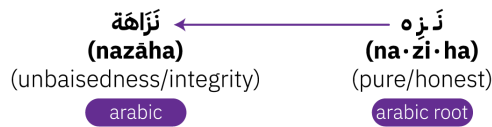
Fig. 1: Arabic root for Nazāha

In Arabic (Fig.1), the word Nazāha (نَزاهَة), which signifies integrity and unbiasedness, has its 3-letter origin form as na·zi·ha (نَزِهَة), meaning pureness and honesty.
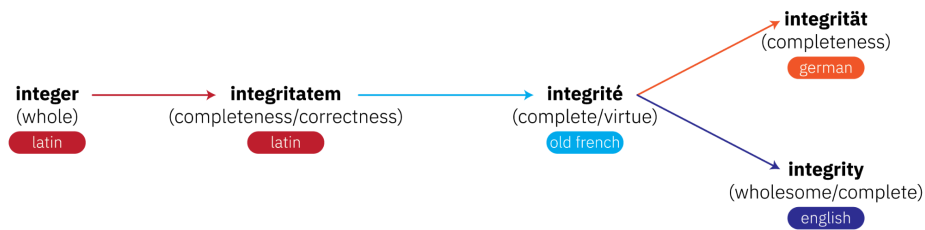

Fig. 2: Latin origin of Integrity for the English and German language

Meanwhile, both German (Integrität) and English (Integrity) mean completeness, both share their Latin origin of "Integer" or whole (Fig.2). Therefore we could conclude that meaning held in those words signifies a whole and an inclusive truth. To divide integrity into attainable levels and goals, we could divide it into three levels:

Three levels to Integrity

Fig. 3: Three levels of Integrity in the field of museums

First through individual integrity, understanding one's own bias, cultural and environmental effects – and it could be worked upon through self improvement in exchanges and programs like SAWA. Then through the museums/institutes cultural integrity practice of displaying the full light and dark truths and cultural understanding. And finally through universal integrity by sharing an ethical, inclusive and honest exchange of ideas through collaboration and communications and displays.

Integrity in a museum can be defined as upholding ethics, respect, honesty, neutrality, inclusivity, transparency, and accountability through all phases of its work. This applies to the staff, visitors, and the broader community, as well as to the museum's surroundings. Integrity also encompasses the accurate representation of exhibited objects and narratives, respecting the past while existing in the present, and providing guidance for the future.

Summary

Reflecting on my own background, through the Quran's advice: *You are accountable for yourselves* (عَلَيْكُمْ أَنْفُسَكُمْ) [Quran 5:105], where at first an individual has to create his own set of ethics and integrity, and understand his own shortcoming and societal biases. Which will later help translate to the institution's work.

After the individual understands himself, his culture, his ethics from neutrality to empathy in the best manner as possible, could the institution apply the fruit of his labor towards its own guidelines and responsibility internally and externally; from respecting and showcasing the diversity to the inclusivity to the displays and representation. And finally, through the institute's outward collaboration and transparency in sharing the narrative could a global cross-cultural collective of understanding form, bridging the gaps and building upon the differences.

And through our SAWA experiences in Berlin and Sharjah, we collectively came to see how every element surrounding museums; their environments, the people who bring them to life, and even the subtle, everyday exchanges—shapes visitors' experiences in profound ways. How the hospitality and kindness of those working in these spaces extend far beyond traditional roles; from after-hours conversations to spontaneous invitations, to shared meals, karak teas, and even to our shared love of cats - these moments built bridges across our differences, celebrates our diversity, and allowing us to see the powerful influence of these interactions.

Sources:

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